



**“NOTHING
TO SEE HERE”**

A Short Story by
LANCE WOODS

Based on the podcast series
produced by



“NOTHING TO SEE HERE”

Prologue

As I write this, it's 2017. What you're about to read is the first new *SuperHuman Times* story I've written since *Heroic Park: A SuperHuman Times Novel* in 2012, and it's dedicated to someone you've probably never heard of: an actor named Bill Johnstone.

To explain: I listen to a lot of old radio shows courtesy of Sirius/XM's Radio Classics (channel 148 — free plug!). One of my favorite programs is *The Shadow*. Even if you've never heard the actual shows, you've probably heard of the character — “Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows.”

I didn't know until I started listening to the channel that the most famous Shadow, Orson Welles (yes, *that* one), only played him for one season. His successor, who assumed the role for five years, was a highly skilled character actor named Bill Johnstone. As soon as I heard his voice, I understood why many fans of the show consider him to be the best of the Shadows. I won't try to describe his vocal qualities here; there are plenty of places on the web where you can hear his episodes. Forget the myriad logical flaws in many of the plots. Just Google and enjoy.

Anyway, one day I wondered, “What would happen if The Shadow went insane?”

I don't mean like Griffin, the warped, tragic center of H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man*, but in completely different way. I mean, since this is the *SuperHuman Times* Universe, it seemed logical that at least one hero in it would have the ability “to cloud men's minds” in their fight for justice. And that there was the potential for a traumatic event to push him over the edge.

Not surprisingly, said hero sounded a lot like Bill Johnstone when he told me his story.

SuperHuman Times™

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“This must be unsettling for you,” he said to me, “talking to a voice without form, talking to nothing.”

“Nothing, with a capital N,” I said from the open doorway. “I knew what to expect — if you agreed to my visit, that is.” Without turning away from the unseen source of the words, I gently stepped into the room.

“I have no objections to receiving you, Doctor Bauer,” said the strong, measured voice with the reedy echo. “It’s just that very few of my contemporaries are still alive to visit, and the few requests I do deny are largely for interviews about the ‘good old days’ — term papers,

retrospective articles, that kind of thing. Just last month I turned down *The SuperHuman Times*' fifth interview request.”

“So, people contact you here? At the hospital?”

“No, I've had a post office box for many years. I never trusted email; too easy to trace. The staff is kind enough to pick up my mail whenever they're in the vicinity.”

“How do you pay for the box?”

“The same way I've paid for my room and board here. From a fund distributed by my lawyers. It was left to me by ... by a friend.”

“I never knew you were one of those multimillionaire playboys who used his wealth to fight for justice. Gee, that's a new one.”

Nothing laughed. There was nothing malevolent about it, but it carried traces of the edge that once famously terrified the criminals who heard it. “I'm afraid my history is far less romantic. But I'm sure you know that. No doubt Doctor Westbrook has shown you my file, shared his observations, that kind of thing.”

I took a few more cautious steps into the room, still facing the voice. “He did. But I still wanted to meet you personally.” My shoe brushed against the leg of a chair.

“Please, Doctor, be seated. Make yourself comfortable.”

I moved around the chair and sat down. “Thank you. I'm honored.”

“Don't be. When Doctor Westbrook told me you were coming, he said you might be able to help me with my 'condition'. I appreciate what he and the staff have tried to do for me over the years, but I'm afraid my 'condition' is quite permanent.”

“Because you wish it.”

“Yes.”

“You’ve wished to remain invisible to the staff, to the world, for more than three decades?”

“Yes.”

“Doesn’t mass hypnosis require a lot of concentration?”

“At first, it did, but with regular use, it became practically autonomic, like breathing. I assure you, I’m quite comfortable. Are you?”

I settled in. “Getting there. I’m more curious than comfortable, though.”

“All of my sessions with Doctor Westbrook and his colleagues are recorded. You can hear me tell them the whole story.”

“Not the same as hearing it from you firsthand.”

“Of course, it is. They’re recordings!”

“Then why did you consent to see me?”

