

OMEGA REIGN

B I L L C O F F I N



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CHAPTERS

See You Next Doomsday	1
Omens and Portents	22
Mettle	47
Eureka	71
Public Enemies	91
Overture	112
Zero Hour	133
Missing Persons	164
Catch and Release	186
Nobody's Hero	209
Friends Close	231
Enemies Closer	253



SEE YOU NEXT DOOMSDAY

05:59:59 REMAINING

Simon Rand floats just above the outer limits of the Earth's atmosphere, listening to the hum of deep space. He extends his senses as far as they will go to hear the echoes of dying stars. The rumble of interstellar emptiness.

His body slowly drifts in the darkness, a tall, broad monument of flesh and bone. The Sun highlights the perfect, chiseled angles of his face and frame and the strong lines of his costume, a sleek, nanoweave bodysuit. A stylized laurel wreath gleams on his chest. It is a symbol of victory that has become known worldwide as the emblem of its mightiest hero: Praetorian.

Simon hears a faint ringing, a sound that isn't sound, one that feels like it comes from beneath the skin of the universe, struggling to break free. He ignores it. It is just one more strange noise in a universe filled with them, and he returns to enjoying his orbital drift.

He gets few moments like these. It has already been a busy day, flying

around the planet, answering calls for help in places where disaster strikes: a supertanker collision in Indonesia, a collapsed archaeological site in Brazil, and a chain reaction at the Hyper Collider in Switzerland that might have ripped a hole in reality.

But so far, nothing involving people with Powers, costumes, and made-up names. No Masks wreaking havoc for cheap thrills or calling out their most hated enemies in the never-ending grudge match that people simply call “the deadlock.” No Capes were crying for backup because they bit off more than they could chew while trying to save the world.

The day is still young. And something very big is coming. I can feel it.

A tone hums on an encoded frequency only Simon can hear. It softly vibrates in his skull so he can sense it even out in space.

So much for some peace and quiet. Sometimes I hate this job.

“Priority message, Praetorian,” an artificial voice says. “Code Magenta.”

He doesn’t remember what the various code colours mean. Long ago, he did, but as more and more Supers came onto the scene and the different kinds of crises that called for their talents spread, so did the colour-coding. Now, there are just too many to keep track of.

Codes for purse-snatching. Codes for bank robberies. Codes for supertech brawls in the street. Codes for problems that threaten entire cities, countries, and continents.

It doesn’t matter much what code they use to call for Praetorian because if they call for him at all, it’s a problem nobody else can handle. Besides, they’ll give him the details on the way. They always do.

Simon turns towards Earth and flies straight down as fast as his abilities allow. His body glows with heat as he punches through the atmosphere.

“Pray-torian!” The unmistakable voice of Transit twangs in Simon’s ear.

This isn’t good. He should’ve gotten a telepathic alert from Ansible. Transit handles teleporting team members from place to place, not comms. Capes don’t fill in for each other when everything’s okay.

Simon modulates his vocal cords to speak on the same special frequency as the emergency channel. It’s how he can respond when floating in space, swimming deep underwater, or flying faster than sound.

“Is that you, Transit?” Simon says. “Talk to me. Where’s Ansible?”

"She's gone, man." Transit says.

"Wait, what? When? Is she dead?"

"Worse. Retired."

"You can't just quit the deadlock," Simon states. "She was the communications link for the entire Echelon."

"Not anymore. I'm running comms until we can figure something out. But we've got to focus. Somebody hijacked the Apex 2000."

Brand new super-plane? Maiden flight? Full of VIPs? Of course, somebody was going to go after it.

Simon shakes his head in disgust. "We told them this would happen."

"You know how it is. They never listen until it's too late," Transit says.

"Who's the Mask?"

"Some mad scientist, calls themselves Praxis. Ring any bells?"

"No," Simon answers. "Must be making their big debut."

"Sounds like it. They're calling for you specifically," Transit says. "They say if you don't show, they'll crash the plane into Heritage Stadium."

Simon sighs.

These people.

"So, this Praxis character. Did they hijack the plane? Are they going to?"

"Sigma called it in. Same difference."

At least Sigma's still on the job. That's a relief. We need her clairvoyance now more than ever, especially if people start thinking the deadlock is winding down. That's when people get sloppy, and something bad slips through.

Wait. Why didn't Sigma tell us Ansible was quitting? Did she just not see it coming?

"Do you have a fix on the plane?" Simon asks.

"Yep."

"Good. Then teleport the passengers out of there. I'll intercept in sixty."

