

# **DAY OF THE KANGAROO MAN**

a novel by  
Jason A. Lefkowitz

*NaNoWriMo 2013 Final Draft  
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# Dedication

*This work is dedicated to my mother, Beverly Lefkowitz, who always encouraged me as a writer. She really deserves to have a better book dedicated to her.*

*I'll keep trying, Mom.*

# A Note From The Author

The book you are about to read was written as a part of National Novel Writing Month (“NaNoWriMo”) 2013, which was held from November 1 through November 30 of that year.<sup>1</sup> NaNoWriMo participants are challenged to write an entire novel – 50,000 words – in that limited time window.

I therefore wrote *Day of the Kangaroo Man* in what could politely be described as a state of extreme haste. The result, I hope, is a work that is, if not timeless literature, at least readable. If I'm really lucky you'll find it fun as well.

This draft represents the state of the work as it was when I put my virtual pen down on November 30. Future editions of *Day of the Kangaroo Man* may get more thorough editing, but this is the one that most closely represents the state of the work as it was when I crossed the finish line at the end of the competition. For this reason, you should consider yourself warned that you may run across the odd typo, misspelling, or other unforgivable abuse of the English language.

In other words, this story is probably a big old mess that will hurt your head to read.

Enjoy!

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<sup>1</sup> NaNoWriMo is an annual thing, so if you'd like to try it, visit <http://nanowrimo.org> to sign up for your year's competition.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

It was three o'clock in the morning when Kitteridge arrived with the bail money.

Sergeant Pete O'Reilly was working the desk at the 47th Precinct that night. He recognized Kitteridge as soon as he walked in the door. His meticulously styled hair and impeccably tailored clothes made him a hard man to miss.

“Morning, Mr. Kitteridge,” O'Reilly said, his voice gruff from a few too many years smoking.

“I keep telling you to call me Chuck, Pete,” replied Kitteridge cheerfully. “Maybe one of these days you'll take

me up on it.”

“Heh. Suppose maybe I will. What brings you downtown this morning, Mr. Kitteridge?”

Kitteridge pulled a thick bankroll out of his fashionable topcoat. “This does,” he replied, waving the wallet. “Or rather, a fellow you all picked up tonight, who could use it.”

He didn't need to say more. “Lemme guess,” O'Reilly said. “The kangaroo man.”

“That's right. The kangaroo man. How did you know?”

O'Reilly grinned. “I know what you do for a living, Mr. Kitteridge. You wouldn't be here at three in the morning to bail out your average garden-variety lowlife.”

“I suppose I wouldn't,” Kitteridge grinned. “But I'm here to bail out the kangaroo man. What's the damage?”

“Three hundred bucks. He's lucky he didn't get charged with aggravated assault. Aggravated assault is expensive.”

Kitteridge smiled as he began peeling hundred-dollar bills off the bankroll. “Here you go,” he said, “three hundred dollars. May I see him now?”

“You may, Mr. Kitteridge. Hold on, we'll bring him out in a sec.”

O'Reilly disappeared through a door behind the desk. Kitteridge hated waiting; in most places waiting was something you could buy your way out of, but this wasn't one of them. Throwing money around a precinct station house would buy you more trouble than it was worth. So he waited.

Eventually O'Reilly returned, dragging a short, disheveled-looking man behind him. A man in a cape and a loose-fitting gray flannel onesie with a pouch imperfectly sewn into the front.

The Kangaroo Man.

“The Kangaroo Man?” Kitteridge asked.

“The Kangaroo Man,” O'Reilly replied, with just the barest hint of a sardonic grin. “Least, that's what he insisted on calling himself. According to his ID his name's --”

“I don't need the name,” Kitteridge interrupted. “Just give me the forms to sign and we'll be out of your hair.”

The man in gray chose this moment to speak up, gesticulating wildly. “Excuse me,” he asked, “but exactly who the hell are you?”

“I'm the guy who's bailing you out.”

## **CHAPTER TWO**

There was a coffee shop down the street from the precinct house. Nothing fancy, but the coffee was decent, and it was open all night. Kitteridge liked to take potential new clients there, after he bailed them out.

The Kangaroo Man stared at him over a steaming mug of coffee. His face was slack, doughy, but his eyes were quick and intelligent. Kitteridge could tell the man was sizing him up.

“First things first,” Kitteridge said. “I need the name.”

“The name?”

“The name. *Your* name.”

“Kangaroo Man.”

Kitteridge arched an eyebrow and took a sip of his coffee. “Not *that* name,” he said. “Your birth name. Your *real* name.”

He thought for a moment that the kangaroo man might actually argue, might try to hold his identity back further. But then he saw the man in gray's shoulders slump, and he knew he wouldn't.

“Marvin,” he said. “Marvin Wendt.”

The name hung in the air for a moment. Kitteridge sipped his coffee.

“Marvin,” he finally said, rolling the name around in his mouth as if testing the taste of it. “Marvin Wendt. OK. Now we're getting somewhere.”

“Look, mister – ” Marvin objected.

“Next question,” Kitteridge said briskly. “Why you were picked up by the cops running around back alleys in footie pajamas?”

The Kangaroo Man looked stung by Kitteridge's remark. Which had been the point of it, of course.

“They're not footie pajamas. They're *tights*. They're part of my *costume*.”

“Of course.” Kitteridge took another sip. “Your *costume*.”

“It's important. Evildoers need to know that a new hero is in town. A hero who's ready to clean house.”

“A hero in footie pajamas.”

“I told you. They're *tights*.”

“You even sewed on a pouch. A pouch! You know the only kangaroos with pouches are the female ones, don't

you?”

Marvin realized a bit more research before putting the costume together might have been in order.

“Look, *hero*,” Kitteridge continued, “I don't care what you call that getup. What I care about is what you're doing in it. Or rather, what you could be doing out of it.”

“Excuse me?”

“Allow me to introduce myself.” Kitteridge pulled a golden case out of his jacket pocket, popped it open, and retrieved a card from within. Embossed in exquisite type on heartbreakingly beautiful cream-colored paper were the words

## **J. CHARLTON KITTERIDGE**

*Founding Partner, Extraordinary Assets Inc.*

Walter considered the card for a moment. “Extraordinary Assets Incorporated?” he asked. “What is that, a porn studio?”

Kitteridge laughed and took another sip of his coffee.  
“Not quite.”

“I'll bite, then. What is it?”

“A talent agency.”

“Talent?”

“Talent. There are people out there who have... *talents*, Marvin. Talents nobody else in the world has. *Special* talents. And to the right people, those talents make them quite... valuable.”

“Like actors, you mean?”

“Oh, no. No, not like actors at all. The people I'm talking about have talents they can use in real life, not in the movies.”

Marvin stared down into his mug and considered this.

“I represent talented people, Marvin. People whose talents don't let them fit neatly into everyday society. People like you.”

Marvin's eyes snapped up from his coffee. Kitteridge could tell he had his attention. It was written all over his face.

“Marvin,” Kitteridge continued, “a lot of the people I represent started out the way you did tonight. They discovered their... talents, and then felt they had to use them to do something – something good. So they threw together a costume and headed out into the night. And then a few hours later they were cooling their heels in lockup.”

Marvin sat in silence.

“They sat behind bars, Marvin, wondering the same things you were probably wondering. What happened? Where did this all go wrong? And the one question you've probably asked yourself since discovering your talents more than any other...”

Wendt looked spellbound.

“Who am I?”

The steam between them thinned out as the coffee cooled. Marvin's gaze was locked on Kitteridge, his expression something between hopeful and desperate. But he said nothing.

“They don't know, Marvin,” Kitteridge continued, taking the other man's silence as interest. “You don't know. You don't know where you fit into the world anymore.”

The slightest hint of annoyance flickered across Marvin's eyes. “I know where I fit into the world.”

“No you don't. Not anymore. Sure, maybe you have a job, a house, a place to live. Maybe even a family. But you don't feel like you fit into any of those things anymore. You feel like you've become someone... something... *different.*”

Marvin wanted to argue, but he couldn't. He knew it was true. He didn't have a family, not yet at least, but he did have a pretty good job adjusting claims for American Mutual Insurance. A job he liked!

Or at least a job he had liked, until he realized he could jump higher and kick harder than anyone he'd ever met, or even anyone he'd heard of. Then it had all seemed less significant, somehow. Pushing his newly discovered physical limits was thrilling in ways that listening to someone describe how the passenger door of his beat-up sedan had gotten dented was not.

Not to mention how as he had explored those limits, the thought had nagged at him: didn't this make him something more than just a simple claims adjuster? Not something better, necessarily, but definitely more. And if he really was something more than that – something more than the average Joe – didn't he have a responsibility to do something useful to society with that?

He eyed Kitteridge warily. How did this guy he'd

never met before know all this about him? Was he that easy to read? That unoriginal?

“OK,” he said finally, “let's say you're right. Let's say I feel like I don't fit into my old life anymore. What's that to you? Why get yourself out of what I expect is a pretty plush bed in the middle of the night over it?”

Kitteridge's face was impassive as he sipped his coffee. “It's how I make my living,” he replied.

“Excuse me?”

“I make my living helping people like you. Helping them find a new way to fit into the world. A way that makes use of their... gifts.”

Marvin looked puzzled.

“It's like this,” said Kitteridge. “There are people out there in the world who have a lot of money. Those people need things, Marvin. They need things. Maybe they need protection, for themselves or their family or their money.

Or they need someone who can do things; things that normal men and machines cannot.

“And those people come to me. They come to me with their money. And I find people for them who can do whatever it is that they need. In exchange for their money.”

“You get the money?” Marvin asked.

Kitteridge saw the objection coming. “Not most of it, no. Most of it goes to the person I find for them. I just keep ten percent, as a finder's fee.”

“Ten percent of how much?”

“It depends on the client, and the project,” Kitteridge explained. “But it can be ten percent of an amount of money that would astonish you, if the client is wealthy enough and the talent is... talented enough.

“It's like I said, Marvin. My firm is a talent agency. And I'm a talent agent. I represent talented people.

“People like you.”

“What would I need a talent agent for?” Marvin objected.

“To bail you out of jail, for one thing,” Kitteridge said, smiling.

“I’ve never met you before,” said Marvin. “I’ve never even heard of your company. How did you know I needed bailing out?”

“I have my sources. They keep an eye on the lockups for me. If someone special comes along, they give me a call.”

“And you do this sort of thing all the time?”

“If you worked with me you wouldn't have to worry about landing in the pokey again.”

“Why not?” Marvin asked. “The law's the law. And

the law's been against costumed heroes for decades.”

“Costumed heroes, yes,” said Kitteridge. “That's why the first thing I would do is get you out of that damned costume.”

“What?” blurted Marvin. “My costume is a central part of my image. Kangaroo Man wouldn't be Kangaroo Man without the Kangaroo Man costume.”

“That's right, Marvin. He wouldn't. He'd be just another guy – at least as far as the law is concerned.”

“But the law is clear. It's not the costume it objects to. It's the heroics. They don't want random people running in the streets fighting crime. I'd be in just as much trouble if I'd have been caught tonight in street clothes.”

“I know. Which is why the second thing I'd do is get you off the streets and into gainful employment.”

“Gainful employment?”

“That's right. Look, Marvin, costume or no, there's no future in the hero business. Everything's against you. The law, the crooks, the media, the public at large. Nobody wants to see the vigilantes come back -“

“Don't use that word,” said Marvin sharply.

“What word?”

“*Vigilante*. I'm not a vigilante. I'm a *hero*.”

“I hope you didn't try explaining the difference to the cops.”

“They don't think there is a difference. But there is. And I'm on the right side of it.”

“I'm not arguing with you, Marvin,” explained Kitteridge. “I'm just trying to get you to understand how the world sees you. It sees you as a social problem. And its attempts to 'solve' you will fall on your head like an anvil.”

“That's why I'm saying, step to one side. Get out of the way of the anvil. Find yourself a line of work that society won't have a problem with.”

“I already have one. I'm a claims adjuster.”

“Somehow I doubt you get to use those powerful legs of yours much in that line of work.”

“So what if I don't?” Marvin said defensively.

“So, wouldn't you rather have a job where you could put your talents to good use? Rather than having to pretend to be normal all day and moonlighting at night?”

Marvin thought this over silently.

“I know you would. And finding those kinds of jobs for people like you is my talent. It's my superpower. So stop fighting me and let me help you build the life you want.”

The look on Marvin's face was guarded. "How do you propose to do that, exactly?"

"It's like I said. We get you out of the costumed hero nonsense and find you productive, paying work. Work that makes use of your skills, your talents."

"I can jump and kick. Who'd want to pay for that?"

"It's true," Kitteridge said, sipping coffee, "your powers aren't as... *grand* as some of my clients' are, which would limit your marketability somewhat. It's easier to find work for someone who can turn back time or stop bullets with a gesture than it is for someone who can kick really hard. But limited marketability isn't the same thing as no marketability, not by a long chalk. It just means that you're in a niche market, so we have to find that niche and position you within it so that you own it."

"A niche market," echoed Marvin glumly.

"Hey, pal, cheer up. Niche appeal is better than no

appeal at all. And I'm sure we could find you plenty of work.”

“Doing what, exactly?”

“That would depend on the client, of course. But I can think of a few obvious angles. We could train you in martial arts and get you into the bodyguard business – a bodyguard who knows kung fu and kicks like a mule would be an easy sell.”

“Kicks like a *kangaroo*,” interjected Marvin.

“Whatever. Or those legs of yours might let you lift more than the average person, which would make it easy to place you in the warehouse business. Or they might make you attractive as a corporate courier.”

“Those all sound like pretty dull jobs for a superhero.”

“They *are* dull, Marvin. That's the point. They're dull because they're *legal*. You can do them for the rest of

your life without having to hide from the police, or the press, or angry mobs looking to string up a costumed hero. You'd be able to live like anyone else, but without having to hide who you really are.

“And they *pay*, my good man. They pay like you would not believe. Corporations and billionaires are always looking for a way to get an edge over their competition, no matter how slight. And they're willing to pay incredible sums to get that edge. To get you.”

Marvin drank his coffee in silence.

“Or you can keep on doing what you're doing, hiding in your cubicle during the day and playing the costumed hero at night. You can keep right on doing that – until some enterprising reporter discovers your real identity, puts you on the front page and gets you fired from your job. Or until you run into a bad guy who's armed with something more than a switchblade, and he puts you down with three slugs to the center of mass. Or until you run into the police again and there's nobody there to bail you out.

“It's your choice, Marvin. Your choice.”

The two men sat in silence for a few moments as Marvin digested these words. The way Kitteridge put it, it all seemed so hopeless, so final. As if the future of Kangaroo Man had already been written, and the man in the fashionable topcoat was just here to read it to him.

“Captain Amazing,” Marvin finally said, softly.

“What about him?”

“You make it sound like there's no possible hope for the costumed hero. And yeah, I'll admit most of them have disappeared, those that weren't put on trial or chased out of the country by angry mobs.

“But Captain Amazing is still out there.”

Kitteridge sighed. “Yes. Captain Amazing is still out there.”

“So it's not all gloom and doom for the costumed hero.”

“You don't think so? Look, Marvin, I've represented a lot of people like you. And every time, with every single one of them, I've eventually had to have the Captain Amazing talk.”

“The Captain Amazing talk?”

“Yes. I made to every one of them the same case I've made to you: a real life, making real money, without costumes and secret identities and all the rest of it. And every one of them listens to my case and then says, but what about Captain Amazing? He did it, why can't I?”

“And I tell them the same thing I'm going to tell you, which is: you are not Captain Amazing. Captain Amazing is something unique. He has powers the average hero couldn't dream of having. He has a strategic mind so keen that the police are always two steps behind him. He has a closet full of gadgets so advanced that the greatest scientists the world over haven't been able to figure out

how they work.

“Not to mention that he has *money*. Lots and lots and *lots* of money. Great heaping piles of the stuff.”

“How do you know that?”

“It stands to reason, don’t you think? He has those belts he wears, full of all those gadgets. He has his Amazingmobile and Amazingboat and Amazingcopter. He has that secret hideout, the Amazingcave, that supposedly has the world’s most powerful computer in it. He has networks of informants, or sensors, or whatever he uses to always be right where bad things are happening. How do you get all of those things — and keep them working for decades, mind — without a substantial fortune?”

“He has all of these things – things I daresay you do not have, Marvin, intending no offense -- in his favor. But even with all that, he's still not able to show himself in the public eye. Where does Captain Amazing live? How does he pay for his living expenses? Where does all his

money come from? What does he do on his time off?

*"Nobody knows, Marvin. Nobody knows. Because despite all his gifts, he has to live in the shadows. He can't ever let his guard down, ever let anyone get close to him, because if he did his cloak of secrecy would be torn away.*

"Is that how you want to spend the rest of your life, Marvin? Alone, hunted? Because unless it is, I'll tell you now, don't pattern your life after Captain Amazing's."

Marvin was surprised at the vehemence of Kitteridge's response. He had clearly trodden on a raw nerve. But he also had to admit that Kitteridge had a point.

"I don't know how I want to live," he finally said.

"Then let me help you figure that out."

"And if I won't?"

“Then, my friend, you are on your own.”

## **CHAPTER THREE**

Marvin was on his own.

It was the next day, and it was raining. He stood in his street clothes under a cheap umbrella, trying to make out the name on a faded street sign.

Kitteridge had made a very good pitch, he thought. But in the end, he just couldn't bring himself to sign on the dotted line. Bodyguard? Lifter of heavy things? These were the best things a person with mysterious gifts could aspire to? They seemed... pedestrian, somehow. Like being a claims adjuster, but in tights.

He wanted to be somebody. To be a hero! To be

## Kangaroo Man!

After the coffee had been drained and all Kitteridge's arguments had been deployed, the older man, recognizing failure, had heaved a heavy sigh and given the younger his business card. "If you ever change your mind," he'd said, "call me."

And then he had gotten up and started out of the coffee shop. But just before reaching the door, he paused, as if thinking of something, and then turned around and came back.

"And if you don't change your mind," he'd said, grabbing a napkin and scrawling on it with an expensive-looking pen he had produced from a pocket, "talk to this fellow. I don't think much of him, myself. But if you're determined to go down the other road, he's one of the few people who will be willing to go with you."

Then he'd turned and walked out, leaving Marvin to puzzle over the message on the napkin:

“ACE” HARDWICK  
PIER FIFTEEN, STE. 9

... which had led him here, to the city's waterfront district, in the rain.

The Waterfront district was not a place that attracted many visitors. Once, many years ago, it had been one of the most thriving commercial ports in the nation, but those days were long past. Today the freighters all docked seventy-five miles to the north, and the city's piers rusted from lack of use. “Renewing” the Waterfront was a favorite campaign promise of aspiring mayors, whose enthusiasm for the idea during the campaign was matched only by the speed with which they discarded it upon winning office. So it festered, a seedy, seeping sore on the city map.

Despite living in the city all his life, Marvin had never been to the Waterfront before. He'd never had a reason to. Reputable businesses didn't have their offices in the Waterfront, and reputable people didn't have home addresses there. They were happy to leave it to those

who could afford to go nowhere else – the drunks and the drug dealers, the people living on the wrong side of the poverty line, the check cashers and lottery shops.

But he was here today, as the rain poured down, looking for a sign.

The sign he looked for was a street sign labeled “Pier Fifteen.” But the Waterfront was a warren of alleys and abandoned buildings, making finding one street in particular difficult. The pier numbers seemed to run south to north, so finding Pier Fifteen should, he thought, just have been a matter of finding Pier Fourteen and then heading north; but a razor-wire fence just to the north of Pier Fourteen closed that possibility off. His cell phone included a GPS feature, which he turned to next; but it seemed willfully ignorant of the geography of the Waterfront, twice giving him directions that led off the end of a pier into the dark waters of the ocean. Technology, he thought. Technology marches on.

An hour and a half of wandering back streets had finally brought him here, to a sign whose label had faded

along with the district itself. Marvin had to walk right up to the sign to make out the words:

P E R F T E E

Had it once read “Pier Fifteen,” back when these streets clamored with commerce and radio swing music? He had no idea. But he also had no other obvious options, so he headed down the long pier as the rain poured down.

He never saw any other official confirmation that the pier he was walking was, in fact, Pier Fifteen. But he did see a faded sign painted on a window:

**HARDWICK SOLUTIONS, LTD.**

*Bail bonds and other services*

*Open 24/7\**

*“We never close”\**

The asterisks struck him as unusual. He scanned across the sign to see what they meant. Finally he saw one more line in tiny type at the bottom:

*\* Except evenings and weekends*

It did not strike him as an encouraging sign.

Nonetheless, the sign said “Hardwick,” so he assumed this was the office of the person Kitteridge had directed him to. It was a weekday, so he took a deep breath and walked through the door.

The office on the other side looked as if a bomb had hit it. Ancient filing cabinets sagged, their sliding doors hanging open to varying degrees, paper spilling out of file folders onto the floor beneath. A wastebasket overflowed with gaily colored fast-food wrappers. A desk stood stolidly in the center of the room, its rich wood making it look like it was worth quite a bit of money, once. The desk was bare, except for an old-style rotary phone, several empty whiskey bottles, and some more paper seemingly scattered across its surface at random.

Behind the desk sat a man, snoring.

Marvin considered the man for a moment. He looked middle-aged — hair thinning at the top, stomach swelling in the beginnings of a gut. A collared shirt with the collar open, a half-tied tie loosely slung around it. A suit that looked like he'd been wearing it his entire life. Marvin was surprised to see it included a vest — he struggled to think of the last time he'd seen a man in a full three-piece suit. Such a suit implied the man wore a hat, too, and sure enough there was a free-standing coat rack tucked in a corner with a battered hat hanging on it. A fedora? No, a homburg. Marvin wondered where he had learned the difference.

The man showed no signs of stirring. Marvin pondered the ethics of how exactly to proceed. Should he try to wake him with a word? A shake? Leave him alone and come back later? (But who was to say he wouldn't find him in the same position on a return visit?)

He could just bang on the desk, he thought; that would wake anybody, unless they were well and truly dead. (Dead people generally don't snore, so he had ruled this possibility out early.) But it seemed... impolite,

somehow. A bad way to start a relationship.

He finally decided to start with a word and escalate from there if necessary. "Hello?" he said.

The man woke with a start. "Ngh!" he said, shaking his head and clearing his throat. "Mrgh! Who's there!"

"Marvin," said Marvin. "Marvin Wendt."

The man digested this while rapidly opening and closing his eyes. "Mmm. Marvin. Marvin Wendt."

"That's right."

"Pleased to meet you, Marvin Wendt. Now do you want to tell me what the hell you're doing in my office?"

Marvin had expected apologies from the man — regrets for his rudeness at being asleep during business hours. The challenge he heard instead startled him. Was he in the right office after all?

“I’m looking for a Mr. Hardwick,” he explained. “Ace Hardwick.”

“Well, you found him,” the man behind the desk grunted.

“I was referred to him — to *you*, I mean — by —” he fumbled in his pocket for the business card — “J. Charlton Kitteridge.”

Hardwick’s eyes narrowed; his shoulders tensed. “Kitteridge?” he snapped. “You’ve got something to do with that sonofabitch Kitteridge?”

Marvin sensed that he had misstepped. “No, sir,” he replied. “Nothing formal, I mean. He approached me with a business proposition, but I turned him down. He said that if I wasn’t going to work with him, I should talk to Ace Hardwick.”

Hardwick considered this for a moment. “All right,” he said. “Sit down, let’s talk.”

Marvin looked around confusedly. "There's no chair for me to sit in, Mr. Hardwick."

"Hm. You're right." Hardwick fished a pack of cigarettes out from his shirt pocket. "Well then, stand up, let's talk. And call me Ace, Mr. Hardwick was my father."

"All right, Mr. — Ace."

"So what do you need from me exactly?"

"I'm not sure. Kitteridge told me I should talk to you. But he didn't say why, or what it was that you do."

"Bail bonds," snorted Ace, lighting a cigarette.

"Bail bonds?"

"Bail bonds. You get pinched, I come and bail you out. Simple. I take it Kitteridge found you in lockup?"

"That's right."

“He does that a lot. Strange way of trawling for new business, I say, but to each his own. What were you in for?”

“Costumed heroics,” replied Marvin.

You could hear a pin drop. The cigarette dropped from Ace’s suddenly gaping mouth.

“Well, not *officially* costumed heroics,” Marvin continued. “They charged me with aggravated assault. But I was in a costume fighting crime at the time, so...”

“In a costume.”

“That’s right.”

“Fighting crime.”

“Yep.”

There was a long pause as Ace looked Marvin slowly up and down. “You wanna tell me why you were doing

that?”

“Someone has to,” Marvin shrugged. “And besides, I have —”

“Powers?” Ace asked.

“Powers,” Marvin confirmed.

Ace suddenly began frantically looking around the room. He sprang up from his chair, bolted over to the door and closed it. He then began drawing the blinds over the window behind his desk.

“Is something wrong?” asked Marvin.

“Is something *wrong*?” replied Ace. “You damn well better believe something’s wrong. Costumed heroics are *illegal*. Seriously illegal. The kind of illegal that gets you hauled off as an accessory just for knowing someone’s doing them and not turning them in.”

“I’m aware they’re illegal.”

“Apparently not enough, or you wouldn’t have been out there playing hero. You’re lucky they let you off with aggravated assault, buddy. Lotsa people have gone away for years for less.”

“OK, fine. But Kitteridge didn’t seem panicked about talking to me. So why did he send me to you?”

Ace settled back down in his chair, wiping beads of sweat from his forehead. “Lemme guess. He tried to talk you into going straight. Becoming a registered deviant and getting a legit job bodyguarding or something.”

“That’s right. Wait a minute — *deviant*? I’m not a —”

“You got powers, kid, you’re a deviant,” said Ace, taking a drag of his cigarette. “Least, that’s the word the law uses. Don’t blame me, I didn’t write it.”

Marvin considered this. “Deviant.”

“Hey, kid, don't let it get to you. Used to be lotsa

deviants running around out there. Probably still are, only these days they have the good sense to keep their heads down. Present company excepted.”

“Look, mister,” said Marvin, “I don't know why Kitteridge told me I should come talk to you. Do you?”

“Long memory,” replied Ace.

“Say what?”

“It's because he has a long memory. He remembers that I used to be in the costumed-hero business myself.”

This took Marvin by surprise; the obviously out of shape Ace would not strike anyone as the picture of heroic vigor. “You don't look like a costumed hero to me.”

“Not like that. I didn't wear a costume myself. I helped out.”

“Helped out?”

“Yeah,” Ace coughed. “Even superheroes need support staff, you know? Someone’s gotta make sure that all the accessories are in the right places on the old utility belt.”

“You worked for one of the old heroes? Before the ban?”

“For a couple of them. I was part of Captain Amazing’s entourage for a little while, but that got old quick — small teams are more my style. After I split from there I was Thunderclap’s equipment manager for few years. Decent gig, but Thunderclap was kind of an ass. Always sneaking up behind people and making that damn boom noise he could make. Rattled the fucking windows!” Ace took another long drag. “Like I said, an ass.”

“I never heard of Thunderclap.”

“Probably before your time. He never really made the big leagues, that’s why it was just him and me. Eventually he gave up and dropped out — I think he bought a used car dealership — so I was out of work for a

while. Then Furicane picked me up to handle his equipment, and I stayed with him right up until the ban came down.”

“Furicane?”

“Controlled the weather. Not as useful a power as you might think.”

“Hm.”

“Yeah. So I’m guessing that’s what Kitteridge was thinking. He couldn’t talk you out of trying the costumed hero business, so he remembered my days as a roadie and sent you to me to learn how it works.”

Marvin was skeptical. “Learn how it works? What’s to learn? You go out, find crime, and stop it. It’s simple.”

“Yeah, kid, that’s why your first trip out landed you in the pokey. Because *you know how it works.*”

“I hate to say it, but you kind of have a point there.”

Ace coughed again, the deep throaty rattle of the lifelong smoker. “Thanks for noticing.”

“So what happens now? We go somewhere and you show me the ropes?”

“What? No! No way. I dunno if you noticed, but my days on the spandex circuit are long behind me. I’m a bail bondsman now, see? I got nothing to do with costumed heroes anymore.”

“Kitteridge obviously disagrees.”

“Him and me, we’re not what you’d call bosom buddies. I haven’t talked to him in years. I’m amazed he knew the address of my office. What he knows about me you could fit in a shot glass.”

“So that’s it? I come all this way to meet you, and you tell me you’re retired and send me on your way?”

“Pretty much, kid.” Ace’s face flushed with anger as

he stubbed out his cigarette. "Ain't you heard? Costumed heroes aren't the only ones who get in trouble for being in the costumed-hero biz. The damned Mitchell Act put lots of my friends behind bars for nothing more than ironing somebody's cape. For just doing what a month ago had been their job! Suddenly it's a Federal offense. Those of us who got out without a prison term learned real good to keep our heads down and stay far away from would-be do-gooders like you."

"Come on. There's got to be at least *one* tip you can give me to get me off on the right foot."

"I already gave it to ya: quit while you're ahead. That's all the tips anyone needs."

Marvin was at a loss. He'd found exactly two people in the world who seemed to really understand the world of costumed heroes, and they both had tried to drag him as far away from it as they could. His powers were beginning to feel like a curse instead of a blessing.

"I need a drink," he finally said.

A grin broke out across Ace's ruddy face. "Now you're talkin' my language," he said as he pulled a half-full bottle and a couple of dirty glasses out from his desk. "Get yourself a chair and have a belt before you go. Least I can do since I gotta disappoint you on the other stuff."

Marvin looked around for a chair, but didn't see one. Ace gestured broadly with his arm towards the far corner of the room. "Over there, under the porno mags." Sure enough, there was an old folding chair buried under the pile of magazines there. Marvin set up the chair and settled down into it.

