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Midgard's Militia

by
Steve Jordan

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Thanks to pretty much everyone I know, and quite a few I don't, who contributed to

making me a better person. To the ones who tried to make me a worse person: Bite me.

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Introduction

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The opening lines of TALE OF TWO CITIES always come to mind when I reflect on those years, because they were at once wonderful, terrible, incredible and impossible. It seemed to have begun with the discovery of the atom as power source and deadly weapon, but in truth I suppose it had begun even earlier with the wonders of chemistry and the miraculous resilience of the human body. Of course, we were only the common folk, we were never privy to the details, were never told the histories, never knew for sure what we were seeing. We were all sure someone in the Pentagon, or the White House, or the CIA, had all the secrets, and were probably staying up nights plotting out how to use them to their advantage. As for us, we searched for clues in news reports, magazine articles and photos, but the more we saw, the more we just stood there and stared.

Gods walked the earth. And life could never have been more bizarre.

It was any number of things. There were the names. Might. Alpha Man. Pseudoman. Tectonic. Thunder and Lightning. The Manhattans. Professor Power and Power Squared. Apollo, Mercury and Athena, Samson and Delilah, the Shade, the Starling, it just didn't seem to end...

There were the colorful outfits. Capes, tights, boots, gauntlets... the kind of things that would look so stupid on one of us, but on them, somehow, they seemed to work. Probably

because of their bodies. Those incredible, perfect bodies that could pop the eyes out of bystanders and cause the opposite sex to salivate.

And their looks... well, what could be seen of them past those hoods and masks... were too picture-perfect to be believed. When you saw them in pictures, your first reaction was always, "It's fake! An airbrush job, or a mannequin, or something." But when you saw them in the flesh, it was like seeing Jesus... or Elvis. It was like they were from another planet.

Of course, their powers. Flight. Unbelievable strength. Speed, stamina. Ability to change shape, at will, right in front of you, now that was weird to see. And some of them would throw these bolts of pure energy, right from out of their bodies, and it was like watching directional explosions.

Actually, what was really scary was knowing there was no point in having all that power unless there was something out there that needed to have that power pitched at it every so often. And you can't have a yin without yang. Those gods fought other gods, mean gods, nasty gods, gods that stole, and destroyed, and killed. Sometimes they fought in plain sight of others. Usually, once they were through, there was nothing left standing in sight.

I mean, you kids today, you just don't know. You never had a chance to see any of these guys in action. Oh, you've seen the videos, the news clips... but it's just not the same. You see the Cybercops in action all the time—you know, don't you, that they were invented thanks to the initial crisis?—but they're not even close to the same thing. You really had to be there. You had to live it. You had to know that day-to-day living could end for you faster than any atomic bomb could end it, and it could happen anytime. You were never safe. Never.

We were paper soldiers, tissue paper, weaklings, ants, next to these incredible super beings, and it was the scariest thing in the world.

Almost.

Because we all found a whole new world of scared on the day they died.

* * *

As usual, the news services were no help. We heard vague rumors that something was really bothering the big guys, but no one could find out what was going on. We went for weeks thinking we were dog food any second. The psychiatrists, pharmaceuticals firms and churches were all cleaning up that month. Most of us tried to do our jobs, but you could see the strain on everyone's faces, you could almost smell it in their sweat. It was a rough summer.

Then came the day we all saw Dr. Tomorrow on television, telling us that there was some kind of menace out in space somewhere, threatening the Earth. They had all gotten together to brainstorm over it, and their conclusion was that it would take every last one of them to stop it, or we were all dead anyway. The next thing we know, Tomorrow's built this space ship, and they all piled into it and took off to stop the thing before it could get here. For four days the observatories watched the ship as it headed out to who-knew-what. It just so happened that it was on the night side of Earth when it got there.

You didn't need any telescope to see that explosion.

Everyone who was up, and saw that instant sunrise at midnight, thought it was Judgment Day. You can't help but feel sorry for those that took their own lives that night, sure there would be no morning.

But we were still all here come morning, and when we heard what happened on the news, we didn't know what to do...

—transcribed from Southwood Academy lecture series: Dr. Franklin Swartz, addressing the school body 4/16/2066.

Shock

« ^ »

He heard the phone ringing on his desk. He stopped what he was doing, and just stared at it, unable to decide whether or not he should answer it. Before he could make his decision, his office slowly darkened, shifted, converted itself into...

His bedroom. General Vincent Reddy had been dreaming that he was in his office, again. He did that often, when work was particularly trying, and it had been for weeks. He tried to find the phone in the dark, finally managing to lift the receiver off the hook. He grunted into the mouthpiece, squinting at the glowing face of his clock. It was 1:36 AM.

The voice on the phone was pure military. "This is Sgt. Peterson, assigned to PS911-S. Please identify yourself."

General Reddy leaned up in bed. "Vincent G. Reddy, General United States Army."

There was a pause, and another voice (sounding distinctly mechanical) announced, "Identification confirmed: General Vincent Reddy." The first voice came back on. "Sorry to wake you, sir, but we have a delivery."

It was a standard code phrase, used regularly by the more classified departments in the Pentagon. It might have been nothing, even given the hour. Still, Reddy did not want to ask. "What is it?"

"Thor's helmet."

Reddy was wide awake in an instant. "I'm on my way in," he said simply, and hung up. He pulled himself out of bed, his efforts causing a stir beside him. His wife rolled over and peered out of the covers at him. "What is it, Honey?"

"Going in early today," the General replied. "Go back to sleep."

* * *

The office was empty, but even at this hour it was still active through the computers and electronic equipment on the immense desk. A few of the components were dedicated to the reception and interpretation of communications data garnered from around the world, and at

the moment they were very busy. The computer tied into these systems gave out coded tones related to the message's type and origin. The tones coming out of it now were very rarely heard at all, and now they were repeating in the middle of the night.

The unique tones caught the attention of the man sleeping in the next room.

Actually, it was more a closet than a room, barely large enough for a bed, a wardrobe and a bathroom door. Once its occupant stood up from the bed, the room seemed to shrink even more. He walked out of the closet and into the office, his head and shoulders barely clearing the frame of the door. The small lights and readouts on the equipment in the dim office cast sparse light onto his frame, revealing that he was not simply big, he was built like an Olympian ideal, tall, broad-shouldered and well-muscled.

Seating his considerable build behind the desk, he silently examined the data scrolling down his computer screen. He sat perfectly still, only his eyes stirring as he took in the data. When the data was largely finished, he turned to one of the computers' keyboards and typed, "Initiate Program: Militia." The screen blanked, then began listing various operations and sequences which soon ran off the screen.

Finally he stood up from the desk. He gazed out the window at the star-filled night, listened to the lap of the waves out on the beach.

"Stupid bastards. I knew it'd happen sooner or later," he whispered to himself. He strode back to the bedroom, muttering, "Stupid inhuman bastards."

* * *

It was close to 2 AM when the phone rang in the residence of L. Byron Scott IV, but since it didn't ring in his room, Scott did not wake up. Instead, one of his servants—the assistant to the night butler—answered the phone, and after conversing for a moment with the caller, went to find the night butler. Another brief conversation, and the night butler found himself with the uncomfortable task of deciding whether or not to wake his employer.

After a minute of weighing his options, and considering the stability of his current employment, the night butler decided the news could wait until the morning—and the day butler—to be delivered.

All the same, he also got on the phone with the security chief of the estate, and told him to keep an extra sharp watch for the rest of the night.

* * *

It had happened just after most newspapers were put to press on the east coast, so a great many of them had been delivered with no mention of the catastrophe... to the chagrin of the newspaper owners. However, the TV and radio news services "never sleep," and when everyone else rose and turned on their morning news programs, they were greeted with news of the disaster.

It was hard for most people to qualify it as a disaster because, as yet, nothing had really happened. Except that the most famous people on Earth were now believed to be dead.

As was typical of modern news systems, the seriousness of the news dictated how much time was devoted to reporting it. Unfortunately, there wasn't much to tell, and the result was the news services repeated their information ad nauseam all through the morning.

Most of the actual information came from many of the observatories around the world that had interrupted their usual stargazing activities to follow the large silver torpedo built by Dr. Tomorrow, as it had sped after hazards unknown. A few of them had video capabilities, which delighted the TV newscasters no end, because it meant they had actual footage of the bizarre explosion in space.

It was a strange explosion: It did not seem to radiate from one point, as explosions tend to do; instead it appeared to race around the spacecraft, like a searchlight pointed inward on itself (which was about the best description any of the newscasters managed to come up with upon seeing it), before the ship itself blossomed into glowing gas and debris in a fraction of a second.

And there was something else about the explosion, what looked like some kind of object that had appeared for an instant just before the strange revolving blast. A great deal of time was spent interviewing scientists, physicists and engineers concerning that barely-glimpsed object, but the upshot of all the commentary was that no one had the slightest clue what it was.

The video footage obtained prior to the ship's departure was replayed repeatedly. Dr. Tomorrow's message was played, and the suggestion of an all or nothing gambit was morbidly rehashed again and again. Then, footage of the heroes, grim but determined, arriving at the launch site. A few file tapes of various of the heroes in action... especially Alpha Man, recently decorated for his diversion of the latest San Andreas quake, and the present darling of the media... and, finally, of the gleaming space ship launching into the unknown.

And the finale: the Unknown that got them.

* * *

In the Situation Room of the Pentagon, the Generals blearily studying the reports didn't have much more to go on. They had better quality video footage, courtesy one of the DOD's own surveillance satellites, but no more information about what caused it.

General Reddy sat at the main table, staring at a blowup photo of the initial explosion. This was the closest he was going to get to the traditional warrior's helmet, he knew. He almost wished they did have a way to recover some part of them, to return with, mourn, and bury. Reddy was a bit old-fashioned, and he felt that was what the moment needed. He noted that the photo bore the legend, "Project: MIDGARD," along the bottom. He remembered from somewhere that Midgard was an old Norse reference to Earth, Asgard being their reference to Heaven, the land of the Gods. It also occurred to him that he didn't have the slightest notion what they called Hell back then, but he decided he probably didn't want to know, anyway. The image seemed to make that much less sense when frozen in time, and Reddy found himself regularly looking up at the monitor on the wall that was set in a constant loop of the explosion.

The reference to "Thor's helmet" had been his official notification that MIDGARD had been activated. Whatever the Norse references, it meant that the Superheroes were presumed dead or unable to respond... in this case, unfortunately, the former... and a crisis existed that they

would have to deal with without the heroes' help.

Reddy looked up just in time to see Brendan Foster, the ranking General, reenter the room from a side chamber. He caught Foster's eye, and Foster responded by glancing up at the monitor Reddy was turned to.

"Turn that damn thing off," Gen. Foster growled, indicating the monitor. "We've got a lot of work to do, and that thing won't help." He sat down at the table, and the other two Generals present stopped conversing to face him. "Well, thanks to whichever of those morons planned out their little strategies, it looks like they're all dead, and we're left to deal with whatever the Hell is out there."

One of the Generals... Milhouse, who had been deeply contemplating the photos... gestured at the reports in front of them all. "Can't anyone tell us more about that... thing, out there, than what's in this crap?"

"No one that we've been able to find," Foster replied, giving a withering glance to the report in front of him. "I don't think they knew what they were going after."

"Tomorrow's report was pretty vague," Gen. Barnes agreed. "But if they didn't know what they were after, how could they have expected to stop it? And how are we supposed to figure it out?"

"By using our heads!" Milhouse snapped, throwing a report over his shoulder and into a corner. "We've still got our scientists, our technology, our drive, our..." words seemed to fail him a moment, but he quickly switched tracks and resumed. "We don't need those damned hotshots to fight our fights for us! We know enough not to run off half-cocked, throwing all our forces at an unknown threat without a backup."

Reddy was nodding vigorously at this. "Get those brains at NASA on this stuff. If they can figure out how hot a star is a million light-years away, they can figure this stuff out."

"Clymer's already getting his crew together, now," Foster told him.

"How accurate is this ETA?" Milhouse asked, indicating a page from the reports at the table.

"If it doesn't accelerate, 52 days," Foster replied. "We had that plotted before they left."

"Gives us some breathing space, anyway," Milhouse concluded. "But we still need more information."

"NASA's too slow," Barnes added. "If we wait on them to tell us something, we'll be a week dead."

"I think we've got something more useful for NASA to do," Foster stated, looking down at one of the groups of photos in front of him. "It looks like the debris from the explosion is drifting in the same direction. And it's roughly towards Earth."

Reddy looked at his copies of the photos. "Some of that stuff looks pretty big."

"We could have them train their equipment on the debris field," Milhouse offered.

"No, we'll do better than that." Foster picked up a phone. "Get me Clymer." There was a

considerable pause before he spoke again. "Jerry, it's Foster. We need a shuttle. Code orange. ASAP." He listened to the other end for a moment, nodded, and hung up. Then he turned to Reddy. "Vince, we'll need one of ours on that shuttle."

Reddy nodded, considering which of their prime shuttle specialists was best suited for the job. "I'll send Col. East. He'll do what needs to be done." Maybe they'd even bring a helmet or two back, after all.

"Fine." Foster finally sat down for the first time since leaving the room, taking a bit of the tension from the air. "Now, let's discuss some of our defense options."

* * *

Ed Stadtler was one of those people who didn't listen to the TV or radio news when he got up in the morning. He lived alone, and didn't happen to run into anyone else in his apartment building on the way to work. He listened to the CD player in his Miata, instead of tuning in a radio station.

On the way into his office building, he passed two men holding up a Post and apparently arguing about why something wasn't in it. Although they seemed to have the attitude that, whatever the story was, it was pretty damned important, for all Ed knew they were arguing over the latest Yankees trade, and he didn't give it much thought.

Consequently, he was all the way to his office before he got an inkling that anything was wrong.

When he arrived at the door of SB Electronic Consultants, he put his key in the lock, turned it, and realized the door was already unlocked. He pushed it open, expecting to see Ann Kennedy, who sometimes beat him into work in the morning, sitting at the front desk reading the paper.

He almost hit Ann with the door, and he pulled back with surprise. "Ann! Sorry..." he looked past her—she was standing with her back to the doorway, and had jumped when he came in, but otherwise hadn't moved from her spot—and into the small front room, which was already crowded with people. His partner, Larry Bind, was just next to Ann. Denise Crane and Robert Bryce, the rest of their firm, were across the room against the wall, next to another woman whom Ed had never seen.

And propped on his desk was a stranger. He was a big man, and Ed hoped he didn't shift that weight in just the wrong way, or he was likely to be wearing that old desk. But the stranger saw Ed, and pushed himself to his feet. "Ah, Mr. Stadtler. We were waiting for you to arrive."

Ed glanced at Larry, who had an odd expression on his face. "They were in here, waiting for us, when we arrived," Larry answered the unspoken question.

"Sorry about that," the large man stated, not sounding sorry at all. "A necessary security precaution." He stepped forward, offering his hand. "Joseph Earl, NSA," he rattled off so fast Ed barely caught it. His brow furrowed a bit, but he automatically took his hand.

"So... what can we do for you, Mr. Earl?"

"Joseph."

"Hm?"

"Joseph. Earl. Joseph."

Ed suddenly wasn't sure he was fully awake. He hadn't picked up any difference in pause or inflection between either name, and he hung there, helpless. Ann stepped up behind him. "Joseph is his last name."

"Oh...oh! Right. Mr. Joseph. Why is the NSA breaking into my office first thing in the morning?"

"We're here to discuss a commission with you." Joseph indicated the woman across the room. "My associate, Leslie, Cass."

He'd done it again. Ed turned to her, his mouth frozen open, almost afraid to speak. She walked up to him, took his hand, smiling at his dilemma, and offered, "Miss Leslie Cass."

Ed broke into a smile and shook her hand. "Miss Cass. I take it everyone else has gone through this?" The rest of room nodded at him, and he nodded back. "Good, just so I know we're through. Now: You came in to offer us a job?..."

"No, not really," Joseph interrupted. "We came here to give you a job. The principal difference being, you have little choice but to accept it."

Ed paused at this, then looked to the others. Now he understood why Robert and Denise were against the far wall, with those cowed expressions. A glance at Ann and Larry told him they were hiding it better, but they felt pushed against the same wall. He looked back at Joseph. "Just what sort of a job are we talking about, Mr. Joseph?"

"We need you to break into Power Tower, Mr. Stadtler."

It took about a second for Ed to realize he was talking about THE Power Tower. When he did, he burst out with a laugh. "You're crazy! That place makes Fort Knox look like my broom closet! That whole building is one big deathtrap! Why d'you think the Red Gang never got in? There's no way I'm gonna try to break into Power Tower!"

"Mr. Stadtler..."

"What's your problem with the Powers, anyway? Last I heard, they're on our side..."

"Mr. Stadtler, someone has to get into their headquarters. There may be valuable information vital to the security..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know the spiel. If you need it so bad, why don't you ask them for it?"

"Well, it's too late now, isn't it?" Joseph snapped.

"What the Hell are you talking about? Too late for what?"

Now it was Joseph's turn to pause, looking at Ed as if he was just slightly retarded. Both men turned to Larry, who just stared at Ed for a moment, then threw his hands into the air.

"Jesus Christ, Ed, do you live in a hole? How could you not know? Turn on a TV some

time, turn on a radio..."

"Larry!" Ed cut him off. "What?"

"The Powers are dead. They're all dead. The spaceship blew up last night."

* * *

"Dead?" L. Byron Scott IV fell into a deeply cushioned antique chair with a plop, mouth slack. "Dead?" He ran a hand through his grayed hair, licking his lips. "All of them? What? What happened?"

The day butler stood in front of him, holding his hands behind his back to hide his fidgeting. "Apparently, the spacecraft they were traveling in was destroyed, presumably by whatever they were planning to destroy themselves. All of them were lost."

Scott sat there for minutes, slack-jawed, silent, eyes vacant, while his butler stood before him, silently considering his possible reactions. Scott finally stood up, and walked like a zombie across the room. He stopped by the large picture window on the study's far wall, staring out but not seeing the spacious grounds beyond.

Suddenly, he jerked as if shot, and threw himself sideways away from the window. He pinned himself against the wall, amidst the silken curtains, and his eyes, now animate, were those of a frightened animal. The butler made no move toward his employer. Instead, he waited for the next order he knew was coming.

After a few moments, Scott turned back to his butler, his frightened stare replaced with one of desperation, then one of concern. "Dennis," he croaked, "call Tork. I want the security staff doubled immediately. Today. Then call LaSalle. Tell him I'm staying here today."

The butler nodded and left the study. When L. Byron Scott finally moved away from the wall, he took care not to cross in front of the window.

* * *

Ed Stadtler paced about the cluttered work area of the office like a caged animal, occasionally slowing down long enough to take a sip of the tea in his cup. He had left the conference room to recover from the blitzkrieg of legalese the NSA agents had leveled at them. He was fully convinced that they would all be thrown in jail for a very long time if they did not agree to take the job.

Job. Right. It was a suicide mission.

Jail wasn't looking that bad.

On top of that, he'd discovered that there were some interesting (to the NSA) gaps in the history of their computer wizard, Robert Bryce, and that his jail term would make the rest of theirs seem like an overnight stay in comparison. Robert, who had been quiet all morning, all but tried to melt into the floorboards at that point, and Ed knew they were thoroughly boxed in.

When he was through venting his silent frustrations at the NSA, his government, Murphy's laws, God Himself, and whatever he must have done to tick Him off, he walked over to the teapot, refilled his cup, and returned to the conference room. On the table in the center of the room were rolls of charts and pages of printed data, and everyone was gathered around the table studying the blueprinted material.

Everyone looked up when he returned. "Mr. Stadtler," Joseph greeted him with a paternal air. "Ready to go to work?"

Ed just glared at him, before turning his attention to the prints on the table.

They spent the next twenty minutes examining charts and blueprints, occasionally flipping through the text material to cross-reference a note here or a diagram there. After a thorough going-over, they put the charts down on the table and leaned back in their chairs.

Ed glared at Joseph, across the table. "Well, Joseph, with all this spotty and missing data on their building's security systems, I'm sure we'll all be electrocuted before we reach the front door."

Joseph shrugged. "We know the data's missing. Hell, if we had all that stuff, we could walk in ourselves." Like you did in here, Ed thought. "That's why we're hiring you. We know your firm is the best in New York when it comes to spotting, evaluating and circumventing the most unique and exotic security systems out there. If anyone can find the way into the Power Tower, it's SB Electronics Consultants. And we know you will."

No one replied to his complement, or his challenge. "Look, guys," Joseph added, "we have to get into the Powers' databases. We think they hold the secrets behind that thing that killed them out there, and we need that info. We're sending people into Doc Tomorrow's lab to find out what he knew, too. We hope that the information they have will give us a chance to try to destroy that thing out there. Without it, we're all dead."

When the room remained silent, Joseph tried another approach. "Think of it this way: If you don't go in, and we lock you up, you won't be in jail for longer than two months before we're all dead, anyway. Now. If you need any special equipment, contact me or agent Cass, and we'll get it for you ASAP."

Joseph and Cass then stood up from the table. "Well, we'll leave you to it. Good luck. Keep in touch."

They left the conference room and walked out the door, leaving the shell-shocked staff of SB Electronics Consultants behind in their conference room. They all looked around at each other, with the exception of Bryce, who didn't seem to want to look at anything but the floor. Finally, they all looked back to Ed, who just shook his head and whispered to himself, "Son of a bitch."

Repercussion

It wasn't hard to understand the universal quiet that seemed to descend upon the population of the world, if you remembered the Kennedy assassination, the Challenger explosion, or the Jonestown massacre. To put it simply, the world was left in shock. People made the attempt to get on with their lives, but most of them just went through the motions, stumbling about with vague looks in their eyes.

It only lasted a day.

* * *

The police cruiser raced down the road so fast that crossing a graded intersection lifted its rear wheels off the ground. When they touched down again, the driver put them into a squealing skid that brought the car door to door with another cruiser, with inches to spare. One policeman, of the many who crouched behind their parked cruisers in the street, was so taken by surprise that he had to check himself from training his gun on the cruiser driver. Then they all turned back to the bank across the street, beyond their cordons.

Officer Woody Klein pushed his door open and crouched down behind it. He looked over the edge of the door to the bank, then looked over his shoulder at the other officers. He saw one of his old partners a few yards away, standing at the corner of the High's on the corner. "Hey, 'Tonio," he called, "find out who it is, yet?"

'Tonio looked at Woody, then pointed his sharp jaw at the bank. "They think it's the Tank, but they're not sure. Portland's tryin' to talk to him, now."

"Portland?" Woody looked back toward the bank. "That bullshit-spewing weenie?"

As if on cue, a commotion erupted from the bank. There was a sudden burst of profanity, followed by a small man in a cheap green suit backing slowly out of the door, hands out in front of him.

"That's my weenie," Woody stage whispered to no one in particular.

Suddenly Portland ducked, fell over, and rolled to one side. There was a crash and a shower of glass from the recessed entrance of the bank, followed by the shattered doors themselves. And a desk arched over Portland's head and landed in the street in an explosion of walnut-stained pressboard splinters.

Someone in earshot said, "Yeah, that's probably the Tank."

Portland was busy scrambling back to cover behind a cruiser. He slipped around a car, almost on hands and knees, and stopped near Woody. Woody looked back at him and grinned. "Christ, Portland, what'd you say to him?" Portland just looked at him as if he didn't understand the question, and Woody started to repeat himself when a large figure lumbered out of the bank.

Woody had never seen the Tank up-close, and he couldn't help but gape. He seemed to be fully ten feet tall, and he was covered with what looked like battleship plate under his clothes. Upon closer examination, Woody realized that the plates weren't under his clothes, but under his skin. In one hand was a large sack, barely holding a very hard, angular cargo inside. Woody guessed it was probably holding the bank's safety deposit boxes, contents and all.

The gargantuan bank robber stood in the middle of the street, sizing up the cordon of policemen surrounding him, as if he had all the time in the world. And Woody suddenly realized: He did have all the time in the world. He had almost forgotten that that robot-thing, Pseudoman, was generally the only one who could rein in the Tank. He'd actually witnessed one of their many battles in the old warehouse district, and had come very close to being crushed by the warehouse wall the Tank had toppled on Pseudoman. Actually, now that he thought of it, he'd come closer to being blown to bits by Pseudoman when he'd blasted himself out from under that wall.

Now, there was no more Pseudoman. He died with the rest of the heroes, last night. And the Tank was obviously keen to press his advantage.

Feeling slightly nervous, Woody looked over to where his closest superior, Lt. Fox, was on the radio to the Captain. He could tell she was talking to Capt. Stears, it was the way she postured even when just talking about him. Woody saw her shoulders square, and she put the microphone back in the car. Then she surveyed the officers around her. Woody knew that look: It meant SWAT was at least twenty minutes away, and she'd been given the ball. When she inhaled sharply, he knew what she was about to shout.

"Take 'im down!"

At once, every cop on the street let loose with their firearms, all trained on the Tank. The noise was deafening, the thunder of the guns contrasting with the sharp whines of shrapnel kicked up from the wall. The Tank threw up his arm, bringing the metal-filled bag in front of his face, and stood there, contemptuously.

Woody noticed a great many of the shots fired by his fellow officers were striking him anywhere, but bothering him little. They were not taking the time to try to pick a vulnerable point in his armor, just trying to knock him down by sheer force. Woody tried to take out his knees, shins, crotch, elbow, neck, wrist, every soft spot he knew of and, once that didn't work, a few he was just guessing at. He wished he had a bazooka on him, or at least a hand grenade. He was sure he wasn't the only one.

Suddenly, the Tank moved. He surged forward, surprisingly fast for his bulk, into the middle of the street. Then he stopped, threw his arms back, and leaped into the air. Woody momentarily imagined he'd somehow learned how to fly, and held his fire. But the Tank reached an apex in his leap, arced back down, and struck the ground feet-first. There was an explosion of rock and dust, the shock of his landing knocking everyone off their feet. Woody's foot slid out from under him, and he fell straight down, landing on his seat hard enough to jar his teeth.

When he stood back up, he looked over his cruiser at the street. The Tank was gone. The cloud of dust he had kicked up was blowing down the street, to reveal a ragged hole in the middle of the street. Someone cursed loudly, and the policemen bounded out from behind their vehicles and crowded around the hole.

"Christ! Sewer!" a cop exclaimed. "Boy, were we suckered!" Someone pointed a flashlight into the hole, the light reflecting off the water running below. "We can't track him through the water. We lost him."

Woody, crouched by the hole, straightened up and holstered his gun. As the rest of the

squad left the site, some heading into the bank, Woody held back a moment, hovering by the hole. Lt. Fox noticed him still standing there.

"Unless you're planning to jump in after him," she advised, "get back to your car and resume your patrol. There's nothing left to do here."

* * *

The Tank's daring daylight robbery was only the first of dozens, all over the world, perpetrated by supercriminals run amok. A few were brought down by the local authorities or armed forces, but most of them, veterans of intricate and devious plots and schemes designed to thwart their law-abiding super counterparts, made a killing on the street.

Woody Klein found himself involved with six other such robberies over the course of the next five days. By the end of his work week, which happened to fall on a Thursday, Woody was whipped. He slumped on a barstool in the tavern a few blocks from his apartment, the space in front of him filled with empty beer mugs. He'd walked in during quarter beer happy hour, and tossed a five-dollar bill on the bar. So far, he had finished off \$3.75 worth of the brews, and was having a bit of trouble focusing on the remaining mugs.

He was also distracted by having to try to ignore the other patrons at the bar, all of whom seemed to have a story about some super-crime they had witnessed, and the inevitable addendums about the helpless, hapless cops left with egg on their faces after each incident.

He hardly noticed when the bartender came up and began removing empty mugs from the bar, to make room for another patron elbowing up next to him. When Woody noticed the missing mugs, the newcomer was already next to him.

"Hey, Woody! Tough week, huh, buddy?" Woody tried hard to focus on the newcomer.

"Arn? How you doin'."

"Oh, man, you've got a real head start on me," Arnold Woon said, plunking a dollar bill on the bar. "You must have had a really tough week."

"Man, it sucked. I mean, it sucked big hairy ones. We almost lost Bishop on Tuesday."

"What!"

"Yeah. Got tossed by Red Rover, about eighty feet. Thought his number was up," he mumbled, tossing down another beer.

"Man," Arn exhaled, just as his beers showed up. He tossed one down and picked up another mug. "What are you guys gonna do? Is anything working?"

"The only thing I've heard of that works is military ordn... ordi... orndinc..."

"Ordinance," Arn finished for him. "Sure, Woody, but are they gonna give any of those heavy arms to the cops? Hell, no."

"Hell, no," Woody echoed.

"It goes against every reg in the books. We both know that."

"Unless you're SWAT," Woody slurred.

"But even SWAT has to use specific ordinance that's nothing like state of the art firepower." Arn took a swig of his beer. "I'll bet the brass beef up SWAT, or at least enlarge the squad."

"AAH!" Woody waved an arm, almost slapping the girl on his far side. "A bigger SWAT team, with the same old guns and toys—Sorry, ma'am—big deal! They need firepower!"

A few others drifted into the conversation, lured by the talk of Dirty Harry police tactics and the dizzying nomenclatures of professional warfare arms and equipment. Woody barely kept up with his end of the conversation, but only due to his inebriation. Arn became the center of the arms debate, demonstrating a superior knowledge of all types of weapons and equipment that patently amazed the rest of the crowd. By the time they were winding down, they had all but drawn up diagrams depicting the ultimately-dressed samurai policeman.

And somewhere deep under Woody's stupor, those details were forming an image in his subconscious.

* * *

"Get Tork on the line! Where's Tork?" Byron Scott IV bellowed into the phone at the desk in his study. Scott himself was poised behind it in preparation to dive under it, and occasionally glanced over its mahogany top at the locked door or the curtained windows. He flinched at the sound of gunfire, somewhere on his estate, a moan of automatic rounds followed by the sharp crack of rifle shots. He had no idea who was using which weapons, his own security staff, or the (at last count) 40 or so thugs that were attempting to storm his home and do who-knew-what to his person and property.

A voice buzzed in Scott's ear, returning his attention to the phone. "I don't care! Find Tork and get him on the phone, or it's both your jobs!"

This was the second attempt to breach his estate in four days. It was not as if it was a unique occurrence: Being one of the richest men in town, Scott had been the target of uncounted threats, robberies, kidnap attempts, ransom demands, takeover attempts and personal attacks over the course of his career.

But there was a significant difference this time. In the past, Scott knew he could depend on Tectonic, Might, or the Metacats, or some other hotshot hero, to show up and save his bacon. They had always turned up, he didn't know how, when he needed them. Now they were gone. His men had managed to repel the first few crooks who tried to break in, but they returned. With friends. Scott knew it was only a matter of time before they made it inside and trashed his beautiful home.

Not to mention, himself.

Scott suddenly froze, cocking an ear at the window. The shouts and gunfire were dying down outside. He peered at the window, as if he could see through the drawn curtains, trying to see some sign that the skirmish might be over. Presently he heard a buzzing on the phone in his hand, and he raised it back to his ear.

"Tork!"

"Yes, I was on the south side of the estate, pinned down at the garage. We've managed to drive them off, sir. The police are picking them up outside the grounds..."

"What the hell were you doing at the garages! Dammit, Tork, if you can't..." Scott checked himself, pulled away from the phone to take a deep breath. Then he lifted the receiver slowly back to his ear. "Sorry, Tork. You did fine. Good job."

A knock at the door startled Scott, and he reflexively ducked a bit before he caught himself. He started to call out, but decided to stay silent. He only saw the shadows of one set of feet under the door, but...

"Mr. Scott?"

Scott visibly relaxed, exhaling the breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. "Hold on!" he called at the door, then to the phone, "Tork, when you're through mopping up out there, see me in my study." He hung up, went over to the massive double doors to the study, and unlocked them.

Mark LaSalle stood on the other side of the door, the expression on his face the only visible sign that he had been in the midst of a small war. He did not immediately come in, instead he stood his ground and looked Scott up and down. Scott examined Mark as closely, noticing his four-figure European suit had not even lost a crease. Mark finally met Scott's eyes, and said simply, "Are you all right?" Scott nodded. Mark seemed to relax, and finally walked into the study. "It's over out there. Tork lost two men. We've got six others needing hospitalization. It was pretty bad."

"Did..." Scott paused, realizing how petty he was going to sound. "Did they get anything?"

Mark looked at him, but his expression wasn't recriminating. "No, but they did a fair amount of damage, mostly to brickwork, windows, and wallboard. I don't know if they damaged any of the art. The staff is checking, by now." He walked over to the liquor cabinet, poured a brandy and returned to Scott's side, handing the goblet to him. Scott nodded and tilted his head back, downing the brandy in one gulp. After a moment, he moved toward the door.

"I want to see the damage."

The tycoon and his Chief Aide walked through the mansion, examining the outer rooms one by one. They found a number of bullet holes and gouges in the walls of the outer rooms. They walked gingerly through those rooms, taking care to avoid the shards of broken glass littered over the expensive carpeting. They discovered an occasional bullet hole bored into some of the many paintings that adorned the mansion walls. In one room, a ceramic sculpture lay in a million pieces on the floor around its pedestal. There was a single bullet mark in the wall about three inches above the pedestal's base, almost dead center.

They paused at the reception room. Mark regarded Scott with a quizzical expression, but Scott did not speak. He was remembering the time he'd stood here with Tectonic, shaking that huge slab of a hand, thanking him for saving his estate from another attack. He almost regarded them as part of his staff, they came so often. Even now, he could almost see Tectonic standing there, smiling.

About an hour into their examination, Scott decided to leave the rest of it to the staff. He and Mark returned to the study, and Scott went back to the liquor cabinet.

There was a knock at the open double door. A man in a dark blue security uniform, looking like he'd just crawled through a bramble hedge, stood there waiting to be bidden entry. Scott turned to the door. "Tork... Jesus, are you all right?" He motioned for him to come into the study.

Tork walked in, just slightly favoring his left leg. "I'm fine, sir. I caught some flying glass, is all."

"Sit down, Tork. Here." Scott handed his security chief his brandy, then poured another for himself. Then he moved to his desk and sat down behind it. "Sorry I snapped at you out there. It's been a bad week for all of us, especially you and your men, and I had no right."

Tork nodded slightly, mumbling, "I understand, sir."

"Good. I wouldn't have blamed you if you'd just jumped into one of the cars and cleared out of here." Scott was looking away, so he didn't notice how fast Tork brought the brandy snifter up to his face to hide his expression. Mark noticed, and suppressed a smile while Scott continued. "We can't go on like this, obviously. Mark, Tork, we have to come up with a way to defend this estate, fast. Otherwise, we might as well board up the windows and leave. And I have no intention of leaving." He gulped down some brandy.

Mark spoke first. "I think we're going to have to pull some strings to get some more advanced weaponry." Scott looked at him with a strange expression. "I know what it sounds like, but what choice do we have? Those people out there have serious firepower. We still have contacts with DOD. We should call them."

"Sir?" Tork almost raised his hand, waited for Scott to look at him. "I have a few friends on the force, who tell me the police brass are making plans to create urban assault gear for their police. Maybe we should talk to them."

Scott seemed to consider both suggestions, and was quiet a moment. Then he shook his head. "I don't know. Anything the police or the Army has, the crooks can get. We need something superior."

"Superior?" Tork echoed.

"Yes..." Scott paused, trying to collect his thoughts. "Something that we know will stop those crooks, no matter what they've got. We need better than police or Army issue, because the crooks know how to get past that stuff." He looked at Mark. "We are talking about self-defense, trespassing, the sanctity of my home. I have the right to defend myself."

"Just how far are we willing to go?" Mark asked.

"Well..." Scott considered. "If we go all the way... well, hell. No one's going to miss a bunch of thugs, are they? No! No one's going to miss a crook at all!"

Mark looked at his boss, then stared off into space for a moment. Then he looked back at Scott. "That's a good point."

* * *

The lights were low in the conference room at the Van Dorn Street police station, and the blinds were drawn on the west-facing wall. It was late in the day, and sunlight forced its way into the room in horizontal strips, sculpting the eight men in the room in bands of yellow light. One man wore the uniform and colors of the Chief of Police, his hat on the table in front of him. The others wore three-piece suits, and despite the high temperature of the room, none of them had loosened their ties.

"Gentlemen," one of the suits addressed them, "We are neck deep in the biggest crisis this city's ever had. Without our champions, the criminal elements of this city are tearing us apart. We can't last like this. I have already authorized a measure giving the police force permission to use deadly force at their discretion, but it's not enough."

"All right, all right, we know why we're here," another suit interrupted him. "If you're planning to build up the city's arsenal, you know I'm all for it. But you tell me what we're gonna pay for it with."

"We're all gonna pay for it with blood if you don't stop screwing around with us..." the Chief of Police snapped at him, but the first suit stopped him with a motion of his hand. "You're gonna find a way, or it'll be your job, as well. All our jobs, understand?"

A third suit joined in. "I guess I know what I'm here for. I can give you all the specs for our SWAT units, and we can figure out what we can apply to the rest of the force..."

"No. Not quite." The first suit leaned forward. "We can't afford to outfit the entire department. We're going to have to work with squads, an elite force."

"But like SWAT."

"Like ultimate SWAT. Stan, what I want from you is not a list of your current equipment. I want your Christmas list. Your ultimate Christmas list. The stuff you've wanted in here all your life, but can't even clear through God, much less the Feds."

"You're nuts," the suit replied. "We'll never be able to afford something like that."

"We'll never be able to buy equipment like that," another suit chimed in. "How ya gonna get it past Uncle Sam?"

"We are the fourth largest city in the country, that's how," the first suit replied. "If we have to, we'll lie, cheat, steal, blackmail, ransom, or blow someone up! But I'll get what I want." He ticked off on yellow-banded fingers. "I want suits that protect the body. I want armor-piercing guns. I want protection from lasers, tasers, masers and phasers!"

The Chief threw in his two cents. "They need specialized sensory equipment. Night vision, heat sensors, metal detectors."

"Instant communication with his commander and other officers," another suit added.

"Instant information access."

"Heightened close-in defensive capabilities."

"Added strength."

"High mobility."

"Smart guns. Built-in computer guidance."

"Smart bullets."

"I think you've got the picture, Stan," the first suit said. "I want a model in three days. I want volunteers picked out to train and wear them. I want these on the streets in two weeks."

* * *

Woody Klein stood in the entrance to an alley, across the street from The Police Store, taking deep draughts of the cool morning air. He had only been up for an hour, but it was too early for his hangover to have dissipated yet. He wished he'd remained in bed, but he knew that he had to come here this morning. Still, he could not bring himself to walk across the street yet, he was crazy, his head hurt, he was cold...

He saw Arn, in the window of the store. He had turned up with a display of some kind, something he was arranging in the storefront. Arn didn't look up. Why should he? Why should he think that his crazy friend was standing across the street in the fog, afraid to see him? When Arn was finished, he pulled himself out of the window display and disappeared back into the store.

Woody stood there for another few minutes, almost wishing he'd see Arn poke his head out the door, look straight at him, and motion him inside. Finally, he seemed to shake his indecision off his shoulders, drew himself up to his full height, and crossed the street.

Arn was behind the counter when Woody opened the door. He was on a stepladder, putting boxes of swiss army knives on the shelves above. He looked over his shoulder, then stepped down off the ladder. "Woody." His smile was not quite a smile, his voice a bit subdued. "How goes? How ya feelin' today, man?"

Woody ran a hand through his hair. "I've been better. Should've had a good ten more hours of sleep."

"Had something you needed to do today, huh?"

"Yeah." Woody ran his eyes around the store. Arn was a sort of "unofficial" official police supplies store. He was good at getting some of the equipment the "official" police stores sold, so he had a strong clientele among the city's force. He also sold arms to the registered public, as well as army surplus and items that were not under government control, so he turned a good profit in his small store. At least, anyone who knew him well knew he turned a good profit, but he didn't flaunt his money on the street. Only his good friends knew what he did with all his cash. Woody was one of the chosen few.

Woody paused a few more seconds, unsure how to start. "You were the one who brought me home last night, right?"

"Don't remember, huh? Yeah, I guess I got you home around two. I would'a gotten you home earlier, but I thought you'd already left."

"Left?"

"Yeah, you got up from the bar and headed for the door, around midnight. Then about one, I saw you alone in a corner booth, just sorta mumbling to yourself. So I took you home."

"Mumbling, huh? Anything X-rated?" Woody asked, trying to sound flippant.

"Not exactly," was all Arn would reply. They locked eyes for long seconds. Finally, Arn moved from around the counter and went to the door. He put up a cardboard sign reading, "be back in twenty minutes," and locked the front door. Then he walked to the counter and pulled back a curtain that led into a back room. "Come on, Wood."

They went into the back room, walked up to another door. Arn unlocked the heavy door and opened it, revealing stairs leading downward. He flicked on a light just inside the doorway, and started down. Woody followed him down. He knew where he was being led, but had no idea what he was actually going to see. At the bottom of the stairs, Arn walked through another doorway and found another light switch. He flicked the lights on just as Woody reached the doorway.

Woody involuntarily caught his breath. Arn smiled and crossed his arms in front of him. After a moment, Woody took a few halting steps forward.

The room was cramped, it was so full of displays and stands. Taking up most of the front half of the room were modified coat racks holding the warfare garments of a millennium. There were coats, uniforms, helmets, shields, boots and gauntlets. Woody saw metals, cloths, wood, plastic and even stone. Behind and around the uniforms were display cases, like the ones upstairs, but filled with everything from prehistoric-looking stone knives to state of the art "smart" guns, defensive small arms, bows and arrows, early automatic weapons, gas canisters, spears, grenades, and a few items that looked more like props from the last James Bond movie than weapons of any kind. There was a WWII issue folding field motorcycle mounted on a wall. A 19th century cannon was suspended from the ceiling. The far wall held a painting of the Battle of Britain that covered at least seventy percent of the wall's span.

This was the infamous collection of Arnold Woon, a treasure trove of lethal equipment like none Woody had even seen. He was sure, in fact, that if the government knew he had even a few of these items in here, he'd be doing time in Leavenworth until his grandchildren died.

The first thing he came within reach of was a suit of Chinese armor, finely polished in what looked like bronze, with a helmet mounted above it on its display stand. Woody ran his hand over the metal, still smooth as the day it was forged. "Sixth Dynasty," Arn spoke. "A bit old for you, I think. Probably too small, too."

Woody stopped fingering the armor and looked back at him. "I knew you were the man," he smiled.

"Yeah, well, after last night, I knew you were gonna be the Man, and I wanted to get in on this. I mean sure, you were pretty smashed, but I know you. I could tell from listening to you last night, that you were ready to take law enforcement to the next level, even if it meant going solo to do it." Arn smiled. "Well, I can't let my friend go out there to defend his people, my people, without making sure he'd be prepared." Arn led Woody past the ancient suit, and further into the room. Woody saw racks of equipment, armor, firearms, helmets, cruncheons,

shields, uniforms, radios and exotic weaponry. Some of it bore close resemblance to equipment upstairs, but upon closer examination, proved to be in much better condition, cleaned, primed, sharpened, sewn, and ready for serious use. He stopped in front of the twenty-first century equivalent of battlefield armor, a fully covering kevlar suit with impact-absorbing composite superstrate. The material was light and flexible, and clearly a breathable and non-binding fabric.

"You've got a good eye, sir," Arn crooned in his best salesman tones. "That would make a good base layer for you. It'll turn anything short of cannonfire, but you can wear it for hours in relative comfort. Easy to move in, too. That'll be important. You will need headgear, though. Let's see..." Arn walked along a wall of helmets, pausing and reaching for one. "See this? Experimental army issue. Spanish army, that is. Kevlar shell, synthetic foam interior, special amplification plastics for each ear. They say it actually clarifies sound, but I've never noticed. Best thing about this: It covers all of your face, except the eyes. And I've got some goggles for you that are strengthened and reflective." He tossed the helmet to Woody. "No one will ever recognize you."

Woody looked at the helmet, then at Arn, and smiled. Arn returned the smile, and turned back to the display cabinet.

"Now, let's get you some armament. Something in a laser, sir?"

* * *

He was alone on the island, for the first time since he could remember, it seemed. The day he'd arrived on this remote atoll, so many years ago, he'd brought surveyors and a construction crew, and they had immediately begun work on his home. Then servants, instructors, caretakers, all gleaned from the nearby islands... those with people, at least... had taken up residence and cared for the island, and himself, for the last eleven years.

Now they were all gone. He'd explained his plans, told them he would be leaving for the U.S., and explained they all had a choice to come with him or go back to their island homes. They had all decided to go home. He tried not to take it personally.

And as he stood on the edge of the thin beach, waves lapping at his feet, he looked back at the house that had been his sanctuary for so long. He was going to miss it, it was true, but there was work to do, and he couldn't do it from here. Already most of his equipment had been picked up, and was waiting for him in New York. The house was only a shell now. Time to leave it to the parasites.

He thought about the people. All the people. They were out there, without their super security blankets, and they were panicked. They were laborers, farmers, clerks, bosses, suits and dresses, afraid of a future without soldiers to protect them. It had been so long since they'd had to stand up for themselves. Would any of them remember how?

By now, the Militia program was mostly complete: His systems here were shut down, and had been recreated in New York. Other stores of equipment had been shipped, and other purchases were on route to his new home. The rest of the "program" was up to him to continue, now. It would be his job to lead the world (kicking and screaming, most likely) into a new era. He had a big job ahead of him, but he was ready to take it on. It was what he'd

prepared most of his life for, including the years spent on this island. Even his tutors and trainers had wondered what he thought he would do with knowledge of the most practical and theoretical sciences, martial arts techniques, war strategy, public speaking, leadership, physical training, medicine, computer programming, engineering, yoga, psychology and world history. Those tutors he explained his future to generally acted as if he was crazy, but since they continued to tutor him and accept their paychecks, he never considered their opinions important. And now they were gone, their duties concluded, it was time to apply some of that knowledge.

Moored against a small dock was a seaplane. It was gassed up and ready to go, and his gear was aboard. He paused before he boarded it. He had the strangest feeling he was stepping into a moment in history. As he started the engines, he sincerely hoped he was playing the part of a Washington... or even a Revere...and not a Custer.

* * *

It was eight days after the destruction of Tomorrow's ship, almost to the hour. Depending on where in Cape Canaveral you were, you were either in the kind of oppressive darkness that only a remote swamp could provide, or you were in the midst of spotlights that seemed to best the sun itself in output. Most of those spotlights were trained on a few spots, most notably the launching pad where the space shuttle Endeavor hung against its fuel tank and boosters.

General Reddy stood at the large picture window at the launch command center, watching the shuttle as if he were somehow protecting it. He had finished the last briefing with Col. Ben East, who would be in command of the mission, just minutes ago. About now, East would be arriving at the distant shuttle and climbing inside, to join the other four members of the crew already aboard. At about the time he estimated East should be on-board, he left the window and headed back to the launch center.

Launch center didn't change much, these days. It used to be that, every few years, NASA would reorganize the huge room where launches were monitored and supervised, but they had since found an optimum layout for Capcom, and now the only changes one tended to notice were replacements to the computers and monitors at each station. There was one difference today, but it was one that most of the American public were not aware of: This was a purely Defense related mission, and they were following standard security procedures for a sensitive mission. Only essential personnel were in Capcom today, and only about two-thirds of the room was occupied, but since there were no broadcasts from Capcom going out to the public, no one would ever see this skeleton crew doing its job.

NASA Administrator Girard Clymer saw Gen. Reddy enter the room. "General. Firechief reports Col. East on-board. We're ready to start final countdown."

Reddy nodded, and the word was passed. In a small corner of a large wall monitor, a digital counter appeared and began counting backwards from 5.00.00 minutes. Reddy listened as the Capcom staff went over the launch checklists with the shuttle's pilot, Capt. Gus Cleveland. Occasionally he would hear someone trip over the name Endeavor, before switching back to the mission's code-name, Firechief, and resuming their checks. This was something Capcom was not used to, indeed, it had only been done twice before. Still, they were professional about it, not sniggering like a bunch of school kids at "all the cloak and dagger nonsense," as he'd

heard it described so many times before.

Of course, they might have just been more aware of exactly what was at stake. Reddy nodded to himself.

