

(Super) “Heroes”

~ Robert Thomas ~

Peter was on the grass, down on one knee - Isabelle stood by, Simon further back - his forehead buried in massive hands, motionless, like a perverse modern glass sculpture, rough and unfinished, concentrating.

His hulking, crystalline form began twitching rapidly. You could hear popping and cracking noises.

“Oh my god,” he muttered looking down, “here we go.”

“Take it easy, big guy,” said Isabelle soothingly. She put a hand on his bulky shoulder. Simon, apprehensive, moved a bit closer. Or rather his neck and head did. The rest of his body could stay put.

The twitching became more rapid, and Peter’s rough, crystalline epidermis began to crack and ripple.

“Fuuuck. It huuurts. Heelp me.” Now he was down on all fours.

“We’re here, big guy. You can do it. Doesn’t take long. Don’t be afraid.”

“I know Is,” he replied, his voice strained and guttural, “but it fucking hurts!”

He breathed rapidly, panting. His exterior bubbled and softened, then changed colour, and he gave off an odour, slightly putrid.

Soon Peter was writhing on the ground yelling in pain, grabbing at the long grass and ripping it out in clumps.

Isabelle had stepped back.

“Be careful, Isabelle,” said Simon, his bald head still closer as his neck elongated. In a split second, Isabelle was surrounded by a bluish haze, just as a precaution.

The outer screen door at the back of the safe house suddenly opened and Lars came out, still in uniform, black with body armour. He looked at Peter with a concerned frown, then at the other two. Then he glanced around nervously, over to the tree line. Peter was making a lot of noise.

Peter collapsed on his side. He noticed Lars and tried to contain his agony, clenching his jaw. His limbs began telescoping inward, his spinal column appearing to shorten in spurts as he arched backwards, sputtering out excruciating moans. His bubbling epidermis began to assume the colour and texture of human skin, his limbs and features reshaping into more natural form.

It ended with a series of sudden spasms, as his skeletal structure continued to adjust and his internal organs moved and shifted, still accompanied by cracking and popping. Peter tried to hold his breath during this last phase, usually the most painful. Sometimes he fainted from it. But he tried to stay conscious and bit down hard on what he suddenly felt were teeth emerging through his jaw.

As it ended, he let out one last, hoarse, desperate moan, and lay there helpless, on his stomach, fully human again, but naked, covered in thick sweat, breathing rapidly, tears streaming from his eyes.

The bluish haze surrounding Isabelle suddenly dissipated. She knelt beside Peter and rubbed his back. She was also dressed completely in black, but it was a tight leather suit with no armour.

“There, big fella. Everything’s fine. Relax. Take deep breaths. There. You don’t want to stay like that, do you. No. You’ve gotta change back. You wouldn’t deny us your handsome face, would ya? You wanna come and eat with us, don’t you.”

She kept rubbing Peter’s back. She hated it when Peter had to change back into human form. But he couldn’t stay crystalline.

Peter lay on his stomach, face pressed firmly on one side against the ground, away from Isabelle, his breathing becoming normal, still sweating profusely and streaming tears.

“Thanks Is. I’m O.K. Sorry for making so much noise.”

“No problem, big guy.”

“You alright, Glass-For-Brains,” said Simon, trying to be jocular.
“You want me to get you some pants.”

Peter adjusted his glance toward Simon, who had contracted his neck and was walking up behind Isabelle. He was only wearing a slight, black Speedo bathing suit, and even that he found constricting. He was completely hairless, and his face lacked any distinguishing features. Like a template, or a mannequin.

“No Simon, I’ll go naked.”

Simon smiled, one of those perverse, freakish smiles he liked to make, where his lips went all the way from one ear lobe to the other. He whipped around. His leg stretched out suddenly several meters, extending just past Lars, his foot landing with a thud in front of the door. Then the rest of his body jolted forward, contorting gracefully in one fluid, elastic movement, the extended leg contracting and the opposite one extending in turn. Suddenly he was standing just in front of the door, opened it, and did the same thing again, snapping forward into the house.

Lars stepped forward.

“We’re proud of you, Peter. I’m so sorry you have to go through that every time.”

“Thanks Lars. No problem, I guess.”

“Let’s get inside, though. David’s making coffee.” Lars turned and the door suddenly swung open again, only he hadn’t touched it.

Isabelle was now sitting beside Peter on the grass. He was still face down.

“It’s gonna be a nice night, Pete. Too bad we can’t stay out.” She gazed over toward the setting sun.

“Yeah. Get a barbecue. Some tunes. Case of beer.”

“Lawn bowling.” added Isabelle, looking down at the thick, untended grass.

“Yeah!” replied Peter with a chuckle, “as long as no one sees us. Next time David should get us a place further from the road...But it’s nice country.”

The flimsy screen door flew open yet again. It was Simon. He stood in the door frame, and extended his arm, dangling a large pair of pants.

“Here you go, bud,” dropping them on Peter’s back then snapping his appendage back again and disappearing.

“Thanks, Stretch.”

Peter turned himself over, laboriously, and pulled himself up. They’d seen him naked before after reverse metamorphosis, so he didn’t care. He casually put the pants on, then wiped the tears from his cheeks. Then he looked at Isabelle.

“Well, good to be back in the flesh, Is,” he said, his breathing still slightly laboured. He was a big man, six foot three, muscular with broad shoulders, thick neck and a wide face. He was covered in dirt and perspiration. His arms and hands were streaked and blotched - with dried blood.

“Good to see you in the flesh,” said Isabelle, jumping up. “Let’s grab some coffee.”

Isabelle turned and collected her two submachine guns and her leather webbing with ammunition pouches, together with her oxygen tank. These had been dumped in a pile nearby. They left the yard and went inside.

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The small kitchen was alive with activity. David had made a large pot of coffee which he placed on the round kitchen table with milk and sugar and cups. He also put out a large plate of cookies, and some

orange juice and glasses. In the oven, a large platter of store-bought lasagna was slowly baking. David always had food out after the group finished a mission. He considered it part of his job. He did the shopping too, and any yard work, in fact everything. No one knew anyone else even lived in the house.

Simon was already stuffing his mouth with cookies, dropping crumbs everywhere. David smiled. "Save your appetite, guy, there's a whole tray of lasagna still."

"Bring it on."

Simon was a cook's dream, because he had an enormous appetite, and ate anything no matter how it was prepared.

"How do they taste?" asked Peter, facetiously, glancing at Simon, grabbing a few cookies himself.

"You tell me, Crystallite. I'll take your word for it."

"Ummmm," continued Peter, "chocolate!"

"I may not be able to taste or smell, Bead Brain, but I know chocolate when I see it. These look like fruit or something."

"Strawberry cream, Simon," answered Isabelle, partaking herself.

"I've always wanted to ask you, Elastoplast, how do you avoid biting your tongue?"

"First of all, Pete, I don't know if I ever have. Secondly," glazing momentarily at Isabelle, "my tongue stretches like anything else. And third," turning back to Peter "I can't feel pain anyway, Bud, unlike some people around here." At this, Simon smiled again, grotesquely, slapped Peter on the shoulder and went off to the adjacent living room, leaving the other two in a mild chuckle.

Lars entered the kitchen. He had changed out of his cumbersome body armour and was wearing a house coat and slippers. He went immediately for the coffee.

“Thanks, Dave,” he said. “Don’t spoil these guys too much.”

“My pleasure.”

