

# **Tribulation & Superheroes**

a short story by Scot Moore  
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I could tell you my real name, but so few people even know I exist anymore that you'd have no way to verify it. So, let's just call me Al. Back, before the tribulation, I was a physicist for the multi-national conglomerate of fat-cat bastards who started this thing. The Americans were working with us on that big collider project to see if we could find the Higgs-boson particle. We found it. And, it was only a matter of time before the aforementioned "fat cats" figured out how to turn it against the rest of us.

They developed a weapon they could point at you and mess your molecular structure around, scattering you into all kinds of different combinations. I spoke up, and now I can fit in the palm of your hand. It wasn't just enlarging or shrinking, though. Sure, they made giants and dwarfs and four-legged postal carriers, but there was more. After some more experimentation, they discovered they could give people super-powers. A few people even volunteered for the duty. The first few were splattered all over the wall like you might expect. However, after a little more trial and error they came across a tall guy with glasses. They promised him they'd cure his vision troubles.

Instead, he gained the ability to shoot high-energy particle beams out of his eyes and light things on fire. They also managed to give him the strength of a bull elephant. We called him Clark because of his "mild-manners" and spectacles. Me and a few other dissidents (the ones who didn't almost step on me) tried to bring him over to our side. He could have torn open the doors on the fat-cats' headquarters and taken them apart one by one. He would be an enormous ally if we could get him. They got to him first, though and I started searching for anyone and everyone who would help us fight the fat-cats. This was when I met a guy named David.

Now, David wasn't a particularly imposing figure. He was average height, and a pretty smart physicist from Lithuania. Other than that, he wasn't initially anything you'd take a second look at. By the time David joined our rag-tag group of dissidents the fat cats had enlisted not only Clark, but two other "Supers" as well. They'd convinced the Supers that they had a plan to save humanity. David and the rest of us knew there was no saving to be had. We fought as hard as we could, but they could kill people by the hundreds. Crowds were no match for them and their connection to world governments kept us away from any kind of weaponry which might stop them.

Before we knew what hit us, they were forcing dissidents into internment camps and brainwashing everyone else on a mass scale. David took me under his wing. Literally. I stowed away in his satchel whenever possible and we sneaked from internment camp to internment camp trying to gather and spread as much information as we could. We became a two-man travelling newsletter. Along the way, we met a girl named Sasha. She and David hit it off from the start and... well, I spent some alone time on the trip. She talked of a long, lost love, and David vowed to help her find them again. Then, in the middle of the night, we got nabbed. David put up as much of a fight as he could and managed to convince them that Sasha was not part of the resistance. They knew David and I too well, though, and our freedom was over. Sasha was tagged with an electronic locator under the skin in the back of her neck and let go.

In the eyes of the overlords our crimes were particularly heinous so we were sent to headquarters. The ride from Europe to the States was cramped, even for me. There were about two hundred of us jammed into a 777 with all of our remaining belongings. The full-size

folks were shackled to their seats and I was kept in a cat carrier. This was not the most dignified part of my life.

Headquarters consisted of a monolithic system of underground caverns and tunnels in Western Kentucky. Some of it was natural and the rest had been bored out to accommodate living quarters for thousands of Establishment friendlies. We had started calling it the Establishment because they refused to name themselves. Also, because there was no defeating them. They had control of the Supers, the world governments and, more importantly, the nukes. When we arrived at the complex, they paraded us and our fellow political dissidents through the main hall to the cheers of the Establishment bastards lined up on either side. The hall was enormous, the size of New York's Grand Central Station, and in the middle was a statue depicting the three Supers they had under their control; Clark, Agnes, and Mole (he was much shorter than the other two). The statue showed them wearing hoods and bowing their heads reverently, as if they would not question the authority of their superiors. And, they didn't. At the end of the hall was a giant auditorium with a three-story glass wall. World leaders were huddled against the wall to watch us parading past on our way to the depths of Hell. They looked distinctly like they were trying to hide how conflicted they were over the whole thing. David spit on the glass as we went by, eliciting a quick jab to the face from the butt-end of a soldier's automatic rifle. I watched the people on the other side recoil in horror, though I'm pretty sure it was from the spit and not the brutality. Assholes.

The underground complex had a double purpose. The deep spaces from which there were no exits served as prison for political prisoners like us. The fact that it had its own air and water supply served as protection for what would come next - detonation.

