

In Justice's Shadow

Robert Alan

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Introduction

The history of myth reveals the history of our true selves. It embodies our hopes and ideals in our heroes, and it showcases our fears and shortcomings, not only in WHAT our heroes battle, but in HOW they battle. With larger than life heroic virtues, and equally prodigious flaws, we entrust to our heroes our very essence.

Even today modern mythic heroes continue to serve us as our mirror, finding expression in a host of media from literature to television and movies, but their most dramatic expression has always been found within the ‘four color’ worlds of our comic books. Though much maligned and mocked over the years, no other medium has ever tapped into the zeitgeist so directly as comic books. From the simple victories and messages of hopes portrayed within their early pages, to the insightful social commentary and blatant revenge fantasies that became so prevalent in their latter years, the pulse of our culture could always be found within them. Given that the origin of their popularity was forged within the crucible of World War II, it is particularly ironic that popularity came to a jarring, and perhaps even final end within the nuclear fires of World War III.

Of course many other cherished and dear commodities found their ends in World War III as well—monuments, landmarks, buildings, and, most tragically of all, lives—so the addition of comic books to that list would likely have been little more than a minor footnote of the war had not so many been obsessed with directing their hatred toward them. Comic books had survived derision, religious condemnation, and even the infamous ‘comic code,’ only to be undone by the icons that inspired them. In the aftermath of World War III, humanity needed a scapegoat, something to direct their horror and rage against lest they turn that anger inward and find themselves equally to blame. Comic

books were not only an easy target, they were also a lot safer than directly blaming the real life suprahumans whose exploits once formed the basis of comic book sales.

Gods or devils, angels or demons, 'superheroes' or 'supervillains'—call them what you will—titans once again stride the Earth, and before any of us can truly come to terms with the glories and the horrors their presence has wrought, we must understand how it all began.

Depression and World War: The Rise of the Mystery Men

No one theory has ever satisfactorily explained why people with strange powers beyond that of mortal men (or at the very least a strange predilection toward dressing in theatrical accouterments as they dispensed their individual definitions of justice) began appearing in such force by the late 1930s. The most common theories for the powers involve increasing amounts of industrial pollution and background radiation, and no two psychological theories has ever agreed upon the source of the predilection. Truthfully, given the dizzying variety of case subjects, even ten theories would be hard-pressed to account for the origin of more than a modest percentage of the suprahuman population. To make matters murkier, it must be admitted that the widespread interest in the source of the suprahuman phenomenon is of comparatively modern origin, however odd that may seem to the younger and fresher minds of today.

What must be understood regarding the debut of the 'mystery men' of the 1930s is that the reports of their activities, abilities and motivations were, in every sense, shrouded in mystery; for years many believed them to be nothing more than urban legends. It should be further understood that one thing was abundantly clear regarding the mystery men, be they real or imagined: namely, they brought with them the warmth of hope to a world that was shivering beneath the lengthening shadows of World War II.

By the time mystery men and their exploits began to appear on newsreels around the globe, the public need for them was at

its peak. Inexpensive to produce and distribute, comic books based on the deeds of the mystery men and the soon to follow 'superheroes' quickly became recognized as an effective (and lucrative) media in maintaining home front morale, paving the way for the radio shows and movie serials that followed. Some decried this as blatant profiteering and propaganda, but such accusations impacted neither popularity nor sales.

In the light of the superheroes' usefulness to the war effort (and to marketers' profits), suffice it to say that questions, of any stripe, were not encouraged. While there were some discreet government think tanks of the time that delved into issues surrounding the suprahuman phenomenon, as of this writing their results remain classified.

Post-War Recovery: The Fall of the Masked Crusaders

As the world recovered from WW II, fascination with comic books lessened as interest in their subject matter waned. After years of the horror and chaos of war, the public yearned more than anything for life to return to 'normal', and flying men and super strong women had no place in their normal world. For the most part, the superheroes vanished into obscurity. Some, content with a job well done, went voluntarily, while some were driven away by groups such as the McCarthy Commission and others who felt that masks and secret identities were tools of 'the enemy'.

The exact identity of the 'enemy' varied from country to country, of course, but the paranoia of the 1950s Cold War affected superheroes worldwide. The only heroes who remained active during this time were those who remained out of critical reach, whether through virtue of being far too trusted and beloved, or of being far too adept at working from the shadows. Fully aware of the precariousness of their position, neither group was inclined to allow themselves to be examined too closely, particularly as horrific rumors circulated that some of their 'retired' companions had ended their days screaming in secret government laboratories. All that may be certain is that there

was continuing government research into the suprahuman phenomenon; the details remain, of course, classified.

Social Evolution: The Rise and Fall of Heroic Consciousness

With the dawning of the turbulent 1960s the idea of being different returned to the popular zeitgeist, heralding the return of the superheroes. A few of the surviving old guard of heroes—their deeds having become legend enough to restore luster to the reputation of the suprahumans—led the way by reclaiming their former place in the public eye (as well as its heart). But when they returned, they did not come alone. They brought along with them a new generation of heroes consisting of the previous generation's children, protégé, and namesakes. The world, suffering as it was from violence and social upheaval, welcomed them all, and for a time it seemed that once again the heroes were destined to restore a world's hope. Unfortunately, the ideologies of this era were too numerous and conflicting, and no one could seem to agree on what that hope should be. Factions began to polarize.

