

WARNING: This isn't good.

The following short novel, which still has the placeholder title of "Story 184", was written for National Novel Writing Month (also known as [NaNoWriMo](#)). That means that the entire thing was cranked out in thirty days, which leaves no real time for editing. I have also not gone back since and done any, so this is still a total train wreck. Even if I were to edit it there would be problems -- one of the things that I hoped to gain from this project was a better level of comfort at having multiple unique characters, but I somehow failed to think of the fact that if it didn't help me in that area (spoiler alert: it totally didn't) then I would have a novel essentially built around one of my biggest weaknesses as a writer. Thirty mini-chapters with seventeen points of view... and they almost all sound like it's the same character thinking or talking. Bah.

I'm still quite proud of this novel simply because writing 50,000 words in a month and ending up with something even remotely coherent is still an accomplishment. I'm leaving it here online for others to see not so much because I think anyone will ever read it, but because I posted each chapter on [my stupid blog](#) as I wrote it, so it seems like it makes sense to compile it somewhere. Otherwise someone stumbling across those individual chapters will see them in reverse order as they scroll through the archives (as if anyone is scrolling through the archives -- most of my pageviews are brief and possibly unintentional) and waste time trying to figure out where it starts instead of seeing this warning and knowing it isn't worth their time.

Anyway, here it is if for some reason you actually want to read it. Treat this as covered by the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike licence.

"Time I am, the great destroyer of the worlds, and I have come here to destroy all people. With the exception of you, all the soldiers here on both sides will be slain."
- Bhagavad Gita, 11:32

Chapter One: For Want of a Nail, the Kingdom Was Lost

David Brunner

Once upon a time, there was a magical kingdom where everyone was happy...

To the world at large that seems to be where the story starts so I guess it's as good a place as any for me. Those who remember what things were like before the fear, the curfews, the government checkpoints - they all get this wistful look and talk about how great Disneyland was. For myself, I can't picture it at all except for how it looked at the end, with the crowds screaming as they packed themselves into a solid wall of flesh and the castle engulfed in flames that seemed to reach forever up into a black ceiling of smoke.

But I'm getting ahead of myself - or maybe behind. It's hard to really say where some stories begin and end, but at the very least Disneyland is the first big milestone here. It happened on a Saturday in July, when attendance was about as high as it ever is - I was already covered in ashes and cuts from the first part of the "terrorist attack", the part nobody hears about, and so somehow it didn't seem strange to hear the sounds of panic as we arrived. Agent Mackey unloaded me from the van and checked my vitals, then we ran through backstage areas that surprised me with their industrial appearance - you would never know we were inside the Magic Kingdom.

People were running past me and my handlers were trying to tell me what to do and the whole world seemed to vibrate. I could feel the one we were looking for, sense him nearby. At that moment it was like he was the only real thing in the entire universe, and everything else was just a pale illusion burning off like fog under his heat. I snapped back to the real world as someone ran past wearing Mickey Mouse's lower half, crying and stumbling. I nodded and told the agents that I understood, still watching Mickey's legs as they turned a corner and vanished.

We ducked into a building with some sort of water works, a mixed smell of bleach and mildew. After a second the walls went from concrete to carefully molded fake rocks and I knew where we were - inside Splash Mountain. For a moment it could have been any other day at the park, but as soon as we came out into open air... That scene we were faced with upon emerging into the park came back to me once at a concert and I nearly lost it. The strobe lights kicked on and everyone was yelling and the club was filled with smoke... just like that, I was there again. Back in Disneyland with thick clouds of ash blotting out the California sun as lightning fired full-auto into the crowds.

Geographically we were close to the front of the park but there wasn't a throughway to the main gate, so the area was packed with scared tourists that had been backed into a corner. Most were finding their way into staff areas or just running into rides to find somewhere that the lightning couldn't reach them. My handlers shoved them roughly to the ground as they passed, and soon a pathway opened up - nobody wanted to mess with the strange men in the black suits.

Agent Mackey looked at me, took off his glasses and looked right into my eyes. "This is what you were put on this Earth to do, do you understand me? This is your destiny, David. If we get killed you need to keep going, you need to get to him and shut him down." I nodded, I think, and

he headed away into the park. I still hear him saying that to me sometimes, when I think about the twisted remains of Disneyland. So much for destiny, right?

Once we were through the crowd it opened up, because nobody was headed towards anywhere but the main entrance anymore. I didn't know it at the time, but they were crushing each other to death, trampling little kids and grandparents and staff. Barely a quarter of them made it out of the park. Meanwhile we circled past Pirates of the Caribbean, navigating by that horrible flickering electric glow of the sky as it struck down more and more innocent people. As we approached Thunder Mountain I saw him for the first time, floating in the air surrounded by a blue halo that made my retinas itch just to look at it. My handlers opened fire immediately, but I think they already knew it wasn't going to work. Mackey told me to keep going while the thing was distracted, but I was petrified. I was completely incapable of moving closer, and probably would have stood there forever if it hadn't been for the deep bass noise of Agent Mackey exploding behind me.

Most days, I had hated my handlers and the place they kept me. I had hated the group home I lived in before that, and hated the foster parents I had before that, and hated my real parents as best as I can remember. But sometimes Agent Mackey would talk to me like a real person, and he would slip me a cigarette even though I was only sixteen. He was, if not a good person, at least a nice guy. I felt part of him slap into my back, hot and wet, and saw what in retrospect was probably an arm fly by me... and something snapped. I charged.

When the lab was first ripped apart by that thing, that horrible scarred monster, I felt excited. I thought I would be able to escape in the confusion and be free, be just a normal kid again and forget the experiments they had done on me. I wasn't useful except to manipulate the other test subjects anyway, so with the scientists dead it felt like a sure thing that they wouldn't look too hard for me. I had my freedom in my grasp, and stood staring at the ragged hole in the wall filled with fear of a normal life. My handlers had provided me with everything for two years, and... while I didn't want to admit it... I couldn't stand the thought of not getting to use my ability again.

So I stayed, and let them load me into the van and take me to confront the monster. I didn't know who had sent him, I wouldn't find out who had made the attack possible until I was thirty-two years old, and so when I finally attacked it was just about agent Mackey. As I charged towards the thing it looked at me, and that scar-covered face broke into a smile. It dropped to the ground, and didn't make any move to rip me apart. The only flex of power was one that slammed an invisible wall between us to keep me from trying to grab him with my bare hands.

"It's good to see you survived. You're David, aren't you?" I felt a cold shiver run down my spine when he - it - used my name, but I kept focused, looking past the visible world and examining the wall of force he was projecting. Lines of energy were snaking out of him into the clouds, but also in directions that didn't exist - trying to follow them made my stomach turn.

"Don't be afraid, David. This is a good thing. This is... a preemptive strike. The people you came here with were going to do something terrible, far worse than this, and I came to stop

them." He paused, waiting for some reply, but I ignored him. "I know it looks like a mess, but I can fix this. I'm still flexing my muscles, you know. You'll learn someday that there is no limit to what people like us can do. I'll teach you myself, now that I've eliminated the program that created you. My side, my people, are already dead. Now yours are too. We are our own people, David. I saw where they kept you, like a lab rat. It can be so much better."

He was so strong, so powerful. The others that had developed powers in the lab after ages of surgeries and treatments had gained some weak control over a very specific area; maybe they could generate enough heat to cook an egg or make their eye color change. Nothing like this. Nowhere even close. I couldn't stop thinking, someone else is doing the same thing the people at the lab were, and they're doing it a hell of a lot better. It felt hopeless, I wanted to just give up and collapse on the ground, but then something seemed to click in my mind and I could see how the wall was woven. My hand slipped through and pressed against that face, that horrible mask of scar tissue, and the world ended.

It should have shut him down. It should have stopped everything. Instead, it felt like I had punched my hand through a dam and released the flood. It felt like my soul was being torn away in the rush of energy, like I had tried to grab the sun in my hand but somehow couldn't burn or die, only channel the heat through me into the Earth itself, destroying everything and everyone, blackening the planet and shattering it into dust.

I woke up thinking that was just what I had done; the twisted and blackened spires of Disney were barely visible through the acrid fog and I was certain that beyond the walls of the park the rest of Los Angeles, of California, of the world would look the same. When I discovered it was limited - almost exactly - to the Disney property, it was somehow worse. I disappeared into the city before they managed to seal the area, tried to forget everything after the group home. I watched the news talk about the terrorist attack on the Magic Kingdom, and I knew it was all my fault.

When the first reports of freaks appeared in the Los Angeles area, my stomach felt like a lead weight and I actually supported the government's position - round them up for the sake of national security. As it spread, and people throughout the southwest United States started to wake up and realize they had strange abilities, I knew some sort of genie had been let out of the bottle and could never be put back. In a way, I really had destroyed the world.

So that's where the story starts, for me. I still blame myself, after all this time, but I've learned it's never about one thing, that no story has one beginning. Tiny events, seemingly harmless choices, somehow come together to shape the world. A scientist leans too close to a test subject. Someone goes to the bathroom at the wrong time and gets left behind. I wonder sometimes about the pattern of these little events, about the fact that in the midst of the big questions about who destroyed the Magic Kingdom and why the freaks started to fight back and take on the Feds we're not asking what controls all those so-called "random" events. We're not asking if we really do have a destiny.

That's what this whole thing is about to me, I guess because I'm still looking for absolution. For

all those involved who didn't destroy Disney and tear a hole in the universe... I guess for most of them it really comes down to the last night at the Drowned Spider - before that stupid little dive bar burned to the ground the freaks were in hiding and the Feds were hunting them but it was stable somehow, routine. After that the war started, short though it was, and so the sixteen years between that and Disney seem more like background.

And I have to admit, I really did love that damn bar.

Chapter Two: Fast Charlie Catches a Bus

Charles Crane

I need to remember the name Daryl Holst - assuming I survive my imminent collision with a city bus. The names of the other prisoners are ones we already know; Tamara Allen, Walter Schwarz... and probably that's all. All that are alive, anyway. I owe Daryl everything for getting me out of that hell-hole... I just hope he understands why I couldn't take him with me. I might be the fastest man alive, but I cut it pretty damn close on the way out.

They brought Daryl and I together because they had some theory that our powers are similar somehow and they wanted to use the Extractor on both of us at once. I had been holding out hope for so long that it almost seemed like a weight was lifted when they said that. A painful, horrifying death and then it would all be over. It's hard to believe that was less than fifteen minutes ago and now I'm praying to live. God damn bus.

When that scientist reached towards Daryl and then fell back screaming I wasn't sure what had happened - it seemed like the kid's head had blurred for just a second. There was a spray of blood as the guy fell and he flailed his arms trying to grab something - and the idiot caught hold of my IV. The second that tube ripped out of the port they had installed in me I started straining, trying to speed up. I knew it was the only chance I would get.

My metabolism is a mystery - there's no good reason for it to be any faster than anyone else's since my power appears to be magic anyway, but when I try I can crank it into overdrive. The drugs they keep in my system have a hard time countering that, they just hamper it some. That means that I had only cleared out one percent of my system when the scientist stood up, but by the time he lifted the IV pole it was two and when he slipped on the spilled liquid it was four. Eight as he stood again. Sixteen as he grabbed the hose and pulled my hospital gown aside. Thirty-two, his hands shaking as he tried to insert the tube again while I wiggled fast enough for the port to be just a blur and keep him from getting lined up. Sixty-four as he called for help that seemed to move like cold molasses. My system was suddenly clear - sadly that didn't do much for the restraints.

The bus is filling the entire front field of my vision now, and I can see the eyes of the bus driver stretching wide as he sees me coming. If this bus crash kills me I'm going to be pissed; it's a seriously stupid way to go. I look down at my wrists, like raw hamburger from my struggle with the restraints, and think that's probably what the rest of me will look like in a few minutes. I left the outer few layers of skin back in the lab with Darryl... and Tamara... and Walter. Now I'm starting to doubt myself, starting to wonder if I could have saved them.

When my hand pulled free help had nearly arrived, and as I undid the other straps I had to squirm around the thugs. I wanted to beat them to a pulp and burn the place to the ground, but the red emergency lights had already kicked on and I knew it would be less than a minute before it was too late. Could I have stayed? I would have been a bull in a china shop, if they had locked me in they still would have had trouble stopping me from destroying everything. Or would they? I still don't know how they caught me the first time, and you hear rumors about some sort of...

stun ray, or something.

There were already thick metal blast doors sliding down from the ceiling, and I had to duck under them and run to make it to the next set, and the next, barely squeezing beneath the last ones before they sealed me in. I could feel myself speeding up, more every second, until I reached a pace I had never moved at before. Something about fighting against those drugs for the past month must have done something to me. I found myself on the freeway, running past cars like they were standing still, trying like mad to make it to the Drowned Spider.

I'm still not entirely sure what it was that got me. I looked up at a photo radar camera to flip it off as I triggered it, and right then something horrible happened - I think I hit a pothole. I must have been going ninety miles an hour, and as soon as my foot caught I was airborne. I launched into oncoming traffic right for this bus - this stupid, stupid bus - and something in my ability strained and fought and my brain started to go even faster than the rest of me.

And that's where I've been for the last five minutes, watching the front of a bus creep closer and closer. It's moving at a snail's pace, but I know that's just a trick of my perception. In the real world, to an outside observer, I'm moving ninety miles an hour and the bus is probably going sixty-five. Total impact speed? One hundred and fifty-five miles an hour - and I'm not wearing a helmet. I flapped and kicked at the air some, but it turns out all the super-speed in the world doesn't help when you're not touching the ground - it's like being a great gymnast in freefall from an airplane. Not a good chance you'll stick the landing.

In retrospect, I wonder if I maybe should have just picked up a phone and called, told them that I heard someone say Agent Black had ordered them to move in on the Spider. Phones are always tapped these days, all of them being monitored by super-smart voice recognition software and a massive team of humans to verify, but what would it matter? I wouldn't even have to try to talk in code, I'd just have to tell them to get the hell out. The bar was clearly compromised anyway. We'll have to meet at the Laughing Squid from now on I guess, or some other generic adjective-animal hole in the wall.

The bus is nearly close enough to touch, and I know what I have to do. Once I hit a patch of ice and slid, helpless, towards a building. I've lived in Los Angeles all my life, ice wasn't something I had a lot of experience with... that was the worst vacation ever. I thought I would be able to run up the wall I was headed towards but the angle was wrong and my leg punched through, nearly letting my crotch hit the jagged edge of the hole. This is similar, in a way, because if I try to grab the front of the bus and move myself it's likely to just put me in an awkward position as we connect. Instead, I extend my arms and lock my elbows so the impact will shatter them and absorb a little of it - hopefully without ripping my arms off entirely. I tilt my head at the best angle possible and hope that someone will hear about this, that Nurse Mary will find me and heal me.

Even my arms look like they're moving slow with my brain cranked up this high, but they're in position. With any luck I'll angle through the window and land on the seats, though I know that's not likely. One last step... I can't let myself screw this up, can't move my arms and make my

head the first thing that hits. I say a quick apology to Darryl - and to the patrons of the Drowned Spider - and let the world catch up.

Chapter Three: The Last Night at the Drowned Spider

Franklin Reese

Naw, that's not even close to how it happened. I was there, so just relax and I'll tell you.

... Generally, this is the part where you get me a beer.

Thanks. Okay...

It was Saturday night at the Drowned Spider, and we had a full house. Most nights there were maybe four of us, but there were thirteen counting me when the shit hit the fan because Crazy Ike was celebrating a new baby. I'm pretty sure half the kids in Los Angeles are Ike's bastards, but he still has a party every time.

The usual crowd was there, getting drunk and making trouble. Not real trouble, you understand - not anything I would have to send them under the cornfield for. Just the usual rowdy shit, arguments over whether or not Eddie Shorthand was cheating at pool again and some noisy discussion about the merits of various football teams. Me, I'm a hockey kind of guy. The point is it's loud and rough as always, but the second the bouncer rings that tiny bell next to him the whole place goes silent. I could see everyone trying to do a head count, and they were all coming up with the same answer - everyone was already there.

L.A. is the freak capitol of the world, of course, but we weren't really in the habit of advertising so the list of regulars was short - and got shorter every time someone tripped a checkpoint and got snatched. We all knew anyone at the door had to be an out of town visitor, someone who was profoundly lost, or a fed. I 'ported outside the Spider and across the street, where I could watch from the shadows.

It was a kid, probably just barely drinking age. He was looking around, nervous, which told me he wasn't lost. The little window slid open and I could see the bouncer's eyes.

"This is a private club, an' I don't know you." he says. The bouncer's voice was like gravel, which was appropriate considering his knack for reducing anything to pea-sized chunks by vibrating his hands. Handy on bank jobs, assuming you can't convince me to do you a favor. Anyway, the kid says - and let me try to get the scared little kid voice going, here: "Someone told me this was a club where people... like... where I could..." stammering like that, wringing his hands, staring at his shoes.

"Ah. Right, no problem," the bouncer said, "Just give me your password then."

I'll tell you, the kid didn't just look confused - he looked like he was flat-out going to cry. "They didn't tell me a password," he says, and I could tell the bouncer feels sorry for him. That rough voice goes a little softer and kinda fatherly; still sounds like a tractor idling of course.

"Well, they couldn't have, not exactly," He says, "The password is different for everyone, innit?" And the kid brightens up some when he hears this, looks around to see if anyone is watching. He held out his hand in front of him, and a big ball of flame appeared just hovering over it.

No, as a matter of fact it wasn't him that burned the Spider down. Stop trying to get ahead of me.

So the bouncer lets him back in and I 'port inside too, and everyone does the introductions. We were always a friendly bunch of assholes. Right away Eddie Shorthand challenges him to a game of pool, and I let him because I know Eddie will have the kid win a few times before using his telekinesis to cheat. I figured at that point I would either pull him away from the table and let Eddie lose a few bucks, or I would let the kid learn a valuable lesson - that being to never trust guys like Eddie Shorthand. Everyone else is watching me, to see what I decide to do with the kid. See, if the Drowned Spider were Mount Olympus, I would be Odin. No, Zeus. Whatever, I'll take them both on in a fight so long as they don't have a sniper rifle.

I'm not trying to make any claims here - I know you Arizona freaks have your own system - but in L.A. we take a lesson from the mob. I guess most dons don't have big grey beards and full sleeves like me, but don't think for a second I'm not the godfather of Los Angeles. Someone wants to do a job, they talk to me. Someone makes trouble with the Feds, stirs up the hornet's nest for all of us? I send them on an involuntary vacation. Not everyone likes me, I'm sure, but they respect me. They know I keep them safe and maintain order. If I say this kid is okay they'll give him somewhere to sleep and throw some work his way, but if I give the thumbs-down he won't know what hit him.

So not twenty minutes into things he's figured out Eddie's game and I can see the wheels in his brain turning, trying to figure out if he should let it go or challenge Eddie, call him a cheat. I wave him over, and I give him the big tip: don't start a bar fight in a room full of freaks if you don't know who has what powers. Fire is fine, sure, but some of these guys can trump that without blinking, take every joule of heat you throw at them and then stab you with tentacles of black energy.

I'm referring, obviously, to Crazy Ike - but there were a couple guys there that could have crushed a pyro without breaking a sweat. Hey, check me out, making a joke without even trying. Anyway, you never know what someone can do. Plus, even the best power is worthless if you spend your days so scared of the feds that you never practice. When I was just some schmuck on a Harley, part of the first wave of freaks, I could barely move a pencil across the room. Now I can get change for a twenty right out of the register without even trying. So anyway, this is my first conversation with the kid and I'm just thinking he's alright when I realize his wrists are funny. Something off about them.

I grab him by both arms and a split second later I'm holding some fancy implants, flamethrower mods to make the kid seem like a natural. It's bullshit, the government lockdowns on everything make it so the new computers they're selling aren't any better than they were ten years ago, but the Feds have pyrokinesis implants? Makes you wonder what else we would have if Disney hadn't been torched. So the kid is in shock, panting on the floor, and everyone in the Spider is just staring at me. Me and the bouncer, who they're ready to lynch. Man, those were some displeased customers. The feds must have had him bugged somehow too, because instantly they're firing through the windows and ramming at both doors. The bullets are bouncing off of

White's energy shield at first, but I knew for a fact that she had been doing shots with Big Dave and was one sip of beer from passing out and pissing herself. Well I'll tell you, some people complained about how cramped and tiny the Spider was but I liked it. I liked it because if I went to the middle of the room I could reach pretty much the whole place with my power.

The kid stood up, starts to say something about if we cooperate... I sent him to a cell in a certain middle-eastern prison I lived in once - most of him, anyway. His testicles dropped to the floor in a little bloody pile like giblets from a turkey. A minute later we were all standing in Vegas, everyone but the bouncer who let the kid in, Big Dave who was in the restroom, and Eddie Shorthand who I was pretty sure had been sleeping with my girl. The fire was maybe just an accident during the shooting or maybe Eddie tried to make some Molotov Cocktails, I don't know. But I do know two things.

One is that you had better find a damn talented bouncer now that they're giving the undercovers fake powers, and the other is that I need another beer.

Chapter Four: Discipline

Silas Black

Dear Mom,

I keep thinking about how dad left us and how sad you were and I don't want to make you sad. I don't want to do anything to hurt you. I put this off for too long already, and I'm worried I might have gotten you in trouble now by staying. It seems like maybe there's no way to do this that doesn't mess up your life somehow. I decided that the best thing now is for me to tell you everything so that you understand and maybe won't be as depressed about it as if I just disappeared. If the government comes looking for me it's okay to show them this letter, I want them to understand that you didn't know anything and it's not your fault.

You probably don't remember this because it wouldn't have been a big deal for you, but one day when I was thirteen you came into the kitchen and I was just staring at a bowl of cereal I had spilled on the floor. You were pretty angry, because the milk was spreading out and some got under the fridge where it was hard to clean up. I remember that you asked me what I was thinking, and I couldn't answer and I guess you probably just wrote it off to me being thirteen. I know I was kind of a pain at that age but I like to think I got over it.

The truth is that I was staring at the cereal for a reason. I had put it right on the edge of the table (I guess that part was just because I was stupid when I was thirteen) and then when I was putting the cereal box away I bumped the other end of the table and the bowl fell off. I reached out to catch it even though there was no way my arm was long enough, and the bowl stopped halfway off the table.

It wasn't just the bowl but everything. The milk was already splashing out of the bowl but it just hovered there like it was paused or something. It was scary but it also felt really good somehow. I reached out to touch a piece of cereal that had stopped in the air and just like that it was over and everything hit the floor. When you came in I was still so surprised that I couldn't even move.

I know what you said about the freaks, and in school they keep a picture of the Disney memorial right by the entrance so we have to look at it every day. I don't want to hurt anyone and I tried really hard not to pause things. I didn't do it at all for a year and I even started to think I had imagined it but then Jenny was over because of Aunt Linda's surgery three years ago and she fell out of the tree and I couldn't help myself. I stopped everything and went over and stood under her so I could catch her.

It didn't seem like anything bad when I did that. I know it's wrong, I know freaks are dangerous and they need to be watched but I thought that maybe if I only used it to do good things it would be okay. Dad had a box of comic books in his stuff that he left behind, and I read all of them. I don't really understand why they stopped making those, because I think maybe it's good to see that you can do good things with powers.

There was one character named Spider-Man, I've heard of him somewhere else so he was

probably one of the popular ones. If you don't know though, he got powers by accident from an experiment and then he wasn't going to use them much except to make money until his uncle got killed and he realized he could have stopped it if he was there. Isn't this the same thing? If I had let Jenny fall and get hurt just because I'm not supposed to have this power doesn't that make me the bad guy? I can help people. I've been depressed a lot since then, because every time something happens where I could have helped I feel like it's partly my fault. I've done a few little things to help out but mostly I have to pretend I'm not a freak.

That has to stop now, because I messed up. We had physicals in school yesterday and when they used this thing on me that they said was to check my reflexes the thing beeped and they all talked and wrote things down and looked at me funny. Nobody else made the machine beep, and I think they were somehow testing to see if anyone was a freak. I got a note saying I should go home early, and on the way I decided to pause everything so I could take a shortcut through the scrap yard without anyone yelling at me.

When I walked closer I saw someone was hiding behind a bale of metal, looking at right where I had been. He had some sort of rifle, and there was a bullet in the air in front of it. If I hadn't stopped everything he would have killed me. I hurried home to write this and managed to keep things paused the whole way. I hope that means you'll have time to read this before they come looking for me.

They want to keep something like Disneyland from happening again, but I do too. I want to do the right thing, to save people. I am so sorry for this mom but I can't let them kill me. I have to go somewhere else where they can't find me and I can help people who need it.

I love you.
Darryl

I finish reading over the familiar letter and look up at Director Doyt's beet-red face.

"Yes? I'm not sure I understand what this has to do with my request?"

He snatches the letter back from me and sits down behind his desk. He gestures for me to sit, but I happen to know he recently had the legs shortened on the other chairs so that he could loom over his guests more efficiently and so I remain standing. This has the happy side effect of making him look up at me, which infuriates him just enough to keep his head that fascinating shade but not so much that he's willing to admit to our battle of wills by standing up again.

"Agent Black," he sneers as he says this, having guessed - quite correctly - that it isn't my actual name, "I find it suspicious that you are so eager to have this particular freak executed rather than Extracted. I find it further interesting that his letter indicates someone was trying to assassinate him rather than capture, as were our orders."

I shrug. "I don't find either of those things interesting. I want him executed simply because his power is dangerous and, in my opinion, not worth the risk of tampering with. As for the letter... possibly he was making things up in order to make the situation more dramatic. I'm fifty years

old, Doyt, and to be honest I don't even remember what makes teenagers do the things they do anymore."

He stabs a meaty finger at the letter and glares at me. "What about the note he received, saying to leave early? If it hadn't been for that he would have still been there when the collection team arrived. I suppose you have an answer for that?"

"As it so happens, Doyt, I do. It was investigated thoroughly after he slipped through our fingers, and your department determined that there never was any such note."

At this he starts fumbling at his computer, trying to pull up the full report on the antiquated system. "Who investigated it?" he asks, more to himself than me.

"Oh, I did. As a favor."

His fingers freeze mid-keystroke. "You." He says.

"Doyt, you can't possibly think that I tried to help him escape if you already think I was trying to kill him. I'll chalk it up to a lack of sleep, but I would seriously suggest thinking things through more before you talk to anyone else. I mean honestly, you sound like one of those conspiracy theorists."

