

Spin 1.1

The Central Valley hangs in the middle of California as a pit, but not just because of its low elevation. It's effectively a hole, a gap between civilizations. There are people there and infrastructure, but it exists not to have its own identity or culture but only as a means to service the rest of the state and country. Maybe it's a holdover from the Dustbowl migrants, but sometimes it's as if they try to be mundane. To hear these people talk about "the Five" you'd think it's some great river like the Nile that their entire lives have been built around, not a highway. Still almost everything was spoken in relation to "the Five." Would that it could be a river instead, because water was the only other appropriate topic of conversation to the locals, more accurately *lack* of water. The more towns I visited the more I realized they only existed for those two purposes: servicing farmers or people traveling through. I was in the latter group, but even running over 90 miles per hour wouldn't get me through here fast enough.

"Scuse me honey, you want some more coffee?" the waitress said above me. Lost in my own thoughts I hadn't noticed her come up, I hadn't noticed my mug was empty. In fact it wasn't even empty, but people in this town needed any excuse to start conversations.

"No I better not," I replied. I looked up at her wondering how forced the smile was and tried to mimic it. Before the pause got too long I remembered to add, "Thank you."

"Oh of course. And sorry for the wait, your food will be out shortly." I tried to signal that the conversation was done with a slight smile and nod, but I had already given her an inch. She continued, "Say, aren't you a little young to be traveling alone?"

I was seventeen. In Los Angeles that meant I was basically a woman, I don't know what it meant out here. "I'm on my way to meet family," I lied.

"Oh that's nice," she went on. "Hey I didn't see you park. You ain't hitchhiking at your age, are you?"

No, I'm using my fucking superpowers, I wanted to scream. Instead I welcomed a change in subject when the first interesting thing in a hundred miles caught my eye. "Hey what's happening on the news?"

She turned around to the to the TV hanging on the wall. On screen was an amalgamation of metal; the reporters' shaky cameras barely captured something in frame, it looked like a van with a mechanical tumor hanging off the back, moving at full speed with the police in pursuit. We both got the answer soon enough in bold white letters: PARAHUMAN ROBBERY IN PROGRESS IN DOS PALOS.

"How far away is Dos Palos from here?" I blurted out.

“About 10 miles east of the 5, but don’t worry. The TV says they’re heading north so we oughta be safe.”

I grabbed my pack off the seat and tried my best bluff, “Oh I just realized I have to get going to catch my ride.”

“Don’t cha wanna wait for your food?”

“No, I’m not hungry.” That was a bigger lie, but I was already halfway out the door. I was not about to miss the one good thing that came out of this trip: my first superhero fight.

Moving at superspeeds wasn’t like a normal run. Ok maybe that’s obvious, but it wasn’t like the couple times I had driven at 100 mph either. In the car, things in the distance would slowly creep up on you until it was right next to you at which point it was gone in the blink of an eye. Using my power had almost the opposite effective, the closer things were to me the greater understandings I had. Even if I passed a stone on the ground for a second, it was like I had 10 seconds to stare at it in detail instead of milliseconds. When I focused on the scenery at the edge of my eyesight, things got almost surreal. The flat slab of road that I had been running on for the past week was curving far in front of me, moving up and down in segments like the tide. Though in a few moments once the same ground was under my feet, it would just as flat like the rest. Similarly I noticed a series of grey and brown blobs to my left, swelling and retracting like they were lungs. They looked nothing like buildings, but somehow I knew they were and from there I made the leap that this was my turn to Dos Palos.

It genuinely surprised me how tired I wasn’t, even at a 130 mph. As I got closer, blobs became buildings. For a moment I was afraid that I might hit something and splatter, but somehow I managed weaving through any object in my path. Even the crowd of people I passed through was simple, I ran right through two reporters by mere inches and the only thing I hit them with was wind and surprise. It gave me confidence, and when you’re feeling confident the last thing you want to do is slow down. I sped up when I saw something shimmering and silver in the distance, far enough away that it was outside the town proper and open road. So for that reason and probably many more, I completely overshot my target and lost all element of surprise. There might have been some shock left, like the “What the hell just flew past me?” kind, but that wouldn’t last long. I pulled a U-turn and flew past the metallic mass again and there would be no doubt in the robber’s mind what happened: another cape was here.

After my second missed I realized that while the other cape might know I’m here to stop him, the townsfolk might think I was his back-up. I turned around again and aimed myself behind a nondescript building. Slowing down as rapidly as I did had left me panting and out of breath, which was fine since I needed a moment to set down my backpack. I hid it neatly behind a dumpster and hoped it would still be there when I came back for it; everything I owned that I wasn’t wearing was in there and what I was wearing wasn’t impressive. A secret identity is priceless, but a good costume costs money. I settled for jeans and a plain white T-shirt (something I could mark up once I got a real cape name). A ski-mask covered face and I had

some leather gloves with a little padding. They were supposed to have good grip. With air back in my lungs I began a quick pace forward to address the concerned civilians.