Ace poured them each a shot and pushed one glass over to Marvin, who noticed while taking his that Ace's glass was substantially more full than his own.

"Down the hatch," said Ace, and they both slugged the liquor back. To Ace's amusement, Marvin immediately broke out in a fit of coughing. "I take it you're not really a drinking man."

“Not really,” Marvin replied. “But today’s as good a time to start as any.”

Ace’s expression softened. “Look, Melvin —”

“Marvin.”

“Marvin, sorry. I didn’t mean to come across so rough. I’m sure you’re really excited about finding out you have powers and you can’t wait to save the world.”

“Nothing like that,” Marvin explained. “I’m not Captain Amazing or anything. My powers are pretty minor.”

“Like what?”

“Super-strong legs. I can jump high, kick hard, and run fast. Less so the running thing than the other two, though.”

“Strong legs,” mused Ace. “Better than nothing, I guess. And hell, back in the day, there were plenty of

heroes running around with powers less impressive than that.”

“Really? Like who?”

“Well, I already told you about Thunderclap. And then there was Octopete, who just had a bunch of extra arms. *Extra arms*, can you believe it? I always told him he was more cut out to be a wristwatch model than a superhero.”

“Heh.”

“Poor Pete. He was always trying to get a date with Sally Supernova, but she’d turn him down saying guys with two hands were hard enough to deal with. Wonder whatever happened to him.”

“What happened to all of them?” Marvin wondered. “I mean, sure, some of them went to jail. But most didn’t. They just, sort of —”

“Disappeared.”

“Exactly. Disappeared. So where did they go? Where do you go when you disappear?”

Ace poured them each another shot. “Most of them just went back to their old lives. The ones who had been careful to keep their identities secret, that is. Nobody had to know that the guy behind the counter at the Stop ‘n Shop used to run around in tights and call himself Cosmic Ray. Here, drink up.”

Down went the shots. “Cosmic Ray?”

“Guy’s name was Ray. Long story.”

“I’ll bet.”

Ace pushed back from the desk a bit. “Anyway, that was that. The costumed heroes disappeared and I was out of a job.”

“That’s too bad. You seem like a good guy, Ace. But it worked out in the end, right? You got back on your feet and got into the bail bonds business.”

“Yeah, I s’pose. Still, as you can see —” Ace waved an arm — “the bail bonds business ain’t so hot. Makes you miss the old days.”

Even though his head was fuzzy from the liquor, Marvin sensed an opportunity.

“You miss the old days, Ace?”

“Sure do. It was exciting! Sometimes you’d even get to mix it up with the bad guys alongside your boss. Or their henchmen, at least. The boss would always want to save the big name for himself.”

“Look, Ace. I know you’re trying to help me by warning me off from the costumed hero thing. I respect that. And I wouldn’t want to drag you into anything that could get you in trouble.

“But what if we just did this from time to time? Get together, throw back a few drinks, you tell me your stories from the old days, I tell you what I’m up to?

Nobody's going to prosecute you just for having a drinking buddy. And you don't seem like the kind of guy who'd take *my* stories and go running with them to the police."

Ace's brow wrinkled as he considered the offer. "I'm always up for throwing back a few drinks," he eventually responded. "But what's in it for you? What do you get for listening to me tell old war stories?"

"I get to learn!" Marvin enthused. "You've got all this experience — experience that I don't have. And I'd rather not get it the hard way, by being beat up a lot. So you tell me about the things you saw, the things you did, and I learn from them. I become a better hero."

"What the hell," Ace finally said. "Sure, why not. Just as long as you're buying the liquor."

Marvin smiled. "It's on me."

"Good deal. Hey, you never told me — what's your hero name?"

“Kangaroo Man.”

“Jesus H. Christ.”

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

The city was different at night.

During the day its streets and sidewalks were clogged with activity, people and cars all fighting for their own small sliver of space. Its roar was deafening — horns honking, builders building, people talking and arguing and screaming — as if humanity itself was waves of surf crashing against the city's concrete walls.

At night, it was different. Quieter. Calmer. The furious activity of the day ebbed away, leaving just the empty streets and those few people whose business or predilections were nocturnal.

People like Marvin.

No, he thought. People like *Kangaroo Man*.

The night was when danger emerged from its lair to threaten the law-abiding citizens of the city. And it was when Kangaroo Man emerged to push them back.

It was almost enough to make him feel like a hero. Almost. Except for the fact that he was a grown man standing on a rooftop in the middle of the night in gray tights.

“Footie pajamas,” Kitteridge had called them dismissively. And he hadn’t been far wrong. Tights don’t usually come in flannel. And then there was the pouch. A little research had confirmed that Kitteridge was right; only female kangaroos have pouches, which made the presence of one on Kangaroo Man’s costume a little incongruous.

He’d considered pulling it off, but Ace had told him not to bother. “Might come in handy sometime, you never

know,” he’d said. “Just call it something other than a pouch, problem solved. Maybe like, ‘tactical pocket.’ It’s a tactical pocket.”

Still, a costume was a costume. And he had bigger things on his mind than how fashion-forward his made him. He had to find a crime to stop.

He had been surprised, his first time out, at how hard that actually was. He’d imagined it would only take a few minutes of walking down streets before he found a robbery, or a mugging, or — *something*. But hours of pavement-pounding had yielded nothing. When the city went home to bed, it appeared that the criminals did so too.

He’d eventually found a convenience store whose owner was standing out front yelling about shoplifters. He’d run off in the direction the man was pointing, only to run into a patrol car before he ran into the shoplifter. So his record so far was a depressing 0-1.

He was determined that tonight would even the

score. But that would require finding another crime to stop. And from his rooftop perch, he could see no obvious candidates.

He made his way down a fire escape to the street. *Just like last time, he thought, it's going to take a little searching to find one tonight.*

Unlike the last time, though, this night Marvin had set out with a strategy in mind. On his first outing, he had patrolled the city's business district. This had made his job harder, because it turned out that the business district was only really populated during business hours. At 5:00 every day its population drained out into the city's numerous cookie-cutter suburbs, leaving behind only janitors and security guards. No self-respecting criminal would waste his time, he realized, in a part of town where there was nobody around to victimize.

Tonight, though, was going to be different. Tonight he was going where the crime was. He was going into the Flatbottom.

The Flatbottom was the most notorious slum district in the city. It hadn't always been that way, of course. Fifty years ago it had been a poor but respectable neighborhood populated by, among others, the city's many dockworkers. The death of the port, though, had put a bullet in the heart of the neighborhood, and it was eventually razed to make room for vast, towering public housing projects. Those were supposed to remake the neighborhood, and they had — only not in the way their architects had intended. The city's refusal to pay for upkeep on the projects and the lack of any economic engine to replace the port had remade the neighborhood into a sort of playground for drug dealers and petty criminals of all kinds. Eventually the projects had come down, but the crime had stayed.

These days, even the police steered clear of the Flatbottom. But Marvin was headed straight into it.

His logic was simple: if you want to be a crimefighter, go where the crime is. He knew it was dangerous; the criminals of the Flatbottom were famed for being armed more heavily than the average army platoon. But he had

his powers — and besides, what kind of a hero would only do his heroics in safe places? The whole point of heroics was facing and overcoming danger.

Which, to be honest, made Marvin an unlikely hero. He had never been particularly brave or assertive, even before he discovered his new talents. Brave, assertive people generally don't gravitate towards careers as claims adjusters. But he'd felt a tinge of shame as he'd listened to Ace tell his stories of the good old days, of Captain Amazing single-handedly taking down the mob, of Stinkbomb and Lightning Bug defeating Doctor Discouragement and his army of Downers, of the legendary feats of the League of Good Guys.

*Am I made of the same stuff they were? Am I a real hero, or just a schlub in footie pajamas?*

There was only one way, he'd decided, to find out. And so here he was, walking the streets of the Flatbottom.

They were actually quieter than he'd expected. He'd

envisioned them as a sort of open-air version of the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, only with the traders being having AK-47s slung over their shoulders and bidding on crystal meth instead of pork belly futures. But as it happened, they were actually pretty deserted.

Or at least, they had appeared deserted. But eventually he began to notice a pattern. Every couple of blocks, he'd encounter a young man standing alone on a corner. These men generally gave him funny looks, as a person walking around dressed in a flannel kangaroo costume might expect. But they didn't try to stop him, or even harass him. They just stood there eyeing him quietly, as if to say: *your move*.

At first he'd thought these were just unconnected urban youths with nothing to do on a Thursday night. But he slowly realized that they were, in fact, lookouts. They were there to defend sections of turf — to sound the alarm if a rival gang were to cross over an invisible boundary, or if the police were to come rolling up, sirens blaring.

Which meant that, while they weren't themselves committing crimes, they were connected to someone who almost certainly was.

Realizing this made Marvin's heart skip a beat. This was the closest he'd come to actual, serious crime in his short career as Kangaroo Man. But how could he pierce the veil that shrouded the people behind these people? How could he get to the man behind the men?

He wasn't a detective, and no obvious superheroic way presented itself to him. So he decided to do it the non-superheroic way: by going up and asking.

The next lookout he saw was a tall, handsome young black man wearing a basketball jersey and a pair of baggy jeans. His hair had been buzzed down to nearly nothing, and he had no facial hair. On closer inspection Marvin realized he was probably too young to grow any; despite being several inches taller than Marvin, his face was the face of a fifteen- or sixteen-year old boy. Marvin wondered if that was the standard practice, sending boys out to the corners while the men stayed behind closed

doors doing the real business.

He approached the young man, trying to make his stride long to project an image of confidence. From the look on the boy's face, he guessed that it hadn't worked.

The two stood in silence for a moment, until the young man finally spoke. "Can I help you?" he inquired.

This was not the opener Marvin had anticipated. "Excuse me?"

"Can I... *help* you?"

"Help me with what?"

The man's eyes began to cautiously scan the horizon. "You know, man. You're in the Flatbottom. People like you don't come down here unless they need some... *help.*"

Marvin felt increasingly out of his depth. "People like me?" he asked.

“People like you,” the young man confirmed. “Do I have to say it out loud? I can see the color of your face under that hoodie you’re wearing. *White people*. White people don’t come to the Flatbottom unless they *need* something.”

Marvin stared at him.

“Something you can only get in the Flatbottom. Something special. Something they *need*.”

Marvin realized he had completely lost the plot. He had no idea where this conversation was going. The expression on the young man’s face was one of mounting exasperation.

“For Christ’s sake. *Drugs*, you clueless cracker. Are you here to buy *drugs*?”

“Oh! Drugs! No, I’m not here to buy drugs.”

“OK. Then get the hell off my corner and go waste

somebody else's time."

It dawned on Marvin that he had made a tactical mistake. "Wait! No! I mean, yes! Yes, I would like to buy drugs. Can you tell me where I would go to do that?"

At this, a smile broke across the young man's face. "Let me guess," he said, chuckling. "You're new at this."

"I suppose you could say that," said Marvin.

"Normally this is the point where I would assume you're a cop and clam up and walk away," the man said. "But there's no way a cop would be caught dead in that outfit."

"I wouldn't really know."

"Take my word for it. I imagine I have more experience with cops than you do."

"So you're confident I'm not a cop," Marvin said. "What now?"

“Now’s the part where you tell me exactly what drugs you’re looking for.”

“I’m not sure. Do you have a list or something I could choose from?”

“A *list*?”

“Yes. You know, like... like a menu or something.”

“A *menu*.”

“Yes.”

“Look,” the man said. “This isn’t a buffet. People don’t come here looking to sample a wide range of new experiences. They come here because they’re jonesing for something. Something *specific*.”

“Jonesing?”

The man laughed again. “You’re a piece of work,

man. You know that? You come all the way down to the Flatbottom, the place white people never go to except to buy drugs, with the general idea that you would like to buy some drugs but no idea exactly which drugs you want. And you do it dressed like a kangaroo.”

At this, Marvin beamed. “You recognized it!”

“Of course I did. It’s gray and there’s a pouch on the front. What else could it be?”

“I keep telling people that,” Marvin said, “but they never seem to get it. It’s quite frustrating. It’s nice to meet someone who knows his marsupials, though.”

“Gotta tell you though, dude, only female kangaroos have pouches. Not the dudes.”

“It’s not a pouch. It’s a... a tactical pocket.”

“Sure looks like a pouch to me.”

Marvin tried to assume a dismissive posture. “Well,

to the untrained eye, perhaps.”

DeAndre snorted. “Whatever. Are you here to buy something or not?”

“Well, I guess not really. I’m not here to buy drugs.”

“You don’t say.”

“I’m here to *stop* drugs. For I am —” and here Marvin struck a pose — “the Kangaroo Man!”

“The what now?”

“The Kangaroo Man. Costumed hero, champion of justice, defender of the innocent, et cetera.”

“You’re crazy, man. There aren’t any costumed heroes anymore. They all got run off the streets years ago.”

“Well, they’re back. *We’re* back, I mean. Or at least, *I’m* back.”

“You can’t be back, you were never here in the first place. I never heard of any Kangaroo Man.”

“OK, OK, you’ve got a point there. I’m not back, but I’m here.”

“You certainly are.”

“Here to stop drugs.”

The young man chuckled again. “Good luck with that.”

“Maybe you can help,” Marvin persisted. “You seem like a nice enough fellow. I’m sure you’re tired of this scourge blighting your hood.”security

“I’m sorry, my *hood*?”

“Yes,” said Marvin, making a sweeping arm gesture towards the dilapidated houses all around them. “Your hood!”

“My hood,” the young man sighed. “I take it you watched a bunch of Spike Lee movies to psyche yourself up for your trip down to Flatbottom.”

“No. But not because I don’t like Spike Lee! He’s a gifted filmmaker.”

“You’ve *got* to be kidding me.”

Marvin could feel the conversation spinning out of his control. “Look,” he said, “my point is, I’m here to help clean this community up. And I need your help to know where to start.”

“Oh, great,” the young man replied. “A white man in a kangaroo suit is here to save us from ourselves. Glory be! The day of Jubilo has arrived!”

“I’m sensing sarcasm in your tone.”

“Is that one of your powers, Costumed Hero? The power to detect sarcasm?”

“Why are you being so difficult? I’m trying to help you!”

“Help me? Look, man, I’m helping *you*. You’re crazy lucky that you picked me to make your little ‘Hark, the Costumed Hero Approacheth’ speech to. If you’d walked up to just about any other corner and pulled that, you’d be bleeding out right now.”

“I can handle myself, thank you very much.”

“So your kangaroo suit can protect you from this?” the man said, pulling up his jersey to reveal the black plastic butt of a semi-automatic handgun tucked into his jeans.

Marvin’s eyes goggled. He’d never seen a gun before, except on TV.

“Let me explain this to you very clearly,” the young man continued, letting his jersey drop down again and speaking slowly, as if to a particularly dull child. “If you’re

here to get the drugs out of Flatbottom, you're not going to have a lot of friends here. Because everyone here is either *selling* drugs, *taking* drugs, or *both*. If you live in Flatbottom, there's not much else to do. So you're not going to find an appreciative audience for speeches about how it's time for us all to Just Say No."

"But —" Marvin blurted.

"Let me finish. And I'm not talking in abstractions, either. Why do you think I'm standing on a street corner in Flatbottom in the middle of the night with a pistol in my pants? I'm standing on a street corner in Flatbottom in the middle of the night with a pistol in my pants because *that is what you do when you want to sell drugs*. It's my livelihood, understand? I sell drugs. Which makes do-gooders in kangaroo suits a threat to my continued financial health and happiness."

Marvin's eyes darted downward to see if he was reaching for the pistol. Thankfully, he was not.

"However," the young man continued, "you seem

harmless enough, mostly because you appear to have been born without the common sense God gave a garden slug. So let me give you a piece of advice: take your speeches, put them in your pouch, hop your white ass out of Flatbottom and never come back. Because *you're not wanted here.*"

Marvin felt a mounting sense of shame as he endured the young man's dressing-down. He knew he wasn't wanted here. But heroes don't go where they're *wanted*, they go where they're *needed*. They go where the problems are, and solve them. And while he'd found a fairly severe problem, he wasn't doing a particularly heroic job of solving it. In the back of his mind, he could hear the heroes of Ace's stories laughing at him. "Kangaroo Man! Remember that loser? He made Octopete look like Captain Amazing. *Octopete.*"

He knew he had to do something, or else crawl back into his cubicle in the insurance company and stop calling himself a hero forever.

"What's your name, kid?" he finally asked.

“DeAndre.”

“Nice to meet you, DeAndre,” he said. “And I’m sorry about this.” And then he kicked DeAndre as hard as he could.

The kick landed against DeAndre’s chest. Marvin knew he could kick, but he was continually surprised at how *hard* he could kick, and this time was no exception; DeAndre’s feet left the sidewalk, and he flew backwards as if hit by an invisible freight train.

He landed hard — so hard that Marvin worried he might have broken some bones. That worry only lasted a moment though, because it was replaced by another, more immediate worry: a loud BANG, ringing out from inside DeAndre’s pants.

“Oh, shit!” he cried. “I’ve been shot!”

## CHAPTER FIVE

Marvin gasped. He'd only meant to throw a scare into the kid, not to throw a bullet into him. But now he was sprawled out on the pavement, blood seeping out of one leg of his jeans.

"Oh, God. Oh, no. Somebody help me! I've been shot!"

Marvin ran up to him, reaching out an arm to pull him up. *I can help*, he thought, *I can carry him to a hospital*. He ran up and lifted DeAndre's bleeding body over his shoulder, his powerful legs making the maneuver easy. But suddenly he noticed that the two of them were no longer the only people on the corner. A crowd of people

was spilling out of a building whose entrance fronted the corner. A crowd that looked angry, and mean. A crowd of lean, hard-looking black men.

A crowd that was carrying *lots* of guns.

“That dude shot DeAndre!” one of them shouted.  
“Get him!”

“I’ve got to get you to a hospital. Do you know a way out of here?” he asked DeAndre.

“Urghh,” DeAndre replied.

He glanced around quickly, looking for a way out. The Flatbottom was a warren of unmarked streets and dark alleys, making it hard to know how to get from one place to another. But dark alleys also had the benefit of making it harder to see someone, and therefore to shoot them. So he turned himself towards the nearest alley and leapt for it with a mighty hop.

The first bullet whistled by his ear even before he left

the ground. They seemed to be aiming wide — Marvin guessed that they were used to shooting at people who were running along the surface of the ground, rather than leaping over it. But he had a bad feeling that they were fast learners.

He bounded down an alley, hopping over discarded refrigerator boxes and automobile tires. The darkness of the alley did give him some cover, which helped. But the gang was hard on his heels, and he knew the protection of the darkness would not last; eventually their eyes would adjust. Not to mention that windows were flying up to each side of him as he passed, people sticking their heads out and asking what all the ruckus was about. And when they heard the answer “that white sonofabitch took DeAndre!”, they began piling out of their apartments and joining the chase.

Desperately, he poured even more energy into his legs, making each hop longer, stronger. He needed to reach the street at the end of the alley; it was brightly lit, which would hopefully throw off his pursuers’ vision once again. He briefly hoped that he might find a police car

patrolling there, until he remembered that he'd come to Flatbottom in the first place precisely because the police did not.

He felt DeAndre's blood running down his shoulder. He needed to find a hospital, soon. More bullets sang past him. They were getting closer now.

He took one more mighty leap and now he was out of the alley, onto a street again. He looked left, right, trying to find an obvious escape route. And he did, in a manner of speaking; the street dead-ended to his right, so the only direction he could go was left. He pivoted on his feet and then leapt off in that direction, bounding over a parked car.

For a moment, he thought he might actually get away. He was putting distance between himself and the crowd behind him; his leaps were getting better, higher, more confident. He'd never really put himself to such an intense test before, and he was learning that he had more in him than even he had suspected.

That was when he noticed the crowd that had gathered in *front* of him.

Word, it seemed, had gotten around. (Not surprising, he glumly realized, in the age of the ubiquitous cell phone.) And now at the end of the street — the only other end of a dead-end street — was another crowd.

Another *armed* crowd.

He landed from his hop and quickly considered what to do. He could try leaping over them, but even the worst shot in the world could hit a person hopping directly over his head. He could leap up and try to scramble up a fire escape, but that was risky — he'd never tried coordinating his hands and his feet in the way they would need to be coordinated to pull that off — and if he stumbled even a moment clambering up the escape he'd be an easy target. He could turn around and try to come back the way he came, but now the crowd that had been chasing him was coming up around the corner, blocking that escape route too.

He was trapped.

He stood stock still, trying to evaluate what was going to happen next. The crowds were silent too, but the expressions on their faces screamed bloody murder. Marvin realized how bad this all must look; here's a white guy none of them had ever seen before, dressed in an outlandish costume, who had come into their neighborhood, shot a kid point-blank — none of them would have seen that the gunshot had come from DeAndre's own gun, misfiring in his trousers — and then picked up the wounded boy and tried to make off with him. Was he a kidnapper? A pervert? They would have no way of knowing.

As the two crowds merged together into a single group surrounding him, he wondered idly if Captain Amazing had ever had to deal with situations like this back in the days before everyone in the world knew who Captain Amazing was.

He finally decided that it would be better to break the silence himself than to wait for someone in the crowd

to do it for him. “My name is Kangaroo Man,” he said, trying desperately to crank the bass in his voice up to eleven. “This young man has suffered a gunshot wound. I’m trying to get him to the nearest hospital.”

“Urgh,” DeAndre added, unhelpfully.

The people surrounding him took a moment to digest these statements. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity to Marvin, a man stepped forward to address him. He was older than DeAndre, mid-twenties, muscular and imposing. A long scar ran down the right side of his face, from his eyebrow nearly down to his strong chin. A semi-automatic pistol rested menacingly in one of his hands.

“We know he’s shot, fool,” the man said. “You shot him.”

“No I didn’t!” squeaked Marvin, his voice breaking. “I don’t carry a gun. His own gun went off — it was tucked into the waistband of his pants.”

“I know how DeAndre carries,” the man retorted. “I also know we ain’t never seen you in the Flatbottom before.”

“How do you know that?”

“Look how you dressed. You think anybody would be able to forget that?”

“I get that a lot. Look —” Marvin said, gesturing with his free hand towards the man to indicate he didn’t know his name.

“Deion,” the man said. “Deion Washington. I run this neighborhood.”

“Oh,” Marvin responded.

“And DeAndre’s my little brother.”

“Ohhhh.”

“So why don’t you put him down and let *us* get him

to the hospital.”

“There’s no time,” persisted Marvin. “He’s losing blood too fast. I can get him there faster than anyone.”

“Sure you can. We saw you hoppin’.”

“So let me pass. I’ll get him to the hospital, and make sure he gets fixed up.”

“Why should we believe you?” Deion asked. It struck Marvin that this was actually a sensible question.

“Nobody here knows you. You act funny, dress funny. How we know you won’t just leave him on a street corner somewhere? Or take him to some place you got hidden away to do something to him?”

“Do something to him?”

“You know. You’re one of those costume heroes, right? Use him for your *experiments*. Make him into one of *you*.”

Marvin knew what Deion was talking about. It was a fear that had been widespread ever since the last days of the original costumed heroes. Nobody knew what caused some people to have powers, but while most had simply gratefully accepted their talents as an unprompted gift, a few had taken a more detailed interest in the question. One, the hero who went by the name Doctor Genome, had become obsessed with it. If the secret could be found, he thought, heroes' powers could be augmented and enhanced beyond imagining, and ordinary people could be "deputized" to fight crime with powers given through a hypodermic needle rather than by random chance.

It had been assumed that his interest was purely intellectual, until a newspaper reporter managed to find his secret laboratory and discovered the bodies of all the transients he had impressed to serve as lab rats in his quest for a super serum. The media circus that followed had been a major factor in the shift of public opinion against heroes, which in turn led to the legislation that had driven them off the streets.

“It’s not like that,” protested Marvin. “I’m not Doctor Genome. I’m not a super-scientist. I just want to help people. To help DeAndre.”

“You doing a strange job of that so far, Kangaroo Man. All I can see of your ‘help’ is a bloody boy slung over your shoulder.”

“I’ll admit it doesn’t look great. But it’s not what it looks like. I swear on my name, on my honor.”

“Your name don’t carry much weight around here.”

“So what can I do to convince you?” Marvin asked, feeling the clammy grip of desperation as the opportunity to sway the crowd slipped away.

Deion racked the slide on his pistol. “Nothing,” he said, raising it to point directly at Marvin. “Nothing.”

To Marvin, time seemed to slow as the gun came up. Seconds stretched out to feel like hours. *So this is how it ends*, he thought. *Soaked in an innocent boy’s blood, a*

*bullet through the lungs or the heart or the head. Just another body on the streets of the Flatbottom. They won't even know I had powers, that I was a hero. I'll just be another statistic in the city's crime rates, another cautionary tale about what happens to people from uptown who stray into the Flatbottom. It will all have been for nothing.*

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and waited for the inevitable.

Which didn't come.

What came instead was a sudden *whoosh*, and a tremor under his feet. The ground shook as if something massive had hit it. Marvin swayed with the impact, concentrating on holding on to DeAndre as he struggled for balance. He opened his eyes, unsure of what could have caused such an effect, of what he was about to see.

It turned out to be a sight that was familiar to every denizen of the city. A sight that had been associated with safety, with justice, for decades.

The sight of Captain Amazing.

Captain Amazing stood before him, his red cape billowing in the breeze, the royal blue of his body armor — emblazoned with the bold white “A” that was his iconic symbol — richer and deeper than newspaper and TV pictures made it appear. He stood between Marvin and Deion, his feet planted decisively, his back turned to Marvin so that he faced Deion and his weapon head-on.

Marvin was surprised to see his hair — his famous hair, short, jet-black and wavy, the subject of untold thousands of admiring boys’ requests to their barbers over the decades — was streaked with gray. Was the legendary spit-curl over his forehead gray now, too? He couldn’t tell from behind.

“My name is Captain Amazing,” the hero said, in the *basso profundo* voice that had frightened criminals for generations.

Nobody spoke.

“I am here,” he continued, “to help this wounded boy, and to prevent any further violence from happening on these streets tonight.

“Here is what is going to happen. You, with the pistol —” he gestured towards Deion — “will put your gun on the ground, slowly. All the rest of you will put your own weapons on the ground as well.

“When that is complete, you, with the boy —” he gestured towards Marvin — “will hand him over to me. You will then leave this place, as fast as your legs can carry you. I will wait a moment to make sure no one in this crowd harms you or prevents you from leaving. I will then use my ability to fly at speeds beyond the human eye to deliver the wounded boy to the finest hospital in the city, St. Mary’s Medical Center, where he will be cared for at no expense to him by the finest experts in gunshot trauma.

“After I have departed with the boy, those of you who remain will immediately disperse and return to your

homes. Any attempt to follow me will fail because of the great speed at which I travel. Any attempt to follow or harm this man —” again he gestured at Marvin — “will cause me to return, find those responsible, and bring them to justice.

“If everyone does exactly as I have just said, I will be able to get him there with time to spare and he will make a full recovery. If anyone does *not* do exactly as I have just said, you will force me to delay myself detaining you and there will be a chance he will not receive the help he needs in time.

“Does everyone understand?”

Marvin nodded, as did every head in the crowd.

“Good. Then let’s begin. Weapons on the ground, now.”

Marvin was astonished to see every single person in the crowd gently place their guns on the ground. Some even fished secondary weapons — revolvers,

switchblades, brass knuckles — out of their pockets and placed those on the ground, too. Such was the moral authority of Captain Amazing.

Captain Amazing turned now and faced Marvin. The spit-curl was indeed gray, and his legendary face — what you could see of it, behind the mask — was weathered and lined. But he still looked as though he had been chiseled out of marble, and his shockingly blue eyes still gazed as if directly into your soul.

“Now, give me the boy, please.”

Marvin didn't hesitate. He handed DeAndre over to the famous crimefighter, who quickly checked the boy's pulse and began fashioning a tourniquet from materials he produced from a pocket of his utility belt.

“Now it's time for you to leave,” Captain Amazing said to Marvin. “Move quickly, and don't look back.”

Marvin didn't need to be told twice. His leg muscles compressed into a tight coil, and he sprang up, over the

crowd, over the form of Captain Amazing knelt over the wounded DeAndre, over the blood and the bullets, over the dilapidated streets of the Flatbottom, over the night, over his failure.

He hopped away quickly. And he did not look back.

## CHAPTER SIX

“Jesus H. Christ,” said Ace, downing a shot.

Marvin and Ace were back at Ace’s shabby office, having one of their periodic drinking sessions. Ace was doing the drinking while Marvin told him the sorry story of his trip into the Flatbottom.

“And then Captain Amazing told me to leave, and not look back. So I did, and I didn’t.”

“You didn’t leave, but you did look back?”

“No, no. The other way around. I left, and I didn’t look back.”

“Oh.” Ace took another shot. Suddenly his eyes narrowed and he was regarding Marvin extremely, almost uncomfortably closely. “Hey, just out of curiosity — do you remember *how* he said that to you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know. His tone of voice. His general affect. That sort of thing.”

“Well, it was... it was *impressive*, that’s for sure. The sort of impressive that overwhelms you, makes you feel small by comparison.”

“Hmm. Well, Cap can definitely have that effect on people.”

“You can say that again. You should have seen it, Ace. He was...”

“He was a *hero*. Right?”

“Exactly. He looked the part, you know? All the way from the spit-curl on down. He looked like a real hero.”

Another shot. “And you didn’t.”

“Not really. I mean, even putting the costume aside. I didn’t really acquit myself particularly well out there, Ace. I got a kid shot. I caused a riot.”

“A near-riot, kid. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“Still. I screwed everything up so bad that Captain Amazing himself had to come out of wherever it is that he hides and fix it. And I didn’t even manage to stop any crime!”