He knows he can't prove it, and it kills him. I know he can't prove it too, because I covered my tracks exceedingly well. He can't touch me - couldn't anyway, most likely, because of my political connections. In point of fact I don't technically report to Doyt, unlike every other agent.

He fumes for just a second, head very nearly reaching purple, and then suddenly regains his composure and smiles. "Fine, Black. You win for now. But you might be interested to know that he's being Extracted as we speak - and you won't be able to do anything to -"

He stops as another agent bursts through the door unannounced, sweating and stammering.

"Director, sir, there's been an accident in the main compound! The scientists were about to extract Holst and Crane, and somehow the Holst kid bit the tech's finger clean off! Charles Crane managed to escape in the confusion - he's out of the compound by now for sure."

My heart is beating so hard I can barely think. I grab the agent by his collar and turn him to face me. "Did Holst escape? Is he contained?" The agent squirms, trying to get out of my grip, but he answers. "Yes, Daryl Holst is drugged into a stupor and heavily restrained. It was just Crane."

I let go of him and take a deep breath before looking at Doyt.

"You march over to that facility and kill Daryl Holst before he wakes up," I tell him, "or I swear on your corpse I'll do it myself."

Chapter Five: Iraq and a Hard Place

Eddie Shorthand

Everyone around me vanishes and the air is filled with bullets, and that's the first clue I have that Franklin knows I'm banging his girlfriend. This whole mess is Franklin's fault of course, though I know he won't see it that way - I'm referring to the gunfire in this case rather than my intimate relations with his girl, although maybe he could have treated her a little better too.

Franklin had all the time in the world once he realized the kid was a Fed. If he had played it cool, maybe found an excuse to let some of us in on it, we could have had a little fun with the situation - or even turned the trap around. There's no way in hell they wanted to start a fight with all twelve of us - thirteen if you count the bartender whose only power seems to be going for a month at a time without sleeping. Anyway, even with half of us drunk it's closer to suicide than a firefight unless the Feds brought the entire Marine Corps with them - we aren't the kind of freaks that stay at home and play house.

Instead, Franklin goes and screws the whole thing up by ripping the implants the kid was using right out of his arms. I've done some stupid shit in my time, maybe cheated at poker against the wrong guy or mouthed off to a cop or something, but nothing that was going to get anyone but me in trouble. There aren't many situations where people would think of me as the responsible one, but even I could have told you what would happen: thirteen of us or not, they opened fire in the hopes of saving their man. Nice work, asshole.

First thing is to get some cover, so I make the pool table flip into the air and plant itself against the window. Unfortunately my telekinesis isn't good for deflecting bullets; if Franklin hadn't teleported everyone away I would still have Emily White's force field, not to mention a whole lot of offensive power. I take inventory and see that the bouncer is cowering next to the bar. He's big, but I don't think his power is going to get me out of here; he shakes things until they fly apart or something, I don't really even remember. If I had Jezebel or Crazy Ike it would be different.

The gunfire stops, which means they must know everyone has cleared out. Their guy is gone too; Franklin probably teleported him into the sewers or something, though if I know him he's going to claim that he tossed him all the way to the moon. Man, I hate that guy.

"Eddie Shorthand? Francis? What the hell is going on?"

That's Big Dave, and from the context I suppose the bouncer's name is Francis which I had somehow not known until now. If we survive this I'll have to make fun of him for that. Not that survival seems likely - Big Dave is just about the most useless guy I could have asked for. He's just some timid, chubby shit. His power lets him screw with other people's abilities which is good for breaking up bar fights - and I have to give him some credit for the time he tweaked me right as I was cheating at pool and made the cue ball fly out the window - but the Feds are using good old fashioned guns.

As if on cue, they whip out something different - gas grenades come flying in over the top of the pool table. I stop them in midair and send them right back, but that won't stall them much. If they

come in, I might have to use Big Dave and "Francis" as projectiles. It won't be any more effective than pool balls or the Feds themselves, but it might make me feel better about them being no help at all. The door shakes, hinges twisting. Big Dave is sniffing around for some reason, walking a little funny.

"Franklin took everyone else, didn't he? I can feel it." Feel it? What, like it's not obvious just by looking? Christ, how many shots did he do? I remember he was hitting on White, and she has a habit of drinking guys twice her size under the table. The door shakes again.

"He's so sloppy he leaves rips and tears... and... residue. Everywhere. Almost enough for me to use, if I could come at it from both sides." I have no idea what Big Dave is even talking about. He rambles sometimes when he's drunk, talks about the Feds doing weird shit to him as a kid - though he denies that when he's sober. He's waving me over now, looking serious. Fine, I can humor the guy. I back towards him while pressing against the whole front of the building in the hopes of slowing the Feds down, which I know won't work. Suddenly I lose it as a meaty hand wraps around the back of my skull and I can feel Dave reaching my telekinesis around, feeling, poking. I feel pretty violated but honestly I don't have any better ideas and Dave has never done anything like this to me. Sometimes when someone gets in the zone they pull off shit with their powers you never thought they could do, so I figure I might as well enjoy the ride.

He's got the bouncer too, and he's saying something about fraying the fabric of space and exposing the wound. Definitely drunk. Meanwhile since I'm being used in this metaphysical bullshit I'm not reinforcing the door or the pool table and both fly away. I gave Big Dave a chance but the Feds are right there, so playtime is over. I try to grab every table in the bar at once so I can fling them but Dave is all tangled up in my powers so somehow I reach out with something else. It's like I'm stretching the bouncer's brain, and every surface in the Drowned Spider goes fuzzy as it vibrates and bursts into flames. Friction, I guess. I don't know what's going on, the bouncer always had to touch something to shake it, but I turn it on the Feds and the first wave of them start spraying blood from every exposed pore. Talk about a rush. Dave wrestles control back but that's okay because the other Feds are falling back for now.

That feeling gets worse, like he's going to pull my power right out of me, and I feel like I'm grabbing an elephant through the eye of a needle. "Got it!" Dave yells, and light pours into the room. There's a tear, a ragged hole, and on the other side there's harsh white light. The edges of the hole are hard to look at, they're shaking and flickering in a way that makes my brain hurt. This isn't how Franklin teleports. Not even close. We all step through and that's when I see the undercover kid on the ground, passed out. I take a closer look and wherever we are it's not nice - it's concrete walls with chains anchored in them - both covered in blood and filth. "Wrong hole," Big Dave says, "I could try again but..."

The 'but' is clear. The bar is in flames, and the Feds are likely to start throwing fragmentation grenades in to finish the job. Screw it. I pull away from Dave and the hole snaps shut.

Francis is looking around in a panic, like he's going to wet himself.

"Oh, shit. Oh shit. You guys, you know how Franklin always says he's going to send us to a prison in Iraq?"

Oh, dear lord. "We're not in Iraq," I say. The light in the ceiling is so bright it's giving me a

migraine, and I'm tempted to smash it.

"We are. Oh, god, we are. What the hell are we going to do?"

For the love of... "Will you listen to me? Iraq is, like, eight thousand miles away. There's no way Franklin sent the fed that far."

Big Dave looks up from examining the heavy steel door, and shrugs. "Oh, I don't know. He sent twelve of us to Phoenix once."

I swear, I'm surrounded by morons. "Are you seriously comparing Phoenix to Iraq?"

"Dry heat jokes aside... maybe. If it's based off of mass as well as distance... Phoenix is what, three hundred and fifty miles away? So maybe if he can send twelve people three hundred and fifty miles he can send one person twelve times that. That's... forty-two hundred miles."

I wish there was a window, some way to know if one of these is an external wall. "Still not far enough."

"Well nobody said Phoenix was the furthest he could have taken us. Also, if he can cut corners - like, go in a straight line instead of following the curvature of the Earth - then maybe forty-two hundred would make it. I don't know, I would need a globe or something." Francis is listening to this bullshit and nodding, still looking like he wants to cry. I can't believe we're having this discussion.

"How about this? We're in a fucking jail cell. Is that a precise enough location for everyone? Francis, shake the walls apart or something. Dave, grab the Fed. We're getting the hell out of here."

Big Dave slings the Fed over his shoulder while Francis tries to pick a wall, and I take another look at him. It seems like Dave is useful after all - that's good to know. Already I'm thinking of the possibilities, and about my next meeting with Franklin. That asshole needs to have the smug look wiped off of his face.

Chapter Six: The Way Things Are

Darryl Holst

The guards talk, because they know we aren't ever going anywhere. I know there are only four of us here right now and Tamara is clearly a woman's name, so that means the man strapped into a seat in front of me is either Charlie or Walter. I smile at him, and he smiles back with as much of a shrug as the straps allow. He doesn't seem too upset about this, but I've seen too much here to take any hope from that. I'm not going to get out of here except in a body bag.

This isn't how it was supposed to go. I was supposed to be a hero, appearing out of the shadows to stop muggers and foil bank robberies. It seems like ages ago that I set out from home, so optimistic... so certain that it would all work out. Really, I don't even know how long ago that was. After I left home it took them a year to find me, but I think I must have aged two years from spending so much time with everything paused. I even learned to keep things still while I slept so that I could be on the lookout for the feds all the time. It wasn't all bad - there's something so beautiful about a crowd of people frozen in the moment. It's like a drug.

Speaking of, Charlie or Walter or whoever looks pretty glazed. Maybe that's why he isn't upset. Or maybe he's just tired of the needles. God, if I could just never see a needle again. One of the guys in lab coats is coming over, he's humming something to himself... it's that song from Aladdin. A Whole New World. He's getting equipment ready, they keep talking about something called the Extractor but they talk past me like I'm not here and if I ask - or open my mouth at all - I get beat again. The tools on his tray look like something out of a horror movie and he's still humming that stupid song and he's leaning towards me to...

Oh.

I shouldn't be able to pause anything. They have me drugged. But he's frozen, just inches from me. There's a rushing in my ears and I know I can't keep things still for long. Good job, hero. You've stopped time but still can't get out of your restraints. This is hopeless, I can't save anyone. The scientist looks so cheerful, like he's laughing at me. He should be. I'm worthless, pathetic. I can't do anything to him, can barely even move.

If I crane my neck... but what good would it do? There's no point. Suddenly, without thinking, I'm doing it anyway. Pointless or not his finger is in my mouth and I'm clamping down as hard as I can - there's a sort of popping noise as time floods back and the air fills with his screams. His finger pulls free from my teeth, leaving my jaw sore, and I realize I've taken a chunk with me. He's on the floor, tangled in Charlie or Walter's IV, then the something happens and as the guards hit the panic button and run forward they dog pile an empty chair.

He's gone.

I did it. I saved someone.

The screams seem to fade away as hands press my mouth shut, and I feel the sharp pinch of a

needle. The room swims, but I don't care. I'm a hero. The flashing red lights are warm and inviting, and my restraints feel unusually comfortable. It's lovely.

There's a boy named Darryl that looks just like me, that's writing a letter to his mother and getting wheeled out of the room back towards his cell. Everything is moving, moving too much all the time - I just need to feel it stop again. I need to make everything stand still so I can think. Darryl is on the streets, he's walking past the statues and it's so quiet, so perfect and quiet everywhere. I want to be there so badly. The Darryl writing to his mother is watching her, he's putting the letter right in front of her so it will be there when the world moves again. He's stealing food from a grocery store, he's fighting against the restraints in the room where nothing will stop moving.

There aren't any Darryls after that yet. Darryl from just a few minutes ago in his padded cell can hear someone humming about a whole new world, a new exciting point of view. Someone else is saying Charles is gone, that he's out of the compound. I hope that's not the drugs. The drugs, the drugs. So many needles. I have to think, remember where I am. Remember how to make everything stop moving so much.

I'm drugged, and dreaming. I'm not any of the places I think I am. I'm somewhere else, somewhere with needles. Not my parent's house, not the underpass by the freeway. That underpass kept me safe for what seems like forever, like some sort of horrible ugly landmark that I kept coming back to for a year, silence and then noise, motion and stillness. I'm there, under the graffiti'd concrete, slowly learning the hard lesson: There aren't any real villains. None.

With everyone frozen in place I slipped from neighborhood to neighborhood and I never saw a crime to stop. Or maybe I did. Maybe they were all around me, but when everything is so still and quiet you just can't tell. I never saw someone paused with a knife halfway into them. I never stumbled across a jewel heist. I saw petty theft of food from stores, because it was my hands. I was the only criminal in the world, the only living thing in the world.

I'm by the beach again, looking at myself. I'm frozen in place, watching someone who is frozen in place. She's crying. She's beautiful, even with red eyes and a runny nose. The wind I can't feel has blown her hair around her face and she's trying to pull it out of her eyes and just bawling. There's nothing I can do. There's nothing to say to her. Whoever made her cry, I can't go and find them and tie them up for the police. I look at my face, the me that's watching the statue of the girl, and it looks like I'm crying too. It might be all the needles in my back, though.

I'm not there. I need to focus. I would be able to think straight if I could just make everything stop, and I know I can make things stop if I can think straight. There's a way out of here, of wherever all the needles are. Charlie found it. I can too. I can taste blood in my mouth and I'm sure the guards hit me again, split my lip open, but it doesn't hurt. It didn't hurt when they took me, either, just a little pinch by the ear. A little feathered dart, like in a movie. That time my mouth tasted like lemons for some reason, and I remember laughing to myself because they didn't know I could keep things still while I slept. I would sleep it off and wake up and escape.

I didn't though. I failed, like I failed at everything else. I never saved anyone. Now I remember, though. I know where I am and I know why I can taste blood without my lip hurting. I remember that it's not my blood. It all makes sense now.

All of it.

I wanted to save people, to be a hero, but the real villains don't run around in black capes and make threats to the United Nations. They're sneaky. The people that make girls on the beach cry are just human; they're stuck in a shitty world filled with needles and restraints. It's not their fault. The government did this to me. To them. If I want to save anyone, if I want to be a hero, I can't be passive any more. I'll get them, one finger at a time.

I'm waking up in my bedroom - no, my cell. My cell. The drugs are wearing off, and I can only remember bits and pieces of my dream. My teeth ache, and my ears are ringing. I feel horrible. And wonderful. Whatever it is I dreamed about, some part of it was true, some part was real. I can't remember it right now, but I know that there's a way for me to get out of here and when I do, I can be a hero for real.

The door opens, and a man in a black suit looks down at me.

"Good morning Darryl," he says, "My name is agent Barker. I hope you had a nice nap."

He's not smiling, but it doesn't matter. He can beat me if he wants, he can even use the needles on me. It's all going to be okay.

"I have good news and bad news for you - the good news is that Agent Black has finally convinced the Director that you shouldn't be Extracted. That little episode of yours has made waves. The bad news... is that the Director doesn't like it when people make him look like an idiot. Do you know what vivisection is?"

Now he's smiling. This isn't the way out I was hoping for.

Chapter Seven: When in Rome, Standoff Like the Romans

Agent Ferris

Where the hell am I?

"Iraq." A voice says. Shit, I didn't mean to ask that out loud. Iraq? The answer sounded sarcastic, but all I can see is brown. Wherever I am, it's hot and dusty. I'm face-down, and my whole body feels strange - sore and numb at the same time. A foot hooks under my chest and rolls me over, and as my hands twist under my back I feel them just as a lump against my spine - there's no feeling in my arms. Just like that it comes back to me, Franklin holding my implants in his hands with blood dripping from them, a burning pain running from my fingers into my chest... what kind of damage did it do? Someone is looming over me but they're just a silhouette with the sun behind them. I have to be very careful what I say here. I have to play this just right.

"Hey fed, the three of us want to talk deal." The one leaning over me says, and it sounds like the same one that answered me before. I heard that voice last night, too. Edward Shorehoff. Telekinetic.

"Go fuck yourself, Eddie." That deep voice is the bouncer, whatever his name is.

"Sorry, Francis. Forgive me, fed, I meant the two of us. My pal here isn't down with the plan. He can't tell the difference between opportunity and betrayal. This is the first one, in case you couldn't tell. Opportunity, fed. It just knocks once."

Three of them, right. There was gunfire, and the world lurched, and I passed out... but I remember seeing three people. I woke up to the sound of a wall shaking itself apart, and then someone was slinging me over their shoulder and... something hit me on the head.

Another freak moves into view, and this time I can see his face right away. David Brunner, one of the only loose ones we have a full file on.

"It's not... it's not a bad plan, Francis. Maybe we could start something, maybe if we convince them to let us help they won't be so fast to shoot on sight, you know? This could be good."

I can't twist around to see the bouncer but I hear him storm off somewhere. David offers to talk to him, and just like that I'm alone with Edward.

There's a feeling around me, not quite weightlessness... I lift off the ground and rotate to face him. He's holding me there with his mind - I don't know if it's a reminder that he's in control or just so he can look me in the eyes.

"Let them argue," he says, "They don't really need to be part of this if they don't need to, you understand?"

I nod. "I'm listening, Edward. What kind of deal were you thinking about?"

His face splits wide open in a grin. "Call me Eddie, fed. And no, I don't need to know your name. I was thinking, there's a service I can provide to you that nobody on your team can seem to do on their own. I can deliver Franklin to you. All tied up in a bow."

I'm going to take him up on it, on whatever he wants. The question is how much I should pretend to think about it so he believes I'm not going to kill him as soon as I get the chance.

"What would we give you in return?"

He makes a big show of thinking it over, but I know he has a plan in mind. I look past him, over

his shoulder, and see we're behind a little adobe building of some sort. I can see tables inside, like a bar or something. I don't really want to see another bar right now, though I could use a drink. David and Francis are inside, arguing. I can't hear the words very well, but I can make out enough to catch that Francis wants me dead. Maybe Eddie too. Trying to make a deal isn't making Eddie any friends.

"Here's what we want," he says finally. "We want to work for you guys, like consultants. You want to do some tests on us that don't involve injury or death, we'll let your scientists do their thing, check out teeth and take our temperature. Whatever. You want us to help round up someone who keeps making trouble for you, we can do that too - if he's actually a threat. In the meantime we get to just go about our lives without you nice folks attacking us and kidnapping our pals. How does that sound?"

I force myself to look thoughtful, like I'm considering it, but it sounds like pretty much the worst idea ever.

When you get into the agency, the first thing they do is take you to Disneyland. It's still sealed off and untouched, sixteen years after the attack, and you can walk between the blasted ruins of old rides. They aren't just burnt, most of them have actually changed into something else. Black crystals like onyx or obsidian have replaced metal and plaster, making it feel like you're on another planet entirely. They don't point anything in particular out to you, they just let you wander. They wait to see how long it will take for you to come across the bodies.

Those have been crystallized too, individually throughout the park or tangled in horrifying mounds at the exits. Many had the flesh burned from them before being petrified, so grinning black skulls seem to be everywhere, staring with empty eye sockets. We don't need to be reminded that all that damage was done by a single freak. It just takes one. The only agent who would go for Eddie's deal is Black, but he was always crazy. Going easy on the freaks one minute, ordering a strike with maximum lethal force the next. Still, anything that gets me out of this place alive - plus, I'll be able to bring David and Eddie in.

"It... it sounds good. Once I get a chance to talk with my superiors I can pitch it to them. I'll make sure they understand you didn't hurt me, that you helped me get back safely."

Eddie makes a dismissive gesture. "Yeah, yeah, subtle. Of course we won't hurt you. Hell, we already gave you some pain killers for those arms of yours. Well, I say painkillers but really it's more like anesthesia. Same difference, am I right? Hang on, I'll tell the others the good news. Hey!" he yells towards the little cantina and the others look. "Good news! We've got a deal!" Francis still looks unhappy, but before he can say anything some uniformed officers burst in from the other side of the entrance and train guns on them. Of course.

"¡Tiren sus armas y bajar en el suelo!" one yells. That seems to confirm what I already suspected - we're in Mexico. The Mexicans have started having freaks show up too, like it's spreading out from Disney a little more each year. If anything they're more brutal about them than we are in the states, although they aren't as good at locating them. I have to actually hope Eddie and his boys win this fight - they're not likely to turn me back over to the agency under these circumstances. Out of nowhere, Francis and David have guns trained on the officers and

everyone is screaming at once. I'm airborne, for just a second, and then I crash down on the ground as Eddie runs toward the building.

Everyone starts firing. It's impossible to count the shots as they pile up on top of each other like a string of firecrackers in a trash can.

With my arms still numb it's hard to move, but eventually I manage to get turned around and on to my knees. There's dust, and the smell of gunpowder, and I can see Eddie standing in the doorway looking at the floor. Rising to my feet unsteadily I can see the bodies - three officers and two freaks. Eddie steps from body to body, firing off a single shot to make sure nobody lingers too long. I keep my distance. When he comes out, leaving a trail of muddy footprints as blood on his shoes mingles with the dust, his face is set in a scowl and I'm half expecting him to kill me on the spot.

"Walk." He says. There's an old jeep nearby that he's heading towards, trusting me to follow. I fall into place behind him, keeping my mouth shut and praying he still wants to deal. I go ahead and throw a little thank-you into the prayer as well, for taking care of Francis. The moronic idea that the agency would ever work alongside someone like Eddie could definitely do without a voice of reason. We climb into the Jeep and he starts it on his third try, pulling onto the dirt road and accelerating until it feels like I'm going to fly out.

We drive for an hour before hitting a real highway and seeing a sign. Only a hundred and fifty kilometers to Calexico... where the hell were we? I guess I'll have time to think about it on the way back - even being closer to the United States than I thought it will be a while before Eddie gets to Los Angeles. We stop for gas somewhere, right as I'm getting used to the pain in my arms. Whatever they did has worn off, but as much as it hurts I'm starting to think there isn't any real damage. Eddie finishes filling the tank, and walks over to me. That grin still hasn't returned.

"I want you to know something, fed." I stay quiet, I don't think opening my mouth is a good idea with the mood he's in even if I'm as polite as possible.

"I want you to understand... our situation here, it's not like it was for my friends in that shootout. It's not like it was for me at the Drowned Spider, either."

"Right here, in this situation, we aren't having a stand-off. If I want to I can kill you, even if we're in public. You can't do the same to me. I'm not surrounded; I don't have any guns pointed at me. This isn't a staring contest because I can blink all I want. But if you blink... if you make trouble for me at all on the rest of our little road trip... I will not hesitate to crush you. Are we clear on that?" I nod, trying to look scared. It's not hard. He gets back in and we pull away from the gas station. There's no way around it - Eddie really is in charge for now - but when we get back I'll get to watch him squirm as they strap him into the Extractor and rip the telekinesis from him. Enjoy your freedom, Eddie, because soon you're going to be as dead as your friends.

Chapter Eight: Making Omelettes

Doctor Stowell

The incinerator cycles through, and I note the time on my report. I check the viewport out of habit although I know that there will not be any remains left. Still, there is nothing wrong with encouraging useful habits. Unfortunately there simply are not enough test subjects for me to do research as often as I would like, but even so it is possible to get sloppy when the procedure is not maintained.

The incident with Haskins is a perfect example. The test subject's drug levels were clearly incorrect, and Haskins never should have allowed his hand to be within reach of a subject's mouth. Careless. Hopefully the severe damage to his finger will serve as a reminder. The loss of a test subject is bad enough, but what if the equipment had been damaged? There are only two working Extractor units, losing one would be unacceptable - it is bad enough that Doyt has allowed a team to take one into the field.

If only another could be built, or - better yet - the original Inducer was still functional! I would give anything to have an easy method of giving extranormal abilities to test subjects. The Inducer only had two real success stories behind it, but surely after sixteen years the design would have improved. The archives and notes from my predecessors are infuriatingly vague about the Inducer's design. Somehow it was linked to the source of these powers - some claimed that the incident at Disney was caused by a catastrophic malfunction of the Inducer after it was stolen from the laboratory, but...

Why does no one document things properly? If the scientists that came before me were still alive, I would file a complaint. I understand that secrecy was important - the general public cannot handle the idea that laboratory tests are not always sterile and focused, that sometimes you need to get your hands dirty - but in this case even the few notes that were taken still refer to the abilities and to the test subjects - mostly vagrants, with a few minors from group homes or volunteer soldiers. Secrecy hardly seems like an excuse once you include details like those in the reports.

There are times when things have to be left out, of course. I sign off on my report, checking each line to confirm that everything is in place. Name - Darryl Holst, in this case - time of death, incineration, etc. Every space filled out. I send it off with copies to Doyt and Black, and then prepare a fresh form for the upcoming experimentation. The name I fill in as John Doe, but I copy all of the other physical information over from the previous file. It is yet another situation where secrecy could get in the way of proper record keeping, but I refuse - unless agent Black compares them side by side the similarities will not raise problems, and I want everything to be documented in case this leads to a breakthrough.

I badge into the secure area, where my current subjects are kept. There are three of them, each with an ability that bears closer examination prior to Extraction. Holst - or John Doe, as I should be in the habit of calling him, has done me a favor by biting Haskins. Under pressure from agent Black we had fast-tracked him for Extraction, but with Black going further and insisting on

immediate execution Doyt has allowed him to be preserved - out of spite, I suppose, although his motivations make little difference to me.

The others are Walter Schwarz and Tamara Allen - Schwarz is approximately thirty, in good health but kept nearly catatonic, and can generate and control a sort of ectoplasm. Each day we collect some of the mysterious substance from him for research, although with the tests going nowhere some are pushing for Extraction. My personal theory is that many so-called "freaks" have a variant on this ability and are unaware of it. I have observed pyrokinetic abilities, and noted that one would logically expect such an ability to produce heat rather than flames - in fact, the color of the generated fire implies a fuel is burning inefficiently and yet no residue of fuel has ever been detected. The ectoplasm Schwarz creates is not flammable, but I still believe it is the answer.

Allen, approximately fifty, healthy other than the complications resulting from a recent hunger strike... is a complete violation of physics. She possesses some form of powered flight, but the method of it is infuriating. Unlike the two telekinetics I have examined, there is no measurable force pushing her away from the ground - nor does she become weightless, as evidenced by the behavior of her organs, hair, blood flow... There is simply no explanation for what keeps her airborne. I avoid talking to the test subjects whenever possible, but it would be foolish to disregard the idea that they may have some insight on their own abilities. I asked Allen about this, and she answered me in German. Translating it revealed a creative string of profanity, but no scientific insight.

Harnessing either power would revolutionize the world. Sadly, the technological breakthroughs we have made in recent years have been limited at best. Some combined research of the source of these abilities and the talents of the first successful Inducer test subject, David Brunner, helped to create the Extractor. Testing on a Jane Doe eventually resulted in the creation of an energy weapon, although analysis would seem to indicate that standard projectile weapons are still roughly as useful and far more cost-effective.

