

SCOTT WILLIAM FOLEY



FREEDOM'S ACQUIESCENCE

:FROM THE CHRONICLES OF PURGATORY STATION

(PART III)

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by

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Allen walked into the living room to find Sophie and Franklin, his elderly roommates, working on dinner together. Of course, Sophie, being the tremendous cook that she was, needed absolutely no assistance from Franklin, but her boyfriend loved to observe the minute delicacies of her sometimes-supernatural prowess at the culinary arts.

Allen smiled when he noticed they were making the first meal he had ever been privileged to consume in the apartment above Franklin's bookstore, called Trover's Fine Literature. So much had happened since then, all those months ago.

He had fallen in love within days of being taken in by Franklin and Sophie, and he had alienated that love almost immediately. It'd now been seven months, and Julie Carmah still had yet to talk with Allen. He didn't even dare step foot in her shop, Carmah's Cup, located directly next door. In a reversal of their original understanding, now Franklin must get all of Allen's coffee for him.

The tall, muscular man sat at the breakfast bar and watched the old lovers adoringly bicker with each other as one of them cooked and one of them impeded the process of cooking. Although he loved the only role models he'd

ever known, or remembered, at least, and was psychologically inclined to behave in the most moral of manners, Allen still felt a pang of jealousy at their happiness.

For the briefest of time, he thought he and Julie would have that joyfulness, even though he was indirectly responsible for her husband's death.

"You look upset, Allen," Sophie commented as she shooed Franklin away.

Allen snapped to and faced the lovely woman. Was he upset? He supposed he was, for a variety of reasons. At the moment, one of those reasons was at the forefront of his mind.

"I just got an encrypted e-mail from one of my former, um, associates—"

"—A member from MAP?" Franklin interjected incredulously.

"Yes."

Sophie and Franklin both stopped what they were doing. Allen had deserted his post in the government's highly classified Meta-Agent Program. He served as a public Colossal for the government, acting as a patron of goodwill. However, the program had many, many more agents than just Allen, whose codename was Freedom, and none of them acted as Colossals—heroes of the people. Nor were they expected to. Instead, they executed covert operations for the security of the United States of America, and most of those maneuvers involved sabotage and assassination.

When Freedom had become too comfortable in his position as a Colossal, MAP officially decided to put him in his place. They assigned him to purge the leader of Ulrakistan, a country his own was at war with, and he refused. They could have gotten any other MAP operative to fulfill that order, but they chose

him as a lesson. It was a hard choice for him, but he wouldn't let himself become a killer. As a result, the war still rages on, men and women continue to die over there, and Allen can't help but blame himself for each of those deaths. Julie's husband, Trent Carmah, was one of those soldiers that perished only weeks after Freedom had gone AWOL.

"Are you in danger?" Sophie asked, looking quite nervous.

"No," Allen answered promptly. "It was from an ally; maybe the only ally I have left in the whole program. He wanted me to know that the botched mission I ran with the Nocturnal Knight and the others brought me all the wrong kind of attention from MAP. I'm apparently back on their list, though I didn't think I ever really went off of it."

"This is my fault, Allen. I never should have suggested you work with the Knight," Franklin apologized, placing his withered hand on Allen's powerful shoulder.

"Don't be so hard on yourself, sir—Franklin!" he corrected after an immediate glare from the old man who hated such formality from a friend. "The Shadow Serpent has killed nearly a hundred people; I had to take action. The Knight had been working on the case, it only seemed reasonable when Devil Woman approached me to join their cause."

"I never dreamt it would end so badly. The Knight isn't the same man he was twenty years ago, not the man I remember," Franklin muttered pensively. His eyes were laden with shame.

“We all make mistakes,” Allen reassured, this time placing his strong hand on Franklin’s tiny shoulder. “I’ll deal with both the Knight and the Shadow Serpent when the time is right.”

“So did your friend have anything else to say?” Sophie questioned. Of course, she asked this while busying herself with the nuances of preparing a meal.

Allen noticed she kept brushing aside her gray hair as it fell into her eyes. “I don’t know I’d go so far as to call him a friend. We weren’t really produced to think like that at MAP. But, no, he just wanted to offer a warning.”

The three of them sat in silence for some moments, contemplating the implications of such dire news. The man who had replaced Allen was known only as Agent 0104, or, to the public, as the newest government sanctioned Colossal called Anthem. Unfortunately, Anthem was anything but a Colossal. He was everything Freedom was not, and that included being a killer. But, he *did* follow his superiors’ orders, so in their eyes, that made him perfect.

Franklin’s brother, Walter Trover, had worked for MAP in his younger years as a scientist. When he discovered that Allen tested off the charts in morality and conscience, he fudged the books a bit to keep the young boy in the program. Such attributes were generally not held in high regard for a program creating super soldiers. Walter Trover considered Agent 0104 his penitence for all the killers he’d helped create. He’d died long ago, apparently, but left a hypnotic suggestion for Allen to come to Purgatory Station if he ever found

himself in trouble, to a bookstore called Trover's Fine Literature. And so Allen had when he first defied orders.

"You need to tell him," Franklin mumbled to Sophie.

Sophie glared at her old boyfriend and replied harshly, "I think he's had enough for today, don't you?"

Allen was capable of hearing most conversations at a normal volume from well over a hundred feet away. A few mumbles directly before him proved infantile as a challenge.

"I can take it. If I need to know, I need to know," he said stoically.

"Put the meat in the oven, won't you?" she requested of Franklin with ice in her voice. She wrung her hands on a dishtowel, obviously distraught at delivering bad news to her young roommate. "Allen, sweetie, I saw Julie last night, after she closed, over at Malko's Café. You know they stay open quite late."

"I know," Allen returned patiently. He knew what was coming next. It was only natural.

"She was on a date, honey."

His face did not change expressions one iota, but Allen was quite sure his heart split directly in half at the conclusion of Sophie's statement. He had cried only once before, and as he felt tears well up, he fought them back. He had, after all, already cried over Julie. He told himself months ago he must let her live her life, even if that meant she wanted nothing to do with him. He understood that at his most rationale level. However, he had always been the atypical

member of MAP due to the fact that he was not a heartless machine instead a human being. His face flushed.

“Anyone we know?” Allen asked with his voice a steady tone despite the tempest wreaking havoc within his heart.

“No,” Sophie answered, raising her nearly non-existent eyebrows in sympathy.

“I should talk to her,” Allen muttered after dropping his chin to his chest. His mussed hair fell into his eyes.

“You can’t,” Sophie immediately imposed, far more directly than she had intended. “Oh, sweetie, I’m sorry to be so abrupt, but she deserves a chance at happiness. You know I love you, Allen—”

“—We both do,” Franklin called out as he put some green beans on the stove, nearly catching his long sleeve plaid shirt on fire in the process.

“—but we love Julie also. We know why you had to do what you did in Ulrakistan, and she does too, in her head; but in her heart, she can’t help thinking what might have been.”

“I can’t kill,” Allen growled in irritation. His ears felt as though they’d been doused in gasoline and lit.

“Honey, I know that. That’s what makes you the hero you are. But, she doesn’t see it that way. You realize that. She only knows Trent would still be here if you’d been the soldier she thinks you were supposed to be.”

“You know I respect the soldiers,” Allen volleyed. “And you know if I could trade places with Trent, I’d do so in a heartbeat. But the entire world saw me as

a symbol of justice. I couldn't commit cold-blooded murder, even if my country was asking me to do it. I may have been just another soldier to my superiors, but the children of my country saw me as their champion! I simply couldn't cross that line, no matter what."

"Allen, we don't think ill of you for your decision, you know that," Franklin pronounced, walking towards him from the stove. "We all have to make our decisions in life, and my brother knew even when you were a baby that there were some things you wouldn't do. Remember, he knew it back when he was a scientist for MAP and you were in your early developmental stages for their little super-solider factory. You can't blame yourself for who you are."

"But Julie can, and she probably should," Allen proclaimed barely above a whisper with his head still lowered. He spread his palms out wide on the breakfast bar, stretching his fingers as far as he could in an effort to relax.

"We're sorry, dear," Sophie offered.

"What should I expect?" Allen asked them. The he spat out, "What kind of a life could I offer her when Allen Hemmingway doesn't even officially exist?"



Five days later . . .

"Nick, I'm home!" Julie notified as she entered the apartment she shared with her brother-in-law. She was the only family he had left, and it'd be a cold day down below before she abandoned him.

She entered the television room and saw the red-haired teen watching a late night movie.

“Shouldn’t you be in bed?” she asked him as she removed her coat and tossed it over the old, patched-up recliner.

“It’s Friday night, Julie,” Nick grinned at her.

“Yeah, I bet you had an awesome Friday night closing down the shop for me,” Julie half-joked, half-apologized as she plopped down and extended the footrest.

“It wasn’t bad,” Nick reassured. “Franklin and Sophie helped me. Then we played euchre for awhile.”

“They’re good people,” Julie acclaimed.

“The best,” Nick agreed with the light from the television reflecting off his face.

“So, what are we watching?” she asked as she pulled her brown, curly hair back into a ponytail and took off her jewelry.

Nick cleared his throat and said awkwardly, “It’s a film based on the end of the Absolutes. You know, that old team of Colossals.”

“Yeah, I know,” Julie said disapprovingly. She’s never been a fan of the overabundance of Colossals that Purgatory Station seemed to have, but since her encounter with Allen Hemmingway, she’d become even less favorable of their existence.

Nick, contrastingly, couldn't get enough of them. His experience with Freedom at the defeat of the Nether Man was something he'd cherish for the rest of his life.

Wishing to switch topics, Nick inquired, "So, how was your date with Hunter?"

Now it was Julie's turn to feel rather awkward.

"Oh, it was fine. We had some coffee and took in a quick one-man show."

"How was it?"

"Pretty funny, actually. I didn't think it would be, what with being titled after a cave man and all that."

Nick glanced at the television and saw that the destruction of the Absolutes was at hand by their greatest adversary, Vitriol. Of course, no one was actually there to witness how the Absolutes' lives ended, so this scene, and the movie as a whole, was largely taken from poetic license. That being said, Nick knew it upset Julie to watch it, so he turned it off.

"Thanks," she said breathlessly.

"No problem, I've seen it before."

"It came out when I was your age," she informed.

