CWTP COMICS PRESENTS...!



PROTECTORS! (VOLUME TWO)

BY E.V. GREIG

CWTP COMICS PRESENTS...! PROTECTORS!
(VOLUME TWO)

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ISBN-13: 9798185711316

Cover and frontispiece illustration created by E.V. Greig, using artwork by Frank Barton Davis.

Published by Upatree Press September 2026

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FEATURING

PROTECTORS! (ISSUES 43 TO 73)

WITH SPECIAL GUEST CHARACTERS

CAPTAIN SUSAN KENNEDY
(DAUGHTER OF MARS)
&
SHANE CABHARTHA (OVERCLOCK)

WARNING!

THIS BOOK IS INTENDED FOR ADULT READERS. IT CONTAINS VIOLENCE, PROFANITY, AND SEXUAL CONTENT. READER DISCRETION IS ADVISED. A FULL LIST OF ALL CONTENT WARNINGS IS PROVIDED AT THE END OF THE BOOK.

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CONTENT WARNINGS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PROTECTORS!

Issue Forty-Three – Susan

NOVEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

The guy who I just rescued has passed out from all the blood loss. I still don't know who he is, or where he's from. All I've got to go on is that he mentioned that the power had gone out, and that someone called Katarina's been hurt. Oh, and he thinks that things like vampires and magic actually exist. Trouble stacked up on trouble, by the sounds of things. I'll do what I can to help. But it'll all have to wait until he wakes up again. In the meantime, I'm focusing my efforts on getting us both back to where there are other people.

Trickier said than done, Marine.

First step is getting us both out from amidst these dang trees. To do that, I need to know which way to go, and the easiest way to find that part out is to climb up one of the aforementioned items of forestry and then look around from up there. That saying about how all problems contain the seeds of their own solutions springs to mind as I pull myself up onto the lowest branch of a gnarled old evergreen.

The view from up top is worth the effort. I can see the bright lights of a city. Better yet, there's a recognizable landmark; one that confirms that this is indeed Earth. The original Griffith Observatory. Still standing, and lit up enough outside that it glitters; just like in the old movies. Cape guy and I are in Griffith Park, Los Angeles, and it's at least six decades into the past from when I'm from. Maybe even a different dimension, too, for all I know yet.

Potatoes and fucking tomatoes, as Woods would say. Time to climb back down again and get to walking – and to carrying, too. Cape guy sure as shit ain't going anywhere under his own steam. And I'm not leaving him behind, neither. Gonna need to ditch that fancy looking armour, though. It'll only add unnecessary weight. If he ain't wearing enough under it, then I'll wrap him up in his dang cloak for decency's sake.

Is it just me, or is it oddly easy to see things around here? Based on the position of the moon, it's obviously nighttime heading on towards early morning. The moon itself is waxing gibbous, but the sky's kind of cloudy, and there ain't any streetlights. By all sane accounts, I should be stumbling around in the dark and complaining about not having a torch on me.

Unnatural, that's what it is, and I don't like it much. Makes my eyes itch.

Cape guy's armour cracks open easily enough once I figure out where all the seams on it are hidden. I peel it off him a bit at a time, and stack the pieces neatly to one side. He's wearing a pair of tailored brown sweat pants, dark suede loafers, and a beige tank top that I'm pretty damn sure is made out of cashmere. Guessing he's wealthy. Lucky for him if he is, given how this is the era when people in America still had to pay for their healthcare.

I sling him across my shoulders in a firefighter's carry, and start hiking on down through the trees in the direction of the observatory. About five minutes in, it finally occurs to me to check his pockets for a cell phone.

Woods would laugh me out the damn airlock if he knew.

Great – now I'm homesick.

Put it in a box, Marine.

Turns out that cape guy does indeed have a cell phone on him. Having set him down and found it, I try to make use of it. No dice there. Damn thing won't even switch on. Must be broken, I guess; probably from the fight he was in with that other guy. Well, that'll teach me for feeling proud of knowing what the number is for the American emergency services in this era!

Guess it's back to hiking again.

I put the cell phone into my pocket along with that flashy looking ring I picked out of the so-called vampire's ashes earlier. Cape guy remains unconscious even while I sling him across my shoulders again. Reckon he's better off that way. Keeps him from feeling any pain, at least. Better way to go out, too; which he's gonna do if I don't manage to get him to a hospital in time.

Time to pick up the pace, Marine!

About three minutes into my triple-timing it down the slope, I start noticing the spiders. It'd be hard not to, given how many of them there are. They're big, and hairy. Kind of cute. Tarantulas, I think. Probably just out and about for their mating season. I read how that's a thing that happens annually here in Los Angeles between late summer and the end of November. That narrows things down some for me regarding the date.

I keep moving; trying not to step on any lovesick arachnids. Five more minutes of running later, I get the sudden and unshakable feeling that we're being stalked. Seconds later, a shift in the breeze brings the warning stench of dank fur and something that ain't really buttered popcorn along with it from somewhere off to my right.

Cape guy lets out a pained groan as he wakes up. Then he starts squirming. "What…where…what's going on…?"

Keeping my gaze fixed on the direction that the smell's blowing in from, I set him down and stand over him while I draw my plasma pistol. "Cat."

Cape guy somehow manages to drag himself up onto his knees. "Cat?"

I flick off the safety and adjust the power level without looking. I've only got one shot left in the power cell, so I'd better make it count. Wide beam heavy stun seems about right for this situation. "Big cat."

He grunts in pain. "Cryptic much?"

The breeze decides it's helped enough and dies down again. I don't doubt that the cat's more than smart enough to take advantage of it.

The last one I ran into sure was.

Pirate base out near Jupiter.

Ringleader with a liking for exotic pets.

Four Marines dead.

Bunch of scars that I'll have for life.

Hell of a way to earn a promotion up to the rank of captain.

Breeze comes back some then. By the smell of things, the not popcorn's still hanging around. Damn thing's sneaky. It's off to our left now. I shift my position accordingly.

Cape guy drags himself around in front of me. "Well, at least the ring's aura lets us both see in the dark! And mountain lions aren't usually all that interested in attacking...!"

I cut in before he can finish. "We ain't dealing with a mountain lion, buddy."

That confuses him. "Then what?"

Somehow, naming the damn thing out loud feels like a jinx. "Tiger."

"Tiger? You're sure?" Cape guy tries and fails to scramble up. Instead, he faceplants into the dirt. "Ow."

The cat's all but on top of me before I can even register seeing it burst out of the trees in front of us. I throw myself backwards just in time to avoid dying. By then I'm already firing at it. Wide beam heavy stun at point-blank range equals one safely unconscious murder kitty, and one pinned in place Marine.

Damn thing must weight almost three hundred pounds!

I manage to squirm out from under it without suffocating. It's out cold, and based on its size, it'll stay that way for the next nine hours. That ought to give us enough time to get clear and send in whoever it is that deals with tigers. Fish and game, maybe, or the nearest zoo.

Cape guy's still lying there face down. He's shuddering some. I crouch down beside him and roll him over onto his back. His eyes are closed, and his skin's cold to the touch and real pale looking. Worse than he was before.

Running out of time here, Marine.

I try and rouse him by squeezing his shoulder while I talk to him about how the cat's been dealt with successfully. "So, good news is that Tiddles is down for the count. Less good news is that my plasma pistol's full out of juice. Better hope there ain't any more tigers around here, huh?"

His eyes snap wide open and fix on me. There's a strange kind of a light in them that ain't quite human looking.

He rasps out a word. "Run...!"

I punch him square in the jaw instead. "Get it together! I'm done humoring you about all this. There's no such thing as magic, and while I admittedly don't know what the fuck that asshole infected you with when he bit you, it sure as shit ain't really vampirism. You ain't undead. And if you can talk, then you ain't mindless, neither. Now – simmer down and sit up."

He obliges me by doing the latter, but he's snarling while he does it. That weird looking light in his eyes has gotten brighter. "Get away from me!"

I punch him in the jaw again, and he falls back onto his elbows. "Calm the fuck down, or I will put you down!"

He quite literally hisses at me as he sits up. "I *am* being calm!"

"Good." I take a firm hold of his right forearm and haul him onto his feet along with me as I stand up. "Keep on with doing that. Can you walk?"

"I…maybe?" He shakes his head for a moment as if he's trying to clear it. "I don't know. Probably, yeah."

"Even better." I lay his right arm up over my shoulders and wrap my left arm around behind him at his waist to help hold him up if he stumbles. "I got you, buddy. I ain't gonna let you fall. Now, let's go get you some help."

He trudges at first. Then he seems to find his stride. Leans on me a little less, which is usually a good sign. His stomach growls. “I’m hungry.”

I risk letting go of his right hand long enough to dig out my very last MRE. It’s what the MMC classifies as being a protein bar with a chocolate flavoured coating. I reach across and press it into his left hand. “Here. Try not to taste it. I’ll requisition you something else as soon as we get back to where there’s people food available.”

Understandably, he tosses the thing away after taking a single bite of it. Less understandably, is how he tries to grapple me afterwards. Don’t reckon that all this punching is good for him, but I knock him on his ass anyway. Except that this time, he springs back up again; snapping and frothing at the mouth. His lips are peeled back in a rictus snarl. All four of his canine teeth have gotten long and pointy.

He launches himself straight at me, so I dodge aside and kick him hard in the small of his back as he passes me. “Quit that now, damn it!

Cape guy slams face first into the trunk of a eucalyptus tree. He claws at it as he slumps to his knees. “Please, for the love of God, just *run*!”

“I ain’t leaving you behind, buddy.” I walk over to him and haul him back up onto his feet. “Don’t want to risk you running into someone who can’t take you in a fight. That’d be on me. It might even count as being an act of negligent homicide, or something.”

He groans. “Then just kill me!”

“Nope.” I prop him up against me the same way I did the last time, and start walking again. “That’d be murder. You’re defenseless.”

“I’m a vampire!”

“I’m a Marine.”

That stymies him. He quits arguing for a while and just stumbles on through the trees along with me.

Finally, he speaks. “You didn’t deny me being a vampire that time.”

I’d shrug, but he’s leaning on me. “Didn’t see the point. You’ve got the idea about being a vampire stuck in your head for whatever reason, and I ain’t a shrink. But I *am* a Marine, and that puts me well above you in the food chain. So, whatever the heck it is that you *think* you are, you’re gonna listen to me, and then you’re gonna damn well accept that what I’m telling you is true. You’ve still got a pulse. You’re still breathing. Reckon that means there’s some hope left of finding a cure for whatever’s wrong with you.”

Damn it, I hope I ain’t wrong.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Forty-Four – Antoine

NOVEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

"It's vampirism. And there is no cure." I wonder if I look as worn out as I feel right now. "Reichslander infected me with it when he forced me to drink his blood. That's how it's spread – the biting part is just how vampires feed. Now that I've got it, there's nothing anyone can do to fix me. And there's every risk that the next time I attack you, I'll succeed."

Captain Kennedy chuckles as if she's totally unfazed by my warning. "Duly noted. What's your name, anyway?"

I try not to think about how I can hear her heartbeat rising, or about how I can somehow smell that she's afraid *for* me as opposed to *of* me.

She's a good person to feel like that.

But her throat is so close to my fangs...

It would be so easy...

I shudder as I manage to control myself. "Ugh. It's getting worse, sorry. But do you really not know who I am? How's that even possible?"

She snorts. This time, her amusement is genuine. "Someone's feeling sure of himself! Guessing you must be pretty famous around here, or something?"

"Globally, actually. For real, though, do you seriously not recognise me?" I finally remember exactly what it was that she said when she first introduced herself to me. "Martian Marine Corps. Wait – are you from the *future*?"

“It was 2097 when I…when I left.” She inhales slowly. I can smell her stress levels spiking. This time, I don’t think it’s got anything to do with me. “Could easily have been a whole other dimension, too. That might explain why I don’t recall ever seeing your picture in any of the historical records. There was what you might call, uh, an *incident*, see. With an experimental engine on a starship. That I kind of set fire to on purpose while I was still on board.”

My mind starts racing through a myriad of potential explanations for what the incident may have been. “What kind of experimental engine? I mean are we just talking about quantum physics, or something more complicated?”

Captain Kennedy shakes her head in amusement. She smells relieved, too. “Complicated lines up with it well enough! So – you gonna get around to introducing yourself now?”

I blink. “Oh! Right – that part. My name’s Antoine Kratz. But I also go by Kickstart. That’s my superhero name; hence the armour I was wearing when we met. Uh, what exactly happened to that, anyhow?”

She takes a couple of seconds to reply. I can tell that she’s trying not to laugh at what I’ve told her. I just don’t know *why*. “Well, I cracked you out of the thing, and then I left all of the pieces of it stacked up as neatly as I could.”

I almost choke. “You cracked me out of my armour? How strong *are* you?”

“It really wasn’t all that hard, buddy.” She tightens her arm around my waist. “Careful now. This next bit of ground looks like it’ll be kind of tricky.”

Sure enough, there’s now a rough patch of dry earth and small stones under our feet. The topmost layer of it crumbles and gives way with each step we take; making it hard to balance.

Well, hard for me, anyhow. Captain Kennedy seems to be well used to such things. Maybe this is what the average surface on Mars is like.

Another wave of hunger wracks me.

Something in me is all but screaming for Captain Kennedy's blood.

I'm not sure that it's the vampirism.

Oh no…the blood magic…!

I try to pull away from her; begging her to leave before it's too late. "Captain Kennedy, please, you need to run, right now! You can't be around me! It's too dangerous – *I'm* too dangerous!"

She sighs as she grapples with me. "Not this again! How many times do we need to go over this? You ain't…!"

"It's not the vampire thing this time!" I drive my elbow into her left side. She doesn't even flinch. "My blood…my mom's familial magic…*please*, let go!"

“Hey, hey, it’s okay!” She lets go of me, and steps around to stand facing me, holding her hands up in front of her at shoulder height in a placating gesture. “You’re okay, Kratz. I’ve got you.”

I gulp in a breath, and clench my fists hard enough to dig the tips of my now pointed fingernails into my palms. The pain from the self-inflicted wounds helps to ground me enough that I’m able to speak. “Look, I don’t know why, but the blood magic in my veins wants me to let it rip out all your blood. And I can’t hold it in check much longer. If you don’t leave now, then you might not get another chance.”

She stands her ground despite my warning. “Is this something to do with that deadly curse thing that you mentioned having earlier?”

I slump to my knees and bow my head. “I don’t know. I mean, I’ve had the ability to use blood magic all my life,

but I promised my mom not to. She warned me that it comes from something evil. I kept my promise until the start of this year, but then…!”

Captain Kennedy’s boots come into view. She crouches down in front of me. “Then you broke it, right? And ended up getting cursed, or whatever.”

“My mom’s side of the family were infamous for using blood magic.” My voice is hoarse. “They’d always wanted me dead. My mom made it so that they couldn’t attack me unless I attacked them first, but they killed my dad, and then they killed my mom, and then in January they killed my grandma, and I just…I couldn’t take it!”

She takes my hands in hers. “It’s okay. Guessing that you took revenge?”

“Yeah.” I stare down in bewilderment at our now joined hands. The blood magic calmed down completely at the same instant that our palms touched.

“I used an ancient forgotten blood magic spell to kill all of them. I wasn’t actually expecting to survive casting it, but I did. And then I ended up inheriting all of the familial magic afterwards. That’s when the curse took hold. Turns out one of my far distant ancestors on that side had put it in place centuries ago to prevent people from doing what I did. Fun twist, huh?”

“Maybe you should have kids.”

Her suggestion leaves me flummoxed. I lift my head and stare at her. “Uh, sorry, I should do *what* now?”

“Have kids.” She shrugs. “You know – help split the magic up some. That ought to satisfy the curse. Simple.”

I think about how I’d arranged in advance for any minors in the Del Drachi Infernali family to be provided for out of my own resources. And how Elodie had later informed me that there weren’t any. From what I’ve

managed to piece together since then, my mom was intended to be the last ever person born to the family. There had been a ritual enacted to prevent her and all of the other then existing members of the family from ever aging or dying. They'd become immortal for long as no new blood was added. Turns out that my mom choosing to have me *really* messed that up. And only by eliminating me could they ever successfully reenact the ritual.

I'm the last of my bloodline.

On both sides, come to think about it.

Blood, steel, and far worse…

Captain Kennedy squeezes my hands. "You alright? Looked like you were kind of out of it for a – hey!"

My sudden lunge towards her just now took us both by surprise!

We tumble to the ground together with her cursing and punching, and me

snarling and snapping. I'm tangentially aware of the migrating tarantulas that are around us scattering in every direction to avoid being crushed.

Thankfully, Captain Kennedy soon manages to regain control of the situation. She flips me onto my back and straddles me; grabbing a tight hold of both my wrists and forcing me to fold my arms across in front of my chest and keep them there.

I grimace. "Sorry! I didn't even know I was going to do that until it happened. Thanks for stopping me again. You smell great, by the way. I mean your blood smells great! Not that you don't as well, but, uh, vampire stuff. I'm not being creepy on purpose, I promise! Ugh, sorry; I'm making this *weird*."

She stares down into my eyes for a long moment before she replies. "Would feeding help you keep control, or would it only make things worse?"

My stomach lurches before I can formulate a reply. The vampirism has already given me fangs and claws. That happens as soon as it takes hold of the victim. Now it must have begun wiping out my gut bacteria. That takes around seventy-two hours to complete. Once the vampirism finishes colonizing the microbiome of my gut, it'll move on to restructuring the internal walls of my intestines. That agonizing process can take anywhere up to six months to complete, depending on the infected person's immune system, hence why newly infected vampires can still eat and drink. Afterwards, I won't be capable of digesting anything other than blood. Finally, my internal organs will begin to essentially shut down. They'll atrophy within me instead of decaying. It's technically a form of biological stasis as opposed to death, but since nobody's ever recovered from vampirism, that distinction is largely pointless.

I don’t try to explain any of this to Captain Kennedy. I don’t answer the question she’s just asked me either. Between the combined effects of the blood curse and the vampirism, I’m in way too much pain to speak.

And I don’t know the answer anyhow.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Forty-Five – Susan

NOVEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

Screw this shit! Whatever's really going on with Kratz, it's hurting him. I ain't gonna stand by and do nothing about that. I don't believe a word of all the supernatural crap that he's spouting, but maybe it's just how people around here explain things that they don't understand. Hell, maybe it's like in those old science fiction shows; when they go out and find a planet that's being ruled by an evil supercomputer pretending to be a god, or something. Or maybe Kratz is just flat out crazy. I don't know, and right now, I ain't inclined to care much either way.

Kratz has it in his head that he's turning into a vampire? Fine. Reckon I've seen enough movies and read enough books to know what the so-called rules are for that situation. Best case scenario, drinking some of my blood actually helps him somehow; maybe by doing something for real, or maybe just by acting as a placebo effect. Maybe it ends up killing him instead. Worst case, he lives but ends up suffering even more, in which case I may end up needing to put him out of his damn misery myself.

Mind you, the most likely outcome is that it does nothing at all.

But it's still worth trying.

I manhandle Kratz around so that I'm kneeling behind him, and he's sitting propped up with his shoulders and back leaning against me. Pulling my knife out of the sheath in the side of my left boot, I use it to cut a strip of fabric

from the lower hem of my vest. Next, I make a shallow cut along the inside of my right forearm, carefully avoiding hitting anything vital. I wipe the blade clean on it, and put the knife back into its sheath. Then I press the already bloodied fabric firmly against the cut on my arm until it's soaked through.

Woods ain't here, but he'd still have a whole bunch of deeply hurtful things to say about my stupidity if I manage to infect myself with whatever biohazards might be lurking in Kratz's saliva by just letting him suck on my arm. And I have my suspicions regarding whether or not me being this far away from home would keep him from yelling them at me in a loud and public manner.

Keeping the aforementioned limb safely at my side, I use my left hand to carefully position the now blood-soaked fabric in front of Kratz's mouth. "Okay, buddy. Drink up. Let's find out together if blood really does do – ow!"