As the year slipped into the 1970s, the sidekicks began striking out on their own, in part to establish their own identities, and in part to distance themselves from their mentors. Despite their good intentions, many of the old guard had simply lost touch with the vocal younger generation of the 1960s for whom WW II was nothing more than a chapter in their history books. The first serious, unclassified, studies of the suprahuman phenomenon began at this time, but their results were so contradictory that the field became relegated as yet another branch of parapsychology.

By the 1980s the 'younger' generation of suprahumans was no longer so young: some now had children of their own, and some, having failed to obtain peace and love, had opted instead for money and security. Disillusionment with ideals had reached an all-time high, and so had crime rates, and in response a generation of a 'new kind of hero' began appearing, one which took a much harsher stance than either their daring or their

socially conscious predecessors. Once again, a desperate world welcomed the appearance of these 'heroes,' but this time they were viewed less as a source of hope and more as the only way to "win the war on crime and drugs." Criticism of this generation's actions, both within and outside the suprahuman community was sharp, but ultimately came to naught. Perhaps significantly, while the comic industry underwent several renaissance periods and expanded significantly into other media during this time, such ventures were, in truth, valiant attempts to revive flagging sales.

By the time the 1990s were coming to a close, the world had reached crisis point. Fully three generations of suprahumans strode the globe, each one more numerous than the last. Turf wars among the latest generation had become commonplace, with humanity often caught in the crossfire. With increasing frequency, the 'heroic' squabbles went too far, sometimes dragging their hosting countries into unwelcome, actual wars. The problems were obvious, the solutions less so, and the U.N. began having emergency sessions on how to prevent humanity's extinction at the hands of its one-time protectors.

Some of the older suprahumans stood with humanity against the unruly tide they had inadvertently released, while others, seeing the matter as an 'internal' one, attempted to implement their own solutions. In the end though, neither approach succeeded in doing anything but further inflaming the situation. As conflicts began erupting around the world it was only a matter of time before things reached nuclear proportions, and in October of 1999, the inevitable finally occurred. The number of nuclear weapons that were successfully deployed was mercifully few, but it was hardly for lack of trying.

Excerpt from "In Justice's Shadow," by Professor Arnold J. Masters

Prologue

Peace is the illusion experienced within the reality of endless war.

The American superhero “The Raven”

Only those incapable of peace scorn peace.

The American superhero “Scion”

Placidly twinkling stars—seeming more like shining fruit placed barely beyond reach than the distant maelstroms of fire spoken of by science—hung low above the ancient monoliths of Stonehenge. Elsewhere across the earth much was disturbed, yet here nothing marred the tranquility of the clear October sky. In fact, it was the *nothing* itself that was disturbing, and one need only hear the lamentation of the stones to understand why.

Elsewhere titans battled, exchanging mountain-shattering blows and lethal volleys of energies. Elsewhere terrified world leaders had unleashed their conventional and nuclear arsenals in a desperate attempt to contain the ‘suprahuman situation’ before humanity, or perhaps even all life on Earth, was lost. Elsewhere the sky was lit aflame by explosions that harnessed the power of the very stars themselves. Here, however, silence shrouded the stones like the shadows of the night; not even a distant whisper pierced the frigid air. Here the wind itself was still and mute, and not the slightest blade of chilled grass dared stir.

But there should be sounds, the stones struggled to moan into their unseemly isolation. Sounds of lamentation . . . sounds of joy . . . even the crass sounds of commerce or the mechanical life upon the nearby highway would be welcome by comparison to this blasphemous silence.

But a world in the process of trying to destroy itself has little time to concern itself over blasphemy. Those whose thoughts and

lives were not consumed by the battles around them, found themselves with barely enough thought to spare to seek out loved ones, or shepherd a panicked populace to ‘safe areas’ they all knew in their hearts would be safe no longer should the war zones randomly shift, as they often did. Densely populated cities were of course the prime battle zones, a grim reality made all the grimmer by the fact that these were likewise the most difficult areas to evacuate. Authorities—elected and otherwise—therefore did their best to enforce rapid evacuations through any means available, as every minute of evacuation saved at least as many lives as were lost during that time. Areas surrounding landmarks such as Stonehenge were also considered high risk, but they proved easier to keep clear. Few were those whose faith in crumbling edifices was strong enough to brave the wrath of the raging demigods that might be present, or the wrath of the tightly wound and heavily armed military personnel guarding the perimeters.

Among those few was Arnold Jeffery Masters, born in London, raised in London, and determined to face his final moments anywhere *but* in London.

Still amazed by his own audacity (not to mention luck) at slipping his pale, portly and graying carcass past wide-eyed young men and women with automatic (not to mention loaded) weapons, Masters put one step ahead of another as he carefully kept his head down like he’d seen in the pictures. Wouldn’t his students—the ones that called him nasty names like “tired old cliché” and “pathetic stereotype” just because he lectured in a brown tweed suit like the one he was wearing, or stammered and lost his thoughts during class, or sometimes forgot where he placed his glasses—wouldn’t they be shocked to see him now? Masters, by his own admission, hadn’t lived much of a life: he had no real friends, an uninspired career, an unfaithful ex-wife, and children who pointedly ignored him. To his credit though, when news broke of the battles and evacuations, his first thoughts were of his family. He would have phoned them had they given him their numbers, and for a time he refused to evacuate and sat waiting for . . . someone . . . anyone . . . to call.