They then sat in silence for quite a while, both quietly reflecting on their evenings.

"He's a nice guy," Nick finally blurted out.

"Who?"

"Hunter."

Julie studied her brother-in-law closely to search for sarcasm. She knew Nick though, and it wasn't part of his personality to purposefully be a smart mouth. So many of them were such jerks at that age, but not Nick. Not now, probably not ever.

"Yeah," she agreed. "He is a nice guy. You know, if it's weird for you, I'll stop seeing him."

Nick just smiled gently and said, "I know my brother's your first love, Julie. Nothing will change that. No one expects you to die an old maid, least of all me. Hunter's good for you. He's a lot like Trent, really."

"You're wise beyond your years, boy," Julie grinned. "Good thing I met Trent before you, who knows what could have happened?"

"Yeah, I'm sure you'd love to date a sixteen year old. Just what you want, a boyfriend ten years your junior with acne and a cracking voice!"

They both laughed, then Julie grew quite serious and said, "I mean it, though, Nick. You say the word, and I'll break it off with Hunter. It hasn't even been a year yet, after all."

Nick rolled his eyes, then informed, "The only way I'd ask you to dump Hunter is if you'd give Allen a chance—"

Julie huffed in irritation.

"—but I know you've got some grudge against him, and I know you refuse to tell me what it is, and I'm going to respect that. So, unless you'll give Allen a shot, I'm good with Hunter if you are."

"Allen's not right for me, kiddo. Just take my word for it," she seethed.

“Franklin and Sophie think he’s okay.”

“They’re old, Nick. They don’t know any better.”

Julie saw the look of disgust come over Nick’s face, even with only the light from the kitchen behind them offering illumination, and instantly realized what she’d said. She couldn’t believe she’d uttered such filth. Franklin and Sophie had been nothing but pure gold to she and Nick, and she had the audacity to speak against them because she’s got a chip on her shoulder.

“Oh, Nick. Oh, Nick, please forgive me for saying that! I’m such a heel; I didn’t mean that. You know I didn’t mean that,” she pled.

“I know Julie. This kind of thing can’t be healthy, though. Your beef with Allen is turning you against your loved ones. That can’t be good.”

“You’ve been watching Dr. Gill again, haven’t you?”

“No comment,” Nick laughed.

“Oh, I don’t know how long it’s going to last with Hunter anyway. He’s a great guy, but he doesn’t make me feel the way Trent did,” Julie admitted as she began to play with her own ponytail, staring off into space.

“Has anyone?” Nick asked, swinging his feet off the coffee table onto the rest of the couch so he could face her better. He pulled the old quilt off the back of the decrepit couch and covered up.

Julie face turned red, but she refused to answer.

“Hey, speaking of Allen, I’ve got some hard news for you.”

With thousands of thoughts flashing through her mind instantaneously, Julie immediately asked, “What?”

“I saw him last night at The Machine in the Ghost.”

“What the heck’s that?” Julie inquired in utter confusion.

“It’s an all night internet café. He was having coffee.”

“He’s drinking someone else’s coffee!” she exploded.

“You know, we’ve been studying this play where someone says something like, ‘I think you protest too much.’”

“Hardy har-har,” Julie mocked. “You know we need every customer we can scrounge up! Whether I like him or not, we need his business! How dare he go somewhere else?”

“Yeah,” Nick chuckled. “How dare he enter another coffee shop when you won’t allow him to step foot in yours?”

“First of all, it’s our coffee shop, not just mine. You know that. Secondly, that’s not the point, and you know that, too.”

Nick leaned his head back on the pillows and stared at the ceiling. He loved his sister-in-law, but he sometimes wished she could ease back on the throttle a little. Trent loved the fire she had in her belly, and Nick knew he’d never settle for someone who didn’t have it as well. It still annoyed him, however, when it made her beyond unreasonable.

“What time did you see him there?”

Nick was feeling very tired now that he had leaned his head back on the pillows and gotten cozy with the blanket on him, and answered rather nonchalantly, “Oh, I guess it was around one-thirty.”

Julie sprang up from her recliner like she'd been shot out of a canon and screamed, "What the hell were you doing out at one-thirty in the morning?"

Startled by her explosion, Nick sat up, stunned, and realized he had just gotten himself in a heap of trouble. Crap. He knew he should have just gone to bed earlier, but he felt like Trent would have wanted him to wait up for Julie and make sure she got home okay. Now he'd just thrown himself into the proverbial fire.

"Um, I was, uh . . . well, you see, I was, um—"

Just as Julie was about to issue a stern ultimatum, their phone rang. She glanced at the clock and saw that it was eleven-thirty at night.

"Who in the world?" she whispered to herself. She hadn't asked Hunter to call her when he got home. She walked into the kitchen to grab the cordless, but pointed at Nick with her eyes wide, feeling it unnecessary to say what she was thinking before she did so.

She answered the phone.

Nick watched her, relieved at the reprieve from the hot water, until he saw a look of shock come over her face.

"Nick, honey," she said between sudden and choked sobs, "would you mind going to bed now?"

"Is everything okay?" Nick asked in genuine concern. He felt his heart began to race, for he immediately thought something had happened to Franklin or Sophie. After all, his parents, grandparents, and only brother were all deceased. There wasn't much more bad news left for him to take.

“Please, sweetie, just go to bed, we’ll talk tomorrow morning, okay? We’ll talk tomorrow morning, I promise.”

Before he left for Ulrakistan, Trent had made his little brother promise to mind Julie in every way, shape, and form, and Nick had done everything Julie had ever told him to do. Although it pained him to leave her obviously distraught, now would be no different.

He squeezed her shoulder as he walked past her and shut himself in his room for the night.

“Okay, I’m back,” Julie sniveled into the phone.

Twenty painful minutes later, Julie stood at the window facing Geoff Avenue, the street Carmah’s Cup faced. The tears were flowing slower now, but there was no sign that they would end. She already had a headache from the tears, and her sinuses felt as though they’d been packed with mud. A million unorganized thoughts raced through her head uncontrollably.

She then saw a familiar, tall figure walk by on the other side of the poorly lit street. She would know him anywhere.

“Someone else’s coffee, huh?” she sniffed, suddenly wiping at her eyes with the sleeve of her shirt. “We’ll just see what’s so great about this Spirit in the Computer or whatever the heck it’s called.”

She grabbed some tissue, rubbed the little mascara off that had ran a bit with her tears, threw on her coat, and pursued the man who had not only betrayed his country, but betrayed her business now as well.



Allen Hemmingway glanced through the immense windows of The Ghost in the Machine internet café. If all went according to plan, he wouldn't have to offer his patronage any longer after tonight.

He powered three blocks past the café until he came to an alley that led nowhere. There was entirely no reason for this alley to be in this particular spot, but it was standard MAP protocol to have a "clean street" in every city. They were streets incapable of falling victim to any sort of electronic surveillance. Although Purgatory Station was nothing compared to its larger neighbor Boston, across the bridge, it still found itself the host of many, many unproven meetings. Smaller cities were more inconspicuous, after all.

Allen, now a renegade of MAP, had avoided this alley as though his life depended on it. And now, ironically, his new life depended entirely upon this familiar alley.

The muscular bookseller stood in the center of the alley, perfectly still. He knew he was being watched, studied. He expected nothing less.

"Serve the country first," a hallow voice said from nowhere.

"And the people second," Allen returned without an ounce of conviction in his voice.

Out of the shadows stepped a large, powerfully built man. From the chest up, he was covered in a metal shell sculpted to fit his body perfectly. It seemed to react to his every moment flawlessly. It covered every aspect of his head, and all Allen saw were two glowing eyes staring at him. In an alley that wasn't masked with electronic buffers, those eyes could figure out an awfully lot just by

scrutinizing something. His arms were bare from the biceps down, except for gloves that fit tightly up to the wrist. They were not laborers' gloves, nor soldiers'. They were an electrician's.

"You know I don't actually believe that, right?" Allen said to the man.

"I think the entire MAP facility knows that by now, Agent 0099," the man said as his sidearms slightly rapped against his legs as he walked toward Allen. In a voice that sounded filtered through an electronic microphone, he said, "I suppose I should be calling you 'Mr. Hemmingway' now, though, correct?"

"I prefer it, Agent 0091," Allen returned. "Or do you prefer 'Cyber Spy?'"

"Actually, I do prefer to be called Cyber Spy, if you're serious," the large man returned.

"How are you?" Allen asked, extending his hand.

"Fine, Allen. You look well," Cyber Spy affirmed, taking Allen's hand and shaking it briefly. Allen could see that the man felt more than compromised by this action.

The two men walked side by side to the end of the alley, sticking to the shadows. Even though they were in pitch darkness, Allen could see the yellowish slits glowing at him where Cyber Spy's eyes should be.

"Been on any missions lately?" Allen asked in an effort at levity.

"Classified, Allen. You know that," Cyber Spy replied curtly.

They both realized that Cyber Spy had been successful with at least one mission seven months ago. After all, he was the one that had located Agent 0099 for MAP, and Allen had suffered a high caliber bullet to the temple as a

result. Even though Cyber Spy had not fired the actual shot, both men thought it best not to bring that up specifically. Allen had gotten his dig in, and that was quite enough.

Orders were orders. Allen didn't follow his last order. He was considered a bad soldier. Cyber Spy was still a good soldier. He had yet to mutiny. He probably never would. Walter Trover had allowed Agent 0099, Allen, to retain an aspect of humanity as a child that was seldom evident in MAP prospects. While Agent 0091, Cyber Spy, was the only other member of MAP that Allen had warmed up to, he was still far from a typical human with typical emotions. Cyber Spy, like the other agents, was bred to follow orders. Period. No matter what. If he were ordered to kill Allen, he would do it. No questions asked, no hesitation.

However, hadn't Cyber Spy broken protocol already by warning Allen? And if this meeting went as planned, wasn't Cyber Spy defying his superiors even more so? Perhaps Cyber Spy was more human than Allen had given him credit for.

"You're risking execution," Cyber Spy reminded.

"I know," Allen confirmed. "It's worth it."

"What's worth it?" Cyber Spy interrogated.

"You're the master spy, figure it out," Allen jibed.

"We're not produced to be normal citizens of the nation, Allen," Cyber Spy lectured. "You cannot offer anyone the American Dream. MAP members are not made to do what you're thinking."