Peter wandered over to the kitchen sink, and began washing his hands and arms. He’d forgotten how filthy they were. The dried blood rinsed off, making a large red pool in the sink. The others noticed it. Peter grabbed a nearby roll of paper towels, tore a large section off, and began drying himself. As he did so he turned around, and noticed the others staring at him. He looked at Lars, slightly embarrassed, finished drying himself off, vigorously, then tossed the used towel into the garbage can. He went over to the fridge and pulled out a beer, and joined Simon in the living room.

Dave glanced at Lars. “How’d it go anyway?”

Lars looked at Dave momentarily, and then walked off to join the other two.

“Messy,” said Isabelle, softly, “messy.”

“How about some news, guys,” said Simon. His whole upper torso stretched forth from the tattered couch where he was sitting, extending over to the television set at the opposite end of the room. He placed one hand on top of the set, and turned it on with the other, carefully, before snapping back.

“Why don’t you just use the remote control?” asked Lars.

“I can’t find it and I need the exercise.”

“Try CNN,” said Peter, swigging his beer.

There was no question what the leading story would be. Someone was being interviewed.

“...ligature marks around some of the victims’ necks. In previous cases the bruising was extreme and sometimes the neck was broken. I would suspect some of the victims in this case suffered a similar fate, sudden violent strangulation. This guy is also constantly distorting and his face in different ways, probably to avoid being identified. One

of the other creatures seems either to be covered in an extremely hard, chunky and impervious glass-like substance, or perhaps even to be made from it. He is also very large and powerful, although his exact proportioning does not seem to be constant. This could mean his form is constantly changing, or he is adjusting his armour to compensate for something, we're not sure at this point. He seems to be the shock element, being dropped in on top of the buildings. He would be responsible for the deaths caused by beating and crushing blows. Often the heads of his victims are simply smashed to a pulp. The female member of the group appears totally human and normal, except that she is protected by some kind of shield which appears as a bluish haze. Interestingly, she has no offensive power but can fire weapons from within her protective zone. She's been seen wearing an oxygen mask with a tank, so it seems the shield is a kind of hermetic seal. It does seem to hinder her mobility, though."

"Mr. Tomlins, do you have anything to say about the history of these attacks. They seem very infrequent and highly targeted. And by targeted I mean it seems they only go after organised crime figures or gangs in their bases. The very first attack two years ago was the house of a known mafia don. Then about six months later it was a storefront mafia hang-out. Then there was nothing for about a year. Then recently in the space of eight months we've had two attacks on known hangouts of biker gangs."

"Yes that's correct. It's clear these creatures fancy themselves as avengers of some kind. They're basically vigilantes. They do go after these gang hangouts. And their attacks appear carefully planned. They do not seem to be interested in routine crime or street crime. Of course it is totally unacceptable in a civilised society and they need to be stopped. And we can see that in this incident even more people got killed than usual, with some collateral damage."

"And by collateral damage you mean people not necessarily involved with the biker gang."

"That's right. First of all not everyone who is inside a biker hangout is necessarily a hardened criminal in the first place, and once they hit their target they tend to kill indiscriminately. Secondly, we know that some of the violence spilled out onto the street this time as some of the occupants tried to flee, and there was actually gunfire in the

nearby street. And we know some innocents were hit.”

“You said something a bit earlier about stopping these vigilante creatures or whatever they are. How do you think that can be done.”

“It’s a very good question. They do have extraordinary capabilities. I mean the key to their success is not only their lethality but their speed. The one member of the group who has this telekinetic power is obviously able to bring them in by air and then to lift them out again when the job is done, and he can move the group at very high speeds and at low altitudes, which is good for avoiding detection.”

“And he’s the only one who seems to need body armour.”

“Yes, aside from his telekinetic power he seems to have no defences, unlike the others. If you can somehow take him down, then at least they couldn’t. How you might deal with the rest of them is another matter.”

“Where do you think they go?”

“No one knows for sure but they disappear into the countryside, as I said moving very fast, hundreds of miles an hour, and at treetop altitude. Eventually they just evade any attempt to follow them. It does appear that this time they flew into the country to the north-west.”

“Lastly Mr. Tomlins, what are these creatures. Where do they come from? The scientific world continues to be turned upside down by all this. I mean what we seem to have is the total violation of some of the basic laws of physics and human physiology. What do you think?”

“I don’t know, and we won’t really until one or more of them are apprehended. If their extraordinary powers have a scientific basis, it must be very advanced science. The stretching creature is a total conundrum because he obviously is able to do these things and he is anthropomorphic, so to speak. And it seems bullets just go through him. With the others at least you could say there’s some highly advanced science at work, although the one covered in crystal might similarly be actually made of the substance and not just a human wearing it. Some years back there were sightings of some stone-like

sasquatch, if you will. Whether this creature is the same I don't know. Some have suggested alien life forms, and you know we have the usual conspiracy theories, that these things are agents of the CIA, and what have you. I just don't think we'll know until or unless we can catch or take down one or more of them."

"Mr. Tomlins, thank you for being with us again, and we look forward to hearing more from you as the story develops."

"You're very welcome."

"Mr. Tomlins is a freelance journalist who has been investigating the vigilante creatures."

The television switched off. The remote control was floating in the air in front of Lars.

"Let's talk," he said officiously.

"Talk about what?" asked Peter. "We know what happened."

"Yes, and we always knew it could happen."

"We'll have to be more careful next time, Lars. It went out onto the street."

"Yes, of course we have to be careful, Isabelle. But no amount of carefulness can prevent collateral damage from happening from time to time. We have to think of the greater good of our work."

"Can we at least not be so indiscriminate? He said we're killing indiscriminately."

"Isabelle, what should we do. These are centres of organised crime. We know that. We do the research. Shall we drop in through the ceiling, and politely ask those who are not involved to step to one side or kindly leave the building? Or shall we descend with a pile of mug shots and ask them all to line up for us?"

"Lars is right," said Simon. "I'm not asking questions. They know we might hit them and they take their chances. Anyone inside is taking

their chances.”

Peter looked up suddenly and over to Lars.

“I smashed in the face of a young boy today, a teenager, Lars. Was he a criminal?”

“Yes, Peter. First of all, he was shooting you with a pistol...”

“Lots of people have pistols...”

“And secondly, he was there. Peter, we don’t have the discretion to judge nicely who might be guilty and who might not be. We are not agents of the justice system. We are agents of justice. We cannot be effective otherwise. And our justice is not that of society. It could never be. Our justice and the justice of law and due process cannot coexist. Our justice is supplementary, extraordinary. It is only invoked when society’s justice is insufficient and defective, and then our justice operates with decisive power at the locus of criminality.”

Lars paused briefly before continuing.

“And we excise not only actual criminality, but potential criminality as well, criminality by association. So that our justice can reverberate, endure. And those who pursue criminality, in particular organised criminality, the worst kind, must know this, that when we strike it is a justice removed from any justice they may experience or evade by their devices and manipulations. Only thus can we be truly effective. Only thus can we have any deterrent value, and the more we can deter, the less we shall have to act.”

“But do we have to kill everybody we find?”

“Yes, Isabelle, we have to. Shall we kill just a few as an example, and let the rest escape. *Then* we are simply random killers. *Then* we just kill for pleasure. *Then* it is a vendetta. No. We target a place where criminals work. The mission is to erase it. Rub it out completely. Exterminate all within. *Then* we have completed a mission. *Then* we have purpose.”

There was another pause.

“Like the military,” resumed Simon. “When the military has a mission, like taking out an enemy base, they go in and destroy it. Sure, there may be people inside who are not the enemy, technically. But they have to destroy the target. Some collateral damage is just accepted. But by destroying the target, the enemy is weakened.”

