

Superheroes in Prose
Volume 1:
Welcome to Prose

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Chapter One

Imagine you have the power to fly.

Pretty awesome, right? Imagine you have the power to levitate or crush something the size of a Winnebago. Equally awesome. Now ... here's the catch: having the power means you are bonded irreversibly to a smartass, sociopathic alien life form.

Not so awesome.

So, what would you do with all that power? The way I figured it, I had one of two options: Option #1) Use it to commit crime or Option #2) Use it to fight crime. My name is Gabe Garrison and I chose Option #2.

The jerk that just punched me through a 15th story apartment window chose Option #1.

It's not the most elegant of landings. My ass shatters the window, my legs take out a good portion of the windowsill, and my entire body skids across some old lady's living room. The momentum carries me through her bathroom wall and into the toilet.

Ouch.

I stand. I'm a little sore, but that's okay. My force field activated in time. It kept me safe then and is keeping safe from the toilet shower I'm getting now.

It might be clean water, but why take a chance?

I don't want to take a chance on slipping either, so I hover out of the bathroom. I ball my hands into fists as I float out, hoping it looks cool. I have to shake loose some toilet paper wrapped around my ankle, which

4 Sevan Paris

totally ruins the moment.

The old lady screams. She backs over the arm of her ugly green recliner, legs flailing.

“Whoa, whoa, lady, look—I’m sorry. Are you okay?” I land and try easing her back up.

Huge mistake.

She screams, kicks me with her fuzzy blue slippers, and backs away on her elbows. Did I mention I look pretty crazy to most people?

When I’m powered up, you see two glowing blue lights where my eyes should be. As for the rest, you see a body shaped window into space.

Literally.

If it’s broad daylight and the Big Dipper is behind me, you can see it by standing in front. If the moon is even on the other side of the world below, you can see it by looking down on me. If the sun is on one side and you’re on the other, look away or you’ll see spots for a while ... like, maybe the rest of your life.

I think it’s a pretty cool look, but most people find it terrifying. It’s also why I chose my Superhero name: Galaxy.

The old lady’s screams are freaking me out. I’m sure people can hear it across the entire city of Prose. “Calm down, lady. I know I look weird, but I’m not gonna give you cancer or anything.”

Oh, well done, Gabe, the voice inside my head says. It’s that alien I was talking about earlier.

What if she already has cancer? You’ve just reminded the poor woman of her approaching demise. Not to mention how humiliating it will be. She’ll probably spend the last of her days in a medicated stupor, dying slowly in a puddle of her own—

“Shut up!” I tell it.

The old lady thinks I’m yelling at her. She goes from screaming to a kind of whimpering. It wasn’t my intention and it’s sad to see, but at least I can think straight.

It’s baaaaaack, the voice says.

I turn around. The eight-foot tall cyborg that punched me hovers

outside the hole vaguely shaped like my ass. Most of its body is a shiny black metal wrapped in hoses and blinking green lights. Its head is the only way I can tell it's a cyborg and not some sort of full-fledged robot. It looks like an elongated human skull minus a jaw. A plume of green smoke rises from its mouth and forehead and flames shoot out of its boot jets. Its purple cape blocks a little of the morning sun.

“Okay, fella, I don't know what I did to you but—“

It garbles something at me in a voice that sounds like a vacuum cleaner going over a bunch of thumbtacks. It points at me all menacingly and then crosses its arms.

“What are you—I don't understand what you're saying.”

It looks surprised and then hits some buttons on its wrist. This time, the voice sounds something like a drowning Klingon.

I was wrong earlier. This guy isn't your average Supervillain. “Try again. Something from the planet Earth.”

The cyborg rolls the two dots that pass for eyes and then hits a few more buttons on its wrist. It looks back at me and I think it starts speaking German.

“Almost. What else do you have?”

It hits a few more buttons and then says in a digitized voice, “For the love of all that is sacred, human, this setting had better work! I just as soon pummel you as to make another attempt at communication!”

I give him a thumbs up. “That did it.”

Then I fly over and knock the crap out of him.

He flips head over tail a few times before righting himself with those boot thrusters. “Who the hell do you think you are, Cyborg Guy? I'm just flying along, minding my own business and you just jack me right upside the head?”

I'm annoyed, but I'd be lying if I said a small part of me didn't enjoy this. When I'm Galaxy, I'm more direct. More confident. I'm basically the guy I wish I were in my real life.

The cyborg crosses his arms again. “I am the scourge of all that is,

6 Sevan Paris

human! I am fear incarnate! I am the terror that haunts you both in your dreams and in the depths of your very soul! I ... am ... DEATHBOT!”

I laugh so hard it hurts.

The average citizen of Prose is no stranger to Superhero slugfests. The town has a really high Superhuman to human ratio, one of the highest in the world I think. Still, that doesn't stop people from running to the windows of every office building in sight and looking at us. I'm still too new at this for them to know my name, but I guess it's obvious who the hero is. A few of them give me fist pumps. Others just stare and continue drinking coffee.

“You dare laugh at me?”

“Oh, I dare ... DEATHBOT!” I air quote his name.

It would be most unwise to agitate him, Gabe. The power emanating from this being is massive. He is quite capable of doing considerable damage to you and—more importantly—me.

Metal plates spiral away from Deathbot's left forearm and combine to form a barrel over his fist. The tip of the barrel glows green. “It shall be your final mistake.”

I hold my hand up a split second before he fires. The green blast sounds like a bad sound effect from *Star Trek*. M uses our gravity manipulation power to deflect the beam harmlessly into the air.

M ... that's what I call this voice in my head. This alien creature I've been bonded to for the past six months. M is short for monkey, as in the monkey that's always on my back. As I mentioned earlier, we can levitate or crush something really big, fly, and can wrap ourselves in a force field. All of the powers come from M's ability to control gravity. I control flight and basic movement, but he controls everything else.

When we first started, we worked horribly together. I wanted him to levitate a scared cat from out of a tree one time. Instead, he sent it into orbit. I think its name was Fluffy.

Now, we work really well together. I don't even have to tell him to bend gravity around my hand to deflect Deathbot's beam. He takes his cue

from the way I move my hand and does it automatically. Deathbot continues to fire and I continue deflecting. I could do it all day.

This is most likely—

There's a basketball-sized explosion in my right side that sends me cart wheeling into a fire escape.

—a diversionary tactic.

“Crap.”

At some point, Deathbot's right arm transformed into some sort of freaking bazooka. That had to be what I felt in my side. Why do bad guys always have bazookas? You'd think they'd be harder to get.

I duck right before he fires again. The shell explodes into the building behind me and I hope there's nobody inside. Then I see it's a building full of health insurance agents—so who cares, right?

He barely misses me three more times. Chunks of concrete and glass explode. Screams and sirens everywhere. I've got to get clear of these buildings. Otherwise, people might get hurt. Insurance agents too.

“Can our force field take repeated hits from that thing?”

How should I know?

There's another explosion behind me followed by more screaming. “The science stuff is your department!”

“MINE IS THE DEPARTMENT OF PAIN, EARTH CREATURE!”

“Oh for the love of—” I make a fist with my right hand and point it at Deathbot. M translates and fires a Grav Bolt at him. Deathbot screams and twists sideways from the light blue energy blast. Pieces of his bazooka and purple cape fall to the street a hundred and fifty feet below.

He turns to face me again. Both of us hover above the buildings, but I probably look cooler.

“You are rapidly becoming more trouble than you are worth, human! I shall demand that my employers pay me triple the price!”

“Whoa, wait a minute. You're being paid to come after me?”

“Not exactly.” He fires the laser and I deflect it again.

Thank God M deflects it up instead of down. There are more people

8 Sevan Paris

gathering on the rooftops taking pictures, and sometimes it's hard to keep this sociopath inside me reigned in.

"I'm being paid to kill your alien host," Deathbot says.

I should be enraged at some intergalactic somebody putting out a contract on me. Instead, I'm enraged over something else. " 'Alien host' ?"

That's the way I've always seen it.

"The alien isn't the host. I'm the freaking host."

Deathbot shrugs. "It is of no consequence." A cable bigger than my forearm extends from his laser gun and into his back. The gun lights up again and is accompanied by a whistling sound. He fires and the beam barely misses me. It does manage to blow the top off Looktop Mountain on the other side of the Tennessee River.

The weapon is significantly more powerful now.

"Ya think?" I fly over Deathbot.

"We do better at absorbing energy stuff, right?" I yell over another blast. It hits the river and steam rolls up the Michael Booth Bridge.

Yes. But I wouldn't advise—

"We've got no choice! He's gonna take out half the city!" I duck under another blast and spot a row of bumper-to-bumper traffic on Broad Street.

Sweet.

Deathbot makes a grab for me as I fly past him.

"Raise the force field power. Give me a percentage with each blast!"

... you're insane.

I hover twenty feet above a Coca-Cola truck and turn around. The driver leans out of the truck and looks at me, then follows my gaze to Deathbot. Even from way down here we can see his barrel glowing.

"Do it!"

I feel the force field power up and light distorts around me. *Seventy percent and falling. I sincerely hope you know what you are doing.*

So do I.

Deathbot's beam hits me right in the chest. I hold my fists at my sides and suck it in. The air hums and I see hair raise on the driver's head.

Finally, we finish absorbing the blast. It's hard to keep hovering, but I manage. "Power ... power reading?"

Forty percent. Do you see that driver running off after we saved his life? Ingrate.

One shot. Just one shot depleted us thirty percent. Once we reach zero, it's goodbye, Galaxy. Followed by goodbye, Gabe Garrison.

Deathbot hits a few buttons on his wrist and flies down.

I take off.

Cars, trucks, and people speed past me. I dodge streetlights and turn into an alley. I'm looking for something big. Something mind-bogglingly big.

"Is he right behind us?"

Like stink on a human.

M can sense a wide range of energies for up to a mile. He tried to explain it once, but I was too upset about Fluffy to listen.

I speed past Trust Banking and come across the Electric Power Board.

That's where I am when Deathbot hits me with that stupid gun thing a second time. I bounce off the asphalt, into a brick wall, and take out a streetlight. The sound of a ten-car pile up quickly follows.

I slowly stand, afraid to look up. I hear people around me and they sound scared or worse. "Anybody hurt?"

Minimal injuries. We, however, have a whopping ten percent of our power left. Get us out of here, Gabe.

I wonder if M is lying to me just so I'll leave. It wouldn't be the first time. I look past the wrecked cars and see Deathbot on the other side. Most people get out of their cars okay, but some are having trouble.

That's when I take notice of the two big power board trucks on opposite sides of the street. The really big trucks with the buckets on the back.

Gabe ...

Deathbot slowly walks toward us. People scatter. They don't know if

they should run from me or him, so they settle for cowering somewhere in the middle. Deathbot shoves a Honda Civic out of his way. It does 360's down the left lane and flips when it hits a fire hydrant, sending water gushing in every direction.

GET US OUT OF HERE!

I extend my arms and make a cupping motion with my hands. M hesitates, but then catches on. We grab both bucket trucks in a pair of blue Grav Beams. They float a couple of feet off the ground.

Deathbot doesn't have a clue until I yank them.

I sandwich the cyborg between the two bucket trucks and pull them apart. The trucks and Deathbot are barely recognizable. His left arm moves.

I slam the trucks together again.

And again.

And again.

The screeching of crunching metal echoes off the buildings of Broad Street. By the time I'm through, the trucks and Deathbot look like some sort of Volkswagen Beetle sized paper wad. M drops the beam and the wreck bounces twice before rolling into Panera Bread. More alarms and screams add to the chaos that is downtown Prose.

I land, out of breath. That only happens after I use up a lot of power. "How ... much?"

Five percent.

People form a circle around me. Some look pissed. Others look like they want to help me up but aren't so sure about the space-field effect my body gives off. "How is everyone?"

An old man wearing a Prose University ball cap looks around. He thinks I'm talking to someone behind him.

Five people have broken bones and twenty-three have multiple lacerations.

I stand. Several people back away. The old man picks up a brick.

"We have to help—"

Forget it, Gabe. HEROES are one mile and closing. They'll assist anyone that

needs assisting and arrest anyone that needs arresting. Including us.

HEROES is the name of the government funded Supers. Since the Wertham Act, they're the only ones that practice this Superhero thing legally. When they come across a Super like me, they tend to arrest first and ask questions later. They mean bad business for me, but they'll be more than enough to help anyone that needs it.

But grab a piece of that thing first. I want to analyze it.

“What?”

To your right.

I look on the ground and see Deathbot's twitching right arm.

“So you really have no idea where that thing came from?”

No. Two percent power and falling.

As the University of Tennessee at Prose comes into sight, I start worrying. I worry that M is lying to me, and I worry that I might be late for class again. Also, I worry that I forgot to put on deodorant.

“And you have no idea why it was after you?”

That's why I wanted to analyze it, Gabe. Please do try and keep up.

When I fly to school in the mornings, I usually land on the top level of the Prose U parking garage. Students don't like paying for a roofless parking space, so the top is usually deserted.

When my feet are about six inches from the top level, I power down and jog to the stairway. I'm wearing the same clothes that I left the house with: fashionably torn blue jeans, my favorite Spider-Man shirt, a blue hoodie, and Chacos. I adjust my backpack containing two protein bars, and an Astronomy textbook. It takes me a minute to stuff Deathbot's severed right arm inside.

