



FREEDOM'S RESURRECTION

BY

SCOTT WILLIAM FOLEY

:FROM THE CHRONICLES OF PURGATORY STATION

(PART I)

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It was early evening and Franklin Trover was looking very forward to Sophie's meatloaf for dinner. He loved her meatloaf. So much so, in fact, that he even momentarily considered closing up shop a bit early if it meant digging into the meatloaf sooner. However, Franklin's father hadn't closed early during the twenty-one years of Franklin's life before he took over the shop, and he wasn't about to be the one to break that streak. Trover's Fine Literature remained open until its posted closing, as it always had.

If Franklin had closed his doors early, it would have been the greatest unknown regret of his life, and his brother's.

The familiar jingle of a bell older than most of his patrons signaled the arrival of what Franklin postulated would be just that. The well-read storeowner looked up from his ever-present book and nodded at the young man that entered.

Franklin was accustomed to people wandering about his store rather aimlessly, especially around closing time when many of them were just an hour or so off work. Franklin once stayed open well past nine at night, but the city was now far too dangerous for that. Now it was door locked, gates shut no later than six-thirty.

He could always tell who the nomads were. They'd come in with a look on their faces that Franklin always interpreted as wanting something more from life than sitting behind a computer. They'd ask the storekeeper what he recommended after drifting through the shelves for twenty minutes or so. The conscientious booklover would suggest whatever title he thought would best help them find what they were looking for in life, and they'd almost always buy it, and then they'd be off to take hold of their destiny. That, or else to continue on in their mediocrity.

This one was different. Different by a long shot. When the mysterious figure walked in, he acted as though the sheer number of volumes that awaited him was shocking. Franklin was, well, frankly, surprised at his unusual customer's child-like wonderment as he began to pull books off of the shelves and leaf through them rather sporadically.

As Franklin took stock of the young man, he realized that his routine alertness was not present. When you own your own shop in a city such as this, it's a matter of survival to remain cautionary with everyone and anyone that enters your store. The patron before Franklin should not have been an exception to the rule. It was, after all, obvious that the young man had come across his clothing through rather non-conventional means. His shirt was far too tight, his pants were gargantuan in the waist, his shoes did not match, and it appeared as though the haggard, though handsome, man had not bathed in days. The only thing about the shopper that seemed to be in good shape was a large black satchel thrown over his right shoulder. Of course, this did not include the unlikely

consumer himself. He was in excellent condition. Franklin assumed he must be a down on his luck athlete of some sort, for his body was heavily muscled, and Franklin could see from across the shop that he must have been well over six feet tall. Considering his own slender, short frame, as stated earlier, Franklin should have been more alert. This city has never been a nice place, but even it had gone from bad, to worse, to finally whatever is worse than worse. Considering its lackluster history, however, this truly should not have been surprising to its denizens.

At any rate, if you'd seen the young man's face, you would have felt no cause for alarm as well.

Finally, after almost forty-five minutes of the young man devouring books unsystematically, Franklin remembered Sophie's meatloaf and recalled that he had to close in a few minutes.

"Young man," he called from his stool behind the decades-old register, "I surely hate to cut your shopping short, but I'll be closing up soon . . ."

Franklin felt his heart skip a beat as the tall, lean, muscular man turned his ice-blue eyes to him for the first time. They put Franklin at ease, yet demanded respect from him at the exact same moment.

"Will you be here tomorrow, sir?" the stranger inquired.

Franklin was touched by the man's politeness, but noticed that "sir" was spoken in a manner that seemed to be as customary as folks saying "hello" when they picked up a ringing telephone.

“Yes, I’ll be open tomorrow. I’m open everyday of the week but for Sunday. Sunday’s reserved for my boss.”

“You’re not ‘Trover’ then, sir?” the customer asked with genuine interest.

“No, I’m Trover,” Franklin chuckled, “but being an owner of your own business doesn’t mean you don’t answer to someone else.”

“Who do you answer to, sir, if my asking is permissible.”

“Well, my boy,” Franklin began with a sincere smile, “if you’re made of flesh and blood, then you answer to the CEO of the sky, whether you want to admit it or not.”

Franklin watched as the dark-headed man nodded while seemingly not to understand.

“So you know my name, youngster, mind if I ask you yours?” Trover began with a grin that he hoped would set the man at ease. He felt a connection to this stranger. Why?

Franklin watched the powerful figure glance to a row of books so quickly that it was nearly imperceptible, and then felt his heart plummet when he heard, “Sir, my name is Hemmingway. Allen Hemmingway, sir.” Franklin fought against allowing his disappointment to show. How can one trust a man who will not give his real name?

“So, Mr. Hemmingway,” Franklin continued while striving to maintain his cheery disposition, “can I help you find anything before I close?”

From across the room, Franklin watched the young man’s sculpted shoulders slump as he slowly shook his head. Allen looked up at Franklin almost

with hope after gazing down at the floor with his piercing blue eyes, but then looked back down at the floor once again in despair. He finally drew in a breath as though he were about to speak, but instead chose to only lift his chin back up. He nodded once, and then began to walk toward the door.

“Where are you going, Mr. Hemmingway?” Franklin called out at the last possible moment before the stranger left his bookstore forever.

Allen turned his gaze back to Franklin, seemed to calculate the best possible response, then gave up and mumbled, “I don’t know, sir.”

“Do you have somewhere you’re staying in the city?” Franklin asked.

“No, sir.”

“Do you have anyone you can call?”

“No, sir.”

“Do you know where your next meal’s coming from?”

“No, sir.”

“Do you like meatloaf?”

“Sir?”



The next morning Franklin walked into Carmah’s Cup, located directly next door to his shop, and approached the register. This was the first time in eleven years, the first time since his brother, Walter, had died, that he was not actually tending his store during operating hours.

He saw Julie standing in the back making some simple pastries when he caught the corner of her eye and grinned to himself as she nearly fell over.

“Franklin! Did the store burn down?” Julie cried out in complete honesty.

“No, Julie, the store’s fine,” Franklin’s grizzled laughter erupted.

“Then, what are you doing here?” she asked as she wiped the flour from her hands and left the kitchen. “Nick will be down in a few minutes; he’ll bring you your usual six forty-five coffee. Is everything okay?”

“Yes,” Franklin confirmed with a smile. His pearl-white mustache lifted up delightfully as he did so. Franklin was in the habit of opening his store at six-fifteen in the morning. He found that he could draw a lot of pre-workday business between then and nine if he did so. He always attempted not to bother questioning the ethics of the people who bought books from him before they went into work, for he knew what he’d do to that type of an employee. Of course, an employee is something he never had the luxury or bankroll to worry over.

“Everything’s fine,” Franklin continued. “I’ve got somebody watching the register for me.”

Julie’s rich, smooth voice burst forth with, “Since when do you let Sophie watch the register?”

“Ha! Since never! That woman is the best cook I’ve ever met, and the best woman since my Mary, but I wouldn’t trust her to make change from a penny.”

“So, who’s the mystery helper, then?” Julie asked as she began to pour Franklin’s black coffee into a cup.

“Name’s Hemmingway,” Franklin snorted.

Julie handed Franklin his steaming coffee from behind her counter and asked cynically, “Does he have a first name, or is it the obvious one?”

“No, it’s not the obvious one. He says it’s Allen,” Franklin answered.

“You don’t believe him?” she interrogated as she watched the white-haired, still very lean man sip his plain coffee.

Franklin placed his cup down onto the perfectly clean counter and took on a dreamy look as he asked rhetorically, “Is it possible to know that someone is lying to you, yet trust him completely?”

“What time is it?” a cracking voice interrupted them from the apartment above.

“Twenty ’till,” Julie yelled back up the stairs. The hard working brunette never would have done this had any other customers been in the shop, but Franklin was like family to the Carmahs. “Don’t worry about taking Franklin’s coffee to him, he’s standing right across from me.”

“What! Did his shop burn down?” the ultra-squeaky voice called down in complete genuineness.

Franklin exchanged a grin with the lovely, curly-haired Julie and then heard her return, “No, he’s found help.”

There was a sudden barrage of thumps, and before Julie and Franklin knew it, Nick had arrived from above.

“You found help?” Nick appealed in disbelief.

Franklin picked his coffee back up and then mumbled out, “Of sorts,” before he took a deeply satisfying sip.

It was at that exact moment that a very modern buzz exploded and alerted Julie that a new patron had arrived. Nick, Franklin, and Julie all turned their

heads to see a gigantic blonde-haired man with a dark complexion enter the shop. He held a newspaper under his arm, had the left side of his collar turned up and the right side turned down, and did not so much as nod at them as he sat in a cushioned chair to their left.

Julie smiled at the man and sang to him that she'd be right with him.

"You better get moving," Julie prompted Nick. "You don't want to be late for school."

Julie and Franklin watched as the pimply faced, red-haired boy said his good-byes to them and then bounced out the door. He moved with the exuberance of youth, but it was apparent to both of them that there weighed a very heavy burden upon the boy's heart. It was the same burden that Franklin knew Julie bore.

"It's a fine thing that you're doing . . ." Franklin offered to Julie as he reached out and touched her red, dry hands.

"I wish I could do more," she responded. "He's actually a Godsend to me. I could never keep up with the evening business if it weren't for him. He waits on tables for me, cleans the bathroom, and even takes out the trash. He does anything I ask of him. Just like he did for Trent."

"Trent was his hero," Franklin said with a solid voice. "Trent was a hero to everyone in this neighborhood."

Franklin kept his hand on Julie's and pressed it even more gently as he noticed her eyes welling up.

“Well, just because Trent’s gone, that doesn’t mean that Nick isn’t still my family. With no real family left of his own, I’m all he has.”

“We,” Franklin corrected in a very serious voice, “are all he has. And we will be all he needs for the rest of his life. Trent was like a son to me, just like you’re the closest thing to a daughter I’ll ever have. That makes Nick like a son to me as well. As long as I’m alive, Julie, you won’t have to take care of that boy on your own. I swear that to you and Trent both.”

Julie slowly walked around the corner of her front counter and met Franklin in route for a deep hug.

Franklin didn’t notice the blonde man scowl at them.



“Would you like some coffee?” Franklin asked Allen as he re-entered Trover’s Fine Literature.

“Yes, sir,” Allen answered. Franklin noticed that Allen was in the exact spot behind the register that he had been at when Franklin stepped out, still standing perfectly erect. That had been almost twenty-minutes ago!

“How do you take it?” Franklin asked without really listening for an answer as he tossed down several packets of creamer and sugar. His hazel eyes lit up when he heard Allen comment that he takes it black, and Franklin gushed, “A man after my own heart!”