“That’s right, Simon,” Lars affirmed. “We destroy the enemies of lawful society in a similar fashion. That’s how we weaken organised crime, destroy it as a force.”

“I guess I’m not suggesting we should change,” said Peter. “We are a team. We did agree this is the best way of using our powers. I guess we’ve been pretty successful so far, though it’s not easy. And you know what you’re talking about, Lars. You’re the leader. We’ve acknowledged that. And you do a good job, but...”

“But what?”

“But I’m human, when I’m not that thing, and I do have feelings.”

“I realise that, Pete. And so do I. So do we all. Today I dashed three men against a concrete wall. For one of them I had to do it again and again before he stopped moving. What we do is not pretty, not glamorous. But it must be done. That’s why we’re here.”

“I don’t throw people against walls or crush their heads or strangle them to death,” said Isabelle, looking down and slightly embarrassed. “I kill with my guns, like the criminals do. It’s easy for me inside my silent little cocoon. You guys are closer to it so you feel it more. For me I guess it’s like a video game.”

Another long pause. Eventually Peter got up, “I need another beer.” Lars turned the TV back on.

“The lasagna should be ready soon,” announced Dave. He had said nothing throughout the discussion. That was his policy when they talked about methods or tactics or purpose or consequences, especially after a mission.

* * *

The group sat silently around the messy table, except Lars, who had left abruptly to go to his room. Another headache, probably. Peter was on his fourth beer and was smoking a cigarette. Simon had put a long T-shirt on over his Speedo, just to look decent. Peter was wearing the rest of his tracksuit. Isabelle had changed into her jeans, with a v-neck top.

“That was good lasagna, Dave. Thanks.”

“My pleasure, Is. Glad you liked it.”

“Yeah, good grub,” said Peter. After a moment he hastily finished his cigarette, puffing vigorously, then put it out on his plate.

“I’m going downstairs to play some tunes. Later.”

Peter got up, his chair moving back with a thud. He gulped down the rest of his beer, then extracted another from the fridge, before disappearing down the creaky wooden staircase, his feet falling heavily.

“You need help with the dishes, Dave,” asked Simon.

“No thanks. You’ll just break them all anyway.”

“I know I’m clumsy but I try.”

“Dave, why don’t you leave the dishes for me tonight.”

“No Isabelle. You guys have had a long day. Just go and relax. I’m good.” He got up and walked over to the coffee machine.

“You’re the boss. I’m off to my room then.” Isabelle got up and left.

“I’m just gonna have one last cup of coffee,” continued Dave, “read the newspaper, which is,” he picked it up and glanced at it before putting it down again, “two days old, then clean up and watch some TV.”

“You don’t need the newspaper if you have CNN,” said Simon.

Dave sat down again.

“Clean your face off, Simon, it’s covered in tomato sauce.”

“Sorry.”

Simon grabbed a few serviettes and did his best.

“I better go check on Lars soon,” said Dave after a sip.

“He better be careful. The brain is a delicate thing, Dave. He could get a brain tumour or something. Then he’s toast, and so are we.”

“It’s funny, Simon. I asked him whether the migraines only come after a mission, after prolonged use of his telekinesis. He said no. They’re random. Except during our off months. After a while they stop altogether. But he has to stop using telekinesis for several weeks before they go away completely.”

“We all have problems. Look at Peter. Fuck. I wouldn’t want to go through that.”

“Maybe it’s better not to have feeling at all, Simon.”

Simon looked at Dave. Then at his hand, as he stretched out his fingers and then clenched them into a tight fist.

“No Dave.”

He looked over, a slightly sad expression on his otherwise blank, hairless face. “I am only consciousness. I control this thing, this strange body I have never truly experienced, in a world I have never truly experienced. Imagine being able to reach out and touch anything, and to feel nothing anywhere.”

“I understand.”

Dave felt embarrassed. There was a moment of awkward silence.

“What else would we do, Dave? I never wanted to be an object of

curiosity. I never wanted to be stuck in a lab under observation.”

“Of course not, Simon.”

“Or in a freak show or circus. I never wanted to be used by anyone.”

“Well, you’d be a very famous circus act.”

“Yeah, doing what?”

“Picking apples?”

“Maybe, Dude.” Simon smiled.

“And then there's the...you know...other abilities you seem to have.”

“Don’t...That’s a curse, you know.”

Dave laughed nervously. Soon there was silence again.

“Anyway, this gives me a purpose. I had to know that there was some larger purpose, that I could be something greater than the freak I am.”

“I think that’s the same for everyone. I guess my purpose is serving you guys. In my own humble way. It’s an honour really. Maybe someday the world will be able to recognize this...I just hope I’m making the right decision.”

“I don’t know. Maybe if I could feel the people whose necks I break, I might have a different take on things. But I’m half dead myself.”

* * *

Lars clenched his eyes. The pain was intense. It throbbed. There was a faint ringing in his ears. Nothing helped. Not even codeine. He lay sprawled on his back, with nothing but a sheet. His right hand was pressing down firmly on the damp washcloth on his forehead. It was warm now, but if he tried to get up to replace it, he would become disoriented. Yelling for someone would make the pain worse.

He just had to hold on for a while. They didn’t last that long, just a

few hours. But these migraines completely incapacitated him. He opened his eyes and looked at the ceiling, barely discernible in the dark room. He could see fleeting sparks, optical effects brought on by the pain or the strain on his eyes perhaps.

Sometimes he could sleep fitfully during an episode, punctuated by short, strange dreams coming in sequences, often flashing back to some mission, or to his ex-wife, or to the time as a child when he hurled his brother against a brick wall and killed him. They were only playing. He didn't have the control.

There was a knock on his bedroom door. After a few seconds it opened slightly. Dave poked his head through the gap. A stream of light entered from the hallway. Lars snapped his head away and the door suddenly forced close with a loud thud.

"I'm sorry, Lars...I've turned the light out. I'm sorry." The door opened.

"OK." Dave stood in the door for a long awkward moment.

"How are you feeling, Lars?"

"Hurts like Hell." He continued to lie perfectly still, sprawled out on his back.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Nothing anyone can do," Lars responded, rapidly.

"Think it'll last much longer?"

"Don't know. Hope not."

"I'm gonna get you a fresh cold cloth, OK bud."

"Thanks."

Dave shut the door and went to the bathroom and ran a clean washcloth under cold water, and folded it into a compress. Soon he was back in Lars room.

“Here you go.” He moved Lars hand away from his forehead, gently, lifted off the old cloth, now quite warm, and replaced it with the new one. Lars’ eyes were closed tight. He was sweating. His breathing was laboured.

“If you need anything, shout, understand?”

“Shout?”

“Well, I’ll come and check on you again.”

“Thanks Dave.”

Dave didn’t leave. He stood there for several seconds.

“Lars.”

“What?”

“Too bad about today.”

No answer.

“I am worried about Pete. He seems upset. He’s drinking a lot.”

“He always does.”

Long pause.

“I’ll speak to him.”

“Thanks Lars.”

Dave turned back as he was leaving.

“Lars they said you escaped to the north-west of the city. They got it wrong. We’re north-east.”

“I know... The diversion may have worked.”

“Yeah, I think so.” Dave was about to shut the door behind him.

“Dave.”

“Yes.”

“Can’t be too sure...We’re not as out of the way...out of the way as I wanted...Keep watching the news...check your radio...Have the others take turns...relieving you.”

“Sure boss.” Dave shut the door.