His fangs have sliced right through the fabric and are now sunk deep in the heel of my left hand. He's locked on tight. I guess feeding's probably the technical term for it. Why in the heck I didn't anticipate this happening is one of life's great and assorted mysteries. Too damn late now to do anything but hope that bites alone really ain't what spread it, I guess. Well, that and figure out how to pry his mouth open in case he doesn't agree to let go.

There's a brief surge of warmth through my left hand. Just for a second, I think I see some kind of a weird blue glow where Kratz's fangs are dug in. Then Kratz unclamps his jaws and rears his head back. The back of his skull connects with my face, and we both end up sprawled on the dirt. From the feel of it, my nose is only bruised instead of broken. Pretty sure I'm a little concussed, though.

Not exactly your finest hour, Marine.

Kratz sits up again before I do. He sucks in a deep, wheezing breath, and then he starts puking blood.

I drag myself up onto my knees and check on him. “Hey – you alright?”

He pukes again. More blood. Up close, I can see that it’s partway congealed. There’s a real foul odor to it. Either it’s what he was forced to ingest earlier, or something’s gone the nastiest kind of wrong with him internally.

Kratz seems like he’s finished puking. He groans and wipes at his mouth with both hands. He’s trembling all over, but he looks a little healthier than he did before I tried feeding him my blood. And that unnatural looking brightness has gone from his eyes completely. Guessing that that’s a good sign.

I rub his back until his breathing levels out. Then I try talking to him again. “How are you doing there, buddy?”

He turns his head to the right so as he's looking up at me. There's a wrung-out kind of a half-smile on his face. "Better, thanks to you."

I give him a pat on the back. "You're welcome. Any chance you can read me in on what the heck just happened?"

Kratz hesitates. "Well, I know what I think it was. But I don't know if you'll believe me when I explain it. You uh, don't seem to think that magic is real."

"Well, you ain't wrong there." I glance down at my hand to check whether or not the bite wound's still bleeding. "Holy shit! My hand ain't hurt! But…but you bit me! You were drinking my blood – I saw it, Kratz! Hell, I fucking *felt* it!"

He shifts around some; altering his position so as he's kneeling right in front of me. "Okay, so, uh, here's the thing. You know how you're from somewhere else? Well, I'm now willing to bet that it's *definitely* another

dimension, as well as a different era in time. You obviously haven't seen or heard of magic actually existing there. Whereas here it's just a normal thing."

I open my mouth to argue about that.

Kratz hurries on with trying to explain. "Wait. I'll show you proof of it. Or more proof, really. Anyhow – watch this!"

He holds out his hands, palms facing upwards, and fingers spread. As I watch, the blood that's smeared all over them peels itself away from his skin. It rises slowly into the air between us until it's just floating there at face height. Then Kratz makes a funny little gesture with his thumbs. The blood coalesces into a perfect sphere; about the size of a softball. It starts to glow, and then it shrinks inwards on itself until it's the size of a walnut. Kratz gestures again; this time using his ring fingers as well as his thumbs. The little sphere glows brighter for a moment or

two, and there's a soft humming sound from within it. Then it darkens, and drops to the ground right in front of me. There's a faint thud as it lands. A little puff of dust rises up from around it.

I stare down at it in wonder; trying to process what the fuck just happened. The walnut sized gemstone – it kind of looks like a perfectly spherical ruby – glints in the moonlight.

Kratz clears his throat politely. "Um, so, yeah. Magic's real. And please try not to freak out when I tell you this next part, but I'm almost positive that you just used it to cure me of vampirism."

I pull myself together enough to reply. "Is that what happened with my hand, too? Magic? I mean, from – by me?"

He nods. "Yeah. I think you might be a biomancer. That might also explain what happened with Reichslander. I think you may have accidentally channeled magical energy through

your pistol without even knowing it. It's the only explanation I can think of for how you were able to fire it. His ring emits a magical field that absorbs all electrical energy within fifty feet of it."

"MMC plasma pistols don't use any electrical components. The clue's in the name. Just a bunch of good old-fashioned clockwork mechanisms and plasma. No magic needed." Clinging to that wonderful, beautiful, and wholly scientific explanation, I dig Kratz's cell phone out of my pocket and give it back to him. "Are you saying that the ring is why this ain't working?"

"Uh, pretty sure that your weapon would need to break all of the known laws of physics for it to really work that way, but yeah. The magic of the ring is messing with my cell phone." He picks up the sphere and hands it over to me in return like it's a completely normal thing for him to do. "It's also what's letting us see in the dark like this."

I cram the sphere into one of my pockets so as to avoid thinking about it too much. Then I take out the damn ring. “I got a torch on me. Call whoever it is around here that deals with would-be man-eating tigers before Tiddles wakes up and comes looking for a couple of meals on legs again.”

The last thing I see before the darkness finally starts acting like it should is the look on Kratz’s face as I hurl the ring away from us. He’s still processing it when I turn on my torch. “Captain Kennedy – you just threw away a one-of-a-kind ancient magical artifact!”

I shrug. “Figure us having working comms is more important right now than keeping hold of some gaudy old jewellery that doesn’t do anything that an EMP and a set of multi spectrum lenses can’t do better. And you’re welcome to just call me Kennedy.”

PROTECTORS!

Issue Forty-Six – Shane

NOVEMBER 2017: UNDECIDED

They stole my genetic material while I was on vacation in Monaco. A single strand of hair from my head with the follicle still attached to the root of it, to be precise. The last thing that I remember before waking up in the laboratory here, was combing my hair in the bathroom of my hotel suite.

From the scant information that I've acquired so far by eavesdropping on my captors, original me got to spend the six weeks after that point relaxing.

I spent them being tortured.

The sixty-four and a half days of enforced servitude to a secretly evil corporation since the active torturing stopped haven't been great either.

Worst vacation ever, am I right?

Of course I'm right.

I'm a world-famous genius, after all!

Dr Antoine Shane Kratz.

Kind of.

If we're being strictly accurate about this whole thing, then there probably needs to be a Roman numeral at the end – Dr Antoine Shane Kratz II.

I'm his clone, you see. The guy that I was. I'm both me and him, really. Although he isn't me. He's him. And I'm the him who was forced to take the worse road through that yellow wood. Does that make me my own clone? Can you be a clone of yourself, and still count yourself as also being you?

My home state's previous governor starred in a movie once about this kind of situation; back before he became a politician. I remember taking my then long-term girlfriend, Livia Bryant, to see it when it first hit the box office. November 17, 2000. We'd been dating for exactly four years at that point, and living together in Malibu for just over two of them. I was going to propose to her that night. I had it all planned, right down to the bespoke 4-carat diamond and 24-karat gold Celtic infinity knot engagement ring in my pocket.

Turned out that dearest, darling Livia had a plan of her own for what we'd discuss over dinner.

It was the opposite of mine.

At least we were dining at home that night, instead of at a restaurant. I'd wanted to avoid there being any risk of a spectacle around my proposal, so that Livia wouldn't feel pressured into

making her decision. As it was, she laid everything out clearly for me over our appetiser: thirty grams of Almas caviar, served atop smoked salmon and scallop carpaccio, with gaufrette potatoes, and a citrus-herb emulsion; accompanied by a well-chilled 1995 Krug Clos d'Ambonnay.

Hey, what can I say? Grandma Molly raised me to know my way around a kitchen – and a wine cellar.

And before anyone starts, the caviar came from a female albino *Huso huso* sturgeon named Mah-Parvar Khanum. It was harvested painlessly using magic, so as to avoid any distress or harm to the massive four-hundred-and-fifty-year-old fish herself, and also to ensure that the rest of her eggs could still go on to become fry. Her keeper's family has been trading in this ethical kind of limited availability extreme luxury since before the Roman era. They sell it in 24-karat gold cans.

Anyhow, Livia broke up with me, and then we both ate the rest of what had become our goodbye dinner.

The entrée, just in case you care, was wild Breton turbot poached in butter, sautéed haricots verts, and confit fingerling potatoes, served with a rich Champagne-porcini and shaved white truffle emulsion, and accompanied by the rest of the Krug. After that, there was the complex chilled pudding that I'd made early that morning, and left to thaw out slowly in the refrigerator while we went to the movies. It was a pistachio infused white chocolate and coconut milk entremet, with a raspberry and lime compote filling, and a dark chocolate-mint mirror glaze, and it was *supposed* to be garnished with a delicate sprinkling of 24-carat gold leaf just before serving. Given the emotional nuke that Livia had oh so clinically dropped on me, I didn't bother with that last part. Nor did I open the 1811 Château d'Yquem

Sauternes that I'd planned on serving alongside dessert. Instead, I went with a 1995 Château Tirecul-la-Gravière Cuvée Madame.

I'll never forget the malice in her voice as she sneered over the lack of gold leaf, and ridiculed me for my choice of dessert wine. Nothing like being called cheap and pathetic to make you feel at least a *little* better about being dumped by the critic in question!

I never so much as mentioned my intended proposal to Livia. It would have been emotional blackmail on my part, and original me wasn't that kind of guy. He still isn't. Me, I'd like to see the look on her face if she ever found out. Mostly so that I could laugh at it.

I could really use a laugh right now.

I still have the ring that I'd made for Livia tucked away safely back at my Malibu property. Well, unless original me has finally found another use for it

since we parted ways back in Monaco. But I doubt if that's happened. He doesn't think that he's worthy of any kind of serious romantic love, let alone marriage! Whereas *I've* since come to the conclusion that Livia is just a flat-out narcissistic bitch who'd gotten bored enough to pick out a new victim.

Speaking of all things evil, it sounds as if my captors have finally discovered that I'm no longer in my cell. It's only a matter of time until they manage to find me, but I've been beavering away here in their experimental weapons laboratory for around nine and a half hours already. I might not win the fight that's coming, but I'll damn well burn this entire place to the ground trying!

And if I do make it out of here alive, then there's a bottle of 1811 Château d'Yquem Sauternes that's waiting in Malibu with my name on it.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Forty-Seven – Antoine

NOVEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

It's a bright and sunny morning here in Los Angeles, and I'm getting seriously bored of being stuck on bedrest here in medical! Reichslander's satisfyingly ignominious defeat was four days ago. The Siberian tiger turned out to be a malnourished escapee from an exotic animal trafficking ring. I wasn't able to help, but the other Protectors and Kennedy saw to dealing with the people who were running it. The tiger has been safely relocated to a Kratz Industries sponsored wildlife park, along with the rest of the animals and birds who were rescued.

On a more personal note, Katarina has confirmed me as being free of true vampirism. Emphasis on the phrasing there – I'm not one of the undead, but I've still ended up with a few minor vampiric traits. Some of them are useful. For example, my senses have all been heightened, and my night vision is beyond superb. And whilst I haven't experienced it yet, Katarina says that I'll automatically sense the presence of blood magic, active curses, and the undead within three hundred feet of my location. I can see that being useful. And I guess being able to transform my teeth and nails at will into fangs and claws might come in handy in a fight someday.

The downside is that I now need to supplement my regular daily diet with human blood; to prevent me from suffering bouts of insatiable hunger for the blood of the living. But since it doesn't matter *whose* blood, I've come up with a workaround by using my

own. For now, the nurses draw some for me every morning, and then give me the ampoule to drink from. I'll start doing it myself once I'm recovered enough to use a syringe.

But anyhow, aside from all of that, I'm fine. Well, mostly, anyhow. Obviously, I'm still recovering from my ordeal at Reichslander's hands. And I did take a few punches from Kennedy. Not to mention how I'm still dying from the familial blood curse.

The whole team knows about that now. Kennedy blabbed about it to Minty when he arrived to pick us up. I was unconscious again by then, but I found out later that Kennedy had carried me out of the trees and down onto the section of road where Minty eventually found us. He got all three of us safely back here to Kratz Industries, dropped me off in medical, and set my rescuer up in guest accommodation on the thirteenth floor. Then he told the rest of

the Protectors everything that she'd told him. I'm not mad at him about that. After all, it's my own fault for having told Kennedy about the curse to begin with. But now everyone who knows is worried about me.

Well – *almost* everyone might be more accurate. Astrape already knew about it, after all; thanks to her almost fatally disastrous interview. But she's never so much as mentioned it in passing before now, and it seems as if that's not going to change. To be honest, I don't think she considers what she refers to as mortal frailty as being important enough for her to care about. Sometimes I can't keep myself from wondering why she ever decided to become a superhero. Maybe it really *was* just down to the will of Zeus. She is seriously powerful, after all, and despite all of my investigations into it, we still don't know how her application to join the team arrived!

Does that mean Olympus has internet?

Anyhow, getting back to my grumbling, I'm starting to contemplate sneaking out of here. Not to try overexerting myself – just to go hang out in my workshop for a while. I miss Gilbert and Sullivan, and I need to inspect my armour and figure out how Kennedy managed to remove it. Minty said that he'd collected all of the pieces of it along with my cape, but I haven't seen it yet. I can't think how anyone could have cracked it open without having some form of enhanced strength, or maybe control over metal. Kennedy insists that neither of those things apply to her. Of course, she also keeps on insisting that she's not a biomancer, and that my blood magic must have been what got rid of the true vampirism and healed her hand. But it *couldn't* have been that. I would have noticed myself doing it when it happened – wouldn't I?

The door of my room opens, and Tim walks in. So does one of the nursing staff; here to check my vitals and give me my next dose of meds. She's a petite African American woman aged in her late thirties, named Brenda Wallace. She's currently studying for her doctorate in Nursing Practice, and has recently accepted a secured offer for a position at that level here at Kratz Industries. We're lucky to have her.

I'm surprised to see that Tim doesn't stand aside and offer to hold the door open for her. I've known him for years, and I've never seen him not do that for anyone before! But instead, he just barges in past her; nodding to me curtly as he crosses the room to stand at the left side of my bed. "I'm here because we need to talk, Antione."

I lift my right hand and point at the door. "Go away, and don't come back until you've apologized to Brenda."

I'm honestly expecting him to realise his mistake and apologize to her immediately. Because it *has* to been a mistake – right? Maybe he was just caught up in thinking about something, or couldn't see her past his wing.

But he scoffs instead, and folds his arms. "Nice try, Antoine, but it's time for you to account for yourself about all of these secrets that you've been keeping from the rest of the team!"

Brenda doesn't say anything, but she's clearly offended. She busies herself with taking readings from the monitor on the right side of my bed.

I glare at Tim. "Hey! This lady here is an incredible nurse, and one of my best employees! How *dare* you disrespect her like this?"

Tim sighs. "Oh, for Pete's sake! Okay – Brenda, I apologize for not having held that door for you. And Antoine, I'm sorry if it actually *did* bother you. But I

think we both know that you're really only making excuses so as to try and avoid having this conversation."

Brenda pours me a glass of water to take my pain meds with. She hands it to me, along with the tiny paper cup that holds the pills. Then she turns and addresses Tim. "Mr Thompson, if you are going to harangue my patient, then I will have to insist that you leave."

I am *so* increasing her salary.

Tim beams at her and winks as he replies. "Don't worry, nurse! I'm just going to try and talk some gosh darned common sense into him! You run along now and see to your other duties."

I'm literally in mid-swallow. By the time that I finish gulping down my pills so that I can speak, Brenda has already left the room, and Tim has launched himself wholeheartedly into giving me a stern lecture about honesty, and trust, and leadership, and how useful

my blood magic will be against our opponents from now on, and how selfish I've been by hiding what I can do for all this time, and how my decisions affect everyone on the team, and how my being a little sick doesn't recuse me from my responsibilities.

I don't even attempt to interrupt.

Let's face it: he's absolutely right. I really *have* been selfish, and stupid, too. Thank goodness that Tim's such an amazingly talented orator, as well as being a flying supersoldier! I'm lucky to have him here to help me realise how terrible I've been. I'll make sure to do right by everyone from now on.

You know, this situation really does bring home why Tim's superhero name ended up being Advocate instead of Captain Liberty.

It wasn't only because of him not ever having been in the military.

It was because of his vocal abilities, and his inspiring presence.

When he speaks, *everyone* listens.

Why wouldn't we?

He's always right.

He's talked people out of suicide.

He's talked villains into surrendering.

And now he's talking me into being a better person.

Suddenly, the door slams open, and Kennedy strides in. She's wearing dark grey cargo pants paired with chunky grey and white sneakers and a sage green vest top. Her hair is plaited up in its usual neat braid; fully exposing her neck and throat. Not the best idea around someone like me, but it's not as if she can't take me in a fight.

Huh. That's strange. She looks like she's kind of mad about something.

My meds are really starting to kick in now. Everything's getting fuzzy around the edges again. It's hard enough to even keep my eyes open, let alone ask Kennedy what's wrong.

But…but that's okay…

Tim…Tim's here…

Tim will…

He'll…

…

PROTECTORS!

Issue Forty-Eight – Susan

NOVEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

Judging by the monitor that he's still hooked up to, Kratz's vitals are going haywire right now. Wallace wasn't wrong when she told me that she was worried about letting Thompson here have access to him. She was looking for Minty at the time, but he's out of the building at present. I'm starting to understand why he asked me to hang out in medical and keep an eye on things there for him while he's gone.

I cross the room at speed, and duck past Thompson's left wing; grabbing hold of the creep by his left elbow and

the nape of his neck. “Okay, skippy, that’s more than enough shit out of you! Visiting hours are over. And in future, I *strongly* advise you to save the speeches for somebody who’s well enough to argue back.”

Thompson ain’t taking my intervention at all well. He blusters at me while he tries to get free of my grip. “Now just see here! You’ve got no gosh darned authority to just come barging in here like this and…!”

Got to love how throat punching makes for such a reliable way of shutting shit down ASAP. And where assholes like this guy are concerned, it’s without a doubt the best option to pick.

I haul Thompson back up onto his feet and manhandle him all the way out of medical. “Elevators are over that way, skippy. Go make use of one of them before I decide to show you how the damn stairs work instead. And maybe

see about getting that little booboo you've got there looked at."

He rubs at his throat and gawps at me like he can't believe what just happened. There's a second or two when I can tell that he's calculating whether or not he'd win if he tried starting any more crap with me. Guess he must have some damn sense in him, because he shakes his head and does as he's been bid instead.

Good riddance.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Forty-Nine – Shane

NOVEMBER 2017: UNDECIDED

Here's to the ignominious eradication of my former captors, the subsequent three full weeks of freedom that I've enjoyed so far, and the completion of my new home here in Malibu!

Morrigan's Rest: a full five-and-a-half-acres of ultra-prime Californian real estate, with a high-end three storey nine thousand one hundred and twenty square foot mansion perched square atop the heart of it. The mansion itself has a grand total of six bedrooms and eight bathrooms, just like Antoine's little place down on Point Lechuza

Terrace. It's the sole property up here on Nido de Cuervo Road. The latter privately owned – by yours truly, of course – little scenic byway is located just off the right side of Encinal Canyon Road when heading upwards into the hills; about two hundred metres or so on past the famous Viewpoint at 3876. The views down over Malibu and the ocean are beyond spectacular.

It really is amazing just how fast a house can be built and fully furnished from the ground up when there isn't any limit on price. And things speed up even more when you ignore all the rules. Admittedly, getting away with that last part of things involves a whole bunch of eye wateringly hefty fines; not to mention about ten times as many bribes on top of them! Ah, the joys of being me instead of Antoine – the same limitless funds, but way fewer inconvenient morals to influence how I spend them. The perfect combination for a happy life, in my opinion.

Oh, and, just so you know? That's the *only* opinion that counts around here. Better get used to that fact fast if you're planning on staying.

I've taken Grandma Molly's maiden name as my new surname, by the way. Shane Cabhartha – multitrillionaire genius turned speculative financier and amateur architect. That's who I've decided to be in life. No more wasting time and resources on philanthropy for this guy! And no superhero crap either. I'm done with trying to save the world from itself. From here on in, I'm all about doing what's best for me. And maybe for mine, too. Not that I really have anyone who counts as being mine just now. Antoine got custody of all of our friends in the biological divorce. But never mind that aspect. I'm sure life will provide me with replacements for them sooner or later! In the meantime, I'm keeping tabs on those I used to know from afar. Just in case. It's not like Antoine can be everywhere.

What's that?

How do you pronounce Cabhartha?

It's simple! You just ignore everything that you think you know about how letters work. Irish is fun that way.