Another shot. “I wasn’t going to mention it, but actually, you *increased* crime. Technically, at least. Causing the accidental discharge of a firearm is a misdemeanor offense.”

Marvin scowled. “You’re not helping.”

“Sorry, kid. Didn’t mean to pile on. I know this must feel rough.”

“How would you know?” Marvin asked, taking the opportunity to down his first shot of the evening.

“I used to do this for a living, remember? Every hero’s career starts out rocky. It’s the nature of the beast. Nobody knows how to be a hero until they are one.”

“I guess.”

Ace took another drink. “You think Captain Amazing was Captain Amazing right out of the gate? No way. He was just another putz in tights. He didn’t even have the spit-curl back then. Took him a while to find his game. Just that nobody remembers now, that’s all.”

Marvin stared at the wall for a moment, pondering Ace’s words. “Maybe so. But maybe I’m just not cut out for this sort of thing, Ace. Maybe I don’t have whatever it is that real heroes have.”

“The only thing the real heroes ever had was guts, kid. Just guts. Most of them had some powers, too, but there were a few who were just normal people with a whole lotta guts. Takes a lotta guts for a normal to go out and tangle with a super-powered villain. But it can be done. Are you saying you don’t have any guts?”

“No, no. I don’t think so, anyway. I think I’m just saying maybe I should hang up my suit and go back to the insurance game.”

“You’re not gonna do that, kid. If you do hang up your suit, you’ll do it so you can get a legit agent like Kitteridge and work contract jobs. Nobody who got powers ever just gave them up. Never happens. Once you realize you got something like that...”

Marvin started a bit. This was an angle he hadn’t thought of. He’d been so focused on his failure in the Flatbottom that Kitteridge’s offer had completely slipped his mind. Maybe that was the way forward — ditch the suit, go be some millionaire’s bodyguard or a movie stuntman or something. Go legit.

“Ain’t never heard of anyone hanging up the spandex to go work in insurance, is all I’m saying.”

Marvin nodded. “Makes sense. I can’t really imagine going back myself. It’d be too weird.”

“As opposed to running around in a kangaroo suit.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah.” Ace took another shot. “Take it from me. You wouldn’t have started down this road if you didn’t want to take it to the end.”

“So what do I do now?”

“First thing, go talk to the kid you shot.”

“I didn’t shoot him!”

“You know what I mean. Go talk to him, say you’re sorry. Get the guilt off your chest. You’ll feel better.”

“Captain Amazing said he’d be taking him to St. Mary’s. I guess I could go find him there.”

“Trust me. You’ll want to. Getting a civvie hurt is the sort of thing that weighs on a hero. Drags him down. You either make amends now, or feel bad later.”

Marvin bristled a bit. “He wasn’t exactly a ‘civilian,’ Ace,” he said. “He was standing on a street corner in the Flatbottom selling drugs.”

“All true, kid, but all irrelevant. You didn’t mean for him to get hurt, and he did. That’s all that matters.”

Marvin considered this while taking another shot. He knew that Ace was right, that the distinction he was trying to draw really was irrelevant. DeAndre had been a drug pusher, yes, but he’d also seemed like an intelligent kid — much more intelligent than Marvin had expected. And he not only had avoided violence himself, but had tried to help Marvin by getting him off the corner without running into violence from anyone else.

And for all that he ended up with a kick in the chest and a bullet in the leg. (Marvin assumed it was the leg, at least.) Ace was right; it wasn't fair. Wasn't heroic.

"You're right, you're right," Marvin said glumly. "Amends have to be made. And I'm the only one who can make them."

"So what're you waiting for?" Ace asked. "You gonna sit here all night feeling sorry for yourself? Get going."

Marvin sighed as he pushed back from Ace's desk. "You know, Ace, it'd make me feel a lot better if you weren't so damned *right* all the time."

"Occupational hazard, kid. Occupational hazard."

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

It wasn't every day that the staff of St. Mary's Hospital saw a man in a kangaroo suit making his way through the halls, much less a man with a kangaroo suit carrying a bundle of flowers. So Marvin's arrival attracted a fair bit of attention.

It took some negotiating to even get past the front desk. The receptionist refused to tell him what room DeAndre was in until he explained why he wanted to know. "Because I got him shot" struck Marvin as the sort of explanation that would open more questions than it would close, so he made up a song and dance about being part of an outreach program for troubled youth.

“An outreach program in gray pajamas?” the receptionist inquired.

“It’s a kangaroo costume. Long story.”

“Hmm,” said the receptionist. “You know only female kangaroos have pouches, right?”

“It’s not a pouch, it’s a *tactical* — oh, never mind.”

Eventually he’d managed to wheedle the room number out of her, and went walking down the long, sterile halls looking for the room it denoted. It took longer than he’d expected, due mostly to the difficulty of reading the signs through his mask. (*Note to self*, he thought, *work on mask*.) Finally spotting the door with the number he was looking for, he strode in.

“Oh, Lord,” DeAndre moaned. “Not you again.”

Marvin looked around. There were no other visitors, which wasn’t surprising — it was the middle of the day, after all. But there was also no evidence that DeAndre

had ever had visitors; no cards, no balloons, no “get well soon!” signs. None of the things that would indicate a person with a bullet in his leg had had people coming by to commiserate over it.

“Yeah, me again. I brought you flowers.”

“I am at a loss as to why you would think that was in any way appropriate.”

Marvin put the flowers into a nearby container. “Considering how I’m the reason you ended up here, I thought I should do something.”

DeAndre sat up in his bed. “And you thought flowers was a good type of ‘something.’”

Marvin pulled up a chair and sat down in it. This always took a while in his costume; it didn’t have enough give in the waist. *Note to self*, he thought, *work on costume waist*.

“Look, DeAndre —”

“You remember my name. Terrific.”

“— I’m trying to say that I’m sorry.”

“I’m so glad. I was ust sitting here this morning getting an IV drip wondering if the crazy man in the pajamas was going to stop by and share his emotions with me.”

“Well, then, you’re welcome,” said Marvin.

The two sat in awkward silence for a moment. DeAndre studiously avoided Marvin’s gaze, his eyes darting around the room looking for something else they could alight upon.

“So,” Marvin finally said, “how’s things?”

“Other than being shot, you mean?” DeAndre retorted.

“Well, yeah. I mean, when you put it that way, it

sounds terrible.”

Marvin noticed that grim, gray clouds had begun to gather over Marvin’s expression. He realized that his last remark had not helped matters.

DeAndre took a deep breath before responding. “OK, listen,” he finally said. “Thank you for coming here to say you’re sorry. You have now discharged any and all obligations you may have incurred regarding me. So you can leave now. Go in peace and sin no more.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I feel like I still owe you... well, I’m not sure what. But it’s *something*.”

“Is that what you think you owe *me*, or is it what you think you owe your bruised conscience?” DeAndre shot back. “I wasn’t put on this Earth to be a pity object for dogooding white men, friend —”

“Kangaroo Man. The name is Kangaroo Man.”

“Whatever. I don’t care. Just don’t try to lay your own

guilt trip on me.”

Marvin shrank a little in the chair. “You might be right, DeAndre. I got into this costume to try and help people. And so far the only person I’ve managed to affect is you —”

“— and you didn’t exactly help me.”

“Right.”

“I tried to make it right,” Marvin continued. “I tried to use my powers to get you to a hospital.”

“Yeah, and that didn’t work out either.”

“But that wasn’t my fault! I was blocked by the crowd, and then by Captain Amazing.”

“So you’re a shitty superhero. I guess the ‘tactical pocket’ business should have tipped me off.”

Marvin winced.

“But how is that my problem?”

“It’s not. But I feel like *you* are *my* problem. I made you my problem when I made all... *this* happen.”

“That’s all you, man. All you. I don’t feel that way at all.”

Marvin could tell his words weren’t having an impact. He decided to try a different approach. “DeAndre,” Marvin began. “What were you doing out there on that corner?”

“I told you already,” replied DeAndre. “I was selling drugs. Or trying to, anyway. You’re bad for business, you know that?”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” said Marvin. “I mean: what were you doing out there selling drugs at all? You seem like a smart kid. You’re articulate —”

“Oh, great. I’m officially well-spoken. Next you’ll be marveling at my cleanliness.”

“— and you seem pretty sharp. A kid like you should be in school, not slinging on the corner. So what gives?”

“I warned you,” DeAndre said, glowering at Marvin. “Don’t try to fix me. I’m not broken.”

“You sure looked broken out there the other night,” Marvin said softly. “You didn’t look like the sort of person whose destiny was to stand watch on a dark corner in the Flatbottom.”

“How would you know?”

“I don’t. I’ll be the first to admit that. All I have to go on is my gut. And my gut tells me that you’re made for bigger things. Better things.”

“Because you kicked my ass?” DeAndre grumbled. “Your magic foot turned me into something special?”

“No, no,” insisted Marvin. “Not like that. You would have been the same if you and I had never met. You

would have looked just as uncomfortable on that corner if I'd never seen you."

DeAndre stared silently at the far wall.

"So what's the story? How does a kid like you end up with a pistol in his pants?"

DeAndre considered this question, his body tensing, then relaxing. It looked to Marvin like he had made a decision.

"You really want to know?" he finally asked.

"I do," said Marvin. "I really do."

"OK," DeAndre replied. "Try this on for size. You're the youngest of two children of a single mother. She dropped out of high school to have your older brother, so she isn't exactly what you would call highly employable."

Marvin nodded.

“She tries to make enough to make ends meet, but it’s tough. Jobs come, jobs go. Sometimes men come and go too. For whatever reason they never stick around any longer than the jobs do.

“You grow up. Your older brother turns out tough — tougher than you, that’s for sure. You prefer to spend your time in the school library. Which is great for your vocabulary, but not so great for bringing cash in the door.

“Then one day your older brother turns to you and says that it’s time for you to step up to the plate for the family. What do you say?”

Marvin considered this. “You say yes, I’d imagine. Unless you’re a crummier human being than I am.”

“There you have it.”

Silence again fell over the room. Marvin got up, paced back and forth a few times. DeAndre just kept staring at the wall.

“Did Captain Amazing take care of the hospital expenses for you, like he said he would?” Marvin finally asked.

“Seems that way,” DeAndre replied. “At least, nobody’s bugged me about money so far. I suppose they could be waiting till I’m all knit up to hit me with a bill, but I don’t see what would be in it for Captain Amazing to let that happen; all I’d have to do is go to the press and there’d be ‘CAPTAIN AMAZING IS AMAZING LIAR’ headlines all over town.”

“I don’t think he would do that. He strikes me as a stand-up guy.”

A challenge flared in DeAndre’s eyes. “He certainly saved *your* bacon.”

“Yes. Yes he did.”

“I’m not sure you’d have gotten out of the Flatbottom alive if he hadn’t shown up.”

“Me neither.”

“So answer me this,” DeAndre asked. “Why are you playing this game? You’re clearly not very good at it, and there isn’t a lot of room out there for costumed heroes these days anyway. Why buck the system? What’s in it for you?”

“I don’t know, kid,” Marvin answered. “I honestly don’t know.”

They lapsed back into silence again for a few moments, until Marvin decided he’d said everything he could say. “I’ll leave you alone now,” he said.

“See you around,” DeAndre replied.

“Sure,” Marvin said, turning to leave. “Sure.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

He was out of DeAndre's hospital room and halfway down the hall when he bumped, quite literally, into the woman.

It was the fault of the damn mask again, he thought; his peripheral vision when he wore it wasn't what it could be, which made it eminently possible for him to step through a door and walk right into somebody. He started to stammer out apologies as she knelt down to pick up the things she had dropped — a handbag, a notebook, a pen.

Marvin considered her as he apologized. She was about the same height as he was, maybe a little shorter.

Her hair was brown and curly, her skin a sort of polished bronze, her eyes a deep black. She looked to be in her mid-20s, and she was dressed in a sort of casual version of business casual — jeans and a blazer.

For a moment, he was stunned, insensible. He had no idea who she was, but found himself extremely interested in finding out.

“I’m sorry,” he said, regaining his composure. “Here, let me help you with those things.” He bent down to help her gather up the items she had dropped.

“That’s not necessary,” she said crisply, picking up her things and rising to stand again. “I’ve got them.”

“Well, please accept my apology anyway. Are you here to see DeAndre?”

“No, Kangaroo Man. I’m here to see you.”

“Excuse me?” stammered Marvin.

“You are the person who calls himself Kangaroo Man, yes? I would have to think so, given your outfit.”

“I am.”

“Great. Then I’d like to ask you a few questions, if you don’t mind.”

Marvin’s pulse quickened. Was she a cop? Had she staked out DeAndre’s hospital room in order to slap cuffs on him if he showed up there?

“Are you a police officer?” he finally managed to ask.

“No, I’m a reporter.” She rummaged around in her bag for a moment and came up with a business card.

“Marisa Ryan. I’m with PopFeed.”

“The blog? With the cat pictures?”

“The very same. Though we also employ non-cat-picture based journalists, such as myself.”

“Sounds like you picked the wrong major in journalism school.”

“Perhaps,” she said, with a hint of a smile. “But at least my beat introduces me to more interesting people than the cat picture beat does.”

“What beat is that?” Marvin asked, proud that his exploits had attracted the attention of an actual reporter. “Police blotter?”

“News of the weird.”

“Oh.” Marvin felt himself deflate just a little bit.

“And you, Mr. Kangaroo, are the subject of the story I’m working on at the moment. So if you could give me a few moments of your time...”

“Yes, of course,” he said. “Let’s get some coffee and sit down.”

They made their way to the hospital cafeteria, Marisa

leading the way due to Marvin's limited vision in his mask. The sight of a masked man in gray flannel pajamas buying a cup of coffee attracted a lot of attention there, but he was impressed at the way she seemed to float above the fact that she was standing next to the cause of it. Maybe it was natural poise, he thought; or maybe it's just a reflex you develop after reporting on News of the Weird long enough.

"Let's begin at the beginning," she said after they had sat down. "What's your name?"

"Kangaroo Man," he said.

"No, your *real* name."

"You don't actually think I'm going to tell that to a reporter, do you?" he asked. "It would defeat the entire purpose of having a secret identity."

"It's been a long time since any reporters interviewed heroes with secret identities," she pointed out. "For all I knew you'd give it up. It would certainly

make my life easier.”

“Can’t help you there. Sorry.”

She made a few quick notes in her notebook. “OK, Mr. Kangaroo — or should I call you Mr. Man?”

“I’m really not sure. Would just ‘K’ work?”

“Fine, whatever you want. Could you briefly explain to our readers what makes you qualified to be a costumed hero?”

He paused for a moment, searching for the right words. “I have gifts,” he finally said.

“Gifts?”

“Powers. I can kick harder and jump higher than any normal person.”

“Hence the name Kangaroo Man?”

“Exactly.”

“Are you aware,” she said, gesturing towards his belly, “that only female kangaroos have pouches?”

Marvin gritted his teeth. “It’s not a pouch. It’s a *tactical pocket*.”

“A ‘tactical pocket.’”

“That’s right.”

“Sure looks like a pouch to me.”

Marvin decided this was an unprofitable line of argument. “Anyway, back to my powers. At first I wasn’t sure what to do with them. But eventually I realized that the city needs help, and I might be qualified — maybe *uniquely* qualified — to provide it. I think it’s important that I use my powers for good.”

“So, K, let me tell you the story as I have it so far. Last night there was a disturbance in the Flatbottom

district. That in and of itself is nothing unusual, but what was unusual is that several 911 callers reported the source of the disturbance as being a man in a gray costume.”

Marvin sipped his coffee. “Go on.”

“They also reported that the cause of the disturbance was that the man in the gray costume had pulled a gun on a local youth and fired, wounding him. He then attempted to kidnap the youth in question, who was identified by numerous witnesses as a teenage resident of the Flatbottom named DeAndre Washington.

“When residents of the neighborhood tried to stop him from making off with the young man, he ran. Or rather, he bounced, or hopped; multiple eyewitnesses reported him leaping higher than any normal man could possibly leap. Two, without any prompting from me, compared it to the leaping of a kangaroo.”

“At least people see the comparison,” said Marvin. “I was kind of worried they’d miss it.”

“The fleeing individual in gray was eventually stopped by a crowd, which confronted him at the corner of 37th and Orinoco streets. This resulted in a brief standoff, which was only resolved through a timely intervention by Captain Amazing.”

“I don’t know if I would say it was *only* resolved that way. I was working on resolving it myself.”

“OK, great,” said Marisa enthusiastically. “This will help me flesh out the story. Tell me more about what you were doing there.”

“I’m a costumed hero,” Marvin began. “As you can probably tell. I was in the Flatbottom because the Flatbottom has a high crime rate and a low police presence. In other words, it’s the perfect hunting ground for those who would hurt the innocent. I was there to help defend them, by fighting crime.”

“There haven’t been costumed heroes in this city for years,” Marisa pointed out. “Not since the Mitchell Act. So

why do it?"

"Because I can, I suppose."

"Because you can. Got it."

"Right. So I went down there to fight any crime I found. I eventually found Mr. Washington —"

"Are you alleging he was involved in criminal activity?" interjected Marisa. "Do you have any evidence to back that up?"

Marvin knew this was a dangerous question. He knew that DeAndre had been out on the corner that night dealing drugs — DeAndre had told him as much — but he didn't have any evidence beyond DeAndre's statement with which to buttress such a charge.

Besides, he liked DeAndre. The kid ran with a bad crowd, he thought, but he wasn't in and of himself a hopeless case. And a bullet in the leg seemed like more than enough punishment for the moment; he didn't want

to pile onto DeAndre's troubles by bringing him specifically to the attention of the police.

"No, I'm not," said Marvin. "I just approached him for information, that's all. Then his weapon misfired —"

"He was carrying a weapon?"

"He was. But I can't really blame him. Can you? The Flatbottom is a dangerous place to be after dark."

Marisa raised an eyebrow skeptically. "So his weapon misfired, and then..."

"And then I realized that he'd been wounded when the gun discharged, and he needed to get to a hospital. So I tried to help him. I picked him up with the intention of taking him to a hospital."

"Why not just call 911 instead?"

"Don't carry a cell phone in my costume; makes me too easy to track. And besides, 911 response time into

the Flatbottom isn't great."

Marisa nodded. "What then?"

"Well, some local residents misinterpreted my motives in taking DeAndre. This led to a... disagreement."

"A disagreement."

"Yes. Which was resolved," he noted reluctantly, "by the intervention of Captain Amazing."

"Anything you can tell our readers about him?" she asked. "Captain Amazing, I mean. He's still incredibly popular, even after all these years, and despite the falling out of favor of costumed heroes in general."

"We didn't really get the chance to talk," Marvin said. "He sort of took charge of the situation the moment he stepped in. He did promise that DeAndre's medical care wouldn't cost him anything, which was generous. And so far he seems to have kept that promise."

“That’s good to hear. But then, he’s Captain Amazing. Nobody who knows this city is going to doubt his word.”

“I suppose not,” agreed Marvin, grudgingly. “It kind of hurts to say it, but I suppose not.”

“Hurts how?”

“Well, it wounds my pride a bit to have to have been bailed out by Captain Amazing. I wasn’t even sure he was still active these days. It’s been a long time since he was on the front page of the papers, after all.”

“Was age a factor? Captain Amazing has got to be at least fifty years old these days. You’re a young man just getting started. Did you feel resentful that he was interjecting himself into your crime fighting?”

“I don’t have a chip on my shoulder regarding Captain Amazing,” said Marvin. “Everyone in this city thinks of him as a hero, and rightly so. I just wish I could have made a better showing myself. I clearly have a lot to

learn.”

“Which carries an implication, K, that you’re going to keep trying. Is that accurate? Is trying to be a hero something you’re going to do again?”

“Yes. My regret is over how I performed, not what I tried to perform. I’m not planning to quit anytime soon.”

“So let’s get back to the chronology. Captain Amazing saves the day. What did you do then?”

“He said I should leave. So I left.”

Marisa took a deep breath. Marvin suspected she was bracing herself to ask a hard question.

“You’ll pardon me for saying so, Mr. K,” she said, “but that doesn’t sound very heroic. Another hero swoops in and does the heroic part for you? Even in your own account, you sound more like a bystander than a hero.”

The criticism stung. “I’m new at this. As you yourself

just said, there hasn't been a costumed hero in this city for ages —"

"Except Captain Amazing."

"Except Captain Amazing, yes. But other than him, they've gone extinct. So there's not a lot of good role models or mentors out there to learn from. I have to learn the ropes the hard way."

"Would you classify the events of last night as 'learning the hard way,' then?"

"Last night was definitely a lesson learned, yes. I know I need to do a better job of interacting with the public, to avoid misunderstandings like these."

"Mmm hmm."

"Even before the Mitchell Act, public opinion was clearly against having costumed heroes running around. If the public doesn't think your services are valuable, why do you?"

“The public isn’t always right. It’s not like crime has gone down since heroes fell out of fashion.”

“Not street crime, perhaps, but you don’t see supervillains running around anymore. People don’t have to worry about bad guys with space lasers or mountain lairs full of ninja clones anymore. Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Does the fact that we don’t hear about supervillains anymore really mean there aren’t any out there? Or are they just keeping their heads down, the way good-intentioned people with powers do?”

“Does it matter?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that I have this gift, and hiding it feels... dishonest. And I don’t want to live a life where I’m dishonest.”

Marisa smiled. “That seems like as good a place as any to wrap this up, K. Thanks for taking the time to talk.”

“No problem,” said Marvin. He watched as she gathered up her things and began to walk away. As he watched, he felt an unexpected twinge of sadness; of loss. He wondered what that was all about, and then remembered how he’d felt when he first saw her.

*Speak up, dummy, his brain shouted at him, or forever hold your piece.*

“Hey —” he called after her.

She stopped and turned back to him. “Yes?”

“I enjoyed talking to you. Would you...” He realized how stupid this was going to sound coming from a man in a flannel kangaroo suit, but nothing ventured, nothing gained. “Would you like to get together again sometime?”

“Why?” she asked, amusement in her eyes. “Are you going to have a scoop for me?”

“No! I mean, maybe I will, but I don’t know. I mean

outside of work.”

She fixed him with that skeptical raised eyebrow again. He began to feel like a drowning man who'd forgotten to grab a life preserver.

“Outside of work. For drinks or coffee, or something.”

She paused, as if considering the offer. Then another enigmatic smile, and: “I'm sorry, K. I appreciate the invitation, but I have a policy against dating men who wear their pajamas in public.”

And with that, she turned on her heel, and was gone.

## CHAPTER NINE

Marvin was still smarting over the rejection the next day when his cell phone rang.

“Marvin?” Ace’s gruff voiced asked. “You there?”

“Of course I’m here, Ace. I’m on a cell phone, if I wasn’t here you’d have gotten voice mail.”

“I don’t like cell phones,” Ace grumbled. “Too easy to track you.”

“Never mind. What’s up?”

“Have you seen PopFeed today?”

“No. Why? Should I have?”

“Go give it a look. I’ll wait.”

Marvin walked across his small apartment to his computer and loaded up the PopFeed home page. At the top of which he found a grainy-looking low-resolution photo of himself in his Kangaroo Man costume just below the screaming headline:

**BOLD NEW SUPERVILLAIN MENACES CITY**  
***“I’m dishonest,” he tells PopFeed reporter in exclusive interview***

“What the hell is this?” he asked Ace.

“Keep reading, kid.”

*BY MARISA RYAN, EXCLUSIVE TO POPFEED —  
Gunshots echoing in the air of the Flatbottom neighborhood tonight heralded the return of a threat not seen in this city for decades: the costumed supervillain.*

*Residents of the neighborhood reported that the villain, who operates under the name Kangaroo Man, opened his inaugural crime spree by shooting a young man he happened to encounter on the street, then attempting to kidnap him. When local citizens attempted to stop him from making off with the wounded boy, he used his super-powerful legs to leap over their heads. His escape was only prevented by the timely intervention of legendary hero Captain Amazing, who freed the boy from his clutches and saw him safely to a nearby hospital.*

*“It was nothing,” Captain Amazing told this reporter. “Helping people in distress is what I do.”*

*Costumed supervillains have not been seen on the streets of the city since the passage of the Mitchell Act, and the subsequent roundups that followed it, two decades ago. The arrival of Kangaroo Man has many citizens worried that a new generation of such menaces to public order has arrived.*

*“Menaces to public order?” Marvin wailed into the*

phone.

*“Keep reading, kid.”*

*When asked whether this incident marked the beginning of a troubled new era, Captain Amazing urged citizens not to worry.*

*“It’s just one man,” he told a press conference today, “and he was soundly defeated in his attempt to kidnap this poor, innocent youth. To be honest, I’ve seen a lot of supervillains in my time, and this one cuts a pretty poor figure compared to the supervillains of old. I have to think he’ll learn his lesson from this experience and give up his dreams of holding our fair city hostage to terror.”*

*While reporters from across the city have been racing to learn more about the enigmatic villain known only as Kangaroo Man, this reporter was able to secure an exclusive interview with him.*

*“I have gifts,” he told PopFeed. “The city needs help... the public isn’t always right.”*

“Hold on! Out of context! Those quotes are taken completely out of context!”

“Keep reading, kid.”

*Challenged to explain his nocturnal activities in the Flatbottom, Kangaroo Man vehemently defended his actions.*

*“The Flatbottom has a high crime rate and a low police presence. In other words, it’s the perfect hunting ground... Some local residents misinterpreted my motives. This led to a... disagreement.”*

*Asked how an unprovoked shooting could possibly be classified as a “disagreement,” the villain stood firm. “I’m not planning to quit anytime soon,” he said.*

*Captain Amazing and the Metropolitan Police are currently seeking information on the costumed miscreant known as Kangaroo Man. Citizens with information to provide should contact their local police precinct, or call*

*Captain Amazing's toll-free tip line at 1-800-AMAZING.*

"Oh, God," moaned Marvin.

"Keep reading, kid."

*Next feature: click for our exclusive slideshow, "27 Cats Who Are More Competent at Super-Villainry than Kangaroo Man."*

"This has to be a joke, Ace. Please tell me it's a joke."

"Fraid not, kid."

"Oh, God. I'm not a villain! How could anyone think I was?"

"Well, there is the part where you got a poor street kid shot and then tried to run off with his bleeding body."

"You know perfectly well that I was trying to help him. And Captain Amazing does too!"

“Does he? All he saw was you with a wounded kid thrown over your shoulder.”

“Just before he revealed himself to us, I had tried to explain to the crowd that I was only trying to get DeAndre to a hospital. And I visited DeAndre in the hospital afterwards and explained how I was trying to help him! I even apologized for screwing everything up!”

Ace chuckled. “See where apologies get you? Not worth the effort, kid.”

“So now what?”

“Now what?” Ace grunted. “Now you go to ground, is what. You burn that costume of yours and hope nobody recognizes your face from behind the mask, is what.”

“I can’t do that! It’ll be the end of Kangaroo Man.”

“Would that be such a bad thing?” asked Ace. “Look, kid, I tried to warn you that this game wasn’t worth the heartburn. Now you’re starting to see why. Being a hero is

a thankless business.”

“Captain Amazing seems to get plenty of thanks,”  
Marvin grouched.

“Yeah, because he’s the best at this game that there’s ever been. This city’s never had a hero it loved as much as Captain Fricking Amazing, and it never will, either, if you ask me. He’s one of a kind.”

“But we both want the same things! What if —”

“You’re not hearing me. *It doesn’t matter how good your intentions are.* What matters is how people *perceive* them, and someone out there managed to spin your story before you could. So now the story’s been spun good and hard, and it came up snake-eyes.”

“You’re mixing your metaphors.”

“Shut up. You know what I mean.”

Marvin did. He knew that, no matter how hard he

insisted on his own innocence, his own good intentions, the city would assume now that he was a villain trying to hide behind a hero's mask.

And they'd still sleep well, because they'd assume that eventually Captain Amazing would deal with him. Which meant that Captain Amazing would *have* to deal with him, in order to maintain his glossily burnished reputation.

It slowly dawned on Marvin that he was utterly, supremely boned.

Just then his cell phone began to buzz and flash. "I've got a call coming in on another line, Ace. I'll call you back later."

"I'm not sure I want you to, kid. You'll get me thrown into the cell next to you."

"Very funny."

"Who's trying to be funny?" Ace asked, just before

Marvin clicked over to the other line.

“Marvin Wendt.”

“Marvin. So nice to talk to you again.”

Marvin glanced at his phone’s display; he didn’t recognize the number. The voice on the other end seemed familiar, but he couldn’t place it. “May I ask who’s calling?”

“I thought you might have forgotten me,” the voice said, chuckling. “This is J. Charlton Kitteridge.”

*Kitteridge.* “Oh, hi,” Marvin stammered. “I didn’t recognize your voice. How are you?”

“I have to think I’m doing better than you are, Marvin.”

*Gulp.* Marvin had no idea why Kitteridge was calling, but one possibility presented itself to him with the force of a smack on the head. Kitteridge was one of the very

few people who knew for a fact that Kangaroo Man and Marvin Wendt were one and the same person. That information had suddenly become enormously valuable — and, for Marvin, enormously dangerous.

Was he calling to blackmail Marvin? To threaten him? *Keep him talking, play for time, see if you can figure this out.* “You saw the PopFeed story then, I take it.”

“I did. My condolences — it’s not very flattering. Even if you put the cat picture slideshow to one side.”

Marvin started to pace nervously. “That’s kind of the understatement of the year.”

“I really hadn’t pegged you for the supervillain type, Marvin.”

“Neither had I.”

“Well, thankfully it appears that at least you’re not very *good* at it.” Kitteridge chuckled again. Marvin wasn’t sure if he was laughing with him, or at him.

“Heh. Look, I’d love to chat, but as you can probably imagine today’s turning out to be kind of a busy day. What’s up?”

“Ahem. Yes. To business. The first thing I wished to discuss was something that I’m sure is at the top of your mind at the moment. Namely, that I know who you are.”

