The Impostor #2: The Blood Machine

by Richard Lee Byers
First publication August, 2013.

All stories © Richard Lee Byers. All rights reserved.

All stories appear here for the first time.

Cover by Jamie Stubkjaer.
Table of Contents

What Has Gone Before
Flinch
Trap
Magnetar Lives!
War Games
Author’s Note
A Portrait of the Abductee as a Young Man
What Has Gone Before

Matt Brown lives in a world of superheroes and supervillains, of mutants, monsters, and sentient machines, but none of that has anything to do with him. He’s just a normal guy living a normal life...until wasp-like aliens invade and overrun the Earth.

The wasps take a number of prisoners, Matt included, for purposes unknown. An accident frees him from his hibernation cell, and, seeking a way out of the alien hive ship, he stumbles on the corpses of Red Bear and Dr. Umbra, two of the city’s superheroes. He also finds the articles that gave them their powers and hopes to use them to accomplish his escape.

When he picks them up, Red Bear’s magic wristbands radiate a potent sense of menace and taboo, and he hesitates to experiment with them. But Dr. Umbra’s costume seems all right, so he puts it on.

Subsequently, Matt finds other prisoners and uses his newfound abilities to lead them to freedom. The exigencies of the moment prevent him from explaining that he isn’t the real Dr. Umbra.

The fugitives exit the hive ship just in time to see Magnetar, Jackson City’s last true superhero, fall in combat with the invaders. Afterwards, Matt doesn’t have the heart to destroy his companions’ last shred of hope by revealing that he isn’t actually Dr. Umbra. He continues impersonating the vigilante and helps the surviving humans as best he can.

Days later, Matt encounters a different sort of wasp bioengineered to hunt someone with Dr. Umbra’s powers. He’s still worrying over the implications when he happens upon a battle between a squadron of aliens and the WMDs.

Led by the notorious Death Metal, the WMDs are a supervillain gang. They’ve emerged from hiding to battle the wasps for control of the ravaged city.

Matt reasons that the distinction between crime fighter and criminal is now meaningless, and humanity’s best hope is for everyone with superpowers to band together. He reveals himself to the WMDs.

Unfortunately, he’s underestimated the magnitude of their grudge against their old enemy Dr. Umbra. They capture Matt to torture him to death in a public spectacle.

But before they can get started, the wasps attack, endangering everyone, the supervillains, the thugs who work for them, and the ordinary people they forced to attend the gathering. Matt escapes his bonds and helps the WMDs repel the assault.

 Afterwards, Death Metal decides to let the man he still believes to be his longtime foe join the WMDs. He’ll kill Dr. Umbra later, when he’s outlived his usefulness.

In the days that follow, Matt grows increasingly upset over the WMDs’ treatment of the ordinary people in their territory, whom they exploit and abuse like slaves. The problem comes to a head when Death Metal makes a deal with Greenclaws, a river monster and another frequent adversary of the city’s superheroes. Greenclaws will give the WMDs free access to the goods warehoused by the docks and even a submarine, which will enable the villains to travel without attracting the notice of the wasps. In return, the criminals will give the monster some of their subject population
to eat.

Matt devises a scheme to save the prisoners, accidentally scuttling the sub when he steals it from its mooring. When everyone discovers the vessel’s absence, the deal falls apart, a fight erupts, and the WMDs kill Greenclaws while the captives escape. Among them is Gwen Porter, a journalism student who has taken it upon herself to gather vital information and disseminate it to the city’s remaining citizens.

Later, Matt returns to the survivors he freed from the hive ship and receives a cold reception. Sally Hollingsworth, a nurse and the group’s informal leader, explains that, thanks to Gwen, they know Dr. Umbra has thrown in with the WMDs.

Matt decides that since ordinary people no longer trust Dr. Umbra, he needs a second heroic identity to interact with them, and his thoughts turn to Red Bear’s wristbands. But he’s still afraid to use them until he receives a radio transmission from Solomon.