Still totally bamboozled? Then go look it up for yourself. I'm not here to teach you about surviving encounters with new and difficult words, mo chara! That's what sociolinguistic educators are for. And self-studying using Irish dictionaries, too, of course; at least for the masochists.

Anyhow – let's get back to that toast.

One thing you can't fault Antoine on is his ability to store things correctly. Case in point: this lovely bottle of 1811 Château d'Yquem Sauternes. I held off on drinking it until now. It's not like the wine cellar back at the Lechuza beach house didn't have plenty of other options for me to choose from during

my recent two-week stay there. High quality alcohol pairs well with takeout food, you know. But I draw the line at popping a $117,000 cork just to wash down a portion of crispy teriyaki beef and boiled rice.

Talking of wasting money, seventeen years and five days on, and the ring that I made for Livia is once again burning a hole in my pocket. Just leaving it behind in the beach house's safe felt wrong to me, somehow, so I nabbed it before I left. Now I'm stuck on what to actually *do* with the damn thing. I guess I could always just scrap it for materials, or auction it off for a little extra pocket change. But I'd really rather put it to its originally intended purpose: locking down a spouse.

No, not you.

Be honest – pre-emptive or otherwise, we both know that at least a tiny part of your soul is upset about that rejection.

There is one person who's caught my eye, though. She's new in town – town being this dimension – and so far, I still know way less about her than I'm prepared to tolerate. My primary source of information is what Minty's put down in his dossiers. Those things are seriously convenient to still have access to. It's lucky that Antoine doesn't know he's got a doppelganger on the loose. He might change his passwords, and then I'd have to go to all the bother of hacking, as opposed to just casually nosing around.

Anyhow, the dossiers, along with the video feed from my steadily growing army of loyal little spybots, tell me that the woman in question is quite literally out of this world. She's Martian, and from another dimension's 2097 to boot! That definitely ticks the box for exotic. And I *really* like exotic. She's also tall, hot, and hypercompetent to the point of being flat out irresistible.

Captain Susan Kennedy.

I think I'm in lust.

Scratch that – I *know* I am.

But honestly, who wouldn't be? Just look at her. Smart, funny, the right number of curves exactly where nature intended for a woman to have them, extremely athletic, viciously efficient in hand-to-hand combat, and a damn good shot. I especially enjoyed reading her statement about what went down in Griffith Park that night.

Sheer perfection!

The problem, of course, is that Antoine and I still share the same tastes in almost all things, and that includes the people who we find attractive. He's out of medical now, so the risk of him showing any interest in her himself is no longer set at absolute zero. Still, Minty's unwittingly helped me there. He's offered her a job there at Kratz

Industries, and she's accepted it. I'll just have to hope that Antoine sticks to our old rule about not dating his own employees. And that nobody else gets in my way, either.

I'd hate to have to do anything drastic, after all.

Again.

Some of what I did to escape from that facility was definitely up there in terms of extreme responses. But hey, it's not like anyone who actually *matters* got hurt! Those sadistic assholes had it coming to them. I'm just glad that I'm the one who got to take them down. Catharsis, you know? Therapy's older, simpler, and frankly cheaper cousin.

It's also the way of my ancestors on Grandma Molly's side of things.

Something far worse, indeed.

Mom never fully understood it. Not the way that I do. Once I'd turned eighteen,

Grandma Molly saw to teaching me all of the Cabhartha family history and traditions – ancient secrets daubed in blood and carved into bone. The triple death. The power of iron, and of salt, and of names too freely given. Then her coven accepted me into their circle, where I got to learn about the more, ah, contemporary way of doing things.

None of the coven know the full truth about Grandma Molly either.

Suffice to say that I could have done a whole lot more than I did to the Del Drachi Infernali.

What?

You're surprised about that?

I don't see why. After all, even the spell that I did eventually decide to use to destroy them was taken from an ancient Tuatha de Danaan text that had been part of Grandma Molly's personal library. True, you mightn't

have realised that that was the case, but then I also never claimed that it was *otherwise*, now, did I, mo chara?

To be cryptically succinct, the Del Drachi Infernali weren't the *only* ones who knew how to use blood magic.

That familial curse is all them, though.

Hey, that reminds me! I forgot to tell you that I don't have to worry about that thing. See, the thing about curses, is that they connect to the *soul* of their intended target. Cloning doesn't have anything to do with souls. It copies the physical form, and sometimes – as in my case – the consciousness as well. So, while I still have full access to all of the powers that are inherent to me via my blood lineage, I'm nonetheless completely free of the curse.

Neat trick, am I right?

Antoine could use it too, in a way. If he transfers his soul as well as his

consciousness into a new body, then he'll be the original him all but physically. True, he'd still have the vampirism problem, and the familial blood curse would still be attached to his soul, but the damage that's already been done to his current body would be left behind. That would buy him time. He could keep on doing it indefinitely if he wanted to; until he finally finds a way to break the curse. Or even forever; like I'm planning on doing. Functional immortality through science. Just think, he'd never need to worry about finding someone to inherit Gilbert and Sullivan from him.

I really do miss those little guys, you know. Remind me to tell you sometime about how they accidentally ended up being the world's only known pair of everlasting rodents. It's a funny story!

Now – come on inside the house. It's time we got to work on finishing this Sauternes. I'll show you the ring that

my alive and unlamented ex-girlfriend missed out on all those years ago, too. It's a sleek, shiny looking little thing; just like Livia herself. Celtic infinity knot, made using 24-karat gold, and set with a single museum quality 4-carat flawless natural round brilliant-cut white diamond. In today's market, it's worth around $350,000. Given the price tag, not to mention all the resources, time, and effort that I poured into making it, someone else aside from me ought to get to at least *look* at the damn thing.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Fifty – Antoine

NOVEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

I found out over breakfast this morning that Minty has hired Kennedy as my official bodyguard. Apparently, he and Elodie steamrollered their way through any and all barriers to her being granted citizenship in this dimension, along with the right to live and work here in the United States. Jason says that there may or may not have been a few instances of literal defenestration involved, but I'm *almost* sure that he's kidding! It's hard to imagine either Minty or Elodie letting anyone find out that they'd done that.

Speaking of Jason, we're now twenty-three days into November, and so far, he and Katarina have broken into nine sacred sites and fourteen forbidden libraries that I know of. Nineteen people and a gigantic quasi-sentient orb are dead as a result. They were all extremely evil, so I'm not judging. Despite what some people in the press and across social media tried to claim – at least up until Elodie stepped in and dealt with them – Katarina hasn't gone back to being one of the bad guys. She's just proactively searching for a way to save me. And so is Jason. Funny how nobody's accused *him* of any villainy over it. I guess having double standards must be the in thing this season, or something.

Ugh, sorry, that was cynical of me! I guess I'm just…well…tired of it all, you know? The way that so many people keep on thinking the worst of Katarina. Sure, fine – she was a villain once. Believe me, *nobody* knows that better

than I do. Well, except for Katarina herself, of course. But the point is that that was all years ago now! She let me help her quit the League of Malice, and she's been one of the Protectors ever since. Admittedly, only as part of her probation for the first four years. The six and a half years since then though? Those have all been by choice.

I'd still appreciate it if she and Jason would quit causing so much havoc around here, though. Although, they do seem to have dialled things down by a few notches while I've been off my feet. And they sent me a really nice fruit basket. Of course, there wasn't all that much fruit left in it by the time that it reached me – thanks Tim! – but the basket itself is still pretty.

I can't be mad at Tim for that last part. I'm pretty sure that he was stress-eating over what happened to Wally. You know; that whole situation with the shadow symbiote that attached

itself to him and then tried to use him as a vessel to kill the rest of us. The symbiote's remains have been stored in a cryogenic chamber in my workshop for safekeeping until I have a chance to study them. I still can't believe that none of us noticed its presence for so long! Or that Katarina and Jason didn't feel able to tell anyone else on the team about their concerns over Wally's behaviour.

Clearly, there are going to be team building exercises in our future! But in order for that to happen, we'll all need to be present. Now that I'm back on my feet, I've managed to coax Katarina and Jason to take a break from scouring the globe in search of a way to deal with the blood curse for me. It was a long phone call, but they're en route back to here from Cairo as we speak. Although, there might be some delay – Katarina said something about needing to help the local authorities there to deal with a mummy cult first.

Amalthea and Astrape are both here in Los Angeles. They've been busy tackling missions as a duo for most of the past three weeks, since nobody else was available to help. I debated using that as leverage with Katarina and Jason, but it felt too ungrateful.

I haven't mentioned it to Tim or Wally yet either. The two of them are off on vacation together; somewhere warm and uneventful. They left two weeks ago, as soon as Wally was fit to travel, and they won't be back until early January. Nobody can argue that Wally doesn't need the break, after…well, everything. And it's only right for Tim to be there with him. Maybe they can take part via video link, or something.

One thing's for sure – I *definitely* need to keep on expanding our membership.

But that last part will have to wait, at least for today. I'm hanging around here on the fourteenth floor instead of

being upstairs in my personal quarters or my workshop for a reason. My friend Dorcas Nelligan, aka Golden Glory from the Miracle Mob, is on her way up in the elevator. She called me early this morning, and arranged to stop by and discuss something with me. She didn't say what it's about; only that it's very important, and also personal, which means that she doesn't want me to get any of the other Protectors involved. That last part surprised me a little, given how Dorcas is usually an open book, but I respected her decision.

It's easy to be discreet about her visiting me anyhow; especially since Amalthea and Astrape are out at a superhero meet and greet event for kids. Elevator D is reserved for guests and approved members of Kratz Industries staff. It connects the main ground floor lobby to this floor, and nowhere else. Aside from me, the only people in the building who'll know about Dorcas being here today are

Minty, Kennedy, and whoever is on duty down in the main lobby of the building. And I know I can trust my employees not to gossip. The ones who know about it are even keeping my vampiric issue a secret for me, along with the rest of the Protectors. I'm not ready to go public about it yet. Maybe I never will be.

The door leading out to the lobby area opens, and Minty shows Dorcas in with his usual impeccable aplomb. "Mrs Nelligan is here to see you, boss."

"Thanks, Minty." I stand up and greet Dorcas with a hug while the door closes behind him. "Dorcas! Wow, it's been a while, huh? How's everything?"

She leans into the hug. Her voice catches as she replies. "Oh, Antoine! It's just all so awful! Ramona came back home from college yesterday for the holidays, and she said that she'd renounced her faith...!"

I shake my head in disbelief as we sit down; trying to think of how to put what I'm about to say politely. "Dorcas – she's just growing up, that's all. Kids don't always follow exactly in their parents' footsteps. Don't panic, okay? I'm sure Ramona's just trying to figure out who she's going to be in life."

She gives a sad little laugh. "Yeah, that's pretty much what I told her dad at first! But there's more, too, and it's so much worse. Antoine – she tried to *murder* an innocent child!"

Every electrical outlet in the room short circuits as I scramble to my feet and stare at her. My heart's pounding so hard that I can feel it echoing in my head. I can't process what's just been said to me. "Ramona did *what*?"

Dorcas continues sniffling. "She won't tell us who led her astray like this, but obviously it's someone she's met at college. Mike's furious with her about

the whole thing. He keeps on saying that I should be too, but how can I? It was her first year at college, Antoine! She'd *never* been away from home on her own before. Oh, I just *knew* Mike and I were wrong to let her enrol somewhere so far away from us!"

I scrape up the words and the courage to ask her about the murder. "Dorcas, please, never mind all that! You just told me that Ramona tried to kill a child! That's not a part of any normal college experience! What happened? Is she being charged with anything?"

Dorcas looks broken. "No charges. Nothing like that. You're the only other person who knows outside of the Miracle Mob."

Clenching my fists tightly enough that my fingernails dig into my palms, I hurry across to the far side of the room; putting as much space as I can between myself and my guest. "I don't

understand. Why haven't you reported what she did yet? I love her, Dorcas, but come on, seriously – there's a line! There *has* to be! Even for family."

She dabs at her eyes with the backs of her hands. "The authorities won't care, Antoine. There's no law against it."

None of this makes any sense! Have I somehow been caught up in one of those weird accidental slips between two different dimensions; like Kennedy was? Or have my two oldest friends and their teammates all just lost their collective minds?

Dorcas doesn't react to my having left her side. I went through her things this morning while she was in the shower. With her renouncing her faith, I had to check if she'd gotten into drugs, or started drinking alcohol. There was a leaflet for one of those *awful* places tucked inside her diary. You know. The ones that help to kill babies."

The basis for reality as I know it comes slowly back into view. “Wait – do you mean a leaflet for an abortion clinic?”

“Yes! Ugh, no! I mean, yes; it was from one of those so-called *clinics*.” Dorcas wrings her hands and shudders. “She’d written in her diary about having contacted the people who work there, Antoine! She’d called them up from a payphone and asked them to help her to murder her child!”

I take a deep breath. “Okay. I’m a little confused. Are you saying that Ramona *was* pregnant, or that she still is?”

Dorcas perks up a little. “Oh yes, she’s still pregnant! Sorry, I probably should have been clearer about that part! But she won’t talk about it to any of the Miracle Mob. She hasn’t even said who the father is! All she’s told us is that he’s not a faculty member at her college, and that she hates him and never wants to see him again. I’ve been

going crazy with worry over it all. And now Mike wants to ask Tim to use that divinely inspiring voice of his to…well, to just *make* her talk!"

"Tim would never agree to do that." I feel sure of that much, at least. Which is good, because it's suddenly become clear to me that somewhere along the line, I've completely lost sight of who Dorcas and Mike have become as people. "Mike never should have suggested it in the first damn place."

Dorcas shrugs me off and sighs. "It's not that simple, Antoine! Teenagers are *hard*. Not that I agree with making our daughter talk to us against her will, of course. But we've got to do *something* to try and fix this mess." She lowers her voice as she continues. "Just between us, Mike and I have been struggling to communicate with each other for quite a while now. This whole thing with Ramona really is just the last straw. I actually told him last night that

I want us to start couple's therapy. But don't say anything to him about my having told you about any of that. He'll only get all huffy about it!"

Something about that last part makes me feel even more uncomfortable. I try changing the subject. "Uh, okay, so anyhow, does Ramona know what she wants to do about all of this yet?"

Dorcas scoffs slightly. "Well, she's definitely not going back to college, that's for sure! She's going to have to settle down and be a mom now; at least for a few years. Mike and I will support her, of course. And we've told her that if she can prove to us that she's completely learned her lesson, then we'll *consider* letting her reenrol somewhere close to us once the child is old enough to go to school. But she'll still have to come home every day after classes to look after her child! Anyway, we really *do* want to know who the father is, so as to make him do right by

her and their child. It's obvious that they've had a falling out. Just some typical teenaged nonsense, I'm sure! Will you come back home with me now, and see if she'll talk to you?"

I nod slowly. "Yeah, of course I will. I'll just go put on my armour for the flight."

There's no polite way of telling Dorcas that I'm going to ask Ramona what *she* wants to do next, and that I'll support whatever decision she makes.

Or that I don't want to remain friends with either one of her parents.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Fifty-One – Antoine

NOVEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

Dorcas and I fly back to the Miracle Mob's shared home and official team headquarters in Holmby Hills. It takes us forty-five minutes to get there from our starting point in Bunker Hill. I had to be careful to restrict my speed to its bare minimum so that Dorcas' wings can keep up. She's wearing her usual costume of gilded plate mail armour; handcrafted for her within the Vatican, and designed to allow for her wings. It's sensible, given how many bad guys pop up without warning. But it really does slow her down as a flyer.

Mike meets us when we land at the designated landing area in the rear courtyard of the Miracle Mob's five storey building. He's in costume, too. The sunlight glitters on the metallic golden trims of his formfitting white leather jumpsuit and boots, and on the stylised double M logo picked out in gold on his chest. Sometimes, I wonder if he deliberately styles himself after Tim. I'd never say that aloud, of course. But it's kind of noticeable.

To my surprise, he scowls angrily when he sees me. "Darn it all, Dorcas! What's *he* doing here?"

Dorcas folds her arms. "I asked him to stop by and help us with Ramona."

Mike splutters. "You told him about what's going on in our family?"

I'm tempted to just turn around and leave, but frankly I'm a lot more worried about Ramona than I am about her parents. I try to smooth things over

instead. “Come on you two – let’s not do this right now, okay?”

“Don’t you dare patronise me!” Mike flexes his hands; as if he’s reminding me about his enhanced strength, as opposed to his healing touch.

Dorcas glares at him. “Don’t be such an asshole, Mike! You *know* Ramona trusts Antoine. He’s here because I thought that she might be willing to tell him the name of her secret boyfriend!”

Mike throws up his hands, and shakes his head in frustration. “Yeah, well, good luck with that idea! She’s taken off someplace. I’ve been calling her for the past hour, but she isn’t answering. She hasn’t even texted me back to say if she’s okay or not!”

I decide it’s time for me to step in. “I’ll track her cell phone. We don’t know that she’s in trouble. Maybe she’s just out doing some pre-holiday shopping.”

Mike glares at me for a moment longer before nodding, albeit grudgingly. “Okay. But I still think we should ask Tim to help. He’d soon get some answers out of her!”

I shake my head. “As I told Dorcas, Tim won’t agree to do that. Anyhow, he and Wally are away on vacation together until January. Also, brainwashing your daughter to talk to you is a *horrible* idea, and you should probably reflect on what suggesting doing it says about you as a person, and as a parent. Seriously, Mike. I mean that.”

Mike sneers. “Are you trying to tell me how to be a dad? What – you think you know better than me because you’re a genius? You don’t have any kids! Heck, you don’t even have a partner!”

I’m about to retort, but Dorcas glares furiously at us both. Her hands are glowing golden. “Quit. The. Crap. Or. I. Will. Murder. Both. Of. You.”

Mike and I once saw her use her energy blasts to singlehandedly level an entire Charybdis facility without so much as even breaking a sweat.

We choose life.

The other two members of the Miracle Mob are standing by the window in the living area. Purely by chance, it's me who walks in first. Those extra few seconds give Harald Nilsen, aka Red Revenant, just enough time to take advantage of his perfect regeneration to swallow his partially eaten candy bar foil wrapper and all before Mike or Dorcas can spot it. They're *extremely* against eating refined sugar.

Harald winks at me as he grasps my forearm with both of his hands in greeting. "Well met again, Antoine! Say nothing of my indulgence, eh?"

I nod. "No problem, Harald. Hey, do you have any more of those candy bars? I'm kind of hungry myself, too."

On Harald's left, Henrietta Harte, aka Sacred Shield, crinkles her nose in open disgust. "Deceit is as sinful as gluttony! I'll have no part in it!"

She flounces off in search of Mike and Dorcas; who still haven't caught up. I don't need to strain my ears to hear that they're arguing with one another about Ramona again.

Henrietta's behaviour is sadly typical of her. I think the nicest way for me to describe her personality is to say that she doesn't have any hobbies outside of attending church and reading her bible, and that she openly judges everyone who does. She's a slim white American woman of average height, aged in her early thirties, with the same blonde hair and blue eyes as all three members of the Nelligan family. Like Mike – and Tim – she dresses in a formfitting white and gold jumpsuit; with the addition of a short cape in Henrietta's case. Her superpower is

the ability to create forcefields. And whereas most people think of forcefields as purely defensive, Henrietta likes to be more proactive. She uses them to suffocate her opponents into submission. It's the reason why so many of the Miracle Mob's recurring enemies tend to have rebreathers as part of their costumes.

Harald's costume is styled after the wool and linen clothing from the era that he was born into. It's a traditional eleventh century layered outfit in various shades of red, with a spring steel chainmail hauberk worn over the top of it. Hey, just because someone's functionally immortal is no reason for them not to have any armour!

You know, now that I pause to think about it all properly, over the past ten or so years, I've gradually become much better friends with Harald than I am with either Dorcas or Mike. Yeah, he can be kind of a weird guy at times,

but he's also extremely kind hearted, and a lot of fun to be around. Jason, Katarina, and I go bowling with him sometimes. Well, Katarina and I bowl. Thankfully, all of the other regular patrons at the bowling alley have gotten used to seeing a tall bald Norwegian guy, with the stylised depiction of a three headed lion battling a polar bear at the base of a cross tattooed on his scalp in various shades of red and black ink, and dark crimson eyes, using a bowling ball to play toss around with an English guy dressed as a jester. And provided nobody outside of our group is ever injured by their game, the staff are content to ignore it. So far, the casualty tally there remains at zero.