"No can do. There's a null field on the plane, so I can't get anyone out. You want me to teleport you there?"

"Don't bother," Simon says. "I'm already on my way. Whoever Praxis is

must want an audience. Might as well give them one.”

“Roger that. Don’t break anything you can’t pay for.”

“I never do.”

Transit laughs. “Then what was that thing with the oil rig last week?”

“Not my fault. Besides, I stopped the entire Gulf of Mexico from catching fire.”

“Just another apocalypse, right?”

“Always is,” Simon says. “See you next doomsday.”

Ω

The earth’s curvature flattens as Simon drops to the planet’s surface like a meteor. He closes in on a point of coastline that takes a sharp turn east before heading north again. In a crook of land before the ocean, gleams an expanse of silver and steel, concrete and chrome.

Hudson City. The City of Powers. The City of Supers. Home.

Simon comes in from the southwest, flying along the Crescent River, with the island prison of Commodore’s Rest to the left and Harbinger Island’s dense thickets of towers on the right. He scans Commodore’s Rest as he flies by for any aberrant energy signatures, thankful there aren’t any. There isn’t time to handle a prison break right now. Besides, most real heavy hitters were transferred to the Hole years ago for life sentences in suspended animation, hidden away in a pocket dimension.

He streaks through the sky over the industrial expanse of Eon Park and the giant transportation interchange that people call the Spaghetti Bowl. Simon winces when he sees it, just like always. To him, it isn’t the massive tangle of highways, rail lines, and flight buoys. It’s where almost every Super in Hudson City had their biggest battle a few years ago. All those Capes and Masks. The fight that could have ended the deadlock once and for all. The one he missed because he was handling an earthquake that leveled most of Jakarta.

If I had only been here. It would have gone differently. All those people might still be alive. And Jenny would still be here.

He shakes his head as if the thought might fly from his skull.

You can't think of her. Not now. People need you.

The Bremmerline and City Hall districts glitter beneath him, with all of their posh buildings, where lobbyists and lawyers make their coin. Simon holds his arms close to his body as he threads through the immense superscrapers of Midtown. The sprawling cityscape, home to some twenty million people, is just a rushing blur to him.

At this time of day, there would usually be at least half a dozen airliners in the sky in this sector alone, along with a dozen helicopters and lighter aircraft. But the Hudson City Police Department would've cleared the fly lanes when the hijacking call came through, so whichever costumed hero saving the day wouldn't have to navigate traffic.

The Apex 2000 Stratoliner comes into view. Its graceful curves and massive bulk suggest the kind of science that defies the laws of nature, a performance passenger craft so big and powerful it looks like an armoured blimp built to outrun missiles. Within its swollen belly ride some five thousand men, women, and children. Many of them are VIPs of some kind or another, or their families. At least three important government officials are on board, too, though Simon cannot remember which ones. Favours given, favours repaid, and all that.

The Apex 2000 is accelerating towards the sound barrier when Simon intercepts it. The scramjets built into the plane's wings glow from within as they suck in air, superheat, and launch out the back. The engines scream as they push against the sound barrier.

Simon tunes his hearing to the city's emergency frequency and monitors the air control chatter. He wishes he had Ansible's power so he could broadcast telepathically to the people on the plane and let them know everything would be alright. But speaking into people's minds is one power he doesn't have. All he can do is listen to the helpless air traffic controllers as they give him updates he already knows. It's something they need to say more than he needs to hear. It helps them to keep calm.

"Praetorian, this is City One. We have you inbound for intercept. Good luck."

Simon picks up the whine of afterburners from about a mile away. With his telescopic vision, he spots a pair of fighter planes peeling off from their intercept course. They must have scrambled from Merrimack

AFB to shoot down the plane if nobody stepped in to stop it. But seeing Praetorian, they don't stick around. They know if Praetorian can't save the day, the day can't be saved.

The Apex 2000 banks slightly and throttles up as the Trinity Towers pass by a few hundred feet beneath them. At this speed, it's only three minutes from Trinity Towers to Heritage Stadium — 250,000 people are there to attend the World Hyperball Tournament, rooting for their national teams. None of them know that the world's biggest missile is aimed directly at them.

It's better that way. There would be a panic if they knew. Every person in this city has either been saved by a Super or knows someone else who's only alive still because of those with powers. And yet, they still stampede for the door when something scary happens.

Simon pulls alongside the giant airplane. From inside, faces look out from the three rows of windows. Their expressions range from the terror of impending death to the elation of knowing that Hudson City's top hero has come to save them.