Eighteen years of disappointments.

The secure area is a circular room with large windows of clear aluminum looking into the "long-term resident" cells. Shutters can prevent the test subjects from seeing each other, but under orders from Doyt they are left open by default in order to encourage discussion. This strange mandatory hole in security has not produced any valuable intelligence as far as I know, but so long as no test subject leaves this room alive it is not a source of leaks, either. As I enter, Allen is in the middle of some pointless conversation.

" - covered in bees!" she laughs. "I mean, yes, you look more like you're covered in honey but still... heh... the man is a comedic genius."

Schwarz does not respond. The inside of his cell is covered in dents and gouges, a reminder of why he will never again have his medication reduced. Instead he sits in a corner, coated in a layer of ectoplasm. I reach a sample collector into his cell and ladle some into a canister, noting the color. It seems to vary from dark brown to light yellow, but as of yet we have not identified

any corresponding change in properties. The canister goes on a shelf with the others, most of which are empty - the ectoplasm vanishes mysteriously after anywhere from an hour to a week.

Allen will have someone that can answer back to her soon. Holst has been medicated for transfer, but it should wear off just enough for him to converse with myself and Allen soon. Hopefully they will not make too much noise. There are seven other cells, and I remember a time that all were filled. A team managed to gas and capture an entire gathering in San Francisco, and brought them down alive for research. Most went to the short-term cells where Holst and Crane were being held until recently, but as we used the Extractor on them we placed the new test subjects into the long-term area for observation.

All but one was dead within a week. The process of extracting an ability is invariably fatal, but implanting that ability into another has a five percent success rate. Initially. The side effects, including insanity and massive organ failure, continue to be an issue. Reports of the Disney attack are heavily censored but they appear to indicate a single subject with multiple abilities. As this has never been documented elsewhere, I suspect that one initial power was supplemented with additional abilities - our records deny having done anything of the sort, but that does not render the hypothesis invalid.

The phone rings in the outer office just as I prepare to start deep scans of my new John Doe. Swiping my badge to exit, I answer in what I must admit is a rude tone.

"Doctor Stowell, this is agent Black. I just received your report, and I wanted to thank you for taking care of Holst for me. I know you probably wanted to examine him more."

I tell him it was no problem, and remind him that I do have a chronic lack of subjects.

"Of course, doctor. Doyt wants me to let you know he has a telekinetic upstairs that he'll be handing over to you in a few hours. I'm off to interview him now."

I thank him and hang up. Telekinesis is less interesting than most, but on the other hand it is one of the few abilities where we have multiple data points - all the better to find a pattern.

I return to the secure area once more, and open Holst's cell. To my surprise, he opens his eyes and looks at me.

"No more needles..." he says, and seems to pass out again. He need not worry - the time for needles is past. I carefully measure his head, and then look through the cabinet for a halo. I suspect, now that I think about things, that with the drugs wearing off he would in fact prefer a needle - one containing powerful anesthetics. Unfortunately I seem to have left those in the other room, and having already swiped in and out twice in the last five minutes I have no interest in doing it again. I ratchet the strap down tight over his head to prevent wiggling and turn on the drill.

Chapter Nine: Friends in High Places

Eddie Shorthand

The fed by the door looks all sour when the new guy walks in, like someone just pissed in his Cheerios. "Good evening, agent Barker." This new guy is a little older than your average man in black, maybe fifty, and he's got a shit-eating grin on. Something about him is familiar, but I'll be damned if I can put my finger on it. He looks around the room, nodding at nothing. Admiring the so-called security, I guess. They've got me in a flimsy green plastic chair that looks like it came out of a kid's playhouse, and the barrels of assault rifles are peeking out at me from slits in the walls. Nothing good to throw, and nothing to hide behind. Fine by me; I didn't go to all the trouble of setting this up just to make waves before I can even talk to the director.

"Eddie Shorthand, working with the feds. I never." He's still smiling, like this is some big joke. "Still, it suits me just fine. Truth be told, Eddie, that strike at the Spider was just to get Franklin anyway, so this is keeping that whole mess from being a waste of my time." He actually loses the smile for a second, looks concerned. "Speaking of wastes... is it true Big Dave is dead?" Hang on a second here. Did a fed just refer to him as 'Big Dave'? Who the hell is this guy?

"Yeah. Thanks to you guys, and Franklin, and some Mexican feds. A real team effort." He sighs, like this is actually bothering him. It's got to be a trick, but it's still strange. "You know," he says, "I worked with Dave a long time ago. Back before Disney, before all of this crap when he was just a kid. He had his power back when nobody knew they existed." Oh, shit. As if I didn't suspect it already, this asshole just told me they don't plan on letting me get out of here alive. Is he seriously talking to me about whatever secret shit they were into before Disney? The other fed looks like he's choking on his own tongue, but this guy just keeps talking. "Dave was... a good guy. I really hoped he would make it through this whole mess. But then again... we're on different sides now and I guess, all things considered, the world is safer with him dead. Still... it's a shame, right Eddie?"

This is some kind of trap, but I'll go with whatever they want for now. "Yeah. That pudgy turd was a lot of fun, when he wasn't trying to go all mister wizard on me. Get a few drinks in him and he would start to argue about math or chemistry or something." The weird fed smiles again and looks off into the distance. "At least he spared you the physics talk," he says, "that's a good way to scare off drinking buddies." "Shucks, fed, you had a real soft spot for him. Actually, though, the physics crap wasn't too bad. I didn't understand most of it, but he did manage to explain quantum entanglement to me." If Dave had some sort of contact with the feds he would have brought it up, right? I mean, at least when I told him the plan.

The fed is about to say something else when he straightens up and holds a hand to his ear. He pulls out his phone and stares at the screen, and I swear he's nearly dancing he's so excited. I guess they found Franklin right where I said he would be. It's a shame there's no way to let the king of teleportation know what's about to hit him - I would love it if he could see my smiling face when he goes. We can't have everything though, right? This should be over by now; they should have had a guy in position when Franklin arrived. How long does it take to pull a trigger?

"Your boys might want to hurry things up; I can't promise he'll hang around all day."
Nothing. They're completely ignoring me.

If I know Franklin, he's busy thinking about how great he is. The thing is, he was almost right. We were all impressed with him once. Teleportation? With precision? Fantastic. He could get supplies for everyone - money, guns, anything. But then, he never felt like it. Last time I heard someone say this I punched him in the face and broke his nose just because it made him sound like such an ass, but there's some truth to the saying: lead, follow, or get out of the way. Franklin didn't do any of those, and now he gets to learn what happens.

It's funny, at first I was just pissed that he left me behind in the Drowned Spider. It was all about revenge. Now somehow it feels like business. Just a business arrangement, in order to secure this business meeting. Nothing personal. Well, no, that's a lie. Not so much personal. Not all personal.

The fed lets out this big breath and stands there with his eyes closed for a second. Did they screw up? No... he's smiling. Sick bastard. I mean, yeah, I set it up and I'm glad he's dead but looking that happy about it is a little messed up. He's taken out his earbud and put the phone away, and he reaches over to shake my hand.

"Eddie, I want you to know I'm going to live up to my part of the bargain and make sure you get your meeting with Director Doyt. I assume you have more than just Franklin to offer?"

I shrug, but of course I have more to talk to them about - I wasn't going to count on getting a face-to-face with Doyt if I had already run out of useful information.

"Please understand, Eddie, that Director Doyt is a diseased hemorrhoid on the asshole of humanity and you're going to need to tease him with the promise of something more before he comes into a room with you."

This time the fed by the door actually does choke for a second, and then glares at the weirdo so hard you would think he's trying to burn holes in his sunglasses.

"Agent Black. Can I speak with you in the hallway?"

Black, I guess, smiles at him as sweet as honey. "Not at the moment, agent Barker. We can talk about it at my disciplinary hearing if I ever have one. I'm sorry, Eddie, where were we?"

At this point I don't care if it's a trap or not, this is comedy gold. I can't quite read this Agent Black guy, he likes us freaks but wants us dead, works for the feds but hates them. Maybe it's all some complicated act, but if so I don't see where the payoff is.

"A teaser, huh? Okay, try taking a look out the window. I'm guessing right about now a storm is brewing that the weatherman didn't see coming."

Black just nods once. "It's been building all day. Excellent."

He pulls the phone out again, and hits a single button. "Doyt! How lovely to hear your voice.

I'm here with Eddie Shorthand... Edward Shorehoff, yes. Since his intel has paid off and resulted in the death of Franklin Jeremiah Reese, I was hoping you would meet with him as agreed." There's a pause, and then Black looks at me and rolls his eyes. "As a matter of fact, I do think it's a good idea Doyt." He circles his fingers and flaps his arm up and down, the universal sign for jerk-off. "He has further information, about the strange weather pattern in the

area. I've tried to interrogate him myself, but he quite understandably wants to talk to you first. Of course. Good to hear, Doyt."

He puts the phone away again and walks over to the other fed. "You were going to file a report on me, I'm sure? You should go ahead and get working on that. I'll wait here." The fed looks like he can't decide, but finally he shoots me a dirty look and storms out. Agent Black looks over and shrugs.

"What can I say? I'm trying to get fired."

Before I can say anything he leans close to me, dropping his voice to a whisper.

"Eddie, I want to thank you for your part in completing my agenda. I hope you understand when I say I don't want to be anywhere near you when you meet with Doyt."

Is this guy for real? "Agent Black, I don't see what you would have to worry about. They've made sure I don't have any weapons, and I'm surrounded by guns."

"Yeah," he says, "that's what has me so worried. Hey, if you see Emily again keep an eye on her for me, okay? She's a good kid too. A lot of you guys are good people. Not you, obviously." And he winks.

Black walks out, leaving me with the empty room and gun-slits in the wall. I want to know who the hell agent Black is, I want to know why he had such a hard-on for Franklin, I want to know what Dave did for the feds. But right now, I need to stay calm. I have to remember I just had big bad Franklin whacked, and I'm surrounded by feds with guns. I have to focus on now, on my meeting with Doyt. My big opportunity to talk to the head fed. Soon, everyone is going to find out that Eddie Shorthand has friends in high places.

Chapter Ten: A Negative Bodycount

Jennifer Wycoff

Mary is chatting with an ambulance driver when I find her at the door, which is unusual. She's generally quiet, although part of that is from other people since they think she's homeless - her hair is a tangled mess of pink with ghost-white roots, and she wears a stained dress that looks like it was designed to be worn by either a bridesmaid or the subject of a particularly nasty practical joke. I've never seen her wear shoes, but her feet are always in perfect condition - dirty, yes, but never damaged. I suppose that's not a surprise. The head of surgery walks past and starts to say something to me before noticing who I'm with and turning to walk the other way. It's not an insult, it's a sad attempt at plausible deniability.

"I didn't realize you had white hair," I comment, trying to fill the empty air as we climb onto the elevator. Mary's perfect youthful face crumples into a frown and she sighs, patting her head as if to reassure herself that her hair is still up there.

"Oh, yes. I used to have such lovely auburn hair when I was younger, but you know how it is. Grey, then silver, then white. I try dyeing it fun colors but I still miss it sometimes."

"Mary, you can't be a day over twenty."

She laughs, eyes twinkling as she slaps me on the arm and steps off of the elevator.

"Bless you, child. I'll be ninety-eight next month."

And I suppose that's not such a surprise either.

Mary knows where we keep the lost causes, and she heads straight over. Stepping lightly from bed to bed she touches each one, and I can see vital signs picking up all over. Some of them seem to be improving just from proximity, though that might be my imagination. The first time I saw her, Mary had snuck in without permission and healed an entire wing of the hospital before someone called the government in. One of the nurses smuggled Mary out and made her promise to be more careful, and now she hits a different hospital each day and tries to leave some of the external damage while healing organs and clearing out infections. It's less obvious that way. She gets tired sometimes and we can't have the numbers get too unbelievable anyway, so the local hospitals track the lost causes and fight to keep them alive until 'Nurse Mary' shows.

We make sure never to mention the ones she was too late for, even if she only missed them by five minutes, and we've never asked for a way to contact her in an emergency because there's always an emergency. We take what she gives, and shut up about it. Nobody knows if Mary would be able to heal herself after working too hard and passing out like she did that first time.

On the chart of each one she touches I mark a small 'M' as I follow behind her, so that the doctors won't be caught off guard by the change in condition and will re-assess any medication. It's a good system, one that even the most paranoid and anti-"freak" doctors have silently signed off on. After all, they can tell she's not doing any harm.

"I was worried when you didn't come yesterday, Mary."

She stops and looks at me as if she's confused. Her hand is still on the forehead of a patient and I wince as I realize the scar over his eye has vanished. Unless I'm mistaken, it was from some previous incident and long since healed. I really shouldn't distract her when she's working.

"Oh, right," she says, "I had to go to Las Vegas on short notice. The government burned down my friend's bar, did you hear about that? Burned it right down. Not that I can get drunk anyway... I used to take the most wonderful pills, I remember when I found some LSD that my granddaughter left lying around - it was the sixties, you know, and I couldn't really be too upset - and I took it and had the most incredible trip. Just lovely. I can't seem to do it anymore, though. I should ask Maggie if she remembers that. Her memory isn't what it used to be, though - she's only sixty but it seems to run in our family."

It's the most that Mary has ever said to me. Just like that she's silent again, flitting from one room to the next and working her magic. She steps into the last room and I hurry in after her - I'm not sure she should do anything with this one. His injuries are so severe it's a wonder he's made it this long, and Mary's options will be to perform an outright miracle and risk exposing our system or do such minor repairs that he'll still wish he was dead. She's just staring at him... maybe she's having the same thought.

"He... he was hit by a bus, Mary. On the freeway. He didn't have any identification on him, but so far nobody is looking. I don't know how you are with brain damage, but... he might be best off without help."

"Damage I can do fine. It's brain defect I'm bad at. Anyway, I think I know this one." She leans over and for a second I think she's going to kiss his cheek - and then instead she screams in his ear. "Chuck, you reckless goof!" the outburst startles me, but not as much as what happens next. Mary throws her arms around the mangled remains of the patient and before my eyes the bandages stretch and push aside, allowing a new arm and leg to push past - pale and new like a sprout in a garden. The patient gasps and sits up as best he can with Mary all over him, then sees her and squeezes back, laughing.

"Nurse Mary, you filthy old woman! Do you have any idea how long I was waiting for you to find me? Worst game of hide and seek ever, darling. Is everyone okay? Is the Spider alright?" Mary wails, burying her face in the man's hospital gown so that it looks like he's grown a tuft of pink and white chest hair. "Oh, Chuck... the Spider is gone. Franklin got us out, mostly, but he left Big Dave and the bouncer and Eddie Shorthand behind. White was despondent, couldn't stop crying about David. She hadn't admitted it yet but she has a real thing for him."

It's like I'm not here. Maybe it's better that way, though - plausible deniability and all that. Still, I can't help but listen in and try to put the pieces together. The bar must have been full of people like Mary... lord, that thought gives me the shivers. I'm grateful for all that Mary does, of course, but a whole bar full of them...

"Don't worry, Mary. I know where the feds keep everyone. I can explain things to Franklin, get him to take us in there and get everyone out. It'll all be okay."

Mary holds up a finger and looks at her watch, then seems to be counting in her head. Her lips are moving a little.

"No... no, I think it's probably too late to talk to Franklin about anything... but you're right that everything will be okay. Oh, speaking of!"

Mary pushes past me and looks out the window at the storm clouds gathering.

"Oh, Chuck, we're late. I thought since the hospital was so close it would be okay. We have a very important meeting to go to at the Squid. Very important. Can you carry me dear? I'm exhausted after giving you those limbs back. Tread carefully, your legs might be a bit lopsided for a while."

The patient is just a blur and a rush of wind and both of them are gone. I look out at the clouds, and something looks wrong about them. I don't like this one bit. I head down to the staff lounge and look at the faded poster next to the phone. The emergency "freak" hotline number is there, along with a reminder about how dangerous they are and how urgent it is that they be reported.

I pick up the handset and stare at that poster for a long time. I read the paragraph about all the charges that can be leveled against you for failure to report, the statistics about how many people freaks kill each year... except... those numbers don't count everyone, do they? Nobody is tracking the lives Mary has saved. She's been coming for six years, hitting five hospitals a week at least and probably treating the homeless in-between. How many people does she save when she does her rounds? Forty a week doesn't seem unreasonable. I look at the poster again. "Each year, these dangerous biological weapons kill more than fifteen hundred people in the Los Angeles area alone!" Hmm. Forty people a week, fifty-two weeks in a year... I dial the phone. An internal number.

"Hey Greg. Look, we're not too bad and I think that I'm coming down with something, so... I'm going to take the rest of the day off. Yeah? Thanks."

I clock out, still unsure if I'm doing the right thing. I used to drive past Disneyland every day, I grew up being told how dangerous the "freaks" are. Not that they were ever dangerous enough for us to move away, of course - nobody moves away from southern California for reasons of safety. Wildfires? Fine. Landslides? No problem. Earthquakes? Eh, not that often. Super-powered terrorists blowing up theme parks or - more often - robbing convenience stores certainly isn't enough to tip the scales. The universe will have to try a lot harder than that to scare people away from SoCal. Still... I can hear the thunder rolling outside, and I hurry to my car hoping I can make it out of town before the storm starts. Just in case.

Chapter Eleven: Spukhafte Fernwirkung

Reginald Doyt

Interrogating freaks is what we have agents for, and those mad scientists downstairs. It isn't the job of the Director. I have more important things to attend to. Still, Franklin Reese was on the short list of high risk freaks and I should probably get my fingerprints on this operation so that Black doesn't take all the credit. For all the trouble he causes me I might as well get some sort of benefit from it. Shorehoff most likely won't have any information that we can't get through torture, so unless he gives me something really compelling this will be a short meeting and I can move on to debriefing the field commander from the Reese strike. The team is already on the way back.

Agent Barker is storming down the hall towards me, all muscle and no brains. He's a suck-up, and an untrustworthy one at that. He doesn't understand that he'll never be fit for any kind of high level position, but he just might step on my toes to reach for one. He's a disgusting worm, and if he didn't anger Black so much I would probably have him transferred.

"Director Doyt, sir, agent Black is being completely unprofessional with the freak."

He falls in next to me when he sees I'm not going to stop for him. I really don't want to hear about whatever it is. It seems like my entire life is filled with these stupid distractions, these pointless wastes of time. I could be actually getting things done.

Barker is still talking, but in the end I know I'll have to read the report anyway. I can already see the paperwork stretching ahead of me, Barker's transcript of the conversation will make Black sound immature and reckless while somehow coming off as whiny, like a child tattling on his little sister. Black will counter, something about how he was trying to gain the subject's trust - it will end up being more plausible than the alternatives even if it's completely false. I'll send it up the chain of command, but the flag on Black's file will cause it to go right to Washington where whatever politician it is that he's been blackmailing will sweep it under the rug.

He's dangerous, yes, but recently he's been primarily tiring. All of my suspicions go nowhere. I know I'm right about him, he knows I know, but there's nothing to do. Speak of the devil, here comes the insufferable waste of space now.

"Hey there Doyt! Agent Barker, weren't you supposed to be watching Eddie? If you're here who, exactly, is with him?"

Barker looks ready to explode, but instead of saying anything he charges off ahead of me down the hall.

"Make yourself useful, agent Black, and reassure me of the safety precautions."

For a moment it looks like he's trying to think of a snide remark, but he straightens up somewhat and answers.

"He's telekinetic, apparently in line with the others we've researched. There are no loose items in the room and guns are pointed at him from the adjacent area. Obviously he has been thoroughly searched. According to all of our safety protocols, Eddie is a code yellow."

"Yellow?" I can't remember how far up that even is on the scale. I think it's low, but not the lowest. Why is it not the lowest?

"Yes sir. In theory he could throw you against the wall. It wouldn't be likely to do much more than give you a concussion before the men opened fire, but it's still a slight risk."

Good. Just what I need right now. Black mumbles something about having the plague and slips away, which is a relief. I can have agent Ferris search his office while he's gone.

Ferris wants to get right back to field work, but after the damage done to his arms on that botched strike I have to leave him on light duty. I'm tempted to suspend him pending review just for losing those implants, but it's better for me to focus all blame on agent Black. One of these days something will have to stick to him. In the meantime I have Ferris researching him - that way if he stumbles across anything looking where he shouldn't I can deny any knowledge and fire him, and if he actually does turn something good up I can use it against Black. Either way I win.

I step into the holding area and it's see Edward Shorehoff for the first time. In person, anyway. He looks like a low-life. A weasel. I wave agent Barker over, ignoring Shorehoff's greasy smile. "Barker, you're confident that this is safe?"

He nods. "Absolutely, sir. He makes one move and we blow his brains out. He doesn't have any abilities that will be an immediate threat, just standard pushing, pulling, and lifting.

Lightweight. He also hasn't made any attempt to contact other freaks since the two he was with were killed in Mexico."

Fine. I guess I might as well get this over with. Barker has set up another chair, flimsy plastic like the one Shorehoff is in, and I sit down. It's awkward, and uncomfortable - I'm not used to being so exposed, so out in the open. I want my ancient desk in front of me, but I know that would be a security breach. Meanwhile Shorehoff makes it look like he's sitting in a throne.

"Edward..." best to start this off friendly. "We appreciate the information you've given us so far. What can you tell us about this weather?"

He looks offended somehow. Did I get his name wrong?

"Man, Reggie! You move right in for the score! Aren't you going to buy me dinner first or something? I don't put out on the first date unless you buy me dinner."

I see. As far as I'm concerned I'm done here. Even talking to these disgusting freaks makes me feel dirty. "Mister Shorehoff," I start, but he cuts me off.

"Mister? Aw, we were on a first name basis for a second there. Fine, Mister Doyt. Go ahead."

I could give the order to open fire. It would be so easy.

"Mister Shorehoff. You want to work with us, but I have several problems I would need to address. I have no reason to believe you will continue to have useful information, and I have no reason to believe you will not betray us like you betrayed Franklin Reese."

"Reggie... can I call you Reggie? Those are some great questions, Reg. Let me answer those for you. First of all, I have all kinds of valuable information. I can tell you why there's a storm over your head right now. I can tell you the names and powers of all active freaks in Los Angeles, plus where most of them live. And... I can tell you about the huge mistake you feds made today. Heck, let me start with that one. About half an hour ago, your guys made the biggest mistake they could have ever made. It might even ruin you completely. You killed Franklin."

He's still smiling, still calm. What is he talking about? "Mister Shorehoff, is this some kind of joke?"

"Oh, no, Reggie. It's pretty fucking serious right about now. For you. For me... well yeah, it's a kind of joke. See, I hated Franklin. He threw his weight around, intimidated us while trying to act like he was our big strong protector - but we were always hiding. He said we were a family, you know that? I can't think of many parents that blame their children for getting kidnapped instead of trying to do something about it. But, see, Franklin didn't want to rock the boat. Why would he? He was in charge! But then... then your guys went and shot you in the foot. Without Franklin, the freaks are going to fight back - and there won't be any one leader to go after. Just one big angry family. There's a new world order now, you understand?"

I can see where this is headed. I'm not an idiot. Shorehoff is trying to make it sound like we need him more than we do. It's a bluff, obviously. We've been containing the freaks until now and when they see that we can reach Franklin they'll be more afraid to fight, not less. "Well, mister Shorehoff, where do you fit into this new world order?"

"Who, me?" he asks, with a look of mock humility. "I'm just the telekinetic. I provide... action at a distance." He smirks when he says that, like it's some sort of clever joke. I don't get it.

"But hey, I haven't answered those other clever questions of yours yet. You still want to know about how trustworthy I am?"

Something about the way he says that makes me very nervous. He knows that he'll be shot as soon as he tries anything, he must just be attempting to intimidate me.

"I would rather start with this weather, mister Shorehoff."

"Nah, I'll get to that in a second. You wanted to know how you could be sure I wouldn't betray you like I did Franklin. It was a good question, Reggie. See, the thing is that I'm a cheat, a liar, and a thief. You can't trust me as far as you can throw me, and judging from that little paunch you've got that wouldn't be far at all. I'm an ass. But... and this is the thing, Reggie... I draw the line somewhere. I'll cheat my friends at pool, because they should know better than to play against me in the first place. I'll con a family member out of some money if they've been getting on my nerves - or, you know, if I'm broke. But I won't sell someone out. I won't do something to get them in serious trouble."

"I'm confused, mister Shorehoff. Isn't that exactly what you are offering to do for us?"

He's got that obnoxious slimy grin on again, and he's shaking his head. This is absurd, I have other things to attend to.

"No, no, no. You've misunderstood me. See, I said I can tell you all sorts of stuff. I didn't say I was actually going to. Franklin wasn't the only one who crossed the line. Your little clan of men in black are worse by far. I won't let a bunch of thugs get away with hunting my friends and family. Never again. Do you understand me now, Reggie?"

I snort accidentally, and try to recover by coughing into my hand.

"Mister Shorehoff, is that a threat? You do understand that you're surrounded, don't you?" He says something under his breath... did he just tell me to wait? Does he really think he's leaving alive, that some moment will come when he won't have guns pointed at him? This has been a colossal waste of my time. I stand to leave, and -

Purple and white spots are floating across my vision, and my ears are ringing... the back of my head feels like a knife has stabbed through it, pain radiating out from the wall I'm pressed against. Oh dear lord! I can barely breathe, and my feet aren't touching the ground. That son of a bitch has me pinned to the wall. The sound of assault rifles is deafening, and I feel disoriented. My vision seems to clear and I can see it, this faint distortion in the air snaking out from Shorehoff and wrapping around my chest. Telekinesis isn't supposed to be visible, is it? The muzzle flashes are reflecting off of the air as bullets ricochet off of nothing - some sort of rippling wall in the air. Oh, god. He's becoming more powerful somehow. His telekinesis is getting stronger.

Agent Barker is firing at him too, but suddenly Shorehoff swipes a hand across the air and Barker's arm drops off a split second before the rest of him slides in half and collapses to the floor. This isn't happening. Next he thrusts the palm of his hand at one of the gun slits and the entire wall rips apart, flying into the next room and burying the guard. The gun through the opposite wall stops firing as well, for all I know the coward is running, but Shorehoff shatters that side anyway. It's silent now except for the ringing in my ears. Dust is everywhere, making the strange telekinetic tendrils reaching out of Shorehoff more visible.