For the first hour he worried that they might not be able to call. For the second he told himself they were busy and would call when they could. After six hours he admitted the truth to himself: no one *cared* enough to call. He had wanted to ask himself when his life had gotten so pathetic, but the sad truth, he knew, was it had been that way almost since the beginning. The last time he even remembered being happy was in nineteen-sixty-something; he had felt light, perhaps even free, laughing and drinking with some long-haired hippie girl at Stonehenge.

Summoning up a girl was a bit more than Arnold could manage under the circumstances, but he *did* have beer, a car, and—who knew? Maybe some long-haired hippies would be at Stonehenge chanting tonight, of all nights, in hopes of staving off the end of the world. Arnold doubted it would do any good if they were, but even if he ended up drinking alone, if the world truly was coming to an end, Stonehenge was as good a place to die as any. Knowing he still had quite a hike to reach the circle of stones, he grinned conspiratorially at his beer laden cooler and slipped further away from the military cordon.

Sadly, there were none of Arnold's hippies in attendance, and he was too far away to hear when the ancient stones, pushed beyond their endurance, finally took a stand against the relentless silence and began to sing.

The notes began softly, yet resonantly strong, in a pleadingly plaintive chord that would have made Wagner weep from joy. With a slow crescendo the music grew in volume and fury, keeping time with the dropping of bombs and the exchange of superhuman blows from far across the globe. Between triumphant downbeats it wailed with the crying of a suffering world, turning into a keening cacophony as the heavens boiled and lightning struck the center of the circle again and again and again.

Abruptly the air was filled with one final, blinding flash of lightning and then there was total silence, a silence soon shattered by a tortured bellow of anguish.

From their posts the military personnel shifted uneasily at the distant spectacle, praying that whatever was happening at the monument remained there. Arnold, too, had stopped, cooler still

clutched numbly in one hand, to watch the heavens disgorge their fury. And while the crashing of thunder had obscured the song of the stones, the sudden silence allowed the pained cry to reach Arnold's ears. A prudent man would have turned away. In fact, he likely would have run as fast as he could in the other direction until he collapsed from exhaustion, and all Arnold ever had going for him in life was the fact that he was a prudent man.

And look where it got him.

Unable to express why, Arnold *did* run as fast as he could—toward the stones where he had heard the sounds of someone who might need his help. He was quite certain his foolishness was going to be the death of him, but strangely though, certain death just didn't seem to matter in the face of the fact he'd never been happier or felt more alive than at that very moment. At that moment, for the first time ever, he was *doing* something with his life, and that was all that mattered.

By the time he reached the circle, the sky was again clear. An uneasy calm prevailed, though the air was still charged and the ground itself seemed to grumble in protest. It didn't take Arnold long to locate the source of the disturbance: a naked blond man, skin pale under the starlight, had collapsed to his knees in the center of the circle and was repeatedly pounding the ground. Tremors emanated from where his fists struck, and Arnold was momentarily awed at the spectacle of powdered rock and displaced earth showering the ancient obelisks of Stonehenge.

In another part of the world, the illusion of peace remained unbroken. A lone figure, almost one with the shadows, stood motionless before a security console. The figure was draped in severe black clothing as much as by the darkness itself, with a jet black fedora pulled tightly down upon the figure's head in a way that could almost draw one's eyes away from the lack of a face beneath. While the figure appeared to be doing nothing more than contemplate the panel before it, in reality it was waiting for the systems embedded in its gloves to finish the bypass process. Like

Arnold, the figure was aware that violence was being performed on a global scale, but was much less interested. Great care had been taken to remain uninvolved, and the situation was irrelevant to tonight's objective, except as a distraction for others.

Meanwhile, Arnold was also well beyond being distracted by events in other parts of the world, albeit for a different reason. He'd dropped his cooler and staggered back, cursing himself for his monumental stupidity, but too tired to run for his life. At that moment he just stood there eying the naked man with equally naked horror.

The man, for his part, was eying the cooler and its spilled contents. He had a classic 'barbarian' warrior's build, the very picture of a boy-faced Icelandic pagan god, but there was an obvious sparkle of curious delight in his blue eyes at the sight of the ice and the strange metal cylinders. The wonder of this discovery momentarily eclipsed his other concerns, but his mood sobered abruptly as he realized his discovery only made his current situation that much stranger. The loss of his clothing was of no immediate importance, and the 'loss' of his wounds was a blessing he'd accept now and question later. Even the indentations he had beaten into the ground, something that he was certain was well beyond even his strongest day prior to this one, were of only passing interest to him in light of his true concern.