He spots some celebrities and assorted big shots among them. It doesn't matter how rich, famous, or powerful they are; everyone always gets that same look when realizing they're in so much trouble that only a Cape can save them. That open-mouthed expression of excitement that curdles into frantic urgency: Do something! Get me out of here!

Well, not all of them. A young woman presses against one of the tall windows in the plane's lounge section and waves her hand, trying to get Simon's attention. As soon as he notices her, she turns around and raises her phone for a selfie.

For a moment, Simon considers letting Praxis fly the plane wherever the hell they want to. Then he sees the little girl. She can't be more than four or five.

The girl is with her parents, whose fearful faces have a frozen glaze. They should be comforting their daughter but are too dumbstruck to do so. The girl's eyes are open wide in fear, but she just calmly looks out the window. Despite her age, she's found the serenity of the doomed. Whatever's next, it's out of her hands.

What kind of people bring their child on a flight like this? Don't they know how irresistible a target a plane like this is to a Mask? Don't they want

her to make it to elementary school?

Simon makes eye contact, gives a thumbs-up, and mouths to her, “everything’s going to be okay.”

She smiles.

This moment is when the energy blast hits him from above, square between his shoulder blades. It’s the kind of thing that makes him glad he doesn’t wear a cape because now, there would be a hole in it. He spins in the air and faces his attacker.

Standing on the top of the Apex 2000, its feet magnetically clinging to the plane’s hull, is an armour-plated, humanoid robot with the word “Increment” laser-engraved across its chest-mounted nameplate. Energy cannons on the drone’s forearms glow with blue light as it powers up for another shot.

Oh, great. It’s one of those stupid, new robot cops Mayor Sandoval is so proud of. The ones he keeps saying will replace Capes. The ones that can’t seem to tell that I’m on their side.

My guess is that’s a feature, not a bug. Maybe anyone in a costume is the enemy.

Three more Increments — just like the one that shot at Simon — rocket through the sky and land on top of the plane as well.

How they’re supposed to recapture the Apex 2000 from destroying Heritage Stadium is anyone’s guess.

Simon watches as the newly arrived robots aim their energy cannons towards the siding of the superjet.

They’re not here to save the plane. They’re here to destroy it. In their silicon, microchip minds, five thousand people is calculated as a better loss than a stadium full of people. That’s the difference between me and them. But I don’t believe in better losses.

He looks at the little girl in the window. “Be right back,” he mouths and then rolls under the plane, out of sight.

He comes up on the other side of the plane and flies into the Increment that shot him, hitting it with enough force to punch through a mountain. It is well more than what he needs to destroy the drone, but he is too angry to care about holding back. Just this once, he gives it everything he’s got

because he can. A living target would've turned into a red cloud.

The drone explodes into a cloud of shrapnel that dissolves into nanodust a split-second later. It's a handy failsafe measure to prevent anyone from reverse engineering any unit that falls in battle.

As the dust vanishes into the plane's slipstream, Simon realizes that if the robot had been less sophisticated and hadn't self-disintegrated, pieces of it could have pierced the plane's hull. A chill goes through him at the thought of accidentally crashing the plane with collateral damage.

That's why you're supposed to hold back, you idiot.

The three other Increments run along the top of the plane with their magnetic feet, converging on Simon. They all have jump jets and can fly, but somebody clearly cut a few corners when programming their tactical situation algorithms.

"Don't break anything you can't pay for," Transit's words echo in Simon's memory. He dashes ahead to engage the first of the Increments.

This will be worth every penny.

He swings a left hook that a robotic drone easily ducks. When Simon's next few punches also fail to connect, he remembers all those times Sigma, Redeemer, Prowess, and the rest needled him for relying too much on his powers and not training harder.

But they could never do a fraction of what Praetorian can, even on their best day. No one can.

The other two drones gang up on him as well, and then everything turns into a blur. A drone's arm cannon reverses itself and turns into a rocket engine, so Simon sees stars when he gets punched across the jaw. Another drives a jet-assisted knee into his ribs. They deliver a tight succession of blows to him, and even though most just bounce off his invulnerable skin, they still send shockwaves through his body. That's what nobody ever realizes about being invulnerable: things that don't cause injury can still hurt. And this stuff hurts enough for Simon's mind to fog.

Before his head clears, one of the drones grabs him from behind, and another winds up to deliver a crushing blow to finish the fight.

Just before the robot's fist makes contact, Simon bobs his head to one side, and the robot hits its mechanical colleague instead, right in its inhuman face. The drone holding Simon goes limp, and he feels the dead

weight of all that machinery turn to dust.