Then Allen did something that Franklin had not seen him do yet . . . Allen let out a little chuckle.

When he saw Franklin look up at him with a smile, Allen offered a wide smile back to the older man. Like everything else about Allen, his teeth were perfect.

“I sold a book,” Allen announced.

“Really. Did you do it the way I told you?”

“Yes, sir. Precisely,” Allen returned without a hint of arrogance.

“Good. You’re a fast learner,” Franklin praised, “I can tell that about you. How are those clothes working out?”

Allen took a quick glance down at himself and was pleased to see a plaid shirt, a loose tie, a gray vest, and a dark brown pair of pants. “They’re very good, sir. It is nice to be wearing clean clothes again.”

Franklin stood with surprising comfort on the customer side of his register and watched as Allen took a long swig from his coffee. He knew Allen was about his brother’s size. He never understood why he had saved all of Walter’s clothes in his old room upstairs, but now he was glad that he had. Heck, Allen now had himself a whole wardrobe, so long as he didn’t mind what would politely be referred to as “vintage” clothing.

“They’re a tad out of fashion,” Franklin apologized.

“Fashion is of no consequence to me, sir. I’m grateful for your kindness. That being said, sir, I shouldn’t intrude upon you any longer. Thank you for your hospitality.”

Franklin was stunned as he saw Allen pick up that black satchel from behind the counter, shake his hand, and then begin to walk past him.

“Now wait just a minute, son,” Franklin blurted out. “You didn’t have anywhere to go last night, what’s changed between then and now?”

Allen stopped as he stood before the door and confessed, “Last night I needed rest. You gave me what I needed most after my long journey. You’ve also given me shelter, food, clothes; I can ask no more of you.”

“You’ve been on the run, haven’t you, son?” Franklin finally asked with his voice barely audible.

He was not given an answer.

“I don’t know what you’re running from, but there’s a reason you came to my shop. What is it?”

He was not given an answer.

“You don’t know, do you?”

He was not given an answer.

“But I do,” Franklin said at last.

“Sir?” Allen almost cried out. Franklin could see the millions of questions behind the eyes of the young man, but he was far too disciplined to ask them.

“Come have a seat, please,” the older man prompted as he motioned for Allen to join him at one of the reading tables within the shop. He was pleased to see Allen do so without hesitation.

Once they both got settled, each took a single pull from his coffee, almost in total unison. Franklin finally began, “My brother, Walter, told me long ago that one day a man would walk into my store without a clue as to what he was doing there. Walter made me promise that whether he was still alive or not, I would

take that man in with no questions asked and treat him as though he were family.”

Franklin noticed a spasm in Allen’s throat at the mention of his last word.

He continued, “He didn’t give me any way of recognizing this man. He just told me that he’d be the only man I ever felt I could trust completely. He said I wouldn’t know this man from any other, but that the trust would be there, like a lighthouse to a lost ship, if I paraphrase correctly. I think you’re that man, Allen. Are you?”

Franklin was not surprised to see the tall man’s head drop between stalwart shoulders in response to his question.

“What’s your real name, son?” Franklin asked pointedly.

“I don’t have one . . .” a shamed voice from below answered.



Julie heard the buzz of her door opening and left her pastries to approach the front register. As she walked from the kitchen, she noticed that several of her mid-morning customers needed their cups refilled, including that strange blonde man. He made her uncomfortable in a way she had rarely experienced. Yet he was the portrait of civility when she would cautiously refill his coffee. How many hours until Nick got back from school, anyway?

She was quickly shocked out of her ponders as she saw a very handsome, broad-shouldered man with a tiny waist approaching her.

“Can I help you?” she asked the stranger while fighting not to stare at his ocean-like eyes.

“Yes, ma’am,” the tall man answered. “Franklin brought me some coffee from here a few hours ago. I wondered if I might have another cup, please?”

“YOU’RE the help Franklin had this morning?” Julie stammered in disbelief.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Ma’am? Ma’am? Julie didn’t think she’d been called “ma’am” during her entire life. “You look like you might be a bit younger than me, but I don’t think I’m old enough to be called ‘ma’am’ just yet,” she chided with a smile. “Call me Julie.”

A flash of perfectly white teeth that lit up his whole face, and then, “Yes, Julie. Thank you. I’m Allen.”

“Hemingway, right?” Julie grilled with a wink.

Allen shifted uneasily from foot to foot and seemed at a loss when Julie eventually offered, “So, is Franklin giving you a coffee break?”

“He relieved me from duty for the duration of the day, ma—er, Julie.”

“You mean he gave you the rest of the day off,” Julie said with a nod. Her brown eyes seemed to be deeper than the depths of space to Allen. He found himself involuntarily peering into them.

“Yes.”

“You’re military,” she deducted kindly, but sharply. “Don’t bother to argue, I know the way you all talk. My husband is, too.”

“Your husband is military?” Allen asked with unmistakable curiosity.

Julie finished pouring what she could only presume was the wish of Allen—black coffee, the Franklin Special—and handed the Styrofoam cup to him with, “Was, I should say. He was military. He died six weeks ago.”

No longer able to meet the chiseled face before him, Allen averted his eyes and whispered his condolences to her. He noticed her head drop only for a second, and then it was right back up again. “Ulakistan?” he probed almost inaudibly, already knowing the answer.

“Yes,” Julie answered with her shoulders nearly slumping. “Some kids caught them off guard. It’s funny, Trent never would have shot a kid, no matter what the child’s intention. He always told me that if he had to defy direct orders to keep from killing a child, he would, no matter what the outcome. He never had to make that decision, though,” she said with a sigh. “They never saw it coming, from what I’ve been told.”

Now lifting his eyes to the ceiling fan above him, Allen questioned more to himself than to Julie, “But is that the right decision? To go against a direct order?”

“I think so,” Julie replied after a moment’s contemplation. “Yes, I think so. No matter what the order, if you can’t live with yourself afterwards, well, I guess someone would have to decide that for himself. I wish Trent would have at least been given the chance to make that decision.” Allen heard her voice crack, he saw her eyes become flooded, but not a single tear fell.

“You’re being very strong for him,” Allen validated while staring into the deep, dark brown of his coffee. He endeavored to ignore the maddeningly sweet aroma of her perfume.

“He made me promise, just in case,” her voice trailed off.

Allen’s voice suddenly became very deep and authoritative and Julie could not help but meet his gaze as he established, “Julie, I’m sorry for your loss. Without men like Trent, this nation could not be the light of hope that I know it is.”

“Thank you, Allen. But it’s not your fault that Trent died. It’s war. Until the war is over, we’re going to lose more ‘Trents’ than we can bear.”

Allen winced at the words “it’s not your fault.” Once more, he could not bear to look into the face that he now regarded as total beauty, and then mumbled that he’d better get back to the shop.

“Why?” Julie asked.

“Ma—Julie?”

“Why do you need to get back to the shop? Franklin gave you the afternoon off, remember?”

Julie could see that Allen was growing more distressed by the second. She’d seen that same look from people who felt as though they were in the wrong when they truly were not. Julie knew that if she didn’t mend this accidentally and mysteriously broken fence right now, Allen would never feel comfortable around her again.

“Judging from that bag of newly bought toiletries,” she began as she leaned over the counter and pointed down to the sack next to Allen’s feet, “I’d guess that we’re going to be seeing more of each other.”

“Yes,” Allen answered in agony.

Why was he so uncomfortable all of a sudden? Julie could not understand. “Does this mean you’re staying in Walter’s old room?”

“Did you know him?” Allen suddenly expulsed in bona fide interest, despite his uneasiness.

“No, he died before Trent and I met. Trent knew him though, always thought the world of him. Are those his clothes?” Julie asked as she looked Allen over. She could smell the mothballs on him and knew they were Walter’s clothes without having to ask, but anything to keep the conversation rolling.

“Out of fashion?” Allen grinned as he slowly became more relaxed.

“Tremendously, but on you, they look debonair,” she answered with good nature.

And with that, a bond was formed. Could it now ever be broken?

Allen looked around him and offered, “You look very busy, would you like some help?”

“How much do you charge?” Julie smiled.

“One cup of coffee,” Allen returned.

“Deal!” Julie laughed out.



Later that night, Franklin knocked on the door that was once Walter’s room. Now it belonged to Allen for as long as he wished it. Franklin heard a strained call

through the closed door to enter, and so he did just that. The white-topped old man was amazed.

He was met with a bed that had been perfectly made, clothes that had been neatly arranged in the closet that had no doors, and several toiletry items arranged methodically upon the oak dresser. He also saw Allen engaged in a set of push-ups that were taking place nearly too fast for his aging eyes to follow.

“Just a second, sir,” Allen gasped between pants.

Franklin sat down on the edge of the bed, careful not to crease any of the covers, for while he was not a neat freak, his brother had been. The younger of the two brothers had long ago learned how to adapt in Walter-territory. He watched the statue-like man finish his set and push himself right up to his feet with no aid from the legs.

“You keep in shape,” Franklin commented as he observed the sweat ring around the old Harvard shirt that Allen wore. He deduced that this was not the only set of exercises that Allen had completed before the shopkeeper’s entrance.

“I try, sir,” Allen responded before picking up a neatly folded towel from the rocking chair in the corner of the room.

“Is the room okay? Sorry there’s no television. I could pick one up for you, if you’d like. I know a guy down the street who’d sell me one cheap,” Franklin offered while watching Allen grin at him.

“No, thank you, sir. I don’t watch television. If I did want one, I’d acquire it on my own. You and Ms. Sophie have done quite enough for me already.”

“I’m sorry I can’t pay you, Allen,” Franklin groaned remorsefully.

“Sir, offering me meals, room, clothes, and board in exchange for my work in your bookstore is beyond generous. For me to accept or expect anything more would be an act of crime on my part.”

Franklin stood up and adjusted his navy robe a bit as he did so. Allen sat down in the chair. The two studied each other for several long moments.

“You remind me of my brother in so many ways,” Franklin whispered.

“Was he a good man?” Allen questioned.

“He was a great man,” Franklin answered immediately.

“You both owned the store?”

Franklin let out a hearty laugh and responded with, “Goodness, no! He was a G-Man—”

“Sir?” Allen interrupted in confusion.

“Oh, right,” Franklin remembered, “that’s not such a common term any more. He was a government agent. They plucked him up as soon as he graduated,” Franklin paused a moment and pointed to Allen’s shirt, “and he then went to work for them for years.”

Allen leaned forward in his chair and asked with anticipation, “What was his duty?”