Still, no matter what my personal feelings towards any of them are, the fact is that the Miracle Mob are a tightly functioning team made up of talented and powerful people. And, although the blood curse continues to

weaken me, thanks to my technology – and that, uh, other thing that we aren't going to mention – I'm still functioning at their level where being a superhero is concerned. Hopefully, Ramona really is just out browsing the stores and ignoring her dad's attempts at contacting her. But if it does turn out that she's in trouble, then whoever's behind it is about to have a *seriously* unpleasant day.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Fifty-Two – Susan

NOVEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

Kratz is back on his feet again. According to Minty, that means that both of our jobs will now be a lot more complicated. Seems that our boss is a danger magnet with self-sacrificing tendencies. Minty's words, not mine, but I've met the guy, and Minty ain't wrong. He's also got a whole dossier on Kratz that confirms it.

As is fricking typical of life, I'm out of the building on my lunchbreak when trouble comes knocking. Trouble in this instance goes by the name of Nelligan, and there's three of them.

The youngest one is called Ramona, and she's Kratz's eighteen-year-old goddaughter. According to Minty, who I just got off the phone with, the latest sitrep is that she took off some hours ago after an argument with her dad, and ain't been seen or heard from since. That's as much as Kratz was willing to share about it. Minty's digging for more information. He's of the opinion that Ramona's an okay kid. But he doesn't trust either one of her parents as far as he could throw them. A pair of toxic friends, apparently, with superpowers, and a marriage that's on the ropes. The mom's got a thing for Kratz. The dad's noticed. So has Minty, which is just as damn well; given that our genius employer seems oblivious.

My primary objective right now is to get myself to wherever the heck Kratz is ASAP, and then stick to him like glue for his own damn sake. If I can help him out some with locating Ramona, then so much the better.

I am a Marine. Ergo, I am well-used to the primary objective being less than simple to achieve. But screw the whole thing sideways if I know how best to go about catching up on motorcycle to a person who can literally *fly*! Calling Kratz himself to request his location just got me his voicemail. Triangulating the answer using his cell phone signal ain't in my wheelhouse. Fortunately, Minty had the foresight – likely due to bitter past experience – to provide me with a neat little wearable gizmo that does all that, and a couple of other real useful things to boot. It's essentially a wristwatch with ambitions. Ironically, Kratz is the one who invented it. Doubtless, he's busy using a version of it himself to try and help find Ramona.

The tracking on my own device has managed to narrow down Kratz's cell phone's current whereabouts to the Port of Los Angeles. Going by the route that he seems to be taking – a lot slower than I'd have expected, so

maybe he ain't flying after all – there's really only place that he could be headed to: an old industrial park down near the docks. It's out of use and unsafe, according to all the signage on the ten feet tall chain link fence that I just climbed over. There was something on it about not trespassing, too, but I ain't got time to worry about that. Some idiot passed the devil the key fob, and now I'm stuck making do. Just gonna have to hope that Kratz hasn't somehow gotten separated from his cell phone. And that nobody comes along and steals my bike from where I left it parked outside the fence.

I'm skirting the side of one of the derelict buildings when a couple of real big feathers drift down through my line of sight. Hoping that there ain't also a giant murder bird in the mix, I look up. No murder birds are in view. There is however a white girl with long curly blonde hair and golden feathered wings sitting hunched up on the edge

of the roof right above me. She's wearing blue jeans, sneakers, and a loose-fitting dark yellow halter neck top with sequins and long sleeves. If she ain't Ramona Nelligan, then that dossier about Kratz that Minty's been having me memorise by heart needs some significant changes made to it. Reckon it will do anyway; given how it doesn't mention anything about Ramona being pregnant, which she very obviously is. Doesn't say anything about her self-harming either, but I'm pretty sure yanking out handfuls of her own plumage counts.

Yeah, I'm gonna step in here.

I edge around the corner of the building to where there's a fire escape going all the way up to the roof. It's more rust than it is metal, but it holds my weight as I triple-time things up to the top of it. Thankfully, the roof itself is in better shape, and flat to boot. I sprint across it to where Ramona's sitting, grab a

firm hold of her by her wings, and haul her the fuck back away from the edge. Thanks to the momentum, I end up falling backwards onto my ass with her on top of me, but at least we're both still alive and on the damn roof.

Unforeseen objective achieved.

Ramona scrambles clear and manages to get to her feet. She stares at me as I stand up. A funny kind of expression comes over her face. I've seen it before; on Marines who just ain't got enough left in them to react to whatever fresh horror has been bestowed upon them.

I start talking before she can regroup enough to try anything that might be extra stupid. "Hey there. Sorry for tackling you like that, but you're on top of a tall building, and you look like you're hurting. Do you want to talk about it? I'm a real good listener."

She shakes her head. "No."

“It’s one of those situations, huh?” I step in close enough that I can grab a hold of her again if I need to. I’ve got a real bad feeling about this. “I’m Susan Kennedy, by the way. I work for your godfather; that Dr Kratz guy.”

There’s the sound of a bike starting up coming from the direction of where mine is parked. Or was parked, I guess.

Ramona sniffles and rubs at her eyes. “Did he send you to look for me?”

“Nope. I’m actually on my lunch break right now. I just happened to look up and see you.” I move around carefully while I’m talking; so that I’m standing between her and the nearest edge of the roof. I don’t risk explaining about how Kratz is leading a search party for her. The odds of her not wanting to be found are stacked way too high for that. “You look like you’re hurting. How about we just hang out up here together for a while, okay?”

“Um, okay.” She spots my tags then. “Are you in the military?”

I give her the uncomplicated answer. “Yeah, I’m in the Marines. Twenty years now, give or take.”

“Oh. You must really like it then, huh?” She sits down on one of the oversized pipes that presumably used to do something important. A bitter sounding tremor starts up in her voice as she continues talking. “I suppose you probably like Advocate, too.”

I sit down on her left. “Nope.”

She shifts around where she’s sitting so that she can stare at me. Got a hopeful, wary kind of look to her now. Her voice softens for a minute. “Really? But I thought that all the soldiers liked him…!” Her voice cracks back into bitter again as she chokes down what should have been a sob. “Advocate – the mighty voice of good! Humble hero of the troops!”

“Ain’t a soldier, kid. I’m a Marine. Big difference there.” I wink as I adjust my own position to mirror her. “And I’ve met him. Guy’s an asshole.”

Those were apparently the magic words. Ramona starts crying, hard, and then she starts talking again. This time, I keep my mouth shut and listen.

It takes her a while to be able to let herself name what was done to her. But she does, eventually; as well as confiding in me that it was just over seven months ago now. She talks about how she’s been hiding what came of it so as to avoid being shamed. She breaks down into tears again as she describes how she finally got the nerve up to contact a clinic about an abortion; only to have it broken to her – albeit gently – that she was too far along for them to be able to help her that way. Her voice shrinks when she tells me how she was too ashamed and scared to take up the

clinic's offer to provide her with counselling and guidance on arranging an adoption. That was the point when she gave up looking for help.

She doesn't tell me who raped her, and I don't pressure her on that decision. Ain't like it matters right now, anyway. But from reading between the lines, it sounds to me like it was someone she knows well, and that she trusted.

Her dad's apparently been pushing for her to tell him and her mom everything. This morning, Ramona overheard him talking to somebody on his cell phone about having her involuntarily committed somewhere for a full psychiatric evaluation. Apparently, her mom had gone out – must have been that visit she paid to Kratz – and it sounded like her dad was planning on getting it all done and dusted before she came home. That last part's what drove the kid to take off and find somewhere to try and hide for a while.

I wait until she's done sharing before I say anything in return. "I get why you left. It's okay. We can stay up here for as long as you want – ugh!"

I don't have time to so much as try dodging the sweep of her wing. It catches me full on, and knocks me flat on my back. I feel a rib crack.

By the time I pick myself up, Ramona's already on her feet and running for the edge of the roof. I chase after her. Given how many feathers she's ripped out, she ain't capable of getting airborne. And there's no damn way she ain't fully aware of that fact.

She jumps just as I catch up to her.

I hurl myself off the roof in pursuit.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Fifty-Three – Antoine

NOVEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

The retail therapy explanation for Ramona's absence is officially toast. I've tracked her cell phone signal to the disused industrial park within the Port of Los Angeles. All four adult members of the Miracle Mob are here with me. We used the Miracle Mobile for transport; since only Dorcas and I can fly, and Mike insisted on us all sticking together. He did the driving. I think he forgot how busy it gets around this time of year. The Miracle Mobile – a sleek white armoured van, with gold trims, and tinted reinforced windows – was stuck in traffic for ninety minutes.

Anyhow, we're finally here.

The entrance gates are chained shut, so I blast them open. "Let's go!"

Mike immediately starts lecturing me about breaking and entering, while Henrietta nods along in support of him. Then Dorcas hauls them both out of the Miracle Mobile to yell at them.

Meanwhile, Harald and I take off to start searching the park. This place is huge, and Ramona could literally be anywhere within it. My tracking device still has limits to how well it can pinpoint someone's cell phone signal. Improving it will be my next project. Finally adding a helmet to my armour will just have to wait for a while longer.

Harald ducks into the nearest empty building, while I stick to the air. Dorcas soon swoops past me; calling out to me that she's on her way to scour the north end of the park. "Mike and Henrietta are covering the west side!"

I wave my understanding and head south. It's just dawned on me that somewhere in here stands the building that Mister Terrible used as his secret base back in April. Why would Ramona want to come back to here?

An agonised sounding scream splits the air somewhere to my right. I turn around and fly towards it as fast as I can; going up higher first, so as to avoid having to weave my way around the assorted empty buildings.

Then I spot them: two familiar figures dangling three storeys up from the fire escape of Mister Terrible's old base. Ramona, limp and unconscious, with her left wing very obviously broken at the shoulder joint, and her golden plumage tattered and bloodied. An arm's length above her, pushing her body to its limits as she keeps the two of them both from falling any further, is Kennedy; clinging on with her left hand to the base of a railing belonging to

part of the building's decrepit fire escape. She's got her right hand clenched tight around the shoulder bone of Ramona's left wing, just below the injured joint.

What the heck has been going on here?

I swoop in and gather Ramona into my arms in a cradle carry; the systems in my armour compensating for how much the blood curse has drained my strength. "I've got her now, Kennedy! It's okay. Just let go of her wing and grab onto me. I'll fly us all down together."

Kennedy winces as she lets go of Ramona. She grits out her words. "Kid's gonna need a medic, ASAP, doc! She knocked me down, and then she jumped. Didn't get to her in time."

I fly up a little until I'm level with her; hovering in place while she wraps her right arm around me. Then I move upwards again, so that she can safely

let go of the railing and hang onto me with both arms instead. “You caught her before she could fall. That’s all that matters to me.”

Dorcas arrives beside us just as we land; doubtless having heard the scream at the same time I had. She gasps when she sees Ramona. “What monster did this to my little girl?”

Kennedy lowers her arms from around my shoulders as she answers Dorcas. “She plucked out her own feathers and jumped off the damn roof, ma’am. I went after her to try and save her. Grabbed a hold of her wing with one hand and the fire escape railing with the other. Gravity then asserted itself. Her wing got popped out of its socket during the resultant sudden stop. Pain of it knocked her out. We were still hanging up there when Dr Kratz arrived. And speaking of pain, sorry, but I’m gonna need to excuse myself here for a moment.”

With that, she lunges sideways and slams her right shoulder against the wall of the building; gripping her right elbow tightly with her left hand to keep her arm pulled across her chest as she does it. There's the unmistakable sound of a dislocated shoulder being abruptly forced back into place. It's accompanied by a mumbled string of profanities from Kennedy.

Ramona suddenly squirms awake in my arms, and wails in agony. "It *hurts*!"

Dorcas springs back up into the air immediately. "I'll go find Mike! Don't worry, Ramona – your dad will fix this!"

She takes off before anyone can react to her words.

Kennedy is already examining Ramona for injuries. She looks at me and shakes her head. "Her belly feels hard and she's bleeding – could be a placental abruption from the fall!"

I bundle Ramona into her arms; doubling over and clenching my jaw as the smell of blood reaches me. “Get her away from me! Hurry – hide!”

As I should admittedly have predicted, my bodyguard stays where she is; carefully helping Ramona to lie down on the ground while lecturing me. “This kind of thing happening is a large part of why Minty doesn’t like it when you skip meals, doc!”

I try and fail to keep my teeth from lengthening into fangs. “Duly noted!”

“Good.” Kennedy socks me hard in the jaw with her left fist; sending me staggering backwards. “Got it together yet?”

I nod at her. “Yeah, thanks.”

She hands me an ampoule of blood. “You’re welcome. Are you gonna be fit for company when Mrs Nelligan and her husband get here?”

I pop the lid off the ampoule and down the contents in a single gulp. “Not by their standards, no. But it doesn’t matter. The three of us aren’t going to be here by then.”

Kennedy hands me two more ampoules. She watches me drain both of them before she replies. “Why not?”

I hand all three of the empty ampoules back to her. “Because I’m taking Ramona to someone who can help me to save her, and you’re coming with us in case I lose control again. Also, you know – that whole biomancy thing that you keep on insisting doesn’t exist. It might come in handy.”

Mike’s powers won’t help with this. He uses unrefined biokinetic cellular manipulation to force damaged flesh and bone to repair itself via aggravated cellular proliferation. Even he admits that it’s next to useless for more complex internal injuries, and if it

wasn't, using it on a pregnant person would still affect the foetus too – with potentially horrific results. And despite Kennedy and me having powers that *could* easily save both Ramona and the foetus inside her, there's nothing that we can do with them here. Even without Henrietta to worry about, Dorcas and Mike would *never* consent to magic being used on their family.

There's only one choice left.

Kennedy doesn't question me on my logic. Instead, she scoops Ramona up into her own arms in a cradle carry, and turns her back towards me. "Grab a hold of me beneath my arms, doc. I'll carry her, and you carry me."

"Nice thinking." I do as she suggests; activating the inertial compensation field that I use for high-speed flying, and adjusting it to protect my passengers as well as me, before flying off at my armour's maximum speed.

I also use my armour's built-in comm to contact Amalthea.

She picks up on her end almost immediately. "Hi, Antoine!"

"Amalthea, I need your help." I glance down at the almost blurred cityscape below me. "Are you and Astrape still at the meet and greet?"

"Um, yeah, why?"

I bank to my left; heading straight towards the Pickleby Youth Stadium. Thankfully, I know that the roof there is flat, with plenty of space to land. "Get up onto the roof of the stadium as fast as you can. Kennedy and I are en route to you now. We've got my goddaughter Ramona with us. She's pregnant, and it looks like the placenta's suffered an abruption. I need you to be ready to use your phasing powers to help me save her as soon as we arrive."

She starts to reply, but I end the call, and contact Minty. “Minty, I need you to send full emergency postpartum medical assistance and transportation for five adults and a possibly preterm infant to the roof of the Pickleby Youth Stadium right away. Keep the press off my back, and let Dorcas and the rest of the Miracle Mob know to meet us back in medical.”

“You got it, Dr Kratz.”

“Thanks, Minty.” I power through the sudden spike in my pain levels and keep talking. “Make sure that the staff in medical know that Kennedy will need checking over, too. She just reset her own shoulder.”

PROTECTORS!

Issue Fifty-Four – Susan

NOVEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

Ramona groans and squirms in my arms as Kratz ends his call. Luckily, I've got her uninjured wing pinned between her and me. "Make it go away! I don't want it! I never wanted it!"

I can't do anything to try and comfort her aside from talking, and I have no idea what to say that might make any part of this better. Thankfully, Kratz speaks up instead. "It's okay, kiddo. You're going to be fine, I promise."

She whimpers. "He *made* me do it! He grabbed me, and I didn't want to, but

he just wouldn't *stop*, and I couldn't get away from him – I tried to, but I couldn't! I wasn't strong enough. And then afterwards, I begged and begged God to forgive me and stop me from getting pregnant, but…but then…!"

The stadium's in sight now. Kratz slows down enough to be able to make a safe landing on the roof when we get there. There's an edge to his voice as he answers her. "Yeah, well, God's not in charge of things now."

His blasphemy appears to comfort her. She gulps in a breath. "I don't want it. I *hate* it, and I hate *him*!"

Kratz begins his descent. He keeps on talking to Ramona the whole time. "Okay. It's okay, kiddo, I promise. Can you tell us who he was?"

She shakes her head as we land. "There was so much blood coming from inside me after he did it…!"

I lay her down gently and kneel beside her, holding her right hand between both of mine. “Give me his name, kid, and I *promise* you that I will put him in the ground for what he did to you.”

Ramona groans again, and clutches my hand so tightly that I feel the bones grind. “He told me not to tell!”

Horner arrives at a flat out run then; phasing out through the panel of the still unopened door that leads up onto the roof. She sprints towards us. “Sorry! Astrape’s on her way up too! I ran here as fast as I could, but…!”

Kratz stuns Ramona with something in his left gauntlet faster than I can blink. He takes off his cape and spreads it out flat beside her while he reassures Horner. “Don’t worry about it. Now – I need both of you to listen to me about what we’re going to do, okay? Firstly, the amniotic sac should still be intact, and if so, we need to keep it that way.”

What follows is an act of straight up body horror carried out by good people for the kindest of reasons.

The removal part goes simply enough. With Kratz talking her through it step by step, Horner does that thing of hers and reaches in through the front of Ramona to lift out everything that needs relocating – amniotic sac and contents, placenta, all of it. She hands the whole lot over to me, and then she turns away to throw up.

I set everything down on Kratz's cape; being careful not to let the placenta tear away from the side of the sac. From what I can see of the foetus as it floats there, it's still doing okay so far. It's a boy. I spot a pair of what I think must be nascent wings on his back. No sign of any feathers sprouting on them yet, but for all I know that's normal.

Athanasiou turns up too at that point, with a big bunch of balloon animals

tied to her left wrist. She kicks open the door, takes one look at what's going on, and immediately appoints herself to the role of sage advisor on the topic of midwifery. I'm still busy with what I'm doing, so I more or less just tune her out. Horner mumbles something in reply that I can't quite hear. Whatever it was, it earns a hearty laugh from Athanasiou.

Kratz rests his left palm on Ramona's abdomen, and his right palm on top of the amniotic sac. He looks at me; his face pinched up a little in stress. "This is the part when I really need you to believe in magic for me, captain."

I pull out another couple of ampoules of blood in case he gets hungry again. Then I nod at him. "Guess I can hold off on exterminating fairies for now, doc."

He chuckles like he's hurting. "Okay – put your hands over mine, and try to think about healing. I'll do the rest."

The rest transpires to be weird shit that I am as yet wholly unable to explain away. Another surge of warmth going through my hands, some more of that blue glow thing. All that crap. I don't understand it, and I don't need to. Whatever it is that Kratz does, it works, and in the end that's all that matters. Ramona's lying there between us unconscious but fully alive and well, and the baby's somehow now full-term and ready to exit the sac. He's got feathers on his wings now. Guess I was right about that last part.

Kratz topples sideways to his right and passes out.

Horner makes as if she's gonna try checking on him, but I wave her off from doing that. "Safer to just let him rest for now, kid. Athanasiou – you actually know shit about delivering a baby? Because if so, then I could really use another pair of hands over here for what needs doing next."

She shakes her head solemnly. “Alas, friend Kennedy, I must confess that whilst I have indeed read much upon all subjects, my vast knowledge of such plebian deeds as mortal birthing remains untried.”

Horner turns and blinks up at her in surprise. “Um…so what about, like, immortal birthing, or something?”

Athanasiou gets a real haughty look on her face. “That is no business of mere mortals, young one! And I warn you to take far greater care in how you speak to a goddess ere forth!”

“Not the time for it, ladies!” I draw my knife and get to work slicing open the sac. “Athanasiou – go keep a lookout for whoever the heck it is that Minty’s sent to get us in case they need any help with spotting where we are up here! Horner – bring me a couple of your hair ties to help with banding off the umbilical! Move it, kid!”