Simon squares off with the remaining pair of drones on top of the speeding mega-plane. The wind is hitting them all so hard that it reminds Simon of when he saw a Mask named Coriolis fire an F5 wind blast into a crowd of people. He pushes the memory back into the corner of his mind, hoping it will stay. But there are too many bad memories for all of them to stay put for long.

Focus, Simon. Focus.

The robots can stand up here because of their magnetic feet. Simon can stand here because he wills it.

Over the shoulders of the robotic drones and down the plane's length, Simon sees Heritage Stadium come into view. The time window for diverting the plane safely is closing fast.

The drones open fire with arm blasters, but the rapid streams of little energy pulses bounce off Simon.

"Is that all?" Simon says, his body glowing from where the blasts hit.

The drones switch from pulse to beam, and their blasters spew a bright stream of energy directly into him. But it is what he needs.

He puts his hands before him and blocks the energy beams with his palms. He cups his hands just enough to direct the beams back at the robots, cutting them into smoothly divided halves. They disintegrate.

A city emergency transmission rings in Simon's ears. It's another special wavelength dedicated just to him. "Praetorian, this is City One; we have you outbound from Heritage, T-minus thirty. Repeat, T-minus thirty."

Simon rolls his eyes.

Of course, it's T-minus thirty. Maybe instead of nagging Supers with useless status reports, somebody could evacuate the stadium that's about to be hit by a runaway plane. But no, why bother? What use is there in trying to save oneself when a legion of people in costume will always be there when it matters?

Knock it off, Simon. Pity yourself later. Save the day now.

He flies to the plane's underside and presses his back, shoulders, and arms into it. He lifts against the screaming thrust of the scramjets. The plane shudders.

Simon knows how tricky this is. His bench press is technically unlimited because nobody's ever built a hydraulic that's stopped him. But the plane is fighting so hard that Praetorian could easily tear it apart if he goes too strong. The trick is finding the sweet spot before time runs out.

A quarter-million people fill the stadium's stands barely a mile away. From this distance, they're just a giant mosaic of tiny blips of colour, a mass of people who look like they have merged into a weird collective being.

Simon grips the plane tightly and pushes his own speed to the limit. Maybe he can get the plane to overshoot the stadium. It's the only option.

He boosts the plane past the speed of sound. The sonic boom dies in his ears like a distant whisper. The only thing that matters is the stadium, so he pushes harder. The plane's scramjets sense a severe speed anomaly, and their safety protocols kick in. The engines quit, and the plane goes into glide mode.

Simon permits himself a satisfied smile.

Praxis might be a mastermind, but Masks never consider the little things. And it always comes down to the little things.

Simon lifts the plane enough so that all it does is perform a dramatic, low-altitude flyover of the stadium. The plane clears the roof lip by just a few metres. The people below scream in excitement and surprise. The plane's shadow darkens the entire field as it passes above the stadium's open rooftop.

Nobody below knows how close they just came to death. They just think a giant plane practically scraping the top of the stadium is part of the show. But that's life in Hudson City. Every day, everyone is close to dying.

Simon banks the plane in a U-turn back towards Constitution Skyport as cheers of relief come across the emergency channel. It's the soundtrack to the joyful pandemonium of a crisis averted: ecstatic air traffic controllers who didn't have to watch the world's largest plane crash into the world's largest stadium, the mayor's staff weeping with relief, and a few envious mutterings from the fire and police chiefs who knew there was nothing they could've done here.

Simon brings the plane down on an empty runway. Every other flight in the city is in a holding pattern until the Apex 2000 situation resolves itself. Days like today are one of the reasons why the airport has such a bad

on-time performance.

Once the plane is safely on the tarmac, its hatches pop open, and inflatable emergency evac ramps unfurl. Streams of people slide out, while emergency response teams hustle the passengers away from the plane itself. It is still unsecured, and while Simon's senses detect no explosives on board, it does not pay to get complacent. The thing was remote-hacked, after all. Anything can still happen.

Among the people leaving the Apex are a few young starlets. Praetorian can't really tell them apart, but one of them has to have been the person who took that selfie with him as he flew by the plane. One of them sticks out enough for him to notice.

Who is that? Isn't she that pop star... Melody someone? Melody Charity?

Harmony. Melody Harmony. That's it.

Melody Harmony keeps making the shortlist that the Echelon algorithm compiles of people who might develop powers. Simon makes a note to himself to remove her from the database. After all, if she were going to get powers, she would have gotten them by now. She's just another Super wannabe who will drop some dumb song about all of this. A week after that, she'll sell her story to whatever passes for news these days. Later, she'll stop trending, so somebody else will take her place.