"I haven't even told you what I'm thinking," Allen chuckled.

"I *am* a master spy," Cyber Spy responded flatly.

"Then you'd know I'm not a member of MAP any longer."

Allen's eyes shot up to the rooftops when he heard a sudden howl erupt, filling the night with maliciousness and wrath.

Before he knew it, he was roughly thrown to the hard pavement beneath.

He made an effort to explode to his feet, but a heavy boot planted itself firmly onto his chest and forced him back down.

"Stay put!" a gnarled voice roared.

Allen looked up and saw Agent 0050 standing over him, nearly foaming at the mouth. The most feared agent in the entire Meta-Agent Program had located him. The agent glaring at Allen was a hybrid of all the most dangerous aspects of both wolf and man.

He had been hunted and caught by Hell Hound.

Cyber Spy started to make a move, not entirely sure what he would do, but Hell Hound immediately yowled, "Stand fast, Agent Cyber Spy. I am your superior officer, and you're in it deep enough as is."

MAP agents were manufactured to follow orders.

Cyber Spy remained still.

Hell Hound gave his attention back to Allen.

The long, forked beard, the crescent, reddish eyes, the elongated incisors, the long fingers tipped with razor sharp claws, and the brown down covering his entire body was enough to unnerve even Allen, who had dealt with things most humans couldn't begin to imagine during his time as Freedom.

Hell Hound removed his boot and mocked, "Now, get up, traitor. Make your move. Give me a reason to call in Shutdown and Anthem. Give us a reason to party tonight; we might finally eliminate a member of MAP turned deserter."

"I serve the people, Hell Hound," Allen announced. "And I don't serve the people by blindly assassinating world leaders."

"Well, don't worry your pretty face about that, Agent 0099. We knocked off your target a few months ago anyway. We cleaned up your mess for you, but don't bother thanking us."

"I didn't miss and it wasn't botched. I chose not to kill him. By the way, the assassination did a lot of good, didn't it? The President announced we've got another four years in Ulrakistan, at least. So, great job with that."

Hell Hound narrowed his animalistic eyes, then grumbled, "I've got orders not to terminate you unless you're in Freedom uniform or attacking a member of MAP. So do me a favor, fight back!" Hell Hound barked as he started kicking and punching Allen bestially.

Cyber Spy backed away and leaned against the wall of the alley as he watched the closest thing he had to a friend cover up and take Hell Hound's thrashing. He been ordered to stand down, and he would follow his orders. It wasn't a matter of a choice for him.

"If we'd caught you during that Shadow Serpent fiasco you'd a been dead by now, you know that traitor? You'd be buried in the compost heap right now!"

“The Serpent’s killed countless citizens of this city!” Allen choked out between Hell Hound’s kicks. “Why doesn’t Anthem stop him?”

“Because the Serpent’s doing exactly what MAP—”

Cyber Spy cleared his throat loudly, effectively ceasing the finale of Hell Hound’s near slip.

Hell Hound ended his attack against Allen, turned to face Cyber Spy, and then nodded in near appreciation.

“The lust of the kill,” Hell Hounds shrugged, taking deep breaths in an attempt to calm himself. His narrow but freakishly muscular chest expanded beneath the tight black shirt he wore with every intake of air.

“Understood,” Cyber Spy responded.

Hell Hound glowered fiercely at Allen once more and spat, “This is your last warning, ‘hero.’ You show your face in the red, white, and blue one more time and you won’t have a face left, got it? Stay off the grid and MAP won’t bother with you.”

“Got it,” Allen gargled.

Hell Hound huffed roughly, then leapt straight up to the edge of the rooftop above.

Cyber Spy strolled over to Allen, offering his hand to help the beaten man up.

The spy dared say nothing; Hell Hound’s hearing was amplified beyond imagination.

He heaved Allen up when a roar thundered down from above, “Desist aiding that traitor!”

Cyber Spy immediately released Allen’s hand and the trampled man fell in a heap to the cement once more.

If Allen could have seen the eyes behind that expressionless faceplate, he was certain he would have detected a wink from Cyber Spy.

That would be the last friendly meeting they would ever have.



“You okay?” Julie asked with such little sympathy that she surprised even herself.

Allen looked up and saw the woman he loved, but hadn’t spoken with in seven months, approaching him.

He got up, rubbing his ribs a bit, and inquired, “How much did you see?”

“It was dark; I didn’t see anything,” she replied simply.

“Stick to that story, would you? I think it’d be better for both of us.”

“Sure thing,” she agreed. She walked with Allen as he started to leave the alley. “So,” she began, “what’s so important that you’d let yourself get beat up like that?”

Allen drew to a stop right as they nearly crossed the threshold of the alley onto the sidewalk. He faced her, taking in her lightly freckled, statuesque fact, and found it difficult to keep eye contact. He held his hand out to her.

She looked down to see a small electronic card blinking in the palm of his massive hand.

“This is what was so important,” he declared.

“What is it?” she asked while staring at it in fascination.

“It’s a key. And it’s got a time limit. Once we leave this alley, we’re going to have to make small talk. We can’t talk about what just happened, and we can’t talk about this key. If you want to tag along and get some answers by only watching, that’s fine. We’re not in any danger as long as we don’t talk about what we’re doing on the street. If you want to go home, that’s fine, too. You’re going to find out what all this was about one way or the other. It just depends how quickly you want it to happen. So, what’s it going to be?”

“You know me, Allen Hemmingway. Lead the way.”



As they walked through the chilly night, Allen and Julie spent more time together than they had in over a half a year. Although she was nowhere near ready to forgive him for, what she believed, caused the death of her husband, she was far too upset to simply go back home. She needed to be out, doing something to take her mind off the terrible news she had just gotten, and if this was it, so be it.

“You’ve been crying,” Allen noticed as they strode along.

“So?”

“Would you like to talk about it?” Allen offered.

“About what?” she snapped.

“Well, I don’t know. You’d have to tell me first, wouldn’t you?” Allen returned with more sarcasm in his voice than he would have liked. He had never

behaved so immaturely in his life, even when he was a toddler. His time away from MAP had made him more and more human, for better or for worse.

“No, Allen, or whatever you want to be called, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I want to be called Allen,” he confirmed.

“Whatever.”

Several moments of silence passed until both of them felt a cold rain dive-bombing their heads. They looked up only to be met with much more of the same.

“Great,” Julie muttered under her breath.

“We’re too far out for you to walk back by yourself,” Allen lectured. “You’re going to have to deal with it.”

“Easy for you to say, I’ve seen you shrug cars aside,” Julie mumbled as she pulled her coat up over her head.

Allen trusted Julie never to tell anyone of his other identity, Freedom, but he knew she knew it irritated him when she spoke of it out in public. He wasn’t going to let her get under his skin, however. He would instead simply change subjects.

“So who’s this new guy you’re seeing?” he asked over the plops of cold rain.

“How’d you know about him?” Julie called out from the innards of her coat.

“Sophie.”

“I should’ve known.”

“So? What’s he like?”

Allen thought she either hadn't heard him or was more likely ignoring him when she finally replied simply, "He's not Trent."

Millions of thoughts flashed through Allen's head, and most of them dealt with the guilt over a man's death he had never met. In Julie's mind, if Allen had followed orders, the war would have ended weeks before a child suicide bomber killed Trent.

Allen not only refused to kill, but always suspected removing the leader of Ulrakistan would do nothing to curb the activity of the insurgents, and he had been right. It seemed his nation was going to be there for the long haul, and his countrymen and women were dying daily for a war no one seemed to believe in. They were dying for their country, they were doing just what soldiers had done for the safety of the United States for centuries, and they had America's respect and sympathy. It's the politicians, though. Allen thought to himself that it was always the politicians that muddled everything up.

Allen thought it best to change subjects again. "How's Nick?"

"Still a devoted fan of Freedom and any other Colossal that puts on a pair of long underwear."

"Good to hear," Allen returned.

Despite her chagrin at such a comment, Julie ignored it. She did have a concern, however, that perhaps Allen could help with. "Actually, he told me, on accident, of course, that he saw you at some café the other night."

Allen did not even break stride. "That's true; I was communicating with the gentlemen you just saw. Not the furry one, obviously."

“I didn’t think so.”

“I didn’t want to risk a trace on Sophie’s computer.”

“That’s happy news. I thought I’d lost your business.”

“No. You may not allow me in your shop anymore, but I’m still a loyal customer. As long as Franklin’s willing to go get it for me, at least.”

Julie threw her head back in frustration beneath her coat, then continued, “Anyway, he saw you there at one-thirty in the morning.”

Allen stopped in his tracks, water streaming down his chiseled face, and asked, “What in the world was he doing out at one-thirty in the morning?”

“That’s what I want to know. I plan on talking to him about it, but I think, now that it’s confirmed, this has been going on for a while. Little signs, here and there. I thought it was just my imagination, but now . . .”

“You need to know what he’s been up to.”

“I worry about him. Trent left his upbringing up to me.”

“I’ll check into it.”

Nearly inaudible, Julie whispered, “Thanks,” without meeting Allen’s blue eyes.

They walked anew, their shoes making flatulent sounds as the chilly water seeped into their soles.

Several more blocks passed by, and then, suddenly, Allen muttered, “We’re here.”

“We’re where?” Julie asked.

Allen led the way through a doorway, though it was devoid of any doors, into an old, abandoned building. Julie had feared upon entering that they would be met with some unsavory characters seeking shelter from the rain, but then she remembered she was walking with the nation's formerly greatest hero, and her fright readily subsided. She was actually rather ecstatic to be out of the dampness.

They descended some decrepit stairs that groaned under Allen's heavily muscled frame and entered a cellar of sorts.

Julie watched as Allen approached a brick wall, pulled out the electronic key, and slid it through what appeared to her to be absolutely nothing.

There was an efficient purr, and before Julie knew it a small portion of the wall slid aside, revealing a hollow no larger than the size of a shoebox. Allen reached in, pulled out a black leather pouch, dropped the key inside the cubbyhole, then watched as the wall slid back into place once more.

"You wanted to know what was so important?" he reminded.

Julie watched as he zipped open the pouch and spread it open for her to gaze within. She had dropped her coat back into its orthodox position upon entering the old building, and when she leaned in to look, water dripping down her forehead from her wet hair, she saw dozens of documents, cards, identifications, and forms, all detailing the existence of Purgatory Station's newest official resident, Allen Hemmingway.

