

SUPERHERO UNIVERSE

TESSERACTS NINETEEN

SELECTED and EDITED by

CLAUDE LALUMIÈRE
& MARK SHAINBLUM

EDGE

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FOREWORD: A NEW UNIVERSE OF CANADIAN SUPERHEROES

Claude Lalumière

I FIRST MET Mark Shainblum way back in 1989, when he walked into my (now defunct) Montréal bookshop Nebula. We instantly hit it off and have stayed friends ever since, in part because of our profound but complex passions for superhero fiction, comics, SF, and, yes, Montréal (where neither of us live anymore).

By then Mark was already an accomplished writer and publisher, having co-created the iconic superhero comics series *Northguard*, to name his signature work.

Years passed. I said farewell to bookselling and started editing anthologies (and writing for them, too). One of my dream projects was to put together a Tesseract volume dedicated to the superhero genre. I always knew I wanted Mark, one of Canada's leading experts on this particular theme, as my co-editor, should I ever bring the idea to fruition.

EDGE Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing — publisher of the Tesseract anthologies — perhaps tiring of my ceaseless pestering for this volume to happen, finally acquiesced.

Canadian writers sent us 221 submissions, with more good superhero fiction and poetry than any one volume could contain. Mark and I read and debated and reread and debated some more... until we narrowed down our selections to these twenty-five texts.

Within these pages are superheroic scenarios unfolding all over the Canadian landscape— but our authors also let their

DIARY OF A TEENAGE GRIZZLY

Patrick T. Goddard

Dear Claude and Mark,

Sorry I couldn't come up with something new for your anthology. But I remembered telling Claude at a party once that I'd been a teen superhero in the 1980s. I dug up my diary from 1983, when I'd just gotten my powers and Calgary was turning into the epicenter of superheroic Canada. The Time Crash of '86 retbombed our powers, but words on paper somehow always manage to survive these crises...

Saturday, September 10, 1983

Dear Diary,

This summer, I got a chance to start fresh. We got posted from Edmonton to Calgary,* which I was very glad for. Shortly after moving in, we took our holidays in the Rockies. I sort of enjoyed myself, except for having to deal with my brothers. I went for a long walk by myself and got lost. I found a bear cub, and I knew to be careful, except that he looked like he was hurt. I got closer, and that's when I heard a big roar and before I could run away there was a giant grizzly bear in my way. Then I don't remember anything. It was weird that I didn't wake up in the hospital or something, because I guess I got attacked. But I was okay. Except for the fact that I didn't have any clothes, they were all torn up on the ground.

When I got back, there were Mounties all around. I'd been missing for three days! Mom & Dad were really worried, of course. But I didn't want to answer a bunch of questions. I didn't even know what had happened! I was just really, really hungry. I got very upset and then I just stood up and roared! Everyone was scared. I had turned into a grizzly bear! All I wanted to do was eat something. My mom calmed everyone down (she's a nurse, so she's good at that), and then she calmed me down, and then I turned back into Patrick. It was really weird.

School started last Tuesday. The bus dropped me off about ten blocks from my new school, Notre Dame, which is downtown.** It's a Catholic school, so we have Religion for home-room. They gave us a New Testament on the first day. I sing in the church choir on base and I do the Readings sometimes, so I already know a lot of it. I think Jesus would have been a good superhero if he had fought the Romans instead of being crucified.

Mom and Dad don't want me hurting or scaring anyone, so I have to go to this school to learn how to control my powers. My class is 8X. So far school is all right. The only thing that peeves me is that we have to take extra classes because of our powers, so we don't get options, like Music or Drama.

Anyway, remember how I swore I'd never repeat "the Chantal Syndrome"? Well, there's this girl called Michelle. She's fairly short, and has blond hair, and... well, I can't exactly put it on paper. But I saw her on the first day and she had a cold and I wished she was in my class and she was.

** My father was in the Army, which made me an Army brat. This was my eighth move in thirteen years.*

*** Normally I would have gone to Sir Samuel Steele Junior High, on base, but it didn't have an X program. Besides Notre Dame, only North West Academy offered superneeds classes, but it was private and we couldn't afford it. A couple of my classmates left Notre Dame for North West and joined the T-Force in grade 9. I hated those guys even before I found out they were funded by the Think Tank.*

Monday, September 12, 1983

Today has not been that great. Religion was boring, as usual. We're always talking about Great Responsibility. The teacher

JESSICA AND THE TRUE NORTH

Kevin Cockle

HE WAS TELLING her about how identity was a pattern; how his algorithm detected patterns, and detected patterns implied hidden patterns. She registered the pride in his voice more than the content— pride and delight. The math made him happy in an uncomplicated way, and if he'd just stuck with that — the math he'd formulated, as opposed to what he'd done with it — he'd have seemed almost harmless. But math wasn't harmless, and neither was Rickard Acheson.

A mere lad when they'd apprehended him a dozen or so years ago; an attractive man in his late twenties now. Gone was the casual "start-up guy" style he'd once affected: now he looked as though consultants dressed him for television. Broad shoulders. Shiny black hair. Tailored suit. "Times change, Jess," he said, smiling in triumph.

"People don't," she said, keeping her voice level, giving him nothing to read.

"That's funny, coming from you."

"You know what I mean."

"Yeah, I do," Rickard said. "Chthonic Sun" had been his online alter-ego in his rebellious teens. Now he just went by "Rick." "We stay the same, and the world revolves around us. You guys were the big heroes back in the day, the Seer and the Rock. Now look at you." Acheson gave her a sympathetic, almost parental smile. "There was this profile on one of those online dating sites last year— who the guy was, what he expected. Put his tax return online so people could see what kind of cheques he could write. Had a habit of hitting women, so he

just led with that. Didn't lie about it, didn't try to cover it up. Said that being with him would be well-rewarded, and that prospective applicants should expect to get hit from time to time. Guess how many responses he got."

Jessica said nothing, could tell she was being baited.

"Three thousand, Jess," Rickard continued. "3482, to be precise. Dating service didn't take his profile down. Police didn't do shit. People bitched like they do online; other people bitched right back, like they do about free speech. In the end, guy got what he wanted. So did some girl. What we in the math biz call a Pareto optimal solution."

Jessica stared out the window into dark clouds, thirty thousand feet above Lesser Slave Lake, Alberta. "What's your point?"

"That's the world now, Jess. That's why I'm the hero now, and you and the rest of True North are the criminals."

"You're an asshole."

"If by 'asshole' you mean *Wired's* Man of the Year, then, yeah, I'm an asshole."

Jess looked at her dim reflection in the darkened plexiglass porthole. Haunted, bleak eyes looked back at her from a nervous, patrician face. She'd been gangly-beautiful at eighteen — more willowy than frail — but approaching fifty now, the neurological stress of her Gift had given her a thin, brittle aspect. She looked like a woman made of fine china. Felt like one, too.

There was a gradual change in forward momentum, barely detectable by the plane's occupants. Jessica marveled at the technology: the silence of the thrusters shifting to vertical descent; the businesslike opulence of the passenger cabin — like a well-appointed hotel room in the sky. She guessed that the plane was the civilian version of a military command jet, but it was so hard to parse what was military, what was corporate, what was government these days.

She turned her most arctic gaze upon Rickard, gave him those pale polar blues. Must've been an accusation in her expression, because after a while he said: "Hey, you made the deal, Jess. You came to us. I'm good, but the program never would have found *you*. Your identity isn't well defined — it's as much noise as it is signal."

"Pareto optimal," she breathed. That got a smile out of him.

PSSST! HAVE YOU HEARD... THE RUMOR?

D. K. Latta

MY FULL NAME? Anthony Samuel DeMulder— Tony “Spats” DeMulder to those who know me, on account of my keen dress sense. I haven’t actually worn spats in ten years or more — got to keep with the times, eh? — but the nickname stuck.

I’m whatcha might call a businessman who engages in the sort of activities that don’t always get reported in their entirety to the Revenue boys up in Ottawa.

The truth is— I’m a racketeer. I don’t mind admitting to it. Not now anyway.

And I was pretty good at it, too. I ran most of the east side and parts of the docks. I had a couple of dozen guys directly under me with another hundred or so who, one way or another, were working for me— even if they didn’t always know it themselves. I had a girlfriend and two mistresses. Or maybe I had two girlfriends and a mistress. I lived in a penthouse apartment and had another place in Petawawa for my ma.

Yeah, I was on top of the world.

And then it all fell apart— because of him.

Who him? you ask. That guy, that actor— Ken Anton. Though I guess his real name was Antonowicz or something. He was a Polack but changed his name when he got into showbiz. Y’know, the radio actor. Some say he was one of the best in the world, if you like that sort of thing. Me, I like that guy with the dummy— what’s his name? Well, don’t matter. Anyway, Ken Anton— that’s when it all started to fall apart.

I know what you’re thinking. How could that be? Didn’t something happen to Anton? It was in the papers and the papers don’t lie— right?

Sure. But they don't always know the whole story, either.
Let me tell you how it went down.

The first time I saw Ken Anton was at the Palais Royale down by the harbour. I didn't really understand the music— "jazz" ain't my thing. But for a man of my, y'know, civic standing, you don't go places to see things, you go to be seen. So I used to entertain my cronies — I mean, my business associates — down at the Royale. And Anton was sometimes there. For a radio actor he was a good-looking Joe, with slicked back black hair and a lip mustache— broad at the shoulders, too. Someone told me he used to be an athlete or something. Anyway, there'd usually be a dame or two with him, and other stars dropping by his table. Lorne Greene, John Drainie, the comedian, Johnny Wayne, that coloured musician, Oscar Peterson. I didn't know most of them to look at, but people would point 'em out to me.

Anton kept to his tables and I kept to mine.

Except then one night— he didn't keep to his.

It was a Friday and the Drummy Young Band was on the bill.

I'd seen Anton cut a rug on the dance floor, as they say. He was a decent hooper, I guess, light on his toes. So I didn't think too much about it when I saw his head appearing and disappearing through the bodies, even as he seemed to be getting closer and closer to my table. I only got suspicious when I noticed he was alone, no dame in his arms. I realized he wasn't dancing, but walking— toward me.