I zip up my hoodie and look at my watch: 9:20 ... I've got five minutes to make it to Grota Hall. I go down the stairs two at a time.

“Hey, hero.”

I whirl and look up. A red head stands in the doorway I left just a moment ago. She's wearing a purple skirt and red top with a bright

yellow jacket. Her name is Reagan MacPherson and she's been the love of my life for five years.

She just doesn't know it.

She's onto us, Gabe. I've been telling you this parking garage was a bad place to land for weeks. "Nobody ever parks up here," you said.

M maybe right. If Reagan just parked, there's no telling how much she saw. I zip up my backpack. "Say what?"

She slowly joins me with a grin on the fifth step. "I said 'hero,' and I'll say it again."

"Why—" I clear my throat, trying to get rid of the squeak that's somehow worked its way into my esophagus. "Why am I a hero, Reagan? I mean exactly."

Reagan holds up a wad of papers. "Your notes saved me. I honestly had no idea what Dr. Murray was talking about the other day."

Neither did Gabe. Those are my notes.

I take the notes and hurry down the stairs. "No problem. Definitely not something of hero proportions, but you're welcome. So, you're on your way down?"

Reagan catches up. I catch a whiff of her strawberry shampoo. "Yeah ... wait. Why are you on your way up?"

Here it comes.

"No, I'm going down."

"But I just parked and I didn't see you. Were you like hanging out in here or something?"

Better think of something fast ...

"I was ... I forgot something in my car."

"I didn't see another car up here."

This woman has to die, Gabe.

My right arm turns into a star field, telling me M is powering it up. I jerk my arm behind my back to hide it from Reagan and to make it more difficult for M to do anything to her. We only have two percent power left, but that's more than enough for M to shoot a Non-Super like

Reagan straight into orbit. There's no way I can put enough distance between us in time.

Reagan's only hope is if I lie my way through this. "I, uh ... " God, why am I so horrible at the secret identity lying thing? "I uh, parked on another thing, and walked too far back to my car, and ... "

I hear a few seconds of Bonnie Tyler's *I Need a Hero* before I realize it's coming from Reagan's cell phone. She answers it before I can see the screen.

"Hello? Hey, you!" She waves at me and hurries down the stairs.

That woman has the attention span of a Terlaxion Spit Slug

M returns my hand to normal.

I let Reagan gain a couple of flights on me. "You need to calm down," I say barely above a whisper. "I've told you before, no killing."

I will kill if it's the only way to preserve what's left of my meager survival, Gabe. The only reason I agreed to play hero with you is because it was the easiest way to hide from the Council. If they find out I've bonded with you, they will—

"What? Send an intergalactic bounty hunting cyborg after me?"

Oh, please. They didn't send Deathbot. If they knew I was here, they would have reduced you to carbon by now. No, this is someone or something else.

I'm halfway down the garage. Reagan's laughter echoes through the fire escape. Wish I knew who she was talking to. "Yeah well, from what you told me about these Council guys, this seems just like something they would do." I hold up my backpack for emphasis.

And see a hole in the bottom.

A hole that could only be caused by a severed cyborg arm somehow ripping its way out.

I frantically look around me. One flight down, I catch a glimpse of the arm creeping behind Reagan. It skitters on its fingers like something out of a horror movie.

She never sees the thing go for her ankle.

Chapter Two

Reagan's hand reaches for the handle on the exit door. She's so wrapped up in her phone conversation, she doesn't even see another hand—a Supervillain cyborg hand—reaching for her.

Thankfully, she doesn't see me one hand the rail and change into Galaxy either.

I fall two flights through the center of the stairway and my feet hit concrete without a sound. I grab the hand, jerk it behind my back, and change back to Gabe Garrison right before Reagan bounces the metal door off my forehead.

“Oh, God, are you okay?” Reagan turns, but keeps the phone to her ear.

I stand, keeping the arm behind my back. “Yeah, sorry. I just fell like a doofus, that's all.”

Doofus?

“Well, I'm sorry ... I didn't see you. Are you—are you sure you're okay?”

“Yeah. Totally, I'm fine.” Blood trickles down my forehead and Deathbot's arm pulls at the back of my hoodie a little. I grin, knowing I look like an idiot, but I don't know what else to do.

“Okay, uh ... see ya.”

“Bye.”

See? I'm already thankful I didn't kill her. Just imagine being denied this spectacular performance of your complete social ineptitude.

The door closes behind Reagan. I wipe blood from my forehead and look at the arm. “Why did it go after her? And how can it go after anybody?”

The fingers make grabbing motions towards my face. I jerk it away. It’s wrapped in black metal and each fingertip ends in a small hook-shaped claw. Six arm bones stick out of the severed opening. Three blinking green lights wrap a purple leather so dark it looks black.

I don’t know. Perhaps it wishes to use Reagan somehow to get at me.

“Give me a break. Seriously?”

I’m sorry. Did I injure your fragile ego? Very well. Perhaps the hand is using her to get to you.

“Okay, first off: shut up. And second: you think this thing is still trying to do what Deathbot started?”

Perhaps. But it’s just a theory. It will take me over an hour to analyze it properly. My right hand—the one that’s holding Deathbot’s hand—goes from flesh to star field as M powers it up. *We should get started.*

“What? No, I have to get to class.”

Well, what do you suggest we do with it in the meantime? Placing it within the steely confines of your backpack simply isn’t enough. And it’s not as if we can just leave it somewhere, now is it?

The hand keeps reaching for my face. What looked so menacing earlier now looks pretty pathetic. “Let’s get rid of it.”

Weren’t you listening? I just said—

“No, I mean let’s just destroy it or whatever.”

My hand powers down. *I’m not destroying it until I find out where it came from and how it got here so quickly.*

“Fine. I’ll do it myself.”

With Deathbot’s hand still twitching, I step in front of the brick wall, rare back ...

I would strongly advise—

... and slam it into the wall. A green flash of light nearly blinds me and the hand bounces off the wall so hard I lose my grip.

That you not do that, Gabe. I am detecting a kinetic force field.

The hand skitters up three steps before I scoop it up. It starts reaching for my face again. “Kinetic?”

Yes, it means—

“Forget it. I’ve got to get to class.”

Suggestions?

I look at the twitching thing in my hand and sigh.

“So, why are the mountains on Mars higher than those of Earth?” Dr. Murray says. He and the rest of the Astronomy 101 class look at me as I open the door.

“Mr. Garrison isn’t it?”

I hold onto Deathbot’s arm even tighter. My arm is elbow deep in my backpack, holding the twitching Deathbot hand. I’ve got the backpack zipped up as best I can to hide the contents. My forehead stopped bleeding, but I can feel dried blood every time my eyebrows move.

Basically, I look like a complete idiot.

“Yes, sir.”

Dr. Murry is in his late fifties. He has shoulder length grey hair and his face wears a constant state of stubble. He’s wearing a button up plaid shirt, khakis and white New Balances. He constantly shifts his unlit pipe from one side of his mouth to another.

“You’re just in time to tell us why.”

“To tell us why what?”

“Why are the mountains on Mars higher than those of Earth?”

“Why? I-I mean, why not? I mean, I’m sure I know the answer ...”

Oh no, Gabe. You’re not getting the answer out of me. In light of recent events, you shouldn’t be in this class. In fact, you shouldn’t even be at this university. There’s nothing these meat bags can tell you that I don’t already know, as evidenced by the notes I prepared for Reagan on your behalf.

Dr. Murray has his back to Reagan. He doesn’t see her hold an apple up and drop it on her head.

“Gravity. They’re higher because the gravity is lower.”

Dr. Murray’s eyes flick back and forth. He usually does that after getting a student response. It’s kind of like he has to digest the answer or something.

“Gravity, yes, good.”

I slide between several desks and nearly trip over somebody’s backpack. I sit at an empty desk behind Reagan. Dr. Murray resumes his lecture and she turns, holding my notes.

“Sorry,” she whispers. “I forgot to give these to you before.”

I grab them with my left hand because my right one is stuffed in my backpack, powered up and analyzing an intergalactic severed arm of a Cyborg bounty hunter.

“Thanks,” I whisper back. “How did you know the answer?”

She grins and her eyes narrow. “You, doofus.”

Dr. Murray paces while he lectures. He walks toward us and Reagan turns back. In my backpack, Deathbot’s hand reaches for Dr. Murray when he gets close. I roll my eyes.

“Are you done?” I whisper after Dr. Murray walks away.

Reagan turns. “Done with what?”

“Giving me such a hard time, you ... crazy girl.”

“Yeah ... I guess.”

I hear M sigh inside my head. *You should be forbidden to breed.*

I look at the window. I can see my reflection, which means M can see it too. I mouth “When?”

Don’t do that. I’ve told you before it’s unsettling to see you as my reflection. And I told you earlier it would take me approximately an hour since you drained our power supply so foolishly low.

An hour looking like this. Wonderful.

“Are you done?”

I told you it would be an hour. It’s been exactly fifty-nine minutes and forty-three seconds.

I stop next to a row of garbage cans outside of Grota Hall. I nod at people for fifteen seconds.

Done.

There's a small flash of blue light that comes out of my backpack followed by some smoke. I pull the ruined hunk of metal out of the bag that use to be Deathbot's right hand.

"Finally." I pitch it in the garbage.

"Head's up!" I hear from my right. I turn in time to see my best friend, Bo Dudley, run up and belly bump me. The impact sends me into the grass. My elbows hit the ground so hard I feel it in my teeth.

Oh yay. It's 'best friend' time.

"Garrison, wassup?" Bo says a few octaves too high. It's the way he does all of his greetings, belly bump included.

But the belly bumps usually don't send me to the ground.

I lean up. I'm getting really tired of being knocked on my ass. "Jesus, Bo. Is that absolutely necessary?"

"Sorry, dude. You should be quicker."

He sits beside me. Bo can be a complete asshole sometimes. The only reason he's still my friend is because he doesn't question the weird situations being a Superhero places on my secret identity.

I grab my protein bar and open it. It's broken in half.

"I hear you can get a pill for that."

I bite off a rubbery piece of the bar, and it tastes like smoke. "Can I get a pill for you?"

"Mom couldn't stop me with a pill. You can't either. You see that hottie looking at you?"

It takes me a second to realize what Bo is saying. Then, I turn my head. Sure enough, there's a girl with long blond hair about twenty feet away looking at me. She's around my height, has nice curves, and is wearing a blue halter-top. I'm sure she's wearing other clothing too, but the halter-top is so tight, it's the only thing I notice. That, and the fact that she's grinning.

At me.

Does that female think you're someone else?

"Amy Lansbury," I say. "She's in my psychology class."

"She can psychology me anytime. Why is she looking at you?"

She wants his psychology notes most likely.

I take another bite out of my protein bar. "Don't know. Maybe she likes me?"

Amy turns her head and says something to a girl next to her, but I can still see her sneak an occasional peak in my direction.

"No, dude, this is an I like you look. Check this out right here:" Bo turns to me and gives me a small grin. "Now this is an I want to sex you in the craziest, quickest way look:" Bo's smile gets bigger than the Cheshire cat and he turns his head, but keeps his eyes on me.

"That looked nothing like the look she gave me."

It looked like that of a serial killer.

"Whatev, dude. It was so the look. Just go talk to her. I'm telling you she wants some Gabe Garrison penne."

Don't do it, Gabe. It's just another woman I may have to kill. You don't want that on your conscience.

My heart skips a little beat and I feel my face get warm. It feels like a creature is trying to worm its way out of my stomach. It's hard to know when M is kidding. Maybe I need to stay away from girls. Maybe I am just a danger to them. But what did it say that I really didn't want to? Did it make me less of a hero?

"Look, man, there's no reason to be embarrassed. Just go over and talk to her."

Why does he think you're embarrassed? Are your cheeks red again?

I take another bite of my protein bar, even though I'm not hungry anymore.

"Crap, never mind, she's coming over here!" Bo nudges me in the ribs.

I look up. Sure enough, here she comes, wind gently blowing blond hair away from her shoulders.

Fighting the urge to panic, I stand and dust off my jeans.

She smiles. “Hi, Gabe, how are you—“

“Gabe!” Reagan comes out of nowhere and grabs my shoulder. “I’m in trouble.”

Reagan steps in front of me, and I see Amy’s eyes narrow.

Excellent. Now all we need is some mud and a pair of cheap bathing suits.

“What-uh, what’s going on?”

“We have a test tomorrow on those equations. The ones that were in your notes.”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“I don’t understand any of them.”

What a surprise.

“Shut up.”

Reagan crinkles her face. “Huh?”

“Shut up, you’re so smart, how could you not understand them?”

“The book doesn’t go over them that well. And well, Dr. Murray, is just y’know, Dr. Murray. Do you understand them?”

“Do we?”

Of course we do.

“Of course.”

Reagan looks from me to Bo.

Bo shrugs. “I don’t understand them, but I know lots about psychology. Tons even.” He jumps up and stands next to Amy.

Reagan sees Amy and steps back. “Oh, hi.”

Amy grins, but not that big.

What the hell is going on here? I can understand Reagan’s attention. She wants notes. But what does Amy want? I shouldn’t be talking to her. I shouldn’t be talking to either one of them. I could just get them killed. I couldn’t live with getting anybody killed—not even Bo.

