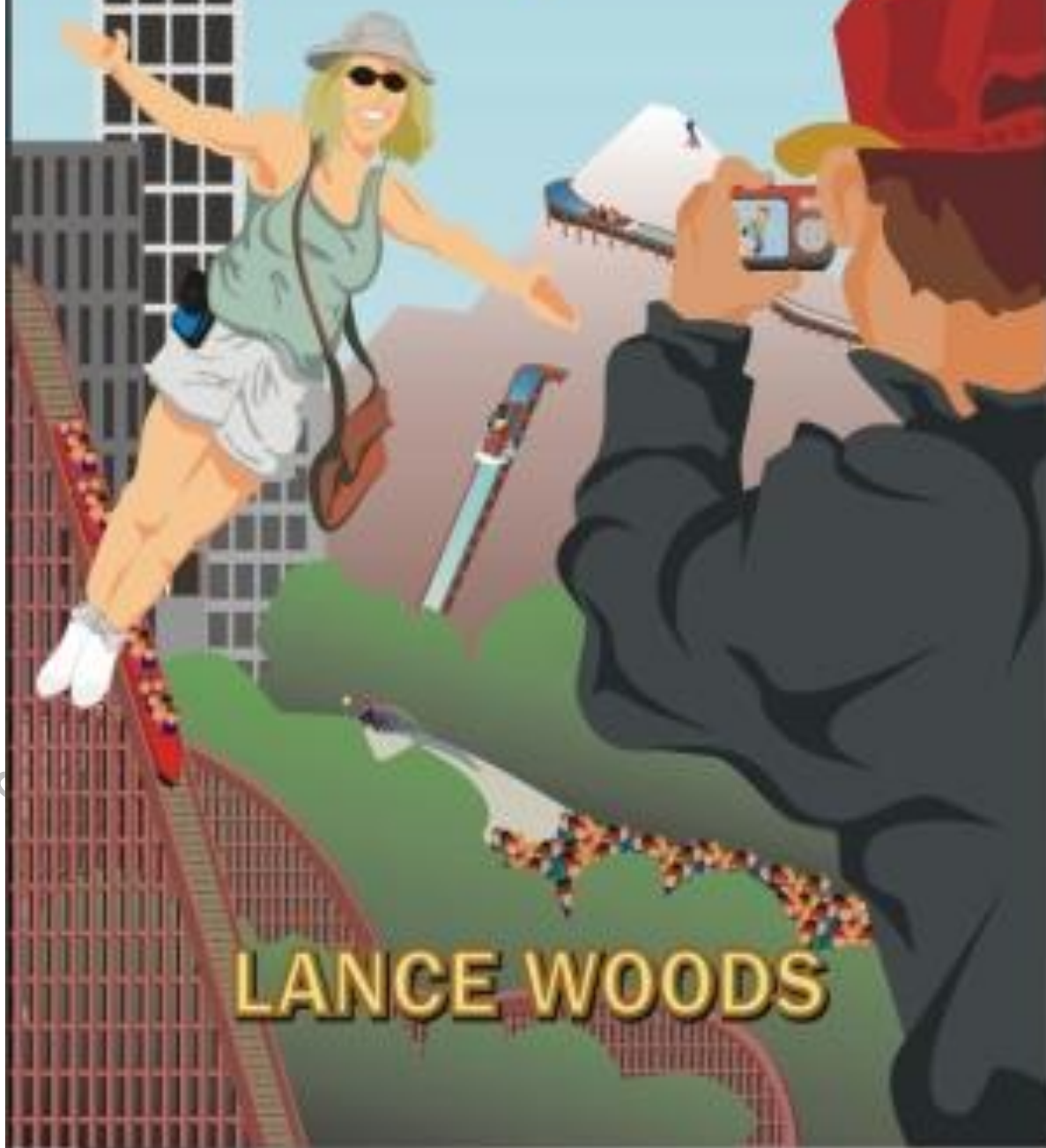


# HEROIC PARK

A SUPERHUMAN TIMES NOVEL



LANCE WOODS

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For Cindy and Greg,  
the source of my powers.

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- WEDNESDAY -

## CHAPTER ONE

She didn't make a showy entrance when she approached our blackjack table. She didn't have to. Her looks were – I can't think of a better way to describe them – formidable. I gauged her to be in her late 50s, maybe even her early 60s, from what lines I could see on her face, which was only lightly made up. She stood about 5' 7", 5' 8", with a trim, attractive build clothed in a casual, smart, deep red suit. I think the only jewelry she wore was a pair of simple diamond ear studs. But what really stood out for me were two things: her hair, which was solid

white and styled in a short, attractive, no-nonsense way; and her bearing, the way she smoothly pulled out a chair and smiled at the dealer and her pit boss.

I knew this woman. We'd never met, but I knew her from photographs, videos, interviews, and other things. Everyone knew her except, it seemed, for the 60-ish guy sitting beside me, the only other person playing blackjack with me before she arrived.

"Don't get me wrong," the guy said – by the way, I'm cleaning up his diction slightly for your benefit, since he was slightly inebriated at the time – "I don't have anything against the superhumans. I know a lot of them in my office. Nice, decent folks. Not pushy or flashy. They do their jobs, make friends, brownnose the bosses, become the bosses, some are good, some are jerks, y'know? Like the Indians who run these places."

I subtly tossed a "Do you believe this guy?" glance at our dealer, a lovely young lady in her early 20s with dark eyes, artfully streaked brown hair, and very nimble fingers. She was doing an excellent job of representing the Pascua Yaqui, the Native American tribe that operated the Golden Flower Hotel & Casino, by adding my meager bets to the house's take.

The burly, smiling pit boss beside her couldn't care less about my sideman's remark, or about me. He was tending to the new arrival. "Good evening, Ms. Tzone," he said. "Nice to have you with us again."

"Good evening." Her exotic, European accent gave her voice a friendly, inviting, and distinctive quality, even when she had to raise her volume slightly to be heard over the patrons, table games, and slot machines in the casino.

"I just don't get why they had to bring their stupid park to Tucson," the man continued. "I mean, it's insulting, ain't it? A park where humans can be superhuman? That's like a park where anyone can be black, or Asian, or Jewish. Or Indian!" He toasted our neutral, patient dealer with

his highball. “But they sweet-talked the mayor and city council, bought off most of the protestors who thought they were messing with the natural order, and y’know how many suckers went for it when it opened last year?”

I turned my attention back to our hand in progress as I replied, “I read in *The SuperHuman Times* that they pulled in close to a million and a half paid admissions.”

“That park’s glamorizin’ the superhumans all over again, like they did back before the Big Shakeout,” my new pal said. “Makin’ ‘em all seem better than us again. You’re probably too young to remember those days.”

Actually, at 32, I do remember a little about those days, although the Big Shakeout started when I was about three. Learning about the days preceding it came largely from studying history on my own and actually talking to the people who made it, which was often my job. But I wasn’t about to volunteer that to my Tucsonan pal, not while I was listening to the pit boss talk with Ms. Tzone.

“How are your security inspections going?” the pit boss asked.

“Quite well,” the lady said. “Everything is functioning perfectly. I’ll be delivering a final briefing on the upgrades before I leave tomorrow morning. It’ll be very early, I’m afraid.”

“Don’t worry,” the pit boss said. “We’ll all wake up with the sun to get briefed by Nataliya Tzone.”

She smiled and turned her eyes away. She may have blushed, but it was hard to tell under the soft lighting that encircled the ceiling above the gaming tables.

Any aura of celebrity she may have radiated wasn’t shining on my fellow gambler, who was absorbed in his cards and his commentary. “Just bugs me, is all. No one comes to Tucson for

Tucson anymore. They don't even come for the Indians. The real ones, I mean, not these casino Indians, no offense."

The dealer professionally smiled and dealt our last cards. My luck was still pitiful. Nataliya Tzone placed a small clutch purse on the table as my chips migrated to Harvey Wallbanger.

"I'm just glad you took time to come down and relax," the pit boss said. "Will you be using your line of credit tonight?"

She shook her head as she pulled a few modest bills from the clutch purse. "Strictly cash, as always."

As the dealer shuffled new cards, my blackjack buddy finally noticed our additional player. He sipped quickly from the drink at his side and brushed a stray lock of graying red hair out of his eyes to see her better. Or maybe it was so he could look better to her.

I watched her fingers. They were long and thin, like those of a pianist, and they moved with great dexterity as she exchanged \$100 in cash for 20 chips, set them in front of her, and slid one into position on the green felt table.

"Is it true you never play the high stakes tables?" the pit boss asked her.

She nodded. "I already take the house to the cleaners with my retainer. Plus, it might arouse suspicion for obvious reasons."

"Ma'am, I can't imagine anyone being suspicious of someone with that pretty voice," my tablemate said. "Why, if you were anybody else, I'd be tellin' you to shut your hole and start playin'."

"Shut *your* hole and start playin'," I muttered to him.

He didn't. "But with that voice, you can keep your hole open as long as you want, far as I'm concerned. While you're playin', of course. Where're you from, anyway?"

"Chicago," she said, watching as the next hand was dealt.

"That voice doesn't sound like anything I ever heard in Chicago. Sounds like, what the hell does it sound like?" He brought his drink to his lips for a second, sipped, then reacted as if he'd been seeking gold and happily discovered whiskey instead. "Gypsy. That's it, you sound like a Gyp-!"

In the middle of his last word, the lady glanced up from her cards, at him, and raised her little finger as if she were flicking away a gnat.

The guy fell, practically flew, backward, off his chair and onto the floor. Unhurt and confused as to how he got there, he started to shake it off. Then he licked his lips a couple of times. He began blowing through them, as if he were trying to cool something down quickly, then frantically. From my seat beside him, I could see that his lips were changing color; their natural red intensified. He patted them rapidly, as if he were trying to smother a fire. Without thinking he grabbed his drink and downed it. The alcohol didn't help. He clamped his hands across his mouth and let out a muffled roar.

The pit boss waved over a nearby security officer. "Bit his lip and the booze got in. Take him to the kitchen and get him some ice, then take him outside for some fresh air."

The security officer nodded, placed a gentle hand on the man's shoulder, and escorted him away from the table. He took his cocktail napkin away with him; he needed it to dab the tears from his watering eyes.

"I'm very sorry," the nice lady said to all of us, embarrassed. "I hope this won't create trouble for the casino."



The pit boss waved it off. “Don’t worry about it, Ms. Tzone. The way he was holding his liquor, you probably saved our guards a lot of trouble.”

“Regardless,” she said, “I should have been more tolerant.”

“No,” I laughed, “you should have been here an hour ago when he was winning.”

Her laugh was as lovely as her speech. “I’ll watch my timing in the future, Mister—?”

“Dunbar. And you don’t need to introduce yourself, Ms. Tzone. Everyone knows the president and CEO of Tzone Defense Security – and the world’s greatest living sorceress.”