Kratz managed to figure out a way to recharge my plasma pistol for me, so I'm gonna use it to cauterise the stump anyway, but tying off the cord first won't hurt, and the kid looks like she needs something to help take her mind off Athanasiou being a bitch.

Amniotic fluid pours out all over me as I lift the baby clear and wipe off his nose and mouth. He starts squalling in the way that newborns are supposed to do. Meanwhile, I start hoping that nobody else outside of the damn roof can hear him. The last thing we need right now is for a bunch of random bystanders to arrive and start asking questions. Thankfully, there's a whole lot of noise going on down at the meet and greet. So far, it seems to be enough to keep everyone distracted.

Horner passes me her hair ties. They're bright pink and glittery, but they do the job. Unsurprisingly, it falls to me to fasten them in place around the cord.

Horner's squeamish about the idea of touching it even with her gloves still on. I don't blame her – this shit's gross. And I say that as a person who's given birth myself by the way, so don't come at me about it. Miracle of life ain't none too pretty to unwrap, that's for sure. Giving silent thanks to all the tiny talking forest creatures in fucking fairytale land that it's finally over and done with, I cauterise the stump, and wrap the baby up in Kratz's cape.

Now all we've got to do is sit tight and wait for our ride home.

Not too shabby, Marine.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Fifty-Five – Antoine

NOVEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

It's now three hours on from the events on the stadium roof, and Ramona is awake and resting in bed in a private room just off the ICU here in Kratz Industries. The doctors have assessed her condition as being stable, but they aren't ready to sign off on my spell having completely healed her. To be honest neither am I. Blood magic isn't a replacement for medical science. And it does absolutely *nothing* where something such as mental health is concerned. Ramona's going to need ongoing professional help and support for everything that she's gone through.

The baby is also still in the ICU for monitoring. Again, the doctors aren't about to take any chances. Ramona doesn't want anything to do with him, and I'm supporting her. Dorcas and Mike have gone home with the rest of the Miracle Mob to pick up some things for her, and to discuss their feelings privately. In the event that they don't want to take their grandson in now that they know about his origins, I'll see to it personally that he's placed with a good family. Elodie is already on standby to help me with that. She has some contacts within Children's Services who specialise in adoptions involving superpowered birth parents.

I'm holed up in my workshop using DNA testing to try and identify the sick bastard who raped Ramona when Kennedy finds me again. She hands me a bright blue travel mug of what smells like my favourite coffee. "Minty says to let you know that he's already added a little blood to it, doc."

“Thanks.” I stand and sip it while I wait for the electrophoresis to be complete.

Kennedy stands beside me in front of the machine. “How’s Ramona holding up? Have you talked to her?”

I sigh. “Yeah, an hour and a half ago; just before I came up here. I told her about our having used our combined magic to heal her. She took the news a lot better than either Dorcas or Mike did, but she still won’t say who it was that raped her. I don’t want to keep pushing her on it, so I’m going to run the baby’s DNA against every available database and see if I can find anything out that way instead.”

Kennedy nods. “If it helps you any with narrowing things down, Ramona told me while we were back on that roof that it was seven months ago. Reading between the lines, it sounded to me like whoever did it to her was someone she already knew.”

I turn and stare at her; my gut lurching as I put the pieces together.

Seven months.

Someone she already knew.

I read the post mission report for the thing with Mister Terrible and his pet monster back in April, so I know for a fact that Ramona and Tim were alone together for a while during it.

Everything lines up in terms of dates.

Tim – I introduced him and Wally to Dorcas and Mike when Ramona was just six years old.

He watched her grow up.

He and Wally helped me to babysit her a bunch of times.

He even gave me pointers on what it's like having wings when he heard that I was trying to help Dorcas and Mike with teaching her how to fly.

Up until now, I'd assumed that the baby's wings were from Ramona. The plumage on them is gold, after all.

But Ramona keeps saying that the rapist told her not to tell; and that she was the one to blame, anyhow.

And people always listen to Tim.

Always.

I stare blankly at Kennedy while I think about all of that.

She frowns at me. "You alright?"

"No." I hand the mug back to her. "But if the comparison that I'm about to run on this sample comes back positive, then I'm a whole lot better than Tim's going to be when I catch up to him."

PROTECTORS!

Issue Fifty-Six – Susan

NOVEMBER 2017: CANCÚN

Got to love how Kratz has managed to invent a jet that can complete a five-hour journey in a little over half that amount of time. But I'll be damned if Minty's daily system of pre-emptively filing flight plans for it to legally fly anywhere and everywhere whenever at the drop of a hat doesn't impress me even more. That man is *not* paid enough for what he does. I don't care how rich and generous Kratz is. The simple fact remains that there is not a number known to humanity which can accurately be connected to the value of that level of efficiency.

The jet's more or less fully automated, aside from there being the option to have a person pilot it. I'm pretty sure that Kratz only really left that last thing in as a feature to help make other people feel more comfortable. At any rate, it's just me, him, and the elder four members of the Miracle Mob who're aboard it at present. Minty's sitting this one out so as to keep an eye on Ramona and the baby. Horner and Athanasiou are on standby back in Los Angeles in case of any Thanksgiving Day trouble kicking off there that needs superhero level help to fix it, and both Vanderova and Driver are presumably still in or around Cairo.

For reasons unfathomable to me, Kratz has decided that I'm to remain here aboard the jet while he and the Miracle Mob go after Thompson. He sprang it on me privately a few minutes ago now, just as we were landing; claiming that it's for security reasons, as if the jet's AI can't manage all that stuff by

itself. The AI and I are in full agreement on this being a bad idea, but sometimes it's easier to just smile, nod, and do your job regardless. As such, my new bike is fuelled and ready in the cargo area. If Kratz ain't gonna let me do my job as bodyguard, then he'll just have to put up with me as an unforeseen element in whatever goes down here in Cancún.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Fifty-Seven – Walter

NOVEMBER 2017: CANCÚN

I read Antoine's text message a couple of seconds after it arrives. It takes a minute for the words to sink in.

Then I drop my cell phone on the bed and stare over where Tim's standing by the open balcony doors of our hotel room. My voice feels like it's gonna stick in my throat. "Tim? Tell me it ain't true – tell me you didn't rape Ramona!"

He gasps in shock. "What? No! Wally, sweetheart, of course it's not true! I didn't rape her – I didn't rape anyone! Why are you even asking me this?"

I take a couple of real deep breaths to try and calm down some. Of course he's innocent! Why'd I ever doubt it? How could Antoine believe it either? "I'm sorry, honey. I was just shocked, is all. Antoine just texted me. He says that Ramona was raped and how there's some kind of proof that you did it. He must've been brainwashed, or something! Or maybe it wasn't really him who texted – maybe Charybdis are trying to mess with us! Heck, Tim, they might even have made an evil clone of you! Yeah, you know what, I bet it was that last one – it's exactly the kind of crap that they'd try and pull!"

Tim looks the angriest I've ever seen him. There's no damn wonder about it neither; what with hearing what he's been falsely accused of doing! He shakes his head and takes a real deep breath to calm down some. "I just can't believe Ramona accused me of doing that to her, Wally. And the very idea that Antoine believes it's *true*...!"

I open my arms for him when he joins me next to the left side of the bed. He hugs me back real tight, and then we sit down together on the edge of the mattress. I try and comfort him as he folds his wings shut around us. “Don’t worry, honey. We’ll get through this.”

Tim kind of shudders; I guess maybe out of relief that I ain’t turned on him, or because he’s as shocked as me about him being accused in the first damn place. Then he leans in and kisses me. “Thanks, Wally. I love you.”

“I love you too, Tim.” I kiss him back. “We’ll figure this mess out somehow.”

“Gosh, I hope so!” He opens his wings and rolls us both over onto the middle of the bed so as he’s straddling me. “Let’s make love, sweetheart.”

I can’t help feeling surprised that he wants to do that right now. Shouldn’t we be trying to figure out what’s going on with Antoine and Ramona?

Something feels wrong with this.

Tim starts taking off my shirt. A couple of the buttons end up getting ripped off because of how much he's rushing things, but hey, it's just a shirt, I guess. I got plenty of others to wear.

But I still can't shake that feeling that things ain't okay here.

I try and sit up. "Let's slow down for a minute, honey...!"

He pushes me back down before I can finish speaking. Then he wraps his right hand around my throat to keep me there. "Gosh darn it all, Wally, will you quit squirming already? What's gotten into you? You're acting like you believe Ramona didn't *want* me to do it!"

God forgive me, but I freeze.

Tim don't seem to notice my reaction at all. He goes right on undressing me; starting in ranting about Ramona while he does it. "That spoiled brat's nothing

but a floozie! A lewd temptress! Just look at how she flies around in that skimpy costume; showing off her body to all and sundry! It's disgusting, that's what it is, Wally – good girls don't act that way! I don't know why I bothered trying to help her out at all!"

His face is all flushed, and there's spittle hanging from off his teeth. It's like he's lost his damn mind! I know I need to fight back, but I ain't even sure how to breathe right now.

He manhandles me over so as I'm lying on my front. "Everything that happened that day at the docks was consensual! Ramona all but threw herself at me! And she's a filthy liar to pretend like it's otherwise! Poor Antoine just doesn't see it yet, that's all. That girl's got him wrapped around her little finger!"

His hands close over my shoulders; right in next to the sides of my neck. He squeezes them even harder when I

flinch. “I promise I wasn’t cheating on you with her, sweetheart. I only did it to help her out, that’s all. Because she needed me to. I didn’t *enjoy* it!”

I never really thought about how much stronger than me he is before now. It never mattered. Not until now.

Tim starts unbuckling his belt. I don’t want this, but I ain’t gonna call out for help. There ain’t anybody here in the hotel who could stop him. And I don’t want to end up getting other people hurt. Maybe if I just let him do what he wants then he’ll let me go afterwards.

Suddenly, there’s a real loud thud and then a cracking, splintering noise from over across the room. Tim don’t let go of me none, but I manage to turn my head enough to see Kennedy stepping into the room through what’s left of the door she just kicked down. “Knock fucking knock, asshole!”

PROTECTORS!

Issue Fifty-Eight - Susan

NOVEMBER 2017: CANCÚN

Thompson's fully dressed and openly unhappy to see me. He rises up from where he's straddling Brooks via a great flap of his wings; buffeting me with air and then diving straight at me.

My plasma pistol is already in my hand: safety off, and parameters set to wide beam heavy stun to help minimise the risk to any innocent third parties in the vicinity. I aim it square at Thompson and squeeze the trigger.

There's about a half a second between my realising that it ain't firing, and

Thompson tackling me into the wall by the left of the doorway. My plasma pistol goes flying, and I feel the rib that Ramona broke yesterday shift inside me. A couple of its companions do likewise as they splinter in solidarity.

Well, shit, Marine.

Thompson grabs me by my neck with both his hands, and lifts me clean up off the floor; dangling me in front of him at arm's length. I catch hold of his forearms, lock my elbows, and pull myself up as best as I can; managing to keep myself from being throttled while I try to kick him in the nutsack.

Alas, the bastard drops me like a hot rock before I can succeed there. He kicks me in the gut and curls his upper lip back in a sneer. "Time for you to learn your place around here, soldier!"

He kicks me again; right across the room this time, and hard enough that a dusting of cracked off magnolia paint

fragments and damaged plaster ghosts down onto me from the wall that I collide with face first.

Something else inside me has joined my ribs in complaining loudly about the situation. Pretty sure it's an organ this time instead of a bone.

I ignore it and stagger back to my feet; drawing my knife with my left hand and spitting blood as I go. "*Marine*."

Thompson scoffs. "What?"

"Ain't enrolled in the army, skippy." I shift my position into a fighting stance; with my left arm angled across in front of me and the tip of my knife pointing towards Thompson. My right arm's still acting up some. I raise it and gesture to him to come at me. "Bring it."

Behind him, Brooks rolls off the bed and rises to his feet in all of his naked glory. He grabs a chrome and glass lamp from off the top of the bedside

cabinet and smashes it down against the back of Thompson's head. "Let her alone, damn it! You know that she ain't got any superpowers like we do! You're gonna kill her!"

All he manages to do is piss Thompson off even further – only this time at him, instead of me. He turns and rounds on Brooks. "Keep out of it, Wally! This uppity mulatta WAC has had it coming to her for too gosh darned long!"

I drop down and scissor kick the racist bastard's legs right out from under him; rolling forwards as he falls so that I'm crouched on top of him. He backhands me away from him, but not before I slice through the tendons at the top of his right wing.

The resultant mix of feathers, blood, and shrieking that is now being expelled in various ways from my opponent would surely bring a proud tear to Woods' eye.

I pick myself up again. “Ain’t a WAC, either, you sanctimonious lily-livered wannabe chair force rejected mouth breathing sack of predatory racist shit! I’d say you might’ve gotten them confused with the fine ladies of the USMCWR, but that would first involve you possessing the intellectual capacity required for making an attempt to accurately utilise such complex forms of historical offensive communication between military personnel. And we both know you *don’t*. Same way that we both know how you don’t have a rank or a service history, poster boy. You ain’t military. Hell, you ain’t even military *adjacent*. And you’re no damn hero. You’re nothing but a fuckwitted outmoded quasi-sentient cosmic error with an overindulged superiority complex paired with a limp dick and a taste for raping people who ain’t able to knock you down and feed you the shattered remnants of your own fucking teeth.”

There’s the soft hissy buzzing noise of Kratz’s armour in flight from outside then, and the clicking of metal boots against tile as he lands on the balcony. His cape flutters in the breeze as he walks into the room. He’s got a too quiet kind of look about him at first; like he doesn’t trust himself not to kill someone if he lets himself breathe.

I decide to pipe up before Brooks gets mistaken for having been aiding and abetting. “Situation contained, doc. Brooks here had my back.”

Kratz doesn’t look at either of us yet. He just stands there without speaking; staring down at Thompson, who’s started blubbering.

Brooks pulls his pants back on without bothering with his shorts. He nods his head at me, maybe in thanks, and then he stumbles away into the bathroom; slamming the door shut behind him. There’s the sound of puking.

Kratz snaps out of his reverie and looks over at me. His eyes widen as he takes in the aftermath of my unasked-for attempt at distracting the enemy for him. Then he looks back down at Thompson. His voice is cold and flat. “Miss Miraculous is in medical because of you, Advocate, but the rest of the Miracle Mob are on their way up here. They let me come in first to get Frontline and Captain Kennedy out safely. I’m going to do that now.”

I retrieve my plasma pistol and wait for him while he gently coaxes Brooks out of the bathroom, and helps him with putting on his shoes. Then we exit the room and head towards the emergency stairwell. Kratz’s armour’s too heavy for him to take the elevator, but it's still located along our route. We pass by the Miracle Mob just as they exit it. None of us speak.

Brooks books it down the stairs as soon as we reach them.

I'm about to follow his lead, when Kratz speaks up from behind me. "Kennedy?"

I turn and look at him. "Yeah?"

He sighs. "Please promise me that you won't do something like this again."

I frown in bemusement. "Like what?"

Kratz grimaces. "Like putting yourself in danger instead of waiting for me and Wally back at the jet like I asked you to! I know you're tough, and I know you're brave, but I left you behind for a good reason. Advocate could have *killed* you in that room just now. How did you even manage to get here before the rest of us to begin with?"

Okay, so maybe he ain't wholly wrong to be concerned, but I'm still pissed about how he puts it. I glare at him. "You got a preference for what order or language that I insult you in over each of those individual words, doc?"

Kratz opens his mouth to reply. He's interrupted by a bunch of loud and angry sounding yelling emanating from along the direction in whence we came. It's muffled enough by the stairwell doors that I can't make out any of the words, but Kratz's senses are a whole lot keener than mine. Whatever's being yelled, it spooks him enough that he scoops me up into his arms in a damn cradle carry, and powers his suit up enough to fly us straight down through the central gap between the flights of stairs. He hisses an explanation at me as we go. "Okay – listen. We're both mad at each other. We can fight about it later, or we can sit down and talk things through. But right now, we need to go grab Wally, get back to the jet, and put as much distance as possible between us and the Miracle Mob."

I nod my assent. "Okay. You planning on reading me in on exactly why we're running away from our allies, doc?"

He holds me a little closer as he lands in the little lobby at the base of the stairwell; like he's trying to keep from jostling me too much. "From what I overheard back there, Advocate wasn't in the room when they got there. They seemed to think that we're to blame."

"Good reason to retreat." I wave at Brooks as he catches up to us. "Hey there, major, what kept you?"

Brooks pants. "Antoine, I'm sorry! I swear I didn't know what he'd done!"

Kratz shakes his head. "I believe you, Wally. Now grab onto my back, and hold tight – we don't have much...!"

There's the sudden rustle of feathered wings, and then Mrs Nelligan lands beside us; clearly having taken the same route that Kratz did. Her hands are glowing, and it looks to me like she's out for blood. There's the sound of her husband and friends coming thundering down the stairs, too.

Kratz starts trying to reason with Mrs Nelligan. “Okay, Dorcas, just listen…!”

I interrupt him by kicking her hard in the right side of her head with my left foot; taking full advantage of the extra height granted to me by my still being cradled here in his arms. She drops like a sack of temporarily unconscious things is inclined to do, and I gesticulate at Kratz and Brooks. “Can we get going now, or do I need to take care of the rest of them first?”

Brooks splutters a little. “What the *fuck* is happening right now, Antoine?”

Kratz makes a little sound at the back of his throat that a lot of other people have previously made in my vicinity. Then he sets me down on my feet beside him, wraps his left arm around my waist, his right arm around Brooks’ waist, and takes off at full speed. One or other of the weapons built into his armour blasts down the door between

us and the rear courtyard of the hotel before we can collide with it. The scenery blurs past as Kratz swoops outside and then up; carrying me and Brooks right along with him.

Guess the Miracle Mob will have to find themselves a different ride home.

But where in the Hell has that bastard Thompson gotten to?

PROTECTORS!

Issue Fifty-Nine – Antoine

NOVEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

It's the early hours of Black Friday, and I finally have time to try talking things out with Kennedy. I figure that I might as well get it over with now, instead of leaving things to fester. Besides, after spending most of last night in Elodie's office arguing via video link with the relevant authorities and the Miracle Mob about what happened in Cancún yesterday, I'm too wired to sleep.

Mind you, I've just knocked on the door of my bodyguard's apartment at four in the morning, so it could also be that I'm too sleep deprived to think clearly.

Kennedy opens her door before I can finish thinking better of this whole idea. She's wearing burgundy cotton bias pants and a rose-pink crewneck T-shirt with a pop art style image of a grey and yellow possum printed on the front of it. Her feet are bare, and her hair is tucked up for the night in a silk bonnet patterned in teal, white, and gold.

She eyes me for a long moment before speaking. "I don't smell smoke, doc. You want to tell me what couldn't wait until after sunrise?"

The only reasonable thing for me to do here is apologise for disturbing her and leave so that she can go back to bed.

I open my mouth to say sorry. "Uh, can we talk? I feel like we should talk. Is it okay if I come in?"

What the fuck, brain?!

Kennedy folds her arms. "Is it about that whole mess down in Cancún?"

I nod. “Yeah.”

She scowls slightly. “You gonna fire me if I say no?”

“What? No! No, of course not!” I shake my head hurriedly. “I just…I mean…!”

“Then no. It ain’t okay.” Kennedy unfolds her arms and rests her left palm on the inside of her front door; readying herself to close it in my face. She yawns. “Go to bed, doc.”

“I can’t sleep.” I blurt out the words; because I need someone else to know that fact. “I just spent seven hours defending our actions in Cancún. Law enforcement is content that we didn’t help Advocate escape, but it turns out that Sacred Shield didn’t bother to file the SIEISA like she’d said she would, so obviously the Mexican government wasn’t happy about that at all, and also the Policía Turística took some issue with our having acted without informing them, but Elodie…!”

Kennedy speaks over me. “Doc! I don’t need to know *any* of this, especially not this early in the damn morning!”

“I know that. I…I’m sorry.” I bury my face in my hands and sigh. “I shouldn’t be here. You’re right.”