"Yale, huh?" she said, looking at one certificate in particular.

“His idea of a joke,” Allen dismissed. It seemed that would be all he had to say on the matter.

Julie pulled her head out of the pouch, after which Allen promptly zipped it closed again and stuffed it somewhere inside his coat.

“What would make you put yourself completely out in the open like this, Allen? I thought you and the government had agreed to be cool as long as you don’t put on the long johns?”

Allen answered before he could think about it too hard, for he knew to think about it too hard would result in not saying it at all. “I realized if I’m ever going to share my life with someone, I need to have a real life to share.”

Julie stared at him, wide-eyed. She then turned and left suddenly, back into the downpour.



The next morning, Allen sat with Sophie and Franklin at the breakfast bar. They ate toast, fried eggs, as well as sausage, for their morning meal. While Franklin craved coffee, he’d have to wait a half-hour until Julie had Nick bring it over, as was habitual. In the meantime, he settled for hot tea.

“And so she just walked away?” Sophie asked after crunching into her toast.

“That she did,” Allen answered. “Without a word. I followed her, of course, to be sure she got home safely. I knew better than to push my luck, though.”

“Good point,” Franklin agreed. “That’s the most she’s spoken to you in quite some time.”

“Yes,” Allen confirmed simply.

“Well, there’s nothing more you can do now other than to wait her out and see what happens,” Sophie figured.

The three of them all nodded together, without anyone voicing anything otherwise. They finished their breakfast as such, in silence, contemplating this new turn of events. After all, Franklin and Sophie had, previous to last night, been boarding a man who didn’t exist for any and all official purposes. Now they had a real, certified citizen of the United States living with them.

“Crap.”

“What is it, Franklin?” Allen questioned, alarmed by the elderly man’s outburst.

“Now I’m going to have to report your pay to the feds,” he groaned.



“Are you still in business?” one man asked another in the shadows of a tavern that few knew about.

“Always,” the second man answered simply.

“Good. I’ve got a job for you,” the first said.

“Where?” the second asked.

“Purgatory Station.”

“What is it?”

“Your specialty,” the first man said.

“Same rates as last time.”

“Worth every penny,” the first man praised.

“I’d ask what you get out of it,” the second man mused, “but you don’t pay for that.”

“Just like a good soldier, you don’t question my orders,” the first man grinned.



It’s two in the morning, and Allen was hiding in the shadows across the street from Carmah’s Cup. He’d been waiting since midnight, waiting for some sign, and now, finally, his stoic patience had paid off.

“I love reconnaissance . . .” he muttered to himself with a slight smile as he looked down at his garb. He was dressed in black, from head to toe. Not so thoroughly as to draw attention to himself, however. No, he’d been trained better than that. He simply wore a black long-sleeved shirt with black pants and black boots. To wear black gloves or a black hat would have been overdoing it, and more likely to pique the interest of the local law enforcement. He simply looked like some sophisticate on his way to or from some swanky shindig.

“What are you up to?” Allen asked under his breath as he followed his target, careful to stay a half-block behind at all times. Thousands of disparaging scenarios fluttered through his head. Drugs? Gangs? Weapons? Worse? Could it get worse than those? Allen didn’t know. What he did know, however,

was that on this night, he would keep his promise to Julie and find out what Nick had been up to.

Allen knew in his heart that Nick was a good boy, a boy that strove always to make his brother's spirit proud, but Nick was also at an age when it was most easy to be swayed by fools. Allen hadn't experienced such things personally, but he had a basic knowledge of child psychology, just as he had a basic knowledge of virtually any topic one could dream up.

Members of MAP may have been brutish, but that didn't make them brutes.

He watched Nick enter an alley and disappear into the darkness. Allen readily followed. He soon witnessed Nick standing before the back door of the business called Malko's Café.

"What's all this about?" Allen questioned in a whisper, remembering that this was the recently the site of a date Julie had been on.

Suddenly, the back door slid open only just a sliver and Nick slid through like a greased snake. The door immediately closed ever so softly.

Racing up to the back door, Allen gently took its handle and turned.

Nothing happened; it'd already been locked behind the redheaded boy.

Allen took a step back and looked up at the building Nick had just penetrated. He could see that, like so many other business in Old Downtown, the owner lived above in an apartment.

He hated to do it, seeing as how it was two in the morning and all, but to pick the lock and possibly set off an alarm would do no good for his newfound

status as an official citizen of the world. Although it was a travesty to possibly wake up a hard working neighborhood, Allen had to make sure that Nick was not exposing himself to any sort of danger within the walls of Malko's Café.

He pounded the door, careful to hold back so that he didn't knock it off its hinges.

Sooner than expected, a middle-aged man yelled down from the window above the door, "What the hell do you want, you moron! It's two in the morning, here! I'm gonna call the cops, you freakin' idiot!"

"Sir, please, there's no need to shout," Allen called up as quietly as he could while still projecting loudly enough to be heard.

"You wake me up and you tell me not to shout?" the man shouted more resolutely than before. "I'll shout all I want, you miserable—"

"Sir, please," Allen interrupted. He held up his identification for the man to squint at in an effort to impossibly read it through the darkness and distance.

"My name's Allen Hemmingway. I'm a friend of a woman whose brother-in-law just entered your café."

"I got a burglar in my shop!" the man yelled hysterically. "Maria, call the cops! Some punk broke into my store!"

"Why isn't the alarms going off?" a nasally, somewhat feminine, voice returned from behind the irate shopkeeper.

The middle-aged man looked back at Allen with his thin eyebrows raised skeptically.

“Someone let him into your shop,” Allen informed. “Sir, really, can you come down and open your door for me so we can discuss this inside? We’re waking up the whole neighborhood.”

The man hesitated.

“Sir, my friend is very concerned about him. She was left in charge of him after her husband, his brother, died.”

Once more, no response issued.

“Sir, do you have any children?”

Again, no answer.

“Look, sir, I live with the Trovers, of Trover’s Fine Literature. If you want to call them right now and check my credentials . . .”

The rotund café owner’s eyes lit up and he blurted, “My Poppi was friends with those Trover boys! I’m glad to hear Franklin’s still up and running that store of his. Why, just the other day I thought about—”

Allen abruptly caught movement within his peripheral vision. As trained, he resisted the urge to turn his head and notify the quandary that they’d been spotted. Instead, he rolled his eyes sideways to see what was happening to the man’s left.

Oh, Nick.

The boy was easing out of a window just three rooms away from who Allen could only assume was Mr. Malko. He appeared resigned to scale the lifted stonework of the building downward.

Allen knew this was an accident just waiting to happen.

“Sir,” Allen interjected rapidly. “Could you just search your home and café for me? You’re not being robbed, of that I’m certain, but I need to know what my friend’s brother-in-law is doing in there.”

Suddenly, the window to the man’s right opened up and a young girl appeared.

“Poppi, what’s going on?” she asked.

Allen felt his heart breathe a sigh of relief. Now he knew what this was all about. Nick had good taste. Not only was the dark haired girl cute, she was also quite smart. After all, she was misdirecting her father’s attention, and Allen’s, from the boy crawling down the wall to her father’s left.

“Irene, this guy says there’s a boy in our store, but there ain’t no alarm going off. Did you let any one in?” the man asked with absolutely no hint of believing such a thing was actually possible.

“Poppi!” Irene cried out, obviously offended. “Of course not!”

Irene next gazed downward at Allen with eyes so pleading they nearly broke his heart.

“There you have it, fella,” Mr. Malko said in irritation.

“My mistake, sir. Please accept my apologies.”

“Yeah, well, if you wasn’t friends with Trover, you can bet your ass I’d be callin’ the cops right now.”

Mr. Malko then slammed his window shut.

Allen shot Irene a look that was somewhere between amusement and scorn before she blew him a sincere kiss and gently closed her window.

Although he didn't have time to wait for it, Allen was certain the cracked window Nick had climbed out of would be closed as soon as Mr. and Mrs. Malko were back to sleep.

Allen left the alley and there was Nick, waiting for him like a good boy.

"You were smart enough not to run, huh?" Allen asked gently while putting his solid hand on the boy's shoulder.

"You're in pretty good shape, Al. I knew better."

They strolled along the lighted sidewalks of the city, heading back to their respective homes.

"So that's what this has all been about?" Allen questioned with a chuckle.

"What what's all been about?" Nick asked genuinely.

"Julie knows you've been sneaking out a lot. I told her I'd find out. Now we know."

"Yeah. Are you going to fill her in?"

"No, I'm going to leave that up to you. It's not to punish you, Nick, although I imagine Julie will do that as well. Purgatory Station is a dangerous city. It won't do for you and Irene to be out so late on the streets. You could literally be killed if caught alone by the wrong people."

"I know, Al. It's just, we go to different schools, we both work all night at our family's shops; if we ever want to see each other we have to sneak out!"

"I understand, Nick," Allen sympathized. "We'll have to work something out. That is, assuming this is something you want worked out."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Nick asked incredulously.

“Well, if you really care about this girl, I’ll try to assist you somehow, but if this is just about . . . well, if you’re just after, um, well . . .”

“Sex! You think I’m just with Irene for sex?” Nick erupted.

“Well?” Allen countered.

“No!” Nick volleyed. “We’re too young for sex, Al! Cripes, what do you think I am?”

“I mean, I’d hoped you knew you were too young, but, I guess, I mean, I’ve heard the temptation—”

“What’s that supposed to mean? You’ve heard? Are you saying you’re a virgin?” Nick interrogated.

Allen felt his cheeks flush. The truth was, he was a virgin. Members of MAP were not allowed to have any meaningful relations with anyone, nor did they ever have an opportunity to bond with anyone on a personal level. They were regularly given access to the opposite sex in order to satisfy certain needs, but Allen had never taken part in such things. His instinct told him it was worthless if done with someone you didn’t care about. He couldn’t blame his fellow MAP members, however, after all, they were incapable of feeling any emotions that dealt with love, other than love of country, of course.

“Oops, here we are,” Allen said as he breathed a sigh of relief. They had finally arrived at Carmah’s Cup. “Listen, I’ll talk to Julie in the morning; don’t wake her up now. She’s going to have to talk with Mr. Malko so you and Irene don’t put yourselves at risk any longer by being out so late. But, after certain

punishments, I'm sure they'll come up with something so you two can date at reasonable hours."