"Reggie... where do you keep the others?" I need to buy some time, I need to make him keep me alive long enough for my men to bring in something he can't deflect. An energy weapon, a flame thrower, something. I tell him it's three floors below us and realize too late I should have lied. I can't think straight. He drops me to the ground and then as I stand he grabs me by the throat - with his hand, this time.

"Oh, god. Please, please, I'll tell you anything just don't kill me!" the words are coming out involuntarily, I want to be brave and spit in his face but I can't stop blubbering. "Just tell me what you want. Anything! Just tell me what you want!"

"Rodriguez." He says. What the hell does that even mean? He laughs, and we drop impossibly through the solid floor.

Chapter Twelve: Collateral Damage

Darryl Holst

For a second all I'm aware of through the haze of drugs is flashing red lights and the sound of an alarm, but then the world snaps into sharp focus and I feel something burrowing out of my head like a worm. It doesn't hurt, somehow, and then I hear it hit the floor with a metallic sound. Memory of where I am floods back and I freeze time, sitting up and only realizing afterwards that my restraints are off. There's someone standing behind the table I was on, with his hand out like it had been touching my head. I've never seen him before, but he's not one of the feds. There's no way. His hair is greasy and he needs to shave - he's wearing dusty, torn jeans and a black tee shirt and he's got some blood spattered across his cheek. Is this Walter?

No, this has to be someone from outside. He's not wearing the baggy grey pajamas they put us in. Behind him there's a door into a circular room, where other glass doors look into cells like mine. I slide off the table and step on some sort of silver peg on the floor, threaded like a screw. Was that in my head? I can't feel any holes in my forehead, and the drugs seem to have completely worn off in an instant. Whatever is going on, I feel great. I walk out, ducking around the new arrival, and take in my surroundings. There's a woman in the air, it doesn't look like I caught her mid-jump or anything though. I think she's flying. She's wearing the pajamas, so I guess that makes her Tamara. Another pajama-clad person is here too, and he's leaning over someone in a suit that for sure does look like a fed. There's some sort of goop like honey extending out and wrapping around the fed's neck. This... this is really happening. We're getting out of here.

I've never met anyone else with abilities. Before they moved me to wherever I am now I heard someone screaming, and the guards talked about Walter and Charlie and Tamara, but other than that brief look at Charlie I didn't actually see anyone else. I don't know what to say. Do I just introduce myself? What if they really are terrorists? I check the door but it won't open, some sort of electronic lock. I glance around again and find some creepy-looking guy in a lab coat huddled under a desk. He's got a security badge clipped to him that's pretty thick, it looks like one of those one with a chip in it. I pull the badge off and swipe it over the silver panel next to the door, but nothing happens. I try a few more times, and still there's no response. Well, I wouldn't know where to go anyway. That seems to make the decision for me... here goes nothing.

"SHIT!" That's the guy that was leaning over me. He's jumped back from the table and he's looking around. The woman sees me first.

"Got him, Eddie, he's right here!" I was right, she's flying. She drifts down to look me in the eyes but I'm taller than her so her feet are still floating off the ground.

"Well," she says, "It looks like we have a new Franklin. Can you teleport us out of here?"

What's a Franklin? Is there some sort of code name system for powers that I don't know about?

"I... no. I don't teleport. I stop time. I just walked over here."

She looks disappointed, but Walter's eyes have gone wide. "Are you serious?" he says. "That's huge. That's incredible, you can take out every fed in this place before they know what hit them!"

"I don't know. Maybe, I guess. I can't open the doors while everything is paused though, I guess the badge reader is frozen too. But I guess I could start up every time I got to a door and then stop things again when I'm through it? I don't... I haven't really thought about it."

The new guy comes over. He's smiling like a used car salesman.

"I'm Eddie. Folks call me Eddie Shorthand. What's your name, kid?"

I reach out to shake his hand and I tell him my name. He cocks his head to the side like he's listening to something I can't hear, and then he smiles even bigger. "You're the one that got Fast Charlie out! Nice work, kid!"

Tamara and Walter both look surprised, and they're asking me questions so fast I don't know what to say. I start to explain, telling them about biting the scientist and him knocking over the IV stand, but before I can finish Walter holds up a hand.

"Hang on, hang on. We can talk about this later. These alarms have been going on for way too long, we need to get out of here."

The fed has been quiet this whole time, but now he's laughing. "Get out? The only way you people are leaving is in body bags."

Eddie gestures and the creepy lab coat guy gets yanked through the air towards us.

"Doctor! I have an experiment to suggest. You ever use that Extractor I've heard so much about on someone without any powers?"

The fed is yelling, begging, but the doctor seems to be happy to go along with whatever Eddie says. It's making me uncomfortable to listen to, so I step aside to where Tamara and Walter are talking.

"Walter, are you okay with this? I seem to remember you being a bit of a pacifist."

He shrugs. "Pacifist? No, I just... I like violence to be the last resort."

"And is this it? The last resort?"

His jaw clenches, and his nostrils flare. "You heard what Eddie said they did to my wife after catching me. She's rotting in some prison somewhere for aiding and harboring a freak. I'm not playing anymore."

That strange goo starts to ooze out of his pores, but as it covers him it seems to crystallize until it's covered in facets and edges like armor chipped from a hunk of amber. A two-foot tendril reaches out from one hand and hardens into a terrifying spike. The goo doesn't seem so silly now that I've seen this.

Eddie shoves the fed past and the doctor follows meekly, carrying some strange device. It looks like a metal crab with a long spike coming out of its underside. The fed flattens onto the table - clearly against his will - and the doctor shuffles over, placing the crab-thing over his chest.

Suddenly, Eddie stops him.

"Wait, Reggie, I think I forgot a question. You asked about the storm, didn't you? Well, our good pal Pudge is busy drumming up some lightning to smack your building with."

"Pudge?" I ask. Tamara leans towards me and whispers, never taking her eyes off of Eddie.

"Yeah. Weird bug-eyed skinny guy. He controls the weather."

"Not that I'd count on him for any vital plan," Walter chimes in, "he drinks like a fish so at any given moment he's useless."

The fed is trying to laugh again, but it sounds more like he's crying. "It won't do anything! He

could hit us with lightning all day during a hurricane and the building wouldn't be so much as scratched!"

Eddie nods. "Yeah, we thought of that too. I'd tell you the rest of the plan but I'm really eager to watch you die screaming. Let's just say it involves pigs blood and some hefty bribing of Mexican officials. Hit it, doctor."

The doctor presses a button and the crab legs start to tighten, shoving the metal spike slowly into the fed's chest. I can't watch. He's screaming, over and over, and then somehow it seems like his voice is getting farther away. I turn around and he's not moving anymore, but it feels like I can still hear him screaming.

"Doc, I'm going to let your fate be decided by my pals here, that you've been torturing. Anyone calling dibs?"

Something inside me wants to, but I shake my head. Walter and Tamara look at each other for a minute and both shrug, then a stream of ectoplasm flies from Walter's hand and envelops the doctor's head. He only struggles for a minute.

I swipe the badge again and this time the door beeps and I can pull it open. We head out past the outer lab into a broad hallway where thirty armed guards level weapons at us. I walk up to them, looking at their faces. They look just like regular people. I'm trying to remember the epiphany I had before, something about who the villains were and how I could fight them. I remember the ache in my jaw after biting the scientist's finger, and the swell of pride when I saw Charlie escape. I can't be passive and wait for something to happen. I have to act, and until I can find a way to strike back at this screwed up situation as a whole I'm going to have to be comfortable attacking regular people. Not evil, just part of something too big to fight directly. Collateral damage.

I take some unused handguns out of their holsters and step back towards Eddie and the others, frozen like the guards like shocked statues. I aim carefully, and as I fire each shot the bullets slow and stop before reaching their targets. I aim for the head each time, two bullets per person just to be sure. I have to reload both guns before I finish. Finally I step back to about where I was when we saw the guards, and I look at them one last time. If I just hold it here, unmoving, I won't ever be a murderer. It feels like I'm standing so still that I'm frozen too, unable to take this next step. Forcing myself to keep my eyes open, I let the world start back up.

The sound is deafening, a horrible roar that nearly knocks me over as a thick cloud of blood blossoms into existence behind the guards and they all drop as one. The others are looking at me, at the guns in my hands. Eddie is patting me on the back, and I want to throw up. This is who I have to be, what I have to do. This is how I have to fight until I can find a better way, one that doesn't involve anyone dying. I have to believe this bloody mess will mean something some day.

"Okay," Eddie says, "Tamara is with me. I could use someone who can fly to keep me from falling to my death. Walter, escort the kid out and away from the area. We'll all meet at the..." he stops, looks at the walls. "I can't tell if they have bugs and cameras here. Whatever. At the place where Jezebel had her bachelorette party. Tamara, would you do me the honor?" He hold

out an arm and she takes it.

"Wait," Walter says, "Where are you going?"

He smiles, and it gives me the shivers. "Up to the roof," he says, "So that I can get struck by lightning. Now hurry, you've got about five minutes before shit gets serious. Rodriguez." With that, they fly upwards through the ceiling like ghosts.

I have a million questions but instead we start running. I use the badge on doors as we reach them, and before long the exit signs lead us to a metal fire exit. Throwing it open, I stop time and look around. It's chaos. There are people running everywhere. Some of them might have guns but I'm not sure any would even notice me, so I unfreeze things to let Walter keep up. He makes a beeline for a large armored van that's pulling up even though I can see from here the people inside have guns. One jumps out and starts to lower his weapon - I want to stop time but it's like I'm hypnotized. Walter swings with the crystalline spike and spears the man clean through his bulletproof vest. Another is jumping out behind him but Walter is already swinging some sort of ectoplasm whip with that connects right between the poor bastard's eyes and send him sprawling against the van.

It's like some sort of horrible dance, tendrils and blades flashing into existence only to evaporate as soon as they serve their purpose. In the space of a few seconds every last one of them is dead or unconscious. Walter climbs into the van without a word and I follow. The storm overhead is rolling, doubling back in on itself, swirling in a maelstrom over the main building that squats there, ugly and plain and grey. I can see the clouds flickering with lightning deep inside them, not just white but red and blue. I remember something from science class, a million years ago in another life. Something about how at the moment of a lightning strike the air is hotter than the surface of the sun, and sometimes tiny bits of antimatter even form.

I'm nervous. I don't like that we're standing still, Eddie and Tamara are going to be flying, they don't need a ride. Instinctively I want to stop time, but that won't help to speed this along.

Walter is just staring at the building. Waiting.

I can hear people shouting, everyone with weapons is running into the building and so far they haven't noticed us. So far.

Suddenly the world seems to end.

The flash blinds me, but I can hear the deep bass sound of something exploding and I feel the van lurch under me. Walter is swearing, spinning the van and nearly tipping it as he tries to point it back at the main gates. Chunks of building, massive concrete boulders, are crashing down around us as we drive. A desk bounces across our path, and papers flutter everywhere. Glancing in the rear view, I see a hole in the universe where the building had stood - one so dark it seems to swallow the light entirely. The van bounces as we crash through a fence, and then we're out of the compound and free on the streets of Los Angeles.

Chapter Thirteen: Answers and Questions

Agent Ferris

"Quite the mess, agent Ferris." Agent Black pauses the video and advances the frame until that horrifying purple-white bar of lightning, easily five feet across, is frozen on the screen. You can't even see Eddie inside of it. Further down, twisted black spikes are tearing out of the walls, all the way to the ground. They're as dark as the lightning is bright, matte black in a way that plays havoc with your depth perception.

"That," agent Black says, "Is Crazy Ike."

There's no way Ike made it into the compound without us knowing, and I tell Black that. In response he throws one of the few photographs of Ike down in front of me - there's no resemblance to Eddie, but his hand is over a candle and directly opposite the spot where the flame is touching his palm a crooked black line is snaking up from the back of his hand.

"I thought of that trick with Ike and the lightning, you know." Black says it almost to himself, then looks at me and smiles. "Not this time. Years ago, I was working on a threat assessment." He seems to be in a good mood, even with headquarters a pile of rubble. I haven't dealt with him much, but at least when he was briefing me for the hit on the Drowned Spider he didn't seem to be so cheerful. He was serious, professional... he messed with agent Barker and Director Doyt, played dumb or egged them on, but in every other way he was just what you would expect from a high-level government agent.

Now... something is wrong. He's very nearly giddy. As if on cue, the smile drops from his face. "Of course, you know this means David is alive."

He must mean Big Dave. I shake my head. "No, I saw him killed. I told you, there was a shootout in Mexico."

"Oh? You saw it? You mean that you actually saw him get shot, checked his pulse, something like that?"

This doesn't look good for me. How did I word it in my report? Did I make it clear that I didn't see him actually dead? Black can tell I'm trying to think, and he laughs.

"Don't worry too much, Ferris. Eddie is a con man, you aren't the first he's tricked."

"Dave wasn't there." I know it's true. It was nobody but Eddie.

Without a word, Black flips to one of the other tapes, the one of Doyt interviewing Eddie. Doyt asks if Eddie knows that he's surrounded, and Eddie replies... I take the remote from Black, rewind the video and turn the volume up. I can just make out what Eddie says. White. Things are starting to fall into place.

"Who... is Rodriguez?"

Black pulls a file out. Very thin, it clearly doesn't have any verified data in it. "Regular at the Drowned Spider. He can phase through walls. As far as I can tell, Eddie must have linked with Dave in a way that allowed them to stay connected even when they split up. Dave gathered up a bunch of the other patrons of the Spider, and gave Eddie access to whatever power he needed at the moment. A mix of his telekinesis and White's force fields to slice Barker in half and knock down the walls. Rodriguez to drop through the floor and stay ahead of the guards. Ike to channel the lightning... he had to have been

nervous, I'm sure Ike never tried to handle anything that powerful before. But it worked."

He sounds almost proud . I can see why Doyt wanted me to look into him. He's been with the program since before Disneyland, but nobody seems to know anything about him. This soft spot for the freaks is disturbing to see - I had heard that he once let White slip through his fingers, but it was hard to believe when he was talking about taking Franklin down at all costs. Now it's all too easy. Of course, without Doyt around I won't have the authority to research him anymore. Not that I would even know where to start. He's looking at the footage of the rooftop again, squinting and using the zoom until the whole screen is just a pixilated mess.

"That's Tamara Allen, isn't it?"

"Yes. She was seen carrying Eddie away... there were two other prisoners with her, Walter Schwarz and a John Doe. Both unaccounted for."

Black tells me to sort through the footage and find where the John Doe and Schwarz went, but my code won't work to bring up the lab footage and before I can try the surrounding hallways the door slams open and the entire United States military swarms in. It's a storm of frantic motion, orbiting around one stationary man. He's got three stars on his shoulder, a Lieutenant General. Black doesn't look surprised or concerned.

"Well Ferris," he says, "Looks like this is out of my hands."

He steps forward and shakes the Lieutenant General's hand, and someone is called over to look at some sort of list. I can only hear bits and pieces, it sounds like Black isn't on the official agent list and that's causing some sort of confusion. Black takes a few steps back so that he's closer to me, and start to fish around in his pockets.

"Don't worry, sir. I don't want to complicate an already difficult situation. I'll just give my security credentials to agent Ferris here and be on my way."

He presses his badge into my hand and walks right out the door, whistling. The new arrivals are ignoring me, pushing past and boxing up files. I know I'm going to be sent away - I'm not cleared for field work until the director finishes reviewing the reports of the strike on the Drowned Spider, and since there doesn't seem to be a director anymore I'm probably not going to be seeing field work for a very long time. Likewise, from the way the army is gathering all of our files up I don't think that they want me behind a desk. In fact, I guess there aren't very many desks left anyway. I duck out into the hall and nobody tries to stop me or question me.

I find a terminal and sit down - maybe there's something I can do to help even if they won't ask me for it. All of the hard copy files that weren't in the main building are in the room behind me, being boxed up, but the file servers were always offsite and so I might be able to access something there. I log in, but they've cut me off entirely. I can get to the research database, but any search query comes back with no results. I'm about to give up when I remember the access code Doyt gave me to dig up dirt on agent Black. If they were smart they would have found it and disabled it with the others, but...

Full access. For now.

I bring up Big Dave's file and it's got more in it than I've seen before. I must not have had

clearance for some of this. There are notes from scientists, from some agent named Mackey, and from agent Black. There's full notes on the use of the Inducer on him - one of only two tests that gave a full strength ability rather than some fitful parlor trick. I follow onwards to the data about the incident at Disney... Doyt never should have given me clearance for this. There are still areas where the data is withheld, of course. All I have for the origin of the Disney Freak is rumor. Everyone agreed that he wasn't made by our lab, but freaks didn't occur in nature back then so he was created somewhere.

Wait... this says that Black was on location at Disney when the incident happened. Maybe he was outside the park itself? No... the first responders found him inside, the only survivor. But how? I follow back to Black's file and start looking. It starts at around the same time as the Inducer project, with nothing on his background. From the communications on file he seems to have had a strong understanding of the freaks before they really existed. He also seemed particularly interested in Dave, even before his abilities manifested in any useful way. Could it be a coincidence that the one test subject he seemed attached to was the first to develop real powers?

There's too much to sort through, and most of it is worthless. Page after page of dry paperwork. A photograph catches my eye, and I feel a rushing in my ears as I look at it. This can't be happening. How could nobody have seen this? Black's agenda still seems like a mystery, but one thing is clear: he knew how to make abilities take hold. Dave was no coincidence. If he knew that, where did he learn it? That seems to lead right into the question of how he survived the holocaust at Disney... did the attacker recognize him? And maybe most disturbing... If they knew each other and Black survived, what about the Disney Freak? Is he still out there somewhere?

Even with this photograph I have more questions than answers, and I can't move on Black while he's still being protected by someone political. For now... I'll take advantage of having no job and I'll dig deep into Black's life. I will find out who he is and what he knows about Disney. I can't stop looking at the picture - it's agent Black, sixteen years ago. He must be about thirty-five - a few years older than David is now, skinnier, different hair... but the resemblance is uncanny, and I can't help but notice Dave's file doesn't have any information on his father.

Chapter Fourteen: Passing the Time

Jezebel Illig

Cynthia,

My favorite sister in law! I am so sorry that I have not written before now, I promise that I have been keeping your brother safe. I may not always be the best wife, but I am great security. I know on the news they make Los Angeles look like a war zone, but understand that it looked like that also the last time we lost the NBA playoffs. That poor Lieutenant General Herman must be ready to commit suicide, they keep playing the quote of him saying the freaks would be cleaned out in a week over top of images of the riots. A week! Two months now and there are five times as many of us.

That is not a result of my bad English. There really are more of us each day. Across the country they are getting more and more strict and searching harder for freaks, and now that news has leaked that the scanners work worse the closer they are to Disneyland we have Freaks coming from all the way in northern California and in Arizona and Nevada. There is safety in numbers because the scanners now go off so many times a day that there are not enough people to bring us in. My dear friend Tamara and a man named Charlie rush down the streets setting them all off at once, and others search for the scanners and break them.

The rioting comes and goes, but we are not part of it. Well, that is maybe a lie. I know that Eddie has a large television now that he did not have before. Still, most of the riots are just people being greedy, or scared, or angry that the government keeps taking away rights. Some remember back when all phone calls were not monitored, when the internet was not so filtered, when cameras were not everywhere. They miss those times, and when they see armed soldiers on the street corners they get upset. The military has made the news say that the riots are all our fault, but the people who live here know better. And then they see how many of us there are now and they think there were always that many, and then they think we must have been living peacefully before the military arrived.

That is true, some, but not as much as they think. The news will not correct them though because the military does not want people to know that they have made things worse. This is fine by me. There have not been any other large attacks, just self defense against the army. I know you have seen the footage of the old man that was shot, I do not mind telling you that right after they turned off the camera I petrified the soldier who killed him. I am thankful that that footage was live so that they could not edit it in time, it is sad that the old man died but he has been a martyr, causing others to come to our side.

I see the signs more every day, people thinking we could help the world if we were allowed to. A United Methodist church even spoke out for us! I am used to religious people calling me a witch and saying I am damned to hell. People are still scared, but as they see us more and more using our powers in public they are not sure if they are more scared of us or the soldiers. Some have left the city but really it seems like very few. Life is going on as normal here on the good days. On the bad days, when the riots start up, the soldiers are so busy stopping looting that we

can go out on the streets in a different part of town and march, demand protection under the law. This will never happen, but it feels good just to march with others and yell.

The other thing I have been doing is going fishing. Your brother hates when I do this, but it is fun and for a good cause. My friend Michael cannot be hurt, bullets bounce off of him and even gas does not knock him out. He swallows a tracking device and he walks over to a checkpoint where the soldiers see he is a freak and tell him to get down on the ground. He does everything they ask, and they take him to the command area while we follow along behind. Once we see where the command area is we take the whole place apart, smashing all of their equipment. Michael is never hurt and thinks it is a wonderful game, so then the next week we do it again. I know after the second time they could tell it was a trap but they still had no choice other than to take Michael away.

Yesterday was the fourth time, and they locked him in a van and drove it off the pier into the ocean so that we had to go fishing for real. They watched the van as it filled with water, and they never saw Rodriguez and Tamara go in from underneath and pull Michael out. They waited a long time, watching that empty van. Tamara and Michael are both really glad it happened - Michael learned he can hold his breath for as long as he wants, and Tamara learned she can fly underwater which she says is incredible. I have a fantastic plan for next time we go fishing, I will tell you all about it if it works.

Sooner or later if catching us gets hard enough maybe they will just stop. One of these days Michael will walk up to them and they will wave him away, tell him to go home.

I should go now, they want me to go on the march with them in case any soldiers start shooting. When Eddie throws them or Vance shoots fire at them they just use more bullets, but if I turn a few into statues it seems to scare them silly and they lose their nerves. I take that as a compliment. Of course your brother is always nervous because he knows I need to almost touch them to use my ability, but I am an excellent dancer and have protection around me always. Oh! I nearly forgot, I spray painted one of the soldiers silver and put a hat in front of him so he looked like a street performer. He made ten dollars yesterday! I am so proud of my little sculpture.

Your brother is talkative as ever - he says "hi". I know your mother is not talking to either of us but please let her know he is safe if you can. I can understand her fear. She would feel better if he did not marry a freak, and I would feel better if he had a power of his own to protect himself. Still, not to embarrass you with thoughts of your brother but in the bedroom I think maybe he has powers after all.

Love,
Jezebel

Chapter Fifteen: Welcome to the Winning Team

Eric Sloane

"Get down on your stomach and place your hands behind your head. Any attempt to resist will be met with lethal force!"

The freak is just standing there as if daring me to try something. He slips a cigarette into his mouth and a tiny spark leaps from one finger to light it. There are two of us and one of him, and he doesn't look concerned in the slightest. Oh, son of a bitch. I bet I know why. Stepping back so that Jesse will cover me, I pop my rifle open and... sure enough, where the firing pin should be there's just a blob of hardened epoxy. How the hell do they keep doing that? I haven't put my gun down since I cleaned it this morning.

I sling the rifle over my shoulder and signal for the Jesse to do the same. "Stand down."

What the hell are we even supposed to do in situations like this? My commander is going to rip me a new one, but it seems like five minutes after we hit the streets each day our weapons are sabotaged, and there's no way in hell I'm going to get into a fist fight with someone who can tazer me with his bare hands. I really don't know how those agents did it. I've talked to someone who helped organize their records, the agents neutralized about fifty freaks each year. We've killed ten and captured twenty in two months, and the ones we capture are always busted out within a day. We're losing. Worse, every time we kill one of them they kill exactly five of us - that's not counting any that died in combat. We can't go on like this anymore.

"I said stand down. Let him go." He's just looking at me like I'm insane. "They disabled our weapons. That's why he's just standing there, he's laughing at us. He wins this round, okay? Forget about it."

I can see Jesse is pissed. He's a hot head to begin with, and one of his friends was killed in an earlier skirmish with some freak that couldn't have been a day over fifteen - he grabbed Jesse's friend and froze him solid, then the guy fell over and shattered. Jesse found a slowly thawing ear clinging to his boot later. I'm not saying something like that shouldn't piss you off, and I'm not saying the freaks don't need to be contained or controlled - clearly they're dangerous - but Jesse wants them to die slowly. I was deployed in Turkey a few years ago when they were making trouble, and once the cease fire was signed I ended up working alongside the freedom fighters. We all knew that a few days earlier we had been trying to murder each other, that we could be standing shoulder to shoulder with someone who had shot a friend, but... that's war. That's what happens. We just didn't talk about it.

Of course, there hasn't been any cease fire here and there won't be one any time soon. Still, Jesse needs to learn to blame some of this on the circumstances instead of taking revenge on each and every freak out there, or he's going to get himself killed. We're fighting them for the United States, not for personal satisfaction. Finally he nods and lowers his rifle. Good. Now if the freak will just take his victory and go without rubbing it in our faces I can work on getting the epoxy out of my rifle - though it will be back tomorrow anyway. The freak shrugs and turns to leave, and the second his back is turned Jesse lunges forward and swings with the butt of his rifle. He connects but it's not as solid a hit as he probably wanted and the freak is only knocked

down, not knocked out.

There's a retina-searing flicker of electric blue as the freak lands and rolls over onto his back, pointing a hand at Jesse. At the last second I knock the lightning aside, grounding it in a fire hydrant - the freak can tell it was me, and he tries a direct shot next. I catch the bolt in both hands, where it pools and writhes around - it's like I'm holding a wild animal. I fling it back at him and score a direct hit - not surprisingly the electricity doesn't seem to hurt him, but his shirt is smoldering. He crab-crawls backwards before standing and running down the street, leaving his lit cigarette smoldering on the ground. I can feel the electricity everywhere else around me, in the power lines and running beneath the asphalt... in the stores and car batteries... even in the people.

"Get down on your stomach and place your hands behind your head. Any attempt to resist will be met with lethal force!"

It's Jessie, of course, and he's not joking. This is just starting to sink in... what the hell did I do? How can I feel the electricity flowing around me? It just feels so natural.

"Listen. I... I'm not one of them. That was something he did, something to make us fight. Okay? It was that freak, not me." He nods, but he's not buying it.

"Fine. Sure. So why don't you come with me and we'll test you back at the base. It says you're fine, then you're fine."

Shit. We both know what a test will say about me. I won't let them lock me up or kill me. I won't. I didn't ask for this, and I'm not a terrorist. Hell, I was here fighting these freaks.

"Jesse... I was trying to protect you."

"Get down on the ground."

"I'm not like them."

"On your stomach."

"Please."