Reagan touches my shoulder and I forget everything. I forget about my problems with the cyborg, I forget about my problems trying to be a hero, and I forget about my decision earlier to stay away from her.

“Would you mind going over them with me in the library tonight?”

My cheeks get warm again. “Sure.”

Her green eyes flick to my cheeks and she grins. “Cool.”

I shrug. “Cool.”

“I have to work late, so how ‘bout 10:00?”

I shrug again. “Cool.”

Her grin gets even wider. “Cool. See ya then.”

She walks away and the world comes back to me.

“All I’m saying is I know this stuff, babe.” Bo says. He’s holding a psychology book firmly in front of him. “And if you need some help, all you gotta do is ask.”

Amy snatches her psych book and leaves.

“Well, that was awkward,” Bo says.

I don’t know where Reagan works, but I hope her job is better than mine. I work in a place downtown called Rock Creek Books, which would be really cool if it wasn’t for the customers. Like tonight, I had this one lady that came in wanting to know where all of our books were on Indian tattoos. I told her I would check, and for some reason that just pissed her off.

“How could you not know what’s in your own bookstore?” she said.

“I, well we have a lot of books.”

“Do you have a lot of problems? Because I’m about to give you a monster of a problem if you can’t find that book.”

I looked in the computer and we didn’t have anything like what she was looking for. I told her. I can lift a bus with my powers, but for some reason this girl scared the living crap out of me.

She couldn’t have been taller than five feet, but she both looked and felt like solid muscle. She shoved all the books off the counter, grabbed me by my apron and pulled me halfway across the desk. M chuckled in my head.

She raised her fist and I flinched. The woman’s eyes glowed like fire

embers ... I mean literally glowed. She was a Super.

My mouth moved, but no sound came out. I wanted to ask her how she did it. How did she live with her powers day to day? Was she a hero? Was she registered? Was she a villain? Was I going to fight her later?

Was I going to fight her now?

Without another word, she let me fall to the floor and left. That's just part of the everyday random weirdness that was Prose, Tennessee. Life was easier if you didn't question it. So I never did ... until I became a Super. Then I was full of questions.

I just didn't have anybody to ask.

But anyway, moments like this one made life worth it. I was about to see Reagan again. And it would just be me and her. I grin like an idiot as the elevator puts me on the third floor of the Prose U library.

The third floor is the fiction section. Like other levels, it's mostly deserted at night, except for the occasional student sleeping in an over stuffed chair.

I pass row after row of books, to a center table, and there she is: Reagan.

God, she's even more beautiful than this morning. How is that even possible?

Tell me again why we are wearing this ridiculous outfit?

The "ridiculous outfit" M refers to is the dress slacks and polo shirt I put on after work. After bonding with me, M became accustomed to our wearing jeans and t-shirts. Anytime we deviate from that norm, he refers to said deviation as a "ridiculous outfit."

"Impressed?" I say to Reagan.

She jerks a little and looks at me. She's wearing cat-eye glasses and has the same clothing from this morning.

"By what?"

"I'm on time."

"And you're dressed up."

"Oh this? It's nothing. I've got nothing else clean."

Liar.

“Oh, okay.” Reagan’s shoulders relax. I didn’t even realize they were tense. What did that mean?

“Can we start with this one? I think I almost have it, but I’m not sure.”

I sit next to her. I can barely smell her strawberry shampoo, but it’s still there.

I pull the book closer. “Well, let’s see ... Newton’s law of gravity. What’s the problem?”

“What’s the problem?” Reagan slams her pencil down. “What’s the problem? I’ll tell you what the problem is. I’m a science major that knows jack about science.”

Yep.

“I don’t understand the equations, my lab data is always inconsistent, and I never understand what the hell I’m trying to read.” She shoves away the astronomy book and notes.

Completely agree.

Her eyes fill with tears and she folds her arms. She stares at her notes on the other side of the table and curls her lip a little.

I pick her notes up and look through them. “You forgot to square the distance.”

“What?”

I slide the book back. “Look, Newton’s law says that gravitational force between two objects equals Object One times Object Two divided by the distance squared. You almost had the right answer, you just forgot to square the distance.”

... How did you know that?

“But why did I forget? I’ve been looking at this stuff for an hour and I just ... “

“You’re trying to memorize it. Try to understand it instead.” I scoot my chair around to face her. “How far are we apart? About nine feet?”

She grins and sniffs. “Don’t you mean like three feet?”

“But not as far as gravity’s concerned. And why’s that?”

She keeps grinning. Her tears are almost gone. “Because you square the distance.”

“See? You already understand it. Now you don’t have to memorize it.”

“I’m sorry about ... this. It’s just—I’ve just been having a really rough week.” She straightens and the sniffing stops too. “But you don’t want to hear that.”

Oh, but I’m sure he does.

“Well, listen if you need someone to talk to—“

“No, I don’t want to bother you. Not anymore than I have anyway.” She laughs. “I’m gonna go to the bathroom real quick. I’ll be right back. Sorry again. I usually don’t get all weird over astronomy.”

Neither does Gabe.

“It’s okay, really, I don’t mind.”

She grins and walks away.

Congratulations, Gabe. That was actually very Don Juan. Do you mind explaining to me just how you knew to fix that problem?

I don’t realize I’m smiling until I stop. How did I know the answer? I probably knew less about this stuff than Reagan. And not only that—but M was right. I was Don Juan just then. I wasn’t the slightest bit nervous or anything.

“I don’t know.”

Interesting. Well, do you know what you’ll do about this?

“About what?”

“Gabe?”

I turn and see, “Amy, hi! What are, uh, what are you doing here?”

“Do I need a reason to be in the library?”

I don’t know Amy that well. But I do know her well enough to know the woman has probably never studied a day in her entire life. She most definitely needs a reason to be in the library.

“Are you,” she looks around, “doing anything right now?”

“Uh, yeah actually.” I vaguely point in the direction Reagan went.

She puts her foot on Reagan’s empty chair, and I can plainly see Amy

isn't wearing underwear.

Great googley moogley.

I jump out of my chair. "Whoa, uh, okay."

She smiles. "Well, I didn't see that coming."

"Neither did I. I mean, I didn't see anything. I mean, I didn't mean to see anything."

Oh please, it was so close it practically blinked at you.

"Oh, I wanted you to look." She places her hands on my lapel. "And I want you to look some more."

And there's the erection.

I start to say something, but catch a whiff of Amy's breath. It's weird. And gross. Like some rotten spinach I had in the fridge one time.

I step back, nearly tripping over my chair. "I ... I can't do this, Amy."

Amy's shoulders slump. For a split second, I want to apologize.

Then her head bursts into flames.

The heat hits my face. The flames start orange, then turn blue and finally settle on green. Her eyeballs make popping sounds and fall to the floor. Pieces of flesh slide away from her skull and flutter away like ash. Her bottom jaw falls, and I recognize the digitized voice that comes from somewhere deep inside her. "Too bad, Galaxy. I had hoped to make sport of you after this morning."

There's no time to ask how this is happening. There's no time to question why this is happening. That's the life of a Superhero. You just do what needs to be done and then sort it out later. I figured this out early. So did M. He already has us powered up.

I motion Deathbot forward: "Bring it."

Chapter Three

The flaming skull that used to belong to Amy Lansbury looks at me.

At least, I assume it's looking at me. The squishy things that used to be her eyeballs are on the floor.

“Oh I will most certainly ‘bring it’, Galaxy!” Deathbot’s body convulses like he’s having a seizure. Its arms bend back at an impossible angle and splits at the elbow with wet snaps and pops. Two six-inch barrels extend from where the forearms used to be and emit a high-pitched whine, telling me they’re about to fire.

I don’t give him the chance.

I fly into him, sending both of us into a bookcase. Books and particleboard explode around us. I feel some kind of metal crisscross where ribs should be. I grab a hold of them and M almost has enough time to light Deathbot up with a Grav Blast, point blank style.

But she ... he ... *it* shoves me away so hard I hit the ceiling. My blasts go wild, shredding carpet and tearing up chunks of concrete floor underneath. I fall to the floor, chunks of ceiling tile and insulation clinging to me. I stand and shove a table out of my way. It screeches across the floor and M readies a Grav Blast in my right hand. My fist glows blue, I raise it—

And Deathbot fires.

The cheesy *Star Trek* style beam hits my face and I cartwheel sideways across the floor. I take out three chairs on my thirty-foot slide across the library. Two students—I think their names are Kait and Jack—barely

have enough time to jump out of the way before I smash into a five-foot ficus tree.

Again ... I jump to my feet. Deathbot picks up a table and throws it at me with a digitized scream. Right before it hits me, I split the table in two with another Grav Blast. The two halves tumble across the floor ten feet behind me.

“Any idea what the hell’s going on?”

“Your death is what ‘goes on’ this night, human!”

None. Although if you remain within close proximity to him, I can better analyze both him and the situation.

“Are you kidding?”

“YOU DARE SUGGEST DEATHBOT JESTS?”

What do you suggest, Gabe? That we let him continue to demolish this building book by primitive book? That we ignore the danger his continued existence represents to the squishy pink life forms contained therein?

Deathbot gets his gun ready for another blast (and it’s really odd referring to it as a him, since he now has breasts). “I SHALL FLAY THE FLESH FROM YOUR BONES, HUMAN!”

Deathbot raises his arm to fire at Kait and Jack. I don’t know why. Maybe he thinks they’re in his way. Maybe he thinks it will distract me, causing me to make a mistake. Maybe he just feels the immediate need to kill something. Doesn’t matter.

Kait tries to run for the emergency exit, but the damn ficus tree gets in her way. She tumbles over it and Jack tumbles over her. They’re even easier targets now than they were a moment ago.

“All right, M. You wanted a closer look, you got it.” Deathbot has already killed at least one person today. He won’t kill another. This fight has to be taken outside.

So that’s where I take it.

I slam into him and we go through a window. Then, I do what comes natural, all Occam’s Razory.

I drop him.

Deathbot grins. The idiot *grins* when I drop him. He's not worried in the slightest about the fall, which means it won't hurt him. Which means I have to take up a notch or twelve.

I slam into him right before he hits the sidewalk. The impact carries both of us straight through the concrete and into the parking garage located below the library.

And onto a Prius ... I've always wanted one of those.

I roll off the Prius, surprised. "What gives?" I cough. "Why am I feeling pain?"

I didn't anticipate your doing something so infinitely stupid as tackling him through twenty-four inches of earth and concrete. Our force field was at insufficient strength.

Didn't anticipate ... bull crap. If M didn't anticipate the move, I'd be dead. He's still pissed at me for running our powers dry this morning. He wants me to feel pain, so he's keeping our force field as low as he possibly can.

"Stop holding out, M. We're finishing this guy off here and now. I need full strength."

Unnecessary.

I almost lose it right then. Wanting me to feel pain is one thing, but refusing to help me get rid of Deathbot means bad business for Prose. It makes my job harder if not impossible. Plus, what kind of Superhero doesn't act Superhero-y?

I circle the Prius—or what's left of it—and see Amy—or rather what's left of her in two halves, one on each side of the Prius. The gruesome scene is only partially lit by the yellow of the streetlights poking through the hole I made. It forms a spotlight around both freaky halves of her body.

"Do a full scan." I hold out my hand as if I'm about to high five somebody.

A moment passes.

As I suspected. Flip her over.

"Gross. I'm not touching it."

I hear M sigh in my head. A blue Grav Beam streaks from my hand and flips the upper half of Amy's body over. Blood squirts out both ends as it lands with a sickening flop.

Several shiny pieces of metal extend from her body in multiple locations. One in her upper chest, two in her stomach, and then one on the shoulder. They all have blinking green lights similar to the ones on Deathbot's hand this morning. Another one pokes through flesh on her leg. It makes a crinkling aluminum foil sound as it unfolds and spreads, like a flower.

"What is as you suspected?"

Nanites. Somehow, this female became infected with a nanite virus.

Nanites ... you mean like on *Star Trek*?

No, I mean like in real life.

"No, I mean—wait this guy is like the Borg isn't he?"

What is that? Something Swedish?

"It means he spreads these nanite things to infect people. After that, they spread through and quickly rewrite DNA, turning them into this ... thing."

Into another Deathbot. Complete with memories and a varying degree of power.

"But how did the nanites get here?"

And then I see the reason M wanted me to flip her over. Deathbot's other hand—not the one I destroyed this morning—is attached, or rather *hooked* into Amy's back. Each finger is buried knuckle deep. The hand makes a pumping motion, sending little yellow specks of light into her blood stream via ooze filled tubes in each finger.

Not counting that vomit scene in *The Exorcist*, I think this is the sickest thing I've ever seen.

I raise an open palm and M grabs the hand in a Grav Beam. He pulls the thing to us. Chunks of flesh and other gross stuff fall from each finger and M crimps the ends before more of the yellow nanite clusters spill out. Some of them fall on my chest, but M crushes them instantly with a localized Grav Beam. They make little popping sounds before hitting the

ground.

“So, what are you looking for?”

I didn't detect these nanites earlier.

“Well, nobody's perfect.”

Don't be foolish, Gabe. Of course I'm perfect. I didn't detect the nanites because they simply weren't there. Now, I have something to calibrate my scans by.

“Alright.” M drops the hand and I fly back to the third story window. Inside, a bunch of students pick their way through the rubble that used to be books, tables and shelves.

