

THE LAST WHITE
SUPERHEROES

Obie

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Obie

[Christian Identity Australia](#)

For white people everywhere.

*Sing me a song of a lad that is gone,
Say, could that lad be I?
Merry of soul he sailed on a day
Over the sea to Skye.*

*Mull was astern, Rum on the port,
Eigg on the starboard bow,
Glory of youth glowed in his soul,
Where is that glory now?*

*Give me again all that was there,
Give me the sun that shone!
Give me the eyes, give me the soul,
Give me the lad that's gone!*

*Billow and breeze, islands and seas,
Mountains of rain and sun,
All that was good, all that was fair,
All that was me is gone.*

—Robert Louis Stevenson

PART ONE

The Last Ride

CHAPTER 1

The train shook and clattered as it hastened out of a long curve. The 12:15 to Sidibule was the last train for the night. Railway employees had nicknamed it the last ride because many a passenger had been knifed, shot, bludgeoned, or raped to death during the perilous journey. Drivers wore Kevlar vests and sat in bulletproof cabins, with a small armory to protect them from the savage hordes on and off the train. And when their shifts were over, they had to be evacuated from Sidibule Station in an armored extraction vehicle that looked like a bank vault with tractor wheels. Only criminal gangs, the insane, and the suicidal rode on the 12:15.

On this night, the night that would mark the beginning of the end, there were just four passengers on the train. Three were black youths prowling the carriages for loose change, jewelry, cell phones, intact corpses, anything of value they could trade for cash or drugs. They'd been through every carriage bar the last.

"Shit, man, ain't nothin' here," the third youth said.

"We got a gun," the second youth said. "Let's go hold up a 7-Eleven."

The first youth slid open the door to the last carriage. "They got armed security guards. They'll shoot your ass dead, nigger." He took two steps inside the carriage and halted. He gestured for the others to shush, then pointed to a head of long, golden hair poking above a seat two thirds of the way down the carriage.

The three of them swapped predatory grins.

They swaggered toward the tiny passenger.

The bells on a pair of crossing boom gates shrilled, as if urging them to turn tail and run, but the primal siren call of their blood drowned it out.

The passenger was a seven-year-old white girl in a frilly white dress and glittering pink slippers. Something dangled from the neck of the dress. A price tag.

The first and third youths stood before her, failing to catch a knowing grin that dashed off her face the instant she set eyes on them. The second youth knelt on the seat behind her, so close she could feel his humid breath on her head. She glared up at the others. They towered over her like giant misshapen humanoids. It was as if Satan had sneaked a peek at God's design drawings for man, then jerry-built his own version to preempt Adam's creation. Only his creative ability wasn't up to snuff. Gone was the incandescent, elegantly proportioned beauty of God's design and in its place was a brutish, discolored mockery.

"Where's your mama and papa," the first youth asked.

In a soft snarl the girl said, "They're dead."

"How come?" the first youth said, snickering.

"They were murdered."

The first youth chuckled. "Murdered? Who murdered your mama and papa, little girl?"

A piercing light flashed in her twinkling blue eyes, like the initial microsecond of a nuclear explosion caught on a high-speed camera. "NNNNNNNIGGERS!"

The youths' eyes mimicked squeezed boiled eggs, and their black angular faces twisted into cartoonish grimaces. The second youth leaned over her so she'd get a good look at the histrionic umbrage on his face. "You don't call us niggers, beeyotch!"

Without casting him a glance, she thrust a hand upward, seizing him by the neck. He made an *urk* sound and blood squirted out of his mouth. The others backed away in a big hurry. Her gaze didn't leave them as she hoisted the second youth up, swung him slowly back, and

pitched him at the steel-reinforced wall at the rear of the carriage. If he'd been composed of stronger stuff than skin and bone, he would have gone through it. Instead, he came to a reverberating stop, his skull compacting in a spray of blood and brain, and his spine shattering into almost as many pieces as there had been hairs on his obliterated head. What was left of him hit the floor with a splat.

The third youth hollered in terror, stamping on the spot, as if he were trying to pound a hole in the floor, through which he could escape the fearsome little girl. The first youth whipped out a Glock and pointed it at her. It jiggled in his trembling hands.

The girl floated up till her glittering pink slippers dangled above her seat. Fire wrapped around her with a troubling *voomp*, forming a blinding coat of armor ablaze with fantastical colors that looked as if they belonged to the light spectrum of another universe.

Eyes shut to avoid the terrible glare, the first youth squeezed off every round in the Glock. None hit their mark. Not because they missed, but because they vanished, devoured by some unseen thing with a ravenous hunger for scorching lead.

He threw the Glock at her. It vaporized into a wisp of steam just inches from her.

She aimed her index finger at him. A lance of concentrated flame brighter than a magnesium flare whooshed out from it and struck his crotch. He shrieked in agony. The unearthly heat headed north, blasting away his flesh and bone to a sound mix of sizzling meat and a cracking bullwhip. Carbonized negro showered the immediate area. By the time his transverse colon had been split in two, he was dead, but the sheer force of the flame kept him on his feet and shook him like a marionette whose puppeteer was suffering a violent seizure. When the fire reached the top of his skull, his left side and his right side went their separate ways. The left bounced off the plastic edge of a seat, losing much of its half a brain and all of its half a chin, and landed half-a-face-down on the floor, while the right smacked down near the base of the seat on which the shivering third youth was

huddled. The first youth's milky right eye stared mindlessly up at him. But not so the charred slit the right side had for a mouth. That grinned at him with ghastly cognizance as if to say "You're next, nigger!"

The third youth scrambled for the door to the next carriage. He needed desperately to scream, but all he could get out of his mouth was a series of breathless grunts. He sounded like a debarked dog warning off a mailman.

Terror stuck its foot out and tripped him up. He fell, then whirled into a sitting position and scudded the floor with his heels, shuffling in reverse until his back was hard against the door.

The girl descended to the floor and began rocking to and fro, hands curled up under her arms, in an exaggerated apish motion. "Eee, eee, eee," she said. "You're like a monkey. A big, big monkey." She stalked toward him. Evanescent contrails of flame followed her.

Although his mind had abandoned him, the third youth still had enough survival instinct to push himself upright and reach for the door handle. But when he found it he didn't know what to do with it except smack it effefully.

The girl stopped in front of him. She floated up so they were face to face. His eyes pinched shut to spare him the discomfort of her blinding countenance.

He whimpered.

He shuddered.

He wet his baggy trousers.

The fire enveloping the girl disappeared. "Look at me. I said *look* at me."

Her the tone of her voice impelled him to ease one eye open, then the other.

"I'm not gonna . . . I'm not *going to* hurt you," she said. "That's 'cause I want you to give a message. To all the other niggers. Tell them to go home, or I'll burn them all up. And you give them this." She held out a sheet of paper to him. He glanced at it, cluelessly.

Frustrated, she placed it right in front of his face. MISSY was written on it in pink crayon. Below that was a crudely drawn skull and crossbones, also in pink crayon. “I said give them this,” she growled. She grabbed his hand impatiently and slapped the sheet in it.

xx xy xx

There was no footage of the carnage that had taken place on the train, because the security camera in the last carriage had been smashed to pieces the previous night by a baseball bat armed with a crazed ice addict, but the security camera on St. Albert Station, one of a modest number of railway stations whose Anglo-Saxon names had by some miracle survived the latest Diversity Initiative purge, showed a beautiful seven-year-old white girl skipping off the train, stopping to pick up a soda can some thoughtless person had left on the platform, depositing it in a trash receptacle, and then skipping out of frame.

CHAPTER 2

Please, dear Lord, don't let my folks hear about this. Please.

Charles must have prayed the same prayer a hundred times. Should his parents get wind of this event, he'd never hear the end of it, and he could only imagine what Isabel was going to think. Nothing good would come from this. Charles knew that as sure as he knew that the glory days of being a superhero ended with Ramsgate, though Brett said they ended long before that, and Brett was almost always right. So why was he going through with it? Even he didn't know for certain. Maybe he was doing it just to maintain the delusion that nothing had really changed, not to the extent that people like Brett insisted things had.

People like Brett?

Surely there couldn't be more than one.

Charles sighed heavily. He just wanted to get this over and done with.

Green walked onto the stage of the art deco theater. The podgy 50-year-old CEO had a face Arachnoman described as a kiddie fiddler's mugshot. He stood behind a mic'd lectern and looked out on a contingent of media occupying the front rows. "Good afternoon, ladies and gentleman. Thank you all for coming. The Rapallo is a cinema renowned for its stylish architecture. It's fitting that we're holding this press conference here, because Golden Masque Studios will shortly commence production on a movie about a man who, like this cinema, will never go out of style."

The "kiddie fiddler" turned Charles' way and grinned. Charles had a mental flash of a fox trotting out of a battery chicken shed, licking its blood-smeared chops.

“As it so happens,” Green continued, “that man is with us today. Here he is, the person formerly known as Paragon, now known as . . . Charles Marshall!”

Charles entered from stage right to the sound of Green’s battery-chicken-shed grin. He wore a crisp gray business suit and an obligatory smile. His cape, leotards, and black patent leather boots were keeping company with mothballs. He shook Green’s hand. It felt like a damp rubber glove filled with Jell-O. Then he stood by a chair. One of two onstage.

Green returned his attention to the silent, largely inanimate media. “Searching for someone to portray this man was no small task. We auditioned over 2000 actors, but only one truly fit the bill. He had—and has—everything we were looking for. He is a man who captures the essence of the man, the *superman*, that is Charles Marshall. So without further ado, Golden Masque Studios is proud to present the star of *Paragon the Movie*, Ibrahim Surkati!”

Please, dear Lord, don’t let my folks hear about this.

A victory fanfare blared. Two white men in Roman soldier costumes, lips pressed against the mouthpieces of Roman fanfare trumpets, marched into view from stage left. They heralded the arrival of Ibrahim, a licorice-black Sudanese in a platinum Marie Antoinette wig and a red satin evening gown, lounging on a pink velvet bed carried on poles by four buff, topless white men in Egyptian shendys. Charles was too busy struggling to keep his obligatory smile to note the absurd hodgepodge of historical fashions. The media applauded the baby-oiled spectacle.

“Set me down, girls,” Ibrahim said. His manservants dutifully obeyed. “That’s it, nice and easy. Watch the wig now. Thanks ever so.” He stood and looked an extra-buff manservant up and down. “What a big one.”

Charles hard-blinked away the urge to decry the progressive casting choice, just as he did three weeks ago when he learned he was

to undergo a dramatic makeover courtesy of Hollywood's race reassignment surgeons.

Ibrahim straightened his wig and sashayed across to Charles. Gazing up, he cocked his head vampishly, then said, "Tell me about it, stud."

It was all Charles could do not to recoil in disgust. He offered Ibrahim his hand—reluctantly. Ibrahim took it, raised it over his wig, and twirled beneath it like a female dance partner.

"Gentlemen," a manifestly delighted Green said, "if you'd kindly take your seats."

Ibrahim swished into his, crossing his waxed, ebony legs ostentatiously so the cameras would get the ideal shot of them through the splits in his gown. He winced in pleasure. "Ooh, that butt plug hits the spot." He leaned close to Charles and whispered, "Ribbed is best."

Charles seriously considered leaving the art-deco treasure via a hole in its roof. One of his making.

"Ibrahim—" Green began.

"My friends call me Boadicea."

"They do?" Green said, unsure whether Ibrahim was joking. "Why do they call you Boadicea?"

Ibrahim faced the audience. "Because I'm big, beautiful, and butch." He emphasized *butch* by placing a hand on his hip and shimmying his chest like a black diva strutting her stuff in a music video. The media laughed and clapped with gusto.

"Fair enough," Green said. "Tell me, what attracted you to this part, *Boadicea*?"

"Six-foot-seven inches of steel-hard beef, baby!" Ibrahim squealed. He eyeballed Charles. "Just look at this blue-eyed, blond-haired hunk of burning love. Who wouldn't wanna get inside that? Theatrically speaking, I mean." He looked at the media with feigned hubris, as if responding to a scurrilous statement one of them had made about him, and in an affected Southern accent said, "C'mon now, honey child."

Green focused on Charles with relish. Charles knew what was coming. He just knew it. “Charles, what was your reaction when you heard that Ibrahim was to play you in a biopic?”

Charles took a fortifying breath and said, “Stunned. Stunned that somebody like him, somebody so full of . . . joie de vivre, would see fit to take on the role.”

Ibrahim very nearly swooned at the endorsement. He fanned air onto his face, as if he were Scarlett O’Hara fending off the oppressive heat at a southern garden party.

“And how did you feel, Boadicea,” Green asked, “when you learned you’d got this plum role?”

“I came . . . close to passing out. To know that I was gonna play Chuck was almost too big a thrill for a girl to bear.” He placed his hand on Charles’. “I hope you don’t mind me calling you Chuck. I’ve got a Shih Tzu called Chuck.”

“That’s fine,” Charles said numbly.

“Excellent,” Green said. “All right, we’ll open the floor now to questions from the media.”

A female assistant handed a microphone to an Asian woman in her twenties who was standing. “Sandra Chan from *The Cosmopolis Daily*. A question for Charles. What do you think of Lucy Beckinsale, aka Bia, becoming an ambassador for the Swan Song campaign?”

“*Temporary* ambassador,” Green said. He gazed pointedly at Charles. “Charles?”

The buoyance in Green’s voice when he said *temporary* didn’t go unnoticed by Charles. “What do I think? I think whatever Lucy chooses to do with her life is her business and no one else’s.”

That was a lie. He didn’t think that at all.

“Is there a reason why you haven’t openly supported the campaign?”

“Now, now,” Green chimed in, “you know full well that Charles is invulnerable. There isn’t a hospital in the world that could perform the vasectomy.” He gave Charles another vulpine grin.

Arachnoman had an unrepeatable word for people like Green. It rhymed with *bike*.

xx xy xx

When Green finally brought the curtain down on question time a compressed eternity later, Charles' conscience was balled up in a fetal position on the stage floor. There was only so much kowtowing and equivocating it could take. Charles' father, who wasn't in the best of health, would pass from this world to the next if he heard about the many falsehoods that had waltzed from his lips.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen," Green said, "that just about wraps up everything here." He snuck Charles a condescending wink. "Just about. But before Charles and Boadicea take their leave, we might get them to strike a pose or two for the cameras."

"Love it!" Ibrahim said with a let's-go clap of his hands.

Charles got to his feet, an agonized grimace hidden behind his obligatory smile. In a millisecond, black arms were locked around white waist. Affixed to Charles' broad chest, Ibrahim gazed dreamily up at him and whispered, "I wanna gargle your grapefruits."

Cameras flashed nonstop. Tomorrow, every print and online newspaper would carry photos of the world's most powerful man sharing a tender moment with its gayest.

Can it get any worse? Charles thought. In answer to his question, Ibrahim stood on tippy toes and frenched his cheek with Sudanese tongue.

xx xy xx

Charles was perched on a snowy mountain top in Colorado. After the press conference, he had to fly somewhere quiet and isolated to cook a pot of misery stew for a while.

By flying he had committed an illegal act. The state sanctioned the employment of superpowers, *white* superpowers, only when it directly benefited people of color. Exceptionals, however, were free to employ “their” superpowers at will.

A sigh exited his mouth as a foggy stream. “That went well, didn’t it, *Chuck?*”

He’d thought, perhaps foolishly, that the point of the press conference was to publicize the movie, rather than humiliate the person on whom it was based. The movie’s budget was in the hundreds of millions. Why were they lavishing such a huge amount on the story of a man they apparently neither liked nor respected, a man they had in the past called a hero? It didn’t make sense.

Charles.

Oh no. Not now.

We need to talk.

The mesmerizingly calm yet commanding voice in his head wasn’t the product of schizophrenia or a conscience that refused to shut up but a hi-tech microwave device Brett had built to communicate with certain people telepathically.

What’s up? Charles asked, knowing that it had to be serious for Brett to contact him this way, though not really caring at the minute.

Three Negroes were attacked by a superpowered white girl on a train this morning. Two are dead. The third will spend the rest of his life in an insane asylum.

Oh boy. This wasn’t just serious. This was end-of-the-world serious.

Meet me in the maintenance shed at Nexus Station in five minutes.

Suddenly the debacle of a press conference didn’t matter to Charles anymore. He had something vastly more important to worry about now.

CHAPTER 3

The Sun was finally gaining on the horizon. It seemed to have lingered directly above the boat for most of the day. At 11:05 a.m. the temperature on the wheelhouse thermometer read 101 degrees, and just half an hour ago that's what it still read. A sun-bleached khaki tarpaulin suspended above the stern provided some small relief from the heat, though the number of warm bodies crammed under it negated most of the benefit of its shade.

Tamils, Tamils everywhere.

Exhausted, dehydrated, they overlaid every square inch of the smoke-spewing tub except the inside of the wheelhouse. They had endured battering seas and blistering heat to reach asylum on the North American continent, whose coastline, the fat-bellied, yellow-toothed captain assured them, would appear at any moment.

A lanky man in his early twenties in a sweat-stained Hulk Hogan T-shirt was standing at the bow, searching the horizon with a pair of binoculars old enough to be World War II army surplus. "Manai . . . manai," he began to mutter, excitement building in his voice. Landfall had finally risen from the scuffed and scratched watery expanse. "Manai! Manai!" he shouted. Men, women, and children rattled to life and looked where he was pointing excitedly.

"Manai, manai," the captain yawned from the wheelhouse. This was his 26th refugee-ferrying trip. The North American coastline was nothing new to him. He was glad to see it, though, since it meant he'd soon be rid of his human cargo, which smelled like a backed-up latrine.

Tamil jostled Tamil in a mad rush to the stern for a first look at paradise. “Ah-mericah!” a woman with a crescent-shaped scar on her cheek cried.

It was late afternoon. So it would be dark before the Tamils set foot on American sand. They would have to walk all night if they were to reach Cosmopolis’ Justice Department building by morning, but it would be worth the effort. Under the state’s immigration laws, any boat person who stood on the Justice Department’s steps and demanded asylum would be given it for a probationary period of one year and then granted citizenship after that, provided he or she didn’t commit a major felony during that period. To stand on those steps by dawn’s early light, what better, more symbolic way to mark the start of their new lives?

As the Tamils rejoiced, an object off the port bow caught the captain’s eye. Something truly astonishing. “Parka!” he shouted, pointing at it. “Parka! Parka! Parka!” Gradually the Tamils followed the line of his bratwurst-thick index finger to see an even more exciting sight than the US coastline.

It was a meteor. But not just any meteor. This one blazed with a dazzling kaleidoscope of colors, some unclassified by science, and was traveling in a ruler-straight line 50 feet above and parallel to the ocean, about a mile northwest. It didn’t move at the blink-and-you’ll-miss-it rate of a typical meteor, but rather cruised along at sightseeing speed.

Never in all his years of seafaring had the captain seen a meteor like this. His excitement dissolved into unease.

The Tamils reacted to the meteor with awestruck *ooohs* and *ahhhs*. For them it was a sign their grueling journey had met with divine approval.

While they were praising whatever deity they believed had summoned it, the meteor did something positively Fortean: it paused in midair and turned toward the boat.

The captain crossed himself and reminded Mary of his deep and abiding love for her, and then reminded her again. Like his passengers, he was Sri Lankan, but that's where the similarity ended. The Tamils, however, were thrilled that the meteor had taken an interest in them. They hollered at it and waved hello.

A searing blast of light swept out from the meteor. It bleached the air and the surrounding ocean. The Tamils fell mute. After a short while a handful of them murmured a nervous salutation to the blazing chunk of rock, but then stopped altogether when it headed their way.

The captain ducked down out of sight in the wheelhouse. He knew a bad meteor when he saw one.

A frantic splashing came from port side. The Tamils peered over the side of the boat to see thousands of hyper-excited fish going Cirque du Soleil in the water. Suddenly the fish gathered into schools, then darted off to greet the inbound meteor.

Roaring like a bonfire drenched in rocket fuel, the meteor was now half a mile from the boat and excruciatingly bright. Too bright for the Tamils to gaze upon it. They could only track its advance by following its dappled reflection on the ocean's surface.

About 100 meters from the boat, the meteor slowed and its flames dimmed, allowing the Tamils to look straight at it again. They could see into the heart of the fire. What lay there drew shocked gasps from them. It wasn't a meteor, it was a small figure. A figure clutching what appeared to be a large fish. As the figure came closer, its terrible heat drove the Tamils to the stern, where they formed a quivering, tightly packed biomass.

The little girl in the white party dress arrived in the air above the bow. She was holding a bottlenose dolphin at her side. It must have been eight feet long and outweighed her by hundreds of pounds, yet she had one arm draped casually across the top of it, as if it were no heavier than a Barbie doll. It squeaked and waved its tail fin merrily, unaffected by the fire enveloping her. The schools of fish that had

gone out to welcome her had followed her back to the boat and were capering in the water, ecstatic to be in her presence.

She scanned the brown-skinned residents of the chugging ghetto, her face as serious as an eviction notice.

Two Tamil males emerged from the cowering crowd. Heads bowed, arms rising and lowering worshipfully, they approached the unfamiliar god, muttering a litany of prayers in their native tongue.