It floors me that humans – including me, obviously – are still fascinated with superhumans after all these years. It’s not like they’re rare creatures. As my blackjack buddy pointed out, they’re everywhere, or seem to be. In fact, the last global count estimated that there were about a million and a half people with some kind of superhuman power or ability among Earth’s population of six billion plus, but such estimates are notoriously underreported to keep humans from thinking they’re being overtaken. Regardless, we still work and play with each other, fall in love and break up with each other, lobby each other for votes on Election Day and bail each other out of jail after a rough night of pub-crawling.

But before the Big Shakeout, before superhumans were just the folks in the apartment or cubicle next door, humans knew them as more “super” than “human.” You’ve probably heard or told your share of stories about those days. If you haven’t, you’re just a Google away from websites with accounts and videos of their rescues, battles, feats of bravery and villainy, and other adventures. It seems like a distant, more dangerous, and strangely more romantic time when good and evil battled each other with relative impunity. I think that’s why humans still look at superhumans and the Superhuman Age the way they look at American cowboys &

bandits in the Old West. The main difference was that, unlike the larger-than-life figures of the American West, the superhumans eventually shrank themselves down to our size. Instead of dying in the streets of Laredo from the bullet of a marshal or gunslinger, they lived on to join us at the bar after work to complain about how our company's upper management could always find money for their bonuses after denying us a break room refrigerator that would stay cold.

Somehow, the mastermind behind Heroic Park figured out that those humans, the ones a generation removed from the Superhuman Age, didn't really want the "glory days" to return. Sure, that period captivated them, but they didn't want to experience the fighting, the danger, the collateral damage, the casualties, and the way the heroes barely saved the world from the villains.

They wanted to experience the *powers*. Wage slaves longed to have super-speed so they could spend an extra half-hour in bed, then shower, dress, and run to work in two minutes or less. Kids wanted super-strength to break a bully's fist (or invulnerability so that the bullies will break their own fists after punching them). Window washers wondered if rinsing the glass would be easier if they possessed the hydrokinetic ability to shoot water from their hands. Millions of humans who have ever lived around superhumans have wondered at some time, "I wonder what it would be like to be like them."

Today, at Heroic Park, they can find out.

More than a decade before the park existed, well-meaning scientists worked for the federal government to develop a certain kind of nanobiotechnology, which involves fabricating chemicals and systems for the body at the molecular level. Their goal was to create what they

called a “nano-serum” to regenerate nerves and stimulate muscles to help paralyzed people regain the use of their limbs. They tried to do this by bonding elements of superhuman DNA with human DNA to create something that could be easily administered. It sounded impossible to most people.

Naturally, they did it.

Kind of.

They not only restored mobility in human test subjects, but in several cases actually enhanced it, making them a little stronger or faster than they ever were. But the “superjuice,” as the media dubbed it, could work for just a few hours. The only way to sustain those effects was to hook up a subject to a device akin to an insulin pump. Developing that technology for the nano-serum was simply too costly, so the feds decided to pull the researchers’ funding. (However, the FDA allowed them to proceed with their research if they could find private money because, as I’m told one forward-thinking medicrat put it in his report, “Hey, ya never know.”)

Enter Coral Mayhew. Yeah, *that* Coral Mayhew, the one you’ve seen on the cover of every major magazine from *People* to *Black Enterprise*. The former party girl who’s routinely named one of the world’s most eligible/beautiful/successful/glamorous/generous businesswomen. The one who’s created resorts that draw millions of people and billions of dollars to the American Southwest every year.

I think she turns 30 next June.

You’d never imagine that someone like Coral Mayhew would follow scientific research but, when the feds stepped out, she stepped in with a proposition. She’d fund the research to

perfect the nano-serum and allow the scientists to retain full ownership of the formula – if they granted her the exclusive license to its non-medical applications.

Naturally, the head of the research team, Doctor Juno Moreta, asked why. I learned during my interviews that the exchange went something like this:

“What would the nano-serum do in someone who wasn’t paralyzed?” Mayhew asked.

Moreta said they’d never tried it.

“Would they gain enhanced abilities?”

Theoretically, yes, Moreta said.

“Could the nano-serum be perfected to last for, say, twelve hours?”

Moreta’s reply was along the lines of, “How much do you want to spend to find out?”

And that’s when Coral Mayhew asked the big one:

“How much do you think a human would spend to be superhuman for one day?”

Within five years, Moreta’s scientists worked enough bugs out of the formula to make it safely usable, if still temporary. Coral Mayhew negotiated and charmed the government and citizens of Tucson into contributing funding to a new resort project. She also succeeded in leasing a huge parcel of land on the San Xavier reservation of the Tohono O’odham nation. The construction of the park was one of the most closely guarded, yet cleverly hyped spectacles in the history of the amusements industry, culminating in the official opening of a new road south of Arizona State Routes 86 & 286, a road just outside of Tucson that would lead visitors to an address like no other:

1 Heroic Way.

The Golden Flower's main lounge mirrored the décor of the casino, which was bathed in a warm, amber glow that accented the Southwestern art on the walls. Occasional floral explosions stationed on the outer ring of the actual gaming area contrasted with the video screens of the slot machines and the LED signs above them tallying the current progressive jackpots. For a Wednesday night, there seemed to be a lot of people pulling the levers and punching the buttons on those machines, watching the roulette wheels spin, shooting craps, and, of course, getting their asses handed to them at the other tables.

But I took a bigger gamble than any of them: after we finished playing blackjack, I offered to buy Nataliya (can you believe she insisted that I call her by her first name?!) a drink, and she didn't set my mouth on fire.

"I knew he was toast the minute he said 'Gypsy,'" I told her in the lounge. "I remembered reading a *Times* piece about you a few years back in which you made it very clear that Romani and Gypsy were not interchangeable terms."

"People have died for making that mistake," said Nataliya. "Not by my hand, certainly."

"His fault for not recognizing you," I said. "Made my night."

"I sound egotistical," she said, not sounding that way at all, "but I must admit, after spending so many years in the private sector, it's nice to know that people haven't forgotten me."

"You're kidding, right? Nataliya Tzone, founding member of The Phenomenon, expert on the occult, kick-ass magic user? Your adventures are legendary. I guess the sorcery has helped you out in the security business, too, huh?"

"Sometimes," she said. "But what I do involves mostly technology and something the casino management appreciates: probability. It's the foundation of successful risk management.

You can predict what *might* happen, but you can never tell what *will* happen. No one can, not even me. There are too many variables in play at any given moment. It's impossible."

"I've seen you do some pretty impossible things in our video archives at work. By the way, you still look great. I like this outfit much better than the bustier and the cape."

She laughed again. "Thank you, Mister Dunbar."

"Please, just Dunbar. Everyone calls me that. The only time anyone calls me Kevin is when I visit my parents, or if someone reads one of my bylines out loud."

"Bylines? You're a writer?"

I nodded. "I'm in town covering the opening of the Heroic Park expansion for *The SuperHuman Times*."

"Oh, my."

"I hope you don't think I was angling for an interview tonight. I mean, I knew you'd been hired by the park as a security consultant, and I didn't expect to meet you until tomorrow but, well, there you were, taking my cash at blackjack, so, please don't turn me into a newt."

That got a laugh, a sweet one, the kind that men would sell their souls to hear from any woman, much less an extraordinary one with a sultry Roma accent. "The 'oh, my' meant only that I was impressed. You have nothing to fear."

"Thanks. Want another drink?"

"I would, but I'll have to pass. I have that early morning briefing before I head for the park tomorrow. Busy day."

She rose and I joined her as she walked out of the bar to the main lobby where the casino joined the hotel. More flowers were everywhere, in brilliantly colored, theatrical arrangements.

“So, let me ask you one thing for the record,” I said. “Is everything on the security end ready to go for the new season?”

Ringling for the elevator, she looked very focused, but on what I couldn't guess. She didn't sound very enthusiastic when she spoke again. “Everything I installed last year worked fine, and I anticipate no problems with my new measures. No problems.”

That bumped me up from curious to concerned. “Do you need a ride tomorrow, Nataliya? I have a rental. We can leave as early as you –”

“Thank you, but the park is sending a car for me.” She extended her hand and smiled a little. “I hope I'll see you there, Dunbar.”

Impulsively, I reached into a planter beside the elevators, grabbed what looked like a small wildflower, and handed it to her. “Count on it.”

She accepted the flower as the elevator doors opened and she stepped inside. “For the record, Dunbar, there's nothing wrong with the park's security. And there's nothing wrong with Heroic Park. Off the record, however, there may be something wrong with me. Good night.”

The doors closed but I stood in front of them for a moment, puzzled, then turned and walked up to the hotel desk to talk with the manager on duty. “I'm afraid I 'liberated' one of your flowers without thinking a moment ago. If there's any charge for it, would you add it to my bill, please?”

The manager smiled. “Not necessary, sir. We'll cut a fresh blossom to replace it.”

“Why not just move one from another arrangement?”

“Balance, sir,” said the manager. “Flowers are an important part of Pascua Yaqui tribal culture. The décor of the hotel and the casino is largely based on native dress and ceremonies.

The balance of each floral arrangement holds its own significance. You see, flowers are considered weapons for warding off evil.”

I looked back at the elevator doors, remembered Nataliya’s parting behavior, and wondered if the flower I gave her might end up coming in handy.

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- THURSDAY -

## CHAPTER TWO

I thought that going to bed late after staying up in the casino, chatting with Nataliya, and taking the time to load my luggage into my rental car would help me adjust from Eastern to Mountain Time in less than a day. Nope. I narrowly woke up to my watch alarm at 5:30, reasonably conscious enough to shower, shave, dress, and grab my bag in time to make the elevator when my smartphone went off.

I checked the screen. It read “Morales,” as in Bob Morales, my editor at the *Times*, who was living three hours in the future back in New York. I thought about blowing him off with

voice mail until after I got to the park, but I figured that, if he was calling me at six in the morning, he must have a good reason.

I popped my headset into my ear and answered. “What’s up?”

“It’s Grogan,” Morales said. “He wanted me to ask you if you could leave sooner.”

“Leave? I just got here yesterday morning.”

“Not from Tucson, for London. He wants to get you in place in two months instead of three.”

“Morales, I don’t really live out of my suitcase. I have an apartment with a landlord and everything. I have to give at least three months’ notice or they’ll keep my security deposit, maybe even sue.”

“If it comes to that, Grogan says he’ll pick up the deposit and any reasonable legal fees.”

“Damn,” I whispered. “The old man really does want me over there. What’s the rush?”

“Perry got called up sooner than he expected. He’s shipping out with the Royal Military Piper Brigade or whatever they’re called. ”

“It’s called the Corps of Army Music, Morales. It’s a real part of the British Army.”

“See? You even know about their army bands! This will be a great fit for you.”

“Maybe, if having an office doesn’t kill me.”

“As the London desk editor,” Morales said, “you’ll know before anyone if a hot story is on the horizon, and you can cover it yourself. Rank has its privileges.”

“I’ve never seen *you* do that, Mister Editor,” I said. “Hang on.” I stepped through the front door of the hotel, onto the pavement, into the desert dark. A hotel valet approached me, looking way too chipper and chic for this time of day in his simple, dignified white shirt, black

slacks, and red vest. I presented my room key card. “Dunbar, seventeen twenty-two. The gray mini-SUV rental.”

