

Bob Moore: No Hero

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An exciting excerpt from the full-length follow up to ***Bob Moore: No Hero*** is included at the end. In ***Bob Moore: Desperate Times***, Bob finds himself working with his super-powered ex-wife to foil a terrorist plot. But a new super, the most powerful anyone has ever seen, arrives with catastrophic results. Can Bob, a Private Eye with no super powers, survive when so many supers have perished?

Chapter 1

I snapped the last picture and glanced down just as the base of the tree burst into flames.

There are a lot of reasons to wear flame-resistant clothing. In my line of work, unfortunately, it is often because the tree I'm sitting in catches fire. Well, maybe that's not exactly true; it isn't like it spontaneously combusts or anything. It's generally *set* on fire. Generally by the people I'm trying to photograph. Generally.

As you might have guessed, I'm a private eye. As a PI, one of my most common jobs is figuring out if a spouse or partner is cheating. While, for most PIs, this doesn't involve a heck of a lot of tree immolation, I'm a specialist. The people I investigate almost exclusively have powers. Power to fly, power to throw cars at me and, way too often I find, power to set the tree I'm sitting in on fire from a great distance.

It's part of the job. I've gotten used to it.

This particular job was run of the mill. Fire dude, what's-his-name (it's always something like Sunburst or Inferno), was worried that his sidekick (yet another in a long line of barely legal, barely clothed, large-breasted supers with tangentially related powers) was cheating on him.

Regardless of whether people have super powers or not, the fact is, if they are worried enough to hire someone, they might as well save their money for a lawyer.

I'm generally a bit more on top of the name thing, but this was a rush job. With the stack of cash he set in front of me, I wasn't all that worried about his name. Of course, part of it was just getting out of the office and away from my phone. Some cop had been calling me every day for the past week. Bitter experience had taught me that no good came from accepting job offers from cops. Still, I couldn't ignore him forever, so I had promised to take his call just as Mr. Flame-dude walked in. That was all the excuse I'd needed to stall a little while longer – even though I was fuzzy on the details. I should, however, have been a bit more curious about *her* powers.

In this particular case, the sidekick (Flamette or something) was cavorting with another super chick I'd never seen before. Apparently, her fling had some sort of super hearing or ESP because the minute I started snapping pictures of the two of them in a passionate embrace, she looked right at me. Shortly thereafter, the aforementioned fire started when what looked to be a lump of flaming, blue coal materialized in the client's sidekick's palm and shot directly toward me.

Luckily, Flamette's powers don't have the intensity of some of the other supers I've investigated or I'd probably be a cinder by now.

Ah... that's right, he called her Cindar (with an "a"). Regardless, it was time to exit before they had a chance to come over and make sure the fire had taken care of me and, more importantly, the film.

One of the advantages of living in a society of supers is that it isn't all that hard to get hold of some crazy technology - if you know the right people. There always seems to be some down-and-out super genius looking to finance his next giant robot or powered suit of armor. Do they invent cars that run on garbage? Do they solve world hunger? Do they create a truly wrinkle-free khaki? No, of course not. But ask one of them to create an Inertial Dampener to protect you from long falls and, oh say, buses thrown at your head, and they're all over it. Never mind that "inertial dampener" is just some stupid phrase I got from an old sci-fi TV show. They'll make it work even if it doesn't make sense.

I shoved the camera back in its pack, sealed it tight, flicked on my Inertial Dampener from the belt buckle control, took a deep breath and dropped out of the tree. I covered my face and head as best I could with my arms, but as I hit the ground, I smelled burning hair. The Inertial Dampener absorbed the majority of my falling speed (or inertia), so even though the fall was a

good thirty feet, I landed lightly on my feet. I knew Cindar could probably fly, which is pretty standard with the flame types, but she would need to stay high or risk starting a forest fire. Since the area I chose was heavily forested all the way back to the city, that meant all I had to really worry about was the partner.

The thing to remember about supers is that they just *love* their masks. Well, it's really the costume thing overall, but they don't go anywhere without a mask of some sort. Cindar was probably looking for her mask (and her clothes) as I scrambled back to the car. I'm guessing the other chick was doing the same. I could only hope they had torn them off beforehand. That would slow them down for a minute or two.

You'd think that a convertible would be a bad choice in my line of work. You'd think a tank or at least some sort of armored vehicle would make more sense. You'd be dead wrong. I drove a multicolored convertible that was probably scrounged together out of three or more different vehicles. I had picked it up a few weeks prior after I found my last car compressed into the size of a soda can and lying in the middle of my living room floor. All around was broken glass from my window. I had to pay a local kid with fledgling super strength twenty dollars to remove it.

Not sure who did it, but I'd bet it was yet another in a long line of "satisfied" clients. That's just part of the job. You'd be surprised how many of those who threaten me end up as clients later. Short story: don't get too attached to anything. When working with supers, they tend to have a bit of a temper paired with a complete lack of impulse control.

I arrived at my car just in time to hear Cindar launch herself from the new girl's backyard. Sounded like a rocket taking off. Damn, that was quick. No sign of the girlfriend though. I slammed the car into first and floored it. Given Cindar's age, I guessed she'd take at least a shot or two at me before she realized how dangerous it was.

Dangerous, in this context, really refers to the penalties for starting a forest fire. If a super is caught doing that just once, there are all sorts of super groups that will automatically reject her application or kick her out.

I weaved down the hillside trying to keep overhanging branches between me and the flying super. I adjusted the angle of my rearview mirror upward to get a better look at the sidekick. Through the branches, I could just make out that the girl was completely engulfed in flames.

So that's how she caught up so fast. No costume required.

An explosion next to my driver's side door reminded me to keep my eyes on the road. I swerved off the road onto the gravelly shoulder, nearly clipping a tree, trying to shake the flying tempest. The back of the car kicked out violently, forcing me to steer into the slide and accelerate in order to maintain control. From above I could hear faint cursing over the sound of flames and rushing air. While a convertible is great for quick entry and exit and allows for easy picture taking, it wasn't so great at protecting me from an enraged, flame-engulfed teenager throwing exploding projectiles.

"Come on!" I yelled over my shoulder, "You're supposed to be one of the good guys!"

A scream of rage followed by a fresh explosion just in front of the car was her only response.

"Yikes," I whispered under my breath.

Guess she wasn't ready to listen to reason. The roar of flames from above increased in volume as she flew ahead, a streak of fire like a comet tail scorching the sky. She disappeared around a bend in the road; the trees and hill obscured her from my sight. As I rounded the curve, I saw her floating just above the road, a flaming lump in her hand. I slammed on the brakes, my car's nose dipped as I came to a stop some hundred feet from her, shocks bouncing the car front to back.

"Give me the camera, dick," her voice was soft but the menace was clear.

"Listen lady, just let it go," I called out. "I had this camera specially made."

No, it wasn't.

"The second I took the pictures they were sent to a secure development facility."

This is actually a pretty good idea. I wondered if it was possible. I'd have to ask Ted about it.

"I could give you the camera, but it won't do you much good."

Why is it I always come up with my best ideas under stress? I should write some of this down.

The client had told me his sidekick was eighteen years old, which gave me a huge advantage. At that age, she was still conditioned to believe adults. The look on her face told me I'd guessed right. The flaming lump in her hand still shone brightly, but the flames that encircled her body started to subside. She was looking around, mostly at the ground, and definitely not at me. I could read the questions clearly on her face. Is he lying? What if he isn't? What can I really do?

"Is that true?"

At this point, the flames were almost gone. Cindar was a typical specimen of a super hero: tall (around five foot, nine, I'd estimate), deep red hair, and naturally pale skin with a hint of red. An aftereffect of her power? Of course the thing that I couldn't help but notice as the flames continued to fade was her lack of clothing. I guessed that she would have normally worn the traditional spandex outfit, but considering the state that she was in when I disturbed her, I guessed she'd forgotten.

"Umm..." I cleared my throat.

She stared at me, her eyes squinting slightly, head cocked to one side. I nodded my head and flicked my gaze down.

"What's your problem, freak?" She was starting to get annoyed. Well, maybe that's a bit mild. She was already annoyed. Now she was getting furious.

"Well," I couldn't help but smirk a little, "you're... ah, showing a bit."

A few more beats of confusion followed by her own glance downward. Her face shot up, her eyes locked with mine.

"You son-of-a..."

The rest was lost in the rush of air speeding toward her body as she ignited. Once again she was engulfed in flames, this time white hot. Below her, the asphalt started to bubble and spread. With a primal yell, which may or may not have been laced with some choice comments about my sexuality, she reared back to hurl the still flaming orb at me. I did the only thing I could. I gunned it.

I only insist on a few things when I buy a car. I prefer convertibles when I can get them. I like a comfortable driver's seat. But what I absolutely must have is an oversized engine. If I spend any extra money on a car, it is to beef up the engine. This convertible started with a V8 engine. I added twin turbos, upgraded the exhaust and intake, and had the transmission beefed up to handle the extra power. While the wheels could have been upgraded along with the suspension and brakes, I really go for the maximum 'getting away with all your body parts attached' potential. Stopping, road grip, smooth ride - these all take a backseat.

I only had one hundred feet or so, and with that exploding lump of coal soon to be shooting toward me, I only had one chance. I floored the accelerator and held on. The rear wheels spun in place for a moment as time seemed to slow. Cindar reared back, her face contorted in a mixture of hatred and glee. Just as her arm came forward, the wheels found purchase and the car lurched forward briefly as I jammed the wheel to the right. The back of the car fishtailed out and I got about two feet before the orb hit just behind the driver's seat. It

exploded on the side panel of the car. I ducked instinctively and flipped the wheel hard to the left, the back of the car fishtailing to the other side.

"Crazy bitch," I whispered under my breath. I gritted my teeth and straightened out the car. I kept the accelerator pressed to the floor and aimed the vehicle right at Cindar.

"What are you doing!" Cindar bellowed.

Both of her arms reached back behind her, and even from this distance, I could see the orbs form in her hands. They seemed smaller than the others I'd seen - a fact that was confirmed when the first hit the windshield and exploded. The glass spiderwebbed but didn't give in. It was on fire, however, and I could feel the heat coming off of it. I was tempted to swerve when I saw the next orb flying toward me, but I held my course steady. Again the orb hit the windshield and again it held. The cracks were so extensive that I could barely see. The heat coming off the glass was too intense and I started to fear that it would melt.

My clothing may be heat-resistant, but I doubt it could protect me from molten glass.

I pulled my hand back into my sleeve for protection and slapped at the windshield. Two good whacks was all it took. The glass separated from the frame and shot over the back of the car. It landed behind me in the middle of the road where it continued to burn.

"What are you DOING!" Cindar yelled as the distance between us quickly diminished.

She put both hands together over her head where another flaming orb formed. She hurled it at me, her body nearly folding in half with the effort. This one was larger than the others and her aim was true. It flew through the missing windshield's frame. I barely had a chance to throw an arm up in front of my face. But instead of the explosion and subsequent fiery death I was expecting, I lowered my arm and saw confusion on Cindar's face. She snarled and shot up in the air at near supersonic speed, barely clearing the hood of the car.

I spent the next mile or so looking around for Cindar, but she was nowhere to be seen. It seemed she'd changed her mind. But I had more pressing things to think about. There was the flaming orb on my lap. It seemed the Inertial Dampener had stopped the forward motion of the orb before it could touch me. It also seemed clear that it required contact to trigger the explosion. The orb had come to rest on my lap, cradled by the inertial field. I tended not to use the field for long as I was not all that confident that it wasn't going to give me cancer. Mostly, though, it was a battery issue. The field required a lot of energy and the belt I wore only had about a thirty minute charge.

That is, if it was fully charged.

Honestly, I'm not sure how much charge was left. I rarely pay attention to such things and I don't spend all that money on my car only to hang around after things get violent. Give a super enough time and they'll figure out how to hurt you. It doesn't pay to stick around after I've got the pictures I need to fulfill my contract.

Luckily, the flames coming off the orb seemed more for show as the heat through my fire-resistant trousers was negligible.

Two other matters crowded my mind. First, the car was on fire. The first orb that hit the back panel hadn't gone out. If anything, driving seemed to make it burn hotter. I could smell burning plastic, upholstery, and what I guessed was metal. If molten metal started dripping from the body, aside from the fire hazard, I might've lost my back tire. That would have made a getaway significantly more difficult. The second - and even more disconcerting - matter was the beautiful woman sitting in the passenger seat.

All of six feet, pale skin, dark eyes, dark, close-cropped hair with a week's worth of gel holding it mostly pulled forward, she was gorgeous. Like all supers, she favored a skintight outfit. This one was constructed out of black leather. It was strapless, low cut in the front and back with a high cut on the thighs. A matching black thigh-high boot with a chromed stiletto heel rested on my dash. If you can believe it, this costume was much more conservative than

the one she wore the last time I saw her.

"Whisper," I turned back to the road just in time to keep me from running onto the shoulder again. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"Cut the crap, Bob," her voice was strong and husky, a poignant counterpoint to her chosen name. "Where's the film?"

"Hmm... so that was you," the pieces were starting to click into place. "I didn't think you rolled that way."

"Just having a bit of fun. Now the film. I heard what you told Cindar. I'm not buying it." She picked up the camera case from the floorboards. "Or maybe I'll just take it myself."

"You don't want to do that, Samantha."

Her head snapped to face me.

"Hey, I make it a point to know as much as I can about my clients, current and former," I shrugged. "If I'd known it was you in there, I'd have offered my services. You know, I'm quite well respected for my boudoir work."

Her eyes narrowed, "Very funny. Now, are you going to give me the film or do I have to gate the whole camera to the sun?"

Samantha Soft or Whisper, as the public knew her, was one of the more powerful supers on the planet. She had a part-time gig with The Bulwark but mostly just freelanced here and there. While she was an accomplished martial artist, her claim to fame was her stealth. You almost never heard her without her wanting you to. She also had a habit of appearing and disappearing when you least expected. I was one of the few non-supers who knew she did it by creating teleportation portals that she called "gates." I had a working theory that the reason she was so waif thin was because of how passing through a gate made you feel. I know I couldn't keep down anything solid for six hours after the only time she'd taken me through one.

"Be reasonable, Samantha."

Her lip curled as I used her name again.

"You know how I work. The client just wants to know what's going on. I always show them the pictures but I keep the originals. It isn't like you super-types are going to use them in a court or anything."

"You say that like it's a swear word."

"What?"

"Super."

I shrugged and looked away.

"Who's the target? Which of us were you sent to photograph?"

"I can't tell you that, you know that," I replied.

"Who's the client?"

"Again, you know I can't tell you that."

We were at an impasse and she knew it. The thousand pound gorilla in the room was the fact that she was a previous client; I'd done work for her in the past. She had wanted to get on with The Bulwark, but at the time, they already had a stealth type on staff. A few pictures of the target, Kid Shadow, drinking himself into a stupor, and suddenly there was a job opening. She knew I still had the pictures and even though I'd promised never to use them, she couldn't be sure. While The Bulwark had strict rules about drug and alcohol abuse, they were even less lenient on extortion. If they found out that she forced Shadow out, she'd suddenly have a lot of very high powered enemies - well, a lot *more* high powered enemies.

"Tell me this at least," she took a deep breath. "Is this going to hit the tabloids? Do I need to call my publicist?"

"Nah, my contract is only for information," I smiled my most winning smile, which, I have

to admit, isn't all that winning. "You know how much extra I charge to deliver printed photographs."

She nodded.

It wasn't a joke. I easily increase my already significant fee by a factor of ten or more to provide physical proof. Most of the jobs I take are just personal. They don't need lasting proof, just something to act on. Whisper had personal experience with my fees as she'd needed the pictures to convince Kid Shadow to quit The Bulwark.

She took a breath (at least it looked like it, I didn't hear a thing). "Fine... fine. Just..." She spent a moment, "Whatever." She rolled the camera case over in her hands a few times, staring at it hard. She tossed it up in the air and caught it. "Fine. Well, see ya, Bob."

"Wait," the shimmering gate that had started to appear under her stopped expanding. "A little help here?" I nodded down toward the orb still burning with blue fire on my lap.

A small chuckle escaped her throat, "Well, would you look at that, a blue ball."

"Cute," I replied.

"Well, Robert Moore, private dick, I'd love to help you with your problem, but you see," she checked her watch, "the world hasn't been in jeopardy for a few hours. I figure we're due for an alien invasion or evil genius any minute now. If not, I've got a young girl to comfort."

"Yeah," I said, "that reminds me, what's the deal? I never pegged you as..."

"As what?" Her tone was icy.

I quickly remembered just how deadly she was at hand to hand combat. "Ah... well," I cleared my throat, "are you two just, um, friends or are you working together now?"

"You mean, is she my *sidekick*?" she practically spat the word. "Like I need one of those!" she laughed lightly. "Don't you remember what it was like when I gated you?"

"I try not to."

"Exactly." Samantha pulled down the visor and adjusted her molded eye mask and hair in the mirror. It was sort of pointless since the wind was beating at us mercilessly without a windshield to stop it. "She's a good kid, but she's not really ready to hang with the big boys."

"Kid?" I retorted, "She's, like, six years younger than you."

Again Whisper fixed her gaze on me, "You DO do your research, don't you?" She tossed the camera in the back seat, "Not even The Bulwark know my true age."

I shrugged, "I have my sources." I added, "Didn't know your address until tonight, though."

She glared, "This better not end up..." Her head jerked forward, then slowly dropped. "Damn."

I smiled, "Yeah, thanks for the confirmation."

"You know, Bob," the shimmering gate under her started to expand once more. "You make it awful hard to like you."

I shrugged.

"Well, you better get one of those sources of yours to help you with that ball problem. Later, Bob."

"Ah, come on Samantha," I replied. "Don't be like that!"

As she drifted into the dimensional opening on the seat of my car she called back, "Don't call me Samantha, Bob."

"Fine, fine," I called back. "Just help me out here!"

It was too late, she was gone. Now I only had one chance. I hoped he'd be awake and sober enough to help.

* * *

Chapter 2

Twenty minutes later I was pulling up at the home of Ted Vente.

When I think of a super genius' home, I usually imagine some sprawling mansion filled with all the latest gadgets plus some technology you've never heard of. What I wouldn't think of is a three bedroom ranch-style home smack dab in the middle of suburbia. Ted, known as Tinkerer to his friends and colleagues (and, frankly, anyone else who wasn't his mom), obtained the home as part of his reward package from his part in repelling the robotic crab invasion of '09 (a fairly local and, in my opinion, overblown bid for world domination by yet another in a long line of super-villains). He really didn't have much part to play as can be evidenced by the amount of his reward. Supers who are instrumental in the defense of the planet often receive enough compensation for a normal "tippy" to retire. Of course, like all supers, Ted thinks he was the lynchpin in the success of the operation (and will speak at length on the subject). Since then, he's been biding his time, as he likes to say, until he can get what's coming to him. A super-villain in the making? That'd be my bet. Luckily, he's young, brash and a little too easily distracted to focus on world domination. So far.

The mailbox on the curb had a hidden panel that reacts to individual bio-prints (as Ted often told me). Again, not exactly sure that a bio-print is a real thing, but it seemed to work. I've never known Ted's lair to be compromised.

I pressed my hand firmly onto the side of the mailbox. It looked and felt like real brick, but after a moment, my hand began to sink into it. A familiar tingling sensation ran along the palm of my hand, radiating slowly outward down my fingers. A moment later, my hand, again, felt like it was pressing against solid brick. It wasn't a painful experience, but it wasn't something I would look forward to. I always felt the urge to wash my hand afterwards and no matter how many times I did, it always felt weird for at least an hour or two.

After a moment, a small cloud of mist started spraying into the car from the mailbox. A holographic face appeared in the mist in front of me. It was faint and semitransparent, and I guessed that from the street, my own head would completely obscure it from view. On my lap the orb hissed and crackled as the condensation landed on it.

"Yes? Can I help you?"

The bubbly blonde with Scandinavian features and perfect bone structure wasn't someone I'd ever seen, but that was nothing new at Ted's.

"Ted, I need your help. Quick," I glanced down at the angry orb.

"Hey, who are..." The holographic face studied me more closely. "Bob? What the hell, man, I was about to go out!"

I shrugged.

She went on, "Come back another time," and tipped back what looked to be a cosmopolitan in a stemless martini glass, emptying it. "Tonight, I'm on the prowl."

"Ted, I'm calling in a marker," I replied, keeping one eye on the orb on my lap, crackling under the relentless misting of condensation. The flames had reduced slightly, but I didn't let that lull me into thinking that it was any less potent.

"Man, you ran out of markers a long time ago." Her head moved out of the picture for a moment, reappearing a second later with a wide-brimmed, floppy hat.

"Well, how about I give you some advice and you give me a bit of help?" I said.

She looked confused for a second, her perfect lips pouted in consternation.

"You first," she replied, her eyes suspicious.

"Lose the hat."

"What?" she looked to the side, obviously at a mirror, "I look fabulous!"

"The only things you'll pick up with that hat are little old ladies coming home from church," I retorted. "Though a good, stiff breeze might let you fly for a bit."

"Ha, ha, funny man. Checking sensors now." The girl disappeared from the projection and I could hear buttons being pushed in the background. "Looks all clear. The boy across the way has taken to night gazing. I've already had to wipe his memory twice. Come on in." The mist and the girl disappeared. After a moment, the crackling from the orb ceased and I exhaled.

In front of the car, the end of the driveway nearest to the home started to descend. The front wheel of the car, which was just on the other side of the pivot point, started to dip. As soon as there was enough room for the hood of the car, I started to pull in. A moment later I could fit the whole car through the opening. I pulled in quickly and the driveway retracted with an audible slap. This was quickly followed by a hiss as Ted's lair pressurized.

Roughly the same square footage as his home, Ted's lair was fairly typical for a low-level super. A single level, it had a fully functional lab, a computer station with equipment we tippys only dream of, and basic living quarters. Ted had a larger than average walk-in closet that, instead of costumes, was filled with actual clothes. His two-seat sports car was parked in the garage that night, so mine was the only vehicle. It could have easily accommodated a few more cars, although that is because Ted didn't have as many mementos as a common super. Well, honestly, he didn't have any, which freed up a lot of space.

"What the hell, Bob," the bombshell blonde stomped over uneasily on her high heels. "Did you know your car's on fire?"

"I was aware of this, yes," I stayed absolutely still. "I've got bigger problems right now."

"Bigger than asphyxiation and carbon monoxide poisoning?" Following my gaze, she glanced down inside the car at my lap where the glowing blue-flamed coal still rested harmlessly (for now) directly above one of my favorite (and sometimes hated) parts of my anatomy. "Whew, boy, ain't that something?"

"Yeah, it's fascinating. Can you get it off of me?"

"Sure. Let me get the fireplace tongs," she turned quickly, almost falling as one of her ankles buckled.

"NO! You touch this thing and it'll explode!" I practically shouted at her.

"Tee hee," even her laugh was cute, regardless of how stupid it sounded. "Just kidding." She hefted up a fire extinguisher that looked much too heavy for her petite arms, "Still, this fire has got to go." She blasted the rear panel of the car, which froze solid in under a second. "There, that oughta do it."

She tossed the extinguisher aside and it bounced on the ground like a rubber ball. It seemed to have a mind of its own as it took two more short bounces and landed right back in its wall cubby.

"Neat trick," I murmured.

"Huh? What?" the blonde cocked her head to the side in the most endearing way.

"You've got to turn that thing off," I said, "it's freaking me out."

"What," she replied, "not your type?" She turned and started rummaging through a drawer in the workshop. She bent over in a most unladylike way, searching for something.

To say Ted is fond of changing his appearance is an understatement. I've known him for years and I can't say I actually know what he looks like. One of his first inventions (the way he tells it, he invented it when he was still in grammar school, though I doubt it) was his PPP. PPP stands for Portable Persona Projector. With it, he can completely change his appearance - visually. While he can project an image of any size, he keeps the projection close to his body size so that when he needs to do something like shake hands, the other person isn't trying to shake air. He also developed (or bought, not sure which) some sort of voice changing device.