Solomon is an artificial intelligence who aided the superheroes of Jackson City and maintained the Castle, their secret underground headquarters. The initial alien bombardment of the city damaged both him and the base, but he’s been working since to make repairs.

Solomon is willing to serve as Matt’s advisor and reveals that Red Bear created a shrine of sorts inside the Castle. If Matt insists on donning the wristbands, the shrine may be the safest place to do it.

Matt goes to the Castle only to encounter Tabula Rasa. A weapon formerly deployed against the slain superheroes, Tabula Rasa is a robot assassin with the ability to rebuild and enhance itself after seemingly catastrophic damage. Unbeknownst to Solomon, the bombardment raised the temperature of Tabula Rasa’s cryogenic display case and allowed the robot to escape. The sight of Dr. Umbra activates its programming, and it starts trying to kill him.

Matt has several close calls, but he and Solomon eventually succeed in shutting Tabula Rasa down. He then goes to Red Bear’s shrine to put on the wristbands.
Flinch

Matt jerked a claw-studded leather band onto his left wrist. The feeling of awe and dread that came over him whenever he handled the talismans exploded into outright terror. The room with its rust-colored sketches of animals drawn on the walls seemed to tilt and spin. He staggered backward, caught his heel on the piece of wood Red Bear had supposedly used for a drum, and fell on his butt.

“What is wrong?” Solomon asked, his calm, intellectual voice sounding from some inconspicuous speaker.

Shaking, his heart pounding, Matt struggled to control himself. Damn it, he’d stood up to aliens, supervillains, and killer robots. He was not going to fall apart just because he’d slipped on a glorified tennis accessory!

Once he stopped hyperventilating, he managed to respond to Solomon’s question, though his voice came out high and thready. “It’s nothing. It’s just that the vibe the bands give off is a little stronger.”

“It is reasonable to infer the ‘vibe’ is a warning. I recommend removing the wrist brace.”

“I can’t. I need Red Bear’s strength to fight the wasps.” And his unblemished reputation, so he could associate with somebody besides criminals and sociopaths.

He’d dropped the second wristband when he was flailing around. His hand still shaking, fumbling, he retrieved it and jerked it on like he was yanking off a Band-Aid.

The fear stopped. The relief was so profound that it took him a moment to realize everything else had changed, too.

Except for the wristbands, he was naked, and the air was cool enough to make him shiver. He wasn’t sitting on a smooth tile floor anymore but an irregular surface of dirt and rock.

A little light leaked in from a horseshoe-shaped opening where the doorway to the corridor had been. It was just sufficient to illuminate the same drawings he’d seen before, or others like them. But the walls had turned stony and rough, like the walls of a cave.

Something thumped. After a moment, the beat and rhythm became apparent. On the other side of the opening, people were drumming. From the slapping sound of it, maybe on sections of log like the one Red Bear had used.

Matt guessed he was supposed to go out and join the party.

Wishing he had clothes, he rose and walked out into the warmth of a leaping, crackling fire. Trees made a black wall at the edge of the clearing, and more stars than he’d ever seen burned in the night sky.

Then, suddenly, he caught sight of the inhabitants of this place. It made him jump, like other people did when he switched off Dr. Umbra’s invisibility and popped out of nowhere.

The men and women had thick, muscular bodies and low skulls with brow ridges, big noses, and receding chins. A little apelike. A number were as bare as Matt, while others wore fur tunics and wraps, although not necessarily in ways that covered their privates. Some carried spears and hatchets with heads made of flint.
Yet they didn’t seem primitive but primal. The sight of them filled Matt with the same awe as handling the wristbands.

And if they were wonderful, the animals in their company were more so. As high at the shoulder as Matt was tall, its pelt gleaming bronze in the firelight, a saber-toothed cat stared at him with yellow eyes. So did a snake so big and long that the back end of it twisted away into the forest and out of sight. A shaggy elephant with dramatically curved tusks barely fit between two trees, and the weight of an enormous eagle bowed the branch on which it perched.

“He flinched!” a male voice snarled. The words weren’t English, but somehow Matt understood them anyway.