The valet pulled out a handheld device of some kind, scanned the key to verify me, then frowned at the device’s screen. “I’ll have it out to you, Mister Dunbar, but it’ll take a few minutes. The guy who works with me called in sick and – ”

From previous valet parking adventures, I knew the rest. “And my car’s at the front of the lane against the wall with three other cars blocking it, right?”

“Five cars, sir. Sorry.”

I checked my watch. It was 6:15. I fished out what was going to be the \$10 post-car delivery tip and gave it to him as an incentive. “Please get her out here as soon as you can. I have to make an appointment at seven.”

“Yes, *sir!*” The valet pocketed the tip and sprinted off to the lot.

I returned to my patient editor. “Tell Grogan he just spent ten bucks to bribe the parking valet and he’ll spend another ten if the kid gets me out of here on time.”

“Tell him yourself when you come home and file your expense report while you talk about the exciting new phase of your career. After ten years with this rag, you deserve it.”

“If this is such an exciting new phase,” I asked, “why am I not excited?”

“You will be if you catch up with *her* over there.”

I said nothing. Instead, I looked out into what was left of the night. The hotel was situated on a high bluff overlooking downtown Tucson, whose darkened homes and businesses were spread across and above the flat desert. For a city that’s been around since 1776, it looked very pretty when it was asleep.

It wasn't New York, to be sure, but with four mountain ranges surrounding the city and dwarfing its tallest skyscrapers, it possessed a natural elegance and majesty that made me want to explore it when I arrived on Wednesday afternoon. I'd tested my rental's GPS by casually driving around the neighborhoods, forcing it to recalculate the best route to the hotel so I wouldn't get lost. That gave me a chance to see a bit of Heroic Park's hometown, sample some local cuisine for lunch, and chat up a few of the locals. Unlike my blackjack pal, the Tusconans I talked to looked forward to Heroic Park's new season – especially since Coral Mayhew had offered every city resident a lifetime pass to the place when it opened last year.

“You're the one who told me she goes all over the world showing her art,” he continued.

“She's not always in Europe, Morales. She goes to other places, too – the Far East, South America, I can't remember her tour schedule.”

“You check her website.”

“I stopped doing that months ago, Bob. I felt like a stalker.”

“It's the Internet. You're *supposed* to peep in her window. What about her blog?”

“And her damn blog, yes, I stopped reading that, too.”

“An even better reason to take the London gig,” he said. “You're unattached and free to grow. This is a good thing, Kevin. Believe me, you were made –”

“I've gotta go. The valet is bringing my car around, and Grogan's gonna be tipping him twenty dollars instead of ten.”

“What the hell for?”

“For doing it so quickly,” I said “And for not denting the thing as he carries it to me on his shoulder.”

Being able to tell people “I write for *The SuperHuman Times*” won’t necessarily help you out in a singles bar (believe me), but it does carry a lot of weight with important people and institutions looking for good press in an international magazine. Heroic Park was a good example. It didn’t need the publicity; its first year was well-documented by the worldwide media, including several of my *Times* colleagues, and everyone from theme park professionals to grade-school kids gave it raves. But since they were mounting an ambitious expansion after just one year in business, the park management viewed it as if it were the first opening day all over again. That earned it more suspense-building media coverage, but nobody seemed to know what the exact nature of the expansion would be. New powers? More rides? Nobody knew. I was told that the park management even filed for, and received, a federal no-fly zone over the grounds to discourage aerial photographers. The mystery ensured that its opening on Saturday was sure to be a record-breaker for them, and probably for the theme park industry.

As I drove through the desert, I realized that I would be the first “civilian” to see it. As if I’d ever get chances like this behind an editor’s desk in London or anywhere else.

The dashboard thermometer said it was 65 degrees, and the weather app on my smartphone predicted a high of around 90. The trip out of Tucson took about twenty-five minutes, during which I got to see the indigo sky erupt into a rose-orange sunrise across mountains, huge rock formations, poppies, wildflowers, and Saguaro cacti.

I wished she could be here to watch it with me.

I tried thinking of other things: what the park expansion might look like, what caused Nataliya to get so serious when we parted company the night before, whether one half-gallon of milk or two would go bad in my fridge before I got back to New York.

Nope. She was still at the front of the line.

As I turned onto Arizona 286, I pressed the button on my headset. “Call Rei Shinozaki.”

First ring. I wondered how she’d react when she looked at her phone and saw I was calling.

Second ring. I wondered where she was – Cleveland, Moscow, Antarctica – and if I’d be waking her up or interrupting something.

Third ring. What the hell would I tell her? “Hey, hi, I know it’s been more than a year since our last email exchange, but you’ve been busy, I’ve been busy, and I was wondering: if I had a job in London, would you – could we – ”

And a voice answered. Even digitally recorded, it was so smooth and so unintentionally seductive that I’m surprised Eartha Kitt hasn’t returned from the grave and said, “Give it back.”

“Hello, this is Rei Shinozaki. I can’t take your call right now, but please leave a message at the tone, because I’d really like to talk with you later. Thanks!”

Beep.

I switched off the headset and considered driving into the nearest, tallest cactus. That urge lasted for only a minute, though, because I could see that I was about half a mile from the left turn to the park’s main access road, Heroic Way. On the sands across the straight, two-lane road from the unguarded, open entrance was what looked like an encampment of four or five small tents with a couple of SUVs behind them.

Initially, I figured these folks must have really wanted to be the first in line on opening day. Then, one of the campers, a middle-aged man wearing a sport shirt, shorts, sandals, and a floppy hat stepped out of a tent with a rolled-up wave banner made of bright, yellow nylon. He didn’t notice me as I drew closer to the intersection. He simply unfurled the banner and inspected it.

In neat, hand-drawn, red letters, the banner read “POWER DOWN HEROIC PARK!”

Had my pal at the casino told me that there would still be protestors camped out for opening day, I would have come out here earlier to interview them. Had I not been expected inside the park immediately, I would have talked to them that morning. But I resolved to come back and get some quotes from them later in the afternoon. I was very curious to learn why they hadn't allowed themselves to be “bought off” by Coral Mayhew.

If nothing else, they steered my mind back to work, and away from Rei, as I turned left off of 286.

The entrance to the park grounds was an arch comprised of two high, sandstone-looking columns connected by a long flat slab bearing a carved, colored, three-dimensional logo of Heroic Park. Beyond it, the road quickly expanded to four lanes, then to eight as it continued for another mile, turning and curving smoothly. For a second, I looked for roads leading out of the park, then realized that the designers probably had the good sense to position the exits on the other side of the property to reduce the likelihood of traffic jams. Immediately, the wildness of the surrounding plant life surrendered to order. I could tell that the flowers and vegetation lining the official roadway were carefully chosen to mirror those of the outside world, only they were arranged with equal care to provide visual impact.

I began thinking about the Pascua Yaqui and their flowers again, and took the presence of these blooms to be a hopeful sign.

I also noticed that, as I moved farther along, the road seemed to be sinking. Then, I realized why. The land was rising. That is, the engineers who designed the park had built up berms along the road that grew higher as I moved deeper onto the property. I'd read years ago



that theme park designers often used berms to create natural walls around the properties. This encouraged suspense in people approaching from the outside. (“What could they possibly have in *there?*”) They also isolated guests from the rest of the world to enhance their in-park experience. I’d also read that the berms were great for concealing security measures, which may have been the case since I didn’t see any conventional fences, cameras, devices, or guards around.

At the end of the mile, the road expanded again, this time to 20 lanes, each leading to a booth that made up the entry plaza to the main parking lot. The row of bright and colorful booths spanned the entire road but, aside from the Heroic Park logo, I couldn’t discern any kind of theming to them. No fairy-tale castles or magical sparkles or flags of the world or goofy mascot characters. It was just simple and functional. Maybe that was the idea: keep everything leading up to the park itself as straightforward as possible so that the big reveal inside would have more impact.

A signal light hung above each of the lanes that ran alongside each booth. Only one was on, burning green. Seeing as that booth was the only one with a staffer standing beside it – a thin female with a ponytail of long, light brown hair, with her back to the lane – I drove there and stopped. “Good morning. Kevin Dunbar, *SuperHuman Times*. I think Ms. Mayhew’s expecting me?”

“She certainly is.”

The staffer turned around, and I stared into the large, brown eyes of a beautiful, smiling woman dressed in a simple pastel green polo shirt (with the park logo embroidered on the left side), khaki slacks, and comfortable walking shoes. Her ponytail wrapped around one shoulder to frame strong, angular features. Her clear skin reminded me of bronze in the morning light, and I was particularly struck by how naturally pretty she was; she wore very little makeup on her face.

In most photos I'd seen of her – the magazine covers and the portraits, not the candid tabloid shots – she wore what my grandfather would have called her “war paint.” Now, the most colorful thing she wore was what appeared to be the standard employee I.D., a green lanyard with a card in a plastic sleeve. An inverted white isosceles triangle whose vertex was covered by a small, white circle was engraved into the card. The Heroic Park logo was engraved in the circle.

Her name was engraved in the triangle: “Coral.”

“Welcome to Heroic Parking, Mister Dunbar,” she said.

I managed to ignore the pun as we shook hands. “My pleasure, Ms. Mayhew.”

“Coral.”

“Dunbar.”

“Last name only? What are you, a Seventies action hero?”

My burst of laughter echoed across the desert before I replied. “Actually, everyone I know seems to like barking out ‘Dunbar,’ so I accommodate them.”

“Have any trouble finding us?”

“Nope. The car’s GPS worked great. Looks like I’m not the only one who got here early, though.”

“Our ‘barbarians at the gates’? We saw them on the security monitors this morning. Die-hards from our first season who still aren’t convinced we’re running a safe park.”

“You gonna leave them there?”

“As long as they’re across the road, they’re not trespassing. And as long as they’re peaceful about it, they can hate us as much as they like. At least there aren’t as many as there were last year.”

My blackjack buddy's comment about the park "paying off most of the protestors" came back to me, so I sharpened my press card. "Sounds like you managed to persuade them you were okay," I asked the friendly rich lady. "How'd you manage that?"

The friendly rich lady didn't say anything. She just smiled. "Gee, I could use a ride back."

Remembering my manners, I unlocked the passenger door as she walked in front of the car. Actually, she bounded in front of the car, like she was sincerely excited about giving this tour.

She climbed into the SUV and fastened her seat belt. "Thanks." Once she was settled, though, she said with a hint of gravity, "Mister Grogan advised you of the ground rules regarding your visit?"

I nodded. "I'm here to cover the season opening on Saturday for the exclusive. I can describe Employee Appreciation Day –"

"Teammates," she corrected.

"Sorry?"

"Not employees. Teammates. Like a super-team."

"Oh. Okay, so I can describe Teammate Appreciation Day today and the clean-up tomorrow in general terms only, but no formal interviews with the staff. No blogging, no photos, no videos until Saturday. Anything said to me or seen by me before then is to be considered off the record unless you expressly tell me otherwise. Does that cover everything?"

"To the letter."