The establishment lobbed the first one without any warning. No one knew what the plan was and were sure that retaliation would be imminent. The real surprise came when it landed on Cairo, Egypt, and nothing was done. No foreign government shot back and, to the best of our knowledge, no one denounced them for doing it. After a week or so of dust-settling a proclamation was made. Apparently, after discovering a particle so powerful it could alter existence itself, the Establishment had decided that they were God. It was time to purge the Earth from its vicious, infectious creatures, and repopulate it with something better. Neither David or I were interested in finding out what that was.

It went down like this. They would drop nukes, utilizing weapons from all available nations' arsenals, on every major city. This act alone would destroy over 50 percent of the world's population. After they dropped the first ten or fifteen, though, people had managed to scatter into whatever countryside they could find. They were detonating a nuke every two or three months before people were able to sufficiently evacuate. After that, they decreased in frequency, but increased in randomness. The mad men and women running the annihilation took measures to keep people off their game. They started dropping nukes throughout the countryside, trying to push people back to population centers where they would be more easily disposed of. After a time, people returned as planned, and the Establishment was back on track within three years. The list ended with Tokyo, New York City, and finally Washington D.C. I'm not sure how it got out, but most people knew it, and the Establishment liked the fear it engendered too much to change their plans.

After five years in next to no light and minimal food, most of the dissidents had died off. Despite the lack of stimulus or nutrition, the Establishment at least made sure to clean up the dead bodies. There were a couple attempts at revolts, but they were poorly organized and ended up doing more harm than good. David and I had a different plan. I had been tunneling through the wall toward an escape hatch in a now vacant missile silo. The tunnel wasn't large enough for David, but if I could get out, sneak back in, and cause a diversion of some sort, then David and some of the others might be able to break through to the silo and up to the surface. It worked. The Supers were out on assignment and most of the soldiers were asleep. I pried the door to the silo open and crept back through the passageway that connected the various camps. It took all the strength I had, but I managed to aim the rifle of a sleeping guard at one of the other guards and fire it. It shot him right in the head. Two other guards came running and they had a shoot-out amongst themselves in the opposite direction of the silo.

I nabbed the keys and broke David and some of the others out. We sneaked back to the silo and began the long ascent up to the surface. The hatch popped open into a grass plain dimly lit by a hazy half-moon. We were all nearly blinded by even that much light. After a substantial amount of adjustment while carefully crawling along the ground, we made it to a safe enough distance to stand up and get a look around. Something looked different. As a result of our time in the underground catacombs and our proximity to some abnormal radiation, our eyes had mutated to see things we'd never seen before. Enhanced by the air of the outside world and the gently falling nuclear radiation around us, we could pick up on heat signatures like a pair of military-issue night goggles. The novelty of this was only momentarily enjoyed, though as we became aware of a group of soldiers coming our way. We scampered to a nearby creek and jumped in to lower our body temperatures. Once we had trouble identifying our own body heat, we felt it was safe enough to continue on our escape. It had to happen at night since they'd assuredly find us during the day. A couple of the escapees were just too weak to go on, and we watched the iridescent soldiers capture them and throw them into trailers behind their ATVs.

Then, it was silent. We picked up and started moving again. By morning we reached a road that appeared to be heading East-West. Neither of us was particularly familiar with the States, but we decided to head East based on two factors. One was that we knew the East coast was the US's population center. We'd have more luck finding members of the resistance there. Second, and more importantly, was that we'd face less nuclear fallout since the Establishment was not likely to drop a nuke on itself.

We found an old shack and snuck in to see if we could find anything of use. Upon entering, we discovered that it had been a poorly planned bomb shelter. There were hundreds of unopened cans of food, guns, ammunition, and a pristine motorcycle. The owner had built it above-ground, though, and the Establishment had captured him, whoever it was. We packed up as much food as we could (after gorging first) and hopped on the bike. David wasn't exactly an expert rider, but he managed not to tip it over and kill me, so I was grateful. After a few hundred miles, he was tired, but much better at driving the bike.

By the time we got to Washington it was nearly uninhabited. A couple devices had been detonated in tectonic zones, causing seismic shifts in otherwise stable regions of the earth and D.C. was now perched on an arid plane overlooking a thousand-foot drop-off. The city had

become a series of abandoned structures looming precariously at the edge of their own deaths. An orange haze illuminated the evening sky above us, and as David was climbing off the bike, the business end of a long rifle leveled itself at his head. We could see the haze grow brighter with the added heat from our increased heartbeats. This was no soldier, though. The man was wearing a long, green coat, boots, and aviator goggles. A cliché of a cigar lolled off his bottom lip as he spoke, "Who the fuck are you?"

David explained that we'd just escaped from an internment camp. He gave a brief run-down on our former lives, and once the man saw my meager visage pop out of the satchel, he had no choice but to believe David's story.

