



“PRINT THE LEGEND”

A Short Story by
LANCE WOODS

Based on the podcast series
produced by



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Prologue

If there's an Adam & Eve analog to the *SuperHuman Times* universe, it must be *Times* correspondent Kevin Dunbar and comic book artist Rei Shinozaki, the first two characters I created back for the series in 2005. Their first adventure, “The Hot Property”, was intended to be a graphic novel. (You can download a PDF of the script from the *Times* website. I make it available as a curiosity, certainly not as a sample of great writing.) However, when Prometheus Radio Theatre's executive producer Steve Wilson offered me the opportunity to turn *Times* into a podcast series, I went that route instead.

Ironically, this story has yet to be produced as of this writing. So I'm adapting it now.

If you've read the novel *Heroic Park*, then you may recall reading Dunbar's thumbnail of how he and Rei met before they reunited at the park. “Print the Legend” is that story. Hopefully, your prior knowledge of it won't spoil your enjoyment of this full blown re-telling. (By the way, this was written as a two-part radio script, so it runs a little longer than the other stories. You've been warned.)

SuperHuman TimesTM

“PRINT THE LEGEND”

A Short Story by

Lance Woods

“Hello, Mnemonica? This is Reiko Shinozaki. We spoke a few days ago to confirm our meeting at the Atlanta show. I just wanted to let you know that the show changed my location in the exhibit hall. I’ll be at booth one-fifteen-B, pretty much from ten o’clock on, so it should be easy to find me. I’m looking forward to finally meeting you. Bye.”

“Play it again.” I said, trying not to beg.

“What is it about her voice that you find so fascinating?”

"It's dusky. You know, like a femme fatale in an old film noir, the kind that leads the hero into danger."

"Then why would you want to have anything to do with—"

"Who cares? Play it again."

"Kevin, you're worse than my niece on her birthday," the thin, elegant woman on my arm said.

"Gimme a break. It's the closest thing I've had to a relationship with a woman in years. If I've learned anything from working for the *Times*, it's that not many women have patience for writers."

"What about F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald?"

"She was a writer, too, and they were drunk."

"Well, this is what you get for running around the world writing articles about superhuman goats like me." She fanned herself with one of her white-gloved hands. "My, it's warm in here."

"I can carry your blazer."

"That's all right," she said as she slipped out of it and draped over a bare arm. She looked anything but seventy in her sleeveless top and maxi skirt.

"Senior discounts at the gym have done wonders for you," I said. "Now, come on, play it again."

"We're going to meet her in a few minutes."

"That's why I want to hear her voice one more time," I said. "I know her real appearance will destroy the mental image I've had in my head since you played that message on the plane."

"She has a website, and you have a phone. You could have simply Googled her."

“I did. No photos of her. Just her artwork, none of which was comic-book and all of which was impressive. Makes me wonder what she’s doing here.”

“I’m wondering the same thing, Kevin.”

Mnemonica stopped. It wasn’t the smartest thing for a 70-year-old woman to do here, with about 125,000 people coursing through every pathway in the exhibit hall of the Atlanta ComiConclave. With close to 300,000 square feet of space in the venue, there was just enough room for this river of fanboys, fangirls, superhumans, celebrities, artists, writers, has-beens and wanna-bes to flow around us on their way to panels, autograph signings by creators and media stars, dealer booths and other activities. It was still a tight fit, but the masses were, for such a huge convention crowd, respectful; even the cosplayers dressed in their finest masks, helmets, capes, feathers, fur or armor managed to walk around us without so much as a nudge.

A nudge — or any kind of physical contact with Mnemonica — might have made things worse for her than they already were.

Depending on your age, or how well you paid attention in history class to tales of the Superhuman Age, you probably recognized the trade name of Monica Jordan, who was blessed (or, as she views it, cursed) by an extraordinary power: if she made physical contact with you, she remembered you forever. That made her popular among her fans, and useful to police who relied upon her to identify suspects.

But you wouldn’t necessarily know that her memory of you resulted from a permanent psychic link she forged with your mind on contact — she could see through your eyes. Forever. And you’d never realize it.

Once she taught herself to filter out all those visions and not go insane, she used those connections for good purposes. Sometimes, a person she shook hands with might be assaulted or killed, and she helped the police identify evidence or the actual crook. Sometimes, she could see that a person was planning to do something bad — pull a crime or even commit suicide — and intervened in time to stop them.

People were grateful for her help, until one of the supervillains she put away sued her for invasion of privacy, which would make any evidence she provided inadmissible. After a long trial, the case was thrown out, but people began to wonder: Was Mnemonica a heroine, or a voyeur?

I interviewed her for the *Times* for a “whatever-happened-to?” piece a few years ago. Even she didn’t know the answer to that question.

More lawsuits followed. None were successful on various grounds, but her legal fees were crippling. So, when an opportunity to finally pay those bills came along at ComiConclave, she jumped at it. Since she knew me, and I could get us in for free under my press pass, she asked me to jump with her.

What could I say? I’m a sucker for nice old ladies who get pilloried for trying to do the right thing.

Mnemonica gasped when I gently placed my hands on her shoulders to start her moving again.

“Don’t worry,” I said, “you infected me at your autograph signing when I was nine. You shook my hand, but your gloves buttoned at the wrist —”

She nodded and started walking with me again. “The button broke, and you touched my wrist How can I not remember?”

With perfect, malicious timing, someone from a nearby row yelled, “Hey, Mnemonica, remember me? If you do, I’m callin’ my lawyer!” It got a laugh from the jerks hanging with him.

“They remember, too,” she said softly. “This was a bad idea, Kevin. Who’s going to read a book about me, much less a — a comic book? There must be something more respectable that I can do.”

“Comics *are* respectable. The comic industry is front-loaded with superhumans these days. I’ve interviewed lots of them at these things. They write faster, draw faster, ship their books on time. Plus, the older ones who were heroes and villains have a lifetime to draw on for stories. Believe me, you’ll have lots of company.”

We weaved through the hall until we reached the section known as Artist’s Alley, that expanse populated by artists of varying degrees of celebrity and anonymity. A few of them recognized me and called out or waved. That — or the fact that none of them seemed to recognize her — appeared to put Mnemonica more at ease.