“M, is—”

Yes, yes, everyone is perfectly fine.

“What about—“

Including Reagan.

Reagan peaks from behind one of the bookshelves, looking through the crowd nervously. Probably for me. It makes me excited and sad. I wanna land, change, and tell her I'm okay.

Then Reagan makes eye contact with me. She looks right at me ...

And mouths my name.

I go numb.

Christ, she saw me change. Somehow, she was close enough during the craziness and saw me change. She knows my identity, and now M knows that she knows.

Gabe, I need you to fly up. I need a better reading.

Or maybe not ...

I don't say anything. I do as he says. He was doing his scans and didn't see Reagan. Thank God, he didn't see her. But what do I do later? He'll find out eventually, and when he does ... things could turn bad real fast for Reagan.

I'll never be able to see her again. After this is over, I'll have to leave.

I shake my head and fly up. I simply don't have time to feel sorry for myself right now.

Within seconds, we're hovering about a mile above Prose. The entire

city sits in a valley and runs along the Tennessee River. From up here, the shape of the valley and the lights coming from the buildings and highways make the city look like a giant train set.

Five minutes pass before I finally ask M, “What are you doing? This isn’t going to take another hour is it?”

And if it does?

“... go ahead and do it,” I say grudgingly. It’s not like it really matters. The only way to protect Reagan now is to leave town. Leave my mom, leave my family, leave my friends (or, friend actually), and move as far away as I—

It is of no consequence, Gabe. I’m finished.

He’s such a jerk.

I’ve been scanning the city, looking for energy signatures similar to those found in both the hand and the female. I’ll have to calibrate your eyes so you can see them.

“So calibrate me already.”

M’s “calibrations” always have freaked me out. He shows me stuff I can’t see with this blue energy field thing. One time, to get back at me for not washing my hands after using the bathroom, he showed me a fecal matter scan on every person I met for a week. Every trace of fecal matter on a person showed up as a blue dot. Just about every person I came across looked like a Smurf.

I still have nightmares.

Point is, I’ve always had a reason to be a little unsettled by M’s calibrations. He only does this when things are bad or when he wants to piss me off.

This time, things are bad.

The entire city looks like it’s washed in a sea of blue lights.

I swallow hard. It’s suddenly difficult to find my voice. “How many?”

I count exactly three hundred million, three hundred and seventy thou—

“How many does it take to infect a person?”

Just one.

I throw up in my mouth a little.

“We’re gonna need a bigger boat.”

I can’t believe we’re actually here.

“That makes two of us.”

I look up at the ten story building located at 401 4th Street. The only thing I can’t believe even more is that I’m about to go inside it. HEROES Tower.

HEROES is an acronym for Humane Emergency Rescue Or Extrication Squad. They’re a government funded Superhero team that, when not fighting villains, they’re enforcing the Wertham act. If you’re a Super and you’re not registered, you’re illegal.

Like me.

I’ve had the roster of HEROES memorized since I was a kid. I always wanted to be a member, but events that happened shortly after getting my powers made me think it wasn’t such a hot idea. Plus, there’s that whole M might kill everybody around me thing.

The Prose division of HEROES is led by the greatest hero to ever put on a cape: Liberty. The guy’s been around since World War II. Last time anybody checked, he’s the strongest dude in the world.

Well, we’re here. So, now what?

The lights in the lobby are out. For some reason, I expected them to have a robot secretary or something.

I tap on the glass door several times. “Uh, excuse me?”

A janitor pokes his head out of an office. He leans a mop against the wall and puts his hands on his hips. A cord winds from his ear buds to his pocket.

I wave. “Hi. Can you come, like, open the door please? I need some help.”

He shakes his head and continues to mop.

Typical. Probably listening to that Ga Ga individual.

“Hey!” I pound on the glass. This is crazy. I need some serious Superhero help, and I can’t even get past this place’s freaking janitor? I

back away and look up the building. It might be easier if I just fly to the top and break in.

Pink smoke swirls around me. I wave it off, but it just manages to get thicker.

I turn and see a girl—or rather something that looks like a girl but is actually a pink ghost—standing there with her arms folded. “Can I, like, help you or something?”

I recognize her instantly and so does M. He raises our force field and I jump in the air, hovering five feet away. “Whoa, stay away! Don’t ... possess me or anything!”

“Oh please. Why on Earth would I want to crawl around inside that noggin? You’re a freak.”

Says the pink free-floating apparition.

Pink has been with the Prose division of HEROES for a year. She’s eighteen but her powers have kept her sort of physically frozen as a thirteen year old for five years. According to *herowiki*, her power/curse was the result of a testing accident for Cover Chick Cosmetics. After the story broke, I don’t think a single woman in Prose wore makeup for a month.

She’s wearing the same clothing that she’s been wearing for the past five years: A Brittany Spears t-shirt, capris, and Keds.

“So, are you, like, here for something? I’m right in the middle of Vampire Diaries.”

Of course you are.

“I need help. There’s a problem out there that I need help with.”

She purses her lips as if she wants to blow air out of them. “You and everybody else.”

“This is serious, Pink.” It’s weird saying her name like I know her. “We could be in the middle of some kind of freagin’ zombie apocalypse.”

She rolls her eyes, floats through me and inside the window. The janitor doesn’t see her until it’s too late. By then, it’s y’know, too late.

She enters the janitor’s body and disappears. He arches his back so far

I think it's about to break and then he lurches forward again. He drops the mop and hurries over to the door with a valley girl walk. His eyes glow pink.

He unlocks the door. I knew the bastard had a key.

Pink floats out of his head. "See you upstairs." She floats through the ceiling without telling me what floor.

The janitor shakes his head for a moment, then recovers. He sighs. "I hate that bitch."

I walk inside, feeling awkward for some reason. I'm a Superhero dammit. Why do I feel awkward?

Paintings surround me in the expensive lobby. There's one to my immediate right depicting HEROES saving the world from the Zorborg invasion forty years ago. Another one shows them defeating Victor Verse, the Verser of crime (a dude that I've also had the misfortune of fighting). Several more show Liberty by himself, fighting Japanese war boats during World War II. All of the paintings eventually lead my eye to Liberty's thirty foot bronze statue in the center of the lobby.

"Wonder if he's here?"

He is.

"You can sense him?"

Of course. He's too powerful for me not to sense. He was even worth my notice before being confined to this wretched—

"Hey!" Pink screams above me.

I want to yell at her in a manly way, but all that comes out is a kind of girlish squeak.

I... have never heard you make that sound, Gabe.

"What part of 'see you upstairs' did you not understand? Big guy's waiting, and I'm getting tired of pausing my show."

She disappears.

"Will our powers do anything to her?"

I can think of only one way to find out.

I take the stairs because it's quicker to fly than take the elevator. I open the door, and the Silver Sentinel is there, waiting next to the elevator. He faces me.

Silver Sentinel hasn't made his identity public, but most of the hero identity bloggers believe he some sort of rich billionaire, or at least a person with close ties to one. His armor is lined with Andrium, the most expensive and hardest metal in the world. He creates at least one new suit each year, meaning he spends more money annually than Apple. His current suit looks like a high-tech knight from King Arthur's Court, covered with blinking lights and topped with a huge purple plume. A mirrored visor covers his eyes, and I hear it glows when he's angry.

He lowers his head like he's reading something inside the helmet. "I don't have your picture in my database."

"Cause you shouldn't. I'm not registered."

"That was the general implication." He looks at a closed door behind him. "PINK, GET OUT HERE!" His voice reverberates around us on some kind of PA system.

Pink's head appears from the wall beside me, almost causing me to squeal again. "What?"

"You let a non-registered cape in here?"

She rolls her eyes. "He said it was like an emergency or something—" Her head goes back into the wall before she's through talking.

Sentinel looks back at me. "Give me one reason why I shouldn't arrest you right now."

"I'll give you three hundred million."

I look at the HEROES gathered around the table. There are five of them. Pink, who doesn't really sit in the chair as much as hover. Silver Sentinel, who has a special chair reinforced for both his bulk and his width.

Ms. Mystick sits to Silver Sentinel's left. She's supposedly the world's greatest user of Magicks (which she spells with a "k", so you know she's

serious). She's a brunette with shoulder length hair. She's dressed in something that looks like a cross between a men's business suit and a bikini. A waist length black cape with a dark red liner hangs from her shoulders. Her eyes are bloodshot and she keeps rubbing her temples.

Next to Ms. Mystick is Thinkor, The Human Brain. Out of all the HEROES, I think he's the most suspicious of me ... he keeps looking in my direction. At least, I *think* he keeps looking in my direction. He doesn't have eyes, so it's hard to tell. He's like a piece of green cauliflower with arms and legs, wearing a purple Speedo thing.

Then there's the big guy: Liberty.

He stands there looking at something on an iPad. His costume is black with gold highlights on the chest, forearms, and shins. His cape—which always seems to be the right size and somehow manages to evoke the right amount of wind—is dark red with a white star on the back.

All I can think about while sitting in this room is that Liberty is strong enough to move the moon's orbit (he's done it before). The others act like he's nothing new though. I wonder how long it took them to think of themselves as an equal to Liberty or, at the very least, able to sit in the same room with him without peeing yourself from excitement.

“Okay,” Liberty says in a low voice that somehow manages to still sound booming. “What do we know? Anybody?”

“The white dots display the number of people in the city.” Silver Sentinel activates the holo-projector at the foot of the table. It displays a map of Prose City. “The blue dots, the number of nanites, and the green dots indicate the number of infected people.”

“Helluva lotta green dots, Sentinel,” says Liberty.

“The number of infected is at one hundred twenty-two. Current estimates puts us at five times that by tomorrow morning and the entire country by the end of the weekend.”

Liberty raises his eyebrows.

Sentinel raises his palm. “Hey, there would be a lot more by now if weren't for the nanite scrambler I cooked up just a few minutes ago. It's

keeping the other three million or so in a sort of stasis.”

Liberty gestures for Sentinel to continue. “The scrambler also keeps Deathbot in one body. Whichever person his central intelligence currently resides in is the one we need to locate and destroy. After that, the other nanites will shut down and be perfectly harmless.”

“So, like, which one is he?” Pink asks, looking at the projection for the first time.

Sentinel shakes his head. “I’m still trying to find a way to calibrate my scanners. But, presently we have no way of knowing. It could be any of the one hundred and twenty-two.”

Liberty sets the iPad aside. “Well, that’s certainly within our means.” He turns in his chair and faces me. “And we have you to thank for this information, Galaxy is it?”

He said my name! “Yes,” I say in a voice way too high. I then try again in an octave similar to my own, “Ahem ... yes. It was from a Cyborg I fought this morning.”

Duh.

“So I hear.” He smiles, breaking the tension. “Why aren’t you registered?”

And here we go ...

“I, uhm, I’m just not.”

“Trust me,” you said. “We need their help, M. We can’t possibly do this alone ...”

Liberty looks at me for the first time since the meeting started. Sentinel changes his posture and I think Pink looks at her nails. Thinkor leans in my direction. I think he’s trying to point his right lobe at me.

And he’s just about to tell you ...

“I need you to register before the night’s through.”

Bam.

I start to say something. I’m not sure what, but I can’t just let this go.

Liberty stands, which for some reason cuts me off before I have a chance to speak.

“In light of your bringing these events to our attention, I’ll skip

standard procedure this time. Just make sure you have your paperwork in by morning. Now, let's get this thing under control. Pink, I need you to —“

“He wants to leave,” Thinkor says.

The others look at me.

Thinkor's voice seems to come from above us rather than from him. “No, *leave* isn't the right word—he wants to escape. The boy does not wish to register.”

Liberty never looks at Thinkor. He keeps staring at me. The Greatest Hero of All Time looks at me ... and he's disappointed.

“Galaxy, I can understand your hesitation, but the law's the law. You have powers, and the government says you must register those powers.”

I swallow. It almost doesn't go down. “No.”

This, Gabe, was a truly wonderful plan, worthy of song and praise for years to come.

Everyone looks at me. They can't believe I just said no to Liberty. I kinda can't either. I also can't believe what else I'm about to say.

“I'm not going to register. I don't feel safe with anybody ... *everybody* knowing my identity,” I hurriedly say with a shaky voice.

I wonder what they will put on your tombstone? “Here lies Gabe Garrison, failed hero and botched host to the most supreme of alien life forms.”

“Everybody won't know, son,” Liberty says. “Just those that need to know. Are you sure you won't reconsider?”

I don't answer.

Liberty lets a moment pass. I feel way uncomfortable, and I think everyone else in the room does too.

“Let me rephrase that, Galaxy.” He walks around the table and stops three feet away. My stomach quivers. “You should reconsider, and you should do so now. I've got a city to save.”

M gets a blue Grav Blast ready in each hand.

“I see,” Liberty says.

We don't stand a chance here, Gabe. There's far too much power in the room.

I fire a blast into the corner, behind Liberty. I could fire it at Sentinel, but it will hurt him. It will just piss off Liberty and I have no idea what it will do to Pink or Ms. Mystick. I don't want to hurt anybody, I just want a distraction.

It doesn't work.

I fly up and almost make it to the ceiling when Liberty's hand cinches my ankle like a vise. He slings me into the conference table, breaking it in half. The projection of Prose stutters before winking out entirely.