He stopped at my table, a mad glare in his eyes.

One of my boys stood up, to put himself between me and the Fancy Dan. But I waved him down, at that point more amused and curious than anything.

"Are you Anthony DeMulder?" he asked, pronouncing the "th" as a "t" like some boarding-school priss.

I took a long puff on my cigar. "I might be."

"We have a mutual acquaintance in one Marie-Josette Bouchard."

"Who?" I asked, genuinely confused.

Then one of the dames beside me, Bessy, giggled, and leaned toward my ear and whispered, "He means Josie."

"Oh, Josie!" I said. "Yeah, I know Good-Time Josie." Then I frowned and looked around. "Say— where is she? She went to powder her nose a few minutes ago and ain't come back."

"Nor will she, you Neanderthal," fumed Anton.

THE ISLAND WAY

Mary Pletsch & Dylan Blacquiere

BEFORE I TURN off my alarm, I have a few seconds in which I can pretend. For that instant I can let myself believe that my memories of salt spray in my face and the schooner's deck rising beneath my feet and the night wind howling against her sails are nothing more than souvenirs of a particularly vivid dream. Logic murmurs in my thoughts: the days of tall ships ended more than a century ago.

But I still smell of brine and brimstone, and as I slap the snooze button on my clock radio my hand bumps against an article clipped from the *Guardian* newspaper. FISHERMAN SURVIVES CLOSE CALL WHEN BOAT SINKS. A young man with a big smile and a crooked front tooth grins at me from the newsprint. The clock radio flashes 7:00.

I've had maybe four hours of rest. I need a shower and a coffee, in that order, before I can face waitressing the lunch shift at the Sea Star. Last year at this time I was getting up to go to high school; it still feels weird to think of myself as an adult.

I shower, throw on my work shirt and some black dress pants, then walk down to the Arcade for some coffee. The Arcade isn't what mainlanders think of as an arcade, even though there's a decrepit pinball machine and Ms. Pac-Man in the back room. It's more like a grill and snack bar, and it's the closest thing to a coffee shop that my village has. If you want a full breakfast, you go to a restaurant, but if you just want a hot drink you go to the Arcade.

The coffee in the Arcade is weak and always served far too hot. I could save money and drink better coffee if I made the stuff I had at home. I rarely do. I had to explain to my last boyfriend that it wasn't about being too lazy to make my

own coffee, or liking the Arcade's coffee better. It's about supporting local business and keeping my neighbors employed. That's the Island way of doing things. If we don't help each other out, who will?

He didn't get it, and our relationship didn't last long. He also didn't like that I went out at night without telling him where I was going, and I guess I can't blame him there. I do blame him for acting like he was better than my friends and family just because he was from Toronto. He was only in PEI for a summer job anyway. He went back to Ontario to start college a couple weeks ago, and I'm surprised at how little I miss him. That'll teach me to date somebody from away.

I notice the autumn chill in the air as I walk the few blocks from my basement apartment in Uncle Lennie's house to the Arcade. The village is quiet. The tourists are long gone. Fisherman's Quay is closed, not that anyone local ever eats there. There's better lobster to be had at Andrea's Restaurant. Andrea's is shut now, too, like the fishing museum and the Albatross's Nest gift shop. They'll open up again in May for the summer season.

Only the Sea Star Family Diner and the Arcade stay open year-round, for which I'm grateful. The Arcade gives me my coffee, and the Sea Star gives me my paycheque. The Sea Star used to belong to Papa, my dad's father, and then his second son, my Uncle Lennie, took it over. Now, just like them, I'm in the family business.

I shove open the front door of the Arcade and Gracie Gallant behind the front counter greets me. Gracie's run the Arcade for as long as I can remember. Candy lines the area below the counter, while bags of chips hang from clips on the wall. In the corner, cans of pop have been wedged into a cooler originally designed to hold bottles. Old-fashioned white boards with clip-on letters spell out the menu: coffee, fries, pizza by the slice, ice cream. Gracie's pouring me a large coffee before I get the chance to speak.

I pay for my coffee, stir in some cream and sugar from the containers at the side of the counter, and then I go see who else is in the Arcade this morning. I walk to the end of the counter and turn the corner, where tables line a long, narrow room running the length of the building. The place is packed, but in the back corner Uncle Lennie raises his arm and waves to me. He's sitting at a table with Papa, Art, and Preston. Art

BLUNT INSTRUMENTS

Geoff Hart

THE VOICES WHISPER incessantly in my ears: news of the world, patriotic slogans, occasionally old comedy routines. Sometimes there are the sex dreams. Those hurt; I wish I knew who I was cavorting with, or even whether they were dreams or memories. Whatever drugs they're giving me make it impossible to distinguish the two. I don't know who I am, don't even know my name. I have a strong sense of a life before this, but it's there by inference, like the empty socket left behind after a tooth has been pulled. I have a sense of gratitude to those who feed me through tubes and who keep me here, safe and knowing that someday I'll be useful again. I remember newsreel images of starving Biafrans, napalm strikes on jungle, other horrors. Here, they promise me, I'm useful and a guardian of everything we hold dear against The Forces of Evil. (Yeah, I hear the capital letters.)



Then there are the awakenings: my eyes open, my body still damp, and I slowly focus on the circle of flickering fluorescent light, and the voice of my handler, no longer filtered through water.

There follow what could be called "battles." Not pitched fights with dozens of men on each side firing guns at each other, but epic knockdowns between various titans. I hear bits and snatches from the Special Forces troops who sit opposite me in the chopper, casting scared glances my way when they think I'm not looking. Because of my impenetrable hide, they wake me to fight the energy villains: those who've mastered

electricity, electromagnetism, sunlight, plasma, dark energy, nuclear power— even photosynthesis. Some are geniuses, some not so much (even by my standards), but it always goes down the same way. They drop me from the chopper, we size each other up, and then we set to whaling on each other until one of us can't take anymore. Usually the perp; it takes a lot less energy for me to stand there and grin and take a beating than it takes them to exert every last scrap energy, hoping they'll blow me away or blast me into tiny bits.

Nobody's blasted me into tiny bits, but I hurt for days afterwards. Maybe it could happen, though. I don't take anything for granted, least of all survival.

Sometimes they give me the killer robots, giant critters, and other things best handled by a good pummelling. I hear hints they have others who specialize in other types of perps. I've seen the wombs they keep us in, but never the residents. Guess they figure it wouldn't be a great idea to let us compare notes. Sometimes I have to fight two or more perps simultaneously. Three or four is worst, particularly when one of them's like me and can take a pounding, while their buds nip at my heels, trying to bring me down so the big guy can step on my throat.

When the smiting's done, I either hand them the cuffs and convince them to do the smart thing, or beat on them again until they stop moving, then snap on the cuffs myself. I don't *think* I've ever killed anyone, but I undoubtedly came close a couple or three times, and my handlers are always quick to reassure me that a loss here and there would be acceptable. We're the good guys, they remind me, and if the bad guys want to share in our rights, they shouldn't be bad guys.



My handlers aren't stupid— or at least they've learned from past stupidities. Since the CN Tower fell, they know enough to drive the perps outside urban areas to minimize the collateral damage. Today, they drop me out of the copter onto a stretch of three-lane highway, just uphill of a soaring cloverleaf, and I see her, standing there, fists clenched, lycra straining against an unlikely bosom. She's as scared as I am. She probably knows as much about me as I know about her— basically, nothing; they didn't even give me a sitrep this time, or hint about why I'm supposed to be fighting her.

BLOODHOUND

Marcelle Dubé

THE SMELL INSINUATED itself into Luke Corrigan's dreams; he turned away from the open window of his bedroom, trying to escape the acrid stink.

Finally he woke up and swung his feet out of bed and sat on the edge, naked and sweating, his heart beating fast. In the war, he'd wake up just like this, convinced that something was in the trench with him. Only once had it been a German. Usually it was just rats.

He reached for the filter on his bedside table, then paused. He needed to figure out what the smell was before putting on the filter.

It was still dark, and the only sound was the loud ticking of the alarm clock by his bedside. Moonlight streamed through the window of the barn loft that was his bedroom, gilding the barrel stove against one wall, washing the rough pine planks of the floor in pale light, and bouncing off the old, warped mirror above the chest of drawers, where he kept the flowered porcelain pitcher and bowl for shaving.

The smell teased him, first appearing, then disappearing, leaving only the ancient smells of hay, manure, and horses filtering up through the floorboards of the loft, along with the more recent smells of gasoline and grease from the little repair shop he had set up in the far corner of the barn.

He wrinkled his nose and took a deep breath. Some smells grew bright and sharp when he did that. Not this time. Whatever it was, it wasn't near. Still, something about it was familiar enough to raise his hackles.

He pushed the tangled sheet away and stood up to pad over to the window. The hot Manitoba night filled his room.

Filled the valley with dust and parched crops and small dead things lying by dried-up waterholes. Even the crickets didn't have the heart to chirp. His back was damp from the sheets, and he could smell the sweat on his scalp.

Harriet MacNeil's farm stood middle-of-the-night quiet, with a half-moon and a wash of diamond stars beaming down on the seared fields beyond her farmhouse. Nothing moved.

Breathing shallowly, he turned his head one way, then the other, trying to make sense of what he was smelling. Dry earth thirsty for rain. Boulders gradually releasing their warmed stone smell. The faint whiff of a coyote that had passed by a few hours ago.

Other smells were so prevalent that he only noticed them by their absence: Rex, the MacNeils's dog, whose smell was as much a part of the scent landscape as the smell of the maple trees in the farmyard; the faint, gagging smell of Jamison's pig farm three miles upwind; the ever-present perfume of a wild grass that he had yet to identify but had come to call "sweet hay," which was what Allie, Missus MacNeil's granddaughter, called it. He had moved into the loft above the empty barn in February, where he near froze to death before he figured out the wood stove, and even then the smell of sweet hay had lingered.