* * *

Peter lay on the bean bag in his basement room. It was one of the coolest places in the house, a real bonus during the hot summer months. But it was a bare, meagre place, with a mattress in the corner and a beat up wardrobe and mirror against the far wall. The only adornment was a large Jethro Tull poster. He could use a TV, though, and could probably splice the cable, if Lars allowed him to.

Peter’s greatest pride was an expensive sound system, which flanked him to one side, set up on metal shelving. On the other was a stout table, holding several bottles. The Jack Daniel’s was open and a shot glass was full. Several empty beer bottles were lined up underneath.

He lay back with his headphones on, eyes closed. The music blared. He needed the distraction, to get the day’s events out of his head, somehow.

But suddenly the volume dipped. Peter opened his eyes and there was Isabelle, next to the volume control, smiling.

“What are you playing?”

“Uh. Creedence.”

“Good stuff. You need another chair in here.”

“Pete lifted his mass and sat upright in the bean bag.”

“I’ll get one just for you.”

Peter took off his headphones and Isabelle pulled out the cord, and the music emanated from large amplifiers. She adjusted the volume some more, down to low, then sat down cross-legged on the floor, after grabbing a hand-full of CDs. She had a small but very well-proportioned figure, almost athletic, with short, blond hair and a pretty, freckled face.

“So, you OK, big guy. You shouldn’t just stay down here all the time,” she said, looking down at the stack of CDs, shuffling them perfunctorily.

“Fuck there’s nothing else to do. If I didn’t have my music I’d be bouncing off the walls.”

“I know. It’s boring as Hell. But this was our last mission for this round and we’ll be breaking up again soon.”

“Yeah. We each go off to our holding assignments. Lars gives us some dough to hold us over, we get Jo-jobs for a year or two. Lars and Dave do their research and planning and shit, and then we get back together and do some more real work.”

“How much money does he have, anyway?”

“I don’t know Is, but he’s obviously very careful how he puts out. You know the orders.”

“Yeah. He won’t support us all the time and while on hold we have to become financially independent within three months.”

Short pause.

“And then when we come together again,” continued Pete, “the safe houses leave a lot to be desired. Look at this shit hole.”

Peter reached over for his shot and emptied it in one motion, then filled it again. Isabelle pretended not to notice.

“It’s prudent, Pete. He has to spread it out as much as he can. I don’t

know how much his parents left him. I don't care about the safe houses, though. We are hiding out."

"Yeah, fun eh? Then we have to save while we're on hold. Save at least ten percent of your net income, and add it to the pot when we're on," Pete made rabbit ears, "active duty."

"You got it."

"Shit, what a life."

Silence.

"I guess I know how you feel, Pete. I don't know how much longer I can continue. Don't know what I'd do if I stopped. I don't exactly have a career to go to."

"Neither do I."

"I know. So it's either a Jo-job forever, or this in-between."

"You're right." Pete leaned back. "I just can't get that teenager out of my head."

"I know. I think the good we're doing, in the long run, outweighs all the negatives. What do you think, Pete?"

"Maybe. I might be happier with a permanent Jo-job, though, even if I'm totally useless to society."

"We can't do this sort of thing on our own, Pete. We need to be a group and we need to be organised. And it's not easy. It's not like a comic book."

"Fucking right it's not a comic book. If I ever see one of those things again I'll tear it to shreds."

There was a pause.

"Did you think it would be?"

Peter let out a sigh and looked at the ceiling.

“Yes. At first.”

“So did I.”

Another pause.

“Pete, when I was a little girl, and my parents would hurt me, I found I could suddenly create this complete silence around me. And the air would turn bluish. I could shut everything out. Shut out my horrible world. It was peaceful. An island of tranquillity. But it never lasted long enough, because after a while I started getting short of breath. The first few times I actually fainted. When I woke up the blue air was gone, and there was noise again. So it was a peaceful place but I couldn’t stay there. I had to leave before it kicked me out. It made me even more sad and miserable than I was. But I needed it.”

“I’m sorry, Is.”

“My father once caught me in my room, surrounded by this haze. He yelled at me and was freaked out. I turned it off. He yelled and yelled, and dragged me to my mother. They beat me and then prayed over my bruised body, saying the rosary, trying to drive the devil out of me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Next time he caught me I didn’t turn it off. Fuck him, I thought. And he couldn’t touch me, nor could she. Until I fainted. When I woke up they beat me some more. As they held me down, I couldn’t go there again, couldn’t make the haze come, to protect me. Only after they let go of me and I could get away from them.”

“Fuck, Is.”

“I was fourteen when I ran away. And my life became an even worse Hell, but I always had this temporary escape when I needed it, for a few minutes. I remember how Lars and me got together. A chat room. A fucking chat room on the Internet.”

“Not me. I wandered for years out there, like a monster. Lars caught up to me. I never liked changing back. Changing into the thing was exhilarating. Not painful at all. Changing back was torture. Would never do it. Just wandered like a beast.”

“But now you do, Pete.”

“Lars taught me how to accept myself. How to live with my humanity. He said I should use the monster I am for something greater.”

“I wish there was an easier way, Pete. I wish we could be accepted.”

“Not with our methods, Is.”

“I know. And I guess there’s no other way.”

“Not that I can think of. Not at this point. I just wish I could get that teenager out of my head.”

* * *

Simon was fumbling with a large can of sardines and a can opener. He hated cans. And especially manual can openers. Anything that required manual dexterity he found extremely frustrating. He could do very little that required delicacy. If only he weren’t so hungry all the time. He didn’t know what caused it, probably something to do with his constitution, and he had no idea what that was.

One of his theories was that all of his cell walls, including his bone cells, consisted of permeable rubber. He always wondered what it would be like to have an x-ray. Lars had promised to do a study, since he had a degree in science. But he never got around to it. On missions, bullets just went through Simon. But he didn’t know what it would be like to have a limb actually severed or to be subjected to explosive force. He had to be careful about that.

Light footsteps were heard coming up the stairs, and the door to the basement opened. It was Isabelle.

“Howdy, Is.”

“What are you doing, eating again.”

She looked at the can opener in Simon’s right hand. His fingers were wrapped around it awkwardly. She then noticed the can of sardines in his other, and chuckled.

“You better let me help you with that, Stretch.”

He extended his arms but she came up close to him and grabbed the can and the opener.

“Watch carefully,” as she opened the can with enviable ease.

“Why doesn’t anyone call me by my trade name, Is?”

“Because no one’s going to call you The Distender. No one even knows what it means.”

“But it’s poetic.”

“It’s goofy.”

“Did we give you a trade name?”

Simon took the open can from Isabelle and clumsily plunged his fingers into it, lifting out a fistful of oily fish. These he stuffed into his mouth all at once, his fingers going in with them, and his mouth and jaw expanding grotesquely. Then he extracted his hand and his jaw made pronounced movements up and down and sideways. His hand was dripping oil, and it also dripped from his mouth onto his bare, smooth chest, and onto the floor.

Isabelle stood there gaping in amazement, both amused and disgusted.

“That is gross, Simon.”

“I’m sorry,” he spit out, sheepishly, as Isabelle stepped back, “fish is softer than other stuff.”

“And no, I could never think of a trade name. Trade name?”

She continued to stare at him, then looked over into the living room, where David was fixed on the TV, grazing every few minutes. He had put on a fresh pot of coffee and it was percolating.

She looked back at Simon, and stepped a bit closer.

“Can you take a shower?”

Simon never bathed unless told to or reminded. He didn't mind doing it, out of consideration. But he never felt or smelled his own dirt or perspiration, and his extremely messy eating habits, no fault of his own, really, made it all worse.