The captain poked his head above the wheelhouse's minimalist instrument panel to see what was going on before snatching it back down. Hail Marys, shit-scared ones, gave his position away.

Once the two Tamil men got as near to the bow as they could without passing out from the heat, they dropped to their knees and offered up more prayers to the girl.

Her flames winked out and she floated down to the brine. She turned the dolphin gently around so they were facing each other and said, "Next time, Mr. Dolphin, don't go swimming on the sand. That's not a good idea. No, it isn't. Oh no, it isn't." Clicking spiritedly, the dolphin nodded its head as if in total agreement. She lowered it into the waves. It swam a short distance, then spun around, stuck its head out of the water, gave a joyful squeak, scooted backward, and dove beneath the ocean. The girl giggled in delight. "Bye-bye," she said, waving after it. "Bye-bye."

She gazed up at the boat. Grubby faces with oil pools for eyes lined the port side. They were staring down at her with the profound vacuousness of a special ed. student trying to make sense of an integral calculus equation. She poked her tongue at them with a spiteful tremor of her head.

Up she flew to her previous possie. The Tamils approached the bow meekly, careful to keep a respectful distance from her. The two kneeling Tamils were joined by other worshipers.

She crossed her arms and scowled. "Turn around and go home."

If dumb stares were worth a buck each, she could have OD'd on Happy Meals.

Fists balled, nose squinched, she growled, “I said turn around and go home. NOW!”

Flames burst from her with a big bassy FARROOOOMP. The Tamils fled stumbling to the stern, erstwhile kneeling devotees and all. “Turn around or you’re all dead! Do you hear me?”

The captain sure didn’t. He was crouched on the wheelhouse floor, lungs bellowing out invocations to the Blessed Mother.

A woman wrapped in an orange sari, cradling an infant, heard the ultimatum, though. Despite not understanding every word of it, she understood the threatening tone in which it was delivered. She started for the tiny powerhouse, hoping to reason with her.

The heat on deck had risen sharply and was getting hotter with each meek, faltering step the woman took. Fire line-danced on the prow. She babbled pleadingly in Tamil.

The girl goggled at her in disbelief. “Did you hear what I said? You gotta turn . . . you *have to* turn this boat around.”

Undeterred by the warning, the woman kept on coming and kept on babbling.

“Do you want to *die*?” the girl asked. Her flames lashed and clawed as if they were every bit as annoyed with the woman as she was.

The woman pulled up four paces from the bow. Any closer and she would have fainted or worse. Sweat rained off her. “En kulantai,” she said. “En kulantai.”

The girl eyed her quizzically. *What was she saying? What did she want?*

The woman lifted her now wailing baby haphazardly toward the girl as though offering it as a sacrifice. “Ah-mericah.” This elicited no response from the girl. The woman shook the baby at her imploringly. “Ah-mericah. Ah-merica.”

Finally the girl understood what was being asked of her. She descended an invisible staircase to the woman, who had to squeeze her eyes shut so her retina’s wouldn’t be snap fried. When the woman opened them, the girl was back above the bow, baby in her arms. She

was scrutinizing it indifferently. It cooed and gurgled, chuffed to be in her company.

A smile of immense relief spread across the woman's face. She motioned to the baby and then the nearing edge of the United States. "Ah-mericah. Ah-mericah."

The girl's flames popped out.

Emboldened by the woman's bravery and the girl's apparent cessation of hostility, the other Tamils crept up to the bow, albeit with a dollop of trepidation. They pointed at landfall and said "Ah-mericah" repeatedly. As their confidence grew, so did their volume level.

The girl held the baby out to her side with one hand as far as her arm would extend. A ball of cobalt blue lightning appeared in her other hand. It spun giddily fast and bombinated as if battling to contain a massive electrical charge it had built up. Suddenly it leapt in an arc from her hand to the air just above the baby's head, silencing the Tamil chorus and ending the woman's already badly faded smile. It began to orbit the baby's head horizontally. Unconcerned, the baby chuckled and kicked its legs in delight. The ball orbited faster and hummed louder until it became a pulsing, droning shimmer. Then it went nova. The explosion of light engulfed the baby, reducing it to a featureless potato shape that fizzed from the cellular Armageddon taking place inside it and then imploded into a pyramid of fine ash in the girl's hand.

The captain, who'd been peeping through the wheelhouse window, was so shocked he rose to full presence-revealing height to absorb what he'd just witnessed.

The woman stared dully at her desiccated child.

"I told you to go away," the girl said as a sea breeze swept her palm clean. "Why are you niggers so stupid?"

An unbearable and overwhelming clarity slapped the woman. She drew a raspy, lung-filling breath which, after an electric pause, came out as a deafening howl of anguish.

The girl was unmoved.

The lanky Tamil grabbed a machete and charged at her, waving it about, as he shouted like a one-man jihad. The girl shot into the air, away from the boat a short distance, then dropped down into the ocean, pink slippers first, without creating a splash or even a ripple.

Tamils swarmed the starboard side and searched the water. There was no sign of the girl. No bubbles, no turbulence, no fire glow, *nothing*.

A turbaned man patted the lanky Tamil on the back. Whooping, the lanky Tamil waved the machete in victory.

The captain was about to give a relieved sigh the OK, when he felt a foreboding shift in the water beneath the boat. He felt it before his passengers did. Old salt that he was, though not the most intrepid one to have sailed the seven seas, he could tell when the ocean was doing something he'd much rather it didn't.

With a creaking groan, the boat twisted viciously to port. The captain slammed against a tasty, well-sprung Irish lass with cherry red nipples, sticky-taped to one of the wheelhouse walls. Her teasing grin survived the impact. Tamils strew the deck. A pregnant woman's head got so close to the hull her brains miscarried through her ears.

The swarthy asylum seekers slid and rolled as the boat spun furiously. The lanky Tamil clutched the port side gunnel, as if it were a year's pass to the best brothel in Vegas, and hauled himself upright. He gazed down into the whirling turquoise. Explosions of light, red, blue, yellow, green, white, and previously unavailable colors, came from deep below the surface. The weird hues made him bilious.

The ocean on the port side erupted. A 20-foot wave created by the upheaval smashed into the boat, tilting it 45 degrees. The crashing flood of saltwater swept some of the Tamils overboard and others against the hull. The weaker of the Tamils ejected from the boat choked on undrinkable water and grasped at non-existent flotsam as the waning, though still powerful maelstrom dragged them to oblivion. But the stronger Tamils, those who could swim, splashed

about in the battering sea, crying for help, an exercise as beneficial to them as reaching for imaginary flotsam was to their drowning kinsfolk.

The boat jounced brutally. Having just peeled himself off a clump of dead and dying boat people, the lanky Tamil married the front of the wheelhouse. A frightful roar assaulted his eardrums. Spinning at Mach 1 off the port bow, unattached to the clear blue sky, was a steaming waterspout 100 feet high. Super-heated waterdroplets shot out from it in all directions, liquefying whatever part of Sri Lankan flesh they hit. One reduced the lanky Tamil's right eye to a runny jelly. Screaming, he cast himself into the Atlantic.

The waterspout seized some floundering Tamils as it roared closer to the boat. They farewelled this world as crimson goutts spiraling up its hissing vortex.

Liquid bullets strafed the Tamils aboard the boat. Those nearest the bow were killed in seconds as squibs of skin and blood detonated all over them. Those farther back fell to the deck or leaped overboard, clutching grisly slurries that had been their faces.

For a moment, the waterspout looked as though it might collide with the bow, but then it veered starboard and made for the Tamils who preferred death by drowning to death by scalding. It vacuumed them into their next incarnations.

Only the lanky Tamil remained in the water. He could see America three miles distant with his left eye. It rose and fell as the ocean lifted and dropped him. He attacked the waves in a last ditch effort to reach the promised land, but the waterspout's inescapable current yanked him backward. Across the crests of the waves he skipped until he met the waterspout's tail, whereupon he was pulped and steamed into a whizzing consommé.

The waterspout headed straight for the bow. The Tamils still on board rolled and flopped, dead or just about, as the boat pitched to port.

The captain was crouched on the wheelhouse floor, hands over his ears, Holy Mother on his lips. Where the hell was she?

The boat shook as the apocalypse came aboard it. The wheelhouse window exploded outward. Sprays of scalding water hit the wheelhouse's plywood walls, and wooden splinters from the deck, some scary big, violated the centerfold. The captain hunkered into a protective ball and readied to fall sobbing into Mary's loving arms.

All of a sudden the shaking ceased, and the apocalypse faded to just a din.

The captain uncovered his ears, haltingly. A ripping wind gust was the only noise that came from the deck now. He raised his head gingerly, looked out the glassless window and then up. The girl was coming out of a supersonic pirouette. A few swirling, translucent coils of steam were all that was left of the waterspout. They quickly dissipated. Then the girl rocketed away.

Praise Mary!

The captain surveyed the damage to his boat. There was a gaping, ragged hole in the deck, and the top half of the bow was gone. So were the Tamils. Every last one of them. A good thing he received their fares in cash money prior to the voyage.

It started to rain. Strange. The sky was cloudless. Stranger yet was the rain itself. The drops were a diluted pink. The captain caught some in his hand. He assayed the liquid by rubbing his index finger against his palm in a circular motion. It was warm and had the consistency of cooking oil. Realizing he was dipping his finger in pureed boat people, he vomited explosively.

Bile clogged his throat. As he toiled to drag a breath into his lungs, the wheelhouse roof was torn off. The girl held it in her hand. She was standing on air. With a casual flick of her dainty wrist, she sent the roof spinning miles out to sea.

She pondered the captain with disgust, then scanned the boat. Her gaze settled on a metal flagpole at the stern, from which a UN flag hung flaccidly. The captain had put the flag there in a cynical ploy to

get white countries to welcome his *refugee*-crowded tub into their waters. The girl motioned to the flagpole. “Put your hands on that pole.”

His plump face furrowed into a tearful grimace. “Please don’t hurt. I am very good man. You understand?”

She grabbed him by his hair and pulled him up and out of the wheelhouse. The acid lingering in his windpipe blocked a tortured yelp. She placed him by the flagpole. “Put you hands on it,” she said firmly. “*Now.*”

He did what he was told with fear and much trembling. “Please,” he sobbed, “don’t hurt.”

“You should’ve turned the boat around.”

His hands spontaneously combusted. He howled in agony as the flesh on them melted and fused with the flagpole.

Before unconsciousness came galloping up to him on a black horse, he felt a tremendous jolt and saw the sky closing in on the world.

CHAPTER 4

Take a look at what the New World Order has done, folks!” The stocky, balding man’s foghorn voice was so loud it could’ve been heard a mile away without the aid of the megaphone into which he bellowed, and his pizza-pan face was as red as the aftermath of a bitch slap.

People crowded the parking lot at Calcutta Bay. They’d been drawn there by reports of a refugee-ferrying boat, the passengers of which had been steam blended into drizzling goop by a super-powered white girl. A police helicopter circling overhead kept the sky clear of drones and small aircraft, while a Coast Guard response vessel scared off boats that ventured too near to the shore. The parking lot was the closest the public could get to the boat. A squad of cops saw to that.

For an old tub with a serrated chasm for a deck and no wheelhouse roof to speak of, the boat looked quite majestic sitting on the beach as straight as a schoolmarm, its bow pointing at lines of black fulgurite in the gleaming white sand.

Beetroot-faced Albert Keane and his loud-mouthed megaphone held court in the parking lot. Keane hosted *The Truth Nuke*, a conspiracy-rife radio show that dominated the tabloid end of the alternative news market. His show’s producer had called him at 3:00 a.m. that morning, raving hysterically about a young blonde girl who’d deposited a 50-ton refugee boat, minus the refugees, on the beach at Calcutta Bay and then set fire to the sand, which burned so intensely the radiant heat whited out most of the footage from the security cameras that recorded the event. Keane lived in a gated community nearby. After dragging the paean to acne that was his son out of bed, he and the gangling galoot, whom he deputized as his

cameraman, jumped in his Range Rover and tore to the scene of the crime against humanity.

“The globalists are behind this!” Keane said. “Their biogeneticists have perverted gene-editing technology to create abominations like this little white girl! My sources tell me she’s the vanguard of a entire army of little white girls!”

“What sources, Albert?” a man shouted from somewhere in the crowd.

“Government sources.”

“Which branch?”

“I’m not at liberty to divulge that.”

“Then how do we know you’re not lying to us, Albert?”

“How do we know you’re not an agent for the New World Order, punk? I don’t lie to people!”

The crowd applauded Keane’s spit-hurling retort.

A ponytailed 20-something man who’d look right at home sharing a desk in Silicon Valley with some Funko Star Wars figures barged out of the crowd to berate the unseen critic. “Hey, punk,” he said, “what are *you* doing to expose the globalist conspiracy? Let’s hear it, *punk*.”

Keane put a meaty arm around him. “We all know the answer to that question, don’t we? Zero and nothing.”

“Right on,” the ponytailed man said, slapping Keane’s shoulder.

Keane pulled away from the man with a flinch of pain and examined his shoulder. “What the hell did you just do to me?”

The ponytailed man held his hands up in a “not guilty” gesture. A flickering smile cast doubt on their veracity. “Nothing, man. I need to clip my nails, that’s all.” *All* came out as an *aw-haw-haw-haw-haw* as the laughter he was trying to suppress staged a successful coup in his vocal chords.

Keane pumped his arms across his chest like a showboating bodybuilder. “You want some of this, punk? You want some of this?”

“No, thanks, I’m into girls.”

After piddling on the barbecue, the ponytailed man turned and bolted.

“Yeah, that’s it,” Keane bellowed into the megaphone. “Run away back to your globalist masters, coward!” He faced the crowd. “You see what happens when you stand up to the globalist bullies and their shills? You see what happens? That guy’s running so fast he’ll be in Delaware in the next five minutes!”

xx xy xx

Charles hovered at pin-prick height above the beach formerly known as Alabaster Bay, ruminating on the super-powered girl’s calling card in the sand. He assumed Missy was her name. As for the skull and crossbones, no assumption was necessary.

He’d been thumbing his nose at gravity for some minutes while he put the inevitable on hold. Once upon a time he couldn’t wait to arrive at the scene of a super crime, where his very presence would bring cheers and applause from the public, who knew he would use all of his God-given abilities to bring the malefactor, or malefactors, to justice. (All except his eye beams, which were too dangerous for him to use, even against the deadliest of foes.) But that was before pre-Ramsgate.

A lone figure stood on the largely absent deck of the refugee boat, staring out to sea. It was Brett. Surprising. Brett didn’t normally take time out to ponder a sight as poetic as the sun-stippled Atlantic and never—as in never ever—when examining a crime scene.

Charles floated upright, pressed his arms against his sides as if squeezing himself into a test tube, and let himself fall. The beach sped toward him. He wondered what it would be like to be physically vulnerable, because then he’d be dead in a matter of seconds.

At 100 feet he slowed his descent. At 80 feet the jeering and the verbal abuse began. Keane stirred up most of it. Charles had been under the impression that Keane was sympathetic to the superhero community. That revenue stream must have dried up for him.

He called the professional blowhard a very rude word, in his mind. It was extremely rare for him to cuss, especially out loud, even when battling supervillains. Once, when Gravity Wave dropped a cement-mixing truck on his head at Mach 6, he said *bloody*, but only because he got showered in wet cement, which was a major hassle to get out of his hair. What became of Gravity Wave?

Charles' black suede shoes touched down on the refugee boat just as the crowd, led by chorus leader Keane, chanted, "Boat people are people too." Ever since the Superhero Act was enacted, super-powered beings, *white* super-powered beings, were forbidden by law to wear superhero costumes or any form of disguise. That's why Charles was wearing navy blue pleated slacks and a maroon long-sleeved shirt, and Brett black pants and a gray business shirt, sans tie. Ties weren't permitted. White superheroes could get their licenses revoked if they wore ties during the performance of their duties. Ties could be used to strangulate persons. Aliases were verboten as well. White superheroes had to use their real names. A pity. *Charles* and *Brett* just didn't have the poetic zing of *Paragon* and *Nightclaw*.

Brett scanned the charred surface of the boat's prow with one of his esoteric gizmos. "Charles."

"Brett."

Charles checked the sky. "No Isabel?"

"She'll be along."

Brett's customarily expressionless mouth had a slight kink in it. This signified that either his gizmo was malfunctioning or it was giving a reading that made no sense to him. Everything had to make sense to Brett.

"So what have you—?" A welcome displacement in the air caused Charles to look up. He smiled.

Isabella had arrived.

He had flown into the roiling heart of the sun, walked upon the rim of a churning singularity, and stood amid a flesh-stripping dust storm on Mars that could have blanketed the Earth twice over, but there was

no sight in the universe more awe inspiring than Isabella descending from heaven with the grace and majesty of an archangel.

“Hello, Charles.”

“Hi, Isabel,” he said, heart pounding on a bass drum in his ears.

Her cream floral-printed skirt and black short-sleeved top, which followed the breathtaking contours of her upper body like cotton skin, would be available for purchase in fashion outlets across the country inside of two weeks. Clothing manufacturers referred to her as Ms. Money Tree.

Wolf whistles came from the parking lot. Not all of them from males.

Brett and Isabella exchanged grudging nods. They had seldom seen eye to eye when life was better for the superhero community, but recent events had aggravated the tension between them and turned underlying animosity into open hostility. The final straw came when he wanted her to use his neural transmission device. Mind rape she called it, an unconscionable violation of her privacy and dignity. At one stage, Charles thought he may have to physically stop her from punching a hole clean through Brett’s head she was that furious, and seeing she was the second most powerful being on the planet, she could have done it too. Since then, the two of them had barely spoken, and appeared in public together only when Charles was present and only to maintain the illusion that they were a united team.

Brett gazed into the boat’s abyss. “A girl of about seven did this.”

“That’s impossible,” Charles said.

“Not if it happened, Charles.”

“The youngest recorded age for the initial manifestation of super powers is thirteen,” Isabella said.

Brett circled the hole studiously. “It’s now seven.”

“She must be part of the Ichor program,” Charles said.

“Doubtful,” Brett said, squatting to collect a piece of orphaned cloth with a pair of tweezers. “She’s white.”

“Hey, Marvel Woman, show us your tits!” some guy shouted from the parking lot.

Isabella gritted her teeth. She detested having to leave the kingdom she ruled to come to Cosmopolis or anywhere else that embraced the new morality—or lack of morality as she always pointed out, but if she didn’t play ball with the UN, it would declare diversity on her island state and thus end centuries of genetic sameness sooner rather than later. Most likely sooner, for none of her subjects had gone Swan Song. Yet.

“Any idea at this stage what the exact extent of her abilities is?” Charles asked, eager to pull Isabella’s mind off the sleazebag in the carpark so she wouldn’t fly over there and ICU him.

“Super strength, pyrokinesis, the power of flight,” Brett said. He scraped some pink muck off the deck with a metal blade and placed it in a zip-lock bag. “Maybe more.”

Maybe more? The girl already had a serial killer’s Christmas wish list of super powers. Just how powerful was she?

“I find it hard to fathom that someone of her tender years would deliberately seek to kill people of color,” Isabella said.

Brett looked straight at her. “These killings were racially motivated. As were those on the train.”

“Someone must be making her do this,” Charles said. “A seven-year-old doesn’t wake up one morning and say, ‘What will I do today? I know, I’ll go on a racist killing spree.’”

“Perhaps not,” Brett said, “but if an adult were guiding her hand, he or she would have been present during the killings.” Using one hand as a pivot, he vaulted sideways over the prow and landed deftly on the sand, 15 feet below. The parking lot crowd applauded his athletic prowess. Without missing a beat, he crouched and ran his gizmo over the glossy black surface of the M in MISSY.

Charles had Isabella all to himself now. He ogled her out of the corner of his eye. Her flawless facial structure, long, lustrous raven hair, scintillating cobalt blue eyes, and luminescent ivory skin, which

had never known a blemish, aided and abetted the claim that she was the most beautiful woman on the planet. Rumor had it she was still a virgin. Internet gossipmongers reckoned she was a lesbian, but the strict moral code by which she lived ruled that out.

After some disagreement, he got his attention to focus entirely on Brett. “The girl must have a distinct energy signature. Couldn’t that be used to locate her?”

“If she had one. The radiation on or off the boat doesn’t exceed normal levels and there’s no plasma residue.”

Keane aimed his megaphone at the trio. “The secret Nazi elite who run the world don’t want this girl caught! That’s why they put these clowns on the job!”

Isabella winced. She knew that Keane was deliberately provoking them, but that didn’t make his inflammatory drivel any easier to endure. “Just ignore him, Isabel,” Charles said.

The drivel continued. “I’m telling you, folks, this has got ‘Nazi conspiracy’ written all over it! Take a look at the word MISSY over there. It contains the letters SS!”

Keane’s rant stretched on all the way to the farthest horizon, but what he said was anyone’s guess, since the megaphone translated his increasingly hysterical verbiage into squealing, staticky pidgin English. Isabella understood enough of it, though, to spear him with an irate look. For a second, he zipped his lip.