I've never seen it, but he can make his voice sound like anything. What he can't do with any skill, apparently, is walk in heels.

His current incarnation was a stunning blonde with a strapless, backless, low-cut, sparkly dress that looked like it was painted or glued on. Her skin was milky white and perfectly unblemished. The dress barely reached her thighs and in her current position I could just make out a red thong underneath. The stiletto heels she was wearing were connected to her feet by thin leather straps that criss-crossed up her calf almost to the knee. She was perfect in a way that you only see in movies or in magazines.

"Ah HA!" she turned a bit too quickly and fell over.

A small, stainless steel device went skidding over the floor and under a cabinet.

"Damn it!" She tried to get up, her ankles again fighting with the four inch heels.

After a moment, she touched a point on the leather strap and they retracted into the base. She kicked the shoes to the side. Finally able to stand, she got up and pranced over to the cabinet. He must have programmed some sort of sexuality subroutine into this persona because everything she/he did produced an almost subconscious physical reaction. Unable to reach the device, she finally had to get on all fours to get her arm far enough back to retrieve it.

"Got it!" She turned to look at me.

I, of course, was looking at her - but not her face.

"Like what you see, big boy?"

I flushed involuntarily, "Like that's not what you were going for, Ted." I looked down at the orb. Luckily, Ted's persona hadn't caused it to fall off my lap. "Can we get a move on? I'm not sure what's keeping this thing from exploding, but let's get it off of me before it changes its mind. Plus, I'm not sure how much time I've got left on the Inertial Dampener."

Ted sauntered over with the device in hand. As she/he got closer, I could see it was - well - a pen. At least, that's what it looked like. It was silver with some sort of button on the back and a hole at the other end where you'd expect the writing point to come out.

"What the heck is that gonna do?"

"Huh?" Somehow her confused expressions were even alluring. "Oh, this?" She held up the device.

"Yeah, the pen."

"Oh, I just used the case. Didn't have anything else on hand and I needed to move something that I didn't want to touch on short order." She looked uncomfortable for a moment. "The thing is, I need to make sure I don't get it too close or you might lose a piece of you."

"What!"

"Well," she depressed the button and a small, shimmering sphere appeared on the end of the pen. It was transparent for the most part though stuff on the other side looked distorted. "See, it creates a small stasis field. Inside here," she pointed at the sphere, "time essentially stops. I can move that thing off you without it touching anything. The problem is, if I activate it and part of your body is within the sphere... well..."

"Well, what?"

"Well, it's coming too." She looked apologetic in the most 'come get me big boy' kind of way.

I glanced down to my lap, the blue flaming orb sitting just above my manhood, "Just... be careful," I looked away. "And for the love of God, turn your PP off."

She leaned into the car, her breasts rubbing against my arm. They felt much smaller than they looked.

"It's a PPP. You always get that wrong."

I couldn't help but tense up as Ted sized up where to aim the Stasis Pen.

"How's it being held here anyhow?"

"I've got the Inertial Dampener on."

"I figured," it looked like she was satisfied with her positioning, "but I didn't know it could do that."

"You didn't know? You built the thing!"

"Right, right, but that field is just designed to negate the forward momentum of objects directed at you. Like bullets and such," she continued as she pressed the button.

The stasis field formed around the orb, which immediately looked like it had frozen in time.

"But I didn't think it'd levitate an object like that. Weird." She stood, examining the orb at the end of the pen, her features distorted as the field passed in front of her face. "Maybe it has something to do with the nature of this projectile. I assume it is a projectile?"

"Yeah," I opened my door and stood up. I didn't realize how tense I had been. I stretched my arms back over my head. My back cracked audibly. "Now turn that PP off."

"It's a PPP. I swear, sometimes I think you do that on purpose." She reached down and seemed to put her finger through her dress at her navel. "Any requests?"

"Anything with a penis. I can't stand looking at you dressed like that."

Her hand moved and her features blurred into a burly man with brown overalls and a blue work shirt. His face was chiseled and flawless with sharp cheekbones, big brown eyes, wavy dark hair, a deeply cleft chin and what I knew to be a permanent five o'clock shadow. He often wore this projection.

"Why do you do that, anyhow?"

"Do what?"

"Dress up like a girl?"

"Oh, a social experiment really." He went back to examining the orb at the end of the Stasis Pen, "I want to see what it's like to be a girl and deal with men."

"Kind of a skewed experiment, don't you think?" I replied.

"What do you mean?" He hadn't changed his voice yet so he still sounded like the Scandinavian goddess.

"Well, if you really wanted to find out what it's like to be a girl, shouldn't you adopt a persona that was a bit more average?" I motioned to my throat.

Ted nodded and touched his neck.

His voice was decidedly more masculine as he asked, "Why?"

"To get an idea of what a non-perfect woman actually goes through?"

He looked confused.

"Forget it Ted. Hey, thanks for the help."

"No problem." He turned back to the workshop area of his lair, "You mind if I hang on to this?"

"Naw, knock yourself out."

Finished with my stretching and relieved that I was free of the flaming orb, I turned back toward the car. I flipped off my Inertial Dampener and sat back down.

"Hey," Ted called out, "I've been meaning to tell you. I came up with a better power source for that thing."

"Yeah, what's that?"

"Oh, it absorbs energy from the sun, from particles in the air, from movement... it's pretty much self sustaining," Ted replied.

"Sounds good."

"It's a bit heavier."

"Define 'a bit.'"

"Couple of pounds."

I thought about it, "I can deal with that."

"Capacitors are a bit unstable though."

"Again, define 'a bit.'"

"Occasionally overload and explode?" Ted shrugged, "I think I got it locked down though."

"Well, I'll hold out for the production model." I started the car. "That reminds me, why don't you ever try to sell any of this stuff?"

Ted looked confused. Given the 'straight off the cover of a romance novel' face he was wearing, he looked dashingly confused. "Why?"

"Oh, I don't know," I replied. "Make money, better humanity, fame, fortune, all that stuff."

"I don't get it." Ted went back to examining the orb.

"Forget it." I adjusted the mirrors waiting for Ted to remember to lower the trapdoor. "Um, Ted?"

He looked up.

"A little help here?"

He nodded and checked a screen. "Bob, why don't you ever call me Tinkerer?" He was obviously satisfied with what he saw as he pressed a few buttons and the trapdoor came down with a hydraulic hiss. "Everyone else does."

I revved the engine, shifting into reverse, "That's not your name, Ted."

I backed out into the night. Sunrise was only a few hours away and I needed to get a bit of shuteye before my meeting with my client.

* * *

Chapter 3

I pulled myself from my bed, still fully clothed from the night before. It wasn't that it had been so long or stressful, I mean, anymore than usual, it was that I hadn't had much downtime since my previous job. Mr. What's-his-name, fire dude, had initially showed up with a stack of cash and a "She just left, follow her" timeline. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and straightened my shirt. Entering the bathroom, I hit the switch and waited as the fluorescent light flickered to life.

I looked like hell; really, I do most of the time. Dark, close-cropped hair framing a square face with smallish eyes, making my nose look overly large. Thin lips and a slight cleft to my chin are the only features that set me apart from the rest of the thirty-something males in my peer group. My hair was messy in that 'did he just wake up or did he do that on purpose' sort of way, which was coming back in vogue. My white, collared, button-down dress shirt looked like I'd slept in it. I could either throw a jacket back over it or change it. I glanced back at my bed. In the indentation my body had left was my jacket. So much for that. I removed the shirt and grabbed my toothbrush.

I am not muscular - at least not compared to the supers I often work with - but I'm not unhealthy. The stereotype of the overweight PI isn't exactly untrue. Many of my competitors seem to live on a steady diet of coffee, doughnuts, and hot dogs. I just don't have the time for it. Coffee makes me pee during stakeouts and I can't eat a hotdog or doughnut without getting it all over myself. I've taken to bringing trail mix and jerky on stakeouts. And honestly, you can only eat so much of that stuff.

I splashed some water on my face to complete my morning ablutions and turned to my closet for a fresh shirt. If I were a super, my costume would be a white shirt, black jacket, black slacks, black belt (with the Inertial Dampener built in, which was still plugged in), and patent leather shoes. Black, of course. No tie. That would just be too formal.

The jacket, slacks, and shoes were treated by Ted to be resistant to fire and cold, plus they keep me safe from electricity by funneling it to the ground through the shoes. Ted built an early version of his PPP into the clothes so that I can have them project a variety of styles. Doesn't remove wrinkles, however. He also gave me a long overcoat that is supposed to be projectile-proof and better insulated, and a hat that is supposed to be as protective as a motorcycle helmet. I rarely wear them. It's mostly too hot around here for overcoats and I don't like hats. Too cliché for my tastes.

I grabbed my jacket off the bed, exited my bedroom trying to shake the wrinkles out of it, passed through my kitchen, and entered my office through the hidden door in the waiting room.

My flat is a huge, open room above a string of businesses and restaurants in the heart of downtown. It's a bit loud during the day, but at night it becomes a ghost town, if you consider the occasional whore and drug addict ghosts. The space is situated so that my living areas are at the back with an office and waiting room in the front. Living where you work makes for a convenient commute, but it can drive you crazy if you don't have clearly delineated spaces. This is helped by a hidden door from the waiting room to the rest of the space creating the illusion that it is only an office for clients.

On my desk was a steaming cup of coffee. I smiled and threw my jacket over the back of my chair. Khan was in early today.

"You slept in today," a voice called out from behind a plant near the floor-to-ceiling windows facing the street.

"Really?" I looked at my watch as he exited from behind the plant with a dusting cloth in his hand. "Seems early to me."

"You think anything before lunch is early," Khan smiled.

Khan is the product of very good breeding. His parents are two of the most powerful supers in the world. They had high hopes for their son (as evidenced by his name). Unfortunately, those haven't borne out yet. Khan has dark, thick, close-cut hair that he pulls forward in a style that I call "The Caesar." His dark eyebrows, pale blue eyes, and soul patch just below perfectly-formed lips have had more than one of my female (and a few male) customers swooning. When he smiles, you can't help but smile back. He is naturally muscular and a few inches over six feet. Basically, he is a coat of white paint and a fig leaf from a Michelangelo.

"Did you get what you needed last night?"

"Yeah, we're good," I responded. "Did you develop the photos?"

He nodded, "They're drying now."

"Great."

"That cop called again."

"Again? Man, that guy just won't take a hint."

Khan shrugged, "You might want to take it next time. Your calendar is pretty empty."

"I'll think about it."

"Plus, weren't you supposed to take his call when this last job came up?"

I shrugged, "That reminds me, how much time do we have before the client is due to come in?"

Khan let out a small laugh under his breath, "You forgot his name, didn't you?"

I scowled, "Maybe."

"You're going to kick yourself."

Khan waited until I turned away from my desk where I was clearing away papers so that I could get to my desktop calendar/blotter.

"What?" I demanded.

"Flamer." Khan's smile grew exponentially.

"You're kidding."

"Nope. I double checked it." Khan handed over a small stack of papers, "Chose it himself."

"Wow. Does he know..."

Khan's hands went up in mock surrender, "Hey, did you see the size of that guy? You tell him."

I shook my head in disbelief as I started shuffling through the data Khan had compiled, separating the pages from each end along the perforated lines. The logo at the top of the pages indicated they were all from The Bulwark's private database. As if anyone else had the records they did.

The Bulwark are supposed to be a group of the best supers in the world that have banded together to protect the planet. They supposedly have secret bases all over the world, but I knew they really live in a space station that orbits the planet. Having an ex who is a member makes me privy to certain little known facts. Having an ex who left behind her access terminal, whether by accident or not I don't know, makes getting information about clients and targets a heck of a lot easier.

I scanned the green and white striped pages, tossing bits of paper that hadn't separated cleanly onto my desk as I read: Flamer - real name, Shawn O'Malley. Typical "brick" - super strength Level 5, invulnerability Level 12. Strength enhanced by fire to near Level 8. Vulnerability to cold - confirmed. Possible vulnerability to electricity, water. Immolation may increase invulnerability and reduce vulnerabilities as well - unconfirmed. No transportation power in evidence. Level 3 citizen.

Geesh, he works as a bouncer at an Irish pub as his cover identity. What a tool. With the

salary he gets from the Super State, he shouldn't have to work at all. Probably thinks he'll run across the next plot to take over the world in the bar. Level 3 citizen means he lives better than most tippys without having to do anything but show up when The Bulwark occasionally call. Makes sense that he has a partnership with Cindar; she complements him well. All she has to do is light him up and get out of his way.

"When did you say this guy was due in?" I called out. Just then, I heard a ring from the intercom.

Khan thumbed over his shoulder, "That should be him."

"Great," I scanned the documents one last time. "Close the door on your way out."

I grabbed my jacket off the back of my chair and shrugged it on. It was a wrinkly mess, but it couldn't be helped. Ted had treated the material so it'd straighten out eventually, but it would take some time. I slid the last of the paper fragments from the printout into the garbage but gave up on straightening my desk. I set the papers Khan had given me face down, grabbed my coffee, and took a gulp.

The phone buzzed. Khan's artificially amplified voice came through, "A Mr. Flamer here for you, Bob."

I pressed the intercom button, "Great, send him in." I half bent down as Flamer walked through the door. I then reversed direction as if I had been sitting the whole time. I stretched out my hand to shake my client's.

Flamer, or Shawn O'Malley, was huge in every sense of the word. He towered over my five foot, ten inches by at least a foot, maybe more. He was probably three feet wide at the shoulders and practically exploded with muscles. Flaming red hair cut in a flat-top and spiked up topped his head. He wore a red mini beard that came down from his sideburns, traced his jawline to the sides of his chin, then cut up and connected with his mustache with a small soul patch under his bottom lip (I'm sure there's a name for that style of facial hair, I'm just not sure what it is). Disconcertingly pale red eyes that matched nearly perfectly the freckles that covered his face and upper body scanned me as he shook my hand gruffly. He wore an eye mask tied behind his head, some uncomfortable-to-look-at spandex pants and large work boots. Oh, and the spandex and work boots were pink.

"Mr. Moore," his voice sounded of years of drinking and smoking, "what did you find out?"

"Go ahead and take a seat, Mr. O'Malley," I replied, motioning to a chair in front of my desk as I returned to my seat.

The guest chair was heavily reinforced for some of my heavyweight clients and was bolted to the floor for some of my hot-headed ones when I got tired of replacing windows and chairs. When I looked up, Shawn was rooted to the spot, his eyes wide and face flushed.

"Oh, please, Shawn, you must have heard of me or you wouldn't have come."

"How did you..." Flamer stammered. The muscles in his neck and shoulders started to ripple. His pecs and lats convulsed as he clenched his fists unconsciously.

I never understood why supers insisted on being half-dressed all the time. Aside from just looking like a dork, their body language gave away way too much if they weren't careful. In the thirty year history of supers, you can count the "careful" ones on one hand.

"Calm down, Mr. O'Malley, I have no intention of ever revealing your identity to anyone. Ever." I picked up a piece of paper off my desk and pretended to look at it, "I just like to know who I'm working for."

Slowly the tension drained from the super.

Silently, I exhaled. With the "brick" types, you never knew what to expect. Those guys (and sometimes girls) loved to lose their tempers. Now that he realized that I knew who he was, we could continue.

"You had a question you wanted answered," I began. "But first, there's the issue of my

payment."

Shawn leaned forward, "You followed her?"

I nodded.

"You saw what she was doing?"

I nodded again.

"Tell me!" he practically shouted.

"Please, Mr. O'Malley," I leaned back in my chair, "let's dispense with the formalities first."

He grimaced and reached behind him.

What I thought was a belt was, in actuality, a fanny-pack. I coughed into my hand, covering my smile.

"There," he practically threw the other half of the money at me. "Now tell me, is she cheating on me?"

"In a word, Mr. O'Malley, no." I gathered up the money and pressed the comm button on the phone. "Khan, bring in the pictures, please."

Flamer looked shocked, "What do you mean, no?"

"Well, I can't say for sure, but you asked me to follow her for a night and see what she was doing."

Khan entered with the pictures and handed them to me. In return, I handed him the money. On his way out, he noticed Flamer's fanny-pack and practically ran out the last two steps.

"I can tell you, she most definitely isn't out sidekicking with someone else."

"What? Well..." he stammered. "What the hell is she doing?"

I smiled and waited a few moments locking my eyes with his, "Having sex."

It looked like I had slapped him. I couldn't help but smile. He looked away, processing what I'd just told him.

"Wa... wa... with who?"

"Now, Mr. O'Malley, that wasn't part of our agreement."

He started to stand, face and chest flushed with emotion.

"Now, don't argue, Mr. O'Malley. You were convinced that whatever she was doing last night was what she'd been sneaking off to do for the last few weeks. You wanted to know what she was doing and I told you."

"But she could still be sidekicking with someone else!"

"If you'd like me to continue following her, I'd be happy to discuss with you a new contract."

"But I paid you a fortune!"

"Let's be reasonable, Mr. O'Malley, you paid me a *small* fortune. You had to because you wanted me to drop everything I was doing and run after her." I stood as well, "You see, what you super-types fail to understand is that out here, in the *real* world, you don't go off half-cocked. I did that for you because you offered me enough compensation to make it worth my while. What I got for it was a car that may have to be completely scrapped, the ire of a super much more powerful than you, and I almost lost my life. Now, if you feel you've been unfairly treated, I suggest you take it up with The Bulwark. Perhaps they'll come to your aid."

Flamer sat back down with a plop. Finally taller than him (though only barely) I watched as he seemed to deflate. He knew The Bulwark would never side with him, not when I had a signed contract. Plus, with the work I'd done for half of them, they'd need an ironclad case before ever moving against me.

"No, that's okay," O'Malley squeaked, "you're right, I was just caught a bit off guard."

I sat back down, "I understand, Shawn. I get this all the time."

"I bet you do," he muttered, quietly.

"So, do you want me to keep following her?"

It was pointless since Samantha had already confirmed Cindar wasn't sidekicking for her, but I wasn't about to turn down additional money. Plus, she could be sidekicking with someone else. I doubted it, but maybe.

"Well," he thought for a moment, "hey, don't I get to see the pictures?"

Honestly, by this point I would have bet that he'd forget to ask. I had already shuffled the raciest picture that didn't include a clear shot of Whisper's face to the top of the pile. I handed it over.

Shawn's eyes got wide. "But... but... that's a..."

"Yes, Mr. O'Malley," I smiled watching the emotions run across his face, "a girl. She was having sex. With a girl."

He shifted in his chair. After a moment, he opened his mouth.

"And no, you can't keep the picture," I replied before he could ask.

He carefully lowered the picture and set it on my desk. He stood slowly and I averted my eyes.

I *really* don't understand why they insist on wearing spandex.

He turned and walked out of my office without saying a word. From the ajar door, I heard O'Malley say, "Bob Moore? What kind of name is that for a PI?"

Khan's voice, "He gets that a lot." A moment later and Khan was back in my office occupying the chair recently vacated by the pink spandex-wearing super. "Oh. My. God." Khan could barely contain himself, "Did you see him? He'd better get that under control or they'll pick him up for indecent exposure."

I shrugged. "What did you do with the money?"

"Oh, I chucked it in the safe," he replied. "We're scheduled for a pickup this afternoon." He stretched, "I could run it down there for you if you're worried..." He left the suggestion hanging. He was fishing for my bank.

I never let him, or anyone else for that matter, drop off my money. It is always picked up, never by the same person. Khan is probably the fastest super on the planet. His file says that his maximum speed could exceed Mach 30 if he didn't have to worry about the havoc the turbulence would cause. That's once around the planet in an hour. The problem, much to his parents' dismay, is that he collapses into a near coma for six hours after thirty seconds at high speed. He's young, only twenty-five, so there is some hope that he'll grow out of it, though not much. Most powers start manifesting in puberty and are fully realized before twenty. Powers may mature and grow a bit after that (especially if you practice), but it doesn't seem like Khan is going to outgrow this side effect.

"Naw," I replied, "thanks for the offer though. Plus you just got here. Can't have you sleeping on the job."

"I'm just saying..." he stood to leave. "Anything else? Your schedule is clear for the day."

"Yeah, gonna need some work done on the car."

His eyebrow raised.

"That Cindar has a temper, though I doubt it'll have to be scrapped. Make sure you get an estimate and keep enough on hand for the repairs."

He nodded.

I called out as he shut the door, "Hey, we get the paper? I want to do the crossword."

"I'll check... gramps."

"Shut up."

* * *

Chapter 4

I rarely get called by the police, so when that cop first called a few weeks back I blew him off. I wasn't alone in this; the police rarely call anyone unless they are asking for money for their latest community improvement project. The police don't really do much policing any more, just reporting. There was a time, when I was a kid, when the police actually investigated crimes and such. Since supers started showing up on the scene, the police have shifted into more of a community building/support role. They are still important in that they are given direct access to the SB - Super Band - radio. With it, they can report crimes directly to their local supers and generally they send someone out. You can always tell police officers by not only their uniforms, but their watches. The Bulwark have created the watch/communicators for specific police use. Each device is tied directly with the user and can't be used by anyone else. Even if they could take them off without help, they probably wouldn't. They consider them more of a badge than their police ID. It gets them into clubs, bumped to the front of waiting lists, and discounts.

"Bob," Khan's voice rang out over the intercom, "the police officer is on the phone for you, again."

I sighed, "Tell him we already gave this month."

"It's not about that. He says he really needs your help."

My brow furrowed. Help? With what, fundraising? The last time he had caught me on the phone, before Flamer showed up, I hadn't let him get two words out before blowing him off.

"Fine, put it through." A moment later and the phone rang, "Bob Moore here."

"Mr. Moore?" the man on the other end sounded official and smooth, as if he spent most of his time schmoozing people with his voice. He had that forced informality that people adopt when they don't want to sound too smart. "Mr. Bob Moore? PI?"

"That's me," I replied.

"I'm glad I finally caught you. This is Officer Kent of the Hillside Branch?" he said it like a question.

Hillside is out in the suburbs, nowhere near me geographically or economically. People that live in Hillside spend more money on their cars than I did on my apartment.

"Sorry to disturb you, but I have a request."

"What's this about?" If I sounded put out and cautious, it was because that's how I felt. No good ever came out of jobs from cops.

"Ya see, we've got a problem," the officer began. "We've got a report of a crime but no evidence."

"Yeah, that's a problem," I replied.

"The thing is, even our partners say they see no evidence."

Partner was code for super. The police liked to make it sound like they were working with the supers instead of for them. I'm sure some people out there believed them. I wasn't one of them.

"Still not seeing what this has to do with me."

"Well, the bloke who reported the crime," I could almost hear the cop pull at his collar as he came up with the right words, "was insistent. When he wouldn't take no for an answer, I suggested he contact someone else. Someone private. Your name came up."

"Great, thanks for the recommendation. If you're looking for a commission, I don't generally work that way."

"Oh, I didn't make the suggestion, I never heard of ya before."

"Huh? So, if he knows me, what's the problem?"

"Ya see, he's afraid you won't take the case."

"What?" Now I was really confused. "Why?"

"Got me," the cop replied. "Said you two had a history. Said you didn't like him much."

I started to get a sinking feeling in my stomach. Hillside. History. Crap. "He's not a doctor, is he?"

"Hey!" the cop exclaimed. "You're pretty good!"

Damn.

"Now here's the thing. This guy won't shut up about this supposed crime but we can't find nothing that says there ever was any crime," the cop explained. "All I need ya to do is take his money and look into it. Anything to keep him from calling us out any more. It's been three times in the last month!"