Capt. Cleveland's voice came over the main speaker. "Capcom, we are go for launch at T minus one minute."

"Roger, Firechief," came the reply from the "voice's" desk, "we have you 'go' for launch." There was a pause, before the Voice of Capcom spoke again. "Good luck, Firechief." Reddy looked down from his vantage point at the woman behind the communications console. After a second, she looked up from her console at him. He gave her a brief nod, then turned back to the screen.

The secondary rockets were just firing on the pad. A few seconds later, the main engines flared to life and thick white smoke spread outwards at hurricane speed, obscuring the pad in seconds. Then in the middle of the white and orange conflagration, a white glider attached to a brown bullet floated out of the top and slowly ascended, already swiveling on its axis and drifting eastward.

Shuttle mission ND001, code-named Firechief, was off for the stars.

Specialists

« ^ »

The arrivals terminal at Kennedy International was unusually busy, and the young reporter had to jostle his way past a number of loiterers to reach the private flights terminal. He couldn't help but notice a lot of the loiterers were decked out much the same way he was, with cameras, pocket recorders or note pads, and "Press" labels stuck to jackets. Once past them, he reached a small lounge where a smaller collection of reporters waited. He sat down next to one of them, a gentleman with a bushy mustache, who broke off his conversation with another to greet the youth.

"Hey, Bushman!" The youth jerked a thumb at the crowd. "What's with all the other reporters? I thought this guy wasn't that popular."

The mustachioed reporter looked over his shoulder and smiled. "Who, that bunch? They're just the paparazzi."

"The what?"

"How long you been a reporter, kid?" Before the youth could answer, Bushman explained, "They're here to get a look at that actress... what's her name? The one who was in that '3 Musketeers' remake. I hear she's gonna try out for some Broadway play. They don't know anything about Prime."

"Oh," the youth responded, looking back at the crowd. They'd suddenly noticed a jet approaching their gate, and many of them were checking their cameras over. "I didn't think

Prime was all that popular.”

Bushman shook his head. “Well, not with them, no. He’s not a movie star, he’s just one of the richest men in the world.”

“I know that,” the youth replied, “but so what? I still don’t know what the big deal was, SupraNet sending a financial reporter down to the airport to report on this rich guy coming to New York. I mean, we don’t even do that for Trump anymore!”

“Kid, Lee Prime is no Donald Trump.” Bushman turned in his seat to face him. “First of all, Lee Prime has lived most of his life on a Caribbean island, not in the States. He built his fortune from scratch, by some of the most ingenious investment strategies anyone has ever seen, over the last fifteen years. He’s a legend in brokerage circles, worldwide. And for the last seven years, no one has seen the guy off his island. He’s a regular Howard Hughes, and that’s more interesting than a Donald Trump any day!”

The kid was starting to look impressed, when a commotion down the hall distracted them. At the main gate, a clot of people had emerged from the berthed jet, and the reporters and photographers converged on them like a pack of wolves. Actually, the kid thought, given the beauty and popularity of the starlet in the center of that entourage, pack of wolves was a good analogy. She was completely invisible from the kid’s point of view, however, her small frame being completely surrounded by taller people and cameras held over heads. After a few moments of watching and listening to some of the shouted questions, the kid looked back to the terminal he was supposed to be watching.

When he first looked up, he thought he was looking at another actor that was trying to slip through the terminal relatively unseen by the mob. He was so large, but in a perfectly proportioned sort of way, that he had to duck his head a bit to get through the terminal door. From the kid’s seat, he seemed to be seven feet tall. And he was incredibly handsome, the kid had to admit. Not quite like a model’s perfect looks, but a rugged sort of handsome. He wore what was definitely a very expensive three-piece suit that had been perfectly tailored to his considerable frame. The handsome giant was carrying a large case in either hand, but he didn’t seem to be affected by their apparent weight.

The kid had just about decided that this was some stunt man or personal porter for the actress, when suddenly Bushman noticed the man, and his mustache seemed to bounce as he jostled himself out of his chair. “That’s him! That’s Prime!”

“Huh?” was all the kid could breathe, but Bushman and the other reporters were already up and crowding up to the giant. After a beat, the kid managed to vault out of his seat and start his tape recorder.

“Mr. Prime!” one of the reporters was already starting. “We hear you’ve decided to relocate to New York City. Is this true?”

“Yes, it is,” the giant responded. His voice was deep and modulated, projecting itself easily around the room.

“Where are you going to set up residence?” someone asked. “Will you be conducting your future business affairs here, then?”

“To the latter question, yes,” Prime replied. “I’d rather not go into my residential

transactions, at this time."

The questions started to come faster and more insistent, mostly relating to rumored business deals and mergers, his legendary investment savvy, the status of his estate, and his present assets. The kid reporter just tried to take it all in, letting his recorder get all the details for him.

Across the terminal, the cluster of humanity surrounding the actress was trying to crabwalk with her entourage to the exits, when a few heads looked back at the smaller commotion centered around the giant. A few voices asked no one in particular who the man was, but it was a few seconds before someone finally said, "Hey... that's Lee Prime!"

"Lee Prime?" a number of people exclaimed at once. The clot of reporters froze, craning their necks to get a good look at the mysterious billionaire. When they saw his face, his build, and realized what a photogenic personality this man was, someone said, "Oh, my, God." and the entire herd of reporters abandoned the actress to accost Lee Prime. The actress and her entourage were left standing almost alone in the terminal, and even the actress stood spellbound for a moment as she watched the incredible figure of the man striding through the fourth estate. Then, as if shaking herself out of a trance, she muttered, "Go figure the public," and she led her entourage to the exits.

The reporters tried gamely to gain more information from Lee Prime, though the new clot of reporters seemed to be more interested in his romances, his suits, or his investigations into a possible show business career. He answered none of these questions, and very few of the financial planning, by the time he reached the exit. Once outside, he lowered himself into a limousine that had clearly been waiting for him, and the black car pulled silently away from the curb.

"How was your trip, Mr. Prime?" The man sitting in the back of the limo with Lee Prime extended his hand. "I'm Danforth. We spoke on the phone."

"Danforth." Prime shook his hand, settling into the seat. "The flight was fine. New York doesn't seem to have changed much, at face value, since I was here last."

"You've probably been away too long," Danforth smiled. "Would you like to stop somewhere to eat or freshen up, before we take you to your office?"

"We'll go to the office first," Prime told him. "Have all my instructions been followed regarding my equipment?"

"Yes," Danforth replied. "I understand there is a delay on one of your shipments from Paris, but it should be here tomorrow. Everything else is here, in place and mostly installed."

"Mostly?"

"Yes... well, to be honest, there were a few things that those technicians you hired didn't seem to be sure about setting up, and they left them unfinished."

"Then call them." Prime did not appear to be upset, but his voice demanded obedience. "Have them meet us at the office, and they'll help me install them. There isn't a lot of time to waste, and I have to get busy."

* * *

"I'm hungry. Anyone else hungry?"

Ed, Larry, Ann and Denise all glared at Bobby, who was propped up on the back legs of his chair against the wall. It was close to nine in the evening, and they had spent the last half of the day doing nothing. Consequently, they were all a bit antsy at the moment, with nothing to do about it but wait. Conversation had died off over an hour ago, so they all sat around in their office lobby, killing time.

Bobby looked from one to the other, when no one answered him. "Come on, guys! How about pizza, huh? Three large meat specials. Company buys!"

Larry finally threw up a hand, took a deep breath, and said, "All right, all right! Bobby, go order the pizzas, for God's sake!" Bobby hopped out of his chair and went into the next room. "I swear, if that kid doesn't stop being led around by his stomach..."

"Better than some of the things he could be led around by," Ann put in.

"Spoken like a true feminist," Larry grinned sourly. "What the hell could be taking them so long to get here, anyway?"

Ed, sitting on the edge of his desk, shrugged his shoulders and continued to examine the rolodex box by his left hip. "I have no clue. He wasn't real specific when I talked to him. He just said he'd be bringing some things that might help."

"Yeah, sure," Larry snorted. "This I gotta see."

Ed nodded his agreement, although he wasn't exactly looking forward to seeing the NSA again. Joseph's people had brought them reams of paper detailing information about the Power's home and technology. They had filled in the details with architectural plans, shipping manifests, manufacturing data, delivery schedules, and information from supposedly secure computer networks (Bryce's particular forté). After a marathon two weeks of studying every scrap of data that could be obtained about Power Tower, they all felt whipped, in more ways than one.

Knowing how formidable a task breaking into the Tower was (because, after all, that was what they were doing) didn't seem to make the details any more palatable, either. They started with reviewing the most basic information, the "front doors." The first obstacle a visitor dealt with was a man in a glass booth that arranged for interviews with the Powers. Only it wasn't a man in a glass booth, it was a computer generated hologram run by the central computer upstairs. The second level, where all interviews took place, was accessible by a main stair from the lobby, but those levels were as far as an unauthorized was going to go. Stairwells and elevators were all locked off, and needed further authorization to use.

They checked the "back door" next, in this case, the basement levels. Often a building was easily accessible from below-ground levels through utility tunnels and such. Not this one, though: There were no access tunnels. There were the usual pipes and conduits from the city's water and power lines, and a few smaller lines that Larry had guessed to be pneumatic in nature, but all of these converged on the building and ran into a solid wall of a construction Ed had never seen before. The wall defied their best efforts to even scratch it with anything short

of explosive devices.

Denise then looked into the possibility of going in through a more intrusive method, say, through an airshaft, elevator shaft, even a plumbing pipe.

That was when they found out about the sensors, and got their real scare. The scanners were embedded into walls, floors, and ceilings, everywhere. And they weren't just visual scanners, although they appeared to be a fairly common image recognition system that SB had dealt with before. These were connected to units that put out radar and ultrasonic signals, and could read clear through a body, making simple disguises useless. And the units were inside the walls, so they could not be disabled.

"Now, that's nasty," Larry commented.

Apparently, even the skin of the building could protect itself. They discovered through the glass manufacturer that the outer glass was covered with a special film that rendered it highly reflective to light and particle weapons. The inner glass contained an auto-reactive LCD coating that instantly opaqued, to prevent a flash of light or explosive from blinding an occupant. The glass was protected by counter-sonic "nullifiers" that cancelled any vibration made by a sonic device or impact. And finally, the coup de grace, there was some kind of an energy field enveloping the building that had the ability to deflect any kinetic force upward. They watched a news tape that demonstrated this aspect to an incredible effect: As they watched, a small projectile plunged at the Tower in slow motion. When it struck, a fiery explosion blossomed outward, but it seemed impossibly small. The brunt of the blast seemed instead to travel up the wall, looking like a movie projection against the side of the Tower. In slow motion, it resembled a ripe fruit after it had been thrown against a wall, and now seemed to drip upward. When the smoke and fire cleared, the Tower was untouched. "I always wondered why air traffic control marked that block off-limits," Ann whispered. Clearly, second story break-in wouldn't work.

Not that they would want to, since the plans said every floor was networked with gas, lasers, masers, sonics and even holographic projections, to deter any cat burglar.

At that point, Ed called Joseph, to tell him they couldn't do it. He explained why they couldn't do it, apologized for not being able to do it, and hoped they wouldn't be thrown in the slam for not doing it.

But Joseph told him to wait for him there, and he would bring "something that might help."

And so, they waited.

Bobby returned to the lobby, plopped himself in his chair, and rocked it up on its back legs again. Almost immediately, he brought the chair back down on all fours with a loud thump. Everyone turned to Bobby, and noticed his eyes were locked across the room. They followed his gaze to the door.

There was a huge, misshapen shadow looming on the glass of the office door. It appeared to be some kind of hunchbacked monster, poised to break the door down.

"Oh, shit," Denise hissed. "We're going to die."

Then the monster shadow reached for the door, turned the knob, and pushed it open. The

large frame of Earl Joseph stood there, balanced against a large grey sack thrown over one shoulder. Denise sighed audibly. Ed tried to hide his smile, as Joseph took a step into the office. He looked at each of them, then walked across the lobby and into the office. "Get the door," he urged. Ann obliged, and they all followed him as he walked with his burden into the cluttered workroom.

Joseph put the bag on a large work table, and opened it. As the others silently watched, he started to remove things from the bag. First, he pulled small, rectangular boxes from the bag. Some were featureless. One had a tiny QWERTY keyboard on one face. Another had two LCD screens, on opposite faces. Some had small control studs, or gauges.

Next, Joseph removed small and large mechanisms from the bag. They gleamed with chrome and bakelite, looking like high tech sculptures on the dusty table. Many had control studs, quite a few had connector plugs attached. Bobby's eyes popped when Joseph removed an item with a large handle and trigger. He started to reach for it, but Larry slapped his hand like an annoyed father, and Bobby snapped it back.

Ed finally found his voice. "What is all this stuff?" he asked, although he had a sick feeling he already knew the answer. "Joseph, where did you get all this stuff?"

"Courtesy of Dr. Tomorrow," Joseph said, smiling enigmatically. "In a roundabout way. These items have been confiscated from thieves that have gotten their hands on some of his equipment, before they were captured or subdued. We've collected these pieces from the CIA, FBI and our own files. Just for such an emergency." He indicated the pile of exotic equipment. "They're yours to play with. Maybe you can find something in here that will make your assignment a bit easier. Feel free to experiment, to rebuild, do whatever you want to it all."

Joseph leaned forward, and the table creaked with his weight. "Just so it gets us inside."

With that, he turned and strode out the door.

The five consultants stood around the table, looking at the array of machinery as if faced with holy artifacts. Then Larry and Bobby simultaneously began touching and examining the objects, and found themselves separating objects into distinct piles. Occasionally Ann or Denise or Ed would make a comment or observation, and an item would be shifted from one pile to another. This went on for about ten minutes.

Finally, Ed put down a small gyro (he was pretty sure) and asked Bobby and Larry, "Do you think we can do it?"

Larry and Bobby looked at each other, at Ed, at the pile of electromechanics, and back at each other. Larry tossed his eyebrows up and twisted his mouth down. Bobby just frowned at the object in his hand for a moment longer, before he said in a low voice, "Better order more pizza."

* * *

It had gotten hot. The LCD thermometer strip adhered to the mirror had long since past 100 degrees, and was now all black. There was very little breeze, and what there was, wasn't cool. So the superheated air blasted over the Suzuki Intruder as it blasted along Route 10 west.

Despite the stifling heat, Curt Mendez smiled to himself, satisfied that his rushed efforts to tune the old motorcycle before leaving Santa Fe were holding together and staying cool. The bike hadn't so much as hiccuped in its marathon journey across three states, and Curt began to reconsider the career in mechanics he had abandoned five years ago.

He'd had plenty of time to reconsider things on this trip, he reflected. The journey to L.A. had been singularly uneventful. Curt had seen many people heading east, but very few heading west with him. He supposed he was the only one that had a good reason to go to L.A. today. The road was incredibly straight, and the plains were mostly flat in that part of California. Curt also had his mind on what would happen once he got to L.A., not on the trip. As a result, he was only half paying attention when he topped a slight rise on the highway, and suddenly confronted an obstacle in the road.

It was large enough to be a dog... hell, it was large enough to be a young mountain lion, Curt realized... but whichever it was, it was dead and sprawled across the highway, the victim of another vehicle and bad timing on its part. Curt only had time to swerve the bike, snatch at his brakes, and try for a miss. He was close, but at the last moment he rolled over a leg, and the bike lurched sickeningly under him. Curt fought the controls, but the bike was at a bad line, and it left the road.

Curt wrestled the cruiser to keep it upright and slow it down on the dirt, but he was still doing sixty, and the ground was getting rougher the further he got from the roadway. His speed slowly decreased, and for a moment, Curt thought he was going to pull it off.

Then the Intruder dropped a foot. Natural gully. Curt knew what went down, in this case, was going to come right back up, and instinctively he set himself. The bike reached the bottom of the gully, where the ascending wall forced the bike to leap high into the air. It came down right on top of a large, loose and unforgiving bed of rocks. The handlebars pulled out of Curt's hands as the bike pitched over sideways. Curt knew he was in imminent, mortal peril.

Fortunately for Curt, he'd had experience in just this sort of thing. Reflexively, his training took over.

Relax, and go with it. Keep your center.

He kicked off and vaulted up, almost fifteen feet above the grounded cruiser. His forward-pitched momentum allowed him to tuck and flip, reversing his position and straightening out in mid-air as he arched down. When he reached the ground feet-first, he bounced off of both feet and rolled again, finally coming to a dusty stop-standing fully upright-about twenty five feet beyond the bike.

After taking a quick check of his condition, he dusted himself off and walked back to his motorcycle. Upon first inspection, the bike seemed in no worse shape than he was in, so Curt reached down and grabbed the handlebar. He picked the bike up off the ground effortlessly, thumbed the starter, and started to climb back onto the seat.

He stopped when he realized a car was approaching him across the dirt. It soon proved to be a California police cruiser. Curt let a moment's apprehension flare and fade, as the cruiser pulled up next to him. The officer was out of the car before it came to a full stop.

"I saw you swerve off the road back there," the officer exclaimed, walking up to Curt. "Are

you all right, son? That looked like a bad spill from my seat."

"I'm fine," Curt said, a bit too quickly, and tried to cover by brushing himself off again. The officer looked him up and down, hard. He finally fixed Curt with a stare.

"What's your name, son?"

Curt paused only briefly. "Curt Mendez." He smiled at the officer. "What's yours?"

"I'm officer Paul Parsons." The officer seemed about to say something, but took a breath and looked Curt over again. "And I'd suggest that when you get to Indio, you stop at the hospital and get yourself looked at. Just in case."

"Probably a good idea," Curt nodded. "I can handle this from here. Thanks, officer."

"You be careful, now." The officer returned to his cruiser, and it rolled back towards the highway in a cloud of dust.

Curt waited until he was out of sight. Then he took a deep breath, and swung his leg over the bike.

The cruiser gained the asphalt, and swung east. Officer Parsons took a look in his rear view mirror, then reached for his radio mike.

"4-Mary-16 to dispatch, 4-Mary-16 to dispatch. Special code 4 on Route 10 westbound, twelve miles east of Indio. Please advise."

"Dispatch to 4-Mary-16," came the reply on his radio. "Leave him be. We will monitor his route."

"Understood."

* * *

"I can't believe we're doing this."

"I know you can't believe it. Shut up."

The three men in the plush hallway of the midtown Manhattan skyscraper apartment milled about, hands in pockets, in front of the only door in the hallway other than the elevator door and the emergency stairwell. One of the men took a pack of cigarettes out of a suit pocket, started to remove one, then looked at his posh surroundings and thought better of it. The other two occasionally looked to the elevator door, then back at the heavy door in front of them. A chrome plaque next to the door bore a label: Mr. WILLIAM TATNALL

One of the men reached out and rang the doorbell. The one who had almost lit up glared at him. "We've done that six times already, all right? Leave it!"

The one who pressed the doorbell sighed loudly. "If it turns out he's just out of the country or something, we'll all be up on charges, Eric..."

"No, we won't," Eric told him. "That's what the warrant's for. Just relax, Bobby, it's probably just another false alarm."

"Yeah, like the nineteen others!" the other man spoke. "Man, I don't care why we're doin' this, just going into these people's homes on a pretense like this stinks!"

"Oh, Christ, guys, knock it off!" the one named Eric snapped. "For the last time, these people are officially listed as missing for over a week! None of them have been seen, and there are no leads, and on the chance of foul play, we've been given permission to search their homes, end of story!"

"Bullshit!" Bobby stepped up to within inches of Eric, glaring back at him. "We all know what we're really doing here! The department wouldn't be tripping over itself, investigating all these missing persons calls by searching residences forcibly, if they weren't after..."

Bobby didn't finish the thought, because at that moment the elevator door pinged its arrival. Bobby clamped his mouth shut and the three men turned toward the elevator. The door opened, and out stepped a man in a security uniform. He glanced up at them, then looked back down to the large ring of keys in his hands. Then he stopped and looked back at the three men, who were standing noticeably still around him. He cocked an eyebrow, then looked to Eric.

"Let me see that warrant again, bud. And let me see all your ID's again." The men reached into pockets, pulled out thin black wallets, and opened them. All three bore the badges and inscriptions of the New York City Police department's Detective squad. The one called Eric also pulled out a piece of paper and held it out for the guard to see. After examining them closely, the guard subsided and turned back to the keys. "Sorry, Detective Ames," he addressed to Eric, "I had to make sure."

"No problem," Ames told him. "That's your job. It's cool. You find the key?"

"Here it is," the guard said, lifting a key to the top of the ring. Using another key in the second lock, he turned both to the right, grasped the knob, and opened the door to Mr. Tatnall's apartment. The detectives marched in, and Ames stopped the guard from following them.

"This is police business. We'll take it from here. If we need you, we'll see you at the front desk."

The guard nodded slowly, turned and went back to the elevator. Ames waited at the door for the elevator to return, watched the guard get on, and witnessed the doors close. He closed the apartment door then, and locked it. Ames walked through the foyer into the living room of the apartment. Even though he knew it was the penthouse suite, he still hadn't expected it to be so big inside. He looked at the other detective, who caught his eye.

"I know what you're thinking," the other said. "I've seen houses smaller than this."

"No stuff," Ames breathed. "Okay, fan out. You know what we're looking for."

Bobby, who was in the dining room about sixty feet away, replied, "I'll holler as soon as I find the cape hamper."

Ames gave him a dirty look, and fell to examining the apartment. There was no doubt that this Tatnall was well off, the apartment was filled with expensive collectibles, fine furniture and some of the latest in entertainment gadgets. The entertainment center, built into a thirty foot

long wall, held a large screen wide screen TV, VCR, stereo equipment, racks of tapes, camera gear, a sizable PC of a brand Ames had never heard of before, and even what looked like a picture phone.

"Hey, Ames."

"Yeah, Fish?"

"Come take a look at this kitchen." Ames and Bobby met Fish in the kitchen, which looked like a model for a sci-fi set. "Have you ever seen this stuff? What the hell is that?" Fish examined the strange appliances and accoutrements, occasionally picking something up. "Man, I don't think I'd know a suspicious looking thing in here if it stood up and talked to me in Martian."

They eventually left the kitchen and resumed their searching the apartment, saying very little as they went from room to room. Ames passed through the vicinity of the entertainment room and adjacent dining room twice, on his way to other rooms in the slightly labyrinthine layout. When he passed the dining room for the third time, he stopped and sat down at the large table. He sat for a few minutes, just staring at the walls, until he finally called out, "Guys, I think this one is a write-off. When you guys are ready..."

Fish appeared, a moment later, from around the corner, followed by Bobby. "I guess we're done, too, Eric... Eric? What?"

Ames did not reply. He seemed to be examining a wall in the dining room. He stepped back to the edge of the wall, where the wall separated the dining room and the hallway to the entertainment room. He stepped to either side of the wall, twice, while looking down its length with a critical eye.

Fish and Bobby just stared a moment longer, until Fish repeated, "What?" Ames looked at Fish and Bobby, then back at the wall. "Looks like an awful lot of room between this wall and the next."

Bobby walked into the entertainment room beyond. "You mean in here? That's 'cause the TV and stuff are set into the wall. You need room to fit that stuff in."

"No," Ames said, "I mean there's an awful lot of room in there, like more than even those things need." He started around the corner. "Is there an access panel or something, in there?"

Bobby was checking the wall when Ames came around the corner. "I think so," he whispered. He found a finger sized recess, inserted three fingers, and pulled. A small door hinged outward, revealing a dark space beyond.

"Who's got a flashlight?" Ames stuck his head in the opening, peering into the darkness. Bobby handed him a pocket flashlight. "Thanks, boy scout." He thumbed it on, and pointed it along the inside of the wall. After a moment, he stepped inside.

Fish stepped in after him. Ames was standing directly behind the television, among numerous strings of cabling that ran from one appliance to another. "Looks like he made the space big enough to just come back here and make adjustments to his setup, instead of pulling stuff out of the wall. Pretty smart."

"Yeah. Pretty smart." Ames took another few steps further, until he came to a blank wall at

the end of the crawlspace. He ran the flashlight along the edges of the wall, and after a few moments, reached up into the top right corner. A sudden sliver of light appeared, then blinded the two detectives as it widened to a bright rectangle of space beyond the hidden door.

"Oh, man," Fish whispered. Ames waited for his eyes to adjust, then he stepped across the threshold.

And into a room, seemingly much larger than the confines of the apartment would permit. There were two tables along one wall, filled with chemical beakers and apparatus. In the center of the room, two more tables held a collection of very exotic looking electrical apparatus. One unit looked a lot like a Van de Graff generator to Ames. The rest was a complete mystery to him. In a corner resided a weight training framework, equipped with weights substantially larger than those in the average workout machine.

And in another corner, a small wardrobe sat, one door ajar. Ames could see the garish blue and black material from his vantage point, across the room. He did not need to get any closer, to know whose uniform it was.

"Oh my God."

Ames looked over his shoulder. Bobby had now joined both of them in the hidden chamber, and had made the same conclusions they had. Bobby had been the one to voice the oath, and now stood there, mouth open, eyes wide. Ames nodded and smiled, hooking a thumb in the general direction of the chamber before them.

"Bobby, you can stop looking for that cape hamper."

* * *

Curt hadn't been back to Los Angeles in years, but he had no trouble remembering the old streets and neighborhoods. He cruised along the peaceful, tree-lined roadway, the shade of the trees creating a cooled corridor of air along the road, and Curt could feel the sweat drying on his arms. He was almost at his destination, and it would be good to get up off the bike after that long trip.

He rounded a corner and slowed a bit. The street was a two-lane, a very average looking lower-middle-class suburb. A few cars sat along the curbs, under the shade of the trees, everything from old Ford trucks to fairly new sedans. He kept his head pointed forward, but he directed his sunglass-covered eyes to the house on his left. It was a small house, just like all of its neighbors, off-white, siding covered, with a red-shingled roof. The grass around the small lot was a bit sparse, more brown than green, but strangely enough, was freshly cut. Curt continued on past the house, considering the grass. He expected it to be much longer. Was someone else in the house? Could Max still be in the house?

Curt reached the alley, and swung into it. Riding behind the houses, he counted each one, then swung into the short driveway and stopped at the small garage of his target. There was a back door next to the garage door. Curt shut off the bike and walked up to the back door. He examined a small plate next to a doorbell. It had the name of Maxwell Ryan typed over it. Against his better judgment, he tried the doorbell. He waited about a minute, rang again, waited. There was no sound from the house.

He walked back to the garage door. Reaching into a pocket, he produced two keys on a small ring. He bent down in front of the garage door, and inserted a key into the lock. He tried to turn the key, but the lock did not budge. It had been changed. Curt considered how this might be significant. It had been years since he'd been here, and Max might have just changed it to foil local thieves. The old lock simply could have rusted up or broken. He considered, but didn't really believe, that Max had changed it to keep him out.

He stood up slowly, pondering how he could get inside.

"Don't move, son. Police. Turn around slowly."

Curt froze, startled. He couldn't believe he'd let someone sneak up on him! He slowly turned, hands held away from his body. Two of them! They were wearing civvies, but both had badges clipped to their shirt pockets. One of them held a gun in both hands, pointing it at Curt's chest. Curt stole a glance down the end of the alley, and recognized the car blocking its entrance as one of the sedans from the street in front of the house.

I've been out of this business way too long, Curt thought to himself.

"What's your name, son?" the unarmed officer asked.

"Curt...Curt Mendez." He kept his hands out. "What's going on, officer?"

"ID?" The officer held a hand out. Curt slowly reached into his back pocket, withdrew his billfold with two fingers, and held it out to the officer. He took it, made a quick examination of its contents. "From New Mexico. What are you doing here, Mr. Mendez?"

"I'm visiting my buddy, here. Max Ryan." Curt's thoughts raced, as he calculated just how much lying he could probably get away with here. Problem was, he had no idea what the police might be doing here, and he wasn't sure if he was compromising Max. If Max was still alive to be compromised, that is. And suppose they knew that? He finally decided to go the safe route, and throw out a few good half-truths. "I used to live here with Max. See? That's the key to the inside door, in the garage. This one was to the outside lock, but it looks like he replaced it. He said I was always welcome to come by when I was in town, and here I am. I rang the bell first. Officer, what's going on here?"

The officers looked at each other, and the one holding the firearm seemed to relax a bit. "Mr. Mendez, we need to ask you to come down to the station with us. We need to ask you a few questions."

Curt blinked. "Am I under arrest?"

"Only if you refuse to accompany us." The other officer tensed on his weapon again.

Curt considered this a moment, decided to side on discretion. "Fine. Can I lock up my bike?"

"We'll have it picked up and brought to the station," the officer replied. "This way, Mr. Mendez."

Curt was led to the sedan, and offered the back seat. The officers took the front seat, put the car in gear, and pulled out of the alley. The car passed in front of the house on its way out, and Curt now noticed a number of the cars seemed to be the same make, in different colors.

He could now also see the occupants inside each one. He'd walked into a massive set-up, and missed even the obvious signs. He mentally cursed himself for an idiot, and settled back in the seat, arms crossed.

Curt vaguely noticed that the last car on the street, on the far end, also contained an occupant. It wasn't until after they had passed it that he realized its occupant was a woman, hiding behind large, dark sunglasses. He looked back over his shoulder, trying to decide whether or not that was significant, too.

* * *

Daniel Kang squeezed through the narrow crawlspace and stepped into the hidden laboratory. Ames, Fish and Bobby were still inside, along with two other uniformed officers. Another half-dozen officers were outside the apartment, posted to keep people out. Kang had flashed his pass at each one, showing his ID as Police Lab Chief, as he'd worked his way into the apartment. Now, he stopped, and the arm that had held his pass up for everyone to see, slowly dropped to his side.

"Whoa," he said simply, eyeing the room. "What a layout. Look at some of this stuff!"

Ames turned to look at Kang, then back to the lab. "You don't have half this stuff in your lab, do you?"

"I've never seen half this stuff," Kang muttered, with a touch of awe in his voice. "Whoever set this up was a certified genius." He stopped, looked a bit closer at a piece of equipment, and his eyes bugged out. "No: a rich certified genius! William Tatnall, huh?"

"We haven't found any evidence that anyone else lived here with him," Fish told him.

"And you're sure about his identity?"

"Oh, yeah." Ames reached behind him, into the wardrobe he was standing next to. He removed a hangar of shiny blue and black fabric and held it up. Kang took it from him, grasped it by the shoulders, and lifted it to the light. The yellow stylized lightning bolt emblazoned on the chest was familiar to all of them.

"It's Thunder, all right," Ames stated flatly.

Unbidden, a memory flashed back to him: Being pinned in a burning warehouse, his second year as a detective; forced to bolt from the conflagration, dashing out into the open, expecting to be picked off by the criminals who set the fires in ambush. There was a sudden whoosh of noise, and he'd looked up in time to see a dark streak across the cloud-white sky, traced by a yellow bolt of lightning. The streak turned an impossible right angle in mid-air, pointed an arm at the criminals lying in wait. Flashes of white light and sonic booms sent everyone scattering for cover, including Ames and his partner. Thunder had taken out the criminals in seconds, flamboyantly, impossibly. Ames had never seen such a display in his life.

They were all silent for a few moments, staring at the costume that seemed even more garish in their hands, as if only its owner could give it credence. Then they turned back to the elaborate laboratory. They were standing in the midst of one of the most secret miracles in the world.

The authorities had been spot on the money when they made the connection between the lost heroes and their recent lists of missing persons around the country. But to anyone's knowledge, this was the first lead that had panned out. Not that the NYPD planned to publicize this, but everyone knew the media would find out, just as they always would. In the meantime, however, the police hoped they would be able to capitalize on their newfound knowledge, although no one had specified exactly what they planned to do. Most knowledgeable people didn't want to ask.

Kang put the suit down and took another look around the room. Then he said to Ames, "I don't think we'll try to move this stuff, just yet. Call the lab and tell the boys I need 'em all up here ASAP."

* * *

After a days-long motorcycle ride across the desert, Curt was positive someone was going to put him in a room with a hot lamp pointed at him. They didn't, much to his surprise and appreciation. They left him to stew for about half an hour, which suited him fine. He used the time to review his situation.

To begin with, the police had no clue who Curt was. The chance of their even making the connection between Curt and Max, with seven years past, was remote. And it depended on if they knew who Max Ryan really was, which Curt doubted. Although they had possibly guessed that Ryan may be one of the many who had perished on a certain rocket ship fourteen days ago, they probably didn't know which one he might have been...

In short, they were grasping at straws.

They had also been very close mouthed about the matter to Curt, so they probably didn't want the public to know why they were chasing Max. It would make a questioning session very interesting, he thought. Some very general questions, followed by some questions that would sound like bad television to anyone who didn't know a superhero on a first-name basis. Curt mentally practiced his best "What in the Hell are you talking about?" expressions, while he waited.

Eventually, the single door opened and two men entered the room. They sat down in front of Curt, keeping their eyes on him. Curt straightened up in his chair, trying to present his best image of a slightly confused model citizen.

"Mr. Mendez, I'm Detective Billy Baer," the one on the left said. Curt couldn't help but smile. "That's B-A-E-R. BAYER," the detective pronounced for clarification. "This is Detective Dean Peck." He indicated the other man, whom Curt recognized from his initial rousting.

"We've met," Curt said to the officer. "So, what's going on? Am I in trouble? I'm not being charged with breaking and entering, or anything, am I?"

"No, Mr. Mendez, we haven't charged you with anything. We brought you down here to assist us in a very important investigation. When was the last time you spoke to Maxwell Ryan?"

"Max? I dunno, it's been a good couple of months."

"Months? You said you were buddies."

"Yeah, well, I guess when I left town we just started calling less and less. We got busy. You know how it is." Curt hoped they knew how it was, because telling him he was coming to visit someone he hadn't spoken to in seven years was not going to speed things up. He decided to try to get them to show some of their hand. "Look, why can't we call Max and straighten this out?"

The detectives exchanged glances. "Curt, Max Ryan is currently on our missing list. He has not been seen by anyone for most of the month."

Curt put on his best confused/worried face and leaned forward a bit, waiting for more. Peck fidgeted a bit. "Uh... We're currently interviewing everyone who knew Mr. Ryan, for any leads to his whereabouts or status."

"Status?"

"We have reason to believe Mr. Ryan has been the victim of foul play."

Curt took a moment, and forced his shoulders to drop perceptively, to let them think he was taking it all in. "Wha-at? Why do you think... foul play?"

"It's difficult to explain, Curt. We suspect Ryan was involved in some... high-risk activities."

"I thought he was still working at the Publisher's office."

"No, not that. We mean... extra-curricular activities. Not job related at all. More in the line of public service." Baer stared at Curt.

"Public service." Curt raised the curtain on his practiced expressions. He could tell they were uncomfortable about what they were doing, and figured making them embarrassed ought to speed up their interrogation a bit. Sure enough, they seemed to make a decision between them, and settled into their chairs a bit more.

"Mr. Mendez (they had gone back to formality that fast, Curt thought), do you know anything about Mr. Ryan's politics?"

"Uh... I'm pretty sure he's Democrat."

"Have you ever known Mr. Ryan to follow or participate in any, more reactionary, or fringe, political organizations?"

After a pause, Curt said, "Greenpeace?"

Baer and Peck looked at each other again. Peck massaged the bridge of his nose. Baer asked, "How would you describe Mr. Ryan's personality?" When Curt didn't volunteer anything, Baer said, "Pessimistic?"

"Um, no."

"Impulsive?"

"No. Not really."

"Responsible?"

"Yes."

"Take charge kinda guy?"

"Mm. I guess."

"Violent?"

"Violent? Hell, no!" Curt knew that one was coming, and he managed to play it off expertly. "What, do you think he's some kinda terrorist?" Max would have loved that, Curt thought.

"Do you know anything about Mr. Ryan's sexual preferences?"

"What? He likes girls!" No acting required, there.

"Did he ever do anything unusual?"

"Not so he'd tell me!" Curt threw up his hands in mock disgust. "Guys, this is getting stupid! I'm not answering any questions about Max's sex life, even if I knew the answers!"

Baer held up his hand, apologetically. "Mr. Mendez, how long has it been since you spent time with Ryan?"

"Up until I left town. About seven years ago."

Baer and Peck looked at each other, and Curt knew their expressions meant they were through. Baer looked back at Curt, and said, "All right, Mr. Mendez. You're free to go. I'm afraid you can't stay at Mr. Ryan's home, though. Not while it's still under police investigation."

"Great," Curt said, standing up. "I didn't bring that much cash with me. Where am I gonna stay?"

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Mendez. The most I can do is recommend a few cheap motels in the area, or a shelter."

"Thanks, I'll find one on my own, if I decide to stay."

"If you do decide to stay," Peck added, "here's my card. If you think of anything which might help us out, give us a call."

"And let us know where you are, so we can get in touch with you," Baer added.

Curt tucked the card into his shirt pocket and left. In a ridiculously long span of time, he sifted through a pile of release paperwork, recovered his bike from the garage, and rode off in the general direction of the industrial districts, where most of the cheaper motels resided.

He made sure he wasn't tailed.

When he reached a non-chain motel, he parked his bike around the corner from the front desk. Bikers were still sometimes shunned by hotels and motels, and he knew better than to make a scene. He would have to wait a few days, he knew, before he could go back to Max's

house and attempt to slip in. In the meantime, he'd have to lay low and work out a plan to get him to the house unobserved.

He secured a room near the back of the building, paid the clerk, and soon he was in the small room, stripping off his clothing and checking for hot water in the shower. He cleaned three states' worth of dirt from his body, rinsed, dried off, and selected a clean change of clothing from his case. Catching himself in the mirror, Curt realized it was a good thing his loose clothes had hidden his well-muscled body from the police, or they might have made a connection after all. He shared more than a passing resemblance to another famous hardbody in this area, the one belonging to the Omerican. Of course, seven years ago, when Curt was just finishing school, he was not quite as large as he was now, when he palled around with Max.

Which was why, back then, Curt was known as the All-Omerican Boy.

Plans

« ^ »

Byron Scott IV shifted in bed again, trying to be easy in his movements, but it didn't work. There was a huff in the dark room, and he could feel the movement on the far side of the bed. An arm draped over his leg.

"Byron? What is it?"

"Nothing." Scott sat up in bed. "I can't sleep. God, this is worse than the Cannon threat. I just can't sleep."

"Let me get you a drink."

"Thanks." Scott threw his legs over the side of the bed. "I know what it is. It's Klopper. I don't know what to do."

There was a sound of liquid pouring over ice across the room. "You said yourself that no one is going to miss a criminal more or less."

"Yes, but this is different... I mean, what if he figures out what we're doing, and decides to come after me?"

"You know, they'll probably want to decorate you just for getting him off the streets."

"But, if he figures out...!"

"Here." Scott took the drink offered to him. "You don't have anything to worry about. He won't be able to come after you. You'll be perfectly safe. Don't you think you should do it?"

Scott gulped the drink down and put the glass on the nightstand. After a long few moments, he ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "All right. Do it. Do it."

"You won't regret it." Warm lips brushed his forehead.

Scott listened to the footsteps that padded across the room. He could hear the phone

receiver lifted off the hook, the buttons being punched. There was a brief buzz on the line.

"It's LaSalle. We're going after Klopper. First thing in the morning."

* * *

"It's finished."

Bobby had to repeat himself, to rouse Ed. He had dropped off hours ago, in the conference room. He thought he would have been able to stay up, once Bobby had announced he and Larry should be only a few more hours, but age had taken its toll around 4 AM. Ed looked at Bobby, yawned and stretched. Then, his waking mind remembered what he'd been hanging around for, and he lifted himself out of his chair. "Done? Let's see it."

Ed followed Bobby back to the workroom, where Larry, Ann and Denise were already gathered around the table. Ed slid between Ann and Denise, to get a good look.

What he saw was a plastic case, about a foot square by two feet tall. It had a small cable attached to it that connected to a calculator keypad. The plastic was pieced together panel by panel from various computer bodies, and screwed together in places, giving the case a jury-rigged look. Which, of course, it was.

"That's it?" Ed said. "What is it?"

"Don't worry, looks are very deceiving," Larry smiled. "Our two programming wunderkinds," he indicated Bobby and Denise, "have done it again. With a little help from my packaging skills." He reached for the case and lifted. It slid off of a thin metal frame, and now Ed could see various of the bits and pieces Joseph had given them. Some of the pieces had been opened, adjusted, or otherwise reconfigured, but many of them had simply been squeezed into the tight frame. All of the pieces were interconnected with a myriad of cables and wire ribbons, which all ran into a black thermoplastic case in a corner. On the outer edge of the case was the receptacle for the cable running to the mini keyboard.

"It looks better stripped," Ed commented. "So, what's it supposed to do?"

"It's supposed to pretend it's someone else," Larry replied. "I figure the only way we're going to get into the Tower is to convince the Tower we belong there. Look." He pointed to a small module in the corner. "This module seems to render this whole thing invisible to sensors."

"Neat, huh?" Bobby grinned. "But this is the best stuff." He pointed to a number of softball-sized chrome modules in the center of the pack. "These things are designed to send out signals that project an image of your choice to sensors."

"No way."

"Yes way!" Bobby put his hands up in front of him, and Ed could tell he was excited. "Imagine: Instead of looking like yourself, you'll look like another person to the sensors!"

"Shit." Ed bent over to peer into the tangle of electronics. "What sensors will it work on?"

"We've got seven installed," Larry said. "One for infra-red, three for radar, one sonar, one

for magnetic resonance, and one for visible light.”

“Actually,” Bobby added, “we don’t think the visible light can do anything but camouflage itself.”

“Yeah, but, still.” Ed straightened up. “But, wait. If that means that you can still be recognized by visual sensors, what good is it? They’ve got image recognition systems, too.”

“True,” Ann nodded. “That’s why we’re going to have to add an old-fashioned touch to all this hardware. Someone’s going to have to wear a disguise.”

“What, a mask or something?”

“Well, we think prosthetics and putty, but you get the idea. We will probably have to pad the whole body to try to match the build of one of the Powers,’ though. It won’t just scan your face.”

“One other thing,” Denise said, “it has voice synthesis capability. This thing will translate your voice into another voice, and mask the original voice in real time. We tried it out, already. You should have heard me, I sounded like Tony Danza!”

“We’ve got data of sensor readings on all of the Powers, from the Pentagon. It’s enough to let us program the pack with any of the Powers’ readings, and fool the sensors.” Bobby grinned that grin again, and Ed didn’t want to ask how he’d accessed Pentagon databases.

“From all indications,” Larry said, “the Tower concentrates on these items to grant access. There shouldn’t be any secret codes needed by one of the Powers. We just put this in a backpack, and the wearer can try to run the gauntlet, so to speak. The keyboard, there, will let the wearer control it.”

“So, one of us can get inside,” Ed summed up. “Hopefully, once they’re OK’d by the Tower, they can bring someone else up. Now, the operative question: Who’s gonna wear the thing?”

“Well,” Ann pointed out, “it needs to be someone who can pass for a Power as closely as possible, physically. They also have to be able to program the pack on the fly, if needed. We think Denise should be the one to wear it.”

“Denise?”

“I volunteered,” Bobby said at once. “But then Larry mentioned how Denny has such a close physical resemblance to Vicky Power...” Ed saw his point. Most of the Powers were fairly distinctive physical types. Victoria Power was the most normal looking of them all... if your image of “normal looking” females came from watching Baywatch.

Ed looked at Denise, trying hard not to look below the neckline at the rest of her, but Denise caught the drift. Even as dark as she was, Ed could see her turn a very red shade of brown. Then she smiled and shrugged.

“Well, I always wanted to try to pass. I guess now’s my chance, huh?”

* * *

Lee Prime studied the four computer monitors surrounding him on the desk. He had organized his systems to mimic, as close as possible, his previous set-up at his island home. He was on-line to all the same information services, including a few that were inaccessible to the general public, and quite a few more that were unknown to the public.

The general impression he received from his informational sources was that people were scared. Incidences of riots, robberies, crimes of passion and petty vandalism were all up, and the police were hard pressed to rein it in. The world markets had all taken a dive, as well, most notably in areas where investors had a lot more to lose from institutions that were not considered as secure as they once were. Money was being held on to, and not much of it was being held by the banks, which meant less money flow, and the general economy was suffering as a result.

All this from a lack of superheroes.

Disgusting, was all Lee could think.

Checking a few other informational channels, he noted that the secret shuttle mission the DOD was referring to as Firechief, was only a few days from an expected rendezvous with the debris field astronomers had been tracking for the last few weeks. There were a number of high-tech weapons and manufacturing firms that were enjoying record sales and production, which Lee would have been glad to see had not the number of law enforcement agencies on their client lists been such a small proportion of their totals. He also noticed the rise in investigative strength concerning recent missing persons in major metropolitan areas. The police had managed to put together the same pieces of the puzzle that he had worked out, two weeks ago. What they planned to do with such information, however, remained to be seen. Lee could imagine the bureaucracy's attempts to recreate the superheroes with stolen chemical formulas and misunderstood equipment, and he shook his head at the inevitable loss of life those attempts would surely result in.

After thousands of years of human history, Lee reflected, people never changed. It was one of the oldest and best-concealed facts about the human race, that it had become completely, helplessly, dependent upon the Ultimate Father Figure. There was no society on Earth, now or ever, that hadn't been guided by a religion or a ruler so valued as to be deified. Even today, as well off as humans generally were, religion was as big and important as ever. It was a mania that even Freud had missed, thinking the guiding force behind the individual was the Superego. In truth, the Superego was simply a façade created by the individual as a presentation to their God, to try to convince Him that they were living a "good" life, and deserved to go to Heaven someday. The real guiding force was always the concept of God, and the inherent belief that every living moment was being judged by some unseen authority for "worthiness."

This need for Father Figures had eventually been transferred to the Superheroes, which was understandable given their high profile in the media and on the streets. It was like Man had multiple Gods running around his world, saving him from the Gorgons and Medusas and Harpies that threatened his mundane life. And in the same way that oppressed peoples tended to rely on their Gods, to draw strength from them, to pray to them to carry them through hardship, so Lee had watched the world rely on its Gods to protect them from harm, to deliver them. Just like children who depend on their parents to save them from the monsters under the bed.

And now the Gods were dead. The children did not know how to take care of themselves anymore, and the parents had just been killed before their eyes. And how were the children responding?

By crying, throwing tantrums, cowering in the corners, and pulling the covers over their eyes to avoid seeing the monsters.

Not for the first time in his life, Lee found himself wishing for a New World, one in which Man took responsibility for Himself, took care of its own, and didn't waste time trying to outguess the Almighty over each and every decision. And he reflected that, now that the Superheroes were gone, maybe it was finally time to create that New World.

Of course, Lee was no statesman, and had no beliefs that he could just tell people what they had to do, and watch them do it. He was going to have to show them. Fortunately, he had prepared for this day long ago. His entire fortune, the many hours spent honing his physique, intelligence, and skills, his contacts and connections into the business and scientific world, were all geared toward supporting a new lifestyle: To fight the evils around the world, protect the innocent, and to show people how to take their lives into their own hands.

Of course, the length of this new career depended a lot on how accurate those heroes had been about whatever killed them. If they were right, it was still out there, and coming their way. The biggest challenge of his life could turn out to be his very first, because he had to try to figure out what it was, and help stop it. He knew he wasn't alone in this quest, and his computers had collected information about numerous investigations into the construction of Power Tower. Obviously, someone was planning to go in there, to glean what information they could from the Power's technology. That was something he wanted access to, as well, and he had studied the computer data carefully. In case their initial attempt failed, he would have to try to go in himself.

Lee's ruminations along that line were interrupted by a ping from the computer on his left. He touched one of the function keys, and the graphic on the screen was overlaid with a small view of the hallway outside of his office. The small square showed most of the hallway, all the way to the elevator bay and stairwell at one end of the hall.

Someone had just stepped off of the elevator. It was the elevator's stop at his floor that had prompted the gentle alarm on the computer. One of the first things Lee had arranged was for the floor to be wired with security cameras and sensors of various types. One of these cameras was now trained on the man looking up and down the hallway. He appeared to be in his late twenties or thirties, large and apparently well built. The man seemed to catch sight of Lee's office door, and started towards it. As he passed under the camera, he looked directly at it. Lee cocked an eyebrow at that. The camera was mounted in the ceiling, behind a one-way glass that had been camouflaged to resemble the other ceiling tiles. It wasn't exactly invisible, but it took a keen eye to spot it... and a sharp mind to know where to look.