The laugh again, stronger this time. “Because you’re a new face, Doctor. I don’t see those very often.”

“You could change that. You could allow more people in.”

“Why? There’s nothing for them to see.”

“You could change that, too.”

The voice turned dark, almost sullen. “Why should I?”

“Why shouldn’t you? I understand why you concealed yourself when you were fighting crime. It was your mask, like the masks of so many superhumans at that time. But since then, they’ve moved on, taken jobs, had careers and families, while you’ve stayed in here.”

“I have nothing more to offer the world. No one needs an invisible hero anymore.” His volume lowered. “Perhaps it never did.”

“Vanessa Breckinridge didn’t feel that way.”

“What do you know about how Vanes—?!”

“Because, unlike you, the world could *see* her, and since she was an heiress, it frequently did. Newspapers, magazines, TV newscasts — I’ve studied all of them. Quite a woman. She funded many worthy causes and helped a lot of people with her fortune.”

“Yes. She was very unselfish. She worked very hard to help the poor of this city find better lives ... as well as justice.”

“How did you meet her?”

“I can’t recall.”

“Please. Other superheroes and supervillains were flying at each trying to save or conquer the world. You busted up street-level crime ranging from punk gangs to organized crime and every bastard in between.”

“All I did was conduct surveillance, inspect suspect locations for evidence, and pass my findings along to the chief of police as a ‘tip from an anonymous citizen’.

“And after the cops moved in to make the collars, the only thing the chief told the press was, ‘It was Nothing’. Every time.”

“I must admit, that was my idea, the only signature I ever wanted to leave behind.”

“And while you were tipping off the cops, Vanessa always contacted the victims immediately after to see if they needed anything. Coincidence?”

“She did that kind of thing long before we ever met. She had friends in the police department who directed her to those victims, and the chief advised her about my activities. I suppose our meeting was inevitable.”

“Who approached whom?”

After about a minute of silence, I wondered if, somehow, I was suddenly alone in the room.

Nothing finally stirred. “That’s hard to say. I was in the chief’s office — unseen, of course — sharing information I’d obtained about a rather baffling case. Suddenly, this Miss Breckinridge burst in to ask him if he knew of any legal means to get a hold of records from a contractor she suspected of cutting corners on a public housing project. Naturally, the chief referred her to the department of permits and inspections, and to the district attorney, but she’d been told everyone she needed to see was ‘in conference’ that whole day. Frustrated, she stormed out of his office. I hurried out right behind her.”

“Why?”

“I’d heard about her for a long time, but I never knew how determined she was. I wasn’t aware of her intensity. I admired her. I wanted to help her.”

“Did you?”

“That evening, I made my way into her home — I learned to pick locks while I was learning mass hypnosis — to introduce myself and my intentions. Like her, I wanted to expose anyone who exploited the less fortunate, which we assumed included one or more of the city building inspectors. I told her I would talk to the district attorney about issuing a subpoena to the contractor’s supplier, so that his office could compare the purchase orders to the actual materials on the site. She was very grateful. Fortunately, we didn’t have to do anything.”

“Why not?”

“It turned out that the contractor was, indeed, cutting corners and pocketing the money in order to pay off some large gambling debts. He might have succeeded if he’d been allowed to finish the project. Sadly, his creditors weren’t patient.” He was barely able to suppress a chuckle. “They hanged him from one of his own construction cranes.”

“Gruesome. Hardly what I’d call justice.”

“Justice can take many forms, Doctor Bauer. Like you, I prefer the kind found in our courts, but if a criminal brought about his own downfall, I never complained. Neither did Vanessa. I think that’s one reason why we worked so well together.”

I sat back and smiled. “Just worked?”

“Romance was out of the question. She never could have loved a faceless voice.”

“Wait — you *never* showed her your face?”

“As you said, my invisibility was my mask. I couldn’t risk exposing my identity to her for fear that it might make her a target of my enemies. It was a good partnership, but no foundation for a romance.

“Of course, that didn’t keep her from trying.”

I could sense the faintest of smiles creeping across his lips.