He pivoted. Except for the little hide bag hanging around his neck, the speaker was one of the people who were naked. Maybe that was to show off the scars that covered his snow-white body from head to toe, the ridged circles, crescents, and jagged and wavy lines.

When Matt met the scarred man’s silvery eyes, cold pierced him like a dagger. He jerked and gasped.

“Stop it,” someone rumbled.

“He flinched,” the scarred man repeated, and the temperature around Matt dropped even lower, although nobody else appeared to suffer the effects.

He wished he had Dr. Umbră’s costume and pistols. As it was, he could only try to fight back without them. He staggered toward his attacker on feet already too numb to feel the ground beneath them.

“I said, stop!” said the second speaker, and the last word wasn’t a rumble. It was a roar.

The pale man scowled, and the cold enveloping Matt fell away as abruptly as it had seized him in its grasp. “Mortals always jumped,” said the second speaker, “whenever we showed ourselves.”

Matt turned to see who’d interceded for him and caught his breath in surprise. His advocate was a gigantic bear with smoldering brown eyes and a ruddy tint to his fur. Apparently, in this place, the animals could talk. Like in a cartoon, or Alice in Wonderland.

“He passed the test of courage by putting on the wristbands,” the bear continued, “and passed it again when he came at you.”

“If you want,” Matt told the scarred man, “I’ll pass it a third time, by beating the crap out of you.”

For a moment, everything was quiet, and he wondered if he’d pushed boldness too far, and the ghosts or gods or whatever were about to smack him down. Then a ripple of laughter ran through the crowd.

“No more fighting,” said the bear. “You’re no match for Winter Moon, and even if you were, you came here for a different reason.”

“Honestly,” Matt replied. “I didn’t know I was going to come here. I just hoped that when I put on the wristbands, they’d give me superstrength. But if I need to pass a job interview, let’s do it.”

“You heard,” said Winter Moon to his fellow spirits. “The not-man admits he doesn’t even recognize us.”

“If that bothers you,” said Matt, “I apologize. But here’s what’s important: The last
Red Bear used his powers to help people. I’ll do the same. And people need help. Maybe you don’t know, but creatures from another world have taken over the Earth. Red Bear died fighting them.”

“And why should we care what happens to your people?” asked Winter Moon.

Matt shook his head. “Why wouldn’t you?”

“Because our children are all dead,” said a woman with long black hair, queenly and beautiful despite the protruding brow, receding chin, and every other difference. She wore what might be a wolf skin draped around her shoulders. “And your kind helped put an end to them.”

“So ask your own gods to save you,” spat Winter Moon.

“I might if I knew how,” said Matt. “But I’m not a priest or a wise man. I’m just a guy who ran a sporting-goods store before everything went to hell. As far as gods go, you’re my only shot, and I don’t understand why you’re giving me grief. You must have given your blessing to Red Bear.”

The woman sighed. “My son did. At first, the rest of us knew nothing about it.”

The bear growled, “I’d do it again, too.”

“Well, you won’t have the chance,” his mother snapped. “Not unless I agree to it.” Her dark eyes shifted to Matt. “We thrive here in our own world, and there are dangers in reconnecting it to yours. In particular, there are dangers to my boy. When his champion bleeds, he bleeds.”

“The last one died and I still live,” said the bear. “I didn’t even have to sleep the long sleep. You exaggerate the risk.”

“Even if she does,” said Winter Moon, “you have no right to expose the rest of us to danger. Not without our consent, and certainly not for the sake of those who killed our worshippers.”

“Look,” said Matt to the black-haired woman, “if my ancestors hurt your chosen people, I’m sorry. Truly. But I can tell by looking at you that they were people. A different branch of the human race than mine, maybe, but human all the same. That means you already are connected to us whether you like it or not. Would it really make you happy to see monsters from another planet wipe us out?”

“Yes,” said Winter Moon.

The bear ignored him and kept his eyes on the woman. “The wars weren’t the only reason our children faded, and they interbred with the other folk before the end. Whatever remains of them lives on in the blood of this mortal and his kind, and I mean to protect it.”