"What the hell are you doing here?" the man asked. David replied, "Looking for the resistance." After some awkward maneuvering, they came to an understanding and the man decided David was safe, ignoring me along the way. I was used to it by then, and didn't take it personally. David was more interested in the climate, though. It was extremely hot in D.C., nearly 100 degrees. Considering it was only May, the weather didn't make sense. Had the weather changed that much due to nuclear fallout? The man explained that the resistance had managed to build solar heating devices designed to throw off the Establishment's use of night-vision detection. Above the ground, the air cooled off significantly. This explained why we weren't alerted to the man's presence when we drove in. David decided to keep it a secret that we also had that ability, and the conversation continued long into the night.

After a few hours, a couple more resistance warriors joined the discussion. They brought what food they could and were eager to hear about the headquarters. David told them everything we knew, right down to the spit on the window of the auditorium. That got a chuckle or two. In return for the information we were able to provide, they helped David with one critical piece of information he needed to know. Where was Sasha? He described her name, her look, and her personality type. They didn't know exactly who he was describing, but had a pretty good idea. When they described the gruesome, complex scar on the back of her neck, David felt sure they were talking about the same person. While they explained that there were many resistance fighters who had similar scars, David was positive the woman they described must have been Sasha. Hoboken, New Jersey was our next destination.

While most average people were trying to run away from trouble, Sasha and the rest of the resistance were running toward it, trying desperately to hunt down the cowards who started this. We tried to sleep that night, but the heat was difficult to stand. It didn't matter after a while, though. As we were wiping ourselves down with wet rags everyone around us started flocking toward the headquarters hut. David and I followed suit and listened intently outside the flap. A nuke had just been detonated outside Niagara Falls, New York.

The proximity of the event to New York City left most people scratching their ass for answers. The man with the gun and a few other people tried to talk David out of going to Hoboken in fear of coming into close contact with nuclear fallout, but he couldn't be dissuaded. They finally addressed me directly and asked if I wanted to stay with them. David assured me I didn't need to go with him, but I'd have none of it. I was already a radiological freak, so the risk was acceptable. Also, I wouldn't have missed that trip for all the tea left in China. We had a job to do, and I needed to be a part of it. We hopped on the bike and rode.

We made our way through a maze of abandoned and demolished homes, factories, and malls looking for recent signs of life. Where had the carnival of the living been to lately? By morning, we found it. In what used to be a mall with a giant, dug-out underbelly were a thousand people, maybe more, putting the finishing touches on a month-long living quarters. They'd gotten adept at specializing temporary quarters for specific periods of time. It seemed these folks felt there was no more than a month or so they could safely live there.

As with our stop in D.C. we were regarded with suspicion at first. However, the D.C. folks had messaged ahead and informed them of our arrival. After passing through the perimeter we came to a series of rooms and hallways inhabited by the officers and higher-ups who were running the local chapter of the resistance. We were escorted to the main office. I'd love to tell you that the door swept open and Sasha came running out into David's arms like in a Romance novel, but that's not what happened. First of all, there was no door. There were only the remnants of broken hinges and a partially demolished frame. Secondly, there was no running involved either. Sasha climbed up from behind her desk and walked confidently over to us and hugged David. She understood immediately that he'd been through Hell and that he didn't have the energy for a big reunion. I was slightly shocked by the whole situation since I had no idea she was actually running the show. She explained that she'd get us some rations and a place to lie down, but that she needed to debrief us as soon as possible. After that initial show of emotion she was all business, which suited David's stoic, Lithuanian disposition. He seemed genuinely content with the encounter. I felt like I'd been cheated out of a good show.

We gorged on beans and corn, the most abundant canned goods anyone seemed to have. However, these folks also managed to have salt, pepper, and garlic. All things we hadn't seen for years. Our digestive systems kicked back a little at the foreign substances, but our taste-buds did their best to subdue the impulse to vomit.

David and Sasha talked for hours about the inner workings of the Establishment, the missile silo, and anything else they felt was relevant. Strangely, David again omitted the information about our eyesight. Perhaps he felt it was best to fly under the mutant radar in case there was a general distrust of people with abilities. I felt it was a pretty meager ability and not one that would make us a threat to anyone, but I wasn't about to question his instincts. I was just happy with the salt.

After the meeting was over, Sasha summoned her officers and laid out the plan. They were going to Kentucky. David and I were offered quarters, rations, and rest to stay at the compound. We both knew it was best if we went along, though, since we knew the territory and the people they would be dealing with. The only trick now was how to get in. Sasha assured us she had it handled and David and I went about finally taking that nap we'd been planning for 1,000 miles.