“Sure Is, before I go to bed.”

“Just squirt shampoo all over you and lather it up. Don't bother fumbling with the bar of soap.”

“That's what I always do.” He was finished munching the sardines, but his mouth was still covered in oil.

Isabelle moved closer, and came up against Simon, glancing furtively again into the living room. She put her arms around his waist and looked up at him.

“Can we spend the night together again?”

Simon did the same, wrapping his arms around her torso, gently. He looked down at her for a while, and sighed.

“Is, you know I feel nothing. Nothing,” he said softly.

“I know. But I do.”

He looked up again, sadly. “I'm half dead, Is.”

“You're alive enough for me.”

“Is that all I am to you?”

“It’s what I need. Please.”

After a few moments, he looked back down at her freckled face.

“I do not want to spend the night with you.”

And his nose began to grow.

Isabelle chuckled. “OK, Pinocchio.” She reached up to the long proboscis and tweaked it hard.

“I’ll come see you when you finish.”

She stepped back and went away.

“And don’t eat anything else.”

* * *

The little house was silent and dark. Dave sat in the arm chair and stared at the television set. The living room was cramped, like every room in the small bungalow. The floor was hard wood, heavily stained, with a worn and tattered area rug, of concentric coloured circles. There was the old beige couch and an older, orange-coloured armchair, and a smaller, straight back chair of cracked brown leather, where Lars usually sat. The off-white walls had not been painted in years, and they were heavily marked and scratched. The television set was modern, and they had a satellite dish. They had to. And an Internet hookup. The front window was as always completely covered in a thick, opaque curtain, like all the other windows.

The television was on low. Still CNN.

We continue with our story on the latest attack of the vigilante creatures.

The attack occurred last night at around six o’clock. The target was a warehouse-type building which was a known base for a local branch of the Hells Angels.

[Square building surrounded by a lot. Roof damaged. Surrounded by emergency vehicles and personnel. Several bodies scattered around the site, covered.]

The attack was sudden and overwhelming and followed the pattern of previous attacks. Specifically, the large crystalline creature was dropped on top of the building from a significant height, smashing through the ceiling and causing it to collapse.

[Helicopter shot of roof of building with large jagged hole through the middle.]

The rest of the vigilante team were dropped through the gaping hole created, set down by the one member who appears to have powerful telekinetic abilities. This individual then circled around the building, but killed several men trying to escape by using his telekinetic powers to throw them repeatedly against the building's outer wall.

[External wall of building splattered with blood. Three contorted bodies on the ground in front, covered in sheets.]

Additional victims managed to leave the building and enter the street, where they exchanged fire with another member of the group, a female apparently protected by a force field but still able to fire weapons.

[Bullet marks in the walls of nearby buildings.]

Two bikers were killed in the street exchange by the female and two others by the crystalline creature who followed her. Three bystanders, however, were killed in the cross-fire, a woman and two men.

[Three bodies on the ground, covered.]

The attack lasted only a few minutes, before the creatures were air-lifted out in the same way they came in, and fled the scene by air at high speed, toward the north-west.

[Helicopter shot of building and area.]

Killed in the attack were twenty bikers, including one teenager whose

head was crushed. Causes of death included massive crushing and brain trauma, violent strangulation, and bullet wounds.

[Bodies lined up outside, covered in sheets. Bodies being taken away on stretchers.]

The roof and building interior were heavily damaged.

Police and military elements are in pursuit, combing areas where the group may have fled to, especially to the north-west of the city, and collecting intelligence from eye-witness reports.

Terry Joans, CNN news.

“Standing by outside the Pentagon is our military affairs analyst Joel Somers.

[Reporter on screen, in front of Pentagon]

Mr. Somers good evening.”

“Good evening Ann.”

“Mr. Somers can you give us the latest news of military or police activity in pursuit of the vigilante group at this point?”

“The military at this point is not saying anything, Anne. We do know there has been military involvement. Bear in mind that it’s been six months since the last attack, so the police and military have had a lot of time to coordinate efforts. However, we have no information at the present time as to the status of this operation, nor of course is the military prepared at this point to give us any.”

“Mr. Somers, you said search and destroy. Is it fair to say that the intention is to in fact take down this group if necessary, instead of apprehending them or somehow taking them into custody.”

“I think there’s no doubt about it, Ann. Whatever these things are, they are a very lethal and very dangerous and very aggressive force, and it is appropriate for the military and law enforcement to act accordingly. There is the need to stop them not only to prevent further

attacks of the kind we've seen, but there has been what might be called collateral damage, that is bystanders being killed, although I guess killing passers-by and killing these alleged biker gangsters in cold blood are not morally very different."

"Indeed. So how do you think the military might deal with the situation if they find them."

"Well, they've only had to face small-arms. Criminals don't tend to pack the kind of heavy weapons that might be effective against these creatures, nor do they have the tactical methods. For instance the crystalline creature is obviously impervious to bullets, but who knows how he might respond to weapons of higher gage or greater destructive power. And of course the military also has very sophisticated surveillance and tracking capability. The role satellites might play, for instance, is an interesting point.

You have to keep in mind also the need to avoid any collateral deaths in a military attack. I think the main issue tactically is where these creatures are if they find them. If they are hiding in a built-up, urban area, well it its much more difficult then to deploy heavy weapons against them. If they find them in some isolated hideout or what have you, it's pretty well going to be open season on them, I think."

"Mr. Somers, thank you. We'll be in touch as the story develops."

Dave was asleep in the arm chair.

* * *

Lars woke up. It was early morning. His migraine was gone and the cloth had fallen off his forehead. The window was open and he felt cool and refreshed as he sat up on the side of his bed. He had tried to make his little back room comfortable. There was the computer table, a work desk stacked with files and maps, and a reasonably full book shelf, mostly science but with some philosophy and politics, and a number of works on organised crime.

His body armour stood on a scaffold in a corner, consisting of heavy plates of kevlar, fitted and shaped in various ways and attached to a thick leather body suit with cotton padding. There was also a black,

bullet proof helmet with full facial guard. It was difficult to put the suit on and David usually helped him. There was a large camel skin attached to the back of the suit. The thing was very heavy and extremely hot in the summer. Of course he had already gone through several camel skins and had a pile of them in the closet. They tended to get shot up.

Lars walked down to the front hall, which led to the living room and the open kitchen further back. David was asleep in the arm chair. Funny, Lars thought. I guess he fell asleep on his last watch. Hope it hasn't been for long.

Lars continued into the kitchen, where he found Simon boiling eggs together with some carrots, dipping his hand in to stir the mixture. His flesh could be damaged by extreme hot or cold, but he healed quickly and didn't feel it. Simon was always an early riser and invariably needed a good breakfast, though not usually the kind anyone else would eat.

"Good morning, Simon."

"Morning, Lars."

"You just get up?"

"A while ago"

Lars noticed the coffee pot. It was almost full. He went back to the living room, where David was sleeping in the arm chair. David's cup of coffee was full as well.

"Simon, did you relieve David last night, or anyone else. I told him to organise a rotation so the news could be monitored."

Simon was gulping milk from a bottle. He stopped and put it down.

"Noooo," he said, curious.

"Well, did anyone else stay up at all?" asked Lars.

"I...think we've all been in bed the whole night."

“I’ll ask the others.”

Lars went back to the hallway. Isabelle’s room was next to his. He knocked. After a few moments he opened the door. Isabelle’s bed was empty. Oh no, he thought.

He moved on to Simon’s room and opened the door. There she was on the bed, naked, with a sheet covering her stomach. He stared for a few seconds, his chest tightening.