*Here we go.* Marvin strained to make his voice steely, but it came out somewhere between icy and watery instead. “The thought had occurred to me.”

“I wanted to let you know that you need not worry about my disclosing this information, either to Captain Amazing or to the authorities. In my line of work, discretion is everything. I have *clients* who are supervillains, after all. If word got around that I was outing secret identities, even those of villains —”

“I’m *not* a villain.”

Another chuckle. “I’m sure you’re not. But really, it

doesn't matter to me one way or the other. I keep my confidences, is what I wanted to let you know."

Marvin felt his gut unclench a bit. "I appreciate that. I really do."

"Good. Now for the second order of business. I have been asked to approach you with an... opportunity."

*Uh-oh.* "What kind of an opportunity?"

"I am not the only one who saw the PopFeed article. Several members of the board of BlaME saw it as well, and —"

"The what now?"

"The League of Blackguards, Malefactors and Evildoers, of course. Come now, Marvin, surely you've heard of BlaME. They're the premier guild of supercriminals in the world."

"I didn't realize there were any supercriminals left,

much less a guild of them.”

“They’ve had a rough time of it over the last few years, it’s true. Still, when it comes to scoundrels, they remain the gold standard. Tickets to their annual awards gala are highly sought-after.”

“I’m sure. So what does this all have to do with me?”

“As you know, there have not been any active costumed villains in this city for many years. That has been a bit of a black eye for the League, since it undermines their message that supervillains are a normal and necessary part of any healthy justice ecosystem.

“So they were quite excited to see a new costumed villain emerge from the shadows of our fair city, Marvin. *Quite* excited. There was actually a good bit of gleeful cackling on the conference call they had with me to discuss it.”

“Terrific.”

“That’s a good sign, Marvin. These fellows are *professionals*, they don’t cackle over just anybody.

“Anyway. As I said, they were excited, and wanted to learn more. And since I am the leading agent for super-powered talent here, they asked me if you were already under my representation.

“I had to admit that, sadly, you were not. But to the best of my knowledge you have not signed on with any other agent, either. So they asked me to be their go-between in making a formal offer to you to become the new owner of the local League franchise.”

“Franchise? You mean, like a hamburger restaurant?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes. You would become the official representative of BlaME in this metropolitan area. Other villains in the region who wish to become a League-sanctioned evildoer would then have to apply to you for initial approval.”

Marvin was speechless.

“And of course, should their application be accepted by BlaME’s international governing board, you would be entitled from that point forward to ten percent of any loot, spoils and/or booty they should earn during their career as a League-affiliated reprobate.”

“Charlton —” gasped Marvin. “I’ve never even asked, can I call you Charlton?”

“Of course.”

“Charlton, here’s the thing. *I’m not a villain.* It’s all a big misunderstanding. I went out trying to fight crime and screwed everything up.”

“Hmm.”

“All the ominous-sounding quotes they attributed to me were taken completely out of context. The things I actually said to their reporter were the things a hero would say, not a villain. Somebody twisted the story to make me look bad.”

“HmMMM.”

“Look, you’ve met me. Did I strike you then as the type of person who would become a supervillain?”

“Not particularly, no.”

“Thank God. So you’ll understand when I tell you that I have to reject this offer, as politely-but-firmly as I possibly can.”

Kitteridge paused for a moment. “I sort of had a feeling you would say that, Marvin.”

“I would be offended if you hadn’t.”

“But.” And here Kitteridge cleared his throat. “There’s a bit of a problem with that, you see. The League is not the sort of organization that generally takes *no* for an answer.

“They’re used to dealing with people who are

different from you or I, after all. People who wouldn't hesitate to turn any and all knowledge of the League's activities against them, if they could turn a profit by doing so. Once you've taken the Offender's Oath, they have plenty of mechanisms they can use to keep you in line, so they don't worry too much if they offer someone a membership and that person says yes.

"But if they offer a membership and that person says *no...*"

*Oh, God.* "What exactly are you telling me, Charlton?"

"I'm telling you, Marvin, that villains who turn down an invitation from the League do not generally go on to enjoy long careers capped with pleasant retirements to beachfront communities. They tend to... well, to disappear."

"Disappear?" Marvin's blood ran cold.

"Yes. Or, if they don't disappear, their bodies turn up

in some sort of unpleasantly mangled or mutilated condition.”

“Their bodies?”

“What’s left of them, at any rate.”

“Charlton, stop. Stop right there. None of this has anything to do with me! I told you, I’m not a villain. It’s all a huge mistake. They shouldn’t have made an offer to me, because I couldn’t accept it even if I wanted to.”

“I will try to explain that to them, of course, but I can’t promise you they will find your logic as compelling as it may seem. Whether or not they should have made an offer to you is, at this point, irrelevant. They *have* made an offer to you. Which means that, from their perspective, the only thing that matters is what your response should be.”

“Which would be no.”

“Ahem. Yes. Which is precisely the answer they do

not want to hear.”

“So what do you propose I do, Charlton? How do I avoid ending up mangled and/or mutilated?”

“Well, you’re not officially my client, so normally I would tell you that this is a question you would need to answer on your own. Advising clients is how I earn my living; if I started doing it for free I’d put myself out of business! But given the... ahem... *special* circumstances of this situation, I will advise you here, pro bono.”

“I am eternally grateful,” Marvin lied.

“My advice to you, then, is this: take the offer.”

“Excuse me?”

“Take the offer,” repeated Kitteridge. “I know you didn’t set out to be a supervillain. You wanted to be a hero instead. But — and let’s be honest with each other — you have not exactly demonstrated a natural aptitude for heroics so far. Indeed, one could go so far as to say

that you are a sad imitation of a real hero.”

“If I’d known what was going to come next,” Marvin grumbled, “I’d have stopped you at ‘let’s be honest with each other.’”

“So it is unlikely that a career in costumed heroics is going to work out well for you. You will either die trying and failing to apprehend some perpetrator, arrested and put on trial for violations of the Mitchell Act, or murdered by the League for rejecting their offer. None of which are particularly appealing outcomes.

“Put that on the side of the scale marked ‘No’, then. And then let us look at the side marked ‘Yes.’ On that side, it is true, is a life as a villain. This may offend your moral sensibilities. You’d have to live with knowing the public sees you as a threat rather than a protector. And yes, you would be obligated to periodically commit crimes, if only to keep up appearances.

“However, nothing says that you would have to be a *good* villain. The League almost never rescinds a

franchise once it's been granted. You could spend the next thirty years throwing fights against Captain Amazing and still be secure in your position. And all that time, you'd be collecting ten percent of the earnings from every villain you recruit to work in the city.

“So in reality, you'd be less of a supervillain and more of a... talent scout, if you will. Find a few good hooligans, get them into a costume and approved by the League, and from that point forward you can just sit back and let them earn your living for you. It would only take one or two big scores a year to let you live comfortably on your share. And if they pull off any *really* big scores, you could live far better than just 'comfortably.'”

“Put all that on the side of the scale marked 'Yes', now. And tell me honestly if the scale does not dip dramatically in that direction. A secure, easy living as a villain compared to almost certain failure and humiliation as a hero?”

“For any rational person, the choice would be obvious.”

Marvin had listened to Kitteridge's logic carefully. And his stomach turned over as he realized that it actually made a lot of sense. More sense than he was willing to admit.

"I need to think about this, Charlton," he said finally. "How much time do I have before the League needs my response?"

"Twenty-four hours."

"OK. Let me think it over and I'll call you back."

"Excellent. And one more thing —"

"Yes?"

"Don't make them wait any longer than that, my friend. These are not people who enjoy being made to wait."

## CHAPTER TEN

*How, Marvin had wondered earlier after hanging up the phone, do you convince the world's greatest supervillains that they actually do not want to kill you after all?*

He had no idea. He knew nothing at all about BlaME other than what Kitteridge had told him. And that wasn't much, except that somehow they had decided that he was of interest to them, and that being of interest to them was a death sentence unless he reciprocated the feeling.

Which he didn't. He had about as much desire to become a supervillain as he did to become an

interpretive dancer. But what he wanted appeared, in the final analysis, not to matter all that much.

Not only did he have no idea how to get out of the predicament he'd somehow gotten himself into, but he didn't even know where to begin. What do supervillains really even *want*?

He was clueless. So he decided to do what he always did when he was clueless: go to Wikipedia.

He pulled up a chair in front of his laptop and got to work. The first order of business: see what the Wikipedia article on supervillains had to say about them.

*Supervillain. A supervillain or supervillainess is a type of criminal or evildoer endowed with superhuman powers, abnormal mental capacity, or highly sophisticated equipment. They frequently find themselves in conflict with superheroes, people with similar powers or resources who choose instead to use them in the service of law and order. A supervillain who frequently engages a specific superhero in conflict is*

*sometimes referred to as that superhero's "arch-enemy," or "arch" for short.*

"So am I Captain Amazing's arch now?" muttered Marvin. "Wonderful." He quickly scanned further down the article.

*Supervillainry in the United States. While supervillains and superheroes were once quite numerous in the United States, the passage of the Deviant Registration Act (sometimes referred to as the "Mitchell Act," after its chief sponsor, Senator Max Mitchell of North Dakota) drove most of them in that nation into inactivity or hiding. While authorities believe that ex-supervillains and potential supervillains continue to exist in the American population at large, they have generally chosen not to pursue them legally as long as they do not commit further acts of supervillainry or otherwise endanger the general public.*

*The primary organization representing the interests of supervillains and other criminally-oriented deviants in the United States was the League of Blackguards,*

*Malefactors and Evildoers ("BlaME" for short).*

He noticed that the word "BlaME" was a link. Curious, he clicked it.

*The League of Blackguards, Malefactors and Evildoers (redirected from "BlaME"). The League of Blackguards, Malefactors and Evildoers (frequently referred to as "BlaME," for short) is the primary organization representing the interests of supervillains and other criminally-oriented deviants in the United States. At its height, BlaME represented more than two thousand of the most wanted criminals in the nation, making it by far the largest and most powerful membership organization for criminal deviants. BlaME members were notorious for committing some of the most spectacular crimes in the history of the nation, including the Pasadena Heist, the Great Facebook Robbery, and the looting of the Federal Reserve Bank of Anchorage.*

*However, their ambitions were rarely limited simply to enriching themselves; almost all of them aspired to the*

*grander goal of world domination. This would prove in the end to be nearly as fatal to BlaME as the work of Senator Mitchell, since by definition world domination is a goal that only one aspirant can achieve. The result was years of infighting among BlaME's most powerful and feared members, each hoping to undermine the others while advancing his or her own bid to rule the world.*

*By the time the Mitchell Act was passed, distrust among its members had already weakened BlaME's organizational strength to a level far below what it had been at its height. After passage of the Act, authorities found it easy to locate and arrest BlaME members by playing them against each other; most were eager to name names, if by doing so they could reduce their own punishment or handicap the ambitions of a long-hated rival.*

*It is unclear whether or not the Mitchell Act roundups completely dismantled BlaME as an organization. Today the only outward manifestation of its continued existence is a postcard mailed each year from the main post office in Utica, New York to the President of the United States.*

*Invariably, it reads:*

### ***BlaME Will Return***

*Despite extensive stakeouts of the Utica post office, no person has ever been intercepted in the act of mailing these postcards; they simply appear in the outgoing mail, ready for postmarking. No fingerprints, typewriter or printer watermarks, recognizable handwriting patterns, or other unique identifiers on the postcards that could lead to the identification of a suspect or suspects have ever been found.*

*Opinions differ as to the meaning and purpose of the annual postcards. Official statements by the U.S. government describe them as the work of copycats, reasoning that, if BlaME did actually still exist, its superpowered members would be able to send a warning far more impressive and/or devastating than a mere postcard. Some writers have suggested that it is a now-traditional prank carried out by Utica high school students, or an attempt to increase tourist interest in Utica as a destination. (The latter speculation has been*

*encouraged by the city's recent trend of marketing the week before the expected appearance of a new postcard as "BlaME Will Return Week," with bunting and other decorations being erected in the downtown area, special concerts and arts performances held across the city, and the crowning of a local girl as "BlaME Queen.")*

*A few suggest that the postcards are exactly what they claim to be — a warning from a dormant cell of supervillains who are simply waiting for the right moment to re-emerge and threaten the public at large — but those holding this opinion are generally regarded as conspiracy theorists.*

"Conspiracy theorists. Unbelievable."

Once he had finished reading the Wikipedia entry, Marvin had called Ace back to see if he knew anything more about BlaME than the wiki did.

He hadn't been much help. "Sorry, kid, all I know about BlaME is that back in the day they were the real deal. They wanted to take over the world, and a few

times they nearly pulled it off. If its leaders are still around, even a few of them, I'd be worried."

Marvin was worried. Isn't there some way he could hide from them, he'd asked? Go to ground and stay there, out of sight?

"Nope. If BlaME is still out there, and they want to find you, they'll find you. Nobody's ever managed to escape a BlaME assassination order — ever.

"Your best hope wouldn't be to run from them, it'd be to take them head-on. Make leaving you alive less painful for them than having you dead would be."

"Has anyone ever actually *done* that?" he'd asked, hesitantly.

"Not that I know off," Ace replied cheerily. "But hey, there's a first time for everything, right?"

Right.

The only bit of useful information that Ace had been able to give him was almost no real information at all. There was a local man, Ace told him, who, once upon a time, had been suspected of being a high muckety-muck with BlaME. But suspicions were all anyone had — nobody had ever been able to connect him to an alternate identity as a costumed villain, or to any observable links with other known villains or with BlaME as an organization. It was all just rumors, petals flying in the wind.

But because nobody had ever managed to conclusively link him to BlaME, the authorities had never had a good reason to haul him in, either. So he continued to live out a quiet life in one of the city's middle-class suburbs, to all appearances just another middle-class cog in the great machine.

“You might even like him — he's an accountant, like you.”

“I'm not an accountant. I'm in insurance.”

“Whatever. Anyway, his name’s Art Bergendorf.”

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

Three hours later, as night began to fall, Marvin got out of his beat-up old Subaru across the street from a nondescript condominium. He was there to find the only person he could think of who could possibly save his life.

Art Bergendorf lived on a cul-de-sac of small, cookie-cutter condominiums: the sort of houses that appealed to young families and old widowers. Marvin assumed Bergendorf was the latter. Ace hadn't been able to tell him much about the man, except that he was an accountant and had lived a quiet life for decades. Not having ever met a supervillain before, Marvin wasn't sure what to expect when he knocked on the door.

It opened to reveal an older man, about Marvin's height, with a kindly face and a trim gray beard. Grow the beard out and put thirty pounds on him, Marvin thought, and he could make a pretty good Santa Claus.

The man smiled the thin smile people give to those who interrupt their mealtimes. "Can I help you?"

"Possibly," said Marvin. "I'm looking for Art Bergendorf."

"Then you've found him," Bergendorf replied. "Please tell me you're not here to sell me a magazine subscription. I already have more than enough magazine subscriptions."

"No, Mr. Bergendorf —"

"Call me Art."

"Art. I'm not here to sell you a magazine subscription. I'm here to ask you what you know about BlAME."

The thin smile disappeared. “So you’re with the police, then. I’ve already told you people, I don’t know anything about that organization, and I never have.”

“I’m not with the police either.”

“So what do you care about BlaME? Why interrupt an old man’s evening over it?”

“I’m here, Mr. Bergendorf, because BlaME is going to try to kill me.”

Art’s eyes narrowed.

“And I’m hoping you can help me find a way to keep them from doing that.”

“Look, mister —”

“Marvin. Marvin Wendt.”

“Marvin. If BlaME, which I know nothing about, still

existed, which to the best of my knowledge it doesn't, then if they wanted you dead, I have to think they'd have a good reason for it."

"Their definition of a good reason may be somewhat different than mine. They want me dead because I know they exist. That's all."

Art's brow furrowed. "That's all?"

"That's all."

"Maybe you'd better come in, then." And he opened the door wide enough for Marvin to enter.

The two men made their way to the living room. The furnishings were simple, but attractive; a couch, a couple of overstuffed chairs, a coffee table. Marvin noted that there was no television, and while there was a fireplace, there were no family pictures on the mantle.

It was a very lonely room, he thought, with a bit of a cold shiver.

The two men sat down. Bergendorf crossed his legs in the European style, one crooked over the knee of another. He reached for a pipe that rested on an end table. "Do you mind if I smoke, Marvin? It's my own house, of course, but so many do these days I always ask."

"Of course not."

Bergendorf lit his pipe and took a contemplative puff from it. He seemed avuncular, somehow; Marvin thought he should be in a jacket with patches on the elbows.

"It's a civilizing habit, smoking," Art said. "Calms the nerves. It's no coincidence that society has become so disordered in our modern era. Nobody smokes anymore."

"I'll take your word for it," said Marvin.

"So. You claim that you have proof that BlaME still exists. And that they want you dead."

“Yes.”

“Let’s start with the proof, then. What is it?”

“They made me an offer,” Marvin began. And then he told him the whole story — his discovery of his powers, his attempt to do good in the Flatbottom and how it had literally backfired, the PopFeed article and the phone call with Kitteridge.

“Charlton Kitteridge is still in business?” mused Art. “I would have thought in these days he’d have no clients.”

“He says he gets deviants legitimate work. Bodyguarding, movie stunts, that sort of thing. He claims there’s big money in it.”

“I would imagine so. J. Charlton Kitteridge never did anything in his life unless there was big money in it.”

Marvin sat silently.

“I must tell you, young man, your ‘proof’ isn’t really proof of anything at all. You haven’t made direct contact with anyone associated with BlaME; all you’ve done is talk to Kitteridge, who claimed that *he* had made such direct contact. But how do you know he really did? How do you know he’s not just spinning tales?”

“I don’t,” Marvin admitted. “Not really. But I can’t see why he would have a reason to lie about it. He wanted me to become one of his clients. It’d be hard for me to earn him his ten percent if I’m dead.”

Art nodded. “Just so. I must also tell you, you’re taking an enormous risk talking to me. You believe I’ve been associated with BlaME in the past, and now you’ve told me your secret identity. How do you know I won’t pick up the phone the moment you leave and tell them where to find you?”

“Again, I don’t. But I have a feeling that if BlaME really does still exist, it doesn’t matter much; they’ll find my secret identity soon enough, if they want to. Kitteridge knows it, for instance. He promised me he

wouldn't tell anyone, but who knows whether he meant it or not? Trusting in the honor of people who deal with supervillains seems like leaning on a weak reed.

“The one group that doesn't know my identity yet is the general public. The PopFeed story didn't mention it, and given the tone of it I can't help but think that if they'd had a bit of information like that — information that could destroy my costumed identity once and for all — they would have gleefully run with it. There's no reason for them to have held it back if they actually had it.

“I suppose you could also pick up the phone after I leave and call PopFeed and give it to them. But I'm out of ideas, Mr. Bergendorf —”

“Art.”

“I don't know where else to turn. You're the only person I know who could possibly have any information on this organization that has threatened me. I'm not sure I have any alternative but to trust you.”

Art took another long puff on his pipe. He relaxed a bit, leaning back into the pillows of the couch. "A man with no choices but one," he said, "is a dangerous man indeed, Marvin."

"I don't know what that means."

"I'm going to tell you something," Art said. "Something I've never told anyone else. I'm going to tell you this because I like you. You remind me of me, in my younger days. I'm also going to tell you this because you are new at this game, and I am therefore reasonably confident that I could kill you with ease if you ever told anyone else."

*Uh oh.*

"I was indeed involved with BlAME," Art said. "Once. Long ago."

"I never had powers myself, you see. But in my youth, I greatly admired those that did. Especially those

who used them to fight the system, which life has taught me is irredeemably, fundamentally corrupt. I was hot-blooded then, you see. I wanted to tear things down, burn them down. Provide a foundation of rubble upon which a new world could be built.

“So the emergence of individuals with fantastic powers seemed like a blessing to me. Some of them, of course, chose to be the jackals of the system, but others struck out against it instead. And I wanted to do what I could, in my limited way, to help them.

“I trained myself, physically and mentally. I became a killer; or rather, an instrument of killing. A finely honed blade. And then I put myself at the disposal of those who would eventually come together to form BlAME.

“My... *skills* proved to be of great use to them, Marvin. More than you probably believe. When you think of the great battles between empowered individuals, you probably think of the well-known fights between superheroes and supervillains — how I hate those categories! So arbitrary! So judgemental! — with

buildings being knocked over, heat vision and death rays and the like.

“But there was another battle being waged as well, Marvin. A battle in the shadows. And I was a foot soldier in that battle. Even the gaudiest so-called ‘heroes’ had secret identities, you see; and while living in those identities, they were vulnerable. They expected to face attacks built on fantastic powers; they never expected the blade in the night, the poison in the coffee. In this way I helped thin their ranks quite substantially.

“But I was not completely devoid of conscience, you see. I killed only those who had donned costumes to take up the battle against my comrades. Those who had, so to say, *volunteered*. They knew, or should have known, what they were getting into.

“As the years passed on, though, and as factions began to form and clash with each other inside BlAME itself, I found myself more and more being asked to dispatch those who had *not* volunteered. Newspaper editors on the verge of running an unflattering story.

Relatives of a BlAME member who was suspected of planning a challenge to the existing leadership. Civilians who had happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. That sort of thing.

“I couldn’t do it. This was not the war I had signed up for.

“So I quit.”

Marvin sat stunned as he took all this in. The trim, neat man before him did not look anything like a notorious assassin; he looked like the host of a talk show on public television. How could his story be true?

And then Marvin understood; it was true precisely *because* he looked nothing like a notorious assassin. Nobody would suspect this mild-looking man of wielding, as he had said, the blade in the night. He could get close to people without anyone giving him the slightest notice. And then, once he had gotten close, he could strike.

He noticed that Art was staring at him, as if waiting

for him to respond to his revelation. He struggled to come up with a response appropriate for a declaration that a person is an ex-assassin.

“Huh,” he finally said.

Art was clearly piqued by his seeming disinterest. “Isn’t this what you wanted to know? Isn’t this what you were looking for?”

“I’m sorry,” said Marvin apologetically. “I didn’t mean to imply that your story isn’t interesting. It is! It is very interesting. It just doesn’t help me with my particular problem much, is all.”

“That problem being that BlaME is out to kill you.”

“Exactly.”

Art sighed, shaking his head. “Marvin. Weren’t you listening? Think back to the last part of my story. The part where I quit.”

Marvin nodded.

“Didn’t it occur to you to wonder *how* I quit? Do you think BlaME lets anyone who’s in deep just walk away?”

Suddenly, Marvin got it. The point of the story wasn’t that Art was a badass. It was that Art had managed to walk away from BlaME and *not get killed* for doing so. Which meant that walking away from BlaME was something that could be done. If Art had done it, Marvin could do it too.

“Oh!” Marvin exclaimed. “I see what you mean. Yes, that part is very interesting. How did you do it? How did you quit and stay alive?”

“Partly it was because of the way BlaME was falling apart by then,” Art began. “They weren’t as good at keeping up on procedures as they had been. And partly it was because the people there who knew me knew that anyone who tried to kill me would have to win a hell of a fight to do so.

“But mostly, it was because of the list.”

“The list?”

“Yes. The list. You see, Marvin, I’m no dummy. I knew the whole time I was with BlaME that, while I admired my colleagues, part of the reason I admired them was because they were amoral serpents who wouldn’t hesitate to cut your throat if they saw a profit in it. That sort of moral clarity is rare, and attractive. But it’s also a pretty clear warning to make sure you have an insurance policy.

“The list was my insurance policy. Over many years, I took every chance I got to find out more about every member of BlaME I could. I learned their secret identities, their property holdings, who on the outside they were bribing and for how much. For security, BlaME made a point of having no central database; without that, nobody could know the whole picture of BlaME’s operations, not even its top leaders. I had to build my own.

“So that’s what I did. I created the single most

comprehensive overview of BlaME that had ever been created. And when I quit, I disclosed that fact to them, along with the fact that I had hidden that database in a place that only I knew, and kept a note with detailed instructions on how to find it in my personal papers. If I were ever to turn up dead under mysterious circumstances, the authorities would search my residence as a matter of course. They would find the note, and it would lead them to the list. And then they would have everything they needed to roll up BlaME once and for all.

“And that, as they say, was that.”

“Wait a minute,” Marvin said. “Are you telling me you *blackmailed* them? You blackmailed the most feared criminals in the world?”

“*Blackmail* is such an ugly word. But yes, I suppose one could say that.”

“And it... *worked*?”

“One could say that too,” said Art, with a smile.

“After all, I am still here. I’m alive, and I live without fear. To me, that is success.”

Marvin’s brain raced to connect the remaining dots. “That’s what I need, then,” he said. “I need a copy of the list.”

Art nodded. “Yes, even though it was put together many years ago, it is highly likely that it contains at least some information on one or more of the people who call themselves BlaME today. It would only have to threaten one of them for that one to veto an attempt on your life. So if you were in possession of that information...”

“... I’d be as safe as you are. So. Art. Will you give me a copy?”

“I wish I could,” Art said. “But I cannot. There is only one copy of the list, and it is in the place I hid it, all those years ago. A place that is secure — but at the cost of being so secure that even I could not simply walk up and get it.

“You see, Marvin, it’s buried in a wall in BlaME’s local headquarters.”

“Let me get this straight,” said Marvin, his jaw hanging open. “You stashed your only copy of the material you were using to blackmail BlaME in *BlaME’s own headquarters?*”

“Of course,” Art said dismissively. “Where else would it be more secure? Any other building BlaME would have torn apart without a second thought. They had members who could make a building collapse just by looking at it! They would have leveled entire city blocks if they thought the list could be found there. “But they would never level their own headquarters building. It was the only monument to their accomplishments that their secrecy allowed them to erect. To destroy it would have been unthinkable.

“Not to mention that it would have been the last place they would have thought to look. Who would have guessed that the document they were so desperately searching for was right under their nose all along? They’d

sooner suspect it of being on the moon.”

“But wouldn’t that have also made it secure from the police, if you disappeared and they found your note?”

“They had been looking for a valid reason to raid BlaME’s headquarters building for years. The note would give them that, and they would have jumped at it. Even if they never found the list, they’d tear the place apart looking for it. And who knows what they would find as they did so?”

Marvin slumped back in his chair. “So what you’re telling me,” he said carefully, “is that you have a list. A list with information so sensitive that BlaME would rather leave you alive than have it public. And this list could save my life, just as it saved yours. But you can’t get to it, so I can’t make a copy of it, so it’s useless to me.”

“Not at all,” objected Art. “What I’m telling you is that, yes, I have a list; yes, it could save your life; and yes, I cannot get to it.

“But *you* could.”

## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

Night in the city. A shadow darted out of one dark alley and into another.

The Kangaroo Man was on a mission.

The objective was straightforward: go to BlAME headquarters, find Art Bergendorf's list, make a copy, put it back, get out alive. But while the objective was straightforward, carrying out promised to be anything but.

First there was the matter of making the copy. Art had told him that the list was stored on a CD-ROM disc. That meant he would need to have a way to copy such

discs with him when he retrieved the list — it would be too dangerous to take it out and then try to break in a second time to put it back. So as he made his way toward the target, he carried a laptop computer in his pouch. (*Dammit, he reminded himself, it's not a pouch. It's a tactical pocket.*)

Second there was the matter of getting in and getting out. BlaME wasn't what it used to be, so it had been years since anyone had seen them use their headquarters building in the city for any practical purpose. But he was sure that it had been extensively secured and booby-trapped to prevent just the kind of unauthorized intrusion that he was planning to make. Who knew how many of those traps were still active, quietly armed and waiting for some unsuspecting idiot to stumble across their triggers?

And finally, of course, there was the matter of whether the list even existed in the first place. Now that he thought about it, Art's story began to seem awfully convenient. Yes, BlaME is a terrible organization from whose poisoned claws no one escapes — but here's a Get

Out of Death Free card, Marvin, all you need to do is go and get it. He wondered if Art had been telling the truth at all, or had simply been luring him into a trap laid by his former associates. (And were they really even *former* associates? What if Art had never retired at all and was still an active agent of BlaME? Would he get to the list only to find Art himself, standing there with his blade in the night?)

It all added up to uncertainty. Too much uncertainty. So much uncertainty that under any normal circumstances Marvin would have walked away from it all without a second thought.

But these, he reminded himself, were not normal circumstances. If Kitteridge had been right, there was a sword of Damocles dangling dangerously over Marvin's head. And all it would take was one mistake, one wrong move, to send it plunging down.

*The risk of death has a marvelous way of focusing one's mind*, he thought. And now his mind was focused on the list. Because the list was the only thing he could

see that could lead him out from under the sword.

He hurried towards the address Art had given him for BlaME headquarters. It was downtown, north of the business district, in an old residential neighborhood filled with grand Victorian houses. “Nobody who lived there would think twice on seeing a building festooned with gargoyles and spikes,” he’d explained. “Most Victorian houses look a little bit evil, dont you think? BlaME knew they would fit right in.”

Finally, he came to the address, sheltering in a dark alley across the street so he could examine it without attracting attention. It was everything Art had made it out to be; three stories of red brick, with crenellated towers on the top floor at each corner. Assorted gargoyles cavorted on top of the towers, along with what appeared to be great snakes and angry dragons, all variously stomping upon, strangling and roasting with fiery breaths tiny human figures arrayed in terror before them. A wrought-iron fence, twice Marvin’s height and crowned with spikes, ran around the building, with a huge, heavy iron gate facing out at the street.

It would have looked terrifyingly difficult to get into if the gate hadn't been standing wide open.

Marvin stared for a moment, unable to believe his luck. Could it possibly be this easy? Could it possibly be just a matter of walking up and opening a door?

He had no idea. But there was only one way to find out. After glancing around to ensure there were no police cruisers idling on the corners, he scurried out across the street towards the building.