“Hey, Mnemonica!”

Even when it was yelling and not coming through Mnemonica’s phone, I knew that voice.

We turned to its source: row 100, booth 14. It was a small pipe-&-drape booth with one covered table, a set-up that an exhibitor on a very limited budget could afford if they cut back on groceries and utilities for a year. (Yep; that expensive.) Matted art hung from the black drapes, probably by large, skillfully hidden hanger clips attached to the mattes. The content of each piece

varied: some were black-&-white pencil or ink sketches; some were full-color paintings; all featured superhumans — heroes and villains, fictitious and real.

The artist walked toward us with a smile. She was thinner than I imagined, not fragile, but athletic, gymnast-thin, presumably with the strength needed to endure one of these shows. She wore very little make-up on her face, which didn't need it. It would only have distracted from the green eyes beneath the long lashes. The entire vision was framed by bright, white hair, expertly colored and styled into a shag haircut. She wore red leggings, sneakers, and a rust-colored top that was cut to reveal just enough of her midriff to attract slobs like me to her booth.

“Hi! I'm Rei Shinozaki.” She extended her hand to Mnemonica. “Nice to meet — ooh, nice gloves.”

“Yes, they're a little affectation I wear on the advice of counsel to avoid making the wrong kind of ‘contacts,’” Mnemonica said as she accepted the handshake and relaxed a bit. “Nice to meet you, too.”

The artist glanced at me. “Who's your date?”

Ever classy, Mnemonica allowed just a short, explosive laugh to escape before pretending to clear her throat.

“Kevin Dunbar, *SuperHuman Times*. We're just friends.”

Rei lifted an eyebrow. “Oh, yeah. I read your feature on Mnemonica before I came to the show. Matter of fact, that interview is one of the reasons we wanted to meet her.”

“We'?” Mnemonica began moving us toward Rei's booth. “All I see is you. And your art, which is wonderful.”

“Not what I expected,” I said, “especially after visiting your website.”

“Really, Mister Dunbar?”

“Yeah, that art was very, I dunno, artsy. These pieces are much more accessible to someone of my limited male intellect who expects female comic art to be —”

“Pretty?” Rei asked, with an edge. “Ethereal? Girly? Ponies?”

“I mean, that fight scene over there looks like something out of a Burne Hogarth *Tarzan* strip. And that portrait looks like it could have been drawn by Jack Kirby.”

“But none of them look like they could have been drawn by me?”

I stopped trying to compliment her. It was just making the hole I was digging deeper.

“Congratulations, Miss Shinozaki,” Mnemonica said. “Thanks to you, one of *The SuperHuman Times*’ best writers is lost for words.”

“Dunbar!”

“What the — Brick Houseman?!”

The short, middle-aged, thick-muscled twerp with the crewcut stood up from his chair.

“You ruined my life!”

“I didn’t try to pay off my gambling debts by betting against my teammates.”

“No, but you wrote the story about it!”

“Who read it to you?”

To my surprise, he didn’t jump across the table and try to kill me. Maybe he had developed a sense of decorum in the years since I exposed him. Or maybe he didn’t want to mess up his nice suit. After all, we were now at the convention center’s restaurant, the Georgian Terrace, where Rei invited Mnemonica — and her “date” — for lunch. Imagine my surprise when she took us to a table in the huge, glass-walled dining room where my pal Brick had been sitting beside a slim, silver-haired gentleman in a tailored suit.

Mnemonica took my arm. “You two have ... met?”

“Ever hear of that superteam called the Quarry? Cuddles, here, used to be one of them until I found out how he was taking falls and endangering innocent people so he could turn a fast buck.”

The dapper man slowly rose and raised his hands for peace. “Mister Dunbar. Brick. I know there’s a bit of history between you two, but I urge you to put it aside for the sake of the ladies.”

“And you are?”

“Marcus Leyton, Mister Dunbar. Investor, venture capitalist and principal investor in Houseman Comics Press – Brick’s new company. Please sheathe your blades. You see, you two have use for each other.”

Okay, I’ll admit it: at that second, trying to figure out that statement, I was as dumb as Brick.

“Excuse me,” Mnemonica said, “I have no scorecard. Could someone tell me what I’m doing here?”

Leyton smoothly wafted around the round table, slid between me and Mnemonica, and pulled out a chair. “My dear woman, that is exactly why I asked Rei to ask you to meet us today.”

Mnemonica looked at me as she sat down beside Brick; I trusted her judgment.

She nodded toward Rei, nudging me with her eyes.

Trying to be conciliatory, I turned and reached for the chair between me and Rei.

She was already sitting in it.

As I sat down, I couldn't help but feel that “nowhere” was just one possible place the lady behind the voice wanted me to go. I was threatening her big deal.

“Hear him out,” Rei whispered to me.

“Sorry, but if you're running with Houseman, I don't want Mnemonica —”

“Please.” She said it with an earnestness in her voice, one that didn't come from desperation or pleading, but from something I couldn't fathom.

And, being a naturally curious journalist, I couldn't stand the unfathomable.

“In the end,” Brick said during his final bite of an ornately served cherry pie, “that'll make us all a lot of dough and get you off the hook with your mouthpieces, huh?”

He sipped from his third glass of beer and slapped Mnemonica on the shoulder genially, almost knocking the glass of white wine from her hand.

I moved to catch her, but she recovered quickly and smiled at me, to my relief.

“Don't worry,” Brick said, “your shoulder'll be okay, ‘partner’. Guess I don't know my own strength, huh?”

“Or half the alphabet,” I said under my breath between bites of my own dessert.

I glanced at Rei. She might have smiled.

“To summarize our offer,” Leyton said to Mnemonica as servers cleared away the debris of steaks, salads, drinks and desserts, “we want to license the rights to adapt your past cases to comics. You would receive an upfront fee plus a royalty from sales of each issue.”

“To be drawn by the Dragon Lady who set up this wonderful luncheon?” I asked.

Rei didn't even look up. “Dragon Lady's Chinese, my family's Japanese, get your racial slurs right, round-eye.”

"Please don't blame Rei for your reunion with Brick, Mister Dunbar," Leyton said.