“Isabelle. Isabelle! Wake up.”

Isabelle suddenly rose, startled, and sat up, embarrassed, covering herself.

“Isabelle. Did you stand watch last night, when you weren’t busy doing other stuff with Simon?”

“No Lars, no one told me about a watch.”

“Then I assume Peter didn’t either. Get up.” He stormed away back to the living room.

“Dave!” Lars shouted, standing over the arm chair. Shaking his head, Lars repeated, “Dave!”

Dave’s entire body shot up into the air. He was forcibly extended and rotated and jolted upwards, hitting the ceiling with a thud, his back flat against it.

David came to, stunned, with a horrified look on his face.

“What the fuck, Lars!”

“Did you fall asleep!”

“I guess I did, sorry.” Dave was thrown towards the other side of the room and dumped clumsily onto the couch. He immediately bounced to his feet, shocked.

“Lars I’m sorry, man.”

“David, I gave you explicit directions to stay up, and to organise relief every few hours so that the news channels could be monitored all night. I’m extremely disappointed. I need to know what the Hell is going on out there. Did you scan your radio.”

“No.”

“Shit.”

Lars turned and went back into the hallway. He found Isabelle emerging from Simon’s room in a nightgown. He grabbed her suddenly and pulled her in, shutting the door behind them.

“What is it, Lars. What’s wrong?”

“Isabelle. Look at me.” She did.

“Do you actually love this man. That thing. Do you love him?”

Isabelle looked away, blankly. Then she stepped back and sat down hard on the side of the bed, and put her head into her hands.

“Isabelle?”

“Lars, what do you want from me! I shoot men down in cold blood for your justice. What the fuck do you want?”

Lars just stood, unsure what to say next.

“Fine, Is. Fine.”

He turned to leave, but stopped briefly after opening the door.

“You want to join us, then? We’re trying to avoid the other justice.”

Lars found Simon in the hall nearby, and go close up to him, with an angry stare. He put his finger on Simon’s chest.

“Sir,” Lars said, “you really have no feelings, do you?”

Simon just looked down, awkwardly.

“Go and wake Peter, and get him up here.”

Lars continued back to the living room, and found Dave surfing news channels.

“I wouldn’t worry too much, they said they were looking in the north-west.”

“That was yesterday, Dave. Yesterday!”

“I know.”

“I don’t like feeling blind, Dave. We need to know whether they have any leads. This is a dangerous and vulnerable time for us.”

“I know.”

“God damned migraines!”

They continued to surf. Soon Peter and Simon came upstairs.

“What the fuck is it now?” said Peter.

“David here, our support person,” said Lars, “decided to fall asleep instead of monitoring the news channels and organising a rotation so others could do the same.”

David looked at Peter. Simon had moved back into the kitchen.

“Like I wouldn’t worry too much, Lars. I think we got away all right.”

“I know Peter but we can’t just assume that. I think we did get away. I don’t think there’s a significant risk but we still need what intelligence we can get.”

“Your flight path is carefully plotted, Lars,” said Dave, “you zigzag all over the countryside, just over the trees, then we come in really

low and walk in from three fields over through the forest. I don't think they know where we are, Lars."

"It's not even that so much as just knowing what the authorities are up to, Dave. I just want to know what's going on, what the official reaction is to the attack, what measures they're taking. I'm pretty confident no one knows where we are, not yet anyway. But I still need intelligence."

"The authorities aren't going to say anything anyway, Lars," said Peter. "They're not gonna tell some reporter what they intend to do."

Lars looked exasperated.

"It's the only really good source of real-time information we have. I don't care how useless it might be. We need it and we need to be able to evaluate it. Isabelle, why don't you go try the Internet."

"Stop." Isabelle interjected suddenly, "there's a report."

We continue our live coverage of the hunt for the vigilante super group. Police and military units have fanned out across the region, especially to the north-west of the city, but including other areas as well.

[Troop carriers in convoy. Apache attack helicopters. Armoured personnel carriers.]

Close ground surveillance by military and police helicopter is being conducted across a wide area, and any suspicious building cordoned off.

"Holy shit," said Peter.

Lars glanced over at Dave, who looked on dejected.

Police and military personnel are proceeding with extreme caution, however. The vigilante creatures are known to be extremely powerful and dangerous. Neutralising them if they are discovered may require enormous firepower, according to military sources. F-18 fighter jets have been scrambled, as well as tank-busting A10 close air support

planes.

[File footage of F-18 and A10 fighter jets.]

Our coverage continues.

“Ok,” said Lars. “They seem to be expanding outward from the city. We’re about one hundred miles to the north-east. It would take them a while to get this far. Also this is farm country and there are many isolated homesteads in the area.”

“I don’t know,” said Peter, “a run down, badly maintained bungalow in the middle of nowhere, all the windows covered. I’d knock on the door.”

Lars looked over at Dave again. He continued to just stand there, dejected. Maybe he should have mowed the lawn more often.

“I’ll take a drive and have a look,” Dave said. “We’re not going to know exactly where they are from the television news, for god’s sake. We need a scout on the ground. I’ll take the cell phone and drive around in a radius. That way we’ll know if and how far they’re approaching our area. I’ll take the road map and report in every ten minutes or whenever I see anything significant. How’s that.”

They all looked at Lars.

“Actually a good idea, Dave,” he answered after a few moments.

Dave grabbed his jacket from the front closet and went back to his room to get his cell phone. Lars went away too and soon returned with two road maps, one of which he spread out on the kitchen table. They gathered round.

“I’m going to make an arch, Dave. Take route eight south, then swing west on route four, to this intersection with route 11,” he traced the route with a red highlighter and drew a circle, “then turn around and come back east, all the way to the intersection with five, then as fast as you can do a broad circle just to our north, just in case.”

“Got it.”

“Then go back south again to come back to where you started at the intersection of 11 and four, and we’ll discuss a new route.”

“Right.”

“Do you have auto dial?” asked Simon. Lars replicated the route on his second map.

“Oh yes. I just press the number eight to get Lars’ cell.”

“Go then.” Lars was impatient. “Don’t hesitate to stop and talk to people if you can get more intelligence that way.”

“Got it.”

“Good luck, Dave,” said Isabelle.

“Remember, check in every ten minutes or sooner if necessary.”

“Don’t worry, Lars.” And he disappeared out the door.

They were quiet as they heard the car start and pull quickly out of the driveway, and speed off down the road.

* * *

The second call from Dave had just come in, exactly ten minutes after the previous one. Nothing to report. Proceeding on route four. About to stop for gas. Roger.

Between Dave’s calls, Peter and Isabelle sat next to each other on the living room couch, with their cups of coffee and a plate of toast, and remained glued to the news reports, mostly repeated footage with some commentary. They’d already heard almost everything that was important. A news conference was anticipated later in the morning, around 11:00. Lars and Simon stayed in the kitchen around the map table. One of the things they discussed was the route Dave should take on a more extended penetration closer to the city, if his present circuit proved uneventful.

Simon was popping hard-boiled eggs into his mouth, alternating with soft-boiled carrots.

“You know, Simon, you’re supposed to peel the egg before eating it,” advised Lars.

“Oh.”

“Just get me some more coffee.” Lars slapped his empty mug against Simon’s chest, which he received with elongated fingers. Simon then flashed one of those gruesome, grotesque smiles again.

Simon fumbled for a while with the cup and the coffee pot, then gently and generously poured in sugar directly from the sugar pot, and some cream.

“You like it sweet, right Lars.”

“Two sugars.”

“I think that’s two.”