He passed through the open gate without any problems. As he did so, he noticed a sign posted on it, reading

## **THE PROMETHEUS CLUB**

Was this a BlAME code name? A cover identity? Art hadn't mentioned it.

Marvin pressed forward. The building's front door

was as imposing as the rest of it, great oaken slabs inscribed with unintelligible runes and more mythical beasts gorging on hapless humans. He quickly scanned the front of the building; there were no windows on the ground floor, so he'd either have to climb up to a second-story window or risk the front door to get in. The windows seemed the safer option — if he could figure out a way to clamber up to one, that is — but the door offered the appealing possibility of a direct approach. He paused, weighing the options.

Then, to his surprise, the front door groaned open.

He was briefly dazzled by the brilliant light that streamed out of the open door. As his eyes adjusted, he saw a figure standing in it, tall and stately, dressed in a traditional butler's uniform. The butler stepped aside and gestured with his arm for Marvin to come in.

"Sir," he said, "your arrival has been anticipated."

Marvin felt the bottom fall out of his stomach. It had been a trap after all! Art had dangled a fine bit of bait,

and like a dumb fish, he had unquestioningly snapped it up. And now he was well and truly caught.

He briefly considered trying to flee, but rapidly ruled out the possibility. If BlaME had known he was coming, they would have anticipated he might try to bolt when the trap was sprung. For all he knew they had guns or super-powered thugs trained on him right now.

The only thing to do seemed to be to put on a bold face and bluff it out, so that's what he did. He drew himself up to his full height (five foot seven — not particularly imposing, but you work with the materials you have), tried to make his face a mask of dignity, and walked up the steps to the door.

“Thank you,” he said, walking through.

On the other side of the door he found a grand entrance hall, brightly lit and impeccably decorated in a sort of quasi-Victorian style. Portraits of grim-looking men lined the walls, with overstuffed couches beneath them. (And spittoons? Were those spittoons? Who uses

spittoons anymore?) The far end of the hall ended with two enormous staircases, one leading left and the other leading right, both going up to a gallery that offered access to the second floor's rooms.

“If sir would follow me,” the butler intoned in what struck Marvin as an absolutely flawless English accent, as he began to walk down the hall.

Marvin followed. The butler led him up the stairs, and then to a door on the second floor. Marvin realized what a picture the two of them must make — a butler in black tie and tails, with a man in a gray flannel kangaroo suit trailing behind. It must all look fairly incongruous, he thought; but what are you going to do. Art had indicated that the list was buried in the drywall of a room on the third floor, so as they walked he had looked around for any indication of how one would get from the second floor to the third. To his dismay, none presented itself.

The butler knocked on the door, making a complex pattern of raps that to Marvin seemed much more involved than it needed to be. A voice from the other side

of the door cried out: "who approaches?"

"A friend of the fur," the butler replied.

"Well met. Yip, friend, and enter," the voice on the other side of the door replied.

The butler turned to Marvin, an expectant look on his face.

"Yes?" Marvin said.

The butler said nothing, but the look on his face made it clear to Marvin that he was committing some kind of excruciating faux pas.

"I'm sorry, I must have missed something," Marvin continued. "Is there something you need from me?"

The butler winced, as though he had been struck in the face with a large fish.

Marvin's voice dropped to a whisper. "I don't know

what I'm supposed to do."

The butler's look of pain intensified, now looking as though someone had kicked him in the kidneys.

"Help? Please?"

The butler opened his pursed lips slightly and, through gritted teeth, muttered "if *sir* would please *yip*."

*Yip?* Marvin wondered. *What's a yip?*

"Yip?" he said tentatively.

And with that the butler's face flooded with relief as the door before them creaked open. Framed in it Marvin saw the figure of what he assumed to be the person attached to the voice on the other side of the door.

It was a person dressed in a rabbit suit.

"Enter, furry friend!" the person in the rabbit suit intoned. The butler gestured with his arm again to

indicate that Marvin should pass through the door. He did, and was surprised when the butler stayed behind, closing the door behind them.

The rabbit-person grabbed his hand. "I see you are new to our happy menagerie," he/she/it said. "Come, I shall introduce you!"

Marvin then noticed that they were not alone. The room was full of people, each dressed in some kind of plush animal costume. Here was a fox; there, a cat. The room was lit by flaring candles, so it was hard to make out details, but it struck Marvin that they looked more like cartoon animals than their real-life equivalent.

"Oh, God," Marvin whispered. "It's a furry convention. I've walked into a furry convention."

"Hardly!" Rabbity-Person said indignantly. "The Prometheus Club is no *convention*, with members of the uncommitted public allowed to tromp about in their T-shirts and dungarees. It is a *private society*, to which only those who demonstrate their complete commitment to

our common lifestyle are granted entrance. Your costume testifies eloquently that you are one of these. One of *us*.”

Marvin felt himself being dragged to the center of the room. They made their way through the crowd, each furry eyeing him curiously. He noticed what appeared to be a bear and a two-legged pony making out on a couch in the corner.

“Fellow furry friends!” Rabbity-Person announced, and the din of conversation silenced. “A new friend has come to apply for admission into our cherished Club!”

The room burst into applause.

“What is your name, furry friend?” Rabbity-Person asked, turning to Marvin.

“Uh... Marvin,” he replied.

“Welcome, Marvin!” Rabbity-Person boomed. The room burst into applause again.

“And tell us, friend Marvin, with which fursona do you present before us?”

*“Fursona?”*

A voice hissed out from the crowd. “Animal. What animal are you?”

“Um... a kangaroo,” he said.

“A kangaroo!” Rabbit-Person intoned. Once more the room burst into applause.

“Now, as you all know,” he/she/it continued, “before Marvin can be admitted as a member of the Prometheus Club, he will first need to pass the Trials. Each person here can testify to how grueling, mentally and physically, they can be. How they push you to the very limits of human endurance. How they wring the antiquated notions of ‘normal sexuality’ drilled into your soul from birth by a corrupt, hypocritical society, replacing them with —”

“I think there’s been some kind of mistake,” Marvin blurted.

A deathly silence fell over the room.

“Excuse me?” Rabbitry-Person asked.

“There’s been a mistake,” Marvin continued. “I’m not here to join the — what’s it called again?”

“The Prometheus Club.”

“Right. I’m not here to join the Prometheus Club. I’m a costumed hero. They call me Kangaroo Man.”

“Oh.”

“And I’m here because this building is supposed to be the local headquarters of BlAME.”

Rabbitry-Person scratched his/her/its rabbit-head.  
“The local headquarters of what, now?”

“BlaME. You remember, right? The legendary supervillain organization.”

“Ohhh, right,” Rabbity-Person said. “Sorry, I was just a kid when all that stuff was going down.”

“No problem. So was I.”

Marvin and the rabbit-person stood silently for a moment.

“Anyway,” Rabbity-Person said, clearing his/her/its throat, “like I said, we don’t know anything about that. We’re just a bunch of ordinary citizens who like to get together and have sex with each other while wearing animal costumes.”

“I see. Well, there’s no law against that.”

“It’s true! There is not. And believe me, we’ve looked!” The crowd laughed politely at Rabbit-Person’s wit.

“Just out of curiosity, how did you come by this building?”

“We bought it a few years back, though. Don’t know much about who owned it before us. The seller insisted on doing business through a shell company in the Cayman Islands. All very cloak and dagger. But we didn’t care, we loved the building; it had plenty of space for our needs, and the way it looks keeps people from poking their noses into our business. Well, present company excepted, of course.”

Marvin nodded.

“So I suppose we should let you be on your way now,” Rabbit-Person said. “Unless you’d like to stay for refreshments?”

“I can’t go just yet. I need to get access to the third floor. I’m here looking for something.”

“Oh. The third floor.”

“That’s right,” confirmed Marvin. “The third floor.” He noticed what appeared to be a wave of concern passing over the crowd. “I believe there is important evidence located there in a case I’m trying to close.”

“Hm,” the rabbit-person said. “See, the thing is, we can’t let you do that.”

“You can’t?”

“We can’t,” said Rabbity-Person, crossing the room to stand before what Marvin suddenly noticed as a faint outline on the wall. *A trap door!* “I’m sorry. The third floor is off-limits to anyone who isn’t a registered member of the Club.”

“I see,” said Marvin. “So you can’t let me pass through that door you’re standing in front of.”

“Correct.”

“That’s good to know,” Marvin said as he leapt up and kicked him.

This kick was a serious kick. When Marvin had kicked DeAndre, he'd only used one leg. This time he knew he'd need to generate enough force not just to knock Rabbit-Person over, but to send him flying backwards hard enough to crash through the door. And that was definitely a two-leg job.

He'd practiced his kick quite a bit before he put on the suit for the first time — in retrospect, he realized that it was just about the only part of being a costumed hero that he *had* practiced — so by now he at least had his form down. It started with a hop up into the air, just high enough to get his feet off the ground, which was then followed by a forceful kick outwards by both legs at once. Done right, both feet would crash into the recipient of the kick simultaneously, which added up to a hell of a wallop.

To his relief, Marvin did it right. The kick smashed into the chest of the rabbit-person so hard that he/she/it not only collapsed the door on his/her/its way through it, but lost his/her/its mask along the way. Marvin noticed that he/she/it was a he.

The impact knocked Rabby-Dude out, leaving him sprawled across the knocked-in door. Behind the door and the dude, Marvin could see the bottom of a staircase. *Next stop, third floor*, he thought, taking off at a run.

The crowd stood silently, stunned by Marvin's sudden burst of controlled violence. But it only took a few moments for the cry that Marvin had expected to hear next to rise up:

“Get him!”

He ran for the staircase as fast as his legs could carry him. He needed to grab the list before the furries grabbed him.

Marvin scrambled up the stairs to the third floor, the furries hot on his heels.

He burst off the stairs expecting to find himself in another room like the one below — a room ripped straight out of a New Orleans whorehouse. What he found instead

was... different.

It was a barn. Not in the figurative sense of a messy, disordered room, either. It was literally a barn. Open space sprawled out in all directions; Marvin guessed they'd given over the whole floor for this use. Straw was scattered across the hardwood floor.

But what really caught his attention were the goats.

There were goats everywhere. Big goats and small goats; happy-looking goats and unhappy-looking goats. All tied to posts that appeared to have been bolted into the floor.

Marvin looked into the eyes of the closest one. The goat looked back up at him.

"Maaaa," it said.

At that moment the first of the furries — a short person encased in what appeared to be dressed as a cartoon duck — bowled into him. "Gotcha!" the duck-

person cried, clapping a hand on Marvin's shoulder. More furries caught up, crowding around farther down the stairs.

Marvin spun around and stared into the duck-person's eyeholes.

"Why," he asked, "are you keeping *goats* up here?"

The furries were startled by the question — or at least *seemed* startled, as far as you could tell through their masks and costumes.

Finally one spoke. "C'mon," he/she/it said. "You know."

*Ewwwwwww*, Marvin thought. "So you... and the goats..."

The furries were silent.

"I'll take your silence as a 'yes,'" Marvin said.

“Not *all* of us,” one furry exclaimed from the crowd.  
“It’s an... acquired taste. Not for everybody.”

“Lighten up!” another furry shouted from the back of the crowd. “It’s not like it’s illegal or anything.”

“Actually,” said Marvin, “I’m pretty sure that *is* illegal. In this state, anyway.”

As the furries considered this, Rabby-Dude muscled his way to the front of the crowd.

“And now,” he said, “you know why the third floor is for members only.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Marvin was tied up with the goats.

Being tied up wasn't the worst part, he thought. The smell was the worst part. The smell was...

The smell was *awful*.

The furies were back down on the second floor, arguing furiously. From what little he could overhear they appeared to be arguing over what exactly to do with him. The bylaws of their sex club didn't seem to have a clause to cover "captured a costumed hero in the bestiality pen."

He assumed that he wouldn't have much time before they came to some kind of a conclusion. Somehow he had to get untied, find Art's list, and make it out of the building without being noticed before that happened.

He was not feeling optimistic about his odds.

The first challenge was getting untied. To Marvin's dismay, the furry who had tied him up turned out to be quite proficient with knots. He stared sullenly at the exorbitant knot the man (was it a man?) had tied. It went far, far beyond any knot science Marvin knew.

He looked over at the goat that was tied to the same pole. "Maaaaa," it said.

"A lot of help you are," Marvin grouched.

He turned his attention to the post he was tied to. It was wooden, but sturdy; several inches thick. It rested on a round base firmly fastened to the floor with several large bolts. The rope that bound him was tied through one of several metal rings at the top, using another one

of those fiendish knots. Marvin's feet were free, so he could shuffle around the post a bit, but the knot made wriggling the rope loose an impossibility.

*Wait a minute, he thought. My feet are free.*

*My feet are free!*

Quickly, he sat down on the hard floor, sliding back to give the rope some play. There was more than enough rope to let him slide back far enough to plant the soles his feet on the pole. He slid back up far enough so that his legs were bent at the knees.

*Got to do this quietly, he thought, as he began slowly to press against the post with his powerful leg muscles. Just want to pull the bolts out; if I take the floor with me I'll be right back where I started.*

When Marvin had practiced training with his powers, his focus had always been on squeezing out more — kicking harder, jumping higher. The idea that he might someday need to parcel out strength in tiny packets had

never occurred to him. So his first push ended up a little stronger than he anticipated; the post groaned under the pressure, making a noise that sounded to Marvin like it could be heard on the moon.

He held his breath, waiting to see if the furries would come clambering up the stairs to investigate the noise. To his relief, they did not. Their voices downstairs were still pitched and urgent, so he assumed that their arguing had drowned out the sound.

He braced himself for a second try, sliding back into position with knees bent. *Easy*, he chided himself, *easy*.

His coiled-up muscles relaxed, ever so slightly, pressing against the post with slight but undeniable force. A smile burst across his face as he felt it begin to give. The bolt closest to him pulled out of the floor by a fraction of an inch.

*Now for the other side.* He got into position again, only this time, instead of bracing his feet against the post, he wrapped his legs around it, feet locked on the

other side.

He pulled his legs back just a bit, his feet pulling the post towards him. Again his effort was rewarded; this time the post moved more easily. He noticed the bolts on the other side were now riding up a bit as well.

He had found a pattern now, and repeated it; first pushing, then pulling, working the post slowly but surely from its fastened-down position. Eventually the first bolt came completely out of the floor, then the next, then the others. He was free!

Well, sort of. He still had a thick wooden post tied to his wrists. But at least now he could move around. He picked up the post and slung it across one shoulder so it wouldn't drag against the floor as he walked.

The next challenge would be to find the list. Art had given him very specific directions regarding where to look to find it. Unfortunately, those directions were all premised on the idea that the third floor was still a warren of rooms, rather than a sex barn. So they were

more or less useless.

There was also another wrinkle to consider: the furries had searched him when they'd tied him up, and they'd found and confiscated his laptop. So even if he could find the list, he had no way to make a copy of it.

*One problem at a time, Marvin reminded himself. Find the list first, then worry about what to do with it.*

His eyes scanned across the room, looking for any of the landmarks Art had described to him. "The third floor is where the bigwigs keep their offices," he'd said back in the condo. "So there's only a few rooms up there, and they're plush.

"The biggest office is for the executive director; it'll be the first your right when you come up the main staircase. Avoid that one, it's rigged with laser sensors hooked up to rotating saw blades hidden in the wall. Trip a laser, and you end up as Hamburger Helper.

"There's cubicle space across from the big office for

the ED's secretary, then a hallway running down the middle of the floor with smaller offices on both sides. Ignore those too.

“Go all the way to the end of the hallway, and you'll find a closet whose door is marked MAINTENANCE. Open the door and you'll see a pretty standard janitorial closet. Down near the floor, to your right, you'll see an electrical wall plate with two sockets. Pull the plate out from the wall and behind it will be the CD.”

Easy enough, it had seemed at the time. But now all the landmarks were gone: no big office, no smaller offices, no hallway, no janitorial closet. The only consolation was that presumably the laser traps and hidden death saws were gone too.

The only clue he had to go on was that he was looking for a wall plate. But even that was tenuous — with all the remodeling the furries had done, it wouldn't have been a surprise if they'd rewired the place too. For all Marvin knew, the CD loaded with the world's greatest trove of supervillain blackmail information had been

found by a contractor and discarded as junk.

Still, he'd come all this way; there was no turning back now. He had to at least *try* to find it.

Since all the interior walls had been torn out, if the wall plate still existed, it would have to be somewhere around the perimeter of the room. Taking care to step softly, he began walking around the room. Occasionally he had to step around a goat, but the goats seemed less interested in him than they were in chewing on the straw that had been scattered across the floor.

By the time he reached the far wall, he'd begun to give up hope. But then he spotted it: an electrical wall plate, with two sockets.

He scrambled to orient the room in his mind, mentally retracing the steps he'd taken to get up to the second floor, into the room with the furies, and then up the hidden staircase. He then compared where that should put the main staircase to where it would be in relation to the wall plate if this was, indeed, *the* wall

plate.

It fit. It all fit. The plate was exactly where it should be. Marvin knelt down to examine it more closely. It didn't look odd or suspicious in any notable way; just your everyday two-socket wall plate, a bit yellowed from age, but otherwise nondescript.

Now he needed a way to get it off the wall. A screwdriver would have worked perfectly, but unfortunately he didn't have one at hand. The plate was fastened flush to the wall, so he couldn't pry it off with his fingers. Unlike with the post he'd been tied to, there were no obvious ways his powerful legs could help him work with it.

*What would McGyver do?* he wondered.

Then it hit him. He scurried back across the room to the spot where he'd been tied up. In the wreckage there, he found one of the now-loose bolts that had previously held the post in place. Its top had a flat head with a thin halo of metal around it.

Grabbing the bolt, he made his way back to the wall plate. He took the thin edge of the metal ring around the top and slid it in between the plate and the wall. It fit between them easily. After a couple of minutes of rocking the bolt back and forth, one end of the plate sprang free from the wall. It was easy then to pull it completely off.

Discarding the plate and the bolt, he looked eagerly in the space it had covered.

There, in that empty space, was an unlabeled CD-ROM.

*The list, he thought. It has to be the list.*

His fingers darted out and grabbed it. Quickly, he stuffed it into his pou— his *tactical pocket*. His computer was gone, so there was no way to make a copy; he'd have to take his chances at taking it with him. Art would be angry, but he could hide it somewhere else later on. At any rate, there was no alternative, and no time to worry about the consequences; that would have to come later.

Now he just needed to find a way out. The room had windows, but they had all been boarded over; Marvin had no idea if he could get the boards off, so that route was out. Which left only one option remaining: the direct approach.

Marvin bounded down the stairs back to the second floor. He found the furries still arguing furiously over what exactly to do with him. Their voices trailed off as they noticed him.

“How did you get down here?” demanded Rabbit-Dude, his mask back in place.

“Magic,” Marvin exclaimed. “Kangaroo magic!”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard,” said Rabbit-Dude.

“You must not get out much,” retorted Marvin.

“It doesn’t matter. You’re not going anywhere yet.

Not until we decide what to do with you.”

“You’re wrong,” Marvin said. “I’m leaving now. If you want to, you are welcome to try and stop me.” And with that he took a great, flying leap across the room towards the door.

Furry hands shot up into the air, trying to pull him down, but the force of his leap was too great; he made it to the door unmolested. Then it was just a matter of a few steps and another leap over the railing to get back down to the first floor. The enraged furries clambered down the staircase after him, but he was in his element now, hopping easily down the main hall.

“Bar the door!” Rabbit-Dude cried towards the startled butler, who was standing beside the main entrance. “Don’t let him escape! Bar the door!”

Marvin landed next to the butler, who gave him a long, searching look.

“Well?” asked Marvin. “Are you going to bar the

door?"

The butler shrugged his shoulders. "I don't get paid enough for this," he said. "I hope sir has a pleasant evening."

"Thanks, Jeeves," smiled Marvin, opening the door and striding through. He was out now, unconfined, back in the crisp night air. He bounded up and over the gate, picking up speed with each hop, the frustrated furries watching him in defeat from the door.

The last thing he heard before the sounds of the house faded completely away was the butler giving the furries his notice.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Marvin rapped hard on Art's door. "It's me," he said. "I've got it."

The door opened. Art gaped a moment at the sight of Marvin's Kangaroo Man costume. "You came here in costume?" he demanded.

"No choice. Didn't want to risk stopping somewhere to change before I'd made a copy of the list?"

"You haven't made a copy yet? But you were going to —"

"We'll discuss that later," said Marvin. "Are you going

to let me in or not?”

Art furtively glanced around to see if anyone was watching, then waved Marvin through the door. Marvin noticed as he closed it that Art had half a dozen locks and bolts on the door. He quickly began engaging each.

“You can’t go around traveling in the open in costume,” Art said, nervously. “It will attract attention.”

“You don’t say.”

Art finished clicking the last of the locks in place. “Don’t be smart with me, young man. Now, what do you mean you haven’t made a copy of the list?”

“Didn’t have a chance. The building you sent me to isn’t BlaME’s local headquarters anymore.”

“No?”

“No. It’s a sex club, Art. A sex club for furies.”

This staggered Art a bit. “A sex club?” he asked. “For... *furries*? What in the name of God is a furry?”

“If you don’t know,” Marvin said, “you’re a happier person than I am.”

“But,” Art said, “you found the list.”

“I did.” Marvin reached into his pou— his *tactical pocket*, and retrieved the CD-ROM, handing it to Art to inspect.

“That certainly looks like it,” confirmed Art. “But why did you take the original?”

“The furries got the drop on me,” Marvin shrugged, “tied me up, and nabbed my laptop. I didn’t have a chance to find it on my way out.”

Art heaved a deep, disappointed sigh. “This list is not just your life,” he chided, “but mine as well. By taking it from its hiding place you have put us both at great risk.”

Marvin, still running on adrenaline from his escape from the sex barn, flushed angrily. "Were you listening to me, Art?" he demanded. "The building's already gone through one extensive remodel. It's just pure luck that the list wasn't discovered by the contractors who did that. The next time the building changes hands it's even less likely that it would have gone undiscovered. Someone is eventually going to rewire the place, and that would have been that. I didn't cancel your life insurance policy, I *saved* it."

Art paused, considering this. "Perhaps," he said finally. "But first we must make certain that this disc is what we believe it to be. Come with me."

He led Marvin out of the living room, down a short hallway into a room that he'd made up as a sort of home office. Bookshelves lined the walls, and at one end was a desk with a computer perched atop it. Marvin stood as Art sat in the task chair that was positioned before the computer and popped the CD into its drive.

The computer hummed for a moment, and then a

window popped up on the monitor showing the contents of the disc. Art's eyes ran down the list. He clicked open a few files, examining each briefly. He then closed all the windows and spun the chair around to face Marvin.

"This is it," he said. "This is the list."

Marvin felt a huge weight lift itself from his shoulders. "Thank God," he breathed. "Now just make me a copy and I'll get out of your hair."

Art spun around in the chair again and began rooting through the desk's drawers. "I'm sure I have some blank discs around here somewhere," he said. "I just need to remember where I put —"

And then, quite suddenly, Art's monitor went completely blank.

Art stopped his search and focused his gaze on the monitor for a moment, as did Marvin. Both had concern knitted across their faces.

“Your screensaver?” asked Marvin hopefully.

“I don’t have a screensaver on this machine,” Art replied.

“Well,” ventured Marvin, “if it’s not a screensaver, what is —”

Suddenly, as if to answer Marvin, the display came back to life. It did not, however, display Art’s usual computer desktop. It displayed instead a great, blood-red circle with a dagger juxtaposed through it.

Art looked thunderstruck. “Oh, no,” he muttered. “Oh my God.”

“What?” said Marvin. “What is it?”

“It’s the logo,” said Art. “The logo of BlaME.”

As if in response, a deep, disembodied voice boomed out of the computer’s speakers. “Shadowblade,” it began.

“Shadowblade?” asked Marvin.

“That was my old code name, when I worked for BlaME. The hidden assassin. Shadowblade.”

The disembodied voice continued. “You have broken our compact, Shadowblade. We chose to let you live on the condition that you keep your treacherous research to yourself.”

“They must have bugged my computer,” mused Art. “A little program designed to sit idle until someone loaded up the list into it. And then it wakes up and phones home to somebody...”

“Who are you?” Marvin barked towards the speakers. “What do you want?”

The disembodied voice ignored his demands. “As long as your list remained hidden, we could be certain that you were holding up your end of that bargain.”

“They can’t hear you,” Art told Marvin. “So it’s either

a recording, or their bug didn't include a microphone."

"Or they *can* hear me," Marvin said, "and are choosing for some reason to pretend that they can't."

Art nodded.

"But now," the disembodied voice continued, "for reasons we can only guess at, you have retrieved your diabolical list, and read from it."

Art and Marvin waited breathlessly to see where the voice was going.

"You have broken our agreement, Shadowblade," it boomed. "You have forfeited your life. We chose to leave you alive because doing so was convenient for us. It is convenient no longer. Your greed has seen to that.

"We therefore place upon you, Shadowblade, the Great Ban of BlaME. Your name is now anathema to all BlaME operatives around the world. It cannot be spoken again unless making the announcement that you are

dead.

“All our hands turn against you, traitor. All our intrigues have your defeat as their design. All our energies flow towards your death.

“Your life is forfeit. *You* are forfeit.” And then the voice fell into silence, leaving just the blood-red BlAME logo rotating on the screen.

Art spoke first. “Well,” he said philosophically, “that’s not good.”

Marvin couldn’t believe his equanimity. “How can you be so calm?” he asked.

“That could have been a recording,” Art pointed out. “We have no idea how long it’s been since it was recorded. I’ve had this computer for nearly ten years; the bug could have been placed on there anytime during that period. And if it was playing back a recording, the actual audio could go back even farther.

“In other words, it could have been recorded back when BlaME was a strong, above-ground organization with lots of members. Back when the Ban of BlaME meant something. Today, with BlaME mostly broken up, that threat is much less terrible than it used to be.

“And besides, notice that it never mentioned you, only me. That implies that it is indeed an old recording; if it was live audio they’d certainly know about your connection with me, and mention it.”

Marvin rubbed his chin. “I hadn’t thought of that last point,” he said, “but it makes a lot of —”

The disembodied voice boomed forth again. “The Great Ban of BlaME is also placed upon the associate of Shadowblade calling himself Kangaroo Man.”

“Oh,” said Marvin.

“So much for that theory,” said Art.

“You should have accepted our offer, so-called

Kangaroo Man,” the voice continued. “You should have joined our ranks. There is much opportunity to be found working with us. BlaME is rising again, rising from the ashes, like a furious phoenix. Many have opposed us over these long years; few have supported us. Those who did support us, however, chose wisely, and shall profit mightily from their wisdom. Those who opposed us will soon taste the wrath of the newborn BlaME.”

“This is sounding more and more contemporary all the time,” Marvin groaned.

“You had the opportunity to become part of the New Order, Kangaroo Man,” the voice intoned. “To take up our cause and reap the rewards that will come to those who do. You chose instead to consort with the traitor Shadowblade, and try to hold us to blackmail with the information he possesses. This crime marks you permanently as an enemy of BlaME. You are branded, traitor. Nothing you do or say can change this immutable verdict. Like Shadowblade, your punishment shall be the eternal punishment of traitors: death.”

“Welcome to the club,” said Art.

“Your fates are sealed; your futures written. I leave you now to contemplate the magnitude of your crimes in the short time you have left. End transmission.” And with that, the voice once again fell silent. The BlaME logo disappeared from Art’s monitor, his normal desktop returning to view.

“The logo’s gone,” Art observed. “I think it’s said its piece.”

“What do we do now?” Marvin nearly wailed.

Art leaned back in his chair, a thoughtful expression on his face.

“There’s only one thing we *can* do now,” he mused. “We find whoever is behind this new incarnation of BlaME. And we kill them.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Kill them?” gasped Marvin. “Wait a minute. I’m a hero, not an assassin. I don’t kill people.”

“I would respectfully suggest,” Art retorted, “that now would be an excellent time to start.”

“What are you talking about?”

Art’s frame seemed to stiffen, ever so slightly. “Look, Marvin,” he began. “I don’t know exactly who is behind this threat. But whoever they are, they’re good enough at evildoing to have found out about our little collaboration, and to deliver their threat in an appropriately dramatic manner. That implies skill, or at least experience.

“They also know my old code name, which implies that they have some connection to the BlaME of old. They’re not some copycat kid trying to spook people with a bogeyman from the past they barely understand. They know how these things are done.

“And worst of all, they’re *confident*.”

“Why is that worst of all?” Marvin asked.

“Think about it. If *you* were holding the reins of what remains of BlaME, would *you* feel confident? You’re in charge of an organization that barely exists. Your operatives are scattered, imprisoned, defeated. The only association the public still makes with your name — a name that used to send thrills of terror running through the public consciousness! — is a meaningless annual postcard ritual that’s more tourist attraction than terror plot.

“If it were you or I in that position, Marvin, we would not be confident. At best, we would see our task as one of

long, quiet rebuilding.

“But this person, whoever he or she is, does not see it that way. They are confident enough to announce that their return is imminent, their patience short. In other words, they see the long, quiet rebuilding as being complete. They are ready to put their newly refurbished machine to work.”

Marvin staggered under the implications of Art’s relentless logic.

“Nothing we know about BlaME today explains such confidence,” Art continued, matter-of-factly. “That means there is something that we *don’t* know about BlaME today. Something big. Something so big that it has restored BlaME’s strength to the point where it can confidently make threats and dispose of enemies, the way it used to do in the old days.

“We only see the tip of the iceberg, the bit that pokes above the water. It’s what’s below, what we can’t see, that concerns me. I fear that we may have run our ship

up against a mountain of ice.”