She snorted. “Of course you do. When did anyone ever change your stubborn mind about anything?” She ran her gaze over the crowd, perhaps gauging their mood, and then looked at Matt.

“Not everyone can carry the weight of a god,” she said. “Bravery is only a part of what you need.”

Matt took a breath. “I’m ready.”

“Then go and try.”

Everything reverted, like the universe was TV and someone had changed the channel back to where Matt started out. He had clothes on, he was sitting down, and fluorescent light gleamed on the rings of claws on the wristbands. He was holding the brace on his right arm with his left hand, like he’d pulled it on only a second before.
“Are you all right?” Solomon asked.
“T think so,” said Matt, and then his body swelled.
His bones thickened and lengthened. Organs and muscles grew larger. He could feel every bit of it, and it probably should have been agonizing, happening all in a moment, but it wasn’t. It was exhilarating.
He’d been healthy all his life, and the gym and sports had made him more so. He was used to feeling well and energetic. This was similar, but cranked up to a level he’d never experienced before. He threw back his head and laughed.
“Are you all right?” Solomon repeated. “Do you know where you are? Do you know me?”
It took an effort, but Matt managed to stop whooping. “That’s what I’m supposed to ask you.” Early on, impaired by Tabula Rasa’s virus, the AI had repeatedly forgotten who he was.
“Please,” Solomon persisted, “demonstrate that your mind is clear.”
“Okay.” Too full of energy to stay seated, Matt rolled to his feet, then reflexively ducked to keep from bumping his head on the ceiling. He actually wouldn’t have, but he only had a couple inches of clearance, which meant he had to be eight feet tall.
“Talk to me,” Solomon urged.
“All right! I’m Matt Brown, we’re in the Castle, I just put on Red Bear’s wristbands, and I feel great!”
“You do appear to have achieved a successful transformation. Your external appearance and biometrics are identical to those of your predecessor. Even your clothing has altered.”
Matt looked down and saw that his T-shirt and jeans had turned to garments of russet fur and brown leather. He felt dumb that he hadn’t noticed before, but then again, it was no big deal compared to what had happened to his body.
“I suggest you now remove the wristbands,” Solomon continued, “to make certain you can change back and forth at will.”
Matt snorted. “Trust me, I can.”
“It is better to verify—“
“It is verified. I feel it.” And he didn’t feel like shrinking back down into an ordinary little human being, not yet, not after only a second or two of tapping into Red Bear’s power.
“Very well,” Solomon said. “I accept your assessment on that particular point. Still, additional evaluation is advisable. Please come to the medical lab. After that, we will avail ourselves of the exercise equipment I constructed to accommodate Red Bear’s needs.”
Matt grinned. “Sounds like a plan.” In fact, tossing around the enormous weights and playing on the super-Nautilus machines he’d seen on his guided tour of the Castle sounded like a whole lot of fun.
As he headed out the door, he realized he was leaving Dr. Umbra’s gear scattered on the floor. It was all that was left of a true hero and the source of everything Matt had accomplished since the night of the invasion, and for a second, he felt like he was being disrespectful. Then a burst of sensation distracted him.
Did bears have keen senses of smell like bloodhounds? Matt suspected they did, because all of a sudden, he did, too. He caught the metal, oil, and electricity scent of a
repair robot laboring thirty feet down the corridor and a dozen other odors as well. For a minute, it was all pleasant and interesting simply because it was novel. Then it started to bother him that everything smelled so artificial. The plastic and other manmade materials. The recirculated air itself. Only the faint, fading traces of the Castle’s original occupants were natural.

And although there were no places that were literally too small for the giant he’d become, and some rooms as spacious as the inside of a church, the complex felt cramped. Maybe it was because even the big areas were still boxes buried underground. How could anyone stay here very long without getting edgy?

Matt still wanted to test-drive his new muscles, but there were better ways. He looked around. “Where’s a tube platform?”

“Our intention was to conduct a battery of tests,” Solomon replied.