She scoffs slightly. “Gee, you think?” Then she sighs. “Okay. Come on in. I ain’t gonna be able to get back to sleep now anyway. Reckon we might as well hash this damn thing out and get it all over and done with. You can start by explaining what the heck a SIEISA is.”

I enter the apartment, closing the front door behind me, and follow Kennedy through to the den; explaining the SIEISA as we walk. “Okay, so it stands for Statement of Intended Emergency International Superhero Activity. It was originally phrased as Statement of Intended Emergency International *Superpowered* Activity, but they broadened it back in 1998 to allow for

those superheroes who don't have any inherent special powers. You know, like the ones who just use advanced technology, or magical artifacts, or martial arts, and so on."

Kennedy herds me towards the couch, gesturing for me to sit down. "Uh huh. Guessing that it's some kind of waiver that lets you fight evil internationally?"

I nod as I sit down on the left end of the couch. "It's one of the few things that every nation on Earth agrees about. Nobody wants to risk not being able to send for superheroes to protect them from danger. The SIEISA grants us total freedom of travel for the purpose of engaging in superhero activity. And it's really easy to file it, too! All Sacred Shield needed to do was tick a box on the online form, or else call the SIEISA hotline and inform them verbally. She said that she was going to do it before we crossed into Mexican airspace."

“But she didn’t, huh?” Kennedy sits down on the other end of the couch. “Do you think it was out of malice, or just plain old dumbass stupidity?”

I lean back against the cushions and close my eyes. “I think it doesn’t really matter either way. The AI on the jet recorded her agreeing to see to it, and that was enough for me to be allowed to file retroactively on behalf of the Protectors, which ensured that me, you, and Wally won’t be charged with engaging in or abetting any acts of international vigilantism. And I paid for the damage to the hotel, of course. Without a valid SIEISA in place during the fight, their insurance wouldn’t cover it. Our part in things is done.”

Kennedy grunts approvingly. “Good to know. What about the rest of them?”

I shake my head tiredly. “They’ve been permitted to return home, but they’re facing some steep fines over it all.”

“Life lessons can be fair that way.” She yawns. “Any news on Thompson?”

“Not yet.” It’s me who yawns this time. “He’s officially a fugitive, though. I don’t know how he escaped from that room without anyone seeing him, but he can’t hide himself forever. It’s only a matter of time until he’s located.”

Kennedy chuckles. “Let me guess, doc – when that happy day occurs, I am unequivocally forbidden from so much as thinking about involving myself?”

I open my eyes and turn my head to look at her. “Wally told me what you walked in on. I’m still mad at you for having put yourself in danger like that, but I’m also deeply glad that you got there in time to help him. Thank you.”

She smiles and gives me a thumbs up. “No problem, doc. All in a day’s work. On which subject, you should know that Minty’s ordered me to take the next two weeks off to rest up some.”

I frown at the horrific bruising on her face and neck. “Are you sure that you don’t need to be in medical?”

She waves off my concern. “It’s fine. Just bruising, mostly. And a couple of busted ribs from where I hit the wall, I think. Medical wouldn’t be able to do much for those, and I’ve got pain meds already; after what happened on that roof with Ramona, and such.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “Did you even stop by medical yet?”

“Uh, well, you know…not exactly.” Kennedy tries to shrug and winces. “Figured I can heal myself instinctively in my sleep with this biomancy thing.”

My blood magic roils slightly at her admission. “That’s not how it works! Damn it, I should have explained that better to you before now! Okay – come on. I’m taking you straight down to medical. You’ll need a CT scan and blood tests at the very least.”

“Okay, okay – keep your cape on, doc!” She gets to her feet; gesturing at my costume as she does so. “You really need to take that thing off. Pretty sure you’ve been wearing it for eighteen hours straight at this – ugh!”

I rush to her side as she suddenly doubles over in obvious pain. “I’ve got you! Where does it hurt?”

Kennedy groans. “In under the ribs…!”

My gauntlets don’t cover my hands, so I’m able to feel for her pulse on the inside of her right wrist. It’s racing, and her skin feels dangerously hot. “Did he hit you anywhere in the abdomen?”

“He got a kick or two in around the middle of my gut, yeah.” She wraps her arms around herself and huddles into me. “Damn it…!”

The electronic lock on the balcony doors deactivates with just a thought, and the doors themselves slide open

obediently for me. I scoop Kennedy up in a cradle carry, as gently as possible, and fly out with her; swooping downwards to the nearest window belonging to medical. I'm in no doubt that Ramona will want to help, but her healing touch is the same as Mike's, so it won't work. And even with all of Kratz Industries' resources at our disposal, I'm not sure if my people will be able to fix this completely. But if we can at least stabilise Kennedy, then maybe her biomancy really will do the rest. I can help guide it along; the same way that I did when we saved Ramona and the baby yesterday.

I need to start learning how to use my blood magic to heal independently.

I also need to have a long talk with Wally about why he didn't step in to try and help Kennedy against Advocate in time to prevent this from happening to her in the first place.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Sixty – Shane

NOVEMBER 2017: UNKNOWN

My original self is an idiot.

All that wealth and power, and where does he decide to live? Yeah, that's right – in a measly little three-storey apartment over his place of work. To add insult to injury, it's not even at the top of the damn building! There are five more floors between him and the sky. His pet murder hobos probably have a better view from their apartments than he does! And even worse, the building itself is a mere twenty-one storeys tall.

It's ridiculous.

Still, to be fair to him, I used to think that it was fine, too. Back in the before times; when Katarina and Jason were my murder hobos, and I hadn't started thinking of people as pets. Before the cloning, and the torture, and the enforced servitude. My salad days, as Cleopatra would say; back when I couldn't even have become to imagine myself ever being desperate enough to do what I ultimately ended up doing to escape from my captors, and to make damn sure that they'd never hurt anyone else again, either.

Life was different back then.

On the subject of serious changes to how I thought things worked in the world, my not so perfect of a hero after all prisoner should be starting to regain consciousness any minute now. Let's go have some fun with him. You can dress it up as justice if it makes you feel any better about yourself for sticking around to watch. But for me

it's going to be an act of pure revenge. A prolonged act, too; for as long as I can keep him alive. I don't like it when my things get damaged, you see. Especially not when it's my things who are actually *people*. And as far as the latter group goes, Ramona's right at the top of the list. Kennedy would be up there, too, but I'm not allowing myself to count her as mine yet.

The mighty voice of good here is about to find all of that out for himself.

Welcome to my humble abode, by the way. Or one of them, anyhow. I do own quite a few now. If you're lucky, you might get to visit them all. I haven't decided if I like you enough for that yet. Stick around for a while and we'll see.

In the meantime, go ahead and give me your thoughts on my kill room. Be honest, now! Empty flattery might not get you where you want it to. Then again, I *do* enjoy being praised.

Seriously now, do you like what I've done with the décor? Is the amount of electric lighting that I've installed enough for a soundproofed metal cube of this size, or is it too much? I wanted to be sure to compensate for the total absence of windows, you see. And what about my decision to use plain surgical steel for – well, everything, really – throughout? I initially thought about going with the classic removable plastic sheeting, but it just felt like it would be too fussy for a contemporary era kill room, you know? And besides, this little place is only a temporary structure. The whole thing's going to be reduced to a fine layer of ash once I've finished using it.

Ah good, Thompson's awake now!

He looks afraid.

He should be.

Come on – let's go take a closer look. Let me show you the handcrafted solid

steel cross that I've nailed him to. It's styled after those that would have been found long before the Christian era of Ireland's history came to pass. The time of the Tuatha de Danann. Aren't the triskeles and other such symbols that are carved into the surface of it beautiful to behold?

As you can see, the pair of empty sockets where Thompson's wings used to attach to his body are still oozing blood. It's too bad you missed that part. In my defence, I hadn't planned on removing them so soon in the process. I really wanted to drag it out, you know? Wait until you got here. And more importantly, until Thompson had woken up from the sedative that I'd given him in order to transport him here. I was *always* going to take his wings. I just wanted him to feel it being done. But I also wanted to crucify him facing outwards like this, and the damn things kept getting in the way while I was positioning him.

Oh well. Maybe I'll see about keeping them as a trophy, or something. I could coat them in platinum and hang them on my wall as a piece of modern art.

Anyhow, back to business! Thompson has clearly had enough time to process what's going on here. You can tell by the way that he's alternating between screaming incoherently and begging. Then again, that might just be from the pain. Whatever. I don't care either way. Right now, the only thing that matters is that he's in my power.

Got any suggestions for what part of his anatomy I should remove next?

PROTECTORS!

Issue Sixty-One – Katarina

DECEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

I am seated comfortably upon the middlemost cushion of the most pleasing of the four couches which are grouped within the communal home entertainment area on the eighteenth floor. Amalthea sits directly to my left, and Jason to my right. We are sharing the use of a fleece blanket, which Amalthea has provided. It is bright pink, and patterned over with purple and white unicorns. The television before us portrays the latest episode of a poorly written comedy whose title I do not know, and am not inclined to discover. The acting is the worst which

I have ever seen or heard. Thus far, we have endured eighteen instalments out of twenty-five across nine and one quarter hours of observation. We have also eaten many snacks, including freshly prepared buttered popcorn.

It has not been wholly unpleasant.

Susan has survived her stupidity. This is fortunate. She appears generally competent, and Minty has confirmed to me that Antoine benefits from her pragmatic management of his vampiric side. Her death would be inconvenient.

Walter also lives. Little more is to be hoped for him at this time. He has repeatedly expressed sincere regret for his hesitation in aiding Susan against our erstwhile teammate. She claims to bear no ill feeling towards him for it. I do not believe that she is lying. Nor does Walter. Her forgiveness troubles him deeply, which may be deemed as sufficient penance in and of itself.

I find it intriguing that Antoine has yet to fully forgive him for his cowardice.

Only ten days now remain in this month. Ramona's situation grows ever more tiresome. Despite her parents' increasingly desperate efforts to attain reconciliation with her, she as yet refuses to contemplate forgiveness. Adamantly professing neither intention nor willingness to return to her familial home, she has instead chosen to dwell amongst us. I take solace that the infant is incapable of making such irksome decisions. I must hope that he attaches so fully to his adoptive family, whomever they may be, that he develops no interest in ever meeting his birth mother.

The wounds created by our erstwhile teammate's vile actions run deep. They have only been worsened by his mysterious escape. Insinuations were apparently swiftly made at that time by Henrietta; regarding how perhaps he

had been aided in his departure by the Protectors. Michael at once embraced this slanderous fiction. Dorcas was not long delayed in agreeing also. Only Harald possessed wisdom enough to be unconvinced. Through his tireless and unsleeping efforts as go-between, the truth was at last grudgingly accepted. Nonetheless, the aftermath of Henrietta's administrative laziness was to prove most costly, and for once, Antoine did not volunteer his vast fortune in aid. The implications of his decision did not go by unheeded. With the exception of Harald, the alliance between the Miracle Mob and the Protectors is irrevocably shattered.

I am untroubled by this change.

As a kindness to Antoine, I have not yet said so aloud.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Sixty-Two – Susan

DECEMBER 2017: MALIBU

Five sleeps left to go until Christmas, and Kratz has sent me off on a two-week paid vacation at his beach house here in Malibu. He's got it into his head that it's the perfect gift. I ain't real sure why. Could've just gotten me an all expenses paid voucher for a damn spa day, or something. Still, like it or not, it would've been rude of me to decline, and so here I am. Figure I'll humour my employer by spending Christmas here alone, and then head back to Kratz Industries in time for New Year's. I've heard some good things about what's planned for the staff party.

I drove up to Malibu alone in one of the company cars as opposed to taking my bike. Kratz insisted on that, seeing as how I was bringing luggage with me. I tried explaining that I'd be travelling light, but somehow that turned into him offering to have one or other of his personal shoppers see to picking out a full wardrobe for me. When I declined, he tried gifting me the damn car instead. At that point, I just flat out asked him why he was making out as if the vacation wasn't enough. Turns out that he's been feeling guilty over his understandable lack of progress in the field of interdimensional travel.

There ain't a kind way to tell someone to quit martyring themselves over shit that they can't control. I told Kratz that truth in those exact words. If nothing else, it shut him up long enough for me to exit the conversation and walk away from him. But he still had Minty meet me in the garage earlier this afternoon with the car and its keys, along with

paperwork granting me full access to any and all Kratz Industries' vehicles on account of my role as bodyguard. Minty advised me that just giving in and calling it a compromise would be the easiest option all around. Seems that the risk of Kratz escalating to trying to gift me a building instead ain't zero.

At any rate, my hourlong journey to Malibu was uneventful. Finding the house itself, however, is proving to be kind of tricky. I missed the first exit from the highway onto Broad Beach Road, which meant taking the second one instead. That somehow confused the car, and the satellite navigation started trying to direct me back up onto the highway. Figuring I'd do better without it, I switched the damn thing off. Ended up looping twice around Seafield Drive; earning me some side eyeing from the locals, and a bunch of awkward questions from some private security guards. Now I'm back on Broad Beach Road again; keeping my

eyes peeled for the turnoff into East Sea Level Drive, which is the gated community that Kratz's place on Point Lechuza Terrace is part of.

Oh, thank crap – there it is! Much more of this, and I'd have turned the damn car around and driven back down to Los Angeles instead. At least I know my way around there.

I follow the road that's now in front of me on past Point Lechuza Drive, and straight down onto Point Lechuza Terrace, and then I turn right into the entrance of my intended destination. There's a ten feet tall stone wall marking the boundary of the property, with a pair of equally high wrought iron bar style gates set into it. They open automatically for the car without my needing to do so much as click a button. Minty mentioned that there's some kind of sensor built in. The gently winding driveway behind them is permeable reinforced concrete, wide

enough for safety regulations, and framed in on both sides by tall shrubs and even taller trees. It meanders its way on up to the top of the bluff, and then it slopes down again some to where the house itself sits nestled into the cliffside; facing out over the ocean.

Kratz bought the just under six-acre sized plot in late 1997; which was five years before he took up flying around in a costume and fighting the forces of evil. The first thing that he did was to buy his way out of having any connection whatsoever to the local HOA. Then he built the wall and the gates so as to keep people from getting in, and set to work on landscaping and building all the rest. Minty's dossier on him indicates that something real important was going on back then in his personal life that made him decide to leave Los Angeles for a few years. It doesn't say exactly what, and I haven't gone digging to find out. Bones are better left buried, and such.

Someone's been here ahead of me and set the house up. Pantry's stocked, fridge is full, and the halls, as they say, are bedecked with an abundance of appropriately seasonal decorations. The smell of cinnamon and pine fills the air. According to what Minty told me before I left, everything that can be is automated and therefore currently operating on a preset timer. He gave me a laminated printout on how the manual controls work in case I need or want to change anything. We also exchanged gifts – nothing fancy, just the usual kind of scarf and hat sets that you go with when you don't know the person well enough to risk buying them the wrong thing.

The house itself is quirky looking from the outside. I decide to explore it some before I see to unpacking. It's far wider than it is deep; four narrow rectangular storeys' worth of big windows set into deep green and gold painted wood, with its rear wall built right into the

bedrock of the cliff. The roof is tiled in red. A broad stone deck made for outdoor dining and entertaining wraps around the front of it down at ground level, with sliding glass doors opening out on to it from the main living room, the dining room, the breakfast room, the kitchen, the pool room, and what I think used to be Kratz's workshop. The interior door between that last room and the downstairs hallway is locked up tight, but the sliding doors out onto the deck are partway open. When I step in through them to take a look, I see that the whole place has been stripped right back to the studs. Being in it feels wrong; like invading a tomb.

I head back inside instead, and wander through the remainder of the first floor. All of the other doors that lead out onto the deck are closed and locked, so I guess the workshop must have needed airing out. Maybe there was a fire in there, or something. Again, it ain't my place to ask for any details.

The living room's pretty much just what you'd expect. Plenty of comfy looking seating, a home entertainment system spaced out across the entirety of one wall, and a full bar taking up the corner just to the right of the way out to the deck. There's a Christmas tree over in the opposite corner. It's real. The needles scattered on the deep crimson and scarlet carpet beneath it confirm that. An archway at the end opposite the fireplace leads on through into the dining room. Not much in here aside from a varnished oak table with enough space and chairs around it for two dozen people, and a couple of matching sideboard type things.

There's another tree in the downstairs den, and an inglenook style brick fireplace as well; with a lifelike holographic flame flickering atop the fake pile of logs in its cast iron grate. It's got real convincing sound effects, too. No door out onto the deck from in here, but there's a large bay window

with deep green and gold velvet bench style seating built into it. Nice spot to sit and read, by the looks of it. The adjacent varnished oak bookshelves support that idea. Too bad that they're empty. Makes sense though; given how Kratz doesn't live here these days. No point in leaving his books here unread.

The kitchen's a square, bright room; with a combination of pale primrose paint and white tiles on the walls, and dark grey granite tiles on the floor. It's fitted out with stained oak cabinets, and glossy black marble worktops. There's one of those big white enamel Belfast sinks underneath the arched window. The faucet and other such fixtures and fittings are all brushed steel, as are the appliances. All in all, it's spacious and well organised room, with a sensible layout.

There's a pair of stained oak double doors over on the wall next to the stove. Upon inspection, I find that they

lead to the breakfast room – a cute little space with floor length red and white gingham drapes hanging to either side of its sliding glass exterior doors. The flooring in here consists of small red tiles, and there's glossy white painted wooden panelling on the walls and ceiling. It feels like a room that's been lived in plenty and enjoyed, and then left empty long enough for it to start resenting it.

Hey, vampires exist here. I ain't about to rule out the possibility of there being ghosts and haunted houses as well!

I take a break from my nosing around and head back through into the kitchen. With luck, having someone around here to make use of it again will help out with improving the breakfast room's mood. I need caffeine either way. Might as well fix myself a snack while I'm at it. Reckon I'll probably just order in for my actual dinner tonight, though. I'm thinking maybe seafood.

Having helped myself to half a packet of storebought Christmas cookies from the pantry while I put together a grilled cheese, I return to the breakfast room armed with coffee that's mostly cream and sugar, and food that's too hot to bite into yet. It sure smells good, though. And it makes a real nice change from the all-pervading blend of cinnamon and pine that's occupying every damn room. Call me a grinch, I guess, but the latter is starting to get on my very last nerve.

Screw it. I'm gonna go see about letting some damn air in around here.

Setting the tray on the table, I walk across to the sliding glass doors and open them fully. The breeze whispers in, bringing the smell of the ocean right along with it. Figuring that the room might need a moment or two to collect itself, I head out onto the deck to appreciate the sunset.

The view down through the cypress trees in the garden and over the little beach outside it onto the ocean is beautiful. I forget about my supper, and my plan to try befriending the breakfast room and its ghosts. Instead, I stand there alone on the deck in utter silence, taking it all in and breathing too deeply; until the light fades away entirely, and looking slowly finishes turning into not seeing anything other than the varied faces of all those who I know I'll probably never see again.

When I start hearing their voices as well, I take off running into the dark.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Sixty-Three – Susan

DECEMBER 2017: MALIBU

It's the headlights that bring me back to myself, and maybe the purr of the car's engine a little, too, and the feel of how the whole thing sweeps past me by only a step or two to my left.

I'm still on my feet, but fuck knows where it is that I'm standing.

A road, yeah.

On a hill, judging by how it feels beneath my feet. Gravity and such. It pulls at you to let you know that it's still there. Comforting. Kind of.

The car backs up until it's level with me then, and comes to a halt there on my left with the engine still running. It's grey in the dark, just like everything else is. Ain't sure of the make or model, but it's low to the ground, and sleek. Open topped. Gonna guess that makes it some kind of a convertible.

The driver's climbing out and saying something to me. I know this, because I can see his lips moving, but all my ears are paying heed to right now is the sound of the car's engine.

He's taller than me. Big guy – muscular looking, and goateed, with tousled black hair. Smart dark suit and open necked shirt that's even darker. Pair of shades on even though it's night. That's the limit for how much my eyes will agree to process.

The car's got heated seats. They're leather. Dark brown; same as with the polished wood of the dash. Only two of

them. Driver and passenger. That's where I'm sitting. Someone's buckled me in, and draped a coat over me. Maybe a jacket. Ain't sure about that detail either. But it's soft against my chin and my hands. Navy fabric. Warm.