“But I’m glad that I kept that distance between us,” Nothing said quietly. “It gave us some ‘breathing room’, some space to really get to know one another. I told her of my days in the Merchant Marine, when I ended up in Portimao, Portugal, that fateful night I stopped three men from assaulting a young girl. I barely threw a punch. I didn’t know she was well-schooled in martial arts; she made short work of them. I also didn’t know she was the granddaughter of a holy man, a Hindu archaka.”

“A Hindu priest in Portugal?” I asked. “I’d think that was a rarity.”

“There are more than Hindu worshippers there than you’d think. May I continue?”

I nodded.

“I escorted the girl home to the archaka, where she told him of my attempt to help her. He was impressed by my bravery and, as he was very old and had no sons, he wanted to show his gratitude by passing along his knowledge to me.”

I frowned. “Why not pass it to his granddaughter?”

“I asked him that. He replied that, had she been older than fifteen, he would have done so. While she was highly skilled at defending herself, it required a mature mind to master his disciplines. I declined and told him that I had to report back to my ship.

“He simply raised a hand and said, ‘They will not miss you. It will be as though you were never among them.’”

“Then he said, ‘I will go with you. To explain.’”

“So, with the old man in tow, I went back to my ship. But no one on the crew would let me on board. I’d served alongside them for years and suddenly none of them recognized me. They wouldn’t even let me come aboard to retrieve my sea bag. So, I dug out my Merchant Mariner Credential, opened it up to show it to them ... and ... you’ll never believe me.”

“An empty room is telling me a story. Try me.”

He took a deep breath before proceeding. “The photo in my passport wasn’t mine. The name, the vitals, nothing was mine. They belonged to a completely different person. What’s more, the passport itself looked like an ordinary U.S. passport, not the credential I’d carried for years. I turned to the old man and told him, begged him to explain to my shipmates, to tell them who I was, to tell them, and me, what I was seeing, to explain, as he said he would.

“He told me, ‘I didn’t come to explain anything to them. I came to explain it to you. Let me take you back to my home.’ Since I was clearly nothing to my shipmates, I left with him.”

“Your first lesson in the art of hypnosis?”

“Yes. As we walked through the streets late into the humid night, he explained that he’d hypnotized my shipmates into seeing a totally different person when I approached them. Then, when I took out my credential, he hypnotized *me* so that I would see what they were seeing: someone else, and their passport!

“Sure enough, when I pulled it out again later, it was my Merchant Mariner Credential, with all of my information unchanged. When I asked him why he did it, he said, ‘You bravely, perhaps recklessly, risked your safety to save my granddaughter. I owe you a tremendous debt and I could not let you leave without repaying you. My secrets are all I have, and I believe you have what’s necessary to use them wisely. Please let me provide you with room and board and instruction.’

“I asked him what would happen if I refused his offer. He just smiled and said, ‘You won’t. If you truly had been part of that ship’s crew, you wouldn’t have been traveling these streets without some of your mates. I surmise that you are an independent man who likes to take care of himself, and — when necessary — of others.

“‘Your life no longer follows the course of that ship. It’s time for you to chart your own course. I can help you.’

“Then he shrugged and said, ‘Besides, it’s not like you need to be somewhere else.’”

“How long did you stay with him?”

“It must have five years, maybe six. I always seemed to be too busy to notice. While I was there, I was so engrossed in my studies that I didn’t even think about that. When he wasn’t

leading services for the local Hindu community, the archaka ran an appliance repair and locksmith shop. When I wasn't training with him, or picking up some fighting skills from his granddaughter, I was working there to earn my keep.”

“Locksmith. That's how you learned to break into penthouses.”

“Among other, less illegal things.”

“Why didn't you do more illegal things once you learned this power?”

“Because the archaka had me pegged. I didn't like seeing anyone get bullied. I grew up a poor, scrawny kid; I knew what punches and kicks felt like. That's why I joined the Merchant Marine at nineteen, to get away from it, and to learn how to fight back. My mates taught me how to protect myself for the honor of the ship. But when I had to fight, I did it for my own honor. Letting those bastards attack the old man's granddaughter would have been dishonorable.”