"When she agreed to arrange this meeting on our behalf, we had no idea Mnemonica would bring you."

"Mister Leyton, I'm very flattered," Mnemonica said, "but even if this comic book is good, who'd buy it?"

"A whole generation of people who weren't alive thirty years ago, before the Big Shakeout." Leyton said. "They don't remember when heroes and villains used their powers to fight each other instead of rush-hour traffic to their ordinary jobs. Did you see all the superhumans in the exhibit hall? Autograph lines, new books, movie deals. People *love* their stories. They're like epic myths from a bygone age. Plus, our announcement of the deal tomorrow will cap Mister Dunbar's human interest story for *The SuperHuman Times*."

My turn to raise an eyebrow. "His what?"

"As long as you're here, sir, we can use you, and your influence at the *Times*. You must admit, this deal's got great hooks. It's helping Brick and Mnemonica recover from their respective troubles, helping Rei, a human comic-book creator, break into a field that's nearly been taken over by superhumans ..."

"Which is something I don't really understand. Rei," Mnemonica said. "Why would an artist of your range and potential want to draw comics, much less tell my stories?"

Rei deigned to look up, and at her. "That's easy. I read about how you never forgot someone once you shook their hand, how you were able to remember them years later. And how you used your memory to help the police if one of those people committed a crime ... or was a victim."

Mnemonica blushed. "That wasn't my *memory* at work, of course."

"No. But even if that physical contact did let you to see into a person's mind, you didn't abuse the vision. And when you finally admitted what you could do to provide the evidence against that murderer who sued you. I thought that was very brave. And I really want to remind people of that by telling your stories." She took a sip of water, then added, "It would also be nice to add some comics drawn by me to all those I have boxed away in my closets at home."

"But even if she agrees," I said, "it wouldn't be *her* story entirely. You couldn't use actual names —"

Leyton nodded. "They'd be changed to protect the innocent, and her."

"Kinda like that old war comic you bought this mornin', huh, Marcus?" Brick snorted.

Leyton frowned. "No need to bring that up, Brick."

Brick leaned over and began looking through something I couldn't see from across the table, but it was clearly something Leyton didn't want to share. "You still got it in your purse?"

"It's a courier bag, and no, I —"

"Yeah, here it is!" Brick held up a very old-looking comic book that was sheathed in a clear Mylar envelope for protection and display. The Japanese text on the yellowed, slightly tattered cover was only slightly faded, as was the cartoon image of a platoon of American G.I.s and a woman flying above them.

She was dressed the rising sun motif of a Japanese flag and shooting fire from her eyes, incinerating the screaming troops.

"They probably couldn't use none of those poor saps' names, neither," Brick said, pointing at the carnage.

For the first time during the meal, the suave Leyton looked uncomfortable. "It's — it's just an old Japanese propaganda comic from World War Two," he said to Rei. "I—I was talking

you up to one of the larger retailers in the exhibit hall and he – he – well, I thought buying one of his high-ticket back issues would pave the way for —”

She stared at it with an intensity I hoped would never be directed at me and quietly read aloud what was clearly the title on the cover.

“The Glorious Adventures of DynaMaid.”

The look on her face wasn’t one of offense. It reminded me of that look a character gets in an action film when they’re unexpectedly — and, usually, mortally — wounded.

She stood up quickly. “I have to get back to my booth. Thanks for lunch, Marcus. Mnemonica, I’ll catch up with you later, okay?”

She was barely away from the table when Brick said, “T’Hell’s her problem, huh?”

“I don’t know, Brick,” I said, “maybe the nice Japanese-American lady found your propa-manga book offensive.”

“Why? She ain’t roastin’ no soldiers. Give Mnemonica the contract, Marcus!”

Mnemonica jumped. “Contract?”

“Nothing that needs to be signed today,” Leyton said, producing a document from his bag. “Just a formal offer that your lawyers can review.”

“Oh, dear,” she whispered, “more lawyers.”

“Who needs lawyers?” Brick said. “I signed it!”

I was pissed off. “How long did it take you to make the ‘X’?”

My memory of the whole encounter got a little cluttered after Brick roared, stood up, picked up our table and flung it across the restaurant as if it were a discus. It sailed through the picture window and, seconds later, could be heard striking something ten stories below. A distant car alarm followed.

Then, just as I was bracing myself to be thrown out after the table, Brick simply walked out.

Fortunately, the table didn't hit any people — including me. I couldn't figure out why he didn't just throw it my way. Maybe he'd experienced personal growth while he was in prison.

Growth, right. Like from Neanderthal to Cro-Magnon.

While Mnemonica and I rode the elevator back down to the exhibit hall, I said, “Don't sign that contract until I ask one of my pals in the *Times* legal department to go over it.

Something about all this just doesn't fit.”

“And I thought I had misgivings.”

“Sorry. It's in my reporter's nature to dig under the surface.

“At least we know that Mister Leyton's got enough cash to pay for the damage to the restaurant. And that car. Did you have to prod Mister Houseman so much, Kevin?”

“Yes. If Brick Houseman's a comic book publisher, I'm Kurt Busiek.”

“Pardon?”

We left the elevator and crossed the lobby to the exhibit hall. I opened the door for her.

“I'll show you. Dealers carry his books all the time at these things.”

“We should go to Rei's booth first.”

I said nothing.

“You should apologize to the face behind the voice,” Mnemonica said.

“Hey, she didn't put up with any of my crap. An apology would just insult her.”

“Kevin, she was upset by that comic book. Doesn't the reporter in you want to know why?”

I looked at her for a moment, sighed in defeat, and threaded our way back to row 100 of Artist's Alley.

Booth 114 wasn't open. The table was cleared except for a stack of Rei's business cards. The art that had hung from the drapes was gone — probably locked away for security — replaced by a smartly hand-lettered sign that read, "Back 9:00 a.m. Saturday."

"Okay," I said, "now I'm suspicious. No artist can afford to shut down their booth in the middle of a major show unless it's an emergency, or they died."

Five tiny daggers sank into my upper arm. They were Mnemonica's fingernails. She clutched so tightly that I could feel them through her white gloves. "Mon?"

"Kevin! She's hurt!" She leaned against me. "Rei's hurt, I see her!"