"Thanks, Al. I know I can always count on you to be fair," Nick offered truthfully.

"All right, I'll see you tomorrow," Allen said as he patted the boy on the back.

"Good night," Nick said before he left Allen to sneak back into Carmah's Cup and his apartment.

"Good night, kid," Allen returned once he saw the boy enter safely.



He pulled the ridiculous suit on.

When the money was good enough, he threw on the tights. After all, he was one of the most feared Mega-Mals in the nation, and for good reason. He had yet to have been defeated, though the official scorecard said otherwise. But, that wasn't important to him. After all was said and done, if the numbers got bigger in his account, his pride could take any blow. He was a business, after all. He was a franchise unto himself. Those other guys who were just plain nuts or seeking vengeance, well, that wasn't him. He didn't have any personal vendettas. He didn't consider himself to be a truly evil individual.

He was all about the green.

It'd been a long time since his last hurrah. Come to think of it, it was Freedom who "took him down" last time as well. Not today, though. Today, Freedom would be embarrassed, and Anthem would be the hero.

He was being paid quite well to make sure of it.

The black mask slid over his face with a hard tug.



Julie heard the ring that signified a new customer had entered her shop. She looked up, brushing a curl out of her vision as she did so, and saw Allen approaching her. It's the first time he'd attempted to enter Carmah's Cup in months, and it marked the first time she wouldn't stop him for entering in the same amount of time.

"We need to talk about Nick," Allen said plainly after he came to a halt before her counter.

"He told me a little bit before he left for school this morning," Julie informed. "Thanks for checking up on him for me."

"Not a problem," Allen returned. "So, you know it's nothing bad then."

"Well, other than all the problems that can spring from late night rendezvous with the opposite sex, no, nothing too bad."

"I think he's serious about her."

"He's just a kid, Allen. You know how fleeting high school love can be . . ."

"Actually, I don't."

Julie blushed, then said, "Right, I'd almost forgotten. Well, anyway . . ."

At that moment, the door rung again and a tall, powerful, strawberry-haired man entered her store. He walked briskly up to the counter, leaned over it, and pecked Julie on the lips.

Allen unwillingly clenched his fist into a solid bone-crushing mass.

Julie, rather mortified for reasons she wouldn't consciously acknowledge, pushed Hunter back a little and stumbled, "Hunter, I have a customer."

"I'm not a customer," Allen seethed. This was so below him. He knew it was, but he couldn't deny the infantile hatred he felt for this man who kissed Julie right before his eyes. "I work next door."

"Ah, well," Hunter began, sensing the man's tension as he stared straight into his own green eyes. "Whatever the case may be, I'm sure you've seen two grown-ups kiss, right?"

"Of course he has," Julie interjected. She hoped a giant cockroach would devour her on the spot, and she hated cockroaches more than anything imaginable.

Just then, several more customers entered the coffeehouse. They appeared to be business men and women hoping to hone their morning's presentation over some coffee. Hunter was forced aside, next to the man who stood just as loftily as did he.

He glanced over to see the dark haired man's blue eyes still penetrating his.

"Got a problem, Mr.—?"

"Hemmingway is my name," Allen retorted. "And I do have a problem."

“Would that problem happen to be me?” Hunter interrogated, turning squarely to face his doppelganger in size and stature.

“Yes, it is you. But, it’s no fault of your own,” Allen answered, backing down from Hunter ashamedly. He was acting like an imbecilic cretin, not a Colossal. Provoking a civilian out of pure spite because of his own jealousy! What was happening to him?

“Then whose fault is it, Hemmingway?” Hunter demanded.

“My own,” Allen responded.

“Got a crush on Julie or something?” Hunter asked directly.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Allen fired back.

“Yeah, in fact, it kinda is. Well, that’s tough, isn’t it? She’s with me now, so deal with it. You should have made a play earlier.”

“Yeah.”

Although he never backed down from a fight, Hunter also didn’t see the point in egging one on. He thought he’d change the subject.

“So, Hemmingway, what do you do?”

Allen watched as Julie took orders from the table full of suits and dresses.

“I work next door, Trover’s Fine Literature.”

“Book nerd, huh?” Hunter grinned.

“Yeah, I guess I am. How about you?”

“Soldier. Just got back from Ulrakistan.”

“Don’t say?”

“Yep.”

“How’s it going over there?” Allen asked, more than slightly uncomfortable. He still felt a slight pang of guilt about that war, although it’d been well established his actions would not have changed the outcome, or lack thereof. At least, not at a national level.

“How the hell do you think it’s going?” Hunter countered. “We’re still there, aren’t we?”

“So you’re against it?” Allen inquired.

“No, I’m not against it,” Hunter said, aghast. “I just wish they’d let us take off the kid gloves and kick some ass. You?”

“I think we should pull out. Immediately.”

Allen was shocked when a rock-hard set of knuckles smashed into his chin. He instantaneously rolled with the strike to spare the man a broken hand, but the savagery of the attack confounded him! He fell to the floor, not hurt in the least. After all, most small arms fire couldn’t rupture his epidermis. However, he was quite surprised nonetheless.

“You’re nothing but a damn coward!” Hunter bellowed at Allen while shaking his fist in pain. “Weak-kneed wimps like you are the reason we won’t take our panties off and get down to business!”

The entire patronage of Carmah’s Cup stopped what they were doing and took in the ruckus playing out before them.

Julie came running across the shop and sternly demanded under her breath, “Hunter, what are you doing?”

“This chicken thinks we ought to pull out overseas! Tell him to get lost, will ya, Julie?”

Allen stood up, rubbing his chin to sell he was actually hurt, though he felt no pain at all from the considerable blow, then said, “My opinions are my own, Hunter—”

“—That’s Sergeant Ares to you, turncoat.”

Huffing, Allen continued anew, “—My opinions are my own, and the fact that I think we’re not doing anything but getting ourselves and a lot of innocent civilians killed and should leave immediately does not make me a coward or a turncoat. I can’t believe you would assault someone without warning just for disagreeing with you.”

“Yeah, well, you didn’t just watch twelve of your buddies die three weeks ago, did you, sissy?”

Dropping his head in genuine sorrow, Allen pleaded, “Don’t you see? Those soldiers didn’t have to die needlessly!”

Hunter made a fist and took a step towards Allen again, but Julie held him back rather insufficiently. He bellowed, “You call dying for your country a needless death? They died performing the duty they swore to fulfill! You pansy people in this country just don’t get that, do you?”

“Hunter, you’re upset. Please, go back in the kitchen, have some water, calm down,” Julie requested, rubbing his thick, lightly haired arm.

“No, damn it!” Hunter cried out. “Are you going to get this guy out of here, or do I have to throw him out?”

Julie met Allen's eyes and answered, "No, I'm not going to throw him out. He's welcome to his opinions, as misguided as they may be. But, no, I'm not going to kick him out."

Hunter tore his arm free. He glared down at her, and though he was quite menacing, no one in the shop believed for an instant he would harm her. Hunter had an air of honor and courage about him, and, after learning he had lost so many close to him so recently, all were willing to overlook his brash aggression.

"What would Trent think of you?" Hunter hissed before he powered past Julie, flung the door open, and left Julie's life forever. She would never see him in person again.

The shop quietly resumed its functions. The presenters went back to their notes, the readers went back to their papers, and the daydreamers went back to their daydreaming.

Allen took a step toward Julie and whispered, "I'm no coward."

"Prove it," she growled at him before storming back into the kitchen.



"So you know Freedom's gonna show up?" Agent 0104, also known as Anthem, asked his superior.

"I've taken care of it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Agent 0050, Hell Hound, barked.

"Are you questioning me?" the superior interrogated.

"No, sir," Hell Hound snarled.

The superior looked about the hold of the stealth ship they flew in. He saw Agents Anthem, Hell Hound, Cyber Spy, and Shutdown all suiting up. Anthem, of course, was the only one that looked the part of a Colossal. He was dressed in a garish uniform of black, red, and blue. His cape hung loosely about his body, all the way to his ankles, fixed in place by a silver star at the end of each collarbone. That was his job, after all—to be the government’s officially sanctioned Colossal. The rest of them were covert agents who dealt mostly with overseas issues or concerns the people of the nation were never to know about. They were each dressed to most efficiently deal with their area of expertise. All wore masks or helmets but for Hell Hound.

It was time to bring Freedom, and his stolen G-Repulser, the belt that gave him the ability to fly, back into the fold. He was too expensive to leave out in the field to do as he would. They’d made a promise, however, that Allen Hemmingway was free to live his life. Freedom, however, would be taken in on sight. For that to happen, he could need the current elite members of MAP. And he would need an exposed Freedom.

Good thing he hired somebody to make sure Freedom crawled out of the woodwork.



“She saw me take on the Nether Man! How can she call me a coward?” Allen complained.

“She didn’t call you a coward, Allen, she told you to prove you weren’t a coward,” Sophie reminded.

“Semantics,” Allen mumbled.

“Not really,” Sophie replied. “There’s a big difference.”

Allen threw his head back in utter despair. “What was I doing? For an instant, I was ready to annihilate that guy in the middle of Julie’s shop because he kissed her! I’ve gone from being a disciplined super-soldier to a soap opera reject!”

Franklin laughed heartily at Allen’s comment before he said, “Oh, now, sure, you’re developing a penchant for the dramatic, what with all those Fitzgerald and Shakespeare works you’ve been reading, but don’t go overboard. After all, some of your changes have been for the better.”

Allen glanced over at The Bible Walter Trover had left behind for his unusual prospect. It still retained the bloodstain on its cover from when Agent Shootdown had attempted an assassination on Allen. He’d read it twice now, and was currently in the middle of his third run. Much of it confused him, but much of it made perfect sense.

“I know you’re right. I’m just becoming so darn . . .”

“Human?” Franklin finished with a smirk.

Allen said nothing in return.

“We know you’re no coward, Allen, but face it, some fears you’re not facing head on,” Sophie reprimanded.

“Like what?” Allen asked in sincere curiosity.

“Well,” Sophie began, “why don’t you tell us?”

“What? What my biggest fear is?” Allen questioned.

“Mm-hmm.”