Lee switched to another camera, in time to see the visitor stop in front of his door and ring the bell. There had been no hesitation on his part, and he did not hold himself as if he had something to conceal. Lee tapped a key, and the door unlocked with a click.

A second later, and the door opened. The man stepped into the room, closing the door behind him. He was well dressed, in a sportcoat and tie, slacks and very functional looking shoes. The sportcoat and slacks had been tailored, Lee realized, as he took in the man's

physique. He looked to be a shade over six feet tall, but Lee realized his hair was cut long and stood erect on his scalp, adding an inch or two to his height. His long face was otherwise clean shaven, and the rest of him seemed to be as well trimmed, right down to his fingernails. Lee decided his original assessment of being in his late twenties was correct.

The young man stepped forward and extended a hand. "Mr. Prime. It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is John Simpson."

"Mr. Simpson," Lee greeted, taking the hand. "What can I do for you?"

"John, please," he offered, and took the seat Lee gestured to. "I came here, frankly, to offer my services to you."

"I hadn't put out any employment notices."

John smiled at that. "That's true. But I'm sure I could be of inestimable service to you, Mr. Prime. Just for the record..." he reached into his jacket pocket and produced a folded document, which he handed to Lee across the desk. "IIT, class of '86, masters in Electrical and Mechanical Engineering. I've spent the last few years with Thompson Myers, in Chicago."

"A good firm. I've heard a bit about them. Were you involved on the Katt Building project?"

"I brought that particular project in," John replied. "Our use of the new Japanese Sunflowers for light transmission was a major selling point with them."

"I understand you achieved an additional 20% light transmission from the optic fiber cables. How did you do that?"

"A slightly modified doping mixture early in the manufacturing process. We discovered DuPont's mixture achieved different results at different temperatures, depending on the width and flexure of the strand, and we found a more optimal combination." John smiled slightly. "It was fun."

Lee nodded. He'd read about the improved optic cabling, and the new doping process, and had asked those questions just as a test. He could tell John realized that, as well, but he had played along. "Well, John, your credentials are certainly impressive. But exactly what did you think I'd be doing here? This is not an engineering firm."

"No, I can see that it's not," John countered, "any more than you're just an average businessman." He hadn't made that statement just to be polite. Lee waited for him to continue. "Mr. Prime, I've read a good deal about you. A lot of it was, of course, about your business dealings, and anyone would want to attach themselves to that. But that's not why I'm here."

John leaned forward in his seat. "I've read your articles in *Futurings* and *Modern Man*. I know you're Lewis Allen." Lee sat, face impassive, trying not to give anything away. "I've got a friend on the staff of *Futurings*. He didn't tell me right out, but I picked up a few clues from him and dug out the rest. I must tell you, I found 'Leaving the Nest' to be one of your best pieces."

Lee remembered the piece well—actually, he remembered all of the articles he'd ever written—as the one that had garnered the most write-in praise through the magazine. Most of his articles, written under a protected pseudonym, had in common his opinions on Man's

dependence on superheroes, his analyses of the Ultimate Father Figure, and his fears for the future. He'd discovered that quite a number of people seemed to share his views, although from the letters he'd read, most of them seemed to be somewhat less than clear headed. So he'd kept his identity secret, to preserve his privacy and isolate him from the crackpots. Lee didn't think John ranked among the crackpots, yet, but he was still a bit wary of his cover being blown.

John seemed to surmise Lee's position. He leaned back a bit, but kept his voice on the soft side. "Let me paint a picture. It's a world of superheroes, and the world is fairly complacent. One day, all the super heroes disappear, leaving the world defenseless for the first time in ages. A man who knows how to defend his fellow man, and wants his fellow man to remember how to take care of himself, has been preparing for this for years. Now he comes to one of the world's centers of everything, to lead his fellow man into the new age of self-dependency. How am I doing?"

After a pause, Lee said, "I admire your palette."

"Then, let me add a hue," John smiled. "He is strong, he is intelligent, he is willing and capable. But he is only one man. He needs allies. He needs numbers, agents, hands to help him rein in the madness. One day another man who shares his views shows up on his doorstep, and offers to throw in his unconditional support. I can see those men joining forces, fighting the Good Fight, showing the world how it's done, how they can do it, too. I see a strong, effective partnership. I see a future for a complacent world.

"Mr. Prime, I've been doing my job like a good boy for as long as I can remember. It's an easy job, no big deal at all. But it was never enough for me. I've always been... concerned, about the state of the world. There are an incredible number of problems in this world, and nobody is trying seriously to solve them. Why? Because they all depend on 'The Man' to do the job for them. They depend on the police... on the government... and on those so-called 'Heroes.' So everyone's gone lazy, sloppy. If we had an invading force enter our shores today, they could take this country over without a struggle!" He swiped a hand through the air, looking like a general swiping pieces off a strategy board.

"Well, I've always refused to be one of the lazy multitudes. I fight my own battles. I do what I can to help my fellow man. My worst flaw is that I can't be in more places at once. Sometimes I only have money to offer to people, and I give it. But I want to do more. I've been doing my best to show men how to take care of themselves. And knowing what I know about you, I'd bet every dime I'll ever have, that you came to New York to do the same thing."

John leaned forward in his chair, spreading his hands. "Give me a chance, Mr. Prime. Those spandex hotshots are gone! We're on our own now, and it's time to prove we can take care of ourselves. I know we can do it, but the people out there don't know it yet. Someone's got to pick up the baton, and it should be us! Look at me. I'm strong, I'm willing, and I'm ready." His face became very intense, his voice deep and, almost, desperate. "I've been ready for this for years. What do you say?"

Lee considered for only a moment. Then, he extended his hand across the table. "Call me Lee, John." John stood up and shook his hand warmly, smiling ear to ear. "Any more at home like you, John?"

John glanced at the window, as if expecting to see someone hovering out there, then looked

back at Lee. "Not at home, no; but, as a matter of fact, I know a couple of guys..."

* * *

On the table in the center of the laboratory, was a safe door. Actually, it was only about a three-foot square section of a safe door, in particular, the part of the door that held the lock mechanism. It was a hybrid mechanism, the kind that used an old-fashioned tumbler with an electronic combination system below it. It was an interesting system, fairly simple yet very effective at keeping its contents secure, which was why so many banks in the city used this type or something similar.

Beside the table, a small man stood, holding an odd device in his thin-fingered hands. The device had three suction cups, a metal rectangular body, what looked like miniature boom mikes on one side, and a small wire loop like a UHF antenna on the other side. The man looked as odd as the device in his hands. He was under five feet tall, very thin and wiry, but possessing a head that was disproportionately larger than his body. He wore coke-bottle glasses, with a strap that ran around the back of his head to each earpiece.

Very gingerly, he approached the section of safe door on the table, and moved his device close to its surface. The legs holding the suction cups flexed as he pressed it against the door, but they held it in place. He let go and stepped back.

There was a pause of about ten seconds. Then, from the side of the box facing the door, a small claw protruded and attached itself to the tumbler's dial. Slowly, the dial began to turn to the right, and a soft series of electronic clicks and beeps could be heard. One of the tiny booms swung around a bit, then seemed to find what it was looking for, and stop. A moment later, the claw stopped turning the dial. Just below the dial, one of the six LED indicators lit bright red. Then, the dial began to turn to the left, and the booms waved around above.

After each turn, an LED would light up. When the sixth LED lit up, there was a distinctive click, and a whir of motors. The two locking bars, the only ones on the tabletop safe door, began to slide inward from their imaginary moorings.

The small man smiled, and began to disengage the device from the door. "Not bad, not bad," he muttered to himself. "Almost ten full seconds before you started to work. I'll have to adjust that. Change the setting in the T49 chip, and increase the step of the motors..."

The small man heard a knock at his door. He stopped muttering to himself and turned about so fast, he almost dropped his device. Clutching it to his chest for a moment, he simply stood and peered across the room at the front door. The room, being an apartment basement, was fairly large, although it was so cluttered that it seemed small, like its occupant. The walls were mostly taken out except for support beams, and only the bedroom and bathroom still had their walls. Large and small tables filled the intervening space, each covered with all manner of apparatus. Against one wall, a large bulky form was covered with a huge tarp, stretching along most of the wall. The door was reinforced, with no window or viewglass, but the small man stared as if he could look through it.

The knock came again. The small man seemed to take a deep breath, turned, and placed his device on the table. He covered it with a small sheet of cloth, then approached the door. He stopped a few feet away from, and to the side of, the door, and called, "Who is it?"

"Mr. Klopper?" came a voice from the other side. "Mr. Cyrus Klopper? I want to talk to you."

"Who are you?"

"My name is LaSalle. I work for L. Byron Scott IV. The financier and President of the Lord Corporation."

"I know who he is!" the small man snapped. "What do you want?"

"Mr. Scott sent me to make you a business proposition, Mr. Klopper. May I come in?"

The small man considered for a moment. Then he reached into a dark shelf near the door and extracted a small handgun. Inserting it in his pocket, he unlocked the door with his other hand. Then he stepped back a few paces.

The door opened, and Mark LaSalle stepped in. The small man took in his silk suit, immaculately cut, the fine leather briefcase with gold appointments, and the expensive Italian shoes. Mark likewise took him in, then gave a quick glance at the rest of the room. He extended his hand. "Are you Cyrus Klopper?"

"I'm Klopper," the small man admitted.

"Pleased to meet you, sir," Mark smiled, kept the hand out a moment longer. Klopper seemed to regard it more as a threat than a friendly gesture, and after a moment, Mark let his hand drop. "It took quite a while to find out where you were residing. I hope I didn't interrupt anything..." Mark took another look around the room, a bit longer than before. "...important."

Klopper looked over his shoulder at his disheveled lab, and back at Mark. "You said something about a business proposition."

"Yes, I did. The Lord Corporation is hunting for the keenest minds for our research departments. Brilliant scientists, the absolute best. Your name keeps coming up. Or, I suppose I should say, Dr. Cyklops' name keeps coming up."

Klopper glared at Mark, but Mark was looking across the room. Klopper turned to follow his gaze. He was looking at a group of newspaper clippings tacked to a far wall. From the distance, they were unreadable, but the headline type could be seen clearly. Dr Cyklops Stalemates Apollo. Cyklops and Tomorrow Gone? Cyklops Ransoms City with Virus. Cyklops Breaks Pseudoman. He turned back to Mark, fingering the cold metal in his pocket.

"Doctor," Mark began, "naturally we know all about your past. But the Lord Corporation sees the genius behind your actions. We recognize what it takes to create the Xenobomb. The Flying Fort. The Light Blanket. And, of course, your greatest inventions..." Mark trailed off, again looking across the lab, this time at the huge black tarp draped across most of one wall. When he looked back down at Klopper, he fixed him with a stare.

"Dr. Klopper, the Lord Corporation has need of your singular genius. We want you to come to work for us. Immediately."

Klopper stared for a moment, then let loose with a harsh laugh. "Are you serious, young man? What makes you think I'd want to work for a man like Byron Scott? He's a

money-grubbing leech, that's all he is! He thinks he's got the world fooled by that Good Samaritan crap, but not me! Why should I work for that charlatan?"

Mark responded by opening the briefcase. A small avalanche of green bills tumbled out on the floor, fifty dollar bills wrapped in bank loops, all at Klopper's feet. Klopper looked down, his eyes bulging like black balloons behind his coke bottle glasses. He finally bent down and picked up a wad of bills, fanning it in his hands. He looked again at the pile, then back at Mark.

Mark smiled. "Your first weeks' salary."

Klopper stood, transfixed, his mouth working slightly, but silently. Finally he swallowed, and croaked, "What does the charlatan want me to do?"

"We're going to set you up in one of our labs, Doctor. You'll have unlimited time to experiment, to research, to create whatever you want. We just want you to do it for us. On salary. We want your genius. We're willing to pay you handsomely for it."

"I can see that," Klopper muttered. Then, he smiled. "Well, Hell! It sure beats crime! I'll do it!"

"Fine! When can you start?"

"Well, I did have an appointment tomorrow..." Klopper looked back at the sheet-covered table. Then he shrugged. "But, it's not important, now."

* * *

It was 9:30 AM. The city's rush hour traffic was still thick in the streets when the armored truck pulled up, in the alley behind Casell's Jewelry. The driver pulled the emergency brake back with a loud grating of gears, and shut off the engine. He tapped the horn once, and waited.

After a moment, the back door of the jewelry store opened, and a young man stepped out. He hooked his long, thin nose down both ends of the alley, then walked over to the truck. He brushed his slightly bushy black hair from his dark forehead, and rapped on the truck's door with a hand. The driver looked out the window at him, nodded, and opened the driver's side door of the truck.

And the driver's side door slammed shut upon him with such force that he was thrown across the cab, to slam into the passenger door with an alarming thud. The hook-nosed young man watched the driver slump into the seat, instantly unconscious.

He looked up across the cab. Outside of the shattered driver's window was a rock that looked like a man. It was the color of cement, cracked and craggy and pockmarked. It was mostly naked, except for a rock skirt and a rock headdress, both carved with horizontal stripes along their length. The headdress was almost as long as the skirt, hanging down either side of the rock head and draping across his wide shoulders. It faced him from beyond the ruined door, one hand on its edge. Although the eyes seemed to be carved of solid rock, they appeared to be looking in his direction.

Then it smiled at the young man.

The young man screamed. He did not move from the side of the truck, he just stood there and screamed for all he was worth, as if doing so would scare the monster away. It didn't work. The cement statue raised a craggy arm and brought it down on the nose of the truck, denting it deeply. When the entire truck danced from the impact of that fist, the young man seemed to find his legs, and he abruptly fled back towards the door.

"Aieeee! It's the Sphynx! The Sphynx! Help me! He'll steal all my jewels! Aieeee!" He ran back into his store, still screaming, and slammed the door shut behind him. He could still be heard screaming as he triple bolted the door.

The man of rock regarded him as he ran away, and ignored him once he was out of sight. He turned his attention back to the truck. Walking with amazing speed given his apparent bulk, he moved to the back of the truck and stood at the back door. Swinging one arm about like a rock club, he thrust it into the latch in the center of the door. There was a screech of metal, and the truck jumped forward a foot. The rock man's arm was through the door up to his elbow. He twisted his arm about for a few seconds, then he set rock teeth behind rock lips and grunted. With an incredible yank, he wrenched the steel door from its hinges and hefted it across the alley.

He stepped forward and looked inside. A number of boxes and built-in drawers filled the inside of the truck. The rock man grabbed a nearby box, snapped the lock, and opened it. Inside was a diamond fully the size of a marble, mounted on a necklace of diamonds and sapphires. A matching pair of earrings resided in the box alongside it. The rock man reached in, grasped the necklace, and held it up to the morning light. He smiled a rock smile.

"I think that's as far as you go, Sphynx."

The rock man stopped smiling. He slowly turned in the alley. There was no one there. He looked up.

A man stood at the top of the building opposite the jewelry store, one foot up on the ledge. He was dressed head to toe in a navy blue material, close fitting almost like spandex, but with a different shine to it, almost a geometric highlight. His boots and gloves seemed to be suited for rock climbing, or perhaps roof climbing. He had a belt festooned with grey pouches, each bulging from their contents. There were similar, smaller pouches strapped to his forearms and calves. A holster sat on each hip, but only one of them seemed to fit the shape of a gun holster. There was also something on the man's back, but the rock man could not see it from his vantage point. Nor could he recognize the man, for he had a black helmet of some kind that covered all of his face, with thin slits for the eyes. He did see the unmistakable shape of a policeman's badge, sewn onto the left breast of the outfit, although no numbers or insignias decorated its dull white surface.

The rock man took all of this in. Then he laughed, sounding much like a bag of pebbles rattling inside a ceramic cup. "What are you supposed to be, some kind of cop?"

The man on the ledge didn't move. "Some kind. Put the rocks down, and walk away, Sphynx."

"You must be joking," Sphynx told him. "Don't you know who I am? I am one of Might's

oldest foes! I've beaten Pseudoman to a standstill! You cops mean nothing to me!"

With that, the Sphynx swiped an arm in the direction of the figure. Seemingly from his rock fingers, shards of rock erupted like small missiles and arrowed for the ledge. The black figure lunged back. Rock shards embedded themselves in the wall below the ledge where the figure had been standing. One shard struck the edge of the brick ledge, and tiny rock shrapnel flew around the building's roof. A number of the rocks pelted the black figure, but they bounced harmlessly off the well-padded suit. He lowered the arm covering his face and straightened up, just in time to see the Sphynx bodily clearing the ledge in a prodigious leap and landing on the roof with a heavy thud. "Tell me, little man," he grated. "What chance do you think you have against me?"

"Yeah, I've seen you fight Might and Pseudoman," the dark figure stated flatly. "Quite a few times, I've watched you all duke it out, and throw bricks and such at each other. I've also seen all the casualties racked up around you, while you all fucked around with each other, trying to be cute."

The dark figure then reached behind him. "Well, I don't do cute." The object he pulled into view from behind him was fully as long as his arm. It swiveled on a steady mount that ran to the belt at his waist. He brought it up and leveled it at the rocky chest of the Sphynx. There was a sharp whine from it, gaining in pitch until it was inaudible.

The Sphynx looked at it. His rocky eyes slowly widened, seeming to crack in their sockets, as he seemed to realize his situation. From somewhere deep in him, a rocky voice croaked, "No..."

A gloved finger tightened on the trigger. An incredible roar issued forth from the cannon, as it pumped rapid-fire bullet rounds into the Sphynx. He screamed an avalanche scream as the missiles exploded across his chest. A thick cloud built up around the rock man, effectively hiding the carnage from the sight of the dark suited figure. But every so often, he noted a cement-colored piece of rock bouncing out of the conflagration.

At once he stopped, and waited for the smoke to clear. The Sphynx was down on one knee, his other leg shot through at the calf. One arm was gone at the elbow, the other missing at the shoulder. Massive pieces of his chest and torso had been obliterated, and his nose and chin were missing from his face. In most of the wounds, was a dark red patch of wetness.

"How about that," the dark figure commented. "You can get blood from a stone."

He emptied the rest of the clip.

Investigation

Come in."

« ^ »

Kris opened the door to his supervisor's office and stepped in. His boss gave him a look, which he recognized as a request to close the door behind him. He did so, then sat down in the

chair by the desk. "What's up, Jer?"

"NYPD found one," Jer said simply. It took a second for Kris to make the connection, then, his eyes widened.

"No shit. Which one?"

"Thunder, apparently," Jer replied. He pushed a file over to Kris. "One William Tatnall, lives in Manhattan. They found a secret lab in his penthouse."

"Cool," Kris murmured. "Is he the first Class 3, then?"

"Officially, yes. We have a few others bumped up to class 2, but he's the only confirmed."

Kris nodded. Once the heroes had been lost, the Central Intelligence Agency had immediately begun a protocol designed to attempt to identify the heroes, based on recent reports of persons who had suddenly turned up missing at work, among friends, by creditors, etc. As recent missing persons were identified, they were investigated to determine how likely it was that they could be one of the missing heroes. Persons that were reliably deemed to be physically or mentally incapable of masquerading as a hero were listed as Class 0. Those with no info yet obtained, were Class 1. Those who were unconfirmed, but were within the (admittedly vague) realm of possibility, were considered Class 2. And any reliably confirmed identity matches, like William Tatnall, were Class 3.

"We want to know every possible scrap of information about this guy. I'm assigning you to the background check. You'll be getting any others we get confirmed. Find out all contacts, family, finances, property, history. And don't waste time: If NYPD found him, the whole world's gonna know about it by the morning news. I want all his stats before everyone else."

Kris nodded. By his definition of everyone, he knew Jer was talking about the Pentagon, the FBI and the NSA, not to mention Treasury. "How close are any of the rest of them to confirmation?"

"Only two others are class 2: A guy named Max Ryan, in L.A.; and Vladymir Kolsheyev in Russia. They think he's Great Bear."

"Great Bear?" Jer raised an affirming eyebrow. "Whoa. Probably not much chance to get any information from over there, though."

"Probably not," Jer admitted. "Still, if we hear confirmation, you'll look for anything we have. Okay?"

"I got it."

"Then scram."

* * *

Once the Police Lab was notified about the Tatnall laboratory, the case officially became theirs. Other than the uniformed officers posted to stand watch at the apartment's door, no other police were supposed to go near the place.

That included Detective Ames.

But Ames decided he'd have none of that. He strategically waited two days, then went to his Captain and spent a considerable time explaining that a further examination of the rest of the apartment might turn up clues concerning the other Superheroes, assuming they all knew each other and may have kept in touch as "civilians." Ames' Captain wasn't too keen on the idea, since he had brass of his own telling him to keep his men away, but he decided to stick up for his gung-ho Detective, since his brass also wanted more of the Heroes' identities found. He authorized a pass for Ames.

He was back at Tatnall's apartment the next day. Although he spent some time in the conventional environs of the apartment, nosing around to make it look good, he regularly stepped through the hidden passage and prowled around the laboratory. It took a while for the lab team to get used to his presence, but he took care to keep out of their way. Kang in particular wanted him out of the apartment altogether, but a look at the Captain's authorization sufficiently pacified him.

To Ames, wandering about in there was like having carte blanche in your favorite store. Ames was an average-enough guy, with no delusions of grandeur, or misconceptions about his abilities. That was probably why he felt irresistibly drawn to the trappings of an honest-to-God superhero.

The lab team had been busy labeling what they could figure out, which included maybe sixty percent of the apparatus, and ten percent of the chemicals. Two of them were arguing over the prospect of taking the cover plates off of one of the strange looking mechanisms, to help decipher its function, when Ames stepped into the lab. He saw Kang look up from a rack of fluid-filled vials and beakers, which he seemed to be trying to identify with his own case of vials and litmus papers. He scowled a bit when he recognized Ames, then turned back to his work.

Ames decided he was having a tough time with it, so he decided not to ask if he'd managed to figure out the "blue doughnut" yet. The blue steel clad machine on one end of the table, looking like a two-foot-round doughnut with numerous control buttons and piping, and refusing to be turned on despite the team's best efforts, remained a sore point with Kang. And, for a civil servant, Kang was brilliant. Why he hadn't gone into private lab work baffled Ames sometimes, but good people usually had good reasons for staying in civil service, and Ames rarely pried into that. Especially since he'd resigned himself to his position long ago, accepting the fact that he would be a civil servant all his life.

So, he moved over to an amazingly compact electron microscope (well, that's what the label said), and switched on the monitor screen. When the image formed, a second later, he saw what looked like a conical mound of grey-black hair, flattened just before the apex, with six shiny black spheres of various sizes pushed halfway into the mass along the top. There seemed to be a sort of space at the foot of the cone, where two hairy columns had been crammed in tightly. After half a minute of staring at the image, Ames suddenly recognized it. "Spider?" he asked no one in particular, hoping some one would pick up the ball.

It was Kang. He glanced up, then replied, "Yeah. We haven't bothered to find out what kind, yet."

"Don't rush on my account."

"We won't." Kang looked at Ames again. "You haven't even noticed what's really amazing

about that thing.”

Ames blinked, looked again at the monitor. “Uh... I always thought they had eight eyes, just like the legs...”

“No, no, the microscope,” Kang said, standing up and walking over. “The image itself. This is an electron microscope. But the image is in real color.”

Ames blinked again. He suddenly remembered, in every picture he’d ever seen from an electron microscope (all of a half dozen in his life, he figured), they were all in black and white, or they were hand-colored after the fact. Although this spider was mostly grey, he could now see the telltale signs of a true color image. “Wow,” he intoned. “How’s it do that?”

“Beats the hell out of us,” Kang shook his head. “I don’t know of anyone who knows how to build that. If Tatnall built it, he’s a genius.”

“I think that goes without saying.” Ames looked at the rest of the microscope, which looked as normal as any other electron microscope (as if he knew). “Makes you wonder: If he did build it, why would a guy like that waste his time fighting crime in spandex underwear?”

“It’s not spandex.”

“Huh?”

“Actually, it’s a common misconception,” Kang said. “I’ve seen some of them up-close, you see. Whatever the material is they all wear, it’s maybe plastic and some other compounds, but not spandex. It’s a lot more durable than that. A lot more. We sent one of the suits back to our lab to get its composition. I think we might find something interesting from it.”

“Like the answer to lightweight motorcycle wear, maybe.” Ames moved away from the microscope after a last glance, and began to circle the table. “So, what do you think Tatnall used most of this stuff for?”

Kang shrugged. “Well, he could have used a lot of this stuff for his own little crime lab, that’s my first guess. He didn’t need it all just to make better fabrics. But somewhere in this stuff is probably the thing that gave him his powers.”

I was hoping you were gonna say that, thought Ames.

“Unfortunately, without knowing more about his powers, it’s hard to say what in here is part of the process. There’s just too much stuff in here, and we don’t understand enough of it.” Kang suddenly raised a finger in Ames’ face. “Yet.”

“You must have a guess.”

Kang looked at Ames, then turned to indicate the racks of vials he’d been studying. “I think they might be part of the process. It could be some chemical that he ingests. Maybe coupled with something one of these other machines do,” he waved a hand to include the mystery machines around the room. “But I haven’t finished analyzing the chemicals yet. And until we know what went with the process, and what dosages of chemical were used...” Kang shook his head, and walked on to another table of glass bottles.

Ames looked at the vials in the rack he had been studying. He counted close to forty vials,

all looking like the same contents inside, in exactly the same amounts. If Tatnall used a chemical formula, he would probably keep it in properly measured dosages, to prevent having to measure it out when he was in a hurry. And he would keep a good supply. This was probably THE STUFF. But Ames had no more clue how it was used than Kang did. Somehow, though, he doubted it was something as simple as just drinking it. So: Look for something to inject it with. Or dropper it. Or spread it. Or... something.

There was a loud snap on the other side of the lab. Everyone looked over at a lab technician standing by a tabletop device with what looked like electrodes standing straight up, about six inches apart. It snapped again. A jagged bolt of electrical energy jumped across the electrodes, lighting up the technician. She shrugged and smiled at Kang. "Well. Now we know what this one does." There were a few chuckles, and another technician edged closer to examine the device.

Ames just watched from across the room. Electrical equipment was common in chemical labs, even he knew that. They were used to stimulate or study things.

But they might have even more significance to someone who could throw lightning bolts from his fingers.

Ames was still standing by the vials of chemicals. With hardly a thought as to why he was doing it, he slipped a vial out of the rack and secreted it in his jacket pocket.

* * *

One of the things about Power Tower that made it stand out was that it was one of the only buildings in Manhattan that was smaller in circumference than a city block, yet was the only building on its block. It sat in the center of a concrete oasis, mostly just sidewalk, benches, a few large trees, and a sculpture on each of the four sides. Power Square. It made the building look very small, although it was as large as most buildings nearby. But it also made it seem taller, thrusting into the sky with no close neighbors competing with it. That lack of abutting structures meant it also saw more sunlight than most buildings, and the glass and stone walls reflected more of the sky than of other buildings.

It was truly one of the most beautiful impregnable fortresses in the world.

There were always pedestrians, lunchers, relaxers, hanging around the square, eating, feeding pigeons, talking. It had been a long time since anyone had been crazy enough to attack Power Squared in their home turf, so to speak, and New Yorkers being New Yorkers, soon regarded the building with no more caution than a pigeon gave a jogger. Although people tended to stay off the square after the news of the Powers' death, that was almost three weeks ago, and the gatherings were back to normal now.

One group gathered, but across the street from the square, in an alley. They had been conversing in low tones for the past half hour, taking care not to be in direct sight of Power Tower. Between them, a knapsack sat on the ground. One of them... even from the shadows, it was clear from the shapely silhouette that it was a young woman... unfolded her arms and reached down for the knapsack. One of the other two helped her put it on her back and secure its straps. There was another moment of conversation. Then the trio stepped out of the shadows and crossed the street.

They picked a moment when there was little wheeled or foot traffic between them and the building. Still, they were noticed by quite a few people as they strode across the square. Most of the onlookers caught sight of the woman, then stopped whatever they were doing to stare at her, slack-jawed. It was only partly to do with her physique, which was impressive enough in a close-fitting shirt and pants to catch any man's eye. Rather, it was her face that stunned the onlookers. And it wasn't just its brown haired beauty, but its uncanny resemblance to a very famous woman who was presently known to be dead. Whispers of, "It's her!" "It's Vicky Power!" "Victoria Power! They said she was dead!" reached the ears of the trio as they climbed the stairs to the front doors of the tower.

One of the men said, "We probably should have waited for nightfall to do this. We're confusing a lot of people."

"So?" the other shrugged. "It just means the news services are gonna go nuts."

"And swarm all over this place inside of the hour. I doubt that'll make Joseph happy."

"I couldn't care less about Joseph," the girl said under gritted teeth. "I just want to get this over with."

"You'll be fine," the first man said, grasping the door handle. "It's showtime."

They entered the expansive lobby of the building. There, between them and the elevator bay beyond, was a cylinder about ten feet wide. It was black marble from the floor to a height of about three feet. From there up, it was glass, continuing up to the high ceiling. Inside was a man in a security uniform (which, they noticed, happened to share the same color scheme as the uniforms of Power Squared), sitting in the center of a monitor console that completely encircled him. He looked up at the trio when they entered the lobby, and smiled at them as they neared.

"This had better work," the girl whispered.

"Shh."

Before they reached the glass column, the guard raised a hand in greeting. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Power. How are you today?"

After a pause, the girl smiled back. "Just fine, thank you. And you?"

"Fine, thank you," the guard replied. He looked at the other two men pleasantly.

The girl tossed a head at her companions. "These gentlemen are my guests. They'll be coming up with me."

The guard nodded. "And they are...?"

The girl motioned toward the older man. "This is Ed Stadtler, of SB Electronic Consultants." She nodded toward the other. "This is his associate, Robert Bryce, also of SB."

"I see." The guard occupied himself for a moment, typing something on a keyboard, just as if he was a real guard and not a hologram. The girl, closest to the column, stared down at his hands as he typed. Then, he looked up and smiled. "I have that, thank you. Go right ahead, Mrs. Power. Have a nice day."

"Thanks. You too." The trio moved past the guard station and headed for the elevators. Once safely out of earshot (they hoped), Ed whispered, "That was a hologram? Incredible! It was so real!"

"Word," Bobby nodded. An elevator door opened as they approached, and they casually stepped inside. Once the doors closed, an electronic voice spoke, startling all three.

"Floor, please?"

The girl looked back at Ed, who pointed at the button marked "LAB" on the panel. She pressed it, and the elevator started up. After a moment, she shifted the weight on her back. "Something's digging into me," she hissed at Ed.

"Not much longer, 'Victoria.' Stop squirming, willya?"

"Do you know how uncomfortable all this padding is?"

"Yeah, but it looks great on you," Bobby grinned, moving a hand to pat her rump.

"If you touch me," she said, "you'll find out not all of this muscle is padding." Bobby lowered his hand.

There was a ping, and the elevator said, "Lab." The doors opened onto a hallway that appeared to be completely clad in an eggshell-white plastic. Square and rectangular panels decorated the walls and ceiling, seeming to fit no pattern. Ed guessed most of the security equipment was behind various of those panels. He had to nudge "Victoria," who was still standing in front of the doors and examining the hall with flashing eyes. She took a tentative step into the hallway, followed closely by her "guests." After four steps with no peep from the walls, she became surer in her stride, and they continued on down the hall to the lab entrance.

"I can't believe it's working," Bobby said.

"So far, so good," Ed added. "Don't get too relaxed yet, though..."

A metal double-door opened with a hiss as they approached. The three walked into the room, and stopped at the threshold.

Bobby's eyes went wide. "Denny..." he whispered. "Tell me I'm seeing what I think I'm seeing." Denise, not wanting to respond to her own name while still disguised as Victoria Power, nodded silently. "It's...huge."

It wasn't a laboratory. It was a temple to science. It was six floors high, and so filled with megalithic machinery that the room seemed to be larger around than the width of the tower itself. Ed was very familiar with most machines and equipment designs, yet, he was lost amongst the metal and plastic giants. There were things that looked like they could have flown as well as Tomorrow's spaceship. Other objects seemed to have a more organic design, still others looked like four story gothic horrors. All of them were unrecognizable to Ed, who could only stand there and shake his head.

Along one wall of the room, a glass-walled area separated the rest of the lab from a bank of what could only be a computer and control system. Ed tapped Bobby and Denise on the shoulders, and moved in that direction. After a moment, they followed him into the glass-walled room.

There were a number of seats in front of the computer banks. Ed did not sit down, and he stopped Bobby from doing so. He motioned Denise to a chair, and she had to sit sideways in the chair to accommodate the bulky knapsack. She looked again to Ed, who nodded back to her. She composed herself in front of the computer.

"Is voice control active?" She asked.

"Yes," the computer replied. "Who are you?"

Denise's heart skipped. "I am Victoria Power. I—"

"You are not Victoria Power."

Her mouth snapped shut. Bobby took an involuntary step backward, before Ed stopped him with a hand on his arm. Denise tried to relax, but her breathing was noticeably faster.

"I know Victoria Power accompanied the rest of Power Squared onto Dr. Tomorrow's space craft," the computer continued. "I know that the craft was subsequently destroyed while in space. I do not have any evidence that there are survivors that have returned to Earth. Even though the Tower's sensory systems confirm that you are Victoria Power, I do not accept the data as accurate."

"How can you not accept it?" Denise tried to recover the situation. "Here I am! There were survivors of the accident, but I cannot explain the circumstances now. I am Victoria Power."

"I require proof."

"...What?"

"I require proof of identity. Inside this console is a switch. It is designed as an identification failsafe device. If you are Victoria Power, you can sense the switch with your telekinesis and change the position of the switch. Do so now."

Denise sat there silently, looking furtively around the board. Ed and Bobby stood stock still behind her. After a long ten seconds, Denise just sighed and slumped in her seat. "You are one paranoid machine."

"You are not Victoria Power."

At once, the neighboring consoles shut down. In the lab, the lights went out. The humming and whining of hundreds of machines stopped. The entire floor went silent and dark.

Denise reached for the control keyboard on the knapsack and punched a code in. A high-pitched whine suddenly became audible, even as it lowered in pitch and volume, to die away again. Slowly her appearance as a brown-haired European faded, and the features of a dusky African were revealed. "I am Denise Crane." Her voice was different, a bit higher pitched now. "I work for SB Electronic Consultants. We were charged by the federal government to enter this tower and try to gain all information possible regarding the threat facing Earth. We need your data to try to save the Earth."

This was it. Ed waited for the computer to activate every security device in its catalog, and reduce them to atoms. He was immediately sorry he had walked them all into a deathtrap, and he hoped whatever God watched over them would forgive him...

"I understand." The computer switched the light and neighboring consoles back on. The hums and whines began to issue from the lab again. "Before his death, Professor Power charged me with passing on what data I possess, to the proper authorities. I require confirmation of your authority."

From a nearby slot, a small slip of paper rolled out. "This is a list of New York State authorities recognized by me. Please bring any one of them to the Tower for identification and authorization. I will stand by."

Bobby goggled at the machines around them, his face slowly turning beet-red. "You mean all we had to do was ask?" he demanded. "Christ! Risking my life for nothing—"

Denise pulled the paper from the slot, looked it over, and handed it to Ed. Ed recognized a few of the names: The Mayor, the District Attorney, the U.N. Delegate, the Governor. There were only two others, but Ed doubted they would need to find one of them. The computer did not seem to be forthcoming with any other information, so Ed pulled Denise out of the chair.

"Come on. We shouldn't waste any time."

Allies

« ^ »

Kris' fingers danced across the keyboard of his computer, coaxing up file after file in rapid succession. Kris was renowned (in this office, anyway) for his speed and thoroughness in researching, and the toughest assignments were generally passed onto him, or to Julia, the other research guru. With the entire government and international database at his disposal (not to mention quite a few that were not supposed to be at his disposal), Kris was confident he'd soon know what color toilet paper William Tatnall preferred, and how many squares he generally used when he took a squat.

The bio, always first on the list, was the epitome of normal, and was quickly glossed over and filed. Kris compiled a list of family from the Genealogy files, and likewise stashed that for future use. Then came lists of friends, contacts and associates. This was one of the tricky parts, trying to figure out where a vague connection might be hiding, who might be part of a larger whole, who needed cross-referencing and further checks. Kris looked them over, glanced at a bio of each, made a few intuitive notes, and stored them away.

On to business and finance. Clearly, Tatnall had money. He owned the entire building he lived in, as well as a few others on the East Coast, but he did not have all his money tied up in property. There were a few cleverly disguised holes in his financial records, more than enough to equip a major laboratory and have enough left over to buy a few union suits. Kris traced some of the investments and donations he'd made over the years. There were a few organizations he'd dealt with that were a bit iffy, at best. More notes filed away. Checking business associates revealed nothing in themselves. None of them matched up with Ryan or the Russian, the only two others on Kris' "maybe" list. He'd have to do more extensive cross-referencing on them, or wait to see if any of the future confirmations might fit in

somewhere.

Kris could see the trend building. If there was anything special to be found about this guy Tatnall, it would be buried deep in a cobweb of facts and links, and it was going to be Hell trying to get it out.

"I love a challenge," Kris grinned, and reached for his coffee cup.

* * *

John Simpson stood at the information desk, where he had been chatting to the pretty airline clerk for the last half hour. Lee Prime, not too far away, had stood by the large plate glass window where he casually watched planes come and go. John's conversation had gone in a number of directions since they had arrived, and each time Lee looked up, John's clerk seemed to be friendlier and friendlier to him. Even after she had gotten a phone call at the desk, which seemed to upset her a bit... and it was about that time that the flight they were waiting on was changed to a "delayed" status... John had managed to pull her out of most of her funk, although she was clearly still upset.

When the phone rang at her desk again, Lee looked up to see what affect it would have on her this time. After a moment, her face visibly brightened, and she hung up the phone with a sigh Lee could hear from across the waiting room. Her conversation with John again resumed, and now Lee noticed John's agitation, as well. He decided to go see what was the matter.

"Let me get this straight," John was saying as Lee reached them. "First the plane was delayed. Then the plane was out of touch. Now the plane is not delayed at all. Come on, Stacy, you can tell me. What's been going on up there?"

"Is everything all right, Miss?" Lee asked. "Perhaps we can help."

"No, no, that's all right," Stacy told them, then, seeming to consider for a moment, came to a decision. "I guess it's all right to say something, now that it's over. There was apparently a group of terrorists aboard the flight, and they were planning to hijack the plane to Europe."

"Were planning?" John echoed. "What'd they do, jump off?"

Stacy shook her head. "They said the passengers subdued them. Well, two particular passengers, anyway."

They heard a tone that indicated a change on the big status board. They looked up in time to see the "delayed" sign change to "arrived." Lee moved back to the window, and saw a jet taxiing along the outer runway toward the branch to the terminal.

"Stand back, please, sir."

Lee looked up. Four men in airport security uniforms had hustled into the gate area, and were busy shooing people back beyond the information desk, away from the boarding tunnel. One of them grabbed a walkie-talkie strapped to his shoulder. "Central, this is Bates. We're at twelve, awaiting flight 90. Situation is under control here." Lee allowed himself to be ushered away from the window, but he managed to stay within view of the boarding tunnel as he stood by.

Eventually, the jet came within sight at the window, and swung into place at the terminal. The boarding tube extended to the side of the plane. Two of the four officers walked down the boarding tunnel then, and waited for the airline personnel to open the plane's door. Once it was opened, the pilot and a petite stewardess stepped out, and the officer called Bates stopped them in the tunnel.

Lee watched them closely from his vantage point. He had learned years ago to read lips, and although they were too far away to hear, Lee could follow their conversation. The officer had started by asking them for details of their incident.

The pilot spoke first. "All I managed to see was the one man, who got into the cabin and started waving his gun around. He said he was going to make us fly to Heathrow after refueling here. Then someplace in the Mideast."

"What about the other two men?" the officer asked.

"They were in the first class section," the stewardess explained. "They stood up front, with their guns, and told everyone to stay still, and we were going on a longer trip than we expected..."

"Calm down, Miss," the officer told her. She halted, took a breath, and continued.

"Well, they were standing there, and one of them moved up and down the aisle to watch everyone. All of a sudden one of the passengers laughed out loud, up front. When the one man came up to see what he was doing, I saw him do a kind of Judo move, or something. He hit the man in the wrist, with two fingers! The man yelled, but he couldn't shoot. It was like his hand was paralyzed or something!"

She took another breath. "Then he grabbed the man by the wrist and pulled him into the bulkhead wall. And that was when the second man jumped out of his seat, and rushed the other terrorist. He just hit him once in the jaw, and he went right out! It was incredible!" A third breath. "Then the third terrorist came out from the cabin, because he heard us cheering."

"Cheering?" the officer repeated.

"Y-yes," the stewardess replied. "We were just so shocked by the whole thing, and those two men were..." Even in the gloom of the tunnel, Lee could see the girl turn a bright red. "Well... when the other terrorist came out, they waited on either side of the cabin, and they both jumped him. They got the gun from him, and they knocked him right out!"

There was suddenly a commotion from the plane, and the pilot, stewardess and officer all turned that way. A moment later, a man appeared hauling another man down the tunnel. The man doing the hauling was tall and rather slimly built, but fairly broad across the shoulders. The broad shoulders gave him a very wasp-waisted figure. When he reached the officer in the tunnel, he swung his burden around to land in the cop's arms. "I believe this belongs to you," Lee saw him say to the officer. Then they all turned back toward the plane.

Past the sudden crowd in the tunnel, Lee saw another man appear from the plane, almost two heads shorter than the wasp-waisted man. This man had two stumbling men in his grip, but where the wasp-waisted man just dragged his man behind him, this one held each by a shirt collar in front of him, and held them completely off the ground. As they kicked and struggled against their choking shirt collars, the man marched down the tunnel with them,

seemingly exerting little effort in keeping them aloft. The officer waved to his men, and they came forward and collected the two gunmen from their captor. The wasp-waisted man then walked up to the smaller but more powerful man, and the two shook hands, before they continued out with the officers and their groggy captives.

They walked out of the tunnel, past the officers and the slightly moon-eyed stewardess, and stopped when they saw Lee and John. The tall, wasp-waisted one smiled brightly when he saw John, and threw an arm out. "John Simpson! It's great to see you! What has it been, three years?"

"Almost four, Ed!" John took his hand and shook it warmly. "This must be Tom, right?"

"That's right," the shorter man replied, also offering his hand. "Ed's told me a lot about you, John. It's my pleasure."

John disengaged from both of them to bring Lee into the group. "Mr. Lee Prime, may I present Sir Edward Lance."

The wasp-waisted man shook Lee's hand. "It's a rare pleasure, Mr. Prime. As they say, I've watched you from afar for years."

"And," John continued, "Mr. Tom Poor."

Lee reached for the smaller man's hand. "Nice to meet you, sir," Tom told him. "I hear from Ed that we have a lot in common."

"I think maybe we do," Lee replied. "So, you two thwarted a hijacking attempt, eh?"

Ed snorted a laugh. "You would have gotten a good laugh out of it, if you'd been there. One of them didn't even have the sense to take the safety off of his gun!"

"He was very smooth," Tom grinned and hooked a thumb at Ed. "Got one right on the wrist's pressure point, and I'd swear he hardly aimed! The other dummy was cake." He flexed his fist under his nose. "Real glass jaw."

Lee glanced over at the terrorists, who were only now gaining full possession of their faculties. One of them, upon awakening, looked full into the face of Bates, who held him up. They exchanged looks with one another, then the crook groaned and sagged in the cop's grip again.

Bates looked at his men. "Boys, let's get these clowns to Security. Come on." They began to hustle their cargo to the escalators, which led down to the level where Security kept its offices. Lee took careful notice of the officers as they headed away.

"We'll just follow you, officer," Lee called after him.

Bates turned in front of Lee. "That's all right, sir. We can handle it from here." He reached for the walkie-talkie on his shoulder. "Central. We're on our way down."

The four officers continued their march to the escalators. Lee stood there, watching them depart. After a moment, John noticed Lee's interest in them.

"What's wrong, Lee?"

"Those men," Lee breathed, "were not security men."

Abruptly, Lee started in their direction. The officers and crooks had already sped up their pace, and had almost reached the escalators. They hit them at a run, feet pounding furiously to get down the moving steps.

As Lee reached the top of the escalator, he looked past the men at the ground level. Beyond the escalator's base were the doors to the taxi stands. A large van had just pulled up to the stand, and the side door slid open.

Lee skidded to a stop at the escalator, and brought a fist down. It slammed into the emergency stop button.

Instantly, the escalator froze. Somewhere close by a klaxon went off, and shouts were everywhere. About halfway down the elevator, the man in the lead of the bogus security men tripped on the stair. All seven of them sprawled forward, arms flying, cursing each other as they tumbled into a knot. Lee jumped to the steel separator between escalators and slid down it like a skier, as John, Ed and Tom reached his side.

Lee launched himself into the air and landed amidst the crooks. He landed a punch to a jaw that put the crook at the pile's base out. Another grabbed him around the neck, applying choking pressure. Lee reached behind him, got a fistful of shirt, and yanked. The man flew bodily over Lee, to strike his head on the steel divider. He slid the rest of the way to the bottom, unconscious.

Two of the men tried to make their way back up the non-moving escalator, away from the whirlwind below them. They had not gone four steps when a foot was planted in the chest of the first one by John, who had seen them coming and hurled himself at the escaping pair. Amidst more curses and arm waving, the two men fell back into the knot of men below. John waded into them from above, with Ed and Tom close behind, while Lee delivered a roundhouse right to another bogus cop from below. He paused long enough to notice the van out front pull away from the curb in a screech of tires.

The rest of the fight was over quickly, and Lee and his men brought the rest of the criminals to the bottom of the escalator, where real security guards were arriving in response to the klaxons.

Explanations were given, and backed up by the pilot and stewardess, who had seen everything, and the criminals were again marched off in the direction of security, this time sure to get there. John slid up beside Lee while the men were being taken away. "Lee, what clued you in that those weren't real cops?"

As if to answer the question, one of the real security officers walked up to Lee. "Sir, I need you to come over to Security, to answer a few questions and file a statement." Lee nodded, and the officer indicated the way.

Lee turned to John. "That," he said simply. "Bates didn't want us to come to Security. He tried to brush us off. That's because he wasn't planning to go to Security at all. They were all going to make an emergency getaway in that van that just took off." He started off after the officer. "Don't worry. This shouldn't take long."

The three others followed after him. Tom just grinned as he walked along beside John. "I

am so glad you got me out of Kansas City for this!"

* * *

"How the Hell am I supposed to get out of here?"

Cyrus Klopper sat in the middle of an empty room. It was obvious it had once been a very busy room. All around the perimeter of the room were control consoles, built into the walls, which were apparently hooked into communications equipment, monitor consoles, manipulator stations, and the like.

Except that all the consoles had the guts torn out of them. Klopper had checked. Outside of the completely automatic life support circuits, nothing else remained. And Klopper had a natural reluctance to fool with the life support circuits.

It was cold enough in the Arctic already.

He cursed himself for seven kinds of a fool, for letting himself get caught with his pants down like this. He'd had no idea Scott even had a facility in the middle of the cold nowhere, much less that they would want to send him there. Of course, after assuring him that Zero Lab, as they affectionately called it, was fully manned and well-equipped for top secret industrial research, not to mention still being able to provide, in a day's time, any other needs he might have, Klopper decided it would be an ideal place to work undisturbed.

They flew him in by helicopter, on an especially clear and sunny day. When they touched down in the snow, outside of the small lab, the pilot told him, "It's partially buried. Don't let its looks fool you, it's supposed to look innocent. Everything has been prepared for your arrival. Have a good stay!"

Whereupon Klopper stepped out of the 'copter and trudged over to the front door. He opened it, stepped in amidst whirls of snow, and closed the door behind him. He pulled back the hood of his parka, waiting for the snow to settle so he could see.

It really was just a dinky little tin roof structure. There was no one else there. The building had had most of its contents cannibalized. Recently. He'd been had. Seething, he charged out of the building, just in time to see the 'copter already fifty feet up and turning toward home. Stranded.