Lars took a sip and grimaced. “Jesus Christ, I should have known better.”

He walked over toward the living room.

“Guys, if we get through this, or even get a few days respite, I think we should move up our shut-down date and get out of here.”

Peter looked back, concerned.

“But the plan is to go to ground here for three weeks and then shut down.”

“I know but it might be risky to wait that long this time. Better to disperse earlier, maybe one at a time, over several days or a week.

“OK. Are all of our new places ready?” asked Peter.

“I don’t have my apartment yet,” replied Isabelle, “but I can get one

quickly.”

“I can distribute your resettlement amounts, anyway,” said Lars.

“What about Dave? He’s not supposed to pull up stakes for six months.”

“That’s fine, Pete. He can stay. Safer for him if we’re not here anyway. Although they might still come and question him at some point after we leave, if they get this far. We’ll discuss it. He is operating under an assumed identity so he could just disappear too and leave this dump.”

“Couldn’t they get a full description of him from the owner, though.”

“No, actually, Pete. We always make sure he never meets a new landlord personally.”

“Good.”

“What if we’re seen in public, even separately, so soon after the last mission?” asked Isabelle.

“It’s most risky for us two, Is. We fit the physical description of two members of the vigilante group, even if our faces are never seen. And you have your submachine guns.”

“I know. It’s a chance we’ll have to take. We could leave last.”

“What about me?” asked Simon.

“Well,” replied Lars, “no one really knows your physical characteristics because you’re always stretched every which way, Simon.”

“And you contort your face all over,” said Peter.

“And I have my wigs. Yeah, I’ll go whenever and wherever. As long as the food’s good.”

They continued to scan the news channels. Still nothing really new.

There was an interview with the city's police chief, who wanted to assure the public that the police and paramilitary forces were doing all they could to protect the citizenry from these butchers.

"That's ten minutes, guys," said Lars, suddenly.

They looked at each other.

"That's ten minutes."

"Well, give him a bit more time, Lars," replied Peter.

"Maybe he's just talking to someone or getting gas."

"He knows to call in every ten minutes, Isabelle."

"Maybe he's just delayed. Give it a couple," insisted Peter.

Lars went back to the kitchen and paced, looking at his watch constantly.

Simon leaned back against the sink beneath the kitchen window, rotating his head unnaturally from side to side, as he did when he was nervous.

Three minutes passed.

"Ok guys, this is serious."

"Just give him five."

"Pete, maybe you should change, just in case. I'll get my armour on. Isabelle, how much ammo do you have left?"

"Not a lot."

"Well, get what you have and get your guns and your oxygen."

Isabelle got up from the couch. So did Peter, reluctantly.

"Lars, I don't want to change and then have to change back again

later on. You know, changing back is not exactly pleasant.”

“Are you sure you want to put that bulky suit on just now, Lars. It’s hot you know.”

“I think so, Simon, and I’ll need your help this time since David’s not here.”

“Lars,” Peter was persistent, “I’m sure he’ll call in a few minutes. Look at the news. There’s nothing.”

“Peter I’m sorry. Until we know what’s going on, we need to be on full alert. In your case that means changing. Look. If they have us, they can come in by air. You won’t have time. Please. I know it’s hard to change back. But I don’t want you getting killed.”

Peter thought for a moment and then shrugged with a sigh, “OK.”

He moved the coffee table against the couch and stood in the middle of the room. Then he took off his clothes and went down on one knee, concentrating hard for about fifteen seconds. Everyone else backed away into the kitchen. Peter’s body began shaking and his skin began to thicken and get hard. There was no screaming and no excruciating pain or spasms. His skin just thickened, buckled, folded in on itself, changed to a gleaming, quartz-like consistency and hardened, while his chest expanded and he increased in size almost double, his limbs successively pushed outwards, bulking and twisting. His head became an unsightly mass of crystal, with two small eyes and a gaping jaw. His nose disappeared.

He let out a guttural “Haa”, several times during the process, apparently enjoying it. When it was over, he sat there in the middle of the living room floor, upright, his legs spread out. He looked up at the others. His proportions were slightly different after every metamorphosis, though always the same substance. This time, his left arm and right leg each seemed slightly longer and thicker, and he had a bulbous mass of crystal behind his right shoulder.

“Hope the floor doesn’t give.” He lay back all the way onto his back, positioning himself diagonally across the living room, looking very awkward. “I’ll be here.” Peter found it hard to talk in his

metamorphic form and he generally avoided doing so. When he did his voice was deep and very guttural.

“Simon, come on, you have to help me with my body armour right away. Isabelle, get your weapons and oxygen.”

“What’s that noise?” asked Isabelle, alarmed.

“Hold on,” said Lars.

“A rocket engine.”

“A missile. Get out!”

Peter was pulling himself up. Isabelle was instantly surrounded by blue haze, her eyes clenching shut. Simon projected his upper torso through the kitchen window with a sudden, violent elongation of his legs, breaking the screen. Lars was flying for the back door.

The cruise missile struck the side of the house opposite the kitchen, where the bedrooms were, and blew it to pieces.

* * *

Isabelle was thrown some distance into the air, still protected by her force field, but completely unarmed and with no oxygen. She landed innocuously with a thud, debris falling around her. She could hear nothing, as usual. She would normally have radio communication with Lars. But not now. The forest was not far off and she could make a run for it. But what about the others?

She crouched low to the ground and looked back at the house. It was completely destroyed, a ball of fire and smoke. She saw some more debris flying up, being thrown. And there was Peter, his hulking form smashing through the wreckage. He was trying to run, but had a bad limp.

Good, he’s alive, thought Isabelle. She stood up and waved her arms, running toward him. Peter noticed her and started running in her direction, laboriously. He was looking up.

Suddenly a missile struck Peter in the chest. A smaller missile, from above. His right arm and shoulder and a large section of his right side were blown clean away, and he was hurled backwards, spinning around and landing on his back. Isabelle fell to the ground and screamed. She looked up, and could see several Apache helicopters hovering above her. She hadn't realised they were there because she couldn't hear anything. Peter tried to raise himself onto his feet with his remaining arm. A second missile struck him on the ground. There was just a cloud of smoke and flying dirt.

Isabelle got up and moved forward, through the smoke, trying to find him. She saw an arm, a crystalline arm, separated at the shoulder. There seemed to be some sort of organic core, because the torn end was bloody. She reached down to pick it up but couldn't. The force field always projected just beyond the reach of her arms. She tried again and again, and sobbed. She looked around and saw other parts of Peter scattered about, parts of his torso, legs. She was looking for his head. She needed to see his face one last time. Soon she would start running out of air.

But she noticed arms flailing in the distance, long, extended arms. Simon was down. He may be hurt. She ran over and found him lying on the grass, looking up, his neck stretched out several feet, his arms elongated, flailing about, grabbing at the grass around him. His entire bottom half from his stomach was gone. Where he had been ripped in two there was just a mass of torn, jagged, rubbery tissue. He was trying to lift his head to get a closer look, but couldn't. He looked at Isabelle and was talking rapidly, but she couldn't hear him.

Isabelle noticed figures emerging from the surrounding forest. Assault troops, obviously, heavily armed, some with shoulder-mounted launchers, moving forward deliberately, forming a wide perimeter around them. Overhead she noticed the helicopters. One of them seemed to be carrying something on its belly, some sort of large cage, open to the ground. It hovered above her, but did not descend. The assault troops drew closer.

She thought she probably couldn't get away now. She could easily be contained with that cage if they dropped it on her, and she had no weapons and no oxygen so she couldn't stay protected for very long anyway. And she wanted to talk to Simon. She looked down at him

struggling, and continued to cry.