"Did your legal department get the confidentiality agreement I signed?"

“They did.” She went back to being my gracious host again. “Sorry if I seem all revved up one second and bitchy the next, but we’ve got a lot riding on this expansion. Keeping it a secret hasn’t been easy.”

“I can imagine.” I pulled out my smartphone and held it up to her. “Any objections to my recording this? Just to take notes, no quotes.”

She smiled. “Audio’s okay. But I should warn you that you’ll be sharing the tour with someone. We have a prospective Teammate here for an informal interview.”

“Understood,” I said. “I’ll steer clear of them and, if I can’t, I’ll just switch this off.”

She eyed my phone. “Will that really hold a weekend full of conversations?”

“Not in a single block,” I said, activating the recorder app on the phone and tucking it into a shirt pocket. “Every few hours, it automatically emails what it’s recorded to a server back at the *Times*. I’ll download it all to my laptop when I put the final piece together.”

“You’ll have plenty to work with,” Coral said. “Let’s get started. See that gold line in the middle of the far right lane? That’ll take you straight to our VIP parking lot, which is right in front of the park entrance.” She paused. “Or.”

“Or?”

“We can follow the blue line in the far left lane, which is for Teammates only. The road goes through some of the backstage areas, as well as the hotel, physical plants, you know, the dull stuff.”

“Not to me.” I pulled away from the gate and steered left.

### CHAPTER THREE

The blue route for Teammates proved to be one of the most fascinating drives I'd ever taken. Along the way, I saw the park's landscaping armada at work cultivating and fertilizing the surrounding plants and grasses with great care. Eventually, we entered an area that reminded me of a college campus, a large development of modern brick buildings, each identified by a sign with a designation that only Teammates would know – PP-1, FS-3B, D-7. Coral decoded them as we drove by them, briefly describing their functions: Power Plant, Food Services, Dormitories

(where she estimated 75%-90% of the park's Teammates lived at the peak of the season), and so on.

When we got to one of the buildings carrying a "V" designation, I pulled the car up to the curb directly in front of the entrance. "Let me guess this one: V for the Visionaries?"

Coral nodded. "Good guess. This is where the magic starts."

"Can we go in?"

She unfastened her seat belt. "There are one or two projects we're keeping under wraps, but it'll be okay as long as you're with me. Not where I expected us to end up, though."

I climbed out of the SUV and waited for her to come around. "What do you mean?"

"Most reporters want to start in the park right away. The backstage area is a sidebar for them."

"I love this stuff. I spent too many summers working on the amusement piers in New Jersey. All that time operating the kiddie rides, yelling 'boo' at teenagers in haunted houses, working the games and concessions. Nothing we did was on this scale, but I can appreciate the work that's involved."

We stepped up to one of the glass doors of the building. Coral grabbed the handle and paused. "So you enjoy the illusion more when you know how it's done?"

"That's me," I said, "a charter member of the Penn and Teller Fan Club."

She walked up to a card reader attached to a wall by the door and held up the I.D. card on her lanyard. A friendly beep sounded, the door unlocked, and she opened it for me.

"Let me show you how we saw a woman in half."

Past its security desk, the Visionary building looked and felt even more like something you'd find housing college art and science classes. The one major difference was that the walls were covered with white metal sheeting, which in turn was covered by magnets holding pages of concept drawings, diagrams, intricate calculations, storyboards, script pages, and other elements for current attractions and attractions-in-progress. Several parts of the walls contained sketches and calculations applied directly with dry-erase markers. Some of the markings extended 10 feet from floor to ceiling. Clearly, the Visionaries were encouraged to let their creativity run wild in the service of the guests.

Looking at all the paper, I asked, "You guys do have computers, right?"

"What can I say?" Coral replied. "When inspiration strikes, it can vanish in the seconds it takes to power up a smartphone or get back to a computer station. There's a lot to be said for having a marker nearby."

As she led me farther down the main corridor, I stole a glance into some of the open doorways we passed. In one room, a group of about 10 Visionaries stood in a cluster in front of a large wall monitor as an eleventh Visionary conducted a PowerPoint presentation from his laptop describing, I assumed, a potential new attraction. The image displayed was a sketch so rough, I couldn't make out what it was supposed to represent; it might have been scanned from a sketch that hung on one of the walls. There was quite a bit of blue in it; water perhaps? The eleven people who did understand wore pastel orange polo shirts with khakis. The presenter stood there, listening and nodding while the others chattered and pointed enthusiastically at whatever it was on the monitor. I heard "What if" and "How about" several times in those few seconds.

It all made sense when I glanced at a simple, neatly lettered sign that was attached to the wall directly above the monitor screen. The sign read: "Why *won't* it work?" It wasn't meant as

discouragement. The Teammates' desire to proactively improve this original idea in its earliest stages, and the presenter's obvious desire to drink it in, made the room a reactor of collaborative energy.

Coral didn't seem as impressed as she mock-snapped at the group, "Hey, why aren't you jokers in the park? No working today. You promised."

The watchers jumped, startled for a moment until they realized who was chewing them out. The presenter stepped forward, unshaken. He was a short, stocky guy in his late 20s with a single, thin eyebrow over both eyes and a badge like Coral's, only his hung from an orange lanyard and had the name "Kurt" engraved on it. All of the lanyards in this group were orange; I'd eventually learn that all Teammates' lanyards matched their polo shirts according to the wearer's department.

"Take it easy, Coral," Kurt said. "It's my fault. We were on our way in when I got an idea for the wa—" He clammed up when he realized there was a stranger in the room.

"Boys, this is Dunbar," she said. "He writes for *The SuperHuman Times*, but he's under a gag order until opening day. If he blabs, we can kill him. Go on, Kurt."

Kurt proceeded carefully. "I came up with an idea for the, um, the water park."

Coral's eyes widened. "Are we that close?"

"Well, no, that is, I — I haven't been told anything by Doctor Moreta or anyone at Crichton, but we wanted to be, you know, ready, and I wanted to get my idea roughed out, and they wanted to kick in, and — here we are."

"Does Tony know?" she asked.

"Not yet," Kurt said. "We wanted to work out the bugs before showing him."



I let a whistle of admiration escape. “You guys are just days away from opening a new expansion and you’re already planning a water park? Damn.”

“It’s the only way to stay ahead of the competition,” Coral said.

“I didn’t think you *had* competition,” I said. “I mean, no other theme park offers super-powers to its guests.”

“You’d be surprised at how brutal it can get,” Kurt said. “A lot of the other parks are really upping their games, trying to launch viral smear campaigns, anything to get an edge.”

“Kurt ought to know,” Coral said. “He used to work for one of them before Tony hired him. A lot of our people come from the other parks. For the money, for the challenge, and for the love of God, will you guys shut down that laptop, get in that park, and enjoy what you’ve already done? It’s nearly eight now. Stop wasting time, go, go, go.”

Knowing that it was useless to argue with the boss, Kurt and the group made their way out the door of the room, punctuating their exits with a moan or two of faux defeat (“Yes, Miss Mayhew.”). We watched as they started down the hallway in the direction that we came, while we continued forward.

I glanced back for a second and saw Kurt silently ushering the bunch back into the room, placing a finger to his lips to request my silence, and quietly closing the door.

Without turning around, Coral whispered, “They go back in?”

“Yeah.” I stared at the closed door.

“Is that longing I see in your eyes, Dunbar?”

“A little,” I laughed. “I spent a lot of my time on those boardwalks dreaming about careers like theirs, about becoming the next Tony Lueras. That was the ‘Tony’ Kurt referred to, wasn’t it?”

“The same,” she said, slowly leading me away from the door and down the hall. “You know him?”

“Only by reputation,” I replied. “I started following his career when I was in high school. I was hoping to carve out enough time to drive to Phoenix and check out what was left of the old park where he worked his way through college. But the hotel staff in Tucson told me it got razed years ago.”

She patted my shoulder. “Sorry the pilgrimage didn’t work out. But don’t worry. You’ll meet him here.”

I stopped and struggled to hide my inner geek. “Is his office here?”

“A small one,” Coral said. “His main office is in the park overlooking – ”

She stopped, then smiled.

“Ah, but that would spoil the surprise.”

We spent about half an hour just strolling through the corridors, passing by other rooms occupied by sculptors, costume designers, concept artists, and craftspeople. Coral chided all of them for not being at Teammate Appreciation Day. They all gave her variations of the same excuse: an idea hit them and they wanted to translate it into their chosen media before it could escape.

“Actually, I’m only busting on them because I know it’s not their work shift yet,” she told me as we walked. “We have split shifts of Teammates working the park all day. While some play, others take care of essential functions – food service, communications, security.”

“Speaking of security, I met Nataliya Tzone last night. She’s staying at my hotel.”

“She’s something, isn’t she? You’d never think anyone with all that power would be so, I don’t know, approachable.”

Not surprisingly, I’d been thinking the same thing about the approachable woman I was with now, who led us down a corridor that ended in a double door. She scanned her I.D. before another card reader. When the doors’ locking mechanisms opened with a loud click, she pushed one open wide, stepped aside, and let me in.

I walked into a cube-shaped chamber that measured about 10 feet in every dimension. Its glass walls – and glass floor – were situated about 15 feet above the biggest operating room I’d ever seen, one where none of the patients was alive. There were several rows of gurneys facing each other across the floor, and each had what most people would consider to be a mannequin lying or sitting on it. Some of the figures were male, some female; some were adult, some juvenile; some were whole, some neatly dismembered. Two humans dressed in white clean room suits with surgical masks, caps, gloves, and shoe covers busily attended to the sophisticated CPUs, wiring, and mechanics that comprised the innards of each “patient,” probing them with instruments and monitoring the results on tablet PCs.

“Synthetimechs,” I whispered, blown away.

Coral smiled. “Told you I’d show you how we saw a woman in half.”

“Can we go in?”

“Not from up here. This is just an observation room. It helps us show everything off to visitors while keeping the room sterile. The only places that are cleaner are the O.R.s at Crichton.”

“I heard Kurt mention that earlier. What is Crichton?”

“Crichton Memorial. In addition to being the research facility that generates our, um, biological attractions, it’s a fully functional hospital. We probably should publicize it more, but we don’t. Thankfully, none of our guests has ever needed it, but it’s come in handy whenever a Teammate’s had an accident.”

“How often is that?”

For the first time since we met, a chill dusted Coral’s voice. “You can get last year’s accident reports from the Arizona Division of Occupational Safety and Health.”

“I’m not trying to find dirt on the place, Coral,” I said. “Asking these kinds of questions is in my nosey-reporter job description.”

“I know,” she said, letting herself smile. “After hearing similar ones from people who *don’t* like the park, I just get tired of answering them. Sorry.”

I turned and watched the Synthetimech O.R. for a second while desperately trying to turn this into a nice day again. “So, is it true that the Synthetimechs actually have artificial circulatory systems within their skins that simulate changes in human coloring? You know, like blushing.” I glanced at her. “Or rage?”

She reached over to an intercom panel and pressed a call button. “Hey, guys. Your turn on the skeleton crew?”