How had he come here? He knew the stones, of course, knew them enough to know he must have been wandering out of his mind for days, though the gods alone knew how he had managed to make it this far, delirious and naked. Inexplicably he felt a touch of fear, and while the phrase, "Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore!" meant nothing to him at the time, he would later say it fit his sentiments perfectly. For a start, the stones were different than when he'd visited them last, in what was for him no more than some scant months prior during the Spring Solstice. The stones were now . . . older, more worn, and the air also smelled . . . different in a way he didn't care for. And

though he could make out little in the night, the surrounding countryside seemed *very* different, even unnatural.

Still frozen nearby, Arnold didn't care much more for his own situation, and ironically enough, the word unnatural was running through his mind as well. Part of him was screaming at him to run before it was too late, particularly as the naked 'hippie' looked up curiously from the dropped cooler toward where Masters stood shivering. As wise as flight may have been, Arnold stood fast, fearing (rightly) that he didn't have much chance of outrunning a healthy man easily one-third his age, particularly when that man had a demonstrated ability to pulverize rock with his bare fists. Another part of Arnold wryly reminded him he had come to Stonehenge prepared to die, and it looked like he was going to get his chance.

The only pity was that he hadn't managed to have a beer first. Still, drunk or sober, Arnold vowed silently to meet death with more dignity than he ever demonstrated in life and, trembling, met the man's eyes.

The naked man must have seen his fear *and* his defiance, but his only response was a gentle chuckle and a nod that might have been approving. Laying his free hand on his chest, he spoke a single guttural word, "Erik."

Arnold stood dumbfounded.

The naked man repeated the gesture and the word, and then shrugged at Arnold's continued silence. Deciding on a different approach, Erik picked up the cooler and held it out before him. "You dropped this," he said simply, then he smiled in what he hoped was an encouraging manner.

To Arnold Masters the words were gibberish only vaguely reminiscent of his beloved Chaucer, but he understood the tone and allowed himself a sigh of relief.

Elsewhere, the faceless figure (having acquired the objective one minute, thirty-nine seconds under estimate) was departing the premises. The success merely was, neither cause for relief nor

celebration, much like the reports that hostilities elsewhere were coming to an end.

Erik, on the other hand, was being introduced to the marvelous concept of the 'beer can'.

Part One

Cavalier

Chapter I

Obviously Earth survived its third World War, and however much this may have dismayed doomsayers worldwide, at least they could take comfort in the widespread devastation. When the losses were finally tallied, WW III appeared less a war in the classic sense, and more a natural disaster on a global scale, leaving everyone on the planet with their own personal blend of grief, pain, and loss.

But continued survival requires that, however slowly, grief eases, pain fades or becomes easier to bear, and adaptations are made for what cannot be replaced. In other words, unless the world wished to join the dead, it instead had to bury them and get on with the matters of living.

Excerpt from “In Justice’s Shadow,” by Professor Arnold J. Masters.

Arnold Masters, still dressed in brown tweed but now some seven months older and fifty pounds slimmer, glanced down at the open envelope in his hands. He considered the further sacrilege of discarding someone else’s mail before they’d gotten the chance to read it, even getting as far as the waste bin in the tiny kitchen of his recently sublet efficiency apartment in New York City before the feeling subsided, replaced by the firm notion that giving into the temptation simply would not be proper. While some might have commended him for that, Masters himself, having already transgressed as far as opening and reading someone else’s mail, felt more like a weak-willed old fool than a paragon of virtue. Heaving a rueful sigh, he directed his voice toward the living room.

“Erik, my boy, a letter arrived for you today.”

“Uh-huh,” was Erik’s only response as he continued to lounge upon the black leather living room sofa. The ‘boy’ was

now clothed in blue sweatpants and a white T-shirt, looking more than anything like a California surfer on Spring Break. Surrounding him was an oasis of pizza, junk food, and other general clutter amidst Master's otherwise painfully neat apartment. Erik's attention was, as usual, fixed firmly upon the wondrous images playing across the television screen before him.

Taking a deep breath, Masters tried again, this time putting some now accustomed steel into his voice. "Erik!"

Erik startled, then quickly pressed the pause button on the silver remote dangling from one hand. On the screen a man in a purple waistcoat stopped mid note in his song about imagination as Erik turned to face the Professor through the open space above the drink bar that divided the two rooms. "Yes, what?" Erik's face and voice conveyed more interest than irritation at the interruption.

"Now that I have your undivided attention," Masters began in an overly genteel voice. "You have a letter." He waved the envelope in his hand for emphasis.

Erik frowned. "I thought we'd moved past me reading 'zhunkmail' as a learning drill." Strict practice had polished Erik's proficiency with 21st century English, giving him, for the most part, a clipped newscaster tone with only occasional hints of other accents. His pronunciation of "junk mail" was one of those hints, and Masters bristled at the sound of it.

"Junk mail, Erik, not 'zhunkmail,'" he corrected primly. "And it is not one word, but two. Make it sound as such."

"Junk . . . mail," Erik repeated with elaborate slowness, then a mischievous smile lit his face. "Why . . . are . . . we . . . in—ter—rup—ting . . . my . . . mo—vie . . . ov—er . . . junk . . . mail?"

Masters looked to the heavens for strength, but gave a good-natured chuckle in the process. "Because this isn't about junk mail, Erik," he explained before a worried frown touched his lips. "It could be rather serious, in fact."