He'd searched around the building, and found sleeping quarters for twenty—and linens for one—well-stocked kitchen and cupboards, a desk full of writing material, and absolutely no way to get in touch with the rest of the world. There were rooms that had been labs, but they had been stripped of every piece of equipment they had once held. Nothing left but a few bare tables. The climate control system seemed to be left intact... at least they didn't intend for him to freeze, at least not soon... but it was the only part of the once-extensive electrical system that was intact. They didn't even leave him a radio receiver.

Solitary confinement didn't get worse than this.

After exhausting himself searching the building over and over again, he finally collapsed in a chair in the former control room. He'd sat there for the last hour, head in his hands, cursing himself and trying to understand why Scott would do this to him. After all, he reasoned, he

was one of the most ingenious men in the world. His designs in robotics, electronic controls and bio-protection were brilliant, almost as great as his strategic and planning skills. Klopper knew that, with the blessing of unlimited funds, his genius would have been unstoppable. And now he was stranded against his will, without even access to his lab—His head snapped upright so fast, his neck cracked in protest.

“M-my lab,” he mumbled.

* * *

Mark grasped the black sheet and gave a yank. It billowed away from the wall, to settle at his feet. Mark and the ten men charged with moving the contents of Klopper’s lab to the Lord Corp’s main facilities stood and stared at the revealed equipment against the wall.

They looked, at first, like robots, covered in metal and plastic, a few of them garishly colored. They stood, on average, about seven feet tall, and most of them shared few features in common. One stood on tank treads, while another sported flat round disks as feet. One had claws for hands, another had assortments of tools for fingers, a third had metal tentacles at the wrist. Two of them had some type of rocket propulsion system mounted on the upper back. Three of them had radio antennae mounted on the shoulder. Upon closer inspection, however, the open-mouthed heads turned out to be helmets, and the suits all showed signs of opening in the front to allow a person to step inside of them. Each helmet, though in different colors, all had the same single, four inch round black view glass on its nose, just an inch above center.

Mark waved a hand. “The exoskeletons of Dr. Cyklops. Treat ‘em gently, boys. Try not to press any buttons you find.”

* * *

Curt had waited until late dusk. The peaceful little neighborhood had descended into deep shadows, thanks to its large population of old trees and shrubs, and it would now be easy to move from spot to spot undetected. Curt improved the odds in his favor by wearing dark clothing, and sticking closely to those shadows as if married to them. Every now and then he stopped and surveyed the neighborhood for any changes since he had cased it last. Once satisfied he was not being watched by anything short of a spy satellite, he would move on.

He reached the side of Max’s house. It had been five days since Curt had been detained by the police, and they had eventually gone lax in watching the house. Curt had managed his own surveillance of the cops, in between stops at local Radio Shacks and hardware stores for a few tools. He reached into a pocket for one of those tools, now. He extracted a small glass cutter, and after one last check of the neighborhood, went to work on a basement window. A few seconds’ cutting gave him a hole large enough for a hand to reach through and flip the lock. The window slid open, and Curt slipped inside. Scotch tape to the glass effectively hid the cut lines on the restored hole.

The basement was incredibly dark. Max had arranged curtains and items in front of the few windows in the basement, to prevent outsiders from seeing inside. It also prevented entry of light, and even though Curt’s eyes had adjusted to the dark, he still could not see a thing. He

pulled a miniature flashlight from a pocket. Twisting it into a narrow beam, he cupped a hand over the lens to limit light spillage around the room. He picked his way past the door to the garage, and around to the stairwell that led upstairs to the main of the house.

Instead of climbing the stairs, however, he moved around them. The stairway was typical of such fifty-plus year old houses, just an open series of wooden planks from the kitchen door above. The triangular space below the stairs was unfinished, and there were a number of old boxes stacked under the stairwell, a fairly typical use of such space.

Curt, inspecting the boxes under the stairs, smiled to himself. The best blinds were the simple ones, he reflected. Even after all these years, Max hadn't even needed to rearrange the boxes. It looked just as it had the last time Curt had been here, years ago. He knelt in the corner of the stairwell, nearest the base, and put a hand on the box in the small space at the corner. He exerted mild pressure, not nearly enough to move a box at the bottom of a pile of heavy boxes. It moved, anyway. The face slid back, as the sides of the box folded like an origami sculpture. The boxes above did not move from their spaces; they just seemed to hover over the space where the folding box had been. Curt found a thin groove in the cement floor, and pushed. The floor slid to the side smoothly, revealing a thirty-inch hole in the slab floor. He reached to one side. The switch was there, just where he remembered it. He flipped it, and light poured up from the space beyond. Levering himself around on his hands, he lowered himself into the space.

His feet found ladder rungs, and he used them to descend into the hidden room. An overhead fan began to turn, activated by the lights, and soon the stuffy room began to air noticeably. The room occupied the entire space under the house's slab, which had been reconstructed into a sort of box that the house sat on. Aside from the square entrance in the ceiling Curt had come through, there was one other entrance, in the west-facing wall, a door as tall as a man and about six feet wide. An empty space on the floor in front of the large door sported a few grease spots. In one corner of the room, an elaborate gym setup sat gleaming in the light. The weights attached to them totaled up to a hefty sum, more than most men could budge. Other exercise equipment sat on the floor around the gym, and a set of rings and chin bars in the ceiling completed the set.

..."You've got the ability, Curt. You've got the eye. But if you don't keep your mind and body in tone, it won't be enough." Max would sit at the nautilus and push those weighted bars up as if they were featherweights. "There's a balance between mind and body that must be maintained. If you've got the balance, you can do anything."

Max had the balance. He moved with the grace of a gazelle, the power of a tiger. He remembered watching Max climb a building wall like a squirrel: Fingers finding meager purchase, toes pushing like pistons, scaling thirty feet and levering himself over the side with no more effort than most men used to hop a four foot fence...

Along one wall resided a fairly ordinary looking desk. Curt could see the journal in its usual place, right in the middle of the blotter, pen nearby. A computer sat on the left side of the desktop, and Curt noted the data line running up the wall into the house. Next to the desk was a table where a radio and television sat. The radio was a multi-band transceiver, but the television was ordinary. There was also a bookcase filled with magazines, books, binders and files. It all gave a sort of anachronistic look to the wall, the old next to the new, but that was Max, Curt reflected. Who else but an anachronism would fight crime like a vigilante, with an

American flag emblazoned across his chest?

Thought of uniforms made Curt turn to another wall, where an oak wardrobe stood. He walked over to it, and opened one of the doors. There were five outfits on hangers in the wardrobe, each looking freshly washed. He pulled one of them out into the light. The deep blue color, with the red and white accents, were almost ridiculously bright. The flag, on the left breast, was about twice the size of Curt's hand, and the only difference between it and the traditional American flag was the Greek symbol Omega, in the center of the blue field that normally held stars. The close-fitting blue cowl hung on the back of the top, its internal padding holding the skull shape and looking a bit like a skeleton with a broken neck. He held the uniform up higher, wondering how well it would fit on him.

"Your own uniform. We're a team, now, Curt. The Omericans." He tried it on. It fit like a second skin, its lines so similar to Max's uniform, yet different. It was his uniform, and it was incredible. But deep down inside, he still wished it was Max's... He still wished he was Max...

"That suit's already killed one good man. Don't you think that's enough?"

Curt dropped the suit and looked up. He'd left the panel open. In two quick bounds, he hit the ladder, shot up to the panel and launched himself out, rolling across the floor and coming up in a fighting crouch.

He strained to see the shadow in the dark room before him. Whoever it was, he could tell he had a size advantage, not that that meant much if you knew how to use your body properly. Then the shadow folded its arms across its chest and shifted its weight, in a manner that was very familiar, even after seven years. Curt relaxed, straightened up a bit, lowered his arms.

"Lainie?"

* * *

Endeavor was the only shuttle that had ever gone beyond Earth orbit. Years ago, on the insistence of DoD, NASA had constructed extra fuel tanks and special engine systems designed to push Endeavor out of Earth's pull and send it into free space, if ever it became necessary. The propulsion package, referred to as Code Orange Specifications, had only been used once before, to recover a classified satellite after an explosion launched it out of orbit. But that was a relatively short trip, only half the distance from the Earth to the Moon.

Now Endeavor was almost eight hundred thousand miles out, four times farther out than the orbit of the Moon. And even though they were inscribing an arc across the Solar System at fifteen thousand kph, the stars didn't flash past like on television. They just hung there, fooling you into thinking you were motionless.

"...And at Warp 9, we're going nowhere mighty fast." Ben East always thought of that line, from a particularly famous TV show, at times like this. Not that he would tell anyone that, but it was one of the things that made space travel interesting, to him. He needed that bit of interest, to counter-balance the work that encompassed the real reason he was up here.

The crew had been unusually quiet over the last hour. Gus Cleveland, Endeavor's Pilot, was busy swinging the ship about and matching speed with the field of debris that was approaching them at thirteen hundred kph. Debra Mura was inputting course corrections to

Gus, and the other two were trying to avoid breaking their concentration. Ben watched the monitors, one of which showed the debris field as tiny specks of light against dimmer sparks of light, moving as a cluster in the general direction of the Sun. Soon, he realized.

Sure enough, a minute later Debra intoned, "Intercept in twenty minutes." She looked back at Ben and the others. "Better get suited up, boys."

Ben pushed himself out of his chair. "Come on, Bob & LeRoy. Time to earn your pay."

"I got news for you," Bob Polk replied, floating toward the rear of the shuttle. "I earned my pay when I got on board. This is all bonus money!"

The three men floated into the mission bay and began squirming into their space suits. They were inside in moments, but it took a while longer to check each other's gear for 100% operation, before they sealed themselves up and headed for the airlock. As LeRoy entered the lock first, Ben switched on his intercom. "How close, Debra?"

"About six minutes, Colonel."

"Okay, we're on our way out. I'll let you know when we make visual."

Bob went through the airlock second, and Ben followed him out.

The shuttle bay was already open when they exited the cabin. Ben had done this a few times before, as well, but nothing compared to the experience of a spacewalk. He was silent as he looked out into the expanse, and he noticed Bob and LeRoy were quiet as well. He didn't know if they were as awed as he was, or if they were being silent for his benefit. Nor did he care. They were out there to do a job. He reached for one of the staffs mounted on the bay wall, and turned back to the open end of the bay.

A few moments later, LeRoy pointed past the shuttle's tail. "Here they come. Let's get busy." He already had a shaft in hand, and he pulled himself up along a special web running across the bay. LeRoy anchored himself at the top of the web, as Bob and Ben joined him. Ben turned himself around.

"We see them," Ben reported. "We can make out individual objects. Increase our speed a bit, Gus." As Ben watched, the large and small bits of debris were coming up fast behind them. They seemed to slow as they approached. Gus and Debra were doing a great job of matching velocity. Now it was his turn to do his job well.

Pinpointing a particularly large object floating toward them, Ben punched a large stud on the end of the shaft. Quickly the shaft extended like a power antenna, running out into space a good sixty feet above Ben's head. At its end, a grapple opened and waited. Ben maneuvered the shaft until it touched the debris. Then he closed the grapple, and retracted the shaft. When it was fully retracted, Ben took the object from the grapple. It was a small metal tank, one end punctured from the inside, and a bit charred. Ben pushed it into a large pouch on his belt, then turned back to the debris field. "It's Tomorrow's ship, all right," Ben said over the intercom.

The three spent the next two hours recovering what debris they could reach from their vantage point. They had started identifying each object they grabbed, for the first fifteen minutes. After awhile, they gave it up and just grabbed what they could. The job looked easier than it was: As lightweight as the staffs were, it required a lot of control and patience to guide

the grapple to its targets, and a number of objects managed to get past them, never to be recovered. LeRoy helped the situation by calling out course suggestions to Debra, which she translated into course corrections for Gus. The resultant maneuvering allowed them to recover a great deal more debris than if they had just plowed through the field.

Once their surroundings were well emptied of objects, Ben called them in. The three exhausted men placed their bounty in secure containers, then took their turns through the airlock. Once they worked themselves out of their suits, Bob yawned expansively, and LeRoy just nodded. Ben recovered his headset and switched it on.

"Debra, send a message on a coded channel."

There was a pause from the cabin, before Debra replied, "Okay, go ahead."

"Firechief to Firehouse," Ben dictated. "We're coming back with the wood chips. End message. Gus, best speed to Earth."

Aftershocks

« ^ »

Curt decided it wasn't safe for him and Lainie to stay in Max's house, after she told him she had gotten in through the back door with a key. So they left as quietly as they had come in, walked down the next block to her car, and headed for her apartment. They exchanged few words along the drive, and it was mercifully short. Once inside, Lainie headed for the kitchen.

"I haven't had dinner, yet. Want something?" She looked over her shoulder at Curt, who was standing in the middle of the living room, hands in his pockets.

"Sure. Whatever you've got."

"There's liquor in the cabinet," she offered. "Pour me a scotch?"

Curt nodded, and knelt by the cabinet she nodded to. He extracted two glasses, a bottle of scotch, and one of bourbon, and poured two drinks out. He took them into the kitchen, where Lainie dropped some ice into both of them. Two cubes each, of course. Curt sat down at the kitchen table while she worked over the counter. He'd been at a loss for what to say to her, since she had turned up at Max's house. He'd tried, in fact, not to think about her at all since he left New Mexico, secretly hoped he wouldn't see her in L.A. And now, he was in her apartment, watching her as she casually made sandwiches. Her back was to him, and he couldn't help but run his eyes over her figure, looking trim and strong under close-fitting denims and a bodysuit. Other than her auburn hair, which was not as loosely styled as it used to be, she looked the same as when he left... or was that just nostalgia talking?

"You've come a long way in five years, Curt." She was wrapping a bandage around his leg. Burning sensations. Not all of them in his leg. "You've become the man Max knew you'd become, when he brought you in. But you can't let it get you in over your head. There were things you knew you couldn't do when you were fourteen, and some of those things still apply now..."

Curt managed to look elsewhere and sip his bourbon, when she turned around to regard him. She seemed about to say something, then turned back to the sandwiches. Curt stole another lingering glance, and commented, "You look like you've been keeping in shape. You still exercise?"

"Not as much as before," Lainie replied. "I'm pretty busy at my job, these days. But I watch my diet, and I try to stay active." She cut the sandwiches with a steak knife. "The years have been kind to you, too."

"Thanks."

She brought the plate of sandwiches to the table, and sat down. "Not that I'm surprised. You and Max always seemed like you were incapable of taking on fat, somehow. You both had that 'magic metabolism.' I always hoped some of it would rub off on me."

"I think it did," Curt told her, instantly sorry he'd said it. Time to get off the subject of bodies. "What are you doing, now?"

"Office Manager at Dannon & Crosby," she said. "They do business research and investigation. Been working there for the last four years. It's a nice, easy job for good money."

"Mm." He took a bite of roast beef. "Must be about ready to finally get out of this apartment, huh? You've been here nine years now, haven't you?"

"I thought I'd be out of it, by now," she said quietly. Brilliant. How about another reminder that her man is gone? Curt took a gulp of bourbon. He watched as she bit into her sandwich and chewed, pointedly avoiding his eyes. He knew, at this rate, they'd be strangling each other within the hour. He shouldn't have come to the apartment. He should have stayed at the house, should've told her to go, there was no reason for her to come to Max's house anyway, should've...

"You... and Max, have been better to me than anyone. You're my closest friends." He touched her warm, strong hand. "I wouldn't be the man I am now, if not for you." She was looking up into his eyes. He didn't say "you two." He was so young and strong, and he knew she felt it. "Lainie, I owe you. I want you to know how much." So young and strong...

"Where did you end up?" She was looking at him now.

"Santa Fe. I have a cousin there, he used to always tell me to come out to Santa Fe. So I went, and found an apartment. Things were tough for awhile, but I had some money to cover me until I found a job as a mechanic."

"You? You never had money."

"A friend floated me an indefinite loan."

She smiled lightly. "I thought your family was all in Mexico."

"Just most of them. I've still got a few relatives north of the border." He took another swig of bourbon, and caught her eyes. "I guess you two stayed together, after I left."

"Yeah. Yeah, we did. After awhile, we were back to status quo."

"Awhile?"

"Yeah... well, Max took your leaving hard. Your explanation for leaving never satisfied him, and he was sure he'd done something to drive you away. And... you know Max. He was very upset."

"What did you do?"

"I made sure I was there for him," Lainie said. She paused, put a hand to her mouth, then pulled it away and reached for her glass. "I thought he was going to quit for awhile, there. He was so moody and quiet. It even showed: When he brought in the Red Gang, he was...brutal. It took most of that summer before he was over it." She took a sip of scotch. "I never told him anything. I almost let him quit, and I never told him anything." She tossed the rest of the scotch down, grimaced, then got up and walked over to the liquor cabinet.

"He... He really thought he'd done something to hurt me?" He threw down the rest of his drink.

"I have to go."

"No, you don't! We can get past this, Curt. Don't let it destroy everything you've both gone through."

"I can't just act like it didn't happen! I never should have done it..."

"It's my fault, too..."

"No, I'm the one who lost control. Lost my balance. I'll never be able to look at you, or work with him, without..."

"I'll never tell him. I promise not to say a word. I don't want to hurt Max, either. But your leaving will kill him!"

"If I don't leave, I'll eventually screw up and get him killed anyway! This is the only way..."

Lainie brought both bottles back to the table. They poured each other fresh glasses, and held onto them as if afraid they would get away. Or afraid that they would want to hold onto something else.

"You could have kept in touch," she said.

"No, I couldn't. Max would have eventually found out. If he didn't, he would have eventually figured it out. I had to get out of both your lives, or it would have destroyed us. I know it was hard, but there was nothing else to do."

Lainie shook her head. "Look, Curt, you don't have to apologize to me."

"Yeah. But it's too late to apologize to Max."

Then she sobbed, once, hard. She gritted her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut, as if trying to fight back a flood of tears. In two seconds' time, the flood won. She burst into a wail of grief, her face twisted into a reflection of her pain. Curt sat still, not knowing what to do at first. Then, abruptly, she threw her arms out to him, knocking her glass flying to the linoleum. Curt came up and around the table like a shot, pulled Lainie out of her chair, and gathered her in his arms. She wrapped her arms tightly around his neck and cried for all she was worth, shoulders spasming powerfully with each sob.

Curt let her cry for a good ten minutes. Then, when her wails had become whimpers, she sagged against him, and he lifted her off the ground. He carried her to her bedroom, flipping the light switch with a shoulder. He walked over to the bed and lowered her gently down. After a moment, he tried to unwrap her arms from his neck to lay her down.

Her arms suddenly pulled tighter around Curt's neck. She lifted her tear-stained face to look into his eyes. Then she pulled him down to her, forcing her lips against his, before he could react. Salt from her tears mixed with the scotch on her breath, causing Curt to momentarily resist. She just pushed harder, opening her lips wide and sliding her tongue between his lips with a plaintive moan.

It had been seven years since he'd seen Lainie. In that time, he'd had several women, all drawn to that perfect physique of his, and each using every sexual trick they could think of to ensnare him. He'd known women other men would die for, or at least kill for.

None of them tasted a tenth this good.

Curt slid beside Lainie on the bed, wrapping his arms around the small of her back. She hooked her leg around his, forcing her hips against him, and he cupped her ass tightly. She moaned again, and ran her fingers through the locks of his hair. Lainie's mouth worked eagerly, desperately, hungrily, refusing to be denied, demanding satisfaction.

Curt became aware of her hand on his crotch, and he reached around for the clasp on her jeans. He undid her jeans, then his, and they helped each other slide them down their legs. Lainie yanked his shirt off over his head, and only then did their lips pull apart. He brought his mouth down onto the base of her neck, slowly sliding down and moving his mouth along her bodysuit. Before Curt knew it, he had popped the catch on Lainie's bodysuit and pulled her panties off, and she had slid his briefs down to his ankles with her toe. He all but ripped the bodysuit from her, and was on top of her before it hit the carpet.

Their sex was carnal—animal—the kind of pure, blind lust that only reunited lovers could share. They rocked together for most of an hour that seemed like all of a minute, until they cried out in mutual orgasm, and collapsed into each other's arms. They followed up with more breathless, passionate kissing, which lessened in intensity over ten minutes, until finally they just held each other, waiting for their sweat to dry on the cool sheets.

And just before Lainie fell into exhausted sleep, she whispered, "Damn you for leaving, Curt Mendez."

* * *

Curtis Mendez.

Kris paused. He'd seen this name somewhere before. Curtis Mendez was the recipient of five thousand dollars from William Tatnall's personal account, via a certified check to an employer's account. A fairly simple blind, the kind of thing that was easily explained away as processing a check through an account that held that much already in deposit, to allow instant cashing. Some people did that kind of thing every day. Tatnall, however, wasn't one of them. Unfortunately, there was no clue as to why the money was sent to Mendez, and as it happened about seven years ago, any trail might be cold now.

Still, there was the name. Kris searched through his own memory first, but couldn't remember where he'd seen it, so he cross-referenced the name in his system. When the computer found the name again, it was in the known associates file of one Maxwell Ryan. Although Ryan and Kolsheyev had not been confirmed as yet, Kris had run basic checks on them anyway, mostly bios and general data, which he had skimmed through yesterday. Ryan and Mendez had lived within three miles of each other, and associated regularly until Mendez moved to New Mexico. About seven years ago.

He jerked as if the data had jumped off the screen and hit him between the eyes. A connection between Ryan and Tatnall! This was more than the L.A. Police had: He knew they suspected Ryan, but they had not heard about Tatnall yet. It was strong (albeit still circumstantial) evidence that Ryan must have been one of the Superheroes that worked out of the West Coast.

So: Mendez knew Ryan and Tatnall, and Tatnall sent Mendez five grand seven years ago. Mendez could have had some way to pass that money on to Ryan, that he hadn't yet found. Tatnall was Thunder, and Ryan's identity was as good as confirmed, although Kris did not know which hero he was. Yet.

Kris reprioritized Ryan, then did the same with Mendez. He began his checks on Mendez, the way he had with Tatnall, starting from the beginning with the bio.

He was stopped cold by a Genealogy trace. There, about eleven generations back, was a family link between Mendez and Tatnall. He wondered if they knew they were related, but there was nothing in either bio to suggest ties to or knowledge of extended family. But it was possible, and Kris had to reconsider the money transfer: Maybe it was meant for Mendez, after all.

One of the things Kris had discovered over the years as a researcher was, you never knew who was going to turn out to be related to who, once you searched back far enough. Finding links between people like Eva Braun and Winnie Mandela, for example, made his day. (No, he hadn't ever found that one, but he held out hope. He was slightly twisted that way.) A discovery of this kind was not, therefore, that unusual.

Still, given the people he was researching, it was an odd coincidence. Maybe Mendez was not simply family. Maybe he knew about Tatnall's identity. Maybe he blackmailed Tatnall over it. (For only five grand? No way...) Maybe he worked for Tatnall under the table. (From New Mexico?) None of these seemed particularly likely to Kris. It suddenly occurred to him that maybe Mendez was himself part of this elite fraternity. There was something for the family album: Two distant cousin Superheroes...

Kris could feel the hairs on his neck rising. He abruptly looked around the room, then brought his watch up to view, noticed it was 12:30. He stood up from his desk, to go get some lunch. Halfway to the office door, he forgot what he'd gotten up for. He paused for a moment, trying to shake the feeling he was missing something. Then he turned back to his cubicle.

There, on the screen, was a connection. Still. It hadn't gone away, and it still looked as tantalizing. One of the other things Kris had learned was to always follow a hunch.

Kris sat back down, and attacked the keyboard.

* * *

It was quiet in the lobby of Power Tower. Earl Joseph and Leslie Cass were the only ones on the floor, and they waited agitatedly beside the guard's column. Periodically they checked their watches, and glanced to the guard, who glanced back and smiled at them each time. Cass mostly kept her back to the holographic "guard," and stood glaring around the lobby at its ornate marblework.

She suddenly sighed explosively and turned to Joseph. "How much longer is this going to take?"

Joseph looked at her tiredly. "I'm sure they're almost there. Relax. We've gotten this far, we'll make it all the way."

"Maybe the computer, up there, doesn't accept Axton's ID."

"Why shouldn't it?" Joseph asked. "He's the DA. He's probably already been OK'd. That punk, Bryce, is probably stuck on the security system, that's all. He may be a boy genius, but he's no Power. Still, give him time, and..."

Joseph was interrupted by a beep that emanated from the guard's column. He and Cass turned to look at the guard, who was looking straight ahead as if they were not there. There was another beep, this one louder. The guard suddenly seemed to realize Joseph and Cass were still there, and he turned to face them. "Excuse me. I am receiving instr-eiving instructions from the security sys-system." The guard's body jerked and repeated its motions with each electronic stutter. Joseph and Cass exchanged glances. "I will be with y-with y-wi-wi-wi-wi-wi-wi-wi-with you in a momen-n-n-n-n-nt."

Cass whispered to Joseph, "Sounds like my CD player on a bad day."

"Max Headroom came to my mind," Joseph told her.

"Who?"

Abruptly, there was a flash that illuminated the entire volume of the column. As Joseph and Cass both happened to be looking at the column when it happened, they yelped in surprise, then backed away and tried to blink the spots from their eyes.

"If I find out Bryce did that on purpose," Joseph grated, rubbing his eyes, "I'll skin him alive!"

Four minutes later, the elevator door slid open. Ed Stadtler walked out, followed by an elderly gentleman who peered suspiciously about. Joseph recognized the man through still-spotty vision. "Stadtler. Mr. Axton. All done up there? How did it go?"

"We've got full access to the Power's files," Ed told him. "The DA's identity satisfied the computer. We waited for Bryce to finish deactivating the rest of the inner security systems, before we came back down."

Joseph turned to the elderly gentleman. "Thank you, Mr. Axton, for helping us out on such short notice. Our driver will take you back to your office."

"Quite all right, Mr. Joseph. Anything I can do to help," Axton smiled. "Besides, I always wanted to see the inside of the building that used me as a personal security measure." They shook hands, and Axton walked out the lobby doors.

Joseph waited until the doors closed fully. "Okay. You've got the inner security system completely disengaged?"

"That's right," Ed nodded. "We've left the voice code authorization circuits on, but they're disabled until you give us the code to secure it."

"Good. We'll be using the code word, 'Canal.' " He spelled it.

"Thank you," Ed said dryly. "Are you sure that's all you want to use to secure this building?"

"Those were my instructions, Mr. Stadtler," Joseph said. "Secure the Tower with a single code word. We expect to have others coming here in the near future, after your involvement in the project is over. Now," he said, sweeping an arm in the direction of the elevators. "Shall we go up?"

As they headed for the elevators, Cass turned toward the lobby doors. Just outside, a man in a dark three-piece suit stood looking in. She flashed a quick set of hand signals to the man, and he nodded. He passed a signal on to a dozen other men in three-piece suits, who quickly placed themselves in strategic positions around the square. Four of them placed themselves in front of the doors, hands clasped in front of them, and formed a formidable barrier against intruders.

Cass joined Ed and Joseph at the elevator, and the three rode up to the lab level. When the elevator doors opened again, Joseph and Cass both peered nervously out at the hallway. Ed noticed, and smiled.

"They're all off. Honest. Look." He walked out into the hallway, and after a few seconds, they followed him along to the lab. At the lab door, they stopped dead and stared at the scientific monstrosities before them. Then they searched the room until they found their escorts, and padded after them into the computer room.

Bobby and Denise were in front of the two main control panels. Neither looked up when the three walked in. A screen in front of Bobby showed the many nodes of the deactivated security system, all red except for a flashing green node in a corner. Ed came up behind Bobby, put a hand on his shoulder. "Use the word, 'Canal.' " Bobby nodded, and worked over the keyboard. Denise was examining a schematic screen when Joseph walked up behind her. The screen was made up of blue rectangles, each with a legend. At the top of the screen, a rectangle read, "Telemetry File." Underneath it, other legends read, "Verbal Logs," "Cabin Cameras," "Sensor Net," and "Ship Systems," and grouped underneath each were more rectangles and more specific legends.

When Denise noticed the three of them in the room, she started punching studs on the panel. "I think we'd better start with this. Apparently, the spaceship was constantly broadcasting telemetry back to Earth. We can assume Dr. Tomorrow's lab has also received this stuff, but since no one knows where his lab is..." Denise shrugged. "Anyway, we've got lots of material from the ship itself, that we can study. But we'd better start with this."

Denise pressed a few more studs, while the rest crowded around. The large screen above the rest came alive. In a corner, one small readout measured hours, minutes and seconds, and another read, "Cabin Camera: Port." On the screen was a view of the inside of Tomorrow's spacecraft.

Everyone remained silent. There they all were, seated in rows in the fairly large cabin, and they all knew they would never see them again. Ed realized he felt much like he did when he first saw footage of the Kennedy assassination. Up front (the far left of the screen), was Doc Tomorrow, at the pilot's seat, and Professor Power was seated next to him. They were both clearly absorbed in their duties at the helm.

Behind them were all the rest, in rows of seats, looking like the most bizarre group of airline passengers ever conceived. A few of them hardly fit into the seats at all, due to their atypical physiques. Tectonic, for example, was actually fidgeting his rocky body against the reinforced metal of his chair, and the chair was losing the battle. Likewise, Great Bear and the Bomb, the Manhattan's strong man, seemed intent on worrying their seats into a more comfortable shape, but having mixed success.

In the other seats, a number of the heroes talked amongst each other, in tones that were pitched just a bit too low for the mike to hear on standard pickup. Those who were not talking sat staring straight ahead, either with a determined look on their faces, or a nervous or morose visage. About the only exceptions to this were Diamond Jim, who seemed to be intensely enjoying the ride (understandable, considering it was not every day that people jumped into rockets and took off to parts unknown), and Puman of the Metacats, who seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the attentions of the Coyote, in the back seats of the cabin.

Ed noticed Professor Power's head snap down at one of the monitors, something the rest of the passengers hadn't picked up on, yet. It wasn't until they heard the voice of Prof. Power announce, "Something's happening," that the Heroes abruptly stopped their conversations and came to full attention. Prof. Power and Doc Tomorrow began rapidly checking monitors and throwing switches, often stopping to glance grimly out the forward viewports. Power seemed about to say something, but looked confused for a long moment. Tomorrow stated, "It's definitely a TDO. Look at the mass specs!" Power, pointing to the screen Tomorrow indicated, said, "Look at that mass change. What..."

Suddenly, Tomorrow barked out, "Damn!" and the rest of the Heroes jerked up out of their seats, demanding information. Power finally managed to yell over the din, "It's here! We've touched part of it already! I should have guessed it had some kind of advance senses..." But Tomorrow was yelling over him, "We've got to hit it now! Everybody out! Hurry!" The heroes immediately began to get into some kind of suits unlike any space suits Ed had ever seen, or heading toward the airlock doors without suits of any kind. Tomorrow was yelling to Power, "Charge the X-field! If we don't throw it in time..."

He never finished. In an instant, everything in the cabin not bolted down was thrown sideways, toward the camera. Ed watched as pretty Delilah, Samson's partner, impacted the wall beside the camera lens, hard, and seeming a bit stunned when she pushed away from the wall. The image had gone a bit blurry, and Ed realized some internal vibration was running through the ship. There was yelling and cursing, and everybody fought to regain their composure.

Then the ship tore in half.

It was hard for Ed to believe his eyes. He had once witnessed the collision of two large ships, during his term in the Navy, and the sight of reinforced battleship plate tearing like paper was one he would never forget. But it was still something the mind had difficulty grasping, and Ed was having that difficulty now.

He watched the space ship's hull shear and pull apart almost along the center of the cabin. The front half of the cabin, now separated from the rest, was thrown forward, carrying Dr. Tomorrow, the Powers, and five other of the Heroes. In an instant they were gone, and in the front of the cabin was a crystal clear view of the vacuum of space. The air gushed out of the cabin instantly, and as the Heroes thrashed in the vacuum, all sound from the pickups ceased.

It had been too fast for anyone to get prepared. Those who had not had time to don their suits, clutched at their throats or heads, hideous grimaces on their faces. The more sturdy of them either turned to help the others, or were summarily sucked out of the exposed cabin, arms and legs pinwheeling.

Then, the explosion. It came from the rear of the cabin, but as it was out in vacuum, it was more of a shockwave than the fireball that would have been expected. Still, it was obvious there was a great amount of heat, and the Heroes writhed in agony from the shock and subsequent burn. Athena's entire back crisped in a second, as she was in the back of the cabin nearest the explosion, and Ed saw her grasp the gold amulet always at her neck, and open her mouth in a silent scream. There was a flash of light where she stood, and suddenly Athena wasn't there, but in her place was another woman whom Ed had never seen, a young girl in jeans and an Oxford shirt. The girl stared, disoriented, at her shattered surroundings. Then her chest heaved outward, and her eyes went wide as she realized where she was. She grasped her throat and, not thinking to grab anything else, was pulled off her feet and propelled toward the open end of the cabin, her face contorted in shock and agony and, maybe, rage...

Then another explosion... but not an explosion. It was more like something between a wall of liquid fire and a... a... Ed didn't know what. But it swept through the remains of the cabin, literally through the walls, and everything it touched seemed to just come apart. It swept through the drifting body of the mystery girl, cutting her body in half just below the ribcage. The other bodies in the rear of the cabin were likewise torn asunder like paper dolls. And, after all this, the cabin camera finally blinked, and the image mercifully broke up, before the screen went black.

It had all happened in about five seconds.

Ed decided Kennedy was nothing compared to this. The most powerful beings on the planet had just been quickly, agonizingly, snuffed out before their eyes. Ed couldn't imagine what kind of phenomenon could be that powerful, that dangerous. And they said it was coming toward Earth. It had just wiped out their best and brightest, and it was coming here.

Ed, Bobby, Denise, Cass and Joseph stood or sat, silent, slack-jawed, in front of the black screen for almost a minute. Bobby ran a hand through his unruly hair, then stood up and walked to the back of the computer room. Joseph and Cass watched him as he retreated to the back wall. He just leaned against the wall, and wrapped his arms about himself. Denise put her head down in her hands for a moment, then lifted it again and took a deep, gulping breath.

The sound of Denise's inhalation seemed to rouse Ed, who looked around the room and focused on Bobby. He walked over to him, and Bobby regarded him silently. "Are you okay?" Ed asked. Bobby glanced at the blank screen, then back at Ed, and slowly nodded.

"I've never..." Bobby stopped, drew in a breath. "I've never seen anything that..." Words seemed to fail him, and he shook his head. "It was horrible."

"I know." Ed placed a hand on his shoulder. "C'mon, Robert. We've still got a job to do. Try to concentrate on the telemetry. We have to read the telemetry."

Bobby stared at Ed for a few seconds. Then, he nodded again, and walked slowly back to the consoles.

* * *

Lee Prime stood close to the spot where Denise Crane had stood, hours ago. John Simpson, Sir Edward Lance and Tom Poor waited nearby, in the shadows. Lee had a small device in his hand, a tiny telescope, and he trained it across the street, across Power Square, at the four men stationed at the main doors of Power Tower. As he watched, his three associates conversed quietly among themselves.

"I know we're out here to learn something from Power Tower," Tom was saying, "but is this really gonna help us to fight the Good Fight?"

John shrugged, hands in his pockets. "Well, maybe not directly, although it's possible there might be something up there we can use. What do you think, Sir Ed?"

Ed looked up at the Tower, then back at them. "Who knows what might be up there? I'm more concerned with finding any clue to what's really out there in space... if there really is anything out there... and how we can deal with it."

"That's right," John agreed. "That's our first priority. If there is some kind of outer space menace, we have to stop it, or we won't need to fight the Good Fight. There won't be anything to fight for."

Lee continued to watch the guards, while the conversation was going on behind him. Abruptly, he pulled the telescope down from his eye, contracted it into a small cylinder, and slipped it into a pocket. He then turned to his companions. "Come on. We're going in, now."

Tom looked past Lee, at the many dark-suited guards stationed around the Square. "Through all of them? How?"

"Just follow my lead, and look like we belong. I'll do the talking. Let's go." Lee turned on his heel and strode out of the alley. John, Ed and Tom exchanged glances, then struck out after him.

The four men crossed the street and walked across the Square, under the watchful eye of half a dozen men. They climbed the stairs purposefully, and didn't stop until the four men at the door arranged themselves as a suited barricade before them.

Lee stopped and fixed the center man with a confident expression. "Joseph sent for us. Let us in."

The center man frowned at him. "Who are you? We don't know you, and if we don't know you, you're not getting in."

"Joseph just called for us ten minutes ago. When was the last time you talked to him?" Before the guard could reply, Lee said, "Look, he told us to say, 'Canal.' He said that password would get us in. So, let us in."

The man in the middle looked at one of the others, who shrugged at him quizzically. The man considered, then motioned for his men to step aside. "All right, go on in."

Lee nodded, and he walked past the guards, followed by his crew. They swung open the door, and stepped inside the lobby. As the door closed behind them, Ed noticed the four guards heatedly arguing with each other over, presumably, what had just happened.

"You'd think they'd never been presented with unexpected orders before," Ed commented. Lee looked over his shoulder at them, then continued on to the elevators.

* * *

Denise and Bobby had continued to call up data from the telemetry downlink (with the exception of any more cabin views), but most of it consisted of readouts that meant little or nothing to them. They recognized a few of the readouts as being similar in type to radar and sonar readings, but there was another readout marked "radar," and you couldn't have sonar in space. Ed and Joseph continued to watch from behind them. Cass had eventually moved out of the computer room, and was taking in the immense lab behind them.

Bobby worked over the computer. "I should be able to access a few files that'll read this stuff for us, and give us plain English data. 'Course, once we've got that, we still have to figure out what the hell it means."

"How long?" Ed asked.

"I'll tell you, in about ten minutes," Bobby replied. He and Denise began conversing between themselves, and Ed lost them somewhere around the fourth derivation of the couched file.

Joseph turned to Ed. "Maybe there are journals around, that spell out what all this data means."

"It would certainly help," Ed admitted. "But, given our late hosts' obvious inclinations toward electronic records-keeping, I'm sure any journals are in this computer, too."

"Are you sure you'll be able to decipher this data? We've got to be able to make sense of it, and there isn't much time."

"Perhaps we can help."

Everyone turned to the main lab doors. Four men had appeared there, without any of them noticing. After a pause, Joseph advanced on them. "Who are you? How the hell did you get in here?"

"My name is Lee Prime. These are my associates. We're here to study the data from the

Powers' telemetry. And you are?"

"Joseph, Earl. NSA."

"Ah. We were told to expect you here." Lee stepped forward and shook his hand.

Joseph eyed him suspiciously, and dropped his hand as soon as they parted. He looked at Cass, who had just rushed back into sight from the lab, wiping her hands on a handkerchief. "And who told you I would be here?" Joseph demanded.

"I'm not at liberty to say."

Joseph paused, scrutinizing Lee closely. He seemed about to say something, but instead he glared at Lee as if waiting for something else. Lee finally broke the stalemate by saying, "Mr. Joseph, my colleagues and I have a great deal of experience between us in dealing with this type of problem. We can decipher the readings and figure out what we're up against. However, as you yourself just pointed out, time is of the essence, and we can't afford to stand here posturing all day. Let's get started, shall we?" He walked past Joseph, and introduced himself to Ed. As Lee moved on to Cass, Bobby and Denise, John, Ed and Tom smoothly introduced themselves in turn to Joseph, then moved on to the rest in line. Joseph just stood there, mouth working slightly, trying not to look too nervous. He looked to Cass, who stared a bit wide-eyed at him.

Lee took careful note of Joseph's agitation, before turning to Denise and Bobby and asking them questions regarding the computers they were working on. After a few moments, Joseph and Cass seemed to accept their presence, albeit grudgingly. Lee studied the available telemetry files stored in the computer, and nodded.

"We've got a few days before Endeavor arrives back on Earth," Lee announced. "I'm sure we can learn a great deal right here, before they return with their findings." He pointed to a glowing rectangle on one screen. "We'd better start with the wide spectrometer readings."

As Lee and his men huddled in close with the people from SB Electronic Consultants, Joseph and Cass stood well out of the way, exchanging glances, and watching them all closely.

* * *

It was the kind of daring daylight robbery that the Chameleon was renowned for. In fact, when one of the stupefied cashiers had cried out, "It must be the Chameleon!" there were a few public outcries of "Wow!" "Awright! How does he do it?" and "Way to go, Chameleon!" It was a strange thing for everyone to be doing, considering the fact that not one of them could see the Chameleon, and had no way of knowing if he was really there, until he hissed his trademark hiss as he exited through the front door.

The Chameleon turned right, then right again into the alley. Throwing his cash booty into an invisible backpack, he grabbed for a fire escape, and pulled himself up. Within seconds, he was on the roof of the same building he had just robbed. After taking a look over the ledge of the building (as if anyone could possibly follow him!), he gave a triumphant leap, and headed north across the rooftop. The alley separating him from the next building was narrow; he vaulted the gap effortlessly and padded across the next building.

Sudden movement ahead of him made him freeze. Two figures had stepped out from behind the roof access stairs, and they faced him squarely. Aware that his running footsteps would give him away, the Chameleon stood stock-still. He'd heard the superheroes had all died. Who were these two, then? They were clearly a team, judging by the matching wardrobe, but he couldn't help but wonder what they did in their own time: They were both well-built, a man and a woman, and the shiny black patent leather, chains and studs revealed a lot of their anatomy and attitude. They wore matching leather hoods that exposed their eyes and blond hair, and high-heeled knee-high boots. Basically, they looked like they had just walked out of a particularly kinky sex flick.

"Well, well, it's the Chameleon," the man suddenly crooned.

"In the flesh, as it were," the woman added.

So they did know he was there... no point in being silent, then. "Gee, there's a line I only hear about fifty times every week," he mocked. "So who the hell are you two wet dreams?"

The man smiled wryly. "I'm Leather."

Chameleon looked at the girl. "Shouldn't you be wearin' lace, then?"

"No, but you're close," she said.

"I don't get it."

"You will," Leather told him. "We've been studying your crime spree, and we knew you would be headed this way." He reached behind him and pulled out a whip, and a billy club. "It's time you were stopped, Chameleon."

"Huh! I don't think so," the Chameleon grated, projecting his voice a bit to the left, in Leather's direction. Leather crouched, shifting his feet outward a bit. That's right, you leather eunuch, you wait for me on the outside, while I make an end run around the babe on her right. She was also reaching behind her, but she was watching Leather and bracing herself to rush in his direction. I've got 'em both fooled. Chameleon leaped, planting his first foot ten feet from his last spot, just to the right of the girl.

She whirled sharply, surprised, but managed to get something into both hands, pointed in his direction. She squeezed the top of the weapon, and the Chameleon ducked, but he suddenly felt cold wetness spreading over his left side as he passed her. Some of it sprayed on his head, and the world turned into pain. Chameleon screamed and clutched his face, clenching his eyes shut against white agony, and ran blindly into some pails and debris near the girl. He crashed to the ground, still howling and clutching his face in pain and shock.

"Good shot, Mace," Leather said, and dimly the Chameleon could tell he was walking right up to him.

"Thanks, Leather," Mace cooed. She stood just over him. They knew exactly where he was. Must be a staining element in that shit, he thought, but before he could get up, he found hands grasping him roughly. He was dragged over to a corner of the roof, where a metal loop was bolted to the brickwork, presumably for window cleaners. Metal clinked onto his wrists. He pulled away, but he was already manacled to the loop on the roof. He cursed quietly as he struggled against the cuffs, but gave up in a minute. He managed to blink the sight back into

his right eye, and used it to regard his captors. They just stood there, as if they enjoyed watching him squirm against his handcuffs.

Hell, they probably did.

"Well, I'd call that subdued," Leather said to Mace. "But we should make sure the police have no trouble finding him."

"My thoughts, exactly," Mace smiled, and pulled another can out from behind her. The Chameleon squeezed his good eye shut, before she started spraying. Whatever it was, she was fairly coating him with it. When she stopped, Chameleon opened a wary eye and took a look. He was day-glo yellow. Everywhere.

"Shit," was all he could say.

Leather suddenly stepped behind him and, producing a fairly large knife, cut the backpack from him by the straps. "We'll just put this back where you got it, I think. And we'll have the Police here in no time. Stay cool, Chem."

The two of them walked off, arms around each other, speaking in low tones the Chameleon couldn't make out. When they reached the fire escape and bent over the ladder, the Chameleon got a good look at the crotch of Mace's outfit.

He wondered in disgust which of them had worn these cuffs last.

* * *

Woody slumped against the damp brick of the building wall, taking deep breaths as he surveyed the damage. He was sore all over, it seemed: Kevlar was wonderful for turning bullets and punches, but they still bruised you underneath, like being punched out by Mohammed Ali sans gloves. And Woody felt like he had gone the distance. All fifteen rounds. He felt of his left arm, above the elbow. He was sure the bone was cracked, at least.

And speaking of rounds, he'd managed to empty his sidearm clips, and only had his rifle left on him. He had avoided using his grenades, but hadn't gotten a chance to try gas or sonics.

He had to admit that, so far, the Tank had gotten the better end of the fight. Not for the first time, he wished he was getting some real help out here against these psycho monsters.

But he wasn't through, yet. Woody held his breath long enough to hear the heavy footsteps of the armored behemoth, maybe a block ahead. Then he pulled himself back onto his feet, and padded ahead. When he reached a fire escape ladder, he swung himself up and climbed for the rooftops.

The Tank trudged down the dark back streets, staying to the shadows, trying to be quiet despite his almost nine hundred pounds, plus the five hundred pound safe he had tucked under one arm. He occasionally looked back over his shoulder, but mostly he looked straight ahead as he kept grimly on.

Not once did he look up.

Woody looked down, from his four story high vantage point. It was easier, and safer by far,

following Tank from up here. But sooner or later, he had to go back down. And he needed to know how he was going to stop him, when he did. His mind raced as he tracked above his quarry, and he frequently stole glances ahead of them for inspiration.

Woody suddenly stopped. He'd gotten his inspiration from a condemned warehouse, just three blocks ahead. If he hurried, he could just set things up. He raced ahead, vaulting between two roofs, reaching the structure opposite the warehouse, and locating the fire escape.

The Tank trudged on relentlessly, paying no mind to the rats that snarled at him before dashing into shadows. But as he came past a building corner, he stopped. There, in the alley's intersection, was a man in black. A white stylized badge was adorned on his chest.

"Oh, Christ..." the Tank sighed heavily, glaring at Woody. "I thought I already broke your arm."

"It's only a flesh wound," Woody replied in his best imitation of a bad English accent. Then he triggered the flare.

Magnesium white burned into every corner of the alley with an evil hiss, and Woody pushed it close to the Tank's face before he knew what had happened. The Tank roared, throwing his free hand over his eyes and staggering.

"I'm blinded! Shit! When I find you, you little cock sucker, I'm gonna..."

"What's that, Tank? I couldn't hear you." Woody dropped the arm holding the flare, and brought up the other arm. He triggered the phone-sized apparatus in his hand, and the alley screamed. The cacophony was banshee wails, mountains of shattering glass, jet engines, subsonic moans, klaxons and mammoth bells, all at once. Woody marveled at the amount of noise he wasn't hearing, thanks to the special earphones he'd put on. Score one more for Arn. But all around him, rats scurried, cats bolted, birds took wing, and the Tank dropped his safe in his rush to cover his ears. He screamed himself, mouth working wordlessly, and still blinking to restore his vision.

Woody had him. He kept the sonics going, lifted the flare back up, and advanced. The Tank stumbled blindly back, away from the deafening sound and the heat and light of the flare, too confused to care where he was going. Woody herded him across the alley, to the empty warehouse. When they reached the loading door, Woody lunged with his weapons. The Tank backpedaled, and hit the door hard. It gave way in a violent crash, and Tank fell head first into the dark building.

He hit the floor fully on his back, and it crunched underneath him. Tank was lodged a foot into the ancient floorboards. He pulled himself out, but stepped deeper into the warehouse, and the floorboards gave again. Half his bulk disappeared under the rotting floor, and he put out two arms to keep himself from falling completely through.

Woody stepped up to the busted door and looked inside. He could see the Tank, pinned into the floor, anger and alarm playing on his face. Just what Woody was hoping for.