The two Visionaries looked up at us and waved. Both Teammates wore their orange lanyards around the necks of their clean suits; I could only make out one badge’s name, “Paula.” She pressed a button on a throat microphone she wore around her neck and her voice came across our speaker. “Yeah, Coral, we got lucky and pulled the morning maintenance shift so we can enjoy the rest of the day.” The silent Visionary affirmed this with a roof-raising gesture.

“Paula, I need a favor,” Coral said. “Could you wheel one of the kids over here and let my friend Dunbar get up close and personal?”

Paula gave a thumbs-up, grabbed a gurney, and wheeled it to a prime viewing spot under us. The gurney held what looked like one of those “visible human” model kits. Its translucent skin was etched with barely discernible access panels instead of a real epidermis. The most advanced technology I’d ever seen lay beneath it in place of tissues and organs. The only parts covered by “skin” were those that would be seen by guests, usually the neck, shoulders, and hands.

Resting at one end of the gurney, between the Synthetimech’s feet, was its head. Bald for now, with eyes closed, “he” had realistic eyebrows, eyelashes, and five o’clock shadow. Even from above, I could tell that there were pores in the skin. It creeped me out, but I loved it.

So you can imagine how high I jumped when Paula tapped her tablet and those eyes opened up and stared directly at me through the miracle of wireless technology.

“Easy,” Coral said, gently holding my shoulder. “The heads and bodies of every Synthetimech have power cells that we can activate independently in the lab for maintenance. We hardwire them into the park’s power grid once they’re assembled and installed.”

I heard most of that as I continued to look at the test subject on the gurney. The color in the irises was deep and vivid; the blinking appeared natural and spontaneous; I even picked up traces of moisture between the lids and the eyeballs, which probably served as a mechanical lubricant as well as an effective accent.

Coral pressed the call button. “Piss him off, Paula.”

Paula tapped the tablet again, and the neutral expression on the disembodied head changed within seconds. The corners of the mouth dropped. The eyelids narrowed. The eyebrows

furrowed. The frown became a scowl. Veins – I swear to God, *veins!* – began to pop out of the temples. Then, with almost no transition, it erupted into a silent scream of rage, its eyes and mouth open wide, its face realistically flushed with red, threatening to go to purple.

Another tap from Paula, and the test subject was himself again.

Whoa.

I staggered a little as I stepped through the observation room door and back into the corridor. Coral arrived a few seconds behind me, probably after saying goodbye-and-go-to-the-park-already to her Visionaries. “You okay?”

I had to lean back against a wall and laugh. “That is the coolest thing I have ever seen.”

Her eyes sparkled. “So far.”

Once we were back in the SUV, it only took us 5 minutes of driving through the rest of the Teammates’ compound before we reconnected with the gold-striped VIP road. At one point, on our right, an entrance road opened up to a path lined with palms and tropical plants. As we passed it, I saw that the road led to a circular court in front of a large, sandstone-like building that rose above the tallest palms. It was 15 stories high, with regular, square patterns of windows in the walls, each with a balcony in front of it, and Native American carvings in the horizontal strips separating each row of windows.

I slowed down just past the entry road. “Is that the Power House?”

“Yeah,” Coral said.

“Great. My bags are in the back. If it’s okay, I’d like to drop them off and check in.”

“No.”

I stopped the car.

“I think your editor misunderstood our press office,” Coral said. “You’re not staying at the Power House. We invited the Teammates to book their families there at a special rate for today through opening day. We open check-in to the guests on Friday night, so this will be good practice for the staff. We’ve always been our own best guinea pigs.”

“But it’s the only hotel you have on-site.”

“Until Saturday, when we unveil the new one. Eroica: Five-star deluxe accommodations in the heart of the expansion. Seventeen stories of luxury. Perfect for visiting celebrities, dignitaries, magical security experts, and nosey reporters.”

I hadn’t intended this to become an exercise in investigative journalism, but she kept dangling these carrots in front of me; I had to bite. “Seventeen-story hotels? How did you build that – how did you build *any* of this expansion – without somebody finding out? The *Times* kicked in a ton of sponsorship money on this project and my editor wouldn’t even tell me what was in there. Even with your no-fly zone, how could you keep, say, satellites from getting photos of the construction? Hell, even the theme park fan sites don’t know what you’re gonna do, and they know everything!”

“We live in a world with superhumans, Dunbar,” she said. “What’s *not* possible? There’s a lot of cloaking technology out there that supervillains haven’t needed since they went into high finance and politics. Ours are called metamaterials. We shrouded what we were building in stuff that was engineered to bend light rays so that whatever was underneath just looked invisible.”

“Invisible or not, you still had to file construction permits with Pima County.”

“Yes.”

“And construction permits are public records that are open for inspection.”

“Yes.” This amused her. “Couldn’t find them, could you?”

“Searched the Pima County government database for three days. I even went to the Development Services office in Tucson, straight from the airport. You’d be surprised at the number of people who were suddenly in meetings when I mentioned the name ‘Heroic Park.’ How’d you manage it?”

“After we created fifteen thousand jobs and brought damn near a billion dollars into the local economy last year, the officials involved knew that it was in the county’s best interests to help us out by keeping quiet. The permits will go live on the county website at midnight on Saturday. Now if you want to get to your room, and more, keep driving. We’re almost there.”

I followed the gold line into the immense, empty VIP lot. A row of diesel engine trams stood on the side of the black asphalt farthest from us. Each engine was connected to four covered cars with padded benches to hold a considerable number of average-sized people. Each train was decorated in a different color of metal flake paint, each corresponding to the color of the parking lot to which they were assigned. I wondered if the *Times* would want a sidebar about how one of its writers got to drive a Heroic Parking tram for a day.

I parked in the closest space to the main entrance. Roughly 200 feet of smooth, white pavement led from the front of the lot to a decorative arch of polished metal. As we passed under it, the morning sun glinted off a corner of the words and logo in the center of the arch: “Welcome to Heroic Park.”

Continuing, we approached two banks of gates, neither of which were staffed. Each bank contained 20 lanes, all covered by brightly colored canopies. They were placed parallel to each other, stretching in front of the entrance. A sign cautioning guests that backpacks, purses, and other conveyances were subject to search preceded the first gate, whose lanes were separated by a waist-high table.



“I’m surprised you don’t have x-ray scanners set up here,” I said to Coral.

“Don’t need them. All of our inspectors have x-ray vision. It keeps things moving and it’s less intrusive.”

“I thought the TSA snapped up all the x-ray superhumans.”

“We pay more. Come on. Almost there.”

We walked ahead to the second bank of gates, this one with openings blocked by turnstiles, each with a reader on top of it for scanning guest tickets. Coral scanned her I.D. for me, then for herself, and we were in.

Immediately, we stood in front of a wide wall that was at least 50 feet high. The surface of the wall was a large, brilliantly colored mosaic representation of normal-looking, tourist-like people flying into a sunny, cumulus-filled sky from approximately where we were standing, the implication being that guests would soon be soaring into adventure with them. On the far left and right sides of the wall were wide exits that allowed people to leave the park via moving walkways.

“Gimme your car keys,” Coral said, her hand out. Figuring that she wouldn’t let anything happen to my rental, I obliged.

She left me to talk to a Teammate, Ted, who was staffing an empty queue line sectioned off by aluminum railings in a standard maze-like pattern. She passed him my keys and gave instructions I couldn’t hear. Honestly, I was too fascinated by the park entrance to care.

Like many theme park attractions, Ted’s queue led to a staging area where guests stepped onto a conveyor belt-type floor that moved alongside a ride vehicle to ensure smooth, safe, and fast boarding. These ride vehicles were eight-passenger facsimiles of luxury cars that silently emerged from a cavern beneath us. Spaced about 20 feet apart, they quietly glided in a seemingly

endless motorcade into a vast tunnel beneath a brick arch running through the center of the mosaic wall.

“Prepare for Your Hero’s Welcome!” was engraved in gold on the arch.

“Come on, Dunbar, our ride’s here.” Coral didn’t have to ask twice. I scurried up to her and, when Teammate Ted opened up a shortcut in the queue path, I joined her on the boarding belt and climbed into a big, red car. A lap bar gently, independently lowered to keep us seated.

Once we were in, Ted followed us up to the point where the cars left the boarding platform behind. He was holding a tiny earpiece in his ear as he called to Coral, “Tony says it’s ready, just give the word. We’ll have Mister Dunbar’s bags in his suite within the hour.” Coral waved then turned and looked forward with me as we slowly headed into the dark tunnel inside the wall.

Actually, the tunnel wasn’t entirely dark. Once my eyes adjusted from the Arizonan daylight, I could see we were surrounded on all sides by a web of what appeared to be black metal pipes dotted with thousands of tiny lights, all of which were mounted behind a fine, nearly imperceptible mesh that stretched alongside and above us. Somehow, I didn’t think this was our “hero’s welcome,” but I was still intrigued by the workings.

Coral whipped out a small transmitter and spoke into it. “Tony? We’re in. Hit it.”

There was a blinding, momentary flash from those lights on the metal frame. The skeleton that was there was soon replaced by two sides of a metropolitan street, packed with onlookers on the sidewalks, all cheering and waving – at *us*!

Looking up, I saw realistic skyscrapers on the “street” rising into a blue sky that hadn’t been there before. Every building was filled with windows, and people leaned out of them to throw ticker-tape and confetti over our heads. Adding to the illusion was a rich soundtrack that

poured from speakers in our car, a chorus of loud, grateful cheers and whoops accompanied by a stirring anthem. You'd think we were the '86 Mets.

The Visionaries had struck again, and I could barely speak. "H-holography, right?"

Coral laughed. "You know how lower Broadway's called the 'Canyon of Heroes?' Well, since we're in Arizona, this is our 'Grand Canyon of Heroes.' We thought it was a nice welcome. Whether or not they choose to get powers, we want every guest to feel like a hero from the moment they arrive."

I'd been to lower Broadway a few times and it appeared that the Visionaries had, too. It was all so convincing, I expected to arrive at City Hall Park to hear the mayor proclaim today as Kevin Dunbar Day.

"This," Coral added, "also prepares them for that." She pointed to the tunnel's arched exit, toward which we were rolling closer.

I tore my attention away from the adoring crowds and followed Coral's direction as the opening grew wider. We moved back into daylight and arrived at an impossible destination.

This was my first time here, but I'd been to this location hundreds of times. We were surrounded by skyscrapers, the shapes and sizes of which registered with me as being true, even though I knew they couldn't be. I heard the sounds of car and truck traffic on the street, but aside from the cars exiting the Canyon, there were no moving vehicles. I reasoned the sounds were coming from well-hidden speakers.

I also reasoned that I couldn't be where I thought I was, although street signs tried to tell me otherwise.

We were on Broadway. To our left, people were walking along Seventh Avenue. We were in ...

Times Square.

New York City.

Arizona.

No way.

I was dazzled by the myriad lights surrounding us. Loud neon and LED signs hung from storefronts. Ribbons of light that would have carried news headlines and stock quotes streamed messages like, “Welcome, Teammates – Our Heroes!” and “Thanks for a Heroic Job!”