"Where?"

"A room – a hotel room –

"Fire," she whispered. "Fire!"

We took a chance that Rei was staying in the hotel directly adjacent to the convention center, but even though Mnemonica saw a fire, no alarms were sounding when we arrived. We told the front desk manager what Mnemonica saw. She checked the hotel registry and took us to a room – one with a shattered door and a single occupant: Rei Shinozaki, lying motionless on the floor.

I raced in, knelt beside Rei and picked up her wrist to check her pulse. After a few seconds, Rei moaned softly, slowly rolled her head in my direction and opened her eyes.

"Swell," she said without gratitude.

I gave her her pulse back.

The manager pulled out a small radio. Before she could speak into it, Rei said, “No. Please. I’m okay.”

“But, what about who did this to you?” Mnemonica asked.

“To the room?” the manager asked.

“No.” Rei gradually stood up with no help from me. “No one did anything. I don’t want to put you to any trouble, ma’am. I think the only thing broken was my luggage when I... I tripped over it. I—I was startled when one of the superhuman guests fell through the door. Probably had too many mint juleps with lunch. Happened so fast I didn’t even get a good look at the dope. That’s all it was. I’ll pay for the door.”

The manager considered the story, then holstered her radio. “Miss, this hotel caters to superhumans frequently. It’s just part of the cost of doing business, especially during convention season. I’ll get maintenance up here to replace it within the hour. You’re sure you’re all right?”

Rei nodded.

“We’ll stay with her,” I said. Mnemonica nodded.

The manager left the room; I heard her contacting Maintenance on the radio to get on that door. Good service.

“Really,” Rei said, “you don’t have to —”

“Yes, we do,” Mnemonica said.

“Tripping over luggage?” I asked. “Bullshit, lady.”

“That your favorite comic book character?” Rei said.

“Rei, I had a psychic flash downstairs, a vision,” Mnemonica said. “I saw you up here falling down as that door shattered. And fire. I saw fire. I saw that you were hurt because I saw it through the mind of the person who shattered that door and hurt you: Brick Houseman.”

"How could you see through Brick?" I asked. "I saw you shake hands with him and Leyton. You never took off your gloves."

"Brick smacked me on the shoulder at the restaurant. I wasn't wearing my blazer. You were carrying it. My shoulder was exposed. That indirect contact was all it took to connect us. His emotions must have been pretty strong; I wasn't even trying to pick up his signals."

"But why would Brick take a swing at Rei? He *needs* her to draw your comic book and launch his company."

"And *I* need *him* to break into comics, Dunbar," Rei said in a measured tone. "So would you please drop. This. Now."

Mnemonic spent the rest of that day resting in her hotel room while I wandered the convention renewing old acquaintances and meeting potential subjects for new articles. It was a nice way to decompress after that lunch and that woman.

What happened to you, Rei? I can understand why you wouldn't tell a couple of strangers, but why not the manager or the police?

Once more, I couldn't get her voice out of my head, only now it was saying, "Drop. This. Now."

The evening's activities promised to be much more genteel. The opening night dance provided fans who paid a premium with a chance to mingle with the superhuman creator and celebrity guests, most of whom actually the hero, or villain, worship that they'd missed since the Big Shakeout.

I called for Mnemonica at her room after the dance had started. We would have been there sooner if I hadn't had to talk her into going with me. Fortunately, she'd packed a lovely plain, indigo evening gown for that possibility.

"You look like Helen Mirren at any given Oscars ceremony," I told her when she opened the door. "And you look ten years younger."

"That still qualifies me for the senior buffet, Kevin," she said, "but thank you. And you're one of the few men I know who can look that good in a white dinner jacket."

"Thanks." We stepped out into the hall and closed her door. "Even in a room full of capes and cowls, it should make a nice statement."

"Yes. 'I'm with Grandma.'"

We made our way to the elevators and descended to the ballroom level, pausing to let Mnemonica gasp at the scene. As promised, humans and superhumans mingled and chatted; the subdued lighting occasionally gave way to flashes as fans posed for selfies with their favorite celebrities; and the dancing ranged from awkward twists to sophisticated ballroom moves. In the case of the flyers, those moves were not confined to the actual dance floor.

"Good evening, dear lady!" Leyton appeared in front of us as if from nowhere, decked out in a dashing black tuxedo. "You look magnificent, Mnemonica! I can't tell you how happy I am to see you. After that unpleasantness between Rei and Brick, I didn't know if you'd want to be seen with me. Guilt by association, and all that."

I nodded in complete agreement.

"Do you know what happened?" Mnemonica asked.

“Not really,” Leyton said. “Both of them were pretty close-mouthed about the whole —” He stopped and reached into his jacket to pull out his phone. I couldn’t read the screen, but I could see that it was lit and receiving a call or message.

“Speak of the devil. Excuse me, please.”

He walked out of the ballroom and just outside the doorway. We followed, stopping just at the exit to give Leyton privacy while satisfying our curiosity.

“How are you feeling?” Leyton asked his caller. “Good, good. Listen, if you’re up for it, there are a number of important people down here who would like to meet you. Could do a world of good for —” There was a pause as the caller replied. “Of course. Of course, my dear, you know best. See you tomorrow at breakfast? Splendid. Bye.”

Mnemonica and I made no attempt to hide our eavesdropping as Leyton returned to the ballroom. “How’s Rei doing?” I asked.

“Great, just great.” Leyton didn’t sound great, though. “And busy. She’s staying up in her room to finish sketches that were commissioned by fans — which is fine, but there are some influential retailers and distributors down here who could do much more for her.”

“And much more for your investment?” It was the first time I’d heard Mnemonica question the guy’s motives.

“Exactly,” Leyton said with equal candor. “Mister Dunbar, would you mind paying a personal call on Miss Shinozaki? Perhaps she’ll come down if a debonair correspondent from the *Times* expresses an interest in dancing with her. What woman could resist such an offer?”

“A busy one,” I said, “and I don’t think she’d —”

“Excuse us, Marcus.” Now it was our turn to step outside the ballroom, with Mnemonica shoving me all the way. “Go, Kevin.”