Sleep felt magnificent. David had a cot and I had a foot pillow someone had lifted from a broken-down home furnishings store which hadn't yet been completely picked over. I dreamt, and for the first time in almost five years it was about something other than death. It was about a nice, curvy, nine-inch tall woman I hadn't yet met. It was about water. It was about leg-of-lamb and green jelly. It was glorious. We slept for fourteen hours. It was morning again when we finally joined the land of the conscious.

It was a busy, frenzied land that morning as the resistance was mounting an infiltration team. A few days earlier, Sasha and her crew had shot down a plane carrying a number of British dignitaries bound for the Establishment headquarters. They knew the bastards would be waiting for their arrival, so they did their best to research the people they'd shot down and hijack their personalities. This plan had been in the works for some time, and they were ready for the task. There were two things they hadn't anticipated, however. First was the complete destruction of the plane itself. There was no remaining trace of the plane's destination. The other thing was that we'd show up with precisely the destination they were looking for. They were already a day behind, but now would be able to get back on track.

We left at sunset that night on our way toward Kentucky in a couple of stolen Establishment vans. Despite the haste to embark, a couple of the metal workers managed to fashion me a perch above the front passenger seat where I could swivel around to see out the windshield or back into the cabin. Most of the ride was at night, so I didn't get much of a view, but it was better than sitting in a bag waiting to get stepped on. Most of us should have slept on the trip with only two people needing to be awake – the navigator and the driver. None of us could, though. I'm not sure of it, but I started to think my sense of smell had been heightened as well with how palpable the anxiety was in that van. David and Sasha never would have let on how scared they were, though. They grimly gazed off into the distance, waiting for the van to crest the next hill on its way to what we perceived as our inevitable doom.

The sun started to rise over the hills behind us through a bright, red smoke that seemed to settle on the Earth. The glare of its rising reflected off the metal and glass in the van. We closed our eyes when we could and made sure the driver had a set of sunglasses. Still, the glare was difficult to avoid because of how it refracted through the permanent haze in the lower atmosphere. Everything around us was glowing with infinite particles of light bouncing through infinite droplets of radiation-filled dew. It was beautiful and terrible all at the same time. We could appreciate the magnificence of the view while simultaneously acknowledging that the same variables which made it so stunning were killing us all and the planet we inhabited.

Two more hills. Two more valleys. Then, a grassy plain. We were getting close. By then, the sun was high enough in the sky that the blinding glare had subsided. David and I could start to see the heat rising off the road in front of us. At that point, he was driving and had to stop. He said he had a headache and asked Jeslyn to drive instead. She gladly took over and David retired to the back of the van where he shot me a mean glance to keep my mouth shut. I had no intention of revealing the source of his headache, but nodded my appreciation for his circumstance and went back to the practice of "resting my eyes."

Jeslyn guided the van along a meandering stream of pavement between the shores of decapitated trees. She was a smoother driver than David anyway, and would likely keep us off the radar just a bit longer as she and the rest of the full-sized people focused on getting into character. David kept attempting a British accent, but after failing at something as simple as, "Would ya like some tea wit' that?" he was scrapped from the plan. Besides, his emaciated form had just as high a probability for causing the plan to fail anyway. Sasha and David felt the loss was acceptable since he wasn't part of the original plan anyway. Now, a different plan started to emerge. It looked like this.

Sasha, Jeslyn, William, and Spencer would go ahead with the plan to infiltrate the Establishment headquarters. They only needed to succeed long enough to get inside and find a place to plant a bomb. If they could stay in character for an hour, it would be enough. The addition to the plan would consist of David and I climbing back down the way we came with a second device. If an hour went by and they hadn't succeeded, we were to detonate our bomb.

Jeslyn maneuvered the van off the road on the near side of the creek we had crossed only too recently before. David climbed out of the van carrying me in his bag and the bomb in the other hand. We looked on as the van disappeared over the small hill which led up to the headquarters entrance. Once they were out of sight, we crept along the banks of the creek until we came to the place we'd seen before. The ATV tracks were still visible on the other side of the creek. He dipped into the creek to remove our scents and heat signatures for at least a short time and held the bomb over his head as we crossed. On the other side, we picked up the trail from before and hiked back to the silo entrance. As we got closer, David was reduced to a crawl to stay out of sight and I finally got to get out of the bag and walk. I tried to engage him in conversation to keep the mood light, but his intensity couldn't be subdued. He understood better than anyone else that if he and I got caught this time we wouldn't just be thrown in prison. We wouldn't even be summarily put to death. Our punishment would be much worse.