“Attention Dos Palos,” I projected the line of reporters I had surely scared.. “Remain calm, I am a parahuman here to help, but I need to know what’s happening.”

“That robot is making off with an armored van!” somebody shouted from the crowd. Other people began talk at me, but that was as much relevant information as I was going to get from them. For a moment I regretted my bedside manor, but I had already began running and this robot was not waiting up for me. 50 mph. I was already starting to catch up on the cops. 70 mph. I had passed them. I thanked my stars they weren’t firing. 90 mph. I held restraint from pushing it further. We were about the same speed now, but how was this van going so fast, especially with a several ton robot clinging to its back?

I fought my way out of the trail of dust this van was leaving, veering to the side significantly only to find the van wasn’t driving at all.. In fact it’s back wheels weren’t on the ground, they were being suspended from behind like a towtruck. But this cable wasn’t attached to a truck, it was a 12 foot tall....centaur? The hell? At least that was the best way I could describe the metal monstrosity, a huge grouping of mechanical limbs. At least four were stabbed into the sides and top of the van while another four were pushing the van from behind like highspeed wheelbarrow. I didn’t really care how impossible it seemed, because I had my target: the vicegrip holding onto to it.

I held my hand forward to begin my secondary power and a purple orb started glowing from it, spinning rapidly as soon as it came into creation. My very human body was too fragile to throw punches at 90 mph, but I could throw this and really mess up this thief’s day.I pushed it a little further to get closer behind it and a little more speed. Swing back, follow through, and I let the orb loose in the world. It followed the curvature of my throw, going straight for a moment till it hooked left and sputtered out in the dirt, disappearing once the movement was gone. I started forming another one, but Robo-taur caught on to my trick and turned his head 180 degrees at me. He veered towards me, kicking more dust into my fucking eyes. Goggles would be the next addition to my costume, once I beat this asshole into the dirt. I retaliated by getting even closer to try and compensate for my shit aim.

I was about 10 feet out from it now and if this robot glared at me harder it would shoot heat rays (something I hadn’t entirely ruled out). I figured this robot must have had a one track mind, because all he did was keep on running even when I was clearly readying another attack. Well screw him, he can make my job easier. My newest orb in hand, I made another daring move towards it from the side, this time angling it so the momentum would hit it fully. I tossed it forward and within a second the arm I aimed for let go of the van, its corner lurching downwards and slowing the whole unit. Before I could celebrate my first successful hit, I realized it wasn’t damaged in any real way. The bot had anticipated my attack and let go of the van intentionally to smack the spinning globe away from its cargo and incidentally, right towards my face.

The sirens were what woke me up. I saw them pull up behind me as I started picking myself off the ground. Also behind me were a length of skidmarks stopping at my own two feet. I guess I knew how I stopped now, by hitting the breaks. The ball.. my orb.. it was going right to me. I don't remember it hitting, but there wasn't anywhere else for it to go. I wasn't decapitated, though my joints were sore all over. One of the cops pulled over while the other's pursued.

"Ma'am stay down, we'll have an emergency vehicle here soon," the officer barked already going to his walkie talkie. But I wasn't in the mood for taking orders or lying down, I had a second life and I was going to use it taking that four legged freak down. I had barely gotten back on my feet when the officer noticed. "Hey I said stay down."

"I'm fine," I tried to protest. It was sort of true, my power took a lot out of me. I think slowing down that rapidly must have been what put me out. "It was exhaustion. Did he take any hostages with him in the van?"

"The driver's hospitalized and we have no other reports of hostages. Did you see someone-" but I was already gone. I turned my head to see the cop waving his arms and kicking the ground in frustration. Being a hero meant I would have to earn favor with locals better than I had today, but hopefully I'd never see these locals again. And the only thing that was important now was stopping him.

Shit. I lost track of how fast I was going. Not good if I didn't want to end up a red streak on the ground. Going too fast would mean I'd overshoot him...again. Though maybe getting in front wouldn't be too bad. The moving bump in the distance became a grey blob, then the grey blob became a vague shape of steel. I was catching up

Ok a couple options came up: one he clearly didn't expect a long chase. The centaur was designed to be a quick sprint out of town with a stash house somewhere outside of county jurisdiction. I could keep pursuing and he'd run out of fuel before I got tired....probably...maybe. There was no real telling what tinkers were capable of and I had already passed out today.