That was an awful lot. Crimes, in general, had taken on two flavors. Either they were so small that the supers couldn't be bothered or they were earth shattering. There was no middle ground. If the Doc was calling, and calling this much, he must be worried about something. The thing was, I didn't much care.

"You can tell that son-of-a-bitch to go to hell," I said, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

"Hey, now!" the police officer blurted. "No need for that kind of language!" He paused for a second, waiting for some sort of reply.

I was too busy trying to decide whether or not to hang up to pay much attention. I *knew* no good would come from talking with this cop.

"Listen, buddy," his voice took on that soothing tone I imagine he used with potential donors and little old ladies who lost their cat, "let's be reasonable. He's a real hero, everyone knows him. He's got good money. I know how you PI types are. Just look into it for a day or two. Just check it out. You two got a history, I get that. But why not use this opportunity to get a little back for whatever happened between you? I'm telling you, there ain't no crime."

I took a few deep breaths. If this cop knew what he was asking me, he'd shut his mouth. Hell, he'd never have called.

"What's he say been happening?" I asked quietly.

"Says a few of his patients have gone missing."

I paused as I digested that. "What do you mean, gone missing?" I replied.

"Just that. They've disappeared," I could hear the shrug in his voice. "He treats them, then when he contacts 'em for a followup, they're nowhere to be found." He added under his breath, "Or so he says."

"Come again?"

"Well, you know how these supers are," he replied, "they're a secretive bunch. This Doc friend of yours?"

I gritted my teeth.

"He deals mostly with them."

"Yeah, mostly," I managed.

"So, it isn't like there are many records. He says they're missing, but there's no evidence of foul play. There's nothing. Just an empty house."

I thought for a moment, "So they could just be off on some mission..."

"Or trapped by their archenemy, or off planet, or God knows where," he continued. "But I can tell you this much, there was no foul play at those homes. Plus, it isn't like it's *all* of his patients. Just a few. And from what we can tell, they aren't connected in any way. "

I thought about it for a moment. Doc Arts was one of the foremost doctors to the supers. If some mad scientist came up with a super virus, he's the guy you'd call. But day-to-day, he was also the personal physician to many of the world's most powerful supers. If he was concerned enough to call the police, that means that The Bulwark and others in the Super State government had already looked into it and passed. Calling me was a big step past desperation. It'd be like asking your gropey uncle to watch your kids; your last resort was five

ideas ago.

"Ya still there?"

I was so lost in thought I'd forgotten about the cop.

"Yeah," I took a deep breath.

"Listen," Officer Kent continued softly, all pretense of informality gone from his tone, "if I had the money, I'd pay you to get him off my back. This Doc, I mean," he stammered for a moment, "I've seen him on TV and all, but he's a real piece of work in person. Sort of talks through you. Plus, he seems to be able to find me anywhere. I walked by a pay phone the other day and it rang. It was him. I mean, how can you even do that? Can you help me out?"

Seeing Doc Arts again was not something I wanted, no matter what the rest of the world thought of him. My daughter's face flashed through my mind. I blinked it away. Seeing him would bring back all those memories - all the pain from five years ago. I reached down to the lower drawer of my desk and pulled out a bottle of single malt scotch (some stereotypes are true I guess. Never knew a PI who didn't have a bottle somewhere within reach). I grabbed a glass, poured a couple of fingers of amber liquid and looked at it for a moment before answering.

"You tell the Doc," I practically spat his moniker, wincing at my lack of control, "I'll drop by tonight. But you tell that SOB that I'm not making any promises."

"Great, oh buddy, you're doing me a solid," the cop blurted. "You do whatever you have to to put his mind at ease. You watch, ya collect a few fat paychecks and suddenly his missing friends start showing up."

"Yeah, we'll see."

"Bob Moore huh?" the cop said.

"Yeah?"

"Boy, that's a funny name for a PI."

I rolled my eyes, "So I hear."

"I thought you guys were all named Mike or Jack or something."

"Guess not." I hung up and swallowed my scotch in one swift movement. I grabbed the bottle and poured again.

Khan was at the door before I finished my second. "What did the police want?" he asked, eyeing the bottle and my scowl as the scotch burned its way down my throat.

"To ruin my day," I croaked. I shook my head, "Damn, I knew I shouldn't have taken that call." I cleared my throat and put the bottle and glass away. "Listen, clear my schedule. I've got something I got to do."

"Well, that won't be a problem, you don't have anything on the schedule." Khan leaned over the desk, "Seriously, what's going on?"

"It's the Doc."

"Doc Arts?" Khan's mouth hung open. "What? Did you finally kill him?"

I frowned, "Not yet. No, he wants to hire me."

"You're kidding."

I closed the scotch drawer and looked him square in the eye.

"You're not kidding." Khan stood, "Listen Bob, think about this. You don't want this."

"You're telling me?" I yelled. "You think I want to work for the son-of-a-bitch that destroyed my marriage?" I dropped my head, took a deep breath, relaxed the deathgrip I had on the arms of my chair and slowly stood. "Sorry. Sorry. Thanks for your concern. I'm just going to talk to him. That's all. I haven't committed to anything."

"I don't know, man," Khan shook his head as I grabbed my jacket off the back of my chair. The sun was setting outside and the pink and orange light cast vertical lines through the blinds across his face.

I threw my jacket over my shoulder, "Is the car ready?"
He nodded, concern etched in his face.
"Good. Don't wait up."

* * *

The drive from my flat was uneventful. The sun had set and the stars, such as you could see over the city lights, were out. I drove the speed limit, not really wanting to rush to my appointment with the doc. The area around my flat was industrial, busy with people on the streets shopping and eating after a long day's work. Traffic wasn't bad, considering. A whoosh of air past the passenger side door indicated that someone with super speed was using the super lane. Above, a streak of flame and a cloud of darkness revealed that whomever it was wasn't alone. Patrolling for villains, on their way to a meeting, or just late for dinner - you couldn't tell. All around, people barely noticed.

The area directly adjacent to the city center was more run-down. That's always been the case. Either you have the money to live in the city or you have the money to live someplace nicer. In between fell everyone else. Multifamily apartments were omnipresent, cut only by a few single-family dwellings that looked like they should be condemned, and a few general stores with teens sitting outside drinking out of paper bags. Many of them nodded at me as I drove by. I'd employed more than one of them for information, stakeouts and other less desirable jobs. They were more than happy to help, though the money was definitely a plus. They loved spying on the supers.

As I exited the city proper and drove into the suburbs, you could see the difference. There were more single-family homes, larger yards and more strip malls. The roads were rough all over, neglect obvious. It was hard for the local police and government to keep up. Anytime there was a major battle between the supers you'd end up with major city damage. Of course, the Super State would pay out most claims, but a lot of that money would end up in the pockets of the politicians, shady developers, and others. The Bulwark and the government of the Super State didn't care as long as the money left their hands. With their superior technology and intelligence, all they needed to do was release a new patent to replenish their coffers.

The City Guide - full of maps of the city and the suburbs - sat unused on the passenger seat. I knew just where I was going. I'd been there plenty of times before. The car sounded good - better than before actually. The new side panel didn't match, but Khan knew I didn't care about that. The engine purred as the houses and yards got progressively larger as I entered Avondale. The streets weren't any better but the yards were. On more than one, I saw small signs near front doors and in flowerbeds. I smiled as I recognized some of the names of the protection companies. "This house protected by CyberTec," by "VeloCyn," or by "The Axiom Consortium." Depending on the package, the protection could be as little as insurance that would replace or repair damages to full-fledged force fields. I'd heard that the uber-rich even paid to have anti-bug/temperature control fields installed. Would be nice on a buggy summer night I suppose.

The sad part was that half the corporations were fronts for super-villains. This didn't mean that the protection was any less valid, it just meant that they left in a backdoor. Well, you'd never convince me the heroes didn't do that as well, but you never heard about it. What does happen is that, occasionally, some villain will decide to make his power play and will tap all his clients for the capital they'd need. Within a day or so there would be some sort of invasion or major attack and The Bulwark and others would be called in. Everyone who had been protected by the phony corporation would have a claim. They'd probably get paid off by the

Super State and they'd look for another protection company. The cycle continues.

Of course, there were no signs on the lawn of Doc Arts. I slowed my car and parked in front. I hadn't been this close to his home in four years. I glanced down the street at the bend in the road where I used to park, thinking about - well - just thinking. And drinking. More drinking than thinking now that I thought about it. There was a big part of me that wished I'd had something to drink right now. Another, smarter, part was glad that I didn't. I took a deep breath and steeled myself. I grabbed my notebook out of my glove compartment, stepped out of the car, and headed up the front walk.

Ignaro Medico, or Doc Arts as most knew him, didn't live in Hillside proper. He lived just down the road in Avondale. A slightly less affluent suburb, it was filled with the upper middle class for the most part. For a super, especially one of his status, this was slumming it. He lived in a fairly routine six bedroom, seven and a half bath house. Though I couldn't tell now that it was night, it was a light brown stucco number with large bay windows, all the upgrades and a three car garage. I'd seen the blueprints and it had a large theater room, a huge master bath, and a spa out back. While I knew how to access his lair intercom, I decided to just knock on the front door.

Medico lived in a brand new, planned community. It wasn't gated but it could have been. There were all the usual amenities - pool, gym, golf course, etc. - though I was sure he never used them. In fact, chances were none of his neighbors actually knew what he looked like. As the door opened, my suspicions were confirmed.

The man standing in front of me was most definitely not Doc Arts. Every bit the butler, the balding man with the thin mustache, tight vest, white shirt, and dark slacks looked like he stepped right out of a fifty's flick. At first it seemed that he was a bit taller than me, but as he motioned me inside, I could tell that he was just a hair shorter.

"Ah, Mr. Moore," the butler stepped aside as I entered, "the Doctor is expecting you. Please follow me."

I stood in the foyer for a moment, taking in my surroundings. The house was immaculate. Cream carpets, white walls, minimalist furniture - the place reeked of a hospital waiting room. As I followed the butler through the house I noted that the low couches were white leather with chrome accents, the coffee table was a chrome and glass affair with magazines perfectly fanned across the top, and even the fireplace brick was painted white. The few pictures on the wall were abstract art pieces obviously meant to add color to the place. I guessed that the good doc had hired an interior designer. I also guessed that he almost never stayed up here.

"So, Jeeves," I said to the back of the butler's head, "what are you, a hologram or something?"

Without missing a beat, the butler replied, "Very good sir. Yes, a hologram. I've been mated with a force field that allows me to interact physically with my environment. If I may ask, sir, how did you know?"

I nodded at his feet, not that he was looking at me, "Your feet, no footsteps and no indentation in the carpet."

He continued into the kitchen, "Ah, very good. Doc Arts said you were astute...for a tippy. I'll have to put in a request during my next scheduled maintenance." The butler stopped in front of a standalone freezer, "Here we are sir." He opened the door.

The freezer looked packed with food. Frozen meats, ice cream, vegetables - everything you'd expect to see in a freezer. He reached inside, near the roof by the door, and I heard a switch click. In place of a freezer full of food, I now saw a set of descending steps.

I looked at the butler whose neutral expression conveyed years of waiting patiently on others. Whoever created this thing did a great job.

"How very quaint." I started down the stairs, "I'm surprised the doc didn't spring for an

elevator or teleporter."

The butler's voice rang out from the bottom of the stairs, "Oh, the Doctor doesn't mind such inconvenience. I believe he finds it stimulating."

"Stimulating?" I exited the stairs where the butler was now waiting.

"The walk, sir."

The butler turned and led me through a series of doors, which snapped open and closed with the whirring and clanging of machinery as we passed. You could bet I wouldn't get past one without the butler. The level of protection of the doctor's lair was impressive. He could probably survive a direct nuclear blast. Finally we exited the last door, which was as thick as a baby's arm.

"Your guest has arrived, sir."

"Oh, thank you, Butler," Doc Arts' head popped up from behind what looked to be a corpse on a table. "Could you get me some water?"

Before Butler could leave I turned to him and added, "I'll take a scotch, neat, thanks."

If the upstairs house was a study of organization and cleanliness, the lair was the polar opposite. Though I had seen the plans, I couldn't tell you how large it was from where I was standing for all the equipment and clutter. While my terminal linkup to The Bulwark's database was no larger than a keyboard connected to a small desk, Medico had floor-to-ceiling devices with screens, lights, and paper feeds. There were instruments connected by wires that hung free as well as what looked to be a huge chandelier, which not only provided light but also had a number of retractable devices. I didn't recognize any of them. There were piles of printouts, discarded boxes and even a few portable coolers with markings indicating that they were used for organ transport. The place smelled of antiseptic, mostly, but there was another sweetly sour undercurrent that didn't sit well with me. I immediately regretted my choice of beverage.

"Scotch, eh?" the doctor turned from the table, placing his gloved hands inside one of the large machines. A mist smelling faintly of lemon and roses floated down upon his hands. A moment later, he removed his hands. The black gloves gleamed as if they had just been polished. "I don't remember you being much of a drinker."

The doctor stepped forward, offering me his hand.

"Yeah, well, things change." I ignored the gloved hand.

"Yes," the doctor dropped his hand, "well, yes, that's true." He started to pace, "You see, the reason I asked you here..."

"Whoa, Ignaro," I interrupted, "let's get one thing straight; I'm not here for you. I'm doing a favor for the police. I won't even discuss your case unless you agree, in advance, to two conditions: first, you'll meet my price, whatever it is, and I can assure you it's going to be high; and second, when I say I'm done, I'm done. If you still think there's a problem, you get one of your super friends to deal with it. You keep off my and the police's backs."

"Ah, yes," he stammered, "I'd heard you'd taken to finding out our identities. I'm guessing Gale helped you with that."

I stepped forward, face to face with Medico, "Don't you ever say her name again, you understand?" My teeth were clenched, my face red.

The doctor was a small man, maybe five foot, five inches. He was completely bald with a reddish chinstrap beard that grew pointy at the corners of his jaw near his ears and again at his chin. In public he wore dark glasses, but down here, in his lair, he left his mechanical eyes exposed. They looked like small, metal tubes that protruded from his eye sockets. The skin was red and irritated where it met the metal. He was wearing his standard outfit of a white, knee-length lab coat, black, rubberized gloves, green pants, and black boots. I knew from Gale, and others, that a good portion of his body had been replaced over the years, not just

his eyes. I couldn't tell because his mechanical eyes didn't have irises, but it seemed that he was avoiding my gaze.

"Surely, Mr. Moore, you can't blame me for your divorce," he said.

"You'd be surprised at what I can blame you for," I muttered.

Just then Butler showed up with the drinks. I grabbed mine and swallowed half of it at once.

Medico delicately picked up his water from the tray, sipping it through a straw.

I noticed that even though Butler was just a bit shorter than me a moment ago, next to the doctor, he looked a bit shorter than him. Apparently, he would never appear taller than anyone he was serving.

The doctor used the interruption to put some distance between us. "I accept your conditions." He cleared his throat, "Now, may I continue?"

I nodded.

"Fine, good. Okay," he started pacing again, "there have been disappearances."

"Yeah, the cop filled me in. Some of your patients?" I leaned back against a table and felt something wet soak through my trousers. I looked back. I had knocked over a tray with some sort of clear liquid.

The doctor noticed and looked at it.

"Oh, don't worry about that; it won't stain," he picked up the tray and Butler took it from him. Of course, Butler wasn't there a second ago. "I'll have to give you an injection, however."

"What?" I replied, concerned. "What for?"

"Oh," he replied absently, "you know, just in case."

"Great," I muttered. "So, how many disappearances we talking?"

"Oh, not many, really, when you consider my caseload. A few have shown up recently but there are five patients over the last two months I haven't been able to contact."

"Doesn't seem like a lot. So, what do you want me to do?"

"Well," the doctor started fiddling with some of the larger machines, "to put it simply, I want you to follow me."

"Follow you?"

"And keep an eye on my patients, yes. Shouldn't be too hard I would think."

I grimaced, "So, these disappearances are happening soon after your visits?"

"So it seems," he was more wrapped up in his machines than me at the moment. "You know how people are. They're always going off on some mission or another."

"People?" I said. "You mean supers."

"Eh? Yes, whatever." He continued, "I can't be sure how long it's been going on, but I recently noticed that an unusual number of my followup visits end up with me finding empty houses and no patient."

"And the police don't see a problem."

"The police?" he reached to his face to adjust his glasses before he realized he wasn't wearing any. "Oh, they were a last resort. It's my colleagues that don't think there is a problem." He approached me with a syringe.

"So, you've already been to The Bulwark," I sipped at my scotch. "Ouch!" I said, as he stuck me in the arm with the syringe. "A little warning would have been nice," I muttered.

"Oh, of course," he laughed ignoring my remark, "you don't think I'd go to the police first, do you? That may be sore for a day or so."

I replied into my glass rubbing my arm, "No, of course not. We're only tippys after all."

"Exactly!" he exclaimed. "But you see, no one believes me. There's been no evidence of struggle, no bodies, no complaints other than mine. I had hoped that getting the police involved would pressure some of the others to investigate further, but it was to no avail."

"I see."

"So I had no recourse but to turn to you. Will you help me?" he stopped working for a moment, waiting.

I stared at the last of the scotch, looking for answers. Regardless of our past, I stood to make a lot of money on this deal. I could really milk Medico. Plus, I might get a lot of good will out of that cop as well. That could really work for me down the road. There was no downside for me other than my near pathological hatred of the doctor. I sighed and took my notebook out of my jacket pocket. I flipped to a blank page and wrote a number on it. A large number. I looked at it for a second and then I added a zero at the end. I tore it out and handed it to the doc.

"This is my price, Medico."

He looked at the paper and slowly nodded. It didn't seem to me that he was as shocked as I had hoped.

"Per day," I added. "Up front. I'll call my bank every morning. You do whatever it is that you do to transfer money. I find that amount in my account in the morning and I'm yours for the day. I don't, and this deal is off."

He nodded slowly, "You really don't like me, do you, Mr. Moore."

"No Medico, I don't," I replied. "Feel free to say no. I've got lots of other cases I could be on for clients that didn't..."

As if on cue, a little girl bounced out from around the corner. I knew her from pictures and news reports. Her birth was the proverbial miracle. As I well knew, babies of mixed super/tippy parents, or cross-births, had a very low chance of survival. This child had miraculously beaten the odds, though her mom hadn't survived the birth.

"Daddy?" her voice was like the tinkling of wind chimes. She was pale in the way that happens when overprotective parents keep their child from the sun or slather on sun block when they can't. Her short, bobbed, brown hair hung down just below her ears, and a green bow topped her head. Her triangular face was framed by straight cut bangs, large ears and pouty lips. Her nose was pointed and bridgeless, her eyes dark brown and thoughtful. "Are you done with Assistant yet?"

"Almost dear," he turned and faced the girl, hands uncomfortably at his sides. "Give daddy a few more minutes."

"Who's that?" she stared at me without a hint of self-consciousness. "He looks angry."

I got down on one knee, cleared my throat and forced my lips into a smile, "No, I'm not mad," I replied, "just..." I stuttered, "your dad just gave me a shot," I covered lamely. "You know, you're a lucky little girl."

She smiled, her perfectly straight teeth gleaming white, "I know." She turned back to her dad but then stopped. Looking over her shoulder at me, "Why?"

"Well," I said, my voice cracking slightly, "if you had been born to a different dad, you might not be here today."

She smiled again, "Oh, I know all about that. I was sick but my dad made me better. My dad's brilliant. Everyone says so."

"Yes, well," the doctor interrupted, "thanks for that dear. Why don't you go and play while I finish up with Mr. Moore here."

"Hurry up with Assistant, daddy, I want to play." She turned back and skipped back the way she came. I slowly stood watching her retreat.

"Well," I said softly, wishing there was more scotch in my glass.

"Hmmm? Oh, yes," the doctor replied. "Okay, Mr. Moore, I accept. The money shouldn't be a problem."

I nodded, teeth clenched.

* * *

Chapter 5

The next morning, I half hoped not to find the money in my account. While I'd have to write a check and hand deposit it manually, supers have access to technology we tippys don't. They could just make a phone call or use one of their computing machines and the money would be there. Turns out, I didn't even have to check. I woke up slowly, the realization dawning on me that something was amiss. I nearly jumped out of my skin as I found Khan sitting on the corner of my bed.

"Do you want to share?" he tried to sound serious but he wasn't good at hiding his smile.

"What?" I rubbed my eyes. "What time is it?"

"Don't give me that!" he mocked anger. "I got a call from your man," he used air quotes. He didn't like that I didn't trust him with my banking arrangements. "He confirmed a deposit. That number can't be right, can it?"

"Ah, so he paid," I sat up. "I guess I better get to work."

"How long you planning on being on the job?" Khan inquired.

"What do you mean?" I stood and took off my shirt as I walked toward the bathroom.

"Well, that was nearly as much as you made with the last three jobs combined," Khan started straightening my bedroom, throwing clothes over the chair or in the hamper depending on how they looked. "Should I plan on you being out for the week? Two?"

I spit the toothpaste from my mouth, "That's just for today."

"You're kidding."

"Nope."

"Man, you really raked that guy over the coals."

I scowled thinking about how little the money meant to the doctor.

Khan paused for a second. "You know..." Another pause. "My parents... they, um, want me to see him."

"Medico?" I was taken aback. "Why?"

"You know, the sleeping thing."

I picked a fresh shirt from the closet, grabbed my slacks and put them on.

"They got me a new suit you know."

"Three piece?"

"Funny. No, it's frictionless or something. Means I can run at full speed without creating sonic booms and stuff." He was looking at the ground. "You know how they are."

I didn't, really, except what he told me. They had been trying for years to overcome his handicap, as they called it. They'd tried stimulants, practice, hypnosis - everything. Anything so that he could run for longer than thirty seconds or at least so that he wouldn't fall into a deep sleep after he stopped. Nothing had worked. At nineteen, he couldn't take it anymore and moved out. My ex was friends with them and we took him in. When Gale and I split, he stayed with me. He didn't really need the money I paid him and, in some way, looking in on supers seemed to make him feel connected to the super community while getting some small measure of revenge.

"Frictionless," I spat, "you know that's bull, right?"

He looked back, confused.

"If it were really frictionless you wouldn't be able to run at all, no grip." I looked away, "I wish they'd just tell us what it was instead of giving stuff these made-up names that sound cool."

"I've been putting it off," he sounded uncomfortable. "I know how you feel about the guy."

"Hey," I slipped on my last shoe and looked right at him, "you do what you have to do. I don't care one way or the other."

He looked relieved.

I paused and thought a moment, "You know what, why don't you call him?"

"What? Now?" Khan asked in bewilderment.

"Yeah. This is the deal: he thinks supers are disappearing after he sees them. Wants me to follow him and them and see what's what."

"Wait! Is it safe?"

"Come on, you're kidding right?" I smirked. "He's already called The Bulwark, the police, just about everyone and no one thinks there's anything to it."

"But if he's paying you all this money..."

"You think he gives a shit about money?" I frowned. "You know how those guys live. Especially the geniuses. If he slowed down enough to pass on just one or two of his inventions rather than hoarding all of them for himself, he'd have more money than he'd ever need." I grabbed my jacket and threw it over my shoulder. "Heck, a Level 5 citizen like him doesn't really want for money anyhow. The thing about the rich, they can afford to be paranoid." I exited my bedroom, heading toward the kitchen for a cup of the coffee I could smell. "But I understand if you don't want to. I was just trying to be supportive."

"Well, I'll think about it."

* * *

He didn't think for long. Later that morning I was treated, once again, to the good doctor's presence. This time he wasn't alone. Again, the doctor was dressed the same, but this time he wore the round sunglasses that hid his mechanical eyes. He entered the office from the stairs with something vaguely resembling a person behind him. Covered in a brown overcoat and hat, the thing bulged in all the wrong places. It stunk of the same antiseptic smell as the doctor's lab and a soft whirring sound escaped as it glided across the floor.