And now, underneath them all, the ghost stink of death riding the wind.

He stuck his head out the window and looked in the direction of the pig farm. There, on the horizon, was a long, glowing snake that seemed to leap toward him even as he watched.



Harriet MacNeil woke from a deep sleep to the sound of her name. Allie? Then the voice penetrated her sleep-befuddled awareness. Luke. Her strange tenant.

She sat up suddenly, clutching the threadbare cotton sheet to her chest, and the old iron bed that had belonged to her parents squeaked beneath her bulk. What was Luke Corrigan doing in her bedroom?

He was a dark figure standing by her bedside. Rex stood next to him, whining a little.

"What is it?" she asked, automatically looking to the window, but there was no glow of fire, her ever-present fear, especially

THE JAM: A SECRET BOWMAN

Bernard E. Mireault

GORDON SAT WITH his arms wrapped around his knees near the wall of the ramshackle shed. It housed the roof access stairwell of the ancient apartment building that he now called home. The building was one of a group of five in a tight cluster, but his was the tallest at twelve storeys. The view was good; a million things to look at, some illegal.

His dog, Harvey, a Labrador-sized mixed breed, was asleep beside him with his black nose on his paws. His business had been done an hour ago but the dog knew the routine and seemed happy with it. Harvey didn't seem to need much exercise to stay fit; he had the physical trimness and reflexes of a ninja. Gordon wished that he could claim half as much.

He scratched the top of the dog's head for a minute and then slowly stood up and had a good stretch. He wore a loose-fitting costume: dark green jogging suit with an inverted orange triangle sewn onto the chest and a hood that had been modified into a mask. There were other little bits of orange sewn onto the forehead and cheeks and the clumsy hand stitching showed plainly. The hood covered the back, top and sides of his head and face, with large square holes for the eyes. It split at the bridge of his nose and fell to either side of his head where it eventually attached to the shoulders of his outfit, leaving the lower half of his face visible and creating a dark cave on either side of his neck. His gloves and boots were dirty white, as was the jury-rigged tool belt that he wore around his waist, with four small tubes on either side of a large rectangular interlocking buckle. Most of the costume's components were

regular athletic wear. The boots and gloves bore large cuffs, custom-made by his sister.

Gordon had a final look around before he returned back to his tiny apartment four floors below. Eastward, downtown Montréal sparkled and blinked like some weird jewel in the autumn night. He loved the older neon signs, they had so much style. When he was younger he used to find himself walking those streets several nights a week, going for some live music and beer at one of a handful of dive bars. These days money was such an issue that it just didn't make sense to spend it at a bar; when he felt the need he just did his drinking at home. As for music, he wrote songs and played them on his own guitar. That was good, too.

A weird scream. A strange, quavering cry. His dog leapt up and pointed in the direction where the sound had come from. The costumed man crossed the roof and, with care informed by late-onset vertigo, knelt down about three feet from the edge and braced himself, looking cautiously over. Below him was the top of the neighboring apartment, an eight-storey building with a roof garden; assorted plants growing in a multitude of large white buckets arranged in rows. A young man dressed in grey and beige military camouflage came out from behind the roof access shed holding a bow and quiver in one hand and an acoustic guitar case in the other. Moving quickly he laid the case at his feet, took the string off the bow, and broke it down into three pieces. He turned his attention back to the guitar case, undoing the fasteners quickly and flipping the lid open. He placed his weapon and quiver inside, then shrugged off his jacket and pants to reveal a white T-shirt and faded blue jeans. He stuffed the camouflage outfit into the guitar case and snapped the fasteners shut. All this had taken place in roughly thirty seconds and all to the tune of the strange wail coming from street level.

From the higher roof Gordon concluded he was witnessing the aftermath of a terrible crime. Shooting arrows at pedestrians? Could this be for real? He was stunned.

The young man stood up, guitar case in hand, and was about to pull open the roof-access door when suddenly he stopped. He took a phone from the back pocket of his jeans. He stared at the little screen for a moment then put the guitar case down and typed on his device furiously with both thumbs.

IN THE NAME OF FREE WILL

A. C. Wise

HER BONES ACHE with the promise of rain. That's what comes of having them shattered, sawed through, pieces of her pinned like doll parts to the wall of the Freedom Tower. That's what comes of being a message for Captain Freedom, showing him his vulnerability and his inability to protect those he loves. Giving him a reason to suffer. To seek vengeance. To grow into a stronger man.

Bullshit. Utter fucking bullshit.

She flexes stiff fingers. She's been waiting just over an hour, in the park's pre-dawn gloom, outside the glow of lampposts lining the path. Her skin, greyish now, blends with the shadows between trees. Her bones may ache, but death has taught her patience.

When the predator finally passes, he doesn't notice her. These are his hunting grounds— six women so far, their bodies left for hapless joggers to find. Always this park. He's a local, choosing convenience over discretion. So much for don't shit where you eat.

She steps out smoothly behind him, uses his shirt to haul him off balance. Once he's down, she settles her weight over his midsection, knees pinning his arms so he can't reach for any weapons.

She looks him in the eye. Panic turns to a sneer and back again; seeing her, then really seeing her.

She could do it quick and quiet — a knife between the ribs — but she owes him this: looking him in the eye as she chokes the life from him. Because she knows what it feels like to die.

She's strong, another thing death gave her. Force of will, the ability to make a decision and stick to it. The will it takes to come back from the grave, to put yourself back together after you've been cut into pieces and pinned to a wall.

Her cold hands squeeze his throat. He thrashes, fighting to live. She's right there, looking him in the eye as he goes slack.

She stands and wipes her hands on her pant legs. There's only time to step into the shelter of the trees again before the shaking starts, her whole body wracked with violent tremors. She remembers how it felt as her blood left her body, the terror as the world narrowed, then winked out. She knows exactly what she did to the man lying on the pathway behind her, what she took away from him.

Her stomach heaves, bile between chattering teeth. She doubles over, making herself small, fetal. Her vision narrows, tunnelling. She lets it, closes her eyes, breathes shallow and waits. Eventually, the shaking stops.

Good. The sun will be up soon, and she wants to change into clean clothes before the Freedom Squad comes for her.



Will is the first into the abandoned warehouse, the silver-white of his suit generating its own luminescence and casting a soft glow around him. Perched on an empty shipping crate, she watches them approach— Captain Freedom, Star Sire, and Fury.

She's surprised it took them this long. She's left three bodies in as many months, and made little attempt to cover her tracks. On the other hand, one body might be a random act of violence, two a coincidence. Three is a pattern, a sign of a deranged mind requiring superheroic intervention. Anything less is beneath the Freedom Squad's notice. Unless a villain makes it personal.

When they draw close enough to see her, but haven't yet, she bangs her heel against the corrugated metal, drawing their attention. Will — Captain Freedom — is the first to look up, the catch in his breath audible.

Even wearing shapeless sweatpants and an oversize grey hoodie, even with the new pallor of her skin and the shadows in the warehouse, she knows she doesn't look that different. He can't fail to recognize her.

"Jenny." Even shocked he says her name the way he always did. Never Jennifer, or even Jen. Always Jenny. "Is it really you?"

NUCLEAR NIKKI VERSUS THE MAGIC EVIL

Jennifer Rahn

NUCLEAR NIKKI STRUTTED her stuff across the Dead End Causeway and into Magic Eddie's 8-Ball Bistro and Magnetic Disco Pub. Her orange, six-inch stilettos clacked loudly against the tile, guaranteeing she'd be turning the heads of many a punter. She struck a pose just inside the door, one knee bent outward to ensure her silhouette showed off her legs and the fact she was wearing a ridiculously short skirt along with a cape that did nothing for warmth, and a few other things that didn't go far in the realm of practicality. Her current reality had degraded from superhero to superwhore— one little mistake in her battle with Monstrous Maxie five years ago had wiped out her superpowers.

Her eyes adjusted quickly to the dimness: six or seven men were hunched over tables. A few of them glanced up before returning to their beers and card games. The muted thud of a disco beat wafted from the back, not disturbing the dull inertia of the room. Nikki pushed down a wave of panic and sauntered over to the bar, flipping back her curly wig to make sure it didn't cover her breasts.

Mango Joe didn't bother serving her a drink, which enraged her because she hated being ignored, and was a relief since she didn't have much credit. Only three more chits remained on her colony card. Once those were gone, she'd have to get off this hellhole whether she wanted to or not.

She glanced around the room and saw Savage Bill staring at her with that trademark hint of smugness playing around his lips. He had a cowboy name but dressed nothing like one.

If anything, “Disco Bob” might have suited him better: white tux, no shirt, gold chains, tacky tats and blond hair slicked straight up. He leaned back as if he were all that, and slowly reached into his shirt pocket to draw out a card with five chits on it, which he loosely dangled from finger and thumb, letting it swing so that Nikki’s eyes followed it. She didn’t like Bill, no one did, because he didn’t ever play fair, not even by supervillain standards, and the last time she’d taken him on, he’d left bruises that had hurt her business for over a week. But in three days those five chits would pretty much be a stay of execution. She slid off the bar stool and clacked over to where he sat.

“Where’d you get so many?” she asked, jutting her chin toward the card.

“What do you care, hon? I got ‘em, you need ‘em, and that’s that. You’ll do whatever I want, Sugarpie.”

Couldn’t argue with him. Nikki wasn’t able to wipe the dislike off her face as she let him lead her out of the bar, but then Bill already knew the score and it wasn’t like she was trying to win over a patron who’d keep her on for a while.

Bill dumped her in a back alley when he was finished, her hosiery ruined, wig gone, one of her shoes broken — but none of her bones this time — leaving her to wipe the blood from her mouth with the back of her hand that tightly clutched the card of chits. Normally she’d charge a month’s worth for that kind of service, but paying clients were pretty slim pickings these days. She got up from her knees and stumbled along with her broken heel until she slipped in the muck draining through the alley and whacked her head against a dumpster. Before she blacked out, she had just enough awareness to hope the pavement wouldn’t further wreck her face.