“Anything happen between you two?”

This time, there was nothing but amusement in his laugh. “With the old man around us almost twenty-four-seven? Not a chance! Besides, I was several years older than her and came to think of her more as a sister than a potential lover.” His voice darkened again. “Given what I planned to do with my new talents, there would be no time or space for romance.”

“Which brings us back to Vanessa Breckenridge,” I said.

Silence.

“I wish you wouldn't bring her up, Doctor Bauer,” he said “The pain of ... well, her memory still affects me.”

I pressed ahead, gently. “In reading about your exploits and hers, I thought it was remarkable that no one ever directly linked you two.”

“Not really that remarkable. She’d been doing her charity and reform work long before we crossed paths. She hated her rich parents and their cavalier attitude toward people beneath their class. On her twenty-first birthday, when the trust fund they set up for her came under her control, she employed some useful traits she inherited from her financier mother and invested her money well. This gave her a source of income that funded her crusade — and mine.”

“Really?”

“She purchased a space near her home where I could work and live. If I needed any kind of equipment, technology, or even weapons, she procured them for me or hired people we could trust who could build them. I would gather information for her to use in her work, acting slightly outside the law against our targets whenever they directly threatened others. Or her. The only price I asked of her was that I be allowed to retain my anonymity. She agreed. Reluctantly.”

He paused, then added, “If only I’d known . . .”

“The Eighty-Third street fire?” I asked.

A very long pause preceded his reply. “Yes.”

“What do you remember from that night?”

“Everything. I’m sure you read about it all in my files, and it was well-chronicled in news reports.”

“Yes. But you gave that account thirty years ago when you checked yourself in here for therapy —”

A small chuckle. “Not therapy. Sanctuary.”

“You might have left out some details inadvertently. I was wondering if you’d remembered any more since then.”

“Why should I revisit that night for you, Doctor?”

“It’s ... it’s personal.”

“May I ask why?”

“If I may ask you to tell me what happened that night.”

“Quid pro quo, Doctor?”

I was surprised that his war on crime or self-imposed exile didn’t prevent him from reading or screening *The Silence of the Lambs*.

He released a long sigh. “At the time, the police were overextended because they were dealing with intense gang warfare throughout the city. So, the chief and the D.A. asked me to protect a frightened woman, Charlenae Parker. She grudgingly agreed to be a key witness in the trial of a gang leader accused of murder — a man arrested thanks to one of my ‘anonymous’ tips. Word on the street was that he was fingered by yours truly. That’s why Ms. Parker stepped forward, and why I felt compelled to help her.

“I was to watch over her for only one night; the next morning, officers would be freed up to transfer her to a secure location until the trial began. I told Vanessa about the assignment and naturally, being Vanessa, she insisted on coming with me. She figured that having a physical, and female, presence might be less unnerving to Ms. Parker than just a voice.

“I agreed, and I’ll never forgive myself.

“We arrived at the sixty-three hundred block of Eighty-Third Street at the scheduled time, only to find that the gang had beaten us there. Firebomb. Our witness lived in one of many rundown brick rowhouses, each with a large window in the front. Her window was shattered. Flames and smoke shot out of the opening.”

“Was the fire department there?”

I could hear his respiration rate increase as he relived the incident. “It was too soon. When we arrived, people in the surrounding rowhouses were just running into the street. Utter chaos. Vanessa asked the neighbors if anyone had called 9-1-1, but they hadn’t. They were afraid they’d be the gang’s next target if they tried to get help, even if their own homes burned to the ground.

“That’s when we heard the scream from inside the rowhouse. Before I could move, Vanessa was sprinting across the street, straight for the fire. Since the power of mass hypnosis didn’t come with super-speed, it was all I could do to reach her before she tried to climb the stairs to the door. I made her step back and felt the door. It was wooden and flimsy; the heat penetrated through the gloves I wore with my costume, but we had no options, so I kicked it in.”

“Hold on — you were invisible and you had a costume?”