I already knew attacking the hands and joints wouldn't work, they would be made to withstand gunfire at the least. Same with the armored van, it would be designed to take more than that. Even the windshields and wheels would be made bulletproof. But they probably weren't designed to move at a 90+ mph over dirt roads on only the front two...

As I pulled into mutual eyesight, I noticed a small figure crawling from the open back of the van into the creature's chest. The tinker no doubt. It was good he wasn't in the van anymore because as pissed at him as I may be, I wasn't ready to kill. Not for him, not for some C-tier villain stealing his way through the hellhole of central California. My deliberating on life gave him time though and the can-shaped face turned towards me again. His "jaw" fell open and plumes of exhaust started pouring out into my face. He noticed the dust trick made give him distance

and he did an on the spot modification to provide a smokescreen. Well good for fuckin' him, my plan was to get distance anyways, more surprising if he thinks I'm retreating.

Where before I was a parallel line to his path, following him directly to wherever he wanted to go, I arced out to the left now. I had to speed up too so as not to lose him. I was a couple hundred meters out when I he noticed what was happening. Surely he didn't know the specifics, but he saw the opportunity of me going left and started to veer right himself. Shitfuck. Well I'd just have to go even faster to compensate, hitting the target would be more dangerous. My previous topspeed had been somewhere around 180 mph. I wasn't sure if I was there now, but I was starting to feel diminishing returns for how much energy I was putting into accelerating.

My arc completed, I turned back to hopefully catch Centard in the front. Angling exactly where I wanted to go was hard as my vision was distorted in the distance, but luckily everything became clearer the closer I got. He hadn't turned right completely, just started angling that direction. But his front was still going forward, which was right where I wanted him. As I finally got into earshot the bot opened his mouth again, but smokescreen wouldn't work with me in front. He let out a "roar", some combination of amplifiers on roaring engines and scratching metal. It unsettled me to say the least.

I threw a ball straight for the front left wheel. A miss, as it seemed, for in the few milliseconds it was in air it went back. I was coming at the robot in a somewhat T-bone fashion, so while it missed the very front, it hit the side of the van like a canon. My orb didn't make a dent, but at this speed and with the van on two wheels it sure as hell gave it a shake. Centard tightened his grip as a countermeasure, but his confidence was already as shook as the van. And my plan would work better if he still held on. I already had another orb in hand by the time I was in front of the van.

Less than a moment after the roar started I had my target rapidly coming into view. As close as I was it was incredibly dangerous, but my powers made it so aiming right next to me would appear as clear as day. Just an underhand toss this time, barely a push to put it in the right direction while my own body's momentum did the rest. I saw the light glint off the edges as it spun forward just ahead of me, careening down to the inside of the right wheel. For extra safety I decided to push just a little more so I'd be ahead of the ball even if I wouldn't see it hit. And boy did it fucking hit.

For the second time I fought the urge to stop and turn around as the carnage unfolded behind me. A quick look through my peripherals showed the tire pop off and the carriage moving forward together. But as I gathered from the crashing noises and virtual dust bomb, both had stopped moving. I had been slowing down, gradually of course this time, and finally allowed myself to view my own work. The back quarter had torn off in Mr. Roboto's hands while the front was upsidedown with a trail of skidmarks dug into the dirt behind it. I guess they tend to dig in the ground when only on one wheel. I couldn't make it out at first, but green blobs had started raining down and settling on the ground. Dollar bills. I had half a mind to go back and pick some

up when I noticed the giant-horse-man-robot picking himself up nearly unscathed. I had stopped the crime as best I could, but the criminal would be a much harder. Especially now that he'd be pissed.

Maybe unscathed wasn't the correct word, because two of it's hands hadn't unclenched some chunks of metal that used to be attached to a van. They looked pretty stiff in general, locked in the forward position. Once his movement started up again I could see the left front leg didn't move in sync with the rest of the limbs, sustaining some damage hitting the van straight on as it stopped.

For all the damage it sustained, this wasn't a bot designed for fighting head on. Sure it's speed and size could compensate when necessary, but if this crash was causing internal malfunctions it wouldn't stand up to most brutes I'd seen on TV. Too fast to be tagged by most brutes, though, and too durable to get hurt by anything fast. But not invincible, and I was going much much faster.

I had to make this U-turn tighter than I'd liked, but there would only be so much time before this became a real chase again. Still, any sort of turning was a change in acceleration and I had been pushing myself already today. A momentary lapse in consciousness, cause me to stumble. Stumbling caused course correction and overcorrection, which put my straight trail back to Ugly into a serpentine pattern. I could see it starting up again