Melody looks at Simon from the tarmac as if she knows him. His hearing threads through the clamor of the plane evacuation, the emergency vehicles, and the first responders. He isolates Melody's voice and picks up what she whispers to herself: "I knew he would save me."

I didn't do it for you.

The little girl and her parents also leave the plane. The girl squeals with delight as she slides down the emergency ramp and into her parents' waiting arms. Her parents look like they need a drink.

I did it for them.

Ω

Simon floats to the Apex 2000's cockpit and lets himself in through the main access hatch. The pilots slump forward, still belted into their flight

chairs. Unconscious but not dead. Simon sniffs the air and picks up a trace of GN20, an experimental compound that one of the big intelligence agencies developed to knock out entire terrorist cave networks without actually killing anyone.

It's the weapon governments need when they can't convince Supers to carry out foreign policy.

Simon focuses his vision to see through materials and scans for anomalous equipment. He finds the gas dispenser hidden in the ceiling and a small CPU installed within a bulkhead behind the cockpit. It can only be one thing: the remote-piloting system used to hijack the Apex 2000 after the gas knocked out the pilots.

It almost makes Simon laugh: a \$10 billion plane taken over by about \$300 worth of components from the local Cyber Shack. But this doesn't add up. The hijack rig is brilliant but simple. The gas is exotic and nearly impossible to synthesize.

Why go to such lengths to knock out the pilots if they would be locked out of their flight controls so easily?

Masterminds like Praxis always do this. Showoffs. They can't help it. They need to task people in costume to feel like they matter in a world with powers. It would be pitiful if it didn't put so many lives at risk.

A fleet of additional emergency vehicles arrives as the second wave of airport techs, firefighters, EMTs, and police rush to the plane. A motorcade of sleek, black vehicles rolls up behind them. Simon decides against blasting off into the sky to search for Praxis. Instead, he slowly lifts off the ground and floats over the crowd of first responders to the motorcade. Praxis will have to wait.

Time to kiss the ring.

Mayor Sandoval exits the main car. He has the good looks of a second-string movie star and wears a patriotic lapel pin on a suit that looks like it should fit better than it does. Deputies, aides, and media ride-along pop out of their vehicles and surround His Honor. Sandoval waves them off.

The mayor approaches Simon and shakes hands with an energetic double pump. "Not a bad piece of work, Praetorian," Sandoval says through a massive smile that reminds Simon of a white picket fence. "Plane's down okay, nobody's hurt. Shame you let the bad guy get away."

“Don’t worry, Mister Mayor,” Simon responds. “Praxis won’t get far.”

Sandoval touches both sides of his Adam’s apple with his thumb and forefinger, and a faint ruby-light glows under his skin. Simon knows a Korovian voice modulator when he sees one. It encrypts the mayor’s speech from any mechanical eavesdropping. Simon can do the same to his own voice with a little concentration. It helps keep classified conversations from leaking.

“Walk with me,” Sandoval says, his voice suddenly like gravel. The mayor slowly begins a circuit around the front of the Apex 2000.

Simon follows.

I should take you in right now for that illegal Korovian tech in your throat — Korovia’s under total embargo for a reason, you hypocrite.

“You know, those robots run about \$15 million each,” Sandoval says disapprovingly, glancing upward. It’s like he can still see his Increments turning to dust. “You and your friends better be good for it.”

Simon silently thanks Sigma for establishing the Echelon’s collateral damage fund once the city exempted Supers from Good Samaritan laws. Smartest thing she ever did. Otherwise, people like Sandoval would’ve put Capes out of business through lawsuits alone.

“There wouldn’t have been any trouble if your robots could tell who the good guys are,” Simon says.

Sandoval studies the length of the plane. He answers without looking at Simon. “They can.”

“You didn’t send them up there to save the plane. You sent them up there to crash it. And maybe blame me for it, too.”

“Don’t float theories you can’t prove. Especially when everybody knows you’d rather fly around and get people killed than conduct a proper investigation.”

The insult doesn’t sting as much as it used to. Sandoval practically ran it into the ground during his re-election campaign. He was twenty points behind before the battle at the Spaghetti Bowl, and his daughter was one of the kids who didn’t survive. After that, she practically became his posthumous running mate. Within 72 hours of his second inauguration, Sandoval commissioned the Many Millions Memorial, that grotesque monument celebrating a world run by regular people, not Supers. It wasn’t

the first time somebody blamed Simon for something he didn't do. Or couldn't have done. All Simon knew was that he went to far more victims' funerals than Sandoval ever did.