Erik pressed the power button on the remote, snapping the screen into blackness. Looking concerned, he sprang off the couch (scattering some more junk food in the process) and moved over to the bar. "What is it then?"

Masters slid the envelope across the counter toward Erik. "It is from the W.I.A."

The acronym meant nothing to Erik, but the Professor's somber face and grim tone (as well as his failure to reprimand Erik for making a mess) gave sufficient evidence that the matter was "serious" indeed. Despite this, or more accurately because of this, Erik responded with the easy, wry smile he saved for when things were particularly bad. "Never heard of it, but I'm guessing I didn't just win first prize in a Women Inspecting Asses contest."

"Mind your language, Erik." The rebuke was as automatic as Erik's ignoring of it, and Masters continued without missing a beat. "But you are correct in that you most certainly have not won a prize." Now Masters hesitated, and looked directly into Erik's eyes. "Erik, do you recall our discussions about how Interpol is a true organization, and not just a creation of spy movies, but that its scope and powers have been wildly exaggerated by popular fiction?"

Erik gave a somewhat glum nod.

"Well," Masters continued. "The W.I.A., or World Intelligence Agency, is in reality much the way Interpol is frequently portrayed in fiction: an international intelligence agency cooperative as well as a force in its own right."

A truly delighted smile graced Erik's face. "Cool." Masters' lips turned downward in disapproval at the slang, but before he could say anything Erik interrupted him with a forestalling interjection. "But then why does Interpol get all the glory in the movies?"

"An excellent question, as well as cunningly timed," Masters observed dryly, choosing to overlook Erik's wry smile. "Consider yourself reprimanded. Now, pay attention while I answer your question." Concern flashed in Erik's eyes at the realization that whatever had Masters worried was troubling enough that even his precious grammar took a back seat to it. Noting that he now truly had Erik's full attention, Masters took a stabilizing breath and began. "For a start, the W.I.A. is a relatively new organization, having been sanctioned in recent years by the United Nations as an emergency response to the . . . troubles."

Under his breath, Erik chuckled. It took someone like Masters to sum up the nigh cataclysmic events surrounding World War III as “troubles.”

For his part, Masters was oblivious to Erik's amusement. “Its creation sparked the usual concerns that the United Nations was attempting to expand its power at the expense of the sovereignty of individual nations,” he continued. “Perhaps those concerns were unfounded . . . or perhaps not. What is certain is that the organization was created as an emergency measure, but now that the immediate crisis is past, the W.I.A. is showing all the signs of being as temporary as taxes. Given that, and the general unease people tend to feel about powerful organization devoted to delving into matters some would prefer remain private, suffice it to say the public response to the W.I.A. continues to be . . . cautious.” Masters shrugged. “In other words, perhaps Hollywood simply has not gotten around to mentioning it in a movie yet, or perhaps they have decided that discretion is the better part of valor in this case.”

Much to Masters' annoyance, Erik responded with a passable imitation of a dramatic movie's ominous musical sting. “Bom bom BOM!” Erik laughed at his mentor's consternation. “Come on, Professor! I can see you're serious, but what could a group like that possible want from me?”

Masters pressed his lips together in thin lines. “To put it in terms that I believe you shall understand, it may very well be your liver they want.”

Erik started to chuckle, but then the Professor's grim tone registered with him, and his chuckle ended in more of a gulp. “I'm pretty sure I'm using it at the moment.”

Masters remained impassive.

Erik quirked his lips then nodded. “Right. Shutting up now.” All hints of playfulness were now gone from Erik's face. “What in Hel's name is going on, Professor?”

With the floor fully conceded to him, Masters slipped fully into the role most comfortable for him, the lecturer. “It is like this, Erik. Any organization that cloaks itself in shadows gathers rumors like dung gathers flies. The *least* of the rumors surrounding the W.I.A. is that it's been around since the end of

World War II and has just recently seen fit to show the semblance of a public face for reasons unknown.” Masters somehow managed to make his tone grimmer. “The worst of the rumors start with that and end with the W.I.A. being the ones responsible for the disappearance of so many of those with . . . uncommon abilities, like yourself.”

Erik set his lips in an expression of disapproval, but kept true to his promise of silence.

“Now, of course, rumor is not fact, but neither is rumor necessarily complete fiction.” Masters almost smiled. “And in the absence of facts it is never prudent to fully discount any source of information, even rumor. Do you understand what I’m saying, Erik?”

Erik nodded slowly. “Yes . . . yes, I do, but when did you get to be an expert on international intrigue and conspiracy theories?”

Now Masters smiled. “Since Stonehenge I have done my best to look out for you in every way possible, Erik. Since I knew it would only be a matter of time before you started drawing attention to yourself, I have made it my business to look into even the wildest speculation about those who might someday be doing the looking.”

Erik stared, unblinking, at Masters for an inordinately long time. “You know what, Professor?” Erik asked with forced casualness. “You just said the perfect thing to me to make me feel like a complete and utter waste of life.”

Masters blanched. “Erik—” he began.

“No, no,” Erik interjected. “I’m not blaming you. You’ve always done your best by me, and how have I repaid your kindness?” Erik answered his own question with a bitter smile. “I’ve eaten your food, read comics, watched movies and played at being a hero.” He shook his head in disgust. “My father was right about me,” he finished in a harsh whisper.