"What's that?" I inquired as the doctor shook Khan's hand.

Khan had donned his new suit. It was skin tight and all blue with what looked to be a white racing stripe around the chest just under the arms. The stripe met in the back at a central vertical stripe that ran from his forehead, over his head, down his back, split at the buttocks and ran down the back of the legs. The suit covered everything but the face, which was left open. It looked like a seamless wetsuit. Khan's face, except for his goatee and eyebrows, was bright red. I had to suppress a laugh every time I looked at him.

"Eh?" Medico replied. "Oh, that's just Assistant. He's here to..." the doctor got lost in some device he was waving all over Khan's body.

"Assist?" I finished.

"Oh... eh... yes, of course," the doctor answered absently before turning to Khan. "And I'm told you've always been this way? What treatments have you tried in the past?"

The doctor and Khan spoke about his history at length. At first, Assistant stood by silently, but eventually, it dropped the coat and hat and began to help. I was a bit taken aback at first at its appearance. It had four arms, two human and two mechanical. The human ones looked unfinished - too smooth, no hair - it was creepy. The mechanical ones had a large cylinder at the end, which rotated occasionally to provide the doctor with the proper tool. The head, if you could call it that, was covered in skin but had no mouth, no ears, and no hair. It looked like skin wrapped over a huge, smooth thimble. Around the circumference was a metal band that looked suspiciously like larger and more complicated versions of the doctor's mechanical eyes. The skin of the head and human arms seemed to meld into a metal chassis. Exposed wires, servos and other devices I didn't have names for terminated in a set of tank-like treads. The whirring sound was ever-present from the creature but became louder when it moved.

It was clear that Assistant and the doctor had worked together for some time. A number of

times during the examination of Khan, the doctor would start to ask for something, and before he could finish asking, the creature would hand it to him.

Suddenly, it hit me, "Hey, Medico, was Assistant on the table last night?"

"Eh," Medico turned away from Khan for a moment, "oh, yes. Yes. It had developed a bit of cancer. Had to cut it out, you see."

"So you made this thing?" I asked.

"Of course, who else?" He resumed his examination, "Quite a help this one. Bio-mechanical robot. Very helpful."

"Bio-what?"

"Bio-mechanical," the doctor replied. "It's a robot, for the most part, but I integrated a few human tissues. Can't get them to heal properly, though. It just won't regenerate skin like we do. I can improve upon some of the senses and abilities of humans but not all of them. Yet," he added.

I grimaced, "Where'd ya get the parts?"

"Huh? Oh," he thought for a second, "well, the chassis was left over from..."

"No, no," I interrupted, "the human parts."

"Oh, those!" he turned and smiled at me. "I grew them, of course. From my own cells."

I turned back to the bio-mechanical creature with a touch of awe. He grew arms, skin and Lord knows what else. I still had to take antihistamines every spring and this guy was Frankensteining up a glorified cup holder.

"You grew the brain too?"

The doctor scoffed, "Oh, no, of course not. You wouldn't know this, but there are prohibitions against using real brains or even sophisticated Artificial Intelligences."

Not only did I know about the prohibitions, just about everyone did. After a super-villain made a series of robots that eventually turned on him rather than doing his bidding, a law had been passed. It was in all the news.

The doctor continued, "Underneath all the skin is a titanium alloy shell with a rather, if I may say so, unsophisticated robotic brain. It really doesn't need to think much. But it uses the fine motor control of the humanoid arms and the sense of touch to assist me in my diagnoses. I've actually managed to upgrade some of the human senses quite a bit. What would be undetectable to our hands is quite obvious to Assistant's."

"Does it talk?"

"No," his brow furrowed, "why would it need to?"

"To assist you and all that?"

"Oh, my Handheld has a connection to everything it perceives. I can access it all whenever I want." He held up the device that he'd been working with since he began with Khan. He turned back to my assistant, "All right, I think we have what we need. Now Khan, I have some theories as to what is going on with you, but there is only one way to be sure. I'll need to take some during-and-after performance measurements. Can you speed yourself up without actually moving?"

Khan shrugged, "I suppose, I've never really tried it."

"Well, it seems plausible," Medico responded. "I'd like you to stand here "accelerated" for three seconds while Assistant and I take some measurements. Then run for twenty-three seconds. And then stand here again for three more. That should give you a second or so to spare." He directed his last question to me, "I assume he can rest here for the requisite time afterwards?"

I nodded, "You might want to change the sheets during the running part. Starting to get a little ripe in there."

The doctor continued, "Good, we'll take some measurements again when you are asleep."

By the time you wake up, I should know something."

Khan shook his hand, "Thanks Doc." He reached up to where his ear would be behind the fabric of the suit. He touched a point on the hood and a shimmering field appeared all around him.

"Now before you go running off," I interjected, "take this." I handed him a small, flat disk about the size of an ashtray. "And you too, Ignaro. These are trackers. We'll be using them to monitor your whereabouts." I shrugged at Khan's look of concern, "Just in case."

The doctor replied, "Good idea. I suppose you have more for my other patients?"

"Yeah, I've got a whole mess of them," I replied, gesturing behind me toward my cabinet. "All you'll need to do is call me and let me know when you've handed one out and to whom. You can make up whatever story you like, but make sure you get them to carry it on them. They aren't going to do anyone any good if they just throw them on their nightstand after you leave."

He nodded. "Assistant, are you ready?" the doctor looked at his Handheld. It looked like a large calculator with oddly shaped buttons and an overlarge, for a calculator, screen. "Good," he replied to the device. He pointed the Handheld at Khan, waited a moment and then said, "Alright, BEGIN!"

For three seconds nothing seemed to happen except that Khan's facial features seemed to soften slightly. I realized it was because he wasn't standing exactly still and it was causing a slight blur. Then suddenly, he was gone. What I presumed was twenty-three seconds later, he reappeared, his features strained and jittery. A few seconds later and he was gone again. We checked the bedroom and found him, face down, sweat pouring from his body. He'd changed the sheets (and cleaned the room from the looks of it), but I could only hope he had the foresight to put some plastic down underneath. The room already stank like a teenage boy's locker room.

The doctor and Assistant waved their respective measurement devices over Khan a few times and Assistant even touched him on a few occasions. All the while, the doctor murmured to himself, occasionally asking questions of Assistant, which were answered silently. I left them to it and went back to my office to retrieve the additional tracking devices. A few minutes later, the doctor and Assistant joined me.

"Now don't forget to pass these out to all your patients," I reminded him.

The doctor took the plain paper bag from me and glanced inside.

"Each one is labeled with a number. Just call my office and leave a message if Khan or I don't pick up. Let us know the number of the device, who they are and anything else you might think is relevant."

"Eh..." the doctor looked confused, "how will I know what else might be relevant?"

"You tell me," I retorted. "You're the one who thinks people are going missing."

The doctor grimaced and turned to leave. Assistant picked up the jacket and hat, awkwardly, and donned them. A light started to glow from under the coat as it reached the stairs. Slowly, it floated down after its creator. I exhaled and closed the door at the top of the stairs.

To the left of my desk was a small closet. Inside, I kept the terminal that Gale had left when she moved out. It was basically a small desk with a TV and keyboard built into the top. Inside were state-of-the-art electronics (as of five years ago). The terminal, among other things, connected somehow to Mind, the supercomputer that ran the space station where the members of The Bulwark lived. I was never sure how it made the connection. In fact, I wasn't quite sure that a supercomputer was a real thing. All I had to do was plug the terminal in and it worked. Through it, I had access to all of The Bulwark's personnel files and databases. Mind could also be tasked with analysis if I wanted, but I was afraid if I did that too often they'd

figure out that Gale had left this terminal behind and take it from me. While there were prohibitions and actual laws about advanced robots, Mind was the exception. It was rumored that it wasn't a machine program at all but actually a super that somehow melded with a computing device. It didn't really matter. As you got higher and higher up in the Super State government, laws became more and more flexible. What might land you in jail for the rest of your life as a tippy was a party favor for the super elite.

I pressed the power button and watched the monochrome screen come to life. I knew that recently, the Super State developed some sort of wrist communicator, which accessed Mind and the Network. The Network was the best source of information on the planet. While most tippys had to rely on calls to experts or encyclopedias, with the Network, most of the world's knowledge was at my fingertips. Unfortunately, the Super State highly restricted access to the Network under the auspices of its use of proprietary technology. Honestly, while it was convenient, it wasn't something I used often. Just screen after screen of information.

Ted, a while back, had built the trackers as a dare. One thing I had to respect about Ted is that he loved a challenge. I bet him he couldn't build a device that could be put in people's pockets to track their locations all over the planet. Technically, he'd lost because it doesn't work at magnetic north or south, but if he hadn't told me, I certainly wouldn't have known. Even though Ted is a low level citizen of the Super State, he still has access to technology and resources that the rest of us can only dream about. If not for Gale leaving the terminal behind, I'd be just as in the dark as everyone else.

As the terminal came to life, I accessed the tracking program Ted created and saw a crude overlay of the city. The doctor was on his way to his next appointment; his beacon glowed extra brightly as he had nearly all the trackers on him. They would split into multiple dots on the map as he handed them out. I got a pad of paper and a pen and set it next to the terminal so I could list who went with which tracker. I got up to make a cup of coffee. From the kitchen, I glanced into my bedroom. Khan's snores were barely audible from my office, but they were a bit louder from here. I poured a steaming cup of the high octane brew and settled in to wait. In six hours Khan would know more about his condition and I'd leave him to monitor the doctor. I thought back to the doctor and Assistant and shuddered. When Khan woke up, the first thing I planned was a shower.

* * *

Chapter 6

Two weeks later I was pretty much at my wit's end. It seemed that the doctor's fears were unfounded. He'd given out nearly four dozen trackers (I had to have Ted make some more) to his patients. I'd been hemorrhaging money paying for the additional trackers, the personnel to follow all the patients, and all the other incidentals. Even though my expenses over the last two weeks were more than my last six months combined, with what the doctor had been paying me, I don't think I'd fully eaten through the first day's pay yet. That meant that I had two stops to make that day. The first was to my banker, the second to the doctor to tell him I was off the case. He might be willing to pay through the nose for his paranoia, but twenty-four hour surveillance was taxing and, frankly, I didn't want to work for the bastard for one more day.

I'd personally followed the doctor as much as I could, mostly from a distance. A few times he insisted that I sit in on some of his sessions with people who didn't mind to get a sense of the types of patients he saw. He had an upbeat if slightly abrasive bedside manner, something that hadn't changed since back when I was still married. It consistently surprised me how little his manner bothered others. With the supers he was mostly okay. Sure, he focused more on the ailment than the patient, but no one really minded. With the tippys, it was different. It was like they weren't there. On more than one occasion, I watched a tippy spouse ask a question just to have the doctor give the answer to the super. While some seemed a bit put out, most tolerated his eccentric nature. When he was curing a debilitating disease, people could overlook a lot of idiosyncrasies.

I had to admit that Medico obviously was at the top of his field as I watched him diagnose and cure ailments that I hadn't even heard of in the time it took others to change the oil in their car. The fact was that supers had special requirements: they were born different and more often than not they had ailments that didn't affect the general populace at all.

Everywhere that the doctor went, so did Assistant. I was constantly surprised by how easily supers accepted the bio-mechanical robot. If the doctor were to wheel that thing into a store or mall, panic would ensue. But supers were so inured to such strangeness that they didn't seem to notice. As alien and strange as the construct was, they didn't even bat an eye. If there was ever evidence of the difference between tippys and supers, that was it.

For my first stop of the day, I had to visit my banker because of the large influx of cash from the doctor. I had my money split up into a number of different accounts on and offshore. That way, if something happened to one bank, I'd still have a nest egg. Before this job, I had enough to retire on. Now I had enough to retire and live well. At only thirty-four, I wasn't exactly ready to retire though I couldn't tell you why. I liked my work, which was a bonus, but it was dangerous. It always felt like I was just one wrong move away from pissing off the wrong super. I did have contingency plans in place, but if any of those had to be used, I'd have to be in pretty dire straits.

The drive to the TOP office was a short one. TOP, or Tippy Outreach Program, was a small, community based organization that provided counseling and support for people who were affected by supers. They were located in a small office in the center of downtown, which was basically within walking distance of my place. Well, walking distance if I wanted to get a bit of exercise. I didn't.

Liz Novac, who runs TOP, is one of my oldest friends. We go back just as far as any two can - I think I was the first one she ever played house with. Our families have always been friends though we each went our own way as adults. She became a high dollar financial attorney for a multinational corporation while I seemed doomed to the life of a perpetual student. While she always seemed to know what she wanted, I never could quite figure it out. I probably hold some sort of record for most undergraduate degrees *almost* completed. While

I was racking up student loans, she was pulling down six figures and living the high life.

Of course, it all went pear-shaped when it turned out that the multinational corporation she worked for was a front for The Anarchist. The Anarchist, as his name implied, had planned to destabilize the world economy - somehow - and then plunge the world into anarchy for reasons that were never meant to be understood. I'm sure there is a psychiatrist somewhere getting a migraine trying to figure out why super-villains do what they do. Sure, some just want to kill everyone (and liberate the plants/animals/mother earth/etc.), but most don't really have much of a point. I mean, what was he going to do after his planned worked? Say, "Ha! See! Anarchy!"

Anyhow, Liz couldn't exactly include "worked for super-villain" on her resume with special merits such as "unknowingly crashed the economies of two third world countries while perhaps unwittingly funneling money to groups that may have assassinated four world leaders." There really wasn't any coming back from that sort of job history. She took what money she had left (which, I have to commend her, was considerable) plus the settlement from the Super State and started TOP. As a special favor to me, which I reciprocate on occasion, Liz handles my banking.

When someone makes as many enemies as my job pretty much guarantees, he'd do well to hide his money. Liz makes sure that I don't have too much money in any one spot. I have bank accounts in almost every stable country on the planet, a considerable sum in gold and diamonds, and I'm told I hold a majority stake in a number of companies. Liz has assured me that no matter what happens, sans another anarchy plot, I should be able to retire comfortably. I live fairly humbly, though I overpay my assistant and the people I occasionally hire on to help out with stakeouts and odd jobs. The exorbitant fees I charge my clients pretty much ensure that I'm always in the black. Since I have very little competition, if they want my services, they basically don't have much of a choice. Since money means very little to supers, they generally don't mind anyhow.

TOP was located downtown within the towering skyscrapers of the central business district. On the ground floor of many of the shorter buildings were multiple businesses, usually topped by high dollar apartments (similar to mine but much more expensive) or offices. While I didn't much mind going in through the front door from time to time, I generally opted for the back entrance. I parked in the garage across the street and crossed. Above the TOP office were a number of offices all connected by a common hallway. It was long and straight and, barring someone with X-ray vision or invisibility, nearly impossible for someone to see you without you seeing them. I stopped outside of a door marked Drs. Myer, Walker and Walkowski, and waited. When I didn't see or sense anyone in the vicinity, I entered.

A lot of times, I feel like I'm being watched. This is in no way a superpower. It's a combination of paying attention to my surroundings and listening to my gut. When Gale and I were first married, she was moving her way up through the ranks of the supers. That attracted more than a little unwanted attention. My gut instincts helped us out more than once. To get accepted into the Super State, a person has to show that they have a power. For Gale, it was easy. She could control air, which is simple to demonstrate. Super geniuses have a much harder time than those with physical powers. That's probably why so many super-villains tend to be of the genius persuasion. During our fairly short marriage, she quickly climbed from a Level 1 citizen to a Level 3. Level 1 is just showing up. After qualifying for Level 1, supers pretty much never have to work again as the Super State gives them a stipend that would keep most middle class families happy. Ted, even after five years, was still a Level 1. To get to the next level, supers need to prove their worth. When a super gets a promotion, they get a stipend raise but are also called upon more often and for more dangerous missions. Reach Level 5 and a super becomes part of the government, usually a member of the earth defense

force known as The Bulwark, where they have the entire coffers of the government at their disposal if they can justify it. Two years after we split, Gale reached Level 5.

The perky receptionist took one look at me, flashed a perfectly white smile and said, "Ah, Mr. Smith! Dr. Walker is waiting for you in room four."

I nodded and handed her my parking stub, "Why don't I go ahead and get this validated now?"

She took the ticket and stamped it, handing it back.

"Thanks, doll."

I walked through the side door to room four. Inside was what looked to be a slightly outdated chair next to a tray filled with instruments that looked slightly more torturous than normal dental equipment. If anyone mistakenly went in here, they wouldn't necessarily think it was staged to look scary, but they'd probably ask to be taken to another room (or at least wouldn't object if it was suggested to them).

I sat in the chair slowly, dreading what was about to happen. Reaching down, I pulled out the leather straps and wrapped them around my ankles. Again, I reached under the chair and pulled more leather straps to secure my thighs and waist. I reached over to the tray and took one of the tongue depressors from the glass cup and bit down on it. I leaned back on the chair, pressing my head hard into the headrest. I grabbed the armrests firmly and waited.

Strictly speaking, the restraints weren't necessary. But Joe Blow off the street wasn't going to strap himself or allow himself to be strapped into a dentist chair. The purpose of the restraints was to set in motion the room's mechanism. Liz had it installed years ago when she first moved in to the space. While technically, she didn't have to be close by for the mechanism to work, keeping an eye on it was easier that way. After about forty-five seconds, the tingling in my legs started.

After that, it felt as if I was being turned inside out. Everything went dark for a moment and when I could see again I was about three feet off the ground in a room with a fully padded floor. I hit hard, the air pushed violently from my lungs along with the tongue depressor. It flew across the room smoldering on both ends. I curled up in pain for a minute or two as the aftereffects of the teleportation wore off. Once again, the same thought went through my mind: all this so I don't have to walk in the front door?

"Ah, so you've arrived."

I managed to lift my head. The illumination inside the room was minimal, so Liz was framed in light from the doorway behind her. She wore a dark coat and a slightly above-knee skirt with smart, medium heeled shoes. Her head was backlit so I couldn't see her face, but her hair - dark, straight and shoulder-length - was immaculate as always. She flipped the switch, bathing her pale features in light. She would've been plain by super standards though she was still plenty attractive. Her triangular face was well accented by a wide smile, clear skin, and small ears. She had her hair parted on the side and pulled behind one ear. Her smile was familiar and comforting if a bit unappreciated at the moment. Under her ever-present dark business suit was a red silk blouse.

"You coming? We've got work to do."

"In a moment, honey," I struggled to stand. "Just let me throw up a bit first." I managed to get to my feet and stumble to her office. I leaned on the doorjamb, clutching my midsection, "Is it just me or was that worse than normal?"

Liz called out from her office down the hall, "Yeah, I heard that from a few people. Should have warned you I guess."

I stumbled down through the door and collapsed in a well padded chair.

She organized some papers as she spoke, "You know, I couldn't be sure until someone who rode it regularly came through." She looked up and smiled again, "You just got lucky I

guess."

"Funny, I don't feel lucky."

"Scotch?"

"A bit early for that."

"Coffee?"

"I didn't say no to the scotch. I was just pointing out the time."

She smiled and poured a small drink from the bottle she always got out for my visits.

"You have something for me to sign?"

"Yeah, rich boy." She passed over a stack of papers. "Need your signature everywhere there's an X."

I grabbed the pen she offered and got to work.

"If you don't mind me asking, you're really working for Doc Arts?"

I gritted my teeth, "Yeah."

"Whew," she whistled through her teeth, "I never thought I'd see the day." She poured herself a coffee, "You sure are making him pay, though."

I shook my head.

"What?" she asked.

"He doesn't care about the money. Didn't even faze him."

"Supers," she responded, "there's no figuring them, is there."

I continued signing.

"How much longer you got on this job? I'm running out of places to hide your money."

"Today's the last day. Oh, and make sure you take a respectable amount out for yourself. Maybe get that damn teleportation chair fixed." I looked the paper over, signing a missed spot on the bottom. "How's business?"

She leaned back in her chair, "Oh, you know, there's always something to do, some right to wrong. You hear about the Names-a-Million incident?"

I shook my head. Names-a-Million was one of the many naming agencies that would suggest names for your child based on your powers, or just powers you wanted your child to have. I didn't buy it, though it was all the rage with new parents.

"Yeah, well, some mom named her kid Millhouse Crush on their recommendation." She sipped her coffee. "Changed his last name and everything. Mom's a low-level brick, can maybe bench press an economy car on a good day. Husband has some sort of stink power."

I looked up.

"Hey, don't ask me, you're the one with all the connections," her hands went up in a surrender pose. "Anyhow, kid's got some sort of flower power."

A guffaw escaped my throat.

"Yeah, he can make flowers grow. Anyhow, his parents went through the roof. Tore the agency up."

"How're you involved?" the stack of papers didn't seem to be getting any smaller. At first I scanned each one, but eventually I gave up and just started signing.

"Well, seems that dad's stink power is somehow toxic. He really let it rip, so to speak."

I didn't have to look up to know that she was smiling as she said it. Liz always did have a guttural sense of humor. We had that in common.

"Blasted not only the office but also got into the surrounding buildings. Not sure the number affected yet, but we're rounding them up now. Counseling for all, of course. Plus I hired a few more lawyers."

"To go up against the Super State?" I asked.

"Hey, you don't have to lean on them too hard to get them to pay. You, if anyone, should know that. It isn't like they care about money."

I grimaced and continued signing.

"So, what's the deal with Arts?"

"Same ol' bullshit," I responded finishing the last paper and pushing the stack over, "you know how it is. 'Someone is following me, my patients are disappearing.' All that paranoia crap."

"Anything I could get involved in?"

"Naw, it's super on super stuff. Or well, it would be if it were real."

"It isn't?"

"No," I answered, "that's why I'm cutting him loose."

"I'm surprised you're not trying to bleed him dry, given your history."

"Well, even I have my limits," I downed my scotch in one gulp. "I can only live with so much dirty money. If he cared more, maybe, but this? This could go on forever."

"Can't say I understand the sentiment, but whatever," she looked over the papers.

"Everything looks to be in order. I'll send you an updated list of your accounts later in the week."

"Thanks Liz; appreciate it."

"Hey, thank you. Even before your recent windfall, you were our biggest supporter."

"Anything I can do to support my fellow tippys."

She frowned at the slang term for non-powered people, "Anyway, I wish you'd let us list you as a donor. People deserve to know how much you do for the community."

"And ruin my reputation?" I stood, "People like their PIs like they like their accountants... just a little slimy."

She stood as well, her hands on her hips, mock indignation in her voice, "Are you saying I'm slimy?"

"Just the right amount, baby. See ya."

"Later Bob."

* * *

"What do you mean you're dropping the case?"

I was back in Doc Arts' lair. Assistant was no longer on the table but also not in sight. The little man with the little, red beard and little, mechanical eyes was more than a little red in the face.

"Listen Ignaro," I retorted, "I told you up front, when I'm satisfied that nothing is going on, I'm done. You promised to leave me and the cops alone. I held up my end, now you hold up yours."

"But, but," he was shaking, "I paid you for today!" he exclaimed as if he had just discovered some sort of glaring flaw with my plan. "You have to finish out today!"

"And I have every plan of doing just that. But tonight, if nothing happens, *when* nothing happens, I'm collecting all the trackers and it's over." I couldn't help but smile.

It was obvious that Medico had fully expected me to find something. I'd managed to stay around for a couple of weeks, which was more than enough time for something to happen. If it wasn't, he would have protested that fact by now. Instead, he was trying to reason with me.

"Wait... eh..." He looked around the room as if the answer were in one of the boxes or organ transport coolers that littered the room. "I'll pay you more!" he exclaimed. "Double!"

I shook my head. If I thought the money mattered...

I contemplated taking him up on his offer - or even asking for more. In his present state, he'd probably pay even if I did come up with a number high enough to hurt. I'd spent the better part of the last two weeks replaying our deal in my mind trying to figure out what I

should have said. What other condition I could have added. But I had come up dry. He had to accept the fact that there was just nothing to this.