Franklin grunted heavily as he lowered to his knees and slowly propped himself down so that his belly was nearly touching the floor. Allen was amused to see the old man begin to do a few pushups of his own as he replied, “I don’t know his specific duty. He said it was confidential. He was some kind of a

scientist/psychologist, I know that much. I heard him talking in his sleep once on my way to the john, kept shouting out something about a map.”

At this Allen’s eyes grew to the size of softballs.

“How did he escape the position?” Allen demanded.

“He got mauled by some kind of a dog he was experimenting on. Darn thing put him in the hospital for six months. I didn’t even know he’d been hurt!” Franklin cried out as Allen counted his fourteenth pushup. “He lost a lot of vision in his left eye and didn’t have great use of his left hand any longer, so I guess the government let him go. Can’t say for sure, he just showed up one day in the shop and asked if he could have his old room back.”

“You both grew up here?” Allen asked.

“Yep. Dad owned this place my entire life and we all lived right here, above the store. It’s pretty common for folks who own a business in Old Downtown to live above it. Julie and Nick do the same, next door.”

“You mean Julie still does and Trent did before he died,” Allen erroneously corrected.

“You’ve met Julie?” Franklin asked with his narrow eyebrows lifted.

“Yes, I got some coffee after I picked up some items and then assisted her with the shop until her regular help arrived. She’s a very strong woman,” Allen remarked in admiration.

Was it only admiration, or something more? Neither Allen nor Franklin knew the answer to that for sure.

“Nick’s not her employee, Allen! Nick’s her brother-in-law! The boy came to live with Julie and Trent after his parents died in a subway accident. He was only there for about a year before Trent got shipped off to Ulrakistan. It’s just he and Julie now.”

Franklin finally wore out after doing twenty-five pushups, so Allen helped the impressively fit bookseller up from the floor.

“Poor, Trent. A good man. We don’t have many of those, especially here in Purgatory Station. God rest his soul, God rest his soul,” Franklin uttered as he walked over to the chair and used Allen’s towel.

Allen reflected as he seemed to have finally solved a riddle and asserted, “The CEO of the sky—correct, sir?”

Franklin laughed and nodded his head while dabbing the sweat from it.

“You a religious man, Allen?” Franklin asked while folding the towel back neatly the way he had found it.

Allen’s response was simply, “One nation under God, sir.”

“Yes, I figured that much where you’re concerned, but do you practice religion?” Franklin chortled.

Allen paused for several moments, as though once again searching for an appropriate rejoinder. Franklin could see that he seemed to have catalogs of things to say, volumes of yearnings to express, but all he heard Allen reply with was, “No, sir. I do not practice any religion to speak of, sir.”

Franklin contemplated as he gazed past Allen and then said, “I’ve got to get to bed, Sophie can’t fall asleep without me next to her, but . . .” Franklin

walked past Allen to the nightstand next to his bed. “Walter left you a gift, something he knew you’d want.”

Allen stared in disbelief as Franklin pulled out the Holy Bible from a drawer and handed it to him. Allen held it in his palms without knowing what to do, so Franklin opened it for him.

Inside the front cover read, “To the man I knew would come. For the man I knew I could place my trust. Believe in what you read, as I believed in you. Sincerely, Walter Trover.”

When Allen lifted his eyes from the inscription, he saw Franklin beginning to shut his door. He heard, “You know to shake the handle on the crapper from last night’s adventure, and try to get some sleep tonight.”

Franklin winked at Allen and then shut his door.

Allen read ardently until sleep overtook him.



“The usual?” Julie asked as she saw Franklin walk into Carmah’s Cup, an occurrence that she still was having trouble getting adjusted to.

“You know it,” Franklin answered as he approached the front register. He noticed that peculiar blonde-headed man in the corner of the shop once again reading a paper and drinking a cup of coffee. Other than he and this man, the shop was empty. “Is Nick sleeping in?”

“Yeah, it being Saturday and all, I figured I should let the kid sleep in for a little bit. I read that growing boys need lots of sleep so they can adjust to their growth,” Julie answered.

“Boy’s growing like a weed . . .” Franklin affirmed while taking his coffee from Julie and leaning on her counter.

“Well, it doesn’t help that he stays up all night reading. He can’t get enough of this city’s freaks. We’re the only city in the nation that seems to have a stock-pile of these weirdoes, and Nick won’t rest until he knows everything there is to know about each and every one of them,” Julie groaned in dismay.

Franklin responded with, “Oh, it’s perfectly healthy, Julie. I was the same way. Heck, I think I knew more about Billy the Kid, Calamity Jane, Al Capone, Doc Holiday, Bugsy Malone, and that sort than the best scholars in the country! Even as a grown man, when the Nocturnal Knight first showed up on the scene a few decades ago, I read every news article and book on him I could find! We’re always attracted to the unknown and the fantastic. If it weren’t this, Nick would be obsessed with UFOs, or ghosts, or whatever. Besides, you know his number-one hero is Trent. Nick’s firmly rooted in normal life; don’t you worry those curls of yours about it.”

“Well, lately all he can talk about is that government character that’s gone missing. It worries me, Franklin, that he seems more concerned for the loss of that guy than for his own brother!”

Franklin couldn’t help but notice the ears of the blonde man in the corner jerk just a little at the mention of “that government character.” Did it mean anything? Probably not. Nick wasn’t the only person in the nation to wonder what in the world happened to its only government-sanctioned Colossal.

“He knows that his brother is gone forever, Julie,” Franklin consoled with his hand on her shoulder. “We should both hope that his number-two hero resurfaces for the boy’s peace of mind. Imagine if he lost both of his heroes within the span of two months . . .”

Julie whispered something in agreement. She then said she had to get back to making pastries.

“Would you like some help?” Franklin asked her.

“Don’t you have to get back to the shop?” Julie asked with total innocence.

“I’ve got Allen watching it for me. That boy’s a workaholic if I’ve ever seen one! By the time I woke up at five-thirty this morning, he’d already fixed the toilet that’s been plaguing Sophie and me for the last few years,” Franklin stopped and began to laugh. “When I asked him how he knew how to do it, he said that he had a basic knowledge of plumbing.”

“Really? Maybe he could come fix the sink in our bathroom for us?” Julie mused excitedly.

“He could do more than that. After I showered and got dressed, I walked past his bedroom on the way downstairs and saw that he had installed those closet doors I’ve had off to the side for twenty years! When I got downstairs and found him opening the shop up a little early, I asked him how he knew how to install them. He said that he had a basic knowledge of carpentry! Isn’t that a hoot? I swear, if Sophie didn’t do all the cooking for us, I bet the boy would fire up the stove and then say he had a basic knowledge of the culinary arts!”

Julie giggled at this as they entered the kitchen and began working on the pastries. After fifteen minutes of Franklin proving he had no basic knowledge of anything involving pastries, Julie commented that maybe he should go get Sophie to come help them.

It was at that exact moment that they heard a single, thunderous gunshot.

The blonde man in the corner was nowhere to be seen.



Allen was busily reading the gift that Walter had left him when he heard the old bell signal a customer's entrance. Allen looked up to see a blonde-headed man enter the shop. He was dressed as any civilian would be, in a tan barn jacket and blue jeans; however, his body language was anything but that of a civilian. Allen closed the gift and stood at full alacrity without changing his body's expression at all.

"May I help you?" Allen offered with what was seemingly the portrait of casualness.

"Yes, I'm looking for a book on Benedict Arnold," a cold, raspy voice responded. "I'm fascinated with the psychology of traitors. Why would someone ever betray his own country? I can't understand it."

"Perhaps you have a faulty understanding of the word," Allen responded with ice in his blood, but warmth in his voice.

"There is no gray area for betrayal," the man retorted as he roamed about the store without meeting his green eyes to Allen's. "You either are a traitor, or you're not."

“Moral convictions play no part?” Allen examined while still maintaining an air of indifference.

“No,” the blonde rebutted.

The stranger found what he was apparently looking for and approached the store worker, this time locking his hateful eyes with Allen’s for the entire jaunt.

“You didn’t truly think that if you stayed in one place, we wouldn’t find you?” he asked. “Why be so stupid?”

“This is my home now.”

“I’m not a particularly romantic man, but I’m sure you long ago surmised the irony of calling a place named after Purgatory your home,” the stranger arrogantly stated.

“As I see it, my very existence is now a case for irony,” Allen informed.

“Well, you weren’t trained for things such as romance, nor was I,” the stranger answered. “You were trained to obey rank and orders.”

“I was given an order that was unthinkable,” Allen enlightened.

“An order’s an order,” the blonde replied matter-of-factly.

“I couldn’t follow orders that contradicted what I was and what I stood for. If they had such intentions for me, they never should have made me what they did,” Allen lectured with his lips drawn tightly.

“If you had done what you were supposed to do eight weeks ago, the war would now be over,” the man expounded in return.

“MAP had other agents for that. There are specific agents for that.”

“They were on assignment elsewhere,” the man dismissed.

“Doubtlessly,” Allen sarcastically replied. “They realized I was becoming a Colossal; I was no longer simply a meta-agent. I was growing out of them. They gave me that order to remind me where I came from, and, in their eyes, what I was . . .”

“And now look at you,” the man snarled with a sneer. “You’re neither the Colossal that the people so desperately wanted you to be, nor are you a meta-agent. You’re just a rogue, a runner, a traitor, a villain.”

“You’re from MAP, obviously, but who are you?” Allen scowled while fighting desperately to control his anger.

“I’m Agent 0104. I’m your replacement. My handle’s going to be ‘Anthem.’ Can’t say I’m going to enjoy having to act the clown that you did, but I am going to enjoy the completion of my first mission.”

“What’s that?” Allen growled without a hint of nervousness, although he knew his end was near.

“The location and termination of Agent 0099, code name: Freedom,” Agent 0104 hissed. “In other words, killing our nation’s greatest traitor.”

“I’m no traitor . . .”

“I’ve been gathering intelligence for the last thirty-two hours, traitor. As soon as Agent Cyber-Spy got a bead on your position, they sent me to verify. Imagine my surprise to see a member of MAP serving coffee and flirting with a widow.”

“I wasn’t flirting,” Allen bellowed.

“Calm yourself, traitor,” Agent 0104 demanded. “You are currently within the crosshairs of Agent Shutdown. Make any sudden moves before I give the order for your termination, and Agent Shutdown will take matters into his own hands.”

Agent 0104 was most pleased to see Allen turn his head slowly and look out the great window he stood alongside. Agent 0104 followed Allen’s eyes until he was sure he saw the barrel of Shutdown’s rifle on the rooftop across the street.