We'd heard stories about attempted assassins who were captured. The Establishment would bring them into a room, tie them down to a chair, and start experimenting. Most of the time, the experiments failed. The bastards would save their high-risk experiments for people they didn't like. Then, if the subject exploded, or mutated into a one-legged crab with no genitals, there was no real loss. Whenever the experiment failed, but the subject lived, the Establishment wouldn't kill them. They used this horrifying ordeal as the subject's punishment. A living death in a foreign body, permanently in pain, anguish, and humiliation as the Establishment would put them on display for people to mock and laugh at. It also served as a warning to those who viewed the poor wretches not to cross the Establishment.

For David and I, there were only two ways out of this new plan; death or success. While David was perfectly comfortable with his possible, imminent demise, I hadn't met my nine-inch woman yet, so I was insistent that we succeed.

The hatch on the silo was a heavy, steel door with an astonishingly low-tech metal handle on the top of it. If the door was sealed, it would only open from the inside, and since it was originally designed to keep wayward American kids from climbing into a nuclear missile silo, it wasn't critical that it be able to be opened from above. We tried prying it open first, but the Establishment had obviously closed it off after our escape. In the package with the bomb was a high-carbon drill they had brought along precisely for this purpose. David started drilling right through the center of the door. Fortunately, the sharpness of the bit and the antique nature of the door allowed the hole to be drilled quickly and smoothly. Once there was a hole into the bearing chamber, he inserted a tire iron into the hole and started turning. He was still pretty weak and this process took a lot out of him. Eventually, the threads on the door spun off the hatch opening and the door could be opened. David fell back on his ass and breathed hard for a moment or two. I didn't want to interrupt him, but explained that a breach in the perimeter would likely be noticed and that we had to get moving.

Much to our surprise, the breach hadn't been noticed. We had a quiet trip down the stairs of the silo and arrived at the first door nearly 100 feet below the surface. The door we climbed from last time was another 900 feet below. I tried not to look down. David slowly opened the door into what seemed to be an air-conditioned armory. There was no actual light, but the heat emanating from under the front door to the room dimly illuminated objects close enough to absorb it. David left the door to the silo open and more heat started flooding into the room. As the air temperature increased, we began to see the scope of the weaponry in the room. Guns, bombs, grenades... anything we might need during our escape. David collected a couple of slender side-arms and a few other toys and stuffed them into the bag underneath my perch. The room continued to warm up until we started to hear a beep coming from the far corner of the room. After the beep we heard something mechanical start up near the ceiling above where the beep was coming from. It was, indeed, an air conditioner. The air started to cool again and our vision became more and more obscured. David climbed on a shelving unit and reached around until he found the power switch for the AC. He shut it off and we went about waiting for the heat to renew. Then, the beep came again. David looked closer at the object from which it came and tried to interpret its meaning. Even with the heat flooding back in, we couldn't see what it said. David warmed his hands up as much as he could and placed them on the metal plate near the red, blinking light on top of the object.

It light up long enough for us to know we needed to turn the AC back on. David put me on top of the shelves to hit the AC power switch and ran back to the other end of the room to close the door to the silo. I flipped the switch just as the beeping was starting to increase in speed. The device was a heat-triggered bomb. It was designed to snuff out the flames of a fire which had gotten too hot to be put out by water. When a fire got too hot, the water would evaporate, and there would be no way to exterminate the flames. However, a bomb, detonated in the right place, could suck the oxygen out of the entire area, thus extinguishing the fire. The obvious question would be why on Earth they would leave the thing armed, *in the bloody armory*. David explained that this room's proximity to the silo was no accident. If there was a fire so hot as to necessitate such a device, it would only be fueled by the mass amount of oxygen in the silo. If the bomb detonated here, it would extinguish the flames as a last ditch effort to stop the fire. Simultaneously, it would blow a hole in the silo where, if the fire didn't go out, it would be strengthened by the excess air. Likely, it was intended as a catch-all. Either the fire would be gone, or everyone would die, but they couldn't have anyone escape by way of starting a fire. It was fear used to keep people under control. As a physicist, I probably would have figured that all out on my own, but I was still thinking about my nine-inch woman.

About forty-five minutes had passed since Sasha and her crew dropped us off. We gave them half an hour to get into the facility, then we'd started the clock on their one-hour timeframe. So, if all went well, they would detonate within the next forty-five minutes. If they didn't succeed, we'd have to detonate our bomb. Either way, we had to make sure we got out of the complex before the heat in that room exceeded the allowable temperature. We weren't sure what it was, but figured it was somewhere in the neighborhood of 100° Celsius. Our escape would have to occur long before that happened.