Nikki woke up in a plasticast basement with weak daylight trickling through the slit of a window near the low ceiling. Father Mike was busy by his little camp stove, boiling something he was probably going to make her drink. He wore a heavy apron, gloves, and goggles; the leftovers of his former supervillain costume. He’d once terrorized the universe with his psionic superpowers; now he was trying to make amends by bringing salvation to the fallen supers in this backwater outpost.

SPIRIT IN THE CLAY

Bevan Thomas

AS THE GUNS *rat-a-tat-tat*-ed and the bombs fell, I was over the hill with the rest of my unit, racing toward the enemy. My sergeant yelled something and close-by someone else screamed, but I kept on going, firing my submachine gun again and again. I don't know if I hit anyone, I didn't know who was alive or who was dead. I just kept firing as the ground exploded around me, as the whole world seemed to break in half.

With my last breath, I tried to recite the Shema: "*Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ech—*" And then silence. Darkness.

A light! It was bright like the sun yet I could stare at it without hurting my eyes. The more I stared at the light, the more relaxed I felt. It was getting bigger and bigger— no, I was getting closer. I was going into the light. I was going... home.

Suddenly there was a crash like a giant window shattering, and the light blinked out. I was falling! Falling through the darkness as if I were inside some inescapable tornado! Swirling and swirling in the darkness! Swirling and swirling and swirling and—

"Do I have the honour of addressing Corporal Daniel Druker of the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry?" The voice penetrated the silence, clear as a bell, and the darkness dissolved.

I seemed to be floating in the middle of a room, above a large round table. The room was dark, though I could make out five human silhouettes seated around the table, linking hands so that their arms formed a sort of five-pointed star. A single candle was in the middle of the table; I hovered above its flame.

"Do I have the honour of addressing Corporal Daniel Druker of the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry?" It was one of the five at the table who repeated these words. Unlike the others, he was now glowing, which enabled me to see him.

He was a balding old man with grey hair and a black suit. The sort of man one sees every day. He could have been a lawyer or a banker approaching retirement, except for his glowing aura and the energy I could sense crackling behind his eyes. And except that I recognized that face, that voice— from the radio, the newspapers, the newsreels.

"I am William Lyon Mackenzie King, Prime Minister of Canada," the figure said. "And I will ask again, oh wandering spirit: do I have the honour of addressing Corporal Daniel Druker of the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry?"

"Yes," I said.

"Excellent!" The Prime Minister beamed. "Doubtless you are wondering what has happened."

"I remember the sound of guns and bombs. I was— I think I was in France."

"Yes, you were."

"And then I was in darkness, heading toward a light."

"Yes, you were."

"Was I— did I die?" I asked.

"Yes, you did," the Prime Minister replied. "I apologize sincerely for drawing you back to the material plane, away from your eternal rest. But your country still needs you."

"What?"

"You are confused. I will try to explain. I am a spiritualist; that is not something I share with most people. I can commune with the spirits of the departed, 'ghosts' if you will, and with other spirits besides. This has proven of pivotal importance in our current crisis— this world war is being fought on far more fronts than most people realize. The artificial monstrosities grown by Josef Mengele's mad scientists, the diabolic sorcery invoked by Heinrich Himmler's warlocks in the Thule SS, and even darker villains... We keep the existence of these abominations hidden from the Allied public; can you imagine the mass panic if people knew the Nazis can reanimate the dead and conjure demons from Hell? We fight a secret war underneath, above, and around the public one; the Nazis have their weapons, and we have ours." The Prime Minister sighed and rubbed his eyes before continuing. "We recently acquired something, something that could give us a chance of winning this wretched conflict."

"What is it?" I asked.

BLACK FALCON SAVES CITY, WORLD

Sacha A. Howells

THERE SHOULD BE noise when he comes down from the sky, like a jet or one of those Apache helicopters. It's that awesome. But there's nothing, maybe his cape flapping if it's windy. He's like god. Blue Titan doesn't float— he stands in the air like gravity does not exist.

"Near disaster today when the Prince Edward Viaduct almost collapsed," the man head said on TV.

"But Toronto's own Blue Titan was there to save the day," the woman head said. "*Again.*" What's with the pink stripes in her hair? She's a news anchor. It's all over the place, checkout girls at the market with utility belts and teenagers on the bus wearing capes.

The Channel 2 Eye in the Sky showed Blue Titan holding up the bridge like it was balsa. "Someone calling himself Mantarr the Invincible has claimed responsibility," she said. "Be sure to vote in our online poll: supervillain or crank?"

"*Mantarr,*" man head said. "Let's hope it's not too late to go back to the drawing board on that one."

"Phil, you are *terrible.*"

They don't get it, this life. It's not about names and costumes and perfect physiques. It's about work. And our sacred duty, and accomplishing something in life, and helping humanity.

Maria's fat lazy ass came in the room about three feet after her fat lazy front. "Jesus, Manny. Where's the remote? I'm not watching the stupid news."

I tucked it under my back. "Like I'm suddenly chief of remotes?"

She stood there with her hand on her waist and looked at the TV. "Always with this. Electroman, Dog Girl. Pigeon Lady. Gimme, my show is on." The couch groaned when she sat.

"I'm watching," I said. The people were safe off the bridge, and you could see red beams of heat from Blue Titan's eyes, welding the girders back together.

"Blue Freak they should call him. Electrofreak for sure. The *Comet* says there's like three Kid Sparks a year."

"Ha ha ha. They save people every day when you're doing whatever, answering phones at the dentist."

"Oh, the bad stupid dentist that pays for the rent and the food and the cable and your dumb karate."

I stood up and threw the remote across the room. "It's *jujitsu!*"

"Maybe if you had a better job than at a pet store, you could get out of my apartment."

"It's not a *pet store*. Birds, exotic birds. And maybe it's my apartment and I let *you* live here."

She snorted. "Yeah, and maybe you pay less than a third of the rent. You think you're all set, the creepy little brother I'm going to float for life. Guess what? *It ain't happening.*"

"I'm putting fifty dollars more to the rent starting next month. A hundred." I had some money saved up, but I wanted to save it for equipment. Maybe a scuba tank, I was thinking I probably needed an underwater suit. Just in case.

I went into my room and slammed the door, hard. I'd taped headlines from the *Star* on the wall, floor to ceiling: BLUE TITAN SAVES GRADE SCHOOL. SOLON GIVEN KEY TO CITY. LEAGUE OF RECTITUDE FOILS MOLEMEN. When it was me, I'd buy the whole stack of papers.

"Almost twenty-one years old," she yelled through the door. "Twenty-one years old, living off your sister and working at the pet store."

Living with a secret identity is a special hell. But those closest to you, the people you love, even when they're being a bitch and won't let you watch a major operation on the national news, they can never know. For their protection.

"Exotic birds."



Valkyrie, the Red Veil, I don't know what they do. Los Fantomas. Mostly, when I'm in the field I carry my equipment in a backpack,

BLUEFIELDS

REHARMONY NEST

Kim Goldberg

DR. AURELIO ANNOUNCED, “We are about to get started, Opul, if you would care to join us now.” On her lounge chair atop the cliff, Opul sat facing the shimmering orange sea.

Dr. Aurielio called Opul’s name again, but she remained impassive. “Very well,” he said as he gathered the rest of them: Ixcel the Ice Child, Leap, Dark Blade, KwaKwa, Doonah the Maker. They all dragged their chairs into a circle behind Opul. All patients at Bluefields must participate in daily group. It was written into the admissions contract, there were no exceptions. A patient needn’t share, but sitting in the circle for one hour each morning while others spoke was mandatory. “If the moon won’t come to the river, then the river must come to the moon.”



Even with her bioelectric flux at low ebb, Opul recognized the reference immediately. It was from an ancient Breitenbas legend on Kellar IV about the Moon-Bride who sought to be united with her new husband, the Black River, on the planet’s surface. But the Moon-Bride did not know how to climb down from the sky, so her husband ascended to meet her, creating night with his blackness.

Opul saw little connection between the myth and her current situation. The only thing she knew for certain was that there was no escaping Dr. Aurelio’s group session— not unless she planned to hurl herself off the cliff and into sea. She considered it for a moment, but she doubted she had the energy or the motor control to choreograph so grand an exit. So she

continued to lie on her lounger while the rest of the menagerie of dysfunctional superheroes joined Dr. Aurelio and brought the circle to Opul.

"Who has something to share this morning?" Dr. Aurelio asked after the patients had settled themselves. He had strategically seated himself directly across from Opul, she looked away.

"Anyone...? KwaKwa, how is your world today? Still having those headaches?"

KwaKwa could usually be counted on to share. He was not bashful about his emotional processes, and he had a surprising degree of insight. KwaKwa's monumental physical strength had manifested by age four; already, he'd been able to lift and toss large boulders, which he did to save members of his tribe, the Seetles, from being enslaved or eaten by the other intelligent species of his homeworld, the Ramorgs. However, the arrival of offworld colonists had pushed KwaKwa beyond the limits of his powers. With their mechanical grapple-maws they were more effective hunters than the Ramorgs, and more relentless by far. He became wracked with night terrors and excruciating headaches, necessitating his stay at Bluefields.

"The headaches are better now," KwaKwa replied. "But I awoke from a dream this morning that I don't understand. It was quite unsettling."

"Tell us about it," Dr. Aurelio urged.

"I was walking through the forest," KwaKwa began, "when I found a ravine filled with hundreds of dead jimbo's caked in—"

"The Mother will be saved!" Leap blurted.

All heads swivelled. "The Mother must be saved because The Mother is sacred!"

"Leap... What have we said about interrupting?" Dr. Aurelio asked.

"If Leap would prefer to share first, that's fine with me," KwaKwa offered.

"No, that is not fine," Dr. Aurelio cut in. "Leap, you'll just have to—"

"The Mother must be saved! All hail The Mother!"

"Leap! That's enough!" Dr. Aurelio didn't use his stern voice often, and never on anyone other than Leap. But poor Leap had impulse-control issues, not to mention attention-divergence issues and mother issues.

"Sorry," Leap replied.