I would have sat there slack-jawed for the rest of the day, looking at it all in disbelief, if that Teammate hadn’t landed on our car hood with a thud and rocked the thing with her perfect, three-point landing.

“Yow! You okay?” Coral was more concerned than shocked; “shocked” was me.

The young woman nodded. “Sorry, Coral.” Without appearing injured, she pivoted and leaped from the hood of the car, into the sky and skyline with hundreds of others, more people than I’d ever seen flying around New York in my lifetime. Most of them were wearing their staff polos and lanyards and badges, probably to prove that they belonged here, and maybe to facilitate mingling between the various departments. Anyone dressed otherwise belonged to a Teammate’s family. Some wore their street clothes; others wore capes and costumes to enhance the fun.

Some of the fliers raced each other, darting around the buildings with the precision of stunt planes. Some were content to perform their own private acrobatic shows, diving, twisting, and flipping in ways that only looked dangerous from our viewpoint. Others appeared to be having mock street battles, seeming to punch each other while laughing out loud.

A couple of them ran around the square, and past us, at such super-speeds that their drafts nearly knocked me off my feet.

Several performed various feats of super-strength – lots of kids bench-pressing their parents, others tossing each other into the walls of the buildings and laughing on impact.

Elsewhere, a small cluster of soaked Teammates was engaged in what looked like a lively water battle with squirt guns and hoses; in this case, however, the water issued from their fingers and hands in rapid, but gentle bursts.

I followed a few of the flying Teammates as they dived toward the street and passed in front of one of the many gigantic video screens above the square. Most of these had the customary animated ads and messages you'd expect to find in the real Times Square. One in particular was mounted across the higher stories of a skyscraper that stood at the intersection of the two streets, which appeared to impossibly flow past it and on into uptown. I recognized the building immediately, even though I knew I couldn't possibly be across the street from it.

Because it was the SuperHuman Times Building. *My* building.

The graphics on its video screen read:

“Welcome to SuperHuman Times Square in Heroic Park!”

## CHAPTER FOUR

The lap bar rose. Coral had to lead me out of the vehicle, off the exit belt, and away from the car. “You okay?”

I think I nodded.

“Glad you like it, Mister Dunbar,” someone yelled amiably, and loudly. “Isn’t it great?”

I turned and looked past Coral at the ultimate destination of our car and the others in the motorcade. They rolled about half a block up not-Broadway, then dropped sharply beneath the street via a ramp under a footbridge. I tried to envision the kind of intricate underground machinery required to rapidly transport the cars back to the front of the tunnel; for some reason,

the only logical solution I could think of at the time was “mole men.” One of those “mole men,” the one who called to me, was striding up a service ramp alongside the conveyor that carried the cars into the unseen machinery below. He was a husky, bald, deep-voiced man in his 50s. He extended a large hand as he drew closer. His smile glowed against his tanned skin and he looked to be as broad as the shoulders under his orange polo shirt. As he strode in our direction, I could hear the clomping from his ornate cowboy boots over the sounds around us. His name badge, hanging from an orange lanyard, read “Tony,” but I already knew that.

“Everything okay down there?” Coral called to him.

“Fine, fine,” he said. “You know me, the old mother hen, just pecking around.”

Coral pulled me over to him. “Dunbar, meet Tony Lueras, President and Visionary-in-Chief of Heroic Park.”

During my time as a journalist, I've met plenty of human and superhuman people I've admired, but never one who directly affected my life. My favorite writers, the ones who influenced what I do now, are all dead. But Tony Lueras's influence on me while I worked the boardwalks was different. Whenever I read about his work in an amusement trade journal, it never failed to fire up my imagination. His accomplishments made me believe that there was something worth dreaming about beyond my seaside adolescence, something bigger. Tony Lueras made me look forward to growing up.

Even though I ended up following another path, every now and then, that young kid on the boards will ask me, "Why didn't you take me more seriously? You could have become the next Tony Lueras?" I usually tell the kid, "I didn't have to. The genuine item is still around and doing fine."

Heroic Park proved it.

I stared at him the way I'd been staring at the recreated skyline and the super-powered Teammates. I'd read Lueras was tall, not quite half a head taller than me – I'm six-foot-two and have managed to retain most of the body I built up playing rugby in college 10 years ago – but that didn't prepare me for being in his actual presence.

“Glad to know you,” Lueras told me.

“My pleasure,” I said. “Really.” I kept staring at the nice, smiling man for a few more seconds before Coral nudged me back to reality. “Um, sorry, I was just overwhelmed. You – this, it's all magnificent.”

His warm hand clasped mine solidly. “Thanks. The fact that a real New Yorker like you didn't start picking it apart right away is high praise.”

I couldn't stop looking around. “Why here?” I whispered. “I mean, why New York?”

“Last year, we polled as many guests as we could about potential expansions,” Tony said. “We knew they liked what we had, but we wanted to give them a bigger playground for their powers. We asked them what city they thought of when they thought of superheroes before the Big Shakeout. Most of them said New York. So we built New York. Sort of.”

“It's close enough,” I said. “I mean, the – the Canyon of Heroes doesn't really go this far uptown, not all the way up to the bowtie, and the traffic, the cars, are running in the wrong direction.”

“Dramatic license,” Tony chuckled.

“And these streets are much wider than the real ones.”

“We have to move a lot of people,” Tony said.



“The buildings,” I said, “the heights and shapes are right, except this *Times* building is about four blocks east of the real deal. And the storefronts, the signage, the advertising, that’s all different.”

“Our generous sponsors,” Coral said. “Your boss isn’t the only one betting a lot on this.”

An odd noise best described as a dull “thoom” came from directly above us. It was actually a series of “thooms,” created by two flying Teammates having a playful air fistfight. As each of their punches appeared to connect, a “thoom” sounded. In fact, the punches never truly made contact with their targets; the Teammates above – and everyone around us making similar noises – could wallop the crap out of each other without getting hurt.

I looked at Tony. “Mobile force fields?”

“Modified from something the feds captured after a failed alien invasion,” he said. “The military couldn’t make them work, so they let us have a whack at it.”

“And the costumes?”

“We have a costume rental shop a little farther up Seventh,” Coral said. “But we also let people bring their own outfits through security.”

A female Teammate hurled a much larger husband or boyfriend into the fifth story of a building behind her, where it promptly caused a “thoom” of its own and created a momentary shimmer before he bounced back, thoroughly entertained. In that second, the wall of the building trembled, briefly exposing a narrow window of metal rods and microprojectors, like those I saw in the tunnel. A second later, the wall restored itself.

“More holograms? I asked. “All of this?”

“Most of the buildings are only real on their first three floors and service basements,” Tony explained. “The holographic imaging takes it from there. By tomorrow, we’ll fix it so you won’t see those projectors.”

“There are only two buildings here that are entirely real, Dunbar,” Coral said. “Your hotel, the Eroica, and Crichton Memorial, over there across Seventh.” She gestured to a white, 10-story building that looked real enough, at least from the third floor up. But then, so did everything else on the square. “Isn’t it nice?” she said. “Tony wanted to bury it.”

“I wanted to put it backstage,” Tony corrected. “Originally, I didn’t want to imply that the guests might *need* medical care while they’re here.”

“I convinced him that the hospital would give them confidence that we were ready to take care of them, if necessary,” Coral said.

Tony shrugged. “What could I say? She’s the money.”

“Even money couldn’t build blocks of real fifty-story skyscrapers within a year,” I said, becoming theme-park analytical. “Forced perspective to make them look taller?”

“You know your theme-park tricks,” Tony said.

“Dunbar used to pull them himself on the Jersey boardwalks,” Coral said.

“Whereabouts?” Tony asked.

“Mostly in Seawall, my hometown.”

“Yeah, yeah, near Wildwood, Ocean City, Atlantic City, right?”

“Right,” I stammered, shocked that my hero had actually heard of it.

“Forgive him, Tony,” Coral said. “Dunbar’s just got a man-crush on you.”

“I do not!” But I was trapped, and Tony looked curious. “It’s just that back when I worked the boardwalks, I wanted to do, well, what you do.”

Tony beamed. “Why didn’t you?”

“I turned out to be better at writing than at business and engineering,” I said. “So I gave up trying to be the next Tony Lueras and ended up writing for a national magazine. Wasted life, right?”

“Don’t knock it,” he said in a welcoming voice. “Without the *Times*, you and I might not be standing here now. Hell, without the *Times*, we might not even have a ‘here’ now.”

I scanned the skies and streets, still incredulous.

“Careful,” Tony said. “You might start feeling at home here.”

To my surprise, when Tony and Coral introduced me to the park’s chief “medical officer,” Juno Moreta – the scientist whose research inspired the park – she did not try to hospitalize me when she saw how dazed I was in the presence of Tony and the park. If she had, I would have rested comfortably. Crichton Memorial was a very nice – and very real – facility with virtually every tool available to diagnose and treat illness or injury, along with research space for creating super-powers. Most people didn’t get to see those areas unless they were park medics, scientists, Teammates, or patients. Guests were confined to the first floor, but that’s the only place they really wanted to see; that’s where they got what they came for.

We could see that anticipation in the faces of the Teammates entering this large area of the hospital for their powers. It was a simple place with a counter separating incoming people from an area restricted to hospital Teammates. It was outfitted to accommodate about ten lines of guests and the staff to service them. On this day, however, several pairs of Teammates attended to their orderly, if eager, co-workers. One member of each team monitored a computer station behind the counter while the other prepared what looked like hypodermic injections. All wore

green surgical scrubs with the park logo on the left breast pocket. We sat in a darkened room next to that one, separated and hidden by a two-way mirror that allowed us to watch the process.

“For quality control,” Moreta told me, “someone’s always stationed in here to watch when we administer the nano-serum.”

“You don’t have surveillance cameras in there?” I asked.

“Certainly, we do. But I feel better having a real person in here to back it up. Technology is like a super-power, Mister Dunbar. It’s nice, but it can’t always do everything for you.”

Coral and Tony chuckled, as if they’d heard that answer before.

Moreta was a short woman of Filipino descent, 5’ tall at most, with silver-streaked black hair and crows’ feet around her eyes that suggested she spent far too long staring at computer monitors and into microscopes. She appeared to be around Tony’s age. She wore half-frame glasses that she frequently peered over with her gray eyes to let you know that she was anticipating a question. If you knew her, I guess you were used to her prescience. Being a newcomer to her lab, it was a little unnerving for me, because she knew exactly what I was going to ask next.

“In case you’re wondering,” she told me in her pleasant, reedy voice, “we did name the hospital after Michael Crichton, God rest him.”

“I know he was a medical doctor as well as an author,” I said. “Did he know about any of this?”

“Oh, no, but during my initial research into the process years ago, back when I started looking for a paralysis cure, I spoke to him at a conference. He helped me to look at some problems I was having in new ways that moved me forward. When we built the hospital after his passing, I insisted that we honor him. We would have given it his full name, but his estate and

family objected. They said Heroic Park was the kind of place he would have written about, and they didn't mean it in a nice way."

"Guess they were worried about malfunctioning Synthetimechs running amok like in *Westworld*," I said.