They expect the impact to knock me out. Partially because Liberty's so strong and partially because I stay motionless. It's the same sort of fake sleeping pose I use when mom wants me to mow the yard on Saturday mornings.

"Okay, lets get this Galaxy person out to—"

And I take off again. I make it through the ceiling, the roof and into the open night. I'm about to twist and fly away when a beam of light—I think it's from Sentinel's photon cannon—shoots by me. It disappears into the night. Then I notice something ... the beam didn't fire around me.

It fired through me.

Chapter Four

You realize this is, of course, all your fault, Gabe, M says.

I think he says something else too, but other things have my attention right now. Things like Deathbot's nanite doohickeys taking over half the freaking city. Things like being on the lam from HEROES (heh-heh, I said "lam"). And things like the icky, glowy blue stuff leaking out of the tennis ball-sized hole under my right collarbone. I resist the urge to draw a smiley face in a puddle of it with my finger.

I think I'm also a tad delirious.

I peak over the steering wheel of the Jeep Cherokee I broke into fifteen minutes ago. After Sentinel shot me, I needed a place to hurt. I landed (crashed actually) in the alley behind HEROES tower and barely made it to the parking garage situated between it and Pump It Gym. My shoulder didn't get all leaky until I made it to the Jeep.

M complained the entire time.

If we don't get out of this, Gabe, I feel it prudent to warn you that I recently learned how to sing "Bottles of Beer on the Wall" and I can count extremely high. I know numbers your race hasn't even fathomed yet.

"Aren't you ... " I swallow, trying not to vomit. " ... aren't you in the slightest bit of pain?"

No.

"How? How is that even possible? It feels like my entire right side is on fire."

I simply shut it off. Pain is a distraction my people found the need to abandon

millennia ago. Aside from being a crude reminder of what we once were, it had no other importance.

“Well ... that’s convenient.”

I hear laughing nearby and I duck lower in the seat. Two girls pass by the rear of the Jeep and talk about Jacob from *Twilight*. Their laughing and discussion of everything they want him to do to him fade away. I rise.

“Too bad you can’t use some of the no pain stuff on me.”

What do you mean? I’m using it on you now. If I weren’t, I imagine your pain would render you unconscious.

I blink. At least I would have blinked if I were in human form. I don’t have eyelids when we’re Galaxy. “Can’t you use more?”

Of course.

“Then, why the frak aren’t you?”

I need to conserve our energy levels, Gabe. What do you think will happen once we revert back to human form?

I look at the hole in my chest. Another round of gooey blue stuff plops to the car seat. “I hadn’t thought of that. Jesus, I hadn’t thought of that. What will happen?”

One of two possibilities: You will either die of blood loss or you will die of shock.

“Why can’t you just heal me like that other time?”

That “other time,” Gabe involved significantly less trauma. I might be able to heal this amount of damage, but it will take a while to—

“You-you don’t know? How could you not know?”

For the exact same reason you don’t, Gabe. This specific set of circumstances has never happened to me before. We therefore need to conserve power until I can ascertain if healing is even possible. In the event that it is not, you should be within close proximity to a hospital before reverting back to human form. Recent events with HEROES and Deathbot have made that practically impossible.

No power equals no Galaxy, which could equal a dead me. Wonderful. Now, I have to sit here and think about Deathbot, HEROES and dying for God knows how long. I wonder if figuring out how to heal me has something to do with the blue stuff? I start wondering if M would tell me

if it did ...

And Liberty lands in front of the Jeep.

It wasn't a hover to a stop kind of landing either. No, he came in, balls to the wall speed. His feet literally dug up chunks of pavement that fall on the Jeep's hood like hail. The entire level of the garage shakes so hard I see a ripple in my blue stuff.

I freak and lower myself to the floorboard. Actually, it's more like a bounce to the floorboard, pinball style.

I hear the clip clop of his boots. His face has to be close to the driver's side window but I can't look. I can't take Liberty. Hell, I can't even run from him like this. I want to tell M to get ready to max out our power. If he's gonna capture me, I've got nothing to lose by high tailing it out of here and then circling back for the hospital.

The Jeep rocks.

What's he doing?

He sighs.

What the hell is he doing?

I turn my head, slowly exhaling a breath I didn't even know I was holding. Liberty is leaning against the Jeep. Of all the cars in the parking garage, he picks this one to lean against.

I hear rocket jets and then metal screeching on asphalt. It has to be Silver Sentinel. They're here to finish me off together.

"Did you find him, Earthling?" says a digitized voice.

Holy crap.

That slimy ...

"Do you care to rephrase your tone, Deathbot?" Liberty says in a cool voice. He's outside the driver's side door, so he sounds muffled.

Deathbot hacks out a sigh ... I think. "Did you find my bounty, Liberty?"

"I did, but Sentinel got a little trigger happy and I had to do damage control. The kid got away."

"I hope that you sufficiently dealt with it, and him, for your sake."

Liberty slams Deathbot into the side of the Jeep. The vehicle jerks sideways and I almost yell. “Let me make something clear to you which should already be painfully obvious. This kid beat the hell out of you this morning. I beat the hell out of the kid just a moment ago. That means I can, in turn, beat the hell out of you. The only reason I haven’t yet is because it’s easier for me to just give him to you, so you’ll keep your little nanites under control and then leave my planet.”

The Jeep shifts more and the driver’s side buckles in. “But don’t think for a single minute that I won’t bag your ass right here. I figure civilian casualties will be around twenty percent. By the time we cover it up, it’ll be more like five percent. I’ve dealt with worse; Prose has dealt with worse. It’ll recover and I’ll have even more support for the Wertham Act. Long story short: killing you will leave me a huge mess to clean up, but it’s a mess I can turn to my advantage if I need to.”

And there you have it. Liberty, The Greatest Hero of all Time, just became The Greatest Douche of all Time.

Deathbot’s green flames light up the inside of the Jeep and I try to take up as little space as possible. It’s not hard. I’ve never felt so small in my entire life.

Deathbot quickly recovers. “Well ... I shall assist you in looking for him.”

Liberty lets Deathbot go and the Jeep rocks back. “No. I’ve got enough to worry about keeping those other idiots under control. I don’t need to worry about holding your hand too.”

“What do you suggest I do, Liberty? Stand around and—what is the Earthling expression—twiddle my thumbs?”

Liberty clip clops away. “I don’t care what you do. Just stay out of sight. I’ll contact you when I have the kid.” Liberty takes off, causing the wind to whistle by the Jeep.

The green light fades. “Get ready, M,” I whisper.

Gabe, no ...

I raise my head. Deathbot is about ten feet away with his back turned.

“People are dying—right now, they’re dying because Deathbot’s looking for me and Liberty’s a dick. I can’t live with that.”

That’s convenient because you won’t live at all if you step outside.

M ups the pain. My shoulder turns from a little bit of fire to a lot of ice with tingling sensations running down the entire right side of my body.

“What are you doing?” I say through clenched teeth.

Preventing you from getting us both killed, that’s what.

I grip the Jeep’s steering wheel with my left hand because the right arm is useless. I try not to think about it. Thinking about it will only make me panic. “You’re ... you’re gonna have to do better than that.”

I open the Jeep’s door. It sticks a little from the buckling. “Hey, Deathbot! You looking for something?”

Deathbot turns.

I stick one foot out of the Jeep and the pain almost makes me fall over. “I mean, you look like your looking for something. But that’s the same, dumbass look you have on your face all the time, so it’s hard to tell.”

“Galaxy ... ” He has a cop’s body now. Or, at least what used to be a cop’s body. The only way I can tell is from the pants and belt, with everything attached to it (the nightstick looks kind of stupid). The upper half is mostly skeleton, metal, wires, and blinking lights. A green flame still covers his head, making what little appears of the skull black. Like before, he’s missing the lower jawbone. He raises his right arm and one of those gun things forms around it. The barrel spins and glows green.

I think the pain has actually gotten worse since leaving the Jeep. My entire right side is completely numb. My leg is little more than a cane.

Gabe, if you think this feeble ploy of yours will somehow convince me into, what is at best, a pointless altercation—you’re wrong

Deathbot laughs. “I see you are indeed injured and all but defeated, yet you still creep closer to Deathbot. Are you really so eager to die?”

I stop five feet away from him. Honestly, I don’t remember taking the last several steps. “I guess ... I guess I’m just too damn ... heroic.”

Deathbot fires.

M curses and raises our force field a split second before the beam hits.
The pain in my side disappears.

You'd best make this quick.

I fly past Deathbot.

Deathbot screams and I hear his boot rockets take off, in hot pursuit.

This isn't what I meant by "quick." In fact, it's just the opposite.

"Shut up and listen. Do you remember that thing you did earlier when you killed all the nanites?"

Yes ...

"I need you to do it again."

I explain my plan to him right before we get to the TVA breezeway on Broad Street.

No.

Deathbot fires and the beam misses my left side by three feet and blows up a FedEx drop box one block away.

"Why?!"

Because this plan—and I use the term ever so loosely—will most likely get the both of us killed.

"Do you know how many people in Prose could die if we don't do this?"

Do you know how little I care?

"Fine. We'll just do this the hard way."

I fly above the buildings. Deathbot isn't fast enough to keep up, so I slow down.

You are insane. Either fight or flight. It makes no difference to me. But make up your mind. Otherwise—

"What? HEROES will spot us?"

.... This is a dangerous game you're playing, Gabe.

Deathbot fires again and the beam disappears into the night sky. "Well, you're the one dealing the cards, M."

I give one of the HEROES enough time to spot us and then fly back to the cover of the buildings. I pass Deathbot again. He screams and follows, firing another blast.

People stare at us from the street. Most of them run, but some stay either to look or because they're too stunned to move. I fly over the Bivoli Theatre, and risk a look back to see if Deathbot is close—

Only to turn and have Silver Sentinel punch me in the face.

I bounce off the street below and skid to a halt in front of an office building on the opposite side. Sentinel hovers twenty feet above me, wind stirring the purple plume on top of his helmet.

I can't help but laugh. God, that thing looks stupid.

He points at me. "Stand down, Galaxy," he says in an amplified voice, echoing off the buildings. A bright-ass head light thing comes out of his chest and shines on me. "This will be a lot less painful if you just—"

I slam a Grav Bolt into his chest.

Silver Sentinel's force field absorbs the brunt of the blast with a yellow shimmer, but it still makes him cartwheel through the air. I fly up and punch Sentinel sending him up another ten feet. I fly up to meet him again, rare back for another punch—only to have Deathbot fly tackle me into the Bivoli Theatre's Marque.

They needed a new one anyway.

Deathbot loses his hold in the impact and goes through the theatre's brick wall.

I stand on top of the Marque and brush the "A" and "B" letters of Madam Butterfly off my thigh. The entire sign rocks a little and Deathbot pulls himself out of hole in the wall and steps onto the upper part of the marquee.

Above you, Gabe.

Sentinel is right over my head and has formed some kind of energy lance. It's eight feet long, glows yellow, and he has the damn thing pointed right at me.

I vacate the marquee right before he fires. A tire-sized chunk of the

sign evaporates into a glowing yellow ash, fluttering to Broad Street.

“Holy crap!” What’s he firing with that thing?

Worry more about what Deathbot fires with his thing.

I don’t even look—I just fly up right before Deathbot’s green blast hits me. It disappears into an office building two blocks away.

You need to get this “plan” underway fast, Gabe. I sense Liberty rapidly approaching ...

“So, you’re game now?”

You’ve left me little choice. But we will have to hurry. I can only separate myself from you for an extremely short amount of time.

I feel relieved ... a little. Just because M’s agreed to help me save Prose doesn’t mean we actually can save it. Especially if we’re fighting Deathbot, Sentinel, and Liberty. Did Liberty include the others into his little plan too?

Liberty will be here in thirty seconds.

Like so many other things in my life, I don’t have time to think about it. I do the only thing I can.

I take the hell off.

I fly past the Blue Cross/Blue Shield building. I see my reflection streak past in the window.

They’re gaining, Gabe. And our power is waning. We’re at twenty-five percent.

“Already?”

You’re the one that keeps getting shot, pummeled and zapped.

“Okay, can we orbit Sentinel?”

He isn’t a Super, so yes. But I thought you were against—

Sentinel tackles me. Damn, he’s fast.

I look down. We’re over the river and the Michael Booth Bridge is just to my right. Sentinel is faster, but I think I’ve got more horsepower. I take us into the water.

The river boils around us from his jet pack, my powers, or a combination of both. We struggle, flip, and toss around until we hit mud. I fire a Grav Bolt into his chest and the impact separates us. M adjusts my

sight, so I can see Sentinel through the murk of the Tennessee.

I fly up, leaving the river. The bridge is just above me and to my left. After a few seconds, Sentinel is ten feet away to my right.

I turn and we face each other. Red and blue lights from the bottom of the bridge reflect off us, making it look like we're surrounded by cop cars.

"Shouldn't you be coughing up water?" I say.

He gets that lance thing ready again. "I can survive the depths of space in this suit," he says while tilting his head. "A tussle at the bottom of the Tennessee poses no problem."

"Good to know. M, hit it."

Gladly.

M reaches out and envelops Sentinel in a blue glow and then rockets him into the night sky. Sentinel's screams echo for just a second before completely fading away.

He will, of course, just return after gaining his bearings.