LOST AND FOUND

Luke Murphy

DAYS LATER, AND I was still finding his things. I'd spot a razor blade under the bathroom sink or one of his books jumbled among mine, and I'd pick it up like it had thorns and put it in the box in the closet. He said he'd call when he was ready to collect his stuff. I didn't even know where he was. Had he moved in with that other girl? Were they coiled together on knotty sheets while I stared at the ceiling?

I tried not to do it. Three days I walked in circles around the apartment telling myself not to do it. I tried to distract myself: web surfing, cheap wine, bouts of self-pity. It didn't work. I needed it. My skin fizzed like cheap pop. I scratched my arms and bit my lips. *My boss called. Why wasn't I at the office processing forms? I told him I'd quit.*

At four in the morning I watched a web video that promised me I Wouldn't Believe What Happened Next (spoiler alert: I did, without much trouble) and realized I'd worn out the distraction capacity of the internet.

I walked to my bedroom. I lay down with my clothes on, shut my eyes, took a few deep breaths. My weight of flesh and bone and blood sank into the mattress.

I felt the shape and outline of my body, sensed its boundaries, and floated out of it.

I drifted up to the ceiling, turned and looked down at the fleshbody lying on the bed below me. Its eyes were closed, mouth slack. Greasy hair and grubby sweatshirt. When had I last showered? Physical me looked wretched.

But ethereal me felt glad to be weightless again. No pinched nerves or lower back pain. I held up the hands of my lightbody in front of my face, saw a vague form made of ghost-colored

mist. Perfect. I floated to the wall and pressed myself into it. A chalky sensation in my lightflesh as I passed through it. I pushed deeper into sudden darkness, moved through sour-tasting concrete and rasping brick and burst into the night air. Streetlights glared seven stories below. I flitted above the luminous streets of Toronto and flew.



We've all got two bodies. Our other body's where our consciousness lives, and it's made of thinner stuff than the flesh. Quantum particles, maybe. Lots of people slip out of their skin at one time or another, mostly when they're in shock or asleep or on the operating table. And everyone does it one final time. But I had the good or bad fortune to have learned how to control the process when I spent a week in hospital with appendicitis at the age of six. The incense-and-crystals crowd calls it astral projection, and I've been doing it for almost as long as I've known I shouldn't talk about it.



I soared into a layer of thin clouds far above the city and rested in the air. Below, the sprawl glittered between the two blacknesses of lake and forest. I pictured his face— making a lopsided smile after he'd said something funny, the way I always thought of him.

"Where is he?" I asked. A light tug pulled me northeast. Just like last time, a week ago.

For the third evening in a row he'd texted me to say he'd be working late at the ad agency; I thought, *let's find out for sure so I can stop wondering*. I lay down and left the flesh behind, came outside and felt that pull to the northeast. His office wasn't that way. I let the pull direct me over streets and parks to a row of townhouses. A window drew me toward it. The curtains were closed, but the light was on. I remembered the rule I'd made when I first learned the knack: no spying. Yes, but this was different, wasn't it? I didn't wait for an answer, just ghosted through the wall and into a bedroom and saw.

They couldn't see me, of course — I'm invisible in this state — but her eyes were squeezed shut anyway. And he never looked up from what he was doing.

CRUSHER AND TYPHOON

Brent Nichols

THE RAILROAD LAY sprawled across the mountain valley like a discarded toy. Dan Carter sat on the tiny porch on the back of his personal train car, gazing at where the tracks ended, and thought about the dreams that had died when Sir John A. Macdonald abandoned the National Dream.

“Bloody airships,” he muttered. You couldn’t see the country you were passing through in an airship, not like from a train. People said train travel took away the intimacy of riding and walking, but airships were much worse.

It had been ten years since polio had withered Dan’s legs, three years since the National Dream had lifted him from the depths of self-pity. It had set his very blood on fire, carving a nation out of a wilderness, driving his way west until he challenged the granite walls of the Rocky Mountains themselves. He used to lie awake dreaming of the day he’d roll triumphantly into Gastown.

Now he never would. Now he was a scavenger, not a builder of nations and dreams. His job was to salvage rails and spikes from the road bed, load them onto flatcars, and ship them back east to be melted down for scrap. When he was finished the CPR would be no more, and even the role of scavenger would be taken away.

In the distance a dozen white men were pulling spikes and lifting rails while a couple of dozen Chinese watched. The Chinese were more victims of the airship infestation. The CPR had brought them to Canada in large numbers, put them to work building half a railroad, and discarded them like the rails.

Most of them were beyond salvage, Dan knew. They spoke little English, and the gulfs of race and culture would keep them unemployed. Unable to return to China and unable to

move on, they had gathered in a makeshift village beside the tracks. Now the tracks were coming up and they were being left behind, in an inhospitable cleft between mountains, with winter coming on.

"At least they're able-bodied," Dan muttered.

"What's that, Mr. Carter?"

Dan glanced at Phil Jones, his assistant. "Nothing, Phil." He thought for a moment. "On second thought, I'd like to take a look at the work site."

"Really?" Phil no longer bothered to hide his annoyance at Dan's requests.

Forcing a wheelchair over rough ground was a hell of a chore, Dan was willing to concede, but it was, after all, the man's job. "Yes, really," he said curtly.

Phil sighed, got up, and went to grab the wheelchair ramp.



Lee Wu sat on a low hill of broken rock, watching men lift rails that he'd worked damned hard to put in place. He was drunk, his head spinning from the rotgut whiskey he'd been sipping for most of the day. It was vile stuff, but it reduced the knot of frustrated rage in his belly, diffused and dispersed it until it was a warm glow that was almost pleasant.

A shout drew his attention to the shantytown near the tracks. He could see four young white men swaggering into the rude collection of shacks. They weren't workers from the rail salvage project. These were men of a different sort, two of them with pistols on their hips. One man shoved old Yi Ah out of his way. She reeled to the side and toppled, her brown limbs sticking up like twigs, and the white man kicked her foot out of his path.

Wu was halfway to the shantytown before he knew he'd decided to act. The ground seemed far away, and he cursed the alcohol he'd drunk. There was a time, long ago, when he'd been a warrior. That was in China, a world and a lifetime away, and he was all too aware of how far he'd fallen.

Still, he remembered a thing or two.

A handful of Chinese men stood in an uncertain cluster, looking to each other for courage, and the four strangers strutted toward them. The confrontation was about to reach its peak, and Wu could only hope that no one would draw a gun.

BLACK SHEEP

Jason Sharp

AS ESCAPE PLANS go, it was pretty disgusting.

Before I'd even been sent to the Special Handling Unit of the Joliette Institution for Women, the Feds had known they'd need to keep me away from water. They'd gone to the trouble of building a new wing all for me. It had climate control to keep the interior humidity low. The toilet was a composter with a long drain pipe. I got damp cloth for sponge baths and hand-cleaning rather than a sink or trips to a bathroom. There wasn't even a sprinkler system for fire suppression— something I'd had my lawyer tackle, but the government had cited some special anti-terrorist law that let them get away with it.

Even my drinking water was rationed out. Every two hours during waking hours, a plastic bottle with a quarter-litre of water was pushed through the slot in my cell door. If I drank it and pushed the bottle back through, it'd arrive again, refilled, in two hours. If I didn't... they'd wait until I *did*.

So it took a while to work out how I was going to do it.

Timing was another issue. I had minimal contact with the outside world— TV, newspapers, books from the prison library. My lawyer dropped by every few weeks. Rarely — very, very rarely — I received snail mail from my thirteen-year-old cousin; the envelopes were always pre-opened and, I had found on one occasion, actively censored. But Lucie had, nonetheless, told me — quite accidentally, I'm sure — when to break out.

It was the last Saturday of July: the tail end of Québec's construction holiday, when projects across the province shut down for two weeks and all the workers go on vacation. I had uncles and cousins on jobsites doing electrical work, plumbing, and brickwork, so this was one of three weekends when they could all get together. Lucie had written that Aunt Hélène

and Uncle Serge would be hosting a family reunion at their place in Montréal.

Thus, on the last Friday of July, I made point of not using the composting toilet before lights-out. It didn't make for a comfortable sleep; by the time the lights came back on at six in the morning, the pressure in my bladder was something fierce. I thought dry thoughts and took a stab at the crossword in the previous day's *Gazette*, watching the clock.

At 6:57, I finally shuffled over to the composting toilet.

At 6:59, I heard the faint footsteps of the guard bringing my breakfast. I pulled up my jumper and scurried over to my bunk.

At 7:00, the footsteps stopped. "Stand clear of the door," the guard's muffled voice barked, and then, "What—" and *then* came the simultaneous sounds of vomiting and urination. I reached out and called the liquid through the door slot— then combined it with the urine I'd kept clinging to the bowl of the toilet. Darted forward to pop the top off the water bottle and added its contents. Flash-dehydrated my breakfast. Wicked the moisture off the skin and clothes of the heaving guard.

I now had a pool of about 1.8 liters of bile, urine, and water on the floor of my cell. I pulled the solution up in a thin column and fired a narrow high-velocity stream into the narrow gap between the door and the wall. The liquid cut through the locks in a matter of seconds, and I slammed myself against the door.

It jammed against the guard's spasming body, but there was enough of a gap for me to squeeze through. Another door opened, and I propelled my captive liquid across the room; the guard coming through the door slipped and fell, and then he puked and pissed himself as well.

In a matter of minutes, I'd incapacitated eight guards and had close to ten liters at hand. Once I was outside, I sucked the humidity out of the air and formed a fog cloud to conceal me from snipers as I cut through the outer fence and fled into the stand of trees beyond.



I'd shed my orange jumper, so I emerged from the forest lining the back fence of a townhouse lot wearing nothing but a grey cotton bra and matching panties. I clambered over the chain link, poking myself in a few places, and fell down into the yard of an end unit. A quick sprint across freshly mowed grass brought

MIDNIGHT MAN VERSUS DOCTOR DEATH

Chadwick Ginther

DOCTOR DEATH WAS back in town.