Charles watched Brett collect a fulgurite sample. “So how are we going to find her?”

“I can program orbiting satellites to give me the GPS coordinates of any unusually excessive heat discharge.”

“Are you allowed to do that?”

“No.”

Foop. Foop. Foop. Foop. Foop. Foop. Foop.

Brett stood and looked to the east.

A jet-black Chinook helicopter that looked like an elaborate prop from a sci-fi movie set 50 years in the future thundered across a range

of sand dunes and set down on the parking lot. The cyclonic gusts whipped up by its blades skittled the onlookers and swatted the megaphone out of Keane's clammy hand.

Charles thought he caught a glimpse of a wry grin on Brett's Marlboro-Man-template face.

The back of the helicopter yawned open. Down its ramp stormed the Secretary of Homeland Security, Murray Michaels, a rotund, shagpile-carpeted Jew in a yarmulke and a matte black suit in danger of exceeding its breaking strain. A pair of roided bodyguards in flak jackets, clutching Duke-Nukem-sized automatic weapons, flanked him. Three Exceptionals covered his CinemaScope rear end. Dogging all of them was a small but zealous contingent of media.

Part of Isabella's agreement with the UN was that she had to allow Exceptionals to accompany her when she visited Cosmopolis, but the three who'd exited the chopper were unknown to her. The first Exceptional was a shapely Onna-Bugeisha in a red kimono, holding a naginata, a wooden pole with a curved blade on the end of it. Unlike white superheroes, Exceptionals had legal sanction to bear weapons. The second was a hulking brute eight feet tall and nearly as wide who appeared to be composed of boxy chunks of synthetic material that resembled dark gray plastic, inside which orange veins of some unidentified form of energy pulsated menacingly. In a previous life, the one before his Ichor treatment, he'd doubtless been a normal-looking black man. The third Exceptional was an Amerindian in full Indian chief costume, right down to the feathered headdress.

Michaels marched vehemently across the sand, toward the boat, like Julius Caesar about to give his army the all-time dressing down. Isabella pursed her lust-stirring lips and fumed. She'd dealt with Michaels before. She and Charles floated down to the sand, which quaked from the hulking brute's tromping footfalls. Brett joined them there.

Charles noticed that Keane had shut up completely. The question was why? After all, orthodox Jew Michaels was a platinum member of

the Nazi elite that Keane swore black and blue, secretly ruled the world. Why was he keeping mum about this?

Michaels pulled up just short of the white superheroes, who were redwoods to his crabapple tree. His bodyguards stayed on either side of him, while the Exceptionals maintained their rear position. Reporters and cameramen moved to the left and the right to get as close as possible to the ratings-winning action. “Congratulations,” Michaels said, “you’ve let a child run rings around you. That’s no mean feat.”

“We will apprehend her,” Isabella said. “It’s only a matter of—”

Michaels’ porcine eyes morphed into contemptuous slits. “Forgive the interruption, *Your Majesty*, but I’d like to know why you haven’t apprehended her already. Is she too smart? Too scary? Too powerful? Or is she too white?”

Charles didn’t have to look at Isabella to know she wanted to separate Michaels’ yarmulke from his neck. The two bodyguards tensed, ready to squeeze off multiple rounds in her direction should the need arise. The Indian chief and the hulking brute seemed uninterested in her—and in pretty much everything. But not the Onna-Bugeisha. She stared at Isabella like a crazed stalker fixing to slice and dice the love of his life.

“Perhaps if we weren’t hamstrung by endless red tape and having to kowtow to political correctness, we might have her in custody by now,” Brett said.

Charles looked at Brett, gobsmacked. *Did he just say what I thought he did?*

Michaels’ Ashkenazi features reared up. “None of which would be necessary had it not been for your kind.”

“Your kind?” Brett said. “Why, Mr. Secretary, that’s racist.”

Brett’s stunning belligerence and the red flushes of war amassing on Isabella’s face alerted Charles that he’d better chime in before things really got out of hand. “Sir, I promise you, we’re doing all we can to find her.”

“If she kills any more people, we’ll have a race war on our hands. Is that what you want?”

“It’s not what we want,” Isabella said, “but is it what you want?”

Michaels had to take a second to stop himself from mowing her down with rapid-fire Yiddish. Then in a carefully moderated voice brimming with spite he said, “You have 24 hours to bring her in. Dead or alive.”

“What if we don’t?” Isabella asked.

Charles would have rolled his eyes in exasperation if not for the cameras and the reporters. *Why’d you have to go and ask him a question like that, Isabel?*

Michaels glared at her. “Then the UN will pass a resolution outlawing superheroes of white European extraction.”

“Outlaw us?” Charles said, genuinely shocked. “Do you know how many times we’ve saved this planet?”

“Saved it from *other* super-powered whites.”

“We’ve also saved it from natural disasters,” Brett said, “and an extinction-level event or two, but who’s counting?”

“Now you’ve become the extinction-level event. This *dear, sweet* little white girl killed two colored people, then seventy-eight. How many will it be next time? A thousand? A million? A hundred million?”

Michaels about-faced and marched back the way he had come. “Dead or Alive.” His retinue, the media as well, followed. All save the Onna-Bugeisha, who kept staring psychotically at Isabella.

Michael glanced at her over his shoulder. “Come on, Masako.”

She lingered a second longer, then glided away, casting Isabella a sly sneer to let her know they would meet again.

“Friend of yours?” Brett said.

Isabella didn’t hear the question. Nor did she pay the Onna-Bugeisha any mind. As far as she was concerned, the only other person in the world at this point in time was Michaels, and she was spoiling to reduce the population by fifty percent.

A pathetically optimistic Charles turned to her. "I'm sure he was pulling our legs when he said the UN would outlaw us." She regarded him with both disgust and incredulity, then soared off out to sea, away, far away from the continental United States. He watched behind her, a nerd who'd just got the finger from the babe next door after she'd caught him spying on her from his bedroom window.

"I'm just about done here, Charles," Brett said, examining something on the boat's hull. "I'll contact you once the lab has produced some meaningful results."

"Okay." Charles gazed idly at Brett, as if filling in time while he figured out what to do next, then drifted skyward to a volley of abuse from Keane, who'd regained the power of speech.

CHAPTER 5

The golden dome shone pristinely in the late afternoon sun. The mosque's heavy oaken doors had opened to the faithful for the first time just two weeks ago.

Jobar was home to Cosmopolis' largest Muslim population. Ninety-five percent of the outlying suburb's population bent the knee to Allah. The remaining five percent wished Muhammad hadn't commanded his followers to drive down house prices. Jobar had mandatory Sharia law, mosques aplenty, including this, its newest and biggest, and almost no woman with a clitoris within a radius of five miles.

Welcome to muzzy Disneyland.

Four humorless Muslim men guarded the mosque entrance. They knew about the super-powered little girl. Everybody did. Her gruesome, racist exploits had become world news. The words WHITE DEVIL GIRL appeared daily in newspaper headlines and on autocues read by TV news anchors. That's what the captain of the refugee called her when interviewed by reporters in hospital after his melted and consequently useless hands were amputated, and the media had run with it, like a Jamaican sprinter with a relay baton.

The guards were armed with AR15s. They had special government dispensation to use the weapons to protect the lives and the delicate sensibilities of their fellow Mohammadans. Should the White Devil Girl be foolish enough to rear her head at the mosque, they would blast it into bloody giblets.

xx xy xx

Inside the mosque, a gray-bearded imam, notorious for his politically toxic views, was giving a politically toxic sermon. “Listen to me carefully now, brothers.” His wild eyes prowled ranks of dusky, hirsute men paying earnest heed to him. “It won’t be long before we wrest this city from Satan’s clutches and place it in Allah’s hands. Already we have made this suburb ours. Soon all the others will fall to us. How simple a thing it has been for us to deceive the white infidels. The benighted fools. They welcome us into their lands, house and feed us, all the while oblivious to our holy mission to subjugate and supplant them. So blinded are they by sin, by the fruit of their wickedness, that even when one of their own warns them about the enemy in their midst, they pay him no mind. Instead they mock, revile, and even imprison him.” The mosque echoed with his laughter. “Allah be praised!”

xx xy xx

One of the guards scoured the sky. The White Devil Girl could fly, so if she were to launch an attack, it would probably come from above. He saw no Devil Girl, only an upturned sea of the brightest blue, in the middle of which floated a puffy white island. A puffy white island shaped like a rabbit. A rabbit whose feet were scurrying, and its head was turning toward him, and its mouth was pulling upward in a rascally grin.

The guard wanted to tell the others about the rabbit but thought better of it. What if he was seeing things? What if he was going mad? They would laugh him to scorn. So he kept his silence and ignored the rabbit—the *rabbit-shaped* cloud. But try as he did, he couldn’t ignore it for long. He had to steal a glance at it every few seconds to ensure he was in his right mind, for if it was still there and still a rabbit-shaped cloud, then he had to be in his right mind. Right?

The cloud bubbled into the shape of a pig. A jovial fellow, the pig shook a big, bulging bag at the guard, letting him know that it

contained something special for him and his Muslim brothers. Colors flashed inside the bag. Blinding, unimaginable colors.

xx xy xx

The imam leaned over the pulpit to emphasize a final point to his attentive audience. “In the meantime, what should we, the faithful, do while we wait for the consummation of that glorious day of Allah? We should continue to prepare, proselytize, and procreate. This, my friends, is Allah’s will for us. Indeed, he commands us to flourish, to eat off the fat of the land.” He stood up straight. “And, praise Allah, eat we shall.” He extended his arms outward and tilted his head back. “Oh how we shall eat!”

Something appeared, as if by magic, in his left hand. He felt its weight before he actually saw it. When he did see it, he wasn’t sure what he was seeing or rather refused to believe what he was seeing. Reluctantly he lifted it up to his nose and smelled it, then smelled it again. It was what he feared it was. A pork chop.

Enraged, he scanned the congregation. “Who is responsible for this sacrilege? Who brought this unclean meat into the house of Allah?”

The members of the congregation traded anxious looks. *Wasn’t me. Wasn’t me. Wasn’t me.*

Realizing he still had the pork chop in hand, the imam jettisoned it, as if it were a hissing cobra. “The flesh of pigs is an abomination! An abomination!”

It rained pork chops. Thousands of them. They bounced off heads, landed in laps, pounded the pulpit, and carpeted the carpet. The Muslims jumped up and spun round and looked up to see who was responsible for this outrage, this violation of Allah’s sanctum sanctorum.

Nobody was.

The pork chops were raining down from somewhere between the top of the dome and the air beneath it. A second later, they weren't raining down from anywhere. The downpour had called it quits.

The congregation looked to the imam for answers, but he was just as bewitched, bothered, and bewildered as they were. Who had committed this evil? Surely it had to be the handiwork of Satan himself.

Whistling, loud and shrill, the cacophony of a plummeting bomb maybe, reverberated in the mosque. The Muslims wheeled toward the front doors. Bursts of rifle fire were promptly silenced by a pork-chop-jumping BOOOOOM that shook the oaken doors forcibly, cracking the surrounding brickwork and dusting the floor with fine particles of mortar. The ringing silence that followed announced the death of the four guards. Smoking charcoal smudges on the front steps outside confirmed their passing.

A 336-strong army braced for battle.

The silence rang louder. Then, with a screeching crash, both doors flew off their hinges into the mosque. Keeping dead flat, they shot from the back of the mosque to the front in perfect sync, cutting bloody swathes as they went. Decapitated heads spun through the air like penalty-kicked soccer balls, and severed arms and legs twirled and flipped in a claret-splashing frenzy. The imam leapt back with a gasp as a gory bonce landed at his feet.

A double-lane highway tarred with blood, organs, limbs, and spasming, leaking non-white bodies lay down the center of the mosque. The 336-strong army was now 299-strong.

Clad in eldritch fire, the White Devil Girl hovered in the front doorway. Her deceptively cherubic face was in the grip of an Old Testament rage that would not be sated until every Muslim present had been sacrificed to it. She held up a generous leg of pork, as if she were Samson showing off the ass' jawbone to the Philistine soldiers, and yelled, "I HATE ISLAM!"

Then she was upon them.

Moving too quickly for them to react, she swatted the Mohammedan horde with the pork leg. Her deadly duo of super strength and super speed turned them instantly into wall, floor, and ceiling paintings worthy of Jackson Pollock at the height of his creative powers. The mosque ran red with their hemoglobin. Bright red, deep red, and hemorrhage red. All the colors of the red rainbow.

The imam watched, aghast, as the diabolical white blur and her unholy weapon dispatched his hapless Muslim brothers in a few racing heartbeats. The only way he could track her was to follow the disorienting succession of misty, globby splashes of Middle-Eastern DNA that signaled each Muslim's demise. He did not sorrow for them, though. They were all devout men who'd gone to their heavenly reward. Even now, 72 chaste, eager virgins would be taking it in turns going down on them in paradise. Allah be praised!

The White Devil Girl flitted into view, aflame no more. Having reduced the number of Muslims in the mosque to one, she discarded the pork leg and sized up the imam, who did what all members of the Islamic faith do when confronted with a superior opposing force, he phoned a friend. The words raced out of his mouth into his cell phone, as if he were rattling off one super-sized word, the last syllable of which, by the Prophet's command, had to be uttered posthaste.

The White Devil Girl smiled darkly. The imam shuddered. To him, it wasn't so much a smile but a full stop on the universe.

"I hate Islams," she snarled as she came for him, striding upon the mosque's heat-regulated air.

The imam's rapidly advancing crisis of faith sorely tempted him to issue a deranged laugh, but he resolved to maintain his composure so as not to displease Allah in the final moments of what had been a faithful life. *This is a test*, he thought. *Allah has sent this white devil here to try my faith one last time before he welcomes me into paradise.*

His feet parted company with the floor. He was ascending into paradise! No. Not into paradise. Unless paradise was ten feet above

the mosque floor. The satanic delight writ large on the White Devil Girl's face let him know that she was behind his levitation. He stopped rising when they were face to face, then just floated on nothing as she did. Unable to move, unable to do anything save breathe and stare into the whirling blue of her profane eyes, he resigned himself to dying in the remaining seconds that Allah had allotted his earthly life.

"You don't belong here," she said. "You and this stupid, ugly place."

He refused to accommodate her words. His mind had room only for his god, and 72 nymphets. *I shall soon be with you in paradise, Allah,* he thought.

"No you won't," the White Devil Girl said. "Do you want to know why?" She stepped within an arm's length of him and in a mocking whisper said, "Because there is no Allah."

His faith was unshaken by her feat of mind reading. He knew that Satan could work lesser miracles.

He wished he could shut his eyes so he wouldn't have to look into hers, but there was no avoiding them. Their gravitational pull would have made it impossible for him to look away from them even if he were physically able to. Far inside their depthless reaches he was drawn. Giddy, lightheaded, he lost all sense of space and time and self. Who was he? Where was he? What was he doing? Then he saw something that reminded him. Something no Muslim was ever meant to see. And at that precise moment his mind ceased to exist.

Drool bungeeing from his mouth, he hung in the air like a zombie parachutist stuck in a tree. The girl giggled at how stupid he looked. She flew over and behind him, gave him a little push. He glided smoothly into the center of the mosque as if conveyed by a moving walkway. Then he began to glow, exceedingly bright.

xx xy xx

The little girl sat cross-legged in the sky above the mosque, head resting in her hands, waiting for the imam to go kablooeey.

KABLOOOOEY!!!

There was a terrific brightening and a thunderous troubling of the air as the shock wave generated by the exploding imam spread outward. Some sweeping urban renewal appeared a certainty. Then the shock wave abruptly curled upward and inward, becoming an implosion that replaced the mosque with a soot-black vacant lot.

The girl beheld the destruction she'd caused, and it was stonkingly good.

She sniffed the air curiously. What was that smell? Roast pork! It was the smell of roast pork—oh so much pork—drifting up whence the mosque had stood but 30 seconds ago.

She was all set to fly down to engrave her signature message in the scorched earth, when a hysterical cry of “Allahu akbar!” whacked her across the back of the head.

A crazy-eyed Muslim Exceptional in a white thobe and a red-checked bisht that could've doubled as a pizzeria tablecloth had invaded the sky. He clutched a laser-bladed scimitar ahum with dismembering energy. “Allahu akbar!” he repeated as he swung it back.

Her hands adopted the same configuration as his. “Babbyboo Mars Bar!” she cried as blinding fire filled the air immediately above her hands, shaping itself into a scimitar blade.

The crazy-eyed Muslim wasn't intimidated. He would attack her with such swiftness she wouldn't have time to react.

That was the plan, anyway.

A rush of warm air and then a vague burning sensation in his mid-section indicated that the plan had gone horribly awry. If he were a bird flying by, he would have seen his top half and his bottom half tumble ungainfully to the ground, and the White Devil Girl poke her tongue at them. He might also have seen her turn and fly toward Cosmopolis, the lights of which were winking on.

CHAPTER 6

Jackson's Bar and Grill was that rare eatery in Cosmopolis' central business district whose patrons and employees didn't reflect the colorization of the populace. They were white. Maybe not all of them but close to all of them. A state of affairs that would end once the Diversity Initiative got wind of it. Although that might take some time to happen, since even the liberal zealots who patronized Jackson's needed a place where they could dine out unmolested by racial heterogeneity, and where the standard of food and hygiene didn't have them reaching for a bottle of activated charcoal tablets after they'd eaten. Jackson's was the dining equivalent of a gated community.

Friday evening was Jackson's busiest night of the week. And this Friday was no different. Empty seats stayed that way only for the duration of a visit to the bathroom. That was until 7:05 p.m., when the superheroine formerly known as Marvel Woman, Queen Isabella of Katharos, strode past the front window. Then they stayed empty for considerably longer. *They* being all the seats that had been occupied by males who crowded the window to ogle her. Lobsters, eye fillets, lamb pizzas, glasses of red wine, and wives and dates craving undivided attention just couldn't compete with the statuesque call to orgasm. The randy fellows kept vigil at the window, even after her succulent legs had carried her out of sight, on the off chance she'd come striding past in the opposite direction, offering them a better, longer view of her mouth-watering rump. When they finally returned to their tables, they found that their female companions had turned as cold as their dinner plates.

Isabella had grave doubts about what she had been asked to do. Or, more precisely, ordered to do. Patrolling Cosmopolis with the threat of being outlawed by dint of her birth hanging over her head was a puzzling exercise to say the least. Why did the government insist she do this when its view of white superheroes was growing dimmer by the hour? Was it to mock her? Nightclaw conjectured that the US military possessed nanotech weaponry capable of destroying even Charles. Why wasn't it being employed to stop the girl's killing spree?

An Exceptional was supposed to be accompanying her. Gonzalez was his name. But he had failed to show up. The Ichor Program gave people of color super powers but no sense of responsibility. Truth be told, she was glad Gonzalez hadn't joined her. The Exceptionals she had dealt with were either ne'er-do-wells or burgeoning psychopaths.

She scanned the deepening blue sky in vain for the girl, that is, the parts of it that weren't blotted out by unseemly conglomerations of steel, glass, and concrete. She loathed modern cities. The acromegalic edifices that choked them and the deleterious pace of living they imposed on their citizenry made them stifling, insufferable places. *Protect this city?* she thought. *If there were any reason, any sanity, left in the world, this and every metropolis like it would be razed.*

Pedestrians were gawking at her and filming her on their cell phones. She remembered that obnoxious jackanapes, Arachnoman, remarking that the purpose of modern technology was to reduce life to a five-minute YouTube clip. Four without the commercial.

A group of glowering Muslim males trooped past her. One growled something in Arabic, then spat on the sidewalk. His bravery met a granite wall after that.

Across the street, a college-aged white man shouted, "Hey, Marvel Woman, did anyone ever tell you you're a stuck-up whore?" This

brought raucous guffaws from the quartet of young fellows in his company. Effeminate-looking upstarts, the lot of them.

Isabella sighed. She could have been home on Katharos Island, sipping a glass of century-old port as she gazed out on the sunset-hued Mediterranean before retiring to her bedchamber to read a musty tome of ancient lore into the wee hours.

Beeeeeeep.

Nightclaw was trying to contact her on the communicator he'd given her. Thank God. She needed an excuse to leave street level, and now she had one.

xx xy xx

The air above the city was crisp and amenable. And blessedly quiet. Why did modernization always equate to more noise?

“Yes?” she said into the communicator.

Nightclaw's voice came through her earpiece in crystal clarity.

“She's on Platform 1 at Namimba Subway Station. I'll meet you there. Be careful, she—” A gale of static cut short the transmission.

Isabella launched herself into a gold-medal-winning dive toward Namimba Station, and then halted. A tingling in her spirit informed her that she had company. She swooped upright and scoped the night sky. Although she appeared to have it all to herself, there was someone up there with her, lurking behind the air molecules or perhaps skulking along a hidden pathway between this world and another.

At any rate, the tingling ceased. The unseen observer was an enigma, but not a threat.

She resumed her subway-bound descent.

CHAPTER 7

A newspaper headline in the subway newsstand read **AZOOMARK CEO ABDUCTION FEAR**. The CEO, Donald Green, masterminded the Swan Song campaign. If Isabella had not been so preoccupied, news of his alleged abduction may have made her smile.