The driver's back behind the wheel and the car's moving again.

Wind's blowing through my hair.

I blink.

We've stopped.

I don't know where.

I blink again.

The driver's carrying me along a well-lit hallway; not quite running, but too fast to only count as striding. Don't recall him getting me out of his car, or lifting me into his arms, but that's where I am. Pale wooden flooring, cream walls almost blurring past on either side of us, and a high ceiling to match them

with little recessed lights dotted along it. It sounds like there's a wood floor. Lot of echoing going on from the driver's footsteps.

Get it the fuck together *now*, Marine!

I shake my head to clear it some before I speak. "Where are you taking me to?"

He stops outside a pale wooden door without a handle. It slides open to the right all by itself as he replies. "Guest bedroom. You look like you could do with some rest. And don't worry – I'm not a serial killer."

I look around me as he sets me back down on my feet. Sure enough, it's a bedroom. Spacious, well-lit, same kind of materials and pale colour scheme as out in the hallway. Comfy looking queen-sized bed to my right, but not much else in terms of furniture. Couple of doors over on the wall that's parallel to the right side of the bed. One of them probably leads into a

walk-in closet. Other one's most likely an en-suite bathroom.

Only two sides of the room are regular walls. The one that's to my left and the one that's facing me are both floor to ceiling glass. Looks as if there's a balcony area just outside, so I'm guessing that there's a door in the glass that I just haven't seen yet.

I stare across the room at all of that glass, and at the night sky beyond it sweeping down to the pitch dark of the surface of the ocean. The steady glow of electric light emanating from homes and businesses alike marks out the crescent of the Malibu shoreline. Now that I know what I'm looking at, I can also identify the flickering lights of vehicles on the Pacific Coast Highway.

Malibu.

Not Mars, Marine.

The cracking sound's all in your head.

My host clears his throat from where he's still standing in the doorway behind me. "The door furthest away on the right is the bathroom. The other one's a dressing area, but I'm afraid the walk-in closet part of it is empty. Guests usually bring their own things to put in it. Think you'll be okay as is?"

I turn around to face him, taking in the fact that his shades are mirrored, and that he's got warm bronze skin in the exact same hue as Kratz's, and feeling glad beyond all measure of having been given the excuse to look away from the windows. "Nope."

He blinks. "Nope?"

"Nope. Not gonna be okay." I walk past him back into the hallway. "Can't take the view. Just too damn much of it. Beautiful room, though."

"Uh huh." He follows me; the bedroom door sliding shut behind us. "So, I'm gonna guess *trauma*."

“Reckon you might be right.” I inhale slowly, hold it for a beat or two, and then exhale even slower. “Thanks, by the way. I should head back now to where I’m supposed to be staying. Sorry for complicating your evening.”

He shakes his head; smiling at me like he’s amused by the whole damn thing. “Hey – at least you apologise! I’ve had worse interruptions. Do you need a ride back to, uh, wherever it is that mysterious damsels live?”

I smile along with him. “No, it’s fine, thanks. I’ll call a cab. Uh – where exactly in Malibu is this, anyway?”

“Nido de Cuervo Road. The estate is Morrigan’s Rest. Any of the local cab drivers will know how to find it.” He wanders off; beckoning to me. “Come on downstairs. I’ll make us coffee.”

I follow him along the hallway, into a square area with a hallway leading off each side. In the very centre of it is the

base of a fully enclosed spiral stairwell with matching platinum handrails on each side. The rest is all polished white marble. Cabhartha leads me up it and onto an octagonal landing area; about eighty feet in diameter, and thirty high. The stairwell emerges almost in the very middle of it; the marble walls giving way at floor level to waist height frosted glass on three sides, with an opening at the front where the stairs themselves let out. There's a square sided frosted glass elevator shaft immediately to our left. It's ten feet on each of its sides, and it reaches all the way up to the centre of the ceiling. Aside from the polished mahogany of the parquet floor, the rest of it's made up of a rainbow of stained glass and platinum metalwork. The artwork is Celtic looking imagery rendered in a variety of strong colours – triple spirals, and crows, and such. Don't ask me where the light's coming from, but the place is bright somehow.

My host's smile edges up into a smirk. "Like what you see? I designed it all myself. It's even better in natural light. Having the interior lights on like this doesn't do it justice."

He gestures around us as he explains, and I finally manage to spot the tiny hidden lights dotted throughout the glass. "Clever piece of architecture."

That has him all but preening. "You're the first person to call it clever instead of beautiful. I like that."

We head on over to the elevator. Its doors are shiny enough that they look like platinum. Heck, maybe they really are. Guessing that this guy's got that kind of money available to him. Whole lot of ultra rich people living here in Malibu. And he's wearing the same level of tailoring as Kratz does, too.

Inside the elevator has mirrored glass walls and ceiling, hammered stainless-steel interior doors and floor, and a

platinum control panel. There's no escaping one's reflection, and I grimace as I catch sight of myself. "Dang it! I'm surprised you risked stopping your car for me!"

He shrugs. "What can I say? I like to live on the edge. And besides – what kind of guy would drive past a lady in distress without helping her?"

"Yeah, well, I'm paying for whatever all needs cleaning in your car!" I stare at the layer of sand and dirt that's gotten smeared all over my face and dried into my clothes. Takes me a second to realise that my hands are just as filthy. My hair is present within the equation, and that's all that I'm gonna say about that part of things. "Aw, crap – I've been treading dirt all over your floors!"

"Only since I set you down." He waves off my attempt at keeping on apologising to him. "It's fine, really. My cleaning staff are the best at what they

do. And don't worry about the car. That's my valet's responsibility."

The elevator glides to a gentle stop. We exit it together into the foyer, which is the same height as the landing area we just left. It's another well-lit pale cream and white themed area; eighty feet from here to the far end, and thirty feet across with no windows. Polished marble walls and ceiling. Tiled floor this time – white granite, I think, with a little quartz sparkling through it. Front door at least according to my host, is the big one that's situated right bang in the centre of the wall over to the right of the elevator. It also appears to be made from platinum. Kind of fancy for an elevator, but a real solid choice of metal for an exterior door. Reckon it ought to hold up against most things.

Never know what might be out there.

Or who.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Sixty-Four – Susan

DECEMBER 2017: MALIBU

There are two smaller platinum doors over to our left, along the rear wall of the foyer. My host leads me through the nearest one into what he calls the main receiving area. It's a big room, double the depth and three quarters the width of the foyer. It's also only half the height, which implies that there could well be at least one other floor above it. I didn't think to count the buttons on the elevator control panel. For all I know, this place could have any number of floors! Reckon I could hazard a guess on how they're decorated, though. I'm sensing a

definite theme so far where that's concerned. It's one of vastness, pale colours, polished wood and stone surfaces, and either platinum or stainless-steel fixtures. And every last inch of it is immaculate.

Whoever the cleaning staff are, I sure hope this guy's paying them enough.

The main receiving area includes glass exterior walls over to our left and in front of us. I think I see the outline of what might be a pair of sliding doors in the middle of the latter, but I have no inclination to go check whether I'm right or not. The memory of what happened back on Deimos Base still ain't playing nice with me. Instead, I turn around and focus my gaze on the wall that the door from the foyer's set into the exact centre of. It's all pale wood shelves filled with books – a floor to ceiling height collection running the full length of the room, including the space above the doorway. There's a

pair of traditional library style ladders made from what I'm guessing is the same wood as the shelves; one at either end of the room. If it weren't for all of the damn glass, I'd want to move in here permanently. As it is, I redirect my attention away from the bookcase and onto the more general furniture throughout the room.

There's a dining area over on the far-left side by the glass. It consists of a narrow pale wood table, long enough to fit the dozen matching chairs tucked in on either side of it. The corner beyond it is filled with an array of assorted large and challenging to keep alive kinds of potted plants. Guess that's one excuse for wanting to let so much light in here. Too damn bad that it lets the dark in as well.

To the right of the plants, and alas squarely in front of the glass expanse on that side, there's a seating area. It's got a couple of real big cream suede

couches sitting facing each other, with their armrests pointing towards the glass at one end and the wall between this room and the foyer at the other. They're set about six feet or so apart, and there's a rectangular pale wood coffee table running parallel between them. Between that area and here is empty space; showing off the polished wood of the flooring to great effect.

The final third of the room's over to the right. It's got another seating area, with an even bigger cream suede couch. The couch is situated with its back towards the previous seating area, and there's a couple of big armchairs to match it. The armchairs are arranged at right angles to the couch, with one at either side of it. Personally, I feel that a rug is needed to help pull the whole thing together, but there ain't one. There is however, the fourth and final wall of the room, which the couch is facing, and which has another platinum door at the near end of it.

That's where things start to get *weird*.

The corner that's over at the far end of the wall houses an oddly familiar looking inglenook style fireplace. True, the brickwork of the fireplace itself is painted in a pristine shade of white instead of being left bare, but the grate and every single aspect of the fake fire that's built into it might just as well be part of a damn flashback on my part! Meanwhile, the wall itself is given over to a home entertainment system that's absolutely *identical* to the one in the living room of Kratz's beach house.

Something ain't right here, Marine!

There's the sudden and all but silent hum of machinery. I turn around just in time to see the glass walls turn pure white and opaque, with a little hint of a sparkle; like the floor of the foyer.

My host frowns at me from over by the plants. "Biometric controls built into the glass itself. Are you okay?"

I keep my eyes on him while I gesture at the copycat wall and fireplace. “You mind explaining this, skippy?”

He shrugs. “I’m not into Christmas. Didn’t really see the point in decking the halls when it’s just me here.”

“I’m talking about how this end of the room’s got a bunch of things matching up way too damn well with what’s inside the beach house I’m staying in!” Now that I’ve said it, it sounds paranoid, but there’s no taking the words back, and so instead I keep going. “I’d like to know why that is.”

He chuckles. “Wait a minute – are you telling me that you’re staying in *Antoine’s* old place? Jesus, he hasn’t been back there in years! I thought he’d just flat out locked it up and thrown away the keys after what happened between him and Livia!”

I don’t quite know how to reply to that. “Uh, well, yeah – I’m staying there.”

“Huh.” He walks back over to me and opens the door beside us without so much as a hint of getting ready to run the fuck away from the crazy lady he brought home. “Nice to know that it’s finally in use again. Come on – the kitchen’s just through here. I promise it’s nothing like Antoine’s. You weren’t wrong about that fireplace, though. I saw it when I was there back in the day, and then when I built this place, I decided to add my own version of it.”

I tag along with him; feeling more bewildered than outright embarrassed, but not by much. “What about the matching entertainment system?”

My host waves airily. “Hey, it’s not my fault that Antoine shares my excellent taste in technology! You’ll find that we’ve got a fair few other possessions in common too – vehicles, for the most part. Anyhow, take a seat. I promised you coffee, and my housekeeper’s away on vacation. How do you take it?”

I tell him, and he busies himself with making a fresh pot of coffee with the electric percolator. I go perch on one of the two tall wooden stools at the breakfast bar part of the rectangular island in the centre of the kitchen. He's right about the room looking different to Kratz's. This one's got more of a galley layout, done in pale wood and more of that sparkly white granite. Fixtures and fittings are all stainless steel. There's a platinum door leading out into the foyer at one end. No windows, but there's plenty of artificial light. There's also a set of glass double doors in the centre of the wall that's opposite to the door we came in here by. They're closed, but from where I'm sitting, I can see what looks like this kind of house's version of a breakfast room through them.

Hopefully it ain't haunted.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Sixty-Five – Susan

DECEMBER 2017: MALIBU

It dawns on me when my host joins me twenty minutes of vague small talk later with our coffees that we still haven't introduced ourselves. I wonder if that means he's famous, and if so, then whether me asking him who he is now will cause him to feel offended or not. Much to my relief, he broaches the subject himself; sitting down on my left and offering me his right hand to shake as he does so. "Shane Cabhartha, by the way. I dabble in finance, and I'm really good at it. And you? I see you've got some military tags there. Source of the trauma?"

I nod as I shake his hand. “Good guess. Well – for some of it, anyway. I’m Captain Susan Kennedy. Marines, but I’m working as private security nowadays. Bodyguard, to be specific about it.”

Cabhartha gives a little hum of acknowledgement to what I’ve told him. “Who for? I take that they live here in Malibu?”

I sigh. “Los Angeles, actually. Dr Kratz; hence the beach house. He sent me here on vacation for the next two weeks. Told me that he wants me to try and take things a little easier.”

He tilts his head to the left. “Kind of seems as if he might have a point. You *were* seriously out of it back there.”

“No argument there.” I frown as I think about what happened earlier. “It might sound like I’m in denial, but I swear I’ve never done anything like that before. I ain’t sure what caused it.”

Cabhartha sets down his coffee and takes off his shades; folding them up and placing them on the table alongside his cup. With them off, and given that I'm now mostly back in my right mind again, I notice that he's got more than just skin tone in common with Kratz. They've both got the same slight curve to the bridge of the nose, for one thing. It's the kind of feature that looks like it arrived there later in life than the rest of the person's face did. Most likely painfully and abruptly. They've both got black hair and goatees, too, but they wear them different. While Kratz keeps his hair slicked back, Cabhartha's is hanging loose around his shoulders, and there's a hint of red in it. He's got more of a sculpted look to his goatee than Kratz does. Their eyes are different as well. Cabhartha has heterochromia – his irises are bright blue around the centres, gradually deepening out to a deep blueish grey around the edges. It

kind of gives the illusion that they're glowing. In contrast, Kratz's eyes are plain and simple dark brown like mine.

Cabhartha looks me square in the eyes for a long moment while I'm busy musing on all of that. He kind of looks like he's assessing whether or not he should trust what I've just told him. Finally, he replies. His voice is softer now. "First time on edibles?"

"Wait, what? No!" I scramble to my feet, tripping over the legs of my stool in the process. It clatters backwards across the tiles while I manage to both remain upright and not spill any of my coffee. "Hell, no! Why would you even think that about me?"

Cabhartha gestures at my face with the first two fingers on his right hand. "You keep panicking at the sight of windows, your eyes are bloodshot, and the pupils are almost fully dilated even though we're in a brightly lit room. If

you didn't take anything willingly, then I think you should consider who could have dosed you without you knowing."

I set down my cup and shake my head. "I haven't had anything other than some storebought Christmas cookies between leaving Kratz Industries and having coffee here with you. The cookies were still sealed in their packaging. Reckon that theory's out. Unless maybe I had something else along the way from Dr Kratz's place to wherever you found me on that road. But that would've been after it all started, anyway, so I guess we can rule it out as being what started things."

He stands up. "Okay, first things first! Let's think about your route. Do you remember exactly when you left Antoine's place – time, date?"

I think back. "December 20 2017, at a quarter to five in the evening. The sun was going down. When is it now?"

He checks his watch. “Same year, same date, and it’s just turned six. Point Lechuza Terrace is three and a half miles from here by road. I found you an hour ago; only a couple of hundred metres away from here, down at Viewpoint on Encinal Canyon Road, which means that you covered the full distance in fifteen minutes. Either you ran full pelt all of the way, or you didn’t travel the whole way on foot.”

I grimace. “No way I drove in that state. Not without ending up in a wreck. Unless maybe I did end up in a wreck, and just don’t remember it.”

Cabhartha inhales slowly. “I haven’t heard anything about any accidents locally. And I didn’t see anyone else around on the road where I found you. It’s usually busy along that stretch, but there was a rockfall yesterday, and it hasn’t been cleared away yet. Most people are taking an alternate route. The highway’s another matter entirely.

I've got no idea how you managed to cross it in one piece. You don't fly, do you? Or phase through things?"

I sit down and shake my head slowly. "No. Nothing fancy like that. I'm just a plain bones biomancer with the luck of a Marine on shore leave, I guess."

He sits down again too; pulling his stool in a little closer to mine first. "Okay. Do you want to go to the hospital anyhow?"

"Not if I can avoid it." I take a sip of my coffee. "But I guess at least there's people there. I don't reckon going back to Dr Kratz's place on my own is a real smart idea just now. It's got way too many windows. And besides, I think the breakfast room might be haunted."

Cabhartha snorts back a laugh. Then he shakes his head at me and smiles. "Sorry if you're not really kidding around, but that was funny."

I smile a little myself. “Eh, you know. Column A, Column B. Also, I think you mispronounced *hilarious* just now.”

He raises his eyebrows at me. “Okay – be honest. Are we flirting? Because it really feels like we are, and if that’s the case, then I’m going to have to be the spoilsport and insist on us not going beyond doing that part until you’re fully sober. Which, believe me, is a big sacrifice on my part, because you are *exactly* my type.”

I stare across my cup at him. “Is this the part where I’m supposed to get all giddy over you not being a creep?”

Cabhartha immediately puts on an exaggerated version of one of those pious little scowls that players like to utilise whenever they’re trying to pass as being genuinely decent. “It only bothers me that the bar isn’t higher!” He pauses and feigns confusion. “So, do I call you milady now?”

I snicker a little and shake my head. “Nah, you need to have one of those neck stubble situations going on for that. And maybe a fedora.”

He wrinkles his nose. “Quit shaving? Hide my hair under a hat? Sorry, captain, but *nobody’s* hot enough for me to make that kind of sacrifice!”

“A man must have his boundaries.” I set down my coffee and hold out my right hand. “Give me your phone and I’ll put my number in it. Let you try wooing me some other damn way.”

PROTECTORS!

Issue Sixty-Six – Minty

DECEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

I need to get one of the repair crews to take a look at Elevator D. It just took four point nine seconds more time than it's supposed to do in getting from the fourteenth floor all the way down here to the ground floor. There's a squeak in one of the doors on it, too. I don't want Dr Kratz to find out and try adding it to his to do list.

Captain Kennedy and I step out of it together and hurry into the main lobby. There aren't any guards on shift down here this evening, but the new automated security system informed

me via my earpiece about there being a potential threat at the front desk. We're expecting trouble because of that, so we've both already drawn our weapons. They mostly look like regular handguns, but they fire little pulses of energy instead of bullets. Dr Kratz invented them based on Captain Kennedy's plasma pistol after he fixed it up for her. Captain Kennedy told me earlier that it's an old weapon, and she doesn't want to risk using it in case it malfunctions again. She says she's keeping it in the gun safe in her apartment as a memento instead.

There's a little brown eyed white boy with freckles and spiky brown hair standing on his tiptoes to try and see over the top of the desk. He's wearing a turquoise and bright green armoured bodysuit and helmet, with electric blue gauntlets and boots. The helmet's one of those fancy open-topped ones that don't protect the top of the head. It's got a clear faceplate on the front of it.

The kid's starting to look frustrated. He's trying his best to hand an A4 sized manilla envelope to Miss Kangjeon, but she's refusing to take it. His squeaky little voice gets louder. "Okay – I did what you said about showing my face, so will you please just open this now?

Miss Kangjeon shakes her head firmly. "All letters and parcels have to be approved by security before anyone else in the building touches them! Just leave it in the tray over there for processing, and then go take a seat."

Dear Santa, please let that just be a nice Christmas card for Dr Kratz, and not another vampire. I guess if it's just a card or a letter meant for somebody else in the building, that'd be okay too, but the boss could really use a boost to his feelings right now. Just as long as it's not a vampire. Or a weird shadow monster thing, either. We've still got the last one of those in storage, and we don't need any more.

Whatever's in it, the kid's still arguing with Miss Kangjeon. "But I need a member of staff to confirm that I've brought all of the right documents with me before I can go in for my interview! It said so on the guidance notes for the application form – it was even printed all in caps and underlined! Please, ma'am, I'm gonna be late!"

"No exceptions!" Miss Kangjeon folds her arms and glares at the kid. "If you don't want to comply with company policy, then you're free to leave."

Captain Kennedy exchanges glances with me as we both holster our weapons. "Uh, do you suppose that maybe this is all just some kind of a practical joke, Minty?"

I sigh. "It had better not be. I was just about to start making a batch of Dr Kratz's favourite Christmas cookies. I should be upstairs in my kitchen weighing out the ingredients."

She smiles. “Well, maybe it’s just the AI being twitchy. It was acting up earlier, too – dang thing even tried to deny me access to my own apartment when I went back up to drop off my things! Anyway, you want me to go and take care of whatever this is?”