Fear stabbed at Marvin’s mind. “I didn’t sign up for this,” he said quietly. “I wanted to *escape* BlaME, not *enrage* it. I wanted —”

“What you wanted,” Art coldly interjected, “doesn’t matter. What matters is what has happened. And what has happened is that you and I have kicked what looks like a formidable hornet’s nest. Good intentions won’t calm the hornets back down again.”

“So what do you suggest?” Marvin shot back. “What do you suggest we do about it?”

“I told you. We find them, and we kill them.”

“I *heard* you,” Marvin said. “But I don’t understand why we have to *kill* them. If we can find them, surely we can bring them to justice instead.”

“What are you going to have them charged with?” said Art pointedly. “They haven’t *done* anything yet. The

law only sees the criminal after the crime has been committed. If BlAME is really coming back, they've got something big planned, Marvin. Something *spectacular*. You call yourself a hero — do you really want to wait until after they've carried it out to strike at them? Do you really want to expose the public to the suffering their plot will inevitably cause?"

"No, of course not. But —"

"But nothing. If you want to stop them, stop them before they strike, you can't depend on the law. You can only depend on your blade."

"You're talking like an assassin now, Art."

Art's visage was grim. "I *am* an assassin. Or I was, at any rate. I'm confident I can be one again, if I have to. Being an assassin is kind of like being an alcoholic, you see — there is no such thing as an ex-assassin."

"Now you tell me."

“Stop *whining*, Marvin. Heroes don’t whine.”

To be honest, hero or no, Marvin felt like whining for a good long while. He hadn’t asked to be caught up in all this. He had never sought out BlaME, never taken them on directly. His ambitions for himself had always been modest; he would have been happy as a simple B-list hero, fighting street crime and leaving the real supervillains to A-listers like Captain Amazing. He had never asked for fame, or even infamy; just a chance to do some good with talents he hadn’t asked for and was never even really sure he wanted.

But, deep down, he knew that Art was right. It didn’t matter whether he’d wanted to anger BlaME or not; what mattered was only that they were angry, and that their anger was focused on him. There was no way he’d ever be able to apologize his way out of it. You can’t mollify an implacable enemy with an apology. And the new BlaME was giving every indication of being quite implacable.

And trying to escape their wrath, dodging it somehow, had proven as fruitless as apologizing would

have been. The list he thought was his shield had turned out to be nothing of the sort. He'd have been better off never having heard of it than he was now with it in hand. His attempt to trump BlaME had only made matters worse.

As he mulled over all of this, a realization slowly dawned on him. *Maybe this*, he thought, *is what being a hero really means*. Having to choose from a list of bad choices; having no other way to deal with a great threat to society at large but to confront it head-on. He started to feel vaguely guilty for having tried to dodge the confrontation in the first place. What kind of a hero would do that? What kind of a hero would try to worm his way out of his responsibility to protect the city in order to protect his own skin?

Art at least had an excuse; he'd never billed himself as a hero. But Marvin had. Marvin *had* called himself a hero. Only when the crunch came, he had scrambled desperately to save himself, which was not particularly heroic.

He made a decision.

“Look,” he told Art. “You and I are both in this together now. I don’t think after hearing that —” he waved in the direction of Art’s computer — “either of us could deny that.”

Art nodded.

“I’m not a killer,” Marvin continued. “I couldn’t call myself a hero if I was. Heroes don’t do that. But you’ve never called yourself a hero, so I’m not going to judge you for having different standards than I do.

“My suggestion is this: that you and I work together to find whoever’s behind the resurgence of BlaME. We join forces, pool our talents. Our interests, after all, are aligned until the moment when we actually find them. At that point they diverge, of course — you want them dead, I want them brought to justice — and we may have to contend with each other for one of us to get the outcome we want.

“But I propose that we cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Art considered Marvin’s proposal. Marvin was surprised at the great change that had come over the man as they had talked. When Marvin had first met Art, he’d seemed harmless, almost avuncular. But now that his old calling had risen back up to the surface, he had somehow taken on a leaner, more angular look. *Like a predator finally uncaged, Marvin thought, unshackled, free to follow his instincts once more.*

“Very well,” Art said, his lips pursed together. “We join forces until we find the person or people who’s behind this. And then, once they’re done, may the best man win.”

He held out a hand to Marvin. Marvin took it in his own, and the two men shook on it.

“So when do we start?” Marvin asked.

“Right now.”

“Right now?”

“Right now,” nodded Art. “We have to assume that BlaME was alerted the moment I put the CD with the list into my computer. For all we know there could be operatives headed here this very moment.”

Marvin shivered.

“We have to move,” Art concluded. “Move *now*.”

“I have to go home first,” protested Marvin. “There are things I need to get.”

Art listened distractedly as he got up from his chair and crossed the room to a closet, whose doors he threw open. “Impossible. Too risky. They know you’re involved now, we have to assume they’re watching wherever it is that you live.”

“They don’t know my secret identity!”

“You don’t know that they don’t know that.”

“There wasn’t any evidence in that little — whatever it was, that they do.”

“There wasn’t any evidence that they *don’t*, either. You can’t be certain either way. So the safe course is to assume that they do.”

“But I don’t have anything on me! No money, no change of clothes...”

Art was busily rooting around in the closet; he was clearly looking for something specific. “We’ll figure all that out once we’re not standing on top of a bulls-eye... aha!” He pulled a beat-up looking backpack out from the closet.

“What’s that?” Marvin asked.

“My go bag.”

“I don’t know what that is,” Marvin observed.

“A go bag,” Art explained, “is a bag you keep packed with essentials in case you ever have to leave in a hurry. For instance, if you’ve just popped up on the radar of a huge organization full of terrifying killers.”

“Essentials,” nodded Marvin. “So, like, what? A change of underwear?”

“No,” said Art with a tinge of annoyance in his voice. “*Essentials.*” He began briskly unpacking the bag’s contents onto his desk; his speed and efficiency of motion indicated that packing and unpacking this bag was something he’d practiced many times before. Watching him, Marvin realized Art was doing it less for his benefit than to confirm to himself that everything that was supposed to be in there actually was. “First aid kit. Map and compass. Mag-Lite flashlight. Rain poncho. Blanket. Box of matches. Folding knife. Three days’ non-perishable food. Three days’ bottled water. Iodine water purification tablets, two boxes. Five hundred U.S. dollars. Five hundred Canadian dollars. Five thousand Mexican pesos. Glock 22 pistol, loaded with one full magazine. Three

additional pre-loaded magazines for Glock 22. Alternate identity papers. Multi-tool. Teddy bear.”

Marvin giggled as the last item came out of the bag.

“Don’t judge me,” snapped Art.

“I wouldn’t dare,” Marvin said. He suppressed another giggle as Art re-packed the bag with the same efficiency with which he had unpacked it.

“And one last thing,” Art said, reaching over to the computer and ejecting the CD from the drive. “This might still come in handy someday. You never know.”

“OK,” Art said, slinging the bag over his shoulder. “Let’s go.”

“Where are we going?” asked Marvin.

“Not important,” Art said. “The only important thing is that we go. *Now.*”

“Lead the way, then.”

Art strode purposefully out of the room, with Marvin trailing behind. “You leave first, out the back door,” Art said, “while I place the Claymore mines.”

Marvin didn’t know what a Claymore mine was, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to find out. “You got it, boss,” he said, heading for the back door.

Once outside, he waited in the cool night air for Art to finish whatever it was he was doing. He was becoming increasingly familiar with the feeling of being in way over his head, but this took it to a new level. Glock pistols? Claymore mines? To listen to Art you’d think they were going to war.

*Maybe we are,* he heard a small voice in the back of his mind say. *Or maybe we already have, and just didn’t realize it yet until now.*

His reverie was interrupted by Art making his way out the back door, closing it gingerly behind him. “All

done,” he said, eyes furtively scanning the area. “Let’s go.”

“I still don’t know where we’re supposed to be going,” Marvin said.

“Can’t discuss out loud; might be people listening. For now, just follow me.” With that, Art began tromping off down the street.

Marvin followed behind, resigned to the need to let Art take the lead. Rather than argue about it, he decided to change the subject. “What’s a Claymore mine?” he asked as the condo shrank in the distance behind them.

“An anti-personnel mine,” Art explained. “When it goes off, it shoots a bunch of metal balls in whatever direction the mine is facing. You hook it up to a tripwire, and point the front of the mine towards the wire. Then, when someone trips the wire...”

“They get a face full of metal,” said Marvin.

“More or less. It’s a good way to booby-trap a building; you put mines behind all the doors, and set the wires so that opening the door will trip them. Then anyone who tries to enter gets a good smack. At least, they do if they’re not smart enough to come in through a window.”

“So that’s what you were doing back there? Putting up traps for anyone who tried to enter your condo?”

“That’s right.”

“But why?”

“If someone tries to enter that place now,” Art said, “it’s because they’re coming to kill me. If we get lucky, the Claymores will knock one or two of them off our trail and into the hospital.”

“Or the morgue,” muttered Marvin.

“Or the morgue.” Art confirmed. “Either way is fine with me.”

“You really think this threat is that serious?” Marvin asked. “We don’t know how strong BlaME really is these days, after all. All we have to go on is assumptions. For all we know it could be days or weeks before they can scrape up an operative to send after us —”

Marvin’s argument was suddenly cut off by a deep, loud *crump* behind them.

“Do I think they’re serious?” Art asked. “You heard that. You tell me.”

## **CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

Marvin was standing watch when the sun rose.

Metro Park was the largest park in the city. Located in the middle of the old downtown, it had been designed as an oasis of green in the middle of the swirl of urban commerce. Downtown had eventually died, of course, killed by shopping malls and station wagons, leaving the park to confront the district's crumbling buildings as a sort of warning: in the end, nature always wins.

The city still kept the park up, but budget cuts meant they did so less and less so every year. This made it a haven for transients of all kinds. And Marvin and Art were, at the moment, definitely transients.

They had managed to find a spot that nobody was squatting on, and claimed it as their own for the night. Art, whose experience in such things clearly outstripped Marvin's, set up a watch schedule; each of them would take a two-hour watch with the Glock while the other slept. When the watch shift ended, they would switch places. It would make for a fitful night, Art explained, but that was preferable to having somebody with bad intentions sneak up on them while they both slept.

So they had spent the night as Art had prescribed. He had volunteered to take the first watch, an offer Marvin thought generous. But soon enough his two hours of rest had passed, and it was his turn to stand watch with the pistol.

"I don't know how to shoot one of these," Marvin had admitted.

"You point the gun, and then you pull the trigger," Art had said. "There's really not much more to it than that. The gun does the rest."

It was perhaps not the most comprehensive course of firearms-handling instruction, Marvin had thought. But it would have to do.

In the event, his two watch shifts had been uneventful. The only disturbances had been the occasional chirp of a bird or rustle of another transient through a distant clump of greenery. As the sun's light flooded across the park, he felt glad that they'd made it through the night without incident.

The morning light roused Art, who rose complaining of an aching back. "It's been a long time since I slept in the field," he said with a scowl. "This is a young man's game."

Marvin, who suspected that Art considered him a young man, couldn't agree. "This isn't *anybody's* game," he said. "Who would want to live like this?"

"You might be surprised," Art said, rooting around in his pack for water. "Some people like it. Living rough,

adrenaline flowing...”

“No thanks,” said Marvin firmly, setting the gun on the ground. “That sounds like punishment, not adventure.”

“Some kind of hero you are,” Art laughed.

“You’re talking about *soldiers*, not heroes,” said Marvin. “When was the last time you heard of Captain Amazing sleeping in a park? Doesn’t he have an underground mansion or something?”

Art took a swig from a bottle of water, then handed it to Marvin. “The Amazingcave,” he said, nodding. “But it doesn’t matter. What does matter is this: where do we begin? How do we find out who’s behind BlAME these days?”

“I’ve been thinking about that all night,” Marvin said. “Even dreamed about it a little. The short answer is, I have no idea. We don’t have any leads, any places to start. We couldn’t even go to Utica to see if the annual

postcard leads us somewhere; unless there's a gross departure from the usual schedule, it's not going to be sent for another seven months. In other words, I'm stumped."

"Normally this would be the point where I would chide you for your fatalism," said Art. "The only problem is, I happen to be stumped too."

"So what do we do?" Marvin asked.

"Keep our heads down, stay alive, hope for a development that tips us off."

"That's it? Sit and wait?"

"That's it. Unless you have a better idea."

Marvin didn't. So the two men sat quietly for a moment, passing the bottle of water back and forth.

"You know BlAME better than I do," Marvin eventually said. "What would they normally do in a situation like

this? What's their standard next step when searching for people and not finding them?"

"Turn to their social networks," said Art. "Not the online kind, the real-world kind. The individual may go to ground, but he's unlikely to take everyone he's ever known with him. Loved ones, friends, co-workers; go down the list and it doesn't take long to find someone on it who's living their life like it was just another day, unaware that someone they know is being hunted. Grab enough of those people and throw a scare into them, and you usually find one who has a bit of information that will lead you to your target."

"But doesn't telling someone how to find you defeat the purpose of hiding?" Marvin asked.

"It does," Art confirmed. "But you'd be surprised how few people who go to ground actually do so seriously. They tend to view it as a sort of temporary inconvenience, something that will be over in a day or two, rather than the end of an old life and beginning of a new one. So they tell people how to get in touch with

them on the theory that something from their old life might come up that needs their attention. They don't understand that the old them is dead and gone. Or they do understand, and choose not to face it."

"You don't seem worried about BlaME turning that kind of methodology on us," Marvin observed.

"I'm not. I learned from the men and women I tracked down, Marvin. I learned how you have to live to survive. I have no family, no friends. I'm self-employed, and my clients know nothing of my comings and goings. I buy my groceries with cash, and rotate randomly through six different stores to ensure that I don't fall into an easily predictable routine. I have no social network."

"That sounds like a pretty spare way to live," said Marvin empathetically.

"It's the life I chose," Art said with a pragmatic shrug. "An occupational hazard."

"But you're not in that occupation anymore."

“I wish I could agree with you,” Art said, taking the Glock from the ground and considering it. “But it would certainly appear that I am.”

Marvin felt overwhelmed by a kind of ineffable sadness. So few of the people he’d met since choosing to become a hero seemed undamaged. Was this lifestyle just something that appealed to the scarred and the mentally ill? Or did it take otherwise normal people, and then brutally break them?

Suddenly alarm crept across Art’s face. “*I* have no social network, Marvin,” he said. “But what about *you*?”

“Me? What about me?”

“I know how to live to protect myself,” Art observed. “You don’t. You may have powers, but you have the mind of a civilian in gray pajamas. What if they turn on *your* social network? Is there anyone out there who could lead them to us?”

Marvin flushed with panic. “Oh, God. I don’t know. I mean, I *know* people, but none of them knew I was coming to see you...”

“Are you *certain* of that?” Art said firmly. “Think, Marvin. Interrogate your memory. All it takes is one to blow your cover. Are you sure that *none* of them knew? There’s no wife you talked to in bed about it, no girlfriend you canceled a date with? *Think.*”

“No, no wife, no girlfriend, no children. I quit my job when I discovered my powers, so nobody from work is looking for me...”

“So far, so good.”

“There’s the reporter who wrote the story about me, but I haven’t talked to her since the interview... the kid I landed in the hospital, DeAndre, but I haven’t spoken to him since I visited him in the hospital the day after the shooting...”

“That’s good. BlAME will probably stake them out —

if their standards are what they used to be, they'll give a cursory look at anyone who's come into contact with you recently, no matter how trivial that contact was — but they're not likely to grab someone for questioning unless there's a good chance they have useful information; it would draw unwelcome attention if people started vanishing off the streets in large numbers.”

“There's the furies, of course, but they don't know where I went after I escaped from their sex barn...”

“Sex barn?” inquired Art.

“Don't ask,” said Marvin.

Art raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

“That's everybody, I think. Except for — oh, God. No.”

“What?” Art said. “Who?”

“Oh, God. I'd almost forgotten.”

“Who?” said Art forcefully. “Who?”

“Ace. Oh my God, no. Ace.”

Marvin explained to Art who Ace was; his history with costumed heroes, how they’d met, how Ace had become a friend. And how Ace had been the one to suggest Marvin seek out Art in the first place.

It was obvious that Ace would be very much a person of interest for BlaME. But Art was adamant: Ace’s office was the one place in the world they should definitely *not* go.

“Think about it,” he pleaded. “The one person in the world you know for a fact that the people who are looking for you are going to be interested in. And you want to go to him? You might as well just take out an ad in the newspaper telling BlaME where to find you. It’s madness, I’m telling you. Madness.”

But Marvin was firm too. “He may need help, Art. He

may be in trouble because of me! It's my responsibility to protect him — or at least to try."

"You can't protect him," Art said softly. "The odds are they've already got him. It's over. He's as good as dead already. All you can do is get yourself killed too."

"You've told me how the world works when you're an assassin," Marvin persisted, stubbornly. "Now let me tell you how the world works when you're a hero. A hero has *responsibilities*, Art. Responsibilities greater than self-protection. The biggest responsibility of them all is the protection of the innocent. And, in this scenario at least, Ace is as innocent as it gets. His only crime is being my friend. He doesn't deserve what's about to fall on him."

"In the real world, the innocent suffer all the time."

"The point of being a hero is to stop that."

"And you think you can stop it?" Art said, this time sharply. "You haven't succeeded at a single thing you've tried to do! All you've done is put kids in the hospital and

drag me back into a life I'd turned away from two decades ago. Some hero you are."

Marvin was stung. But he knew that the reason he was stung was because Art's words were true. And the only way to make them sting less was to become something more than he had been before.

Something better.

"I'm going," he said, picking himself up off the ground and brushing leaves and dirt from his costume. "You can go your own way if you like, I won't stop you. You're right, you don't owe Ace anything. But I owe him a lot. And I honor my debts."

And with that, Marvin hopped off towards the waterfront.

"Damn it," Art said. "Damn it all." And then he gathered up his stuff and followed.

## **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

When they reached Ace's office, they found it gutted.

It was clear that the fire had been recent; the ruins still smoked. The destruction was total. Not only had Ace's office burned, but the buildings to the left and right of it had gone up as well.

Marvin looked on the ruins in horror, while Art viewed them with a craftsman's eye. "This is a professional's work," he said, poking through the rubble. "To the untrained eye it'll look like an electrical fire. The sort of thing that happens in these old buildings all the time. Somone put a lot of care into this."

“There’s no body,” Marvin said. “Maybe he wasn’t here when it went up. Maybe it was just a warning.”

“Not likely,” Art replied. “The fire looks like it burned last night. It’s more probable that either the firemen picked up the body, or that BlaME grabbed him first and then set the fire to cover their tracks. So he’s either dead or captive, in which case he’s as good as dead.”

“You don’t know that!” Marvin objected.

“I used to do this sort of thing for a living,” Art quietly reminded him. “BlaME doesn’t let informants go after they’ve extracted information from them. Too messy, too many loose ends. It’s better if the person just disappears. And a fire is a great way to cover up a disappearance.”

Marvin couldn’t tear his eyes from the rubble.

“Either way, there’s nothing we can do for him now,” said Art. “He’s gone. And we need to get gone too. For all we know BlaME could have left a stay-behind operative

here to see if you'd turn up when you heard about the fire. It's what I would have done."

"This is my fault," Marvin said. "It's all my fault."

Art reached over and placed a hand on Marvin's shoulder. "Fault is something you have plenty of time to think about after an operation is over," he said. "Until then, it's just a distraction. Something that keeps you from doing what you need to do to stay alive and accomplish what you want to accomplish. Something that gets you killed."

"Aren't you full of wisdom today," said Marvin, frowning bitterly. "It's too bad none of that helped us get here in time to do anything."

"Sometimes there's nothing you *can* do," Art said. "Not even when you're a hero."

"*Especially* when you're a hero," a voice said above them. Marvin and Art both started in shock.

A figure stood up on the roof of the unburnt building to the left. Hands on its hips, it considered them. "Only one of you claims to be a hero, of course," it said, "and that one isn't very good at it. So this may be a salutary lesson for him."

Marvin was paralyzed by the appearance of the figure, but Art was not. He pulled the pistol out from the waistline of his pants and trained it squarely on the figure. "Show yourself," he said, "very slowly."

The figure laughed. "As you wish, Shadowblade," it said, leaping from the roof and landing unharmed on the street below. The force of its landing rocked the street, cracking the pavement and sending Marvin and Art reeling.

Once he recovered his footing, Marvin looked closely at the figure before him. It was a man, slightly taller than himself. He wore a black unitard that flowed loosely around his body and connected seamlessly to a hood that covered his face. His only visible ornamentation was a Sam Browne-style utility belt festooned with pouches,

and a gray insignia of some kind across his chest.

Marvin squinted, trying to make out the insignia. It appeared to be a loop of rope; a noose.

“Marvin,” Art said formally, never turning his gun away from the menacing figure, “allow me to introduce the Hangman.”

The figure in black gave them a mocking little bow. “The pleasure is mine, of course,” he said.

“Who are you?” Marvin managed to ask.

Art didn’t wait for the figure to answer. “A killer,” he said simply. “A servant of BlAME.”

“You say that with such bitterness, Shadowblade!” the Hangman laughed. “As if you yourself were not the very same thing.”

“I left that life behind a long time ago,” Art responded.

“And it is well that you did,” said the Hangman. “For the days when simple mortals like yourself were sufficient to carry out BlaME’s wishes are long since past. Today just knowing how to handle a blade or a bullet is not enough to a BlaME operative make. One must bring powers to the table as well.”

“I don’t believe it,” Art said. “BlaME would never let the empowered serve as operatives. There would be too much risk to themselves. A super-powered BlaME member is dangerous enough to his peers; a super-powered BlaME member with an assassin’s skills would be...”

“Unstoppable?” the Hangman grinned.

“Nobody is unstoppable,” said Art through clenched teeth. “Nobody.”

“Again you show yourself to be behind the times, my friend. For not only does BlaME accept the empowered into service as operatives today, it does not even need to

wait for random chance to produce a suitable candidate.”

“I don’t understand,” said Marvin.

“He’s saying,” Art explained, “that they don’t wait for empowered individuals to be produced through whatever mutations have always produced them. That they have figured out a way to... *breed* them.”

“You breed supervillains?” Marvin spat.

“‘Villain’ is such an unpleasant word,” the Hangman said. “I’m sure your friend Shadowblade has explained that to you.”

“Whatever you call them, then. You *breed* them?”

“We do, yes. Random mutation is so... *unreliable*. And it leads to instability. People who spend many years on their own with their powers, building up their egos, before coming to BlaME, are unlikely to sublimate those egos to the greater good when they do come. It is better if they can be raised from birth to understand themselves

and their mission in the proper context.

“Did you think Doctor Genome was the only super-scientist experimenting along these lines? Hardly. He was just the only one who got caught. My progenitors were not just smarter than he was. They were more cunning, too. More circumspect. They knew how to hide from the prying eyes of the inquisitive public.”

“And are you,” Marvin asked, “one of these? One of these who are bred from birth?”

“I have the honor to be one of the first,” the man in black confirmed. “It provides me with a certain pride of place in our organization.”

“I’d heard rumors about this near the end of my time with BlAME,” Art said. “Rumors of test-tube babies with designer powers. There was even one who was supposed to be a teenager at the time, a kid who went by the code name Hangman. But I thought it was all a legend designed to keep our spirits up as the organization unraveled.”

“The rest of the world thought that as well,” the Hangman said. “Which suited our purposes quite well.”

“Enough of this,” Marvin said. “Enough talk. Where’s my friend? Where’s Ace Hardwick?”

“Oh, he is quite dead, I’m afraid,” the Hangman said solemnly. “D-E-D. Dead.”

Marvin glanced in confusion at Art.

“Remember, he’s home-schooled,” Art said.

“Oh.”

“Burned alive in the junkpile he called an office,” The Hangman continued. “You can confirm this with the authorities if you wish; they hauled away what was left of him after the fire was put out. I’m afraid his habit of drinking himself to sleep did not make for fast reactions when he awoke to find the building on fire.”

“I don’t buy it,” Art said. “Why kill someone who could have valuable information? In my day we would have taken him alive for questioning.”

“In your day, perhaps you would have; but it is not your day anymore. The only valuable information the sodden Hardwick could have had would be the location of the Kangaroo Kid here. And that information would be unnecessary if we could devise a way to get him to come to us. Which burning Mr. Hardwick alive seems to have accomplished.”

“So all this...” said Marvin.

“... is a trap, yes,” said the Hangman.

“Then screw this,” Art said, “and screw you.” And then he pulled the trigger of the Glock.

Marvin was amazed to see the man in black, moving faster than the eye could follow, dance nimbly around the flying bullet. “I *told* you,” he said impatiently, “I have powers. I have been engineered specifically for this task.

A gun is a feeble weapon, compared to me.”

“You’re not the only one with powers,” Marvin said, springing into action. His plan was simple: get in close to the Hangman, knock him over with a super-kick or two, then hold him down while Art subdued him.

Unfortunately, he realized in mid-air, a man who could dodge a bullet could easily dodge a kangaroo kick too. The Hangman stepped adroitly aside as Marvin landed from his hop, and then, before he could rear up for a kick, he struck him with a punch directly to the solar plexus.

Marvin had been punched before, but never like this. It was like getting hit head-on by a freight train. He flew backwards, crashing into the brick facade of a nearby building and sending cracks splintering across it. Dazed, he picked himself up again.

“You’re persistent,” the Hangman said. “Not very bright, perhaps, but persistent. It’s a good quality. I respect that.”

Out of breath and aching all over, Marvin needed a moment to compose himself before he could try again. *Need to buy some time*, his brain screamed. “What do you want with us?” he panted. “What’s your plan here?”

“My plan is simple,” the Hangman exulted. “I will incapacitate you both and take you back to our headquarters. From that point on, you’re the Leader’s problem, not mine.”

“The Leader?” asked Marvin.

“Yes, of course. The genius who has masterminded the second coming of BlaME. The one who commands my loyalty, and the loyalty of all those like me.”

“He sounds like quite a fellow,” said Art, still keeping the gun trained on the Hangman.

“Oh, I assure you, he is. He is a great figure, a history-making figure. And you two are but mere footnotes in his chapter of history. You should be

honored.”

“I’ll make a note of that,” Marvin said, catching his breath.

“Your sarcasm is misplaced,” the Hangman said. “But this will all become clear to you soon enough.”

“I don’t think so,” Marvin said.

“Why not? We have already seen how I am superior to you both. How could you possibly hope to defeat me?”

“We’ve seen *some* ways you are superior to us, that’s true,” Marvin admitted. “You punch at least as hard as I kick, and your reflexes are outstanding.”

The Hangman nodded, as if to accept a compliment.

“But one question still remains.”

“What could that possibly be?” the Hangman asked.

“What hope could you possibly have to outfight me?”

“I don’t plan to outfight you,” Marvin said. “I plan to outrun you.”

“Excuse me?” the Hangman asked. But even before the words escaped his mouth, Marvin had launched himself back up into the air in another mighty hop, this one bringing him down right next to Art.

“Get on my back,” he told Art. Art did not need to be told twice; he clambered up onto Marvin’s back, wrapping his arms firmly around Marvin’s waist.

“Now hold on,” Marvin said. And he leapt up again, past the Hangman and towards the end of the street.

“You must be joking,” the Hangman said. “Your hops are pathetic.” And then he took off running after them. But Marvin’s hunch — that he could hop farther, faster than the Hangman could run — was correct. The Hangman had many powers, but super-speed did not appear to be one of them.

Marvin and Art landed at the far end of the street, and Marvin took off again in another hop. The Hangman fell further behind them. "Stop!" he cried. "Stop right now!" But Marvin kept hopping, each leap throwing the Hangman farther behind.

The threatening voice faded out behind them as they hopped away. "Stop! Stop, I say! No one escapes from the judgement of the Hangman! No one!"

"That might be true tomorrow," Marvin said, enjoying the feeling of the wind whipping by as they left the genetically engineered villain in the distance. "But not today. Not today."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Now you see what we are up against,” said Art, holding fast to Marvin’s back as he hopped along.

“That’s putting it mildly,” Marvin responded.

“It is disturbing to learn that they have found a way to breed empowered individuals,” Art continued. “I had only ever thought that to be a rumor. It appears they pose an even bigger threat than even I had thought.”

“So there’s more like that guy running around?” Marvin asked.

“Quite possibly.”

“Terrific. They’ve got an army of superpowered clones, and we’ve got two guys and a Glock.”

“More or less.”

“Which shoots bullets the superpowered clones can apparently dodge.”

“This isn’t helping, Marvin.”

“I know, I know. I’m just frustrated. We don’t have a plan. We need get to the heart of BlaME, not mess around with its flunkies. But we don’t know where the heart even is.”

“It’s true, we don’t,” said Art. “I wish I had some bright idea of a thread we could pull on. But I don’t. Nothing the Hangman said gives us a lead.”

Marvin thought silently for a moment as he took another superpowered leap. Then, to Art’s surprise, he suddenly changed direction.

“Where are we going?” Art asked.

“I have a plan,” Marvin replied.

They had made their way now into the business district. Men in expensive suits stopped and gaped as what appeared to be a gray rodent with a grandfather strapped to his back bounded in flying leaps down the streets.

“I can’t help but notice that we’re calling an awful lot of attention to ourselves,” said Art guardedly.

“That’s the idea.”

He hung a right and turned onto Nassau Street. If the city could be said to have a media hub, Nassau Street was it. The local newspaper, the *Herald-Picayune*, had a glorious Beaux-Arts building there — or at least it had been glorious once, back when local newspapers could afford such extravagances — and over time the city’s other magazines, newsletters, and assorted rags had

gravitated there as well.

If you were trying to find a reporter, in other words, Nassau Street was the most likely place you would find her. And Marvin was trying to find a reporter.

He landed with a thud in the middle of an intersection. Traffic screeched to a halt around him. Art, deeply mystified, clambered down from his back.