She stood at the base of an escalator, scanning platforms one and two. A policeman guarding the station entrance said the girl had emerged from one of the subway tunnels, blazing like a phoenix. It took him and a colleague seconds to evacuate the station. Half a second to evacuate the people of color. Had the girl departed the way she had come?

Kerbang. Kerbang. Kerbang. Kerbang.

Someone was pounding on something boxy and metallic at the opposite end of Platform 1. It had to be the girl.

Isabella started toward the racket on foot. Flying would be unwise. The girl might regard that as a threatening act. In another time, Isabella would have had to secrete her sword and shield, which she often carried with her into battle, but as white superheroes (and whites in general) were no longer permitted by law to bear weapons, that was not a concern.

Nightclaw was late—and he was never late—and Charles had been dispatched to the outer reaches of the solar system to investigate a rogue planet. She alone would have to deal with the girl. She prayed her strength and fighting skills would be sufficient for the task.

The end of the platform drew nigh. Isabella could hear girlish grunts of frustration among all the pounding. A concrete pillar was the

only thing that separated her from the undersized mass murderer now. She rounded it.

The girl was thumping a soda-vending machine with her fist.

“Give me one!” she said. “Give me one, you damn thing!” She noticed Isabella peripherally and spun in her direction with a guilty gasp. “I don’t have any money. I was gonna put some in later when I got some, I promise. And I’m sorry for saying *damn*—and *gonna* too.”

Isabella smiled. She didn’t mean to, but the girl was so adorably earnest in her contrition she couldn’t help herself. She expunged the smile before a security camera could zoom in on it.

The girl looked her over, in awe of her. “You’re tall and pretty.”

“Thank you. You’re rather pretty too.”

The girl grinned. A wide gap in her upper dentition was awaiting a second set of teeth. She grew serious. “Can you get a can out? The man said he’ll die if he doesn’t have a drink.”

“What man?”

The girl stepped closer to Isabella and whispered, “The smelly man around the corner.”

Isabella clicked her tongue. Clearly, the police had failed to evacuate everyone. “Stay here. I shall return presently.”

“Okay,” the girl said, eager to please.

Isabella was reluctant to leave the girl, but she had to make sure that all civilians were well clear of the station before she subdued her, provided that was necessary, or possible.

xx xy xx

A sock-covered foot poking out from between a split in the tip of an old brown shoe was the first glimpse Isabella got of the “smelly” man. He was a drunken vagrant lying with his head propped against a metal garbage receptacle, arms and legs splayed, as though he had been knocked out by a heavyweight pugilist. He did indeed smell,

noxiously so. “Sir, you’re in grave danger,” she said. “You need to leave here immediately.”

He gazed up at her, eyes bobbing in alcohol. “Where’s my li’l darlin’?” he slurred. “Said she was gonna get me a drink. I’m as dry as a rock in the sun.”

Isabella disapproved of drunkards. They would rather wallow in their own filth than face their responsibilities like men. Still, she had no choice but to carry the noisome fool to safety—fleetly and while holding her breath.

She stepped toward him to gather him up, then halted. Her gaze fixed on the far side of a flight of stairs. “You can come out,” she sighed.

Gonzalez skulked out from behind the stairs. He could’ve been mistaken for a Mexican street pimp, with his wraparound dark glasses, baggy purple jumpsuit, slicked-back ponytailed hair, and neck tattoo of a skeleton in a sombrero, ravishing a terrified white woman. “Hola,” he said unctuously, doing to Isabella in his mind what the skeleton was doing to the woman.

She scowled. “Being part of a superhero team does not give one license to spy on its members for one’s adolescent gratification.”

He grabbed his crotch and jiggled it at her. “Nothing adolescent about this, puta.”

Rage welled on her incomparable face. He cocked an ear toward her, hand cupped against it, and said, “Yes?” daring her to say something that would have severe repercussions for her.

She drew a calming breath, then motioned to the vagrant. “Take him out of here. *Now.*”

Gonzalez whidded up to the vagrant so briskly that Isabella lost sight of him momentarily. He was ill-prepared for the stench that assaulted his nostrils. “Ay caramba! Mierda y orines!” Grimacing, he hefted the vagrant, who growled in protest, into his arms. Then the two of them vanished. A wind gust kicked up in their wake shoved a Styrofoam coffee cup onto the subway tracks.

The girl was waiting worriedly at the soda-vending machine when Isabella returned. "I'm not in trouble, am I?" she said.

"No. Of course not." Isabella hated telling a lie, but in view of the circumstances, it was a necessary one.

"Did you get the man a drink?"

"A friend of mine is getting him a nice refreshing one."

The girl beamed sweetly. For a merciless engine of death, she was surprisingly compassionate. Isabella would have to wait to find out why the girl's penchant for homicide was restricted to people of color, for she had a more pressing concern: to get her out of Cosmopolis to avoid any further killing.

She hunkered down so they were face to face. "My name's Isabella. What's your name?"

"My name is . . ." The girl anxiously rummaged her brain. "I . . . I don't know."

Isabella smiled reassuringly. "That's all right. I forget things on occasion too."

"I think it starts with an A."

"Is it Alice?"

The girl shook her head.

"Anne? Anna?"

"Um, I think it sounds like Anna."

"Annabelle? Analise?"

"Anastasia!" the girl declared excitedly. "My name's Anastasia!"

"That's a lovely name. Anastasia, may I tell you a secret?"

"Yes."

"I'm the queen of a magic island kingdom."

Anastasia's eyes widened in wonder. "Really?"

"How would you like to accompany me there as my special guest?"

"Can I?" Anastasia said breathlessly.

“You may.”

Anastasia beamed with joy.

Isabella knew that stealing her away to Katharos would be viewed by the government as an act of treason, but there was no telling how many innocent people might perish if she were to go on a rampage in the city. Katharos lay thousands of miles away and its population was uniformly white. She would do no harm there. Of that, Isabella was certain, though she wasn't altogether certain why.

A rush of air teased their long locks. Something massive was lumbering toward them through Platform 1's tunnel. It couldn't be a train, for the policeman had said that all rail services had been canceled. Elephantine footfalls made the platform vibrate.

“It's a big fat nigger,” Anastasia said, her face milling around a look of ungovernable hatred. “A *really* big fat nigger.”

Isabella stood, gripped Anastasia's shoulders, and met her gaze sternly. “Anastasia, you must not kill any more colored people, do you understand?”

Anastasia was unmoved by the plea. As much as Isabella was loath to resort to bribery, the urgency of the situation, underscored by the growing vibrations from the person of color's piledriver tromps, made it the nearest port in a raging storm. “Let me deal with this individual. Or I won't take you to my magic island.”

Disquiet softened Anastasia's stubborn demeanor. Oh how she wanted to go to the magic island.

“Now, get behind me,” Isabella said. “And don't say anything—especially not racial epithets.”

“What's a racial epithet?”

“Words like . . .” Isabella placed a hand over her mouth, “*nigger*.”

“Why? Niggers are niggers.”

“Just do as I say.”

Anastasia tramped reluctantly behind Isabella.

Loud, sonorous wheezing echoed inside the tunnel. An enormous shadowy mass almost as big as the tunnel itself rumbled out of the

inbound opening and turned ponderously toward Isabella. It was a 15-foot tall, impossibly fat black man who must have weighed several tons and was built like a huge balloon with bloated sausage-like arms and stumpy legs obscured by an immense spherical gut, somewhere beneath which was a pair of black shorts covering his privates, assuming he had them. His relatively small head was a compressed ball of fat with bulbous cheeks that pressed hard against the corners of his mouth, squashing it into a permanently agape O. The upward pressure of his cheeks and the downward pressure of his Neanderthal brow had turned his eyes into narrow slashes in danger of being hidden by meaty folds above and below them. A phallic bob of frizzy hair stood erect on his shaven head.

Isabella was nonplussed. The science of genetic engineering had become the domain of devils.

Ghost Gal, an Exceptional with the power of intangibility, drifted out of the tunnel and positioned herself in the air, beside the Black Balloon. Her pallid, translucent skin and blanched eyes, which lacked pupils and irises, could not mask her unmistakably negroid bone structure. She smiled vacuously. This was the only expression she seemed capable of making.

“We’ve come for the little white bitch,” the Black Balloon said in a hoarse, incongruously high-pitched voice, between asthmatic wheezes.

“She’s in my charge,” Isabella said. “Your presence is not required here.”

The Black Balloon pointed at Anastasia via Isabella. “Gonna break every bone in her fuckin’ body. Fuckin’ nigger-killin’ skank.”

“Nigger-killin’ skank,” Ghost Gal said, her anime-girl voice as vacuous as her smile.

Isabella feared that the next thing she said would fall on black ears, but her sense of civic duty prompted her to say it, anyway. “Both of you need to leave while you still can.”

The Black Balloon dragged in a labored breath as if trying to suck a marble column through a drinking straw. “Nothin’ hurts me. I fuck nuclear bombs in the ass.”

“In the ass,” Ghost Gal said.

He waved for Isabella to step aside. “Now, outta my way, white cunt.”

Isabella felt a flash of heat on her back. Anastasia was ablaze and ascending, a sight that was strange, beautiful, and unnerving in equal parts. The heat coming off her was deadly. Isabella hurriedly put some distance between them. Although she had bullet-resistant skin and healed superhumanly fast, she was not invulnerable. If she was injured severely enough, she would die, and she had no doubt that Anastasia could cause such an injury.

“Fire don’t scare me, bitch,” the Black Balloon wheezed. He spread his tree-trunk arms out wide, inviting Anastasia to attack him.

“C’mon, give it your best shot.”

“Your best shot,” Ghost Gal said.

“Anastasia,” Isabella said, shrinking back from the heat, “you must come away with me *now!*”

Anastasia wasn’t listening to anyone or anything.

Her fire built to a terrible intensity. Soda cans in the vending machine burst, spewing their fizzy guts out, and overhead lights imploded, showering the platform in glass.

Outside, policemen fled the station entrance. The hurricane-force draughts being sucked into the subway by the oxygen-gobbling conflagration inside would have swept them to their deaths had they remained at their posts.

Unaffected by the heat and the wind, the Black Balloon sneered, not physically, for he was unable to change the O-configuration of his mouth, but mentally. Ghost Gal was unaffected too. Her intangibility rendered her immune to physical phenomena.

Isabella was not so fortunate. She staggered about in the pummeling gusts, her consciousness ceding vital ground to the heat.

Something akin to a blast wave scooped her up and pitched her backward across Platform 1, all the way to the curved wall on the far side of Platform 2, pinning her against it. A cushion of air softened the impact. Then what looked like shimmering, frosted glass appeared in front of her, and immediately the temperature plunged to a tolerable level.

The Black Balloon chortled at her predicament, a noise similar to air blown flatulently through a trumpet. He gave Anastasia the goading arm spread again. “C’mon, you short-assed ho, let’s see whatcha got.”

Anastasia had become a roiling blizzard of white fire. A mouth and eyes made of the inkiest patch of the universe materialized in the flames. “NIG-GERRRRRRRRRR!” the mouth screamed. Then with a percussive roar that convulsed the subway, the flames shot inside the Black Balloon’s mammoth gut in the form of a giant broadhead arrow, vanishing completely.

The Black Balloon grinned a cocksure grin, if only in his mind. “Nothing can harm . . .” he began to say, but stopped when an excruciating pang of doubt called his invulnerability into question.

“Nothing can harm,” Ghost Gal repeated mindlessly.

Lightning-bright flashes lit the round expanse of the Black Balloon’s belly from the inside out, and his impervious hide bulged like bubbling tar. A soul-chilling scream stretched his O-shaped gob into an elongated oblong. It was truncated by a scalding geyser of blood and bile. Shafts of unworldly light pierced his gut, slicing effortlessly through concrete, metal, and anything else they struck. And then his gut exploded. Not with a reverberating BOOM, but with a sodden, muffled BLORRRRRP. Bloody, flaming chunks of his flesh and internal organs slapped the subway walls, floor, and ceiling. The force of the explosion sheared his head from his neck. It hung against his back, held there by a single flap of skin. Divested of most of its bone structure, his body collapsed in on itself, forming a goodly pile of smoldering blubber on the subway tracks.

Isabella's invisible bonds released her. The station had gone from a crematory to a sauna; the heat was troublesome but far from fatal. She returned to Platform 1. Anastasia, sans fire, glittering pink slippers flush with the platform, crinkled her nose contemptuously at the disseminated Black Balloon. "He was annoying."

"You killed Quintrill," Ghost Gal said, scouring his bits and pieces. "He was my boyfriend."

Isabella stepped in front of Anastasia, deliberately blocking her view of Ghost Gal. "Anastasia, it's imperative that we—" She was interrupted by a brief, painful pressure on the small of her back, then on her left leg, then on her stomach, then on her shoulder blade, then on her right leg. Cognizant of what was happening and who was making it happen, she spun at an aeronautic clip, arms extended outward like propeller blades, and clotheslined her attacker. It was Gonzalez. He snapped into visibility and backflipped upside down against a concrete pillar so forcibly his spine broke with a resounding CRACK. He flopped to the platform, dead.

Isabella beheld his corpse. It was more than a corpse. It was a declaration of war bedecked in purple. A declaration of war she had made on the multiracial United States on behalf of the racially homogenous island kingdom of Katharos. It mattered not that the declaration had been made purely as an act of self defense. All that mattered was that it had been made.

"Mrs. Isabella, you're bleeding," Anastasia said, pointing at her cuts.

Isabella gave them a cursory glance. "Fear not, little one, they'll be gone presently." She picked up a knife streaked in her blood. She had never seen its like. Its gleaming double-edged blade was atom sharp and fashioned from an unknown metal that resisted her efforts to bend it. How did a lowlife like Gonzalez come to possess such a fine weapon? Moreover, why did he try to kill her with it? Was he merely obeying the capricious dictates of his Ichor-altered DNA, or was he following someone's orders?

She sheathed the knife in the hem of her skirt, then took Anastasia by the hand. “Anastasia, you and I are going to fly out of the city. I don’t want you to release my hand until we’ve reached my island kingdom. Do you understand?”

Anastasia nodded, scarcely able to speak for excitement. “Yes.”

Ghost Gal, tangible now, was standing on the platform, holding a piece of the Black Balloon, hubbed around a cocked, bloodshot eye, searching for other pieces of him. “We can get them to put him back together. You seen his nose anyplace?”

Isabella whispered something in Anastasia’s ear, then together they flew up the stairs and out of the subway.

xx xy xx

The street outside Namimba Station was deserted. But the air above it was a different story. As Isabella and Anastasia climbed upward, they were confronted by a host of Exceptionals. Scores of them. And the Exceptionals had company. A group of Super-powered whites. Including Charles’ second cousin, Lara, the superheroine formerly known as Starburst.

Lara was a miscegenating trollop who could have passed as Anastasia’s older sister. Her garb reflected her loose morals. A maroon skirt and a black G-string scarcely amounted to chalk marks on the Sistine Chapel, and a gossamer-thin azure top did little more than paint her breasts blue. Only a maroon cape lent her the tiniest shred of dignity.

Evidently, white superheroes on the political left were exempt from the no-costume law.

On the street below, non-flying Exceptionals were amassing. They had scurried out of the alley ways and other shadowy hiding places. The Onna-Bugeisha was with them. Her bosom heaved with the feverish anticipation of a virgin bride on her wedding night; she was

about to engage the world's greatest female warrior, Queen Isabella of Katharos, in mortal combat.

Isabella cursed herself for a fool. The signs of imminent war had been all around her, yet she had chosen to ignore them while indulging a fable entitled the brotherhood of man. A truly fantastic fable. How fantastic was readily apparent by the hatred running rampant on the faces of the Exceptionals. Hatred as genetic as blood.

Anastasia let go of Isabella's hand and turned dark into daylight. This should have been a sign to the enemy forces that their victory in the looming battle was not a foregone conclusion; however, apart from some worried glimmers here and there, they were blithely confident in their numerical superiority.

Eyes locked on Lara, Isabella drew the knife from her skirt. The traitor would be the first to die at her hand.

But not the first to die.

For just then a thunderous rifle shot cleaved the air, and a bullet lodged itself in the gray-furred brow of what Isabella reckoned to be a half man, half dog with flapping batlike wings. The chimera issued a confounded chuff, then spiraled frantically to the street. The ground-based Exceptionals gave it a wide berth.

Wearing his famous black, cowled costume, replete with cape and gloves that bore silvery, fiendishly sharp claws he could extend and retract at will, Nightclaw arose from a crouched sniper's position on the roof of a nearby apartment building for all the world to see. He could have employed any one of a range of sophisticated weapons to kill the Exceptional man-dog-bat but had elected to use an Enfield bolt-action .303 instead, a rifle indelibly associated with white Europeans. He too had declared war on the current world order.

It was uncharacteristic of Isabella to succumb to distraction while facing an enemy. But succumb she had, if just for a second, which was all the time it took for Lara's super-powered fist to crash into her face with the force of a railway gun shell.

CHAPTER 8

So where was Nibiru? It had to be around here somewhere. How could he have missed it? It was supposed to be ten times the size of Earth, for crying out loud.

He checked his navigation device, which, according to the NASA scientist who'd given it to him, worked by detecting X-rays emitted by pulsars to provide the celestial equivalent of GPS coordinates. He was in the right spot.

So where was Nibiru?

Maybe their orbit calculations were out. Way out.

There was only one thing for it. Moving in an outward spiral at greater than lightspeed, he searched 10,000,000 miles in every direction, but Nibiru was a no show. If he were a cynical sort, he might be inclined to deem Nibiru a never was.

He turned and commenced the long journey back to Earth.

CHAPTER 9

Isabella sailed through a double-glazed window on the 48th floor of an office building, taking out a mahogany desk and a shiny, egg-colored wall which collapsed in a noisy cascade of bespoke glass, flew backward through a procession of cubicles, splitting a high-volume copier in twain, clipped a steel support column, shattering her left elbow, then slid along a polished concrete floor, bashing her head against the wall at the far end as she came to a full stop.

She sat up straight. It wasn't becoming for a lady of her royal bearing to lie slumped on the floor like a discarded rag doll. Blood dripped onto her lap in a broken stream. Lara's punch had split her lip. It had also concussed her, judging by the way the building was wobbling. The structure quickly stabilized.

Her return to lucidity gave her a full appreciation of the brutal pain grinding her elbow to a fine powder. She allowed herself a terse groan. The pain subsided as her healing factor repaired the damage.

Brilliant blue sparks crackled off a shorting wire, lighting the riven copier and its surrounds, while a potent draught bustled down the center of the floor, tossing sheets of A4 into the air.

Silhouetted against a backdrop of cataclysmic light flashes, Lara stood inside the glassless window. Her cape thrashed frenziedly in the wind.

Isabella reached for the knife. It was gone. Lara's prodigious punch must have dislodged it from her skirt. She shot to her feet to do battle but lost her balance and stumbled backward through a glass pane. She plunged 502 feet, a fabulously attractive brick.

Lara flew after her, but when she hit the airspace outside, Isabella was nowhere to be seen.

She'd been had.

Isabella yanked her up by the hair, spun her around, seized her throat. "I have a good mind to wring your Quisling neck," she said through clenched teeth.

"Fuck . . . you . . . Eva," Lara said, choking.

Isabella presumed that *Eva* was a derogatory allusion to Hitler's paramour. She maintained her girder-pretzeling grip on Lara's throat. She had to. Lara would initiate her starburst effect, a lethal explosion of laser light, if she let her draw a breath. Isabella learned this from a dossier Nightclaw had compiled on Lara. Nightclaw had dossiers on every super-powered white person. Charles and her included. The dossiers contained detailed information on each super-powered person's weakness—all of them had one—which he could exploit to defeat them, or kill them if necessary, in the event they went rogue. She and Charles had protested the act of betrayal. She more than Charles. Yet here she was taking advantage of the sort of information she had so roundly condemned. Mr. Amazing said life was a constant struggle to minimize one's hypocrisy.

Her urge to do Lara in had subsided. A good thing too. Charles would be most displeased if she killed a blood relative of his, traitor or not. But she would give her a sound thrashing.

"MUDDAFUGGAHHH!"

The garbled truck-exhaust of a voice belonged to either an exceedingly muscular black man or an exceedingly masculine black woman. Isabella wasn't sure which. A gold lame halter top adorned the flying androgyne's sinewy chest, and a matching pair of hotpants kept its sex a secret. The underwhelming head of hair it possessed was pulled back in a stream of tight curls that ended in a fan of dreadlocks at its shoulder blades.

"LEDGOHER MUDDAFUGGAHHH!"

"You want me to release her?" Isabella said. "Your wish is my command." She spun Lara overhead blurringly fast, then launched her at the androgyne.

“MUDDAFUG—”

Lara hit the Exceptional like a karate chop from God. They careered as one over the tops of some unsightly architecture with sufficient velocity to dump them in Canada. Their disorienting rate of departure triggered Lara’s starburst effect. The Exceptional copped its full brunt. She/he/it fell to earth as a trail of sparkling ashes that lit a small patch of the night sky, then flickered out.

xx xy xx

Isabella returned to where she’d been when Lara blindsided her. A flaming semi-human head soared past her, gnashing its sharkish teeth listlessly, the final order issued by its dying brain. A flaming leg pursued it. A flaming torso with flaming, flailing entrails pursued the leg.