"Come on Medico. You're a scientist. You know that you can get a false positive. Observe enough phenomena and you'll see a pattern even if it doesn't exist." I reached out to put a hand on his shoulder, then thought better of it and drew my hand back through my hair instead, "You said yourself that a few you thought were missing had shown up. We gave it the ol' college try."

He paced and stammered for a few more minutes, talking to himself more than me. Finally, just when it seemed he had accepted, he turned and pointed at me, "Fine. You want to leave? Fine. But you follow me today. Not your lackeys, but you. You stay with me all day."

So much for feeling bad for the guy. The revulsion I normally felt when I was around Doc Arts returned in force. It was claustrophobic. I felt like the room was too small, the air too thin. I reached up to loosen the tie I didn't wear, "Okay... okay... fine. If that's what it takes. But you don't call me, you don't call the cops after today. When I leave, it's over. Agreed?"

He sighed, "Agreed."

* * *

I spent the majority of the day upstairs sipping the doctor's scotch. After about an hour and no hint of a buzz, I finally questioned Butler. Turned out the good doctor abhors alcohol and keeps on hand synthetic substitutes, which mimic perfectly the taste without the deleterious effects. He had the real stuff too, but Butler had been ordered not to give it to me. Seems Ignaro not only didn't want me drunk, he wanted me alert. Butler had been spiking my drinks with caffeine all afternoon. He didn't have much going on that day and was working all afternoon in his lab on God knows what. I practically gave myself a blister using the rotary phone as I checked in with Khan way more than was necessary to see how the rest of the patients were doing. So far, everyone we were tracking was still around and moving. I let him know that we'd definitely be finishing tonight and to pass that on to our people in the field.

Khan was happy to hear it. The good doctor had given him news about his condition a few days after his experiment. Something to do with electrolytes or some such thing having to do with salt and water. I even looked it up on the Network and couldn't find anything on it. Medico, of course, was all excited. Said that Khan's body was shutting down to protect itself and that the long sleep was necessary for his body to replenish itself. Other bodily systems were as fast as his legs but apparently not this one. Medico had devised some supplements that he could take to counteract the effects as a stopgap measure. He was supposed to be working on something more permanent. Early experiments by Khan with the pills had been promising. His parents were ecstatic. I was less so, but then, I was the one who would be losing an assistant.

I spent some time pacing around the doctor's house and lab, though I didn't learn anything useful. I found out how to switch off the hologram in the freezer that hid the stairway. I could walk through it if I wanted, but I just about killed myself missing the first step when I tried. I discovered that the force field paired with the Butler hologram was fairly weak. It could serve drinks and carry groceries, but it couldn't, say, catch a man who was about to break his neck falling down a set of stairs. I saw the Doc's daughter a few times, mostly playing alone or with Butler. She asked me about Assistant but I didn't know when the Doc would be done with it. I tried to scope out the security systems, just to get an idea of what he had, but everything was so foreign, so alien to anything I'd seen before, it was pretty much useless to me. Ted would have given his pinky to get his hands on nearly any of it, I'd have bet.

Finally, the doctor bounded up the stairs, Assistant hovering behind him. While the bio-

mechanical robot had spent all day with its skin and metal exposed, it was dressed in its trench coat and hat. Apparently, we were going out.

"What's the deal, Medico? We on the move?" I asked.

"Bob, excellent," the doctor put on his sunglasses, hiding his mechanical eyes, "yes, I must see a patient. A very fascinating case." He turned back to Assistant, which adjusted his glasses so they properly covered his eyes, and again faced me. "Are you ready?"

"Sure," I grabbed my jacket off the back of my chair, "you driving?"

"Eh? Oh, no. Nothing so mundane. Just step through here." He moved toward the kitchen, Assistant in tow.

Shrugging, I followed. I'd been in the doctor's kitchen a number of times over the last few hours. What I stepped into was definitely not the doctor's kitchen.

This kitchen was homey and warm. It showed evidence of use: utensils in large containers on the tile countertop, a toaster with crumbs on top, woodgrain cabinetry with floral accents. Nothing at all like Medico's kitchen, which looked like it was designed for a showroom floor instead of daily use, with black granite countertop, stainless steel cabinetry, and not a utensil or cooking implement in sight.

I looked behind me at a country-style breakfast nook. The table top and long bench seating was constructed of pine, the legs painted white. There was what looked to be handsewn cushions on the benches and fresh cut flowers on the table. On one bench was a stack of plaid fabric placemats and matching napkins ready for the next meal. There was a brand new contemporary highchair to the side, a fragment of wrapping paper hanging by a piece of tape from the seat.

"Um... Doc? Where are we?"

"Oh, thank God!" a voice behind me exclaimed. "Doc Arts, this way. The baby's coming!"

I turned around as a balding, slightly overweight man grabbed Medico's arm and led him from the room. Assistant followed close behind. I swallowed slowly, threw my jacket over my shoulder, and followed the clear sounds of a woman in distress upstairs.

* * *

Chapter 7

The only person who didn't want me to witness the birth of this child more than the parents, was me. Aside from the obviously rustic choice of furnishings, there were just too many similarities to my past. The man (I guessed him to be the husband by the ring and the fact that he was the only other person in the room besides the pregnant woman, the doctor and me) had the look of ineffectualness that only fathers in a delivery room can have. It's sort of a mixture of empathic pain, guilt, and fear that would be funny if I hadn't been there before. He held her hand, whispered words of encouragement and occasionally remembered lamaze techniques. She responded with derision, glares, and the occasional threat. They'll probably remember this as a beautiful moment. It really wasn't.

The doctor and Assistant were far too busy to even introduce me. They scanned the woman, her bed, and occasionally the father. The doctor was murmuring to himself mostly and once sent Assistant off. I watched as it approached the bedroom door and paused momentarily in front of it. I barely noticed the distortion around the frame. When it exited, I could see the doctor's lab through the doorway. It grabbed a few instruments and returned. As it passed through, the hallway behind reappeared. Whatever teleportation technology they were using was unlike anything I'd ever seen. I'd have to give Liz a head's up about it. I didn't feel a thing.

Eventually the doctor shooed the husband away from the bed. He looked a little relieved though I couldn't help feel a wave of déjà vu crash over me. He noticed me standing to the side and approached.

"So, what's your deal?" he asked apprehensively. "You look a little old to be an intern."

"Right, no," I tried to laugh it off and looked for a place for my eyes that didn't have a direct or indirect view of his wife's private parts. "I'm working with," I almost slipped and said his real name, "Doc Arts on... a different project."

"Different?"

I wasn't exactly putting him at ease.

"Sort of private." I extended my hand, "Bob Moore."

"Hi Bob, nice to..." his eyes narrowed in thought, "Moore? You're that PI guy? The one who only investigates supers?"

"That's me."

"I've heard of you." He turned to face me directly, "Maybe you can clear something up for me. Why'd you change your name to Bob Moore? That's kind of a weird name for a PI."

I looked down. Down seemed to be pretty safe, "Well, I didn't change it. My parents gave me the name. I'm thirty-four, so I was named before the supers really started showing up."

He nodded, more to show that he was listening rather than agreeing. "So, how come you don't change it?"

"Because it's my name?" I asked sarcastically.

"Hmm..." He thought some more, "So how come you only investigate supers?"

Before I could answer, we were interrupted by a huge scream. It didn't take a doctor to know that the woman was in much more distress than normal.

"God. I hope he can help," Ed intoned.

I nodded toward the bed, "I'm guessing her power is the problem?"

"Uh-huh. She regenerates. Great for the baby, there isn't a toxin or virus that can survive in her body. Bad thing is, she can't get the baby out. The parts that are supposed to..." he motioned with his hands.

"Rip?" I offered.

"Yeah, rip. Well, they won't. Or at least won't rip long enough for the baby to come out. Arts thought this might happen. He thought he could figure out a way to cut it out of her."

"It?"

He sighed, "Yeah. We didn't want to know the sex of the baby. Doc said we could find out but we didn't want to. You know. Didn't want to get too connected..."

"In case you lost it?" I finished.

"Yeah. I don't have powers and...well, you know."

I nodded, not that he was watching.

He got quiet after that. The doctor seemed to decide that the baby wasn't coming out the normal way so he covered her up a bit and started working on her stomach. He could easily cut her, but as quickly as he could open her up, her skin was closing. Assistant had all four arms in play as the doctor spoke quickly to both it and the mother. Twice more, Assistant returned through the doorway to the lab to get more supplies. Finally, they seemed to be making progress with the wound staying open longer and longer. After about fifteen minutes, they were pulling a crying, gooey baby from its mother's stomach. The minute they turned off their devices, the opening closed up. Whatever power she had, it was significant. I'd heard of healers but never one who healed this fast. I wondered how they had managed to conceive. I supposed it'd be like she was a virgin every time? Every thrust? I cringed just thinking about it.

The doctor took the baby over to a bassinet off to the side of the bed. The parents were all questions. How's the baby? What's the gender? The usual. The doctor was far too busy with the baby to answer. Once the father tried to approach, but again the doctor sent him away, this time with a verbal rebuke. He and Assistant hovered over the baby, syringes and scanners descending upon it like birds diving into the sea after fish. A minute passed...two. The parents stopped asking questions and fell silent as we all listened to the crying of the child, the hum of Assistant's motor, and the murmuring of the doctor. A third minute...fourth. No one moved, the parents were barely breathing. If the stress in the room materialized, you wouldn't be able to see your hand in front of your face. I couldn't help but feel like I was back, in that room, so long ago.

* * *

Five years ago. We were at City Hospital. Doc Arts, the best and the brightest in ranks of the super geniuses, had insisted. Back then it was thought that super/tippy cross-couplings couldn't produce a child. At least not a healthy one. Most women miscarried and tippy girls were afraid that babies with powers would come ripping out of their stomachs. Of course, that's never happened. Children rarely display any super powers before adolescence and less often in the womb. That didn't stop the old wives from talking.

Gale and I met on campus; she was studying meteorology and I think I was in Poly Sci (though that may have been during my Psychology phase). Supers were becoming increasingly common though there was still a lot of fear and resentment among the general population. The early nineties were the heyday of the super registration movement and there was a lot of strife. The more law-abiding supers immediately registered. Others took some convincing. After years of fighting, the super civil war was settled when world governments decided that they'd allow a borderless Super State. Registration became voluntary for all, but mandatory to be counted as a citizen. As the Super State quickly became the richest country in the world, supers soon didn't need much persuasion to sign up.

We met a couple of years before the establishment of the Super State, around 1998. She had kept her powers hidden and really didn't come out until I gave her some encouragement. We dated for nearly three years and got married just before she became a full-fledged member of the State in 2002. I finally got a degree in General Studies (code for: seriously, just

get out and get a job already), a degree for the working professional. Gale and I worked odd jobs until she started getting her stipend. At that time, it was just enough to live on.

When Gale got pregnant, three years into our marriage, we were both shocked. Conventional wisdom said it shouldn't happen and, frankly, we'd been less than careful with protection both before and during our marriage. We'd just assumed it would never happen. But it did. At first, we didn't talk about it, thinking she'd miscarry or something. After a few months, she started to show (you can't hide even a small baby bump in spandex) so we had to announce it. Sort of. Gale stopped gallivanting around trying to make a name for herself and she quietly asked around for the best doctor. Doc Arts was at the top of everyone's list.

Even back then, when he still had all his original parts, he was considered the best. He'd already stopped two super viruses, a plague, and had developed a counteragent to a gas designed to wipe the memories of everyone on the planet. He didn't want to see Gale until he learned that I didn't have powers. At that point, we became his pet project. For four months we were at his beck and call. We even moved into his building (back then he lived in a posh downtown penthouse apartment) in a place that cost twice as much with half the space. Sometimes we'd see him twice a day, sometimes not for several days. When we did see him, his enthusiasm was infectious. He talked on and on - as he scanned, prodded, and poked the both of us - about how groundbreaking this birth would be. The first tippy/super child. The first cross-birth. It would be a milestone. The child would bridge the gap between the two communities and would be the first step toward showing both sides that we really weren't so different.

When the big day came, we rushed to the hospital. Doc Arts wanted the birth to be a public spectacle, but Gale and I had refused. Really, it was more Gale. I probably would have gone along with it. As it was, Arts had a press conference standing by and filmed the entire birth. An entire wing of the hospital was cleared out. All the best equipment was on hand and I could barely fit in the room with all the nurses, attendants and filming crew. Gale, as always, looked amazing as she fought through the pain. Outside, a storm of epic proportions battered the hospital, complete with lightning, hail, and, I found out later, a small tornado. Prepared for anything, we had generators at the ready and the lights didn't so much as flicker.

Gale probably screamed. I can't say I remember that specifically but I'm sure she did. Doc Arts was there, narrating for the camera as much as he directed Gale. Nurses encouraged her, held her hand, wiped her brow. It was, in every sense of the word, a circus. I remember at one point, Gale looked over at me. Her hair was matted down with sweat, a stray curl escaping the moisture and remaining upright. Her hazel eyes were wild, as if she were looking for a way to escape her own body. I remember the moment our eyes met. She didn't see me - I know that. She was looking inward. But I saw her. And she was beautiful. She was bringing my child into the world and, at that moment, with the blood and the sweat and the storm and the tears, I couldn't love her more.

And then it all went wrong.

Doc Arts held up the baby. "A little girl," he announced to the camera.

Gale held out her arms to receive the child, calling out the name we had chosen - Abigail. Doc Arts cut the cord and suddenly the baby stopped crying. The room went silent. Slowly, dark blotches started appearing on the baby's skin. Gale was screaming again. I might have too; I don't know. All I know is that they whisked the baby away. And then Gale and I were alone in the room. Me over by the wall where I had been pushed by the crowd, her in the bed, legs still elevated. She didn't look at me. She just wept.

* * *

A slap on the shoulder.

"It's a boy! Can you believe it?"

I looked at the new father, remembering slowly where I was.

"He's gonna be fine!"

"Congrats." I forced a smile.

Across the room the doctor was talking with the mother who was nursing her new child. Assistant was cleaning up the bassinet. The father was placing a cigar with a blue wrapper into my hand. I smiled again as he continued to talk. I needed to leave. Now.

"Doc," my voice cracked slightly. I coughed softly. "Don't we have to get a move on?"

Medico turned, "Oh, Bob. Sorry, I forgot you were here."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" I muttered.

"Sue and..." the doctor stumbled.

"Ed," the father interjected.

"Ed," Ignaro pointed at the woman and man, "this is Bob Moore. He's... um..."

"Helping you out," I volunteered.

"Yes!" he exclaimed, "You know, Bob put me on the road to the development of the technology that makes cross-births possible."

Ed's hand shot out again, grasping mine firmly and pumping it, his other hand on my shoulder slapping it violently, "Well, well," he punctuated each word with a slap, "come have a drink with us."

There have been few times in my life where I completely lost my wits. Notably, I remember back in grade school, a kid had teased me mercilessly for months. I held my tongue until one day I just lost it. I remember my vision narrowing, as if I was in a tunnel, until he was all I could see. It took two kids and a teacher to pull me off of him. As the doctor complimented me, my vision started to dim. I could feel my face flush, adrenaline dumping into my bloodstream. I spoke through clenched teeth, "No, really, Doc. We need to go. Now." I pulled my hand from Ed's, forced smile on my face, my eyes hard.

The doctor looked confused, "Eh, okay. Sure." He turned to Ed who was still grinning, "Ed, make sure she takes the pills I gave you. And if anything happens, anything at all with the baby, press this button," the doctor pressed a small, black object into Ed's hand.

Sue was too busy cooing at her new baby to pay much attention. Assistant followed close behind the doctor as he moved toward the door.

I patted Ed on the shoulder, "Congrats," I said again lamely.

Ed's eyes were bouncing between me and Medico like he was at a tennis match. As I turned to exit, I could tell by his falling smile that he was catching on that something was amiss. He only managed a small grunt before I stepped through the doorway and into the lab of Ignaro Medico, Doc Arts. The last thing Ed saw as the teleportation portal snapped shut was my arm reaching back, my hand in a fist. If the portal had lasted a half second longer he'd have seen the doctor turn just in time for my fist to catch him on the cheek.

* * *

Chapter 8

As we walked through the doorway, Doc Arts was saying, "I don't see why we had to leave. Shouldn't we have given them a tracker or something?"

My punch hit him full on the side of his face, the resounding "crack" louder than I would have expected. I shook the pain out of my hand, which wasn't used to being utilized in that way. The doctor sprawled out on the floor of his lab, arms and legs akimbo. I was breathing hard, much harder than I should have been, given that the punch hadn't taken much exertion on my part. Back in grade school, the only other time I'd ever thrown a punch, I seemed to remember very little but red hot rage. As I looked down at the doctor, my mind was anything but blank. A thousand thoughts were screaming through my mind. More than anything, I just wanted him to stay down. If he got up, I didn't know what I'd do. It was then that the whirring reminded me that we weren't alone.

Assistant was off to my side, apparently motionless. The four-armed robot never looked more monstrous than at that moment. The metal visor device that served as its eyes didn't lend themselves to reading and, frankly, the lack of movement either to protect the doctor or to remove itself from the situation was disconcerting.

Not knowing what else to do, I said, "So, what's your move, Assistant?"

On the floor at my feet, the doctor rolled around, holding his cheek. Assistant continued its impersonation of a statue. The doctor called out and Butler appeared next to him. The hologram helped him to his feet. There were tears in the doctor's eyes and a large welt on his cheek that promised to bruise and maybe develop into a black eye. Well, as much of a black eye as he could have. He backed away, keeping the hologram at first and then his work table between us.

"You... you stay away from me!" his finger shook as he pointed at me.

"That won't be a problem, you little shit," I roared, the sound of his voice triggering my anger again. "We're done here. Don't you ever, EVER call me again."

I turned to leave.

"Wait," the doctor behind me, "what happened? What did I do?"

I just turned and glared at him. After a second, I remembered the tracker and moved toward him quickly. I grabbed him by the shoulder, using my other hand to frisk him quickly for it. He squirmed to get away but didn't have the strength to pull it off. Again, Assistant did nothing. Of course, the tracker was still in the same pocket I'd seen him drop it in the day I'd given it to him. Facing him, I wanted to say more, to say all those things I stayed up late at night thinking about, but this was just too much proximity and I spun on my heel.

I don't remember much of the drive home. All I could see was Medico's smiling face as he cheerfully told that couple that I had made their miracle birth possible. Such an idiot. As if I had anything to do with it. Would they be so thankful, so quick to offer a drink, if they knew the road to their son's birth was paved with the bodies of dead children? My dead child. And he had the gall to ask me what he'd done. What hadn't he done, was more like it.

I parked the car in my dedicated spot in the building's garage. I made my way up to my apartment with a modicum of muttering. Whenever I got really upset, I tended to talk to myself. It wasn't excessive, but when I was alone, my inner monologue tended to escape. Right then, my inner monologue was mostly curse words. I opened the door to my apartment expecting to find the waiting room outside my office empty. Instead, I found Khan at his desk seemingly waiting for me. The look on his face spoke volumes. Unfortunately, I was way too self-absorbed at that moment to read it.

"What are you still doing here?" I asked angrily, immediately regretting my tone. It wasn't his fault.

"Sorry, boss," he replied, "she's in there." He nodded toward my office.

"She? She who?"

Khan didn't respond. He looked like his cat had just been run over by a car. I opened the door to my office. The lights were off, but there was obviously someone sitting behind my desk. I threw my jacket down on the guest chair and reached over to the light switch.

"Did you really hit him?" Her voice was as familiar as my own.

My hand froze over the top of the switch. After a moment, I remembered to breathe and I turned on the light.

"Gale."

"It's not his fault, you know." She was dressed as she usually was these days, in nothing but a long, flowing piece of semitransparent fabric. With her power over the wind, she could wrap it around her as much as she wanted. It was both functional and seductive. This one was white with bits of silver sewn into the weave and at the fringes. Somewhere on it, I knew, there would be a stylized B indicating her membership in The Bulwark.

"You weren't there, you don't know..."

"Oh," her laughter was forced but it still had hints of the joy we once felt.

It hurt to hear.

She stood and walked toward me. "I can guess all right. Doc Arts might be brilliant but his bedside manner leaves something to be desired."

She was tall for a woman, eye to eye with me. Since she could control the air, she rarely wore more than she needed to and tonight was no different. The white fabric was probably five yards long but it snaked around her like a living thing. Small microbursts of wind kept it always on the move. Occasionally I'd see a flash of skin hinting that whatever she had on underneath was minimal. I remember when she first started doing that, she had to concentrate on it. Now it was second nature.

Her green eyes locked in on mine as her brown, waist length, wavy hair flowed around her like she was underwater. She had a golden tan, evidence of how much she liked being outdoors. She was barefoot and wore a large, silver upper arm bracelet inscribed with the words or symbols for wind in multiple languages on her left arm, a ring on her index toe on her left foot and an anklet on her right. While it wasn't warm outside, she rarely wore anything else. I could feel the air temperature increase as I neared her, evidence of her power.

"So, to what do I owe the honor of this visit? This can't be about Medico."

"You know it is."

"I damn well DON'T know any such thing, Gale!" I shouted. "I can't believe you, of all people..."

"Oh, cut it out," she interrupted. "It's all fine for you to go on hating him but I don't have that luxury."

"Luxury!" I stammered.

"Yes, luxury!" she spat. "I've got to work with him. It isn't like I can ostracize him. He's easily one of the top three minds on the planet."

"Well, as long as it's for the greater good, I suppose," I muttered, walking behind my desk, searching for a clean glass and my bottle.

Gale circled to the other side, "Don't start that again, Bob. It's not like he didn't try."

I poured a shot and grabbed the glass so violently that I spilled most of it, "Yeah. Amazing how when he tries for his own daughter, it works. But everyone up until then is out of luck." I threw the alcohol down my throat, not noticing the burn.

"That's conspiracy theory talk and you know it."

"If the shoe fits, I say."

"I didn't come here to have that same old argument with you."

"How about this for conspiracy: How does a man like Medico end up with a tippy? He fell

in love? I don't buy it. I'd bet dollars to doughnuts it was so he could have that daughter."

"That's crazy."

"You didn't see her. She spends more time with his creations than she does with him."

"He's a busy man..." she started lamely.

"Fine," I interrupted, "Make excuses. So why did you come, Gale?" I said, pouring another glass.

"I've come to ask a favor of you."

I gripped my glass so tightly I thought it might break, "Don't say what I think you're going to say," I replied, quietly.

"Stay on the case."

I closed my eyes, slowly, dropping my head.

"Listen, I know you don't like him but he's really worried about this."

"I couldn't care less about what he's worried about," I replied. "And that's another thing. Why don't you and The Bulwark check this out? You've got a lot more resources than I do."

"We have," she replied. "Thing is, the missing supers are low level. Some of them are brand new registrees. They're in the system but we don't track them that carefully. And you know how it is; supers go missing all the time. Vacations, missions, deaths... it could all be normal. But as long as Arts thinks there is something to it, he'll be distracted. The others in The Bulwark don't see it, but I do. These last two weeks, since you've been on the case, he's gotten more done than in the last two months combined. With a man like Doc Arts, a bad week or two, and hundreds, maybe thousands of people die."

"I seem to remember that on his good weeks, people still die," I sipped my drink.

"Come on, Bob. I haven't asked you for much. Just keep on it for a while longer. Once he's convinced there isn't a problem and he's back to his A game, you go." She paused, then added softly, "What would Abigail want?"

I gripped my glass tighter, my knuckles white, "That's not fair."

"Maybe not," she looked away from me. "But I need you. Will you do it?"