“ATTENTION, CITIZENS!” cried Marvin, in a *basso profundo* voice that Art would never in a billion years guessed Marvin (Marvin!) was capable of. Having gathered around him, a small crowd gaped in amazement at this interruption to the usual workday routine.

“I am the Kangaroo Man!” he continued. “I am here on a crime-fighting mission of grave importance. I need one of you to direct me to the offices of the Web site PopFeed.”

The crowd stared silently at him. Art crossed his fingers and hoped that Marvin knew what he was doing.

Marvin tried again. "Come now, citizens! This is Nassau Street! Surely one of you must know where PopFeed is headquartered!"

"Two blocks down," someone finally volunteered, "one to the right. It's the building with the lion on it. Fourth floor."

Marvin beamed. He looked, Art thought, like the cat that had caught the canary.

"Thank you, citizen!" boomed Marvin. "Your assistance in the cause of justice is greatly appreciated!"

"Whatever," the voice in the crowd responded.

Marvin turned back to Art. "Let's go," he said, indicating with a gesture that Art should climb back up onto his back. Art dutifully did so, and with a mighty leap they were once again making their way down the street.

"Do you want to tell me what that was all about?" Art

said.

“It’s important that people hear that I was there,” Marvin responded, turning right. “They have to, or my plan will never work.”

“And you are going to share this plan with me at some point, I assume?”

“There’s no time. Just follow my lead.”

Another *thud* echoed as they landed in front of a building with a lion on the facade.

“Here we are,” Marvin said as Art climbed down from his back. “Fourth floor. Follow me.”

“I’m not sure I have a choice,” said Art as he followed Marvin inside.

The building lobby wasn’t particularly grand; it was just another dull lobby in just another dull office building. A security guard sat behind a desk that stood between

them and the elevators. Marvin strode past him as if he wasn't there.

"Hey, you! You in the pajamas! Visitors have to sign in!" called the guard.

"Good to know," Marvin called back, breezing past him with Art two steps behind.

The guard started to get up, but then seemed to think better of it and settled back down into his chair. Art and Marvin made their way into the elevator. Marvin punched the button for the fourth floor. The two men stared ahead as the doors closed in front of them.

"You could have been more polite to that guard," Art said as they began to ascend. "He was only doing his job."

"I didn't realize my fatal flaw as a costumed hero was not being polite enough."

"I'm just saying."

A soft chime sounded as the elevator reached the fourth floor. The doors parted to reveal a large sign reading “POPFEED” in stylized lettering, mounted on the wall directly in front of the elevator. Beneath it was a glossy flat-screen monitor displaying the headline “UNIQ VSTS 24HRS” and a list of names and numbers. A glass door stood to their left. Marvin opened it and walked through, Art close behind him.

The room they had entered was a classic cubicle farm, half-height beige walls flooded with harsh fluorescent lighting. One desk stood out in the open directly behind the doors, with a bored-looking young woman seated behind it. Marvin assumed she was the receptionist.

“Welcome to Popfeed how can I help you,” she said in a dull monotone that indicated her actual emotional investment in helping the two men was minimal.

“I am the Kangaroo Man,” Marvin said. “I am here to see Marisa Ryan.”

“Do you have an appointment,” asked the receptionist, filing her nails.

“I don’t need one,” Marvin said. “Call her. She’ll see me.”

The receptionist raised an eyebrow. “And I should tell her that her visitor is... the Kangaroo Man?”

“That’s right.”

“Like, you know, right,” the receptionist asked, chewing thoughtfully on a stick of gum while pointing at Marvin’s torso, “that, like, only female kangaroos have pouches?”

Marvin sighed. “It’s a *tactical pocket*.”

“Whatever.” The receptionist picked up her phone and punched a few numbers on the keypad. “Ms. Ryan? You have a visitor. No, he doesn’t have an appointment. He says his name is Kangaroo Man.” She listened to what

sounded like a brief burst of noise on the other end, then hung up the phone and turned back to Marvin. “Ms. Ryan will be with you shortly please wait there,” she said, gesturing blankly at a cheap-looking couch.

Marvin and Art took a seat.

“Wasn’t there a story in the news not long ago about PopFeed raising hundreds of millions of dollars?” Art asked.

“I think so.”

“You would think they could afford better furniture.”

Just then, Marisa Ryan emerged from out of the warren of cubicles. Marvin found her every bit as striking as he remembered her being at their last encounter. The feeling was almost strong enough to wash away the sudden gag reflex he felt at thinking of how grandly the story she took from that encounter had screwed him over.

Almost.

“Look who it is,” she said cheerfully. “K! And here I thought you’d never hop into my life again.”

“We need to talk,” Marvin said.

“That’s the usual reason people make unannounced visits to journalists,” she replied.

“I’m serious. It’s a matter of life or death. We need to talk. Right now.”

The flirty lightness dropped away from her face like a veil, leaving a hardness — or was it toughness? — Marvin didn’t remember seeing before.

“All right, K,” she said. “Follow me.”

She led them through the maze of cubicles to a glass-walled room with a large conference table. The three of them seated themselves around the table, and Marisa took out her notepad.

“Here we go, then.” she said. “Let’s talk.”

“Your life is in danger,” Marvin began. Hearing this, Art settled back in his chair, his expression saying something like *this ought to be interesting*.

“My life?” she shot back. “Are you threatening me, K?”

“No. Despite what you’ve written, I am not a supervillain.”

“Reliable sources say otherwise.”

“Then your reliable sources are not very reliable.”

“Putting the question of your villainy aside for a moment,” she said, “let’s get back to your allegation. My life is in danger, you say, but not from you. If not you, then who?”

“DeAndre Washington.”

Marvin was pleased to note that this actually appeared to have shocked her — a bit of surprise leaked through her professional mask of composure.

“DeAndre Washington,” she repeated. “The kid you *shot.*”

“I didn’t shoot him. He was carrying a gun and it went off. It was an accident.”

“That’s not the way I heard it from my —”

“Reliable sources?”

“Yes. Reliable sources.”

“Did those include DeAndre himself?”

“No,” she admitted. “I couldn’t get him to say anything specific about how he had been wounded, or about his encounter with you. According to him his gun went off, and then he woke up in the hospital.”

*Interesting.* “That’s not the only thing he didn’t open up to you about, Ms. Ryan. You see, DeAndre is also my sidekick.”

“Your *sidekick*.”

“Yes,” Marvin continued. “I have secretly been training him in the arts of costumed heroism. Someday he will be a full-fledged hero himself. For now, he is my sidekick.”

“In my conversations with him, he seemed smart and decisive. A natural leader. Not really the sidekick type.”

“Appearances can be deceiving.”

“Says the man in the kangaroo suit.”

“Touché.”

“Let’s circle back to the general vicinity of the point,” Marisa said briskly. “How is my life in danger from DeAndre?”

Marvin took a deep breath. He knew that everything, maybe even his life, hinged on her believing what he was going to say to her now.

“It all goes back to that story you wrote about me,” he began. “The publication of that story impacted my life in one major, immediate way. That being that it brought my existence to the attention of the League of Blackguards, Malefactors and Evildoers — the association of supervillains known to the world as BlaME.”

“That’s impossible,” Marisa interjected. “BlaME doesn’t exist anymore.”

“That would be news to the BlaME operative who tried to kill us earlier today,” Art said.

Marisa, whose attention had been focused on Marvin ever since the first moment she’d come out to the reception area, now swiveled her head and considered Art.

“K,” she asked, “who is this guy?”

“A friend,” Marvin replied.

“Great, thanks for that biographical sketch,” she said. “It’s very helpful.”

“All you need to know about him,” Marvin said, “is that he’s with me, and that earlier today the two of us were very nearly murdered by a self-confessed operative of BlaME.”

“The plot thickens,” Marisa observed.

“Very nearly murdered because of your story.”

“Wait,” she said. “That makes no sense at all. Even assuming BlaME still does exist, why would they want to kill a fellow supervillain?”

“They seem to believe they still hold the franchise on that line of work,” said Marvin. “And that I, as a freelance malefactor, was horning in on their turf.”

He noticed that Marisa had begun taking notes.  
“OK,” she said. “Go on.”

“DeAndre,” Marvin continued, “is protective of me. You saw yourself how he wouldn’t open up to a reporter about our relationship, even after getting shot accidentally because of it.”

Marisa nodded. “Mmm hmm.”

“So he had to go through two separate experiences he found a bit of a shock. The first was seeing me portrayed in the media as some kind of cackling, mustache-twirling villain, rather than the person I really am: sincere, honest and —”

“And humble,” Marisa chuckled. “*Especially* humble.”

“And the second was seeing how that story led directly to an attempt on my life.”

“If he’s your sidekick, as you say, and you’re a

costumed hero, as you say, shouldn't he already understand that attempts on your life are kind of par for the course? In the old days people were taking shots at costumed heroes all the time. Taking one out was a well-recognized way to move up from being a common street thug to a criminal entrepreneur."

*Keep going*, Marvin thought to himself. A lie, he knew, was like a shark; it had to keep moving forward, or it would die.

"I tried to prepare him for that," Marvin said. "But no matter how many times you *tell* a person something might happen, it's still very different to see it actually happening. Especially if the person is a young person, who hasn't had to confront mortality before."

"So he snapped, and decided to kill me for putting you in harm's way?" she asked.

"More or less."

"OK. Answer me this, then. You couldn't have been

enamored with my story either,” said Marisa. “So why are you here warning me?”

“Because I’m not a villain. I’m a hero, Marisa. I’m a hero.”

She paused.

“No matter,” he said with a touch of satisfaction, “what you read in the papers.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Their visit to the PopFeed offices complete, Art and Marvin took the elevator back down to the ground floor. As they exited, Art put his hand on Marvin's shoulder, stopping him.

"Would you mind explaining to me," Art asked, "what exactly all that back there was about?"

Marvin's eyes scanned the area, looking for unfamiliar faces. "Finding BlaME, of course," he said. "Finding BlaME."

"How does lying to a reporter get us any closer to finding BlaME?"

Marvin grinned. "How do you know I was lying?"

"If you had a homicidal sidekick stalking anyone who looked at you cross-eyed, I have to think you would have mentioned it at some point."

"Fair enough."

"So what did that little trip buy us? Other than giving you a chance to bat your eyelashes at a pretty young woman, I mean."

"Art," Marvin sighed. "You're not thinking big enough here. *Strategically* enough. Frankly, I'm surprised. I had you pegged as a big-picture type of person."

"There is a strategy at work here? I applaud your ingenuity, you have camouflaged it very well."

"Art! Look. Think back to the beginning of the trip to Nassau Street. What was it you said then that I was doing?"

Art recalled the day's events. "Calling attention to us. Making a scene."

"Exactly. Then I stopped traffic. Why?"

"To ask for directions to PopFeed."

"Exactly. Then we went to PopFeed... and?"

"You talked to the reporter."

"No, no. Before that. In the lobby."

"Oh, that's right. First you were rude to a security guard. *Then* you talked to the reporter."

"Correct. So do you see it now? Do you see the thread that connects all of these incidents together?"

"I must confess," said Art, "that I do not."

"I wanted the world to know what we were doing. Or,

more specifically, I wanted *BlaME* to know what we were doing. I wanted them to know that we were going to talk to a reporter.

“That’s why I stopped traffic; costumed heroes aren’t a routine sight in the city these days. I knew an appearance by one would get peoples’ attention — that it would be buzzed about on social media for the rest of the day. We’d be hashtagged and trended and photcaptioned endlessly. And all that activity would get the attention of anyone looking out for us, as well as establish our location and intentions to those observers beyond doubt.

“That’s why I asked a crowd of passers-by for directions; I wanted those people buzzing not just about me, but about the fact that I was specifically asking for directions. Directions to the offices of PopFeed.

“That’s why I was rude to the security guard; I wanted there to be at least one person unrelated to either us or to PopFeed who could confirm that we did indeed enter PopFeed’s building and go up to a higher

floor. Being rude to the guard would help fix us in his memory. It would make us unforgettable. And this is a moment when it is to our benefit to be unforgettable.

“I wanted to make it as plain as day, Art. I wanted to put up a billboard screaming in giant, loud type that we were on our way to talk to a reporter. And in the absence of a billboard budget, making a big scene and loudly associating it to anyone who would listen with the fact that we were on our way to PopFeed’s offices was the next best thing.”

“But why? How does that get us closer to BlaME?”

“Because to any observer at BlaME, there would appear to be only one reason why we’d want to talk to a reporter.”

“Which is?”

“To give them the list, of course.”

Marvin smiled as he saw the penny drop in Art’s

mind.

“To give them the list.”

“Yes. If they searched your house — and the explosion we heard on our way out would certainly imply that they did — they would definitely have noticed the conspicuous absence of the list CD. Because you put it in your go bag before we left.”

“I did, at that.”

“Which, to them, would mean that the data is still out there. If it is still out there, to them, it’s still dangerous. And even if we can’t use it for blackmail anymore, they would have to think we could still use it for revenge.”

A guarded smile crept across Art’s face. “By giving it to a reporter. To Ms. Ryan.”

“Exactly. There would be lots of PopFeed exclusives that could be spun out of the data on that disc. Lots of BlaME members, current and former, who could be made

uncomfortable. Either by renewed attention from law enforcement, or from other ex-BlaME members looking to work out old grudges. Things in the world of supervillainy could get very hot, very fast.”

“But we didn’t give her the disc, Marvin. *We didn’t give her the disc.* So what was the point?”

“Her actually having the disc isn’t important. What’s important is BlaME *thinking* she has it.”

“Because...”

“Because then their next action will be one hundred percent predictable. They will have no choice but to kidnap her.”

The color drained from Art’s face. “Excuse me?”

“Kidnap her. They’ll want to retrieve the disc, to wrap up that loose end. They’ll believe she has it, because why else would we have taken the time to talk to a reporter today, if not to give her the list in order to strike back at

our enemies? And when they search her things and don't find it, they'll want to interrogate her, of course, to find out where it is.

"That's why I didn't want to *actually* give her the disc, you see. If she really had it, they'd find it in her things when they searched her, or when they searched her home or office. And once they found it, she'd just be another loose end to be wrapped up. So they'd kill her, Art. They'd kill her and move on to the next problem.

"But as long as the disc doesn't turn up, they'll assume she's *hiding* it from them somewhere. That she has placed it in some hidey-hole so fiendishly clever that it has eluded all their searchers. And they'll need to keep her alive, so she can tell them where."

"So she's kidnapped," Art said. "So what? That's bad for her, but I don't see how it's good for us."

"It's *very* good for us," replied Marvin. "Because when they kidnap her, we can follow them."

“Follow them...” said Art.

“Back to their base,” Marvin elaborated. “Back to their headquarters.”

Art chewed in silence.

“Back, in other words, to the exact place we very desperately want to find. And once we’re there, once we’ve found them... we can *wreck* them. Bring them to justice. End this once and for all.”

“So the song and dance about DeAndre being a psychotic sidekick was...”

“Was nonsense. I just needed an excuse for us to be in a room with Marisa that didn’t end with us being hauled out by security. It was the best story I could make up on short notice.”

“And Ms. Ryan... Marisa... is —”

“Bait.”

Art shuffled his feet for a moment, looking up at the sky before turning back to Marvin. “This plan,” he eventually said, “this is not the sort of plan I would have expected from a costumed hero.”

“Because of the enormous danger it exposes an innocent reporter to?”

“No. Because it might *work*. Costumed heroes were never that bright.”

## **CHAPTER TWENTY**

It did not take long for Marvin's plan to bear fruit.

The two men had agreed to part company in order to stake out the PopFeed building more effectively. Art, being less conspicuously dressed, could watch the building from the corner across the street. Marvin, being dressed as a giant kangaroo, ducked around the back and into a disused alley. From these positions, in theory, they would be able to observe anyone entering or leaving.

Such detailed surveillance proved unnecessary, however, for less than an hour after they had walked out of the PopFeed building what sounded like an enormous bang crashed around them. The Hangman, it turned out,

had a flair for the dramatic entrance.

“That was fast,” said Art to himself as he watched the Hangman begin to scale the front of the building.

It took only a few minutes for the genetically engineered villain to clamber his way up to the windows of the fourth floor. He promptly made his way through the nearest one by ripping it out from the wall, taking a sizable chunk of the surrounding wall with it. Debris fell to the streets below with a crash as the Hangman climbed up through the newly-made hole and onto the offices of the fourth floor. Pedestrians walking past the front of the building scrambled madly to avoid having the falling bricks land upon their head.

Hearing the racket of the Hangman’s entrance but unable to see what was causing it, Marvin ran back along the side of the building until he could see Art again. The older man waved at him and gestured for him to join him across the street. Marvin obligingly sprinted over, and the two men positioned themselves behind a bus shelter.

“What’s going on?” he asked Art.

“Your plan,” Art replied, pointing up at the ragged hole in the building, “appears to be working.”

They could not see what was going on inside the building, but all the evidence pointed towards pandemonium. People were running in all directions, raised voices were babbling incoherently; occasionally a cubicle wall, or a computer monitor, or a piece of office furniture would come sailing out of the hole in the wall to the street below.

Marvin guessed that Marisa was putting up a fight.

If she was, however, it did not last very long. It only took ten minutes before the Hangman reappeared at the hole in the wall, this time with the reporter thrown over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry. She was beating her fists against his back, to no visible effect, and screaming something that neither Art nor Marvin could quite make out.

The villain leapt down to the street, the pavement buckling beneath him as he landed. He gave no indication of having noticed Art or Marvin.

Everything appeared to be going according to plan. “So far so good,” Marvin said to Art. “Now we just need to see which direction he heads off with her, and tail them to wherever he’s going. Get ready to mount up.”

“Mount up?” Art asked.

“Climb up on my back,” Marvin clarified.

“Oh, right.”

The Hangman took a moment to orient himself, and then began walking back up towards Nassau Street. The two men prepared themselves to move off in pursuit.

And that was the exact moment the plan went spectacularly awry.

It began with a noise — a noise that sounded like a

fanfare of trumpets. The Hangman, hearing it, stopped walking down the street and tilted his head upwards, in the direction from which the noise had come. He, like the crowd of mystified onlookers that had gathered ever since he began tearing up the street, wanted to identify its source.

And there, standing on the roof of a nearby building, was the spit-curlled, body-armored personage whose own fondness for dramatic entrances rivaled the Hangman's.

It was the only man in the city who could announce his own entrance with a trumpet fanfare without a single snarky blogger making fun of him for it. It was, in other words, Captain Amazing.

"Shit," the Hangman breathed.

"Shit," Marvin breathed.

"This ought to be fun," Art chuckled.

"Hangman!" the city's greatest hero cried out, in the

voice that could reduce hardened thugs into weeping penitents by its soul-shaking timbre alone.

“It’s *The Hangman*,” the villain below him sniffed. “A little respect, please.”

“You don’t deserve respect,” Captain Amazing shot back. “Look at you. You’re a common kidnapper.”

“Kidnapper, yes. *Common*, hardly.”

“Either way,” the hero continued, “your little spree here is over. This doesn’t have to end violently, though. Put the lady down and step away from her peacefully, and I’ll see that you get admitted to a very good rehabilitation program instead of a very bad insane asylum.”

“You don’t seem to have done your research on me, Amazing. I’m not the type to back away from anything peacefully.”

“So you want to play it the hard way, then, eh?” said

Captain Amazing. "Fair enough." And suddenly, in less than the blink of an eye, he was gone.

Or at least, he appeared to be gone. But in reality he was just moving so fast that the naked human eye could not follow him. At one moment he was taunting the Hangman from the rooftop, and then the next he was down on the street with him, making a grab to pull Marisa from his grasp.

But Captain Amazing was not the only person on that street who enjoyed the benefits of super-reflexes. The Hangman had them too. And he used them to deftly dodge away, out of Captain Amazing's reach, his hostage still securely slung over his shoulder.

"Interesting," Captain Amazing said. "I don't think anyone's ever been able to sidestep my Amazing Grab before. I congratulate you."

The Hangman took a mocking little bow.

"I can't believe these guys," Marvin said. "They act

like they think they're in a comic book or something."

"Your abilities may be significant," Captain Amazing continued, "but I have only begun to test them."

"Get on with it, then," growled the Hangman.

Even before the words were out of the villain's mouth, Captain Amazing had begun his next attack. Eschewing the direct approach that had failed the last time, he took several steps back, carefully circling the Hangman while seeming to contemplate what his next move should be. Then, in a flash, one of his hands was at his utility belt.

"Amazarangs," said Art, admiringly. "He's going for the Amazarangs." And sure enough, the hand came back up wrapped around a sleekly curved black wedge: the famous Amazarang.

In some respects, the Amazarang is actually a very simple device. Building on the aerodynamic principles of the boomerang, when tossed by a skilled user — of which

there is exactly one in the world, namely Captain Amazing — it describes not just a single arc around its target, but several full circles, each progressively smaller and tighter in diameter.

The real crime-stopping power of the weapon, however, was not its flight pattern, but the super-thin filament of material that spooled out from its back to its base in Captain Amazing's utility belt. Made of an alien material unknown to terrestrial science — a material whose origin Captain Amazing steadfastly refused to disclose, except to say that it was discovered by him on a secret mission — it was both astonishingly lightweight and absolutely impervious to breaking, snapping or fraying. Each spin of the Amazarang wrapped its target in a new loop of this fantastic material, turning the device into a kind of self-aiming lasso. A true rogue's gallery of criminals, villains and other evildoers had been hauled off to justice wrapped in the Amazarang's gossamer straitjacket.

The appearance of the Amazarang made it clear that Captain Amazing now wanted to bring the Hangman in

the same way. As the device was widely associated with his greatest victories, it was to be expected that Captain Amazing would wield the Amazarang with grace and precision, and he did not disappoint; his toss was elegant, minimal, sending the Amazarang sailing off towards the Hangman with an economy of motion that suggested a world-class dancer or Olympic athlete. The device responded, carving a long arc through the air between Captain Amazing and his foe.

In a normal confrontation, this would have been enough. But the Hangman, as Art and Marvin had already discovered, was no ordinary villain. And unlike every villain who had ever faced the Amazarang before, he proved sufficiently skilled to deal with it: as the device flew towards him, in a gesture that seemed almost contemptuous, he extended one arm and batted it away. The Amazarang curled off to his side, deflected, useless.

“Oh, *very* interesting,” the hero said, brushing his spit-curl back into place with a hand. “Nobody’s ever been able to deflect an Amazarang before, you know.”

“Of course I know,” the Hangman replied. “I read your book.”

(Captain Amazing’s autobiography, *An Amazing Life: One Man’s Quest for Justice*, had topped the best-seller lists for nearly a year at the height of costumed heroism’s golden age, and was still required reading in many classrooms.)

Suddenly, Marisa chose to speak up. “Hey, Captain,” she said, “I appreciate your coming to my rescue and all that, but do you think you could put the mutual admiration society on hiatus and actually *rescue* me?”

“Oooh,” Marvin said, impressed. “That’s a pretty harsh burn she just laid on him. On Captain Amazing! Can you believe it?”

“She has always struck me as a hard person to impress,” said Art.

Captain Amazing seemed a bit miffed by Marisa’s request. “Don’t worry, young lady,” he said curtly. “I will

be bringing this situation to a close very shortly.”

“That’s an excellent idea,” the Hangman said. “Here, let me help you.” And then, balling the hand at the end of his free arm into a fist, he struck a punch into the ground.

The earth shook on the impact as if it had been struck by a meteor instead of a fist. Buildings, street lights, and the bus shelter Marvin and Art were watching from behind began to sway sickeningly. The crowd that had been watching the fight began to flee; or, at least, those who had managed to retain their footing did.

Marvin used his powerful legs to brace himself. He was surprised to see that the shaking and swaying was not the only result of the Hangman’s powerful punch; a crack had opened up in the earth itself where he had struck, and to Marvin’s horror, it began to run towards the PopFeed building. Before Marvin could fully process what he was seeing, it ran just past the edge of the building, which began to lean dangerously towards the ground.

Captain Amazing's super-tuned equilibrium had meant he had no problem staying upright as the scenery swayed sickeningly around him. But Marvin saw an expression of dismay on his face, and realized that the Hangman had posed the hero with a devilish dilemma. He could continue fighting the villain and trying to rescue Marisa, but if he did so, the building would fall and countless innocent bystanders would be injured, or even killed. Or he could devote his energies to propping up the building until the area was fully evacuated, but if he did so, the Hangman would be able to stroll off with his victim.

There was only one of those choices a true hero could accept, Marvin thought, and he was impressed to see how quickly Captain Amazing came to the same conclusion, breaking off his combat with the Hangman and turning all his attention toward keeping the lurching building from toppling. "Get out of here!" the hero cried, and people streamed out of the building from every ground-floor exit and window. As the earth settled back into stability, those members of the crowd who had been thrown off their feet began to make their way from the

scene as well. Even with the city's greatest hero fighting as hard as he could to buy time, it was clear to anyone with eyes to see that in a short time this particular stretch of street was going to be unpleasant to be standing in.

"We should get out of here," said Art, picking himself up from the ground and recovering his backpack. "Now."

Marvin's eyes scanned the area, looking for the Hangman. He finally found him, Marisa still slung over his shoulder, running off towards the east.

"I agree," Marvin said. "Get on." Art climbed up on his back, and Marvin, taking care to stay far enough behind that his objective would not be immediately obvious, began hopping off after the human weapon that had just managed to escape the greatest of the great heroes.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY ONE**

They followed the fleeing Hangman down city streets choked with panicked pedestrians and confused drivers. Police cars and ambulances streamed past them, heading back to the scene where Captain Amazing was, as far as Marvin knew, still struggling to keep the PopFeed building upright. (At least, he hadn't heard the loud crash one would expect to hear when a multi-story building collapsed.)

On any ordinary day the sight of the Kangaroo Man hopping down the city streets would have instantly made him Public Enemy Number One, but today was not an ordinary day. Today he was just one weird sight among many, and not even anywhere close to the weirdest

among them.

Marvin bounced his way through the crowds. They were growing increasingly dense and panicked, which made it easier to tail the Hangman without having to worry about being seen, but harder to move with speed as streams of people choked the streets, blocking traffic. Despite having run the whole way, the Hangman didn't seem to be winded, or even to be breaking a sweat. Marvin was briefly impressed, until he remembered that the Hangman was a genetically engineered demi-god.

Suddenly the Hangman stopped. Marvin stopped too, ducking into an alley to avoid being spotted. The Hangman briefly looked around to see if he was being followed — not doing a very good job of it, Marvin thought, since he didn't appear to spot them — and then reached down to the ground and wrenched something up from it.

“What the heck is that?” Marvin asked.

“It looks like a manhole cover,” said Art.

As they watched, the villain climbed down into the manhole, pulling the cover back over the hole behind him after making his descent. They waited a few minutes to see if he would suddenly pop back up out of it like a superpowered Whack-A-Mole, then muscled their way through the crowd to approach the manhole. They stared at the cover as frightened pedestrians elbowed their way around them.

“It could be a trap,” Art said.

“That seems unlikely, though,” replied Marvin. “He didn’t look like he knew he was being followed. And even if it is a trap, I’m not sure we have a choice as to whether to go in or not. The whole point of this exercise is to find out where he goes, and we’ll never know unless we follow him.”

Art nodded. “And of course we have to save the lady reporter, too,” he noted. Marvin felt himself blush a little under his mask.

Marvin pulled back the manhole cover and stared down into the darkness. There was no sign that the Hangman was waiting for them, so they clambered down the ladder into the sewer below. Art pulled his flashlight from his go bag and used it to illuminate the scene.

It was nothing like Marvin was expecting. Instead of a dank sewer, they found a sleek, modern-looking corridor with walls of brushed steel. The corridor stretched off into the distance.

“This doesn’t look like any sewer I’ve ever seen,” Marvin said.

“I doubt somehow that you spend a lot of time in sewers.”

“You know what I mean.”

They headed off down the corridor in silence, the beam from Art’s flashlight slicing through the darkness. There were no signs or other indications of why this corridor existed or what its purpose was, just long,

gleaming walls of metal. Periodically they would encounter a left or right turn, but more frequently they found themselves climbing down stairs, delving deeper into — well, into *something*.

And then, after one turn more, the corridor abruptly ended. The way forward was blocked by a pair of steel doors, hung flush with the wall. The doors had no handles or knobs, no other obvious mechanisms for opening them. They stood blank and mute.

“So what now?” asked Marvin. “How do we get past here?”

Art was running his hands across the doors’ smooth surface. “There’s always a way to open a door,” he said confidently. “*Always*. Otherwise there would be no point having a door there.”

“I don’t see any.”

“That doesn’t mean there isn’t one there. It could be a pinpoint camera, set to trigger based on biometric

indicators — a fingerprint, an iris. It could be a hidden microphone that actuates when a password is spoken aloud by the right voice. It could be a thermal imager that reacts to body heat. It could be —”

“Hey,” Marvin said, pointing at a button recessed into one of the side walls. “I’ve found it.”

“That can’t be it,” Art protested. “Too simple. A door this sophisticated-looking would never open with the push of a —”

Marvin pushed the button. With a *whoosh* of compressed air, the doors swung open.

“Never mind,” said Art.

The two men stepped through the door and found themselves swallowed in a huge expanse of blackness. The brushed metal walls that had enclosed them wandered off in other directions. Art swung the flashlight beam around, confirming that they were in a vast, open chamber.

“Hello?” Marvin said.

Suddenly, the room was flooded with light so powerful that both men recoiled at its intensity. Spots swam before Marvin as his eyes adjusted. Shielding himself from the light with one hand while still gripping the now-useless flashlight with the other, Art squinted into the middle distance.