The blue haze disappeared. Isabelle's senses were suddenly bombarded by the intense cacophony of noise from the helicopters, by their pounding downdraft and the swirling dust it kicked up around her, and by the smell of smoke and charred earth. She moved closer to Simon and took hold of one of his flailing arms, and cradled his head in her lap.

She bent over to yelled into his ear. "Simon darling. Are you going to be OK?"

His mouth was moving but he didn't seem able to speak. The helicopters moved off slightly, even the one with the cage underneath. Isabelle put her ear next to Simon's mouth.

"I was always half dead. I guess now it's three quarters."

He smiled.

"No, Simon."

"The others?"

"They're gone, Simon."

"I feel weak. I can't even lift my head to see."

Isabelle suddenly shrieked and collapsed forward. A prong had been shot into her back, connected to a wire. Two soldiers came up from behind and pulled her away. Simon tried to keep hold of her, grabbing her arm with his hand. But they pulled her away and Simon tried to maintain his grip as his arm extended further. A soldier came up and stepped on his forearm, and tried to pry his grip loose, to no avail.

Two men approached dressed in chemical suits. They carried what looked to be fire extinguishers. They held off while Isabelle was injected with something.

"Do it," the soldier said, turning away but maintaining his pressure

on Simon's forearm.

They sprayed Simon with a fine mist, starting with his head. He was quickly enveloped. His fingers were pried lose from Isabelle. He continued to be sprayed, now all over, including his remaining appendages. He turned blue and lay there solid and motionless. Then he was turned over and sprayed on the other side.

Several ambulances drove up and disgorged personnel and stretchers. Various military and police vehicles arrived. Isabelle was strapped down, lifeless, and taken away. Simon was picked up by several men and placed on another stretcher, a grotesque form, rock solid, his neck elongated and twisted to tone side, his mouth gaping, his arms stretched out like some macabre wire doll, one of them still grasping for his friend. It was difficult to fit him into the vehicle. Peter's body parts were slowly collected and placed in large plastic bags.

* * *

Dave sat handcuffed in a small room in front of a metal table. He'd been there for a while. The police surprised him when he stopped for gas. How did they know? Was their cover completely blown? Did he arouse suspicion by just driving around? Two plain clothes officers surprised him as he was paying and took his cell phone immediately.

The door finally opened and three men entered. One sat down in front of him and placed a file on the table. He was short and stocky, with greying hair and a ruddy face, dressed in a blue shirt and tie, with a badge hanging from his breast pocket. The other two men stood behind, one was also a civilian, the other dressed in military uniform.

"Hello Dave. How are you." He turned back. "Take his cuffs off." The other civilian stepped around the table and took a key from his pocket, removing the cuffs. Dave placed his hands on the table.

"Thanks."

"I'm Staff Officer Thompson. I've been the police department's chief liaison with the military during this operation."

“Military?”

“This is just a preliminary talk to let you know what happened, before you’re arraigned. And before the press conference.”

“OK.”

“It’s over, Dave. Your friends are dead or in custody.”

Dave straightened.

“Dead or in custody, how?”

“The army found out where you were hiding and hit you.”

“With what.”

“Well, it seems the quartzite guy could stand up to small arms but not armour-piercing missiles, Dave.”

“Shit.”

“He took two of them. Those things can destroy a tank, Dave. Your leader was killed by the cruise missile that destroyed your house.”

“Lars! A cruise missile?”

“Yes a cruise missile. They didn’t go in with pea shooters, Dave. The plastic man was cut in two by the blast and that seemed to incapacitate him. They froze him with liquid nitrogen, or what was left. The girl could have been more difficult, but she was unarmed, and then let down her shield to comfort the plastic man.”

“And you killed her?”

“No. She was stunned by a taser and apprehended. Seems she’ll be the only one to stand trial, and you of course. How they’ll get her into court I don’t know, since no one can touch her. Maybe they’ll keep her in a cell and try her remotely.”

“Just deprive her of spare oxygen, and she has to cooperate.” said the

civilian behind.

“Well exactly.”

“So is Simon still alive?”

“I don’t know.”

“What will they do with what’s left?”

“Well, the scientists are waiting like hawks. Same for those quartzite body parts. The thinking is there may be some scientific breakthroughs in all this. Too bad we can’t recover your leader’s brain.”

“But how did you know where we were?”

“My friend, they had you guys pegged yesterday. They tracked you from the crime scene. It wasn’t hard. They used high-resolution satellite. That biker hangout was under constant surveillance. Most known biker hangouts were. Special Forces had an observation team in the woods outside your place by nightfall. They had their listening equipment. They heard everything.”

“What about the news? They said you were concentrating on the north-west.”

“I know. That was just a decoy. We fed the media what they needed to know, and kept them at a distance. We know you’d probably be watching the news.”

“So you knew I was leaving to scout?”

“Yup, and exactly what routes you were taking. And your cell phones were being monitored. We just pulled all our personnel back beyond your range, then sent some plain clothes to pick you up when you stopped for gas.”

“I guess we were a bit optimistic.”

“Dave, how long did you think you could continue this? Did you

think you could just defy the power of the entire government and police and military forever, while you went around dispensing your vigilante justice? Do you know the military has had a task force in place for months, planning how to take you guys down. And do you have any idea how much you've cost the public purse?"

"Never really thought of it."

There was a long pause.

"I have to ask you, Dave, are there any more of these creatures out there?"

"No. None that I know of. They were the only ones."

"If there are and you know, I suggest you tell us. It might make it easier for you. Where did they get their powers?"

"I don't know. I really don't."

"How did you get involved."

"I've known Lars for a long time. We went to school together."

"Lars, the leader."

"Yes. Are you sure he's dead?"

"Forensics is still going over the site. But we're almost positive. He wasn't wearing his body armour when the cruise missile struck. It wouldn't have helped him anyway."

"Funny, he was the most important one of the whole group, but in some ways the most vulnerable."

"But why did you follow him? Did he exercise some kind of mind control on you, in addition to his telekinesis?"

"No. I don't think so. We followed him willingly. We had nothing else. None of us really amounted to anything outside the group. We wanted it to work."

“You wanted it to work. They went around the country as self-appointed judge, jury and executioner, killing violently and brutally in cold blood. Did they ever think, any of them, that they could make their powers available to the authorities, to help society?”

“Yes they discussed that. But Lars said it wouldn’t do any good. They would only be able to use their powers in the context of the law and due process, and therefore not effectively. There was nothing they could do working with the police that the police could not ultimately do as effectively themselves. Only by working outside the law could we have any value for society...”

Dave stopped.

“Working outside the law. Value for society. You can say these things in the same breath?”

David sighed, his eyes downcast.

“Look, I don’t really think, never really thought that what we were doing was right. But we meant to do good. My friends were basically good people, just fucked up by weird powers.”

“Well it’s over now.”

Dave looked down, resigned, “yup.”

“And what do you feel about what you’ve done?”

“I’m sorry all those people died.”

“You should be.”

“And I guess I’m glad if the death of my friends can help science, and...”

“Yes?”

“And I guess I’m thankful.”

“Thankful for what, Dave?”

“That I’ll be given the kind of justice and due process we denied our victims.”

Thomson chuckled, and leaned forward.

“You did not deny your victims justice and due process, Dave. That was not in your power. You murdered them.”

“That’s what society has to say.” He looked up, “Rightly.”

“And David, you yourself will have justice and due process, you and the girl. In this state, we execute murderers.”

Finis