"Ten challenges at a time, please," Tony said. "We just moved an entire park around to accommodate a city."

"He's exaggerating," Coral said, "but he works p.r., so we're used to that. We actually moved the front parking lots and the roads. Regraded, repaved, new landscaping, the works. That gave us the space we needed to put up SuperHuman Times Square in front of the existing park."

"Sounds like a superhuman achievement," I said. "I don't suppose your construction crews got a little 'help' from the nano-serum?"

Although I wasn't accusing her of anything unethical or unsafe, Moreta glared at me over her lenses. "No," she said firmly. "But there are natural-born superhuman Teammates on our construction crews."

"No offense meant, Doctor."

She dismissed it and directed my eyes to the room next door. "Before any guest can receive the nano-serum they must submit, no less than six months before their visit, their medical history from their health care provider. Each history must be emailed to us directly from the provider to ensure its authenticity. We then review the histories and notify the guests as to whether or not they may receive the nano-serum."

"I imagine that part of the process is expedited for the Teammates, since you probably have a lot of information on them already?"

“We have their current files here,” Moreta said, “and their providers submit their records when they’re hired as a condition of their employment.”

“Is that legal?” I asked.

“It’s for insurance purposes,” Tony said. “In addition to giving us a baseline for future examinations, like drug testing, it also helps us figure out who’d be best for which job. There’s lots of multitasking involved in working here. Our people are quite versatile.”

“Then there’s the feds’ background check,” Coral said. “We wouldn’t want criminals coming here for powers that would let them cross the border to escape prosecution.”

Moreta glanced toward the injection salon again. “Once a guest is cleared, he or she can receive the nano-serum of their choice, which is what Jakey, the team leader in there, is administering now.”

I watched as Teammate Jakey, a lanky guy in his 20s, removed a vial from a large rack of similar vials in the workspace. Each vial contained a liquid with one of several colors, and each had a plastic cap with a flashing, red LED on it. “What’s that light on the caps of the vials, Doctor?”

“Anti-theft measure,” Moreta said. “Every cap packs a low-grade explosive that detonates if it goes out of the park without being deactivated, which can only be done here. It won’t harm the thief, but it will destroy the vial and spray the bearer with a permanent dye.”

“Anyone ever try to steal one?”

“No, and the precaution may be overkill, but we’re dealing with sophisticated medical research that someone could abuse. If I had my way, the cap would blow the thief to bits. But I’m not the security consultant.”

I watched as Jakey held up what looked like a pistol with a flat silver barrel and a bottle of nano-serum on top of the main chamber. “Jet injection?”

“No matter how badly they may want to fly, people don’t come here to be stuck with needles,” Moreta said. “They come for –”

“Wait, let me see if I can remember from my research.” I counted each point on my fingers to keep track. “Only one power to a guest, right? Super-strength, super-speed, flying, and limited hydrokinetics for folks who want to be their own water parks. What don’t you offer?”

Moreta counted off her own list. “Nothing that affects the basic senses. No heat vision, super-hearing, et cetera. No pyrokinetics; no cybernetic enhancements; no telepathy; no mind-reading; no elemental powers, like weather control; and no magic of any kind.”

“That should make Nataliya Tzone happy,” I said.

“For now, anyway.” Moreta smiled. “Sir Arthur C. Clarke used to say that ‘Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.’ You never know what we’ll come up with.”

“How long does the current nano-serum last?”

“Twelve hours. However, should a guest need or want to leave the park before their powers expire, we have a counterserum that restores their original metabolisms immediately.”

“Can a guest choose a different power in mid-visit?”

“No,” Moreta said. “When they submit their histories, guests must let us know which power they want, so we can analyze their data properly and adjust the nano-serum, if necessary.”

“The best ‘adjustment’ we can make to the juice is to make it last longer,” Tony said.

Moreta let out a low groan.

He continued. "Right now, a guest staying in the park for more than one day has to get an injection each time they enter the park if they want powers. Imagine the equivalent of a multi-day pass, a nano-serum that became active in cycles, allowing the body to rest in between consecutive visits before reactivating the next day."

"Can I quote you on that?"

"Sure."

"No." This time, Moreta's gaze skipped over her glasses in Tony's direction. "It is merely an idea in the preliminary stages of research. There is no 'multi-day' pass, nor is there likely to be one in the near future. And don't even get me started about the gills."

That made Tony a little uncomfortable. "Um, Juno, we're not talking about that project to the press."

"You mean the water park?" I asked, trying to rein in my excitement. "It's okay. I overheard your Visionaries discussing it on the campus. Don't worry; you're protected by the waiver I signed."

"Thanks," Tony exhaled. "Wouldn't want to spoil the surprise for next season."

"If we perfect the nano-serum for water-breathing," Moreta said, unenthused.

"You don't want to?" I asked.

"I don't want to work on any version of the nano-serum that can't have practical applications in the real world," she said. "Turning people into sea monkeys is a waste of time and can be dangerous. We're trying to help them move again."

"Good," Coral said softly, seriously. She never looked away from the injection salon. Coral without her bubbly game face on was a little disconcerting. It reminded me of the expression on Nataliya's face when we spoke of the park the night before.



“That’s what makes the two-day serum such a worthy dream, Juno,” Tony said. “You need to figure out a way to make your original formula last longer, right? Wouldn’t that be a step in the right direction?”

Instead of answering him, Moreta tapped my shoulder and nodded to the other room.

Jakey gently took the waiting Teammate’s arm and fired the jet injector. The only sign of discomfort from the injection was a tiny wrinkle on the recipient’s brow.

I got back to work. “Doctor, what did you mean about the counterserum restoring guests’ metabolism?”

“Human bodies aren’t naturally equipped to handle superhuman powers,” Moreta said. “The nano-serum not only gives them abilities, but alters their genetic make-up so that those abilities won’t kill them.”

Coral and Tony looked a little uncomfortable with Moreta’s choice of words, but she didn’t. “For example, the nano-serum for super-strength adds bone and muscle density to a guest so that nothing inside them breaks when they pick up one of our hollowed-out cars on the street. Guests receiving super-speed also receive denser skin that can survive the friction of the air racing past them. Like the powers, the modifications are temporary and terminate at the same time.”

“What’s the tech giving the Teammate now?” From where we sat, it appeared to be a hard, white, plastic wristband with a digital readout and a small, flashing green light.

Moreta pointed at the scene. “The wristband’s a GPS device that tells us where the guest is at all times. It also monitors their vitals and alerts us here if anything’s wrong. Plus, there’s a timer on them. Do you see?”

I looked through the glass. “Yes.”

“That tells the guest how long they have until their powers end. When that green light next to the timer goes red, they have one hour left. The nano-serum itself also reminds them of this by gradually losing potency over the course of those sixty minutes. That way, nobody runs out of gas in midair or mid-run.”

We watched as the Teammate who’d just received the nano-serum jogged out the doorway of that room, which opened to the street. With one hop, he flew away.

“You send people out with super-powers just like that?” I asked.

“The Teammates are already pretty familiar with the basics of handling them,” Moreta said. “Guests are required to take a half-hour tutorial before we turn them loose. The wristbands are good, but information is the best protection against injury.”

“And lawsuits,” Tony added.

“So the wristband generates the force field?” I asked.

Moreta nodded. “It surrounds the wearer and keeps them from slamming into buildings, or punching each other too hard. I take it you saw examples of how it worked when you came in.”

“Oh, yes,” I said. “I bet a lot of Teammates aren’t going to want to give up their powers at the end of the day.”

“They have no choice,” Moreta said. “Our team is always stationed at the exits to administer the counterserum, even if the guest’s powers have already worn off. No one leaves the park without it.”

I glanced at Tony. “So much for your multi-day pass.”

“Well, yeah, we’d still need the counterserum when a guest left the park,” he said. “But instead of working permanently, it would neutralize their powers with a time-release substance, like a cold tablet. Until that function was incorporated into the serum itself.”

“Sure,” Moreta said, unconvinced.

That earned a forced chuckle from Tony. “Juno, why do you hate this idea so much?”

“Tony, I am simply asking the question you and your Visionaries ask each other: ‘Why *won’t* it work?’”

I flashed back to the sign I saw hanging in the room where the water park guys were meeting earlier. Now I knew where they got their motto, and their mission.

“I don’t like the idea of a human guest leaving the park with superhuman powers,” Moreta explained. “Dormant or otherwise. You’re just lucky to have Jakey messing with this crazy idea in his spare time.”

“What if someone did leave with powers?” I asked. “What if a guest is too fast to catch at the gate? Or if they decide to go on an unscheduled flight over the Sonoran Desert?”

“That, Mister Dunbar, is what we call a security issue,” Moreta said. “I gladly defer to Tony and Ms. Tzone.”

CHAPTER FIVE

As we stepped out of Crichton Memorial, back into the whirlwind of giddy superhuman Teammates and their families, Tony whipped out a cell phone. “Nataliya should be the one explaining the safety net. Plus, she can answer any questions you might have about park security. Within reason.”

“Of course,” I said. “Is she here?”

“She got here an hour before you did,” Coral said. Her happy face was back.

“I’ll try calling her,” Tony said. “Excuse me.”

He strolled a short distance up Seventh Avenue. Beyond him, I could see a large plume of what looked like steam issuing from a manhole cover on the street. This looked normal in New York, but rather odd in Tucson, especially as I watched people playing in the steam. Then it made sense.

“They’re misters, aren’t they?” I asked Coral. “You shoot mist instead of steam up through the manholes to keep the guests cool. I wondered if you guys had something other than drink carts and restaurants for – ”

Coral wasn’t listening. She was watching everything and everyone around us, but without the joy she conveyed before.

I leaned over to her. “Completely off the record: are you okay?”

“Sure,” she said, her eyes bright now. “Why?”

“When we were watching the injections and talking about Tony’s multi-day thing, you looked and sounded, I dunno, distant.”

Her light began to fade. “I had no idea. I’m sorry. Great hostess, huh, Dunbar?”

“Coral, it’s okay. I remember the days when the only profile a magazine seemed to run of you involved a mug shot.”

She bit her lips, appearing reflective. Experience with this type of female expression told me to be ready to duck; I didn’t need to. “You and the world probably remember those days better than I do,” she said.

(She may be right. After reading the name “Coral Mayhew” for the first time in here, you probably wondered why I didn’t mention her spoiled-little-rich-girl past – the parties, the drinking, the drugs, the driving-while-sexting, the accidents, the fights, and ultimately the rehab. That’s because none of that was relevant to this story until she dimmed inside the hospital. Old

Coral was pretty worthless, her trust fund notwithstanding. But I liked this Coral, and she was troubled. The reporter in me, as well as the all-around swell guy, wanted to know why.)

“I had some issues in my younger days,” she said. “Now, here I am running a place that shoots drugs with super-powers into peoples’ bodies. And when Tony starts talking about filling them with more, moving away from Juno’s original work, it just gets to me.”

“I get the sense that Doctor Moreta wouldn’t pump anything if it weren’t safe. In any case, it’s your money. Just tell them you don’t want to do it. They’ll understand.”