The powerfully built hero sat inertly upon the couch, unable to verbalize that which immediately sprang to mind.

“Well, if you’re anything like Walter, I know what your biggest fear may be,” Franklin hinted.

“What’s that?” Allen inquired.

The silver mustached old man rose creakily from the couch and disappeared for a few minutes. When Allen studied Sophie for an answer, she looked even more perplexed than did he.

Finally, Franklin returned, holding a very small box.

He cracked it open, and Allen saw before him an engagement ring.

“What in the blue skies above is that?” Sophie called out in alarm from the loveseat she sat upon with her favorite magazine on her lap.

“Relax, old gal,” Franklin eased with a wave of his liver spotted hand. “I’m not going to break our promise to each other. This isn’t for you.”

“Who’s it for then?” Allen questioned, looking at the ring in keen interest.

“This was for my brother’s lady, way back when.”

“I never knew Walter had thought about marriage!” Sophie interjected with her eyes grown huge.

“Thought about it!” Franklin exclaimed. “He dated that woman for six years, and he bought this blasted thing after only their six month together! He

darn near thought about marrying her since the moment they laid eyes on each other!”

“I don’t believe it!” Sophie blurted out while moving across the room to admire the diamond she had no interest in having for herself.

“I didn’t either. He showed it to me after a year and a half with her. Said he was going to pop the question any day now. Well, after four and a half years had passed beyond that, she got tired of waiting on him to come around and work up the nerve, so she moved on. Within months she met some school teacher and they married within the same year.”

“I don’t believe it!” Sophie repeated, stunned that the brother of her boyfriend she thought she had known so well could surprise her so thoroughly from beyond the grave.

“Said it was the biggest regret of his life, God rest his soul,” Franklin enlightened. “I’d sure hate to see someone else make that mistake.”

Allen couldn’t remove his eyes from the object before him.



A man wearing a black trench coat and a black fedora stepped into the middle of the busy street. Immediately, motorists began barraging him with insults and complaints. It was just before rush hour.

He threw off the coat and hat, revealing a skin-tight costume beneath of black and white.

“Time for a little ordered-up death and destruction,” he whispered to himself in perverted glee.



“Okay, soldiers,” the superior said to his MAP operatives. “We’ve got reports of Mega-Mal activity in Old Downtown Purgatory Station.”

“Where there’s a Mega-Mal in Purgatory Station . . .” Hell Hound began.

“There’s Freedom,” the superior finished.

He then continued, “Despite your personal feelings, you’re orders are to bring him in . . . Got that, Agent 0091?”

“Yes, sir!” Cyber Spy replied robustly.

“And,” the superior continued, “I want him brought in alive. Do you copy *that*, Agent 0104?”

“Piss on that,” Anthem muttered under his breath before shouting, “Yes, sir!”

“Superb. Remember, Anthem plays to the cameras, the rest of you are not to be seen. I don’t want this country knowing about you all just yet,” the superior commanded, feeling quite satisfied. “Get ready, gentlemen, we’re bringing in the last of MAP’s defectors.”



Allen entered Carmah's Cup with a sense of fear he had never experienced in all his years of battling the worst the world of Mega-Mals had to offer. His feet felt as though they were melted to the tile floor beneath him as he trudged through the doorway.

His mind was momentarily distracted when he was stunned to see Nick working the tables, which was in no way an odd sight, but, more surprisingly, his girlfriend Irene was waiting on tables side by side with him!

"Oh, I am so glad you're here!" Irene called out to Allen. "I never got a chance to thank you!"

"Thank me?" Allen questioned as he shook the slender hand the young lady offered. "I thought you two might be upset with me for, well, you know . . ."

"No way, Allen!" Nick chimed in. "Julie and Mr. Malko talked it over, and they decided Irene and I could work together at each other's shops during the week. Sure, we're working extra hours, but—"

"—at least we get to be together!" Irene finished.

"Well, that's good news," Allen said. "I'm glad this has all worked out for you two."

"Who would've thought my dad could be so reasonable," Irene laughed.

"What do you need?" Julie suddenly interjected from the counter. She had a scowl on her face that did nothing to hide the disdain she felt for Allen.

"I wondered if we could talk, um, in private?" Allen asked, moving past Irene and Nick, towards Julie.

“No, we can’t talk in private, Allen. I mean, you ruined the only relationship I’ve had with a man since . . . well, in a long time, and you didn’t seem to mind doing that in public.”

“You could have told me to leave like Hunter wanted you to,” Allen reminded.

“Why don’t you just tell me what you want and get out?”

“Fine,” Allen mumbled.

He dropped to one knee and pulled out Walter’s engagement ring.

Julie, Nick, Irene, and everyone else in Carmah’s Cup all gasped at the sight of the diamond and all it entailed.

However, their gasps coincided with hundreds of panicked screams from the street outside.

Allen turned his head to gaze out the windows of Carmah’s Cup. His eyes bulged at the sight of street tables and chairs, papers, and all manner of debris flying through the air. People clung to light posts and mailboxes to fight against the unseen force drawing them to its source; others smartly rushed through the nearest doorway. The wind howled with the fury of a hundred tornados, yet the sun shone brightly, and there was no call for stormy weather on this day.

Allen dropped the ring box and sprinted out the door.

Just as he laid eyes on the villain not more than a quarter mile away, the city’s alarms began sounding. Unfortunately, it was a sound Purgatory Station was more than use to. It had more than its fair share of Colossals, after all, and with that came a disproportionate number of Mega-Mals.

“What is that?” Julie shouted over the thunderous winds as her hair immediately whipped and flailed after stepping out of Carmah’s Cup, following Allen. She yelped as she lost her footing and slid.

Allen grabbed her quickly and flung her back into her coffee shop, then slammed the door shut in Nick and Irene’s faces as they seemed about to exit the business as well.

“Get to cover!” he shouted through the glass.

Nick looked down at Allen’s feet and saw that they had burrowed an inch into the concrete. His eyes became wide at the sight, then they locked with Allen’s.

“Get them to cover, Nick,” Allen commanded in a familiar voice.

Nick followed Freedom’s orders.

Allen turned back to face the cause of the cataclysm taking place on Geoff Avenue before him.

The void was nearly seven feet tall and four feet wide. It sucked everything into it; everything, that is, but for a man dressed in all white and a black cape with a featureless black mask that completed a black circle on the upper half of his body. He stood directly before it, unaffected, with his arms spread wide and his cape willowing madly behind him. He had to duck and weave in order to avoid large fragments of city life sucked into the abyss directly behind him.

“The Black Hole,” Allen muttered under his breath.

He had hard work ahead.



Allen burst into the apartment above Trover's Fine Literature and rushed into his bedroom.

Sophie took cover in the corner of the kitchen with a small television playing on the counter. Franklin was busy boarding up the windows that faced Geoff Avenue.

"You better take a nap!" Franklin shouted through the apartment.

"I was thinking the same thing!" Allen hollered in return. "Don't disturb me for a few hours, please."

"Not a problem," Franklin muttered to himself as he kept hammering.



Allen tossed his bed aside and lifted up the loose floorboards. He pulled out his black satchel that held the uniform of America's former favorite Colossal. He slid on the red, white, and blue uniform with the large, red "F" on the chest, the blue and white cape, and then the red gauntlets and boots. Lastly he fastened the machination that allowed him to fly, the G-Repulser. He would be killed for its retrieval if he weren't careful. The government gave no mercy to those they considered traitors. But, he was only in danger if caught in uniform.

Allen knew he had a hard battle ahead of him. He's certain he'd never beaten the Black Hole fair and square. It always seemed to him that the villain had given up far too easily for a man with those sorts of powers.

Although it was specifically not a true black hole that he commanded, the void the Black Hole controlled could lift cars off the ground if he wanted it to, and its range hit up to a half-mile. The only weakness, as Allen saw it, was that the cavity would only devour those things within its perimeter. If a person were to walk right alongside it, they wouldn't feel even a twinge of its power. However, as soon as they crossed its area, they would be sucked in instantaneously.

Because Black Hole always stood directly before the void, it was hard to lay a hand on him, shoot him, or even blow him up. Everything—shells, fire, energy of any sort—got diverted right into his personal chasm.

Last time they fought, Allen and he tore up five city blocks in Noir Port City before Black Hole's void dissipated and Allen rushed him instantly, knocking him out cold. The battle had lasted about an hour, but he saw no reason why Black Hole's abilities should have a limit. Again, it seemed to Allen almost as though the Black Hole had simply called it quits.

"Let's hope he gets tired again," Allen uttered to himself.

In the next moment, Freedom flew out the skylight above Allen Hemmingway's room.



“This is Sydney Attwater with WPUG news, bringing you the live attack of the unstoppable Mega-Mal, the Black Hole. It has not yet been determined what the motivation for this onslaught is, but Senator Otto Janus joins me with some strong opinions of his own. It so happens he had granted me an interview in the area prior to this development and has graciously agreed to adapt to the situation at hand. Thank you for that, sir.”

Like so many of Old Downtown’s denizens, Julie, Nick, Irene, and the patrons of Carmah’s Cup took cover from the devastation of the Black Hole while watching events play out on the television. They were huddled in the upstairs kitchen of Julie and Nick’s apartment. They watched the live newscast set up a block behind the villain, where his powers didn’t reach, for the latest developments.

“My pleasure, and thank you, Sydney,” Senator Janus said in response to Sydney Attwater. I’ve just called in the only Colossal our nation’s government condones—Anthem. He should be here any moment. Let’s pray no vigilantes decide to take action upon the monster before he arrives.”

“Senator, when you say ‘vigilantes,’ are you referring to this city’s Colossals such as Freedom and the Nocturnal Knight?”

“You’re damn right I am!” Senator Janus exclaimed. “We all agree that Freedom is out of control of late, and the Nocturnal Knight has always been a madman, hell-bent on his own agenda. He’s plagued this city for decades!”

“But didn’t Freedom stop the Nether Man just mere months ago?”

“That’s right, Attwater!” Nick screamed at the television. “You give that pencil pusher heck!”

“Shush, Nick!” Irene shot out. “I want to hear this!”

“As I see it,” Senator Janus corrected, “Anthem stopped the Nether Man, with the help of a concerned citizen.”

“Pastor Irons, I believe it was,” Sydney Attwater hissed out with obvious contempt.