Once his eyes had acclimated to the light, Marvin couldn't believe what he was seeing. The room they had wandered into was immense, easily as large as an airplane hangar. The walls and floor were painted a dazzling white; lights hung from the roof and the side walls. Despite all that space, though, it was completely, utterly empty, save for one thing: a desk and chair, located precisely in the middle of the space, the desk adorned with what appeared to be an inexpensive computer.

“Where on Earth are we?” Marvin muttered.

“Wherever it is, it’s deep underground,” Art replied, impressed. “Think of all those stairs we climbed down. A space of this size, under the middle of the city, right where all the utility pipes and subway tunnels run... the expense boggles the mind. Someone spent a lot of money to make this place happen.”

“I don’t get it. Why go to all that expense, and then leave it empty?”

“But it’s *not* empty,” Art pointed out. “There’s a desk.”

“OK, OK, fine. Leave it *mostly* empty then. My point still stands — almost none of this space is actually being used. What’s the point? What’s the purpose?”

Then, from the far end of the chamber, they heard a *whoosh* just like the one they had heard upon entering. Another set of doors, identical to the one they had found, swung open.

And through it walked the Hangman.

Marisa Ryan was still slung over his shoulder. He dumped the woman rudely to the floor. She gave a grunt of pain as she landed. Marvin noticed that her wrists and ankles appeared to be bound, and what looked like duct tape had been fastened over her mouth.

“What’s the purpose, you ask, of this beautiful space?” the Hangman said. “I should think that would be obvious, even to you.”

Marvin tried once more to crank up the imposingness of his voice. “Explain yourself,” he said gruffly.

“Go over to the desk and see for yourself,” the Hangman said. “Don’t worry, I’ll wait.”

Marvin and Art gingerly approached the desk, moving cautiously, as if it might sprout teeth and bite them. It appeared to be a completely normal desk; metal legs supporting a surface the same dazzling white as the walls. The computer on the desk looked unremarkable as well; it was just a plain computer tower, with a flat-screen

monitor next to it that faced away from Marvin and Art and towards the Hangman.

“I’ve started to wonder what the trap is here,” Marvin whispered.

“I’m sure it will present itself soon enough,” Art replied.

But even by the time they were standing right next to the desk, no trap was apparent. Art knelt down to look under the desk, while Marvin walked around it to inspect the computer’s display.

“Nothing unusual down here,” said Art.

“I can’t say the same.”

Art stood up and circled around the desk to see what Marvin was staring at. His eyes followed his costumed colleague’s and found themselves examining the computer’s monitor. On the display, bouncing gaily like a screensaver, was a single glyph: a bold white letter A.

The same bold white letter A that Marvin had seen the night he had been saved in the Flatbottom.

The same bold white letter A that had flashed by them when the PopFeed building had started to fall.

The same bold white letter A that generations of the city's residents knew by heart.

The same bold white letter A that one man had made into a universal symbol of justice.

The bold white letter A that was the icon of Captain Amazing.

Marvin felt his breath catch in his throat.

"It's the Amazingcave," Art said. "We're in the Amazingcave."

"That's right, fellows," the Hangman said. "Glad you could join me here."



## **CHAPTER TWENTY TWO**

Marvin looked to Art in astonishment as he realized the import of what he was hearing.

The Amazingcave was the famous secret laboratory of the city's greatest costumed hero, Captain Amazing. Among other wonders, it was rumored to contain the world's most powerful crime computer — a computer that had cracked dozens of cases that had foiled the world's greatest human investigators. Despite numerous massive searches, nobody had ever even so much as generally established its location, much less actually walked into the place. Its forbidding placelessness was part of its mystique; it was as if Captain Amazing had made his base of operations in an alternate dimension.

And that in turn fed the mystique of Captain Amazing himself.

*But, Marvin thought, there's no way this can be the Amazingcave. The Amazingcave is supposed to be impossible for anyone but Captain Amazing to find, much less enter. It's supposed to be elaborately camouflaged and covered with traps fiendish enough to snare even the most talented and ambitious evildoers. But we just pulled up a manhole and pushed a button, and here we are!*

"I suppose you're wondering," the Hangman said, "how this can be the Amazingcave, since it's supposed to be elaborately camouflaged and covered with traps fiendish enough to snare even the most talented and ambitious evildoers."

"How did you do that?" asked Marvin.

"Do what?" the Hangman said, appearing to be genuinely surprised by Marvin's question.

"Never mind. Go on."

“All right. So, how can this be the Amazingcave, since it’s supposed to be et cetera et cetera. The answer is simple: everything you’ve ever heard about the Amazingcave is wrong.”

“Wrong?” Art asked. Marvin noticed that Art’s free hand was slowly drifting around behind him, towards the spot in the back of his trouser waist where he had stowed the Glock.

“Wrong,” the Hangman confirmed. “Utterly, completely, one hundred percent wrong. There are no traps, and once you know where the entrance is it’s not hard to find at all, as you have discovered. All the stories you’ve heard are just urban legends. Urban legends that Captain Amazing has not taken the trouble to debunk, but urban legends nonetheless.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Marvin objected. “Why would Captain Amazing have a top-secret underground lair that just anybody can waltz up and walk into? Doesn’t that defeat the purpose of having a top-

secret lair in the first place?”

“Not if the stories do the same job that the traps and the camouflage would, which they quite effectively do. People hear the stories and think that if they don’t find traps and camouflage in a place, that place could not possibly be the location of the Amazingcave. So they rule out the actual location, which has none of those things, as the one place where the Amazingcave could not possibly be.

“It’s all actually quite brilliant, you know. Take a minute and think about it; savor it. Let the taste of it roll around on your tongue. I don’t know about you, but I’m impressed.”

“I’m not sure ‘brilliant’ is the word I would choose,” said Marvin. “It seems more reckless than brilliant to me.”

“Perhaps, but you can’t argue with the results, can you? He’s been able to hide out down here for decades, and nobody’s ever been the wiser. Decades! Call me

when you're able to pull off a psy-ops operation for half as long."

Marvin saw Art's fingers curl around the butt of the Glock. *Art just needs a little more time — so, play for time, Marvin, play for time.* "So that," he said, pointing at the utterly normal-looking computer sitting on the utterly normal-looking desk, "is the world's most powerful crime computer?"

"An exaggeration," the Hangman shrugged, "like so much else about this place. As with the other exaggerations, though, it has its purpose. Captain Amazing with the world's most powerful crime computer is a lot more imposing a figure than Captain Amazing without it."

"I didn't realize that you were a dues-paying member of the Captain Amazing fan club," Marvin sniped.

"I admire talent," the Hangman said, "and you have to admit, the man has talent. Almost as much talent as Shadowblade over there, with the John McClane gun draw

he's about to try to pull on me."

"The what?" said Art.

"Come on," the Hangman said, irritated. "Did you think I wouldn't notice your hand going for your gun? Aren't you supposed to be better than that? Doesn't that move seem a bit 'basic cable action movie' to you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Art replied guardedly, his hand resting on the gun.

The Hangman sighed. "Don't play dumb, Shadowblade. Even if I didn't see you going for the gun, what could you possibly think you could do with it? Have you forgotten how I dodged your bullets? And you must know that if you tried it, my vengeance would be terrible. I mean, you must have heard about how I *punched out a building* a little while ago, didn't you?"

"I don't care about your vengeance."

"So brave! Well, *you* might not care about it. But the

lady might,” the Hangman said, gesturing towards Marisa. “You may feel like you signed up for this, but I’m sure that she does not.”

Art hesitated a moment. “There’s no need to hurt her. She’s an innocent bystander. She was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Indeed!” the Hangman said. “Indeed she was! Which is why I would happily hurt her if you try to make a move. I’m a villain, remember? A bad guy. Hurting innocent people is kind of what I do.”

From the edge of his vision, Marvin saw Art move his hand away from the gun. “All right, all right,” Art said. “You win.”

“Oh well,” the Hangman said, disappointed. “I was really hoping you’d give me a reason to hurt her. When you have a talent, you find yourself looking for reasons to put it to use. Sometimes the world cooperates, sometimes it does not.”

Marvin felt frustration boil up within him. “Enough about us,” he spat. “How about you? How did *you* find Captain Amazing’s secret hiding place?”

“He didn’t,” said another figure walking through the far doors that the Hangman had entered through earlier. It approached them with a long, confident stride.

Marvin couldn’t believe what he was seeing. The figure was tall and muscular, clad in blue body armor with a bold red cape trailing behind him. The body armor had a stark white “A” emblazoned across its chest.

It was Captain Amazing himself.

“Find it, that is,” the legendary hero said. “He didn’t find it. I gave him directions.”

Marvin’s inability to believe his eyes was only slightly surpassed by his inability to believe his ears. “You *what?*” he sputtered, confused.

“I invited him. It would hardly have been polite not

to. How are we supposed to work together if we can't find each other?"

Marvin, gobsmacked, turned to look at Art, who looked every bit as gobsmacked as he felt.

"Work together," he eventually managed to blurt. "You and this villain are... *working together.*"

Captain Amazing sat down in the room's only chair. "That's right," he confirmed. "It's a business partnership, you might say. A mutually beneficial business partnership. So far it's been a fruitful one."

"Meaning what?" Marvin asked.

"Meaning that I'm the only costumed hero left in this city. And until recently, there were zero costumed villains. Zero! A city without costumed villains doesn't have much use for a costumed hero, does it?"

"Not really," the Hangman chimed in.

“Not really,” echoed Captain Amazing. “It made for a pretty boring life, frankly. A costumed hero without an arch-enemy is like a day without sunshine. Without one, you get to feeling a bit beside the point. A bit... well, I don’t want to be overly dramatic, but a bit useless.”

“Obsolete,” offered the Hangman.

“Exactly. Not to mention how unappreciative a city gets to its one remaining costumed hero when there’s no costumed villains threatening it anymore. After a few years it’s like you never existed at all. How soon people forget!”

“It’s shameful,” sympathized the Hangman.

“Positively shameful.”

“At first I thought I could stay relevant just by keeping the name of BlaME in the public eye. So I started sending the President postcards from upstate New York — with various media outlets cc’ed, of course.”

“So you’re the one who’s been sending the postcards

all these years?” asked Marvin.

“Of course. And my powers made it easy for me to get the postcards into the post office in Utica without anyone knowing it was me. The benefit of being the world’s greatest superhero, you see.

“But I soon discovered that I had miscalculated. The postcards, by themselves, would never be enough. They would get people talking about BlaME again, but only for a single news cycle. Then, inevitably, their attention would drift to other things. Empty-headed actresses having wardrobe malfunctions and the like.”

“It’s tragic,” tsk-tsked the Hangman. “Just tragic. We’ve raised an attention-deficit generation.”

“Precisely. And even worse, after a few years the novelty of the postcards had worn off, so they were commanding less and less attention every year. I realized that I had fallen into a bit of a rut. I needed something bigger, something bolder; something that would seize the public’s attention and not let it go. A game-changer, as

they say.

“So I went back through my old records and found the one about BlaME doing genetic engineering experiments just before they went under. I did a little detective work and found my friend here. He was born in a BlaME laboratory, but after BlaME collapsed he went back to school and eventually became a very talented florist. I’m serious! You should see what he can do with begonias sometime. It’s positively breathtaking. You will never look at begonias the same way again.”

“You flatter me, boss.”

“Not at all,” Captain Amazing said, lighting a cigarette from a pack he had taken from a drawer in the desk. “Anyway, we talked and I persuaded him to join me in a little collaborative enterprise. Together he and I would reconstitute BlaME, not just in postal form, but for real. We’d even hire a few flunkies to give our announcements and threats some heft. Two of which —” and here he nodded towards Art — “you managed to turn into little flunky chunklets with that little booby-trap you

set up in your condo. Claymore mines! A little on the overkill side for my tastes, but who am I to judge? I do so wish you hadn't killed those two, though. It's so hard to find good henchmen these days."

"My heart bleeds," said Art.

"So we'd send the henchmen out to commit some petty crimes to get people warmed up to the idea that BlaME was back, and then periodically the Hangman would leap out of the shadows and use his powers to put a good old-fashioned scare into the city. At which point, of course, I would swoop in and quote-unquote 'defeat' him. Then cue parades for me, keys to the city, and so forth, all of which are very pleasant things to receive. And I'd be sure to let him escape each time with part of the loot he'd managed to scoop up, so after a few years he would have quite the little nest egg with which to expand his floral shop.

"It was all very neat and tidy, if I do say so myself. Until you showed up, of course."

“Until I showed up,” Marvin repeated dumbly.

“Oh, yes,” Captain Amazing continued. “Having a *second* costumed hero running around the city would have been highly inconvenient. You might accidentally receive some of the appreciation that really belongs to me, you see. And you might even run into my colleague here and try to fight him for real! It was unlikely that in such an event you’d actually be able to *beat* him, of course, but I didn’t get to where I am in life by running unnecessary risks.

“So you had to go. I tried everything I could think of to get you off the scene. I tried convincing you that costumed heroics was a dead-end career. I tried getting you to doubt your own abilities. I even tried putting you in touch with a sad old drunk who I knew would fill your ears with stories of failure and dissolution.”

“Ace,” Marvin said sadly.

“My hope was that you’d look into his defeated, booze-sotted, gin-blossomed face, see your own future

there, and turn away in horror. But that didn't work either.  
”

“But you didn't introduce me to Ace,” Marvin said.  
“That was Kitteridge. J. Charlton Kitteridge. The talent agent.”

“Oh, Marvin,” Captain Amazing said. “You really are so terribly, terribly slow on the uptake. It's almost comic, really.”

“Haven't you realized yet what my secret identity is?”

And then Captain Amazing removed his mask. And Marvin recoiled as the face of J. Charlton Kitteridge looked back at him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

*"You're Captain Amazing?"* Marvin blurted.

"Nothing gets by you, champ," snarked the Hangman.

"Now, now," Kitteridge chided his villainous sidekick. "There's no need for sarcasm."

"Sorry, boss."

"Yes, Marvin," Kitteridge said, turning back to him, "I am Captain Amazing. Always have been."

"You couldn't be," Art said. "You've been floating

around the edges of the empowered community for as long as I can remember. You booked talent for both sides!”

“I did,” Kitteridge said. “It was actually very convenient: J. Charlton Kitteridge could find new talent for BlaME and other villainous organizations, and then Captain Amazing could save the city from those very same new talents. I had invented a criminal perpetual motion machine! It was a great way to build up a reputation as a crimefighter. Of course, getting to keep Kitteridge’s ten percent was nice as well.”

“Playing all the angles,” Art grumbled.

“I’m a businessman,” Kitteridge said, smiling. “I wouldn’t be a very good one if I left angles gratuitously unplayed.”

“Enough of this,” said Marvin, anger flashing. “What’s your endgame? You’ve got all of us here, what now?”

Kitteridge's smile turned into a disappointed frown. "I'd hoped that I could put you off my scent without having to kill you," he explained, "but that hope was quite thoroughly dashed some time ago. So now both of you have to die, along with Ms. Ryan here."

"Mmrfh! Rrrmfh!" Marisa protested through the duct tape.

"Her death will be the most tragic one, of course," Kitteridge said, "since her only mistake was trusting me to be a source for her original story about you, thus giving me the opportunity to skew it beyond all recognition, and then being willing to play along with your little gambit of leaking Mr. Bergendorf's secret list to her.

"Now that we've had this conversation, of course, I can see the list poses no threat to me, since if my name was on it Mr. Bergendorf would have known that I was not just a neutral talent agent. But I didn't know that at the time, and again, unnecessary risks, et cetera."

“So if she’s no threat to you, let her go,” Marvin said.

“Don’t be silly. I can’t very well let her go now, after she’s overheard me laying out my entire plan to you. It would be madness to let her leave this room with that information. Once the three of you are dealt with, the Hangman and I can go back to our original plan and squeeze some appreciation out of this stone-hearted city. But if any one of you were to leave alive... I assume you can follow that line of thought to its logical conclusion.”

“You’re a bastard,” Marvin growled.

“Perhaps!” Kitteridge said brightly. “But bastards have a habit of winning in the end, Marvin. And I plan to win in the —”

Kitteridge was interrupted by a dull thud echoing from a distance. It sounded like it came from the hallway Art and Marvin had entered through.

“What was that?” asked the Hangman.

“I don’t know,” Kitteridge said. “We should be alone in here. And there’s nothing out there that should make any noise, much less loud ones like that.”

“Maybe I should go check it out?” said the Hangman tentatively.

“Yes, that’s a good idea. Go give it a look. I’ll keep an eye on our guests.”

The Hangman dashed off through the doors and vanished down the hallway.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Kitteridge continued, “but better safe than sorry. Now —”

Suddenly another thud rattled in the distance, this one closer and louder. Then another one, closer and louder than the last. Then another one, closer and louder still. Then another thud, this one so loud that the room itself shook. Kitteridge’s chair skittered across the floor; his desk swayed. His computer monitor tumbled.

And then, with a thud so loud Marvin thought his eardrums would burst, the Hangman came flying back through the doors through which he had left, his limp form smashing into the desk.

As if struck by lightning, Kitteridge stood up from his chair. Anger gleamed in his eyes as he fixed them on the doors. He planted his feet, bracing himself as if a freight train was about to come rumbling in from the corridor.

Something did come rumbling through. It wasn't a freight train, though, but a group of people. A group of *old* people. Old people with a determined look in their eyes.

Marvin scanned their faces, looking desperately for one he would recognize. He found none, until one of the people elbowed his way out from the center of the group to its front. It was a man, disheveled and paunchy, with a face that was both familiar and yet somehow now lit up with a strange, unfamiliar aura of leadership.

It was Ace!

“Time’s up, Kitteridge,” Ace said.

“Yes — for you,” Kitteridge shot back. “You’re supposed to be dead already.”

“Your buddy there cut a few corners when he came to put my lights out,” said Ace. “Got lazy. Didn’t make sure they actually found a body in the ashes of my office. You owe me for my cleaning expenses, by the way.”

“And who are these people?” Kitteridge asked, sneering contemptuously. “Did you rent out a senior living center to be your posse?”

“Not quite,” Ace replied. “You actually know these people, Kitteridge. You even helped some of them find jobs, back in the day. They’re all retired now, of course, but when I explained what was going on they were more than happy to put on their work boots one more time.

“What do you say, folks? Would you mind re-introducing yourselves to Mr. Kitteridge?” And one by

one, the members of Ace's group stepped forward to do so.

"I'm Thunderclap," said one, whose hands seemed to thrum with audible power.

"Furricane," said another. "Today's forecast calls for pain."

"Sally Supernova here," a woman said, her forearms glowing red.

Another man suddenly sprouted six extra arms. "Octopete, at your service."

"And I'm Cosmic Ray," said an older black man in dark glasses.

"See, Kitteridge?" Ace smiled. "I got the band back together."

Dark clouds of fury passed across Kitteridge's face. "This isn't a retirement village, people," he growled,

muscles flexing under his iconic body armor, his voice ringing with the same commanding tone Marvin remembered from his night in the Flatbottom. “This is the real deal. How long has it been since any of you had a costume on? Since any of you were in a good fight?”

“I remember you all from the old days. I respect you. I don’t want to hurt you. So please, don’t make me. Turn around, walk back out that door. Walk out and never come back.”

Marvin knew very well how tempting it was to follow that commanding tone, to let it tell you what to do. It was seductive to surrender, turn your will over to it. So he was surprised to see none of Ace’s friends even flinch.

“Don’t pull your bullshit mind tricks on us, Cap,” said Octopete, arms wriggling. “We all saw you use them on villains in the old days. They only work if you don’t know they’re there.”

“Oh, very well,” Kitteridge said. “I suppose I will just have to kill you all, then.” And with that he leapt forward

at Ace, fists raised.

Suddenly the room exploded into a furious crescendo of action. Cosmic Ray took off his glasses, and energy beams crackled from eyes across the room. Sally Supernova burst into flames and took off flying. Furicane snapped his fingers and a lightning bolt appeared in his other hand. Ace, lacking any powers, dropped and rolled to one side to avoid Kitteridge's flying punch, drawing a gun when he came back up again.

Marvin tried to follow the fight, but the combatants began moving too fast; it all became a blur, a wall of light and sound. He felt disappointed in his comparative weakness, his simple powers of kicking and jumping. They seemed so trivial compared to the astonishing display unfolding before him. He felt like a talented high school baseball player who'd just walked into Yankee Stadium for the first time.

Then he looked back to the other end of the room, and realized there was still one way in which he could contribute to the fight. Marisa Ryan was lying there on

the floor, still bound and gagged, but forgotten by Kitteridge in the heat of battle. He could take advantage of Kitteridge's distraction to free her.

He hopped across the room, away from the fight and over to her. A blur flew past his head as he crossed the room, smashing into the far wall with a thud; it was Furicane. The old man picked himself up, dusted himself off and threw himself back into the fray without so much as a word.

Marvin reached Marisa. "Don't worry," he said. "I'm going to untie you."

"Trfff yrfff," she said.

He quickly undid the knots that held her hands and feet together, and then tore off the duct tape that covered her mouth.

"Thank you, is what I meant," she said.

"No problem," he replied as a blast of ionized energy

from Cosmic Ray's eyes sizzled over his shoulder. "You should probably get out of here while you can. This place is getting seriously dangerous."

"Are you kidding?" she said, smiling as a stray bullet from Ace's gun zinged across the room. "This is the best story I've come across in years! It'll get me out of the cat-picture-slideshow leagues forever. I'm not leaving unless they drag me out with a tag on my toe."

"Be careful what you wish for," Marvin said as a blast of fire from Sally Supernova scorched the floor at their feet.

Art, who had been watching the fight with a sort of bemused fascination, strolled over to join the two of them. "This is quite the show," he said as one of Octopete's arms reached past him to grab the unconscious body of the Hangman and hurl it at Kitteridge. "I haven't seen anything like this since the old days."

"I don't think anybody has," Marvin said. "It's a good

old-fashioned superpower brawl. No holds barred.”

“Shouldn’t you be in there mixing it up, K?” Marisa asked. “You being a costumed hero as well, I mean.”

“I’m honestly not sure. In theory, absolutely. But I see the powers these geezers are uncorking, and I feel like mine are a little... underdeveloped, by comparison. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m glad I have them. But kicking and jumping seem pretty pathetic next to bursting into flame or controlling the weather.”

“Powers are powers,” Art said as an Amazarang flew past. “Sure, these heroes’ powers look impressive. But they’ve had a lot more time and support to develop their powers than you have. With the same training you could probably do just as well, if not better.”

“Exactly,” Marisa agreed just before Thunderclap smacked his hands together and the room rocked with another ear-splitting thud. “And besides, how many chances are you going to get a chance to mix it up like this, in a real costumed hero furball? In a world where

costumed bad guys are few and far between, not many, I'd bet. If you skip this one now, you'll regret it later."

"I suppose you're right," Marvin agreed. "It would be an awful shame to miss the chance to work with so many of the greats."

"So get started," Art said, pointing at Kitteridge. "His back is turned to us. That looks like an opening to me."

"Me too," said Marvin. "Excuse me for a moment, won't you?"

"Of course," Marisa said.

"Break a leg," said Art.

Marvin coiled the muscles in his thighs tighter than he had ever coiled them before. He'd only get one chance at this, he knew; he had to hit, and hit hard. His knees bent slightly as he braced himself for a jump; his muscles hummed in his ears.

*Now!* He thought. He released the tension on his leg muscles, and suddenly he was springing upward, outward, flying towards Kitteridge's back. He remembered all the practice kicks he had made, going all the way back to the day he first discovered his powers, and used those memories to fine-tune his form as he sailed through the air, legs swinging into kicking positions, his whole body ready for impact. He felt sure, powerful, like a finely-tuned machine. He felt more free than he had ever felt in his life. It was as if his every experience, every moment since discovering his powers for the first time had been training him for this, for this one, critical moment; for now.

He flew towards Kitteridge's back, and then — and then —

And then Kitteridge stepped to his right. Marvin flew harmlessly past him. His head hit the floor, hard. The last thing he saw was Kitteridge's feet before he blacked out.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

The first thing Marvin saw after he came to was also Kitteridge's feet.

This time, though, the feet weren't moving. They were lying still on the ground, out cold, as was the rest of the armor-suited agent; his limbs were tied up with his own Amazarangs.

As he stared at the fallen villain's booted feet, it slowly dawned on him that his head felt like it had been hit by a wrecking ball. His mind fumbled to piece together what had happened before everything had gone black. *Oh, that's right*, he thought, rubbing his aching head, *I tried to jump into a fight between people with real*

*powers and ended up screwing everything up. Just like I always do. This is starting to get a little old.*

Just as it occurred to him to wonder how Kitteridge had been knocked out despite his epic screw-up, Marisa noticed that he had awoken. “Look who’s back in the land of the living!” she said, clapping her hands.

“Very funny,” Marvin replied.

He looked around in an attempt to get his bearings. He was still in the vast, gleaming, empty Amazingcave. Marisa was there, and Art. Ace and his friends were still there, too.

“You,” Marvin said to Ace, “were supposed to be dead.”

“So they tell me,” Ace said with a grin. “What the hell, I never was any good at following directions. Guess this just confirms it.”

“So what did I miss?” Marvin said. “What happened?”

“We won,” Art said.

“Thanks to you, kid,” Ace added.

“Thanks to me? All I did was conk my head on the floor!”

“True,” Sally Supernova said, “but Cap didn’t expect that you would join the fight. Like, at all. When you jumped at him, he had to side-step to avoid your kick. And that threw off his timing just enough for Pete to get a couple of arms around him.”

Octopete smiled, wiggling his eight arms joyously. “A couple is all it takes.”

“Once Pete had him tied down, his mobility was cut down enough for the rest of us to get our licks in,” Sally continued. “At that point, it was all over but the shouting.”

“I’m glad I could help,” Marvin said, picking himself

up off the floor. "Even if only as a distraction."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Cosmic Ray told him. "You're new at this. It took me plenty of time before I had mastered my powers enough to do anything useful. That's just how it works."

"Ray's right," Sally said. "It was ages before I could do anything with my powers other than boil water. You'll get there."

"What about all of you?" Marvin asked. "You were all very impressive. Are you coming out of retirement for good? The city could sure use you."

"Oh, no," Furicane said. "We only came out here because Ace convinced us that the threat of Cap going bad was a once-in-a-lifetime crisis. Now that it's taken care of, I'm looking forward to getting back to my shuffleboard."

"I have a hard time picturing you playing shuffleboard," Marvin said.

“When you can control the weather, you spend a lot of time on cruises,” Furicane chuckled. “Not much to do other than play shuffleboard and spin up beautiful, cloudless days.”

“Costumed adventuring is a young man’s game,” agreed Cosmic Ray.

“Young *person’s* game,” Sally chimed in.

“Sorry. A young person’s game. People like you, Kangaroo.”

“I don’t know. I don’t really feel like a hero.”

“Nobody ever does, kid,” said Ace. “Nobody ever does.”

“I suppose we could help you with that,” Thunderclap said. “Train you a little, show you the ropes. Help you get up to speed on the ins and outs of costumed heroics.”

“It would only be fair,” Octopete agreed. “We all had mentors when we were just starting out. I don’t know how I would ever have survived without the things I learned from mine. And we could help you look for other gifted people as well — people who could make good heroes themselves.”

“If they exist,” said Marvin.

“If they exist, sure,” said Octopete. “But you exist, right? It seems unlikely that you’d be the only one.”

“So how about it, K?” Marisa asked. “Give me an upbeat ending for my story, tell me that you’re going to keep at this hero thing.”

“But I’m a terrible hero. Terrible.”

“You’re all right,” she said, smiling.

“All right enough for you to let me buy you a drink sometime?”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” she replied. Sally giggled.

“I’m not even sure the city needs a hero anymore,” Marvin said. “Blame is gone, Captain Amazing and the Hangman are out of commission, there’s no other costumed villains running around threatening the public. Seems like it might be a good time for costumed heroes to disappear too.”

“People always need heroes, kid,” said Ace. “They don’t know it a lot of the time, of course. But they do.”

“Not to mention that you seemed to be having fun,” Art added.

“There is that, yeah.”

“Gotta lose the pouch, though,” said Furicane. “Only female kangaroos have pouches. I can’t believe you don’t know that.”

“It’s not a pouch. It’s a *tactical pocket*,” Marvin said,

reflexively.

“And you need a sidekick,” Thunderclap said. “Every great hero has a sidekick.”

“How am I supposed to find a sidekick? People with powers are sort of thin on the ground these days.”

“A sidekick doesn’t have to have powers just because you do. They can just be a normal person who’s smart and dedicated. Train them with guns and kung fu, they’ll be fine.”

“Hmm,” Marvin mused. “DeAndre might make a good sidekick. If he’s willing to take a pay cut, that is.”

“He seems like a smart kid,” agreed Marisa. “Ask him, you never know.”

“All right, all right,” said Marvin. “You win, all of you. I’ll keep at this hero thing. For now, anyway.”

“For now?” asked Art.

“Yeah. I mean, it’s not like I have anything better to do.”

“That’s the spirit, kid,” Ace said with a wide grin.  
“That’s the spirit.”

“But there’s one thing I still don’t really understand. Every costumed hero is supposed to have a thrilling origin story. But I just woke up one day and discovered that I could jump really high. That’s not the sort of origin story that people will ooh and ahhh over.”

“Who says your origin has to be your origin story, kid?” Ace asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that you didn’t become a hero when you first discovered your powers. That’s when you became a freak, a deviant. A schlub with a power is still just a schlub.”

“I’m with you so far,” Marvin said.

“You become a hero when you choose to use those powers for good,” Ace continued. “Use them to help others, even at personal risk to yourself. That decision is what makes you a hero. Nothing else.

“And that’s a decision you didn’t really make until today. Until right here, when you threw in with the rest of us in trying to stop Kitteridge. That’s when you came in off the sidelines and became a real honest-to-gosh hero.”

“So does that make today the Day of the Kangaroo Man?” Marvin asked.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

THE END