I crouched down and looked under the crack in the door. I couldn't fit through, but could see there was no one in the ante room beyond. David opened it slightly and I walked

through the opening. He would keep his ear near the ground and I'd knock twice for him to come out, once to stay where he was. The room was bare except for a few chairs and a window next to the door which led to the hallway outside. The door was locked. I looked around for the camera, and there it was, perched high in the corner on the hinge-side of the main door. It wasn't currently aimed at me, but I was sure if I moved enough, it would be. I moved slowly to the wall and crept underneath the chairs lining the wall. Apparently, the guards had to be checked in and out of the armory, which would occasionally take long enough that seating was in order. Evil is identified by many things, but bureaucracy is a generally sure-fire indicator. Once under one of the chairs (from which I could no longer see the camera), I pulled out my miniature rucksack of the few remaining belongings I had which weren't designed solely for a doll. During our short stay in Sasha's camp I fashioned myself a slingshot out of cigarette-case spring and a rubber-band. I picked up a pebble which had fallen from the tread of a soldier's boot and fired it at the camera. The pebble smacked the lens with such force that it cracked and fell out piece by piece. I ran to the entrance and hopped up onto a chair next to the window. From the chair I climbed up onto the window sill. For a moment, I thought about trying to shoot the dead-bolt to unlock the door but thought better of it. I was at the wrong angle and even my surprisingly useful little weapon was likely not strong enough to compensate for the requisite force needed to turn the deadbolt. Instead, I resigned myself to looking out the window and hoping the allowable peripheral vision was sufficient to establish whether or not there were inhabitants in the adjacent hall. Time was short, since the security force would likely notice the broken camera at any moment and send soldiers on their way. After establishing that I couldn't, in fact, see a damned thing, I hopped down off the sill, off the chair, and ran over to the door and knocked twice.

David hurried out and over to the door. When he bent down to unlock and open the door I hopped back into his bag. He peered out into the hallway and verified that there was no one in there. He fixed his hair, straightened up, and shifted me and his bag over to his other shoulder, closing the door behind him. I ducked under the flap of the satchel and put all my trust in David. I could hear the occasional smattering of conversations, doors opening and closing, the whirring of machines, and feet shuffling along at varying paces. David was fitting in. The bag was lightening up, though, and I knew it was because his heart was racing. He ducked into a side room and closed the door behind him. I could feel his back heaving with the breaths. He told me he was okay, and that he just needed to rest. I left him to it.

"Where are we?" I asked. He answered and before I could protest opened the door and stepped back out. I peeked from under the flap of the satchel and saw the great hall I'd remembered so vividly from five years before. It was even more sizeable than in my memory. The stone walls loomed over us and the statue's monolithic presence permeated into my very being a sense of terror I still retain flashbacks from. To be noticed now would result in a fate far worse than death. David strode to the center of the atrium and gazed off into the auditorium. As we walked up, Sasha, Jeslyn, and the others were having cordial discussion with some of the Establishment brass. David averted his eyes so we couldn't be linked to them, and ducked into a passageway off to the side of the atrium. We had half an hour before we had to detonate our own device. Then came the really tough part of the plan.

David and I had to break back into the prison block and release a friend of Sasha's. Well, "friend" was a loose way of saying "lover." It was just easier for David to say. Sasha had often spoken of Adria when we were rogue messengers back in Europe. The reason she'd gotten into the business was because she had lost her loved one. After David was captured, her resolve was strengthened and she ended up running a whole chapter of the resistance. David volunteered to break Adria out. We'd met her briefly when we first came to the camp, so we knew who we were looking for, if she was still alive. We met a guard on the way down and once David managed to get him out of the main hallway, made a quick shot to the guard's head, knocking him unconscious.

It was only then, six years after I'd met him, that David admitted to me his prior involvement in the Russian military and secret service. I was shocked. You think you know a person... He was dead serious, too. He hadn't been gasping before because he was scared. He'd been gasping because he was out of shape and needed to catch his breath. He didn't know about the bomb just because of his understanding of physics. He knew about it because he'd designed the thing while doing field work in the war with China (a war the rest of Europe had only scarcely been involved in, though the Americans made it their business to join up). He hadn't been initially bad at riding a motorcycle because he was new to it, it was because he was poorly nourished and could barely hold the thing up. He was a professional killer and assassin, not just a scientist as I had thought. All of this was kept from me and our friends so that we wouldn't be killed upon his capture. This information also helped to explain why he didn't want anyone to know about us and our special ability.