"You know where you are?" Woody stepped into the warehouse. "These old buildings were all built over man-made extensions of the Hudson. They used to unload ships below, then store

shipments here for trucks to pick up and deliver. About... oh, forty feet below you, I guess, is the river." Woody idly kicked a small piece of floorboard through the first hole the Tank had created. It fell silently for interminable seconds, before it made a splash in the water below.

"Oh. Okay, maybe fifty feet. How's your dog paddle, Tank?" The Tank struggled feebly, looking like a child stuck in a chest-deep mud puddle. "Or maybe I should ask, how long can you hold your breath?" Tank froze then, and his expression of stark terror was unmistakable. Woody was pretty sure the Tank couldn't swim, with all that weight, and now he was sure the Tank knew it, too.

The Tank looked at Woody, eyes wide. "H-hey, buddy. Whoever you are. You can't just leave me like this. I could die."

"Tank, old buddy," Woody smiled, "just between you and me: Nothing would please me more than to see you die, you pathetic shit."

"Aw, c'mon, man," Tank begged. "I'll make it worth your while. The safe! Half of it's yours, man. C'mon, pull me out."

"Sorry. I make it a habit not to try to pick up anything larger than a Volkswagen."

"Then get some help!" His plaintive bellow seemed to cause a loud crack in the wood around him. The Tank subsided, but his eyes still boggled with terror.

"Man, I would've paid to see this!" Woody smiled wide. "It's almost worth a fractured arm. Look, I'm going to call the cops, and I'll tell them the fix you're in. If I were you, I'd try to keep real still, so you don't fall in. Especially since there's no telling how fast the cops are gonna rush to your rescue. Seeing it's you." He turned and walked out through the splintered door, then paused. His black figure was framed in the vague light of the alley when he looked back at the Tank. "Is that a spider by your left hand?"

* * *

On the television, 20/20 was doing a segment on the upsurge in the activities of American vigilantes. Curt sat silently on the living room sofa, idly stroking his unshaven jaw, and taking it all in. There were reports of violent incidents, usually involving supercriminals, vigilantes, and heavy firepower, most involving in the death or serious injury of somebody. They even managed to get an interview with somebody calling himself the Janizary, a Middle East-looking man (some things show, even through masks) decked out in leather armor and sporting two swords in crossed scabbards on his back. Turkish ninjas? Unfortunately, not every instance had resulted in the prevention of a crime, and a few had resulted in serious injury to innocent bystanders, raising the same kind of reservations much of the public had voiced in the past toward the Superheroes. Still, there were enough people to argue for the vigilantes and their contribution to a "helpless society" to make the show interesting. Curt took notice of artist's depictions of some of the more numerous sightings and reports, mentally comparing notes with the barely-protective outfit he'd worn when he was out on the streets. Back then, he was young and stupid enough to believe in his own immortality. Compared to the Omerican's costume, which had well-contoured padding and body armor incorporated into it, his had been just a costume. The only protection on it had been his jock cup. How the hell had he survived? Now these guys, he reflected, are dressed like they know what they're doing. They're

not acting like it's a big dress-up game.

That was me, he thought. Out having a good time, busting up the bad guys, side by side with the Omerican. Just a hotshot teenager, gifted with the same speed and gymnastic gifts as Max Ryan, but still just a hotshot teen out for kicks. He asked himself again: How had he survived?

He was suddenly aware of Lainie, behind him, and he craned his neck backward to see. She stood behind the sofa, wearing a robe she had not bothered to close. She looked down at Curt, then back at the TV she'd been watching over his head. She put her hands on his shoulders.

"I've seen some of that footage on the evening news," she said. "Sometimes, it's like they never left. It's like they just passed the baton. Maybe they just decided to leave us, knowing we'd pick up where they left off."

"Did you really expect people to just pick up where they left off?"

"I don't know," she said quietly. "But I'd like to think so."

She walked around the sofa and sat down, curling up against Curt. "What did you think we'd do?"

"I don't know, either. But I didn't expect this," he said, nodding at the screen.

"What about you?" Curt looked at Lainie, and her eyes searched his. "What are you going to do, Curt Mendez?"

Curt looked at her for a long time. He turned back to the screen, where a camera had caught a fleeting shot of a man in black on a rooftop, ducking from sight. He looked away from the TV and Lainie. He thought of Max, the greatest man he'd ever known. Max had saved his life, more than once. He gave Curt trust and friendship, and introduced him to the most exciting life possible. When Curt betrayed him, out of a hormone-induced weakness that any teen would understand, he had run from the two people that he loved more than anyone else, palpably sick over what he'd done and hoping not to hurt them any more. He'd lived for seven years in crappy apartments and lousy jobs, never forgetting what scum he was, and hating himself for wanting back everything he didn't deserve.

And now Max was dead. He was back in L.A., with his woman, breaking into his house, and wanting back everything he didn't deserve. What was he thinking?

"I don't know."

Recovery

« ^ »

The Police van rolled noisily down forty-third street, sirens screaming, jumping and rocking over every depression and pothole in the street. From the outside, it seemed to simply roar on,

its special black paint and distinctive red streak marking it as something other than a standard SWAT van. Inside, the occupants in the Operations section of the van tried to stay calm and stoic during the bumpy ride.

Bert McCoy was bent forward, adjusting a reinforced boot, when the van hit a good-sized pothole, and he was nearly pitched off of the bench. He windmilled his arms wildly, until he regained his balance and flopped back into his seat. Half of the others chuckled at him, and he grinned back, before resetting his balance and going back to checking his boot.

A few others double-checked their suits as well. They were all fairly new to them, had in fact only trained in them for eleven days, and there was a lot to get used to. The kevlar armor was, of course, nothing new to them. Neither was the two-way radio, though it was now built into their helmets and controlled by studs on the right forearm. But the rest of it was right out of the comic books, as far as they were concerned.

Most immediately noticeable was the exoskeleton, built into the joints of the kevlar frame. They amplified body movements with electro-chemical linear motors, giving the wearer augmented speed and strength. The exoskeleton was coated by an insulated surface layer, designed to deflect lasers and masers, and to insulate against a taser shock. The suits had their own temperature control system, and could self-seal and activate an enclosed air supply system. A PC was contained in a chest module, with controls on the left forearm and voice activation through the helmet radio, and a heads-up display was projected onto the helmet's visor. The helmet also had extended-spectrum vision enhancement gear, allowing the wearer to see IR to UV, amplify available light, or filter out flashes to prevent blindness.

There was also special armament that went with the suits. A pistol, automatic rifle and knife were still standard issue. But these were augmented by a small projectile cannon, mainly used to fire gas cartridges, and a forearm-mounted apparatus that fired lasers or masers at will. There was also a purely defensive item, a contact-activated medium voltage generator that instantly charged the outer shell of the suit with sufficient voltage to stun or kill an attacker. Finally, there was the cruncheon, which appeared ordinary but also carried a healthy electrical charge.

This was the new Class E (for Emergency) Police Action Gear, or EPAG, as some idiot at HQ liked to call it. Those who wore them referred to them as the Cybercop suits, when they weren't just tugging at them, as Bert was now. Officer Ed Cloud had made the most accurate remark, when they had first tried the suits on.

"It looks like my son's Robocop video game, with all the lethal accessories attached."

Frank Jackson, the Field Commander, looked at Bert as he continued to fidget. "I thought you got that suit adjusted, already."

"They screwed it up," Bert told him, slapping his boot with a hand. "Damn these shoes! I'll have to get them resized, again." He finished by stomping his boot on the floor of the truck, and attempting to settle back on the bench.

"At least they got to yours," Martha Guisse complained. "Frank, if you see me keel over in the middle of a firefight, it won't be because I've been shot. It'll be because I've finally been strangled by this thing."

"All right, all right," Frank waved his hand to quiet them. "Listen, I know the suits still

suck. Okay? So, let's just get through this, so we can go back to the station and take the shit off." He turned to the front of the van, where a cop in standard uniform sat at a control console. He was listening intently to the headphone on his left ear, with a finger in his right ear and a frown on his face. "Lou, you got anything, yet?"

The young cop paused a few seconds before replying, "It's coming over now, sir." He went back to listening, and in a moment he pulled his finger out of his ear and began typing into the keyboard at his console. Data began scrolling across the screen mounted on the van's wall. After another moment, he turned to Frank and said, "It looks like a big one, sir. Bazooka Joe."

"Bazooka Joe?" Eddie Cloud turned the corners of his mouth up in disgust. "You have got to be kidding. Bazooka Joe is a big one?"

"He is, as far as we're concerned," Frank said. "Lou, put data on Joe on the line. Put your helmets on, people. Download this into your PCs."

The rest of the team quickly donned their headgear and plugged them into the small receptacles mounted on their upper breasts. They worked over their PC controls, and their heads-up displays came on and displayed an image of a man dressed in leather and armor. There was a large metal tube mounted on his back, attached to gear that ran from his shoulder to his waist. A piece of headgear held a laser sighting scope against his right eye.

"Check it out, people," Frank told them. "Real name Joe Kay. Ex Army. He's a class-A strategist. And he knows how to use that bazooka on his back. It fires armor-piercing mini jackets and short burst carbon dioxide laser beams. It auto-aims, fires once a second, and is counterbalanced for easy and quick movement. There's a chance these suits will deflect a glancing shot from those shells, but it's not a good one. So keep it moving double-time, and don't let him draw a bead on you. Lou," he turned back to the young cop. "What'd he grab?"

"Reports say he's got a bag full of mostly finished jewelry and some uncut gems. Probably only has one free hand."

"Where is he now?"

"Fighting his way in our direction. Uniforms disabled his truck, and he's on foot now, but he's tearing the street apart along the way. Three blocks ahead."

"Okay." Frank turned back to the rest of them. "We'll use scenario four. Eddie and Pat, you've got point. Me and Martha on left. Craig and Lonnie on right. Got it?" Everyone nodded. "We'll do it by the numbers. Charge up, guys."

Twenty seconds later, the van ground to a halt in the middle of the street, and the sirens began winding down. The van's driver turned to the back and said, "He's a block ahead, still coming this way. Uniforms—" There was a tremendous explosion outside the truck, and Lonnie and Pat reflectively ducked their heads in unison. "—Uniforms are taking pot shots at 'im, driving him this way."

"Clancy," Frank yelled as he stood up, "when we're clear, get out of the line of fire. Lou, keep radio on me. Let's get to work, guys!" He marched over to the rear door and muscled it open, throwing his body outward with it. The rest of the team followed him out onto the street, and broke up into their assigned groups. Frank flashed a thumbs-up to Lou, who called out to the driver, and the van screeched off and around the corner in a cloud of dust.

By the time the dust had cleared, the six Cybercops had moved to the middle and edges of the street, and walked forward slowly. Frank watched his people from the left sidewalk. With their helmets on, they looked like robots, or cyborgs at least. They seemed to be ready, although Eddie was taking them up the street a bit slowly. Frank looked on down the street. He activated the binocular lenses, and his view shot forward up the long block.

It locked on a man. Even from this distance, he looked big. Well over six feet, although it could have been the boots. He had an armored breastplate that extended below his crotch, and armored pads on his legs and arms, all attached to a stiff black leather jumpsuit. His head was topped with a leather skullcap, which held the laser sighting system sitting over his eye. In the heavy air of New York, Frank could easily see the sighting laser dancing in front of him.

"I see him," Frank said over the radio. "He hasn't seen us, yet. He's looking at the building just behind him. I can't see..."

They heard a crack up the street. Bazooka Joe bucked a bit to the left, then turned toward the source of the shot fired at him. Frank watched as the huge cannon on his back pivoted up from its resting position behind his right shoulder, until it was level with the building. There was a small flame from the rear of the gun, and instantly the corner of the building's wall leapt out into the street. The sound and concussion reached them a second later.

"He's using explosive shells," Frank smiled. "That means he's not using the armor piercing jackets. Good news for us. Eddie: Challenge him."

Eddie nodded, and stood his ground in the street. There was an audible click from him, then his voice boomed out at ten times its normal level. "THIS IS THE POLICE. BAZOOKA JOE, WE ORDER YOU TO DISARM YOURSELF AND DROP TO THE GROUND, ARMS AND LEGS SPREAD, NOW!"

As they watched, Joe turned and squinted his eyes forward to see who was yelling at him from down the street. Frank knew he couldn't make out any details from his distance. But all he had to do was find a target. "Get ready, guys, here it comes..."

Ed had already set his binoculars to watch Joe. He was standing stock still, down the block, and his left eye was squinted shut. Ed saw a red flash from Joe's laser sight, and at that moment, the bazooka pulled up from behind his back.

"Down, Pat!" Eddie shoved Pat over and dived to the pavement, just in time to avoid a tiny whoosh of air that cracked by him. Down the street, the shell impacted on a mailbox, and it exploded in a shower of charred paper. A second later, and another explosion burst ten yards in front of Ed's prone body. Joe was trying to sight them in on the ground. He rolled to the right side of the street, making sure that Pat was rolling the opposite way.

The others had taken cover close to the walls of the buildings. Frank said, "Lee, take out that sight."

On the right side of the street, Lonnie positioned himself beside a traffic post. He sighted with his helmet system and leveled his own laser down the street, holding it still with his other arm. In his sights, he could see Bazooka Joe's sighting mechanism clearly, and tried to find a spot (other than through Joe's right eye) that would disable it. Unfortunately, most of the mechanism was hidden behind his head, and Lonnie couldn't see much of it. "Somebody lob a

shot behind him," he suggested.

"Got it." Martha pulled a gas canister from her belt and loaded it into her arm launcher. Setting herself, she fired it down the block. It exploded behind Joe, instantly blossoming into a huge pall of thick white smoke.

Bazooka Joe looked over his shoulder at the smoke. Lonnie could see the sighting mechanism perfectly. He set his aim and fired his laser. There was a burst of metal behind Joe's left ear, and he pitched forward, bellowing.

"Good shot!" Frank could see Joe staggering around, holding his hand behind his head. "Can you sight the Bazooka housing?"

Lonnie didn't get a chance to answer, for he suddenly jerked backward, four distinct times, until he fell on his back on the pavement. Frank caught a glimpse of what looked like a burst of light in front of Lonnie when he jerked back, and realized he had been hit by Joe's CO₂ laser. "Martha, gas 'im!" An explosion hit the pavement close to Lonnie, who rolled back to the corner of the building wall. Another explosion rocked the building just above Lonnie's head, and bricks and dust rained down on him.

Then Martha's second gas canister hit, right at Joe's feet. He disappeared in the pall instantly. "Switch to IR," Frank barked. In a moment, everything in his view switched to varying shades of red and grey, and he could see Bazooka Joe again, arms windmilling in a vain attempt to clear the smoke.

Frank charged up the street, followed by everyone except Lonnie, who was just getting up from the pavement. When they were only thirty yards from Bazooka Joe, Frank stopped and crouched. He switched on his PA, to add to Joe's confusion. "DROP THE BAZOOKA, JOE!" Joe, blind in the smoke, swung around, off balance, and fired. The shot went wild, and impacted on the building behind Frank. Frank didn't budge. He sighted his laser on Joe's gloved palm, and fired.

Joe cried out in pain and swung around, finally dropping his bag of stolen goods to cradle his burned hand in the other. He exposed his back fully to them. Pat took the opportunity to rake her laser across the bazooka, and it exploded in a shower of sparks and white-hot metal. Joe bellowed again, and was thrown to the ground underneath the damaged bazooka. As he tried to unbuckle the harnesses and get free, the Cybercops rushed up and leveled pistols and assault rifles at his head. Joe froze, slowly looking over his shoulder.

"Real slow, Joe," Frank told him. "Undo the harness. Now, crawl right over here." Slowly, very slowly, Joe did as he was told. "Stop there. Lay down and spread 'em. Joe Kay, you're under arrest. Eddie, read 'im his rights."

* * *

Twelve stories above ground, on a building ledge that overlooked the scene of Bazooka Joe's takedown, a lone figure stood. He was dressed head to foot in a navy blue spandex-like material, and a blank white space shaped like a policemen's badge adorned his left breast. He collapsed a pair of mini-binoculars in his hand, and replaced them in a pouch on his waist belt.

"Good work, guys," Woody muttered to himself. "Glad I didn't have to do that." And he slipped unobtrusively away from the ledge.

* * *

Moments later, they had Joe cuffed hand and foot, and waited for a riot truck to arrive. When it pulled up, Frank lifted Joe bodily aboard the truck and planted him in a seat. Eddie got in after him, and the truck roared off with the felon and the Cybercop.

The rest of the team stood by until the truck pulled off, and then walked back to their ride. "That'll look good at the station," Pat said, "Letting Eddie bring Joe in. If the press is there, they'll eat it up."

"Who's got a cell phone?" Craig asked, and the others laughed. "It was a good start, I'll admit. But Joe wasn't that bad. If we'd gone up against, say, the Flying Fortress, we'd've had our hands full."

"Something to talk about, when we get back," Frank told him. "We'll have to prepare strategies specific to each threat. But in the meantime..." As the van pulled up, he opened his breast plate to the air. "Let's go get these damned things off."

* * *

"Who is that? Who is that?" L. Byron Scott was close to the window, but wouldn't bring himself to step in front of it and look out. Mark LaSalle was already leaning out of the window, using a pair of binoculars to study the man at the foot of the Lord Building, the headquarters of the Lord Corporation.

"I can't tell," Mark replied to his boss. "There's too much dust kicked up."

At the foot of the building, inside that dust cloud, was someone trying to break a hole in the wall with his bare hands. Whoever it was, he was apparently familiar with the building's layout. The spot on the wall he was trying to break through just happened to be adjacent to the location of one of the building's vaults. A great deal of negotiable bonds, cash, and private treasures resided there, easily a few billion's worth. There were a number of Lord security guards outside, shooting at the lone man with their rifles, but the slugs seemed to bother the man not at all. Mark felt the building shake suddenly, all the way up on the fortieth floor, and he saw a large chunk of white stone fall free of the wall. More choking dust, and the lone figure was stepping inside of the wall, out of Mark's sight.

"What's happening?" Scott pressed himself against the wall of the building, trying to look down from the corner of the window.

"He's partially through the wall, already," Mark reported. "It didn't take him long to get through that reinforced foundation..."

Mark stopped, and Scott saw him look up into the air, then shift the binoculars back up to his eyes. "What? What? Is it them?"

"Yes," Mark said, "they've just arrived. Now, we'll see if Klopper was money well-spent."

Forty stories below, the dust cloud was beginning to clear. Six feet inside of the building's outer wall, the figure was digging shovel-sized hands into an outer metal sheet just beyond the stonework. The metal buckled, then tore at his hands. He threw an arm out, and a chunk of metal four inches thick and as large around as he was pitched out and landed on the pavement with a deafening bang.

"All right, come on out of there, buddy!"

There was a high-pitched whine in the air. The figure in the wall froze in the process of reaching for the newly-exposed metalwork, then slowly stepped back out into the light. His proportions were similar to those of a gorilla, but he was about twice the size of any known species of ape. His body was not hairy, though, but smooth and white. In fact, it seemed to match the stonework he had just broken through, right down to the whorls of texturing on the building. All of his body was the same white, except his forearms, which were dark and shiny, like the metal plate he had just torn out of the wall. His eyes were tiny black slits, hidden under massive stone brows, and they searched their surroundings slowly.

"It looks like the Matamorph," Mark said. Scott slowly peered around the edge of the window.

The gorilla-like Matamorph took two steps away from the building, a tiny ear cocked at the whine all around him. He finally seemed to localize the sound, and looked into the air.

There were four robots floating in midair, slowly descending to the pavement. They were each painted black and silver, decorated much like the Lord security guards that were giving ground to them, right down to the stylized corporate L on the left breast, and the numbers one through four on their right. They touched down on articulated metal feet, and their ten-foot-high frames cracked the pavement below them.

Matamorph glared at the robots carefully, trying to figure out what he was up against. He suddenly realized that each robot had a single glass eye, mounted in the center of the head. He realized they weren't robots at all. He cocked a suspicious eye at them. "Cyklops? You in that suit?"

"We are Lord Corporation Elite Security," one of the black and silver monsters announced. "We order you to submit to arrest quietly, or we'll be forced to take you down."

The Matamorph stared for a moment, then a smile cracked his stone face. He bent down and picked up the discarded metal plate. "No shit." He pitched the metal at the center suit, the one marked #1. It flew unerringly through the air at its head, almost too fast to see. Just before it struck, a blinding white light flashed, and the metal rebounded over the robosuit, to arc through the air like a frisbee and land yards away. #1 was still knocked backward by the impact, and promptly fell on his back.

The voice inside the toppled robosuit was heard to exclaim, "Shit! Get him!"

But the Matamorph was already moving, incredibly fast for its bulk. He charged the robosuit on the far side of the fallen suit, #3. #3 brought his metal hands up, and the two locked arms in a loud collision, looking like bizarre sumo wrestlers. Matamorph quickly began to change, and the stone portions of his body darkened and smoothed, until he mimicked the robosuit's metal composition.

While the two combatants grappled, #2 helped #1 to his feet, and #4 circled around them. #3 seemed to be holding his own for the moment. He got a hand inside of their bodies, and there was a staccato burst of sound and light. Matamorph bellowed as point-blank hollow point shells ricocheted off his chest in rapid fire bursts. Then he picked #3 bodily off the ground and hurled him fully thirty feet in the air. #3 kicked in his flight rockets, but he was angled almost parallel to the ground, and instead of hovering, flew off at a wild angle, barely missing a stand of trees as he tried to regain control.

Matamorph laughed as the out-of-control robosuit blasted away and out of sight. He turned back to the rest of them. "Who's next?"

"What do we look like, idiots?" The three suits leveled their arms at Matamorph, and he was suddenly the center of a firestorm that could be heard for miles. Bazooka fire, hollow-points and laser cannons blazed around him, mostly impacting smack in the middle of his chest. Matamorph managed to stand his ground, but just barely. After about thirty seconds, they ceased firing and waited.

When the smoke cleared, the Matamorph was still there, stooped a bit, but barely pitted by the beating he'd just taken. #1 stepped closer. "Do you give up?"

Matamorph glared at him. "Is that... the best you can do?" he grated.

"Actually, we're not through yet."

Matamorph looked up. #3 was back, hovering over him just out of reach. He pointed an arm and cocked a metal hand at him, like a gun. "Pow."

There was a snap, like an electrical discharge, and Matamorph grabbed his head. "OW!" he bent over, straightening again very slowly. He looked down at his body. No longer was it the dark sheen of metal: Instead, it had changed to a grey rock, rough and gravelly. "What did you do to me?"

#3 straightened. "How 'bout that? The E-M pulse worked!" He leveled his arm at Matamorph again, and this time, a high-pitched whine emanated from the mechanism mounted on his wrist. Matamorph became aware of a vibration, and pain, building up in his hand. He tried to pull it to his chest, but he seemed to have no control over it. Then, it abruptly blew apart, rock shards flying everywhere, leaving a rock stump that ended just below his elbow. Matamorph screamed and fell to the ground, clutching his stump with his other arm.

The other robosuits stepped closer and raised the same weapons against the fallen criminal. Matamorph could hear the whine building up. #1 asked, "So: Do you surrender, asshole?"

Matamorph growled, but somehow it sounded more like a whimper.

High above, Mark closed the window. "They got him," he said to Scott, who breathed a sigh of relief. Mark walked over to the phone at the desk and picked it up.

"Yes... make sure to get crews in here ASAP to rebuild that wall. And call Jefferson in legal. Mr. Scott needs to talk to him about product licensing."

* * *

It had been more than a week since Lainie had found Curt in Max's basement, and three days since she had seen him. After spending most of their time together when she wasn't at work, she had come to expect seeing him waiting when she came home. So she was surprised when, upon arriving home one evening, she found only a note:

A few things I need to do while I'm here.

Just need a few days. I'll be in touch.

—Max

At first, she didn't think much about it, and although she missed his not being in bed with her that night, she was sure she'd hear from him tomorrow. After all, there must be other friends or family in town. Or maybe he was looking for work.

But by the end of the next day, she began to wonder. And by the end of the third day, she knew.

So she went back to Max Ryan's house that night. Under cover of darkness, she got in through the back door and went to the basement. She found the box, pushed, and it slid back for her. The lights were already on inside. Without looking first, she mounted the ladder and climbed down.

When she got to the bottom, she turned. Curt was sitting by the gym in the corner, a towel over his shoulders. The rings above his head, in the middle of the room, still swayed back and forth. He was naked from the waist up, and his upper body was covered in a fine sheen of sweat. The black spandex shorts he wore below were as shiny as his sweaty legs, and tight enough to be painted on.

He just sat there, breathing a bit heavily, looking at her silently. She didn't speak either, just regarded him from across the room. Finally, she walked over to him, stopping at the desk to grab the chair and carry it over, and sat down in front of him. She looked at him again. He was still breathing hard.

Curt realized what she was thinking, and nodded. "I'm a little out of shape."

"Seven years will do that to you," Lainie smiled, although you'd never know it to look at you. "I knew this was why you'd really come back."

"I never said I'd come back for you." Curt frowned and shook his head. "Sorry, I didn't mean it that way..."

"I know. I just hoped, that's all. But, it's okay. I don't mind sharing."

Curt looked at her. "Lainie, I only came down here to blow off some cobwebs. I wasn't planning to..." His voice trailed off when he glanced at the wardrobe, where they waited. The door was open a slit. A tiny strip of red was visible through the crack. He forced himself to look away. "You're jumping to conclusions."

Lainie shrugged, looked down at the floor. "I know it's something you have to do. I mean, you might not be a policeman or a fireman, but it's just as important to you. And me. And everyone else, out there. I would never stand in the way of your doing what you have to do. I want you to know that."

She reached out and put a hand on his thigh. "I almost let myself get in the way of Max, once. I did get in your way, and you quit. You don't know how much it hurt, to know I... denied the rest of the world the talents of the All American Boy, and almost took the Omerican from them as well. I mean... well, you left... you probably don't realize what you both meant to this town. If it weren't for you two..." Curt saw a tear fall to the floor. Lainie paused, gathering herself, before she continued.

She sighed, and looked up at him. "So you have my blessing, Curt Mendez. Be the Omerican. Somebody should, and you're the natural to do it. Max would have wanted it that way. No matter what might have happened between us." She leaned forward and kissed him, and he took her into his arms and held the kiss for a minute longer. Then he released her, and she straightened up beside him.

"I'll always be there. I'll make sure you always know how much the world appreciates you."

* * *

Endeavor gleamed under the lights of search lamps on the tarmac. It had landed only minutes ago, one of the rare night landings that Gus Cleveland always hoped he'd never have to do with this flying brick. But it had gone off flawlessly, and now the ground crew was helping him secure the orbiter's systems for shutdown.

The rest of the crew was either assisting in shutdown, or helping to unlimber the cargo boxes for unloading. Col. East was with the cargo, checking it carefully to make sure it had survived reentry without mishap. Each one of the boxes was undamaged, and with Bob and LeRoy's help, he removed them from their stowage spaces.

When the orbiter was finally opened, East was the first one at the door, holding one of the smaller cargo boxes in two hands. He looked for the Huey he expected would be taking the cargo on to JPL.

There was no copter. Instead, there was a small jet on the tarmac, rear end open, engines idling. East looked around for an explanation, and saw one in the form of General Reddy. He stepped down the ladder and walked towards the General.

Reddy spoke first, as they came within earshot. "Good to see you back, Ben."

"General, is there a change in plans? What's going on?"

Reddy tossed his head at the jet. "Your cargo's not going to JPL. We're flying it to New York, where some specialists want to look it over."

"Specialists? In New York? What the hell have they got in New York, that JPL doesn't have?"

"Access to Power Tower." The General steered East toward the jet with his box. "I received a call from General Foster, who was contacted by someone named Prime, In NYC. This guy Prime and a bunch of eggheads have gotten into Power Tower, and want to use it to study the debris. I guess Foster and Prime have a history, so Foster says this stuff's going to New York." They reached the jet, and hands reached down from inside to accept the box from East. "Have

everything we've got loaded on board, ASAP. Thanks, Ben." Reddy turned on his heel, and strode away.

East stood there and watched him go, for a moment. Then he shook his head and muttered, "New York. Yes sir."

* * *

"Ames! Get out of the way."

Ames almost dropped the flask-shaped object he had picked up from the lab bench. He hadn't realized that any of Kang's people had returned to Tatnall's apartment, and he had had full rein of the lab for the last two hours, alone. Now he had to backpedal and swerve to one side, to avoid Kang and the two police scientists close on his heels. Ames realized Kang didn't seem too perturbed to see him alone in the lab. Which told Ames that Kang was very worked up about something.

Ames recovered from his guilty alarm, to chase around the table after Kang and his men. "What is it? Kang, what's going on?"

Kang did not immediately respond. Instead, he went from table to table, examining the elaborate electrical machinery on each one. His associates also examined each gadget closely, whispering back and forth to each other. As Ames watched, Kang almost literally bounced from one item to the next, peering at each's controls and gauges.

"What are you looking for?"

Kang suddenly stopped and returned to a large apparatus he had looked at a minute ago. His associates crowded around, and they began talking one after the other, sotto voce.

"High capacity generator. Variable flow?"

"Yes... I think."

"The keyboard is specific."

"See the modulation controls?"

"And amplitude. Very exacting."

"What are you looking for?"

"You're right. Variable."

"But the control handles..?"

"No. Look at the keyboard!"

"Don't need control handles."

"No. Arc points?"

"No. No burn marks. Field coils?"

"What? What is it?"

"Look at the space between them."

"Comfortable grip spacing."

"You hold them. Like handlebars."

"Like poles of a battery!"

"And they charge you!"

"Yes!"

"WHAT!!!"

Kang and his men stopped and turned toward Ames, who waited, arms outthrust. Kang straightened and beamed at Ames. Ames, startled at his expression, took a step back. "What?"

"Tatnall," Kang said. "We've figured out his transformation. How he got the power." He pointed at the mechanism his two men were still drooling over. "It's got to be that one, there. And the serum. The serum!" He gestured at the racks of fluid-filled vials. "We've figured out the serum, Ames. That's the real secret, the serum. Without it, all this equipment is crap!"

"Tell me!"

Kang seemed to slow his kinetic frenzy for a moment, and fully regarded Ames for the first time since walking into the lab. Then, he walked over to Ames, arms gesticulating. "The serum. It's designed to stimulate the production of hormones and endorphins, all over the body. It strengthens the cell walls and maintains internal cohesion against high-speed electron saturation. It gives the body's cells protection against high voltage charges. Somehow, it must allow Tatnall to store large amounts of electrical energy in his body, and direct charges at will, without causing internal cell damage or disruption." He indicated the mechanism his men had begun photographing. "We think that's the thing he used to charge himself. I'm sure that's what he used to charge himself."

You hold them. Like handlebars. Ames slowly pointed to the machine. "You mean he turns it on, grabs those grips... and it charges him up, like a battery?"

"If," Kang held up a finger, "you take the serum first. Oh, God, if we only had Tatnall's body! He didn't leave any notes behind, and without knowing how to set the machine, or Tatnall's body chemistry to check the serum against..." Kang trailed off, turning back to the machine, where his men were already underneath and probing for access points.

"Never mind that!" Kang snapped at his men. "This is the only important piece of equipment in the room, anyway! Call Clemson. I want this taken to the lab." He turned to the rack of vials, then searched wildly around the room. Discovering a foam-padded case, he snatched it up, placed it on the table and opened it wide. He began removing the rest of the vials from the rack and placing them in the case. He stopped abruptly and looked at Ames. "Say. Did you ever find anything else in the rest of the apartment that was particularly relevant to any of this?"

Ames shrugged and looked away. "No, not really. I mean, outside of a few business logs in his study. I've been going through them, but none of them mention any of this. And we're still running checks into his financial dealings to see if anything turns up, but..."

"Okay, okay," Kang cut him off. "It's not important now, anyway. This is." He nodded at the machine, finished loading the case, and closed it. "Get another picture of that control panel, Dick. I want to send it to cryptography. And find some insulated gloves, I know I saw some in here." True to form, Kang managed to forget Ames was still in the room. After a few more moments, Ames left the secret lab and reentered the more conventional confines of the apartment.

Ames paused and listened for a moment, to make sure Kang and his boys were all occupied in the lab. Then he turned and headed for the study. He closed the study door behind him, switched the light on, and crossed the room. He opened the door to a small closet, knelt on his haunches. Peering into the back of the closet, he fished a hand in and pulled out a small box made of black leather. It looked for all the world like a high quality travel kit, the kind which usually held designer-molded razors, combs, scissors, tweezers and the like. Ames brought it over to the desk, unsnapped it, and lifted the lid.

Inside were a number of tiny glass canisters, filled with a liquid that looked identical to the contents of the vials in the lab. Each canister had a metal top with a short needle embedded into it. Ames had seen something like them before, and he knew they were designed to deliver measured dosages of a fluid when the needle was pressed through the skin. A sort of automatic syringe.

And there was something else in the case. The only part of it that Ames had recognized... when he looked at it a week ago, before hiding it in the closet... was the black cord and standard wall plug, coiled against it. Looking at it now, he recognized the odd symbols next to the tiny studs as matching a few of those on the machine in the lab. And now he understood the significance of the two thin metal electrodes, attached by wire to the top.

When he had first discovered it, Ames wasn't sure it wasn't just a designer heroin kit, or an insulin kit, or something just as harmless. Now, he was pretty sure it wasn't harmless at all.

Ames got up and closed the closet door. Returning to the case, he closed it and slid it into the back of his (thankfully) baggy trousers. The hang of his sportcoat hid the square from sight well enough for him to get past the uniforms outside. All he had to do was get to his car with it. Child's play. He crossed the study, turned out the light, and left the room.

He made it to his car without incident, and once inside, removed the case from his pants before sitting down. He slid the case under the seat, out of sight, before he started the car. Then he pulled easily out into traffic, headed for his apartment.

Data

| They're here."

« ^ »

Lee Prime looked up from the apparatus he had been examining. Tom Poor held the phone, one hand cupped over the mouthpiece. Next to him, Bobby Bryce lifted his head from the computer console and yawned mightily.

Lee nodded. "Better find the others, and wake them up." He turned back to the apparatus in front of him. The chrome steel behemoth, squatting in the corner of the vast laboratory, had remained a mystery for three days, since Lee had found it. Careful examination and study had finally revealed it to be a field generator that seemed to create its own gravity. Any item dropped into the field from above, would instantly change direction and "fall" at a right angle to the ground, until it left the field and resumed its downward descent. Lee considered this small device to be one of the single greatest machines in the lab, and he had repeatedly found himself standing in front of it and considering the myriad possibilities.

The lab had presented Lee with many interesting possibilities, some of which had provided answers to questions posed by the telemetry from Tomorrow's ship. Lee and his men had closely examined every second of the telemetry, including the on-board records, from every angle. In marked contrast to SB's shock and repulsion watching the heroes die, Lee had watched the images impassively. He had shaken his head at one point, muttering under his breath, a slight scowl on his face. None of the SB team saw it, but John heard him clearly, and had quietly commented, "Idiots. All of 'em." Lee did show more concern for the young girl who suddenly appeared in the place of Athena, only to die in the frigid vacuum. He was as puzzled by her sudden appearance as the rest, but instead of registering confusion, it seemed to disgust him further somehow. The rest of the telemetry was only slightly helpful. Lee and John had paid particular attention to background radiation readings onboard the ship, and taken various notes, but they were still left with numerous questions.

Now, thanks to General Foster, with whom he was closely acquainted, Lee expected more answers were being brought to him from Endeavor. Maybe not a moment too soon.

Tom returned to the lab, with John and Sir Edward in tow. Following close behind were Ed and Joseph. All of them were yawning and rubbing eyes and necks, trying to wake themselves up. A moment later and Denise joined them, also yawning and stretching. Denise was the only one of SB to have left the building, and come back sans padding and elaborate makeup, in her own clothes. Other than her, and NSA agents Joseph and Cass, the rest of them had not left the Tower since they had arrived ten days ago. They had discovered excellent guest apartments in the Tower, each including washer-driers and fully-stocked kitchenettes. As a result, they had all gotten well-acquainted with each other. Lee surveyed them all, and realized someone was missing.

"Agent Cass?"

"Here I am." Lee turned. Cass emerged behind him, from the bowels of the lab. Unlike the rest of the group, she seemed wide-awake. She walked up to Lee, buttoning a shirt pocket with one hand, and said, "What is it?"

"The remains from the shuttle are being brought up." Lee indicated the open floor with a hand. "Find a tarp and spread it over this space. We'll look over everything here." He walked out of the lab and headed for the elevator bay. As he reached the elevator, the door opened to two men in army fatigues, and seven large boxes stacked against the back wall. The two soldiers heaved one box up and struggled it out of the elevator. Once they were out, Lee reached out and plucked the box easily out of their hands, placed it on a broad shoulder, and strode to the lab. John and Tom appeared next, and each shouldered a box. The rest of them formed groups of two with the soldiers and carried the remainder of the boxes to the lab.

In half an hour, the remains of the spaceship were spread over the tarp, in orderly piles. There was very little organic matter in the debris, but the smears of blood and faint smell of decay was clearly evident. Bobby and Cass in particular made every attempt to stay as far from the debris as possible. Bobby returned to the computers, while Cass faded back into the lab, noticed only by Lee. The rest of them tried to make sense of the remains. They had separated the remains into metals, plastics and fabrics, in a pattern that they believed approximated their positions in the intact craft. The debris was widely spread out, since none of it was particularly large, and they walked easily among the bits and pieces.

Lee knelt down beside a palm-sized chunk of metal, and picked it up in a gloved hand. He produced a small but powerful magnifying scope from a pocket, and held it close to the metal's surface. Bringing his eye close to the lens revealed a strange edge to the surface. The metal looked like a sponge, as if it had been heated enough for inner gasses to boil out. But away from the edges, there was no sign of heating. And the cavities were not only too small and regularly spaced to be gaseous pockets, they seemed to be formed in a kind of spiraling wave like nothing Lee had ever seen.

He placed the metal fragment back on the ground, and moved over to a chunk of plastic. He picked it up and examined it with the magnifier. It had the same pattern of tiny spiraling pockets, the same size and spacing as that in the metal. No gases would act exactly the same in metal and plastic. But careful examination of a piece of seat fabric revealed no such patterns. The fabrics instead looked like they had been pulled apart, but they did show signs of rot. Lee squeezed, and fabric dust rained on the floor.

Not too far away, Sir Edward was looking at a similar piece of fabric, but the one in his hand was a bright orange in color. Lee knew from the cabin tape that there were no seats in the ship that were bright orange. However, the Metacats' Tiger had an orange and black costume. Sir Edward held the fabric out to Lee. "Dry rot," he said simply.

"These, as well." Lee nodded into the bowels of the lab. "There's a device back there, similar to a Kirilian scanner. We need to examine the fabrics with that. And the large electron microscope over there will be ideal for a cursory examination of the metals and plastics." Everyone else had stopped examining the debris, and were all looking at Lee. "Whatever took this ship apart, seems to have done it at a molecular level. Maybe an atomic level. Mr. Bryce."

Bobby looked up from the computer console, upon hearing his name.

"We'll have to tie that computer into this lab equipment for in-depth scanning and detailed cross-checks. Can you get started on that?"

"Sure thing," Bobby replied, and began working over the keyboard.

"Sir Ed," Lee said, straightening up, "let's go get that scanner and bring it over here. It's small enough to move ourselves." Sir Edward stood up, and the two of them headed into the lab.

They rounded a corner, and came across Cass. She was standing before an object shaped like a crouching circus elephant in miniature, and her back was to them, her hands in front of her face. When she heard them, she spun around, and a hand went down to her pocket. Lee caught a flash of glass from something in her hand, before it was in the pocket and being buttoned up.

"Oh! You... startled me," Cass told them. "Have you found something already?"

"Not yet," Lee replied. "We were just coming to get the scanner back in that corner." He and Sir Edward walked on past her, and she simply stood by and watched them go.

When they reached the scanner, they bent down behind it to make sure it was not plugged in or attached to anything. Sir Edward looked over his shoulder in Cass' direction, then back to Lee. "That was a camera I saw in her hand, wasn't it?" he asked in a low voice.

Lee nodded. "She's taken a lot of interest in the contents of this lab."

"I suppose these machines could be of some interest to the NSA."

"I suppose." They exchanged doubting glances, then continued securing the scanner. Once they were set, they discovered that the machine's feet were very slick, and they had little trouble sliding the scanner across the lab to the open area. They maneuvered it to a spot by a power core, and plugged it in there. After a few minutes of trial and error, they managed to charge up the machine and set it to read samples.

While Lee picked out a few likely fabric and organic specimens, John and Sir Ed worked with Bobby to hook the machine up to the computer. Actually, connecting it to the computer turned out to be relatively easy, once they discovered another cable and plug from the scanner that matched a small receptacle in the power core. It did take a few more minutes, though, to access the scanner through the computer's network. Finally, Bobby offered a thumbs-up, and they set to work.

Lee had found a potted plant in a nearby room, and had brought a leaf back to the lab to run through the scanner. The image displayed on the computer was very similar to Kirilian photography, with the exception that the aura around the leaf was much brighter than Kirilian auras, and it exhibited a variety of bright colors, which John attributed to the computer's enhancement circuits. Lee also saw a distinct glowing streak where the severed stem had been, which was not as easily explained.

Once they had recorded the control sample leaf, Lee replaced it with the first piece of fabric he had examined. The cloth had a weak aura about it, as Lee expected it would. The coloring was much more uniform, mostly shades of brown, but the pale colors formed a grid pattern which extended beyond the edges of the fabric, aligned with the weave of the material.

"Strange," Sir Ed noted. "I've seen Kirilian images before. Although the color enhancement suggests some form of advanced rot, the intensity of the aura is brighter than it should be. Something accelerated this rot, in a very short amount of time."

They examined several other items of fabric and clothing. Each one shared the same characteristics as the first, but the scanner was giving them no insights. Sir Ed and Bobby began attempting to reset the scanner to look a bit closer at the artifacts.

In the meantime, John and Ed had set up the electron microscope, and were just looking at the first of the bits of metal they had lined up next to it. Ed had used an electron microscope extensively at a previous position, and he handled the controls at John's direction. They ran the image along the edge of the torn metal, until they came to a ragged edge and zoomed in.

"Lee," John called out. "Take a look at this." Lee came over and examined the screen. He

was looking at the edge of the metal, an image just a few microns wide. What he saw were the same sponge-like cavities and spiraling patterns, but now he saw the cavities were much smaller and more regular than he thought. In fact, what he had seen as a large cavity was actually a series of small cavities that, in some places, bunched up so tightly that their void was greater than the metal's mass, and a cavity was created. In other areas, the legions of tiny cavities were far enough apart that they did not meet, giving the metal a solid look at conventional magnifications. It was a lot like looking at a newspaper photograph, at a close enough magnification to see how the grids of black dots formed the image on the page.

But what caused the series of cavities? What was in those spaces in the first place, and where had they gone? And why, when they went, did they spiral? After a consultation with Ed and John, they agreed to try to narrow their focus and get a look at the molecular makeup of the sponged metal.

While everyone else was focused on examining the debris with their machines, Denise had continued to sift through the waste by hand, occasionally moving an object to a more accurate-seeming location, like a vast jigsaw puzzle. She had found a four-foot metal shaft, and was mostly walking erect through the flotsam, nudging items around as she went.

She pushed over a small bit of plastic, and a string of gold caught her attention. Upon closer examination, the string turned out to be a chain. She moved the plastic away, and discovered what the chain was attached to.

"Ed! Mr. Prime!"

She barked it out so urgently that Lee and Ed snapped their heads up, then leapt from their equipment to see what was the matter. They reached Denise, who was hunched over the tarp and reaching out gingerly with a gloved hand. When she lifted her hand to the light, it held a palm-sized object resembling solid gold, with two prongs where the gold chain was attached. The round object was featureless on the side she held up. She turned it over into her other hand, to see the other side.

In direct contrast to the first side, the second side was adorned with elaborate designs. Around the edge ran thin scrollwork, and Denise pointed at it. "What kind of design is that?"

"It's not a design," Lee told her. "That's script. It looks like something similar to Latin, but I don't recognize many of these characters." The center of the object contained images of a sword on one side, and a lightning bolt on the other. The center was dominated by an owl, wings outstretched, claws out, as if pouncing on the unlucky engraver. There was a break along the side of the object, where the chain had come loose on one end.

They looked at one another. "You recognize it, don't you?" Denise asked.

Lee nodded. "Athena's amulet."

Lee thought back to the on-board tape he had reviewed, upon arriving with his men at the Tower. He had watched the mortally wounded Athena vanish in a burst of light, and had seen the young woman who suddenly appeared. Although there was much conjecture among his men, the NSA agents, and their SB conscripts, Lee was of the firm conviction that the women were two distinct individuals, not one in the same, as the majority of the group seemed to believe. The tape had been clear enough for Lee to confirm that the two women were possibly

related, but very dissimilar in physical type.

This theory brought up obvious questions none of them had been able to answer, the most glaring being: How does a person go about instantaneously exchanging positions with someone else? Followed close behind by, Who was that girl, anyway? and Exactly where had she come from? These questions were unlikely enough to put Lee's theory into second place behind some kind of accidental costume change on Athena's part.

But Lee had also taken careful notice of how she touched the amulet around her neck, before she vanished. And close examination of the second woman revealed a telltale bulge under her shirt, a few inches below her neckline, that could only be another, possibly similar amulet.

The amulet was the key. Whether it was the same one, or a second one, it held the secret to Athena's fate.

Lee took the amulet from Denise, and stood up. Then he walked purposefully into the bowels of the lab. Ed and Denise watched him go. They exchanged glances, then Ed levered himself back up on his feet and took off after Lee. After a moment, Denise leapt up and chased after them. They were soon out of sight beyond the mammoth machinery.

When Ed caught up to Lee, he was standing before a three story chrome column, as wide around as an automobile. The column seemed to be hovering in mid-air, about six feet above the ground. Five feet below its featureless hanging base, was a platform as large around as the column that sat on the floor, also of gleaming chrome. It looked remarkably as if someone had knocked five foot of column right out of the base, and somehow left the upper end standing. A standing console resided next to the contraption, attached to the base, and Lee stood before it. He had placed the amulet about a foot from the center of the round platform.

Denise came up from around a corner, and walked into Ed, who almost bumped into Lee. Lee did not register their presence, but kept working over the standing console. In the corner of a small indicator screen, colored telltales winked on one-by-one, and a tiny wire frame graphic of the amulet appeared below them.

Denise looked the huge machine up and down. "What is this thing, Mr. Prime?"

"It functions like a combination internal scanner and tunneling microscope," Lee explained, glancing at them briefly. "I had the opportunity to work out its function two days ago. We should be able to use it to get a better look at the amulet."

"You think it's made of some exotic metal?" Ed asked.

"I think it's made of more than just metal."

"Like what?"

Lee smiled slightly, without looking up. "We won't know until we've looked, hm?"

"Hm." Ed seemed about to add something, but at that moment the main viewscreen came on, and they all turned to it. The amulet was on the screen, and in a moment of fine tuning, Lee had it centered and magnified just enough to take up the whole of the image area. The engraved images stood out clearly on the screen, more distinct than looking at the object itself.

Lee began manipulating other control systems, and on screen, the amulet began to slowly melt away. It started at its highest point, in the center, and spread outward and downward from there, looking much like a time-lapse shot of butter being sliced away.

Suddenly smooth butter gave way to complex geometric patterns, just below the surface of the amulet. The patterns danced around the exposed area on the screen, forming tiny and intricate pathways throughout the amulet.

From the main part of the lab, they suddenly heard an exclamation. "Whoa! That's rad! What are you guys doing, back there?"

Ed looked at Lee. "Bobby. He must have accessed this machine at the main computer."

Lee nodded over his shoulder. "Please ask him to record all of this, then." Ed made his way back into the lab, and Denise crowded behind Lee to watch the screen. He managed to reverse the motion of the scanners, so the amulet seemed to reconstruct itself, layer by layer. He stopped once he reached smooth metal again, and reversed the process again, slower than before.

As they all watched, the reforming patterns seemed much more familiar as they shifted between layers. Tiny squares, rectangles, discs and triangles appeared and disappeared, as did regularly repeating patterns throughout the layers. Denise breathed it first: "Microcircuitry."