“Why bother? You already checked my biometrics, and I’m exactly like Red Bear was, healthy and superstrong.”

“That is insofar as I have been able to determine. But the med lab enables modes of analysis—“

“You’re looking out for me, and I appreciate it. But what you don’t know is, I must be fine, because the bear and his mother gave me their blessing.”

“I do not understand.”

Matt grinned. “I’ll explain later. Right now I need to get topside and prove they were right about me.”

Solomon stayed quiet for a moment. Then: “I urge you to remember that, while exceptionally hardy, you are not impervious to harm. When they brought sufficient firepower to bear, the invaders ultimately killed Red Bear.”

“I’ll be careful, Mom. I promise.”

“I also urge you to carry a communicator like the one integrated into Dr. Umbra’s costume.” A spindly bluish robot stepped out of a side passage with a bit of metal in its three-fingered hand.

Matt took the little black dot of a gadget between thumb and forefinger and touched it experimentally to the front of his sleeveless shirt. Burrowing like an insect, it disappeared into the fur.

“If we can trust past experience,” Solomon said, “the communicator is now part of Red Bear’s regalia and will materialize with the rest of it whenever you assume his guise.”

Matt frowned. For an instant, he didn’t track what Solomon meant about “assume his guise,” and then the penny dropped. “Right. Got it. Now will you let me out of here?”

“The nearest platform is to your right.”

There was a plastic cylinder, like a giant-sized version of the containers used to swoosh deposits and money back and forth at the drive-through window of a bank, waiting for Matt when he got there. It was a tight squeeze for his new body, but he managed to jam himself through the gull-wing door and into the seat.

“Where do you wish to go?” Solomon asked.

“Gauge and Bach, or as close as you can get me.”

“According to Ms. Porter’s newsletter, the aliens are constructing an outpost there.”

“I know.”
The car shot forward, hurtling up and down and from side to side as the tunnel avoided water mains, sewers, buried power lines, basements, the foundations of high-rises, and whatever else it needed to avoid. It braked to a halt at another small platform with a door in the middle.

“You are adjacent to the cellar of an apartment building,” Solomon said. “It contains a laundry room, the superintendent’s workshop, storage, and a furnace. Because the bombardment damaged the sensors on the far side of the door, I cannot determine whether the way is still passable or if anyone is present to see you traversing it.”

“Maybe I can figure out the second part of that, anyway.” Matt climbed out of the cylinder, moved to the door, took an experimental sniff, and nearly gagged on the smell of rot.

He tried to spit out the foul taste that came with it. “I don’t think there are any wasps or living people waiting. There are dead bodies, though.”

Because the aliens had murdered them. God, how he hated the filthy bugs! He clenched his fist, punched the door, and smashed a hole in it.

“It is unwise to make noise,” said Solomon, “or to compromise the secrecy of the transport system.”

Actually, “unwise” was putting it kindly. It was stupid, and Matt felt a twinge of chagrin. “Sorry.”

“I will dispatch a robot to repair the door, but if you still intend to proceed, I encourage you to do so with caution.”

“I will,” he said, and he meant it. But as he groped his way through the dark cellar, and rats scuttled away at his approach, he started stumbling over the twisted, decaying corpses he’d smelled before. He couldn’t tell what sort of weapon had killed them, yet even so, he could imagine their last moments, weeping, shaking, parents trying to quiet their children, everyone praying that hiding in the basement would protect them from the slaughter in the streets. His anger burned hotter and hotter until, when he’d found his way to the front door of the apartment building, he kicked it open without thinking. It flew off its hinges and cracked down in the middle of the benighted street.

“That action too seemed pointless and potentially counterproductive,” Solomon said.

“So send two robots,” Matt snapped. He turned toward the intersection of Gauge and Back, and the night breeze brought him the bitter stink of wasp. He looked wildly about, couldn’t spot a threat, and finally realized there wasn’t one. With a bear’s nose, he didn’t need to be right on top of an alien to smell it. He could catch the scent from a block away.