“Yes, that’s correct. While I am not a member of the blockheaded religious right, it seemed a man of the cloth was integral in the defeat of the rock man. Thank goodness Anthem figured out such a man would be necessary. Freedom simply convoluted the matter. Anthem was doing fine on his own,” the senator argued.

“Does this mean the government is not backing Freedom any longer?” Attwater asked.

“That’s exactly what that means,” Janus clarified.

“Shouldn’t this be coming from the President?” Attwater countered.

“In two years, I will be the president,” Senator Janus informed.

Sydney Attwater, always doing whatever it took for scoop, ejaculated, “You heard it here first, ladies and gentlemen! America is no longer sponsoring the Colossal known as Freedom *and* Senator Janus’s will throw his hat in for the next Presidential election! This has been Sydney Attwater with—”

“—Just a moment, Attwater,” Senator Janus interrupted. “I want this city to understand something. We have video surveillance taken from one of our

satellites of Freedom, the Nocturnal Knight, Turf, as well as Excitor, Silver Streak and two other unknown vigilantes engaging the Shadow Serpent. You remember that, Purgatory Station, don't you? Several innocent civilians were killed that night, and we were ready to deploy Anthem and some other highly trained operatives on the Serpent, ending his vicious murder spree once and for all. Had those . . . vigilantes . . . not interfered, the Serpent would be in our custody at this very moment, and this city could get a good night's sleep once again. I vow, America, that when I'm elected President, I will end the reign of these so-called Colossals. Why, don't you see? These Mega-Mals seek out people like Freedom and the Nocturnal Knight for a fight! If you were rid of these grandstanders that take the law into their own hands, you'd be rid of your Mega-Mals like the Shadow Serpent and the Black Hole—"

"—I hate to interrupt you, Senator, but it seems as though one of your local 'vigilantes' is on the scene!"

Julie, Nick, and Irene watched as the cameraman panned from Senator Janus to the Black Hole, just a block ahead of them. Amazingly, his void was not perceptible from the back. However, the camera focused in tightly on a man flying in at a steep angle.

The man was Freedom.

"He's going to whip that Meg-Mal just like he did the Nether Man, and it's going to be right outside our apartment again!" Nick cheered.

"That deal with the Nether Man was outside Carmah's Cup?" Irene asked Julie.

“Yeah, what a coincidence, right?” Julie seethed. Senator Janus was right. He was exactly right as far as Julie was concerned. Allen was a magnet for these freaks.



Freedom flew right up to the edge of Black Hole’s chasm and stood next to the villain dressed in black and white.

“What do you want?” Freedom asked.

“This is just another day at the office,” Black Hole responded.

Freedom watched as a car lifted and flew towards Black Hole and his void. He stepped back as the car entered the abyss, bursting into a million projectiles as it collapsed and folded until completely engulfed.

“Is this going to be like last time?” Freedom demanded.

“Oh, no,” Black Hole answered, turning his head quickly and slightly to glance at the hero. Freedom saw nothing in the mask of total blackness, not even a pair of eyes. Black Hole hurriedly looked back at the objects flying towards him so he could dodge and avoid. “This isn’t going to be like last time at all. Today, you don’t beat me.”

“This is Old Downtown. The Banking District is blocks away. There’s nothing of value in this area! What . . . do . . . you . . . want?” Freedom insisted with glaciers in his voice.

“Just to earn an honest day’s pay,” the Black Hole replied musically.

Freedom didn't have time to ponder such an odd statement coming from a Mega-Mal, for he saw several citizens stupidly walk right into the void's parameter two hundred meters away and instantly fly into the air, heading for the void.

"Looks like you have work to do as well," the Black Hole teased.

Freedom took off into the air, flying as close to the edges of the void's territory as he dared. He sped to the victims, there were two, and screamed for them to put their hands above their heads.

Luckily, they were lifted near the top of the void's area, so they were able to extend their hands beyond its realm. Freedom caught both their hands and yanked them free, though it dislocated the innocents' shoulders in the process. Had he reached in for them, the insurmountable force would have trapped him as well.

He flew to the nearest storefront and guided the citizens inward, away from the unmerciful gale of the Black Hole.

When Freedom turned around, he saw his most dangerous enemy, the government sanctioned Colossal that replaced him, Anthem, soaring headlong at the Black Hole, just above the void's power.

Suddenly, Freedom watched as the cavity inexplicably disappeared and Anthem knocked the Black Hole to the ground. It was like an out of body experience for Freedom, for he had gone through the same motions with the villain in the past, and now he understood only too well what Black Hole had

meant. He was nothing more than fodder to make the government's agents look good. Like an amateur, he had never thought such blatant deceit possible.

Freedom lifted off and soon landed next to Anthem. The Black Hole lay on the ground, his black cloak spread wide beneath him. He was cursing under his breath at Anthem for the stiff punch.

"You're nothing but a scrub to make us look good," Freedom mumbled at the felled victim.

"Hey, gotta put food on the table somehow," the Black Hole replied. "Don't you think if the government wanted me gone they'd just nuke wherever I was? That's the only way to get rid of me, and don't think they wouldn't do it."

"They still might do it if you don't shut your damn mouth," Anthem condemned. "Why the hell are you detailing classified information to this traitor?"

"Hey," Black Hole responded, "I might work for you guys, but I ain't one of you. Boss knows I don't give up the info to just anybody. I figure Freedom's going to be taken in with me anyway, right?"

"Right," Anthem said with a grin as he turned and faced his predecessor.

Freedom couldn't see the eyes behind the star-shaped visor of the blonde man in black with a red "A" on his chest, yet he knew those eyes would be full of hatred.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, "This is Sydney Attwater with WPUG News! Anthem, it looks like you and Freedom have teamed up once again to take down a Mega-Mal! Should we come to expect you two working together regularly?"

Anthem removed his intolerable eyes from Freedom to take in the lovely reporter standing with a cameraman and Senator Janus.

“Absolutely not, Ms. Attwater. In fact,” Anthem continued, “by order of the President of the United States, I have been called upon to incarcerate Freedom so that he may pay for his crimes.”

In their kitchen, Sophie and Franking gasped in shock.

Next door, in the Carmah kitchen, Nick and Irene, as well as the patrons taking shelter, were astonished as well.

Julie merely sat tightlipped, resentful of the pain her heart felt.

“So, this is it, huh?” Freedom grumbled at Anthem. “That’s what this has all been about?”

“What do you mean?” Attwater asked.

“This whole thing, it’s been a set up. The Black Hole is no Mega-Mal; he’s a hired hand! A lap dog!”

“Are you coming in quietly or not?” Anthem interrupted.

“What exactly did Freedom do to warrant such aggression?” Sydney interrogated, sticking the microphone into Anthem’s face.

Senator Janus grabbed Sydney Attwater’s hand and directed the microphone towards him. “Freedom betrayed the USA several months ago.”

“Oh, no,” Franklin muttered.

“Oh, no,” Julie moaned.

“What?” Sydney Attwater questioned while noticing Freedom’s head drop.

“He was given an order, and he defied that order, taking matters into his own hands. He’s been fleeing his government ever since that debacle with the Nether Man. Had he not interfered, Anthem could have stopped the Nether Man in record time.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Freedom groaned. “Anthem was ready to call in an air strike and destroy Old Downtown right along with the Nether Man. If I hadn’t smashed his communications link, he would have done just that!”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Senator Janus chastised. “A government Colossal would never do such a thing!”

“What do you take me for?” Anthem chastised.

“Exactly what you are—a cold blooded killer willing to follow any cold blooded order.”

“The fact is,” the senator resumed, “that little piece of equipment you see around Freedom’s waist is government property. That device was funded by the tax payers of this great nation, and Freedom has taken it upon himself to steal it from those very same people!”

“I use it in the same capacity I always have!” Freedom bellowed. “I fight for justice in the homeland! I don’t go overseas and murder our opponents while they sleep, I protect those who need it here!”

“Really?” Senator Janus countered. “Then why didn’t you and the rest of those ‘heroes’ stop the Shadow Serpent? He’s been killing the citizens of this fair city for months, yet you’ve done nothing to stop him!”

Freedom noticed that, with the Black Hole still lying on the ground, pretending to be unconscious, the people along Geoff Avenue had started wandering out of the buildings. He looked over and saw Sophie and Franklin standing arm in arm with one another, staring at him for a sign to take action. He then saw Irene, Nick, and the patrons of Carmah's Cup emerge.

However, Julie was nowhere to be seen.

"Freedom, could you answer the question?" Sydney Attwater asked just above a whisper. He could see the sympathy and understanding in her eyes, after all, she had played a role in the botched capture of the Shadow Serpent as well.

Freedom cleared his throat and said, "The Shadow Serpent was all but captured, but then dove into the waters of the bay in order to escape. We had his victims to tend to, and, with none of us being underwater combatants, thought better of diving in after him."

"So, you were all cowards," Senator Janus mocked.

"Screw you!" Nick yelled from the sidewalk, then moved threateningly towards the senator. Just then, a tiny explosion of concrete erupted at Nick's feet, causing him to cry out in alarm and jump back, falling onto his rear.

Irene rushed over to him to make sure he was unharmed.

"I'm a United States Senator, boy," Janus reminded. "Move like that and threaten me again and you won't like the results. I have bodyguards everywhere."

Freedom knew better. Yes, Janus had bodyguards, but none of them would have shot at a high school Colossal-worshipper. Janus had ad-libbed to explain the sudden gunfire, but Freedom knew the real deal. He was currently in the sniper scopes of Shootdown, and, considering this seemed to be his grand finale, he was sure that Cyber Spy and Hell Hound had guns trained on him as well.

“No bulletproof glass to protect you this time,” Anthem chortled so quietly that only Freedom heard him.

Just then a large, black transport vehicle arrived. Numerous soldiers of the sort none had before witnesses jettisoned from it and took command of the perimeter. These were the foot soldiers of MAP. They were not genetically engineered like the actual agents themselves, but they had experienced much psychological tinkering. There was nothing they would not do when given an order by a commanding officer.

They immediately restrained the Black Hole with some sort of a sedative and bound his hands with shackles of the sort none had seen before. They led him, as he stumbled wobbly, into the transport vehicle.