“It’s not easy to kill members of MAP, traitor. My superiors know this, of course. That’s why they designed a special caliber just for you. It’ll pierce even our hides, if you believe any small arms fire can do such a thing. A shot to the temple—a guaranteed kill.”

It was with glee that Agent 0104 finally saw a sign of nerves from Allen—a hard swallow—before Allen turned his blue stare back to the outsider.

“You know, the widow, Julie, I picked her name up easily in her shop while engaged in reconnaissance, she wouldn’t be a widow right now if you had followed orders.”

“Shut up,” Allen commanded.

“The war would have been two weeks over around the time he was killed. Indeed, he may have even been coming home within the year. But you had to believe what the people of this great nation were saying about you. You believed you were the greatest of the Colossals. You ceased to be a soldier. Do you

know how many men have died in Ulrakistan since you mutinied? Do you know how many men's deaths you are responsible for now?"

"Don't you think I feel that weight on my soul, on my conscience, Agent? Don't you think I've thought of nothing else since then?" Allen reacted with his cheeks grown flush in fury.

"Don't talk to me of souls and conscience, traitor. We don't have them. The fact that you look that woman next door in the eye is proof enough of that."

Allen calmed himself, and he then let out a long, deep sigh. Finally, he said, "Get this over with."

Agent 0104 pulled his collar up to his mouth and murmured something quietly. Allen quickly seized the gift left from Walter and held it to his chest, right against the heart he knew he had.

The sound was deafening.



Franklin and Julie bolted from Carmah's Cup after the rapport of the shot. They were horrified as they instantly saw the hole in Franklin's window that had taken out the "V" in Trover's Fine Literature.

"That's impossible," Julie heard Franklin mumble as he nearly paused to gape at the bullet hole.

The old man and young woman raced into Franklin's shop to find it completely empty.

"I'll check on Sophie," Julie screamed as she started to run to the back of the shop for the stairs leading to the apartment above.

"She took a ferry into Boston," Franklin muttered as his heart dropped.

Julie was momentarily relieved . . . until she saw what had caught Franklin's attention.

A trail of blood was peeking from around the corner of the front register counter. Both of them approached the counter slowly, and then they leaned over it.

Allen Hemmingway lay upon the floor with the Holy Bible held to his chest and a bullet hole upon his left temple.



“ETA in seven minutes, sir. You have orders over stealth comm. to suit up and await further orders . . .”

Agent 0099 grimaced at the soldier relaying orders to him. He released his straps and took his black satchel down from the overhead. He'd made quicker changes into uniform than this, seven minutes was an eternity. The agent unzipped the black satchel and pulled out the red, white, and blue uniform that his home country loved and trusted.

He'd had a bad feeling about this mission since he was called in twelve hours ago. After a debriefing that told him nothing other than the fact that he'd be going overseas and then given orders at the location, he geared up and moved out.

Now he found himself in what could only be black ops. The fact that he was to execute orders in uniform did not bode well. Agent 0099 loved his status as his nation's favorite Colossal. Unlike the other agents of MAP, he actually considered himself a Colossal and cared more about the purpose he served than the orders he was given. Thus far, the Superiors had used him only for moral

boosting within home borders. He'd handled all Mega-Mals that crawled out of the garbage, and lives were saved. If that brought the people of his great nation closer to their government, well, that was an enormous perk. But, he contemplated long ago about what would happen if he was given an order that compromised his status as a Colossal. He had been frightened to think what he may do.

Today, his worst fear was about to come true.

Agent 0099 had just finished fastening on his G-Repulser when the soldier began to speak:

"Your orders have just come through, sir."

"Proceed," Agent 0099 ordered.

Although the soldier had on a black visor and all Agent 0099 could see on it were the reflections of the surrounding red light within the tiny compartment of the plane, he somehow knew those eyes were wide in disbelief.

"Sir, you are to jettison in sixty seconds and reach these coordinates," the soldier said as he handed Agent 0099 a gunmetal colored device lit up with green numbers.

The soldier could not meet the ice-blue gaze that met his countenance after the agent looked back up from the coordinates.

"These coordinates . . . What are my orders?" the agent asked with glaciers stuck in his throat.

"Sir, after reaching the coordinates, you are to infiltrate the facility, then terminate target." With the completion of his last statement, the soldier reached

to Agent 0099's device and pushed a button. The green numbers disappeared instantly and a picture of a man appeared.

Agent 0099's heart sank as he saw the image before his cold stare.

The day had finally come.

He knew exactly what the Superiors were up to. They knew he was the only member of MAP that fully welcomed being called a Colossal. They also knew that he was outgrowing them. He was expanding beyond their control. He was serving the people now, not the program. Apparently they felt it was time to reel Agent 0099 back in. They knew he'd never killed anyone during his years of service. They knew he valued his reputation as a heroic Colossal. It would be all over the international news in hours that Freedom had become nothing more than a common assassin. He was going to be just like all the other members of MAP. Agent Shutdown, Agent Hell Hound, Agent Cyber Spy, and all the rest had been given orders such as this in the past. Some didn't like it, some loved it, but they all had followed orders. Did he dare not?

"Soldier, you're positive orders were relayed correctly?" Agent 0099 sternly questioned.

"Yes, sir," the soldier answered. It was apparent that he did not disagree with the orders, only the choice of executioner. He tried to help with, "Agent 0099 . . . Freedom," this caused Agent Freedom's head to snap to, "I know that you're a hero to the people of America. Hell, you're my hero, for cripe's sake! You're everyone's hero! But, you've got to think of the consequences of your

actions. You plug this monster, and the war will be over. Ultimately, lives will be saved, sir.”

“Where are the other agents, soldier?” Agent Freedom queried with bitterness.

He saw the soldier’s head sink and that was all the answer he needed.

The Superiors were sending Freedom a message. In their eyes, he was just a lap dog. But, was that all he was? Was he just another soldier, beholden to any and all orders? Or was he also something else? The world had looked up to him over the last few years, virtually since his unveiling. Would the world ever forgive him for this act of hypocrisy?

“Ten seconds, sir,” the soldier alerted.

Agent Freedom grabbed his now empty black satchel and approached the door of the jet. The soldier counted down and on “mark” rolled the door open. A whoosh of wind ripped through the vessel. Agent Freedom saw the soldier mouth good luck to him while counting down again with his fingers. When the last finger dropped, Agent Freedom flung himself into the star-filled night sky.



Crossing deserts.

Hiding in cargo trucks.

Stowing away in ships crossing oceans.

Swimming the final few miles to shore.

Why?

Why must he reach Purgatory Station?

Living on the streets.

Where was it?

Why was it so important that he get there?

What was the meaning behind Trover's Fine Literature?



Slowly the tiny blue slits opened almost completely. It was the first time they had done so in days. He saw a female figure hovering above him.

"Julie?" he mumbled.

He was greeted by a laugh that immediately told him that, no, this was not Julie. The voice was just as sweet, but far too aged. It could only be—

"Sophie . . ." he whispered with a smile.

"That's right, Allen," Sophie crooned while petting the hair back from his face, careful not to disturb the clean bandages she had just applied.

Allen reached up with a trembling, fatigued hand and felt the bandages upon his left temple. It's not the first time he'd ever been wounded severely, and he could tell simply by feeling the doctoring job that it'd been done well.

"Who dressed my wound?" Allen stammered in a weak voice while struggling to keep his eyes open and locked upon Sophie's.

"I did," Sophie answered. The attractive, elderly lady could see the surprise in the eyes of her patient and quickly informed, "I'm more than just Franklin's live-in gal pal, you know. Before I retired, I was an emergency room nurse. You don't honestly believe that this is the first gunshot wound I've treated during a lifetime of working in Purgatory Station, do you?"

"You're very good, ma'am, at field dressings."

Here was Sophie's sure sign that Allen was going to be fine. When he first gained consciousness, many things troubled her. She was troubled by his shaking hands, his weak voice, his drooping eyes; however, most of all, she was troubled by the fact that he called her simply "Sophie." She'd been either ma'am or Miss Sophie since Franklin had brought the young man up for some meatloaf several days ago. After hearing herself referred to once again as "ma'am," she was quite certain the boy was going to be just fine.

"Well, I think you're going to recover completely, as long as you give yourself a few weeks to heal."

"I should be fine in a few days," Allen said out loud without thinking. Sophie saw his eyes shoot up to her in alarm as he realized his mistake.

"Don't fret, child," she cooed. "I figured that your sort would heal up quite a bit quicker than a normal person. I won't tell your secret to anyone, don't worry."

"Ma'am?" Allen rejoined in complete guilelessness.

Sophie let out a long, chirp of a laugh and then voiced, "Oh, now, don't play that with me. Frankie doesn't remember that night, but I've been waiting for you since Wally spilled the beans all those years ago."

Allen quickly sprang up in his bed, causing himself the mother of all head rushes in the process, and looked at Sophie with an expression that words can't describe.

“Oh, I’ve got your attention now, do I?” she teased. “Well, I suppose I’ve just spilled the beans in a way myself, so I better get it out before that wound re-opens with your eyes as wide as they are.

“Oh, how to begin? Frankie told me that he shared with you how Wally came to live with us all those years ago—”

“*Wally*, ma’am?” Allen responded in perplexity.

Again, a big flash of white dentures, a laugh, and then Sophie sprang forth, “Those two are so formal with their ‘Walter’ and ‘Franklin.’ They’ll always be ‘Wally’ and ‘Frankie’ to me. You’re lucky I’m not calling you ‘Alley.’” Once again, Sophie stopped to let out a bright giggle and even Allen smiled before she continued.

“Frankie hadn’t been with us but a few weeks when those two yahoos got drunk off their buns for one of only a handful of times. I forget what the occasion was, I think they had convinced some big shot author to agree to a date for a signing in the shop. I can’t remember.

“Anyway, the two boys were quite incapacitated, so I decided it was time for both to go to bed. Frankie needed more help than Wally, so, of course, big brother had to help me put his little brother in for the night. By the time we’d taken care of Frankie, the juice had caught up with Wally. He was a huge man, about your size, in fact, but even he couldn’t drink all the whisky those fellas had gulped and not feel it eventually, so I found myself tucking Wally in also.

“Once I finally got him all tucked in, he was chatting like a drunk parrot. He started talking all about his job with the government.”

Allen had been as stiff as a board while listening to Sophie recount the past, but now he grew even more rigid as he guessed his connection to this “Walter” was finally about to be revealed.

Sophie could see the anticipation in the young man’s visage and tried to continue ‘spilling the beans’ as quickly as she could, “Walter was talking about how he used to be a bio-engineer/psychologist or some such with the government. Said that he’d been recruited to help with a soldier development program of sorts. It’d been going on since the forties, he told me, but they needed new scientists to carry on the program. What did he call that program?”