After raiding the guard for tools, ammunition, an extra weapon, and his clothes, David and I set off for the prison. On the way, he only killed the guards he had to kill, and managed to hide their bodies so the surveillance assholes would be none the wiser. We made it to the prison block in one piece. David pulled out the ID card of the last guard he'd assaulted and swiped it in the local computer interface. Adria was alive, and resided in a cell block two levels below our entry point. We worked our way down to her level with fifteen minutes to spare. Here, David threw all tact to the wind. He quickly shot out the camera near the entrance to the level and disabled the three guards in the hallway. We stole their keys and opened Adria's cell. She recoiled from the light in the hallway and the fear of being beaten. She was horribly malnourished and sickly-looking. Despite her meager appearance, she had a fire in her eyes. David and I could both see what Sasha had seen in her all those years earlier. He took off his hat and said, "I'm here with Sasha. It's time to go."

Without hesitation, she got up off the bench in her cell and followed as closely as she could. She saw the dead bodies and shuddered, but made no sound. She'd clearly been preparing for this day. Whatever Sasha had told her before she was taken was still foremost in her mind. Based on that response, I was starting to have more and more faith in Sasha's plan. 'Course, this meant we only had ten minutes to get out before the place blew up. David was also acutely aware of the timeline and made a hasty exit from the prison block.

There, waiting for us at the mouth of the block, were thirty-five soldiers in full combat regalia. The commanding officer of the group was a cocky, self-important American with a sloppy Southern accent who asked, "How long we got, David?" To which David responded quickly, "Twenty minutes." The officer was crude, but not stupid. He shot back, "So, I can

assume that means we got eight or ten minutes, am I riiiiight?" His drawl seemed to be a caricature of itself as he lengthened out the attempt to get David to agree with him. David said nothing this time and was surprisingly cool, while I could feel Adria trembling behind us.

They grabbed Adria and David and hustled them up to the Atrium level where they could parade us into the interrogation cells. As we struggled past the auditorium I could see out of the corner of the satchel that Sasha and the others were being simultaneously arrested. The guards had the two bomb cases in tow and were walking toward the exit elevators. The plan had failed. Before entering the interrogation cell, David and Adria were searched in front of the onlookers in the atrium. They tore open the bag and roughly pulled me out of it, throwing me onto the table in the room. I woke up only a few minutes later to find David, William, and Spencer on one side, with Clark and the redneck on the other. They were all in silence. I asked if I could be removed from the middle of the room in case a fight of some sort broke out and was lifted onto the ceiling fan for safe-keeping. What was only a few foot difference to regular folks was over a 60-foot drop to me. If the fan started, I'd be dead. Perhaps my request was somewhat ill-advised.

At that moment there was a shudder in the structure as the two bombs detonated outside. The plan was officially dead. The officer smiled and stood up to hover over the newly-trapped criminals. He began listing off our personal contacts, our loved ones, our histories... anything he thought might start to recall reasons to "give ourselves up." We gave up nothing. The officer just smiled and said, "Okay, I'll leave you alone with Clark, here, and we'll see what you have to say." As he left, Clark got up and lifted the table from its place and into the wall on the other side of the room. My 60-foot drop had just become a 90-foot drop, and my decision to get out of the way was becoming increasingly stupid.

Just as Clark was gearing up to fire a hole through William's face to get at David's conscience, David shouted at him to stop. Over the course of the next few minutes, David spoke more than I'd ever heard before put together. He unraveled stories of a past time when he was part of a national force of elite soldiers whose sole purpose was to reign terror on innocent people. He had been in charge of keeping people in line through fear, and now it was time to give something back. He spoke to Clark of things I'd never heard, and convinced him to take his seat again where they could talk more casually. A whole torrid history of the Establishment's takeover of planet Earth unfolded before us with William, Spencer, and myself just bystanders to the great debate of human need. David poured out his soul, and all the horrible things he'd done in his former life. Clark couldn't resist the information pounding away at his brain.

After ten or fifteen minutes of this, Clark stood up, took off his glasses, and got mad. He flexed and we could see the bull-elephant muscles ripple through his tweed suit to the point that some threads came loose. He removed the table from the wall he'd only recently inserted it into and swung it, removing the door of the room from its hinges and shooting it across the hall into the other interrogation room. David wasted no time getting up from his chair and coercing me to jump down onto his back. Normally, I would have hesitated, but there was a Super across the hall punching holes in steel walls and I didn't want to be near him. David dipped down as I landed, softening the impact enough that I could climb up to his shoulder. He put his hands up by me so I could cut the tie-wrap they'd placed around his wrists. The other

two men followed suit and once I had freed them all, David placed me into his satchel and ran across the hall. Clark came out to meet him, "I'll hold them off," and gave him his key to the main elevator, "Get out as fast as you can."