He tried to sneak as he approached the source of the stink, but it was mostly to keep Solomon from bitching. It seemed pointless when he didn’t have Dr. Umbra’s cloak and his new body was so big. Still, maybe weeks of practice paid off, because he made it to within sight of the new alien outpost without attracting attention.

The northwest corner of the intersection was also one corner of the campus of Jackson City University. The aliens had taken over the nearest of the classroom buildings. Matt could tell their smell was coming from there, and after a moment, one of them crawled out a broken window. Clinging to the wall, it appeared to set to work, although Matt couldn’t make out exactly what it was doing.

Nor, he realized, did he care. He just wanted to smash it.
Then someone screamed. The sound was faint with distance, and something cut it off after just a moment, but he was sure it had come from inside the wasps’ new fortress.

He stood up straight, towering over the bush he’d been using for cover.

“I recommend further reconnaissance,” Solomon said.

“For all we know,” Matt answered, “somebody’s getting killed right now.” He charged.

After a moment, he realized he was running faster than he ever had before, faster than any normal human being could. Still, it would take a few seconds to reach his destination. The building was set back from the street behind sections of lawn and an asphalt parking lot, and although he wasn’t even a little bit afraid—for an instant, that came as a pleasant surprise—he nonetheless hoped the wasps wouldn’t spot him too soon.

Unfortunately, it turned out they didn’t have to. He was halfway across the grass when, with a flash and a bang, something slammed him from underneath and hurled him up into the air.

He thumped down on the ground with clumps of burning sod showering around him. “You stepped on a landmine,” Solomon said. “Are you hurt?”

“What do you think?” Matt gritted, tears streaming from his eyes. Superstrong or not, Red Bear should have had the brains to wear a cup!

“The explosion has undoubtedly roused the aliens. You must prepare to fight or flee and do so immediately.”

“I’ll fight,” said Matt. It didn’t look like he was hurt badly, just singed and scraped up, and the pain was dwindling.

As he scrambled to his feet, the building ahead buzzed. The wasps were calling to each other. The worker on the wall floated clear and sped in Matt’s direction. It pressed a button on the bracelet gun attached to one forelimb.

Hoping he wouldn’t step on another landmine, Matt sprinted, veered, and dodged the first stab of blue light. The parking lot was mostly empty, but there were a few cars, and he dashed to somebody’s Mini Cooper. He heaved it over his head like an armor-plated umbrella and ran onward.

“I infer from your location and the ambient sounds,” Solomon said, “that you have picked up an automobile. If I were an alien, I would now fire heat rays to ignite the gas tank.”

The AI was right. That was almost certainly what was about to happen. Matt hammered the Mini down on the pavement as hard as he could.

The impact didn’t quite break it to pieces, but it crumpled it and made it easier to yank apart. He tore off a door and hurled it spinning end over end.

His target tried to dodge but was too slow. The missile smashed the wasp and sent it drooping to the ground in pieces.

But an instant later, blue energy pierced Matt’s shoulder and made him jerk with pain. At some point in the last few moments, a second invader had emerged from the building to snipe at him from above.

Snarling, he ripped loose a fender and threw that. Once again, his aim was good. The pulverized remains of the second alien splatted onto the pavement.

Matt ran on toward the building before any more aliens could soar out or start
shooting from inside. Not seeing a door, and unwilling to spend time looking for one, he leaped at a window, crashed through, and thumped down on a classroom floor in a clinking shower of glass.

“What is your status?” Solomon asked.

“I’m fine.” The ray had stung, but really, it was nothing to someone as strong as Matt.

And now that he was inside the building, the wasps would have to get close to attack him, which meant it was going to be a lot easier to attack them. Grinning, he sprang up and rushed the first as it scuttled through the door.

It pointed an energy rifle at him. He jumped, the beam blazed under his feet, and he bumped into the ceiling and knocked loose some tiles. He dropped back down with them clattering around him, made a floundering lunge, and grabbed the wasp’s head with one hand and its body with the other. Yanking in opposite directions, he decapitated it like he was popping a cork out of a bottle. Dark fluid splashed out of the two sections, and he shouted in triumph.