Screams. Crashes. Explosions. The grand opera of mayhem rose from the street below. Anastasia, transmogrified into empyreal fire, had the hulking brute by one of his boxy ankles and was whirling him with ease, merrily spouting racial epithets, at 20-plus Exceptionals encircling her at a leery distance on the ground. They comprised only a third of their original number. The other two thirds were dripping off the facades of surrounding buildings and smoldering on the street and the sidewalks.

Further down the street, Nightclaw was in a defensive posture on the roof of a motor vehicle. A pair of flying Indian twins, conjoined below their necks, turned out in a charity-shop-brown suit gazed down on him haughtily. “Permit us to introduce ourselves, sir,” they said in unison. “We’re Call Center. Do you know why we were given this name?”

“Paki Rapists was already taken?”

Nightclaw’s quip rocketed over their bulbous, deformed heads.

“No. Because when we call, you must listen.” They threw their heads back and cackled, as if the dubious logic behind their name was

a sublime joke. Then they focused on Nightclaw, opened their mouths preposterously wide, and issued a deep thrumming screech which manifested as a series of merging concentric rings that would have blasted Nightclaw into mush if he hadn't rolled smartly to his right. He was injured. Isabella could tell by his slower reaction time. He must have been ambushed by Exceptionals earlier.

She dived toward him to render him assistance, when a black man dressed like the Norse god of thunder intercepted her. His horned helmet sat atop of a gargantuan ball of frizzy hair and was held in place by an elastic band anchored to his chin. He was clutching a large platinum bung hammer, or something akin to it. "Where d'ya think you're goin'?" he said, flashing a set of gold teeth.

She eyed him in disbelief. "Who on earth are you?"

He laughed derisively as though she'd asked the stupidest question imaginable. "Who am I? I'm Thigger, the god o' fuck yo mama!"

The hammer powered up with a menacing crackle. Effulgent tendrils of plasma cavorted upon its platinum head. He spun it over his horned helmet, then chucked it at her with super-powered fury. It sliced through the air like an Exocet.

Isabella hugged sidewalk at the last possible instant. The hammer skirred over her back, making her hair flutter, and took out the front entrance of a nearby office building. What sounded like the rapid succession of explosions in a controlled demolition echoed from within the edifice as the hammer smashed its way up through 68 floors. It blasted through the roof. A lofty spire surmounting the building toppled over with a jarring screech, then plunged to the street. The hammer beat it there.

One unbelievably sharp turn later, the hammer was speeding toward Isabella.

She zoomed straight upward.

The hammer zoomed straight upward.

She veered hard right.

The hammer veered hard right.

She plunged down and then swooped up and over in a tight loop. The hammer did likewise. Worse, it was gaining on her.

Seeing how she couldn't outmaneuver it, her only other option was to try to outlast it, a stratagem that hinged upon its power source being more limited than her endurance.

She headed straight for the upper atmosphere, flying faster than she had ever flown. Alas, the distance between her and the hammer remained the same. Pain beset her. Her body was remonstrating the tremendous stress she was placing on it.

She glanced back. The hammer was keeping up.

She entered the Stratosphere. Unlike Charles, she could not fly beyond it without freezing to death, nor survive indefinitely without oxygen.

Seconds later, the nightmarish cold of the mesosphere bailed her up, demanding she turn around forthwith. She did.

The hammer altered course, tailing her into a suicidally swift descent.

Gravity was on her side now. Unfortunately, being a bipartisan force of nature, it was also on the hammer's side.

Her failed stratagem was her only stratagem. The only other course of action she could think of taking was to dive into the ocean depths in the hope that the water would slow the hammer to a stop.

Communicator. The communicator.

Did she still have it on her person, or did she lose it in her fight with Lara?

She still had it.

Now she had a second stratagem. That was if she could raise Nightclaw on the communicator and if his hadn't been mislaid or damaged in battle. "This is Isabella," she said into hers. "Can you hear me?"

Static.

She glanced over her shoulder. Less than 30 feet separated her and the hammer.

“This is Isabella. Can you hear me?”

More static.

Then a voice half-buried in electronic noise said, “Y-s.”

“Lure the Negro in the Viking costume onto the street.”

Nightclaw said something too faint to be heard above the interference. Isabella assumed he’d acceded to her request.

If he’d heard it.

She sped inexorably toward the ground, where either salvation or an abrupt, life-snuffing halt was expecting her. God only knew.

Through a thin, misty layer of cloud, she saw the twinkling lights of Cosmopolis. The cloud dissipated, revealing the tops of the tallest buildings and the illuminated grid of the streets far below.

Otherworldly fire swept like napalm along one of the thoroughfares. She tacked toward the flames. The cold air sluicing over her bare flesh felt exhilarating.

Cosmopolis grew rapidly bigger as a mirrored sky-reaching mosaic tracked the final moment of her and the hammer’s meteoric fall from heaven. The wind hollering in her ears dampened the sound of cars exploding and windows shattering.

Thigger was where she wanted him to be. He and Call Center were fighting Nightclaw, bookending him, in the middle of the street. When Nightclaw descried her, he threw a flash grenade into the air, distracting them long enough for him to dash outside its blast range. Left insensate by the grenade’s blinding bang and deafening flash, the two Exceptionals were easy targets.

Isabella slowed a fraction. She did this to facilitate a 90-degree turn just above the intersection of the air and the asphalt and to let the hammer get a couple of body lengths closer to her. The hammer turned too.

She sped up.

So did the hammer.

Thigger and Call Center raced toward her, strapped to a rocket sled. Six feet from them, she sped into a back-breaking upward turn.

Failing to match her maneuverability, the hammer slammed into the two Exceptionals, sending them flying through the display window of an upmarket ladies' shoe store and as many concrete walls they required to cancel their momentum. VAROOOOOOM. A fireball erupted from a sushi bar behind the store. They'd struck a gas main.

Isabella returned to earth. *Exhausted* didn't do justice to how she felt. It was as if her lifeforce had been vacuumed out of her body. She staggered this way and that, her legs objecting to the weight they had to support. She gripped a street sign pole to steady herself.

Nightclaw darted into an alley, chased by the foppish white superhero formerly known as Bliss, though more commonly known by his nickname, Soy Boy, an appellation coined in response to the idiotic grin, a characteristic of young, low-testosterone males, his super power put on his victims' faces. A trio of Exceptionals, two airborne, one scrambling on all fours, accompanied Bliss.

An awful commotion called Isabella's attention back to the shoe store. A compendium of deep red cuts and pale purple bruises, Thigger thundered out of the store, hammer in hand, blustering with profanity. He set eyes on Isabella. Livid snorts dilated his flary nostrils, and fuming huffs blew raspberries between his inner-tube lips. He prepped the hammer for flight.

Isabella doubled over, on the verge of crumpling to the sidewalk. There would be no dodging the hammer this time.

Thigger released the hammer. It ripped unwaveringly toward Isabella's head. She braced herself for its ruinous impact. It got within a sneeze of her, when a whooshing streak of light plucked it out of the air. Anastasia had it. She showed it off to Isabella, as if she had caught a baseball slugged into a grandstand.

"Gimme back my hammer, bitch!" Thigger said.

Obliging him, Anastasia delivered it in person at unlockable speed, splitting his big black mouth every which way and knocking in his absurdly white teeth as she shoved it down his throat, which bulged and ruptured, jettisoning blood in thick spurts, to make room

for both ends of its blocky head. His arms windmilled and his legs did a rubbery, spastic version of the twist before suddenly falling limp.

Anastasia lifted the hammer and Thigger with it above her head, then drove it down through the street, creating a localized earthquake that flung Isabella and the Exceptionals upward and tore and split the asphalt for two blocks in each direction. The atonal sing-song of car alarms, near and distant, and the roaring hiss of a burst fire hydrant hurried after the explosive rumble.

Anastasia yanked the hammer out of Thigger's pulped remains. Claspings each end of its head, she held it tauntingly out to the Exceptionals littering the street and with a clap of her hands reduced the head to a cloud of conductive polymer.

"They aren't paying me enough for thissssssss sssssssshit."

The cadaverous, racially elusive Exceptional who voiced the complaint rattled to his feet. His ghostly flesh and red, reptilian eyes were complemented by a black top hat and coat-tailed suit, the 19th century undertaker's ensemble of choice. He about-faced, crossed his arms over his sunken chest and, bouncing five stories high like a grotesque pogo stick, took his leave.

Isabella emancipated her posterior from the sidewalk. Anastasia crossed the ravaged street to her, lugging a pained look of boredom. "Mrs. Isabella, can we please go to your island now?"

An Exceptional in a cybersuit displaying his bearded Moroccan dial in animated form on a Plexiglass visor fired up the suit's jets and launched himself at Anastasia's back. Three blazing mesh screens materialized behind her. The first and coarsest stripped the Moroccan of his suit. The second and finer stripped him of his flesh. The third and finest stripped him of everything that was left.

Isabella marveled at Anastasia's powers. There seemed no limit to them.

A giant video screen on a building across the street flashed to life. The super-powered stoush in the heart of Cosmopolis was being covered in a live report on Fox News. Isabella looked up at the screen.

A female Eurasian reporter was in a traffic control center, watching the action via a bank of monitors linked to a network of traffic cameras. One of the monitors showed Nightclaw standing over a bald, wizened midget in a loose-fitting Paragon costume, begging for mercy on bended knees. He popped two of his claws and sunk them into the midget's eyeballs. Blood gushed out of the orbs. The midget slumped forward, dead.

Isabella was incredulous. Nightclaw had his failings, but murdering the afflicted was not one of them.

On another traffic monitor, she and Anastasia, both aloft, were playing a game of catch with the drunken vagrant. Blood and mucous spilled from his nose and mouth, and one of his legs, broken in multiple places, swung with revolting limpness as they threw him back and forth. The murderous pain had knocked him out.

Anastasia squealed in excitement when she saw herself on the colossal screen. "Look, Mrs. Isabella, it's me! Look!"

Meanwhile, in the news report, Isabella pressed the vagrant's head between her hands and twisted it 180 degrees. She let his lifeless body drop to the street.

"Heyyyyyyy," Anastasia said with annoyed disappointment. "You didn't do that." She turned angrily to Isabella. "They're telling fibs." She burst into flames, roared up to the screen, and cast it into Gehenna. The smoking, blackened outcome received a vitriolic *nyaah nyaah nyaah*.

Something in the distance caught Anastasia's eye. It was an enormous Ferris wheel lit up like Times Square on New Year's Eve. "Wowwww," she said in a hushed, spellbound voice. Unable to resist the meretricious attraction, she made for it with alacrity.

Isabella didn't have time to chase after her. Now at full strength, she had to return to Katharos Island with the utmost dispatch. Within hours UN troops would be deployed to commandeer it into the modern age of tolerance through force of arms. Her misdeeds, real and contrived, would see to that. However, before she departed, she

was honor bound to assist Nightclaw in his fight with Bliss and the three Exceptionals. Hopefully, it wouldn't take long.

“BEASTY BOY! BEASTY BOY! BEASTY BOY!”

What now?

A huge mocca-colored mass was charging her way. This new abomination was built like a prehistoric rhinoceros but with massive rabbit-like legs that propelled it forward in a great hopping motion. Apart from a stupendous horn that sat above its brow, its substantial head was decidedly mongoloid. “BEASTY BOY! BEASTY BOY! BEASTY BOY!” it vociferated with the joie de vivre of someone too dimwitted to know he was making an embarrassing spectacle of himself.

The onna-bugheisha sat astride Beasty Boy, trilling a lively Japanese ditty. If Isabella had been a student of pop culture, she would have recognized it as the theme to *Psychodemic*, a stylishly violent anime TV series.

She needed to end this quickly. She bulleted toward Beasty Boy, locked her hands around the tip of his horn, pressed her feet against his rock-hard head, and, using his bounding momentum and her incredible strength, flipped him backfirst onto the street. The asphalt detonated from the seismic impact.

She landed gracefully on her feet, scanned for the Onna-Bugeisha. The Onna-Bugeisha was missing. Was she lying flattened and very much dead beneath Beasty Boy?

No.

She was standing on the sidewalk, smiling her obsessive smile. She pressed a button on her naginata. A thin, green gel oozed out of a tube inside the staff and covered the weapon's curved blade. Isabella surmised it was a poison designed to neutralize her healing factor.

ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZAAAAKKK!!!

A bolt of electricity struck her from behind. Juddering violently, she glowed like Saint Elmo's fire as a gigawatt of skin-frying energy

racked her body. She collapsed to her hands and knees, smoke billowing off her.

She slowly grew aware of a ginger-haired white woman stooped over her, belting out *racist* and *hater* and other oft-sung lyrics from the liberal songbook. The woman was fitted from head to toes in a dull gray sylphish bodysuit which buzzed and popped with snaking lines of electricity. Isabella recognized the woman. She knew her name—her *superheroine* name. Zap.

“There’s only one race!” Zap screamed into Isabella’s face, speckling it with spit. “And that’s the human race! So why don’t you just fucking die, you dirty, stuck-up white supremacist asshole bitch?! Fuck, I hate you! Fucking fascist scum of the earth! I’m gonna blast your fucking eyes out, blast them out right now, you great big cocksucking cunt!”

Zap stepped back and extended her hands toward Isabella’s face as she readied to fire a devastating blast of electricity. “Fuuuuuck you.”

Shunk.

Zap’s head flew sideways off her neck. Blood jetted out of her carotid arteries. She remained erect for a second before buckling to the ground.

The Onna-Bugeisha glared down at Zap’s twitching body as she straightened up her *naginata*, the blade of which was red with blood. *Queen Isabella is mine!* her indignant visage screamed.

Isabella was still feeling the effects of Zap’s attack. Try as she did, she couldn’t get up.

The Onna-Bugeisha clapped her hands impatiently, urging Isabella to get a wriggle on, in a raging torrent of Japanese.

Isabella toiled into a stooped position. There was no way she could fight her opponent on all fours. The Onna-Bugeisha mockingly adopted the same stance, chattering and waving her finger disapprovingly as though rebuking a naughty child.

Isabella sensed the unseen presence she'd detected earlier. It was studying her like a trainee surgeon observing a complex, delicate operation. What did it want, now of all times?

Tired of Isabella's non-compliance, the Onna-Bugeisha kicked her under the chin astonishingly hard. Isabella somersaulted in reverse through the air, flinging blood and teeth from her mouth, and crash landed on the far side of Beasty Boy, who was embedded horn-up in the street and, thankfully, either deceased or unconscious. She lay helpless on her back, jaw broken, pelvis fractured.

The Onna-Bugeisha strode up, bobbed down, and appraised Isabella dispassionately. Was she able to fight or wasn't she? That was the question. And the answer was no.

With a harrumph, the Onna-Bugeisha stood, then with deliberate precision slashed Isabella's shins with the naginata. The cold sting of its blade gave way to a leaden numbness as the poison shut down her nervous system.

Humming, the Onna-Bugeisha dragged her by the hair to a mailbox and sat her up against it. A bloody mo had formed on her chin. The sticky film had caught a tooth.

The Onna-Bugeisha reappraised her. She pressed the naginata's blade against her temple and asked her a question in Japanese, attaching a cheeky grin to it. Then she pressed the blade against her throat and repeated the routine. Then she pressed it against her stomach, pressed it again and again, as she spoke with the rising inflection of a happy discovery.

Isabella reached behind, grasped the side edges of the mailbox, and fought to stand up. She lost the fight. The Onna-Bugeisha tilted her head and unfurled her bottom lip in feigned sympathy.

A look of patent malevolence came over her. She pivoted into a battle stance and with an argute cry thrust the blade deep inside Isabella's stomach. Blood spilled from the wound. Unsatisfied with her work, she pushed down on the naginata until she had doubled the

length of the cut. She nodded her head, pleased with the finished product, and whisked the blade out.

Gouts of blood fled Isabella's gut. Numb as she was, she could feel her life force fading like warm sunshine on someone lost in the snow.

The Onna-Bugeisha caressed Isabella's face and murmured something that sounded genuinely sympathetic. She dipped her fingers in the blood flow, wiped it on her lips, and kissed Isabella tenderly on the forehead. She left a red imprint which glistened briefly.

Twirling the naginata above her head, at her sides, and behind her, she performed a brief ceremonial dance that climaxed with her pulling off a spectacular triple twist, double backflip and landing in a crouched warrior pose. She then stood before Isabella, bowed respectfully, and tripped off down the street.

A deep sleep, the deepest of all, had come for Isabella. It insisted she go with it, and it would not be denied. Could not be denied. Even somebody as stubborn and stiff-necked as Isabella knew that. But she could forestall it a little while. She had every reason to now; Charles had returned to Earth. He was standing on the opposite side of the street, looking directly at her. What a handsome figure he cut in his superhero costume. *Why so far away, Charles? Come to me. Give me the kiss I've been waiting for.* He must have heard her, because he was striding across the broken blacktop as if his feet weren't touching the ground. *Hurry, Charles. Please hurry.* He was hurrying, but not nearly as fast as she needed him to hurry. *Please, Charles. Just a few more steps. Just a . . .* He got within an arm's reach of her, then all of creation went to black.

PART TWO

A House Divided

CHAPTER 10

It was a freezing cold morning when I saw my father die,” the old woman said. “The guards dragged him naked out of the barracks, into the misty rain and the mud. Mud so deep it came up to his knees. Mud red with the blood of all the Jews who’d been dragged out before him. One by one they were murdered. Their heads bashed in with the guards’ rifle butts. Old, young, crippled, it made no difference to the Nazis. Killing was like sex to them. Once they got a taste of it they wanted more and more. Their Aryan bloodlust was never satisfied. They killed thousands of our people that morning. By the time it was my father’s turn to die, the streets of the camp were paved in dead Jews. Several deep. Oh the horror! As one of the guards raised his butt—his rifle butt—to cave my father’s skull in, there was this godawful thunderclap. I’d never heard anything so loud. The sky above the camp looked like boiling Coca-Cola. Coca-Cola with exploding marshmallows inside. White marshmallows, not those godawful pink ones. Then down it came, a honeyboo spaceship with a big red glowing swastika on it. It descended without making a sound, like an axe murderer sneaking into an orphanage basement. It landed right on top of my father crushing him to death.” She cried imaginary tears. “My poor dear papa. He was so sick, so frail, so persecuted. He didn’t know what hit him. Then the door to the spaceship opened, and out staggered Hitler himself. Dead drunk. So drunk he could barely walk. The guards and the officers sieg-heiled him. He gave them a little salute back, and when he did, his trousers fell to his ankles. He wasn’t wearing any underwear. So there the accursed Führer stood, his teeny shmekel on display for all the world to see. He took that shriveled worm in his hand and he peed and he peed and he peed on

all the murdered Jews lying around him, and then he peed some more. The psycho Nazi bastard was full of it. To think, even in death the precious apple of God's eye had to suffer such a shocking indignity. Hitler was shaking loose the last few drops when Himmler emerged from the spaceship, an underaged catamite on each arm, and said, 'We must away, mein Führer.' Hitler pulled up his trousers and stumbled back into the honeyboo as if he'd just come out from behind a tree on a country road. The psycho Nazi bastard. Seconds later, the honeyboo vanished into the clouds, leaving thousands of Hebrew dead far behind. But the smell. Oh the smell! For as long as I live, I will never get the appalling stench of Hitler's pee out of my nose." She sobbed tearlessly. "Please, God, help me."

The old woman was sitting in an operating chair in a stainless steel room filled with hi-tech medical equipment at least ten years more advanced than what was currently the state of the art. Professor Einhorn, a bearded Jew in his mid-thirties who'd stepped off the cover of a '60s surfing rock album, was parked on a stool beside her, hands in latex gloves, the rest in a lab coat. He grinned. "Did anyone call you on that pile of utter BS?"

"Not a one!"

The stainless steel walls tingled with their braying laughter.

"Oh," the old woman said. "There was one. A reporter from the *Washington Post*. He sidled up to me afterwards and said, 'Was all that true?'"

"And what did you say?"

"I burst into tears and said, 'What do you mean was all that true? Are you trying to start another holocaust?'"

"Then what did he do?"

"He backed away, shaking his head and waving his hands, like a goyim caught cheating on his wife. The next day they sacked the bum."

The walls tingled harder and longer. When the tingling waned, Einhorn swabbed the old woman's mouth, then placed the swab in an envelope with her name on it. "There. All done."

"That was easy," she said. "What happens next?"

"One of our technicians will insert your DNA in a nanite, and then the nanite will be introduced to a suitable candidate."

Her maze of crosshatched wrinkles squinched into a tangled mess of worry. "You're not gonna put me inside a frigging spear chucker?"

Einhorn sat up straight with fabricated shock. "Lady Maxwell, that's no way for the patron of one of America's leading black charities to talk. Anyone would think you were a racist."

"Hating niggers isn't racist, it's common sense."

"So they say. Do you have a candidate in mind?"