“Tony wouldn’t.” She, then I, turned and watched as Tony finished his phone call and started hustling toward us. “I need his brain, Dunbar. It’s the heart of this place. ‘His brain is the heart ..?’ Jesus, did that make any sense?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.” Her smile came back.

“She was right in front of us the whole time,” Tony said, pointing across the street.

“Come on. You can see some more of the square along the way.”

We crossed Seventh, turned, and started to head north on Broadway, toward the footbridge above where the Canyon cars left the street and went underground. Along the way, I noted the various types of stores that lined our route, each operated by a heavy hitter in its field. In addition to the park’s own stores for souvenirs and gifts, there were restaurants for fast food and sit-down dining, apparel shops with items co-branded by the sponsor and the park.

And there was a café-slash-bookstore: Heroic Perk Coffee and Books.

I stopped at its window. It was much like the café-slash-bookstores in Manhattan or any other large city in that it seemed to pull off the impossible trick of fitting two businesses into a space the size of a kitchen cabinet. There was only one person in the store, a short Teammate

dressed in a red polo and a beige apron, stocking a shelf on the second of the building's three actual stories. He stood with his back to us by the top of a tight spiral staircase.

"With everything there is to do," I said, "I'd think the last thing someone would want is a book, much less coffee in the middle of a summer day in Arizona."

"What if you don't get on rides, or go for powers, but you don't want to deprive your family of the fun?" Tony said. "Grab a book and a bench and you're all set. And as for coffee, hell, there's always someone somewhere who wants coffee and they show up eventually, especially when the desert gets chilly at night."

"Plus," said Coral, "it actually does rain here sometimes, and when it does, guests appreciate having the store as an alternative. And you should see our attendance and sales when a superhuman creator comes in to sign their memoirs or their comic books –"

The Teammate minding the store overheard that. He turned and looked back at us. The name "Bryan" was engraved on the badge that the young guy wore at the end of his red lanyard.

But I have no idea how he knew *my* name. "Holy crap! Kevin Dunbar?"

Coral and Tony watched me as Bryan charged down the staircase. I'd never seen the guy before this moment and he was heading for me like I owed him money.

He stumbled to a stop at the doorway and leaned out, panting. "You *are* him, right? Kevin Dunbar? *SuperHuman Times*?"

I replied with a nod. Could this be possible? Could I actually have a fan? If so, why? How?

"You okay, Bryan?" Tony asked, gently placing a large hand on the clerk's shoulder.

“Do you guys know who this is?” Bryan extended his hand, which I shook. “This is a real treat, Mister Dunbar. I had no idea you’d be here, too. Do you, can you, would you come in? Just for a second?”

“Sure.” I didn’t know why I said it then, but I do in retrospect: ego. My photo never appears with my *Times* articles and I don’t travel in celebrity circles. I had to find out how Bryan knew me.

He stood beside the doorway to allow me and my hosts into the store. The sales floor was brightly lit, well-organized, and stocked with mostly portable paperbacks, although a sign on the counter by the register read, “All titles available for download to the device of your choice. Just ask!” There were also several tables, chairs, and benches provided for reading, relaxing, and drinking coffee, which was served from a separate counter that offered a variety of javas and a compact showcase of noshes.

Hanging from the ceiling were banners with images of superhumans I recognized – The Quarry, Projectrix, Non Sequitur, and several others. Some photos were classic shots of them in costume from their younger days; others were more subdued portraits of them as they appeared today, in civilian gear. Each banner shared the same bold, colorful trade dress announcing their visit, and each image was accompanied by copy stating dates during the season when each would be appearing at the store in conjunction with book signings.

“I’ll bet you’ve met all of these guys,” Bryan said, “working for the *Times*.”

“Not all of them,” I said. “I should have my editor send me back out here when they come here. No, wait, I’ll be in ... London.”

I paused, noticing a book lying flat on the checkout counter. It measured roughly 7” x 10” and looked to be about 200 pages thick. The title of the book was *FireBrand*.



The cover art was a painting of two very different women. Most of it looked like a very old, enlarged comic book cover from World War II. The setting was an island in the Pacific. The action prominently featured American soldiers running toward the viewer with horrified looks on their faces as they fled from two thin lines of fire coursing toward them from the sky. The artwork of the doomed soldiers was not overly graphic; there was no seared flesh, no charred bones; the stark art just suggested the first embrace of flames touching their bodies. As chilling as it was to see American soldiers on the brink of incineration, even more chilling was the source of the flames. They emanated from the eyes of a female superhuman flying above them. She was petite, with black hair tied back into a bun, and wearing what looked like a Japanese military uniform of the period with a skirt added.

Even though all of the text on the comic cover was in Japanese, I knew the superhuman woman's name: in English, it translated to DynaMaid.

I also knew the other woman depicted on the cover, standing in front of the DynaMaid comic. Her stylized image depicted a slender woman in her late 20s, dressed in a contemporary T-shirt, jeans, and heels. She stood 5' 9" and her short, platinum blonde hair, which she inherited from her mother, caressed her angular, green-eyed face, which she inherited from her father. But those beautiful eyes were thinly masked by a pair of green flames surrounding them. She was also flying, hovering actually, slightly over the upper right corner of the Japanese comic. She was looking at the DynaMaid cover, firing narrow flames of green fire with her own eyes to scorch, and ultimately burn, the image.

I glanced away from her face and read the text of a review printed on the cover: "Rei Shinozaki's journal of coming to terms with her family's secret, and her own, make for compelling reading." – Pierre Davide, Author, *The Nacht Conspiracy*."

I briefly noticed that a gold sticker was affixed to one corner of the cover: “Bates Trophy Winner!”

I ignored it, sort of, and read the credits that ran along the bottom:

“Written by Kevin Dunbar. Illustrated by Reiko Shinozaki.”

That’s how I knew the lady with the fiery green eyes, and DynaMaid – and that’s how Bryan knew me.

I picked up the book and began leafing through it as if I’d never seen it before. There, rendered in bold strokes and dramatic compositions, was the story of how Rei discovered her superhuman powers as a child, but kept them hidden after learning that she was related to a Japanese war criminal. The book retraced her investigation into the life of DynaMaid, and how her powers granted her a kind of freedom and respect that Japanese women of that era never knew. She used that freedom to inflict terrible carnage upon the Allies. I remembered calling her a firebrand at one point during the process, and Rei – who always felt branded and shamed by her powers as a result of DynaMaid’s acts – chose that for the title.

Coral looked sincerely curious. “Hey, Dunbar, did you really write a comic book?”

“Actually, it’s a graphic novel, not a comic book,” Bryan corrected helpfully. “Tells a whole story with sequential art in a single volume, not in serial installments like a regular comic.”

Coral pretended to cower. “Oh. Sorry.”

Her voice jolted me out of the trance I’d accidentally fallen into. “Yeah, yeah, I wrote it a couple years ago. Rei and I met at a comic book convention, she told me about DynaMaid, we solved a murder, and I talked her into this. I didn’t expect to see her – *this* – here, though.”

Tony was a few steps behind the conversation. “Solved a murder?”

“Yeah, um, well.” While not intending to stop the tour for this story, I shook my head and proceeded. “After the Big Shakeout, a lot of superhumans got into the comic-book game, writing and drawing books based on their adventures or selling their stories to publishers. I interview them occasionally for the *Times*.”

“The first volume of memoirs from Obliterix drops in September,” Bryan interjected, pointing to one of the banners above us for his signing.

“Right, right,” I said. “Well, all those superhumans have made it harder for humans to get into that racket. That’s what Rei was trying to do when we met at the Atlanta Comic Book Conference a few years back. Her non-comic art has been exhibited all over the world, but she’s been drawing comics since she was five. It’s her first love. She had her first publisher lined up at the show and everything, but, well –” I speeded it up for their benefit – “someone got killed at the show, Rei and I found the killer, and she saved my life by melting the killer’s gun *into* his hand when he pulled it on me. Unfortunately, she’d been keeping her powers a secret her whole life because of a certain distant relative-slash-war criminal.” I tapped DynaMaid’s portrait with my finger.

“But Rei didn’t kill those soldiers,” Tony said as he leafed through the book.

“That’s what I told her,” I said. “Once her secret was out, she talked a lot about what it was like growing up with DynaMaid’s powers and never being able to use them for something good. It took months of emails and voice mails for me to convince her that she had a great story there. Eventually, I put everything she said into a narrative format and showed her a comic script. After she read it, she decided to bankroll and publish a graphic novel. We found a distributor, did a promotional tour around the country, it was ... fun.”

Bryan quickly walked over to the counter, gently grabbed the book from Tony, and took a felt-tip pen from his apron pocket. “While you’re here, would you mind, Mister Dunbar?”

I joined him at the counter and accepted the pen. “My pleasure.”

Bryan opened the book and turned to a page in the back, “About the Authors.” There were two short biographical paragraphs about me and Rei; above them was a photograph of us that I hadn’t seen for a while. I found myself remembering the day we took that picture, when Rei told me to sit down on her couch and look handsome and “author-ly” while she set the timer on her camera. I remembered when she triggered the timer and bolted back to the couch, hurled herself into the space beside me, and wrapped her arm tightly around my shoulders. I remembered when she smiled that smile as the camera went off. I remembered thinking I looked like a dork; she thought we got it right in one shot. I remembered trusting her judgment; she was a professional artist, after all. With her visual sense, it’s no wonder we looked so good.

Together.

Now, more than two years later, I could see that the guy in the photograph didn’t look so dorky after all, at least not beside that sexy, gymnast-thin babe with the shag haircut. In fact, seeing him with Rei’s arm coiled around him, I was jealous of the lucky bastard. Even if all he got to do in that image was sit next to her, at least he got to do that in this frozen moment, forever.

Coral and Tony moved up behind me and looked at the page. “I can see why it was fun for you,” Coral said.

“Not really,” I replied. “I mean, not that way. We’re just friends. I think. I haven’t even seen her in about a year and —”

If seeing that portrait made my heart beat faster, the next thing I saw on the page stopped it. As I started to sign my name, I spied a rapidly drawn figure on the page, in the style of a Japanese kanji character, representing what looked like a bookstore clerk, presumably Bryan, flying into the sky.

It wasn't just a drawing; it was an autograph.

"I'll be damned." I couldn't keep from smiling. "When was she here to sign this?"

"What do you mean?" Bryan asked.

"Rei. She made quick sketches like this in every book we signed. She never drew the same thing twice. The fans ate it up. Did she come to the park last season? I had no idea she was back in the states. She never called – well, she wasn't obligated to call me, but I – her website said she was in Rio or Amsterdam for one of her exhibitions, and –"

"Berlin. The show was in Berlin, Dunbar."

I never heard her step out from wherever she was hiding among the shelves, but when I looked up from our book, there she was – all 28 years of her, wearing a form-fitting denim outfit that looked new and appropriately Southwestern; wearing slightly longer, tousled platinum blonde hair; carrying a wicked-looking pro digital camera; and speaking to me with those thin, soft-looking lips. And that voice.

Rei Shinozaki's voice. "Hi."