Unaccustomed fierceness entered Master’s voice and features. “No, he was *not!*”

“Yes, he was.” Erik responded slowly. “And I deserve to have been forgotten by history.” He took a deep breath. “At least this way I can no longer sully his good name.”

There was a time when Masters would have been flummoxed but such an open expression of emotion, but Erik's moods had always been mercurial, and Masters had painfully learned to weather their storms. "Erik," he said gently. "As much as I love the art of history, it remains an art, and a fickle one at that." Masters came around to lay a hand on Erik's shoulder. "I know you think your father a great man, Erik, but even great men sometimes forget that they were not *born* great." For a moment, Masters was almost lost in thoughts of his own towering and impassive father, a man whose presence felt more imposing in the years since his passing. "And that can make them unfairly hard on those who have not yet had their opportunity for greatness." In memory, once more Masters heard his father's voice repeatedly berating him for always coming in second—second in his class, reaching the second ranking, winning second place—rather than first. "Particularly when they are dealing with their own children," he finished softly.

Erik turned away. "I'm not his child," he said almost under his breath. "He made that abundantly clear."

Masters moved Erik around to face him once more. "He disowned you, I know. But Erik, however much that hurts it does *not* make you any less his son. The man could not change who you are any more than he could control the tides, and he did *not* rewrite reality."

"No . . . just history."

Masters' eyes softened even further. "It has been over a thousand years, Erik, and few records survive that kind of test of time." Masters seemed about to stop there, then quickly amended, "Even so, you know I will not stop looking even if it requires extending my sabbatical."

"Just like I know you won't find anything, Professor," Erik said to the floor as his eyes fell. "The . . . Church . . . kept the genealogies, and my father kept the Church . . . happy." A strong bitter taste flavored the word "church" in Erik's mouth. "I'm sure both were overjoyed to strike me from the records."

"No, you are *not* sure!" Masters retorted heatedly. "If you were sure then it would hurt for a bit, but then you would move on. It is the uncertainty that is the problem, uncertainty about

how you got here and uncertainty about what you left behind, not to mention the uncertainty about what happened to you in the process to make you so much stronger and resilient than before you arrived at Stonehenge. All of that is perfectly understandable.” Masters fortified himself with a fierce breath before rejoining the fray. “But I *will* not tolerate this uncertainty about yourself, Erik! Our differing standards of housekeeping aside, you have been a frighteningly excellent student and a welcome guest, and you have done MUCH more than be idle between what you DARE call ‘playing’ at being a hero!”

Erik had never seen the Professor this angry, and it honestly startled him. “Professor . . .?”

“Don’t you ‘Professor’ me!” Masters interjected, his anger finally reaching its peak. “You do not ‘play’ at being a hero, Erik. You *are* a hero! Not because you can lift a car off someone in need, but because whenever you have something of yourself you can afford to give, you go out and *give* it! Perhaps that was common when you were born, but I assure you it is a rare and precious thing NOW!” The next breath Masters took was a calming one, and the words that followed were quiet, albeit no less forcefully delivered. “You are a good man, Erik, and I am proud of what you are, as I no doubt shall be prouder still of what you are yet to become. And may God help anyone, including your father, who dares speak ill of you in my presence, for a black eye shall only be the start of what they receive from me in response.”

Erik responded with a genuine smile. “Does that include me as well?”

Masters crossed his arms decisively as he answered Erik’s smile with his own. “If pressed.”

“Thanks, Professor,” Erik answered with a chuckle. “So, in the interest of saving my eye, I guess I should try and keep in mind that I must be doing *something* special to catch the attention of an international organization.” He placed his hand over his liver. “I’m not sure that’s a good thing though.”

The Professor gave a glum nod. “Well, presumably it is an encouraging sign that the W.I.A. sent a letter as opposed to breaking down our door in the name of ‘international security.’”

The upshot of their request is that the Director of the W.I.A. wishes to meet with you to discuss a potential . . . recruitment.” The Professor’s tone left no doubt as to his disapproval of the whole concept.

“Recruitment?” Erik asked, taken aback by both the idea and the Professor’s tone. “Well, that sounds better than ‘dissection,’ but I’m getting the impression you just don’t see them as a band of noble knights sitting around a round table and inviting me to join their circle?”

Masters grimaced. “Not precisely, no. I have no doubt they do important things, but I also have no doubt that they are perfectly willing to get their hands dirty whenever they feel like it.”

“So . . . no round table?”

“I am afraid not.”

Erik’s face split with a grin. “Still, everything else sounds like most of the knights I used to know. When do they want to meet me?”

Masters glowered at Erik for a moment then visibly gave up and handed over the letter. “Read it for yourself.”

The faceless figure considered the e-mail glowing on the screen before it. The missive appeared to be legitimate, conforming to all known protocols and contact procedures of the W.I.A., making its arrival all the more unanticipated. Employment offers tended to be rare from organizations that listed one on their Most Wanted list, and sincere offers were doubtlessly rarer still.