Her beady, limpid eyes assumed a mad intensity as she leaned close to him. "The unsullied daughter of a Southern Baptist preacher. I'll have her hooked on crack and spreading her ass cheeks for spic day laborers in no time."

xx xy xx

On his way to the elevator, Einhorn passed a number of stainless steel rooms. Each was occupied by a DNA donor submitting her- or himself to a vigorous swab. There was political commentator Manny Isaacson. There was feminist author Judy Sackhoff. There was environmentalist David Tyler (Levi). There was street evangelist Pastor Emmanuel Kaplan. There were other, less well-known members of the Jewish community too, Jews whose DNA was no less potent and would prove no less influential than that of their famous brethren and sistren.

The future was a shining Star of David.

xx xy xx

The elevator's digital display read LEVEL 20 in rutilant letters as illumined as the swastika on Hitler's "honeyboo". "Iris scan and voice match required," said a disembodied female voice. Einhorn stepped over to a strip of dark glass recessed in one of the elevator walls, gazed into it, and said, "Professor Joseph Einhorn." The elevator doors opened. As they did, the LED lights in the corridor outside came on. He exited the elevator with a smirk. He had the whole level to himself. He liked that, *adored* it. This was one of the few places in the world, where absolute privacy was guaranteed—his absolute privacy, since he was the only person allowed down here. He could sprint stark naked through the corridors, smeared in his own feces, screaming obscenities and racial sobriquets hysterically, and none would be the wiser. Maybe one day he would.

xx xy xx

The way the small spotlights in the impregnable case in which it stood glinted off its reflective metal components made the suit look godlike. A godlike suit for a god. How appropriate. Of course, he wasn't a god yet; he had just begun his Ichor treatment. But he would be one soon enough. He would be *the* One.

He removed his lab coat, rolled up his left sleeve, and sat back in a heavy-duty operating chair. "Commence Treatment Gamma."

Silently a sleek conglomeration of biomedical machinery descended from above, like the hand of Jehovah reaching down to make physical contact with an inchoate Adam.

CHAPTER 11

The heart of Cosmopolis resembled the bombed-out streetscape of a war-ravaged Middle-Eastern city. There was no point in Charles flying down there to ask one of the FEMA personnel guarding the warzone what had happened, he already knew. Super-powered beings had happened. Super-powered beings exercising their super-powered supremacy. One in particular. A seven-year-old blonde member of the master race, channeling the vengeful spirits of the Third Reich. Perhaps her fiery attacks were payback for Dresden.

What with Ramsgate and now this, public sentiment toward super-powered whites had to be at an all-time low and would likely stay that way for the foreseeable future. If he had entered the rifle sights of the FEMA snipers hunkered on the roofs below, high-caliber bullets would be pinging off him by now.

xx xy xx

A white blood-patched sheet shrouded Isabella's corpse.

"Isabel Alectronea, the super-powered person formerly known as Marvel Woman, was killed fleeing a homicide last night."

Charles stared in shock at his TV.

A black anchorman continued to relay the CNN news report. "After murdering a homeless man, Alectronea blind sided Masako Kasumi, a Japanese Exceptional, who fatally wounded her in self defense. It is unknown at this time why Alectronea killed the man, nor why she attacked Kasumi and befriended the super villain dubbed Missy Death. Bernie Goldblatt, Chief Strategy Officer for the Southern Poverty Law Center, told CNN News that, quote,

Alectrona's White Nationalist roots are the key to understanding her actions.”

Although he kept looking directly at the TV, Charles didn't see the video footage of well-dressed, normal-looking Exceptionals, with scant regard for their safety, rescuing the public from Isabella's sanguinary clutches. He only saw himself slogging through a lightless world without her.

The report was for the most part a lie. It was what dissidents called false news. Isabella would have rather slit her own throat than harm an innocent member of the public. But the bit about her being dead was true. He knew that much. Isabel was too formidable a presence for anyone to hide her away under lock and key somewhere. That would be like trying to catch the noonday sun in a butterfly net.

He collapsed into a chair. His physical invulnerability could do nothing to stop the excruciating sorrow hacking wildly away at his heart. This was the end. The end of his dream that he and Isabel would one day be man and wife. The end of his belief that the government, despite its endemic corruption and kowtowing to minorities, had the best interests of the people at heart. The end of his hope that things would get magically better all by themselves without his having to do anything but assure everyone that things would get magically better all by themselves. The end.

He gave a sad, demented chuckle. He'd been conned. They'd sent him on a wild goose chase to the other side of the galaxy so he couldn't interfere with their plans to kill white superheroes, starting with Isabel and . . . Brett?

He'd forgotten all about Brett. Had Brett suffered the same fate as Isabel? And what role had the little girl played in the proceedings? What role had she actually played as opposed to the role CNN claimed she'd played? And where was she now?

Tump tump tump tump.

Where was she now?

She was standing on the balcony of his penthouse apartment, knocking on the window and now waving to him.

CHAPTER 12

M*mrrrrrrrcchiiiiiiinnnggonnnnnnn. Mmrrrrrrrcchiiiiiiinnngg-
onnnnnnn.* The voice was dull and garbled, as if it belonged to somebody shouting underwater. *Am I underwater too?* he thought. His head thumped rhythmically as it slapped against something, swung an inappreciable distance, slapped against something again. Blood was weighing it down. *Am I the right way up?*

xx xy xx an

Crocodilian jaws snapping, the Abo thing lunged at Brett, who sprang off the alley wall, dodging it. *Just.* The injuries he'd sustained in the ambush were slowing him.

The Abo thing's snout skidded along the brickwork before its bearlike body twisted into a lumbering course correction. The heavy chain attached to the spiked collar around its neck snaked furiously after it, smashing against and scarring the alley walls. Airborne, the see-through Exceptional side-stepped the metal serpent. Had he not, he would have forfeited several internal organs and the better part of arm.

Brett backed up against the dead end. The Abo thing's viscous saliva splattered the left side of his costume. Vaporous specters drifted off it.

Bliss hung in the air near the alley entrance, well out of Brett's reach. His blond, James Brownesque bouffant and black satin, paunch-hugging pajama suit gave him the appearance of an aging homosexual. Which was fitting. He was an aging homosexual. He

grinned gaily. “Come, come, dear boy. Withdrawing to an alley with a dead end is hardly an effective stratagem when one is outnumbered.”

Brett knew what he was doing. Bliss and the two flying Exceptionals had less room to maneuver in the alley, and no one, save Ghost Gal, could sneak up behind him with a brick wall covering his rear.

Of the quartet, Bliss was the only known quantity to Brett and probably the most dangerous. His super power worked best in close quarters, but he was keeping his distance until his associates had softened Brett up for him—to the point of unconsciousness, preferably.

The see-through Exceptional’s green, radioactive heart pulsated balefully. He hovered toward Brett. A wicked smirk sat on his see-through lips. The emerald glow of his heart engulfed his body. He lifted his arms, aimed them at Brett.

Uh-oh.

Surmising he’d be pulped by dual concussive blasts or something equally devastating, Brett dived for his life.

He dived too late.

xx xy xx

His eyelids fluttered open. The world was a watercolor painting left out in the pelting rain. When it sharpened into a more unified composition, he found himself looking at something moving briskly below him. Pavement. Cracks and fissures and weeds festooned its coarse surface.

The weight of his body tugged persistently on his stomach. He was draped over a bough. On a walking tree.

xx xy xx

Shafts of green light roared out from the See-Through Exceptional's fists, blasting twin hubcap-sized holes a yard deep into the bricks and the prestressed concrete beyond them.

Brett's injuries conspired to mistime his dive for life. He dodged one of the shafts, but not the other—not completely. It clipped his left side, slicing off the shoulder of his protective suit and a decent portion of the skin underneath. He spun madly. The Abo thing snapped at his spraying blood.

He careered closer to the see-through Exceptional and the flying super-tranny in the silver bodysuit clutching the Abo thing's leash. Careered closer to Bliss too.

The see-through Exceptional was going full-body green again. He was situated below and in front of Bliss.

Good.

As Brett bumped to a stop on the alley's cobblestone pavement, he fired a clawed grappling hook at the see-through Exceptional from something akin to a black ray gun. The hook affixed itself to the see-through Exceptional's chest, started to beep like a bomb timer in a Hollywood movie. The see-through Exceptional looked down at it anxiously. It ignored him. Emitting a dazzling blue energy pulse, it thrust his see-through ass into Bliss' satin-draped crotch, taking all of the fun out of what could've been a meaningful encounter for the old sodomite.

“That wasn't very nice,” the super-tranny said in a high- and low-pitched voice that matched its morphing sexual organs. One second it had a penis. The next it had breasts and a vagina. The next it had breasts and a penis, though only a malformed tiddler. The telltale bulges in its sexual regions came and went, as if a hyperactive gerbil were running amok in its bodysuit. “Not very nice at all.”

The Abo thing reared up on the spiked-collar end of the leash, exposing its scaly underbelly. Its furry head, which had the rudimentary features of an Australian Aborigine, had been glued on top if its jaws from the nose up. Or that's how it looked. Jaws

swiveling wildly from side to side, flinging ropes of spit on the alley walls, it struggled and strained to get at Brett, who took nearly as much effort to stand up.

The super-tranny smirked and paid out the leash. The Abo thing pounced toward Brett with a raspy bark, but pulled up frustratingly short of him when Super-Tranny yanked tyrannically on its leash.

“I’ll make it sit and stay,” the super-tranny said, “if you drop your pants and hug that wall.”

“The crocobear or your intermittent penis?” Brett said.

The super-tranny’s eyes bulged with indignation, and his crotch bulged with a newly forming willy.

Brett went to deposit a gumball-shaped grenade in the Abo thing’s gaping maw, when a localized earthquake heaved him into the side of a dumpster.

xx xy xx

Did he have anesthesia awareness?

Anesthesia awareness occurs when a general anesthetic renders a patient immobile but not unconscious during a surgical procedure. Although the patient appears to be unconscious, he is awake, yet unable to communicate this to the surgeons. Sometimes the patient feels no pain. Other times the patient feels every knife slice, every saw cut, every drill twist in nerve-jolting detail.

He fell into the former category. He was virtually paralyzed, though pain free. Whether his lack of pain was the product of a souped-up opiate or a state of shock induced by his injuries, he couldn’t say. But if an opiate was responsible, who’d administered it?

The bough supporting his limp form became a human shoulder with the breadth of a mountain range.

xx xy xx

Bliss and the see-through Exceptional lay entwined and inanimate on the cobblestones, as if a busy evening at a public lavatory had gotten way out of hand.

A familiar clanking set Brett on full alert. The Abo thing's chain was on the move.

Ignoring the white-hot railway spike in his lower back, Brett girded himself to fight the Abo thing and its gender-fluctuating handler. It would have to be a quick fight. His waning strength and impaired mobility weren't conducive to a protracted one.

As it turned out, the Abo thing and the super-tranny were indisposed. The Abo thing had the super-tranny's head wedged between its jaws, which grabbed at the bloody noggin in search of optimal purchase. The super-tranny flailed his arms anemically.

SPLUNNNNNCH.

Optimal purchase had been found.

Brett saw no reason to continue fighting the remaining Exceptionals. He had bigger fish to fry. Once he'd checked on Isabella, he would head *home*, apace.

If he made it there.

An invisible Exceptional picked him up and swung him into the dumpster. He hit it so hard it rolled backward. He blacked out, came to within the same second. The invisible Exceptional then seized him by the chest of his Nightclaw costume, lifted him up and, in a voice like a cartoon chipmunk, said, "Whaddaya think of that, pally? Not too shabby for a little guy, eh?"

The invisible Exceptional wasn't invisible. At two inches tall, he was just difficult to see. But Brett could see him now. He looked like one of the cast members of *The Godfather* after a year at a Shaolin monastery.

"I asked you a question, idiot," the two-inch Exceptional said. "And I expect an answer. *Now* would be good."

Brett's metal-slicing claws had been damaged in the ambush; otherwise, the two-inch Exceptional would be impaled on one. He

theorized the mite's power was psionic. This would explain why his chin didn't have a small hole in it. One made by a Lilliputian fist. The two-inch Exceptional must have had a regular-sized fist in mind when he delivered the punch.

As a psionic thinks, so is he.

"You're impressively strong," Brett said.

"Duhhhh," the two-inch Exceptional said with a contemptuous rattle of his head.

"I bet you could give Paragon a run for his money."

"A run for his money? I could kick that son of a bitch's ass!"

"Really?"

"I kicked yours, didn't I?"

"Fair point. How about I give him a call, and you and he can go at it?"

The two-inch Exceptional released Brett. "What, right now?"

"Well," Brett said, dismissing the whipcrack of pain from his jarring landing with a dull squinch, "it'll take him five seconds to get here."

"But I'm not ready."

"No?" Brett smote the two-inch Exceptional into the yawning trap of the Abo thing, which was trotting over to him. "That's a shame."

The Abo thing's jaws clamped shut on the miniscule snack. Seeking a more appetizing repast, it persisted toward Brett, then stopped dead.

Something was wrong.

The Abo thing's jaws sine-waved agitatedly. Uttering a helium-voiced scream of rage, the two-inch Exceptional burst through its snout. "Ooh yuck!" he said, screwing his face up at the super-tranny residue dripping off his Shaolin monk's robe. "Will you take a look at this crap?" He glared at Brett. "You stinking piece of white trash, this is all your stinking fault!"

Brett's injuries clamored for attention. He groped for something, *anything*, from his weapons belt he could use against the two-inch

Exceptional, stumbled against a metal-faced door. Dark red blood leaked copiously from his nose and mouth. He twisted awkwardly, beat the hell out of the air, keeled. He hoped Isabella was faring better.

The two-inch Exceptional buzzed the Abo thing, just out of reach of its snapping choppers. “Can’t catch me! Ugly bastard!”

A figure rose at the mouth of the alley. Bloody sweat rolled down into Brett’s eyes, clouding his vision, so that he could discern only the figure’s outline—and the pulsating green inferno it had for a heart.

Brett tried to stand up straight to meet the vengeance-seeking challenge floating his way, but his committee of fractured bones and internal injuries vetoed the attempt.

Delirium threatened.

The two-inch Exceptional nabbed the Abo thing’s chain and flicked it at Brett psionically hard. The Abo thing cachooned toward him. It forgot all about the two-inch Exceptional. Crunching Brett into digestible nuggets was its lone goal in life now.

Stalactites and stalagmites collided in a torrid, foul-smelling cavern. Brett stared into the disquieting place. Suddenly his subconscious screamed, “Get down!” He didn’t hear the directive, but his brain did. Taking immediate action, it swept his legs out from under him, reuniting him with the cobblestones.

The Abo thing tagged the door with splashes of spit, then scabbled around to where Brett lay in lieu of an emergency room gurney.

“Suffer, pally!” the two-inch Exceptional cackled.

To his right, Brett could see the see-through Exceptional’s green fireglow. To his left, he could see—or at least hear—the two-inch Exceptional’s risible chortling. He couldn’t see the Abo thing. But that didn’t matter. The growing pool of rancid slag on his forehead let him know it was near.

He gazed up at the star-pricked sky. Was that his father’s white Learjet streaking across it? Yes, it was. He, as a boy, was in the passenger cabin with his parents, playing Scrabble, en route to the Bahamas.

Memories. Wonderful memories.

Someone fell out of or perhaps through the Learjet. The someone descended in an upright posture at an incredible rate. The someone was a man. Tall and broad. Soul-fadingly bright. He lit space. He lit time. He . . . *FOOOOOOOOOOOOM*.

The Abo thing yelped.

xx xy xx

It was night when he blacked out. It still was.

A vacant lot gagged on overgrown grass. The wire fence that surrounded it had collapsed in places. Broken windows and decrepit brickwork mazed with cracks and defaced with graffiti typified the warehouse-like buildings in his peripheral vision. He was somewhere in the economically downturned part of town.

The submarine ululations that had blocked his ears were syringed away by the markedly clearer intonations of a hale and hearty and strikingly masculine voice. His innards droned from its resonance.

Marching on while the worldlings sneer
Marching on, I'm marching on
Perfect love casteth out all fear
Marching, marching on

Jigsaw pieces of memory clicked randomly into place. He remembered fighting a gang of Exceptionals in a dark, confined area, but everything after that was a neurological barren waste.

A robe of white, a crown of gold
A harp, a home, a mansion fair
A victor's palm, a joy untold
Are mine when I get there

Where had he heard that song? And who was the man singing it? The man on whose steel beam of a shoulder his 250-pound frame rested with the greatest of ease.

CHAPTER 13

Are you a Nazi? ARE YOU A NAZI?"

Anastasia gazed skittishly up at Charles, who glowered at her from a great height, or what to her seemed like a great height. "No. What's a Nazi?"

"A Nazi's someone who kills colored people because they're colored—or Jewish."

"Jewfish?"

"No! *Jewish!*"

Her face sagged with teary-eyed self-pity. "Why are you yelling at me for? I didn't do anything."

He opened his mouth to set her straight, but only a staccato string of flummoxed gasps came out.

She bowed her head despairingly. "Mrs. Isabella said you were a nice man."

His expression switched to one of serious consideration. "You spoke with Isabel?"

"She said if she couldn't take me to her magic island, I should come see you." She met his gaze with kindled hope. "Do you have a magic island?"

Charles' mind was a demolition derby of cognitive dissonance. In her capacity as a mass-murdering white supremacist, Anastasia had slaughtered an untold number of non-whites, yet Isabel supposedly thought enough of her to invite her to Katharos—and to his place. And in his capacity as a figurehead for American might and glory, he categorically rejected talk of government conspiracies against the people, yet Isabel was a victim of one, as was, it could be argued, the mass-murdering white supremacist herself.

He paced his living room, trying to process everything, to distil it into a truth he could grasp without having a metaphorical brain hemorrhage.

“What’s wrong?” Anastasia asked shyly.

Charles stopped, gave her a prosecutorial look. “Did you have anything to do with the death of that hobo?”

“You mean the smelly man?”

“Did you kill him, yes or no?”

“Noooooo,” she said indignantly, as though his question were a gross insult. “And Mrs. Isabella didn’t either. Just ask her.”

He saddened. “I can’t. She’s dead.”

Anastasia gaped at him. “No she isn’t.”

“Yes she is.”

She burst into tears.

The sight and sound of a crying child struck up a string quartet of compassion inside him. Lord, have mercy. “There, there. Don’t cry. Don’t cry, now.”

“She was nice to me. She said I was pretty.” Her ruddy, tear-washed face searched his for whatever scrap of solace it could find. “Has she gone to heaven?”

At that moment, he knew she wasn’t entirely evil, that goodness and compassion co-existed alongside her abhorrent racial animus. How it co-existed, though, was beyond him.

“Yes,” he said, holding back a flood of sorrow. “Yes. She’s gone to heaven.”

A relieved smile soaked up Anastasia’s tears.

Charles didn’t know what to do with her. Handing her over to the authorities was out of the question. They’d arrest him as well as her. In light of recent, orchestrated events, Michaels was bound to make good on his promise to outlaw white superheroes, if he hadn’t already.

“We can’t stay here,” Charles thought out loud.

Anastasia brightened. “What about Mrs. Isabella’s magic island?”

“Uh, no,” he said absently as he formulated a plan. “No, we can’t go to Katharos.”

“Why not?”

He looked her up and down. “What size are you?”

“I’m four feet two and a half.”

“No, I mean—” He marched over to her and read the price tag on her dress. “Size 7.” His eyes fastened on hers. “I have to go somewhere. Don’t move a muscle till I get back.”

“What if I have to go to the toilet?”

“Then go to the toilet.”

“But you said I can’t move a muscle.”

He had a brain freeze minus the ice cream, then departed the apartment via its balcony.

She scoured the apartment, looking for something to do, when a cry lifted from the street below.

xx xy xx

Charles returned to the apartment minutes later, holding a shopping bag. He’d stolen the items in it from Myers, Cosmopolis’ largest department store. No one saw him commit the crime. He’d moved too fast. But they felt a hair-rustling breeze as he zipped past them.

Anastasia was chatting to a tomcat seated on the kitchen bench top. It stared at her raptly, as if it understood and savored her every word. “I used to have a golden retriever. Her name was Missy. But niggers shot her.”

“What’s that cat doing here?” Charles said. “I thought I told you not to go anywhere.”

“I didn’t. I made him fly up. He was miaowing. He sounded so sad.”

“Look, you can’t . . .” He did a slow burn, then vanished with the tomcat.

Anastasia hit the sulk button.

Charles reappeared. “We have to leave Cosmopolis.” He handed her the shopping bag. “Put these on.”

She reached into the bag and removed a blue-checked flannelette shirt and then a pair of jeans which might as well have been roadkill. “These are jeans,” she said.

“Yes, I know.”

“Boys wear jeans.”

“Girls do too.”

“Girls wear dresses.”

“And jeans.”

“I don’t.”

“Well, you’re going to have to because I need you to wear a disguise.”

“Why?”

“Because everybody on the planet knows what you look like and what you wear.”

“But I don’t want to.”

“I’m not interested in what you want.” He turned her around and pushed her toward a bedroom. “Now, go in there and put them on. And make it snappy.”