I hung my head, looking for inspiration at the bottom of my glass of scotch. I downed the last of it. "Okay, fine. I'll stay on. But on two conditions. First, you let me tell him, which I promise you won't be until tomorrow. The bastard deserves to sweat a bit. Second, go out with me."

She stopped in her tracks. I stunned her so acutely that her fabric almost fell away.

"What?"

"Sorry, forget it. I don't know why I said that."

"Bob, I... I... can't." She turned back to me, moisture in her eyes. "It'll never work."

"It worked once. It was working," I pleaded. Every time I saw Gale I ended up in this position. After every meeting I promised I wouldn't beg again.

"Bob, you'll always be special to me..."

"Yeah, yeah, okay," I interrupted. "It was worth a try."

"Bob, you know I know about the terminal right?"

I most certainly did not. It must have shown on my face.

"Khan is good at covering his tracks but not perfect. Plus, you can't hide anything from Mind. Giving you access is a great risk for me, you understand that?"

I nodded, glumly.

"Isn't that proof that I still care for you?"

"Just not enough to be in the same room with me."

She cringed, "It's just too... Every time I see you..."

"Yeah, I know."

She didn't have to finish. She may have the power to change the weather, suck the air

from a room, or create a tidal wave, but there were some things even she was powerless against.

She turned to leave.

"I'll need the location I was at this afternoon. He used some sort of teleportation device so I don't have the address."

"I figured," Gale replied, "I left it with Khan."

"Good."

Her hand was on the doorknob, "Bob?"

"Yeah?"

"Why don't you call me Wendi anymore?"

I shrugged and poured another drink.

* * *

Chapter 9

As I had guessed, the house I had gone to with Doc Arts was in Leederville. While Hillside had mostly supers and the filthy rich and Avondale had the merely affluent, Leederville was strictly middle class. With the regenerative power I'd seen in the mother, she had all the makings for a high level citizen of the Super State. The only reason she wasn't must have been because she hadn't been around long enough. That fit with the information Gale had given me.

The house was as quaint on the outside as it was inside - white with green shutters, two car garage and well manicured lawn complete with white picket fence. After Gale left, I grabbed my keys, a tracker, and exchanged information with Khan. He had probably listened in on everything but I brought him up to speed anyhow. I rarely had a visit from my ex-wife and my moods after such meetings were universally grim. Khan knew to keep it professional. I confirmed that he hadn't officially pulled anyone off of surveillance yet and all the trackers were still in place. I decided to bring the tracker to Ed and Sue myself as they at least knew my face. Having Khan show up unannounced wasn't exactly going to work.

It was late, after 10 p.m., by the time I rolled up in front of the house. I grabbed a handful of trail mix and chewed it noisily. I wasn't looking forward to this meeting. I could only hope the child was with the mother and I could drop off the tracker with a minimum of fuss. If I thought I could get away with sticking it in an envelope and dropping it in the mail slot, I would. I swallowed the trail mix, hoping it would counteract some of the alcohol I had consumed. Whenever Gale was around, I couldn't help but drink. She ran away; I drank. We all cope in our own ways, I suppose.

I knocked on the door, at first lightly, then more forcefully. I rang the doorbell once...twice. No answer. I stepped back from the door. Lights were on both upstairs and down. There wasn't a car in the driveway, but the garage door was closed. Plus, who would leave home with a new baby only hours old? I tried the doorknob, but the door was locked. Circling around the house, I noticed a few windows ajar. It was a cool evening but had been a warm day. If I had to, I could pull off one of the screens and get in that way, but that was a last resort. I cringed as I thought of the time I had gotten half way through the bedroom window just to meet the owner face to face as he exited the bathroom with only a towel on. I wasn't thrilled at the notion of repeating that experience.

The latch for the gate to the backyard was on the inside so I had to reach over the top of the fence to gain access. I opened the gate slowly, wary of dogs. I let the gate creak a bit; if there was one around, I'd rather be close to an exit. If I had thought I'd be traipsing through the backyard, I'd have grabbed my flashlight out of the trunk. It was a large, nearly two foot metal job that was as good for personal protection as it was for illumination. I considered going back for it. Seemed a bit overkill. Convinced there wasn't a dog about, I entered the backyard proper.

With the homeowners expecting a baby, I found the backyard to look exactly how I'd expected it. While keeping up appearances for the neighbors was motivation enough to keep the front yard in check, the back was a bit overgrown. Not so much that I needed a machete, but I could guess that the next person to cut the lawn was going to have a bad time of it. Typical for the neighborhood, there were tall privacy trees planted around the fence perimeter with flowers and other aesthetically pleasing plants in front. The majority of the property was covered with two week's worth of overgrown grass. A small wooden deck housed a pergola, which sheltered some teak outdoor furniture. The deck was flanked at the corners with bamboo torches that held mosquito repellent fuel.

As I approached the deck, I noticed that there was a wisp of smoke escaping the chimney. More evidence that someone was home. While I wasn't sure how Sue was reacting,

I know that Gale had been a mess during her pregnancy. If it wasn't strange foods, it was the temperature. The weather didn't justify a fire, but if a new father (or father-to-be in my case) learns one thing, it's to not argue with his wife. Since Gale could control the temperature, I hadn't had much choice in the matter anyhow.

Through the sliding glass back door I could see the kitchen clearly illuminated. I slowly approached, reminded by the lights that I was technically trespassing, and held my breath. If there was a new baby inside, it was either asleep or being very quiet. There was no sound of a TV, music, or people talking. Maybe they weren't home? I tried the handle on the back door. The glass slid quietly to the side. I laughed silently to myself. No one locked the back door any more. Still, I couldn't deny that my gut wasn't happy. Something seemed off.

Entering, I called out, "Ed? Sue?" I stepped in.

The table was set for two. One dinner was still covered with aluminum foil, the other half eaten. Spaghetti. On the counter, a freshly opened can of pre-made sauce, the remainder still simmering in a pot on the stove. It didn't smell burnt so they could just be upstairs checking on the baby.

"Ed? Sue?" I called out again, "It's Bob Moore. I was here earlier with Doc Arts? Just need to drop this off with you." I reached back to my pocket, "Damn," I said to myself. I called out again, "I just left it in the car. I'll be right back, okay?"

From the back door, the kitchen was to my right, with a door and the breakfast nook I had identified earlier to the left. The door probably led to a laundry room or pantry. The dinner was set on the small table in the breakfast nook. As I walked forward, on the left, past the laundry door and breakfast nook, separated by a half wall, was a formal dining room with a large, elaborate table, probably rarely used. Past that there was a hallway under the stairs with a couple of additional doors, one of which surely led to the garage. I headed past the dining room towards the front door, which faced the stairway to the upstairs area. To the right of the front door there was a sitting room with similar furnishings. There was an alarming amount of wallpaper, wood trim, and wainscoting in every room. It was as if Sue and Ed had gotten hold of an old magazine and decorated their house accordingly. Given the current style, it wasn't so much out of style as just a little dated. Get rid of the wallpaper and the place would be pretty nice. I looked down at the thick, blue carpet in the hall wondering if there was hardwood underneath when it hit me.

Where's the fire?

I didn't smell or hear anything. I called out again, "Ed? Sue? Are you here?" I quickened my pace through the house, my gut screaming at me.

Where was the chimney? I glanced into the sitting room; there was a fireplace but no fire. Could there be more than one? I couldn't remember any additional chimneys and I was way too distracted during my last visit to have paid much attention to the walls. I started to run, randomly calling out to the residents. I made a U-turn to the left at the front door and headed up the stairs. I made it halfway up the stairs before I saw him. Ed. He was lying on his back in the hallway upstairs. I could see his head and a bit of his neck. I took a quick step, wanting to help and then stopped short. Those blank eyes.

"Ed?" I said as much to myself as to him.

He didn't move. My eyes started to water as I realized I was waiting for him to blink. He didn't.

"Goddamn it, the doctor was right," I muttered, taking the rest of the stairs two at a time. I stopped two stairs from the top, bending down to take a closer look. I reached over and felt his neck, confirming no pulse. My hand jerked back as I felt a movement, but it wasn't rhythmic like it should be, "Holy...!" I exclaimed. It was as if something were crawling inside of his skin. I practically jumped up the last stairs and over Ed's head. "Ed, are you..."

What I saw at the top of the stairs defied description. At first I thought Ed had been cut in half. From Ed's navel on down, his body was completely gone. His left arm was extended above his head as if he were waving to someone on the ceiling. His right arm, however, was at his side. Just below the elbow, directly in line with the missing part of his torso, the lower arm and hand were also gone. Horrified, I froze, mouth agape. He wasn't just dead, he was defiled. Who would do this? Who *could* do this?

I never carried a gun or any other sort of weapon other than my flashlight, which was noticeably absent at the moment. There never was really much of a point. With supers running around with the power to melt the planet if they coughed wrong, a gun really wasn't going to do much more than piss them off. My mind started to race. Was whoever did this still there? Could they be finished? Should I look around or should I run? Every instinct in my body was telling me to run, but my gut disagreed. I had been calling out multiple times. If someone was here, they knew I was here. I'd been completely unaware of them until now. If they had wanted to kill me, they could have, many times over. And where the hell was the rest of Ed? Who steals half a body?

I took a calming breath. I must have fallen back when I saw Ed. I got up to a crouch and tried to think straight. Ed was dead. Somewhere in the house there may be a mother and new child. The killer could still be here. Half of Ed was missing and I finally realized there was no blood. I moved forward slowly. I wasn't thinking so much of contamination of evidence as that I didn't want to step on Ed. Weird how my thoughts were that I didn't want to hurt him.

Getting a closer look in the dim light, the wound didn't look cut. It looked - like a piece of meat at the butchers. Sort of red and glistening. I grimaced and stood slowly. There were three doors beyond Ed and two behind me. One of the two behind me was certainly some sort of linen closet. It was a double bifold number covering a large portion of the wall and faced out to a wooden railing that overlooked the foyer from above. Past that was the master bedroom where I'd seen the baby born. Past Ed two of the doors were open and one was closed. Of the open ones, the closest was on the right and looked to be a bathroom, but the light wasn't on so I couldn't be sure. The second open door was on the left and the light was on. The walls were painted a mixture of blue and pink - probably the baby's room. At the end of the hall facing me, the door was closed.

Where to go first? With supers I never knew. One could be invisible two inches from my face and I wouldn't have a clue. Do I put my back to the wall? To the railing? Do I check the linen closet? The bathroom, which seemed to be the easiest place for a killer to quickly hide if I startled him in the middle of doing whatever he was doing to Ed?

There was no point in agonizing over it. I walked backwards slowly, keeping my back to the railing. I glanced over and confirmed that there was no one on the stairs or downstairs. When I reached the linen closet, I opened it quickly. A washer and dryer with ample storage on the sides and above for linens, supplies and more. Apparently that was a pantry downstairs. There was what looked to be a year's worth of diapers in the laundry closet. I winced. Where the hell was the baby? I glanced back to Ed. Man, this sucked.

I closed the laundry doors and continued quickly to the master bedroom. For some reason, I decided to open this one slowly. The lights were off inside. I groped around for a switch, finding it after a moment. The disarray from the birth was still in full effect. The bed had been stripped, but that was about it. Ed and Sue had abandoned this room soon after we'd left. I closed the door behind me and did a quick search. The closet and master bath were all empty. Okay, this part of the house was clear.

I moved toward the door and stopped. "Ed, just how stereotypical are you?" I asked out loud. I hit the floor and looked under the bed. Nothing. Back in the closet I quickly rifled through the myriad of shoe and other boxes in there. Nothing. Given the furnishings of the

house I'd half expected to find a gun or...

"Ah, there it is!"

Inside the closet, leaned up against the back corner behind the clothes was an aluminum bat. I knew I could count on Ed. With a kid on the way, he'd feel the need to have some sort of protection nearby. Even if it was as ineffectual as a baseball bat. I grabbed it and exited the master bedroom as quietly as possible. I closed the door behind me and scanned my surroundings. I leaned over the railing: still nothing. The laundry closet was still closed, the bathroom and kid's room open, and the door at the other end of the hall still closed. Ed was still in the middle of the hall near the stairs, still dead, still missing his lower half. I moved cautiously down the hall, stepping gingerly around Ed.

I glanced in the bathroom as I passed. Nothing. I closed the door. I pushed the door to the kid's room fully open. There was a crib and a rocking chair, both empty. The decorations were decidedly neutral with a good mix of blues and pinks. On the walls were images of flying elephants, strangely shaped trees, and happy suns. It was the kind of cute only new parents would appreciate. Again, I shut the door as I left. I didn't bother checking the closet or under the bed. I was starting to relax. Whoever did this must have exited. They probably took the baby and Sue and headed out to some safe house. Some sort of ransom? Maybe she has powerful parents? With that regenerative power, I wouldn't have been surprised. I opened the door at the end of the hall. It was a guest bedroom that had been transformed into half an office, half a workout room. It, too, was empty. If anyone were downstairs, they wouldn't have stuck around after I started searching upstairs. I exhaled slowly and thought about what to do.

The doctor, damn him, was obviously right. Something was going on with his patients. While it was possible this was coincidence, I doubted it. Now, what to do? This crime scene had opened the proverbial can of worms. Where were Sue and the baby? If they were being held for ransom, why hadn't others been ransomed if they were all connected to the doctor? It just didn't make sense. I tended to walk as I thought and I ended up with Ed at my feet. I didn't really see him anymore as I contemplated whether I should call the cops or The Bulwark. Either way The Bulwark was going to be involved. I decided to call the cops and let them take the credit. Might do me well in the long run. I stepped over the head and shoulders of Ed and paced quickly down the stairs looking for a phone. I suppose I could have used the one in the master bedroom, but that seemed like an invasion of privacy.

Wait, the head and shoulders of Ed?

I stopped so abruptly that I slid down the last few carpeted stairs, hitting my butt hard enough to make me bite my tongue and sending the bat clattering down to the tile foyer below. I turned and ran back up the stairs. Sure enough, what was once half of Ed was now less than a third. Ed wasn't cut in half, he was...being dissolved? I located a light switch and turned it on. In the glaring light I could now clearly see that what I had thought was a glistening of moisture on the severed part of Ed was, in fact, some sort of creature. Small, almost too small to see, they were like tiny, flying confetti. They shimmered in the light as they seemed to drift onto Ed, land for a moment and then drift away again. Afraid to inhale the tiny creatures, I covered my mouth with my hand, wishing for some sort of handkerchief. I watched for a few long minutes as the creatures consumed Ed slowly from the bottom up.

Consume is the wrong word. It was like they were carrying him off bit by bit. Little sparkly specks that seemed to float on the wind. As one glided by, I exhaled. The speck flashed and spun in the turbulence of my breath careening away from Ed. Others caught in the path did the same. After a moment, they slowed. While I had lost track of the original speck, it was clear they resumed their course toward Ed.

Now that I knew what to look for, I could follow the line of them. In shadow they were practically invisible if you weren't looking. Even in bright light, they were hard to see. They

seemed to have a bit of internal illumination but mostly it was reflected. They floated over the railing and down to the first floor. I descended the stairs slowly, trying to keep an eye on them. As I moved farther away from their flight line, however, I lost them. When I got to the bottom of the stairs, I turned on the lights in the entryway, but I couldn't find them. I moved forward, slowly, trying to spot them in the weak light. Above, the lamp had two out of four bulbs burned out with the rest burning at a fairly low wattage. With all four, the two-story foyer probably would have been well lit. Just two wasn't cutting it.

I kept to the wall, hand still over my mouth. While the floating specks hadn't shown any aggression toward me yet, I'd seen what they had done to Ed. I wasn't about to take any chances. I reached down to my belt. Why I hadn't thought to turn on my Inertial Dampener until then was probably more a function of how little I used it than an actual feeling of safety. I looked down as I reached the switch, horrified to see one of the specks resting on my hand. I slowly brought my hand up to my face to examine the creature. If I had a magnifying glass like that famous detective from literature, I might have been able to make something out. As it was, it was like trying to focus on a star. It seemed to twinkle different colors and I guessed it to be vaguely square, but I couldn't make out any details. I didn't feel any pain where the creature rested, but I certainly didn't want it on me any longer than necessary. I blew and it bobbed away. I examined my hand: no visible damage. Whatever the creatures wanted, I wasn't it. At least not yet.

Now that I had one of the specks in my sights, I followed it. It met up with others and meandered across the hall and into the sitting room opposite the stairway near the front of the house. I flicked on the lights as I went, trying to keep my eyes on at least one of the sparkling creatures as they floated along their path. Occasionally, I'd see one traveling in the opposite direction. It made little sense. How could they drift along in the breeze in opposite directions in such close proximity? If I had any doubts that there was purpose behind the movements of the creatures, their consistency in direction would have dispelled them.

I entered the sitting room, walking on plush carpet surrounded by large, overstuffed, upholstered furniture. A love seat was positioned along the wall under the window overlooking the front yard with two individual chairs opposite. Behind the chairs was a wall of books, most of which looked to be more for show than actual consumption. Only collectors had that many leather-bound books and Ed and Sue didn't strike me as collectors. Plus, you could always tell a real book collection by the eclectic nature of the arrangement and book sizes. These books were all uniform size and shape. They were practically color coded. Between the chairs was a small table with a lamp and a book full of photographs - obviously meant to impress visitors. All the seating surrounded and framed a fireplace, the one I had seen on my way in. The one without a fire...

I clicked my tongue as the pieces fell in place. Smoke without a fire? I ran to the kitchen and quickly started rifling through the cabinets with one arm, holding my breath when I needed both. There were the usual assortment of pots, pans, trays and casseroles. Plates with floral patterns with matching coffee cups, bowls, and saucers. I found a drawer with tea towels and tied one across my mouth, freeing up both hands. I turned off the stove. I continued my search and found silverware, cleaning supplies, and plastic containers. I grabbed one of the latter though that wasn't really what I was looking for. I spun around in the center of the kitchen, looking for any other cabinets or - the pantry!

The door I initially thought was for the laundry must have been storage. I flung the door open and looked inside. Floor-to-ceiling shelves stocked with cans, boxes and cereals. All sorts of non-perishable items. The pantry was small but large enough to step inside. I scanned each shelf individually. I found a container filled with pasta that had a metal clamp and a rubber gasket to keep it airtight. I discarded the plastic container and grabbed it. "Damn

it," I cursed. It was plastic as well. I opened it, dumped the pasta onto the floor of the pantry and turned to leave. Just as I did, I saw a cardboard box half opened on the floor. I pulled it out and saw what I had been looking for: Mason jars. I pulled one free. It was slightly larger than the size of my hand and had a raised motif on the side of a fruit, maybe a bunch of grapes? I couldn't tell and didn't really care. I exited the pantry at a near dead run, unscrewing the lid as I sprinted toward the sitting room.

As I suspected, the creatures were almost done. What had been a fairly steady stream had dwindled to a trickle. I scooped up as many as I could in the open bottle and slammed on the lid, tightening so much that I feared I might crack the glass. I held the jar up to my face and watched. The creatures were still floating and moving around, but they didn't seem to be able to get out. They tried to get under the lid, but as far as I could tell, it didn't work. Satisfied that I had a good sample, I went back up the stairs to check on Ed.

Well, there was no Ed. Where Ed's body had once been, there was not so much as an indentation in the carpet. Everything was gone, his clothes, his hair, his body - everything. But I was still occasionally seeing a sparkle floating by. Where were they coming from? I glanced around. I caught sight of one near the bathroom door I had closed earlier. I opened it and turned on the light. Inside, there wasn't much to see but a guest bathroom outfitted for other people's use. Decorative soaps, monogrammed towels, gaudy shower curtain. I was about to leave when I noticed a sparkle near the floor. I looked down and saw a small line of them landing on the floor near the toilet. I couldn't see anything there, but that didn't mean there wasn't anything to see. I glanced around the back, still nothing. I shook my head in frustration.

Finally I saw it. A hair - no, an eyelash. Ten or twenty of them landed at the same time and the tiny hair was gone. "My God!" I exclaimed. I got up from the bathroom floor and ran back to the master bedroom. There, the sparkles were more numerous and, now that I knew what to look for, I could see what they were doing. They hadn't just taken Ed and most likely the baby and Sue. They were taking ALL of them. They were scouring the house for every last molecule. They were in the bed, in the carpet, in the closet, and in the bathroom. They were scooping up hair, skin cells, and anything else they'd left behind. No wonder The Bulwark and the police said there was no evidence of foul play. There would be no evidence that these people were ever in the house other than the physical objects they left behind!

I pulled the Mason jar from my coat pocket, shook it to get the specks moving again and confirmed they were still trapped. "You little bastards," I whispered through my tea towel tied around my mouth.

Next to the bed was a phone. I picked it up and dialed the police, the dial clicking slowly as it spun around.

"You've reached the police switchboard. How may I direct your call?"

I could have called 911, the emergency hotline, but then I'd be talking to a volunteer, little more than a glorified neighborhood watch commander.

"Give me the Hillside office, please."

A few clicks later, "Hillside branch, Officer Richman."

"I'm looking for Officer Kent?"

"Ahh..." the officer moved away from the receiver, "Anyone seen Kent?"

Indistinguishable voices in the background.

"Nah, looks like he went home for the night."

I glanced at my watch, it was nearly midnight. I was surprised there was anyone there at all.

"Can I take a message?"

"Yeah, you tell him Bob Moore called. He's got the number." I started to hang up when I changed my mind and added, "And you tell him... he was wrong."

* * *

Chapter 10

I could have reported the murder, but honestly, there really wasn't anything the police could have done. It wasn't like there was an evidence trail they could follow. If I hadn't been there making a mess of the place, they'd never know anything bad had happened. By the time I got outside, the smoke coming from the chimney was all but gone and impossible to follow from the street. I suppose I could have called The Bulwark, but I wanted to let the police take the collar and hence, get me in their good graces. Plus, I wanted Officer Kent to owe me one specifically. And I really, *really* didn't want to see Gale again so soon. Plus, what was The Bulwark going to do that I wasn't about to do myself?

As I drove, I kept one eye on the Mason jar. Every time I turned or moved the jar, the sparkly creatures would float up, looking for escape. After a few moments, they'd settle back down on the bottom of the jar just to do it all over again at the next bump in the road. Finally, I threw the tea towel I had used to cover my mouth over the jar to keep them from distracting me.

My mind kept drifting back to Ed and his family. Everything in the home spoke of a desire for the traditional. Traditional house, traditional furnishings, traditional life. If I'd had to make a bet, I'd have guessed that Sue and Ed had one more child planned and I imagined they would have considered a little girl the best outcome. The proverbial matched pair. Sue and Ed were looking for a traditional family in a decidedly non-traditional world.

What had happened to Sue and the baby? I saw no evidence of foul play, but if I hadn't stumbled across half of Ed, I wouldn't have known about him either. While I wanted to think that they were out somewhere, maybe having escaped into the night when they saw what was happening to Ed, I didn't believe it. If these creatures were there for a reason, it certainly wasn't the tippy, Ed. No, it had to be either the baby or Sue. And since there was no sign of them, I could only assume that I was much too late. Did Ed try to save them? Was he rushing up the stairs to the screams of his wife and child when they descended upon him? I doubted it. If Leederville was anything, it was tight knit. Screaming coming from a home in the community would have been noticed and reported. No, they probably didn't know what had happened to them. Maybe they just fell asleep and the things started consuming them. I shuddered. While it was better than some deaths I could imagine, it sounded fairly horrible.

The houses gradually got larger and more elaborate as I headed uptown. Leederville wasn't far from Avondale, but there wasn't a straight route. I had to snake through neighborhoods sprinkled with manmade ponds, gated communities and shopping centers. Avondale wasn't quite as stuffy as Hillside, but it did have a sort of haughty feel about it. The houses weren't just larger, they seemed to be raised. Of course, part of this was a function of the landscape. The neighborhood dipped and rose, whether it was manmade or natural I didn't know, affording those with money views of the city center and the coast. Those of lesser means had the privilege to live in an affluent neighborhood with all the status that entailed. Even in the lower elevations, however, the homes seemed to be built up so that they loomed over me as I drove by. They practically said, "Don't knock on *my* door unless you're *sure* you have business here." It was the kind of neighborhood where people had *just* enough money to live in it. The kind of neighborhood that pizza delivery drivers loathed because the tips always sucked.