Lee nodded. "Built into the amulet. Actually part of the amulet itself. It seems to be composed of the same elements that make up the rest of the amulet. Incredibly advanced, as well. Whoever did this, seems to have mastered 3-dimensional circuit design."

"But what does it do?" Denise asked.

"Hopefully, the master computer back there can tell us," Lee replied, and shrugged. "Right now, I don't have a clue."

The scan seemed to reach the bottom of the circuitry patterns, just before the middle of the amulet, and abruptly the images changed back to the butter smooth flat surface. It did not change or show any more patterning inside the amulet, and as the rounded back was scanned through, the cross-section became smaller and smaller, until it vanished from sight. Lee reversed the scan again, and stopped it just at the end of the circuitry patterns. Then he left the machine, and returned to the main computer area where everyone else was crowded around Robert at the console.

Denise joined him at the adjacent console, and the two of them began poring over the recorded data from the amulet scan. After a few minutes, the computer announced that it was analyzing the recorded circuitry to derive its function. Bobby kept at his console, but Denise swiveled about in her chair and told the others, "This could take a while."

The rest of them began to slowly file out of the computer area, back toward the tarp and its pungent contents. They had not been away from the computer for ten seconds before an audible tone issued forth from it. Denise turned back to look at her screen, and did a double-take. "Or... not," she said, and began working on her console again. The others, upon hearing this, turned back and reentered the computer room.

They were disappointed. The computer stated, "Insufficient data to decipher circuit

function. Please provide data on following components." It then proceeded to print out a list of four dozen or so reference numbers, which it also highlighted in 3-D on the screen's wire frame diagram of the circuit.

"Hell," Bobby whispered. "I don't know what that stuff is!"

"I knew it couldn't be that easy," Tom added.

The computer spoke again. "Suggest rescan of the object in the following modes: D, E, H, J, J-prime, R."

Everyone turned to Lee, who stood to the back. "That we can do," he told them, and started back into the lab.

"Hold on," Bobby called back, and Lee stopped. Bobby considered for a moment, then worked over the keyboard. After a moment, the last computer message winked off of the screen, and the computer said, "Scans running. Stand by."

"Ha," Bobby said. "I knew they didn't just run back and forth in this lab. No point in having a computer, unless it's going to do the work for you."

The "Stand by" message fooled them into thinking the scans would be done in a few seconds. It turned out to be an additional twenty-three minutes before the computer and scanner finished their task. When they did, the 3-D pattern of circuits on the screen reformed, and a color coding had been added. The computer spoke again.

"Analysis suggests this device is a combination generator and emitter. Circuits in amber receive a coded signal to generate a modulated pulse of energy. Components coded in blue function to emit the energy pulse."

"That can't be right," Joseph said. "Athena didn't have any kind of energy weapon or shield. Did she?"

"Not that I ever noticed," Bobby said. "And I've looked close."

"Look at the diagram," Sir Ed spoke, pointing at the screen. "That emitter is in the center of the amulet. The circuits are in front of it. It can't be directing a beam forward."

"Backward, maybe?" Tom speculated. "Maybe it's Athena's power source."

"Bobby, ask the computer where the emitters are pointed," Ed urged.

Before Bobby could speak, the computer said, "Emitter is directed at a point located eight microns from the center of the object."

There was a long pause, in which no one spoke. They all exchanged glances and confused looks. Finally, Tom asked no one in particular, "Why would it be aimed at its own center?"

"There's more to that amulet than meets the eye." John, who had been silent throughout most of the last hour, stepped forward. "It has no discernable power source, either. But it directs energy of some kind. Something about its structure collects and redirects energy, but we don't know from or to where. Computer: Where does the object derive its energy, and where does the emitted energy go?"

"The object transceives its energy transdimensionally."

"Huh?" Bobby said simply.

"Computer," Lee said, "what is the makeup and structure of the amulet?"

On the screen, the amulet was moved off to the left, and a list ran down the right of the screen, listing a few dozen elements.

"Hey, I thought that thing was gold!" Joseph exclaimed. "What's all this stuff?"

"There is gold," Lee pointed out, "As well as silicon, carbon, iron, boron, actinium, oxygen, tellurium... hydrogen... vanadium... argon... a strange collection of elements, and they're all in metal form."

"Metal!" came from five mouths at once. John leaned forward and examined the screen closer. "Metal oxygen? Metal hydrogen? How is that possible?"

"I don't know," Lee admitted, "the technology to construct this is far beyond anything I know of." He examined a string of equations that represented the mathematical structure of the amulet. "Computer, display a graphic representation of the object's structure."

The computer screen cleared, and a new wire frame image appeared. The front of the amulet, the circuitry area, was a grid of rectangular strips and bars, just what Lee expected to see. Just behind them, the rest of the amulet was inscribed by a complex web of short segments, radiating out from the center of the object or interconnecting the radiating segments.

It looked remarkably like a large, semi-circular crystal. Its flat edge abutted the layers of circuitry, and the exact center of the crystal structure touched the circuitry emitter.

"It looks like a flat-faced gem," Denise pointed out.

"A gem made of metal?" John reminded.

"Look at this," Sir Ed said, indicating another diagram in a corner. "This thing was constructed atom by atom. In such a way that the elements were aligned in a very precise way, and densely layered."

"You know what it looks like to me?" Bobby looked at them over his shoulder, then back at the screen. "A lead crystal. A prism."

"I think you're on to it," Lee told him. "Whatever it is. Computer, can you show us how the object would react to the emitter's energy pulse?"

"No."

Lee paused. "Can you simulate the reaction?"

"Please move the object to the spectro projector, and place it in the test chamber."

Lee was already moving before the rest of them realized what the computer was requesting. In moments, he had plucked the amulet from the huge scanner, and moved to another part of the lab. He soon found the equipment he was looking for, and placed the amulet in the small, round chamber. He closed the chamber, then made for the master computer.

Back at the computer, everyone watched the image of the amulet on the screen. When Lee arrived, he nodded at Bobby, who turned back to the computer.

"Proceed with the test."

On the screen, the ambient light around the amulet rapidly increased, then dimmed, then focused from a single overhead source. As the computer-controlled machine cycled through various modes of particle projections and light wave bombardment, they watched as lights flashed and high-pitched tones came and went.

Suddenly, there was a flash. The screen went black, and did not recover.

"What the...?" Tom exclaimed, then bounded out into the lab. He returned a minute later with the amulet, apparently none the worse for wear. "I don't see any damage, but the chamber was hot," he said. "What happened?"

"Stand by," the computer told him, and he stopped in mid-stride. John turned to him and grinned.

"It's processing the results, now. Apparently, it was only the camera by the scanner, back there, that was burned out by the flash."

"Oh."

After a minute, the screen winked back on with a wire frame of the amulet. A yellow line ran from the top left of the screen, to the center of the amulet at the crystal's apex. At the apex, the line disappeared. But immediately around the amulet, was a white aura. The yellow line and the white aura both displayed details about their contents.

"That must have been the flash," Sir Ed commented. "It looks like it's made up of 100% visible light. But what was the source that set it off?"

Lee was examining the data on the screen. "I don't know. This looks like a wave, but... Computer, what is the power source used?"

"Object was triggered by an Opal beam."

"What is an Opal beam?"

"Waveguide discovered by Professor Power, code-named the Opal beam, is a high speed cosmic particle." The computer displayed a wave graph, along with a few lines of data below it.

They all studied the graph. After a moment, John, Tom, Denise and Robert said in unison, "Never heard of it."

"What was the result of the bombardment by the Opal beam?"

"Beam caused a transdimensional refraction."

"There's that word again," Joseph said. "What does 'transdimensional' mean? Anybody?"

"The computer seems to be telling us that this amulet is somehow connected to a dimension of existence other than ours," Lee explained.

Denise looked up at him. "You mean, like the fourth dimension? Or subspace, or

something?"

"You've been watching too much Star Trek," Bobby chided. "Subspace..."

"Call it what you will," Lee said. "If it's true, it must mean the microcircuitry controls the access to that other dimension. It could serve to open a gateway of sorts, that would allow objects to cross the dimensions."

"Objects?"

"Possibly even living objects."

"Hold on!" Ed stepped back and threw up his hands. "You still think Athena and some other girl changed places, out there? Come on, Prime, Athena was nowhere near Earth when we saw the change! How could she have changed places with someone millions of miles away?"

"We don't know about the properties of other dimensions," Lee told him. "Distance might mean very little in another..." Lee's voice trailed off, and his focus drifted away from Ed. Everyone waited for Lee to continue. Denise finally reached out and put a hand on his arm, and it seemed to bring him back. Lee looked down at her, then at the rest of the group.

"We need to activate the amulet."

"Activate the amulet?"

"That will solve our mystery," Lee explained. "It may even solve a few other mysteries we still need to deal with."

* * *

It was just after nine, and out in the farmlands, it got dark fast. Most of the families in that part of Ontario, being farmers, were already in bed, if not asleep, and the vast fields were quiet except for the chirpings of crickets.

Somewhere out in the vast fields, a low rumble rolled, and for a minute, the crickets were still. A few heads looked out of bedroom windows, wondering if a late night storm was coming. It was certainly warm and humid enough, any farmer would know, so it would have been no surprise. However, the sky did not look particularly threatening that night, and soon the crickets were chirping again, and one by one, the farmers forgot the noise and slept, to be ready for the next day's work.

* * *

Lee and Sir Ed were repeating the cabin film for the umpteenth time, it seemed to Ed. They had replayed just one section, a few seconds, over and over, and each time they conversed in low tones to each other, or took notes down on a sheet of paper Lee had produced. Even though Ed thought Lee's theory was crazy, he was so intent on his research that Ed could not help but watch, intrigued.

The tape was just starting again. As it ran in slow motion, Ed saw the explosion in the rear

of the cabin that slammed full into Athena from behind. He watched as Athena raised a straining hand to the amulet above her breast. Her lips moved, silent in the vacuum but clearly screaming. The flash. And now she was a college student. Ed had taken to thinking of her that way, after seeing the jeans and oxford shirt for the fifth time at least. Even he had thought, when he first saw this tape, that this girl couldn't be Athena. But the resemblance was there, and Ed could now only believe that Athena changed her costume, maybe even her makeup, this way, and spent much of her time living a normal life.

Had spent.

The tape froze again. The college student was about to be pulled out of the cabin by the vacuum. Her lips were distorted.

"She was trying to say something," Sir Ed told Lee. "Look at that. Looks like she was pronouncing an 'O.' "

"Probably an 'Oo,' " Lee stated. "If she was trying to say the same thing Athena screamed..."

"Computer, replay from the explosion again."

"I guess the computer can't help you with this one?"

Lee looked over his shoulder at Ed, then back at the screen. "It's very difficult to read lips that are screaming, even for an expert. It seems to be beyond the computer's capacity to decipher, as well."

Ed looked at the screen for a moment. "You know," he said slowly, "there isn't any apparent diaphragm on the outer shell of that amulet." Sir Ed turned to look at him, waiting for him to continue. "If there's a pickup inside it, somewhere, it won't pick up such specific sounds as words." Now Lee stopped and looked at Ed.

"It might just need a general vibration."

It suddenly occurred to Ed that he was helping them do something he thought was stupid, anyway. He shook his head, as if to clear away the cobwebs, pushed off of the door jamb he'd been leaning on, and walked back out of the computer room. Lee and Sir Ed watched him go, and exchanged glances with each other.

Lee abruptly turned back to the computer. "Computer, replay audio record, beginning at the explosion." The speakers came on, and they listened closely as they watched the screen. There was the sharp explosion first, blending into the scream of escaping air. They heard something of Athena's voice as she screamed, before the sound died out altogether. "Freeze. Isolate sound from time index 4:8:44:19:10 to 4:8:44:19:16. Playback." They listened to the six seconds' cacophony intently. "Computer, remove background noise from escaping atmosphere. Playback." The tape played again, but this time the roaring whistle from the air was gone. The sound quality was noticeably better, but still not clear. "Computer, remove the sound produced by the explosion. Playback."

This time, when playback began, there was no constant noise from the rest of the background. Instead, staccato bursts of sound, bits that the computer had not managed to filter out, beat like static on the speakers. The intermittent explosions of sound bits, mixed in

with the silence, were almost too much to listen to.

But in the midst of the static, Athena opened her mouth, and the spaces of silence were overwhelmed by the static that was her scream. It was still not understandable, it was hardly audible, but it was something.

"Computer," Lee said, "Sample that and save it as A-V-1." Lee stood up and took the amulet, which Tom had left by them on the console. "Let's clear a space off of the tarp."

Everyone regathered to watch as Lee placed the amulet on the tarp, then cleared the rest of the debris away in a ten-foot radius around it. He asked everyone to join him in the computer room, behind the glass wall that separated it from the lab. After a few confused glances, they slowly complied.

Once everyone was behind the glass wall, Lee told them, "You should all turn away. If this works, it will likely produce a blinding flash." While most of them turned to face the computer, Bobby reached into a pocket and produced a pair of dark sunglasses. He put them on and faced the amulet, giving Lee a grin. Lee offered a rare smile in return, then turned to the computer himself.

"Computer, focus the speakers in the lab on the face of the amulet. Broadcast sample A-V-1, adjusting amplitude and modulation according to these parameters." Lee typed a few equations onto the keyboard. "Begin when ready."

Less than a second later, the sound byte Lee had sampled called across the lab. Thanks to the focus of the sound system, it seemed to them all that the amulet itself had made the sound, and a few of them turned to look full at the amulet, before they remembered the flash warning and turned back. The sound byte repeated, but this time, it was slightly higher pitched. Again, and now the tone seemed to have a slightly more treble quality to it.

The sound byte repeated over and over, each time producing a slightly different variation of the same muffled theme. Everyone watched the computer's monitor screen, except Bobby, who continued to stare directly at the amulet through his shades. Eventually the byte changed in speed, as well, moving faster and slower and sounding closer together. It soon became jarring, and Ed noticed the muscles in Denise's jaw and neck tighten. He was soon compelled to put his own hands over his ears, and was about to ask Lee to lower the volume on the speakers.

He never got the request out. The room was suddenly bathed in a white light like a bolt of lightning, bright enough to banish every shadow from the lab. Most of them were startled enough to cry out, and brought hands up to their strobe-shocked eyes. Bobby squalled painfully and almost smacked his head into the glass wall, so quickly did he duck his head away from the flash.

Lee was likewise blinded by the flash. He stood perfectly still, blinking to clear his eyes from their temporary blindness. The others were rubbing their eyes, cursing, or groping for something to steady themselves against.

Ed was first to notice the silence. "Thank God that noise is stopped!" There were quite a few affirming noises from the rest, then a few nervous chuckles.

Then a shuddering sob.

Everyone froze. The noise hadn't come from the computer room. It had come from the lab. They turned slowly, still blinking tears out of their eyes, and tried to see into the lab. They realized there was a mist beyond the glass wall, a white cloud that did not seem inclined to clear. Led by Lee, they slowly walked around the glass and up to the edge of the tarp. Came another hollow, mucous-filled sob, and they stopped dead. Lee took one more step into the slowly-clearing mist, and stooped down.

"Athena."

Lee supposed he knew as much about the super-powered beings that populated his planet as anyone else. He had seen films and tapes of Athena lifting autos, holding elevators up by their cables, punching through stone and metal, holding her own against foes five times her size. He had never really expected to see her so badly hurt by anything.

It made so much more of an impact, therefore, to see Athena lying on the tarp, her upper body burned and bruised, her lower body missing, from the lower ribcage down. Athena had been cut in half. Blue and black organs slid against each other in the exposed body cavity, and slowly pushed out onto the tarp. A pool of blood under her widened and darkened rapidly. She moaned, eyes wide open but unseeing, hands clenching and unclenching.

Cass fainted. Bobby and Joseph both ran in opposite directions, and were soon heard losing their respective lunches. Denise fought back a high whine, and fell to her knees. Ed spun on a heel and stood still, clutching his sides.

Lee had spent enough years living among island populations to see a few shark bite victims, and Athena's condition was very similar. He also noted that none of his men had turned or run upon seeing her, and he took a measure of pride in that. There was no doubt that, even with her incredible strength and metabolism, Athena was seconds from death. He laid a hand on her cheek.

"Athena. Can you hear me?" Athena did not seem to hear, but she seemed to respond to Lee's touch. Lee tried again. "Athena. You are very brave, but your time is come. Please help us. Athena."

Slowly, Athena's eyes focused. She tilted her head toward Lee, and her eyes fixed on his. She worked her mouth, but made no sound.

"Athena. You must help us. Your ship was destroyed. All of the others are gone. Did you see what did it?" Lee spoke slowly and deliberately, never taking his eyes off of Athena's. "Can you tell us what attacked you?" He saw a flicker of emotion on her face. "Tell us what attacked you, Athena."

Athena was staring full into Lee's eyes. She slowly lifted a hand, and Lee took it in his. She strained a bit, and blood-caked lips parted. "I..." she croaked, swallowed. "I... am back on Gaea?"

"Yes," Lee said softly, "you are back on Earth... on Gaea. Tell us what attacked you."

"Mossta..." she whispered, then worked her mouth, and tried again. "M-monster. Orcus. Attacked from Phlegethon..." She shook her head, tried to get her message across. "We were struck from Phlegethon..." She faded, and her head rested against Lee's hand.

"What's she talking about?" John asked. "If these are Grecian references..."

"They are," Lee confirmed. "Orcus was one of the gods of Hell, or Orcus, as it was also known in ancient history. And Phlegethon was the river of fire that traversed it." He looked up at John. "Hell is also known as 'Limbo.' "

John started. "You think she's talking about... wherever she just came from?"

An urgent grunt came from Athena, and Lee looked back to her. "Y-yes. Phlegethon is where I came from. Orcus is there."

"What is it?" Lee asked.

"It... travels the Phlegethon. It feeds on energy. Living energy. It feeds on living planets."

"What does it look like? What is it made of?"

Athena sighed. "It is... beyond you," she whispered. "The heavens themselves... float on the surface of Phlegethon. It wades through..." She coughed lightly, and a trickle of blood escaped her lips. "It struck when I was entering Phlegethon. Most vulnerable. It cut through me..." She trailed off, and a tear ran slowly down a bruised cheek. "She was safe. She might have lived. But I was weak..."

"What? Who?" Lee squeezed her hand. "Who might have lived?"

"Amy..." she could not speak for a moment, but sobbed in grief, and her severed torso jerked horribly with each ragged breath. "In my weakness, I tried to. Amy, I'm so sorry..."

"The other girl," John realized. "You were right, Lee."

Lee didn't seem to hear. "Athena. You must help us. How do we stop it? What can we do?"

Athena moved her head from side to side, as if trying to marshal her strength. "Between... the surface is the vulner..." she faded for a moment, before she could continue. "Strike between the worlds."

She reached out and put a charred hand on Lee's arm. Even as weak as she was, the grip she put on Lee was considerable. "I regret that... we have failed you all," she whispered. "In our vanity and ignorance, we... have left Gaea unprotected. You are Gaea's sole defense. It is up to you... save the world..."

She seemed to deflate, bereft of energy. Then, she looked up into Lee's eyes again. "Please... do not activate the amulet again. Amy..." She repeated the name once more, in a tiny voice. Then her eyes lost their focus once again, and in a moment, she was still. Lee reached down and pushed the lids down over her eyes.

They were all silent for long moments. Joseph had returned to the group, wiping his mouth, and said, "Maybe we can match that name she spoke with the face on the tape, and find out who Amy is."

"Shouldn't we..."

"Her family should be notified!" Joseph snapped, then subsided. "The authorities should be notified."

After a moment, Lee nodded, then stood up and walked over to the computer. "Computer, do you have access to DMV records?"

"Yes."

"Using the tape of the unidentified woman, and the first name 'Amy,' try to find a match in DMV files. Start in the state of New York, and work your way outward. Report when you've found a match."

Lee then returned to the mutilated body, where Sir Ed was now kneeling in examination. Bobby had returned from the far corner of the lab he had dashed to. He was still rubbing at red, wet eyes. Cass quietly leaned against Joseph. Denise came up behind Bobby and put her arms around him, and he allowed himself to be cradled. Sir Ed had taken out a pen and a handkerchief, and he dabbed at the masticated edges of flesh with them. He bent down and examined her nose and ears closely, and Lee noted his interest.

"What is it?"

"No blood in the ears or nose," Sir Ed replied. "Usually, when exposed to vacuum, the body develops nosebleeds and ear bleeding. I suppose it's possible that Athena's constitution is sturdier than that, but..." He paused, considering. "Maybe she didn't spend that much time out in the vacuum."

"It's been a month since she's been out there," Tom pointed out.

"Yes," Lee said, "but if we understood her correctly, she was in some other realm or dimension during most of that time... until we just pulled her back, in fact."

"There might be different properties in that other dimension," Sir Ed continued. "Her present condition suggests there may be different rates of time there, much slower than here. Or maybe she was held in stasis. She couldn't have survived long like this."

"I'm still confused about this Amy person," Cass said in a quiet voice.

"Amy and Athena," Lee explained, "apparently shared their existence. Amy lived the day-to-day life of a normal person, probably just like you and me. When Athena was needed, Amy used her amulet, sent herself to some kind of 'holding' dimension, and thereby released Athena from that same dimension. When Athena was done, they would reverse the process." Lee's face then showed a rare display of emotion. "When Athena was attacked, she must have triggered the transformation, either inadvertently or in blind panic. She died before moving to the other dimension, and Amy was brought forth out there."

"Do you think she knew?" Bobby couldn't finish the thought.

"Judging by the film," Lee replied sadly, "she probably knew what was happening, exactly a second before she died."

"Oh, my God," Cass moaned.

"Attention." The computer spoke, and everyone turned. "I have a probable identification."

Everyone crowded back into the computer room, and Lee said, "Go ahead."

The computer promptly displayed an image of a New Jersey driver's license. A young girl's

face adorned the upper corner. "Name Amy Ethyl Greco, of 410 Pritchard lane, South Orange, New Jersey. Age, 22."

They stood silently for a moment, not knowing what to say. It was hard enough coming to terms with one death, but looking at the image of a victim-by-association, a young girl who probably had a rich, full life ahead of her, was like being confronted by an innocent war casualty.

Finally, Lee said, "Give me a hard copy printout of this." He waited until the white paper slid out of a slot on the console. "I'll take this to the police, and try to explain. I'll be back in a few hours." He turned and left the lab, and the rest of them stood together for another minute.

John finally looked up. "Computer: Blank screen."

Monsters

« ^ »

It was a good thing that the computer was doing most of the work. If it had been up to Kris to do this, his lack of sleep for the last few days would have made him, and any data he gathered in that time, useless. Even now, while the computer searched through Genealogical databases, Kris was tossing a small tablet down his throat and washing it down with black coffee, doing his best to stay awake.

He was also getting jittery, and jumping at every sound in the office. He was half-afraid Jer was going to come back to him and pull him off the job, after he'd begged for more time to fully research his new findings. Jer had agreed, but he'd not been thrilled about waiting longer for his report. And it had been two weeks since then. At least, he thought, he did have something to show for it. And it was something.

He had found the Allen Clan a day ago, although it seemed like a week ago, now. The clan was a common ancestry for Tatnall, Mendez, Ryan and Kolsheyev, and now that Athena had been linked to the new missing case of one Amy Greco of New York, she had turned up in the incredible family tree, as well.

A family tree of Superheroes.

Repeatedly Kris had to stifle a giggle, to avoid drawing attention to himself and his data. It was funny because it made so much sense! A single family that carried metahuman abilities in their genes, carried down through the generations, spread with the natural migration of humans around the world. It also made so much sense that so many of the heroes would be in America, the world's Melting Pot.

They must all be related to the same family tree.

How far back did it go? And where did they come from? What made them?

The computer was now attempting to hunt down the answer to the first question, searching through every database at its disposal to trace the clan back to its earliest recorded

roots. It was an incredibly intuitive system, thanks in no small part to Kris' expert programming skills, but Kris doubted it would answer the other two questions without help. He was sure there were other directions he could go in from here, but he was just too tired to think of them. He had to go get some sleep. In the morning, he would know. He'd work it all out. Just a few hours sleep. He glanced at his watch.

4:45 A.M.

Kris groaned.

* * *

Kris awoke with a start, realizing he'd never even left his desk last night. He blearily looked around, to get his bearings. Someone was standing next to him. He blinked, waited for his vision to clear.

It was Julia. She stood there, hands clasped in front of her, looking so fresh as she examined Kris. Why shouldn't she look fresh? She just got here, didn't she?

"Were you here all night?" She asked, making a point not to look at his monitor. A Genealogy graph dominated the screen.

"Oh." Kris tried to gather himself together. "Oh, yeah. Fell asleep before I could leave."

"Whatever you're working on must be pretty good stuff," Julia smiled. "I can't remember the last time I saw you here all night."

"Yeah, it's pretty good. It's a background check, but it's full of surprises." Julia nodded. Sometimes the two of them talked around an issue like this, not out of jealousy or paranoia, but out of a respect for each other's abilities, not to mention security. Julia was easily as good as Kris was in researching, and he was beginning to suspect he'd have to ask her advice on this one, but he wanted to hold out a bit longer. This was a matter of pride. "I've still got a ways to go, but I'm not sure about the next step."

"Okay. Don't work too hard." Julia turned and headed for her cubicle. She stopped a few yards away, and turned back to Kris. "Have you looked for a family crest yet?"

Kris had been facing the screen when she spoke, and hadn't realized she was talking to him. He finally turned in his seat, and blearily mumbled, "Huh?"

"Family crest," Julia repeated, smiling. "It's amazing what one can tell you." She turned and continued on her way. By the time she reached her own cubicle and switched on her computer, there was a message in a neatly bordered box in the center of her screen, waiting for her: That's another lunch I owe you.

* * *

The first person to notice the rock was a young man from Barrie. He just happened to be the first person to drive by the fallow field, just as the sun was coming up and bathing the Ontario landscape in reds and yellows.

The young man, whose name was Claude, was fresh out of college, and raring for work. He had borrowed his brother's car, and was headed for London, where an old friend of the family had told him of a job that had his name written all over it. Because of the distance, and the fact that he had to drive by Toronto at the peak of its rush hour, he was trying to get an early start so he could reach London by 11:00. He was trying not to think about how early he'd have to get up to drive to work, if he didn't find an apartment in London first. He knew he could find one. He was just out of school, and the world was his awaiting oyster.

As he drove south on 400, he glanced over his left shoulder at the fallow field. Claude had been on 400 many times before, and was sure he remembered seeing this farmland. Why, then, did he not seem to remember that huge rock in the corner of the field? He unconsciously slowed the car. The rock was between him and the rising sun, so he could not make out too many details about the rock. He did notice that the field around it did not seem to be disturbed by its being there. But, somehow, the scene was strange to Claude. Curiosity finally got the better of him, and he pulled the car over on the shoulder.

He got out and crossed the street. He had gone far enough past the rock that the sun was no longer behind it, and he could make out more details. The rock was very light in color, almost white, and very smooth. It looked almost like one huge egg, except it had a number of bulges spread unevenly around the smooth surface.

Claude had never noticed a rock like that anywhere in this region. Not that he was a geologist or anything, he thought, but still. What he realized was funny about the sight was the ground. The field seemed to be absolutely undisturbed by the rock in the middle of it. The ground did not stain the side of the rock, or crater around it, or bulge around it, or have a lesser (or greater, he wasn't sure what to expect) amount of grasses immediately around it. It couldn't be a meteorite, without burn marks on it or the surrounding ground. Besides, anything that big falling from the sky would have woken up most of the continent. And it hadn't rained in the last few days, but it looked very clean...

Claude mentally shook himself, realizing he didn't really know what he was thinking about. It just looked weird, that's all. And he didn't have time to check out weird stuff right now. He had a job to apply for.

So Claude jumped back into his car and roared off down 400, making a mental note to take a look at the rock on his way back.

Tom McCollin jumped down out of the good tractor while the engine was running, and listened to it sputter and hesitate like the bad tractor usually had before he'd turned it into a lawn ornament, two years ago. A flicker of worry crossed over his eyes, for a moment. Then he switched the engine off and picked up a pair of pliers from his tool kit. About two minutes later, Tom was looking at the incredibly filthy air cleaner filter he had pulled off, and thanked God and John Deere he could still field-strip a tractor if necessary.

As he turned toward the house to find the garden hose and blow out the filter, he saw a line of smoke tracing the path along his dirt driveway. Tom looked at his watch. 8:45? Who the heck was coming to see them this early in the morning? Holding onto the filter, he walked around to the front of the house to meet their guest.

He reached the head of the driveway, and could now recognize the Jeep Wagoneer that was almost on him. "Hey, Larry!" he called, when the Jeep came to a stop. "Visiting kinda early today, aren't you?"

Larry, a neighboring farmer, climbed down out of his Jeep. "Hey, Tom. I didn't come to visit. I was on my way into town to meet Sarah for breakfast, but I had to stop by. There's this huge, white boulder out on your west fifty."

"Huh? What boulder? Where did it come from?"

"I don't know, I just saw it! But it's as big as your house, Tom! Listen, I gotta go, but you better go take a look. Maybe it's a meteor or something," Larry added, as he climbed back into his Jeep. "If you talk to the press, tell 'em I told you about it!" He circled the Wagoneer around and headed back down the driveway, dirt flying.

"Christ," Tom muttered. "Like I need meteors and stuff falling on my land. Damn good thing it wasn't the wheat field, I guess." He walked over to his old reliable Honda trail bike, in the back of his garage. The trail bike was often the best way to get from field to field in a hurry, Tom had discovered years ago, and he liked to take it out every once in a while. He started it in one kick, threw it in gear, and growled out of the drive. Taking a quick right, he roared across the lawn, bounced over the dirt and hay ridge that surrounded the house, and took off over the fields.

Once he reached the west fifty, he had no trouble finding the white boulder. It was in the corner of the field, just past the trees Tom roared out of. He swerved left, passed the huge white rock, and came to a stop a healthy distance from it. He shut the bike off and spent a moment trying to stand it up in the dirt, but the kickstand kept sinking into the soft earth. Tom finally gave up and left the bike on its side in the dirt.

He walked a bit closer to the boulder, but stopped before he was closer than thirty yards. If it was a meteor, he thought, it might be radioactive, and he didn't want to mess with radiation. Then he took another look at it. It couldn't be a meteor, it was thirty feet tall! And there were no burns on the rock, or in the dirt. But if it wasn't a meteor, where did it come from?

Tom decided to head back to the house and try to figure out who to call about the rock in his field. As he turned around, he realized someone else was on his field, coming his way. He stopped and squinted into the distance, but they were upon him in a moment. It was two of the boys from the neighborhood, Frankie and Beanie, whom Tom regularly saw bicycling past his farm on the way to school. The two boys liked to hang around Tom, and his trail bike, and they often stopped by to see him. Now they were bouncing their bikes along the fallow field, eyes popping out of their sockets.

"Wow! Hey, Mr. McCollin, where'd that rock come from? Is it a meteor? It's huge! What is it?" The questions came too fast for Tom to answer each one, so he waited for the boys to take a breath before he responded.

"I dunno what it is. It just turned up this morning. I was just about to call..." But the boys rode right past him on both sides, right up to the rock. "Hold on, boys, don't get too close to it..."

The boys pulled up next to the rock, laughing and waving at it. Before Tom could chase

them away from it, Frankie reached out to touch the white rock.

“Frankie, don’t tou—”

There was a crack, like an electrical arc or a giant spark plug. Frankie lit up like a strobe, and flew backward twelve feet through the air. He hit the ground like a sack of potatoes, and did not move. His clothing began smoking.

“Jesus Christ! Frankie!”

* * *

John leaned back from the computer console and rubbed his eyes with both hands. He had spent the night, along with Lee and Sir Ed, poring over data and computer simulations in an effort to piece a complex puzzle together. Sir Ed had already given up to exhaustion hours ago, when he could no longer focus on the computer screens. John was about at that point, himself. Only Lee Prime seemed to be wide awake, and busy typing simulation formulas into the computer. John stretched and yawned, throwing his arms out behind his head.

“Hey!” Denise ducked just in time to avoid a left hook from John’s outstretched hand, and barely managed to hold the platter in her hands level. John turned around, still yawning, and slowly realized what he’d almost done. “Oh. Sorry,” he grinned sheepishly.

“I brought you all something to eat,” Denise smiled, placing the platter between John and Lee. “You two have been at it all night, haven’t you?”

John nodded, and looked over the platter. Sliced fruits, eggs, bacon, biscuits and juice for two filled the large plate. “Oh, God, it’s morning, isn’t it?” Denise nodded. “I had no idea...” He took one of the small plates holding eggs and bacon, and added peach slices to it, then a biscuit. “Lee, have some.”

Up until then, Lee hadn’t looked up. He finally glanced at the plate, then up at Denise. “Thank you. It looks great. Could you place it there, please?” He nodded at a blank spot on the console, his hands never leaving the console. Denise’s smile flagged only slightly, but she put the platter in the indicated spot, then sat down behind them both. Lee continued to work over the console, and when he had to wait for the computer to process a computation, he reached over and took fruit slices and biscuits from the platter.

“Have you found something significant?” Denise asked.

“I think so,” Lee replied. “At least, I’ve found theoretical evidence for the existence of Phlegethon.”

“Which is what, exactly?” Denise asked.

“Another dimension.”

Denise slowly lifted out of her seat. “You’ve found evidence of another dimension?”

“Theoretical evidence,” Lee repeated. “I have no concrete proof, although the amulet seems to be proof enough. But I’ve been feeding theoretical and conceptual data into the computer. Back in ‘88, two scientists named Rovelli and Smolin studied a new translation of Einstein’s

equations by a physicist named Ashtekar. They tied the translations into a mathematical study known as knot theory, and discovered a strong connection. The theories describe space as a chain mail-like fabric, each loop representing a bit of space measuring ten to the minus-33 centimeters across."

"That's smaller than atoms themselves," Denise marveled.

Lee nodded. "Very good. And more: These loops might provide an explanation of gravity at the microcosmic level, as well as suggest that some of the loops could be part of a region of space we cannot directly interact with." Lee gestured at certain panels on the vast computer in front of him. "Apparently Professor Power was also familiar with these theories, and I think he'd already put them to use. I offer as proof the on-board tape, which indicated the presence of gravity control aboard his ship. The same equations probably gave him a means to observe other regions of space. And if we tie in what we know of Athena and her amulet, there is a strong possibility that 'Phlegethon,' and the region of space Power had access to, are one and the same."

Denise's brow was now deeply furrowed in concentration. "Do you think there really is an 'Orcus,' then?" she asked.

"It may be what we're looking for," Lee admitted. "Although, given the information we have, Athena would have been more accurate if she had said 'Charybdis.' "

Denise's shoulders dropped visibly. "I'd barely figured out loops and Orcus, yet. What's Charybdis?"

"Another Greek mythological creature," Lee explained. "But as opposed to a monster from Hell, Charybdis is a sea monster."

"Why would that be more accurate?"

"Because of the nature of the dimensions," Lee told her. "I don't believe Phlegethon is a dimension parallel to ours, or existing in another 'mystical' reality. I think this other dimension Athena referred to is literally the Fourth Dimension. The dimension beyond our own three dimensional universe."

"I think you're losing me," Denise said. "I thought time is the fourth dimension."

"According to some theories, perhaps," Lee said. "But scientists have also postulated as many as twelve dimensions, none of which are apparent to us. What we're talking about is the dimension immediately beyond ours, spatially."

Denise looked at Lee in confusion, so Lee quickly looked about the room. His eyes fixed on John's glass of juice, which had been sitting in a CD-sized can lid to catch the condensation. Lee picked up the glass and handed it to John, revealing a small pool of water in the lid.

"See this water? Suppose the very top of the water was the second dimension. Length and width, but no depth. Suppose you are a life form that lives in that dimension. You are not aware of anything happening anywhere, except for your plane of existence. I can hold up my hand, here, and the organism would not know I'm here."

"Uh-huh," Denise nodded slowly.

"If I extend a finger into the water." Lee lowered his index finger into the water, creating a small ripple in its surface as his fingertip touched its surface. "To the denizens of the second dimension, my finger just appeared out of nowhere. And the only part of it they can see is the part in their two dimensions. They have no idea about the rest of me. That's what happens if a creature from the dimension beyond ours pierces our dimension. We see a small three-dimensional part, but it's nothing compared to the rest of it, beyond our perceptions."

"Charybdis...?"

Lee nodded. "I use the reference of Charybdis because a sea monster, under the surface of the ocean, could swim up to attack anything on the two-dimensional surface of the water, and never be seen by its two-dimensional prey, until it cuts through that dimension to feed. To the prey, your attacker appears, without warning, from out of nowhere."

John, who had been silently eating throughout this, sipped down his juice. "Chilling thought, huh? A shark from the fourth dimension."

"We can only hope it is a shark," Lee commented.

"Why?" Denise asked.

"Because a shark is basically a dumb animal, operating purely on instinct," Lee explained. "If it is intelligent, it will be much harder for us to kill."

"Which begs the question," Denise remarked.

"Yes, it does," Lee agreed. "Unfortunately, we don't have much information about its structure. We also don't know how to confront it on its own territory, so to speak."

"What can we do?"

"We think Athena's dying words are a clue," John replied. " 'Strike between the worlds,' she said. She suggested the thing cut her in half when she was 'between the worlds.' And we've looked closer at the data and tapes from the telemetry. The weird thing we saw sweep through the ship may have been the manifestation of the creature when it passed into our dimension."

"It's possible the creature is most vulnerable to attack when it is intruding into our dimension," Lee continued. "We may be able to seriously injure or kill it, in much the same way a two-dimensional race on the surface of the water might run a band saw through their dimension and cut a three-dimensional wader in half."

"You have quite a way with words," Denise commented.

"I'd much rather have a way with time," Lee said.

Denise paused. "You mean...?"

"According to the computer, Doc Tomorrow detected the creature forty million miles from Earth, forty-one days ago. The ship was destroyed about thirty-six million miles from Earth, five days later. Do the math. If it continues at that speed on its present course, it will reach Earth in another ten days."

* * *

Route 400 was closed off a mile in each direction by police cordons, causing miles-long backups on the highway. On the local roads, the police had sawhorses up on either side of the McCollin farm. An emergency unit had picked up the boy, and was rushing him to the hospital, but the prognosis was not good. Tom was at one of the roadblocks, answering rather pointless questions posed by the police detectives. He had shot the morning like this, and could hardly concentrate on the police's questions for thinking about his wheat field, so he was getting antsy by the time the black police van drove up.

"Is that the SWAT team?" Tom growled. "It's about time..." He didn't finish the thought. The van door swung open, and a metallic black boot tromped onto the ground. Tom, and the rest of the bystanders, all went silent and stared at the boot.

A second boot planted itself on the ground, and the owner of the boots stepped from around the door. Tom's mouth dropped open, and his eyes goggled at the sight. The metallic boots were topped by black metallic leggings, complete with knee, thigh and shin pads. Hard storage packs encircled the waist, and above that, a black molded hard suit completely covered the torso. Black sleeves, made of the same metallic fabric and pads of the leggings, were additionally adorned with shiny metal control pads below each wrist. More padding at each shoulder and the collarbone sat below a tight-fitting helmet and dark visor. A short metal antenna jutted upward from the right ear of the helmet.

The effect was like that of a black robot, stepping out of the truck. Five more robot-like suits followed the first. Each slowly walked up to the fence at the end of the field, and stopped in a file facing the white rock beyond.

The bystanders, and quite a few of the police, began whispering excitedly. This was the first time these new SWAT suits had been seen in public, since Canadian officials decided to take steps against the wave of terrorism and criminal acts that erupted after the loss of the superheroes. Quite a few of the police who were briefed on the project were looking forward to this trial by fire, and they were recognizable by their silence in the babbling crowd.

One of the police detectives walked up to the first of the black team. "Anderson, have you been briefed?"

The black helmet nodded. "We weren't given much real information," a filtered voice replied.

"Don't look at me, we just found out ourselves!..."

"We'll have to get closer." The helmet turned to the rest of the team. No word was heard, but simultaneously the black suits climbed easily over the wooden fence, and started across the field.

When the black team reached the rock, they spread out around it, keeping ten yards distant. The leader approached an extra two yards, and stopped. "Billie," the leader intoned. "Scan it. What's it made of?"

Another of the team lifted its arm and, with its other hand, began typing on the wrist pad. After a moment, it shook its head. "It's not rock, Sarge. It's got a hard shell, but it's soft inside.

There are organics in there!"

"Organics?" the leader replied. "What do you mean, Billie? Is something or someone inside it?"

"No," Billie replied. "More like the entire inside. It's pretty solid inside, kind of like a sponge, according to the scans."

"Any reaction to us?" another one asked.

"Uh uh."

"Whatever it is, it hospitalized a kid this morning. As far as I'm concerned, it's toast. Right, Sarge?"

The one addressed as Sarge picked up a rock, and tossed it against the white mass. It thumped harmlessly off its surface, and fell to the ground.

"No reaction," Billie said.

"It shocked that kid, though," one of them pointed out. "Our suits are grounded. I'll go up and touch it."

Sarge looked at them. "Okay, Don, go for it. Slow. Billie, watch your readings."

Don began moving slowly forward. Billie continued monitoring as he stepped closer. Don came within a meter of the surface, and stopped.

"Electrostatic buildup," Billie replied. "The suit should handle it."

Don nodded, then put out a hand. As his gloved fingers approached the white shell, electric arcs danced around his hand and lit the space between glove and rock. Suddenly, lightning danced around Don's body, charging the air around him and lighting up the entire field. Don lost his balance, and fell backward onto the smoking grass. The lightning show stopped a moment later.

"You okay, Don?"

"Yeah, Sarge," Don replied, already getting to his feet. "I'm half-blind, though."

"Amanda, Stone," Sarge said. "Lasers. See if you can cut the top off." The two other suits pulled rifle-sized mechanisms from side holsters and leveled them at the top of the rock. "Go," Sarge commanded.

Twin beams of laser light arced out from the officers, striking the top of the white object. Where they touched, bolts of lightning cracked and flashed angrily. Stone seemed to be painting on its surface, while Amanda ran her beam along the top as if opening a soft-boiled egg. White smoke began to pour from its top, illuminated by St. Elmo's fire.

Suddenly, a blast like a sonic boom knocked the officers violently to their backs. Amanda and Stone cut their lasers off, but not before a few seconds of wild firing that sent bystanders rushing for cover.

Sarge was the first to struggle upright. "Tech Squad!" he called out. "On your feet!" The squad regained their feet quickly. "Forty meters back. Arm grenade rifles!" The squad moved

back, keeping their eyes on the still-smoking white mass while priming their rifles for grenade fire. When they were all ready, they leveled their weapons at the target. Sarge used a red laser sight to mark a spot about mid-height, and the others all aimed at the same spot.

“FIRE!”

Six rifles cracked simultaneously, and less than a heartbeat afterward, the white mass erupted in noise and flame. Lightning shot straight out from the breach, sending bolts of energy over the heads of the bystanders. Sarge grabbed his laser then, and fired into the breach. “Hank and Lei! Put another grenade in there! Billie, talk to me!”

Two more rifle shots preceded two more explosions, this time inside the mass. The hard shell cracked, and more lightning danced along the fault lines. Billie had slung her rifle, and was using her wrist pad again. “It’s burning inside!” she called out. “If it keeps up like this, it’ll be consumed in fifteen minutes.” Even as she spoke, a lick of fire leapt out of the breach, and within a minute, it blazed.

Twenty minutes later, the flame had become a pall of smoke. Most of the hard shell had burned and crumbled, and the white mass could no longer be seen above ground. Sarge walked up beside Billie. “What took it so long?” Billie just shrugged. Sarge continued up to the smoky remains. The white mass had left a crater behind. Amanda, Lei and Don joined him. They could see signs of the hard shell embedded on the sides of the irregular crater.

“Looks like almost two thirds of it was below ground,” Lei remarked. “What the hell was that thing?”

“I don’t know,” Sarge said. “But I hope it doesn’t have kin.”

* * *

The first report in New York City came in at about ten A.M. to the switchboard. The report was a bit confused (due to the fact that it was called in by an excited Arab merchant, and no one at the switchboard on that shift spoke Arabic), so it was two and a half hours later that two uniformed cops showed up at the waterfront warehouse to check it out. They instructed the bystanders to remain outside; then they went inside, closing the door behind them.

Three minutes later, a thunderous boom shook the corrugated walls of the warehouse, and knocked every windowpane into the street. Less than one minute after that, the policemen exited the building. One of them struggled to support the other, whose sleeve was charred and smoking. They made their way back to their patrol car, and the uninjured officer made an excited but crystal clear report to his superiors.

A bit before one P.M., the report was directed to the Elite SWAT department. At one nineteen, the SWAT van with the distinctive red streak pulled up at the side entrance to the warehouse and disgorged its EPAG-wearing occupants.

Bert McCoy was the first out of the van, giving the old building a good once over while tugging his gloves into place. Commander Frank Jackson was next out of the van, followed by the rest of the squad. Frank pointed, and three of the cops headed for the far side of the building. Frank turned back to Bert, who was pointing to a small paneless window about twelve feet off of the ground. Frank nodded to Bert, and without another word, Bert vaulted

the twelve feet to the window and chinned himself up.

There happened to be a number of crates piled up on the side of the building Bert was on, and he pulled himself up a bit more to see over them. He could make out a large object not quite in the center of the warehouse. At first it looked like a large pile of white sand in the low light. Once Bert adjusted the night lenses on his visor, he could see lumpy protrusions on the white mass that could only mean a solid shell.

"Can you see it?" Frank asked.

"Yeah, I see it," Bert replied. "But it looks like nothing I've seen before. Looks like it's about fifteen feet tall. It's not moving."

"Okay. Come on down. Martha, you at the door?"

"I'm here," Martha replied. "I read a solid object, hard shell. Contents reads like... I dunno, like thick gelatin or something. Maybe plant matter."

Eddie Cloud stood beside Martha at the door, and looked inside. "That's a plant?"

"It's got a weird heat signature," Martha continued. "It's almost eighty degrees outside, but it's below zero at its center."

"That's no plant," Eddie commented. "It's a giant baked Alaska."

Frank appeared at the door beside Martha. "Any sign of electrical activity? Any charge in the air?" Martha checked her scanning equipment, and after a moment, shook her head. Frank stepped into the building, followed by Martha and Eddie. He searched the wall for a moment, found an old knife switch, and threw it. The warehouse was bathed in light from overhead bulbs that gridded the ceiling. Three bulbs, those closest to the white object, appeared to be burnt out, but there was still plenty of light on the object.

"Come in slow, team." Frank walked slowly up to the object, circling to the left about ten feet from its side. He stopped when he saw Craig, who had come in from the side entrance. "Everyone monitor your static backgrounds." Frank lifted his arm and, without bothering to point, fired his laser at the side of the object.

The laser beam struck, and the warehouse was instantly lit by lightning emanating from the impact point. A few bolts jumped roughly at Frank, but most of them fired randomly around the room. Frank stopped firing, and another five seconds later, the lightning also stopped.

"That must be what got the uniform," Craig stated. "Great defense mechanism."

"Yeah?" Tom chimed in. "What the hell is it, that it needs to electrocute anyone who leans on it?"

"I got a better one," Pat said from beside him. "Why were we called in to dispose of it?"

"A Hazmat team is supposed to be on its way to meet us," Lonnie reminded them. "But I don't think they're equipped to deal with lightning bolts."

"So call Con Ed."

"It's not part of their equipment, so they didn't want to be bothered."

"Well, we may have to call them in, anyway," Frank said.

* * *

"Buddy-O-mine," Arn said as he unlocked a heavy steel cabinet in his basement, "the rate at which you go through ammunition would make Rambo proud."

"Don't I know it," Woody shook his head in amazement. He was sitting on the floor, with his back against one of Arn's display cases, still in his outfit. He had trouble thinking of it as a uniform. "I mean, the normal people are nothing. If I have to, I squeeze off a few rounds, that's it. But those fucking monsters!" He drained the Bud in his hand and reached for the six-pack. "If it weren't for your heavy firepower, I wouldn't stand a chance with those things!"

"I thought you knew so many ways to take down opponents. Judo, pressure points, things like that."