“If I leave you here, he’ll try to talk you into signing the contract. He’ll get you drunk and you’ll wake up in an ice-filled bathtub tomorrow morning holding a book deal and missing a kidney.”

“He may try,” she said, “but I might find out exactly why he and Brick pursued me in the first place. He just might tell me after a dance. Or two. I can sacrifice.”

“I just don’t like the idea of leaving you —”

She whipped out her phone and tapped the voicemail: “Hello, Mnemonica? This is Reiko Shinozaki. We spoke a few days ago to confirm our meeting at the Atlanta show.”

“Hi, you’re always drawing stuff and I’m always writing stuff in my head; wanna hang out?”

She smiled at me. And laughed a little. I didn’t expect that, especially since I’d caught her in the middle of a phone call. I kind of expected the explosion of drawing materials across her bed. She was, after all, trying to get commissioned work done by tomorrow morning.

I decided not to waste her time. “I’m here on a mission. As far as Marcus Leyton is concerned, it’s to try and get you to join us at the dance. He thought I looked impressive.”

“Then you dance with him. And as far as you’re concerned?”

“I just wanted to see if you were okay. You look okay, and busy, and I don’t want to distract you.”

“Nothing distracts me from money, Mister Dunbar.”

“A lesser man would be insulted.”

She stepped back and opened the brand new door I’d knocked on. “A smarter man would come in so I can get back to work. Just excuse me for a sec.”

It was exactly like my room: decorated in a clean, dignified manner with two beds, only one of which was being used, a writing desk, a small table with a comfy chair for visitors, and a bathroom.

She returned to her cell phone and spoke. I didn't know what she said, though, because she spoke in Italian. I couldn't translate, but from her clipped and friendly delivery, it sounded like a business call. It also sounded as good as her voicemail message to Mnemonica, so I didn't mind listening for a couple of minutes before she said "Ciao."

"You can move those brochures off the chair over there and put them on the floor," she said as she pulled out a pencil and returned to her bed to draw.

I sat down and glanced at the materials I was moving. One was a brochure illustrated with some of the pieces I'd seen on her website. "Your name's all over this thing, surrounded by Italian."

"That's usually how it works when you're exhibiting in Venice. I have a show opening in two weeks."

"Congratulations." I watched her work and shook my head. "A successful gallery artist wants to draw comic books? What gives?"

"I got hooked on reading comics when I was sick with mono in the fourth grade," Rei said. "I love 'em, so I started doing a few big conventions every year to make some connections. When Marcus introduced himself at a show, I saw a chance to break into the business, expand my range."

"And you met Brick while exhibiting at a children's museum?"

I made her laugh again; I was proud. "No. Marcus got me together with Brick, told me about his hard times. Of course, I knew Brick's story before I ever met Marcus, thanks to a reliable source: you."

"Me?"

"Your *Times* article that exposed his gambling. I read it. I believed it. Just like your great profile on Mnemonica. That's why I didn't slam the door on you. I wanted to meet the writer behind those words." She never looked up from her work, but I didn't feel ignored at all. "I just didn't know how to approach you after my earlier behavior."

"Next time, have the front desk page the shlub who called you 'Dragon Lady.'"

"Yeah, smooth pickup line, Dunbar. I can tell you've never read *Terry and the Pirates*. But that's okay. Despite the Shinozaki name, my immediate family's from Kansas, not Japan."

"Funny you should mention Japan," I said, treading as if in a minefield. "The propaganda comic Brick pulled out at lunch today, the one with the flying girl shooting flames at the G.I.s with her eyes? What was —"

Before I could finish, there was a knock at the door — a rapid, urgent, loud knock.

I jumped up. "You order another distraction from room service?"

"No, but I won't fault their timing."

I opened the door, ready to find an impatient Leyton pacing on the other side. Instead, I found Mnemonica panting and looking slightly mussed. "Holy crap! Are you okay? What happened? Did Marcus —?"

"Kevin, it's not me and it's not Marcus, all we did was dance, and it's Brick Houseman! We — we found him ... in a stairwell ..."

"Kevin, he's dead."

The ComiConclave was now a crime scene, which meant that — in addition to Rei, Mnemonica, me and Leyton — the Atlanta Police Department’s was tasked with questioning hundreds of conventioners who’d been in the ballroom, lobby and other common areas at the time Brick was found. They would also have to talk with the rest of the convention to account for people who weren’t in the immediate area; with the cooperation of the convention center, they set up a room to which attendees could be routed upon arrival on Saturday morning.

All of us spent our share of the wee hours in that room that night. It was close to 5:30 in the morning when we were allowed to return to our rooms. Since dawn was coming anyway, I decided to stay in the lobby and wait for the hotel’s complimentary breakfast buffet to open at 6:00. Besides, I was feeling too guilty to sleep. Brick did a lot of good when he was part of the Quarry. A lot of people forgot that after my story broke. Maybe if I hadn’t exposed him, he wouldn’t have needed to come here to redeem himself, and he wouldn’t be dead now.

Out of fatigue, I blurted all of that out loud in front of Mnemonica and Rei, who sat in the lobby with me. “Maybe I should have followed that advice from *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*,” I said.

“When the legend becomes fact,” Rei said, “print the legend”?

Mnemonica smiled. “You know your old movies.”

“I have a thing for visual media,” Rei said. “Artist thing.”

Marcus still looked like he was on his way to a cotillion when he left the cops’ interrogation room and approached us. Like Mnemonica and I, he was still in his formal wear from Friday night.

Mnemonica stood up to greet him. “Marcus, what took you so long? What did they ask you?”

“They needed as much information about Brick as they could get, and since I’m his business partner, they asked me plenty of questions. But based on what I’ve heard in the background, it sounds like they’re leaning toward an accident. Brick was powerful enough to ward off most superhuman attacks, and I don’t recall seeing any huge wounds or even blood when Mnemonica and I found his body. I think the big guy just slipped, fell down the stairs and banged his head. Probably an internal injury.”

“Did they say anything about his hands, Marcus?”

“Mnemonica, it was an interrogation, dear. I didn’t ask the questions.”

“What about his hands?” I asked.

“While Marcus was calling the ambulance and the police from the stairwell after we ...”