Doc Arts' home was the same as always, repulsive. Not because of the design, but because of the inhabitant. I know I should have been rushing over there with the evidence of Ed's killers, but the thought of seeing the doctor again, after just a few hours, really didn't sit well. The whole way over I kept trying to speed, to maintain a sense of urgency, but it didn't work. Instead, I had to force myself to even go the speed limit. I kept rationalizing that they were all dead, that Sue and the baby certainly weren't hiding out somewhere, but I should

have given them the benefit of the doubt. If there was a chance, no matter how small, that they were still alive somewhere, I should have done everything I could to save them. I should have blown every light, insisted Officer Kent get over there, even call Gale and The Bulwark myself. But I didn't believe it. My gut didn't believe it. I guess I was just no hero. I knew they were all dead and that now, all there was left to do was to give the evidence to the one man who could figure out what was going on and how to stop it. The one man I didn't want to see again, ever.

I blew past Butler, ignoring his pleasantries. I knew where I was going and how to get there. I opened the freezer, located the little button on the inside of the frame and switched off the holographic projection of ice encased bags of meat, vegetables, and leftovers. I took the stairs two at a time using my free hand to keep my balance. Butler, since he was a hologram reinforced by a force field that didn't have to physically move between locations, beat me to the bottom of the stairs.

"Sir, I can see you are in a rush, but I must insist," he stood in front of me blocking the exit off the stairs, "that you please state your business."

"I need to see him."

"I gathered that, sir," the hologram continued, "but I must announce you."

"Oh, for the love of..." I pushed my way forward.

As I'd discovered earlier in the day, the force field that gave the Butler substance wasn't very strong. With a minimum of effort I pushed right through the middle of the hologram. I stopped short at the first of the large doors that protected the doctor's lab from the outside world. Of course, it didn't open. "You've got to be kidding me..."

"Sir, please," Butler actually sounded exasperated. The creator of the hologram really should be commended. "You understand that it is quite late."

"Fine, whatever," I spun on the hologram, "tell him that Ed and Sue are dead. The baby too. See if that gets me an audience with his highness."

Almost immediately, the door behind me hissed as the lock released. Machinery clicked and clanked in a way that I suspect was more for effect than from actual function. Supers were nothing if not dramatic. I'd known supers who would burn holes in brand new costumes and repair them thinking it increased their street cred. If I remembered correctly, there was an incident where a super died from self inflicted wounds right before a big date. He had planned, it was thought, to impress the girl by saying he had been in a large fight on the way to the restaurant. Instead, he had died in a pool of blood on the floor of his bathroom with his cape over the shower curtain and his tights around his ankles.

The doctor must have been coming for me because the door in front of me stayed closed while I could still hear the machinery. Finally, the door opened and Doc Arts, Ignaro Medico, stepped forth. His mechanical eyes did not detract from the obvious look of concern on his face.

"Dead? Are you certain?"

"Pretty sure, yeah," I replied, forcefully. "Ed's definitely dead and I don't see how Sue and the baby would have made it out alive."

"That's just terrible, terrible," the doctor said, turning back toward his lab.

I followed.

"I just can't believe it..." he sighed. "I mean, I suspected, of course. But I had hoped there was some other explanation."

"Other explanation?"

"Oh, you know. Mass abductions by some villain, keeping them all cryogenically frozen, maybe brainwashing... you know, something reversible."

I grimaced, "You consider brainwashing, probably through torture and who knows what

other psychological torments, to be reversible?"

He turned back to me, "Why, yes. Don't you?"

"I don't know, Medico. Some things are worse than death."

"So, did you call The Bulwark?"

"Not yet. No."

"What?" the doctor looked confused, "Why not?"

"No point really, there's nothing for them to find."

"I don't understand."

"Okay, Medico, let's just get this over with. You were right, okay? You were right; your patients were going missing. I was wrong, the police were wrong, and The Bulwark was wrong. Regardless of anything else, I figured I owed you that."

"Eh...thank you?"

"Yeah, don't mention it." I reached inside my jacket pocket and placed the Mason jar covered by the tea towel on the lab table. "This is your culprit. This is what killed them."

He looked down at it, "I surmise that it is safe to handle?"

"It was for me. They only seemed interested in Ed." I swallowed, "I found him, upstairs. They were... eating him."

"Eating, you say?" the look of sadness was replaced immediately with fascination. The doctor quickly walked around the table and reached out for the jar.

I put my hand on top of the jar before he could pick it up, "Listen Medico, these things ate not only Ed, but every piece of evidence of him and his family. I saw them consuming pieces of skin and hair off the floor. I'm betting if you go back to that house with one of those gizmos you supers always seem to have lying about, you'll find that not only are there no bodies, but no pieces of them anywhere in that house. They took them. Took *all* of them. Whatever these things are, they're evil. They're the sort of evil that could destroy the world. If they could do that to Ed and Sue, what would happen if they were let loose on the rest of us? What would happen if they could eat anyone? There would be no one left. I've never seen anything like them."

The doctor nodded seriously. He slowly picked up the jar and removed the tea towel. Inside, there seemed to be nothing. He looked at me confusedly until I flicked the bottle with my finger. The sparkly specks jumped to life and the doctor nearly dropped the jar. He stared at it intently, turning it over in his hands. The specks didn't seem to care about the orientation of the jar. They moved around with obvious purpose.

"Well... eh..." he murmured, "I just don't know what to say."

"I know, they're weird, right?" I forgot my aversion to the doctor and leaned in for a better look. I hadn't been this close to him in years. He smelled of disinfectant and pine-scented aftershave. It wasn't a pleasant smell. I moved away.

"No, actually, not at all," he spun and placed the jar inside one of his larger machines. He closed a door and pressed a few buttons. The machine began to spit paper out of a slot, which the doctor looked at intently. "I've seen these before."

"Wait, what?" I stammered, "How?"

"Well," he rubbed his bald head, "I invented them, actually."

"What!"

"It's a side project. Something I'm experimenting with. Basically, they are very, very small, very, very basic robots."

"Those things," I pointed at the jar, "are robots?"

"Essentially, yes," he tore off a larger piece of the printout. "Ah, you see here?" He pointed at a line of numbers and figures that didn't mean anything to me, "They are my creation. That's my signature. I put that in anything I create. Sort of like a calling card."

"So, wait, what are you saying?"

"To put it plainly for you," the doctor was exuberant, "if these are mine, and I'm sure they are, I can stop them. Someone must have acquired the technology. They obviously improved it as I've never gotten them to work so well together, but fundamentally, they are the same robots. And all robots have an off switch. You just need to know how to access it."

"Which you do."

"Of course," he started whistling as he moved quickly around the lab. He pressed buttons, looked at readouts and screens, pulled levers, and, at one point, poured a greenish liquid into one of the machines. "With my robots, I generally use some sort of auditory, olfactory, or physical off switch. Many times I use more than one. Obviously, with creatures of this size, a physical switch is practically useless. I'm sure I used some sort of chemical trigger, which could be incorporated into an aerosol."

"Bug spray," I interrupted. "You're talking about bug spray."

He stopped what he was doing and stared at me with those mechanical eyes, "In a way, yes. Yes, a high-tech bug spray." He pressed a button on one of the machines.

Butler appeared.

"Now, all I need is the exact chemical combination." He turned to Butler, "Butler, get me the shutdown manual."

Butler disappeared.

"Wait, slow down Medico," I said, "how did someone get hold of your technology? Plus, you said they improved upon it. Who could do that?"

He shrugged, "Like I said, it's a side project. It wasn't like I was devoting serious time to it. I'm sure I could have gotten them to work like this, or even better, if I had allotted the time."

"But how did they get loose?"

Again he shrugged, "Who can say? There are so many powers out there. Someone is bound to be born with something that this lab hasn't been shielded from." Suddenly he stopped, "Ah, it's really too bad about Sue and the baby. She had such potential. Plus, who knows what abilities that baby might have developed."

"What about Ed?"

"Eh?"

I controlled my voice, "Ed, her husband. You know, the tippy?"

"Oh yes, him too. Loss of life is always regrettable. I was speaking scientifically. In fact, I was just saying how I wish I could incorporate that healing ability into some of my projects. I've never seen anyone heal that fast. Quite fascinating, really."

I turned away. Science, that's all he cared about. I didn't believe for a moment that he regretted the loss of life. He was just another in a long line of scientists willing to do anything to...

"Wait," I turned back to him, leaning forward, "you were just talking about Sue's power to whom?"

"Eh?"

Just then Butler entered with a large binder. There were color-coded tabs, maybe five of them. Behind each of the color-coded tabs was a number of smaller tabs with handwritten labels. The doctor flicked the binder open on the table and grabbed the silver tab, turning to the first page. It said, "Robots." He looked through a few of the smaller, handwritten tabs before he settled on one. He opened it and there was a diagram that looked like one of the molecules I had to study in high school chemistry but ten times more complex.

He exclaimed, "Ah HA!" His face was alight, "I knew it. Oh, I'll have this solved in no time."

"Medico."

He turned from me, back to a small refrigerator at the back of the room. He pulled a

number of vials from it and moved over to the machine he had poured the green goo into.

"Ignaro."

He started measuring out small amounts of the different liquids and pouring them into the machine. The machine whirred and hissed and, after a moment, a door opened with steam pouring out.

"Doc Arts!"

That stopped him. He turned, hand still half way into the machine, and looked at me.

"You said you were talking about the family. About Sue's power. To whom? Who were you talking to?"

He looked confused, "Eh... no one really. I mean, I was just working and thinking. I wasn't talking to anyone."

I glanced around the lab. We were alone. Butler had disappeared after bringing the folder.

My stomach was in knots, "Medico, where's Assistant?"

"Oh, in the back, recharging I guess. It's programmed to do that when its battery power lowers past a certain point." He pulled his hand out of the machine with a small aerosol can. He moved to another machine and opened a small window. He sprayed a short burst into the window and waited while the machine flashed and chimed and started spitting out paper.

I turned, heading in the direction he motioned. I opened a door half hidden behind one of his machines. I'd never been past the main lab, but I wasn't surprised that it looked much like a kid's room. The only difference was that the toys probably represented enough money to buy a small country. There were shelves and tables everywhere. Abandoned projects were omnipresent. There were half built robots, the stereotypical backlit glass shelves stuffed full of jars filled with creatures and body parts in liquid, and discarded electronics. The little light that was available came from the main lab, the display shelf full of jars and the water cooler in the corner. The floor was littered with boxes, both cardboard and plastic, and filled with additional equipment. There were a disconcerting number that were marked hazardous both with official labels and by the doctor's own hand. I wasn't sure which I was more afraid of.

I searched around the wall near the door for a light switch but couldn't find one. "Medico, where are the lights in here?" I called out.

"Eh?" he replied. "What are you doing back there?"

"Lights?"

"Oh, here, I need to get them."

Behind me, the doctor entered the room. Immediately the room was flooded with fluorescent light.

"You see," he continued, "they are keyed to my bio-prints. It's a very handy system that a friend of mine came up with. Not exactly bio-molecular engineering, you see, but it impresses guests."

While the doctor spoke, I glanced around the room again. The light didn't reveal much more than the shadows had before. While I could see everything more clearly, I still didn't know what any of it was.

"What is all this stuff?"

"Oh, you know, odds and ends. Projects I'll get back to one day." He laughed lightly, "You'd be surprised how many times I come back here and find just what I'm looking for."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, just the other day I was working on a new battery type. I needed something that was light weight, highly reactive and wouldn't burst into flames." He motioned to a box, "So, I started rummaging around back here and found just what I needed."

"Just like that you say?" I noticed Assistant over by the water cooler, motionless as always.

"Yes." The doctor held up the can, "So you see, we spray this on the robots and they'll shut down. Guaranteed."

"Medico?"

"Yes," he looked up from his can.

"What is Assistant doing?"

"Why," he reached up to adjust glasses that weren't there, "I don't know."

He walked over to Assistant. I followed a few paces behind.

"Assistant, what are you doing back..." his voice started to trail off. The can dropped to the ground, "here..."

From over Doc Arts' shoulder I could see Assistant. It was facing the water cooler. But it wasn't a water cooler. It was a device about three feet tall and rectangular with a large inverted glass bowl on top. Of course I mistook it for a water cooler; it looked just like one except for the lack of spouts, the lack of water and all the tiny, sparkly robots floating around inside of the tank. The robots swirled around of their own volition, a vortex of internal and reflected light. In the dark, it was slight and ghostly. In full light, it was like those pictures you see of the center of the galaxy: just light. In the center, the robots were so concentrated that it looked like a ball of light. They rotated around this central mass lazily. Slowly, the concentrated section started to shift from the center to the outside, dancing within its glass cage. If I hadn't seen what these things had done to Ed, I'd have thought it was beautiful. Way better than a lava lamp.

In front of me, the doctor dropped to his knees.

My brow furrowed, "Medico, you okay..."

It was then that I saw what had caught the doctor's attention. Assistant wasn't just standing next to the water cooler, it was touching it. And where Assistant touched it, the tiny, sparkly robots swirled around its hands. Where before it had two skin covered and two robotic arms, it now had four flesh covered arms. The skin on its chassis was growing, visibly, and covering every part it could. It was imperfect. The two robot arms were terminated in cylinders meant to provide different tools and the skin was growing into every nook and cranny. Assistant was rotating the cylinders and exposing each of the tools in an attempt to keep them free of skin but it was a losing battle. The skin on the human arms had grown hair and actually looked like real arms, but now it was growing up the shoulder and onto the torso. It was covering the exposed servos and actuators, even covering the treads by which Assistant rolled across the ground. Blood was splattering all over the water cooler, the floor and everything nearby as every move Assistant made caused the new skin to rip and tear.

Assistant turned toward us, slowly, spraying blood all over the doctor's white lab coat. A bell chimed. Slowly, Doc Arts stood, reached into his pocket and withdrew the device he had called a Handheld.

He looked at the screen, "Assistant is asking for our help. It's confused."

"What the hell is going on, Medico?" I took a step back. I was way out of my depth here. I needed an exit plan before things got dangerous. Wait, who was I kidding? Things were long past dangerous.

"I'm not sure," he stood, absently, staring at the tiny screen on the device in his hand. "I've got access to all of its data and..." he spun and looked at me, a frenzied look in his expression. "My God!" he exclaimed.

I took another step back, "Listen, don't you think we should call someone?"

"Bob, listen to me. Do you see what this means? I programmed Assistant to be a simple helper. Nothing more. But somehow, it's changed, *evolved*. I say, 'Hand me a scalpel,' and it hands me a scalpel. I say, 'I wish we could get a sample of Sue's DNA and integrate it into your skin,' and it does it!"

"Yeah, I got that."

"No, you don't. This shouldn't happen! That," he motioned to Assistant who now had skin dripping off of it like bloody, fibrous ice cream on a hot sunny day, "shouldn't happen."

I shook my head in horror, "I agree with you there."

"Fascinating! I can't wait to study this!" he exclaimed, turning back to Assistant. He addressed it, officiously, like he was giving a valedictory speech, "Assistant, you should have Sue's DNA removed from your own for now."

Dutifully, Assistant turned back to the water cooler. It placed its hands on it and the tiny robots began to glow even brighter. The rotational speed increased until they were a blinding light. A second or two later and the light dissipated. I dropped the hand I had used to shield my eyes just as the sparkles started to surround Assistant. I couldn't see how they were escaping their glass chamber, but they were. They seemed to just melt through it. The doctor was giddy. He was murmuring to himself as he held up his Handheld, much in the same way he had when scanning Khan.

Khan. I had let this psycho treat him. I glanced up at Assistant and watched as the sparkles ate the flesh off it much the same way it had consumed Ed. I swallowed hard to keep from throwing up. If there were any doubt about Sue and the baby, those were banished. Doc Arts made an offhand comment to his robotic assistant and people died. Good people. People who had just had a baby. People who had done nothing wrong other than have a problem that the doctor found interesting. The doctor kept looking back at me and talking, but I couldn't hear him. All I could hear was my pulse in my ears. Beating hard. Beating fast. What if he had said something about Khan's speed? About Gale's power over wind? He'd said that his patients had been going missing for months. How could he not have known?

"Now, of course, it'll have to be destroyed, that goes without saying. But first, there's so much we could learn!"

I shook my head. Was he still talking to me? This man, who had done so much good according to some - to most, really - was a hero. I had stopped getting the paper because I couldn't stand seeing his name in it all the time. His smiling face with those glasses covering mechanical eyes. Those people didn't know him. Didn't know the things he did. The lives he ended. The lives he ruined.

"You shouldn't have said it," I said.

His head jerked around, "What?"

"You said it like I wasn't there."

He looked genuinely confused. Behind him, the sparkles were returning to their tank.

"In the room, after..." I couldn't finish. My eyes burned with anger and tears.

"Bob, I'm not sure I know..." he stammered.

"You said it was my fault!" I yelled, five years of rage causing my voice to crack like a schoolboy's. "I heard you, you son of a bitch!"

"Bob, I really don't think this is the time..."

"Oh, it's the perfect time!" I took a step toward him, finger extended, accusing, "You came in there to 'comfort' Gale."

"Wendi?"

I ignored him, "You said it was me. My genes. That cross-births weren't possible because the tippy genes weren't strong enough. That she was a 'fantastic specimen.' That she should be congratulated on bringing the first cross-birth to term. But that my genes were weak. That it seemed that cross-births would always abort some way or another."

"But I didn't mean it that way. That's what we all thought. We were all wrong," he protested. "You saw that today. Your case helped save that child. Many children. In ways you don't even know!"

I waved his comments away, "Saved for how long? Saved until you came up with a different way to kill them?"

"But, but, your case was instrumental in developing a treatment... a protocol..."

"I'm not a case, God damn it!" I turned away from him, talking at the open door out of the back room. "Don't you see? Don't you see what you do? Sure you save lives, you build wonderful devices, but look at the destruction in your wake. Look at Sue and Ed. And why Ed? What did he do? He didn't have the genes of Sue or the baby?"

Ignaro looked back at his Handheld, "I'm not sure. Maybe it was covering its tracks? That'd be concrete proof that Assistant is more self-aware than..."

"You're doing it again!" I roared. "Look at their son. Look at my daughter. My marriage. So many others."

"It was an accident, Bob. How was I to know?" he pleaded.

"Oh, yes, ignorance." I turned back to face him.

Assistant, behind him, was motionless and restored. The excess skin and blood completely gone. The tiny robots back in their water cooler cage.

"You didn't know that cross-births could work so you destroyed my marriage. You didn't know your robot had gone serial killer and slain Sue and Ed and many others because of your words. You think that fire blasts and lasers are the only way to kill someone? Do you think that a part of me didn't die with my daughter? Didn't die with my marriage?"

"Bob, I'm sorry. I guess I didn't think..."

I scoffed, "No, I guess you didn't." I glanced up at Assistant. I closed my eyes and chose my words carefully, "I guess Assistant didn't either."

Again his head snapped back in confusion, "Pardon?"

I spoke quietly, "Speaking scientifically, Ignaro, how could this have happened? How could Assistant learn to act on its own?"

He thought for a moment, looking down at his Handheld, "I suppose it must have something to do with incorporating my own DNA. Perhaps my genius is encoded within my genetic structure. Enough to allow Assistant to grow beyond its programming and form a sentient intelligence of its own - albeit, only an obviously primitive intelligence."

"Well just imagine then, Ignaro... Imagine what Assistant could achieve if it had more than just your skin cells..."

"Interesting, yes! If it had cells that are actually specialized for thought and intelligence. Not just the basic genetic structure from my skin cells, but specific cells: brain cells! I could take a..."

"So," I interrupted, "if Assistant wanted more skin, or perhaps the brain to think for itself without having to wait for your suggestions, you would be the perfect donor?"

"Well, yes, I suppose I would, but I don't see how that applies here. Assistant doesn't think."

As I spoke, I turned slowly, "No," I agreed, "it doesn't."

Behind the doctor, Assistant had turned to face the water cooler again. Once again, the sparkles increased in intensity. The doctor turned realizing that something was going on. He raised his Handheld and stared at its screen. Even as the tiny, shiny robots enveloped him, he stared. At the last moment, as they started to enter his nose and mouth, he turned and looked at me, confusion on his face. His mouth fell open in a noiseless scream. Under the skin around his eyes I could see the robots' internal light shining through as they traveled into his brain. His mechanical eyes were emotionless as his body collapsed to the ground. I turned and slowly exited the back room, closing the door behind me. When I reached the lab table, I turned the folder with the off switches for all the robots toward me. I scanned the tabs until I found the one marked 'Assistant.' I opened it to the correct page, made sure I understood

what I needed to do to shut Assistant down for good and sat down wishing I had a drink.

* * *

Epilogue

Officer Kent was just about exactly how I'd expected him to be: smooth, trim, and attractive. For a tippy, of course. He kept himself in shape and wore his uniform and SB radio bracelet proudly. He was tall, chiseled, and confident. His adopted informal speaking style didn't match his physique and overall neatness but I don't think anyone else noticed.

"So, another science experiment gone wrong, huh?"

Kent was more than happy to wake up in the middle of the night when I called from the doctor's house, saying that I had cracked the case. He was decidedly less excited when he arrived at Doc Arts' home to find the doctor dead. Even less so when he saw the condition of the body. I had only waited a few minutes before entering the back lab, but the sparkly robots had already consumed two thirds of the doctor's body. All that was left was his belly and a bit around the elbow of one arm. I spoke the complex series of sounds that it took to shut down Assistant, which didn't, as I had hoped, send the tiny floating robots back to their tank. Instead, I ended up using the doctor's spray to kill them. Apparently, I was right and the glossy look of Ed's wound was because of the robots. Once I killed them on the doctor, gravity pretty much expelled all the blood and juices that were left in a hurry. Needless to say, I hoped Ted had some way of cleaning my shoes.

I was sitting upstairs in the living room of the doctor's home with Kent sitting across from me. He was happy that he'd gotten to call in The Bulwark, but knew that the death of the doctor wasn't going to score him many brownie points. They would remember his name, however, and that was worth something. Hopefully, later on, I could cash in on that one. Behind him, Gale leaned against the wall, glaring at me. I tried to ignore her. All night there had been mourners, lawyers, and random supers in and out of the place. Doc Arts was well known and well loved. Plus, if you were trying to make a name for yourself as a fledgling super, getting on TV seemed to be a good way to increase your exposure. Liz had stopped by and let me know that TOP would be there for the non-super victims. She put a hand on my shoulder and I squeezed it but I had a hard time meeting her eyes. She gave me a look that told me it was okay and that we'd talk later. I heard a lot of talk. Some were suggesting an international day of mourning; others wanted some sort of memorial. The more extreme suggestions involved a Rushmore-like carving on the moon. God. I hoped they wouldn't go through with that one. I didn't think I could go out at night if I had to see his face staring down at me.

One of the harder moments was when Medico's daughter was brought out. She was young, maybe three years old, and she didn't understand. Disconcertingly, she asked more about Assistant than she did her own father. I couldn't help but hang my head. There was no way I could look that little girl in the eye. Members of The Bulwark had been in and out of the doctor's lab all night mostly bringing out material and equipment to be destroyed. Ninety percent of what was down there was completely unidentifiable to anyone but the doctor so it all had to be destroyed or recycled. Given that his supposedly harmless robot had gone on a killing spree of unknown scope, they weren't taking many chances. If it even had a circuit board, they'd strip it for wire and raw materials and incinerate the rest.