He swings with his rifle but I block, and lash out with... something. For just a second the electrical activity in his brain is scrambled, and he drops to the ground. For the first time I'm aware of everyone watching me, eyes peeking from behind closed curtains or cracked doors. They're all watching, and they all saw me take Jesse out. I don't even know what I did to him, not really. I can't promise I didn't just turn him into a vegetable. I drop my useless gun and my radio, and start walking. I don't know where to. I won't be able to go back to base, and I won't be able to go home. Ever. How long before the military walls off the whole city and starts hunting the freaks down for real? How long before they realize that's not working either and just bomb the place?

I thought this was hopeless before, with the freaks killing us off and escaping. Now I can see the real problem... they're going to keep coming, appearing out of the woodwork. What if one of the generals gains abilities? Will they sabotage everything to protect themselves? Would they be wrong to? I've been loyal to the military for five years, risking my life for my country. It's hard to give that thought up. Then again... I remember working alongside the Turks that I had been shooting at just hours before... sides change all the time. My commander gave a speech once, explaining why we were going into battle against a dictator that the United States had been

funding up to a month prior. A man who had received training, supplies, and weapons from our military. I don't remember the whole speech, but the basic gist of it was clear: sometimes the situation changes, and it's not our responsibility to ask why. It is our responsibility to do what needs to be done for whatever side we are on.

So maybe that goes both ways?

I see one of them, watching me. I know it's a freak, because he broke through a roadblock I was at last week. He's big, muscular, with shaggy black hair and bugged-out eyes that make him look like he's having a staring contest with everything.

"Hey. Will you take a message to the other freaks?"

He smiles, still just watching me. It seems like he's not blinking. Finally his head tilts, just the barest shadow of a nod. That's probably the best I'm going to get. I pull out the pad of paper I keep in my pocket and start writing. I describe where the hidden sensors are, where the weak points of our base are, everything I can think of. I walk over and hand the paper over.

He looks at it, then at me. "Why should I trust you?" he says. In response, I point to the traffic light and short it out. He shrugs. Fine. How about this... I reach out, all around me, feeling again that steady pulse of electricity. I pull, one sharp swift yank, and hear bulbs and outlets in the nearby stores popping as a ball of liquid light swirls into existence in my hands. I palm it, like a basketball. Now the freak looks thoughtful.

I hear tires squealing, and a military jeep turns the corner. Jesse is in the back, and part of me is relieved that he's okay. The other part is actually a bit disappointed. The freak isn't running.

"G.I. Joe," he says, "Toss me that ball. Now."

As the people I joked with at mess last night train weapons at me, I throw the ball of electricity to the freak. He catches it in midair as he leaps out into the street, but instead of electrocuting him it just vanishes - at the same time some sort of massive black tentacle swings out of him and smashes down on the hood of the car, crumpling it in and making the soldiers lose their footing. I pull again, funneling the energy straight into the freak. More and more black lines are sprouting off of him, tearing the jeep to shreds and flinging guns aside.

The soldiers run, stumbling, and the freak laughs. He turns to face me, inky black appendages already fading into shadows, and nods once. Then he turns and walks away, leaving me by the ruined jeep. Just an hour ago I thought I was losing. Now I'm not so sure.

Chapter Sixteen: Socializing at the Silent Squid

Darryl Holst

I unfreeze time and walk into the Laughing Squid, wincing as I see that it's filled to capacity. It's so noisy. I hand the sack of firing pins to Jezebel, who is making some sort of sculpture out of them, and slink off to a chair in the corner. Eddie is drunk and telling the same story as every night, about having Big Dave and someone named Francis fake their deaths in Mexico. People are getting pretty tired of that story, but nobody bothers to say anything and Eddie can't tell nobody is listening. He made a big show of saying that nobody was in charge anymore but I think that was just to avoid responsibility. I think in all honesty he wants to be our leader. He's got a certain kind of slimy charisma, and he's come up with some good plans, but in the end nobody trusts him to be in charge of anything.

Instead we just form little committees, break off into groups to do whatever seems right at the time. We've agreed that we shouldn't kill anyone except in self defense, but some of the more violent freaks quickly revised that to include a "tax" of five soldiers per freak killed. The especially nasty ones just went out and picked fights so they would have an excuse to defend themselves. Most people are good though, a lot of them are offended that they've been labeled as terrorists and don't want to earn the title. I don't know where I stand anymore. I want everyone to be okay. I want this whole thing to be over. I especially want those men I killed on the way out of the federal building to be alive again. If I have to pick a more attainable goal, I'd love for it to be quieter in here.

I can't keep hiding from people. It's been getting easier and easier to keep time stopped, and now I'm actually spending more time with things paused than not. In the eight and a half weeks since escaping I've aged nearly six months. That can't be good for me. I know that, I force myself to step back into the world and interact with people, but as soon as I get into a crowded room like this I want to stop it all. Something is wrong with me. I try to listen in, but there are a hundred conversations going on. Big Dave is trying to explain why he hasn't sent Eddie on another rampage - I assumed it was because it didn't fit with our current tactics, but Dave is saying that with all the new freaks arriving and all the scanners running there's some sort of interference, he loses Dave after just a block.

Crazy Ike, meanwhile, is trying to convince everyone that one of the soldiers gave him a note pad full of intel and helped to smash a jeep. The general consensus seems to be that he's another ringer like the one that tried to infiltrate the last bar these guys hung out at, some place called the Drowned Spider. There have been two other ringers since then - or at least two that got caught. One emitted a high pitched sound that could render you deaf, and the other fired lasers from his palm. Ike is insisting this guy was the real deal, but nobody is listening. He's getting louder and louder, and then Eddie talks louder so that everyone can hear that same damn story again, and then Dave yells at them both to shut up, and then everyone is laughing and Eddie and Ike are still yelling and...

That's better. For a second it seems like there are echoes, whispers bouncing off the walls, and then it's as silent as the tomb. Things never used to echo with the world paused, the few sounds

were muffled and faded almost instantly like everything was happening in a padded room. What changed? Is my power starting to fail? Maybe I'm burning out. What a relief that would be, burning out and losing my ability. Being normal again. But then... I'd never get to walk around in this silent world, and I'd never get to be a hero. To set all this right. With great power...

I weave between the statues of the other freaks, and head out of the bar. I made it almost ten minutes tonight... that should count for something. God, I'm pathetic. Leaning against the outer wall, I can actually see the Laughing Squid's bouncer. He's bone thin and wears a ratty trench coat and fedora, and you almost never get a good look at him. He likes it that way. Even now he's hunched so I can't make out his face. I suppose I could go closer and take a look but I don't want to ruin the mystery. I stare at him, really look right at him, and let time flow again. Almost instantly he loses definition, and it's like looking at a pile of laundry in the middle of the night with your mind finding shapes in it. He's part of the wall. He's trash falling out of the dumpster he's next to. That part that looks like a fedora is just a stain on the brick, or graffiti, or a reflection of light off of something. Meanwhile I can still hear the arguments, picking up right where I left them.

"I'm telling you, it's implants like in that baby faced agent they sent to the Spider." Someone says, "The one that burned the place down."

"Naw," another voice yells, "that was Eddie!"

"Eddie isn't an agent!"

It's too much. There are too many voices, too much movement even outside. I stop time again, and there's still that slight echo:

"It was Dave that burned the spider down." A faint voice whispers. And then, "The Spider never burned, it's fine." And then silence. Beautiful silence. I start walking towards home - I haven't been there is what feels like a month. It may have even been a month, for me. Most of the time when I need to sleep I just crash on whatever bed is nearby. I'm there and gone without time passing, so nobody knows I've broken into their house. Tonight, though, I want to go back to the space I set up for myself after escaping.

It's part of an old auto shop, a crumbling property with weed-laced junkers and little pools of oil and engine grease on the cracked cement. After a little work I was able to clean up a space and seal it off so that unless you measure the place it's hard to tell there's a room missing. I have a bed, a dresser, a little lamp. There's also a chest filled with weapons I never touch, most taken from the van Walter and I escaped in. I don't know why, but more and more I feel like I need to check on it. I worry about it, worry that someone will find it and steal it. It would be simpler to just drop it into the ocean and stop worrying, but I can't. It's almost like it has sentimental value.

I seal the door back up behind me, making sure that no light will spill out and reveal my presence, and then I unpauses time and turn on the lamp. The chest is still there, of course. I lift the lid gently and remove the guns, feeling like I'm being watched, and then reach the carefully wrapped package underneath. I want that to be good enough, to satisfy my obsessive worrying, but I need to be sure it hasn't been swapped out for something else. I place it on the bed and begin to unravel the fabric, not stopping until it is sitting fully revealed before me. It makes me almost sick to look at, but at the same time something about it is exciting.

There really is a strange beauty about the Extractor, crab-legs gleaming silver in the tiny lamp's light. The back panel comes to life with a touch and the screen glows green, scrolling status and power levels past. The beauty is marred somewhat by the dried blood still stuck to the protruding spike underneath. Why have I kept this? When I found it in the van I should have smashed it, should have made Walter rip it apart, something. I guess I still can. I can take it out into the auto shop and get the old sledge that's leaning against the wall... a few good hits should do the trick. I stand, intending to get the sledge, and then I just stare at the Extractor.

...

I wrap it up again, carefully, and place it back in the chest. Maybe tomorrow.

Chapter Seventeen: It's All Fun and Games Until...

Michael Higgins

It's perfect. Flawless. The single most beautiful plan ever to be formed by a mortal. Nothing can possibly go wrong - though I refuse to say that last one out loud. Other phrases on my ban list include "I'm invincible" even though I am, and "There are never any cops around here" when you don't want to get pulled over. I've been practicing my part all day, much to the frustration of everyone around me, and I can't wait to go for it. This is going to be epic.

Jezebel is fussing over me, putting makeup on me and taking it off again. I just have to trust she knows what she's doing. The other guys tried to give me a hard time for wearing makeup, but once they heard the plan they stopped laughing. Well, no. They continued to laugh, but it was with me rather than at me. I'll take that any day. Jezebel's husband is watching her work... I can never tell if the guy is jealous or not. If he is, he doesn't need to be - Jez is crazy about him and if I ever made a move on her she's petrify me before I knew what hit me. Actually, that thought scares me a little. When you're nearly impossible to kill the few things that might do the trick seem extra scary.

Charlie bursts into the room in a blur, holding a large bucket with a lid.

"Got it, Jezebel. Just like you asked for. Anything else I can do to help the plan?"

She takes a second to answer, because she's busy squinting at my face.

"No, Charlie. I am good. Tamara is looking for our friends now, and when she finds them we can move in."

Oh, please let them be working the checkpoints today. If they're not this whole thing is a waste. We didn't start setting the plan up until Rodriguez reported seeing them setting up a barricade together, but there's a chance they set it up and then headed somewhere else. It has to be those two.

The only part of the plan I'm not crazy about is that Jez tore my shirt - and it will probably be filled with holes by the end of this, too. I really liked that shirt.

Before this whole rebellion thing got going, I was terrified of getting caught. I mean, since I can't be killed by normal means I figured they would have a really good time experimenting on me, shoving probes up my wazoo or whatever freaky shit those mad scientists were into. And then it wouldn't stop, ever. No thanks. But now, with everyone fighting back and making the government look like morons I can walk out there without worrying, because if they catch me some of my pals will just bust me out again.

Don't get me wrong - I was a little scared when they dumped me in the ocean. I said to myself, "Michael? What are the odds that your friends will pull you out of this mess before you drown?" And I didn't really have an answer for that, because I'm not good at math and I wasn't really paying attention to what I was asking myself anyway - being fairly distracted by all the water coming into the van. Still, I figured if I could survive poison gas a little oxygen deprivation wasn't going to do me in too soon, so I just held my breath and sure enough some friendly faces appeared to whisk me away.

There's nothing like friends who can fly and pass through walls and shit. I'm not kidding, if you have the opportunity to pick up a few I would highly recommend it. It really makes me wish I had moved to Los Angeles sooner - I'd been keeping to myself in Florence, Arizona because I was scared to go somewhere that they had the time and energy to really search for people like me. When I heard that they were looking everywhere, and that Los Angeles had suddenly become the safest place of all... well, I thought it was a trap. I stayed, tried to lay low, and some sort of SWAT team showed up at my door. I can't get hurt, but a big pile of guys can pin me down and hogtie me. Wow, that sounds dirty.

So I ran, and they shot me rather than break a sweat chasing me. Then they shot me again. And again. Somewhere around there they did start running, but I had a head start and managed to get away. I still don't know how they found me in the first place, unless they can scan for freaks by satellite - of course, even if they can it probably won't work this close to Disney, not to mention any trouble it would have from the storm that's always over the city. There are three guys here - well, two guys and a girl - that can mess with the weather, and they keep it overcast just to make surveillance harder. Seriously, find yourself some friends like this.

Suddenly Tamara bursts in, with Eddie Izzard smirking at me from her shirt.

"Found them! They're at a checkpoint, scanners running. Is everything ready?"

Oh, yes. It's go time. We grab everything and head out, Tamara giving us directions, and find the soldiers in question standing at attention as the regular humans try to filter past and get home before curfew. We only have one shot at this - it has to go perfectly. I try my best to calm myself, taking deep breaths and preparing to face the men that dropped me in the ocean to die.

Charlie pulls the lid off of the bucket he brought and looks at me, all serious.

"Jezebel," he says, "Is this going to be okay? I'm not going to ruin the paint job?"

She insists it's fine, and Charlie dumps the water over me. It reeks like rotting fish. Jezebel carefully drapes some seaweed over me, and everyone steps back to look.

"Magnificent!" Jez yells, and everyone else applauds.

As soon as I step out people start to shy away from me, and as more people see me the street clears. I let one foot drag, and keep my mouth dangling open even though it lets some of the salty ocean water drip in. Finally the soldiers look up and I can see the recognition in their eyes. Pointing a shaking hand at them, I yell my line: "Muuuunh! Guuuuh!"

They're taking it all in; the lurching gait, the grey skin, the rancid water that drips from me as I moan. Let's see how the soldiers deal with a zombie attack. Quickly, they raise their guns and try to fire. Nothing. I guess that means Darryl has been here already. Throwing their weapons aside, they open a compartment in the box behind them and pull out smaller guns. Round after round slams into me, and I can feel my skin stretching from the impact. It doesn't hurt, though, and it's not enough to knock me over.

I'm getting closer, slowly, and I crank the moaning up a notch. Reaching both arms up, I make a strangling gesture even though I'm nowhere near close enough to actually touch them. They look like they want to piss themselves. It's fantastic. They're out of bullets, and one actually throws his gun at me. Hah! A helicopter swings overhead, but I force myself to keep looking

forward. I want to stay in character, mindlessly shambling forward bent on revenge. One of the soldiers breaks and runs, and the other has jumped over the barricade and is preparing to circle around to whatever side I don't go on.

"Grrraugh!" I yell, trying to convey hunger for his tender, unprotected neck-meat.

A military humvee pulls up and they're aiming some huge gun that's mounted on the roof. The soldier trying to avoid me had better hope it's not some sort of flamethrower - I already know I don't burn, but he's close enough to me that he would be a charcoal briquette in two seconds. The gun gives off some sort of high pitched whine and despite myself I have to turn and look. The man behind the weapon pulls some sort of lever, and I get pins and needles all over my body. Immediately there's the bark of a rifle and a searing pain in my chest. I lose my balance, falling backwards to look at the overcast sky. I can't breathe, and everything hurts so much. Each little breath feels like I'm trying to pull a lead brick into my lung. The helicopter drifts into view for a moment and I see the pilot drop screaming from it out of sight.

There's a roof over me now, and I feel weak. Cold. It still hurts, but the pain is... localized, somehow. Someone I don't recognize is standing over me with a scalpel, hands covered in blood. I close my eyes again.

"I can't, do you understand?" he yells. "I can't cut the bullet out, I can't stitch him shut, all I can do is pack gauze in there and wait for him to die! That's it!" I feel him poking uselessly at the edge of my wound with the blade, and then he throws the scalpel in frustration. I hear it bounce off of the wall, and the rest of the room goes quiet. The light in the room changes and a draft blows in, and I hear someone with a nasal voice break the silence. "Fuck! What the hell is this? Where is Mary?"

"She got nabbed trying to reach Tamara after the helicopter went down." The first voice says. "Walter, Eddie, and a few others are trying to get them, but I would be surprised if they didn't execute them as soon as they weren't under attack."

Oh.

I'm too tired to cross my fingers, but I say a little prayer as I fall asleep.

Chapter Eighteen: Growing Pains

Silas Black

After the attack, the betrayal, that whole disaster, I woke up in a hospital as a John Doe - but Agent Ferris won't be able to track me back even that far, let alone to the incident that put me in my coma in the first place. He can look all he wants. I can see that he's trying, and his searches are quite clever. Right now he knows the obvious parts of my seventeen-year career with the feds, plus the names of two of the three politicians I've blackmailed to maintain my position. That information is useless, worthless.

His new strategies, the clever ones, have scored him something that Doyt managed to overlook a hundred times - the name of a surviving scientist that worked on the original experiments. Well, not original... but I'm the only one that knows that. I don't know if that will fill in any blanks for him, but it's a good place to start. Will the good doctor remember that I was still healing from the incident when I arrived? Will Ferris think to look for unclaimed medical records? I'm inclined to think that even with all of the government snooping tools at his disposal that won't be enough to narrow it down.

After I woke up, still injured and confused, I knew that I had failed. Everyone and everything I had worked for, gone. I think I cried then, just lay in the hospital bed and cried like a baby. I felt raw. I was thirty-two years old, and starting life over from scratch. When I calmed down a little, I tried to weigh my options. On paper, I was a non-entity. No social security number, no birth certificate, nothing. That meant I could, in all likelihood, just stay in the hospital and claim amnesia and find out what they do with John Does. The problem was one of responsibility. I had helped to create something terrible, to unleash it on the world. I wasn't sure if it was still filled with energy and growing stronger, or weak as a newborn baby... but either way I had to stop it from causing any more trouble. I knew that wasn't something a John Doe could do.

I snuck out of the hospital without difficulty and started thinking of what leverage was available to me - I had a universe of valuable information, but all of my reference materials were gone and there was so little I could remember off the top of my head. Luckily, I recalled some names associated with up and coming politicians. The names of mistresses, of high priced call girls. If the one I was looking to stop was weakened, it would need the help of other freaks - but this was still nearly two years before Disney and at the time the freaks were still just fantastic ideas out of a comic book. That meant the political angle was best used to have me assigned to a certain top secret research project. It took me less than a year to become Silas Black and attach myself to the lab.

When I was introduced to David, I was speechless. He looked angry, and awkward, and scared. Seeing him was such a shock, even though I had tried to prepare myself. These days everyone is aware of the human experimentation that goes on even if it's not considered polite dinner conversation, and by now I've had thirty-four years to get used to the idea, but this sixteen year old David was still dealing with the fact that he'd been sold into slavery by his government. If ever there was a reason for teenage angst, that would have to be it. But that scowl... I was most surprised to see his mother in it. It's funny, the little traits we pass on or inherit without

knowing. I hadn't thought about her in years... we had never really gotten along, and I only went to her funeral under duress. Most of my memories of her involved a fight, but seeing some trace of her so unexpectedly still threw me for a loop.

The scientist introducing us took my expression to mean that I was bothered by David's age and unwilling participation, and assured me that everything was completely legal and approved of by the government. What a meaningless phrase. He moved on, showing me some other subjects who had gained pathetic abilities. One could oxidize iron, rusting things by staring at them, but it only worked on the outermost layer. Another could increase the surface tension of water, allowing a puddle on the lab table to look like a single giant drop - but he could only hold it for a few seconds. I asked to see the Inducer, to get a clearer explanation of the source of the powers, but there seemed to be limits to my political clout.

Part of me wanted to just burn the lab to the ground, kill the scientists, but I knew that wouldn't stop anything - it would just happen somewhere that I couldn't observe it. Instead I played the part, watched, learned. Waited. Search after search failed to find any of the contacts from my former life - so many people were known only by a nickname or pseudonym. Eventually I was able to locate my friend who had been with me when I was knocked into a coma, but as he had been found dead in a field the same day I was taken to the hospital he wasn't much help. The only connection I had to my former life was David.

I found excuses to talk to him, and I saw that he was becoming depressed due to his lack of an ability. He was a guinea pig, with no freedom or rights, and he wasn't even providing useful test results. I waited until I believed us to be alone, and told him to close his eyes. He sneered at me and flipped me off. Oh, to be a teenager again! I refused to back down, however, and eventually he listened to me. I told him to keep his eyes closed, and to picture looking down at himself. I led him through a meditation, describing a spider's web inside his mind with threads connecting him to everything.

"You, of all people, can do this. You can pull yourself up by your bootstraps, David. Feel the power inside you. The spider web is tangled, disorganized... I need you to reach in, gently, and fix it. One thread at a time."

I saw his brow furrow for a second, and then a look of peaceful concentration took over. We sat there in silence for what seemed like hours before he finally opened his eyes wide and smiled.

"I... I have to try on one of the others." There was an urgency in his voice; he was feeling that incredible rush of having a real ability. I put a hand on his shoulder before he could stand and run out into the hallway.

"David... I need you to do me a favor and not tell anyone about this conversation, do you understand? If anyone asks, you figured it out on your own."

He nodded, and I let him go.

It was careless of me, a stupid risk. If anyone had heard me talking to him they would have wanted to know how I knew he had an ability when none was apparent - even stranger, how I knew what specific ability he had when even now after years of experiments they don't have any clue about how that is determined. I don't know what I would have said, but keeping my

position would have been difficult. I was more careful after that, falling into the role of Silas Black and waiting for the other shoe to drop. Waiting for him to return. In that year between helping David to realize his powers and the day at Disney where the shoe did finally come down I became almost content, and I had fooled myself into thinking that my nemesis was ruined and now existed only as a powerless, bedridden invalid. I fooled myself into thinking I had all the time in the world.

I immersed myself in the experiments as much as the scientists would allow - they were immoral, but not inhumane as they would eventually become. It was fascinating, and I was excited to see David mature and learn more about his abilities. There was a certain amount of jealousy, but nothing to do about it - the Inducer was heavily secured and off limits, and I suspect it wouldn't have done anything for me anyway. Instead I lived vicariously through the others, David in particular. I watched with pride as he hampered or re-directed the abilities of the other test subjects, and tried to ignore that longing, the cold depression that had resided in me since the moment I woke up in the hospital and felt... mundane, impotent. It was for the best, I told myself - after all, I needed to blend in and monitor for the day my lost enemy tried to enlist the help of other freaks. Still, for the best or not, I couldn't ignore the emptiness that filled me when I watched David and knew I would never feel that exhilaration of having an ability again.

Chapter Nineteen: The Price of Beer

Eddie Shorthand

This doesn't feel right. This feels like a trap. When I went into that building with the feds I was in charge, and I could feel Big Dave there just out of sight, like I had the whole bar of backup at my fingers. This feels like the opposite, like we're isolated and surrounded and the military has set some kind of trap that we're marching right into. Dave is puffing along beside me, and that feels like part of the problem. He's not going to be able to hold his own in combat, and with this interference he keeps talking about he can't help me from somewhere safe. That means bringing an extra body into the job that will more than likely have to be carried back out on a stretcher.

Walter, Rodriguez, and Jezebel can hold their own. I'm not worried about them. Slim, the Squid's bouncer, is already helping us just by being here. That freaky little scarecrow is our ticket in. Still, I would feel better about all this if we had some real firepower... that kid I busted out from the Feds could clean this up in a second if he were here, but it seems like nobody sees much of him these days and I can't wait around for him to notice there's a problem. Crazy Ike... well, we'd need a power source for him to do any real damage but honestly I think that an aluminum baseball bat would make Ike more dangerous than Dave or Slim.

We're low on defense, too. Once we blow Slim's cover there's nothing to keep those guns from turning us into ground beef. White should be here, would have been here... but Big Dave ruined that. The two of them have been all over each other since he got back from Mexico, and now he wants me to believe she needs to stay at the Squid in case they hit it while we're out hitting them. I know what he's doing. He has as bad a feeling about this as I do and he wants her somewhere else so she doesn't get killed. I couldn't even argue with him, because he was smart enough to say it in front of everyone and get them in a panic. He knew I wouldn't steal their security blanket when I was already taking Slim. Big Dave seems like this harmless teddy bear to most people, but he's got it in him to be one sinister son of a bitch if he wanted.

Walking past all these soldiers is making me feel more than a little uncomfortable. I know that thanks to Slim they're seeing us as other soldiers or not at all, but he flat-out told us that that wouldn't get us very far. Already they're on alert, we must have triggered a bunch of sensors when we arrived. There's something going on, a search pattern, with radios and detection gear. The screens on their scanners are going to tell them everything is fine, but that only works locally. Someone watching the security cameras should have spotted us by now. We're on borrowed time.

Shit, it looks like I jinxed us. The soldiers are all sweeping towards us, following orders from their radios.

"Stay calm." Slim says. Sure, of course, calm. That's easy.

They're aiming weapons at us, or at least in our general direction, and I feel like we need to do something while we have the element of surprise. In a second they're going to slaughter us and we'll still have our thumbs up our asses.

"Wait for it. Wait." Slim insists, keeping a hand on my arm. He must be able to tell I'm getting antsy... well, he had better have one hell of a plan.

And the shooting starts. The soldiers are laying down heavy fire just to my right, splattering their own friends against the walls. It's chaos, everyone is shooting at everything but us. One of the army guys hoses down three of his pals, yelling "They're deflecting my bullets! I can't hit them!" while another has his friend in a choke hold, hollering that he caught one. Slim's fedora falls off and I can see veins bulging out all over his balding head. He's sweating, straining, and more soldiers are coming to replace the ones that got hit.

"Rodriguez, Walter... cross through that building and follow another path up in case we don't make it. Jez, Dave, get ready to carry Slim because I think he's about to pass out. I'll cover you."

Walter and Rodriguez are gone almost as soon as I stop talking, and I start grabbing guns and bodies and throwing them into anything that's still standing. Sure enough, Slim grunts and drops halfway to the ground before Jez and Big Dave grab him, and all eyes are on us. Way, way too many.

We break and run for cover, and I hold down the trigger on the automatic weapon that flies to me. I'm not used to it, and mostly end up firing into the air or ground, but it buys us a second. I only have one more ace up my sleeve.

"Dave, I need Jezebel's power at range. Now."