Recalling this visibly affected her. Leyton gently placed his hands on her shoulders and, comforted, she continued. “After we found Mister Houseman, I noticed that the palms of his hands looked very red. Like they’d been, I don’t know, burn —”

“Well,” Rei said abruptly, “no Brick Houseman, no Houseman Comics Press, right, Marcus?”

He released Mnemonica and weaved around the lobby chairs to Rei’s side. “On the contrary, my dear. You have immense talent, and your comics could entice other humans to try their hand at graphic storytelling, return them to the entire comic industry, open up new opportunities —”

“Make mo’ money,” I said.

"It's what Brick would have wanted," Leyton said. "I haven't cancelled our three o'clock presentation yet, Rei. We can still move forward, in Brick's memory, and fulfil his vision. What do you say? For Brick?"

"Marcus," she said, "I need to —"

"You need a glass of orange juice," I said quietly. "From the hotel buffet. Outside on the balcony."

I can't describe the mystified look that earned from her. "Was that the Jedi mind trick for lobotomy patients?"

"Please." I said it quietly and firmly, as she said it to me at lunch.

"I'll see you this afternoon, Marcus. I still have commissions to finish before the exhibit hall opens."

While she and Marcus worked out their game plan for the balance of the day, I took Mnemonica aside. "Hang with him while I talk to Rei. Talk to him some more before you go back to your room. Hell, find another stairwell and let him muss your hair up some more."

"Kevin! I told you we just danced. A few spins were involved."

"Okay, take him for a spin, then." I kissed her forehead. "Later."

"So ... an old comic about a Japanese dame who shoots fire from her eyes got you upset at lunch yesterday; Mnemonica sees you *and* fire through Brick's pea brain when he attacked you; and now Brick's dead with burned hands.

"In writing, we call this kind of thing a motif."

I paused to sip my orange juice. Rei looked at her black coffee. We were the first guests at the breakfast buffet, which meant that everything was fresh and hot. We were also the first

people to claim a table on the balcony overlooking the city, which was nice. I knew we wouldn't be alone for long, and she didn't have time to waste because of her art, so I risked being blunt.

“You can't help me,” she said.

“Give me a chance, Dragon Lady.” I smiled when I said that. “If that hits too close to home under the circumstances, I'm sorry. I wouldn't have risked having hot coffee thrown in my face if I didn't think you were worth the risk.”

She held onto her coffee and took a sip from it. I spread some jelly on a bagel while I waited a minute.

Soon, the dusky voice sighed. “After I left the restaurant, I went back to my room to get my head together before going back down to the exhibit hall. Brick came banging at my door, ordering me — *ordering* — to get my ass back downstairs.”

“And when you didn't, he shoved his ass through your door.”

Rei nodded.

“I'm guessing that comic rattled you because DynaMaid's a distant relative?”

She nodded again. “Not one we're proud of.” A little more coffee and another sigh.

“Dunbar, can you imagine what would happen to my career, my family, if the world found out that I had the powers of a war criminal?”

“You roasted Brick?” I tried not to jump over the table and kiss her when I said that.

“It was a kind of flash,” she said. “My defenses kicked in, my eyes went ‘foompf’, he threw his hands up to protect his eyes. And he left. Alive. That was the last time I saw him.”

“Let me guess: Brick knew your secret and threatened to expose you if you didn't draw for him?”

Rei snorted and smiled a little. “Yeah, right. To Brick, DynaMaid was a babe on a comic Marcus had in his purse — uh, courier bag. Besides, if he knew what I could do, he wouldn’t have screwed with me at all. You gonna eat all of it?”

I don’t know what surprised me more: her request for my food or the fact that I immediately started cutting my bagel apart to give her half of it. “I don’t think it was just a coincidence that Marcus had the comic. Someone knew that DynaMaid would set you off — if not Brick or Marcus, then the dealer who sold it. After you go back to your room, I’ll try to catch some dealer friends before the hall opens and see if any of them have a line on that comic.”

“I could just ask Marcus where he bought it.”

“He might think you don’t trust him, and that could send your publishing deal into the toilet. I don’t want all this to ruin your big shot.”

“No, I’ve already withheld this information from the cops, so things are risky enough. Just promise me you’ll let the first issue of Mnemonica’s comic hit the stands before you repeat all this in the *Times*.”

“You said it was off the record, it’s off the record.”

“I never said —”

It was my turn to stare at her intently.

When she understood why, she smiled.

That was nice.

“Fire-shooting eyes? Why didn’t you say so?”

I had just under two hours to question dealers before Saturday’s onslaught of ComiConclave attendees. They were already lining up outside the building before the doors

opened. Fortunately, *SuperHuman Times* press credentials can get you into the show early, and they made it possible for me to hear those words from a reed-thin retailer with a vast selection of Golden Age comics on display.

"I can't read Japanese," he said as he arranged his displays. "I wouldn't have been able to tell DynaMaid from DynoMutt. I just got it as part of a manga collection I bought and thought someone might want it. I never expected to find two people interested in it."

"Two?" I asked.

"Yeah. You and the guy who bought it yesterday morning. Described it exactly the same way when he emailed me about it a month or so ago."

"He asked you for the comic? *Before* the convention? You didn't offer it to him?"

"He paid what I asked without even blinking," the dealer said. "He was a sharp-looking guy, African-American fella with graying hair and goatee, paid cash. If you wanna leave your card, I can pass it to him if he stops by again."

"Don't worry," I said. "I know where to find him."

"Dunbar! If you see Marcus, tell him I may be late for the presentation, but I'll meet him at the presentation as soon as I'm done, okay?"

I'd wandered into Artist's Alley shortly after the doors opened to admit the herd of thousands. I was lucky to make it to the end of Rei's row. She expertly juggled between yelling to me from her booth, talking about her art with fans and sketching some of it for them. Her leggings and crop top were a different color, and they attracted plenty of attention from females (who liked her art, and her look) and males (who liked her art, and her ass). Her mood seemed better, happier, but I couldn't tell if it was just for the crowd or if she was genuinely invigorated.

"You'll be there, right?" she called.