"Without his orbital suit, it'll take a while." I fly over the bridge. There's something like fifty people gathered on the edge looking at me. "Now to—"

Something red, black, and gold hits me with the force of a wrecking ball (and that's no exaggeration, I've actually been hit by one).

I slam into the walking bridge and the entire thing shakes. People scatter. A man with a guitar tumbles behind me. His case upends, sending dollars and quarters all over me.

Liberty skids to a halt in front of me, tearing five feet of the bridge's wooden planks to splinters. A slushy cart rolls between us, leaving a trail of blue and red syrup on the broken wood. The cart's owner thinks about coming after it, but one look at Liberty and me makes him decide that isn't such a hot idea.

As if on cue, the wind picks ups and gives Liberty's red cape that perfect amount of lift. He walks slowly toward me—popping each knuckle so loudly it forces people to blink—and looks so perfect, so heroic, so Super, I want to give up right then and there.

“I gave you a choice, son,” he says.

He kicks me and I fly into the bridge’s metal structure, twenty feet above us. After leaving a sizable dent, I fall back. The bridge shakes more and people turn, running over each other to get away. They scream and act surprised—as if they had no idea of the kind of power they were hanging around, living around, and practically worshiping like a god every day. I can’t really blame them.

I didn’t either.

“You could have done it the easy way. But no—you chose the hard way.” He grabs the back of my neck and circles me into one of the metal rope posts in the middle of the bridge. The impact makes it double over and it’s all I can do to pull myself out of it and fall on my back.

Gabe ... I ... M flakes out on me. He’s too stunned that we’re about to die.

The fire in my shoulder returns. There’s a stabbing pain in my back to give it company. I don’t even ask M for a reading on our power level. What would be the point?

“Now, I can’t even give you over to Deathbot to stop the chaos you started. I’ll have to spend the better part of the week picking of the pieces of what he—”

“Good to know,” A digitized voice says behind Liberty.

He drops me.

I land in a puddle of slushy syrup and look up. There’s a throb in my head that’s kind of in rhythm to a Black Eyed Peas song, but I forget which one. My stomach feels like somebody pumps it with a plunger. I roll over, begging to throw up, or for the pain to go away, or to pass out, or to even die. I just want this feeling—all of this freaking pain to go away and I still don’t know if I can stay away from Reagan and I wonder why I’m thinking that and I wonder if I’ll ever think anything again and I hope my mom understands when they find a body if my bonding with M even leaves a body to find.

Deathbot clamps a palm around my head and lifts me.

Deathbot?

I've figured it out Gabe.

Deathbot laughs. “Surprised? You shouldn’t be. Liberty didn’t pose a problem to Deathbot, despite his pointless posturing!” Deathbot turns and holds my head low, so I can see that Liberty’s about to become infected with the Cyborg’s nanites. The World’s Greatest Hero writhes on the ground and clutches his throat. His motions become a blur and then his eyes grow wide with panic. He realizes his Superspeed isn’t even enough to shake the things off. They enter through his mouth, nose and eyes. He screams and rolls over, causing the bridge to tremble again. I already see a couple of wires poking their way out of his uniform.

I figured out how to heal you with a minimal use of power. It’s not a complete heal, mind you, but at least you won’t die.

Deathbot turns me to face him again.

And then the world rushes back.

The pain, the nausea, and the deliria are completely gone. M fixed me. Somehow, he figured out a way to do it. “You ready, M?”

Deathbot’s shoulder bazooka clacks into position over his right shoulder. He points it right at me and it whines at a high pitch.

With great reluctance, Gabe, yes. Let’s finish this.

Deathbot barks a laugh. “Are you ready to be a hero, Earthling?”

I hook my fingers in Deathbot’s flaming sockets and pull him close. “Hells yeah.”

M leaves me.

Everything that is him—the power, the star field, and the smart assitude—leaves my body, travels down my arm and shoots straight into Deathbot’s face. Deathbot screams and drops me.

He frantically backs away and trips over a passed out Liberty. Deathbot falls and the star field oozes up his body. Smoke pours out of him and I hear something that sounds like a hundred pennies in a dryer (also, no exaggeration). Nanite clusters explode out of him and fall harmlessly to the bridge.

As M slowly bonds with the body Deathbot took over, it finally dawns on me I'm not dead or feeling any pain in my arm. In fact, I don't feel my arm at all. I can't even move it.

Deathbot takes that opportunity to deliver an impressive uppercut to my jaw, which I have absolutely no problems feeling.

I fall on the ground and Deathbot is on top of me, tearing at me with his boney fingers, yelling at me with that vacuum cleaner voice, and—to my absolute horror—he peels open what little is left of some guts at his midsection.

A flood of nanites rush out like ants and crawl up my belly.

I scream and kick him off.

M just about has his body completely enveloped now. If M can kill him before the nanites take me over, I'll make it. If not ...

I shake my head. I have to give M enough time to finish the job, which means fighting Deathbot all exposed like.

Deathbot's nightstick lays on the ground next to me. I pick it up and go to work on his skull.

The nanites rush up my chest and back. They tickle a little as they pass my armpits. I think I'm about to die, but knowing what's at stake, I kinda feel okay with it.

I hit the skull until it shatters, and I go to work on the wet, mushy stuff inside. I pummel it until there's nothing left and then I go to work on the ribs, the guns, or anything else large enough for me to hit with this nightstick. My left hand tires, so I switch to my right.

I stop in mid swing when I realize I can once again use my right hand.

Gabe?

M's with me again. I look at my hands and see he's turned me back into Galaxy.

The juicy heap that use to be Deathbot lies motionless on the ground next to me. Liberty slowly raises to one knee, shaking the last of the dead nanite clusters off his chest. He's okay, which means other people in Prose are okay too. He looks at Deathbot and then makes eye contact

with me.

I drop the nightstick. It falls on the pile of nanites that were on me a moment ago. “How much juice do we have left?”

Not nearly enough.

Liberty slowly walks to me. He figures out what happened and grins. But it’s not the kind of grin a person makes when they’re happy. It’s more like the kind of grin my grandpa used to make when he found out grandma made pancakes.

“They did it! Liberty and that other dude took out the bad guy!” someone yells behind me.

I turn and the crowd that ran from Liberty earlier is now running back to the bridge. Some are new. Some were on the bridge when Liberty kicked me into the framework. Capes duking it out is certainly nothing new, but I can tell they don’t really know what to make of me. They already know who Liberty is. Or, at least they know what they’ve been told.

“Who are you?” a girl in the front asks. She’s wearing a yellow sundress and her eyes flash pink for a split second.

WTF?

“I ... ” I look at her and then back at the crowd. There’s upwards of eighty people gathered around me, most of which are taking pictures with their cell phones. Some look at Liberty. Most look at me. Several people accidentally step in Deathbot.

I straighten up. “I’m Galaxy.”

“Are you one of the HEROES?” she says loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Yeah. Guess I am one of the heroes.”

People laugh, cheer, clap, and ask for autographs. Pink loses herself in the crowd and Liberty makes his way to me. He has to pat three babies on the head and sign five autographs to do it, all of which he does with a smile on his face. A smile that doesn’t touch his eyes.

Liberty waves at the crowd, but speaks to me in a low voice through his

teeth. “I’ve seen your face. It’ll just take one phone call to find out who you are.” He turns to me and holds out his right hand. Not knowing what else to do, I take it and we slowly shake hands for the crowd. “If you don’t register in forty-two hours, I’ll make that phone call and bury your family on the moon.”

This time, the grin touches his eyes.

Why did that Pink person help us?

I land about three blocks away from the house. I have enough power to fly the rest of the way, but in our neighborhood, it’s best not to take any chances. Everybody knows everybody.

“I don’t know. She felt sorry for us?”

Oh please. That woman feels sorry for no one.

I stick my hands in my pockets. “You don’t know that.”

I know she reminds me of me.

I don’t know what to say to that. M’s right. Pink does act like M, a less intelligent and valley girlish kind of M, but an M just the same. It wouldn’t make sense for her to help me unless ...

She wants something in return.

I stop walking. Pink does want something from me, I would just have to wait to find out what it was ... and wait to see if it was something I could turn to my advantage. Maybe there was a way out of this whole registering thing.

Of course, as long as I can fly away in time, M can apparently heal just about anything HEROES can dish out. I rotate my right arm. It and the rest of my side still feels tingly, but M managed to heal it the rest of the way. He tried to explain how he did it—with great pride in fact—but I was just too damn tired to listen.

I round the last block and am surprised to see Mom left the porch light on. It’s almost 1:00. She’s usually in bed by now.

When I place one foot on the first step, I hear the porch swing squeak. I turn and see someone sitting in it.

“Reagan?”

She smiles and stands.

I whisper a curse. I still haven’t told M anything about her seeing us change. I hurry to the door. There’s no time to ask her how she found out where I live, or what she thinks about my being a hero, or if she even thinks it’s a little sexy (admittedly, it’s the last one I’m most curious about). I have to distance myself from her before she says something, anything to indicate she knows I’m Galaxy.

I try to put my house key in the lock with all the excitement of a blond being chased by an ax murderer. “Hi, um ... I can’t—I can’t talk right now. I’ve, uh got, work in the morning at it’s late. I’ve got to—”

She grabs my arm and spins me around.

I drop my keys.

Instead of Reagan standing there, I see a person-shaped star field with glowing blue eyes. She’s powered up, just like me when I’m Galaxy.

Great googley moogley.

“Gabe, we need to talk.”

About the Author

When Sevan Paris isn't involved in things UTCish, he is doing something incredibly geeky, probably involving superheroes. He enjoys all things comics, Transformers, Science Fiction, and anything George Lucas related prior to 1999. Despite each of these child-like addictions, his wife, Cindy, continues to love him in a super adult-like fashion. You can keep up with his many ramblings and release schedule at sevanparis.com.

CHAPTER ONE

Space Pulp! Preview

And now enjoy a preview of *Space Pulp!* by Sevan Paris

My rocket pod bounces off the mountainside and tears through a long stretch of jungle before grinding to a scorching halt.

“Computer—” I cough in the smoke-filled cockpit. “Computer, where am I?”

The computer beeps. “... *Please repeat the question, Captain Starson.*”

The atmo readouts are in the green, so I jerk the escape lever. The rocket pod’s canopy blasts away, flipping end over end. I wave the last of the smoke away and cough again. “I said—where am I?”

More beeping and a scratching noise I’ve never heard a Federacy computer make: “*I’m sorry, I don’t understand the question. Would you like to try again?*”

“That’s okay—” I straddle the side of the cockpit, flinching from the sparking navigation console—“You’ve got a lot on your mind.”

I cough the entire way to the ground. Rolling onto my back brings into view the cap bottoms of brown mushroom trees.

The Federacy trains their officers to deal with hostile situations in a variety of planetary environments. Regardless of the atmo, gravity, or temperature, your first two priorities are always the same: assure survival and transmit position. Granted, survival often *depends* on transmitting

your position, but when raising the nearest rocket ship seems unlikely, it's best to assume you're staying put for a while. The most important thing you can do—regardless of the situation—is not panic. Doing so often wastes valuable time and even more valuable resources.

I stand, unfasten the chinstrap to my helmet and let it plop to the blue grass. After wiping the blood off my forehead, I crawl under the pod's belly. A quick read of my thumb print opens the cargo hatch with a hiss. I yank the survival backpack and DKR-50 blaster pistol free of their straps.

The jungle's humidity glazes me in a thin layer before I have the pack on my back and blaster on my hip. I raise the wrist-comp to my chin. "Bard, Livy—are you there? *Space Pulp*, do you read ...?" I'm three whole steps away from the pod when something stops me cold.

No jungle noises.

Federacy training teaches you to look for signs of an oncoming danger without actually being aware you're looking for them. Jungles like this one—thick with vegetation and moisture—should have more life than a nova dog has fleas. So when you don't hear any of the usual jungle hooting, screeching, or honking—it can only mean one thing ...

You're being hunted.

I turn ... hear a cross between a growl and a hiss. A red tongue rolls across a toothy maw as a four legged beast slithers out of the jungle. Eighteen feet of black, corded muscle and twitching tail rounds the exhaust port of the rocket pod, slowly—anxiously. Pointed ears lie flat against a long skull.

I pull my blaster, point it at the beast's head. "Easy, boy." I raise the other hand, palm out, and take two gentle steps back. "You've probably never had human before. I hear we taste terrible—"

It growls, takes a step towards me.

I pull the trigger three times, filling the jungle with my blaster's angry whine. Each laser blast slaps into the creature's jaw, sending up sparks. The beast jerks its long head away ... then slowly, dangerously, turns back.

The blaster didn't do a damn thing.

No blood, no mark—nothing. The beast's side swells as it draws a long breath, then opens its mouth with a thunderous roar.

I run like hell.

Yellow branches slap my face. My training keeps me from looking back. Not that I would need to: The thing's gallop shakes the blue leaves on either side of me.

I jump a log and splash into a deep puddle. My right foot slides out from under me, puts me on my ass. The beast leaps through the air, roaring—sunlight reflecting off its pointed teeth. I roll sideways. Its gaping jaw snaps up empty dirt. The creature slides ten feet before it stops, turns my way with a deep growl.

Dripping in muddy water, I jump to my feet and run into a thick grove of giant mushrooms. It gallops after me—smashing, tearing its way through the trees. Its jaw snaps again, tearing off a mushroom cap inches from my head. I dart right. It skids by, screeching, and crashes into another tree.