Sophie paused to ponder over her thoughts. Allen could see her searching the databanks of her brain and thought it rude to interrupt, although it took every effort on his part not to do so.

“MAT? No,” Sophie corrected. “NAP? That’s not right, either . . .”

“MAP,” Allen finally informed as he at last saw the old gray eyes plead with him to help her remember.

“MAP! That’s right! Mega-Agent Program, as I remember.”

Allen chuckled, “Meta-Agent Program, actually.” He knew he could be court-martialed for revealing such classified information, but since the government had already attempted an assassination upon him for, as they say, treason, he didn’t see what the harm was at this point. How had he survived that gunshot, anyway? Agent 0104 had guaranteed him that the bullet being used would kill even a member of MAP, so how—? In due time, he hoped, he would find that answer out as well.

“Meta-Agent Program, that’s right,” the elderly lady grinned. Anyway, he was talking about how he had done the work of the devil. He was getting very emotional about it, and I could tell that he was greatly troubled by whatever he had been doing for them. I guess that’s why he got out of it after he’d been attacked by some sort of dog.”

Hell Hound sprung into Allen’s mind instantly. It had to be Hell Hound. Allen had heard that Hell Hound had maimed several scientists during his development. It couldn’t simply be a coincidence.

“He didn’t agree with the work he was doing from a moral standpoint?” Allen inquired.

“That’s right, he didn’t agree with it at all,” Sophie answered. “He said he was rearing the killers of tomorrow. He said it would all be in the name of truth, justice, and the American way, but they were still nothing more than killers.”

“So he felt damned,” Allen muttered.

“Not exactly,” Sophie corrected. “In the midst of his tears, and that was the only time I’d ever seen Wally cry, by the way— I’m still waiting to see Frankie shed some of the waterworks—anyway, in the midst of his tears, he said that no matter how many killers he’d helped to develop, he had made a champion as well.”

“A champion?” Allen choked out with a glimmer of hope struggling to be released.

“Yes, a champion,” Sophie reaffirmed. She could see the longing in Allen’s face and hoped that this would give him the peace that he so wanted.

“Wally talked about the men and women he’d helped create who had no conscience and felt no guilt. They were bred to follow orders no matter what they thought of them. But there was one, he said, who, even as a child, had something he was not supposed to have.”

Sophie watched as Allen began to lean forward.

“He said that there was a little boy, not even five years old, who he already knew from his evaluations could never be a killer. The boy had rejected all the psycho-tinkering that the lab rats had done to him. Wally said the boy would have been perfect in every way but one, according to his bosses—he had a conscience. But Wally made sure that the bosses would never find out about the boy’s imperfection until it was too late. He said he was damned if he didn’t let the boy develop, and he was damned if he did. He chose what his heart demanded, and he lied on the boy’s evaluations.”

The gray haired woman could see the workings of Allen’s mind go into overdrive. She knew the boy already had deduced what she was going to tell him, after all, being above average intelligence probably was a component of being perfect.

“Wally finally began to drift off to sleep that night, Allen. Before he fell totally asleep, though, I asked him what he did about this boy with a conscience. He told me that he lied on his reports and allowed the boy to continue his training. He even recommended that the boy become the first of the Public Figure Program that MAP was thinking about. With all the Colossals springing up, apparently they thought they needed one of their own out there in the open.

“He told me that he knew it would only be a matter of time until the boy was given an order that he couldn’t follow, so he placed a post-hypnotic suggestion in the boy that he was to immediately seek a specific location if he ever found himself on the outs with the government.”

Allen began to shake. “What was the location?”

Sophie reached her hand out to Allen and lightly touched the young man on his cheek. She tested the bandage on his left temple, and after finding it to her satisfaction whispered, “The location was Trover’s Fine Literature.”



Later that evening, Allen was roused to see Franklin leaning over him with that old mustache of his partially framing a ripened smile.

“Good to see you, sir,” Allen mumbled with a grin.

“Good to see you, too, son,” Franklin returned while patting the injured man on the shoulder. “I thought we’d lost you when I saw all that blood.”

“The temple area tends to bleed profusely,” Allen informed while gently touching the bandage next to his left eye. “But I shouldn’t have survived.”

Franklin’s slender eyebrows rose upon hearing Allen’s rather matter-of-fact comment and exclaimed, “Preposterous! That bullet never should have hit you in the first place!”

Allen could only presume that this was some insinuation that the aged storeowner wanted an explanation as to why his front window now had a large hole in it. However, Allen had some things he needed to know first, such as, how was he able to survive a bullet that had been designed specifically for killing MAP members.

“Sir,” the wounded man began, despite noticing Franklin’s agitation at being called “sir” incessantly. “I realize that you need to know why I was shot—”

Allen stopped a moment as he saw Franklin begin to protest, but something in his sometimes cold blue eyes communicated that he wished to finish, “—but there are some things that I need to know first. Describe the exact circumstances of my being found. I can only assume it was you who brought me up here.”

“Well,” Franklin began uncomfortably, “I’m afraid that I couldn’t lift you alone, you’re an awfully big boy. I had to have Julie help me—”

“What!” Allen cried out in astonishment.

“Not to worry, Allen,” Franklin consoled. “I told her that you were simply grazed by the bullet.”

Franklin could see the multitude of thoughts flashing through the dark headed man’s eyes and quickly reported, “When we came into the store, she started to run upstairs to find Sophie, but I told her that Sophie had gone to Boston. I said this as I leaned over the counter to find the source of all that blood. That’s when I saw you laying on the floor with the Bible held to your chest.”

Allen quickly looked to his nightstand and saw his most cherished possession, left to him by Walter, awaiting his next visit. It now had some rust-colored stains upon it.

Franklin continued, “Julie immediately began to scream and put her hands over her eyes. She started to stumble back, so I’m relatively sure she didn’t see

what I saw. I saw *this* sticking three-quarters out of your left temple.” Franklin reached into his pants’ pocket and pulled out one of the biggest bullets either man had ever seen in their lives. “I’ve got no idea what caliber this monster is . . .”

“There is no name for its caliber. That bullet doesn’t even officially exist,” Allen hissed out. He wasn’t angry with Franklin. He was angry with himself. Although he knew he was the target of this Agent 0104, or “Anthem” as the mystery man called himself, it is doubtless that if anyone else had been in the shop that they would have been terminated as well. One thing about MAP, if it didn’t want to be seen, it wouldn’t.

“Yeah, you’re probably right. That’s why I went ahead and handled it,” the clever old man admitted. “I figured we wouldn’t be able to trace it anyway, so my fingerprints wouldn’t hurt it any.”

“Sir,” Allen tested with hesitation in his voice. “Aren’t you curious as to why that bullet didn’t kill me? You seem to be awfully calm about this.”

“Actually, young man, I was just thinking the same thing about you!” Franklin let out with a huff.

Allen Hemmingway’s eyes grew large at this statement and he had no idea how to reply. What was that supposed to mean?

Franklin smirked and continued, “I slid the bloody bullet into my pocket and yelled at Julie to call Sophie. I knew that she’d be able to patch that wound up. If it’d gone any deeper, I don’t know what I’d have done.”

“Not that I’m complaining, sir, but why didn’t you take me to a hospital?”

Allen inquired.

Franklin laughed and said, “Julie argued that same point. She demanded we call 911, not Sophie. I’ve never had any children, Allen, not of my own, but I used the best parent voice I had, and I told Julie to go call Sophie and trust me. Well, that got her moving. I didn’t mention the fact to her that a man who uses a fake name would not like to find himself in a public hospital. Am I right?”

“Does she realize it’s fake also?”

“Julie’s a smart young woman, Allen. Smart enough to know when not to ask a man why he’s covering up his real identity. But I like to think that she knows the good guys from the bad guys. I figure that’s why she doesn’t badger us about who you really are.”

Allen winced at this. He thought of Trent, Julie’s husband that had died weeks after he had defied orders. Trent, who in all likelihood, would still be alive today if Allen had done what he was told. Trent—a man who left a widow and a kid brother. Trent—a man who Allen found himself becoming jealous of whenever he thought of Julie.

“I tried to haul you upstairs while she called Sophie to come back, but you’re too darn heavy! I had to wait for her to get back and it took us twenty minutes to get you up the steps. We finally got you up here, though, and did the best we could with stopping the bleeding. I was worried you were going to hemorrhage to death before Sophie got back. But, she finally arrived after taking a cab all the way from Boston. She stitched you up just in time, according to her.

She does tend to have a knack for the dramatic, however, so who's to say for sure . . ."

Although he already knew the answer due to the fact that Franklin and Julie were still breathing, Allen asked anyway, "So no one was in the store or the apartment after you and Julie arrived?"

"Well," Franklin's voice began to tremble while he rubbed the back of his head and sat on the side of Allen's bed. "No. No one was here. But your room was a disaster, as though someone had sifted through all of your things. Your window was open as well. I think whoever it was, we just missed him . . ."

"Thank God," Allen whispered to himself. "Was anything missing?"

Franklin could hear the concern in Allen's voice and said, "No, son. Everything seemed to still be here, just out of place. Of course, I didn't see that black satchel of yours, but I haven't seen *it* in quite a while."

"It's fine," Allen interjected harshly, and instantly regretted his tone. He couldn't hide the rage he was feeling with himself for putting his friends at risk. It's obvious what Agent 0104 was looking for. He didn't just have orders to terminate Agent Freedom; he had orders to retrieve some very expensive equipment as well. A belt that allows a man to fly is not something that the government merely writes off.

"I'm glad you're all safe," he said with his eyes down and his hand on Franklin's shoulder.

"We're glad you're safe as well, young fella," Franklin returned with the most kindness that Allen had ever heard. "Julie's going to come see you later.

She's beside herself she's so happy that you're going to be well. She's a beautiful young woman, isn't she?" the old man hinted.

Allen grew sick to his stomach with self-loathing and wished to change the subject, "So, you seem to have a theory as to how I survived. May I hear it?"

The shopkeeper began to shake his head back and forth in puzzlement and pondered, "You never should have been hit in the first place!"

"Why?"

"Until you walked into my shop I never had a clue as to why, but years ago Walter insisted that we install the highest quality bulletproof glass available. And when I say available, I don't mean on the open market. He knew some people from his old government job that owed him a favor, as he put it.