He prowled onward and saw that, though they were nowhere near finished, the aliens had done more to modify the inside of the building than the outside. Their workers were running cables and pipes along and through the walls and ceiling, then covering them over with the same fibrous stuff he’d seen on the hive ship, building material that resembled flesh.

Matt didn’t have time to stop and try to figure out what it was all for even if he’d had the scientific background to make sense of it. He was too busy playing hide-and-seek with the wasps.

It wasn’t really hard, not with a bear’s nose to tell him where the insect-things were hiding. In fact, it was exciting to kill them and not be scared. To sense that, at long last, they were afraid of him.

Still, fun as it was, he didn’t forget he was looking for people in trouble, and when he reached the third floor, he caught the sweaty, hormonal funk of them. Unfortunately, he smelled wasps, too. Several were evidently waiting for him to come through the door so they could all blast him at once.

So why not come in another way? Grinning, he took a couple steps back from a section of wall, then ran at it.

He plowed right through, but the move wasn’t as lightning-fast, graceful, and generally superhero-ish as he’d imagined it. He tripped over something and, staggering, nearly fell on his face. Chunks of concrete block and the ceiling tumbled around him, bumping him and obscuring his vision. He could just barely make out the half dozen startled wasps pivoting in his direction.

He bellowed and scrambled in among them a split second before they could point their guns. Some tried to shoot anyway, and the rays lanced past him. Other sought to stab him with their stingers. Meanwhile, he spun, dodged, and punched until there was nothing left of the aliens but twitching, oozing pulp and scraps of broken exoskeleton. Then he was sorry because the fight was over too soon.

“Help us,” someone moaned.

Matt turned. The room, he now saw, had been a geology lab, complete with microscopes, display cases full of crystals and minerals, and wall charts showing how the three types of rock formed and why volcanoes erupted. But the aliens had
evidently repurposed the place into another dissection chamber. White paste glued three naked people, one man, one woman, and one teenaged boy to table tops. The boy’s torso was crisscrossed with cuts and red with blood.

Matt hurried to the kid and was relieved to see that he didn’t look like he was about to die. The various wounds were relatively superficial. He picked at the hardened goo, and it yielded easily to superstrong fingers.

“Red Bear,” the boy whispered, his voice hoarse with pain. “People said you got killed.”

“They were wrong,” Matt answered. The lie gave him the usual twinge of guilt, but he quashed it. People needed the hope heroes gave them. Besides, maybe it wasn’t completely a lie. He’d just proved that he was every bit as tough as the first Red Bear, hadn’t he?

He finished chipping and peeling away the sludge. “Don’t try to get up yet. Rest while I free your friends.”

“I didn’t tell,” said the boy. “I swear. Not anything.”

Matt blinked. “What are you talking about?”

“One of the bugs was different,” the woman said. “It had a mouth that looked halfway human, and it could talk. It wanted to know where everybody’s hiding. And about the villains. The WMDs and Krymzon Red.”

That seemed like bad news, but then again, maybe it didn’t matter. Who cared how the wasps altered themselves? They hadn’t come up with anything Matt couldn’t kill.

He finished freeing the captives, located the tattered remnants of their clothing, and got them moving. As, one arm supporting the wounded boy, he escorted them out of the building, he caught the scent of another human being, and a figure stepped out from behind a maple at the edge of the parking lot. When she hurried forward, he recognized Gwen Porter with her short blond hair, glasses, messenger bag, denim jacket, and jeans.

He tensed, wondering if he was in for another dose of the disgust she’d shown him before, then remembered it was Dr. Umbra she didn’t like. Red Bear ought to fare better.

And he did, although there wasn’t much chitchat as they escorted the people he’d rescued to the nearest survivor hideout. Gwen was all business, stalking quietly along and peering this way and that for signs of trouble. Except for the smutch of dirt on one cheek and the grubby clothes, she still looked like the college girl she’d been, cute in a bookworm kind of way, but it was plain she was toughening up.