When she got to the bedroom door, she stopped to pout at him. No pout had ever been poutier.

xx xy xx

The air outside the apartment was relatively clear of spy drones. Two had whirred past separately, but that was it. If the government knew that public enemy number one was holed up in his place of abode, every available drone and police and military helicopter would be surrounding it by now. So why didn’t the government know?

The bedroom door dawdled open. Head bowed in shame, Anastasia crept out, covered from head to foot in the American Midwest. Her bumper crop of blond hair was siloed in a denim baseball cap, and her feet were shod in brown leather boots. “I’m not a boy,” she muttered. “I’m a girl.”

“There,” Charles said, blind to her misery. “That’s not so bad, is it?”

While she was getting changed, he’d slipped into a blue business suit and donned a gray fedora and a pair of black-framed glasses. She regarded him with puzzlement. “Where’s your disguise?”

“I’m wearing it.”

“But you don’t look any different.”

Chagrined, he vanished, then returned half a minute later. His get-up now comprised overalls, a black beanie, a red-and-blue-checked flannelette shirt, and a fake mustache.

Anastasia giggled. “That mustache looks silly,”

“Does it now?” he fumed. “Well, it’ll have to do because we can’t stay here till I grow one. If that’s OK with you.”

She cringed like a scolded puppy.

He took a deep, calming breath. “What we’re going to do now is take the lift to the basement and then drive away in my car.”

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll find out when we get there.”

“Why don’t we fly? We could get there quicker.”

“Will you stop asking questions and just do as you’re told.”

“Do you have a Mustang?” she asked excitedly.

He winced. “No, I don’t have a Mustang. Now, listen, I want you to keep your head down and not say a word. Understood?”

“Why? Is someone going to shoot me?”

He grabbed her by the arm and hustled her to the door. “Let’s go.”

“You don’t have to worry, ‘cause bullets can’t hurt me. I’ve been shot lots of times by niggers.”

“Stop saying that word.”

“What word? Shot?”

CHAPTER 14

Anthropomorphic animals, a buoyant bear, a whimsical wolf, a decorous dog, and a recalcitrant rabbit, cavorted around him.

He was lying on a narrow, uncomfortable bed—an army cot—that smelled of unwashed socks, taking in an airy room that would have echoed with the joyful squeals of children when its paint was unfaded and its plaster uncracked. A man stood at the end of the cot. A tall, bearded man. A tall, bearded man in a white suit who looked like a young Colonel Sanders. The man’s shoulders were sufficiently broad to necessitate his walking sideways through a door of standard width. He stared down at Brett with eyes that could pierce the Earth’s core. Yet he stared benignly.

“Wakey, wakey,” sang a voice, not the colonel’s. “Hands off snakey.”

Brett knew the voice. He and its owner went way back. He rolled onto his side, in the voice’s direction. He should have felt razor wire twist inside him when doing this, but pain had somehow been locked out of his body.

Arachnoman, the FBI’s second most-wanted superemacist, was kicked back on a well-used sofa, hand roving the ample breast of a lady friend in a string bikini, curled up beside him. A crimson silk robe and a pair of crimson silk boxers constituted his attire. He smirked as though witnessing the payoff to a practical joke he’d set up.

Brett sat up laboriously. “How long have I—?”

“Just a couple of days. Give or take a couple of days.”

Brett took another, closer look at his surroundings.

“Whitley’s Whizzbang Carnival.” Arachnoman said. “FYI you have two cracked ribs, a broken tibia, and a punctured lung.”

“Why aren’t I in pain?” Brett asked, examining his arms for needle marks.

Arachnoman motioned for Colonel Sanders to move away from the cot. The Colonel took five steps back. Then the razor wire twisted.

Arachnoman laughed. “We call him Morphine Man. He can make a third-degree burn feel like a blowjob. The catch is he has to be within 20 feet of you, or the blowjob becomes a buzzsaw.”

Arachnoman motioned for Colonel Sanders to step inside morphine range. Brett waved the Colonel off. Drawing upon his bracka training, he sucked in lung-flooding breaths to help quell the riot in his nerve endings.

“Is Marvel Woman OK?” he said, recalling that he hadn’t fought the Exceptionals alone.

Arachnoman's grin shriveled. He pushed his lady friend off him and sat up straight. “She called me a licentious rogue and an oafish degenerate,” he said in a melancholic voice. “She was a true lady. Great judge of character too.”

Brett closed his eyes for a second and reminded himself that he couldn’t let emotion hamper his plans. To do so would invite failure, and failure would be worse, far worse, than disastrous. He would mourn the loss of Isabella afterward. If there was an afterward.

Arachnoman perked up. “The good news is I’m still alive and kicking. Almost bought it at Ramsgate, but then, who didn’t?” He tilted his head with bogus curiosity. “Were you at Ramsgate?”

“You mean you don’t know?” Brett said, matter of factly.

Arachnoman stared at Brett for a taut moment, then slapped his bare legs and stood up. “I bet you’re just dying for a guided tour.”

Brett had to get back to his mansion and tend to his wounds—and other things—but first he had to find out what Arachnoman was up to and how many white superheroes were up to it with him.

He got up. The act of standing was agonizing. The act of walking would undoubtedly be worse.

Colonel Sanders, ever-smiling, kept staring at Brett, as if he knew something, something wonderful and marvelous, that Brett didn't. Arachnoman threw him an impatient look. "Why don't you go and creep somebody else out?"

Colonel Sanders smiled and stared a smidgen longer, then turned and walked off, singing in his Welsh miner's voice.

All hail the power of Jesus' name
Let angels prostrate fall
Let angels prostrate fall
Bring forth the royal diadem

Arachnoman watched after him. "Nobody knows who he is or where he's from. He just rocked up one day and has hung around like a fart in a space suit ever since. He's a terrific conversationalist. If you speak Anglican hymnal."

Arachnoman gestured to an arched entrance on which a door, one of what had originally been a pair, hung precariously. "Shall we?"

xx xy xx

There were narrow-gauge train tracks in the floor, and spooks, witches, and monsters copied from an old Neil Adams-penciled *House of Mystery* comic splashed over the winding corridor's walls. Remnants of a ghost train ride. Arachnoman expelled dual streams of herbal air freshener. Cannabis was an analgesic. If Brett didn't need to have his wits about him (at all times), he would have asked Arachnoman, who was leading the way to an undisclosed destination, to roll him a joint.

"How about that little chick who's been torching all the nogs?" Arachnoman said. "What's the deal with her?"

“Growing pains.”

Arachnoman did his best impression of a movie trailer voiceover. “JonBenét’s back from the dead and, boy, is she pissed.” He cracked up, then inspected the joint. “This is some good shit.”

A multitude of voices went from a vague echo to a clear din. Arachnoman came to a wide entrance at the end of the corridor. He paused and winked at Brett, who then followed him into an atrium host to an assortment of broken down amusement park rides. Dozens of super-powered whites, most of whom had gone AWOL after Ramsgate, were scattered about, eating, ranting, swapping war stories, or just passing the time until doomsday put them in a Boston crab. One by one they looked in Brett’s direction. None was happy to see him.

CHAPTER 15

Homeless people everywhere. They populated the shoulders of the side streets, and congested alleyways and disused parking lots with their makeshift encampments of canvas and cardboard. They weren't your typical homeless. Nary a gibbering schizophrenic or space-jaunting druggie could be found among them. But what set them apart from the everyday street dweller was their familial groupings. Mothers comforted crying babies, fathers kept a watchful eye on their playing children, teenagers, uprooted from Nintendos and the Internet, stood idle and disconsolate. All were white and underfed, victims of the Diversity Initiative's workplace legislation.

Anastasia gazed out the front passenger's window of the Nissan Patrol at the passing parade of despair with a kind of curious apprehension. She intuited that something wasn't right, but didn't know why it wasn't. "What are all those people doing?" she asked.

"They're waiting," Charles said, reticent to look at them.

"What for?"

"For life to get better."

Anastasia turned to him. "Why don't they wait at home?"

"This is home," he said under his breath.

xx xy xx

The gas tank was about empty. Charles didn't want to risk their being spotted, so he waited until they were outside the city limits before filling the Nissan. Well outside. It was a long wait because they were forced to travel the back roads to avoid the heavily monitored freeways. The 1992-model Nissan Patrol had belonged to his father.

Sentimentality had talked him out of selling it. He was glad. With their sophisticated electronics, modern cars were four-wheeled homing signals. He'd been reliably informed by Brett that spy satellites could track him when he moved at sub-light speed. Earth's atmosphere restricted him to that speed. While flying, flaming Anastasia had to be Tokyo at night to the eyes in the sky. But the Nissan made them untrackable. Or less trackable. Which in these hi-tech paranoid times was all a body could hope for.

An old white man was filling his SUV when Charles and Anastasia drove into the gas station. He and a Pakistani cashier were the only other people there. If Charles was quick, but not too quick, they'd be back on the road within five minutes. He eyed Anastasia dubiously. "Can I trust you to stay put while I get some gas?"

"Uh-huh," she said, craning her head to get a better look at the station's mini-mart. "Do they have ice-cream here?"

"Just stay in the car please."

"I like chocolate ice-cream, but I really like hazelnut. Do you like hazelnut?"

Thoomp.

Charles was outside, reaching for a gas pump. Undeterred, Anastasia continued but with greater volume. "I like it so much I always get double scoops!"

xx xy xx

Charles stepped inside the mini-mart and smiled. Anastasia hadn't stopped chattering since they'd left the apartment complex. At least it distracted her from the people of color they'd passed. Although she'd glare at one every now and then, like a hungry lioness zeroing in on a stragglng gazelle. Anyway, it was nice to welcome sanity back. Albeit temporarily.

The cashier, in his late teens and morbidly lean, divided his beady gaze between a cell phone and a ceiling-mounted TV in the hold-up-

proof compartment from which he served customers. Charles glanced at the TV. A black pizza delivery guy was giving a skanky white housewife extra salami in her McMansion's hot tub. They were curtly replace by a CNN bulletin. An apologetic grimace flickered on the cashier's gaunt face.

"Number three, please," Charles said in a deeper voice than usual, careful not to look directly at the cashier. "Oh. Do you have hazelnut ice-cream?"

The cashier stared dumbly.

"Never mind. I'll grab something from the fridge."

As Charles went to a freezer, on the TV a female Arab Muslim news anchor in a hijab warned that an upcoming report contained scenes of a graphic nature. Footage of the aftermath of a deadly shooting at an illegal medical clinic was broadcast. A reporter explained that the clinic, now a raging inferno, treated white racists, who were denied treatment in the public health system. Cops had got into a firefight with the clinic's staff. If not for an intervening team of Exceptionals, none of the outgunned cops would have survived. A black-eyed Indonesian teen whose creepiness suggested his teammates, who didn't make it into the report, were creepier, walked robotically out of the flames, unharmed, carrying a singed, semi-conscious female cop.

Charles slid open the freezer, checking that Anastasia was still in the Nissan. Face smooshed in hands, she was gazing at the minimart with ennui. She clapped eyes on him, sat up, and waved ebulliently.

Silly girl, don't be doing that, Charles thought. Someone might see you.

A musk-colored Toyota Landcruiser with chrome mags tore into the gas station, horn blasting, and yipped to a halt a heart attack away from the old man as he returned the pump nozzle to its cradle. He flinched and doddered into the side of his SUV. A crack-empowered young black woman shot out of the Landcruiser and fired enough foul

language to fill an urban dictionary point blank into his face. How dare he block her fucking access to the fucking diesel pump!

Charles froze with indecision. His turbo-tonsiled passenger would not sit idly by while the black woman harassed an elderly, frightened white male. He had to save the woman from herself. But if he whisked her to safety at super speed, he might alert a battery of spy satellites to his location—and his passenger’s. That could be, *would be* catastrophic.

The black woman seized the old man by his apricot polo shirt and pulled her fist back to knock his dentures out.

Charles could vacillate no longer.

Yes he could.

Suddenly the woman released the man and stood rigidly to attention. She shuddered as though struggling not to stand at attention, but at attention she stood.

The old man gaped at her. Recognizing he needed to take advantage of the situation, he bundled himself into his SUV and sped off at 15mph.

xx xy xx

“I’m an ugly, bad, stupid nigger. I’m an ugly, bad, stupid nigger. I’m an ugly, bad, stupid nigger.” The black woman chanted the mantra through clenched teeth in objection to the characterization.

Charles pondered her, then scowled at Anastasia, who was taking a big bite out of a hazelnut ice-cream bar. “Whatever you’re doing to her, stop it right now.”

She didn’t respond.

“Did you hear what I said?”

“Mmm hmm.”

“Then stop it.”

“Wenweergon.”

Simmering, he drove the Nissan out of the gas station. Once it was out of sight, the black woman could move freely again. “I’m an ugly, bad, stupid nigger.” Move freely but not speak freely.

She trundled calmly down the street in front of the gas station on foot, until she came to a road as busy as an expressway out of Hell. “I’m an ugly, bad, stupid nigger. I’m an ugly, bad, stupid nigger. I’m an ugly, bad, stupid nigger.” She stood at a curb, waited for just the right moment, then dived in front of a barreling semi-trailer, ensuring her head was where one of its front wheels would shortly be. “I’m an ugly, bad, stupid n—”

CHAPTER 16

The big, bulky woman rushed angrily up to Brett, as if he were a kid who'd pocketed the latest iPhone in a store she managed. "And what do you think you're doing?" she said with the tonality of a constipated parrot. "You've got no right to be here." She shuffled to a stop, though parts of her kept going. "This is a patriot community, not a refuge for sell-outs like you."

Brett recognized her instantly. It was Meter Maid. Hers was the ability to decrease or increase a white person's superpower for a period of five minutes. She could extend the power-boost if the recipient was willing to endure debilitating nausea or a potentially fatal brain hemorrhage.

"Leave him alone," Arachnoman said. "He's with me." He eyed the surly, judgmental audience. "I repeat, HE'S WITH ME."

Most of them grudgingly resumed what they'd been doing—practically nothing in the majority of cases. Meter Maid was the sole exception. She was going to get what she had to say off her humongous chest come hell or high cholesterol. "You had no right to bring him here. I'll have you know this constitutes a major breach in security."

"And I'll have you know," Arachnoman said, "that if you don't shut the fuck up, I'm gonna turn myself into a salad and chase you off a fucking cliff."

Her mouth flew open with an indignant gasp.

"Piss off, will you?" Arachnoman said.

She bubbled and troubled, then tramped out of the room, huffing mumbled threats.

Arachnoman winked at Brett. “Sometimes the troops need that personal touch.”

They passed groups of superpowered whites who resented Brett’s every step in their direction. An albino metalhead with long, fine white hair, straddling a pale horse on a nonfunctional merry-go-round, gave him the finger. An albino flame flickered on the tip of it.

A set of middle-aged quintuplets, all seated around a plastic orange breakfast table, all wearing the same blue business suit and the same condemnatory expression, shook their heads. “I must say I’m disappointed in you, sir,” they chorused. Four of them phased into the body of one quintuplet. “Extremely disappointed,” the remaining quintuplet said.

“Ass-hole,” said a voice with a ponderous Texas drawl. Its owner stood directly in front of Brett. Arachnoman and Brett stopped.

“Wanna get out of the way, *ass-hole*?” Arachnoman said.

There was a pause as the unseen Texan deliberated on the request, then footsteps and the clink of boot spurs as he acceded to it. “Y’all get stuffed now, ya hear?”

“Sure thing, pard. Oh, and incidentally, stop grabbing my girlfriend’s tits. It creeps her out.”

“That ain’t me.”

Arachnoman was genuinely taken aback. “Oh.”

A willowy, bespectacled woman, wafted down from the top of a Ferris wheel, holding up a Bible, like a televangelist librarian. “Pray silence! Pray silence! I have a word from the Lord!”

Arachnoman’s eyes spun north. *Not this nut again.*

She beheld Brett and slapped the Bible reverently. “There’s a message in here for you, son of the republic. Hearken to the Word of the Lord.”

“Maybe later,” Arachnoman said. He motioned to a large sliding door, gave Brett a grandiose wink. “This is where all the magic happens.”

The librarian read stridently excerpts of a Bible passage as Arachnoman and Brett disappeared behind the door. “And the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord. And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time . . .”

xx xy xx

He was mildly surprised. When Arachnoman said that this was where all the magic happened, Brett presumed the room would be the new staging area for Arachnoman’s scandalous super-powered orgies. But there wasn’t a giant waterslide, ride-on mower, or industrial exhaust fan in sight. The room lacked the requisite space, anyway. It was only as big as an office, not an aircraft hangar.

Three geeks were huddled at a teak laminate desk, the ponytailed guy, who pricked Albert Keane’s shoulder, a bald young fellow with a black disc floating halolike above his head, and a tubby dude with a pink mohawk and a gray tee with “Missy Death’s” calling card printed on it in maroon. They were watching a live stream of *The Truth Nuke* on a laptop. Watching it expectantly.

“Looks like it’s show time, boys,” Arachnoman said.

The tubby dude maintained eye contact with the laptop and said, “Yep.” But the other two looked Arachnoman’s way. Upon seeing Brett, the ponytailed guy was mildly shocked, then wryly surprised. The bald fellow was sourly resentful.

The ponytailed guy elbowed the tubby dude. *Looky here*. The tubby tube scanned Brett, then shrugged, *whatever*, and went back to finessing a busy software interface framing the live stream.

Brett recognized the software. *This should be good*, he thought.

“You a fan of Keane’s?” Arachnoman asked him.

“Can’t say I am.”

“Me, I’m a big fan. A big, big fan. So it breaks my heart to have to do this.”

“The a-hole took the Mark,” the tubby dude said. “He’s got it coming.”

The Mark was short for *the Mark of the Beast*, a name political dissidents had given to a flu vaccine that contained a neural nanobot. After being injected into the body, the nanobot attached itself to the neocortex, where it controlled signals to and from the brain. It could make a mountain climber think he was deep sea diving and turn a Rhodes Scholar into a dribbling retardate. Not everyone received the “mark”. It wasn’t mandatory like the biblical original. One could still buy and sell without it. But that was its genius. Because people could refuse the vaccine with no repercussions, millions of them freely consented to being vaccinated. That the vaccine purportedly bolstered their immune system’s defenses against a new, deadly strain of the flu, which was merely an old strain rebranded, gave them a strong incentive to be jabbed. Keane, an expert at cross-pollinating truth and untruth, originally reported that the vaccine had a nanobot payload. But he didn’t hold that view for long. An after-dark visit from government agents convinced him that the vaccine was nanobotless. They did such a spiffing job that a week later he live-streamed himself receiving the vaccine. And he apologized for buying a hoax masterminded by the Red Chinese.

“How’s nano the second doing?” Arachnoman asked the tubby dude.

“In position and awaiting orders.”

“Good. Good.”

Face awash in tirade red, Keane paced and postured in front of his studio desk, while a token female co-host, a sexy brunette, watched in bemusement and with a tinge of embarrassment from behind it. “The globalists think they can stop us! The satanic, baby-raping Skeksis think they can stop this worldwide revolution to end their diabolical tyranny! But they can’t! You hear me?! They can’t! This people-led, God-anointed movement is too strong, too powerful for the forces of Hell to defeat it! We’ll crush the oligarchs and the Bilderbergers and

the pedophile elite beneath our feet just like this!” Keane stamped the floor with his foot, as if squishing a bug, and twisted it back and forth. “Raaaaaaarrgh! Take that, you demon bastards!” He jumped up and down maniacally to finish the job. “Raaaaaaarrgh! Raaaaaaarrgh! RAAAAAARRRRRRGH!”

He stalked up to the camera so that his face filled it. “You’re on The Truth Nuke! BOOM!”

Panting after his workout, he dropped into his desk chair. “You know what I need after that?” He grabbed a bottle of tablets off the desk. “I need a Mega Max male virility pill. You know, people email me all the time and ask me, Albert, they say, do you really take the nutritional supplements you promote on air? And I tell them, yes, I really do. I take them every day. As a matter of fact, I’m gonna take one right now.” He popped a tablet, chased it down with a swig of bottled water.

The tubby nerd looked at Arachnoman, who nodded. He mouse-clicked a button on the software interface. A red light flashed on a black box attached to the laptop via a cable. A second, thicker cable led from the box into a PVC pipe that ran all the way up a wall and into the ceiling.

Keane rubbed his belly, with an orgasmic grin. “Mmmmmmm. Tastes just like male virility.” He held the bottle up to the camera. “For today only, you can buy Mega Max male virility pills from our secure online store for 30 percent off, and we’ll toss in free shipping. Again, that offer is for today only.” His face twitched with surprise. “Ooh, that male virility pill is starting to kick in already.”

Looking slightly uncomfortable, he turned to his co-host. “What’s the latest news, Emily?”

Emily glanced down at a pile of news printouts in front of her as Keane shifted restlessly in his chair. “This is a sequel to yesterday’s report on the guillotines being shipped to—”

“Oohahhhmmm.” Clutching his crotch as though smarting from a boot to the balls, Keane was in pain and unable to hide it. “Dammit.”

“Are you OK?” Emily said.