That meaty hand clamps down on my skull again, and I can feel it sink right down into my brain like he's playing cat's cradle with Jez and I as the string. If this doesn't work we're all about to die. The soldiers are being careful, circling around into a better firing position - maybe even getting something that can punch through the concrete behind us. I need to wait until I can see them... closer... closer... oh, screw it. I step out as far as I can with Dave's arm on my and start swinging. I can feel as I connect, and watch a soldier thirty feet away go all glassy and topple. They're trying to fire but I'm clipping them too fast - one by one they're falling over or freezing in place.

We're going to do this. It's going to work out. I forgot the incredible rush of linking up, the absolute power that comes from mixing abilities. They can't stand up to this. Nobody can. In a minute it's just going to be a field of statues, as... no. No! I duck back into the doorway we're trying to shelter in and turn to yell at Dave for breaking it off. I had them, I was winning! And then... I see Jezebel. She's staring up at me - through me - without focusing. There's a perfect dark hole in her forehead, and a spray of red on the wall she had been standing against. Slim is still passed out, and Dave is staring at me like a lost puppy. Like I'm supposed to know what to do.

The gunfire stops, and I hear screaming. I risk a look and Walter is there in his alien-looking crystallized armor, barbed spikes throwing the last non-petrified soldiers aside. I grab Slim with my telekinesis and run towards Walter, Dave in tow. He looks past us at Jezebel's feet, dangling into the road, and then follows. Just a little further down they're getting a vehicle prepared to move something - something important, if it's worth moving during an attack. Some burly MPs are hauling Mary and Tamara out of the building, but they see us and stop. I'm a sitting duck, out here in the open, and I doubt Walter's armor protects worth crap against anything more powerful

than a .22 or a kitchen knife. We scatter as the bullets hit around us, and I end up separated from the others. I crouch behind a Jeep, trying to peek out. I don't see any bodies in the street, that's a start. They're focusing fire on Walter, who I can't even see. Shards of ectoplasm are flying into view like a cloud, he must be spinning a shield as fast as they blow it away. Nobody is looking at me, but I don't have a shot.

"We don't know if we can hold this position," one yells, "kill the prisoners so they can't escape if they take us down."

I can't stop it. There's nothing I can do. If I attack them they'll kill me, and Slim, and they'll still be able to shoot Mary and Tamara. They're at least fifty feet away, I don't even have that kind of range. I tried my best, but hopeless is hopeless. Two of the MPs are holding Mary by her arms, and a third pulls a gun and walks over to her. Sorry, Mary. I don't think you'll be able to heal a headshot. He's about to pull the trigger when Dave comes barreling towards him, weaponless, at top speed. That dumb son of a bitch. Round after round hits him and his momentum almost gets him there. Almost. He goes face down and he's breathing, but just barely.

Is that what I'm supposed to do? Throw my life away like an idiot just on principle? Forget that. I'll admit it, I'm selfish. I'm not the kind of guy who wants to die for his cause - I wanted the feds to die for my cause, and I wanted Franklin dead partly for that and partly for personal reasons, and... well, if I'm honest about it I rescued Tamara and Walter as much for the free beer the story would get me as for anything else. Is that so much to ask? A pat on the back, a bunch of free drinks? I never wanted to be a folk hero as a full time job. I've got a clear path to the exit if I move fast and stay alert, there's no way I'm going to risk that. I never promised them anything, that big bad fed-smashing hero thing was a one-time deal.

The soldier is turning back towards Mary, who is trying to reach a foot towards Dave. He's reaching too, barely. He can't reach, not even close. Even if he could, what good would it do?

But his brain really is devious.

Damn it.

I charge out, reaching with my mind. Ten feet. Fifteen. I shove Dave towards Mary right as the bullets start tearing into me, but it only hurts for an instant.

Chapter Twenty: Nightmares

Darryl Holst

I know I'm dreaming, but it feels so real. I'm at Disneyland, looking up at the castle. It's beautiful, just like in the pictures. It feels right, somehow. This is where I'm supposed to be. There are clouds overhead just like in Los Angeles, but here the clouds are... wrong. They're moving like living things, twisting and reaching like clawed arms. It's probably symbolic of something, but I'll be damned if I know what. Apart from the clouds everything is frozen, paused. Peaceful. There are families wearing mouse-ear hats and smiling as they walk hand in hand. There's a cart selling churros.

I've had this dream before, and I think I know why. This is where everything started, where the world went wrong. This is what did the damage. Everything after this point is just collateral damage. If there was something I could do that did as much good as the attack on Disney did harm... then maybe the world would go back to normal. Whatever normal is.

I was born into this world, almost at the same time it happened. I've grown up knowing that something is wrong, that things used to be better. I've spent my life looking at pictures of Disneyland and wanting to go there. I need to do more than wish or dream, I need to use my ability to do something. Maybe I can make everyone lose their powers somehow. Maybe I can give powers to everyone. Maybe I can... I don't know, do something so great that everyone will decide we're super heroes. Like Spider Man.

I can recognize faces in the silent crowd. I see my mother and father, and the men I've killed, and the ones I couldn't save. All of them are smiling and happy. I know that's just the dream talking, that there's no way for me to actually make all of that better, but it gives me hope anyway. It's like there's some ray of light coming through the clouds. I need... help. I need to find someone I can talk to, start spending my time in the real world. I need to work things out and plan for the future. The past is over, but I can make the world better tomorrow.

"That's not what you decide."

The voice comes from behind me. I turn, and see that all of the faces in the crowd are mine. Younger, older, male, female.

"The past is over? Not for the people you killed. Not for the ones you left to die."

No matter which way I turn it's from somewhere behind me. Every time I turn around the crowd is a little closer, though they don't seem to move.

"You owe them more than that. Try again."

I will myself to wake up.

"A better tomorrow? They'll all still be dead tomorrow, Darryl."

The crowd wearing my face is pressed right up against me now, and the smiles are gone.

Someone is watching from the shadows. I can catch glimpses of him moving between the sea of identical glaring faces. I'm not waking up for some reason.

"This is just a dream. I'm going to wake up now."

"You can hear me, can't you Darryl? That's fascinating. That makes this whole thing much, much easier. Let me tell you what you need to do to repent for your sins. To make everything better."

I still can't wake up, and I can't see his face. This is stupid, it's just a dream and I should be in control. I concentrate on the buildings behind the crowd. The buildings are there, solid, brighter than life - and the plaza in front of them is empty. It's just the buildings and me, nothing else. I allow my gaze to wander and see that it seems to have worked - all of the copies of me are gone. I've never been to the real Disneyland, of course, so this landscape must just be cobbled together out of pictures and my imagination. Even so, something feels out of place. Something isn't where it's supposed to be.

"Stop ignoring me, Darryl. This is a unique opportunity for both of us."

The voice is coming from inside a ride. There's a building with a smiling frog standing next to a little car, right near the carousel. Something is moving in the window.

"Don't listen to him, Darryl." This voice is from across the way, in another ride. "This is just a dream. Just wake up, and go talk to your friends at the bar. Buy Franklin a beer and talk to him." I've heard that name thrown around, but I'm not sure why it would be in my dream. Then again, nobody ever said dreams have to make sense.

The first one, in the frog ride, makes a hissing noise. "Franklin is dead."

"David then. Go talk to Big Dave."

I start backing away from the building, towards the carousel, and back up against something. That feeling that something is wrong, out of place, gets stronger. I turn and there's a raised pedestal that I know should have a sword in it. The Extractor is there instead.

I'm awake.

I'm in my room, my little sealed auto shop fortress. I feel stiff, sore, and tired. If I didn't know better I would think a truck ran me over. I want to go back to sleep, but I don't want to dream any more. I don't want to do anything, lately. That feeling from my dream is still hanging over me; I feel like something is out of place, and like someone is watching me. I'm getting used to the paranoia, actually. It's starting to feel normal.

This other feeling, though... I know nothing has changed while I was sleeping; I'm the only person in the world that's not on pause. Still, something seems off. I'm used to absolute silence, and I can't help but think I can hear a slight noise at the edge of my awareness. The clock is frozen in place, second hand motionless. It's just my imagination. I stand, groaning, and change clothes. Resisting the urge to check on the Extractor, I open the door... no. The auto shop is too dark. With the clouds always overhead it's hard to gauge the time of day, but I know it was brighter when I went to sleep. Stepping back into the room, I smack the wall clock with the back of my hand. The second hand marches forward a few steps before twitching fitfully and stopping. It's out of batteries.

How could this have happened? Did I turn it off in my sleep, or did it just slip away from me? How long have I been wasting time in this stupid room? I have to get to the Squid right now and get caught up on everything. I have no idea what I might have missed. I rush out onto the street

the second the room is sealed and head for the bar. I pass some bright green fliers on the way, more than ever before. They're from some pro-freak group, regular citizens of Los Angeles that are tired of seeing the city turned into a war zone and blame the government rather than us. It would be reassuring if I thought it would lead anywhere, but the news that comes out of southern California is only what the government wants.

I get to the squid and I can tell that something is wrong. Everyone looks miserable, it's quiet and grim. Charlie is in a cot in one corner with his leg bandaged, and someone else is covered with a sheet. What the hell is going on?

"They tried to hit the military base, poor bastards." Someone says. I strain to listen over the mumbling and I pick out a little of the conversation.

"Dave and the others were all killed, they got dumped in the park two blocks down. Nobody wants to go get them because they think it's a trap, they'll just rot there."

Oh god. I could have helped. I could have done something. I storm over to the bar and grab a beer - the bartender was an early casualty but Eddie "found" a semi truck loaded with six-packs. I start nursing it and looking around at the disaster, trying to think what I can do. Too late for Dave, too late for whoever is under the sheet. For whoever else is laying in the park.

White sits down next to me. She looks like death warmed over. Of course she does; I understand it's recent but as long as I've known her she's been staying as close to Dave as possible. Even having already lost some friends it must be tearing her apart to say goodbye to Big Dave.

"Emily... I'm so sorry." It sounds so weak, but there's nothing I could say to comfort her.

"It wasn't your fault. They thought nothing could hurt Michael, they wouldn't have bothered asking you to come along anyway." She takes a long pull from her beer and sighs. "When Dave gets back with Mary she can heal Charlie, though, so that's something."

"I thought Dave was..." She fixes me with a stare that could bore through iron, and I stop mid-sentence. She doesn't know. Nobody has told her yet.

"What? Dave is what?"

"I... I just heard that he... that none of them made it. That they were dumped in the park."

She stares at nothing, and finishes off her beer. "He's still there?" Her voice is calm. Cold.

"They think that it's a trap, that..." before I can finish she stands and storms out of the bar.

She won't want me with her, but I should go ahead of her and clear the way of any traps or soldiers. Something tells me I should finish my beer first. It won't hurt to have a little buzz, and I'll beat her to the park anyway. I grab a second one for the road and step outside, and I'm about to freeze time when I'm thrown forward into the brick wall in front of me. A wave of heat washes over me and I frantically try to stop everything so I can get my bearings. It isn't working; it's still too loud.

No. The sound is in my head.

It's a rushing, ringing noise. I can barely think it's so loud. I pull myself to my feet slowly, and turn to see a magnificent fireball frozen in the air. Behind that, barely visible, is a thin streak of cloud - the trail from a missile.

Chapter Twenty-One: Plan 'H'

Tamara Allen

I should have had more of a plan, but there was just no way to anticipate them shooting Michael. Nothing has ever hurt him. I acted on impulse, flew up and threw the soldiers out of the helicopter and then tried to take the controls. I thought I might be able to aim the crash; I knew I wouldn't be able to do much, but it seemed reasonable to think that I could at least point it away from my friends and then fly out the open door.

It turns out that helicopters can crash faster than they can fall. It's very sudden, and very disorienting. I flew for the opening as everything spun around me, and then just as I reached it the door frame seemed to lurch out at me and hit me on the head. Then there was the explosion, and people screaming, and a hood was pulled over my head. I pulled free and tried to fly away but went straight into the ground, and then they had me. At the base, when I heard the alarms, I knew that the others were coming to rescue me and I tried to stay calm but between the concussion and the memories of last time they had me locked up I could barely breathe.

They dragged us outside, Mary and I, and we watched in complete helplessness as Big Dave charged forward and was mowed down. It seemed so pointless. Eddie lunged out next and I had the briefest flash of everyone I knew running forward, one by one, to be killed. Eddie swung an arm, and Dave's body skidded along the concrete leaving a red smear behind him. That was when the guards started to howl. It wasn't screaming, it was this unnatural mournful noise that froze my spine. I looked down and Dave, barely breathing, was hanging onto Mary's outstretched foot. He had her by the big toe.

Her other bare foot had swung up to lay alongside the head of the one with the gun, the one that had been preparing to execute her. All three of the soldiers touching her were writhing, and the guards let go of her - she dropped to the ground, keeping her hands on them and balancing on the one foot Dave was clutching. The soldier's skin seemed to shimmer with sweat that ran red and then black as skin sloughed off in sheets. The howl turned into a gurgle and finally they collapsed on the ground, still twitching. The two that had me seemed to be frozen in terror, and as they snapped out of it Mary caught one by the hand. The other let go of me to draw his weapon, and I swung the edge of my hand as hard as I could at his throat.

I was rewarded with the horrible feeling of something giving way, and he fell too. I kicked the gun away from him just as two soldiers who had been shooting at a shell Walter had thrown up turned to fire on us. The very second they turned, Walter leapt through the shell like it was air and impaled both men on jagged amber spikes. It all happened in the space of a few seconds, with Mary's guards still dying noisily as Walter threw the others aside. Mary, meanwhile, was running to Eddie. I reached down to Dave and tried to help him up, but instead found myself on the ground with him. My head was absolutely killing me, and my legs were so tired - I can't really remember the last time I used them for this long. Dave stood and hauled me to my feet, and for a second I stood mesmerized by the bloody holes in his shirt. Talk about your close calls.

I looked around and saw that Mary was standing up, and Eddie... wasn't. Even from thirty feet

away I can see that there was too much damage. So now I'm alive and Eddie is dead. I guess I need to focus on the present, get out of this place.

Walter runs off, vanishes down an alley between buildings. I start to fly after him but stumble - on air, on nothing - and bounce off of the concrete. Mary clucks her tongue and I feel a foot on my head, warm peaceful waves rippling through my body. It's like a lead veil has been pulled off. I drift up and look at Dave and Mary.

"Where the hell is Walter going?"

They clearly don't know. Even if I was willing to abandon Walter - which I'm not - I can't carry Dave and Mary at the same time. Or... maybe I can, but not high and not fast.

Dave tenses a second before I hear it - people are moving all around us. I can see them, crouching in doorways and lining up behind obstacles. There have to be thirty of them, all armed. They're taking it slow, making sure we're surrounded. As soon as we move we're going to be dead. Eddie just got himself killed so I could be free for about thirty seconds. Dave looks lost in thought, he's trying to come up with a plan I'm sure. Mary just looks tired. The soldiers, what I can see of them, look scared. Scared but determined. What are they waiting for?

A jeep rumbles forward, with... of course. They've brought that weapon that knocked out Michael's powers. They aren't taking any chances, they want us as weak as possible when they start shooting. Maybe I should try to fly while I still can; it's a suicide move for sure but so is staying, and if I'm carrying Mary there's a chance she can heal me as I get shot so that only a headshot will be a problem. Maybe. It's better odds than nothing.

"HOLD YOUR FIRE!"

The voice rings out from the edge of sight, and as people move to make way I see one of the most incredible things in the world. Walter and Rodriguez, carrying Lieutenant General Herman, mouthpiece of the actions in Los Angeles. Walter is doing all the carrying, and Rodriguez is following behind. They march right up to us, putting themselves and the Lieutenant General in the line of fire.

Rodriguez, that magnificent bastard, is holding a four way lug wrench through Lieutenant General Herman's head the same way he might pass his hand through a wall.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the United States Armed Forces," he says with a smirk, "I would like you to notice that I am holding something inside your fearless leader's head. If that device of yours works like I believe it does, firing it will guarantee that I am no longer able to pass through any solid objects. I assure you, the lug wrench will still be in his head. Do we understand each other?"

Guns are drooping slightly. Nobody wants to kill a high ranking officer. Or, more accurately if I know anything about how the world works, they very much want to kill a high ranking officer but don't want to be responsible for it. How long can we do this? Do we just walk out, with all these people following us, waiting for us to mess up or fall asleep? Something whispers, right in front of us.

"I'm so sorry, you guys." It's... Slim? "I'm usually passive, making people explain me away... forcing them all to see something so specific was just too much. Are you guys ready to get out

of here?" The voice is coming from a reflection, from some dust, from an angle formed by cracks in the concrete that might look like a person if I squinted just right. Dave taps me on the shoulder.

"Tamara... can you provide some lift? Just as much as you can, I know you can't fly us all out." The soldiers look confused, they're moving back and forth and tilting their heads. Slim must be shielding us all. We close in for a group hug, ectoplasm wrapping around us, and I try to lift. Nothing is happening, of course. Dave whispers again, calm and soothing.

"Walter... like we discussed. Go."

Tendrils of flattened ectoplasm, like streamers, reach out and start fluttering in the air. They begin to spin in a circle around us, around and down, twirling and vanishing and reappearing. I can feel something reach into my mind, and suddenly those translucent golden fronds are a part of me, extensions of my body. They lift, and flap, and spin, and my flight pushes from each and every one of them. And we're airborne. As the wind joins us the surface area shifts and turns like flaps and wings on a plane, and even with only a little thrust I find I can move us in and out of air currents and speed us along. The city races along below us and I start to steer towards the Squid.

I'm lowering down, planning to land us a few blocks away in case we're being tracked, when I feel a brick wall slam into me, pass through me and leave me hollow and cold as if my soul has been pulled out. The ectoplasm is gone, instantly, and we're falling. I don't have time to react before I hit a tree and a branch slaps hard into my solar plexus, knocking the breath out of me. I tip backwards and clip another branch on the way down, landing on my back in grass. I can already hear people yelling something - "They landed over there!"

Oh, lord, this just isn't going to end. I lift my head and look around, and can see the others sprawled nearby. We're in the park near the Squid. I can't fly, can barely move, but I crawl over to the others. Mary is up and helping Slim to his feet, when the stuttering bark of assault rifles shatter the relative silence and both of them jerk around for a moment before tumbling down in a bloody heap. Not Mary. Anyone but her. The soldiers are charging closer and I drop prone. I can see Dave rolling behind the trunk of a tree. Walter runs in a crouch for a few feet before a spray of red erupts from his arm and he falls. I can feel a strange tingle somewhere deep inside me that might be my ability returning, but it's not fast enough. I won't make it.

The soldiers are here, bursting through the trees, and as they pull the triggers bullets ricochet off of thin air. Emily White steps out of the trees with a look of absolute fury on her face, and something happens that I've never seen her do before - that she probably never knew she was capable of. The barely visible wall of force curves away from her, sending the bouncing bullets back towards their source. The soldiers yell and stop firing, but Emily keeps going. The field becomes easier to see as it flickers blue, encasing a soldier for an instant before vanishing and appearing around another. Each one falls to the ground, crushed. She's screaming at them, cursing, and as the last soldier tries to run he bounces off of the air in front of him and turns just in time to see Emily pick up a rifle and hold down the trigger.

Now I can see she's crying. She turns towards me and, swallowing to keep back sobs, asks me,

"Where is his body?"

I don't know who she's talking about. Slim's body is here, but Emily barely knows him. She wouldn't even know about the Lieutenant General - still laying at an awkward angle with his head propped up by the lug wrench. Suddenly she stops, staring, as Dave stands up and starts walking towards her. They meet in the middle at a full run, and nearly crush each other in a hug that doesn't seem to be ending any time soon.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Doctor Toht Grants an Interview

Doctor Arnold Toht

Does Mister Black know that you are here, agent Ferris? No? I think you'll find that you are mistaken about that. Mister Black is fallible, but he protects his investments. Oh, agent Ferris. I do appreciate that you insist on looking me in the eye but I assure you that it is not necessary. There is no need for us to beat around the bush on this - I am obviously disfigured in a truly spectacular way. A reminder of my responsibilities.

How impatient you are! No, as a matter of fact we will not be "getting down to business" as you suggest. Your questions will be answered when - or should I say, if - I decide to get around to it. I have no doubt that your research has shown that I am already dead, but let me also reassure you that I would not be overly concerned for this to become the truth. I am only alive now because Mister Black made me promise to hang on until after this altercation between the so-called freaks and the military.

An excellent question, agent Ferris, and one that I am more than happy to answer. No, I have not spoken to Mister Black in quite some time. He knew that the current situation would arise, or at least feared that it would. Mister Black is playing a different game from you and I, one that started years before our laboratory ever discovered the source of the freaks' powers. I understand it ended badly for him. No, agent Ferris. I don't know details.

When he arrived I knew instantly that he was hiding something, that he knew more than he let on. In the beginning I believed that he was playing stupid, but in time I saw that the truth was far stranger; he knew certain things about our operation in detail and was completely ignorant when it came to others. I should have turned him in, but I told myself that he might be a plant from my superiors there to observe. Better to know who is spying on you than to wonder. That's what I told myself. Not what I believed. What I believed, and what I still believe, is that agent Black was from a rival program - but if I turned him in I would never get to learn what he knew. I was spying on the spy.

He was ignorant of the technical details, and so that is what I deprived him of. I made sure he had latitude in all other areas so that I could watch what direction he went, what interested him. Would you like to know what interested Mister Black, agent Ferris? Looking for freaks. In the wild. Before the attack that destroyed Disney, when there was not a single documented freak that had spontaneously appeared, Mister Black was searching for them. I already knew where one was, the one he was most frantically trying to locate, but I said nothing. My mistake.

Oh, agent Ferris. I'm disappointed in you. Do you really think I would reveal everything that easily when I'm clearly enjoying dragging this out? Patience is a virtue.

We had some failures, early on, but by the time Mister Black joined us the Inducer was working and the lab had seven successful test subjects. Now, having seen what a fully functional ability looks like you might not call what we had success stories, but at the time it was very exciting. The first was a man... I forget his name, Percival or something similar, who gained the

incredible power to generate heat. To a layman, it seems almost natural to envision a pyrokinetic generating flames in the air. Percival - I've resolved to call him Percival, agent Ferris, although I feel certain I will remember that his actual name was something else entirely- Percival could generate heat but could not protect himself from it. In essence, he had the miraculous ability to give himself third-degree burns.

Percival, unsurprisingly, did not consider this to be a success at all. But oh, agent Ferris, how amazing it was! The heat came from nowhere. Nowhere at all. You have seen, I'm sure, the flyers from the group of concerned citizens that believe the freaks should be used in a constructive way rather than persecuted. I see that sneer, agent Ferris, and I understand that you have been trained to think of them as monsters. Maybe they are. That being said, the right... assortment... of powers could solve most problems that our country faces. Free energy, healing rare diseases, developing otherwise impossible technologies or materials. Fear them all you want, agent Ferris, but your people are out hunting down and destroying our country's greatest national resource.

Where was I? No, that's not what I was talking about at all and I'm not likely to answer that question no matter how long you wait. I was talking about our early successes. Another was a woman who generated a terrible, terrible smell. That was it, the entire ability. This rancid, burning odor that I imagine I can still smell sometimes. When Mister Black fixed David, however, they...

Oh, yes. Mister Black tried to keep it a secret and the boy swore up and down that he figured it out on his own, but I had them under surveillance. He knew exactly how David's power worked before the boy himself did, and he talked him through fixing and improving it. I never told anyone.

Oh, please. I don't need you judging me. Do you think I care whether or not you approve of my actions?

At any rate, after that point David helped the other test subjects. As he explained it to me, he could only permanently alter abilities the first time - to repair what he saw as damage from the inducer. After that he could twist them somewhat, but only while touching the test subject. He altered that horrible smell into something more floral, thank god, and allowed Percival - no, Herschel! Ah, that was going to bother me all day. He allowed Herschel to direct the heat outwards properly. After that he was able to cook things other than his palms, though they remained burned until slightly before his death.

They all died, agent Ferris. Everyone except myself, Mister Black, and David Brunner. And then I died too, on paper. The... incident... started in our laboratory, and destroyed most of it. My colleagues were all killed, our equipment destroyed. Only a few items in my workshop were left intact; I understand your agency still has my two prototype Extractors, for example. I never did get to test them out, since I refused to use them on anyone that was not already dying. Mister Black told me some time ago that your boys found a science team with fewer morals to get in their way. They wouldn't let him get a look at the research, however. Smart boys - I feel

confident saying that Black would have destroyed the Extractors the minute you left him alone with them.

He wanted to see the Inducer so badly, and I think he would have destroyed that as well. Oh, if only we still had that beautiful device. Hooked directly to the source, funneling power into test subjects and making them something more, something better. We had nearly figured it out at the end; we even got another freak working properly. A real, useable power. Healing. As a matter of fact, I had him - Timothy Wells - cure a nasty case of ringworm I had developed. He fixed Herschel's burns, healed some of the disabled soldiers that had volunteered. Everything was perfect for three days.

You would think that, wouldn't you? You're wrong, of course. Mister Black had nothing to do with the attack. He could have even prevented it, had I been honest with him. I tried to tell him that afterwards, tried to persuade him to just be honest and tell everyone his story, but he wouldn't listen. He still won't tell anyone what he's actually doing. He should at least tell David. Yes, I know about Black and Brunner. I was able to obtain a DNA sample and compare them, as a matter of fact. You mean to tell me that you know what it showed? Oh, how clever you are! Yes, that would explain at least half of it. You're missing a rather large piece of the puzzle, however. That's okay, agent Ferris. I'm missing parts too.

Timothy was the one that caused the attack, as it happened. A test subject had suffered a bad reaction to the Inducer and I called Wells in to heal him. The test subject was still hooked up to the device and when he was healed... there was some... overflow. Bleed-through. I saw what was happening too late, and by time I pulled Timothy off the warning lights were already flashing. The wall seemed to melt though there was no heat, and then the test subject that had been hooked to the Inducer melted as well. I ran, through the door and into the main hall, and then an explosion knocked me out and - as you can see - nearly killed me.

Black was standing over me when I awoke, demanding to know what had happened. There were bodies everywhere, and the walls were torn apart or reduced to liquid. I was honest with him for the first time, because I knew that if there was any hope of containing the disaster it was with him. I told him the source had escaped. He was confused - he thought that we had been pulling energy from some mysterious field or by tapping into another dimension. Maybe that's how he had done it before he came to us. I don't suppose I'll ever know. When I told him what only a handful of people have ever had clearance to be told, that the source was a human kept in a perpetual coma, he nearly killed me. The man he had been using our resources to hunt for had been under his nose the entire time.