"Your little deadlock is about to end," Sandoval hisses. "And I'll be there when it's over."

"We didn't start the deadlock," Simon replies.

"You sure haven't ended it," Sandoval answers, poking Simon in the chest. Simon glances at the mayor's hand and wonders how far the guy would fly if he threw him.

"Within a year, Increments will be in every district of the city. We've modeled this thing a hundred different ways. All of them say we'll get crime to zero within six months. Not just super-crime. All crime. And we'll do it without trashing the city too. I want you to think about that when everyone realizes that you and your freak friends are more trouble than you're worth. If you're smart, you'll take a hint from Ansible and quit while you still can."

"I will die before I stop," Simon says.

Sandoval smiles and leans in. He claps Simon on the arm. "I'm counting on it."

The mayor deactivates his throat baffle and walks back to his motorcade. "Thanks again, Praetorian!" he shouts over his shoulder, loud enough for the floating media drones arriving on the scene to hear. The drones float in formation around Sandoval, and without skipping a beat, the mayor gives his version of events — embellishing how the Increment program helped Praetorian save the city.

Simon ignores it. Sandoval's supporters had made up their minds long before the Spaghetti Bowl. They were the ones who stopped being thankful for their costumed saviors. Whose gratitude turned to resentment for being stuck where they no longer felt they could control. If the latest polls are correct, half the people on the Apex 2000 will already be blaming Simon for the hijacking.

"I really hate this job," Simon whispers.

"What would people say if they knew that?" says a voice in Simon's ear, synthesized well past the point of bass distortion.

Finally! A lead. Today might still have a happy ending.

“Praxis.”

“I’m surprised you got it on the first try,” Praxis says. “You don’t seem that smart.”

“Smart enough to know that I wouldn’t have to look very hard for you.”

“The hijacking was just a little warm-up exercise. An amuse-bouche by which to introduce myself,” Praxis says. “Now is when the real fun begins.”

When are these jerks going to come up with better lines? It’s like none of them ever listen to each other.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” Simon growls. “I will detect whatever wavelengths you’re doing all of this on, and I will find you. If I don’t, somebody else in the Echelon will.”

“This is between you and me, Praetorian,” Praxis says. “No need to bring your friends into it.”

Simon moves his head from side to side, loosening up. When his neck cracks, it sounds like two rocks hitting each other. “Stay put. I’ll be right there.” He bolts into the sky.

Back on the tarmac, the little girl Simon had spoken to through the window looks upward to see Praetorian disappear from view. The girl is the only one on the ground who notices him leaving, and he is gone too quickly to notice that she is waving to him. When she no longer sees him, she turns back to her parents, sad.

“I noticed the Mayor fails to appreciate your efforts,” Praxis says. “That must sting.”

Simon picks apart the different sonic elements in Praxis’s voice to trace it back to its point of origin, somewhere in the city.

“Perhaps it has to do with that battle in the Spaghetti Bowl. All those Masks. All those Capes. All those dead people. Had you been there, would it have gone differently?”

What is it with these mad scientists? Whatever they’re trying to prove, why can’t they prove it to someone else, for once?

“Would you have saved that school bus full of children? Would you have saved Mayor Sandoval’s daughter?”

Simon rockets over the city, feeding on Praxis’s signal.

These losers always monologue their way right into jail. They make it easy because getting caught is the point. Most would rather be thwarted and imprisoned than do something horrible and leave the world wondering who was responsible. It's why ninety-nine percent of all Masks do time. Whoever made Voyager disappear in the 70s was in that one percent that was too smart to talk about it.

"You're getting closer." Praxis chuckles, and their digitized voice sounds like an ancient robot amused by its own joke. "I can't wait for you to see what I have planned for you."

Simon follows the transmission to the top of the Glenrock Building, Hudson City's tallest and most distinctive skyscraper. Great stone gargoyles lurch out into space from each of the four corners at the base of the building's spire. They are high enough to give an expansive view of the city below. Their heads are just wide enough for a person to stand on them.

Just seeing the northwest gargoyle floods Simon with a torrent of feelings that are as bad as familiar. The shame. The guilt. The emptiness. The sense that there was a hole in the world where a person used to be, and nothing would ever fill it again.

Praetorian can hear over the emergency channel that a hostage situation is brewing at one of the big malls downtown.

I don't have time for this. It sounds like Horde is spoiling for a fight. Maybe with a little luck, Iron Will is on-call to handle it. He seemed to be the hero with Horde's number; the two have a weird grudge that goes back for years. Horde is probably calling out his old enemy for a rematch. Masks are nothing if not predictable.