As Officer Kent continued his questioning, I noticed a familiar officer in the crowd. As I didn't normally associate with many cops it drew my attention. At first I couldn't see his face clearly, but it was obvious he was doing more than just cleaning up. Half of what he picked up went in his pockets. I was about to say something to Kent when the officer turned.

Ted.

He was wearing the same face I'd last seen on him except now he had a mustache and a cop's uniform. He tipped his hat at me and ducked out through the front door. I closed my mouth, which had been ready to report this suspicious cop.

Well, it looked like Ted would owe me one more for not ratting him out.

Finally, Kent was done with his questions and he stood up. "Well, thanks for the collar. Sorry it ended up this way. I know you didn't like the guy, but no one deserves to go like that."

"Yeah," I responded softly.

He patted me on the shoulder, "It's been a long night, man. Sun's almost up. I'm sure we're gonna have some more questions for you tomorrow. Try to get some sleep. I'll see if I can keep them from calling you in before lunch."

"Thanks for that," I nodded at him, but I couldn't help but notice how intently Gale was watching me.

As he left, she walked over purposefully, the white fabric snaking around her angrily. Unlike before, she was wearing her customary molded eye mask. This one was white, to match the fabric, and trimmed with a silver wind motif. I thought it was a bit much, but it was clear she wasn't coming over to talk about masks.

"Gale..."

"Cut it, Bob. I want the truth," she whispered angrily. She sat where Kent had, only moments before, and leaned far in so that we were almost nose-to-nose. She must have had dinner plans. She was wearing the perfume she only wore when she went out.

"I'm not sure what you mean," I responded evasively.

"So that's your story? You get here, tell Arts about the microbots, and they turn on him?"

"That's the way it happened," I looked at the floor.

"And you're telling me there was nothing you could have done? Nothing that might have saved him?"

"No."

"Bob?"

I looked up at her, her hazel eyes so familiar, yet so distant.

"Yes?"

"Tell me you couldn't have done anything. Tell me you didn't let him die. Tell me you didn't orphan that poor girl under some pretense of justice."

"Come on, Wendi, you know me. Do you think I won't be asking myself that same question every night? Could I have found the code faster? I thought that would shut down the... microbots you called them... but it didn't. I didn't think they would hurt me. And they didn't, but at the time I didn't want to go diving through a cloud of them for the can." I sighed, "Sure, in hindsight, if I had grabbed the can first, maybe. But they went right for the brain from what I saw. I don't know that there was anything I could have done."

"It wouldn't be justice, you know," she stated, voice hard.

I thought about the daughter. Would she really be worse off without her father? I didn't know. "What do you mean?"

"It's revenge, pure and simple. Nothing you can do will bring her back. Bring me back."

"I know," I answered wistfully. "I know."

She stared at me for a long moment, skeptical, "Okay, okay. I know how these things are. I won't second-guess you. But you have to admit that you've never been a fan."

"That's an understatement," I said. "But do you really think I'd let the man die?"

She looked at me again. I met her eyes, happy to be this close to her again regardless of the circumstances.

"No, I suppose not. The man I knew wouldn't, that's for sure."

I nodded, remembering that man.

She stood, slowly, the cloth around her settled in to a comfortable position, "You know, you just called me Wendi, right?"

"Sorry, Gale."

###

About the Author

Tom Andry is the Associate Editor of Audioholics.com, the largest AV website in the universe (as far as he's concerned) and host of the [AV Rant](#) podcast, the rantiest AV podcast on the net. He's the father of three boys affectionately nicknamed Punkalicious, Captain Evil, and Neo. He's happily married and currently resides in Perth, Australia. His background is in drama, creative writing, and research psychology, which basically means his kids are in for a pretty rough time. His wife, Tanel, doesn't have it so easy either. If you liked what you read, he'd appreciate checking out his other works, reviewing the book so he'll actually do other works, and telling your friends.

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Note from the Author

Writing bios about myself has always reminded me that I'll probably never be the subject of a biography (or autobiography). And if, by some fluke, something like that did get written, please, don't read it. It's sure to be boring (or full of lies, which probably would be a better read). I grew up trying desperately to be unhappy in a chronically happy family. I succeeded for a long time until I got married. Luckily for my writing career, I remember enough of those bitter, forced unhappy times to call them up when needed to connect with my damaged characters.

I've always been the type that wished he knew what he wanted out of life. There were times that I thought I knew what I wanted to be "when I grew up." Ironically, one of those times I was sure I'd be a writer. I loved writing, I had people tell me I didn't suck at it, and it was fun and easy. What I've never had was the sort of drive that it takes to see a project all the way through to the end. On the computer that I'm typing on now, I've got two different novels that both stalled on the sixth chapter.

Believe me when I say that when *No Hero* passed the sixth chapter, I cracked a smile and a beer.

I know what I did wrong with those other two books. The first was a complicated fantasy novel where I had to keep a pantheon of gods, a monetary system, a government, a city, the characters, the plot, and much more all in the front of my mind. I started the novel on a vacation, outlined the whole thing, and got five chapters written. I managed one more before the demands of work and my family made it impossible to keep everything straight in my head. On my next big vacation, I planned on getting back into it. Unfortunately, my charger for my laptop died and I couldn't get a replacement. Since then, I haven't taken another vacation.

When I started the second novel, I realized what I'd done wrong on the first. Too complicated, too big, too much to think about. For the second, I set it in the present day, in a city not unlike the one I was living in, with a slightly supernatural twist. I figured out the beginning and the end but assumed the middle would just flow. The first six chapters wrote themselves. After that, the "flow" ended. I put it aside to figure it out. I'm still trying. So I've got one that's outlined and ready to go that I can't keep straight in my head and another that is easy to keep in my head but won't come out.

Then along came the iPad. My eyes were opened to a world of free books (because I am, at heart, a cheap bastard). I read them voraciously thinking all along, "I could write one of these!" There are two things that were really (other than sloth and the demon of chapter seven) holding me back from completing a work. First, publishing. Writing the book is the first part. In many ways, it's the easiest (though that seems hard to believe when you're staring at a big, blank chapter seven with no idea what to write next). The hard part is getting it in front of the right person at the right time. How many novels have languished, unknown, until finally crumbling to dust after years of living in a box in an attic somewhere? With the iPad, I knew I could get published. No one might read it, but it'd be published.

The second hurdle for me was length. Having to meet some sort of arbitrary number of words because that's what sells or what looks good on a shelf or what publishers want has always infuriated me. Maybe I don't have the skill to plan a novel out so well that it will hit 70,000 words (not just maybe, definitely). Maybe I don't have a story that long in me. I know from my writing at Audioholics.com that I tend to be succinct. Even *No Hero*, which I had planned as a really short novella (around half the size it ended up), could have been stretched into closer to a full length novel if I wanted. That two weeks where Bob is following around the doctor? Prime filler material (and more than one person has suggested that I do just that). But I didn't want to be bothered and while I'm sure I could have made it work for the story and at

least mildly interesting, I don't think it hurts to skip it. How many novels have you read and thought they could have cut out over half the chapters and still made a decent book? Many for me.

What made No Hero a project that I completed in less than a month (twenty-five days to be exact) was that I had no limitations put on me. I wanted it to be short; I wanted to tell my story with a minimum of fuss; and I wanted to be published. Honestly, writers are egomaniacs by nature and as long as I have a place I can tell people to go (even if it is on the Internet though I'd love to walk into a bookstore and see one of my works) to get my book, I'm happy. To be honest, I couldn't be happier. Will I write another? Will I dust off one of those novels stuck on chapter six and finish them? Will I write another story of Bob Moore, PI? We'll see.

I have a few people to thank. First and foremost, my wife Tanel. Even though I had to give up being a bitter, cynical bastard to marry her, I think it was worth it. My parents, of course have to make the list. A special shout goes out to all my proofreaders and friends; Angie, Theresa, Pat, Bobby and Clint. Rob gets a special mention because he probably wrote as many words as I did simply commenting on the novella. His help was invaluable. Even though I'm writing this while the email to him is still in my drafts folder, thanks to [James Riot](#) for what I'm sure it going to be an awesome cover. For my loyal readers and coworkers at [Audioholics](#) and listeners at [AV Rant](#), thanks for the support. A special mention goes out to the kid that got Eragon published and for all you iBooks authors for making me think I could do it too. Lastly, even though you said I'd never make it as a writer, a big thanks goes out to Kevin for making me the man I am today.

Excerpt from Bob Moore: Desperate Times

Chapter 1

"I really don't see why I need to be here is all I'm saying," I groused.

"Ja, I agree," Force, the super currently piling the unconscious bodies of terrorists in the middle of the room, muttered in his lightly accented English. "He's just a PI after all. He doesn't even have powers."

Gale ignored him. "You know the rules, Bob," Gale turned to face me, her "stealth" costume, a length of black fabric, coiled around her, a silver embroidered B flashing in the light as it passed, "to collect the reward from the Super State, you need to be instrumental in foiling the plot. Sure, bringing it to our attention is usually enough. But considering our former relationship, I didn't want there to be any doubt."

I wasn't as grumpy as I sounded. I was mostly just tired; hadn't been sleeping well for the last few months. But if I had known uncovering a terrorist plot would make Wendi, my ex-wife now known as the super "Gale", insist on spending time with me, I'd have focused all my efforts in that area.

"And me being here erases that doubt?" I managed through a yawn. I nodded at the man on the ground who was writhing in soundless agony, "You gonna let him breathe any time soon?"

Gale glanced down at the man. He was wearing a camouflage flak jacket, matching cargo pants, gloves, and work boots. When we had arrived a few minutes ago, the group had camouflage ninja-style hoods as well, which showed only their eyes. Gale, whose super power was control over air, had pinned down the leader by blocking most of the oxygen from entering his lungs. He had pulled off his mask and now his eyes were bulging as he clawed at his throat, struggling to breathe.

"Oh," Gale laughed lightly, her green eyes flashing behind her black, molded eye mask, microbursts of wind keeping the five yard long piece of fabric constantly on the move, "he's being overly dramatic. He won't die." Her bronze skin was flawless on her five foot, eight inch frame, wavy brown hair flowing down her back and out behind her. I shook my head. Gale's power always made it look like she was posing for a photo shoot.

"Still," I responded, "it's a bit disconcerting."

Gale nodded toward the wall of mismatched TV screens the terrorists had planned on using to watch their handiwork. Behind her, Force and Whisper, two members of the premier superhero team known as The Bulwark, continued exporting the terrorists to their holding cells on their space station base. Whisper had the power to open up "gates" or teleportation portals. Shimmering around the edges, she would open a gate to a particular cell and Force would throw them through. They'd land in a heap and immediately start vomiting. Whisper's gates had that effect. I knew from personal experience.

Over Force's shoulder, I noticed one of the terrorists moving slightly. I thought about pointing it out, giving him a warning, but shrugged instead. Gale's current fling shouldn't need my help protecting himself. The hooded terrorist raised a weapon of some kind, probably the proverbial death ray, and aimed it at Force. A beam of light shot out of it, hitting the super squarely on the back. He actually grimaced, which I found to be extremely satisfying. The Bulwark was, without a doubt, the most famous super group on the planet and Force was one of the more popular members. I thought everyone knew that he was pretty much invulnerable. I supposed this terrorist missed the memo.

Force spun on the terrorist, his hands in fists by his waist. In moments, his muscle mass, which was already considerable, seemed to double. He was nearly seven feet to begin with

and he seemed to grow with his rage. If ever someone fit the stereotype of the master race, it was Force. His milky-white face, complete with square jaw and pale blue eyes, turned a light shade of red. This only served to accentuate his yellow-blond, crew cut hair. His costume was a tight-fitting, black, leather-like affair that started with his boots and covered him to his neck. It was styled and molded as to emphasize his considerable physique. There were silver letter Bs, like the ones on Gale's costume, on his shoulder and chest, a hallmark of members of The Bulwark. He clasped his hands together in one huge fist over his head, preparing to bring it down on the terrorist. His back smoked where the beam had hit him.

"Come now, Rod," I said quietly, "let's not lose our temper."

Force turned on me just as quickly, his eyes red with hate, "Don't use my name!" he hissed through clenched teeth.

The terrorist punctuated Force's statement by shooting him in the back again. Rod screamed in rage as I covered a chuckle behind my hand. This trip was turning out to be a lot more fun than I had anticipated. Again, Rod turned on the terrorist, grabbed him by the flak jacket and threw him through a recently opened gate.

"Hey!" Whisper called from the other side. "A little warning please?"

"Sorry, Samantha," I answered. "Our German friend here is having trouble keeping up with these tippys."

"Gale?" Whisper called back, "Keep that man of yours in line please. And tell him not to use my name."

"He hasn't been my man for quite some time," Gale responded playfully. "You two," she looked at me, "play nice. And Bob," she cocked her head disapprovingly, "stop using their names."

"Why?" I muttered. "You're going to wipe these guys' memories anyhow. I'm one of the few who know about your little space station."

She knew just how to take the wind out of my sails. Not my man. I shook my head, warding away the images from my old life. I finally turned my attention to the TVs, unable to meet Gale's gaze. Every channel that was broadcasting the games was displayed on the wall of mismatched TVs, some more than once. The TVs looked like a display at a garage sale or pawn shop, many models older than me and only able to produce a black and white picture. My source had told me about this plot, not out of some sense of right or wrong, but because his family had won tickets to the games. He couldn't very well let his family die no matter how worthy his cause. He came to me because everyone knew I had connections. He could have gone to the cops, but they'd have ratted him out to the supers. With me, he could be sure that he could stay out of jail and alive.

Back when I was younger, we had the Olympic Games where the best athletes in the world met every four years to compete. When supers had started showing up in the late seventies, that had all changed. No one knew who was super and who wasn't, so professional sports fell out of favor, replaced by nightly recaps of super-on-super battles in the streets. Or, if you had enough money, you could pay exorbitant ticket prices for live super battles held whenever the Super State wanted to replenish their coffers. This was the first time an official Olympics-style games had been held in nearly twenty years. Only supers could participate, and it was quite an undertaking. To compete, heroes and villains alike had put aside their differences, rivalries, and plans for world domination. Everyone was shocked when Siddeon turned in Mr. Torture a week ago. Gift-wrapped and everything, complete with a fifty page report on exactly how Mr. Torture was planning on using the games to kidnap most of the world's leaders. With the lure of embarrassing your archenemy on global TV, even the villains had turned on each other to ensure the Tournament went forward.

The current terrorist plot had been engineered by a tippy group who planned to detonate

an explosive during the opening ceremonies. The plan had merit: most everyone would be there, so their kill ratio would be high. But the games were held in a secret location and when we'd arrived, the terrorists were trying to suss out its coordinates based on the TV coverage. It never would have worked. On the way over, Gale and the others had been discussing the precautions. Fake backdrops, previously filmed footage, and carefully controlled camera angles pretty much guaranteed that the location would stay secret. Even if they figured it out, their plan was to launch a stolen ground-to-ground missile at the arena. Since a super with control over water had created a solid but mobile island of water in the middle of the Pacific, I didn't see how that would've worked. The super could have just moved the island.

On the screens, a dozen or more angles were being displayed of supers, both heroic and villainous. Rockface, The Gothic, The Rumor Monger, Toil, The Way, TriForm all flashed across the screens. A sea of supers, many I'd never seen before, many looking to make a name for themselves, no doubt. Dozens of languages, if not more, created a cacophony, devolving into white noise. Supers on fire, covered in ice, flying, semi-solid, in costumes of all kinds, paraded around a large, grassy central area surrounded by stands. The spectators were dignitaries, family members, and tippys lucky or rich enough to get a ticket. I noticed a few supers as well, not competing for one reason or another.

For the better part of a year, this event had been all anyone could talk about, not that I'd been paying much attention. Gale and the other supers had been planning it for years. Tickets had been exorbitantly priced and still had sold out in seconds. Members of the borderless country known as the Super State had automatic free entry if they wanted, of course; but for the rest of us, the only chance most people had of getting tickets for any of the events was through one of the many ticket giveaway contests held around the world.

I nodded at the monitors, "Can we turn that down?"

Gale stepped over to the console and, after a moment or two, pressed a few buttons. All non-English transmissions were suddenly muted. She glanced again at the wall of ancient TVs and pressed a few more buttons. All the pictures switched to a single feed.

She stepped back. I always appreciated how she chose to walk more often than not. She could have easily floated everywhere if she'd wished.

"These guys paid through the nose for exclusive access," she nodded at the screens.

I watched her watching the coverage. She was just as lovely as she was six years ago when we divorced, and as she was thirteen years ago when we met. My ears popped as they had each time Whisper opened a gate. I didn't have to turn around to know that she had just opened one behind me and Rod was tossing one of the terrorists through. The banging of bone and flak jacket against metal was all the evidence I needed. Rod was grunting audibly and, I daresay, unnecessarily. Aside from being nearly invulnerable, Rod was one of the strongest supers still in existence. The only one who even compared was Hero, a super from my childhood of legendary strength, speed and power. Of course, Hero could fly. Rod was always catching rides with Gale, a fact I took great pleasure in bringing up as often as possible.

"I think that was FiresStorm, wasn't it? Yes! He's sure to be a huge contender in this first Tournament of Supers. The opening ceremonies, especially this parade of supers, have been fantastic so far, wouldn't you agree, Cindy?"

"Oh, absolutely, Tim. It's been an impressive display."

The two commentators bantered easily and inanely as the screen showed super after super. It seemed as if the ceremonies were coming to a crescendo as fireworks started blasting off in the background.

From behind me, a muffled voice, "You'll never stop us! We have cells everywhere! You can't steal all our best people. You're monsters!"

I turned. Rod was picking up the last terrorist as he screamed. In front of him, a gate opened and Rod reared back to toss him through. The man continued yelling his rhetoric as I reached into my jacket and retrieved my flask. The cool liquid burned as I swallowed. I knew where these extremists were coming from, but wiping out half the world's supers, a good portion of its leaders, and countless innocents was not the way.

Rod tossed the man through the portal just before it closed. "Huh, that was close," he remarked, rubbing his hands together, "he almost lost a foot. She must've wanted to get to the games."

"Can't say I blame her," Gale responded from behind me. "Are we about done here?"

"Ack..." Rod grumbled and grabbed his ear. I turned back to Gale to see her doing the same.

"You two okay?" I asked.

Gale rubbed her ear, "New earpieces. Some sort of feedback."

I frowned at the thought of technology so advanced. Tippys still needed to find a pay phone. Supers were talking into their ears. I turned back to the monitors just in time to see a huge explosion of purple light on the screen.

"Man, that was a big one!" the commentators on the broadcast agreed. Shots of people oohing and ahing and pointing at the sky peppered the screen.

"It seems we have a latecomer, folks." Tim's face filled the screen as he held one finger to the earphone covering his left ear, "Yes, yes, there's been a sighting."

Cindy interjected, her face in full frame, "Now folks, if you've just tuned in...where have you been? This sort of stuff has been happening all afternoon. If supers love one thing, it's an entrance, right, Tim?"

"Right you are, Cindy," Tim responded. "Do we have video? We do?" Tim said quietly.

"Okay, folks," Tim looked right into the camera, "looks like we have video. There's a super flying in very quickly. They say he's coming from overhead, from the midst of all the fireworks."

The video cut to a glowing spot with multicolor explosions and sparkles in the background. Behind the spot was a yellow trail of light.

"Seems like it's moving awful slow, Tim."

"Yes, well, they're telling me that's the angle, Cindy. It's coming from directly above the stadium."

As if to prove Tim's point, the glowing spot seemed to accelerate, fire streaking out from behind it. It reached the ground in mere seconds, hitting the center of the coliseum with enough force to ripple the ground. While I knew that was at least partially because the ground was actually made out of solidified water (not ice, I was assured), I was sure the spectators found it quite impressive. In the center of the ripple effect was a figure, bent over, with one knee and both hands on the ground. Light, bright enough to force me to squint, emanated from the figure. All around it, waves of heat distorted the landscape and figures behind.

The figure stood, slowly, wisps of smoke trailing off his broad shoulders. Initially, I thought he was crispy-fried. His spandex outfit covered every inch of his body and was completely black. There were no markings, no eyeholes, nothing. It was as if he was a shadow - his costume was that featureless. Compared to the other supers in attendance, the man was as stark a contrast as you could imagine. Most supers looked for any and every opportunity to show off their bodies, draw attention to themselves with bright colors, and accessorize with capes, belts, and body paint. The lack of detail was jarring, disconcerting.

Something was wrong. Very wrong.

"Cindy, have you ever seen this particular costume before?" Tim asked.

"No, I don't think so," Cindy responded. "You?"

"Nope," Tim replied cheerfully. "Either someone has a new costume, or we are witnessing the birth of a new hero."

"Now that would be exciting," the sides of Cindy's mouth curled up, but her eyes didn't change.

Next to me, Gale put her hand up to her ear, "Mind, do you have a make on that super?" A moment, "Mind?" She turned to Rod, "I'm not getting a signal, you?"

Mind was the supercomputer that managed all of The Bulwark's files, programs and defenses. It was supposedly a super who had melded into a machine, but many, including me, suspected it was some sort of highly advanced and therefore highly illegal Artificial Intelligence. I looked back at the screens.

"Nein, nothing here either," Rod responded, stepping up between Gale and me.

Glancing up at the big man, I took a step away. I'd need more than distance to even out our heights, but every little bit helped.

"Is he...? Yes, I think he's moving," Cindy's voice drew my attention back to the screens.

Sure enough, the man's arms were rising slowly, finally stretching straight out from his shoulders. He spun, slowly, his head moving slightly up and down, apparently examining the assembled supers and the crowd. The camera panned around. Supers looked like they were preparing for the worst. Many had changed into their alternate forms like living fire or ice, some had erected force fields or barriers, and still others had donned their armor or raised their shields.

The figure stopped once he completed a full rotation. All movement in the coliseum halted, all eyes resting on the figure in the middle. The camera zoomed in on his face and even the commentators hushed as it seemed the world held its breath. He looked to the left, the right, his face unreadable behind the all black mask.

"Unclean."

The voice was as dark as the suit the man wore. I felt the need to run, to hide, to get as far away as possible even though I knew, intellectually, that the venue was probably thousands if not tens of thousands of miles away. The picture on the TVs flashed white and then changed to static. A stock "Technical Difficulties" message quickly took its place with a high-pitched tone playing simultaneously.

"Well, that's not good," I couldn't help saying.

Next to me, Gale and Rod were frantically trying to reach their Bulwark friends. After a few moments, the tone coming from the monitors subsided and my two companions stopped their communication attempts and turned back to the screens.

An empty news desk appeared on the screen, quickly followed by a man trying to sit, adjust his jacket, and fix his hair, simultaneously. He was middle-aged with thick, salt and pepper hair parted on the side. His clean-shaven appearance was marred only by the lack of makeup to even out his complexion for TV broadcast. He ran a hand through his hair one last time and looked directly into the camera.

"Dan Anderson here. We seem to have lost contact with the games broadcast and we don't at this time know..."

A female wearing a large headset, the curled cord trailing off-camera, came into the frame and whispered something into Dan's ear. The blood drained from his face. He turned back to the woman, his expression grim. She nodded.

"Folks, I'm not sure if what I'm hearing is true, but there's been some sort of attack on the venue. I'm told we have video?" He looked off to the side for confirmation, which he apparently got. "Please, if there are children present you'll want to have them leave the room. I'm told the images are from a plane that was en route to the Tournament and has since been diverted. Again, these images are shocking."

The picture changed and for a moment I couldn't believe what I was seeing. It just didn't make sense. In the middle of an endless vista of water, with nothing else around it, was a huge mushroom cloud.

"What?" I stammered, "Where's the stadium?"

As if in response, Dan's voice came through the monitors, "It looks as if the venue, and all those in attendance, has been destroyed. God help us all."

* * *

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