“Yes, I had a costume. It was white and well-tailored and it hid my face in case I needed to show up out of nowhere and scare the hell out of punks like the ones who did this — *now, do you want to hear this story or not?!*”

With those few words, I understood completely how he’d been able to terrify so many criminals into surrendering. “Yes, I’m sorry, please!”

“We were lucky,” he said, calming. “There was no fire immediately behind the door, so I pulled Vanessa close to me because, although no one could see it, part of that costume I wore was a fireproof cape, to be prepared for this kind of rescue. I wrapped my arm, and the cape, around Vanessa and we ran in.”

“That must have been difficult for you, not being able to see yourself and running into a fire. You could have tripped over furniture or into a burning wall.”

“My power didn’t work that way, Doctor. I’m able ... I *was* able to see myself normally when others couldn’t, since I wasn’t hypnotized.”

“Oh, okay, sorry.”

Occasionally, he halted as moved deeper into the incident, as if he were determined to get the facts straight before speaking, or was deciding which facts to let out. “The fire was much worse in the rear of the rowhouse than in the front; I assumed the firebomb that had been lobbed through the window and exploded there. Flames were racing across the ceiling and walls. The stairway to the second floor of the rowhouse was near the entrance, and it looked as if the fire hadn’t spread there yet. I gave Vanessa my cape and told her to go up there and quickly search the rooms, the closets, any place Ms. Parker could hide, while I checked the back of the townhouse. We would meet back at the doorway in one minute — with or without Ms. Parker.

“While Vanessa ran upstairs, I ran as far as I could to the back of the rowhouse. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen one of these places from the inside, but there’s usually one long corridor connecting the front room, dining room, kitchen and rear porch. I didn’t even get halfway through the dining room before the heat and smoke drove me back, which was lucky. Had I gone farther back, I might not have heard Vanessa call me. I hurried back to the staircase and found her standing there with the cape around Ms. Parker ...

“And her crying infant. She couldn’t have been more than a few months old. The D.A. never mentioned that in the briefing.

“Ms. Parker was terrified at the thought of coming downstairs, even in the fireproof cape. Vanessa assured her that they would be all right, that I could protect them. But Ms. Parker refused. She screamed about not trusting anything she couldn’t see.”

“How did you help her?”

“I dropped my hypnotic cloak and revealed myself to her – and, for the first time, to Vanessa. Ms. Parker was still afraid, but she met me halfway on the staircase and handed me her baby, begging me to take her. I tried to get the woman to come down, but the fire terrified her too much. That’s when Vanessa told me to get the baby to safety. She would get Ms. Parker out of the house. I was certain that she would ... if the floor hadn’t dropped out beneath them.”

“My God.”

“The fire on the first floor had quickly burned through the ceiling and weakened the floor above. They plunged through it, into the flames below. The floor they stood on fell on top of them; even my cape couldn’t protect them from that much debris. Hot embers flew everywhere. I wanted to dive in after them, but I couldn’t help them because I had the baby in my arms. And I was so damned focused on them that I didn’t see that embers had fallen on the baby’s face until she cried out. I brushed them off and got her outside just before the old rowhouse collapsed.

“By now, the fire department, police and paramedics had arrived. Conventional fire equipment and hydrokinetic superhuman firefighters fought the blaze while I gave the baby to paramedics for treatment, and to find her father or a neighbor to care for her. I remember looking into that infant’s scorched eyes and praying that she wouldn’t be harmed by the burns caused by my delay.

“Then, the neighbors turned in my direction. They started yelling at me — ‘Where’s Charlenae? Where’s Ms. Parker? Where’s that lady you went in with? Why didn’t you get them out? Why are you standing there? Go back and get them!’

“That’s when I realized that they were not just yelling at me, but *looking at me*.

“I’d rushed out of the fire without cloaking myself.

“They could *see* me ... and I didn’t give a damn.

“I just stood there. I wanted to be able to answer them, to tell them how I failed their friend and ... and mine, to tell them that I wouldn’t have made a difference. Before I could, a police officer on the scene stood between me and the crowd and tried to calm them down. I must have regained my senses because I remember he told them they were yelling at nothing.