Mister Black knew the source. He had worked with him, possibly created him. He followed the source to Disneyland that day to destroy him, I'm sure, but the explosion didn't satisfy him. Black survived, after all - most likely because he is somehow immune to the radiation that caused all the damage. He came to me afterwards and told me that the threat was not over, that freaks would begin appearing outside of the lab. He knew.

I'm tired, agent Ferris. I won't be answering any more questions for you. Let me just leave you

with this thought: the United States government has never truly had a program to study the freaks. We have always been studying the side effects of Mister Black's earlier research. Following behind, trying to piece things together from the few breadcrumbs that have fallen. When the time comes that Mister Black tells you to do something, agent Ferris, I would suggest you do it.

Now leave.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Ignorance is Bliss

Emily White

My name is Emily White, and while I won't be aware of this until the last second I'll be dead in less than twenty-four hours - like everyone else lately. I don't know the names of everyone that was inside the Laughing Squid when it was hit because the majority of them were from Phoenix or Las Vegas, but I know that Charlie was still inside, and Jane, and Pudge, and Todd. Maybe Francis. Jezebel and Eddie were left behind at the base, Slim and Mary are laying in a walk-in freezer. The bodies just seem to pile up these days. Tomorrow morning I'll be just another one of the casualties.

So it goes.

I heard the missile strike while I headed towards the park, but I had no idea what it was until we got back and saw the soldiers sweeping the area. Ten years ago - God, I'm old - I was staying with a bunch of my deadbeat friends and living off of ramen noodles and stolen prescription medicine. Nobody owned the house; everyone was staying there because they knew someone else who stayed there, and after enough people came and went it was clear that the original owners were long gone. Still, it was home. One day someone fell asleep with a lit cigarette or possibly just lit something on fire for no reason, and the house burned to the ground with at least one person inside. Seeing the Laughing Squid brought that moment back so vividly that it felt like I was there.

Darryl was next to me without warning and on reflex my fist snapped forward and connected with his nose. There was a familiar crunch and he fell backwards, vanishing halfway down and reappearing to my right. He had blood on his shirt and two black eyes, but he had cleaned his face up.

"Darryl! I'm so sorry." He shrugged and waved me away dismissively, and walked into the Laundromat a few doors down. We all followed without a word and headed into an employee only area at the back. Walter was walking on crystalline crutches, keeping his injured leg up.

The problem had always been one of communication. Everything was monitored, and encryption was a joke because even with unbreakable codes the government only needed to find a way to intercept it before encryption or after decoding. They always found a way. There was even some program that detected the use of code phrases in conversation with some degree of success - probably we could have found a way to trick that but nobody liked the idea of testing it. For two months the plan had just been for everyone to meet at the Laughing Squid and coordinate.

We all knew it was a bad plan. Dave talked about finding a better way and we all agreed but somehow didn't get around to it. The topic of conversation there in the back of the laundromat stuck to all the ideas that had never been implemented and avoided talking about the burning wreckage of the Squid. Most of the ideas had to be set up before a disaster, so we didn't get far. We each knew a few addresses, but as we compared notes we realized they were all locals and we all seemed to know the same ones. Worse, we couldn't avoid the long pauses where we

carefully didn't mention knowing Eddie's address, or Jezebel's.

Rodriguez snorted. "You know what? I'm sick of this. It's not going to end, okay? Let's just admit that and say what needs to be said. We don't need to contact anyone; we just need to kill every god damned soldier in the city. Darryl has been marching around and stealing firing pins when he could have been shooting. I know, before we wanted to act like there was some chance of working things out and coming to a truce... but that's not happening now. Do it, Darryl. Just clean house."

Darryl was shaking his head, and rocking back and forth a little. He didn't look well.

"I can't," he said, "I can't do it. I've tried, I've pointed guns at them a hundred times, but..."

Darryl takes a deep breath, shaking, and then continues. "If I act, people die. If I don't act, people die. There has to be something I can do that just... fixes things."

Even Rodriguez was quiet, though I know he wanted to tell Darryl to grow up. There wasn't anyone there who didn't want to just make a wish and have everything be happy, but it was a fairy tale. I hated to be the one to burst the kid's bubble.

"Darryl... if you want to work on some plan that lets us do this without killing anyone, I respect that. I do. But those soldiers out there... they aren't on that plan. They're killing us. You have the opportunity to keep them from killing any more of our friends, and I'm begging you to take it. You can't fix anything if you're dead, understand?"

He seemed to glaze over, staring at the wall. His eyes were watery, on the verge of tears, and then he vanished with a sound of thunder.

"Was that... gunfire?"

We all ran outside and back to the street corner, and saw that all of the soldiers were on the ground. At the time, we wondered if it had happened all throughout the city. We pictured all of them being gone, cleared out in an instant. Of course, later we would find out it was nothing like that, that only a fraction of them were hit before Darryl couldn't take the pressure of the executions and ran off somewhere to hide.

It was a few hours later that the announcement went out calling for the curfew to be extended to a full lockdown, in light of the Lieutenant General being found in the park. Nobody was to leave their homes for any reason. This included all of Orange County as well as most of Los Angeles and San Diego counties and big chunks of San Bernardino and Riverside. It had mixed results - another riot, a lot of people sneaking out anyway, and slightly quieter streets. We tried to sneak around anyway, tried to contact the others and find Darryl. That had mixed results too. No Darryl, but word worked its way around to wait for a signal. Of some sort. In the meantime all the freaks that were able started to take out soldiers with a renewed fury. The soldiers took them out too. Most I didn't know.

I spent those hours in a horrible little motel with Dave. I don't know how long I've had a crush on him, but a few times lately I've thought that I lost him and each time it somehow refined my feelings, purified them until I know I can't live without him. I don't know it yet, but that won't be a concern. I convinced him to join me in the bedroom and took his mind off of things for a bit, but the second it was over and we were laying there staring at the ceiling both of us went back to

those thoughts.

"Emily?" he asked. I had been pretending to sleep, badly. I grunted an acknowledgement.

"I've been thinking about what Darryl said. How does this end? If we kill every single soldier in the city, then what? Do we think that the government will just fold over and let us go because they're afraid of us? We need to find something that's not just reacting back and forth. You know what I mean?"

"Yes, sweetheart, but I left my magic wand in my other pants."

There was a knock at the door before he could answer, and we both rolled out of bed and grabbed guns. I looked through the peephole after tossing up a shield and saw Darryl, dragging a large chest behind him. I opened the door and let him in, feeling self-conscious at the fact that I was in my underwear. I shouldn't have worried; he walked past me in a daze. "I'm sorry I couldn't shoot them all. I'm so sorry."

Dave put a hand on his shoulder while I looked around for the sweatpants that I had shoplifted earlier.

"It's not your fault. That was a really big job to drop on you. What... what's in the box?"

Darryl looked nervous. "It's stupid, I think I'm just getting paranoid or something, but I feel like someone wants to steal this. I have a better idea for it, though. Much better. I just need your help. I know a guy... I mean, a way. A plan. I know a way to actually do something and make some real progress. You just have to trust me. Oh, also there are government guys outside."

I bolted to the window and flattened myself against the wall so I could peek out. There, in the street, was an armored vehicle with four soldiers tied up outside it.

"I listened in and heard them talking," Darryl continued, "and they were guessing there was five of you. You have a few guys here in the same building?"

Dave nodded, walking over to join me at the window. "Yeah. Next room over, we've got Walter and Ike and some guy Ike vouched for. So they can find us now, even in Los Angeles?"

Darryl sat on the bed and stared at the chest he had dragged in. "I overheard enough. That's how they got the Squid, so I guess it's good news at least that nobody tipped them off. It sounds like it's only working with at least four or five people in one spot, so we need to travel in small groups. It doesn't matter, though. I have the plan now, we won't have to worry about them anymore."

And then Darryl told us his plan, the one that will start to go wrong almost as soon as we take the first step and will be well on its way to disaster when I die. There probably isn't a plan that ends better for us at this point, though. Best to just not think too much about it.

Chapter Twenty-Four: On a Need to Know Basis

Agent Ferris

I disarm the main alarm system easily, as well as the separate and more subtle alarm system that I wasn't supposed to see. Another, smaller alarm goes in its place - this one linked to the phone in my pocket. If Black comes home unexpectedly I'll have enough warning to duck out the back and avoid a difficult confrontation. I'm not here on official business, so if he wants to he can even shoot me on sight and tell the police he thought I was robbing the house. Police? What the hell am I talking about? Right now it's the National Guard or nothing, and they're a little overwhelmed.

The rooms are fairly sparse and impersonal. I scan the walls as I go, looking for a safe or hidden compartment, but everything seems normal. Normal is the last thing I expected here. The kitchen looks like it's never been used, and the refrigerator just has the stereotypical Chinese take-out cartons. It almost feels staged, but I know this is his house. I head into the bedroom and immediately something registers - there's a metal object behind a painting. Really, Black? A wall safe behind a painting? Still, there are no alarms or anything attached to it so I might as well.

The lock is electronic, and it's one that I have the government code for - a requirement on all new safes. There's only one thing inside, a manila envelope. I reach in, and -

- I'm on the floor, with spots floating across my vision. Oh god, there was some sort of tazer in the safe. I've pissed myself. The envelope is laying next to me, and against my better judgment I open it. There's a photograph inside, a close-up of my face with a moustache and goatee drawn on. Of course. I take far too long to stand, but eventually get upright. It's been a long time since I was tazed. It's clear this isn't going to get me anything if he already knew I was coming, I should just put the picture back and get the hell out of here. I slide the photograph back, replace the envelope, and close the safe.

"Leaving so soon, Ferris?"

I don't react. I think I don't react. I turn slowly, trying to look calm, and of course he's right there in the doorway. Just as I'm congratulating myself on being so cool and in control I remember about the urine dripping down my leg. He can probably smell it. Worse, I bet he won't say anything about it. It would be somehow better if he rubbed my face in it, stuck to immature taunts. Black can be immature, but I know in this case he's going to act like I just stopped by for tea because he wants me to feel stupid.

"You did a good job on the alarm systems - the ones that you found, I mean. Not bad at all. I think most agents would have found the second one, but the notification I received was triggered by the third alarm rather than a clumsy disabling of the second. That's an important distinction." He pauses, but I can't think of anything to say so I just glare at him. "Well, then. I'm going to duck into the next room and make myself a drink. There's a change of clothes in your size hanging in the bathroom, feel free to put them on and join me." He walks out and closes the door behind him. I thought I hated Black before.

I go ahead and change clothes. What am I supposed to do, defy him by walking around in wet pants?

When I get out to the living room Black has taken a seat on the couch and is sipping on something clear in a crystal tumbler. He gestures towards a set of bottles and glasses but I sit in a chair opposite him without taking anything. I'm trying to suppress the nagging feeling that the alcohol wasn't there when I was searching just a few minutes ago, but I probably just don't remember because I was focused on finding Black's files. Probably.

"Do you know what this is, Ferris? This is a party. A very exclusive one. It was going to be just myself, in fact, but when I realized you would be crashing it I was overjoyed. I'm vain, and much like Doctor Toht who I know you've just spoken to I like to hear myself talk."

Oh, good. I get to listen to more inane monologues and vague hints at some supposed conspiracy. That's just what I wanted from my day. "Fine, Black. I'll humor you. Do your best Bond villain impression and ramble on about your master plan."

He feigns offense, and then takes a breath as if to speak - but instead it turns into a sigh and his face falls. "I don't have one, Ferris. Right now my master plan is to get very, very drunk and hope that we survive the next few hours. At dawn tomorrow if I wake up at all I will set about making a new plan, one that will start with leaving the United States entirely and then shedding this identity like a snake sheds its skin. Maybe I'll be a goatherd somewhere, who knows?"

"David is your son." It's not a question. I'm sick and tired of the cryptic comments and I want to get some of this out in the open. Black smiles.

"My last name, as you have guessed, is Brunner. It's been a long time since I answered to it, however. I thought about telling David so many times, explaining the situation to him, but my position in the government was important and I couldn't risk it. Any other revelations you'd like to share, agent?"

"You knew the freak that destroyed Disney. Personally."

He nods, and then empties his drink. "I did. Yes. I helped to make him what he was, and then I fought him, and he won. He... destroyed everything and everyone I knew, my entire life. He was injured, worse than me, and your people found him. He was the basis for the line of research that created David, although I have reason to believe you would have stumbled across that energy one way or another even if I had managed to kill him.

It's so strange to just be told things like this. I've been suspecting it all, and Doctor Toht filled in some of the blanks, but I never believed Black would admit to it.

"Who were you working for? How did you make him?"

Black laughs. "Well, 'how' is a question for later, if ever. As for the who, I can tell you that we weren't exactly friendly with the United States government. In fact, I have some scars I can show you if you get me drunk. Yes, Ferris, I'm the enemy. A traitor, a double agent. Feel free to arrest me at any time. I've hated working for you people, you know that? Every day it makes me sick to my stomach but I've done it all the same just to keep history from repeating itself. I will not allow the event at Disneyland to be re-created."

"Is it the same freak? Is he still out there?"

Black shrugs. "...no. No, I think he's really gone now. He required some very specific... assistance... in order to gain that power again, and that shouldn't be possible with Darryl Holst and Franklin Reese dead. We should be safe. Still, I plan on being very drunk tonight just in case. Tonight is when he was going to act, you know. Tonight or tomorrow."

Black is refilling his drink, and I reach for the bottle before he can cap it. I tilt it back and taste Whiskey burning down the back of my throat. He raises one eyebrow at me, clearly thinking I'm making an attempt to bait him in some way. I wish I was. I wish this was just some mind game. "Black... how bad would it be if Darryl Holst were still alive? If he were the John Doe that escaped from the facility?"

Black closes his eyes, seems to sink into a meditation. After a moment he opens them again. "Agent Ferris, there were three freaks that I was actively tracking. David, Darryl, and Franklin. All three were reported dead. We know now that David was faking his death, and you tell me that Darryl's execution was a lie meant to... pacify me, I suppose. That leaves me with only one question to ask. I know that I watched Franklin Reese die on a live video feed, but... is he somehow alive?"

I take another shot of whiskey. Black is going to murder me, he's going to kill me right here and bury my body in the back yard. "The team that shot him... had some men in position prior to the shooting. Before his body was cold they rushed in and were able to successfully Extract it." Black is shaking, veins lifting off of his forehead. "The team arrived back at the facility during Eddie's attack, and their vehicle was stolen by Walter Schwarz and Darryl Holst. The Extractor is currently unaccounted for."

Black stands up and walks towards the door. He pauses with his hand on the door knob and stares back at me; he looks old, tired. "Agent Ferris, I am only going to say this once. One wrong move right now will almost certainly result in nothing less than the end of the world. This is not an exaggeration. You are going to come with me, and we will find and kill Darryl Holst as quickly as possible - if you attempt to involve the National Guard in this endeavor they will be certain to make everything worse by taking control and provoking the freaks into acting sooner than they otherwise would. Nobody will believe me but you, and nobody will believe you but me." He walks out the door, and the phone in my pocket vibrates. The alarm. Of course.

I don't know what to do. I hate Black, I hate that everything terrible that has happened since the first freak appeared might be his fault. He's an admitted traitor and liar and terrorist. And he's right. Besides, I can always call for backup later; if I do it now, Black will cut me off and I'll never know where he's taking me. I take one last swig of the whiskey. "To the end of the world," I toast.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Walter Passes On

Walter Schwarz

It's a game of telephone, passing the message on from freak to freak. When I was a kid the danger was that someone would deliberately mangle the message. In this case, the risk is the same one that would come with real phone lines - it might be tapped. There are too many new freaks in the city, and no way to tell if any are working for the government. In addition to that, there's the added danger that the military is tracking our movements, letting us lead them right to the doorsteps of everyone we know.

Oh, and I think the gunshot wound in my leg is infected. Just to make this a perfect day.

When White came over from next door and told us the bad news we stepped into her room to discuss. We weren't sure how long we had before more soldiers would show up, but we didn't want to just scatter. I nearly had a heart attack when I walked in, though - Dave had Darryl laying on a bed with the Extractor clamped to his chest. My pulse slowed down a little when I saw the metal spike had been removed, but I still had to fight an instinctive urge to throw Dave aside and smash the Extractor into pieces. Something told me that would be a bad idea, despite how satisfying it sounded.

"I know what I'm doing," Dave said. "This is almost exactly like the Inducer that doctor Toht had back when... well, the point is that other than the power source being different this is a pretty familiar device."

Ike and his pal Joe had come in behind me and were staring. Dave must have realized he hadn't answered anything at all, and he shrugged. "I didn't get my ability like you guys. I got it before Disney, in a lab. From something like this. I helped them do it to other people too, because I can... fix it. It's hard to explain."

He hunkered down over it again, and then started typing on the tiny screen set into the back. Almost immediately he started swearing and hammering the buttons again, then slid off of the bed and sat on the floor panting.

"Okay, so I have some more bad news."

The plan, as it was explained to me, was to give Darryl a dose of Franklin's powers. His big limitation was that once he stopped time he had to head out on foot, and not only was it physically demanding for him but he had decided that spending all that time alone was messing with his head. If he could stop time and teleport, though, it would solve that problem as well as another one - he was sick with guilt over killing soldiers. He figured he would be able to just teleport them, one by one, to somewhere harmless but inconvenient. Maybe the top of a mesa in Monument Valley or something. That way he wouldn't be killing anyone but it would be such a colossal pain in the ass that something would have to give. He could also organize protests in an instant, move all of us to another city whenever things got hot, or - if push comes to shove - kidnap the President. Of course, that plan started to look shaky when Dave turned on the Extractor and saw... something. He's always been able to see things the rest of us can't; it's part of his power. He would get a buzz on sometimes and just lean back in his chair, watching the air over our heads. What he saw this time was some sort of spike in the... energy... of the room.

He said he was pretty sure whatever the military was using to track us would see it like a flare, and the Extractor would take at least an hour to use. I figured Dave would come up with a plan - Dave and Eddie seemed to be the two creative ones - but of all people it was Crazy Ike. The plan, not surprisingly, was crazy.

"It's not crazy," he said. "It's... well, crazy, sure. Whatever. But it will work. And we only need it for an hour, right? Look, my boy GI Joe here came into town with the army. He knows how they've been setting this stuff up."

We all backed away from Joe as soon as Ike said that. White slipped over to Dave so she could shield him, and I got ready to spin a blade out of ectoplasm. Dave... squinted.

"He's... he's legit. I can't vouch for him as far as character but he's got an actual power. Not a ringer or something."

The four of us all let our breath out at once, as Ike insisted that he could vouch for the guy. Apparently the two of them had been tearing up checkpoints for days. That meant Dave had no choice but to approve, because we were already on borrowed time. Darryl packed up that hideous crab-thing and vanished, Big Dave and White headed down to steal a car, Crazy Ike and GI Joe ran down the street, and I hobbled towards downtown.

I've passed the message on to five other freaks so far, and now I can see the door of the sixth and final one. The lockdown is mostly being obeyed in this neighborhood so I feel exposed even hiding in these bushes. Out in front of the house - a dingy little ranch style with a car rotting in the yard - there's a van that I don't like the looks of. It's sitting way too low, and even though it's dirty with patches of primer grey the tires are new and nothing looks dented or damaged. I'm guessing this means there are at least four freaks inside the building. If I knew which ones, or had any way of contacting them, this would be a lot easier.

I could try to envelop the entire van and suffocate them, but that might not work very well. I could try to sneak around the back of the house to warn whoever is inside, but the people in the van would almost certainly get me before I reached the door. I could leave. I don't really like any of these plans. I need a way to be in control, to have the element of surprise. A frontal assault would probably meet those criteria. Then again, it would also get me killed. I would prefer not to be killed.

A helicopter, nearly silent, sweeps overhead - I duck further into the bush as it float over the house for a moment. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end for a moment and my cast goes all mushy - just for a second. That damn ability-draining gun. Of course. The doors of the van fly open and five soldiers pile out with guns at the ready. They're heading right for the front door and don't see me coming at a full run - using one of my own legs and one made from ectoplasm.

I grab the closest soldier as a shield and run another through just as the helicopter starts firing. They have to stop almost as soon as they start to avoid hitting their own men, and the noise must have alerted the freaks in the house even if they didn't feel their powers fail. If that chopper can use that thing again to disable me it's all over, so I'm counting on it having a recharge delay. I'm also counting on the soldiers not just shooting me through their friend, which isn't always a safe

bet like you would hope.

Still, standing around does nothing but give them a chance to turn this around and kill me. I swing a whip at the next-closest soldier who manages to step clear, but I wrap it around the barrel of his rifle. Excellent. That's mine now. I pull, and - shit! One of the other two shoots and splatters the tentacle that was holding the rifle, while the other circles around behind me. No problem, I can do this. I lash out and clip one - not a killing blow, but it sends him onto his back. The one I'm holding as hostage is squirming, but I can't dedicate much attention to him right now. The helicopter is overhead, which can't be a good sign at all.

A worse sign is when the other soldiers throw themselves to the ground. I've missed something, I've left myself open somehow.

Boom.

Shards of ectoplasm tear through my midsection and fly out the far side as I bounce along the asphalt. There's smoke in the air, but I can see one of the soldiers helping the one I had hostage up - the guy's hand looks mangled, and the back of his outfit is black. The son of a bitch managed to weasel a grenade between us and set it off. Most of the explosion went outwards, some was deflected by his armored jacket. My shirt was just cotton. Damn.

I'm watching them, waiting for one to come over and finish me off, when the bouncer from the Drowned Spider comes running out of the house with an aluminum baseball bat. The soldier turns at exactly the right time to catch the tip of the bat with his face instead of his helmet, and actually lifts up off of the ground. The world crawls in slow motion as he arcs up and back, droplets of blood trailing behind. I snake out a tendril, barely keeping it steady, and drag a rifle over as the bouncer rushes another guy and actually jabs his fingers Three Stooges-style into his eyes. Someone else raises a gun to shoot the bouncer in the back but I'm on it - I hose him down and then aim up at the chopper for a second before passing out.

I'm in the back seat of a car, with two people I don't recognize. The bouncer and one other guy is in the front. I'm not going to make it, I can tell. I can barely feel my body, and my vision is dark around the edges. Just one thing to do.

"Listen... Listen. They can find us in groups. Split up, no more than three at a time. Two to be safe. Pass this along to anyone else you know. In two hours there's going to be a blackout, and the military security systems are going to get sabotaged. You'll have maybe an hour. We're meeting where they can't find us. The only place. Dave will tell you what to do once you get there. Just... just get to Disneyland and everything will be okay."

Shame I'll be missing the show.

Chapter Twenty-Six: You've Just Knocked Out Power to Most of Southern California. What Are You Going to Do Now?

David Brunner

The government never needed to wall off Disneyland; nobody would have dared to set foot in it anyway. I can see parts of it reaching up towards the clouds that blanket Anaheim even with Pudge gone, crooked black fingers like I would expect from a mix of Walter and Ike's powers. Actually, I should try that some time. For years I was embarrassed of my ability, embarrassed by the fact that I had used it to help the government. I almost never used it, and only a few times did I dare to try mixing powers. Now that they're looking to me as a leader I've done it more times than I can count - mostly just as a scientific interest, not even in combat. I told them I wanted to know my options, but in reality I was playing.

It's not a game anymore, not even a little. There's no time for me to relax, not a single second I can afford to be doing anything that's not focused on surviving. I need this plan to work. I need Darryl to be the one we've been waiting for, the one that can just... fix everything. Instantaneous teleportation - no violence, and no way to stop it. We'll even use it to solve some of the world's problems, make people see us as more than weapons. Sooner or later they'll come around. Emily and I will get married, and we'll raise kids in a world that... well, that maybe still fears us a little - I'm not expecting a miracle - but hopefully respects us, too.

Emily checks her watch. "Any time now, hon. Are you sure this is the place?"

I nod and continue pacing. This is the place, all right. Between Manchester Avenue and the I-5. I noticed the damaged area of wall six months ago but they haven't fixed it, just set up a camera nearby. Unless I'm confused we should end up on the tracks used by the little cars - just at the edge of Tomorrow Land. Over the center of the park I can just make out something like the aurora borealis, visible to only me. It's hypnotic. The light doesn't reflect off of anything, so the crumbling peak of the Matterhorn is black even when those waving ribbons of energy overlap it.

Suddenly the orange glow of the city lights winks out. There's a crash from across the way as the camera guarding our entrance drops to the ground in pieces. That would be Darryl. All through Los Angeles and the surrounding cities Ike's friends and a mob of normal humans are disabling scanning devices - and to make things more interesting GI Joe just crashed the closest power plant. Others hooked to the grid will try to compensate, but there were already rolling blackouts with everything working properly so I'm not expecting to see the street lights come back on today. They'll have to pick and choose where to investigate. If they pick Disney first we're screwed, but Joe and Ike seem to think they won't. It's not a "strategically important location". After all, what are we going to do? Trash the place?

I kiss Emily, and then think that was maybe the wrong thing to do. It feels like I was kissing her for luck, or in case we don't make it across the street. I need to be confident right now. This will work. It has to. We run across the street and the crack in the wall is right where I remembered. It's not a hole, but it makes an excellent hand-hold for us to climb up. I try to offer Emily a hand but she's up and over without any apparent effort. I start hauling myself up and immediately I'm sweating and cursing my fingers that pinch together in the crack. I really need to get in better

shape if I'm going to make a habit of this. I come over the other side completely gracelessly, landing hard on my side and twisting my ankle. Smooth. Emily helps me up and we make our way down the hill onto the concrete tracks.

My ankle starts to feel better after a few steps, so it's not sprained. For the first time I really look around, and something is wrong. Everything is too perfect. The trees and bushes should be either dead or overgrown, but they're neither. I reach up to touch a branch and my hand sinks in - it's like jelly. I recoil but there's no residue left on me; even so, I feel like I need to wash my hand. We make it to the other side and climb out into Tomorrow Land, and the illusion of perfection vanishes. Here, everything looks burnt. Black, like the towers of the castle visible from outside. There are drifts of bodies in the corners, mounds of black with a few horrifyingly recognizable parts sticking out. I try not to look as we press on.

We reach the center and pass into the shadow of the castle. It's smaller than I remember. The space underneath it is cluttered with fallen beams and debris. We press through and past the carousel, to what looks like a blackened mouth gaping in a low hill. I'm not sure what it was before the incident, it really does look like it's rimmed with pointy teeth the size of my head. Well, maybe Emily's head. Curving past that in search of the place we agreed to meet something catches my eye and I point it out to Emily. "Hey. The happiest payphones on earth." She looks at me quizzically. Yeah, it sounded funnier in my head.