"I guess that there must have been a weak point where the bullet hit. That's all that I can figure. Otherwise, a bullet fired from a handgun or rifle, no matter how big it is, should never have breached the glass. "

Allen knew better, however. MAP agents were built tough, and their skin was more resistant than any known bulletproof glass. It was only the combination of the two that saved his life. Once again, Walter, a man he had no recollection of knowing, had proven his savior.



He knew she had entered before he had even opened his eyes. It was her perfume; it lit his heart on fire every time he smelled it.

"Hi, Julie," he greeted as he opened his eyes and sat up.

Allen couldn't help but notice that Julie appeared as though she was going on a date later. Her curly hair was done beautifully and hung loosely about her

shoulders. She wore a lovely black shirt with a khaki skirt. Allen even noted that her fingernails had been freshly painted. He hated himself for it, but his heart grew envious of whomever it was she had a date with.

“Hi, big guy,” she offered playfully. She sat on the edge of his bed, and he tried very hard not to notice her arm brushing his leg as she propped herself to one side. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m feeling better.” Indeed, Allen was feeling much better. It had been nearly twenty-four hours since his injury. He had been engineered to heal quickly. He didn’t feel it was necessary to share that information, of course. Any nagging pain had hurriedly disappeared at the sight of the gorgeous brunette.

“We’ll need to get you a new one,” Julie whispered as she pointed to Allen’s stained Bible on the nightstand.

“No, that one was left to me for a reason. I’ll never replace it,” Allen returned.

Julie simply nodded her head in understanding. She then reached out and touched the bandage on his left temple. After inspecting it to her liking, she took her hand away and rubbed his cheek gently as she did so. Allen loved it and hated himself for loving it.

“Do you have a date later?” Allen asked, trying to distract himself from the pleasure of her touch.

“No, why?” she answered.

Allen found himself speechless.

Julie, however, did not, “Allen, I’m sorry, but I’m not like Franklin. I have to know. Why were you shot? Why do you use a fake name? You’re obviously in some kind of trouble. I need to know what’s going on.”

Julie saw Allen’s jaw begin to clench tightly. His blue eyes stared deeply into her soul. She perceived his mind racing. She knew this was a lost cause. He wasn’t going to tell her.

“I know that I have no right to ask you anything. We just met, after all—”

“Julie—” Allen tried to interrupt.

“—but I always assumed I’d never find anyone else after Trent. I never wanted anyone else. Trent was my hero. I loved him more than life, but now he’s gone. I feel like I haven’t grieved long enough, but—”

“—please don’t do this,” Allen moaned.

Julie continued anyway, “Allen, I don’t even know your real name, but I’m feeling something for you that I haven’t felt for anyone but Trent. I can’t lose someone else that I feel this way about. I don’t know why I have these feelings for a man who won’t even tell me his real name, but I do. Please Allen, tell me what’s going on. Who are you?”

Allen let out a deep groan. He knew this moment would come. Ever since he saw Julie and then learned of her husband and his death, he knew this moment would come. The confession. The problem is that he never dreamt that she would have feelings for him. However, she just admitted as much. He could hang up his uniform forever. As far as the Superiors were concerned, Freedom was dead. Agent 0099 was targeted by Anthem and terminated by Shutdown.

As long as the G-Respulser never resurfaced, he could live a life with Julie.

Freedom was dead. He could stay that way. Allen Hemmingway could live on.

No. He owes Trent the truth. Although he never met Trent, he owes him that much. Like all those others, Trent died defending the nation. Allen couldn't take his life and then his wife as well. The truth must be told. Freedom is a Colossal, and Colossals must do the right thing.

"Julie," Allen began with hesitation. "There's something I have to tell you." His eyes locked with Julie's and he whispered out of fear, "I'm a fugitive of the government. I was ordered to kill someone eight weeks ago, and I defied orders."

Julie's eyes grew huge. "Who were you supposed to kill?"

Even though he wanted to drop his eyes from hers, he wouldn't let himself. "If I had killed this person, the war in Ulrakistan would, in all likelihood, be over right now. I'm certain it would have ended two months ago.

"I was shot because I'm considered a traitor by the government. They think I'm dead, and as long as I keep a low profile, they won't bother me again.

"I'm not a killer, Julie. I never have been. I couldn't follow that order, even though it meant—"

"Trent would still be alive . . ." Julie mumbled as she tore her gaze from Allen's.

"Not just Trent, Julie. Hundreds more would still be alive. It was the hardest decision of my life, but I couldn't carry out that order—"

“WHY?” Julie screamed at Allen while bursting to her feet. “What makes you so high and mighty that you can defy orders? Trent had to follow orders all the time that he hated, because that’s what a good soldier does! That’s what loyal soldiers do! They follow orders to keep other soldiers alive!”

“I was more than just a soldier, Julie . . .”

Julie’s mouth set rigid as tears began to roll down her red cheeks. They left black trails behind them. “No, you weren’t more than a soldier. Because if you were, that means that you were better than Trent, and you’re not half the man that Trent was. I can’t believe that I almost tainted his memory by thinking you were even close to being what he was to me . . .”

Allen tried to stand from his bed, but immediately became lightheaded from the sudden movement. “Julie,” he started as he fell back down onto the bed, “please, don’t go. I can’t make it up to you, but try to understand—”

“NO!” Julie turned in his doorway and burned hatred through him with her eyes. “You understand this—You ARE a traitor! Whether you’re a traitor or not to the government, I’ll let God decide. But I know you’re a traitor to Trent, and a traitor to me! If I ever see you step foot in my shop again, I *will* call the FBI, or CIA, or whoever it takes! I’ll turn you in, whoever you are, so stay away! Don’t ever talk to me or look at me again!”

Allen’s wound may have been healing, but after seeing Julie storm from his room, he had a new injury that he was sure would never heal. All the engineering in the world couldn’t help him now.



“It’s been days . . .” Allen muttered.

“I know, Allen, but things take time. You sure you don’t want to tell me exactly what happened?” Sophie responded as she handed him his coffee from across the breakfast bar.

Allen reached out and felt the warmth against the palm of his hand. It was the only warmth he’d felt since Julie had left his life forever. He was sitting on a stool with his back to the living room and faced Sophie while she was preparing lunch in the kitchen.

“I’m sorry, ma—er, Miss Sophie, but saying what I had to tell Julie was hard enough. I’d prefer not to get into it again. I had to say it to her; it was a matter of duty.”

“You always do your duty, don’t you?” Sophie stated rather matter-of-factly as she dropped noodles into boiling water.

“No, I don’t,” Allen seethed with self-hatred.

Sophie turned around from the stove and reached her hand out to Allen’s. She felt the heat left over from the coffee cup on his skin and confirmed, “You do follow your duty, Allen. You may not follow the duties given to you by some, but you follow the duty given to you by your most important superior.” At the conclusion of this statement, Sophie purposefully gazed at something.

Allen followed her gaze and saw it resting on his Bible that was comfortably next to him on the counter. It was open to the place he had last left off reading.

“What are you saying?” Allen prodded.

“I’m saying that sometimes you have to follow your heart. If you’re meant to be something, and you succeed at that something, your heart will be at ease. If you’re meant to be something else, your heart will pine until you are that something else. One thing may not be more right or wrong than the other may. You are what you are, Allen, and you can’t be anything else. Whether Julie agrees with what you are or not, you must remain true to your calling.”

“I no longer heed my calling,” Allen said below his breath.

“I hope that’s not true,” Franklin’s voice interrupted from behind.

Allen and Sophie turned to see Franklin climbing the steps from the shop below. He quickly ran to the television set and demanded that Allen and Sophie come see what’s on.

“Who’s tending the store?” Sophie asked.

“Store’s closed!” Franklin exclaimed.

“Why?” Allen inquired.

“Because the Mayor’s ordered all of Old Downtown to close up and take cover!”

Franklin found the channel he wanted and pointed to the set. Sophie and Allen peered at the screen and saw a huge, human-shaped rock trudging along, tossing cars and busses and anything else that got in its way to the side.

“What is that?” Allen spouted with grave concern.

“That, young man, is what Purgatory Station dubbed ‘The Nether Man’ long before you or I were born,” Franklin answered very seriously.

“What is it?” Sophie questioned.

Franklin shrugged his shoulders and returned, "It's just what it looks like, a giant rock-man!"

"Is it hostile?" Allen interrogated with his eyes narrowed. He could feel the calling.

"Depends on your idea of 'hostile,' Allen." Franklin could see the perplexity in Allen's eyes so he gave a quick update, "This thing shows up every once in a while and wreaks havoc on the city. Last time Purgatory Station saw him was in 1901, so when I say every once in a while, I'm serious! He's never been stopped; he just surfaces out of the Atlantic, crosses our island, and then walks right back into the ocean! It's like he's some kind of a nomad."

"What's his purpose?"

"He doesn't appear to have one," Franklin said in reply to Allen's question. "You know I've been known to keep up with this city's Colossals and Mega-Mals—"

Sophie interjected with a huffy, "That's an understatement!"

Franklin, having chosen to apparently ignore her, continued on, "This fella first showed up in the late seventeen hundreds, back when this city was just a house of detention for what the Puritans felt were the worst of irredeemable sinners. He's never been seen anywhere else but here. Legend has it that he was a fella that killed himself on the north side of the island in what's now Wilderness Park next to the Historic District. Problem is, he supposedly committed suicide on a cursed rock. According to the myth, his soul became

trapped within the rock and he's been stuck inside of it ever since, doomed to wander the island and the surrounding ocean floors for all eternity."

"You're serious?" Allen asked incredulously with an eyebrow raised.

"I'm as serious as bulletproof skin," Franklin responded with a smirk.

"Can it be stopped?"

"Never has in the past—"

Franklin stopped talking as he noticed Allen's attention distracted by the newscast on the television. On the screen the reporter was talking about a new Colossal dubbed "Anthem" that showed up on the scene a few minutes ago to challenge the Nether Man.

Allen saw the black-suited agent with a big red "A" on his chest and a blue cape try to punch the Nether Man. It wasn't quite without satisfaction when he saw Anthem go flying into a building after the Nether Man responded to Anthem's blow with a very solid roundhouse.

Anthem next tried bullets against the rock-man with his forearm mounted semi-automatic weapon. That was to no avail as well, and for Anthem's efforts the Nether Man tossed a bus in his direction.

Allen wondered how long it would take Anthem to regain consciousness.

"Fella's going about it the wrong way," Franklin mumbled.

"What do you mean?" Allen asked.

"The Nether Man can't be stopped. You just have to get out of his way and hope his tour of the city isn't going to be a long one. There's no record of it being a murderer outright, to kill simply for the sake of killing, but it has killed

before. Lots of folks in the past have been killed simply because they were in the way. That Colossal should be trying to get people away, not taking it on man-to-man.”