“But I already knew that.”

I leaned forward. “You could have told them, made them understand that there really was no way to —”

“I could have gone up the stairs, handed the baby to Vanessa, shoved her and that poor woman down the stairs in my cape and died in their place,” he snapped. “Or we could have arrived on the scene a few minutes sooner, and I could have knocked the stupid woman out on the doorstep! Or I could have told the chief and the D.A. to go to Hell! Or I could have kept my damn mouth shut and let the bastard walk, because that woman only came forward because of ... me.”

He breathed quietly, then said softly, “I could have told Vanessa not to go because ... because I loved ...”

The next minute or so felt endless. I didn’t speak or move toward him. The man that the press once called the “Unseen Fist of Justice” made barely a sound.

He resumed, quietly. “I walked around the city for hours before going back to the base Vanessa helped me build. The home we built. I prayed that investigators would find something to link the fire with the gang without me. I wanted to help and, at the same time, I never wanted to go near the place again. Even if they razed what was left and built an entirely new home, it would be no different. It would always be the site of my greatest loss. I failed the police chief, the district attorney ... that poor mother ... and I failed the woman I ... wanted to love.

“At one point that night, I felt physically sick from everything that happened and ran into my bathroom to throw up. Naturally, I wasn’t cloaked, so when I went to the sink to clean up, and looked up at my bathroom mirror, I saw something that made me even sicker.

“I saw an arrogant bastard who thought protecting a witness would be easier than bringing down corrupt politicians or hardened street criminals. I saw a weakling who could never share his deepest secrets with the person who meant the most to him. I saw a failure, and I couldn’t stand him. So, I eliminated the source of the reflection forever to ensure that no one would see my face again — including myself.”

“You hypnotized yourself?”

“Yes. And I was gone. I truly became nothing. Then, I came here. Since I’d consulted with Doctor Westbrook on criminal psychology in the past, he generously offered me a place to ‘recover’, although, despite his best efforts, I seriously doubt that I will.”

His sigh was followed by a slightly lighter tone. “There it is. Care to offer your own prognosis, Doctor Bauer?”

I took a few seconds to compose myself before answering. “From what I’ve heard, it looks pretty bleak. Maybe if *you* heard something, things might look better.”

“I don’t understand.”

“As I’m sure you’ve noticed, you’re not the only one in the room with a condition.”

“Ah... so you *are* blind. I suspected, but I didn’t want to call attention to it. Is this where you tell me about how you overcame your disability to become a respected psychiatrist? I could use a story with a happy ending.”

“That would be a very dull story,” I said. “This one’s better. See, my mom died when I was very young, and every so often my father used to say something when he missed her.

“He’d say, ‘Nothing could have saved her.’ Sometimes once, sometimes many times, sometimes under his breath, sometimes out loud. ‘Nothing could have saved her.’ He was at work the night she died at our home. I used to think that he became fixated on that statement as a way to convince himself that he, the firefighters, no one could have saved her.”

“Firefighters? May I ask, how did your mother —?”

I told him without bitterness or malice. “She died in a fire when I was a baby. About thirty years ago.”

He responded immediately, whispering, “The fire ... the baby ... my God, *the embers!*”

“Yes, they did burn my eyes. But, please, don’t think I came here to confront you, or to add to your guilt. I spent years piecing together the events of that night to find out exactly what happened. My father wouldn’t talk about it beyond muttering ‘Nothing could have saved her.’ It wasn’t until I was in my teens that I spoke to the police, firefighters, reporters, neighbors, anyone who might be able to help me find out everything that happened that night.

“When I did, I understood what my father meant. ‘Nothing could have saved her.’ He was talking about you.

“For a long time, I believed him and I hated you for letting her die. Then, after a few years of studying psychiatry — as well as the authorities’ reports of what happened, and press coverage of your other exploits — I realized that what I felt all that time wasn’t really anger. It was guilt. Survivor’s guilt. Ever hear of that?”

“Yes. I understand that it’s fairly common.”