There's a shallow depression that looks like it might have been a lake at some point. A fish on a wheel sticks out of the ground - I guess it was meant to turn and look like the fish was jumping. I don't remember this part of the park at all. There's a circular hole in the hill on the other side of the dry pond, and as we scramble into it I see Darryl on the other side. He's staring at a stand of trees that are... preserved... like the ones we saw when we entered.

"Dave. Emily. Are you... ready to get started?" That's the million dollar question, for sure. I'm not, of course, but it doesn't seem likely that I ever will be. It's already been fifteen minutes since we hopped the wall, so hopefully everyone else that's coming is already inside. It might have been safer to keep everyone scattered, but if this doesn't work we'll need a new plan and we may not get another chance to coordinate.

"Darryl, the rumor is that most people don't live through this. They lose their minds, or have some sort of physical reaction to it. You understand? I can't promise that this won't kill you."

He smiles at me. "I trust you, David. Your plans always work out in the end."

"This... this was your plan. Not mine."

He looks confused for a second, and then waves at me dismissively. "Right, of course it was. But it's fine, it will all work out just fine."

I'm worried about him. He's aged noticeably since I met him, and he's been acting strangely. I don't know that he'll be able to handle having this kind of power. Then again, I don't think anyone could. I have to believe it's mostly just stress, and he'll be better once things are going our way again. Once this war is over.

I hear someone coming, and see a few friendly faces. None of them exactly heavy firepower, but every little bit helps. This spot sounded like a good idea, and it was for the three of us, but I'm

realizing that with these others we'll be visible from the air - just what we wanted to avoid. Emily can see what I'm thinking.

"I've never been to Disney. Is there somewhere... underground?"

Oh, yes. As a matter of fact there is. "Everyone? To Pirates!"

We climb out of the hole and start walking again, and... wait. I turn and point out someone at random.

"You. What can you do?" She looks startled, and glances around to make sure it's her I'm talking to.

"Oh. I can turn water into acid. Just water though, it needs to be mostly pure. Can that help?"

It can't, which is perfect. "I need you to stay there in that hole and point any others that get here to Pirates of the Caribbean. Can you do that?"

She nods so fast it looks like her head is going to fall off.

The archway in front of Pirates is collapsed, as is the front of the building. I know there's another way in, though... I circle around the side to the Blue Bayou restaurant and find it largely intact. We head in and the scrawny bearded man behind me lifts up his hand. Cool blue light fills the room and we see that the water is all gone, leaving the track exposed. The track curves around and slopes down, and we follow it down some steps and past a boat filled with desiccated corpses. I'm tempted to stop the others from pilfering the fake gold coins as we pass them - it seems disrespectful somehow - but I let it go. Hell, I wanted those as a kid too. I climb up onto the platform and shove a pirate skeleton aside to clear a space on a bed that looks more than a little out of place in the fake cave. "Okay, Darryl. Lie down."

I busy myself with getting the Extractor ready as the others start setting up lookouts. I take a deep breath and start it up, seeing a swirl of energy blossom around it. Just a matter of time now, and... coaxing. I can see what's happening, inside Darryl and yet somewhere else entirely. It's like thread weaving itself into a pattern, and every so often it misses a stitch and I have to push it back into alignment. Emily is watching me closely, though there's not really anything for her to see.

"You've really done this before?"

I nod.

"What happened? How did you get away from them?"

Oh, the memories. "The one that destroyed this place... he hit the lab I was in first. He tore the place to pieces, killed almost everyone. At first, I was excited. I thought I would be able to escape in the confusion and be free, be just a normal kid again and forget the experiments they had done on me. I stood there staring at the ragged hole in the wall and I... I was too afraid. I was scared to be out on my own, and scared that I wouldn't be able to use my ability anymore. That I wouldn't get to feel that rush. And then agent Black got back, and... he told me to go for it. He told me to be brave, to run out of the lab and never look back. And that's what I did."

Chapter Twenty-Seven: More Than a Clever Nickname

David Brunner

I know they call me Crazy Ike, but I'm not crazy. I wouldn't ever cause trouble for my pals when everything we have is at stake, right?

I guess that maybe, just maybe, it was a little bit my fault. Just partly, you know? I was in a hurry to get to Disneyland, there was no way I was going to get left out when it was my brilliant plan to begin with, and with the lights out it was a little hard to see. I could have turned on the headlights, yeah. Fair point. At the time I thought that would draw attention to me, because I thought that with the curfew and everything the streets would be clear. See, it seemed like I would be able to drive as fast as I wanted and nobody would see me. Headlights would just get in the way.

So, yes, I ran over some soldiers.

Just a few of them.

I might have swerved towards them a little, but I'm pretty sure they had already seen me at that point anyway. So that part was just reasonable more than anything. What else was I supposed to do?

Anyway, after that it devolved into a kind of chase. The problem was that the helicopter was black and way quieter than anything like that has a right to be and so I had to keep looking out the window and upwards to see it. It's hard to steer that way, you know? So... okay, yes, I hit some more stuff. At that point it didn't really make things worse. Well, it made the truck worse. You know, just enough so that I couldn't drive it. I got out and took the assault rifle from the seat next to me - which incidentally hadn't been on the seat when I started driving - and I headed out on foot. Figured I would lead the helicopter astray or something, right?

I don't know how I ended up in Disneyland.

I wouldn't have done it, really. I knew what that would risk, there was no way that I would ever do that to my friends. I just got turned around somehow. See, there was a vehicle coming and I stepped out to flag it down so I could steal it. Of course, it turned out to be a big army humvee. That maybe should have been something I expected because of the lockdown. Still, easy mistake. I'm only human, right? So they start shooting and I start shooting and I'm clearly outgunned. I'd love to open a can of whup-ass on them, but I don't have a power source so I have to stick to bullets.

It was a total overreaction of them to fire that thing at me, you know? It was some sort of anti-tank weapon, when I'm pretty sure a good old fashioned bullet would have done the trick fine if those guys had been able to hit the broad side of a barn. They took out a wall, and there was a lot of crap on fire and I thought, hey, I could use that. So I headed over to the hole and pulled in the flames and sent it all back at the soldiers as a big axe-thing. It was a beauty, you

know? Took them out no problem but the helicopter was shooting at me, something high caliber too - no way I'm going to let myself get hit by one of those things.

So I duck through the hole, right, and already I can hear more vehicles pulling up. They must have been in the area. Is that my fault? No. I mean, I'm not the guy who told them where to do their stupid patrol. So I head away and I guess it's about then that I realize I'm in Disney. That's what the wall was. I felt like an ass, I promise, but I was even going to turn myself in to make them think it was all over so they would leave. I was ready to do that for my friends, you know? That's when someone deeper in the park takes a shot at the helicopter. Damn good shot, too, some sort of beam of energy that knocks it right out of the air.

Smooth move, right? So then they need to go in. Not my fault, at all. Mostly.

After that the shooting started for real, and more of them started coming.

I'm holed up pretty good in the upper floor of some shop, hosing down the troops as they run past. I can hear sounds of fighting everywhere around me. Bullets start ripping through the wall next to me, so I decide it's maybe time for a new spot. I climb up onto the roof, where there's a lot of stage lights and shit. I run back and drop off the far side into... Adventure land, I think. Hell, it's been twenty years since I've been to this place and it looked a little different, you know? I tackle some schmuck that was dumb enough to forget the buddy system and take his gun. He tries to grab it back but just snags the barrel, which doesn't work well for him since it just makes me point it straight at him. Pop pop, problem solved.

I head a little further in to where there's some sort of temple thing off to my left. Looks like a good strong position for a siege, but that's not my style. I'm more into hunting, you know? Like I called them or something more pile around the corner, and from the other side come a bunch of freaks. I don't know most of them but it's not hard to tell that they aren't with the army, right? Someone starts slinging fire and I grab her. "Pump that shit into me. Now." She doesn't even argue - must know who I am. Full of juice, I start tearing the place apart. I love that part.

The flames curl around me for a second as the girl falls with a pretty bad bullet wound. Shit, back to the gun. I hate not being able to use my mojo. Someone is throwing the army guys around like rag dolls, and so I circle around behind and start shooting from the other side. Let's see how they like being surrounded. Of course, the problem with surrounding a whole big group with two guys is that as soon as one of them falls down it's over. A grenade lands behind me, and I've got nowhere to go - not in the time I've got, you know?

The shrapnel does a number on me but the heat just turns into spikes that I send into the crowd. I do a little damage, anyway. Someone is standing over me, trying to help me up. I didn't even know that I had fallen down in the first place. He drags me off to the side and down a slope into a ravine with some old steam-boat looking things.

"Grenade, huh Ike? That's what got Walter, too."

It's the bouncer from the Spider. Francis. "Hey. Yeah. It's cheating, if you ask me. Hey, you

can't, like, make fire or anything, can you?" he shakes his head. Right, he... vibrates shit. Ugh. I'm sitting here bleeding to death and nobody can toss me any fuel. Stupid. Francis brightens up all of a sudden, and runs off towards the fighting. What, abandoning me? Shit.

I prop myself up and army crawl up to where I can see some, and start squeezing off shots. Not doing a lot of good, you know? Still, it's better than nothing. I see a few more freaks get taken down. They aren't equipped for this. They aren't trained, and half of them have powers that aren't meant for combat. Francis reappears out of nowhere, hands me a coffee can with a fuse. "What the fuck is this?"

He says it's thermite, home-made. Burns hotter than lava, he says. Hotter than anything on earth. Sounds lovely. I pull out my lighter and ignite the fuse, then crouch down and hold the coffee can close to my chest and thighs. I hope this works.

Oh, yeah. Fuck yeah.

I'm in a ball around that blazing heart of fire, it's beating in rhythm with mine and feeding me the sweetest fuel ever. It's nearly liquid but I don't need to stand. I march forward on legs of black energy, looking like a spider, and tear into them. They're shooting back but they keep hitting the arms or legs or whatever they are instead of firing at my actual body. Okay, yes, a few hit. But none in the head. That's all that matters for now, you know? They fall back and I speed up to overtake them, I pile right into a squad of them as they turn the corner and tear them apart.

I don't know for how long. A second, a minute, a lifetime. It feels so good. I'm a force of nature. When it burns out finally I'm alone in a wide plaza. There are bodies everywhere, some soldiers and some freaks. I'm the only one standing. Okay, yes, I'm actually laying down. I'll probably be dead in a minute, sure. But he who laughs last, you know?

Chapter Twenty-Eight: For Want of the Kingdom, a Nail Was Lost

Silas Black

We're already past the wall when the military arrives. I shoot Ferris a look, but he looks as surprised as I am. I can't let this happen again.

I hate being here in person, it's bad enough that I see it in my nightmares whenever I sleep. We try to come out through the backstage area and into Splash Mountain, but the exit is blocked by bodies. Wonderful. We head back into backstage and start to circle around to another entrance, but I'm feeling more and more certain that I'm not going to live through this. There should be a way to go from here directly into Pirates. I know that's where they are. It's just a question of the best way to approach this - I need to get all the way to David if I want to be able to stop this disaster from unfolding.

The last time I was here, sixteen years ago, I came in over a wall and scrambled along the rooftops of Main Street. I saw people literally crushing each other to reach the exit, strollers discarded on the sidewalk with screaming children still strapped in. I could barely breathe. The clouds were rolling in towards the center of the park in concentric circles, ripples in reverse converging on a flickering cascade of lightning. Waves of energy would lash out from nowhere and whatever they struck exploded, or turned to stone, or launched into the air. They passed through me without any effect.

I dropped down and slowed to a walk as I reached the castle. I had no one backing me up. I wasn't sure where agent Mackey was, or the few other survivors - and I didn't care. I knew they wouldn't be able to help. Of course, I was fairly sure that I wouldn't be able to help either. What do you do to stop someone who is very nearly a god? I already knew shooting him wouldn't work, and since he had stripped me of my ability that was all I had. Talking to him hadn't gotten me much the time before, aside from a trip to the hospital and a few scars. I was running towards my death.

That's what I'm doing now too, of course. I'm going to be shot on sight by the military, and blasted into dust by the freaks. If I'm really lucky I'll get to live long enough to see the world end. Ferris has his gun in one hand and his badge in the other, though I doubt the soldiers will give it a second look. We're not supposed to be here, and that makes us targets. I should probably just ditch him; I only brought him along to get me past the security here at Disneyland so that I could confront Darryl and David without alerting the military. Clearly that part isn't going according to the plan.

We turn the corner and the entrance to Pirates is there - as is a freak standing guard. Ferris and I level our weapons at her, but she doesn't look concerned. I rack my brains but can't remember her name, if I ever knew it. I certainly don't remember her ability. Will she just bounce the bullets back at us if we shoot? I'd rather not try. I lower my gun.

"My name is Silas Black, and I need to speak to Big Dave immediately. David or Emily can vouch for me - Emily is still alive, isn't she?"

The woman looks us up and down, slowly. I gesture for Ferris to lower his gun, but he keeps it

pointed at her.

"Ferris, if you continue to point that at her I'll be forced to kill you myself. I'm not joking."

He lowers the gun. Good boy. The woman holds up a single finger as if telling us to wait, and then goes inside.

"And now, Ferris... we wait. Praying is optional."

On that horrible day sixteen years ago, I remember making the same choice and holstering my weapon. No weapon would ever be enough. I walked closer to the castle, in plain sight, watching as that monster hovered in the air. He saw me as I approached and drifted downwards, smiling. Smiling.

"Hello, old friend! I'm excited to see you here! Will our other partner be joining us?"

"No. He's dead, about two years back."

The smile vanished for a moment, but it seemed more like gesture to be polite than actual sadness.

"I'm sorry. It would be good to have someone else from the old crew around."

I felt so powerless. I had to make small talk, while innocent people were dying around me.

"You can't do this. Look around you! You're murdering everyone!"

He did look around, then. It was like he was seeing it for the first time. His forehead wrinkled as he thought.

"No. This is right. This is... this is how it needs to happen. You'll see."

It was hopeless.

"Don't look so sad. This is all just... temporary. I can feel the energy flowing into me, and soon I'll be able to do anything. I'll work with others, as I create them. I saw young David back at the lab, as I was passing through. I'll recruit him as well, and I promise I'll take good care of him. Together we'll build a better world."

It was then that I knew what I had to do. No matter how much damage he would do, it seemed leaving him alive was the more dangerous option.

"Prove it," I said. "Fix this place right now. Heal all those people you've killed, repair the buildings. You can do anything, right? This isn't so much to ask."

It was stupid. The oldest, weakest trick in the book. Bet the genie he can't fit in that little bottle. There was no way that anyone could actually fall for a stupid trick like that.

"Fine," he said.

And the rest was history.

The door opens, and I'm looking at Emily White. "Hello, dear."

She smiles at me. "You're the one that let me go when the feds caught me last year. None of my friends believed me. David tells me you know each other?"

Oh, yes. I nod and hand her my gun, and she leads the two of us into the Pirates of the Caribbean ride. It's a shock to my system, seeing it again. I know he's here somewhere, the one that caused all this devastation. He's waiting to get his power again. Last time I provoked him into destroying everything around him, but something tells me that won't be enough now. The

time before that I tried to deprive him of the tools he needed, and instead he tore my powers away. The time before that... this never seems to end. Never will end, unless I end it.

I turn the corner and see the all-too familiar scene. It's all playing out like it did before, and I get to watch. Here goes nothing.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same

Darryl Holst

The Extractor is heavy on my chest, but I can something happening to me. It's going to work, I know it will. Everything is going to be okay.

"Until you die." Nobody said that. It's fine. Dave is smiling as he works, I can tell we're almost done now. Just a little longer. I'll have the ability to fix it all, stop all the fighting. The Extractor beeps, and David places a hand on my shoulder to keep me from standing. "Not yet. Let me make sure it's all... lined up. Don't try to use any powers, do you understand?" I nod. There's no need to rush.

"Dave?" Emily is coming back, with some suits in tow. I recognize one of them, but I can't place him.

"Emily... ah. Agent Black. Long time no see. Are you here to negotiate our surrender?" He laughs. "No! Lord no, David. I daresay I wouldn't be able to do anything for you no matter how nicely I asked. I need to talk to you about what you are doing right now, with Darryl there. It's very important."

Where do I know him from? This is important. I've seen him.

"You can't stop me, Black. This needs to happen. And you've brought the wrong person with you if you want to make friends - last time I saw baby-face here he was trying to infiltrate the Drowned Spider."

The other one, the one Dave called baby face, steps forward. "Listen to your father, David. The one who destroyed Disney is still alive, he's waiting nearby to use you."

"My father? What the hell are you talking about? I remember my father, it's not agent Black." Black laughs again. "Sorry, that's my fault. He got this into his head and I just let him believe it." Baby face looks confused, or angry. "What? Are you kidding me? I've seen the pictures! I talked to Toht!"

He's waving his arms around like a crazy person, and suddenly there's a gunshot. Emily drops backwards and hits the floor and baby face spins to face me. It happens so fast. I couldn't stop it. Can I use my powers? Is it safe? He's going to shoot me, I have to do something. Dave can't move, he's in shock just staring at Emily. I want to tell him it's okay, that we can fix this. Even this. He's going to pull the trigger, I have to do something... but Dave is still holding on and it won't work. Something won't work right. There's a shot, and baby-face drops with a look of shock on his face. Black steps over him, fires again. And again. And again. He unloads the clip and keeps pulling the trigger after it's just clicking. I would swear he wasn't even holding a gun a minute ago.

Dave still hasn't moved. I don't know what to do. I start trying to use my ability again, and I can feel that it's changed. Grown. It's something more than the sum of its parts.

"Do it. Now." No. No, it's not right. Not yet. Black drops his gun, collapses to his knees. The shots and yelling is closer now, somewhere in the building. I can smell what's left of Disney burning. When Dave finally speaks his voice is barely more than a whisper. "Is this... what you came to do, Black?"

"David. I'm... I'm so sorry. This wasn't meant to happen. I need you to listen to me, to

understand what you're doing. Please."

David looks at me. "Darryl... you're ready. Whenever you want, you can leave. Get started on the plan. Just leave me here when you do. I'm not going to leave."

"For the love of god, David! You don't know what you're doing! Just listen to me. Please."

David steps down to stand next to Emily, and takes a gun from her hand. "Talk." He presses the gun against Black's temple. "Go ahead. Say whatever you want. But when the soldiers get here I'm going to pull this trigger. Nothing you say will change that."

I know where I've seen him before. It all clicks at once. "David, no. Don't trust him! He... he tried to kill me. He shot at me on my way home, the day the feds found me. He's here to kill us. You can't listen to him!"

"Yes, I tried to kill you. I know what you are. Ferris... was confused. The one who destroyed Disney is here, but not in the way he meant. It's you, Darryl. You did all this."

He's lying, of course. It's absurd. I've had dreams lately, dreams of tearing the sky open and... and nothing. They're just dreams.

"David," he continues, "Of course I'm not your father. But it's more complicated than that... I'm you. A you that might have been, that was. This has all happened before - I don't know how many times. Darryl isn't going to teleport anywhere - he's going to travel back in time."

So maybe he's not lying. I had my suspicions, a strange feeling that I would be able to reach into the past, but it was only minutes ago that I understood it was real. Within our grasp. My grasp.

"When I was younger, there was no agent Black. I followed Darryl to Disneyland, I confronted him, and I tried to stop him. Something went wrong, and... I don't fully understand. Between us, we damaged some barrier that allowed this energy to leak through. It destroyed Disney, and left only myself alive. When I was your age, I fought against the government in the same way that you did. Franklin would teleport Ike to a strategic location, and then Pudge would hit him with lightning. That was my plan. We had help from Darryl, though we didn't know his name; everyone just called him Freeze Frame. In the end, we were cornered here in Disney and the interference from government jammers and the rift overhead kept Franklin from teleporting. I linked them, searching for a way out, and... Darryl felt what he could do. Until then I hadn't known, hadn't understood, but as soon as he said he could travel through time I knew who he was.

"I fought him, tried to pull away, but he had already tapped into something more powerful than either of us and he turned my own power against me. He stole it. When the soldiers burst in - like they will any minute now - he panicked and fled back in time, pulling me and Franklin along with him. Franklin was killed, but I survived and searched for him. I vowed to never let it happen again, but... there's something larger at work here, David. Something terrible. Do you see what's happening? There shouldn't be any way for this to be happening. You can either change the past or you can't. There's no in-between. Why would everything be happening just like before if we truly have free will? How is it I can change things but the results are the same?"

David slams Black behind the ear with the butt of the gun and knocks him to the ground.

"Darryl... is this true?"

I might as well be honest. "Yeah. Yeah, it is. It's the only way to fix things, Dave. Anything else I do won't bring them back. The people I killed, the ones that died at Disney. Emily. Think of Emily, Dave."

He nods. "Yeah. What about the part where nothing changes?"

"It only has to change once. Do you want the change to be that the story ends here, or that Disneyland never gets destroyed?"

Black is watching the door as Dave comes back to stand next to me. "How many times has this conversation played out, David? I tried to break the cycle before, all that Darryl had to do was avoid Disneyland. That would have done it. But guess what? He went straight there. Maybe he went there to stop it, maybe he had good intentions, but I don't think so. I think some sick force of destiny made him do it. We can't stop it except head on, David. Disney will be destroyed every time. The conflict will escalate every time. Emily will die. Every time. I won't watch her die again, David. I won't do it."

"Do it. Now. You don't listen to them." Nobody says.

A voice echoes through the cavern. It says to surrender, says that all of the freaks in the park are dead. I would say it was a bluff except that the gunfire has stopped. Dave looks at me and squints, like he does when he's looking at an ability.

"Don't try to stop me, Dave."

He smiles at me. "I won't. I'm going to help you. Relax, we'll do it right this time."

Black charges forward, desperate, ready to kill me with his bare hands. David reaches inside my mind.

And the world ends.

Chapter Thirty: Peer Pressure

David Brunner

There's a field somewhere in Southern California where the body of Darryl Holst appears like magic. Abracadabra. His heart beats once, twice, and then is still. A moment ago I was in a pirate's cave, staring at an older version of myself. It got me thinking.

When Black - I'll have to keep thinking of him as Black to prevent confusion - said that agent Ferris was wrong, he didn't see the truth. It was right there in front of him. When I looked at Darryl I could see millions of threads streaming away from him, and some were going... elsewhere. Not in any real direction. That's where I am now.

"You're not supposed to be here. This doesn't happen."

It's hard to say where that voice is coming from. It's not even a real sound, I don't think. It's Darryl's voice, but that hardly narrows it down - I'm surrounded by a sea of Darryls, all frozen in looks of shock, despair, pain. Some are covered in scars, some look like old men. A million different variations.

"It's happening now, Darryl." They're not happy with this. I'm not exactly thrilled myself - I was expecting to find two at the most.

"David dies."

"He comes back with us, and fights us."

"No, he comes back and helps."

"Shut up."

"He was already dead, Extracted."

"He is alive when we leave him."

"Shut up."

"Dave and the others were all killed, they got dumped in the park two blocks down from the Squid."

"Dave is right here, in front of us."

"Shut up, shut up, shut up."

The voices are echoing all around me. My god, they've gone insane. How long have they been arguing like this?

"How have you been doing it? How have you been forcing things to happen the same way every time?"

There's a long pause, and some murmuring, and then a single but somehow disjointed voice answers me.

"We can influence things. Small things. A nudge, a push. We can see probable outcomes, sometimes. Recently... we can talk to ourselves. To Darryl."

It looks like a swirling purple cloud all around me, with frozen versions of Darryl bobbing gently in the fog. My original surprise has colored my judgment; there are maybe as few as thirty or forty of him. For all the good that does. "You've been destroying Disney on purpose, haven't you? You've been forcing that to happen."

As before, it takes a moment for the consensus voice to answer. "Yes. Traveling back links us to... to the true source of these abilities. The power is amazing. We cannot control him when he first awakens, and people die. If at first you don't succeed, manipulate events and guarantee that the timeline will provide you with the ability to try, try again. We only need to get it right once. We have all the time in the world."

They're just going to make it worse. Ferris was right for all the wrong reasons; Darryl really was being manipulated by someone. Black was right too - it had to stop somehow.

I reach out a hand, and the closest Darryl unfreezes, crumples to the fog, and expires. A scream of rage echoes through the cloud.

I'm in the Drowned Spider, with Emily at my side. She's offering to buy me a shot because she thinks it's funny when I get drunk and try to explain physics to her. I take her up on the offer, and as soon as she turns her back I press my palm against the back of her head. She looks like Darryl again, with a long beard and torn clothes. He drops like a marionette with its strings cut, and the bar vanishes.

I'm sixteen, in the lab. Doctor Toht is asking me to help someone whose only ability seems to be making iron oxidize - just a thin layer on the outside. I remember that I was having a dream, something about a girl named Emily and a place with purple fog. It doesn't seem to matter now. I show the man how to reach inside iron and weaken it, and when doctor Toht congratulates me I seize his hand and squeeze it until a young, tattoo-covered Darryl falls down dead.

I'm back in the Pirates of the Caribbean. I'm in my mother's kitchen. I'm sleeping on a couch at an old friend's apartment. Over and over.

Finally it stops, and I'm facing a single frozen Darryl. He's maybe seventeen, with a long scar across the middle of his face. He's frozen with his face contorted in agony, tears running down his cheeks.

"I need to fix everything. You can't do it, you don't know how it happens. It needs to happen all the same, all but the final step. You can't do this without me. You need me. The first time, my time, it wasn't me. Disneyland was destroyed much, much later with the rest of Anaheim. If you stop me now, that is the reality that will assert itself. This will all start over. You need me here to stop that." I place my hand on his head, gently.

"No. It's time for you to sleep. Let me try this one for a while. Subtle manipulation is kind of my thing."

And with that, he collapses with a sigh.

There's a field somewhere in Southern California where forty-two bodies of Darryl Holst appear like magic. Abracadabra. When construction begins there in a year, the obvious pile of bodies goes somehow unnoticed even as it is bulldozed and covered over by the foundation of a new block of condominiums.

There's a group home somewhere nearby where a boy named David is dreaming. They're dreams about super powers, and ways to make the world a better place, and a girl named Emily.

When he wakes up he thinks about what might be, and what might have been, and he sits down to write a story. Just fiction. "Once upon a time, there was a magical kingdom where everyone was happy."

It's a start.