Wow. That gorgeous voice I first heard on Mnemonica's phone wanted me to share her moment of glory. As there were far too many moving, talking and yelling bodies between us for me, I simply flashed a thumbs-up, let her get back to work and negotiated my way out of the hall and into the lobby.

I wanted a little privacy so I could feel like crap about what I was thinking, and what I was thinking about doing about it.

It didn't make any sense. Rei clearly wanted to be in business with Marcus. Why would he need to blackmail her with the DynaMaid comic? And how would he find out Rei and DynaMaid were related in the first place? Did she tell him? Should I ask her? How could I ruin what could be the start of a new career for Rei by telling her unfounded suspicions?

I needed more information. I had a pretty good idea where I could get it, and where it would be at 3:00.

"I'd like to thank all of you for coming to the unveiling of Houseman Comics Press!"

Leyton stood on the ballroom stage in a new suit, looking as impossibly suave as when we met. He was surrounded by easels featuring enlargements of Rei's booth art. A large video screen behind him displayed the Houseman Comics Press logo, possibly the opening slide of a presentation. The ballroom that was so large on Friday night had been divided into smaller rooms to accommodate convention programming. This section appeared to seat about two hundred people. It was nearly full. I wanted to think it was because of Rei's promising art, but I knew it was probably because it was connected to the big old superhero who died in the stairwell.

“By now, I’m sure you’ve heard the sad news about Brick Houseman’s tragic accident last night,” Leyton said. “Before I begin our presentation, please join me in remembering our company’s founder, and all of the good deeds he did as a member of the legendary Quarry, with this short memorial.” He nodded to an audio-visual crew at the back of the room. They dimmed the lights and activated the video presentation, a montage of Brick as a superhero in the midst of action, a public champion receiving honors from dignitaries, standing alongside the teammates he sold out with his gambling.

Having had no respect for Brick in life, I saw no reason to honor him in death — especially when covers from the *Times* with his fat face on them came onscreen — so I sidled up to the back row of the room and sat down beside Mnemonica, who was back to her impeccably unmussed self.

“Hi,” I whispered.

“Where’s Rei? Isn’t she with you?”

“She might be backstage. Or she got held up at her booth. You should have seen her, Mon. People are really digging her art.”

She smiled. “You sound so proud, almost like a boyfr—”

“I do not!”

Nearby mourners shushed me.

“I hate to ruin your mood,” Mnemonica whispered, “but I saw something. Something terrible.”

“What, like through someone’s mind? Another vision? Who did you touch?”

Before she could tell me, the presentation faded out and the light came up to a sincere round of applause.

"Thank you all for remembering Brick," Leyton said, "and thanks to the ComiConclave A-V team for helping me put together that tribute on short notice. I think I can honestly say that, even in the wake of his passing, he'd want us to go forward with this venture in his name." He chuckled. "And after months of working with him on this launch, I should know."

"Yes." Mnemonica stood up. "Because he owed you a fortune!"

Leyton's jaw dropped open. So did mine. Everyone else turned and looked at her. This time, she wasn't at all self-conscious.

"You're not an investor," she continued, sounding more wounded than angry. "You're a bookmaker. Brick's bookmaker. He owed you money but, since breaking his legs was out of the question, you arranged for him to front a comic book company to pay off his debt."

"Why would Brick be intimidated by Leyton?" I asked. "Why didn't he just ignore him, or snap him in half?"

"Everyone knew about Brick's gambling addiction, Kevin. If Brick welched on a bet, he'd never place another. And if he killed Marcus, he'd have been the prime suspect. But when Marcus saw how talented Rei is, he realized he didn't need Brick, so he killed Brick to assume control of the publishing company. It's all in Houseman Comics Press' company charter, which the police will find in your hotel room, in your briefcase —"

"You looked in my briefcase?" Marcus said, his voice rumbling low.

"You were in his room?!" I asked. "What were you doing in there?"

"Getting my hair mussed a couple more times, now shush." She returned to Leyton. "After you left my room, I saw everything through your eyes, Marcus. It's all right next to the program book for the convention, where you've circled certain names on the superhuman guest list and written notes like 'desperate' and 'on probation' and 'bets on football.'"

“That’s it!” It was like that classic video game where you’re supposed to knock out all the bricks in the wall. Mnemonica had knocked out the bricks and I could now see through to the other side of the wall. “Ever since I met you, Marcus, I’ve been trying to figure out why a guy like you would want to get involved with Mnemonica and Brick and comics, and now it makes sense! You looked for artists with something you could hold over them. You found out that Rei was related to DynaMaid, so you ...”

I’d never been jealous of Brick before, but when I realized what I’d said, and heard the murmur from the crowd, I wished I was dead. “Oh, you stupid son of a bitch.”

“It’s all right, Dunbar.”

Rei stepped out from behind a drape on the stage. She looked angry, but — thankfully — not at me. “He found out I was related to DynaMaid and made arrangements to buy that comic before the convention, didn’t he? That way, even though I wanted to play along, he would have had leverage in case I ever wanted to quit or work for another publisher.”

“And you and Brick would give him access to an industry loaded with superhumans,” I said, “especially those who like to gamble, or who haven’t done so well, the ones desperate enough to sell their lives to comic books.”

“Like old women with huge legal debts,” Mnemonica said.

Everyone looked to Marcus for his rebuttal. Instead, he offered a slow smile. “I would never blackmail Rei. *Exploit*, definitely. I mean, that’s what you do with talent. Think of it: a gifted human artist descended from a notorious war criminal tries to restore her family’s honor by succeeding in a business dominated by superhumans. There’s another hook for your article, Dunbar!”

“No article,” I said.

“No hook,” Rei said. “The deal’s off.”

Marcus eyed her. “Really?”

That’s when my brain ripped open. At least, that’s what it felt like. I was told later that it only lasted, maybe, three seconds, but the moment felt endless to me. I might have screamed, but I didn’t hear anything or see anything. I registered nothing except the pain of a nuclear explosion that went off in the center of my head and radiated out to every nerve ending in my skull.

Then it stopped. As it cleared, the first thing I heard was Marcus from the stage.

“Telekinesis. Useful for so much more than sliding chess pieces around a board or making things float through the air. It’s also wonderful for simulating a subdural hematoma – the kind of injury Brick sustained when he ‘fell down those stairs.’ Wanna watch, Rei?”