“Anyway, a few months ago, when I told my husband — also a psychiatrist — that an opportunity to meet you came up, he thought it would be good closure for me. After Doctor Westbrook acquainted me with your case ... well, I hoped it might be good for both of us.”

Silence.

I sighed. “At the very least, I get to thank you for saving my life. I hope I’m not too late for it to mean something.”

I waited for several minutes. More than ever, I wished that I could see his face, read whatever expressions crossed it.

When he finally spoke, it seemed to be with some difficulty. “Doctor Bauer ... I appreciate your gratitude more than I can say ... and I’m very sorry for your ... condition, and the negligence that caused it.”

“You did everything you possibly could. I know that, and you should —”

“And while I’ve ... enjoyed talking with you ... I’m afraid I must ask you to leave now.”

“Are you tired?”

“No. I simply cannot look at you anymore. When I do, I see the horrified face of a brave woman who died because I inspired her to risk everything for justice.

“But there was no justice for her. Or Vanessa. Or, in the end, even for you.

“Because of me,” I whispered.

After I sat and waited for several minutes, he said, “Please go, Doctor Bauer.

“Trust me, there’s nothing to see here anymore.”

As my tears soaked through the third tissue Doctor Westbrook handed me, I said, “I can’t thank you enough for letting me see him.”

“Are you sure?” he said, trying not to laugh. I imagined him leaning against a desk in his office, opposite the chair he’d escorted me to. “This isn’t what I intended when I approached you at the conference. When you spoke about the psychiatric benefits of adversity, about being

blinded in a fire as a baby, I took a chance that yours might have been the last life he saved.

Well, he and your mother.”

I sniffled. “Hardly professional, am I?”

“You should have seen me watching you two on the closed-circuit monitor.” He sniffled.

I started to feel better. “It was just a bit more overwhelming than I thought it would be. But I’m glad my father, and I, were wrong about him.” I took a breath and regained my composure. “I was wondering, have other superhumans with invisibility had issues like these?”

“I don’t think so,” Doctor Westbrook said. “In fact, some of them have visited him over the years to try and bring him out of it. You brought up a few things he’s never told them, or me. It may help us find an inroad to treating him.”

“I’m happy to help. I think Vanessa would have wanted that.”

“I noticed that you didn’t tell him about your scholarship from the Breckinridge Foundation. Did you know that Vanessa left all of her money to him, and that he set up the foundation — from here — with the help of her family’s lawyers? I mean, I had to certify that he was of sound mind, just here for exhaustion at my invitation, that kind of thing. But aside from that and what he pays us for his room and board, he doesn’t touch it.”

I sat there, dumbfounded. “You mean, Nothing put me through college?”

“The foundation’s put a lot of kids through school over the last thirty years,” Doctor Westbrook said. “But, I think you may be the only one to know exactly where the money comes from.”

“I certainly never knew that when I applied for the thing. I never would have figured it out.” I drummed my fingers against the arm of my chair. “Now, if I could only figure out where that echo in his voice came from.”

“It’s all him. It can be unnerving if you’re not used to it. Clearly, he still has what it takes to send a chill up the spine.”

“Such concentration is amazing, given his true condition.” I sat back in my chair. “Will you ever tell him that he’s not really invisible? Before I went in to see him, you told me that everyone has been able to see him from the day he checked in.”

“The trick isn’t telling him,” Doctor Westbrook said, “but convincing him. As I told you before your visit, he’s hypnotized himself into a delusion, but he’s generally benign and harmless. We haven’t even told him that we figured out his true identity years ago because, as far as he’s concerned, that man doesn’t exist. He won’t even acknowledge his image on the security recordings I’ve shown him.”

“Maybe he really *has* hypnotized himself to be blind to his own image,” I said.

I followed Doctor Westbrook’s voice as he moved about the office, probably to think. “Your visit may just be what he needs to come to terms with what happened and, eventually, convince him to see himself again,” he said. “Hopefully, as the good man he was, and the one that all of us still see in that room. What do you think?”

I smiled. “What can I tell you, Doctor?”

“I saw Nothing.”