“We’ve got a nice spot for you in there as well, Freedom,” Anthem informed. “So, do we need to clear the people out of here, or are you going to go in quietly?”

Freedom glanced over at the multitudes of people standing along the sidewalks, forced back by the foot soldiers. Franklin and Sophie had expressions on their faces that begged him to fight for his sovereignty. Nick and

Irene looked horrified that their hero was now considered a villain, though they did not believe such a thing. And then . . . then, Julie walked out of Carmah's Cup. Tears were rolling down her cheeks. Freedom could see that she was distraught, heartbroken, about something.

He had to know.

He left Senator Janus and Anthem so that he could console Julie. No matter how poorly she thought of him, he would always love her. She needed him now; he knew it. And despite what she may think of him, he would not abandon her in her time of need.

"Where you going?" Anthem interrogated, grabbing Freedom's arm.

Freedom spun in a preternaturally fast arc and delivered a thunderous roundhouse to Anthem, sending him flying into the side of a building twenty feet way.

The next thing Freedom knew, he had blood spurting from his left shoulder.

"That was a warning shot, traitor," Senator Janus declared. "You give us that G-Repulser and let us take you in, and you won't have to suffer more of our artillery designed just for that hide of yours."

"I give you the G-Repulser, right now, you give me two minutes without skirmish. No one gets hurt; none of these civilians get caught in a crossfire. I'll go in quietly, just give me two minutes first."

Senator Janus started to laugh, then realized he was still on camera with Sydney Attwater. "In respect to your past good deeds, I'll honor said request. However, remember, one misstep and you will be terminated."

Freedom nodded once, paying no attention to the fire that had erupted figuratively within his shoulder, then unlocked the G-Repulser. His chances at flight were now gone. He let it fall with a heavy thud, and one of those mysterious soldiers instantly gathered it up and ran with it into the transport.

With blood pouring down his arm, Freedom approached Julie. He spoke over the interlocked arms of the foot soldiers that had formed a barrier against the inhabitants of the city.

"What's happened?" he asked her.

"My father . . ." Julie began. "He had a stroke a few days ago. I was going to fly out tomorrow to see him. He . . . he died. There were complications . . . I just got the call on my cell phone," she finished before erupting into tears.

Freedom broke through the foot soldiers and took her into his arms, neither minding the smeared blood, and they held one another.

Finally, she stumbled, "You're turning yourself in . . . j-just so you could find out what's wrong with me?"

Freedom only nodded.

"W-Why?" she asked.

Freedom held her out at arm's length, then said, "Because I love you, Julie. Despite how you feel about me, I love you. I was going to propose to you, you know."

“I know,” Julie whimpered.

Freedom felt his eyes water. “What was your answer going to be?”

“Time’s up!” Senator Janus yelled from behind.

“Just a minute!” Freedom hollered in return.

Just then, Julie’s shirt was showered in blood as Freedom’s other shoulder exploded. He dropped to his knees in horrid pain, staring up at her the entire time.

“I don’t even know your real name,” she sobbed. “How can I marry someone when I don’t even know his real name?”

The soldiers gathered him up, each taking him by an arm, mindless of the pain it caused, and Freedom answered, “Since my earliest memories, my name has been Agent 0099. But you know my real name. You were there for my birth.”

They dragged him away.

Freedom, now only Allen Hemmingway, tore his eyes from Julie for just a moment to say good-bye to Franklin and Sophie. He saw both of them sobbing with sympathetic smiles on their faces.

“I know a Pastor that can help you!” Franklin finally called out.

“No!” Allen yelled in return. “Let me handle this on my own!”

“You’re never on your own, son!” Franklin issued in return.

“I know,” he responded, gritting his teeth against the pain. “The CEO in the sky, right?”

“Right,” Franklin whimpered.

“I love you!” Sophie wailed.

“I love you, too, Miss Sophie,” he chuckled through the pain. The old woman couldn’t help but choke out a laugh at the old formality that’d become an inside joke for them.

“Be a good boy, Nick. Trent and I are both counting on you now,” Allen finally said to his biggest fan as he was hoisted up, into the transport.

Nick, who had previously been helped up by Irene, fell to his knees once more, covering his face in his hands. Irene dropped to her knees and placated him as best she could. Within the span of one year, the boy had lost his two greatest heroes.

He stood, shoulders bloody and torn asunder, just inside the transport as the doors slowly shut. He would not remove his eyes from Julie.

“I’m sorry about your father,” he yelled. “Give my sympathy to your family.”

And with that, the transport doors closed, and the mammoth vehicle pulled away.

A clean-up crew arrived and began putting the devastated area back into order. Senator Janus lectured into the camera once more as to why Freedom was a liability that couldn’t afford to roam free, just as were all so-called Colossals that were not government approved. Anthem peeled himself from the wall Freedom’s blow had driven him into, then, without making eye contact with any of the citizens, flew away. Although no one saw them, Hell Hound, Cyber

Spy, and Shutdown gathered their equipment and made for the rendezvous, satisfied at a mission accomplished.

As Irene held an inconsolable Nick, Franklin and Sophie moved to take Julie into their arms. They were comforting her about her father when she lifted up her left hand.

She wore the engagement ring Allen had offered her.

Through a thick wall of tears, she whimpered, "I wanted to say yes."



Epilogue One

Within the deepest innards of the Meta-Agent Program, there was a conference room.

Within this conference room, there was a gargantuan table. At this table, there sat seven men.

Facilitating the meeting was one Senator Otto Janus.

"And so, the mission was a resounding success. All objectives were satisfied with extreme competence. Well done, Agent 0104," Janus commended.

Agent 0104, Anthem, dressed in standard fatigues, nodded in acknowledgement.

"Well done also, to Agents 0050, 0073, and 0091. That was excellent shooting," Janus said.

"Thank you, sir," Agents Hell Hound, Shutdown, and Cyber Spy replied. Cyber Spy hadn't actually fired a shot, but that was only because he was last to

fire if a third shot were needed. He would have been the kill shot. Although he counted Freedom as one of his only friends, if such a word can be used with a member of MAP, he gave an oath to follow orders. No matter what. He would have made that shot to the head if it'd been required.

“Dismissed,” Senator Janus, their superior and the Supreme Commander of the Meta-Agent Program, said.

Anthem, Hell Hound, Shutdown, and Cyber Spy stood, saluted, then left. Now there were only two men besides Janus remaining.

“Well, ‘Black Hole,’ you delivered perfectly once again,” Janus complimented as he tossed a satchel full of hundred-dollar bills the Mega-Mal’s way. “Consider this a bonus. The predetermined amount has already been wired to your account. As usual, money impeccably spent.”

“I aim to please,” the mercenary replied. “You ever need me again, you know where to find me.”

“Affirmative,” Janus answered. “Take care, Cody.”

“Same to you, Otto.”

The Black Hole stood, dressed in civilian garb, then took his leave.

Now there remained only one man with Commander Janus.

He was dressed in black fatigues, from head to toe, and his face was covered with a black mask as well. A black visor allowed the man to see, but other than that, the mask was solid.

Before they had left, this was not an unusual sight for the other members and the Black Hole. Several members of MAP covered their features because,

while their abilities were great, some of their appearances were grossly damaged as a result of the experiments that made them Meta-Agents to begin with. Hell Hound, for example, appeared to be a wolf-man. Though this wasn't a terribly hideous sight to behold, some members of MAP were changed even more drastically. The man who sat at the table was one such member.

“Agent 0102, now that your bullet wound has healed, you are to resume activities, understood? You didn't need both eyes anyway, right?”

Commander Janus, of course, did not expect a verbal reply, as this agent was incapable of such. Instead, Agent 0102 merely nodded.

Janus stood, leaned upon the table with his hands outstretched, leered at Agent 0102, then said, “It's time Agent Shadow Serpent embarrass the ‘Colossals’ of Purgatory Station again. After a few more hundred murders, perhaps the people will finally turn their backs on their ‘heroes.’ Dismissed.”

“Agent 0102, the mass murderer known as Shadow Serpent, stood up, silently saluted his commanding officer, then exited the conference room.”



Epilogue Two

Prisoner #62618, formerly known as Agent 0099, or Freedom, or, if you prefer, Allen Hemmingway, was led through a brightly lit corridor. Shackles constrained him without hope of breaking free. He passed steel door after steel door, holding the most nefarious of his country's criminals. He could only assume this was the

MAP Mega-Mal prison, located just off the coast of Purgatory Station. No one outside of the program knew of its existence. It was, after all, underwater.

“We got a special treat for you,” the prison guard mocked as he poked and prodded Allen along with a taser. “Commander Janus ordered it up just for your cellmate. We usually don’t put prisoners in the same hole together, but he knew your new roommate would especially appreciate your company.”

“I can’t believe Janus is posing as a United States Senator,” Allen grumbled.

“It’s not a pose,” the guard informed. “It’s the real thing. Remember, no one knows of MAP’s existence, not the real MAP, at least. And those who do talk about it, like yourself, well, they don’t stay outside these walls for long.

“Here we are,” the guard finished, and so Allen came to a stop.

The other guard issued commands through a transmitter for the other prisoner to face the farthest wall, palms against said wall.

And with that, the solid, steel door whooshed open. Allen’s specialty cuffs were removed, and he was thrown into the dark cell the guards lovingly referred to as a “hole.” They called it thus because, once the door shut again, as Allen was about to discover, there was no light, none whatsoever. Total and complete sensory deprivation.

Who was it in the hole with him?

Some former Mega-Mal? Was he in for a fight right off the bat? So be it. He’d fought in total blackness before and come out the victor.

“Who’s there?” he issued forth threateningly, without a hint of fear in his voice.

“I’m just an old man, don’t concern yourself with me. I don’t know why they gave me a cellmate; it’s highly irregular.”

“How long have you been in here?” Allen questioned with his fists raised, ready in case the other man was putting on a ruse.

“How would I ever be able to deduce such a thing? No light, no clocks, no discernable passage of time! I haven’t seen myself since the day they locked me up and threw out the key, so to speak.”

“When was that?” Allen asked, still not convinced.

“That I know. It was 1988.”

“Tell me who you are!” Allen demanded.

“Calm down, young man. I couldn’t do you any harm even if I wanted to. My name is Walter Trover.”

Had there been any light, the old man would have seen Allen’s eyes grow to the size of saucers.

To Be Continued ...

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