Fossils were missing from the local museum. Those fossils were followed by three summer students. Their paleontologist teacher was hot on their heels. No bodies had been found but given the blood at the scene foul play was suspected. The cops were baffled, but I recognized the signs of my nemesis.

Every city is haunted by villains. And eventually every city raises its own champion. It's almost a competition. Bragging rights. I fought a smile. Bragging *rites*. Mort Cheval was no different. What was once two large Prairie towns, was now a small city. New developments consumed farmers' fields like a cancer. Things got disturbed. Things woke up. But when a city actually has death built right into its name, things get a little special, and it takes a special sort of hero to stem the tide. That's me. It's my job to put the bad guys back to sleep. I'm the Midnight Man.

Not a lot of people with my skill set are on the side of the angels. For many the Fight is a religious calling. I was wary of anything smacking of religion, but I did have a calling. It was a mad thing, dressing up in a costume to fight evil. But there are villains who raise the dead and murder the living, all without receiving justice.

I took the tools of my first defeated foe, and used them against the next. And again. Mister Murder, Sister Slaughter, Mademoiselle Mortuary, Uncle Anesthesia. They hated the handles I gave them, but they never had to put up with them

for long, because I put 'em all in the ground for good. Only one of the blackguards I couldn't keep there: Doctor Death.

Since Doc was into fossils now, he'd need cheap labour to help with the digging.



I waited at the bottom of an open grave. Some would say I'm absorbing death. Stretching my thanatomancy— my death magic. Truth is, I like to make an entrance.

This graveyard was supposed to be a place for the dead to rest, but because of Doc three were walking tonight. I fastened my black leather Hades cap emblazoned with a skull and crossbones, and slid on my grave-sight goggles. I popped up to take a look, and Doc's walkers flared red in my goggles against the grey penumbric haze. Thin lines, like veins and arteries, spiderwebbed over their bodies, gathering in thicker power clusters that glowed like fireflies where Doc had injected them full up with evil. They were easy to spot. Easier to see I was outnumbered.

I grinned. A slow pop of the holster flaps, and I was ready to draw my two Colt Model 1911s. Each pistol was loaded with lucky sevens of tombstone bullets. I was often outnumbered, but never outgunned.

As I jumped into the fray, I turned on my emblem. The white double Ms on my jacket flared briefly, blinding Doc's goons and spotlighting my targets. I drew my pistols midair, firing before my feet touched grass. The Colts' muzzle flashes were lightning bright, their reports thunder loud.

The first walker I hit turned grey, reclaiming the waxy pallor of death as its embalmed body fell. Its spirit oozed out before the body hit the ground.

I ran toward the walkers as if the Devil were chasing me. Another shot. Another flunky trying to get back to Doc so he could reload it in some other dead meat. I holstered my right hand Colt and tossed a ball-and-chain bomb. The eggshell thin casing shattered against a tombstone behind the walker. A puff of silver dust glittered in the moonlight, enveloping the body and the trailing end of the spirit.

It was sucked back into its body and locked in. Dead meat. Dead spirit. Another bomb sorted the first goon.

SÜPER

Corey Redekop

GOOD MORNING. Good morning. Calm down now. Please, remain in your seats. Thank you. Can everyone hear me?

What a bright and eager group! At the risk of sounding giddy, this is always my favorite time of year. So full of promise. New recruits, new ideas, new breakthroughs.

Before we commence training proper, allow me to fill in a few blanks. Each and every person in this room was approached by recruiters from an organization known as LNF Incorporated. You were informed that LNF specialized in experimental medical procedures. After a lengthy process of interviews and examinations and background checks, offers of employment were tendered, confidentiality agreements were accepted and signed (perhaps some of you even read them, ha ha), and you were informed that LNF would be in contact very soon regarding an employment start date.

Consider today day one.

A vigorous selection process pared the number of applicants to the thirty men and women currently sitting in this auditorium. Congratulations! Your presence here serves as ample proof that each of you ranks among Canada's finest medical minds. I know you all have many questions; indeed, your innate and relentless curiosity is a main component in how you came to arrive in this hall under such... unorthodox circumstances. Rest assured, most of your questions will be answered this morning. Any unanswered questions will be dealt with at the appropriate time.

Before I proceed any further, I must ask that you consider the gravity of this undertaking. I cannot stress this enough. Right now you are befuddled, perhaps even terrified, but I

promise that those who stay will be presented with challenges that may change the course of human evolution. I do beg your indulgence for remaining so vague, but a sense of fairness compels me to offer one final chance to anyone who wishes to return to life as you knew it. If you back out, there will be absolutely no recriminations. Simply raise your hand and you will be escorted from this room, anaesthetized, and returned to your city of origin. Stay, and be assured a place among the greats of medical science. Stay, and join the likes of Salk, Bethune, Hippocrates, and Banting. Leave, and prepare for a monotonous existence devoid of meaning.

So I leave it to you. Stay or go? Yea or nay?

Lovely. I'm proud of you. That minor detail out of the way, welcome to the greatest challenge any of you will ever face. I am Doctor Haddon Nickle, and—

I'm sorry, as I said, please hold your questions; we have a great deal of ground to cover today. Figurative and literal. But as you're all so keen; yes, I am he. I, along with Professor Carlyle Lalumière, am co-discoverer of the Lalumière-Nickle Flux, *the* most important event in *Homo sapiens* history. I don't mean to toot my own horn, but, if elementary school textbooks label it as such, who am I to argue? Ha ha.

Did you know, the names Lalumière and Nickle, separately and together, were in the top ten choices for baby names for almost a decade after the discovery? Both boys and girls? Fascinating. And flattering.

I digress. Each and every one of you has been recruited as ideal candidates for what you will discover is one of, if not *the* most compelling, unique, and challenging opportunities in medical science. There isn't one person here, with the exception of Colonel Tidhar — he's that rather intimidating fellow standing at attention at the back of the room — who hasn't graduated at the top of their respective classes. You are all world-class doctors with genius-level intellects.

You all are also, to a one, completely alone in this world. Not one of you has a single living relative. Few have friends. None are in relationships, or in any event, relationships that will be missed. Your profiles indicate a high degree of borderline personality disorders combined with near-crippling social phobias that would, in individuals not as innately driven as

BEDTIME FOR SUPERHEROES

Leigh Wallace

MARIE HAD MADE a full pot of tea even though she was alone in the little house. She added a perfect dribble of milk to her mug and took a slow sip. It was late, and everything was tidy. She was an old lady, she reminded herself. She should sit down, take a load off. Instead she pulled three more mugs from the drying rack and lined them up before her on the counter.

Into the ugly cartoon mug she dropped two absurdly large blobs of honey. Into the sparkly unicorn mug she poured some of that artificial hazelnut stuff. Next to the yellow mug with a chip in it she placed a container with a perfectly sliced lemon wedge— not too thick. She made the tasks take up as much time as possible.

Tea in hand, she turned from the counter toward the living room, the living room being the far corner of her unspacious kitchen-living-dining room area, where the soft old furniture was crowded. And there, on the sofa, suddenly and silently, was a ninja. So Marie went back to the counter and poured a second mug of tea. The tacky supervillain mug — with an image of a punching masked woman and the word *Shwoooooom!* — half full with two oversized spoonfuls of honey. It was for the ninja, who liked her tea sweet and evil and who was all tuckered out.

Marie shuffled her old feet to the couch, a mug in each hand. She kissed Lacy, her ninja, on the forehead before closing the living room window, which Lacy had suddenly and silently left wide open to the chilly night before collapsing onto the sofa. The ninja hugged her mug like a friend, like she didn't even think it was ugly, because she didn't.

Before Marie could sit down with her own tea there was ninja paraphernalia littering the floor. She put her mug down on the coffee table and gathered up the mask and the gloves with the little black buttons that she had sewn onto them. Lacy had asked her to sew them on. Had begged her to. Even though nobody's ever heard of a ninja with buttons.

"You're wearing the housecoat we got you," said Lacy, cracking open a drowsy eye.

"It's lovely, dear," said Marie.

"Is it warm?" asked Lacy.

"Yes, just lovely." The housecoat was a leopard print, but it was nubbly and thick and Marie loved it.

Marie nudged the ninja's boots with her toe. No shoes in the living room. No. Not even ninja boots. Not even after a long day of fighting crime. The boots blurred off Lacy's feet and onto her lap.

Marie, with her usual unhurried step, put the mask and gloves away on the hall closet shelf, above her limp old housecoat and the ninja's patched old ninja suit that neither of them had ever thought of throwing away. One of the fingers of the ninja's good gloves, the new ones with the shiny buttons sewn on, was pulling open at the tip and Marie thought she might try and get that sewn up tomorrow before the ninja went back out. Or exchange the pair, since they were new. No, it was easier to just mend it. That's what she would do.

"Oh no!" In the living room Lacy was poking at a wisp of thread hanging loose near the top of one of her boots. "Gram! I lost a button!"

Marie paused in the hall. "Who ever heard of ninjas with buttons?"

Lacy shrugged. "I like buttons."

Marie shrugged back. "So put on another one."

Lacy made a scrunchy, lip-bitey face. "I didn't buy any extras."

"Honestly, Lacy."

Lacy didn't look up. "Well, they were expensive."

Marie didn't sit down to her tea yet. She made her way to the hall closet to fetch her sewing basket. "And may I ask why you came through the window? Again?"

"I forgot my key. What do I do about my button?" Between those two sentences Lacy had gone from a sock-footed ninja to a pyjama-clad young woman who looked like she'd been coiled

A HOLE LOTTA TROUBLE: A TALE IN FIVE VOICES

David Perlmutter

MUSCLE GIRL

It was a hole. There was no question about it. The question was: where did it lead to?

That was the question the five of us — The Brat, Power Bunny, Candy Girl, Cerberus, and myself — were pondering as we looked at the thing. As the highest ranking — and, so far, sole — members of the International League of Girls with Guns (referring to our superpowered muscles, as we are all superheroes — not that we were packing heat, so we're clear on *that*), it was our job to deal with it — and, particularly, whatever might emerge from it.