"Even judo doesn't work on Mac trucks. And they don't have the same soft spots. And damned if they'll let you take all day to look for 'em!"

Most of the basement was dark, to prevent light spilling upstairs to attract attention. But in the back of the basement, Arn had two antique lamps made from matching mortar shells, and they were switched on. The speaker connected to the store radio was playing Foghat, also low, to prevent outside ears hearing. Arn and Woody had met down here quite a few times in the last few weeks, to replenish Woody's ammo supply. Arn never seemed to run out of the expensive arms he gave Woody, nor did he seem to have trouble paying for them. Whatever wheeling and dealing Arn did on the side, it was obviously paying off for him.

Arn opened the cabinet. It was deeper than it looked outside, and inside it held numerous boxes of ammo and ammo belts, brackets of grenades and mini-missiles, and clips of specialty projectiles made for autopistol use. He reached in and began pulling out boxes. "So: What's it like out there, Wood?"

Woody pulled on his beer, considered a moment. "Well, it's definitely an experience. When you're after someone, or casing a hideout, it's a lot like the ultimate stakeout. 'Course, things get real weird when you're facing down the Tank, or the Red Menace, or Spyder. I mean, those guys can kill you with their bare hands, if you're not careful. But in a lot of cases, my police training sort of kicks in, and I can handle it. And this stuff helps." He swept a hand around the basement, then over the gear on his outfit.

"I didn't mean that, exactly," Arn said. "I mean, what's it like being the only one out there between the bad guys and the people? All that responsibility. The self-reliance. The solitude. What's that like?"

Woody sat silently, thinking about the question. Arn locked the cabinet back up, and reached for the speaker mounted on the wall beside it. He turned down the volume knob, now that the music had segued to news, sat down next to Woody against the display case, and reached for a Bud himself. They looked at each other a moment, before they pulled on their beers. Woody stifled a burp, and wiped his mouth with the back of a finger.

"It's hard to put into words," he finally replied. "You get a sort of confidence out there... it's a lot like being a cop, but more, somehow. And I'm very... aware of the fact that I'm only

answering to myself, out there. I killed the Sphynx. But I've seen the list of people he's murdered. I could've killed the Tank, but he's never killed anybody, according to the records. But he's maimed dozens of people, done untold amounts of property damage, and never showed any regard for anyone other than himself... I think it's just blind luck he hasn't killed anyone. And I almost deliberately snuffed him. But I stopped myself. I just couldn't do it to him, no matter how much of a scum he was."

Woody took a long pull off his bottle. Arn took a pull from his. Arn turned to Woody. "And if you find out he's killed somebody?"

"I'll nuke the sonofabitch." Woody suddenly craned his neck up at the wall. "What was that?"

"What?"

"On the news," Woody said, sliding back up the wall and reaching for the volume knob on the speaker. The news report was still on.

"... near Humphrey street. Reports indicate the object is electrically charged, and has injured a number of people and knocked out power on the block. ConEd has been dispatched to the site, and paramedics are already tending to shock victims. The white object seems to be the second reported in the New York area tonight, and eyewitness reports indicate they simply appeared from nowhere, and look like giant sacks of yeast..."

Arn and Woody stared at each other during the news report. Then they simultaneously took a mouthful of beer, swallowed, and said, "What the fuck?"

* * *

"Attention. Attention. I have a flagged police broadcast."

Lee Prime looked up from the pad he was jotting notes into. The computer had spoken to him, unbidden, after the last hour of silence. "What?" he said simply.

"I have a flagged police broadcast. I am programmed to monitor public broadcasts and flag any items which are unusual or of specific interest to my parameters."

Lee shrugged. "Play the broadcast."

The computer began replaying the police band transmissions, simultaneously printing the text of the broadcast on the small screen. Lee followed the broadcast and watched the screen for information about the broadcast locations.

Suddenly he leapt out of his chair and whipped into the lab. He flashed by John and Tom, who were silently examining more of the spacecraft wreckage. "Lee?" John called after him, standing up from the debris.

When Lee reappeared, he was carrying a suitcase-sized canister and heading for the corridor. Now Tom stood up, calling out, "Lee, where are you going?"

"Come on, you two! I may need your help," Lee threw over his shoulder. "Sir Ed, keep working on our equations. We'll be back." With that, he strode toward the elevators.

John and Tom exchanged glances, then smiled at each other. "All right!" Tom exclaimed. "I was starting to feel cooped up in here, anyway!" He and John bolted after Lee, catching up to him just as the elevator doors opened.

* * *

The Hazmat unit finally arrived, twenty minutes after Con Ed's lone technician showed up. The technician had taken one look in the warehouse, then returned to his truck and remained there. "I don't know what that thing is," the technician told Frank, "but bothering with it is not in my job description." The Hazmat unit likewise didn't want to get too close to it without knowing more about it, and as that risked electric shock, they were content to wait outside with the Con Ed man.

One of the Hazmat boys, their supervisor, was in a corner talking to Martha about her readings. Frank, bored after standing around for the last hour, walked over to them. "Tell me something."

The Hazmat supervisor looked at Frank, a bit goggle-eyed over their high-tech outfits. "Officer, I'm looking over this data right now, but I don't have the slightest clue what that thing is."

"No clue at all?"

"Sir, they pay me to identify chemicals, package them safely, and haul them away. If I've got a sample, I can tell you what's in it. But I don't know what it all makes up." He pointed into the warehouse. "That's a mystery to me."

"What about tearing it apart... killing it... whatever?"

The Hazmat man shrugged. "Well, you said it's charged, so water might burn it out. But you could electrocute everybody here. Didn't that laser of yours burn it at all?"

"Not much," Frank replied. "Just poked a hole in it."

"What about those grenade launchers? Put a grenade in that hole."

"The hole wasn't that big," Frank told him. "But maybe we should work on widening it a bit. Lonnie!" Frank found his sharpshooter. "Get some explosive shells from the truck, and meet us inside. Pat, Bert, Eddie, follow me."

A cab screeched up to the side of the building as the ESWAT team reentered the warehouse. The rear doors flew open, and Lee Prime, John Simpson and Tom Poor piled out of the cab. Lee carried a meter-long metal canister with him. They headed for the warehouse door, and were promptly blocked by Craig Pierce.

Tom looked the uniform and all-enclosing helmet up and down. "What are you dressed up for?"

"Police," Craig said simply. His voice sounded vaguely sinister through the helmet speaker. "For your own safety, gentlemen, stay away from the building."

"My name is Lee Prime," Lee offered. "I know a great deal about the organism you have in

that warehouse. I need to examine it."

"You can't do that," Craig said. "That thing electrocutes everyone that gets near it..."

There was a sudden boom inside, followed by flashes and cracks of lightning. A single bolt lanced out of the open door, and narrowly missed striking the bystanders. Craig abruptly shoved the crowd against the far wall as easily as he would coax a child across the street.

"What's going on?" Lee called over the commotion.

"We're attempting to subdue the..."

"Subdue!" John repeated. "It's not a bank robber! We need to study it! It could be a matter of life and death!"

"Sorry, sir..."

There was another explosion, and the building could be seen to shudder. The ESWAT cop stopped and turned to the warehouse door. After a moment, the rest of the ESWAT team filed out of the building. Lee watched them gesture back and forth, although he heard no voices, and realized they were all communicating by radio. One of the officers broke off from the group and walked up to them. He took off his helmet and cradled it in the crook of his arm.

"I'm Commander Frank Jackson," he said, extending a hand to Lee. "I understand you know something about that thing in there?"

"Is there anything left of it?" Lee asked. "We need samples of it for study. It's a very dangerous organism, possibly a harbinger of a much larger threat."

Frank regarded him dubiously for a moment, then stood aside. "We had to blow it up. There's bits of it around the warehouse. You're welcome to whatever you can get."

Lee did not comment further. He turned and strode into the warehouse with the canister. John and Tom followed, Tom flashing a dirty look at the officers.

The trio stopped at the door and looked around. There was an irregular oval hole in the warehouse floor, still smoldering from the apparent explosion. The hole was twice as deep as it was wide, and seemed to indicate that the object had the same bumpy surface below ground as it had above. Bits of meaty material were around the hole, clean-white or burnt black and everything in between. Lee put the canister down and opened the cap on one end. He removed two sets of gloves, a set of tongs, and a small remote-control sized device. "Gather up what you can. Fill the canister, if you can." Lee took the hand held device and approached the hole in the warehouse floor.

At the edge of the hole, Lee crouched down and extended the small device. Without touching the edge of the hole, he ran the device slowly along the hole, then down a few inches into it. He noticed a small bit of material embedded into the side of the hole, and passed the device over it.

Lee looked back toward the door. John and Tom were both gathering good samples of the white material and depositing them into the canister with the tongs. Lee stood and walked out of the warehouse, approaching Frank again.

"Your officer said something about electrical charges."

"The object burned a uniformed officer with an electrical charge," Frank told him. "When we fired on it, it shot lightning bolts out from the impact points."

"So, it fired off electrical charges after being touched. Did it fire off any bolts when no one was bothering it?"

"Apparently not."

Lee turned to a scuffling at the warehouse door. Tom and John walked out together, carrying the canister between them. He turned back to Frank. "Thank you, officer. We'll get out of your way."

The three of them returned to the waiting cab, put the canister in the trunk, and loaded inside. "Back to Power Tower," Lee ordered.

"Hey, hey, waitaminit!" Frank called out as they closed the cab door. "So, what is that thing?"

Lee rolled the window down. "It seems to be part of what killed the superheroes."

"Shit!" Frank seemed on the verge of stepping away from the building. "What's it doing here?"

"Preparing to consume the rest of us," Lee replied as the cab pulled away.

Heroes

« ^ »

Reports began coming in from all around the globe. In the space of a week, almost two dozen of the white shells of jelly had appeared around the world. They generally turned up in areas of high human or animal populations, which was why they were discovered fairly soon.

Quite a number of cities in Europe and America were prepared to deal with the threat immediately, due to the fact that the absence of heroes had forced them to create their own high-tech police units similar to New York's ESWAT team. Most of the rest of the world depended on their country's armies to deal with the threats, and they proved equal to the task with their firepower.

Throughout the week, Lee Prime monitored the world's progress through the Power's computer, noting any patterns that emerged from the "preliminary invasion," as he referred to it. Ed Stadtler and the rest of SB Consultants were naturally curious about his theories, and had continued to assist his research in Power Tower. One evening, when most of the people in the Tower had gone to sleep, Ed found Lee still in the lab, hunched over a device the size of a large car. In the center of the device, a glass cube with a metal top face held a large chunk of the white mass they had recovered from the downtown warehouse. A readout screen scrolled endless strings of numbers across its length, which Lee watched unblinkingly. "Know what

that stuff is, yet?" Ed asked, once it became clear that Lee was not going to look up at his approach.

"My examinations of the material from the warehouse reveal semi-organized protoplasm, with a highly conductive cellular membrane. It seems to be similar to plant matter, but with the architecture of a terrestrial brain cell."

Ed goggled at Lee's description. "You're not telling me that thing was alive? And sentient?"

"Yes, and no," Lee replied. "There is no evidence that the polyps are sentient at all. In every case of their appearance, they remain quiet and motionless, until bothered. Their electrical discharges might be instinctive reactions to a threat, or they might simply be caused by damage to its structure. Electrical blood, as it were. Unfortunately, we didn't recover enough of the organism to discover the source of the electrical charge."

"The source? Is that important?"

"Keep in mind that this organism has some connection to the fourth dimensional creature heading this way. They may be physically linked through that dimension."

"And may offer a means to strike at it through these organisms?" Ed guessed.

Lee nodded. "We could be injuring it now, just by blowing these polyps up. However, it's more likely these polyps are some form of trans-dimensional anchor, or net, to catch us in. I expect the number of polyps will increase in number, and perhaps size, in the future. They are the advance signs of the creature."

"What are we going to do?"

"We're going to blow it up," Lee said simply.

"Oh." Ed shrugged and stepped back. "Well, I feel better, knowing how simple the solution is."

"It is far from simple," Lee said, and finally looked up from the readout screen. "We will need to deliver a powerful explosive to it, detonate it while the creature is in transition between dimensions, and hope the blast will not engulf us in this dimension as well. We should strike at it from space, in other words."

"But we don't know how big this thing is," Ed reminded him. "How do we know how much explosive to throw at it?"

"Right now, we don't. I think the most prudent thing to do, given our short time frame, is to send a space shuttle out with as many nuclear warheads as we can pack within its cargo bay, and detonate them when the creature reaches it. My studies indicate it should be susceptible to the force of a nuclear blast and the resultant radioactive fallout."

Ed rubbed his jaw. "Sounds like a plan. Why does it sound simpler than it is?"

"Because we don't know the creature's exact course. Delivering the payload on target, and detonating it at the precise moment, will be very difficult."

"I see. I'll get Joseph, and see what he can do."

"I've already called the Pentagon," Lee told him, and Ed almost fell over with surprise.

"Jesus Christ! Who do you know at the Pentagon, that you just call them whenever you feel like it, and they give you shuttles?"

"Kennedy is already making the preparations," Lee continued. "I just need a few more days to prepare the payload."

"Of course! Then it's all over. We might as well go home, then! There's obviously nothing left you need us for." Ed started to huff back out of the lab, but Lee stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Actually, there is a good reason for you to stay, after we've gone. It's not directly related to this, but it's just as important."

* * *

Curt found himself realizing he hadn't forgotten a thing over the last seven years. Every twist and turn of the sewers, every second's reflex, was carrying him through the passageway at top speed.

It all felt so natural to him, that it was almost dreamlike. Max's uniform... the Omerican's uniform... fit him like a glove. After debating, deliberating, considering. when he heard the news report of a strange egg-like rock that had appeared in town, he had finally thrown caution to the wind, and put Max's uniform on. Then he'd jumped on Max's bike and hit the starter. It had thumbed to life instantly. The bike felt not much different than his, although much more powerful, and incredibly quiet. He'd opened the camouflaged door into the tunnels that led to the L.A. sewer system, twisted the throttle, kicked the bike left, and arrowed down the black tunnel.

Now he was breaking out into the light, sliding to the right, avoiding the wet center of the trough, and accelerating northward at the limits of the bike's horsepower.

Curt was heading into a battle situation.

He couldn't help but smile. It was like coming home.

He shook his head in concentration, as he approached The Ramp. Max had made a minor modification to some of the access ramps in the sewer system that allowed a rider on a motorcycle to jump over the security fences. Curt set himself, gunned the bike up the ramp, and flew into the air.

When he cleared the lip of the drainage wall, fully ten feet over the street, a red-white-and-blue uniform on a matching motorcycle, he was sighted almost immediately by a boy eating an ice cream cone. The boy's eyes popped out of his head, and he dropped his cone in his excitement. He leveled an arm at the colorful figure and yelled at the top of his lungs.

"Look! It's the Omerican! He's not dead! He's back! HE'S BACK!!!"

Curt saw quite a number of such responses as he flew down the city streets. It was heartwarming to know how much respect Max had among the people of L.A. It occurred to

him that he was carrying a large mantle with him on that bike. He hoped he wouldn't let them down. He hoped he wouldn't let Max down.

He brought the bike to a stop a block away from his destination. He didn't need to get any closer; he could see his target just fine from there. Whatever it was, it was three stories tall, white, bulbous, and sitting in the middle of the street. A small crowd had formed around it, but they were keeping their distance from it, and talking among themselves. A few policemen stood among the crowd, keeping them back, but they weren't being challenged. Probably due to the reports of lightning coming from it, Curt decided.

He got off the bike, and reached into a hard case mounted next to the seat. Curt had loaded the arsenal into it, all of the Omerican's heavy fighting gear. He selected a harness that held mini grenades, a magnum pistol, thermite bombs, and a holstered rifle, and strapped it on. Then he advanced into the crowds.

When he was noticed, a number of people pointed and shouted. Before he knew it, a cheer had gone up in the crowd, and the people parted like a tide to let him through. A few people patted him on the back, calling out, "Good to see you back, son!" and "Go get 'em, Omerican!" and Curt found himself feeding on the positive energy of the crowd.

Thanks to the cheering of the crowd, Curt almost didn't notice when some kid picked up a chunk of brick, and hurled it at the white mass, shouting, "You're gonna get it now, meat!"

The brick struck, and an explosion of lightning immediately followed. People screamed and dove for cover under the lances of electricity, and Curt soon found himself alone in the street. Then he felt the hairs on his arms suddenly stand on end, and training took over. He bounded to the right, took two steps, and launched himself into the air. The arc of electricity shot out and impacted the spot he had been standing on, but he was already forty feet from there, and fifteen feet up. His gloved hands caught the fire escape of the nearby building, and he swung himself up to the next landing. He pulled the rifle from its holster as he lighted.

He remembered standing smack in the middle of the street, wide-eyed, dumbfounded. Staring up at a four-story glob of green jelly with one eye and a mouth, something from a dumb cartoon come to life. Fifth week on the streets with Max, and every bit of fourteen. It was all bank robbers and megalomaniac nutcases before. What the hell was this?

He was frozen in shock, as a glowing tentacle reached out for him, then unfrozen as Max swooped around and propelled him behind a parked car. "Wake up, son! There's work to do!" "W-what is it? Omerican, what is that thing?" "That's not important, now. It's killed eight people... that's what's important. And it's our job to stop it. That's why we wear the colors."

He watched as Max drew a collapsible lance from his belt, and stood up confidently from behind the car. "Worry about what it is later. But we stop it now." He took three steps and pole-vaulted—Jesus, he's thirty feet high!—to its eye level, swinging the lance back around in mid-air. Curt came up from behind the car himself as it batted Max's lance away. Extending his fighting staff, Curt rushed forward as it turned after Max. Gotta help Max. Gotta stop it. That's why we wear the colors...

He couldn't even hear the cheers and screams of the bystanders. All he could think was: Time to earn these colors.

He cocked and fired.

* * *

Woody had to duck to avoid the bits of white jelly that exploded into the alley. He gave a sigh of exhaustion, then reached for the fire escape ladder. He was slow in climbing to the top of the building, and he stopped at the top to rest a moment. His dark blue outfit breathed reasonably well, but he was still hot and sweaty from a hard day's work.

That one made the seventh he had blown up today. And they were getting bigger. And Woody's leg still felt a bit twitchy after being hit by one of those lightning bolts, even through his insulated suit. He had no idea what the damned things were, but they were popping up all over town. One of them had popped right on top of somebody... no one would ever know who, since only the legs had been visible when Woody arrived, and they were badly burned by arcing electricity. At least they blew up easily enough, once you put a hole in it big enough to fire a rocket into. But they were getting tougher as they got bigger, and Woody had used a rocket just to make his hole for the next rocket.

He was low on ammo.

Woody checked. Five more rockets. A fair supply of standard and armor-piercing ammo, but his explosive shells were spent. I really ought to go back to Arn's shop and load up, he thought. And rest. He looked around the rooftops to get his bearings. Arn's shop is that way. According to the police radio, another one of those white things is just two blocks out of the way.

Woody finally sighed and stood up. "What the hell. I'll make it an even dozen, then."

* * *

"It's only five blocks away..."

"I don't care if it's five hundred miles away. If it's not on our property, I don't want my men fooling with it. They're supposed to guard this building. They're Lord Security. Call them back, Mark."

Mark looked over his shoulder at Byron Scott IV, who glared at him from the desk he seemed unable to remove himself from. Scott's hands held the sides of the desk in a death grip, and Mark half expected to find splinters in them later. He fought back an exasperated sigh. "Don't worry, Mr. Scott. We've all seen the footage on the news. They shouldn't have any trouble." He turned back to the window and raised his binoculars to his face. "Look at it this way: It's worth it for the P.R. You can't buy publicity like this."

The whole thing took less than fifteen minutes. Mark watched the tech-suited security team arrive by the white mass in the park. He saw the lightning flashes, the smoke of gunfire, and finally, the fiery explosion of white pulp. Then, the exit of the security squad, amidst the cheers of the bystanders.

"Yessir," Mark said to himself. "You can't buy that kind of P.R."

“Get up, Li. Get up!”

“Fuck you! It’s not like it’s chasing us, man. I’m staying right here for a minute, okay?”

“What are you two doing? Will you get up and—”

“Fuck you, Lion!” they cried together. Li and Dana had fought as wildly as the rest of the Street Legion, but after twenty minutes against the giant soft mass in the middle of Carter street, they hardly had enough clothes left between them for one body. The Legion had spent a great deal of that time dodging lightning bolts thrown all over the street by the white mass, and now their attacks were fewer and further between. And now, as Lion tried to get Li and Dana back to their feet, the other fifteen members of the Legion stood warily about the polyp seeking a soft spot to attack.

One of the Legion, a girl known as Streak, glanced back at their leader and the wasted fighters, and ran a red-gloved hand through her hair. “And to think, it was going so well!” she called back sarcastically. Lion turned to look at her. “We’ve busted muggers, bank robbers, stopped six car-jackings, busted a drug ring, and been on Sixty Minutes! Maybe we should have stopped before we took on monsters from space, though, huh?”

Lion left his disobedient warriors with a withering glance, and strode back toward the others. Their red and blue uniforms were sweat-soaked and ragged, and the free-moving fabrics seemed about to fall off of their shoulders. “All right, stand down, everybody,” he ordered. “As much as I hate to admit it, Streak’s right. We’re street fighters, not storm troopers. All the martial arts techniques in the world aren’t going to bring that thing down.”

One of the warriors abruptly threw up his arms and tromped over to Lion. “Wait a second! We swore to protect our streets! And this is a pretty serious fuckin’ threat! We can’t just walk away from it!”

“Yeah!” another Legionnaire chimed in. “You’re our leader! Start leadin’! What are we gonna do?”

Lion looked to them all, and past them to the giant polyp, still crackling with electrical energy. And back to them. A few seconds of that, and he finally threw up his arms in disgust. “I. don’t. know! OKAY? The Lion is stumped! Happy now? Good! Now that that’s out of the way, the rest of you have brains, don’t you? Help me think of something!”

And they stood there, eighteen teens and young adults in ragged street fatigues, surrounding the polyp. They tried bouncing a few ideas around, but none seemed workable. A few restless souls even wanted to try a direct attack again, and they were all but drummed out of the Legion on the spot.

Dana had finally regained her feet, and she had leaned against the nearest wooden power pole to listen to the discussion. She examined the soles of her shoes, picking a few bits of gravel and debris from them. Bouncing a bit to keep her balance, she scratched herself on a splinter. She grimaced and pulled away from the power pole, giving it a mean look as she reached for the splinter in her back.

Just as she managed to catch the splinter, she stopped and looked at the pole again. Her

eyes traced along the power lines to the adjacent poles, up and down the street. Then she looked at the polyp, and seemed to take the whole street in.

"I got it!" Dana cried, interrupting the debates and charging up to Lion. "We gotta get some cable cutters and pickaxes!"

Heated debate ensued, and within four minutes it was agreed that it was their best plan. Obtaining picks and cutters at 10:20 P.M. meant breaking into a nearby hardware store, but Lion took a collection and left the cost of the gear on the cash register.

Back on Carter street, the Street Legion took up positions around the street and by the power pole Dana had been leaning on. The larger of the Legionnaires fell to breaking up the sidewalk around the power pole, and soon hit soft earth underneath. "Only in St. Louis," one of them muttered, as they dropped the pickaxes.

"Can't believe there's just dirt under the sidewalk?"

"No: I can't believe we just dug the sidewalk up, and nobody's come to arrest us."

Lion took the cable cutters and stood over the guide wire that ran diagonally down to the street. With the sidewalk gone, the pole was already swaying visibly. "Get ready, Legion." Lion braced himself, placed the jaws around the wire, and squeezed. The cable snapped with a violent twang and whipped into the air. At that moment, the Legionnaires put their weight against the pole and shoved.

Slowly, the power pole tilted off-center. The power lines running up and down the street managed to stay connected to the pole, although one cable running to the nearest building pulled out of the transformer and spewed sparks over the corner. The pole continued slowly down, throwing sparks in the air as it fell. It impacted directly on top of the polyp, sinking deeply into the soft mass.

There was a boom of electrical energy, sending Legionnaires scattering. Arcs and lightning bolts flew up and down the block from the live cables, and Lion could see lights going out all down the street. The mass was glowing with electricity, and the snaps of power were deafening.

Then, abruptly, the light show stopped, the street went silent again. Lion looked up and down the street, and realized everything was dark.

"Shit," he whispered. "They cut the power to the lines."

They all looked back to the polyp. There it sat, still in the middle of the street, but now it had a dead power pole embedded in it, still connected to the power grid.

It hadn't worked.

"Man, they're gonna crucify us," someone said.

"I think I hear my Mom calling me," someone else said.

"I think we'd all better get the hell out of here," Lion nodded, his chagrin visible on his face. "We'll meet tomorrow morning at headquarters. Get lost, guys."

The Street Legion started melting into the shadows, and in a moment, only Lion and Dana

were left. Lion just stared at the mess, but Dana looked at Lion. She stepped up behind him and put a hand on his arm.

"Sorry about this, boss. I thought it was a plan."

"It was a plan," Lion told her. "Better than anything I could think of. It just... didn't work, that's all." He turned to her. "Better get out of here, Dana."

"What are you gonna do?"

"I'm debating waiting for the authorities, to explain what happened."

Dana considered that for a moment. "You could," she agreed. "But if they decide to throw you in jail for it, who's gonna lead the Legion?" She turned and disappeared into the shadows, leaving Lion alone.

He watched her leave, stood a minute longer by the mess they'd made. Then he sighed and shrugged. "Well, somebody's gotta lead the Legion." And he bolted.

* * *

It had been a long day. Detective Ames had spent all of his shift, and half of the next shift, on crowd control. Crowd control! Keeping nosy New Yorkers away from twenty-foot tall white potatoes that fired lightning bolts from their eyes. The whole thing was just weird enough to give Ames the feeling that they had something to do with the dead superheroes, but no one seemed to know for sure.

All anyone did know was, they were getting bigger and harder to kill. Which was making Ames more concerned as the day dragged on.

By the end of the day, Ames had to fight the urge to duck duty and go back to his apartment. The same thought had been running through his head for the last four hours.

It takes lightning to fight lightning.

When he reached his apartment, he locked and bolted the door, then went to his closet. Taking a box from the upper shelf, he opened it and removed the black leather box from underneath a stack of papers. He placed it on the desk, and sat down before it.

Slowly, he opened the box. The syringes and tiny plug-in apparatus were right where he left them, just as he left them, but he still stared at them as if he'd never really looked at them before. He wiped at his damp forehead with a shirt sleeve, contemplating what he was about to try. If it worked, he would become a hero, and his life would never be the same. If it didn't, it could kill him. And life would definitely never be the same.

He was stalling, he realized. But he knew he had to do it. He finally had a chance to do something special with his life, to rise beyond the nowhere of his job, to be somebody. He had the means, and now he had the perfect opportunity, if a bit rushed. It worked on Tatnall, and he was probably not much different than anybody else, just healthier maybe, so it should work on him, too. He had to do it now.

He took the apparatus out of the case. Uncoiling the cord, he reached over to a wall socket

and plugged it in. A tiny electrical whine began to emanate from the apparatus, sounding like a camera's flash unit charging. In a moment, the whine was inaudible.

Ames removed a syringe from the case. They were all identically marked. Where did you inject it? Arm? Neck? Ass? Arm would do, this time. He glanced over to the package on his bed: A black spandex jumpsuit and mask. If this worked, he'd need a costume to hide his identity. Maybe he should have taken one of Tatnall's costumes... oops. Stalling again. He held the syringe up to his bared arm, and took a deep breath. Now or never. He jabbed it home.

The world exploded behind Ames' eyes. He cried out, dropping the syringe and clutching at his head. The pain was blinding! Had he done something wrong? He had come up out of the chair, but there was no strength in his legs, and he fell painfully to his knees.

He began to shake. His ears were roaring, and his heart was trying to burst through his chest. He fought the pain to clear his eyes, and find the tiny box and electrodes. With shaking fingers he took the metal probes in each hand and tried to touch the firing stud. He could hardly see it. He couldn't stop the shakes. Now or never.

He hit the stud.

He never heard the crack, loud as a splitting tree. The surge of electricity snapped through his body faster than his brain could have detected it. Raw power engulfed his body, reaching into every cell and charging every membrane with the primal energy of the universe. The cells strained to hold the power, seeking protection in the chemical soup that was there to strengthen the cell walls and keep internal cohesion.

The strength, however, wasn't there. The chemicals were not properly matched to the body they were coursing through, and the cells were not properly protected. Ames' body exploded from within every cell in him, at once. His brain was gone before he realized his fatal error in judgment, and his heart finally pulped and stopped in a ruptured chest cavity. Ames keeled over to the floor, never feeling the floor hit him. Blood and bile and urine soon pooled under the body.

It had happened too fast to alert anyone. The tiny apparatus was designed to deliver the charge without overloading power systems, so no one's electricity was interrupted. No one heard. No one lived with Ames, and he had no steady girlfriend to check up on him. It would be days before anyone forced the door and discovered his body.

But Ames was gone before he had a chance to dwell on his lack of mourners.

* * *

Lainie put the sheaf of papers down on the front of her desk and looked up at the young intern standing before her. He had a smile on his face, playfully smug about the papers he had just given to her to read. And with good reason, she had to admit. He had done excellent work.

"Nice," she nodded, "nice. How long did you say you took to get all this data?"

"Just three days, Miss Tyne," the intern replied. "That search parameter tip you gave me was a big help, too."

"Well, you definitely put it to good use. This shadow department was exactly what we were looking for. Okay. We're going to show this to Mr. Dannon, and then we can move on to the... next..."

Lainie stopped. He wasn't even looking at her. His smile was gone. She stood up and waved a hand in front of his face. "Morrie?..."

He responded by dashing around her and thumping up against the picture window behind her desk. "Look! Down there! Isn't that the Omerican down there?"

At that moment, another intern, a pretty coed, burst through the door to Lainie's office and plastered herself against the window, next to Morrie. "It's the Omerican! I can't believe it! They said he was dead, but there he is!" Lainie took a look. It was Curt, all right, on that funky bike of Max's, and wearing the uniform. She had to admit, too, it looked great on him.

Outside Lainie's office, other workers were piling against the windows and looking down to the street. They all started pointing and talking at once. Lainie watched, as she listened to her office workers' conversations.

"Where's he going?"

"He's gorgeous, isn't he?"

"How can you tell? We're four stories up!"

"Well, I can see those muscles from here. Yow!"

"Hey! Remember that news story, from this morning?"

"About those giant white blobs?"

"Yeah! He's going to get those blobs!"

"Cool! Is there one nearby?"

Curt rounded the corner and rolled out of sight, and slowly, the workers moved away from the windows. The coed was the last to push away from the glass. She started back into the office, then glanced at Lainie from the door.

"I'd sure like to be the one waiting for him when he comes home. To celebrate a job well done, you know?" She smiled, and continued out the door.

Lainie watched her go and raised an eyebrow after her. She's got a point, she mused. Maybe I should stop by Frederick's on the way home.

* * *

"Lee? The 'copter just landed on the roof. You ready?"

John walked up to Lee as he crouched over a large silver object in the lab. It was the size of a metal trashcan, covered in silver piping, and capped on one end with a geodesic frame supporting dozens of pen-sized cylinders. The cylinders all pointed at a black prism in the center of the can's end. Control boxes and other, smaller mechanisms adorned the other end of

the cylinder. A small panel sat on the top, and Lee was making a final adjustment to it with a jeweler's screwdriver. After a second, Lee straightened up and looked up at John.

"Ready. Get Tom and Sir Ed." John headed off, and Lee opened a small port on the side of one of the control boxes. There was a space inside the control box, about three inches around, backed by numerous electrodes and probes, and surrounded by short metal strips clearly designed to hold something in place. Lee reached into his pocket, and removed a cloth-wrapped object. Removing the wrapping, he brought Athena's amulet to the light. He placed the amulet into the space in the box, and the metal strips snapped it into place. A group of tiny telltales around the now-filled space winked on in red and green. Lee surveyed the box once more, then closed the panel and screwed the top shut with the jeweler's tool.

The cylindrical apparatus was mounted on a standard grease monkey's roll pad. Lee guided the object out of the lab, and at the door, Tom assisted him to the elevator with it. John and Sir Ed waited at the elevator, as well as Ed Stadtler. They rolled the object on board, and pressed the button for the roof. Before the door closed, Lee held it and looked meaningfully at Ed, who remained in the hallway.

Ed merely nodded at Lee. "Don't worry. I'll take care of everything."

This seemed to satisfy Lee, who allowed the doors to close, and the elevator was soon accelerating to the roof. The elevator deposited them in a short hallway with a single door at the end. They pushed the apparatus to the door, and Sir Ed held the door for them to go through.

Out on the roof was a cargo helicopter, blades turning just under their takeoff velocity. A hatch was open on the belly of the machine, between the landing wheels, and they made for that. A few minutes time, and the silver cylinder was safely stowed aboard. Lee and company found seats along the sides of the cargo bay, and a moment later, the copter lifted off and swung in the direction of the airport.

LaGuardia was within sight in short minutes. On a side runway, being isolated by military guards, was a small cargo jet, and they made for that. Lee recognized the jet as being capable of great speed and considerable distance with an average load, and they weren't carrying much. He glanced at his watch. They would be at Kennedy Spaceport inside of three hours.

* * *

Three hours was a long time to a computer. In three hours, Kris' computer had: searched back through the family records of the Allen Clan to unearth a four hundred year old official family crest; broken the elements of said crest into identifiable icons and phrases; sifted through historical texts for any matches to the indicated phrases; examined archeological monographs, art and lithographic records for matches to the specific icons; cross-referenced everything with historical data on ancient human migratory patterns; and further cross-referenced the name Allen, and all phrases on the crest, with historical language databases for translation comparisons.

Kris hadn't expected the search to take a tenth of that time. If Kris had been the kind of person who believed machines were alive, he would have expected to see his computer sweating after such an exertion. In fact, his own hands were a bit clammy as he studied the first of the results on his screen.

As he had expected, the Allen clan had many divergent and convergent lines, throughout its history. A great many family names similar to Allen also connected to the extended family tree, creating a seemingly infinite number of branches in both directions, forward and backward. Among the modern lines were the now-familiar family names of Tatnall, Ryan, Kolsheyev, Mendez, Greco, various alliterations of Allen, and scores of other names and languages that seemed to span the dictionary and cover the globe. Some of the names Kris noted were the known aliases of many of the supervillains in the world.

The clan's roots seemed to run throughout Europe, but at its earliest origins, the family came up through the Italian peninsula, touched a number of the islands surrounding ancient Greece, then seemed to jump across the Mediterranean, to end up in the Middle East. There seemed to be no earlier records of the clan anywhere else, and the computer traced the clan, known then as Ali, to an approximate origin of 3000 B.C., a time when the Middle East was still relatively fertile before global climate changes robbed the region of its precious rainwater.

There Kris found evidence of a major local event. Some of the hieroglyphs of the time, in describing the event, bore strong similarities to a few of the icons on the family crest. The computer did not have an exact translation of the hieroglyphs, but the evidence seemed to suggest the arrival of a group of travelers amidst mysterious circumstances. Some of the glyphs featured celestial markings, clearly an indication that the people of the time drew some link between the travelers and the existing constellations, and these celestial markings provided the time estimations derived by the computer. But there was no clear indication that the Ali clan was, in fact, the travelers mentioned in the glyphs.

Then came the phrases on the crest. There were three of them, in Old English on the crest, reading: "Embracing the New Disciplines;" "In God's Hands;" and "Royal Astrologists." There was an obvious parallel to "Royal Astrologists," although the Zodiac was the last thing he would have expected this particular family to go for. But the computer traced each phrase through the various languages and times they had passed through during their history, and the results were interesting. For example, "Royal Astrologists" retranslated backward a few hundred years into "Royal Celestial Chroniclers." Further back and two nations over, and the word "Royal" seemed to drop out of the translation entirely. And by the time the phrase reached the Middle East, the phrase most closely retranslated into "Celestial Worksmiths."

The phrase "In God's Hands" retranslated, a few hundred years earlier, into "Hands of the Gods," and further back, into "Workers of the Gods." And in the Middle East, that became "Workers of Allah."

And "Embracing the New Disciplines" took on the most interesting connotations of all. "New Disciplines" had replaced a word most approximating "Science" three hundred years back, and "Science" had replaced the word "Knowledge" once the crest had crossed from Eastern to Western Europe. During the Roman era, the phrase had read "Embracing the Heavens." The Romans had translated it from the old Greek, which was "Embraced By Heaven." The original Greek had read, "Kissed by Heaven." And its origins in the then-fertile Middle East had been, "Kissed by The Gods."

Celestial Worksmiths. Workers of Allah. Kissed by the Gods.

"Great Christ," Kris whispered. "They're fucking aliens."

These people had appeared in the then-bustling Middle East. They had migrated to Greece.

They stayed for the Roman Empire. They lived through the legendary Middle Ages. They enjoyed the Renaissance period. They endured the Industrial Revolution. They survived two World Wars and countless smaller ones. And they had seen Man finally reach into space. Had they been the Greek and Roman Gods? Odysseus, Hercules, Sinbad? Merlin, Helen of Troy, Paul Bunyan, John Brown? Medusa? Cyclops?

He decided to try another tack, checking health records. He was not surprised to discover there were virtually no health records for any of the modern descendants on file. Of the few items he could track down, a number of them seemed to indicate unanswered questions on the part of the physicians regarding blood tests, tissue samples and missing records. The family had something physical to hide, it was something a doctor could detect, and they were well aware of it.

Kris remembered an old pet theory he'd had, regarding the superheroes. He had surmised that their powers all came from some sort of mysterious technology that only they had access to. This data suggested his old theory was wrong, at least in part. There was most likely a basic physiological difference that gave them their powers, or allowed their systems to tolerate and control alien technology. If that was true, it meant normal humans would not be able to duplicate their abilities, even with their technology. Kris could not help but feel a bit sad at the prospect, much like a child realizing he would never be able to fly like Peter Pan.

And what about the rest of the family tree? Did the mysterious "special" gene, or whatever it was, exist in the rest of this clan? Or were the superheroes and supervillains the only ones to possess the trait? Did the trait trigger itself, or was it triggered by the individual? Once the heroes were all gone, would that end the era? Or simply mark the beginning of a new one?

Still so many questions, that Kris had no answers to. And no time left to look. Jer had demanded his report today. About an hour ago, in fact. And Jer wouldn't come and get you when you were late. He'd just take down how late you were, and you'd find it in your file someday. He had to take his data in.

Jer would never believe it.

* * *

Curt returned to the sub-basement after the sun had gone down. Riding the near-silent motorcycle in through the access tunnel, he jerked to a stop inside the door and killed the engine.

He climbed slowly off the bike, and straightened up. He was more tired than sore, but he knew he'd be sore by tomorrow morning. He could only hope tomorrow morning would take its time getting here. As he crossed the room, he removed his mask, then his uniform top, and stretched his corded arms. He finished removing his uniform, stepped naked into the shower stall, and slapped the water on.

He took his time washing up, enjoying the invigorating feeling of the scalding hot water on his skin. He took particular care to massage his arms and legs while he washed, to keep the limbs from cramping up. The water almost seemed to wash some of the fatigue from his body, and he felt himself smiling again. It had been an incredible day, and Curt had been the man he always wanted to be, the man he had aspired to be, all those years ago. And it felt good... No. It

felt right. It was right. He was a worthy successor to the Omerican, and he'd fought the good fight and won. He knew it didn't get better than this.

Curt finished showering, shut off the water, and began toweling off in the stall. Once he was dry from the waist up, he stepped out of the stall to finish up. And stopped.

"Did you know you went right by my office?"

Lainie was across the room, seated on the bench of the Nautilus, facing him. He couldn't help but look down at her legs, crossed sensuously, in black heels and a hint of color that suggested stockings. The suitcoat she wore completely covered the rest of her. She stood up. If she had a skirt on under that suit, it was damned short.

"You did. Colorado and Vine. The whole office ran to the windows and watched you go by." She walked toward him. "I watched you on the news, later. You looked like a god." He could smell her Shalomar. "You were incredible. All of Los Angeles loves you. You deserve to know how much they appreciate it."

She stopped four feet away from him, and opened her suitcoat. There was no skirt, or blouse. Lainie wore a black lace bodice, lace G-string, and garters supporting her stockings. Curt knew there was no point in covering himself up. He was already rising to her, aching for her. She smiled, let go of her suitcoat, and glided up to Curt. She kissed him, and their tongues intermingled wildly as she forced herself against him.

They were standing on an exercise pad. Lainie pulled Curt down to the mat with her, pulling her lips away from his long enough to breathe, "I love you, Curt Mendez. I want you."

Curt paused over her. "Lainie, if I... I mean, it's been a long day..."

Lainie just smiled knowingly, and squeezed his buttocks. "Nonsense!" she cooed. "That's what makes long nights so worthwhile."

Victory

« ^ »

The military transport taxied to a stop on the Johnson Spaceport's tarmac. The cargo door was humming open before the crew or passengers had gotten up from their seats. Lee, John, Sir Ed and Tom made their way to the side door and clambered down the extended stairs. Florida, as was typical for that time of year, was hot and dry, and it seemed Tom broke into a sweat within seconds of stepping off the plane.

"Doesn't usually get this hot in Green Bay," he explained to John.

"Green Bay? Is that where you're from?"

"Yep. Born in February." Tom shrugged and grinned. "I'm a winter kind of guy."

Lee stood by the plane, watching the payload being unloaded. A figure walking towards the plane caught his eye, and a moment later he walked around the plane's belly and outstretched

a hand. The approaching figure smiled when he saw Lee, and took his hand smartly.

"It's good to see you, Lee."

"How are you, General?"

General Foster glanced over at the plane and its cargo, and rolled his eyes. "I liked it better when I was still fighting men. Right now, I feel like I'm in a bad movie."

"These are my associates." Lee introduced them, as they were walking up to meet them. Foster shook each hand, then indicated a nearby van, which they headed for. Once in the van, they were driven toward the mammoth gantry that held Endeavor, prepped for launch.

Foster sat in the forward seat, and had to swivel the chair around to face them. "You know, I had to pull a lot of strings to get two of you on this flight. Not to mention giving you the platform of nukes."

"Were you able to get everything I specified?" Lee asked.

"Forty ICBMs with MIRVs wiped, ready to program," Foster nodded. "And, yes: We got the Shitcan, too."

"Good, good," Lee nodded back.

"And what about that thing you brought down here? Exactly what is that can supposed to do?"

"It will help to pinpoint the optimum coordinates to place the missiles," Lee explained. "Without it, we'd be shooting blind."

"And that's why two of you have to go along?"

"That's right."

Foster looked at Lee's three associates. It was plain among them which had been picked to accompany their leader. John Simpson sat there with a mildly excited grin on his face, while Tom and Sir Ed sat glumly beside them. Foster guessed this Simpson was more excited than he was letting on.

"I still don't like it," Foster admitted. "One of our people could probably handle the thing..."

"There's not enough time to train anyone on the intricacies of its use," Lee told him. "Nor do we have time to try to install a radio control. We have to go, General."

Foster regarded them closely, Lee especially. After a few long moments, he sighed. "If I didn't already know what you're capable of..." He looked ahead, at the approaching gantry. "But I do, and I'll go with your assessment. I guess it's time for a crash course in space flight, then."

They reached the gantry, and climbed out of the van. A flight technician in a blue USAF jumpsuit met them at the bottom of the gantry and introduced himself as Miles. Then they piled into the elevator to the access level. The technician took over the briefing that Foster had started, explaining basic procedures and need-to-knows about shuttle launches, weightless

motion, command and control jargon, use of emergency equipment and airlocks, and access to their special payload. Once on the access level, they discovered a number of monitors that allowed them to watch Lee's silver contraption being loaded and secured in the front of the cargo bay, near the airlock. They kept tabs on it as they were fitted for EVA suits and issued special tools for zero-gee work.

After forty minutes of all this, they were finally taken aboard Endeavor. One man was up front (or, in this case, above) in the command cockpit, and he greeted them from his pilot's chair.

"Gus Cleveland. I'll be your pilot on this flight. Nice to meet you, Mr. Prime, Mr. Simpson."

"What's it look like, Gus?" Foster called up.

"We're go for launch in about thirty minutes," Gus replied. "I'm just finished with pre-launch."

"All right," Foster said. "Let's get you two strapped in."

Outside of the shuttle, back in the gantry, Sir Ed and Tom watched on a monitor from the shielded pre-launch room. Tom, standing there with arms folded together, seemed a bit overwhelmed by the experience of being so close to a shuttle, almost to the point of avoiding touching anything. A thought occurred to him, and he turned to Sir Ed. "Say, do you know what the General was talking about, when he made that remark about already knowing what Lee's capable of?"

Sir Ed knitted his brows a bit. "I asked Lee about that myself... or, rather, about his Pentagon contact... yesterday. He told me he met Foster while he was in Viet Nam, a Colonel at the time. Apparently, Foster had gone down in a plane in enemy territory. Lee went in to get him, and they had quite an adventure getting themselves out again."

"So, Foster probably owes Lee his life."

"Well, yes, but I get the impression there's a lot more to it than that," Sir Ed confided. "You know military men: It's part of a soldier's job to protect his own men. The higher-ups don't usually get choked up over soldiers doing their job, even when it saves their own necks." Ed shrugged. "But I don't know any of the details, anyway. Maybe we can get Foster to tell us, once they've taken off."

Tom nodded. "Good idea. You've got me curious to find out, that's for sure."

At that moment, General Foster stepped out of the shuttle and joined them in the pre-launch room. The technician secured the door from the inside, and disappeared beyond the glass port. "Come on, you two. Time to get out of here and over to mission control. Unless you'd like to be deep-fried by the launch."

"Ready when you are, General," Tom grinned, and the three made their way back to the elevator.

Ten minutes later, the three walked into mission control. As it was the last time a shuttle had gone up, there was a skeleton crew at the monitors, all military personnel. A number of the crew looked up questioningly at the two newcomers, and Tom knew the General's

presence was the only thing keeping them from being escorted out at gunpoint by these people. Foster showed them over to the controller's auxiliary monitors, where they could keep in touch with the shuttle's crew.

Administrator Clymer was at one of the monitors, where he was busy conversing with Capt. Cleveland in the cockpit. When he finished, Foster introduced him to Tom and Sir Ed, and they all took seats at the consoles. Clymer showed them the radio controls, warned them not to touch anything else, and resumed his talk with Cleveland. When he was through, he took off his radio headset, stood, and walked quietly out of the control room. Tom and Sir Ed watched him go, and exchanged glances. Foster noted their concern and leaned over to them. "Those are his men, out there," he said simply. Sir Ed nodded, and Tom turned back to the console and folded his arms.

Finally, it was time, and as they had all seen dozens of times before, Endeavor lifted off amidst gouts of flame and smoke, heeled over to face east, and climbed its column of smoke and thunder into the deep blue of the Florida sky. Within seconds it was too small to be seen unaided, and the screens in mission control all switched to telescopic cameras for the next five minutes. Eventually, even this was useless, and the screens switched to various graphics, predominantly the ever-popular orbital sine wave overlaid on a computer generated Earth. The computer graphic was one that never ceased to amaze Sir Ed. Although it was clearly just a simulation, Ed could almost imagine a satellite positioned in high orbit viewing the mission as it progressed. In fact, only the absence of clouds took away from the realism of the graphic.

It occurred to Sir Ed that Lee and John were in no position to enjoy all this.

* * *

Elsewhere on Earth, the white polyps were multiplying rapidly. They had begun to materialize below ground, protected from sight or attacks. In most cases, their appearance and displacement caused major and minor earthquakes, which baffled the authorities at first. But when worldwide seismic equipment revealed dozens of the earthquakes within the same two hour period, scientists began to put two and two together.

In New York City, the polyps were popping up everywhere. Woody had discovered that his sonic gun, set at a particular frequency, managed to break the polyps down into harmless white powder. He stopped off at home long enough to change and grab his car. Once away from home, he replaced the plates on his car with bogus ones, put his gear back on, and began tearing through the city, using his police radio to guide him to the polyps. Each time he found one, he drove through the crowds, pulled up next to it and triggered the sonics. A few short minutes seemed to be all it took to reduce the polyps to piles of flour. Then Woody gunned the engine and roared after the next one, heedless of the cheers he left behind.