"Why do you suppose I brought you here, Praetorian?" Praxis asks.

"Because it's the tallest building in the city. Perfect place to bounce a signal and waste my time," Simon says. He could feel an anger rising within him. He hates this place. He wishes Praxis would threaten to destroy the building just so he could let him.

"You know that's not why," Praxis says. "I brought you here because I know what happened at this very spot a year ago today."

"You don't know what you're talking about, Praxis."

"I know more about you than anyone else. I know you landed in some kind of meteor in 1947, outside of Roswell, New Mexico — arising from

a crater of fused desert glass, naked and confused, with no knowledge of who you were or where you came from.”

Simon feels a knot in his stomach.

All of this information is beyond top secret. It should be impossible for anyone to find. And yet, Praxis did. What other secrets are no longer secret?

“I know Simon Rand isn’t your real name, and that Praetorian was the title of the government program they used to try to train you — they wanted you to be their secret weapon. I know you had other ideas.”

“That’s enough,” Simon says through clenched teeth. “Tell me where you are.”

“You must have saved millions of people since you started wearing that ridiculous outfit of yours, flying around like some guardian angel for the entire planet,” Praxis says. “So, what happened up here, with Fluke? Having a bad day? Off your game?”

Don’t let them make you think of it. Don’t let them bring her into this. Wall it off, push it down, and focus on the mission. Find the Mask. End the threat. Save the day.

Simon calms his surging rage and listens to Praxis’s transmission signal. It bounces off the tower through a relay, probably half a dozen more hidden around the city. He takes off and follows the signal, leaving the Glenrock Building behind him. He does not look back but can see it in his mind. It is always there, his magnetic north. No matter how far, wherever he is, he knows the way to the Glenrock Building.

“You think I don’t know about you, Praetorian, but I do,” Praxis says. “I have been studying you for years. I know you never sleep. I know you only visit the Echelon headquarters when the rest of your friends hold meetings. And I know you visit Fluke’s memorial an awful lot.”

“I’m warning you, leave her out of this.”

“For somebody who cares so much about saving people, you didn’t lift a finger to save Fluke from doing what she did to herself back there at the Glenrock Building, though, did you?”

Whoever this person is, nobody will know if I kill them.

“Really, Praetorian. Fluke needed help after that unpleasantness at the Spaghetti Bowl. How could you not have not known that?”

Simon homes in on relay after relay, tracing Praxis's signal all the way across the city to an ugly, three-floor walkup in Gearshift. It's the decrepit industrial district every mayor of Hudson City promises to revitalize but never does once in office.

One day, I'm giving up the Cape and rebuilding this place myself. But first, some demolition.

He flies through the building's brick walls fist-first, exploding a dense hail of fragments into the grimy apartment within. The flying debris might kill whoever was inside, but Simon would risk it. Somebody like Praxis doesn't invite Supers to drop by without preparing for a dramatic entrance. But it would be convenient if they did, just this once.

Behind a plasteel bomb shield hides Praxis. He looks like every other computer jockey who spends so much time online they practically develop vampirism. His lank hair hangs to the side of his head, and his shabby clothes bear three different food stains. Entry damage aside, the place looks like an entire fraternity partied in it a year ago without bothering to clean up. The sudden smashing of the wall probably didn't change the property value.

"You're under arrest," Simon announces.

Praxis looks flattered. He speaks into the microphone, which distorts his voice. "What for? Hijacking the plane or threatening the stadium?"

"For getting under my skin," Simon replies. "And for bringing my dead friend into it."

"It's not my fault Fluke killed herself. I wasn't there."

Simon swats the bomb shield aside with no effort. "Give me a reason."

"I've given you several," Praxis says excitedly.

Oh, great. Another one of these weirdos. Getting busted will be the biggest moment of his life. We have to stop enabling these people.

"The Apex 2000 was just to get my attention, and the wild goose chase around town was to annoy me, is that it?" Simon says. "And for what? Some elaborate death-by-cop fantasy?"

Praxis shakes his head. "No, Praetorian. Something much better."

He holds up a small device in his gloved hand. The device is little more than a black handle with a vivid red button at the top. Simon uses his

vision to look inside the device but sees nothing. Not the blankness as if it had been built of lead, but the emptiness that comes from looking into the space between the stars — black beyond black.