“Yeah, that’d be a big help, thank you.” I nod at her gratefully. “You’re officially my favourite underling. I’ll be sure to keep some cookies aside just for you. And don’t worry about changing your mind over taking that vacation Dr Kratz offered you. He’ll understand.”

To be honest, I think sending that her away to the Malibu property like that was a bad idea in the first place. She’s only really started settling in here as it is. Staying in the beach house would have been awful lonely for her.

I’m surprised at Dr Kratz not thinking of that last part himself.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Sixty-Seven – Claudine

DECEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

The scrawny little brat turns and stares up at me when I arrive at the desk. He's doing that annoying thing again; where he scrunches up his already snub nose and makes his eyes look as big as possible. Just like we'd planned, he shoves the envelope at me instead of at Kratz's minion.

He pretends that he's trying not to sniffle. "Can you deal with this for me, please, ma'am? The reception lady says she doesn't take letters from people! For real – what kind of receptionist doesn't do that?"

The bitch in question shakes her head and mutters to herself as she turns her attention back to her computer. “The kind who learned from the last time!”

We were counting on her paranoia after Reichslander’s little stunt at Halloween to give me an excuse to get involved, and as usual my profiling skills were right on the money.

I take the envelope and open it. “Okay, kid, let me see what all this is about.”

He bounces a little on the balls of his feet as I rifle through the documents; really hamming up his performance. “I’m here for an interview with Dr Kratz, ma’am! My name’s Powerboost, and I want to join the Protecters!”

“You do, huh?” Mimicking Kennedy’s disarmingly casual way of moving, I pull out a page that’s got the Kratz Industries logo embossed on the top of it, and Kratz’s signature at the bottom. Feigning surprise, I pretend to read it

through twice, before putting it back into the envelope and nodding to the idiotic receptionist as I address her. “No sign of any vampires in here, and the kid ain’t wrong. He’s got a signed letter in there inviting him to attend an interview today at noon. I’m gonna take him on up now. You let Dr Kratz know that he’s here.”

She glances down at the brat, and then back at me. Her micro expressions tell me that she’s not happy about all this. Luckily for her, she doesn’t try arguing. “I’ll see to it at once, Captain Kennedy. Will there be anything else?”

I smile. “Nope. Reckon that’s all.”

“Very well, captain. I’ll take care of everything here.” The moronic woman smiles as she stands up and comes out from behind the desk. She bows politely to me, and then apologetically to the brat. “And sorry about the confusion, sir.”

He grins up at her as he waves goodbye. “Thanks, ma’am, but it’s just Powerboost! Merry Christmas! And don’t let the vampire bite!”

The receptionist’s smile flickers a little at the corners. “Ha, ha, yes, thank you! Funny joke! Very…very funny, yes.”

I pat Powerboost on the shoulder and herd him over to the elevators before he can overdo his performance; pretending to lecture him as we walk. “Vampires ain’t really something to joke about around here, buddy. There was an incident back at Halloween that’s still got people on edge.”

He feigns cringing a little. “I’m sorry!”

“It’s okay. You didn’t know.” We step into Elevator G together, and I press the button for the ninth floor. The doors glide closed. “Nice work, brat, but don’t get cocky. The Protectors are a lot smarter than that bitch.”

Powerboost keeps grinning for the sake of the security camera up in the corner of the elevator's ceiling. He hisses at me angrily. "I already *know* all that, Replikilla! Quit lecturing me!"

I pretend to pat him on the head; digging my fingernails into his scalp for having backtalked to me. "Mind your manners, you snot faced little shit, or I'll wring your neck and frame this bitch for having done it! Now – let's go give the Protectors a festive surprise that they'll never forget!"

PROTECTORS!

Issue Sixty-Eight – Antoine

DECEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

It's approaching six fifteen on the evening of December 20, and where my human employees are concerned, Kratz Industries is operating on a skeleton crew. As always, the building's robotic support staff are busy picking up the slack. I've also added in a new AI to help with security. I refuse to deprive my people of having enough time to spend with their families over any holidays that are important to them, which means that everyone gets as much paid time off for that as they want each year. Bodhi Day, the Solemnity of the Immaculate

Conception, and the Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe have all been and gone, Hannukah ended two hours ago, at sunset, and La Posadas is still ongoing. There are plenty of others still to come; including Yule, Christmas, Kwanzaa and Ōmisoka.

Yule and Christmas used to be my two favourite holidays. But this year, with Grandma Molly no longer around, and everything else that's gone wrong, I'm honestly just not feeling festive. Instead, I've been busy working on improving the security right throughout all three floors of my apartment, including here in my workshop. After Halloween, the thought of anyone or anything sneaking up on me – very bad idea, by the way, please don't do it – when I'm alone is enough to trigger a panic attack. I actually want to upgrade the security for the entire building, but Minty's been getting worried that I'm doing too much, so I've put a pin in that for now.

I've also redesigned my armour to be fully vampire proof. Long sleeves, high neck, the works. And the helmet that I've spent so long working on is finally almost ready to be worn along with it! I just need to tweak a few more things; such as making it so that the faceplate automatically closes itself and locks into place as a muzzle for me when needed. You know – just in case my bloodlust ever kicks in when Kennedy isn't there to stop me. As for my other health problem, I'm now on a daily cocktail of specifically formulated meds. They help to take the edge off the non-stop agonising pain and the ever-increasing weakness still being inflicted on me by the blood curse. Beyond that, all I can do is hope Katarina succeeds in her research.

My own research project has hit a wall. Interdimensional time travel is a niche field, and that's putting it mildly. In fact, the only thing that I'm sure of so far, is that I don't know enough to risk

beginning to experiment with it yet. What I need is an expert, or at the very least, some reliable source material on the subject that I can use as guidance. But for now, all I'm able to do is try to support Kennedy in coping with being stranded in this dimension. Well – that, and try to convince her to stop putting herself in harm's way on my behalf.

Speaking about my bodyguard, she's on her way up here now with a kid who's claiming to be the guy that I'm scheduled to interview today – a self-proclaimed up-and-coming superhero from Manhattan, named Powerboost; who apparently has the ability to somehow boost the superpowers of those around him. I hadn't heard of him before he applied, and I still haven't managed to find anyone else who knows about him. In hindsight, that should have been a red flag, but I was intrigued enough by what he said he could do to invite him here. He stated in writing when he applied that

he wanted to keep his secret identity private unless he was accepted onto the team, so I haven't seen his birth certificate, and I don't know his social security number. I've just finished doublechecking his application form; to see if I made a mistake about his date of birth when I first read it. But according to what's here on my tablet, Powerboost was born April 9 1994. There's a photograph, too, of course. It shows what I'd then *thought* was a wirily built male adult. He's in full costume, including an open topped helmet with a fully polarised faceplate, in front of a plain white background. Now that I think about it, there's nothing in the picture to provide scale.

Has a little kid *really* just managed to con his way into an interview by putting down a fake date of birth, and using having a secret identity as an excuse not to give a social security number?

PROTECTORS!

Issue Sixty-Nine – Jason

DECEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

Another fucking day, another fucking wannabe! I can't fucking believe that Antoine's fucking expecting the rest of us to sit in while he fucking interviews whoever the fuck it is this fucking time. But such is life, so here we fucking are. Me, Katarina, our little pink sidekick, Wally, and that fucking Greek twat.

Antoine's pacing around the fucking conference room when we all fucking file in there to join him. He's looking a tad fucking squirrely, which given his usual fucking self is right fucking odd, in my considered fucking opinion.

Katarina calls him out on it. “What is the meaning of this, Antoine? Why do you appear so very unsettled?”

He shakes his fucking head. “There’s a problem with today’s candidate. I think he may have lied about his age on his application form.”

That has Amalthea all fucking ears. “So, um, is he like, younger than me, or um, super old, or…?”

Antoine does something clever with one of his fucking gauntlets, and a fucking full colour holographic image appears in front of us in mid fucking air. It’s footage from the front fucking desk. Little Boy Blue and his envelope of raw fucking terror, by the way that fucking receptionist is fucking acting! She’s the Korean American one what Katarina’s got the fucking hots for, so I don’t take the fucking piss about it.

Miss fucking I’m a fucking goddess has no such fucking scruples. “What mean

cowardice is this, friend Antoine? Your servant panics at the mere sight of the child! You should have her whipped for such poor hospitality!"

I swear on my fucking bollocks that my fucking grubby little soul has just up and left my fucking immortal body! And by the looks of those around me, the feeling's more than fucking mutual.

The fucking door opens before anyone can say a fucking thing. In walks our dear brave Captain Kennedy, for once not fucking injured. And toddling along at her fucking heels is the tiny little bugger from the fucking footage. He's beaming from ear to fucking ear; as if he thinks he's won the fucking lottery by even getting this fucking far.

Bless his ambitious little heart, for it's about to be fucking stomped on!

Good old Wally steps right up to the proverbial fucking plate and greets the kid while Antoine turns away and

knocks back one of his fucking vials of blood; presumably to keep himself from ripping Astrape's fucking head off and bathing in the resultant fountain of fucking blood. It's a fucking shame and a half, too, because I for one would fucking join him in doing it!

If that bitch is still on the fucking team by the end of the fucking day, then I will eat my own fucking foot.

Wally does the fucking introductions as if he's competing for the world fucking record in tolerating the fucking stupidity of small children. He's a right good bloke, that man. If that fuckwit Tim has the fucking stupidity to ever show his fucking face again, I'm going to remove it with a fucking blunt potato peeler! But in the fucking meantime, I've signed him up for online fucking dating. It was Amalthea's idea. Little bint's a delightfully chaotic influence. I'd name her my fucking heir, but I don't fucking die, so it's pointless.

The kid stops wittering on about how we're all his fucking heroes, and holds out his fucking hand for Antoine to shake it. "Hi, Dr Kratz, I'm Powerboost! I'm super happy to be here today, sir! Is it okay for me to show everyone how my powers work now? I know I'm really young, but if you'll just give me a chance, you'll see how useful I am!"

On my fucking left, Katarina gives me a fucking look. A fucking microsecond later, Amalthea leans forwards, looks past her, and gives me the exact same fucking look. I take the fucking hint, and say fucking nothing. Apparently, we're playing fucking nice today.

Antoine, his fucking right hand still being pumped up and fucking down, gives Powerboost an extremely fucking tired smile, and nods his fucking head. "Sure, kid. Go right ahead."

Powerboost tightens his grip on our fearless leader's fucking hand, and

grins the creepiest fucking grin that I've ever fucking seen. "I hope you've got good insurance for your building, sir!"

With that, the little bastard's eyes turn bright fucking red.

Antoine drops to the fucking floor, and starts fucking convulsing. His fucking eyes roll up, and the back of his fucking head thuds against the fucking carpet, which fucking fortunately for him is very fucking thick indeed.

Powerboost lets go of his hand and starts fucking giggling. "All shall fall before the might of Charybdis!"

He makes a run for the fucking door.

Captain Kennedy sticks her left fucking foot out and trips him up. "I'll check on Kratz! Somebody else make this damn kid explain what he just did!"

Astrape just so happens to be the nearest fucking one of us. She reaches down, picks our tiny fucking foe up by

the scruff of his scrawny fucking neck, and proceeds to lean in and fucking threaten him. “Heed my words…!”

He grabs her fucking face with both of his fucking hands because of course he fucking does! He’s still fucking giggling as she too fucking collapses. “Dumbass! You guys are lame!”

This, my fucking best beloved, is why we don’t let the fucking enemy with the fucking obvious touch attack get within fucking arm’s reach!

The rest of us form up in a fucking circle around the little fucker, in the vague fucking hope of keeping him from fucking legging it out the fucking door. None of us are fucking stupid enough to risk grabbing him, and the little bastard clearly fucking knows it.

Out of the corner of my left fucking eye, I see Antoine fucking finally stop convulsing. Kennedy, who’s fucking kneeling beside him, leans in closer to

fucking try and examine him, as if she has full fucking medical training and a functioning fucking plan for what the fuck to do next, which she probably fucking does, because she's frankly fucking brilliant. "Doc? Are you okay?"

Antoine goes from fucking prone to tackling Kennedy onto her fucking back, and sinking his fucking fangs into her fucking throat within the span of three fucking seconds.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Seventy – Walter

DECEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

Jason sees what's going on with Antoine and Kennedy the same time I do. We both charge over there to try and help; leaving the girls to deal with Powerboost. I yell back at Katarina as I run. "Countess – use your powers to try and get that little creep out of here whatever way you need to!"

Antoine's armour lights up right as Jason's about to reach him. A whole bunch of little energy turrets pop out from the shoulders and open fire. Poor Jason's knocked clean across the room! He slams into the glass doors

leading out to the balcony, and they splinter from the force of the impact, meaning that Jason keeps right on going. He sails backwards over the balcony's little wall and plummets out of sight; windmilling all four limbs to try and save himself, and cursing up a storm the whole damn way. "Fucking fuckwitted bollocks of a fucking...!"

I'm the guy who's in the line of fire now, but that ain't a problem for me. All the energy blasts do is make me stronger and tougher. In fact, it's the best damn rush in the world! I can feel my eyes blazing from it as I grab hold of Antoine. "Come on, man, snap out of it! This ain't who you are! That kid's messing with your head somehow – you got to fight him off!"

My pep talking ain't doing diddly squat, but my superstrength lets me haul him away from Kennedy. She clutches at her throat; probably already using that magical healing thing that she has to

save herself from bleeding out. That Marine is a real tough cookie, so I know I can quit worrying about her. Now all I've got to do is keep Antoine pinned down while we find some way to break him free from the kid's control!

PROTECTORS!

Issue Seventy-One – Amalthea

DECEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

Oh my God – Antoine's totally lost it! He's gone into like, rabid vampire person mode, and now his other powers are shorting everything out! Did Powerboost like, wipe his brain, or something?

Katarina's moved around so that she's between Powerboost and the door. Her eyes are like, glowing. She raises her hands as she yells at me to go help Wally. "This is not the time for you to dawdle, Pink Phantom! Hurry and remove Kickstart's armour so that it will no longer grant him strength!"

I run over to where Wally's still like, um, pinning Antoine down. He made his armour so that it doesn't, you know, overload when he uses his powers? So, it's like, still shooting at us while we try to help him. Wally's like, totally fine being zapped, but I have to, um, keep myself insubstantial for the whole time!

I'm freaking out while I pull his armour through him and Wally.

What if I mess this up and it like, keeps firing even when it's off?

What if I hurt Antoine or Wally doing it?

Oh my God, it's off! I did it – I like, um, totally did it! And it's stopped firing!

Wally nods up at me. "Great job, kid! Now go and find Minty and Ramona – I think Kickstart's gonna need some of those ampoules to drink so as to let him get his head clear, and Kennedy might need help healing herself, too!"

Katarina's busy using her powers to like, levitate Powerboost. I totally don't want to get in her way, so I basically just run out through the far end of that wall instead of going near where the door is, you know?

The lights out here in the lobby are, um, well they're kind of flickering, but it's nowhere near as bad as in the conference room. I guess Antoine's powers don't reach as far when he's like this. Or maybe he's like, trying to stop himself, or something? I *really* hope it's that last one. But there's still *totally* no way that I'm gonna risk using any of the elevators!

PROTECTORS!

Issue Seventy-Two – Astrape

DECEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

The varied clamouring of my mortal allies assails my ears as I return to consciousness and rise slowly to my knees. It is a most befuddling chorus. Some small distance in front of me, Wally is pleading with Antoine to cease struggling, and yet all that I hear in reply to him is the wordless snarling of a mindless beast! Meanwhile, behind me, Katarina threatens dire vengeance indeed upon our opponent. The foolish youth dost dare to heckle her in reply, but I hear naught from the others. Mayhap they have for some cause or another departed from our company?

I shall arise at once, and determine the truth of things for myself!

So determined, I spring to my feet, and open my eyes to gaze upon what dire battle it is that unfolds around me.

Mighty Zeus...!

PROTECTORS!

Issue Seventy-Three – Katarina

DECEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

Astrape's optical blasts miss Antoine by less than a hair's breadth. Walter does not prove so fortunate. Angled as he is, the twin beams of energy connect squarely with his upper back. He is sent reeling across the room; crashing through the table and leaving it splintered in his wake an instant before slamming bodily into the wall. There he remains, for Astrape has not the wisdom to know that she must close her eyes, nor the humility to accept any command to do so.

Doubtless, he will endure.

Antoine has begun to feed on Susan once more. She does not struggle. Her body hangs limp, and her head lolls to the side as he pulls her to him and savages her throat with his fangs.

It does not escape my notice that her biomancy remains inactive.

Something peculiar is occurring here.

The boy dares to smirk at me over what he has wrought here this day. “Uh oh! Looks to me like you so-called good guys have been keeping a big secret from your adoring public! I guess stinky old Reichslander isn’t a total loser after all! That’s too bad for Replikilla – argh! Ow! Stop it, you bitch! You’re gonna crush me if you’re not careful!”

I continue to tighten the telekinetic energies binding him. “Foolish child! Do you know nothing of who you face? I am Countess Cruel! And *you* have *harmed* the one who convinced me to never again use my powers for evil.”

Walter's voice rumbles from where he remains trapped. "Antoine wouldn't want you to hurt him, Countess!"

I glower at Powerboost. "Why do you speak of Replikilla?"

His voice cracks in fear as he answers. "Charybdis sent her to help me get close enough to Kickstart to use my powers on him! She snuck in here a couple of days ago and tricked the real bodyguard lady into going on vacation so she could pretend to be her!"

The confirmation of my suspicions is most satisfactory indeed.

I loosen my hold on Powerboost. "Undo whatever it is that you have done. Do not tell me that you cannot. If Antoine remains out of control in this way, then it is not his technokinesis that will be the death of you."

TO BE CONTINUED...!

CONTENT WARNINGS

An adult male character with a lifelong unseen disability.

An adult male character living with a terminal condition.

LGBTQ+ and cis heteronormative characters.

Non-explicit depictions of consensual LGBTQ+ and cis heteronormative relationships between adults.

Discussions regarding consent.

Frequent strong profanity.

Frequent genre typical peril.

Frequent instances of genre typical violence involving adults, including revenge killings and acts of murder.

Repeated instances of implied mental and emotional issues in adults.

An adult female character experiences a prolonged PTSD induced dissociative event, resulting in personal danger.

Depictions of toxic masculinity.

Negative depictions of Christianity.

Non-explicit discussion regarding an absent third party's historic decision to seek an abortion.

Non-explicitly described discussions about historic rape of an adult female by an older adult male.

Aftermath of rape.

Mild descriptions of body horror.

One non-explicitly described reference to animal trafficking involving multiple endangered species.

One instance of unavoidable but non-lethal defensive violence against an endangered predatory animal by an adult female during an emergency situation

Recurrent instances of offensive and defensive physical violence due to an ongoing supernatural threat.

One non-explicitly described instance of abduction, false imprisonment, and ongoing torture of an adult male by an adult male.

Recurrent mention of historical false imprisonment and torture of an adult male by unknown third parties.

One non-explicitly described instance of attempted rape of an adult male by another adult male within an established same sex relationship.

One prolonged act of deliberate child endangerment by an adult female.

One instance of unavoidable defensive violence against a child by an adult female during an emergency situation.

One instance of outdated but deliberately racist language usage by an adult male towards an adult female.

One instance of casual racism by an adult male towards an adult female.

One non-explicitly described act of deliberate self-harm.

One instance of attempted suicide.

Implied marital discord between an established heterosexual couple.

One reference to dangerous behaviour by two adult males.

One medically accurate description of elements relating to childbirth.

Implied human sacrifice.

Frequent references to magic and the supernatural.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Non-binary indie author E.V. Greig is a graduate of Queen's University Belfast, and the co-founder of the literary e-zine *A New Ulster*. They have been actively involved within the Arts Community in Northern Ireland since 2001, and have received funding as an individual artist via SIAP 2013/14, 2016/17, 2019/19, 2020/21, 2023/24, and DDASF 2021/22. When not busy writing, their other interests include gardening, cooking, reading, dog walking, chicken keeping, and equestrianism.