Well, technically it was *my* job, as it appeared in the ruddy woodlands surrounding Lake Winnipeg, where I live, in both my mild-mannered secret identity Gerda Munsinger and my pink-and-white suited super identity, in which I battle evil in all its forms. However, being as I'm "just" a blond-haired elementary school kid, I sometimes feel as if I need some help from my pals.

I became an ILGWG member early in my still-young life and career, after the girls helped me beat down a particularly vicious gang of superpowered criminals I couldn't deal with myself. Since then, according to our organization protocol, we assemble periodically to deal with things that we judge have the potential to be similar blow-ups. That happens more than you think. A *lot* more.

Fortunately, the five of us are the best of friends, in addition to being "professional" colleagues, and stay that way regardless

of what happens to us. This story kind of brings that home, I think, along with what we each bring to the team.

Anyway, I have a tendency to go off on tangents when I narrate, so I better turn this over to one of the others...

THE BRAT

So there we were, the five of us, looking sheepishly at the hole. I was shivering a bit in the Canadian winter cold, seeing that I was only wearing my trademark white skirt, blue sweater, monogrammed white T-shirt, and high-top shoes, looking every inch the blond-haired three-year-old I only *appear* to be, *thank you*. The rest of us were a little better off: Muscle Girl in her usual pink tights, white panties and cape, and short grey boots; Candy Girl her purple coveralls and red mask, belt and boots, with her equally red hair flapping in the breeze; Power Bunny, dressed in her usual blue shirt and skirt over her bright pink fur; and Cerberus, a *seemingly* runty Dalmatian puppy, wore her white T-shirt with a gleaming black "C" on it. The fur on Cerb' and PB gave both of them *mucho* more protection from the cold than me, which made me a little jealous.

Also, the cold is unnatural to me, since I come from a hot planet and am warm-blooded. So I was more short-tempered than usual.

Impatiently, we examined the orifice with our superpowered senses for a few minutes. Then I lost it.

"What are we *waiting* for?" I demanded. "Let's go down and see what's *in* the damn thing already!"

"Hang on," said Candy, who's a (you guessed it— seemingly normal) teenager in her off-time, and a skittish and easily intimidated one, besides. "We don't know what's down there. I mean, there could be—"

"Helllllllooooo!" Cerberus drawled, sarcastically. "That's a *given*, Candy! You're not *afraid*, are you?"

"No!" Candy snapped, angrily. "I just meant that if we go in there without a plan, we might not come out, and—"

"We'll come back out," said Power Bunny, tersely. "*That's* our plan."

"Really?" said Candy, unconvinced. "Can't we work something out first?"

Although she's the oldest, Candy was the last of us to get her powers. They come from a ring she received in reward for

THE RISE AND FALL OF CAPTAIN STUPENDOUS

P. E. Bolivar

GREETINGS, AVID READERS! This is Myra Moon reporting from her prison cell, in an attempt to set the record straight.

You've heard how I was kidnapped by the villainess Jaguar while on assignment in Brazil, gassed by a mysterious Amazonian plant she'd left in my hotel room, and how Captain Stupendous and his Canadian Super League rescued me, but you haven't heard my side of the story. The story of my life, and how it all came crashing down.

Ever since my first interview with Captain Stupendous, with that accompanying photo of me flying through the air in his muscular arms, I was assumed to be his girlfriend. Love at first sight, it was said, but it was never love. I was dating my photographer, Mikey Bell, and at the time we were happy together.

The roof of my condo complex was freezing cold the night of the interview. For months I'd been writing article after glowing article about the Captain's many exploits in the hopes of catching his attention. How he'd flown in to save those people trapped on the sinking ferry off the coast of Vancouver Island; how he'd foiled the Scandalbug's attempt to blackmail Parliament; how he saved his fellow superhero Sufferjet, prevented her from marrying the villain Pherognome, who'd put a spell on her with his magical perfume.

It was that article that made the Captain finally agree to speak with me. Mikey was the one who captured the famous image that accompanied it. Captain Stupendous in his tights and knee-high boots, his red cape fluttering behind him as he hoisted that ugly little man into the air. Pherognome was outfitted in black

tuxedo and top hat and trying to hit the lantern-jawed hero with a cane held in his comically too-short arms.

They called the photograph a classic. It won awards, but I never considered it to be one of Mikey's best. Something always bothered me about the way it captured Pherognome's spellbound fiancée. Sufferjet lay sprawled on the ground, dressed in her shining white armor, hand on her dazed head. A veil crowned her long black locks in place of her usual half-helm, her head almost resting on the Captain's rippling thigh.

To my mind she deserved better than to be portrayed as a damsel-in-distress for him to save. She'd singlehandedly stopped the Venusian Horde from destroying Earth, to name only one of her exploits.

When I suggested not using the photo for the story, Mikey balked. "Come on, it looks great," he said. "They look like they belong together! People are going to eat it up." Turned out he was right, and since it got me my interview I couldn't complain too much.

The Captain agreed to meet me on my rooftop, but only if we were alone. Too bad, I would have liked Mikey's company, and to be honest I was incredibly nervous. He could melt me with his eyes, crush me with one hand. That kind of power instilled an instinctual fear in people. I was no different, even if I did write glowingly of his many adventures.

When he finally arrived, his entrance did not disappoint. The clouds opened up with a flash of light, his laser vision burning a hole in the cumulus layer. He slowly drifted down toward me, giving me time to admire him. His suit was white with red stripes down the sides, a stylized C emblazoned on his chest. No maple leaf adorned the uniform, but it was obvious which country he represented.

He touched down on the roof and walked up to me, offering his hand. Before I knew it he was kissing my knuckles, his deep voice so full of bass that it rattled my ribcage.

"Myra Moon, it is a pleasure. I am Captain Stupendous."

And that's how my adventures began.

After a lengthy interview, which included showing me his Chalet of Secrecy up at Whistler, he flew me home. I was exhausted, the night having lasted much longer than I thought it would. He seemed eager to talk about himself and even more eager to impress me, like a schoolboy showing off for a girl he liked.

FRIDAY NIGHTS AT THE HEMINGWAY

Arun Jiwa

FRIDAY NIGHT AT the Hemingway was a quiet affair. The bar's three patrons crowded together at a table toward the back. There was a time when you had to know Dev or someone who knew Dev to get an invite on a Friday evening. But Dev had been notoriously difficult about any publicity since the accident, and eventually business moved away from the Hemingway.

Dev set down a pitcher of lager and slid an appetizer tray across the table. "Last call will be in half an hour," he said, though it was only a casual notice. Maia, Rohit, and Ben were regulars, upholding a tradition from the old days, when The Alliance frequented the Hemingway on Friday evenings.

"The rumor I heard was that Shade's an alien, she came from a planet with no sunlight," Maia said.

"No, my brother went to school with her boyfriend," Ben reached over for the pitcher and filled all three glasses. "He knows for a fact that there was an accident at Faustech Labs. Shade, was an intern there, you know, in her pre-Shade days."

"What about the Probabilist? Supposedly, he was a teenage stock-market genius. Made millions before the Alliance figured out he could predict other events too." Rohit leaned over and gave a thumbs-up to Dev, who nodded. They were quiet for the next few minutes as they ate their appetizers and checked their phones.

"Let's talk about someone who's actually done something in the last decade. Not the ones who show up for publicity stunts once a year," Ben said.

“Like who— Gargoyle? Crimson Falcon? They’re all paid retainers to stay out of trouble.” Maia quirked an eyebrow. “And rightly so. You don’t want them jumping in and saving cats from trees or putting out fires. Can you imagine Gargoyle trying to put out fires?” She mimed the action with her hands and the three of them laughed.

Ben pointed to the bar. “What about them? The Alliance. You don’t think that the Earth’s five strongest heroes just vanished all of a sudden, do you?”

The picture that hung over the bar showed the five original members of the Alliance, all patrons of the Hemingway. Shade, The Probabilist, The Architect, Tesla, and Dr. Kepler the Puppetmaster. In the picture the five of them stood in front of the bar, with Dev standing off to the side.

Ben set his pint glass down unsteadily and motioned for silence. “You remember the news story about Dr. Hugo Moriarty, from eight years ago? World-famous criminal suddenly disappears?” He waited for confirmation from the other two before continuing. “Well, if you look up news after that incident, the number of hero-related stories drops off sharply.”

“So what?” Maia countered. “The tenth time Gargoyle and Captain Neutron worked out their marital problems in public, it stopped being news.”

“Not just that, though,” Ben said. “What about Shade? Tesla? The Puppetmaster? The Architect?”

Dev had stopped what he was doing to listen to the conversation.

“Do you think that they all just vanished overnight?”

“Like I said, paid to stay out of trouble,” Rohit said. “There hasn’t been anyone who’s threatened the world in a big way since Dr. Moriarty disappeared.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Ben said. “Dr. Moriarty was rumored to control criminal cells all over the world. He was running a big-time operation. Even if the Alliance took him down, why would they keep quiet about it? Who was his number 2? They could still be at large.”

“What do you think, Dev,” Maia asked, turning around in her seat.

Dev set down the bottle he was holding and thought for a long moment before answering. “They weren’t my friends. I didn’t know them as people, just who they were when they

APOLLO AND GRETA

Evelyn Deshane

I

WE USED TO go to all-night diners at four o'clock in the morning to see if the world was different then. He told me it was a lot lonelier, but I never agreed. I didn't see how it could be if there was a place that was always open, always willing, and waiting for us to come. The big neon sign, red and yellow, told us its name. The restaurant was a person and his name was Denny. He engulfed us as we ordered our eggs and pancakes with extra maple syrup. How could this warmth, this circulatory system of fluorescent lights, ever be lonely? We were inside of Denny; we were a part of him.

I ate my meal of champions in the middle of the night and told my brother that he was wrong. The world wasn't lonelier now. It had exactly the same amount of gut-wrenching sorrow that always existed. Only now it was far more obvious when it was black outside and we sat right next to the throb and buzz of a diner sign.