“He’s no Colossal,” Allen grunted with his lips in a snarl.

“Well, if that’s the case, I think we could use a Colossal who respects life on the scene,” Sophie uttered directly to Allen.

“I think Allen could use some rest, don’t you?” Franklin asked his live-in lady-friend.

“Yes, I think so. Allen, why don’t you go take a nap and rest that head up of yours. We won’t wake you up for a few hours, so don’t worry about us coming into your room. Be sure to take the bandage off before you get into bed, though.”

Allen smiled at the old couple as he got up from the couch.

“You’re sure there’s no way that thing can be stopped?”

“Allen, I’ve told you everything I know about it. How do you stop a soul encased within a cursed rock? I have no idea. I just hope whoever helps this Anthem fella can get the people out of its way!”

A soul within a cursed rock. Allen could relate.



He entered his bedroom and slid the bed off to the side. Once the bed was out of the way, he removed the loose floorboards and took out his black satchel. After unzipping it, he pulled out the red, white, and blue uniform. He then pulled out his gauntlets, followed by his boots, and finally, the G-Repulser.

They’ll kill him to get it back.

But not before he saved some lives.



The skylight on top of Franklin Trover's building was thrust open and Freedom burst through it towards the mayhem of the Nether Man.



The bus was on top of him in such a way that he could get no leverage to lift it. Any other members of MAP may have had concerns that they'd be able to lift it in the first place, but Anthem, or Agent 0104, never had any problems in the "I can" department. Even so, he was going to need some sort of a foothold if he was going to budge it.

"Damn it," he muttered to himself. "First time out in this clown suit, and I've been buried alive by a bus thrown by a rock-man. Black Ops is where I belong, not this garbage."

He gave one last push with all his might, and the bus amazingly lifted from his chest. It was quickly tipped to the right, and Anthem found himself staring up at a big red "F."

"You're dead," Anthem growled.

"I guess I've been resurrected," Freedom answered with an uncommon arrogance.

Anthem brushed the debris from him and stood up. He was only slightly taller than Freedom.

"I'll deal with you after the freak," Anthem assured as he turned and walked away from Freedom, the overturned bus, and the rest of the chaos that the Nether Man had left in his wake.

"You won't be able to stop him with sheer force," Freedom called out.

Freedom knew exactly what was happening when he saw Anthem stop in his tracks, glance back at him, and say, "I'll stop him. By any means necessary." The more experienced Colossal knew that this was a make or break mission for Anthem. He had to stop the Nether Man. Freedom realized that this was his official debut as far as the nation was concerned, and if Anthem was going to replace America's greatest Colossal, that being himself, then he couldn't afford to take a loss. This made Anthem very dangerous in Freedom's eyes. Anthem would win, no matter what the cost. Even if it took the deaths of a few civilians to guarantee his victory.

Freedom lifted off thanks to the G-Repulser and landed directly in front of Anthem. He stared into the star-shaped visor that gave him his own reflection in return and snarled, "I won't let any civilians be harmed in this mission, Agent 0104. Whatever you've got planned, you better clear it with me first."

Anthem roughly shoved his way past Freedom and hissed, "You hold no rank, traitor, so don't give me orders. But if you say that nothing can stop that thing, well, that leaves me no choice. I'm calling in an air strike."

Freedom's eyes grew huge while he quickly took an inventory of the human loss that was about to happen. There were camera crews and reporters everywhere, not to mention all of the people taking cover in the buildings along the surrounding blocks. Although this inventory took only seconds, when he returned his gaze to Anthem, he saw the vicious agent pulling his comm-link in closer. Without a moment's hesitation, Freedom shot out a red-gauntlet, turned Anthem around so that he faced Freedom, and then tore the comm-link loose

from Anthem's headpiece. Any communication with whoever was giving and receiving instructions from Anthem was now terminated.

Anthem raised his weapon to Freedom's chest and stuck the barrel right to his heart.

"Look around you, Agent," Freedom muttered. "You're my replacement, yes, but you don't want the people to see you actually execute my needing replaced, do you?"

Anthem slowly turned his head and saw the camera crews filming his very move. "You're lucky, traitor . . ."



"It's so great to see him again!" Nick shouted with joy.

Julie, Nick, Sophie, and Franklin sat in the living room of Julie's apartment above her shop, Carmah's Cup. Franklin insisted that they take refuge together, whatever her feelings may be about Allen. Julie didn't even ask Franklin where Allen was, her hatred seemed to run that deep.

"This is Sydney Attwater with WPUG news, where the legendary Nether Man has finally returned, along with Freedom, the long-absent Colossal. We also have a new Colossal on the scene, but we have yet to learn his name. It would appear that this new Colossal and Freedom appear to be acquainted, but, judging from their body language, it is not a friendly acquaintance. Indeed, the blonde man in black went so far as to point his weapon against Freedom's chest," the reporter from the television accounted.

"I wonder what caliber the fella's got in his gun," Franklin whispered into Sophie's ear. Sophie gave him a very concerned look in return.

“Julie, isn’t it great?” Nick yelled with glee to his sister-in-law. “I knew he’d be back! Just when Purgatory Station needed him most!”

Julie only let out a disgusted sigh as a response.

The news reporter continued, “Apparently having settled their differences, Freedom and the other Colossal have both lifted off and are heading south on Geoff Avenue to catch up with the Nether Man. The Mayor is urging all citizens in Old Downtown to seek refuge. Remember that it has been one hundred and three years since the Nether Man was last seen. There are many in this city that doubted its existence at all! Well, as this reporter can attest, the Nether Man is very real! This is Sydney Attwater—”

“South on Geoff Avenue, they’re heading right for us!” Nick smiled widely. “Maybe we’ll get to see them in person! I’m going down to the shop for a better look!”

“You’re staying right here!” Julie commanded with stone in her voice.

“But, Julie, it could be my only chance to see a hero! Besides Trent, I’ve never seen a real hero!” Nick begged.

Julie mumbled, “You won’t see a real one today, either.”

Franklin and Sophie squeezed each other’s hands, not sure how to take Julie’s last comment.



Freedom and Anthem flew in low at thirty miles per hour. Anthem wanted to hit the Nether Man high from behind and have Freedom hit him low, but Freedom had to convince the other man that would do nothing but give them each a concussion. For some reason, Anthem refused to accept that the Nether Man

was made of pure rock. Freedom supposed that it would be difficult for a man that hadn't been fighting Mega-Mals like the Black Hole or the Fog Master for years to accept that there existed enemies that were more than just flesh and blood wielding man-made weapons.

"What is your tactic, then, traitor? After all, if you hadn't destroyed my comm-link, this thing would now be a pile of debris."

"And so would most of Old Downtown, Anthem! Do you even think of the lives at stake?" Freedom argued.

"This coming from the man who is responsible for a war's continuance?" Anthem assaulted with an obnoxious smirk.

Freedom did not give a repartee.

Anthem and Freedom flew over the Nether Man's head and landed twenty meters ahead of it. They both turned and faced the monster and waited for his approach. Freedom could see that the creature was not angry, it was not in a rage. It simply walked. If an empty vehicle happened to be in its path, he tossed it aside with a shrug. That was the story with anything that got in its way, and Freedom was there to make sure that nobody found themselves in the Nether Man's path. He looked around and saw no one on the street, and that was good. Unfortunately, he did note several faces pressed up against the windows of the surrounding buildings as though they were watching a sporting event. Should the Nether Man deviate from its course of following Geoff Avenue and begin infiltrating buildings, Freedom didn't dare think of the casualties.

“What this thing’s story, traitor?” Anthem yelled over the explosion of a car’s gas tank igniting. Freedom could not see if the other agent was shocked to observe the Nether Man emerge from the flames.

“Supposedly, it’s a cursed rock with a man’s soul trapped within.”

Anthem turned his head and stared at Freedom.

“I’m serious,” the dark haired man grumbled. “NO!”

Freedom saw another car get tossed out of the creature’s path, but this one was heading straight for a diner with many patrons pressed to the windows. In an instant, Freedom lifted from the ground and sped to intercept the car. There was no way he could catch it with its momentum and no leverage of his own to be had, so he instead opted to ram it from the side and force it to land harmlessly on the sidewalk. The plan worked perfectly, except for the fact that when he thought ‘harmlessly,’ he failed to take into account the impact damage to his shoulder. By his count, though, no one had died . . . yet.

Freedom waved to the people in the diner with his remaining good arm and then turned to soar back to the Nether Man. As he neared it, he was disgusted to see Anthem pick up a motorcycle and throw it into the Nether Man. It did not even slow the creature’s stride as it broke into a million pieces.

“Follow me!” Freedom cried as he swooped past Anthem. Anthem lifted off thanks to his own G-Repulser and followed in Freedom’s slipstream. They finally landed and turned toward the creature that was now a quarter of a mile behind them. It was time to regroup and develop some semblance of strategy. Freedom had a long shot of an idea.

He did not notice that they were standing directly in front of Carmah's Cup.

"First Redeemer is two blocks west of here, Agent. Bring me back a priest!" Freedom ordered.

"What?" Anthem blurted out in confusion.

"We've got to stop this thing. The city's only getting more populated; if we let it run its path, it could return later and cause even more loss of life. Today we stop it."

"What does a priest have to do with that?" Anthem hatefully roared with cynicism.

Just then Freedom saw a fire truck speed into the Nether Man at the intersection of Geoff and O'Neil. He'd heard the sirens, but there were sirens going off everywhere from the damaged vehicles and buildings, the fires left in the creature's wake, and as a general warning to the civilians. The truck accidentally engulfed the creature, and Freedom's eyes nearly grew watery as he realized that the Nether Man had just claimed its first lives during this excursion.

"Get the priest!" Freedom barked and then hurled himself towards the truck.

Freedom did not see Anthem give him the finger before flying west in search of First Redeemer and the priest. Freedom only saw the men that were still alive trapped within the fire truck. The trick was going to be to dislodge the Nether Man before it began thrashing the truck from its body. Once it started pulling the truck from itself, the casualties on that truck would be even more horrendous.

Freedom banked right and then turned sharply left. He would ram the truck from its front and hopefully push it backwards, dislodging the monster stuck within its grill. He'd just have to be sure to lead with his left shoulder this time.

The impact was devastating to Freedom's other shoulder, but the truck was freed, the Nether Man was released, and lives were saved. Freedom could do nothing as the Nether Man continued his trek southbound until after he had checked on all the surviving firemen. After making sure they were relatively fine, he pulled back the mangled frame so that they could retrieve their fallen comrades. They quickly covered their brothers and then went to work on the surrounding fires. Duty called them to action, no matter what their emotions demanded. Freedom knew that they were the true Colossals of the world. He quickly bent to one knee and prayed over the fallen men, and then he followed his duty as well.