Even so, prior to the unfortunate incident in Sumatra that led to the current state of unfriendly relations, previous association with the W.I.A. had proven quite lucrative. An opportunity to resume that association, as well as end the unwelcome scrutiny that came from the W.I.A.’s attentions, held too much potential reward for the idea to be easily dismissed. Viewed in isolation, the apparent risk clearly outweighed the potential reward, but the W.I.A.’s use of this particular e-mail account, one *not* part of the

figure's usual web of elaborate contact procedures, gave reason for pause. It mutely suggested the likelihood that if the W.I.A.'s true intentions involved attempted incarceration rather than employment, an elaborate lure would be an unnecessary, not to mention unusual, conceit on their part. With no further pause an affirmative was sent, and the e-mail account was deleted.

A security breach, even one that led to employment, remained a security breach after all.

Once he had come to terms with the notion that nothing around him was ever going to make sense, as he saw it, Erik had adapted with relative ease to the idiosyncrasies of 21st century life. In light of that, it hadn't surprised him that the headquarters of the W.I.A., fearsome bogeyman of the shadows for so many people, was a shining fortress of white marble and gold that would have been visible for miles had it been placed upon a clear plain instead of within the man-made canyons of New York. Presumably someone feared that such distinctive architecture wasn't sufficient identification, because helpful brown signs, part of some midtown walking tour, also pointed to the building and had further guided Erik's steps. The irony of that alone cheered Erik immensely, and made him glad he had decided to walk to his meeting, almost as glad as his discarding of the ridiculous 'tie' the Professor had insisted he wear to accompany his newly bought black suit.

Having arrived early, he wandered off the entry hall into the public wing that was devoted to the history of espionage, where he happily stepped around a rambunctious elementary school tour group whose boundless enthusiasm for the exhibits was the match of Erik's own. He pressed his nose to the glass of certain displays just like they did, happily lifted children up for better views upon request, and casually flirted with the somewhat frazzled, yet extremely pretty guide to the wing's display. She proved grateful for the help with the children, flattered at the attention, and completely ignorant of anything espionage related

that wasn't printed on the cards she had memorized as part of her job.

Outside, a figure slipped into a well-concealed side entrance constructed for just such a purpose. The entrance in no way allowed for the bypassing of the W.I.A.'s security, but it did allow for the desirable bypassing of the bright, public entrance filled with smiling, clueless personnel whose sole purpose was to make the building seem as innocuous as possible.

As Erik progressed deeper into the building for his meeting, he noticed two things: first, fewer people were smiling, and second, more (and bigger) weapons started to be seen. The first security checkpoint had been nothing worse than a cursory walk through a metal detector flanked by two guards wearing the standard W.I.A. smiles, though they had standard W.I.A. side arms as well. Erik would have been more impressed if the side arms hadn't been firmly strapped into their holsters, making it clear that gun play wasn't the guards' first—or even second—best option. Erik had to wonder if the guns were even loaded.

Maybe they carry their bullets in the shirt pockets? Erik speculated, then had to suppress a chuckle. All in all, he had to admit that he was disappointed.

His disappointment lasted only until the second checkpoint, where he was subjected to a metal detecting wand wielded by one of the guards while the other looked on attentively. They neither smiled nor frowned, and while their guns weren't strapped in, they were holstered at least. The third checkpoint involved moving down an enclosed metal corridor manned on the outside by technicians monitoring readouts and flanked by grim soldiers with rifles at the ready. Erik had yet to make a dedicated study of guns, but his love of his movies had taught him the basics. To him, the rifles looked semi-automatic, possibly fully automatic, and now he was starting to be impressed.

Once past all of that, Erik was led to a room that he thought was going to be the office of the Director, or at least the reception area. He'd guessed this because the guards posted outside were covered head to toe in some sort of black, full body combat armor that prevented Erik from seeing whether they were smiling or not. Somehow, judging by the way that they hoisted their rifles at the ready, he doubted that they were. This imposing image was further reinforced by the fact their rifles were of a design that was completely unfamiliar to Erik, and he got the impression that whatever they fired, it wasn't bullets. If the room beyond warranted such guards, then clearly the room had to be important.

It was. It was an examination room, complete with a pair of guards matching those outside its reinforced metal walls and a bland man in a starched white doctor's coat. As Erik blanched at the scene, he heard the audible click of the door being secured behind him.

"Is this the point where you tell me you want my liver?" Erik asked the question casually, forcing both his voice and body to relax.

The bland man didn't even look up from his clipboard. "No, sir, this is simply a routine security procedure," he droned as if that explained everything. "Now please remove your clothing and we'll begin the examination."

"Routine security procedure," Erik repeated dully. "For an interview?"

The bland man checked something off on the clipboard and nodded. "Routine for people like you, yes, sir."

"People like me?" Erik repeated, this time with considerably more animation, as well as a hint of a threat. His smile was broad, but it was a baring of teeth, and not a friendly gesture. "And by that you mean 'good looking people,' perhaps?"

The man still didn't look up, so Erik's 'smile' was lost upon him, but his tone was not. The man made another check mark and shifted his body posture to convey his annoyance. "Sir, please remove your clothing." Everything about the man made it clear to Erik that that same request was going to be repeated until he either acquiesced or the sun burnt out in the sky, and nothing Erik said was going to change that.