The alarm was going off at this point and Clark was crashing through walls into Establishment offices, killing everyone he saw. Sasha, Jeslyn, and Adria joined us and we made our way into the atrium. As we got to the entrance, a few hundred soldiers met us. Just as David was about to start shooting, we heard someone yell, "Get down," behind us. We all ducked (even though it didn't really matter for me, I did too) and two white-hot beams of fire came from the mess behind us, sawing a number of the soldiers in two. The rest dispersed as Clark came pounding out of the hallway. Like a prisoner let loose on his captors, Clark walked to the center of the atrium and lifted the statue off its base. He swung it around and around and let it go back in our direction. We ducked and watched the entire management structure collapse behind us. Clark was on the war-path. We hastily ran from the remains of the management structure to the exit elevators. Clark backed up behind us to protect us, throwing every large object at his disposal into the crowd of soldiers and onlookers. David, Sasha, and Jeslyn laid down cover fire while William, Spencer, and Adria maneuvered into the elevator and began rigging its programming not to return after our ascent. David stayed at Clark's side for a few moments, trying to think of ways to ignite a fire. Clark told him to leave, but David explained the reason for his lingering and Clark assured him he'd get the fire started.

As we were entering the elevator, Jeslyn turned and noticed the crowd clear on the other side of the atrium. We looked back and saw Agnes and Mole step out from the rubble and face off with Clark. David took off the satchel and put me and it down in the corner of the elevator. I climbed out and asked what the hell he was doing. He stepped out of the elevator, brandishing his weapons. Sasha and I shouted our disapproval, but he yelled back telling William and Spencer to start the elevator. Jeslyn pulled Sasha back into the elevator and William hit the button. As the door closed I could momentarily see the battle begin. Clark got knocked back into the wall by some sort of energy burst from Agnes. David started unloading an entire clip at Mole. Clark shot back at Agnes and she flew back through the glass wall of the auditorium. The last thing we heard before the elevator door shut was David shouting, "Run!" to us and turning away.

The elevator started its ascent. About halfway up the fire alarm finally went off. William had hot-wired the thing so it didn't start back down and we continued our way to the surface. Adria put me in David's satchel and picked the satchel up. We stayed out of the way when the door opened and Sasha, Jeslyn, William, and Spencer went out with guns blazing. William took a quick shot to the head and was gone. The other three managed to clear out the entry way and we made our escape to the van. Adria pulled me out of the satchel and put me back on my perch. While I was grateful to see it again, I couldn't help but think of David. Why had he stayed? He was no match for the Supers and could only be killed as a result of his dalliance. Then again, after hearing the horrible things he'd been party to before the tribulation, I can see how he felt he owed his life to the cause. Either way, none of us felt he had any chance of surviving.

Jeslyn hopped behind the wheel of the van and tore through the gates toward the main road. The upgrade to bullet-proof windows they'd made before the trip came in handy as a

bullet which would have splattered me all over the van instead glanced ineffectually off the passenger window. Adria was equally grateful. I guided her to the canned food in the bottom of the satchel and she cracked the can open, greedily devouring its contents. Sasha watched in conflicted contemplation. Spencer tried to comfort her that the losses were acceptable considering the cause had gained an ally in Clark, but she wasn't interested in being convinced of anything at that point.

As we drove, we saw a nuke go off in the distance behind us in what must have been Southern Illinois, or even far Western Kentucky. It was a long way off and wouldn't affect us until the winds picked up, and even then, we'd likely not be drastically endangered by it. They were trying to hit close to home to appeal to Clark's sense of self-preservation. We hoped it wouldn't work, and that he'd keep fighting. For now, we were safe.

David was not. He'd sacrificed his new-found freedom for a chance at saving a Super. What happened after we left that silo, no one really knows, but the next thing we knew for sure of David was that he was making his way along the Southern route with Clark, stopping at Establishment silos along the way. Killing them. Killing them all. He was determined to make it right. A cartoon picture of him popped up on the net showing a third eye and a crazed look on his face. Maybe that was true, but we don't know.

What we did know is that he was working his way toward her. He was missing something and she had it. Maybe it took two people to right the wrongs of the past five years. Maybe a woman was the one who was supposed to put us back on the course to civilization. Whatever it was, he knew it, and it gave him purpose.

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