As Freedom approached the Nether Man again, he experienced fear in a form he had never dealt with before. How could he not have noticed his surroundings? The Nether Man was just meters away from Carmah's Cup and Trover's Fine Literature. That is not what put fear's icy scythe through his heart, however. The true fear came from seeing Nick popping out of the front door of Julie's coffee shop. The true fear came from seeing the Nether Man toss another car, this time in a direct course for the redheaded boy who was waving too frantically at Freedom to notice the yellow sports car jetting towards him. Freedom pushed the G-Repulser to its limits as it kicked into high gear, and he prayed he could go three for three.

He knew his shoulders couldn't take another shot, so he'd have to do this the old fashioned way. Could he catch a car standing flat-footed? He'd find out soon enough.

"Oh my gosh, Freedom, I can't believe it's yo—ahhhhh!"

Freedom was thankful to the CEO of the sky, as Franklin put it, for having Nick prop the door to Carmah's Cup open with his back as he waved like a madman. He was able to land, push the boy into the coffee shop as gently as he could, which in this case would surely result in bruised ribs for the redhead, and turn to face the impending car.

He didn't even have time to get his hands up.

The car hit him directly in the chest and pinned him against the doorframe of Julie's shop. To say that he was in pain could easily have been the biggest understatement since the last time the Nether Man had visited.

He heard the boy crying from inside the shop, but he knew the fifteen-year-old would be fine. He had no such sure feelings about his own outcome, however. Especially since the Nether Man was now finally and impossibly stopped dead in his tracks.

Anthem had dropped the priest right in front of the creature and then looked at Freedom for further instruction. Freedom could tell by Anthem's body language that it was killing him to take orders from Freedom, and he understood that this would be the last time that the other agent would ever take commands from him.

What surprised Freedom more than anything, however, was the priest! The priest actually had his fists raised expertly as though he was going to attempt to combat the Nether Man!

“No, Father! You’re not here to fight it!” Freedom yelled from the wreck of the car around him.

“What the hell’s he supposed to do, then?” Anthem shouted back as he was in the middle of reloading his gauntlet’s gun.

“I’m a pastor!” the pastor hollered immediately after Anthem, and then followed with, “And you watch your language.”

Freedom would have laughed if the situation was not so serious, and if he hadn’t noticed his vision going black around the edges.

“Pastor, tell it to move on!”

The middle-aged man known to his congregation as Pastor Irons returned with, “What are you talking about?”

Freedom, fighting to stay conscious, clamored back, “It’s got the soul of a man who killed himself stuck in it. Tell it to move on; tell it that its time in Purgatory is now over!”

A light seemed to go on in Pastor Irons’ eyes. Anthem seemed more confused than ever.

Freedom watched with dimming eyesight as the pastor lifted his cross up into the air while the Nether Man lifted its great, stony arms high above the pastor’s head. Anthem also lifted his left arm, as well, and prepared to let loose a volley of useless bullets.

And then Freedom went dark.



“You may address me as Anthem, and you’ll be seeing me whenever a Mega-Mal such as this one appears.”

“Anthem, are you and Freedom partners?” he heard Sydney Attwater ask.

Freedom slowly opened his eyes to see Anthem giving an interview to a reporter. He saw this over the top of the car that was still pinning him against the doorframe of Carmah’s Cup. Anthem had him. He was trapped. They wouldn’t have to terminate him in public now, they’d just show up, haul him away, and no one would ever see him again.

It was worth it, though. He couldn’t handle another death of a Carmah on his soul.

Apparently his plan had worked. The Nether Man was in the exact same position it had been in when he had passed out. The eerie brimstone light that had been glowing from its eyes was now gone, and Freedom hoped that meant that the soul that was powering them was gone as well. Gone where, he couldn’t say for sure. But gone, nonetheless.

Freedom closed his eyes and awaited *his* outcome.

“Negative. Freedom is no partner of mine,” Anthem informed with rigid dislike in response to Sydney Attwater’s most recent question. “In fact, there’s something that you all should know about Freedom. This man is nothing more than—”

“A hero!” a new voice shouted out. “This man, Freedom, is a hero, and we should all thank him!”

He smelled her wonderful perfume before he even opened his eyes.

“This man saved my brother-in-law’s life. The least we could do is free him from that car!”

Freedom perceived a vision of beauty crawling out from the huge broken window of Carmah’s Cup. This was the same beauty that was doing her best to get him away from Anthem.

He heard a groan and saw that Pastor Irons had been pushing on the car all along, but to no avail. Still, he wondered why a middle-aged pastor would have biceps the size of his own bulging out of his shirt sleeves. Freedom took note.

He next saw Franklin, Sophie, and a bruised Nick crawl through the window as well. They all went to work on the car. Even Sidney Attwater stopped her interview of Anthem as she and her camera crew lent a hand.

“Don’t I know you?” Freedom heard Franklin ask. He assumed it was directed towards him as an inside joke.

“I don’t think so,” he heard Pastor Irons return quickly.

“You could help, you know,” Julie called out to Anthem.

Freedom watched in amusement as Anthem realized that while his interview with Sidney Attwater may be postponed; there were still plenty of cameras recording the situation. How could the nation’s newest Colossal not help the nation’s favorite Colossal?

Anthem steamed at the civilians to get out of the way, and then he tore the wreckage, rather barbarously, from Freedom’s body.

Finally, Freedom could breathe again.

Sydney Attwater was immediately taking advantage of the situation. “So, Freedom and Anthem, seemingly a rather patriotic pair! I wonder if you might give me an exclusive interview about your battle against and final defeat of the Nether Man.”

“Why don’t you continue on with Anthem, he did all of the exasperating work. I just caught a few cars,” Freedom said with a smile. “Besides, I think I need to say hello to a friend.”

Freedom chuckled as he read a rather rude command from Agent Anthem's lips while Sydney continued her interview.

“How are you?” Freedom asked as he approached his friend.

“Oh, my gosh! It’s you! It’s really you!” Nick stammered.

Freedom beamed at the boy even though his insides were on fire. The boy seemed not to even register his own bruised ribs after Freedom had tossed him away from the door.

“Nick, try to calm down,” Julie coldly ordered her brother-in-law.

Nick looked at her in confusion as she stood with Sophie and Franklin, and then questioned, “But Julie, he saved my life! If you can’t get excited over your hero, who can you get excited over?”

“I’m not a hero, Nick,” Freedom clarified. “I’m just a man who tries to do the right thing. Sometimes the consequences of my decisions are good, sometimes they aren’t. But my conscience is my only compass, and I have to live by it.”

Nick looked up at Freedom in obvious bewilderment. Julie, on the other hand, could not bring herself to meet the eyes of the Colossal known publicly as Freedom, nor could she return the gaze of the man known as Allen Hemmingway.

“But you are a hero, Freedom,” Nick affirmed as he admired the towering man. “You’re just like my brother, Trent. I want to be just like both of you someday!”

Freedom put his hand on Nick’s shoulder and replied, “It’s an honor for you to compare me to your brother, Nick. But trust me, he’s the real hero. Remember that.”

Freedom looked at Julie one last time and felt his heart drop as she refused to meet his pleading eyes. He then nodded to Franklin and Sophie who waved to him in return. He next looked at Nick one last time and said, “This country owes men and women like your brother for the sacrifices they make on a routine basis, Nick. Thanks to you and all the others who give us their family members so that we may live on in freedom.”

A tear fell from Nick’s eyes and he whispered something that only Freedom could hear.

Freedom turned away from those he considered his family and called out to Sidney Attwater, “We’ll have to do it another time, Ms. Attwater. I’ve got to fly.” And with that, Freedom lifted off and disappeared high into the evening’s glowing sky.

“This interview is over,” Anthem snapped at Sydney as he started after Freedom.

“Nick,” Julie began as she took note of Anthem’s action, “why don’t you go ask our newest Colossal for his autograph?”

“Great idea!” Nick replied as he ran off towards Anthem.

Julie, Sophie, and Franklin watched, bemused, as Nick and several other neighborhood children delayed Anthem’s pursuit of the wounded Freedom. Sydney Attwater was even kind enough to give the children paper so that each and every one of them could get a coveted autograph from the nation’s newest Colossal.

Anthem looked as though he could spit venom.



A few days later, Julie heard the buzz signal the arrival of a new customer and left her pastries to approach the front counter. Her heart sank as she saw the man walk through the construction workers that were rebuilding the front of her shop and stand before her.

“Thank you, Julie, for helping me out with Anthem the other day. You kept me from being taken in. I’ll always remember that.”

“I did it for Nick,” Julie answered coldly. “I couldn’t stand him losing you and Trent within the same year. I didn’t do it for you. Just remember that.”

Allen shifted uncomfortably, but he continued nevertheless, “What I said, about the nation owing you and Nick a debt of gratitude for giving up your loved one to us, I meant that.”

Julie said nothing.

“You know now why I couldn’t kill that man. Maybe I was just another soldier who was supposed to follow orders, but what would children like Nick think if their hero had become an assassin? I know that Trent had to kill, but he killed in battle against forces that were battling in return. I don’t think Trent was the sort of man that could have been an assassin. I don’t think he could have been a cold-blooded killer.”

Julie said nothing.

“I’m so sorry, Julie. If I could trade spots with Trent, I would. I would in a heartbeat. I wish with every fiber of my being that he was standing in front of you right now, instead of me. I’d give up anything to make that happen. But even with all my abilities, there’s nothing I can do to make him return.”

Julie said nothing.

“I can’t change the decisions that I’ve made. Trent is gone. If you want to think it’s my fault, then I will bear that burden. I owe men like Trent that much. But, Franklin and Sophie insist that I continue to stay with them. Now that Anthem has made his official debut and they botched one attempt on my life, I don’t think I need to worry about them coming back. They’ll still be pursuing Freedom, but I think they’ll leave Allen Hemmingway alone. I need to find out more about Walter. I need to find out more about myself, and I need to see what it’s like to try to live a normal life. But I can’t live next door to you, Julie, knowing that you’re hating me the entire time. Please, I’m begging you, can you forgive me? I’m not saying that I want you to, um, to feel the way I thought you were

starting to feel for me. I just have to know that you don't hate me. Can you tell me that?"

"Get out of my shop."

Allen turned with a tear in his eye and left Carmah's Cup.

Julie turned with a tear in her eye and went back to her pastries.

To Be Continued ...

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