Keane rocked forward and backward in his chair, trying to ease his discomfort. “Shouldn’t have taken that frigging pill. No, no, no. I mean I should have—it’s a great product, really great—just not on an empty stomach. Ahhhhh! Damn it all to hell!”

“What’s wrong?” Emily said, anxiously.

Keane stood with difficulty. A massive erection tentpoled the front of his trousers. “What’s wrong with me? It’s never been this big! Owwww! Ouuuuch!”

Emily gasped. “Oh my . . .”

He staggered toward her, crotch stretching and bulging as if a wild ferret were struggling to push its way out through his fly. “Help me. Please.”

She screamed and ran.

He swept the bottle of tablets off the desk. “What the hell are they putting in this shit?” He stumbled around to the front of the desk. “Somebody call 911! Quick! My penis is out of control!”

Rrrrrrrrrrip! His tumescent member burst through his fly. Reddish-purple from the blood engorging it at high pressure, it curved upward, expanding and lengthening like a condom filling with water. Its mushrooming head began to tear and bleed.

He squeaked in horror, wept girlishly. “No. No don’t do this to me. Owwoooohhh, it’s too big, too big! Oh shit, I’m gonna . . . I’m gonna . . . ARRRRRRRRRRRGH!”

Keane’s penis exploded in the worst possible way. Blood spritzed his tortured face and the camera lens.

The video stream died.

Whooping and laughing, the three guys at the table jumped to their feet and high-fived each other, as if they’d won an esports tournament.

Arachnoman grinned cockily at Brett. “One traitor down. Millions more to go.”

“Where did you get the nanobot?”

“Nanobots R Us.”

Arachnoman staged an inquisitive look. “Say, have you seen our security facility?”

xx xy xx

The redheaded colleen in the flowery russet dress swayed languidly in the rocking chair, the room’s one piece of furniture, hair pouring down its rosewood back. She only had eyes for the dull gray wall before her, which was interspersed with abstract patches of bare plaster. Her back faced the two men.

“So what do you think?” Arachnoman asked Brett.

“Needs more furniture.”

“She’s our one-woman security detail.” A proud, affectionate smile bloomed on Arachnoman’s face. The affection had to be platonic. The redhead was thirty and had a 32a bust.

The public once knew her as Fantasia. She was a telepath who could induce hallucinations in people, making them see whatever she wanted them to. The powerful electromagnetic waves her brain emitted could linger in the air for hours on end. How they were able to do this was a mystery to even Brett.

“If I were passing by out front,” Brett said, “what would I see?”

“A condemned building covered in signs saying KEEP OUT: ASBESTOS.”

The chair stopped rocking. Fantasia turned her head toward Brett and smiled beatifically.

xx xy xx

Sunlight bounced off the water in a million places, warming his tanless skin, and the cool breeze skipping off the ocean gave his arms goosebumps. Hot dogs, candy floss, roasted walnuts. The salty air carried their mouth-watering aromas and the din of a summertime crowd over from the boardwalk. His feet disappeared beneath an

incoming wash of water and sand. He didn't notice. His attention was devoted to his father, who was puttering into shore in a small boat with an outboard motor.

Arms, soft and loving, wrapped themselves around him from behind. "How's your sea legs, Tiger?" his mother said. "Raring to go?" She smooched his crown with a *mmmmwah*.

He was ten and this was the best day of his life.

xx xy xx

When Brett returned to the here and now, there was a perceptive twinkle in Fantasia's green eyes. He thanked her with a smile. He hadn't smiled so emphatically since before his parents were murdered.

xx xy xx

Darkness, cold and damp. The echo of something heavy and metallic clunking down on concrete. A conical shaft of light, like a tractor beam from a space ship, cut a vertical path through the gloom, manifesting the interior of a large stormwater drain. Metal rungs *toomed* as two pairs of feet descended them.

Arachnoman and then Brett, who'd swapped his torn costume for a gray, hooded tracksuit, climbed down into the light. They set their sights on a luminescent button in the distance, where the drain opened out.

Lighting a doobie, Arachnoman said, "Well, thanks for dropping by."

"Thanks for having me."

"Sorry I missed that skirmish with the Legion of Super-Leftists." Arachnoman coughed and spluttered with laughter. "Oh man, what I wouldn't give to have seen you getting the crap kicked out of you. Talk about a Kodak moment."

Brett channeled an unamused magistrate. Arachnoman dispensed with the mirth. “You do know they mean to kill us. *All* of us.”

“They?” Brett said facetiously.

Arachnoman grinned. Brett's question was as close to a joke as he would hear from the cowed crusader, who nowadays was more cowed than crusader.

Brett started for the opening. Arachnoman would have stayed to watch him awhile had it not been for an overbearing ego.

Brett knew every inch of the city above and below it. The drain opened into a river culvert. When Cosmopolis was called Angel City, white teenage boys would drag race their cars along the culvert's broad concrete lanes. But the practice was outlawed. The mayor's office deemed it much too inclusive for the city's multicultural vision.

Pain sharper than dressmakers scissors stabbed at Brett's chest and sides with each footfall, and drawing a breath was intolerably arduous. His new base of operations was a little over three miles away. That was three miles too long, but he'd make it.

He stopped. Someone noticeably taller and heavier than he had entered the culvert end of the drain and was striding toward him. The person's head almost scraped the top of the drain.

It is God who trains my hands for battle,
My arms can bend a bow of bronze.
It is God who trains my hands for battle,
My arms can bend a bow of bronze.
He gives me His shield of victory,
My enemies fall at my feet.
Praise be to my Rock,
He is the Lord of Hosts.

Brett continued walking.

Were his injuries or the poor light impairing his vision? Colonel Sanders had appeared to be about 12 feet high when he was at the far

end of the drain, but now, as he got closer, he was a trifling 7 feet. The ability to suppress pain may not have been the colonel's only super power. He put the hymn on pause and stopped in front of Brett. He held his right hand out, palm up. A flat, oval-shaped stone of the deepest purple was in it. Brett took the stone. It was flawlessly symmetrical and light enough to be weightless.

Colonel Sanders smiled, then strode deeper into the drain, picking up the hymn where he'd left off. The drain rang with his rich tones.

Brett walked on, whistling the hymn until the colonel's morphine effect cut out.

CHAPTER 17

Maddie sat on a sky blue sofa with her waxed legs crossed elegantly in the institute's plush reception area. Her black blazer was new. Her black, pleated skirt was new. Her red blouse, which offered an engaging glimpse of her cleavage, was new. Her black lace panties and matching bra were new. Her lustrous black stilettos were new. Her perfume, an exorbitant fragrance called Midnight Grace, was new. Her full-bodied dark hair wasn't new but newly coiffed and gorgeous as hell. Her makeup was impeccable. She'd examined it with the laser-focus of a dermatologist scanning for carcinomas before she stepped through the institute doors. The rouge highlighted her round Filipino cheeks to perfection, and the glossy red lipstick gave her voluptuous lips a carnal glisten. Gay was the man who could resist those cushiony wonders.

The air in the reception area made her conscious of her breathing. It was mountain pure. Her button nose was unaccustomed to inhaling such a hygienic mix of nitrogen and oxygen. *They must be pumping negative ions through the air conditioning vents*, she thought. They were.

She pressed one leg against the other to stop them from trembling. She was nervous. She'd been granted a world exclusive interview with the planet's greatest scientific mind and its most eligible bachelor. *Second* most eligible bachelor. Though she wouldn't dare tell anyone that. The way things were going, she'd lose her job and her life.

She glanced furtively at the Scandinavian receptionist. The receptionist's honey blonde hair, ethereal violet eyes, delicately freckled nose, and fashion model build presented her with some stiff competition. But Maddie trounced her in the personality department,

insofar as she had one. The receptionist, comely as she was, had the charisma of a deflated sex doll.

“Madeleine, I presume.”

Maddie jerked. Einhorn stood over her, radiating testosterone and a boisterous intensity that could be construed as friendliness or hostility.

“Oh. Hello there, Professor Einhorn,” she said, trying to stand with all the allure she could wrangle on such short notice and wondering how he’d managed to sneak up on her like that.

He extended his hand. “Please call me Joe.” She shook it, held onto it a tad longer than a good girl should. He was no fashion plate. His crumpled lab coat, drab pair of jeans, and khaki corduroy shirt were all fit for the rag bag. But he was undeniably dreamy. She pictured herself naked on all fours, glistening with sweat, breasts jiggling to his vigorous pelvic thrusts, screaming, “Fill me up!”

He chuckled. “You’re from what magazine, again?”

“Rolling Stone.”

“That’s the music magazine?”

“Music, culture, social commentary.”

“Social commentary? You can never have too much social commentary.”

“No, you can’t,” she said, sheepishly. What was up with his facetious tone?

He studied her with fascination, as if he were an entomologist gazing upon a new species of insect, then said, “Come this way.”

She walked with him to a pair of silver, glassless sliding doors.

He winked at a laser scanner above the doors. They opened with a subtle lisp. “After you,” he said with a gallant sweep of his hand.

“Thank you.”

What’s the bet he’s eyeing that round, pert ass of yours, Maddie? she thought as she sashayed ahead of him. The crisp folds of her pleated skirt traced its curves like water flowing over a rock. She knew that for a fact. She’d admired the meeting of cloth and derriere in her bedroom’s cheval mirror prior to coming here.

“I appreciate this opportunity you’ve—” she started to say, looking for him. He was lagging behind watching, unbeknownst to her, a swarm of nanites buzzing about. He dipped, swiveled, and craned his head as though following the erratic flight path of an invisible fly. *Is he high or crazy?* she thought.

“I’m not on drugs,” he said as he continued to track the nanites. He looked hard at her. “And I’m not crazy.” A teasing grin flaunted his dimples. “Just a bit unusual.”

How did he know what she was thinking? Did her facial expression give her away? She felt as if she were hunting for a firm footing on a grease-caked tightrope. A lot was riding on this interview. She couldn’t afford to lose her composure.

She mirrored his abrupt switch to lightheartedness, in an effort to develop some urgently needed rapport. “A bit unusual? You should upgrade to a lot unusual, like me.”

His did the dimple thing once more, much to her relief.

They walked together down a sterile corridor whose beige walls converged into a minute black square in the distance. Workers in lab coats and a dour man in an air force uniform emblazoned with medal ribbons passed them from the opposite direction.

“Thank you for this opportunity,” Maddie said.

“Opportunity?” Einhorn said. “Oh yes, the interview. Yes, I guess it is an opportunity. I don’t normally give interviews. Don’t have the time. Nor the inclination, to be honest. I believe it’s a man’s actions, the things he does, not his words, that speak the loudest about him. Don’t you agree?”

“Absolutely. But an interview can bring to the surface things that help us understand what makes a person who he or she is. Things like family history, personal relationships, triumphs, setbacks.”

“Stuff that other people wouldn’t normally know?”

“Exactly.”

He halted and without a hint of levity said, “Like my drinking the blood of little children.”

A blank stare or an awkward smile. She couldn't decide on which so tried each in turn.

"You find my drinking the blood of little children funny?" he said.

"No. Never."

He lightened up. "Well, you ought to. I'm a vegan."

She relaxed somewhat, though his dark sense of humor was making her uneasy.

They continued toward the minute black square, an infinity away.

"Do you like the great outdoors, getting back to nature, that sorta thing?" he said.

"I sure do."

"Are you in for a treat?"

xx xy xx

A waterfall filled the cavernous room with its restful susurrantion. Maddie and Einhorn strolled along a meandering path through lush greenery that soared above them. The surroundings curbed her ability to speak. "This . . . it's . . . it's enormous," she said.

"We call it the diversity room," he said. "You've got your mountain ashes, your eucalyptuses, your coconut palms, your tree ferns. Look at that. Gotta be 12 feet high if it's an inch. You've got your babbling brook, your spinifex, your rich sandy loam. Mother nature at her diverse and beautiful best."

The path opened into a sandstone-paved circular clearing in the middle of which was a bench seat fashioned from thick planks of lignum. He motioned for her to park her self-admired bum there. He parked his next to hers. "I suppose you're wondering why you in particular were granted this interview."

Because I'm hotter than a roasted marshmallow and a top social influencer, to boot, she thought.

He coughed into his balled hand, disguising a laugh. “No, the reason was the article on diversity you wrote. A colleague drew my attention to it. He’s a big fan, by the way.”

A flush of vanity plucked her mind off the unsettling notion that it might require a firewall.

“It was something you said in the article,” Einhorn said. He cocked his head, tilted it toward the room’s glass roof as if the memory he was trying to retrieve was stenciled up there. “What was it now? Oh yes. That’s right. Diversity is not just our strength, it’s our blood, our breath, our soul, our lifeforce, it’s that which delivers us and the world from the unforgivable sin of sameness.” He sighed affectedly. “Pure poetry.”

“Thank you. That means a lot.”

“You’re most welcome. Being a Jew, I covet diversity. The more cultural enrichment you can shoehorn into white society, the better, the more at ease, we Jews feel. Do you know why that is, Maddie?”

“Er, no.”

“Because, to us Jews, white fraternity is like a shining silver cross to a vampire. It makes us retreat, snarling and hissing, into the shadows. Now, some might say it’s anti-Semitic to liken Jews to vampires. But this Jew isn’t one of them. Ever see that Bela Lugosi flick, *Dracula*? In one scene he’s wearing a Star of David around his neck. Now, there’s a movie starring a Jew and produced by Jews, yet none of them kicked up a fuss about that Star of David. Why do you think that was, Maddie?”

“I . . . I’m not sure.”

“Because Jews hate having to hide who and what they are. Sometimes we just have to let the unwashed masses know. Usually, in subtle ways. But there are times when subtle just won’t cut it. Times when only right in your face will do.” He stared into her almond eyes with a mesmerist’s intensity. “We, you and me, Maddie, are living in those times.”

He fell silent. It was her turn to speak. But she didn't want to speak. All she wanted to do was get the hell out of there. He was a nutjob. No doubt about it. She could see the insanity spinning giddily away in his eyes like a neon-lit whirling dervish. She had seen its like before, in the eyes of Danny Babooka, the serial-killing Satanist, who'd raped and dismembered 86 women, though not necessarily in that order. Cops speculated that Babooka may have murdered upwards of 100. She had interviewed him in prison for *Rolling Stone*. Despite his restraints and the presence of an armed guard the size of a Humvee, he'd scared the living shit out of her. She promised herself afterward never to interview another psychopath, in or out of prison, again. But now here she was breaking that promise, and without a single handcuff, leg chain, or protective services officer to be seen. She wanted to bail but knew she had to stay. If she turned pleated skirt and ran, if she let the opportunity of a lifetime slip through her and her editor in chief's fingers, she'd find herself unemployed forever more.

"I see," she said, trying hard not to sound as if she were humoring him, even though she was.

He wrinkled with disbelief. "Do you, Maddie? Do you really? I don't think you do."

"Well, I know that the Jewish people have suffered great persecution for centuries, so . . ."

"Persecution? Retribution would be more accurate. Imagine you invited a group of vagrants to come live in your home, and they ate all your food, cut your family's throats, and burnt the place to the ground. Then they went round, telling everyone that it never happened, that you made the whole thing up because you have this irrational hatred of vagrants. Wouldn't you hanker for some payback, Maddie?"

"I . . . I don't know what to say."

"Of course you know what to say. You're just afraid to because then you'd be labeled an anti-Semite, a hater of Jews. The irony is, Maddie, everyone hates Jews. Even Jews hate Jews. Frankly, we suck—individually, collectively. Let us loose in any fair-skinned society and

we'll soon darken it with depravity and the ethnic effluvium of foreign lands. We've been doing it for millennia. Ever since Cain cold-cocked Abel."

What! Einhorn was a *racist*? Characterizing non-white immigration as if it were human waste plopping out of a backed up toilet, was something one would expect a superemacist or an old-time Nazi to say, not the director of the Thorne Institute, the scientific genius who gave the world Exceptionals.

"Don't come crying *racism* to me, Maddie," Einhorn said. "Racism is simply a self-preservation instinct, a genetic call to arms, that ensures the continuity of one's ethnotype. The only reason we Jews demonize it ad nauseam is so we don't get what's coming to us."

Maddie swish-panned her head. She was searching for—

"There's no hidden camera, Maddie," Einhorn said, standing up. "This isn't some elaborate Candid Camera-type prank. What I've said and what you are about to see is as real as real can be. *Realer*."

He held his palm out to her. She regarded it, regarded him, then absently surrendered her hand. He pulled her to her stilettos with an "Upsa-daisy," and led her to the center of the clearing. Something roiled beneath her feet, like a writhing tangle of stupendous, mating anacondas. She snatched them up in a panic. He laughed. "They know you're here."

"They?"

"My contribution to the holy crusade."

Confusion jostled past her fear. *Crusade? What crusade?*

"The crusade against sameness, of course" he said.

The room appeared to spin. Maddie twigged that it wasn't the room but rather the clearing that was spinning—and descending.

"Next stop, the bowels of Hell!" Einhorn said. He chucked his head back and cackled insanely.

Maddie spread her feet apart surfer-style so she wouldn't flatten the pleats of her skirt, as the clearing spiraled deep below the greenery room. A wall of dark glass a foot thick encompassed them. Monstrous,

frighteningly bizarre shadows thrashed and heaved on the other side of it. An icy blast of terror made her shiver.

The clearing stopped with precision-engineered seamlessness. Maddie looked up. The greenery room lay 15 stories above.

The glass shuddered. Adumbral monstrosities, tentacled, serpentine, insectoid, and faintly humanoid, were attacking it with primordial savagery. Maddie expelled a scream-queen-quality shriek.

“I hope that protective glass holds,” Einhorn said, snidely. “Some of those buggers could tear a T. rex apart.”

Crying, trembling, Maddie turned clumsily. The Lovecraftian horrors were all around her. “Wh . . . what are they?” she said. They pounded on the wall, giant, insatiable carnivores fighting to get at the last slab of meat in the slaughter yard.

Einhorn gestured to them with swelling pride. “Behold the apotheosis of diversity. God Himself could not create these. But I did. By my reckoning, that makes me greater than God. What say you, Maddie?”

She blenched as if someone had grabbed her unexpectedly, then levitated off the pavers, turning to face him. Her photogenic cheeks were streaked with mascara.

“Obviously, you can’t be God without godlike powers,” Einhorn said. “This one’s courtesy of a fellow named David Locke. You might know him as Gravity Wave. He’s in there somewhere. With all the other . . . things. Their powers are now my powers. I can chug a bottle of fluorosulphuric acid, fly to the Moon and back in seconds, lift the world one handed without breaking a sweat, and much, much more. I can even read people’s thoughts. Just to let you know, Maddie, any form of sexual congress between us is completely out of the question. I’m God and you’re a lowly Filipino. You may be a cut above the usual marmosets who infest that sad part of the world, but you still fall short of human, let alone a god. Besides, I’m already spoken for. You should see her. My future wife would put Eve herself to shame. But hey, look on the bright side, you too can fly now.”

He lifted her up, down, up, down, then spun her round and round like a pinwheel. “Whee! Whee! Who’s having fun, then?”

“Let me go,” she said, voice racked with anguish. “I want you to let me go. Please. I won’t say anything. I promise.”

“But, Maddie, I brought you here to celebrate diversity. You sang its praises loud and long in your article, remember?”

She stopped pinwheeling, floated nigh to the creatures. They loomed over her, a clawing, lashing mountain born of the delirium of heroin withdrawal. Her heart stuttered as if to send her into cardiac arrest.

“I could have invited any reporter here, Maddie, but out of thousands of the worthless bastards, I chose you.”

Machinery under the floor hummed to life. The rioting abominations rioted harder as the glass wall slid nonchalantly into a deep recess. Dinner was on.

“No,” Maddie whimpered. She reversed away from the sinking wall two steps, then collapsed onto her back. The weight of her body had increased fantastically.

“I’ve made your body denser, Maddie,” Einhorn said, squatting beside her. “You weigh approximately a ton. You can’t move and you can’t breathe. With any luck you’ll expire before they can get their grody appendages on you. Hey, do you like riddles? Here’s a good one. Why is diversity like a Jew? Because it fucks everything up.” He stood, began to levitate out of the hole. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got some almighty fucking up to do.”

Gaze stuck on the impending avalanche of monstrosities, Maddie didn’t get to see the glowing whorls that sparked in Einhorn’s eyes and then bubbled out of them as brilliant red marbles of energy, but she did get to hear the rollicking madness in his laughter.

The world was fucked.

Behemoth confections of animal and human scrambled over the descending glass and one another to get to Maddie first. A titanic chittering serpent that had human eyes and multiple pairs of vestigial wings along its back, a colossal hairless ape, wailing like an infant,

with tentacles for arms and an oversized mouth stuffed with foot-long raptor teeth, a gargantuan tarantula upon which sat eight hideously deformed human heads, all struggling to speak but able to make only horrid, phlegm-clogged burbles, and a host of other bioengineered nightmares fell upon her. Death was swift but dreadful. A pair of pincers met inside her head with a revolting click as an unthinkable appendage covered in boney spikes laid waste to her womb and its surrounds.

Next: The Way Things Used to Be.

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