I slide, trying to change direction again, when the jungle suddenly opens up ...

And I'm falling into a ravine.

I fall twenty feet and land on my side—hard. I roll over, head throbbing—stabbing—with a fiery pain.

The creature peers at me from the ravine's edge, long ropes of drool hanging from its mouth. It carefully picks its way down the cliff, rocks sliding away from clawed feet. Blood trickles over the rock under my head. My eyes grow heavy, desperately trying to close.

The world goes black—the last thing I hear is a deep growl getting closer and closer ...

SIX MONTHS AGO ...

When you're a rocket ship captain, you learn to expect the unexpected.

A routine charting mission can turn into the discovery of a sentient

wormhole. A Hedgmonian diplomat may possess your first officer and then try to assassinate you. The Queen of Ridgimon IX may take you as her concubine and impregnate you with her seed.

But still ... when you're suddenly ordered to the fleet admiral's office twenty-four hours before you're due to punch, it's enough to give even the most seasoned captain pause. The Federacy doesn't make hasty decisions, but they do give orders with little to no warning. Orders that can turn your life upside down, back to front, or—literally—inside out.

“It makes one wonder, doesn't it?”

I turn my head, look up at the Admiral. I never even noticed him walk into the lobby. “Sir?”

“The painting, Starson.” He gestures at the oil canvas hanging on the wall in front of me. “It really makes you think, doesn't it?”

“Honestly sir, I really wasn't looking at it.” I take in the painting. It's *The Odyssey*, the original rocket ship that first explored Earth's new home five hundred years ago. Earth hangs underneath it, distant but vibrant. “Most paintings of *The Odyssey* show it going deeper into the Twelve—exploring. I've never seen one of it leaving Earth.”

“Oh, most don't. It's not ... sexy enough.” Admiral Bentura clasps his hands behind his back and straightens. “But I've always been drawn to this one. Helps remind me what it must have been like.”

“Going to the frontier?”

“Leaving the ... familiar. Leaving everything—everyone—you ever loved. In hopes of understanding why your planet had been yanked—torn away—from its solar system.”

“Sir, without *The Odyssey's* discoveries—their experiments—we wouldn't have been able to travel space like we do now. It was for the greater good.”

He sighs. “The greater good ... I wonder if that's how they saw it once they returned, decades older?”

“I suppose sometimes that's just part of the job.”

Bentura grins. It's a haunted grin that shows his sixty-plus years. “And

I suppose that sometimes the job requires too much.”

I stand from the couch. “What can I do for you, Admiral?”

Bentura turns, walking between the leather seats in the lobby and stops at the viewport, his hands still clasped behind him. Earth lights up his face with blue and green. “I apologize for this being so short notice. I realize the *Athens* is due to ship out tomorrow. But we really need your help with something.”

I step beside him at the viewport. “I’m listening.”

Bentura turns away and gestures to his office door. It hisses open. “A group of Preydean are willing to pay top dollar for a TMD. We can’t let that happen.”

I stop in the doorway. “Where—who would be stupid enough to sell the Preydean a temporal warhead?”

Bentura walks behind his black desk and looks up at me with a devilish grin. “We are.”

“... You’re gonna draw them out. With a dummy warhead. Then capture and interrogate them.”

“Before somebody else sells them the real thing.” From a desk drawer, Bentura produces two small glasses and a bottle of Kreegari fire brandy. He places the glasses on the desk with a soft clink and pulls the cork from the bottle. “We’ve taken a casing and replaced the guts with a warp furnace from an old DC 10 hauler. You familiar with them?”

I nod. “They play hell on ship sensors.”

“Just like a real temporal warhead would. It should be enough to convince them it’s the real thing, draw them out of whatever hole they’re hiding in.” He pours two fingers of the blue liquid into each glass and squeaks the cork back into the bottle. Within moments, the fire brandy turns red.

“You want me to make the sale ... ”

He hands me a glass. “We want you to setup *and* make the sell. Frankly, there’s no one better.”

I let the glass stay in his hand for a long moment before taking it.

“Admiral, I ... I've been exploring for a long time. Espionage isn't something I've even thought about for—”

He raises a hand. “We don't need just a rocket ship captain. Or just a spy. We need someone that can be a little bit of both. It's a short list and you're at the top of it.”

“I ... this isn't me. Not anymore.”

Silence.

“Think about it, Starson.” Bentura slides his glass off the desk and walks to his office's viewport. He points at Earth, peacefully turning in its orbit below. “The Preydean are animals. If they get their claws on a Temporal Warhead? Aim it right at Earth? You know what the repercussions could be.”

I sigh. And take a long drink. The fire brandy burns all the way down my throat, but leaves a sweet aftertaste. “How long until the dummy warhead is ready?”

“Three weeks. Your crew can wait until—”

“No,” I place the glass back on the table.

Bentura raises his eyebrows.

“The crew of the *Athens* isn't up for something like this.”

“No Federacy officer is—not really.”

I shake my head. “That's why I don't want Federacy officers.”

“... What are you thinking?”

“Bard.”

The Admiral leans on his desk. “Dear Lord. That Kreegari gives me—well, he unsettles me.”

“Bard's ... interest in ancient Earth culture—”

“Interest? The stuff he wears? The way he talks? More like an obsession ...”

“He has his reasons. The point is that this ‘obsession’ gives him access to black markets all over The Twelve.” I point at the Bentura's glass. “Including those with fire brandy.”

Bentura grins. “Touché.”

“The point is, if we need this deal to happen, he’ll have the contacts to make it happen fast.”

“I don’t have a problem with him. He’ll just attract a lot of attention.”

“Which is what we want.”

Bentura nods. “Point taken. Anyone else?”

I raise the glass back to my lips and pause just before saying in a low voice, “Olivia Nova.”

“Nova!” The Admiral rounds on me, sloshing fire brandy out of his glass. He swipes a hand through the air. “No way—forget it!”

“I know you two have history,” I say in a calm voice.

“History—that’s one word for it. She knocked out three of my teeth you know.”

“She’s really good at what—”

“And this scar!” He rolls up the blue sleeve of his uniform, spilling the rest of his drink. “You see this scar? That was her too!”

“She’s really good at what she does. You’ll never find anybody better with an explosive. Or an engine. And she’s a hell of a pilot.”

“Oh, I’m aware,” He rubs the sleeve back down. “But it’s those same talents that has her going through clones like gym socks. What’s she on now? Sixty-three?” He turns up his glass, and curls his lip when he realizes it’s empty.

I pick up the bottle and pour him another shot. “Her people don’t like the word ‘clone.’ ” He doesn’t hold the glass closer to me, but he doesn’t pull it away either. “They prefer ‘shell.’ ”

“Like I give a damn what she prefers.” He takes another sip before the brandy has a chance to change colors. He puckers at the sour taste.

I ease the bottle back onto Bentura’s desk. “Livy’s experience gives her a lot of talents. She’s basically three officers rolled into one. And since we’re going to have limited space anyway ...”

Bentura starts to raise the glass to his lips, then stops. “What do you mean—limited space? We’ll give you a Federacy rocket ship. Something older of course, but you’ll certainly have the room to—”

I shake my head. “That may have worked years ago, but now I’m too well known. If I’m going to sell this, I need to use my identity. People have to think I’ve turned. I have to use my personal ship.”

He turns back to the viewport, fingering the rim of his glass. “I didn’t even know you had a ship. How big is it?”

“Big enough to get the job done.”

“What model?”

“Phoenix Dx.”

“Phoenix? That’s barely Solar Class.”

“It’ll need some work.”

“You’d be better off in something bigger.”

“It’ll need some work.”

Bentura lets go of a heavy breath. “Phoenix Dx... those ships are— what—thirty years old?”

“Forty.”

“It’d be strange if it *didn’t* need work. How much are we talking?”

I smile. “Oh, I think anybody that’s footing the bill for a fake temporal warhead can handle it.”

Bentura crosses the space to his desk, picks up the fire brandy and pours himself another drink. “Alright. Fine.”

“Bard and Livy will need to be paid.”

He gestures vaguely. “Fine to all of it.”

I place the empty glass back on his desk, then start for his door. “I’ll comm Bard and Livy first thing in the morning.”

“Starson ...”

I turn, face him as his office door slides open.

Bentura’s mouth moves a little, as if he’s trying to find the right words. “The Preydean are very unpredictable. And so is this crew you’re putting together. Be careful. There’s a lot riding on this.”

“Relax, Admiral. This will go off without a problem.”

SIX HOURS AGO ...

“Patty, we got a huge problem,” the tall, cat-like Kreegari says from the communication’s console.

I step out of the gravlift. “What is it, Bard?”

He points a furry finger at the screen. “Our nefarious buyer appears to be early. Guess they know a shortcut.”

“Or they’re just wanting to check out the area, like us.” I narrow my eyes at the Preydean rocket ship on the viewdome. It looks like a clawed hand reaching out for us, each fingertip bristling with blaster cannons and torpedo tubes. “In case things go south.”

“They punched out of warp six minutes ago. Been hailing us ever since.” Bard’s hands go to his hips. “I say we make’em wait. I just confirmed with Bentura that those Federacy rocket ships aren’t gonna be in place for at least another hour.”

Bard’s twentieth century clothing is just as strange as always: black shirt, stretched to fit his thick shoulders and golden fur (across the front it says “Got Milk?” in white letters); green camo pants; and a black belt with a Jack Daniel’s buckle.

“The Preydean aren’t known for their patience.” I nod at the view dome. “What does she look like?”

Bard taps a few buttons on the console. “Weapon signatures show she’s a match for the *Pulp*. We’re too far away to take a gander at the warp furnace though.” His tail twitches back and forth from the tailored split in the back of his pants. “There’s no telling how fast she is.”

I cross my arms. “Magnify.”

“Hang on,” Livy says from the helm. “The nebula is giving the dome sensors a run for their money.” She taps buttons on the white keyboard to her right and then rotates a dial with a slender finger. “Got it.”

A separate image appears on the viewdome. It zooms in with a blur, blocky pixels smoothing into a high definition image of the Solar Class rocket ship. The clouds of the Styx Nebula part to expose her markings. They’re in Preydean, so it really just looks like a bunch of claw marks.

“The computer says it’s *The Stalker* alright,” Bard says. He shakes his

black tipped mane. “Never thought I’d be this close to a Preydean ship.”

“They’re hailing us.” Livy turns away from her console, flicking her straight hair out of her eyes. “Last chance to back out, Patrick. There’s a warp tunnel about to open in thirty seconds. We can still rendezvous with ___”

“We didn’t come all this way for nothing, Livy,” I say. “Let’s put on our game faces.” I give her a small nod. She sighs and then taps more buttons on her keyboard.

The image of *The Stalker* flickers and shifts into the reptilian face of a Preydean. Yellow eyes dot either side of an angular head jutting out of a long, flowing cloak. Out slips a forked tongue between rows of needle teeth. The triangular badge of a warmonger—their equivalent of captain—is displayed prominently on the chest of the cloak, an ornate design made from the bones of some small animal.

“*Captain Starson,*” the Preydean says in its deep, bubbled voice.

“Warmonger Bar’tock,” I flash a fake grin. “You’re early. By a lot.”

Bar’tock’s mouth opens and his throat bulges, like he’s trying to cough up something. The Preydean equivalent of a laugh. “*As are you. Perhaps we share your species’ tenacity for—what do you call it? ‘Getting down to business?’*”

“Fair enough. I share your species intolerance for surprises.” I step closer to the viewdome. “Do you have my blood gems?”

“... *I have them. Whether they become yours depends upon your delivery of the merchandise.*”

Livy curls her lip a little—just barely noticeable to someone that really knows her—and turns the dial for the shield emitters in the aft section of the *Space Pulp*.

“We’re lowering the shields around the cargo bay, so that your sensors can see for themselves.”

Bar’tock looks off screen and then his head jerks diagonally three times. “... *Our sensors do indicate that you’re carrying a temporal warhead. But such readings can be faked. I require a personal inspection.*”

I sigh, long and hard. “Visual inspection wasn’t part of the plan. If you

think I'm letting a pack of Preydean soldiers on board my ship, then you clearly don't think much of my intelligence."

"On the contrary, I think far more of your greed. No inspection. No deal."

A pause. I feel Bard and Livy's eyes on me.

"Fine," I say. "But only two Preydean, plus yourself."

"That will not be enough. We require—"

"What you require is something capable of ripping a hole in space large enough to swallow a planet. I have it. You don't."

His tongue darts out of his mouth. *"Surely some sort of compromise would be —"*

"I've compromised all I'm going to, Bar'tock. Clearly you have no qualms about killing others to get what you want, or you wouldn't be in the market for one of these things. So you can either do some compromising of your own or go back to your home. Nest, whatever. You have one minute to decide." I look at Bard over my shoulder and mime a throat slice. He kills the transmission, and the muzzle of the Preydean Warmonger is replaced with *The Stalker* floating in the red clouds of the Syxx Nebula.

Livy turns in her chair, narrowed eyes staring at me through strands of long, auburn hair. "Patrick, you can't seriously be considering letting that thing on board."

I hold up my hand. "We don't have a choice, Livy. If he runs, there go our chances of figuring out why the Preydean want this thing and how to stop them. Eventually somebody somewhere may give Bar'tock what he wants."