Rei glared at him. “Leave Dunbar alone, and you win.”

“I thought so,” Marcus said. “But I think we’ll forego the presentation and make our exit. Unfortunately, since I can only work my little trick against one person at a time, I’ll need a more — no pun intended — conventional weapon.” He emphasized this by producing an automatic pistol from his jacket.

Mnemonica had her arms around me, but I was about to break free try something stupid to get Marcus and his gun away from Rei.

Luckily, Rei had a similar idea. Her eyes flashed with a bright, intense green light that produced two thin jets of fire that struck Marcus’ gun and, within as second, melted it.

The agonizing heat made him scream and drop the useless gun. Half of the crowd was heading for the exit; the other half stood transfixed by one of the coolest things they’d ever seen.

Still holding his hand, Marcus snarled and turned to Rei.

She let out a scream and fell to her knees, grabbing her head in agony as he mentally stabbed her.

Still not seeing clearly, I found the strength to stand and, grabbing the backs of chairs and the shoulders of conventioners for support, staggered forward.

"Marcus!" It was Mnemonica's voice, ahead of me, followed by the sound of someone getting knocked down, followed by ... loud applause from all around me.

I started to regain my focus. Rei sat on one side of the stage, holding herself up and panting as if from great exertion, which I understood. She looked at me, then at the other side of the stage.

There, Marcus unconscious, with Mnemonica standing over him, rubbing her sore, gloved hand.

"How ...?" I asked.

"Iron filings," Mnemonica said. "Simple senior citizen precaution. Plus, it adds insulation between me and handshakes." She turned to the crowd. "Would someone please have security call 9-1-1 for my friends ... and the police, for this?"

As I expected, the conventioners were eager to help. A few assisted me as I climbed onto the stage and made my way over to Rei. "How're you doing?"

"A — a little disoriented, exhausted," she said. "Just feel like going to sleep."

"No. Let's stay conscious," I said.

"Just keep talking, Rei."

Police came for Marcus. Mnemonica and members of the audience provided them with the details. Paramedics came for me and Rei. We were both advised to take it easy until we felt

fully recovered. (There are no drugs on the market for telekinetic attacks.) The balance of Saturday was spent doing just that, but when I went down to the exhibit hall late on Sunday morning, I found Rei back at her booth, joined by Mnemonica.

I stayed back to allow the paying customers access to the booth, and there were plenty. From the surrounding chatter I heard, Rei’s prints and sketches were in high demand following the revelation of her powers, and Mnemonica’s slugfest with Marcus made her the belle of the ball. It was particularly nice to see older fans step up to her, then to surprise them by recalling how she first met each of them years ago. Rei drew a small, beautiful tent sign that rested in front of Mnemonica: “Autographs \$5.00” And everyone who spoke to her gladly paid for one.

Neither of the ladies acknowledged me, and that was fine.

At one point, Rei stepped deeper into the booth, away from the crowd, and pulled out her phone. Her back was to me, so I couldn’t see her face. I could only see that she was texting someone. Couldn’t have been Marcus or Brick.

Family, maybe. Boyfriend, perhaps. Girlfriend, even.

I couldn’t help but be a little jealous. That voice on the phone turned out to belong to a pretty smart and talented woman. Someone was lucky to have her in their company.

Before I could feel too sorry for myself, my phone vibrated and whistled the hailing signal used in the communicators on *Nebula One* (the original series, not the sequel). I pulled it out and checked the screen.

“Hi! I’m buying dinner. Swing by @ 5 when hall closes or whenevs.

“Bye. Rei.”

Although we’d heard that the staff had replaced the shattered picture window in the Georgian Terrace in record time (like the manager of the hotel said, they were used to superhuman guests of all kinds), we opted to not trigger any PTSD among the staff by showing our faces and reminding them of the incident. Instead, we went next door to a brick-oven pizzeria that gave us a welcome opportunity to experience life outside ComiConclave for a while. Not that life within it was bad now. Rei’s sales receipts and her collection of business cards from legitimate publishers proved that. Many of those publishers shared their cards with Mnemonica as well.

I toasted the entry of both ladies into the comics industry. “Your comic about Mnemonica should generate enough royalties to keep her out of debtor’s prison.”

“Um, about that ...” Mnemonica started.

“We decided to make it a one-shot deal,” Rei said, “a graphic novel instead of a series. And you know, if we can get a quote from Marcus on visiting day at the pen, I can make her look like a senior sex goddess with this book.”

“Now, just —”

“You’ll be a legend. Unless you don’t want to be portrayed as a vivacious, enticing woman who can still get a stud like Marcus to dance with her —”

“And muss your hair,” I said.

“Then we’ll portray you as the most respectable, down-on-her-luck spinster on Earth.”

Mnemonica looked at us for a moment.

“Print the legend,” she said. “If you must. But, I think your story is better.”

“I don’t have a story,” Rei said.

"You certainly do," Mnemonica said. "DynaMaid. You could tell the story of how she became, well, what she became. One thing I learned from walking around that hall with Dunbar was that people find supervillains much more fascinating than superheroes. Covers for their books far outnumbered those of the heroes. That's one reason why I was so nervous about the whole deal with Marcus."

The idea got my wheels turning. "Make it personal," I told Rei. "Parallel DynaMaid's story against the story of how you came to terms with your own powers," I said. "That's a graphic novel I'd read."

"But would you write it, Kevin?" Mnemonica asked.

"Not my story, Mon."

"But would you?" Rei asked. "I'm not wandering around inside DynaMaid's sick mind all by myself. If I go in there, you're going with me."

"We'd have to do it all by email. I'm in New York, but I travel. Where are you?"

"After this, Venice for the next six months, then back to Kansas to spend time with my Dad." She then tempered her enthusiasm with a slight frown. "I should probably let him know we're doing this. If he doesn't give me too much flak, he might know relatives we can talk to in Japan. Maybe we even have a few left who actually knew her. But if they're my family, they probably won't shut up once they start."

"And I'll have to translate for them," Rei said, "so you'd better get used to the sound of my voice."

Without even looking at Mnemonica, I knew she was smiling, and she didn't even have to read my mind.