He was quiet after I explained and made no attempt to counter the argument. We were staying, lonely or not, in this hum. We were orphans and, having aged out of the foster care system, this was the only place where we belonged. This small type of consistency was the only thing we craved more than pancakes.

II

Our origins were always unclear. He was named after a Greek God and I was named after an actress, a silent film star. Apollo

didn't like it when I dwelled on his power, so we romanticized our unknown ancestors. We tried to figure out our parents' lives from the small facts they left behind. Our blood, our names, and the powers we had to keep secret before they could be taken away.

"They probably went to a classic Garbo movie on their first date," he explained away Greta within seconds.

"And Apollo?"

"Maybe they majored in Greek."

All the stories we spun, the lies we lived off of, were always so idealistic. It took me too many revisions of the same tale to realize that in their minds men were supposed to be treated like gods and could crush anything with their thumbprint but women were supposed to be silent. To shut up and learn to live with loneliness in diners, swallowed by men, in the middle of the night.

"Or maybe they just liked comics," I suggested.

III

When we turned eighteen, minutes after one another, we left the house where we had been placed for the last six months. Without a goodbye note or explanation, I climbed out the window first and unlocked the door for him. He stole the car after I convinced him to. When we drove down the highway entering the Albertan badlands, I saw his spine finally relax.

"What did you realize?" I asked him. "That we're not getting caught or that it wouldn't matter if we did?"

"No," he told me, voice transparent. He clutched the wheel. "I realize that anyone could have done this."

"But *we* did."

"But we *did*," he nodded. After a while, he smiled.

I rose in the back through the sunroof, grabbed a blanket from the seat, and tied it around myself like a cape.

We should have done this a long time ago. Anytime our foster parents had threatened to split us up, anytime they tried to separate us in different rooms, we should have just crawled out our small windows and left it all behind. The badlands of Alberta, where we had always dreamed of going, passed us by too quickly. In the rear-view mirror, the reflection was like a movie on fast-forward, the film blurred and tight against

IN THE KIRBY KRACKLE

John Bell

You wanted something
I couldn't, wouldn't
give:

A murderous rampage
against your
enemies

Your very own genocidal
god raging in the Kirby
Krackle!

When all I wanted
was to retreat like
Thoreau

Into the last wild
places beyond your
reach

Your comic-book
fantasies, video-game
mythologies

New scriptures of
unbridled death &
destruction

A WEEK IN THE SUPERLIFE

Alex C. Renwick

MONDAY

Monday you wake up and all your bones ache, every single one.

People probably don't realize you ache like this, if they ever think about you. Sure, yes, you can fly and you do have superstrength, but you also take superpummelling, day in, day out. Anybody ever think of that?

You're like any other guy; you put your pants on in the morning one leg at a time— except they're not really pants, but tights. And they're not really tights, but some nanotech self-repairing microfiber developed in some government lab back when you had your regular gig and still punched the clock for the feds. But then you had to go and fall for the Commissioner's only daughter, had to find out she wasn't the type to be happy with a workaholic son-of-a-bitch like you. Had to find out she wanted kids — *kids* for chris'sakes, in a crazy messed-up world like this one! — and *that*, plain and simple, wasn't something you could get on board with.

So you started staying out later and later, calling it work, coming home drunk sometimes, it's true, but never really meaning to, not really. Eventually she stopped crying, though she never stopped caring (she really is a saint and you never did deserve her), until one night she wasn't there when you got home three sheets to the wind with your guts so full of bullet holes from those delusional teenage self-styled gangstas you'd tangled with earlier that evening, you looked like a goddamn slab of Swiss cheese.

Bullets can't kill you, though they sure as hell hurt. But unlike other times your woman wasn't there that night to patch

you up, to cry over you or kiss or even yell at you because you scare her half to fucking death and she's afraid one of these nights you won't come home at all, and though this actually all happened what feels like a long time ago you're still glad she finally got the juice that night to leave you for good.

For her sake, you're glad.

TUESDAY

You spend Tuesday doing the usual. It's harder and way more boring than people might think to find crimes or accidents or even catastrophes actually in progress. Back when you worked for the government you had some military-developed superphone, tapped you into police channels, rang whenever the Commissioner needed your expertise. These days you look for breaking news on your regular smartphone (smarter than many, not as smart as others), or simply fly around the downtown core, waiting for someone in trouble to flag you down like a goddamn taxi, for chris'sakes. Some days, you figure you may as well start wearing a light on your head, turn it on when you're flying around doing nothing so it announces to the world: *Available*.

But today you're in luck. You spot two guys messing with some poor junkie prostitute near the corner of High Street and 82nd. They chase her into a weed-choked gully out of sight from the roadway and one pulls a knife. All this you see from seventy feet up in the air, so you don't get details or hear what they're saying (it's not like you have superhearing or supersight), but you recognize the unmistakable terror in the prostitute's cower, the heart-wrenching inadequacy of her brittle-twig arms raised to shield her face from the bigger guy's blade. The other guy, the littler one, is unbuttoning the fly of his jeans.

You drop like a raptor, *Bam!*, and those guys go sprawling. The knifer squeals when you rip the stupid metalhead T-shirt off his back in one go and tie his wrists so tight to his ankles, he'd better hope the cops arrive before blood loss forces them to amputate later. The other guy's fumbling with his buttonfly, trying to pull up his pants and run at the same time, gets all tangled and falls.

Hoist with your own petard, motherfukkah! you shout as you tie him like his buddy, all yoga-pose on his stomach with wrists lashed to ankles. The woman — a girl really, you can see now

CHANGE AS SEEN THROUGH AN ORRERY OF CELESTIAL FIRE

Michael Matheson

SHURUI PEELS LONG strips of burnt skin off her shoulders in front of the bathroom mirror. She grits her teeth as they tear away down her back. The days between immolations are always painful; the moments in which she burns down to ash blinding, but nothing compared to the waiting— to the slow build of days before the fire frees. Her body a cage, too-narrow knit with bird-hollow bones.

The rest — the rebirth and what comes after —
—The rest is agony.

Has been since she first rose, broken, garbed in lank, slick flesh. Since she tumbled to Earth in a scatter of pinions, remiges, and retrices; her sun-bright feathers ripped away in the heat of her descent. Since she spotted the first Xifeng bathing in a moonlit lake. And fell.

The whole of it, now and always, Chang'e's fault. A terrible gift she hadn't known better than to accept.

"You all right?" asks Zetian from the doorway. Her lover takes a step into the bathroom to lay a glacial hand on Shurui's burning back. The frost of Zetian's fingers a momentary respite. *Like scorched, shed feathers brushing the surface of a distant, long-ago lake bathed silver.* Zetian's qi strong, but mortal. The ice coating her hand fades in a swift billow of steam. It fills the air between them. Zetian barely draws her hand back in time to avoid burned fingers.

"It's bad this time," she says quietly.

“Too long between burns,” grunts Shurui, breathing through her mouth.

It’s been a long time since their last trip to Mount Sinai Hospital. Most of those visits not long after they officially got together. After they decided to try living together instead of just falling into Zetian’s bed most nights. After Shurui carted her couple of boxes worth of possessions on the TTC up to Zetian’s Spadina and Willcocks apartment from her own place in the Market.

Shurui remembers the looks the nurses used to give her. How sure they were that Shurui was abusing Zetian. How sure they were she kept lighting her lover on fire.

Not that they weren’t right. They just had the wrong end of it: not on purpose. Never on purpose.

Six years of relearning control after living so long alone later, and those years might as well never have happened if she can’t control the furnace raging in her. If she can’t quiet her qi.

So many centuries later, and she’s still a co-opted version of her own Celestial mythology. A western phoenix burning and beginning again instead of her own radiant fenghuang self.

She knows what happens if she can’t quiet it. Knows *exactly* where that leads. She learned the hard way. With the first Xifeng.

“You going to be all right?” asks Zetian— Xifeng Zetian. Always a Xifeng in her life. She’s drawn to them like the sun. Always seeking their warmth. She nods. Exhales.

It’s that care and that patience that have kept them together. Zetian the only one who doesn’t think her condition a burden. Zetian the only one there for her when her body can do nothing but scream for days on end. That sense of unity, of co-operation, served them well in their separate careers working with others, but much better once they struck out together. A life of crime far easier if you have someone to share it with.

Zetian waits until Shurui’s breathing quiets before she leaves her to her ablutions. Says “I’m here if you need me,” as she leaves the room.

Shurui listens to her lover’s footfalls travelling away and around corners as she turns on the tap. She cups her hands under an icy waterfall, and pours the water onto her back. The steam rising from her shoulders makes a sauna of the tiny bathroom.

This form was never meant to house the qi of a fenghuang. She didn’t think that far ahead when she descended from the

AFTERWORD: THE DEATH OF THE DEATH OF THE SUPERHEROES!

Mark Shainblum

I HAVE BEEN writing, editing, and publishing superhero stories on and off for over thirty years now: doing this in 2015 is profoundly different from doing it in 1985.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, it had become fashionable among intellectual comics fans to prophesy the imminent demise of superhero comics. The genre was embarrassing for its silly underwear-on-the-outside conventions, scary because of its dark vigilante (maybe even *fascist?*) heart, and artistically stultifying due its big-fish-in-a-little-pond dominance of the comics medium. Popular only among a dwindling minority of hardcore fans, superheroes were bound to disappear, and we shouldn't even mourn them, because their death would finally allow the comics art form to flourish.

Yet here we are, in the 21st century, and the superhero genre has done anything *but* "go away." It has, in fact moved from the outer spiral-arm fringes of the pop-culture galaxy to the all-devouring black hole at its core.

In previous generations, superheroes had occasionally erupted out of comics and into the mass-consciousness, only to fade away again as the two or three years of the fad ran its course. But that's changed, there no longer seems to be a boom-and-bust cycle. Rather than liberating the comics medium by conveniently dying, the superhero instead *escaped* its single-medium ghetto and became a permanent, mass-culture icon as ubiquitous as the knight, the fairy-tale princess, the cowboy, the secret agent,