Simon senses a magnetic field between the device and Praxis's hand. The kind that does double-duty to keep the user from dropping the device and that automatically triggers it if it gets too far from the operator's hand. The kind of thing that would have passed for cutting-edge terror-tech five years ago. Now, it's just another weapon of choice for basement bombers.

"This is the part where you tell me what that is," Simon rumbles.

"Oh, this?" Praxis says with feigned modesty. He hefts the device in his hand and looks at it admiringly. "I call it the Omega Trigger. Just a little gizmo I invented. It's far too sophisticated for a simpleton like you to understand. Perhaps you should think of it as my insurance policy."

Simon crosses the room so fast that the dust on the ground swirls as if blown by a wind. In a flash, he has Praxis by the throat. "Insurance against what?" Simon says as he tightens his grip.

"From now on, you work for me," the geek gurgles. "You will do exactly as I say. If you do not carry out my orders, I will press this button."

"And then what?"

"Then a quantum chain reaction spreads across the universe, starting with you, and spreading to every other person with powers. One by one, you will all vanish as if you never existed. Until none of you are left."

"Why?"

"Because you deserve it," Praxis says. "You all do. Every Acorn who doesn't know they're going to get powers someday. Every Gifted who uses their abilities to get rich and famous without actually working. Every Mask who spreads chaos wherever they go. And every Cape who makes regular people feel like they don't count. But you're the worst of them all, Praetorian. You're the most powerful. You were the first. You started this."

Simon looks at him. "So it's personal, then."

"That's right," Praxis barks.

Simon casually tosses him across the room. After sliding across the floor and stopping against a wall lined with empty drink cans and takeout cartons, Praxis rubs his throat and issues a sound between a laugh and a cough as he wobbles back to his feet. The trigger never leaves his hand.

"I'm one of the smartest people on the planet! Maybe the smartest! But none of that matters if I can't fly or deflect bullets or shoot lasers out of my face. All I am is just another human. And I am so much more than that."

"Then go cure a disease. Fix world hunger," Simon says. "I'm not stopping you. If you want to do those things, go do them."

"Shut up! You know what I want? I want to make you walk around like a regular person. I want you to know what it means to have to stand in line. I want you to know what it's like to feel the blast of wind when some Cape flies overhead and it knocks your coffee out of your hand. And then, when you've felt every indignity there is to feel, I want you to admit to the entire city that you let Fluke jump off the Glenrock Building. And that you're no hero. You're just a hypocrite and a phony."

"There is literally nothing stopping me from moving so fast your eyes can't even register it, and taking that thing out of your hands. You do know that, right?"

Praxis shakes his head and grins. "It will go off automatically if it breaks contact with me. Try anything funny and you'll be the first one to die."

It's always the same. Some delirious inventor with a grudge against Supers is convinced they've made a gadget that can blow up the planet, stop time, reverse gravity, or whatever. None of them ever do what they're supposed to. Every time.

Simon looks at the Omega Trigger. Then he looks at Praxis. Then he looks at the Omega Trigger again.

But there's a first time for everything. What if it works?

"Well, Praetorian? What will it be?"

...

"Well?"

...

"Answer me!"

Let's find out.

Simon speaks slowly and evenly. "Do it."

Praxis blinks a few times. "W-what?"

"You heard me."

Praxis collects himself and gets back into character. "I'm not bluffing!"

"Sure, you are. You and every other wannabe mastermind I've put away. Do it."

Praxis looks at his invention as if he doubts it. He looks back at Simon with fresh courage. "This device commands a power your puny mind cannot possibly comprehend!" Praxis sneers. "You are gambling with the very fabric of reality itself!"

"I know what I'm doing," Simon says.

There is a pause. Praxis looks into Simon's eyes. Simon is not kidding.

"You're crazy," Praxis' voice shudders as he speaks.

"No," Simon says. "I'm just tired."

Praxis starts a countdown. A final threat. "F-five."

Tired of people like you testing people like me. Tired of people I care about getting hurt because of this life we live. Tired of every time I was supposed to be there and wasn't. Tired of people who don't even bother to look up in the sky anymore.

"Four."

"You've got two options," Simon says. "You can activate that gizmo and maybe watch me turn to dust."

"Three."

Simon's voice lowers. "Or you can turn it off before I break you for making me think about the worst day of my life."

"Two."

"No one will blame me, either. I've had a pretty bad day." Simon's face betrays a momentary, pained look. "And lately, they've all been bad."

"One...?"

"Ready or not," Simon says.

Praxis holds the Omega Trigger in his shaking, outstretched hand.

"Here I come."

An awful moment of nothing. Then Simon takes a single step forward. Praxis shrieks. He hits the red button.

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