"I gotta side with Livy on this one, Patty," Bard says. The fur on the back of his neck stands up a little. "I don't think it's a good idea letting that maniac on the ship. He's just as likely to eat us as to pay us. Plus, there's always the off chance that he'll realize the TMD is a fake."

"Bard, we can't even tell it's a fake, and we've seen the real thing."

Bard opens his mouth to say something else, and Livy stands.

I raise my hands. "Look, I hear both of you. I don't want to do this

anymore than you do. But this may be the one chance we have to track them and get some answers. It's worth it. End of story."

Bard shrugs. "All right. Your call, buddy."

Livy purses her lips, plops back in her chair. "He's hailing again, *Captain*," Livy says in a hard voice.

I nod and Bar'tock's grim visage fills the dome again. "*Very well, Captain, we've agreed to your terms. Prepare to receive our boarding party in five tedras.*"

I cross my arms. "Five isn't nearly enough. We need to ... spiffy up a bit. Let's say ... ten."

"*You have five. I suggest you 'spiffy' quickly.*" The viewdome goes black.

I turn, face Livy and Bard. "What the hell is a 'tedra'?"

Bard shrugs. "Something from their religion, originally. It's the amount of time it took the Preydean to kill their god after they were granted life—around three minutes I think."

Livy rolls her eyes and crosses the bridge to the gravlift. "Charming."

"Keep an eye on them, Bard." I follow Livy into the lift. "Let us know when they're at the door."

Bard nods right before the gravlift door slides shut.

"Docking bay," I say.

Livy and I ride there in silence. She never looks at me.

When the door finally opens, Livy walks out at a brisk pace, stopping next to the weapons locker. She opens the metal door, banging it off the bulkhead.

"Livy ... are you alright?"

She grabs a DH blaster rifle from the shelf and snatches an energy pack from the cubby next to it. "'Alright,' why wouldn't I be 'alright'? We're about to sell a fake warhead to a bunch of ruthless Preydean. What's there not to be 'alright' about?" She slams the energy pack into the blaster rifle and kicks the locker door shut. Loudly.

I reopen the door. "Call it a hunch."

She walks to the docking bay door control panel, still never looking at

me. “I caught your comm. The one you sent to Bentura.”

“Okay ...”

She wheels on me. “You’re requesting another assignment after this one?”

“Here is the part where you tell me why you’re mad.”

“I’m not mad.” She turns around, punching buttons on the console. “I’m furious! I thought we were ... you and I—you know what, forget it.”

I step next to the console. “Livy ...”

“No, forget it. I don’t know what I was thinking. Maybe it was something like we would finally talk about ... about something other than the Preydean and weapons of temporal destruction.”

“There’s a lot going on here, Livy. Can we think big picture?”

“That’s all you ever see. Which means you never really think at all.”

“This isn’t fair. If you wanted—”

“*Hey guys,*” Bard’s voice cuts in from our wrist-comps. “*They’re at the cargo bay doors. Guess a tedra isn’t as long as I thought.*”

I hold up a hand. “Give us just a min—”

“We’re ready, Bard,” Livy adjusts the strap on her blaster, jabs her thumb into the red button on the console. “Opening the doors now.”

The bay doors creak open. The shield emitters kick on, keeping the atmo contained inside the cargo bay. Passing through the field with a yellow burst of static energy comes a rocket pod carrying the most dangerous race I’ve ever known, here to buy one of the most dangerous weapons that’s ever existed, being sold by me and the most dangerous girl I’ve ever had sex with.

Every Federacy Captain eventually asks himself two questions.

Question one: Why do we have to learn how to fight an enemy when we have access to Temporal weapons of Mass Destruction? Losing millions of lives on the front line doesn’t become an issue when a strategically placed TMD literally makes the universe forget your enemy ever existed.

The answer: people need to sleep at night. To take some small measure of comfort in a hundred-year old treaty that keeps all members of the Twelve Worlds from erasing each other. However, deep down, everyone smart enough—aware enough—eventually wonders question two: What really—I mean really, *really*—stops one planet from erasing another?

And the short answer: absolutely nothing.

At the end of the day, a government's word is only as good as the set of circumstances surrounding it. All of them are just one economic crash, one military failure, one political uprising from initiating the unthinkable. And throwing Preydean into the mix just turns the ridiculously scary into the infinitely scary.

The Preydean are a vile, nomadic species that can often be found close to the Styx Nebula, pillaging tiny outposts or any small ship unlucky enough to cross their path.

Fifty years ago, a warmonger named Ga'kall sent a comm to a remote Federacy science outpost. The Preydean message pretty much amounted to “We’re on our way to steal everything you have—anybody that doesn’t want to be eaten should vacate immediately.” The scientists thought it was nothing but primitive saber rattling. And although the logs showed there was a general sense of anxiety—nobody made a move to pack up and leave. Two days later, another comm was sent to Federacy Command: It showed the Preydean Warmonger stuffing his mouth with human scientists.

And he was eating them alive.

After an hour of chomping, slurping, and chewing, the Warmonger eventually puked from over gorging his stomach. His Preydean pack then swooped in, feeding on the vomited remains. The video ended with the Warmonger laughing through tufts of human hair still clinging to his teeth.

Using Weapons of Temporal Destruction may be unthinkable to most, but the unthinkable is well within the Preydean wheelhouse.

The Preydean rocket pod teeters on repulsers for a few moments before its landing gears scrape to a halt on the deck. The angular shuttle is faded brown and red, with edges that extend into long thin curves like razors.

The side hatch slides open, and Warmonger Bar'tock is the first to emerge. His foot talons make soft clicking noises on the deck plating as he steps out. He pulls back the hood to his dark red cloak and makes a vague gesture with a three fingered hand. Two blue cloaked Preydean snake their heads out of the hatch, then follow their leader down the ramp. The three of them stop ten feet away from me and Livy, swaying their thick tails back and forth. Their corded muscles tense under dark green scales.

Bar'tock straightens to his full seven foot height and his tongue flicks the air twice. "Captain Starson, at last. We meet—face to face."

I cross my arms. "Didn't know I was popular."

Bar'tock barks out a laugh with a jaw large enough to fit three human heads. "Your ability to adapt to any situation the Federacy places before you has made you extremely popular. You saved an entire planet from a sentient wormhole. Persuaded a nebula dragon not to lay her eggs in the moons of Sussex Prime. Somehow wooed the Queen of Ridgimon IX to —"

Livy steps towards Bar'tock, sliding a finger inside her blaster rifle's trigger guard. "Are we going to do business, or what?"

The three Preydean laugh. It's a horrible sound, like metal in a garbage cruncher.

"Of course," Bar'tock says after the laughter slows to a series of low clicks. I was just making ... what do you call it ... 'casual conversation'? And attempting to ascertain why such a successful Captain would want to leave the Federacy."

"Keep ascertaining." I step sideways, gesture to the TMD behind me. It's black, circular, and covered with red blinking lights. "I think we can all agree it would be best to conclude our business and be on our way as soon as possible."

Bar'tock looks back at the Preydean on his right and quickly flicks his head in the direction of the fake warhead. The Preydean crosses the space, slowly pulling a digital monocle from the folds of his blue cloak and placing it over a yellow eye. He leans over the warhead and presses a scaly palm against the smooth surface. The lights shift from red to yellow, and a tubular lux casing slides out of the top with a hiss. The Preydean gently pulls the casing out of the warhead and examines it, monocle whirring as its lenses zoom in and out. After a few seconds, he looks at Bar'tock and grunts twice.

Bar'tock opens his mouth wide enough to show his pointed teeth, the Preydean equivalent of a smile. "Everything appears to be in order, Captain." He reaches into the folds of his red cloak and brings out a leather pouch. "Here is our agreed upon payment."

He flings the pouch in my general direction. I take a quick step forward, snatching it out of the air. I shake its six contents into my palm: Blood gems, each one rare enough—expensive enough—to buy the *Space Pulp* five times over. Each stone is half an inch wide and literally glows red.

"So, what are your plans with the warhead?" I say, dropping the gems back into the pouch one-by-one.

"It is of no concern to you," Bar'tock says. He barks at the Preydean inspecting the casing. Within moments, the other Preydean has the casing slid back into place and pulling the monocle away from his eye. He and the other blue hood wrap a three-fingered grip at opposite sides of the warhead and lift.

Livy's eyes suddenly widen.

I wait until they carry the warhead past us and then step closer to Livy, dropping my voice to a whisper. "What's wrong?"

She points her chin at one of the blue hooded Preydean. "You notice anything peculiar about that monocle?"

"Seems a bit fancy for the Preydean, but—"

"Too fancy. It's Federacy tech. There's no way a fake warhead will fool

it.”

My ears pound. “If they thought it was a fake,” I whisper, “they would’ve tried to gut us right here on the deck.”

“Which can only mean one thing,” she says.

With a clawed finger, Bar’tock activates the hatch controls to his rocket pod. His two Preydean carry the warhead behind him.

I wheel around, raising my wrist-comp. “Bard, do a quick scan of the cargo bay.”

The longest seconds of my life pass before he finally comes back: “*Sure, okay. Everything alright?*”

The shuttle’s hatch slides open. Livy thumbs the blaster rifle to full-auto.

“That’s what I’m hoping you’ll tell me,” I whisper.

“*Well ... there is something weird in there. I’m picking up—holy crap—I’m picking up temporal radiation. The Federacy gave us the real thing!*”

As a rocket ship captain, you know that, occasionally, spending too much time trying to figure out why something awful is happening can only keep you from stopping the awful *from* happening. In those situations, all you can do is take action and hope you live to see if it was the right move.

Livy and I lock eyes. She presses the blaster rifle’s stock into her shoulder and nods.

I turn back, facing the Preydean. “Wait just a second, you slimy, scale-covered lizard-brains.”

Bar’tock and the others freeze, slowly turn their yellow eyes in our direction. “Was that supposed to be an insult?” Bar’tock says.

I step forward, holding up the bag of blood gems. “You’re damn right it is. Our guy said we were getting twice this!”

Bar’tock’s eyes narrow. “You counted the gems some time ago. I taste ...” his tongue flicks the air twice ... “a deception.”

For a long moment, the only sound in the docking bay is the deep hum of the *Space Pulp’s* engines.

Bar'tock hunches, clawed hands at his sides. One of the blue hooded Preydean hisses and crouches over the warhead. The other steps between it and us.

Livy shifts her aim between all three Preydean, waiting to see which one will make the first move. My fingers brush against the butt of the blaster pistol on my hip ...

If you're human, the last thing you want to do is go toe-to-toe with Preydean in a confined space. Even if you're armed, their thick hide and quick reflexes tip the scales in their favor. Unless you're close enough to put a blaster bolt in an eye or an ear slit, all you can do is hope for something in the environment that will level the playing field.

"Livy," I say in a low voice, "the emitters."

Her eyes flick to the shield emitters, just over Bar'tock's right shoulder.

"You got me?" she says.

Bar'tock's jaw opens wide, exposing rows of needle teeth, then shuts with a loud clap.

I put one hand on the metal railing behind us, slide my fingers under the back of Livy's belt. "Always."

Her eyes flick to me for just a moment. She immediately looks back to Bar'tock, tightening the grip on the rifle even more.

Bar'tock yells. And charges us.

He moves in a tight zig-zag, quickly jerking side to side. One of the blue cloaks stays next to the warhead, but the other one follows Bar'tock, moving in the same style charge.

Livy shifts her aim to the shield emitter and squeezes the trigger. A high-pitched whine fills the docking bay and the emitter erupts into sparks. The force field flickers twice before disappearing completely.

A massive gust of howling wind shoves everything in the room towards the blackness of space.

The Preydean clutching the warhead screams. Both he and the other Preydean tumble end over end out of the *Space Pulp*. Bar'tock hunches close to the deck, shoving his talons into the grating. He locks eyes with

me, and hisses. His red cloak whips violently around him before being completely ripped from his massive shoulders.

Bar'tock's corded muscles thicken underneath the dark green scales as he hunches closer to the deck. A portable generator is ripped from its storage locker on the far wall. The fifty pound hunk of metal spins through the air and then stops abruptly in Bar'tock's open mouth.

And he bites it right in two.

Both pieces tumble into space, briefly clanging off the closing emergency doors. He bares his teeth and growls, slowly using the grate to pull his way closer and closer to us.

I pull on Livy's belt, desperately trying to ignore the burning in my arms and hands. Livy shifts her weight, wrapping her legs around my waist and squeezes the trigger again. A yellow burst of light leaps from the blaster rifle and slams harmlessly into Bar'tock's thick, scaly back. He bares his teeth at us and yells something about defecating our remains.

Livy smiles, lowers her weapon, and fires three more times. But not at Bar'tock—at the grating panels he clings to.

Bar'tock screams my name as the panels twist and then yank away with a loud screech. They go spinning with him into the black and red of the Styx.

The emergency doors clang shut a moment later, dumping us on the floor. Our chests heave in the deafening silence.

"Somebody gonna tell me what's going on down there?" Bard says from my wrist-comp.

I raise the comp to my chin. "Bar'tock—he's off the ship," I say between hard breaths, "but we've got another problem—the warhead went with him."

CHECK OUT *SPACE PULP!* FOR SALE IN THE KINDLE STORE NOW!