In Los Angeles, the combination of weird polyps and, now, numerous unexpected earthquakes, with no heroes to lighten or forestall them, was too much for the populace. The highways were soon choked with people heading for the hills. Of course, given the population of Los Angeles, there was still no sign that the city was emptying out noticeably.

The news programs in L.A. carried a lot of footage of the Omerican, seemingly back from the dead, roaring around the city on his star-spangled motorcycle to battle each polyp.

Watching that incredible figure vaulting into the air as if spring loaded, using that cannon of his to blow the things to kingdom come, was enough to galvanize the populace, to give them someone to rally behind. Many people ventured out into the streets with shotguns, Molotov cocktails, powerful fireworks, anything they thought would work against the monsters from space. Some of it even did the trick, and the crowds cheered themselves lustily.

Curt was grateful for the help; he was already ragged from sprinting around the city after each polyp. In the middle of one skirmish, he dodged a lightning bolt and ran up hard against a building wall, almost cracking his head into the brick. He slowly turned back toward the polyp, taking the moment to catch his breath.

"Hey! Omerican!" Curt swung his head around the corner, not realizing any civilians had been nearby. Before he could warn him away, however, the man thrust something at his hand. "Here. See how he likes one of these!"

It was a Molotov cocktail. Curt took it in his hand, and the man quickly lit it with the lighter in his other hand. Curt waited for the cloth to flare a bit, eyed the distance between him and the top of the polyp, and heaved it like a grenade. The bottle arched high, and came down directly on the polyp's crown.

The bottle pierced the top, and the polyp burst into flame with a whoosh. Whatever was in that bottle, it was a bit more than the average Molotov. The polyp writhed in flames, clearly a goner.

Curt turned back to look at his benefactor. He was still standing there, watching the flames with a big smile on his face. "Good going, friend. You can fight on my team anytime." He flashed the stranger a thumbs up, and leaped back onto his motorcycle.

* * *

Lee had heard that the powerful shuttle engines were louder than any other engines NASA had ever used, and of course Endeavor was still fitted with the powerful transorbital engines that took it eight hundred thousand miles out on its last trip. But nothing could have prepared him for the howitzer blasts of the retros and main engines, as they maneuvered into orbit. The flight had been loud and long, and it was hard to separate fear from excitement after such an experience. He looked over to John, and could tell he was feeling the same way. Making a few quick mental calculations, he concluded that the organism was probably inside of ten thousand miles from Earth, and they must be getting close to the interception point he had given them to shoot for.

It was good timing that Capt. Cleveland's voice came over their headsets at that moment. His voice, which they had listened to through much of the early moments of the launch, was instantly reassuring. "We've made interception trajectory. How you guys doing, back there?"

Lee and John exchanged glances. "We're fine, Gus," Lee replied for them. "Let us know when we can get out of these seats."

"Actually, now's as good a time as any," Gus told him. "We'll be opening the bay in about fifteen minutes, to deploy the platform. You need to get your equipment ready for launch monitoring."

"We're on the way." Lee popped the harness on his seat, and was immediately pushed out of his seat by the cushions. John had opened his safety harness, and was likewise floating away from his seat. Neither of them bothered to hide their enjoyment of weightlessness, and after a few moments, they managed to get themselves turned around and headed into the rear of the shuttle.

When they reached the rear bulkhead, they were a bit overwhelmed by the amount of time and exertion it had required to get them there. "I thought this was supposed to be easier," John commented.

"It is. You just have to get used to it." The technician that had met them at the gantry had just floated in behind them, with the grace of someone who had done this numerous times before. "It's a shame you won't get a chance to really enjoy this, but we don't have the time. Is your equipment okay?"

Lee was already removing a white casing from a storage space on the rear bulkhead. He removed the outer bag, revealing the console from the contraption he had pieced together at Power Tower. A cable ran from it to the bulkhead. Lee made some basic checks, then nodded. "Everything seems to be in working order."

"Good," the technician nodded briefly, and turned to check the other systems. "We had time to install the pile in your monitor before we loaded it, so at least we don't have to do that."

Lee looked at him when he heard that, and John caught a flicker of shock on his face. But it was gone as fast as it had come, and Lee moved to the small window that looked into the cargo bay. "You really should have left the installation of the pile to me and John. I know the connections were clearly marked, but one mistake would have been catastrophic." The technician saw Lee look out, and thumbed a switch. The bay illuminated along its length, and Lee peered through the window.

Just below the window, on the near side of the bay, rested his contraption. It was secured to the floor of the bay, and a white cable ran from it to the bulkhead wall. Lee pulled the small console to him, allowing it to float by the window, still tethered to the wall by the cable that connected it to the object outside. He tried a few control settings, and could see telltales flash red and green on the cylinder outside. Satisfied that the equipment was ready, he looked past it to the rest of the bay.

Filling the bay was metal scaffolding, difficult to make out in plan due to its complex architecture. There was no problem making out its cargo, however: Seated amongst the metal webbing were forty ICBMs, gleaming white in the bay lights. They were arranged in two groups of twenty, each group sitting tail to tail and facing either end of the cargo bay.

John came up beside Lee, and looked out the tiny window. Spying the missiles, he whistled quietly.

"No kidding," Lee said. "That's enough power out there to take out most of a good-sized continent."

"Is it going to be enough, though?"

Lee looked at John and nodded. "It'll do."

John and the technician both looked at Lee, trying to decipher his expression, but Lee was already working over the floating console.

* * *

Woody careened around the corner, almost running down a pedestrian as he hit the alley. He was sure the police cruiser had seen him come down this way, and would know for sure in just a few seconds. He'd been so intent on his bug hunt, as he was now thinking of it, that he'd given no thought to trifles like speed limits and stop signs.

He cursed himself up and down when he realized he'd picked up two of New York's finest, but couldn't think of what to do about it but just try to outrun them and lose them. He really wasn't sure how they were going to react when... if, if, they caught up with him. And there was always the chance the officers would know him from the force, and almost certainly recognize him if they removed the mask. Better to avoid such a confrontation, if at all possible.

Problem was, it was looking less and less possible. These guys were good tailers...

Woody suddenly slammed on his brakes. He'd managed to run right into one of the bugs, right in the middle of the alley. In fact, it filled the alley. He didn't think he could drive through it, and the boys in blue were just turning into the alley behind him.

He didn't have much choice. Woody levered himself out of the car window, leveled his sonic, and thumbed it on. The white mass began shuddering incredibly, and the alley was filled with a low moan as its sides reverberated against the walls on either side of the alley.

The cruiser pulled up behind his car, just as the polyp began to flake. The officers jumped out of their car, then clamped their hands over their ears and stayed behind their doors. As they all watched, the polyp began to deteriorate like a statue eroding in time-lapse. Six minutes did the job, and the polyp was a huge mound of powder in the middle of the alley.

Woody switched the sonic off, and slowly turned around toward the two officers. They were only now lowering their hands, still standing dumbfounded behind their car doors. Then they shifted their eyes to look at Woody. Woody was sure he recognized one of them. He finally smiled and said, "Gotta go. I got lots more of 'em to kill before dinner."

The cop by the driver's side door stared for long seconds, swallowing twice as he tried to find his voice. Finally he whispered, "Go ahead. We never saw ya."

"Thanks, guys! Have a nice day." Woody slid back behind the wheel, gunned the engine, and plowed through the white mound, throwing up a wall of powder behind him.

* * *

Lainie watched the news reports on the television, at home. She had refused to go into the office, suggesting to her superiors that a friend of hers had been shocked by a polyp, and she was too rattled to come in.

She hoped it wouldn't turn out to be true.

Even now, the news services were claiming that the twenty-sixth polyp had turned up in town, and eye-witnesses reported seeing the Omerican heading for it. He'd killed two thirds of them himself, she knew. How did he manage to get around town so fast, even on that bike? How did he keep going at all? And how long before he was too tired to go on? Before he lost his balance?

She realized the reporters were saying they had live helicopter footage of the newest polyp. Helicopter? Just how big was the damn thing...

The screen changed. She was seeing a slightly jittery long view of a polyp from beyond a building. It was five stories high. Its sides touched the buildings on either side of the street. And at the top of one of those buildings, there, on the ledge, the camera was zooming in on...

Her heart stopped. Curt stood there, back to the camera, hair whipping about under the helicopter's wash, shoulders pulled back as if by conscious effort. He was looking down, surveying the huge white mass up and down, and Lainie knew what he was thinking. Don't do it. It's too much, Curt. Pull back. Don't be a hero.

But he was a hero. Just like Max. He couldn't turn his back on his duty. As she watched, he reached into a sleeve strapped to his leg, and pulled out his cannon. He calmly loaded it. Be careful, Curt Mendez. From another sleeve strapped to his arm, he removed a short pole, which extended into his battling staff. I love you. Come home.

Without further hesitation, the Omerican leapt off the ledge.

* * *

"It's about that time," Gus said over the intercom. "Miles, open the bay."

The technician worked over a wall console, and a moment later, a crack of light appeared along the center of the bay. As the doors opened wider, the crack became a ribbon, then a band, then a flood. The white missiles and metal scaffolding became a blinding mass, and Miles had to show Lee how to polarize the glass to cut down on the light and glare. After about four minutes, the cargo doors could no longer be seen over the edges of the bay.

"Doors are locked open," Miles called up to Gus. "Are we ready to deploy platform?"

"Go ahead," Gus replied.

Again Miles worked over the consoles. It took a minute before anything happened in the bay. Then abruptly, the scaffolding jerked into motion. The twenty missiles facing them heaved upward so suddenly that John winced. The scaffolding slowly lifted out of the bay, an inch a second, and soon the oscillation of its jerky start was replaced by its smooth slide into space. Lee continued to work over his console, while John watched the scaffolding. The framework was attached to a structure that was bolted to the center of the bay, and as it pushed the scaffolding up with scissor extensions, it occurred to John that the equipment seemed tailor made for the bay. He wondered how long ago the military had built all this. Or how many times it had been launched and tested.

Once clear of the bay, the entire scaffolding began to pivot. Now the scaffolding itself scissored open, and the two sets of missiles slowly turned in the framework to face the same

direction. Their engines were facing away from the shuttle at a right angle, to minimize the amount of engine backwash that would hit the shuttle when they launched. The whole assembly made John think of the field transports he'd seen mounted with braces of rocket launchers, looking not unlike the huge platform suspended outside. But this scale, not to mention the destructive potential, was unimaginable. John had to wonder again, what other surprises the military kept up their sleeves.

The entire assembly finally stopped moving, and Miles announced, "Platform is deployed. Missiles confirm ready to arm, and we're ready for course input. Lee?"

"Working on it." Lee worked over the floating console, and in a few moments, it was busy with activity: One readout screen displayed a constantly changing string of ten-digit numbers; a second screen glowed with intersecting lines and curves, each with its own directional equation in two planes; a third screen offered a graphic display filled with glowing nodes and colored regions; and a fourth screen, which gave distances to the Earth, the Moon, and the supposed target. A fifth screen, which had remained dark throughout the initial burst of computer activity, suddenly came alive with double sets of numbers.

"Got it," Lee announced. "Transmitting course to ICBMs now." A few commands were given, and the number sets rolled along the screen, one set for each missile on the platform. In less than ten seconds, the task was completed. "They've got their course. Arm and launch all missiles."

Miles turned back to his console. After half a minute of punching commands, a single telltale on the board glowed red. "Missiles are armed. Gus."

"Go ahead."

"Launching missiles in fifteen seconds. Shield yourself from the blast."

"Ready here."

"Ten...five...launch."

Outside the shuttle, forty powerful engines came to life, one by one. Their vacuous insulation from the missiles meant that the only sound that reached them was a slight buzz, relayed down the platform's arms, to the shuttle body. The platform itself was already glowing red, as one by one the missiles slid free of their holding collars and shot into space. There was even flame, the result of glowing particles blasted from the platform and splashing in every direction. Again, John thought of the rocket launchers, tiny and pathetic compared to this.

In moments, the missiles were all free of the platform, and raced in a slightly arcing cluster for open space.

"Missiles away," Miles announced. "Platform temperature at two-sixty. We'll retract it when it's cooled to one hundred..."

"There's no time for that, now," Lee interrupted. "I have a problem."

John turned back from the window, where he'd been watching the missiles flying off. "What is it?"

"I have a red light on the cable release. It was green a minute ago. It must have been

damaged during the ICBM launch."

"Cable release?" Gus had listened to this over his headphones. "What cable release? What cable?"

"The cable attached to the tracker, outside. We have to detach the cable from the tracker. Miles, help me into a suit."

"Waitaminit! Waitaminit!" Gus was yelling now, and the noises they could hear over his intercom were the unbuckling of his harness. "What the hell's going on back there? No one's going anywhere! We just launched forty ICBMs out there! When they go up, no one's going to survive outside..."

"The ICBMs will probably not be triggered."

Gus had already managed to free himself from the pilot's seat, and had been freefalling to the back of the shuttle as fast as he could propel himself. Upon arriving at the door to the observation bay, and hearing Lee's words, he shot his arms out and caught himself at the door with a thump.

"What?"

"The ICBMs will most likely be destroyed, before they can trigger," Lee told him. "They were never meant to destroy the organism, out there. They were meant to attract it to our dimension."

Gus floated there for a moment, indecisive. Then he propelled himself over to the EVA suits, and helped Miles prep one. "This had better be good."

"The trans-dimensional organism is incapable of being hurt by our technology, while it is in the fourth dimension," Lee explained, as he grabbed a set of EVA leggings.

"Fourth dimension?" Miles repeated. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"The creature exists in the fourth dimension," Lee continued. "I thought they briefed you." Gus gave Lee a withering look. "Anyway, it needs to be attracted to our dimension, so we can attack it. The ICBMs will attract it to the third dimension."

"How, if they're not going to blow up?"

"The radiation from their payloads will attract the organism. It was the radiation from Dr. Tomorrow's spacecraft that attracted it into striking out and destroying the craft, last month. Unfortunately, when it strikes from its own dimension into ours, it is impossible to predict or anticipate, so it is impossible to pinpoint its position before it attacks. The ICBMs will act as decoys, to draw it out."

"Great! Great!" Gus growled. "Forty ICBMs, and we're using them as decoys! And then what?"

"And then, the tracker will destroy it." Lee pushed himself upward into the suit, and Miles dogged him in. Gus froze, staring at Lee, then John, then floating over to the window to look in the bay at the silver contraption.

"That thing? That's gonna do what forty ICBMs can't do?"

"It will, if you don't hold me up any longer," Lee snapped. "I need to get into the bay. NOW!"

Gus and Miles assisted Lee into the airlock, and he waited while it depressurized. "John," he called into his intercom. "Watch the D5 relay board on the console. When it goes green, set the autopilot to UNLTD1. Understand?"

"Got it," John replied, as the green light came on in the airlock. Lee pushed the door open, and worked his way out into the bay.

Pausing long enough to attach a safety line to a wall eyelet, Lee maneuvered himself over to the silver canister. He pulled at it with a gloved hand, and it floated slightly away from its mooring posts. As the console had indicated, it had freed itself from its moorings as it was meant to do. The indicators on its side were green, with just one exception. A single red light flashed, alongside the designation "CC1." The command cable.

Lee pulled the cylinder out from the bulkhead, as far as the length of cable would allow. Examining the cable socket, he could see nothing wrong with it. He grasped it, and tried to pull it out. The cable held fast to the cylinder, hardly flexing at all. Lee grunted his confusion.

"Lee, what happened?"

"All I can see is, it's stuck," Lee replied. "Stand by on that console, John."

Lee then turned the cylinder until it was between him and deep space. He set his knees against it, and grasped the cable in both hands. Setting himself, he pulled. The plug did not budge. "I don't believe this," he muttered to himself. He reset his position, trying to examine the plug to make sure no retainers had been added to it accidentally. There didn't seem to be anything holding it in place. What was holding it? He pulled again, growling with the effort. Still nothing.

"Shit!" Lee paused, chiding himself for his lack of control. He glanced up in the direction of the missiles. They could be struck down anytime, now. He needed to free up the tracker, so it could do its job. It couldn't destroy the organism if it couldn't get out into space. But what was holding it...

"Into space," Lee said suddenly. "Of course. We're in vacuum. Damnit." He pivoted wildly about in the bay. "I need a lever. A wrench. A bar! Miles, what's out here? I need a lever!"

John, who had been watching through the window, turned to Miles and Gus. "Is there a tool kit out there? A metal bar?" Miles threw out his hands uselessly, trying to think of something out there Lee could use. Gus likewise seemed stymied.

Suddenly Gus slapped a hand to his head, causing himself to spin slowly. "There is something! Lee, find the locker door marked 'B2,' on the bulkhead wall. Open it by turning the handle counterclockwise."

John looked out the window. Lee was already at the locker, and turning the handle.

"Inside there are the extensions we used to recover the spaceship debris! Are they there?"

"They are! Good thinking, Gus!" Lee pulled one of the metal rods free, and turned back to the cylinder. Aligning himself with the socket, Lee grasped the rod with both hands and lifted

it over his head. With a golflike swing, he brought the rod arcing down, and thwacked the base of the cable plug.

The plug came loose with an almost audible pop. A single wire strand ran from the severed end of the cable, to the cylinder.

Inside the shuttle, the relay board went green. "It's clear!" John cried. "Setting autopilot..."

There was a flash. Lee looked out of the bay. In the distance, a wild conflagration was taking place. Lee saw what looked like blast waves, sweeping in a circular motion in the void, like strobes of energy. With each stroke, there was a flash of white and a rain of fiery debris. The organism was striking at the ICBMs. And any moment now, the tracker would get its fix and spring into life...

Lee tried to pull back from the cylinder, but he could not quite move fast enough. There was a sudden burst of light from its side, as tiny rockets kicked into ignition. As the cylinder activated, the final small wire pulled free from the cable. The cylinder leapt out of the payload bay with a vengeance, swung in a wide arc, and blasted out into space almost faster than the eye could follow.

The backwash from the rockets caught Lee full in the chest, and he was thrown bodily across the payload bay. His safety line caught by the airlock door, and he swung in an arc at the end of it, until he struck the bulkhead.

"Lee! Jesus, Lee!" John pressed himself against the observation window, craning his head to see Lee in the far corner. He didn't seem to be moving at all. "Lee, it's John! Answer me! Lee!"

"It's okay, John. I'm here."

"Lee! Are you all right?"

"Yes, I think so. More shocked than hurt, I think. I'm coming back in."

"Don't waste time," John advised. "Tracker should reach organism in just one minute!"

Lee turned himself around, grasped the safety line, and pulled himself to the airlock door. Along the way, he passed the now freed end of the tracker cable, and regarded it. From his angle, he could see the face of the plug dangling in his direction. In the center of the plug, the small metal ground head resided. It was small, but it had a flat face, designed to be pushed flush against the ground contact plate on the tracker. It was a common multi-outlet plug design, used for years in and out of the space program. It amazed Lee that it had never caused a problem, before today.

It had been discovered years before that two perfectly flat surfaces, joined together in a vacuum, created a perfect seal. The effect was known as vacuum welding, and two surfaces thus joined were almost inseparable. Lee was only lucky the joined surfaces were so small, and that he had been able to strike at it with sufficient force to knock the surfaces apart.

Lee smiled wryly, and climbed into the airlock.

* * *

A ridiculously short distance away, by fourth dimensional reckoning, the Feeder approached the rich source of energy it had sensed from so long away. It had already secured the planet-sized energy source in place and time, to allow it to feed on it without chasing it down. Now, it watched as its quarry threw another morsel of poisoned food at it. The Feeder remembered the first two times it had encountered the poison: One, not too long ago, which held more appetizing morsels within, and had blossomed into delicious fruit when it struck at the poison; and another, a long time ago and far away from this group of worlds, but which had apparently been thrown from this direction ages ago. There had been very little food besides the poison on that first small one, but what little it tasted had been tantalizing enough to warrant tracking its source. When the poison was close enough, the Feeder struck out again, and the poison was harmlessly dissipated.

This time, the Feeder noted, there was no blossom of energy into its own dimension, no sweet tease of a tidbit like that released from the last poison. No matter: The source was so close now.

Something else there now, the Feeder realized. There was no poison here, although it didn't look particularly appetizing. But it would go harmlessly by, and the source was so close...

* * *

A ridiculously few thousand miles away, by terrestrial reckoning, the tracker streaked through space, its sensors activated by and locked onto the center of the explosions it had waited for. Its computer brain, programmed by Lee with the Powers' dimension equations, now recognized the telltale flashes and whorls of interaction with the fourth dimension caused by the attack on the ICBMs, and the subsequent radiation framed the readings in red. As it approached its impact site, it activated two systems: The tiny but incredibly powerful antimatter bomb that Professor Power had left in a corner of his amazing laboratory; and the tiny amulet that had so often before transformed a young girl from New York into a crimefighting Goddess...

* * *

Lee was just pulling himself in through the airlock when John cried, "There it goes!"

Outside, the sky was white with energy, flickering like a lightning bolt from Hell. The tracker had triggered right on time, opening the path to the fourth dimension with the amulet, throwing an antimatter explosion right into it, and topping it off with a small but incredibly dirty radioactive pile...the "shitcan" donated by the Pentagon. The resultant conflagration was beyond anything the shuttle's crew had ever seen.

And there was something else in the explosion. It was only dimly seen, parts of it at a time, like something too large to be illuminated at once. It flickered into view in rotating streaks, as if a searchlight were rapidly passing over it, but it was still only partially solid, barely cutting off the stars' glow behind it.

It writhed and flashed, waves of light encircling it like a spinning torus, and blinding bolts of energy shot impossibly through space in every direction. John pulled back from the

window, slapping his hands over his eyes with a cry of alarm. Lee pulled John to him, and turned his face up to the light, but John was already blinking back tears and looking his way. "It's all right. Give me a minute."

Almost five minutes later, John looked back out into space in time to see the last of the wild light show dissipate. The ghost image, which seemed to fill the entire quadrant of space before them, was already losing size and coherence, as if shrinking... or departing, perhaps. Then a last flicker, and it was gone.

* * *

This time, the side of the world which missed the destruction of Tomorrow's ship, saw the flash and fury of the destruction of the organism. It was large enough that people on the street could see the shape of the creature unaided. The explosion caused everyone to stop cold and point into the sky. News programs carried reports within minutes, although none of them knew precisely what had happened. But someone guessed accurately that the strange apparition was the thing which had destroyed the superheroes, and that it, too, was now destroyed, and the rest of the news services jumped blindly onto the bandwagon.

At Johnson Spaceport, General Foster and the crew yelled, screamed, patted backs and shook hands. They had listened silently to every minute of the mission, no one speaking until they heard Lee's voice announce, "It's gone." Then they carried on like schoolchildren, and it was fully four minutes before Foster thought to call the President and give him the good news.

The President, upon hearing the news, had the distinction of going on the air and providing the first historical confirmation of the destruction of the monster from space. A well-prepared speech managed to link his administration with the detection and defeat of the monster, and his staff grinned hugely as his approval ratings skyrocketed.

* * *

In a small office in Washington, Kris studied the information on his computer, gleaned from the computers at Johnson Spaceport. Idly he considered checking the history of Lee Prime, on the chance that he might have a distant relative named Allen.

* * *

In a huge tower in New York City, an almost sentient computer informed the staff of SB Electronic Consultants, and their NSA guardians, of the destruction of the trans-dimensional organism. Denise and Bobby, who had spent more time sweating over the supercomputer than anyone else there, seemed to be the only two who were at all enthusiastic about the outcome, judging by the happy embrace they immediately fell into. The rest of the trespassers merely slumped into the nearest chair or wall, weary smiles on their faces. After a few moments, Earl Joseph announced that their work was through, and it was time to be leaving.

As he walked out of the computer room, Ed Stadtler kept a wary eye on him.

* * *

Around the world, the white polyps exploded in violent bursts of lightning and flame. Quite a number of people also saw vague images, almost ghosts, which seemed to pass through the white masses, before they disappeared from sight.

On New York's streets, a polyp disappeared before Woody's eyes just as he trained his sonic on it. He stopped, looked again, then slumped in his seat. "Good. I was low on gas." A number of bystanders saw the polyp disappear and, assuming Woody had accomplished it, ran up to his car to congratulate him. Woody decided to accept the benefit of the doubt.

In Los Angeles, Curt threw himself to cover when he realized the polyp was shuddering unbidden. The monstrous polyp went up in a roar, flooding the block with intense heat and shaking it with thunder. Curt waited until the cacophony was over, before he stood up and surveyed the block. An irregular charred crater resided where the polyp had been, still smoking lightly, but not a bit of the white mass had been left behind this time. He heard cheering, looked up to see a crowd approaching. Coming to thank the Omerican. He had done his duty, and his city was proud of him. He liked the feeling. They crowded around him, cheering him and thumping his back and saying how they knew he would save them. He just stood there and soaked it all in.

Curt was roused by the chop of the hovering copter behind him. Without looking up, he slipped the cannon and staff back into their holsters, mounted his bike, and roared away. There was someone else at home, waiting to thank him personally.

* * *

And in orbit above the Earth, Lee, John, Gus and Miles solemnly shook hands as they waited for the missile platform to retract.

Aftermath

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The cavernous space was filled with monolithic shadows, black holes in the almost complete darkness, trying to make the laboratory seem claustrophobic, and failing completely. The laboratory's machines were all deactivated. No telltales flashed or blinked, no motors whirled, no fields whined, and all was silent.

The rubber-soled shoes walking slowly across the floor maintained the silence of the lab, but the pencil-thin flashlight beams that lanced out intruded into the perfect darkness. Tiny spots of light struck bits of indescribable technology, too advanced to seem real, round white bursts of magic jumping about the room. One set of flashlight beams disappeared beyond the gargantuan shadows, while a second group moved across the front of the lab. The second group stopped in front of a small object of chrome steel, squatting in the corner of the lab.

"This is it. It can change gravity."

"That, I gotta see."

"Later. Get the dolly over here."

"This is the little thing we're picking up? How are we getting the rest of the stuff out of here?"

"Just a few things. But very special things. Go make sure they found the other stuff..."

"Sorry. I'm afraid everything is staying right here. Lights."

The laboratory lights snapped on. The sudden illumination of the mammoth machines all around, startled the two figures in black jumpsuits, standing next to the small machine in the corner. They jumped back in surprise, and one of them bumped into something that didn't feel like machinery, jumped forward, and spun around. Lee Prime stood there, smiling.

"Hello, Joseph."

Earl Joseph stood transfixed for long seconds, staring in shock at Lee. The man behind him recovered first from the surprise. He doubled down low, and tried to rush around Joseph and Lee. Lee swung out with a leg, and the black suited man was propelled twelve feet through the air. He landed on his face, slid twenty feet across the floor, and impacted his head against a heavy table leg. Once he stopped, he did not move.

Joseph started to attempt the same dodge, but Lee was in his path before Joseph knew he had moved. He froze again, and Lee took him by the arm.

A commotion arose from deeper into the lab. Lee effortlessly dragged Joseph toward the noises, stopping before they reached the source of the commotion. Lee yanked Joseph back a foot, before another black-suited figure pitched through the air and landed in a heap in the middle of the floor. The figure pulled himself to his feet with surprising speed, but before he could take another step, a hand grasped his shoulder and yanked him around. Tom Poor drew back a fist, and slammed it into the man's jaw with a sickening crack. The figure fell to the floor again, and did not stir.

Tom turned back toward the bowels of the lab, and called out, "Need any help, Ed?"

"No," came the reply. "I've got things well in hand, here." Sir Ed walked out of the tangle of machines, stumbling a bit with his charge. He held Leslie Cass in a bear hug against his chest, and was apparently enjoying her indignant struggles in his arms. "I'll personally take this one down to the station."

Tom hovered over his charge, watching for signs of stirring. "You know, the Tower could have stopped these guys cold, from what I've heard. Why didn't we just reset the security system, and let it do its job?"

"It's true, the Tower could have caught them," Lee nodded. "However, it is set to repel the most dangerous of super-criminals. It would probably manage to kill one of these people. Until we have a chance to manually reset the system, it was best to catch them this way."

John walked into the lab from the corridor with Ed Stadtler, stopping to pick the

unconscious man up from the floor. "The police have the men in the van downstairs. You get everybody up here?"

"Looks like it," Lee answered, turning to his charge. "Overall, not a bad con job you tried to pull off, Joseph. Just a bit sloppy, that's all. Next time, try not to use a con that's been done on television more than fifty times."

"Next time," Sir Ed told Cass, "don't be so obvious when you case a joint."

"Look on the bright side, though," Lee told them. "You did your country a great service by convincing SBEC to break into Power Tower. I'm sure they'll look favorably upon that when they pass sentence."

"Sentence?..."

"Yes: Trespassing; attempted theft; endangering national security; and, of course, impersonating high ranking government officials. But given the circumstances, I'm sure you'll get off with less than fifty years."

At that moment, five police officers walked into the lab. Joseph, Cass, and their cohorts were gathered, cuffed, and marched out to the elevator bay. Lee turned to Ed Stadtler and smiled.

"Good work, Ed. Your stalling before leaving the Tower, held those crooks up long enough for us to get here from Florida. Thanks for keeping an eye on them for us."

"No problem," Ed grinned, shaking Lee's hand. "Were they really that obvious about this con of theirs?"

"Well..." Lee shrugged. "I suppose it wasn't that obvious, but not insisting on throwing us out when we arrived on the doorstep was pretty suspicious. When I found out Joseph had specified the word, 'Canal,' as an access code, Tom came up with the link to television."

"How's that?"

"Stephen J. Cannell," Tom replied. "He's produced a number of detective shows on TV, for years. A common theme of his shows is con men, used either to commit crimes, or to catch the criminals at their own game."

"Once the suspicion was planted, their covert inspection of the machinery in the lab was pretty obvious," Lee finished. "Maybe if the police sweat them enough, we'll find out if they were planning to use the equipment themselves, or were hoping to sell it to some other mastermind."

"Or country, for that matter." Ed smiled and rocked proudly on his heels. "So. What are you boys going to do, now?"

"Well, we've talked to the city officials about this building," Lee said. "They've offered to make it available to us, as its caretakers, on an indefinite basis. We could use some help from SBEC to reprogram the security systems. And if your organization is interested, you're welcome to use these facilities, as well."

"Permanent access to this computer? We'd be honored. Thanks." Ed grinned at them. "We

made a hell of a team.”

“But first.” Lee clapped a hand on Ed’s shoulder. “We’ve all got a parade to go to.”

* * *

“You sure we’re not back in Florida?” Tom wiped back a sheen of sweat from his forehead, as he shouted over the noise of the throngs at Sir Ed. “Sure feels like it!”

“Take my word for it, I’ve been here often enough,” Sir Ed assured him. “This is definitely Washington, D.C.” The open limousine they rode in, along with Lee and John, had a strong air conditioning system, and it was blowing cold air at the four heroes at its maximum setting. But with the car open to the 97 degrees and 98 percent humidity of a typical Washington summer, the AC might as well have been blowing fire, as far as Tom was concerned.

The parade was, thankfully, near its end, as it passed in front of the White House along its Pennsylvania Avenue route. It seemed all Washington, maybe a sizeable portion of the country, had squeezed itself along the parade route, and brought all the noise and confetti (where did one get confetti, these days?) of an old-fashioned heroes’ welcome.

The numerous limousines carried groups from all over the country. The SB team was just behind Lee’s limo, followed by the NASA astronauts that had flown Endeavor during the Firechief missions. Behind them, advanced ESWAT teams from all over the country, the men and women who had protected the nation from its criminals, then from its predators, rode in reinforced vehicles designed to carry one of the cybernetic combat suits worn by the officers. Even the Lord Industry Security Team was there, in a flashy flatbed truck built by the prestigious company to carry all (but one) of their massive exoskeletons, and with seats included for the security team to sit in and wave to the crowd.

But as popular as these real heroes were, the crowd went wild for the men and women riding in the rearmost limousines. In a red, white and blue stretch open limo rode the Omerican, waving proudly to the crowds. Most of America had seen his heroics, thanks to the L.A. news services, and true to the powers of media hype, he was the real champion of the nation. Now they thundered their applause, and threw flowers and flags at the star-spangled hero. The Omerican caught many of the objects right out of the air, and his feet were already covered by a pile of the offerings in the car. Behind his car were others, coaxed into appearances from all over the country, men in black, women in jumpsuits and kevlar vests, multicolored uniforms, helmets, masks, gloves, boots, and proud smiles. The masked vigilante-heroes were all the darlings of the media, and were having their day in the sun with the rest. There were even rumors that the President had gone on record to pardon any illegalities they may have committed during a “time of global emergency.”

The lead cars of the parade swung around to the rear of the White House, headed for the tree-lined avenues between 14th and 17th streets. They would soon be meeting the President himself, inside that august structure. Ahead, Lee could see numerous television crews set up in the areas where the cars would discharge their passengers. He recognized quite a few of the commentators, who were speaking animatedly to their live audiences and preparing for the optimum moment to spring on the celebrities.

Even now, Lee could hear Stef Gold of the local NBC news affiliate, whose voice somehow

carried clear across the block, finishing up her pre-interview comments.

“—and more than anything else, these people are credited with keeping this country safe, when our protectors were gone.” Stephanie Gold caught the cue from her on-site director, indicating the first of the limos were coming up the block, and would soon be pulling up directly behind them. “We’ve addressed the problems of having the kind of world that needs people like these, many times, and we will not debate that here. For now, we are grateful for having them at all, and they are deserving of our praise. But what will keep these conscientious volunteers on duty? And what will we do, if they ever give up on us?”

She turned and indicated one of the cars carrying an ESWAT team, just coming into distant view. “Thanks to the efforts of individual city task forces, many of our biggest cities now have advanced SWAT equipment to protect themselves. The name ‘Cybercop’ has already become a household name, in a few short weeks. But the Cybercop suits are very expensive, and many of these cities are in negotiations with the Federal government to help finance the suits. It is hoped that the suits can eventually be rolled out in all major U.S. cities and many fire and rescue services. Maybe someday, the need for so-called vigilantes will fade away. But who knows how long that could be?”

Stef threw her auburn hair around, as she picked out Lee’s limo on cue, then swung back to the camera. “And here are the first heroes of the day, the brave men that destroyed the creature from another dimension, before it could consume us from space. I’m going to try to get a few words with them.” She was already moving, and her cameraman followed as she moved alongside the car and confronted Lee. “By now, all of America knows Lee Prime, the man who created the bomb that destroyed the creature, launching it himself from the space shuttle Endeavor four days ago, and his associates, John Simpson, Tom Poor, and Sir Edward Lance. Gentlemen, we’re all proud of you!”

“Thank you, Ms. Gold,” Lee volunteered, as they stepped out of the car.

“Tell me, Lee, are you planning to continue to offer your services to your country?”

“Actually, I have every hope that we will not need to.”

That was definitely the last thing I expected him to say, Stef thought. “What do you mean by that?” was all she could ask.

“We came forward, because we were needed to help combat an extraordinary threat to the world. But the fact is, the rest of these cars are carrying the real heroes of America. The ones who do this every day, who have been doing this for years, and the ones who stood up to defend their homes and friends. They’re the ones I’m proud of. They are regular men and women. They are smart, strong, and brave. They are willing to stand up to the worst our criminal element can throw at them, fight through the worst natural disasters, and they don’t need superpowers to do it.”

“Not even the Omega American, who has resurfaced and proved himself in Los Angeles?”

“We all saw the original Omerican board Doctor Tomorrow’s ship. Whoever that man is, he’s not the same man who left with Tomorrow and the rest. He may be incredibly gifted and athletic, but he’s as normal as the rest of us.”

“I take it,” Stef said, “that you don’t think we need superheroes anymore?”

"We never needed them," Lee stated. "We were always capable of taking care of ourselves, without the help of superheroes. Unfortunately, the presence of the superheroes has made the world a bit complacent, lazy. We were giving our future up to them. Now that they are gone, it's time to take our future back."

"Prophetic words, gentlemen. Thank you."

"You're welcome. And in the meantime," Lee said, "my associates and I will be sticking around, to fight the good fight here on Earth, this time."

"Any plans on where to start?"

Before Lee could reply, they were distracted by a rumble in the distance. The camera crews and reporters went silent, and after a few moments of looking around, someone spotted a plume of reddish smoke pouring into the sky from the general direction of Georgetown. One of the ESWAT teams had seen it from their car, and three of them were jumping to their Cybercop suits and climbing into them. Tom ran over to the driver of their limo, and asked, "Can we borrow this for awhile?"

Lee looked at Stef and smiled. "I think you have the answer to your question. If you'll excuse us." Lee, Sir Ed and John piled back into the limo, and they tore off in a squeal of brakes. Two of the ESWAT cars followed right behind them.

Stef watched them go, glanced at the stranded limo driver next to her, then finally turned back toward her cameraman. She paused a moment, trying furiously to think of the best way to end the sequence. Finally, she just shrugged and smiled into the camera.

"I just love a happy ending! Back to you in the studio. Jim?"

Epilogue

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...Lee Prime proved to be right. We had gone lazy, with the superheroes around. It took awhile for us to get our acts together, but soon we were tackling the supercriminals that we thought we couldn't touch. We weren't as helpless as we thought we were.

And things got better. Those first cybernetic suits were kind of simple, but they evolved into the "Cyber Police" suits all over today. And the Cybercops are to the old Police, and even SWAT teams, what a computer is to a scratch pad. We also got better rescue squads, firefighting gear, emergency teams... Those suits were a stage of evolution for the emergency service industry. Before we knew it, we had really made an improvement in the quality of life in the country. People were suddenly able to walk down the streets at night, in areas where they never could have done that before.

That creature they stopped was never seen again. We still don't know if we killed it or not, or if there are more like it out there. But our entire Solar Watch Network, our plants on the Moon, and New Hawaii, all owe their existence to the realization that there are things out there

worth knowing about. Not the least of which was our own Solar System and its resources. And would we have found life on Venus, Mars or Io, before the twenty-second century, if New Hawaii hadn't been there to send out expeditions from?

And now they're talking about going into that fourth dimension. Well, I'll believe it when I see it. But then, I've seen a lot...

At any rate, it almost seems like we learned our lessons backwards, having to lose our Gods before we fully understood what they had given to us. But a famous man once said, "You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone." And what did we learn? That Mankind did indeed have a vast, untapped potential. And once we fully understood that it was time to use it, we stepped out of our infancy, and into the future.

And the Gods are gone. Despite Lee Prime's incorrect assumption, the second Omerican, Curtis Mendez, was the last of the superhumans. Speaking of Lee Prime, it's funny: I discovered, years ago, that Lee Prime had once published articles under the pseudonym of Lewis P Allen. How about that? I always wondered if it was just a coincidence, but I never found a connection.

Anyway, there is no evidence of Mendez ever fathering a child, and no new superhuman abilities have been recorded since. But of course, we should assume that Mendez was sexually active throughout his adult life, and we don't know all of his activities, or his conquests. And there's still the matter of the four months when the whereabouts of Miss Elaine Tyne were unaccounted for.

Also, after over 3000 years, there could still be descendants of the original Allen clan somewhere in the world that have not been unearthed. Who knows?

—transcribed from Southwood Academy lecture series: Dr. Kristopher Muir, addressing the school body 4/18/2096.

Gods and Children

by LEWIS P ALLEN

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In the annals of global history, it is unarguable that Man has progressed further than any other animal on the Earth. Out from under the bones of the dinosaurs, he has become the most intelligent and capable of the primates, in just a few hundred thousand years. From isolated tribal groups, he has gone on to create an amazing and complex civilization, in just ten thousand years. And, with the (debatable) exception of the Delphinids, he has developed the greatest wealth of accumulated knowledge and communication skills ever seen on this planet.

But for all his advancements, Man is still a child race, in more ways than one. It is true that Man has not changed much since his original departure from primate evolution. Other than a noticeable lack of body hair and slightly different anatomical proportions, Man is still the ape

that walked off the savannas those many years ago. He has developed a larger brain than the other primates, but it is still wired the same way it was when he first learned to walk upright.

Incredible as it may seem, it is Man's brain that holds him back from the next step in evolution. There are two reasons for this. First, the human brain is complex in scope, but limited in ability. It is capable of only one or, at best, a few complex operations at once. It is easily distracted, it has a very inefficient long-term memory storage system, and its understanding of the world is limited to the dubious input of its major senses of sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch. And it is hardwired—it cannot be physically improved or adjusted.

The second constraint of the human mind is in its excess baggage. Humans, as a species, tend to have a common psychology, a base of behavior that all subsequent behavioral traits spring from, or are colored by. This psychology is mostly related to his racial pasts as a social animal, as well as his place in a family structure during his formative years. As these traits are buried deep enough in racial history to be essentially instinctive, there is nothing that can be done to remove or alter that base psychology.

To progress, Man must further evolve beyond Homo Erectus. He must open parts of his mind that have yet to be used. He must broaden his perceptions, to see the things that are presently beyond his senses and understanding. And he must expand his mental capacities, to understand those new perceptions and take advantage of them. But before Man can do this, he must triumph over the hardwiring and excess baggage of his animal mind. The hardwiring will prove to be the easiest to change, given time. The excess baggage, however, has the potential to arrest human evolution completely, judging from the damage it's already done.

One of the overriding elements of Man's base psychology is the Father Figure. The Father Figure is originally formed by impressions of the biological Father, and over time the impressions take on mythic qualities. The Father Figure is the master, the protector, the icon. He knows all, he survives all, he can do all. The Father Figure is wise, strong, brave, dependable, and loving. The Father Figure is the Ultimate Man. Such is Man's respect for this icon that he aspires to its perfection, and respects or reveres anyone who most closely approaches it. When Man is alone and helpless against Nature, and he subconsciously wants to believe some force out there is secretly helping him, he projects a quintessential Father Figure into the role.

A God, by any other name.

A God is, by definition, the ultimate Father Figure. All-seeing, all-knowing, omnipotent, loving, protecting, these are the traits which are so attractive to Man, that he will willingly give his life to such a figure. And Man has done this, ever since he banded together to form the first farming communities.

When Man ceased his nomadic ways and became agrarian, families agreed to work together to produce the best variety of crops, trade and sell between themselves and protect their resources from outside threats. Natural leaders soon came forward to administrate these tasks, but soon they discovered that hard-working people sometimes needed more of a reward for their efforts... or more of a punishment for their transgressions... than they could provide.

At some point in history, in an unnamed place much like any other, a leader hit upon the notion of convincing his people that the God or Gods they worshipped were capable of bestowing rewards or punishments on people. This suggestion only works well if the concept

of Heaven is accepted by the people, so people were subsequently taught that they would go to another life after this one, and live forever. Then a set of rules could be created, which would represent the “Law of God,” and people could be convinced to follow these laws, or suffer the wrath of God forever, even after death.

When the process is laid out in such a fashion, it seems ridiculous that people would blindly accept such a concept, even without any physical proof of the Gods or afterlives that the idea hinged upon.

Why, then, has this basic concept managed to spread around the world, from the simplest to the most intelligent of people, accepted virtually unchallenged, for the last five thousand years? The answer is in Man’s hardwired psychological need for a Father Figure. Children need Father Figures to provide them with rules of behavior, and are rewarded with love and protection when they follow these rules correctly. As children become older, they still feel they need rules of behavior imposed on them, but the reward system is transferred to their peers. Group acceptance as Father Figure, therefore, becomes the major motivation as the child enters adulthood.

Once adulthood is reached, group acceptance has lost much of its importance as a reward system. However, increasing age causes Man to reconsider his mortality. Man as a species fears death. As he grows older, he comes to understand that death is inevitable, but the fear is strong enough that his psyche creates a subconscious desire to live forever. The concept of Heaven is embraced by the subconscious as a possible alternative to death. This subconscious desire is often the only thing that assuages Man’s fear of death, and as it is so important to Man’s acceptance of his fate—a possibility of cheating death—that the psyche makes incredible allowances to support the desire for immortality. These allowances are commonly known as “leaps of faith.”

The result is a populace that believes in a God or Gods, and will do what they think the Gods want them to do, on the slightest chance that they will live forever and reap the rewards of obedience.

This is why it is so easy for Man to believe in Gods he cannot see, and Heavens he will never reach. But this is only part of the story.

It takes a leap of faith to believe in Gods. Once Gods are accepted, people often become fatalists. They give their lives over to their Gods, and trust in Them to protect them. Events become Acts of God, and people accept some higher reason for events which they may not understand. They do not challenge authorities. They do not strive to change life overmuch. They do their jobs, and go home. They trust others to do their jobs, so they do not need to be concerned. In short, they become complacent. They become sheep.

Enter the shepherders: The men and women who are commonly referred to as “Superheroes.” In these people, we have the physical manifestations of many of the qualities we bestow upon our Gods. These people are watched, photographed, interviewed, iconified, idolized and imitated by Man. They have become the substantiation of the Father Figure, and as such, they are having a marked effect on Man beyond their “heroic” acts.

The effect is evident in the performance reports of elected officials, public servants, scientists, inventors and even thrillseekers, in every region “superheroes” frequent. There is a noted lack of aspiration. Challenges are more often passed up than met. Less effort is given to

difficult tasks. In every case, evidence suggests the expectation that one or more “superheroes” would magically appear and do the job, and this expectation robbed normal individuals of incentive.

Consider the Los Angeles Riots of ‘91. The riots should never have lasted for ten days, and if local authorities had not rested on their laurels and waited for the costumed vigilantes to do their jobs for them, they could have ended the riots over the first weekend. The same attitude cost fourteen men, women and children their lives in the Astrodome in ‘90, and burned eight men and women to death in Burma’s Firestorm Incident in ‘92.

And these obvious incidents are not isolated. In cases of accidents, eyewitness reports document a noticeable lack of volunteer assistance. Video cameras have caught images of private citizens standing around a mangled car and pinned victim, helplessly calling out and watching the skies for salvation.

Clearly, the very existence of these “superheroes” is affecting the way human beings work with and take care of each other. This trend is growing, and it is the most dangerous threat Mankind has ever faced. Man is not taking responsibility for himself. Man is giving up on his future. He is not trying to improve, to progress, to aspire. Man is losing the will to strive, and the will to strive is the only thing that brought Man forward out of the savannas. Man is at risk of a tragic demise that will make that of the dinosaurs pale in comparison.

Does this make us a soon-to-be-extinct missing link between Early Man and the “superheroes”? Are the “superheroes” really early versions of Homo Futuris? I do not think so. The proportionately small number of them against the number of humans suggest that these are isolated evolutionary events, or “freaks,” and the chances for their long term survival are slim to none. To suggest that 99.999% of humanity must bow out to make way for an almost certainly doomed .001% is ludicrous. However, if Man does not work to regain his former stature, he will surely die out; and when the “superheroes” die out not long afterward, the Human Race will be no more.

Clearly, it is time for Man to cease his complacency and work to regain his place on the evolutionary ladder usurped by these “superheroes.” Man must take steps to regain his initiative, rediscover his strengths, his capacity to dream, and his desire to pursue his dreams. The best and the brightest will have to lead the way back to the path, for the rest have forgotten how to move on their own two feet. But when they are reminded of how great it is just to be Human, they will be ready to walk again.

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1.1.2006

Any good New Year's resolutions out there? I'm just asking... I don't generally make any, myself.

I don't make periodic resolutions, so much as I constantly review my life, habits and activities, and make changes as I go. For instance, when I realized another business venture of mine wasn't working out, I acted to shut it down right then, to avoid wasting time and money on it. Much better than waiting for the New Year to make lifestyle changes, at the very time when the chaos of the holidays demands the familiarity of old habits to keep your balance. (I personally think this is why a lot of New Year's resolutions go bad, but it's just a guess.) There are other improvements I'd like to make with my life, or my work, or my hobbies. But I do them when it feels right to do them, not when the calendar tells me I should. Generally, when I make changes to my life in that way, the changes are much longer-lasting and effective.

So I won't be recommending any resolutions to you, like to read more, to cut back on the denuding of our forests for paper products, or to start buying more e-books.

I'm expecting that you'll just start doing those things, when the time is right.

(Psst! New book coming out in mid-January! Details out in a week! Bet you can't wait, huh?) -SJ

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