So Erik decided to try the direct approach, thereby making his first serious mistake of the day.

Smile still frozen to his face, Erik gently extracted the clipboard from the man's hands, braced the board between his middle and ring fingers, and made a show of snapping the clipboard in two using just his thumb. "No, I don't think so," Erik said cheerfully.

Deprived of his clipboard, the man was forced to look Erik in the eye, though he remained silent, waiting for Erik's next move.

Erik gave a mock gracious nod at finally being recognized. "And now that I have your attention," he continued in the same cheerful tones. "If you'd be so kind as to show me the way out and convey my regrets to the Director. Rumors to the contrary aside, I don't get naked that easily." Erik gave a throaty chuckle.

Erik's attempt at humor seemed to have as much effect on the examiner as anything else Erik had so far said—i.e., none at all. "I'm afraid that's not an option, sir," he intoned with a glance toward the two guards who stood behind Erik.

Even without turning, Erik knew they had their rifles pointed at his back. Turning anyway, Erik confirmed that then raised his hands up slightly in a gesture of surrender. "Oh, I see. Why didn't you say so in the first place?" he babbled ingratiatingly, backing toward the examination table as he did so. The guards followed his movements with their rifles, and Erik began to realize just how serious his mistake truly was.

These people were hiding it well, but they were *afraid* of him. It wasn't in Erik at the time to understand precisely what in him they found frightening, but he could feel their fear nonetheless. Fear and weaponry were a bad mix, particularly when both were being pointed at the same time in one's direction, and Erik's bit of insubordinate one-upmanship had ensured just that. He made a mental note to watch that in the future.

Provided he survived, of course.

"I'll pay for that clipboard, if you like," he told the examiner helpfully.

NOW the examiner smiled slightly, but Erik rightfully didn't take it as friendly. "Perhaps you shall."

To Erik, the threat was unmistakable. And whether you blame his love of adventure drama, his roots in a culture where threat and action were almost inseparably intertwined, or simply Erik's impulsive nature, the end result remained the same. His instincts screamed danger, and he acted.

The walls were reinforced, and he doubted he would have been brought to this particular room if the W.I.A. believed that he could easily breach the walls, but someone had been careless about the examination table. It was heavy, no doubt, and even though it had wheels, a normal person would have been hard pressed to maneuver it quickly.

In other words, Erik found his first choice of actions rather obvious, but first he needed a distraction.

"Look, I'm sorry about the misunderstanding," he said sincerely as he removed his jacket. "Hey," he said in what he hoped was an appropriately casual voice. "Is it O.K. if I toss my clothes over there?" He indicated the section of counter he was referring to by tossing his jacket in its general direction, managing to 'miss' his throw and landing the jacket on the floor.

"That's my workspace, so, no," the examiner said in arctic tones. "Place your clothing there." He indicated a work tray attached to the table itself.

"My mistake," Erik said with a truly pleased smile that would have forewarned anyone who knew him to be on guard. The examiner harrumphed as Erik moved behind the table to retrieve his jacket. Despite his pointed detachment, the examiner took professional care to remain out of line of the guards' fire, clearly still unsure if he could trust this apparently bipolar suprahuman.

And as it happened, of course, he couldn't. With a fearsome shove, Erik hurled the examination table toward the guards flanking the door, dropping them with a cracking sound that Erik prayed mightily was just their armor. To their credit, they managed to get off one shot each, heavily scorching the table with laser burns but doing nothing to divert its flight. Before the guards finished crumpling, Erik was already moving toward the door, punching not at it, but at the security panel next to it. A shower of indignant sparks from the ruined circuitry gave him

hopes he'd just bought himself some extra time before reinforcements arrived and managed to get the door open. Alarms were already beginning to sound as he whirled upon the stunned examiner. "What's behind that wall?" Erik demanded, indicating the area opposite the door.

"I . . . I don't really know," the examiner stammered. "A corridor, I think, but you'll never—"

Erik didn't bother to let him finish. For Erik, "never" was a word used after one was incapable of further action, not before. With a bellowing cry he charged toward a wall that the W.I.A. had been assured was capable of withstanding any force Erik could throw at it.

The W.I.A. had been misinformed.

In another nearby examination room, the faceless figure had been pleased at the sound of the alarms as it meant the moment had provided the option of a non-lethal resolution for its own situation. By the time a sound reminiscent of a bomb tearing through a wall reached the figure's ears, everyone else in the room had been satisfactorily disabled.

"Thank you for your interest, but I must decline your offer," the figure intoned in a low voice subtly enhanced by a modulator, speaking more to the hidden security cameras than to the unconscious personnel. "Suffice it to say that I find your current security requirements . . . unacceptable."

Moments after, the cameras smoked and burst into flames.

As the interfaces in the figure's gloves did their work on the door's security lock, there was time to consider the next move. Departing the way of entry was out of the question, that much was certain. Unfortunately, as only trace amounts of interference in the W.I.A.'s scanning equipment could avoid detection, that meant the on-hand supply of explosives was limited. The odds of successfully reaching an appropriate location secluded enough for the proper placement of said explosives were problematic, but not beyond possibility.