The exuberant welcome came when they reached the mattress store where twenty other survivors had taken shelter. Everyone went nuts to see Red Bear, babbling, shaking his hand or just reaching out to touch him like he was something holy, or they needed to feel as well as see and hear him to be sure their hero really had come back to them.

People had never reacted to grim, ghostly Dr. Umbra in quite the same way. It made Matt feel good but uncomfortable, too, since he wasn’t really the guy they loved. Eventually, it verged on overwhelming.

His wounds, never serious to begin with, had mostly healed already. But he still had scabs, blisters, and splashes of wasp gore all over him to make everything look worse than it was. He asked for some space to rest and recover, and his hosts hastily gave it
to him, although they kept on gawking from a distance, and whispered back and forth to one another.

Sitting on a stack of mattresses, their shrink-wrap rustling when he shifted position, he emptied a liter bottle of lukewarm water in two long pulls. As he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, he noticed Gwen watching him like everybody else. He waved her over.

“Sit here,” he said. “I mean, if you want to. I wasn’t trying to shoo you away. You helped me.”

She tried to clamber up beside him, but the mattress stack was too tall to make it easy for someone so petite. He took her by the forearm and lifted her.

The fleeting contact was...nice. Maybe she liked it too, because neither of them had anything to say for a moment.

Then she took a breath and told him, “I just happened to be there, is all. I’ve been keeping an eye on the place.”

“I know. I read the flyers you put up.”

Gwen smiled. “Really? Then can I interview you?”

“I recommend against that,” Solomon said in a voice that, as Matt knew from past experience, only he could hear. “You could conceivably say something erroneous and reveal you are not Red Bear.”

The AI had a point. But on the other hand, wouldn’t it be suspicious if Matt refused? The real Red Bear wouldn’t have anything to hide.

Besides, Matt simply wanted to do it. When was the last time he’d sat and talked with a pretty girl? Well, if you counted Sweet Lady Q, recently, but she was a killer. That made it harder to relax and enjoy the experience.

“Sure,” he said. “What do you want to know?”

“Well,” she said, “for starters, how is it that you’re still alive? I’ve talked to more than one person who said he saw the wasps kill you and carry your body away.”

He smiled. “That’s almost right. They did knock me out and drag me off, but I wasn’t dead. I was a prisoner, and finally, I escaped.”

“I’m glad. We need you. Things are bad.”

“I know. But if we keep fighting, we can turn things around. All it takes is courage.”

It seemed like the kind of thing the real Red Bear would say.

“I hope so,” Gwen answered. “I mean, I know it’s not the first time aliens have attacked the Earth, and you and the other heroes always won out in the end.”

“Right,” he said, hoping she wouldn’t want him to reminisce about those particular conflicts. If she did, he’d need Solomon to feed him information.

“I’m just scared it’s different this time,” she said. “There are no police or soldiers or government left. Maybe no superheroes except for you. And without them, the wasps aren’t the only problem.”

“I guess you’re talking about the WMDs,” he said. “The lady we rescued mentioned them.”

Gwen nodded. “Them mainly. They’re the gang operating on this side of town. And trying to make everybody bow down to them as our new lords and masters.”

“How bad is it?” he asked. “I read what you wrote about them trying to trade prisoners to Greenclaws, but that’s over, right?”

“Apparently,” she said, “but now some of their thugs have sent up a checkpoint on
Stillman Boulevard. They won’t let ordinary people pass through there anymore. Not until they get what they want.”

“What’s that?”


Matt frowned. “Because they don’t like what you write about them. But don’t worry. Everybody’s grateful for what you do. No one’s going to sell you out.”

“That’s what I keep telling myself,” Gwen said. “But Stillman is where a lot of the good stores are. The ones that still have supplies where you can get at them, not buried under rubble. If people can’t take from there, if they have to forage farther away...”

“They’re more likely to run into wasps.”

She nodded. “Or not find what they need.” She glanced around the mattress store, where, tiring of looking at Matt at last, some people had lain back down to resume their interrupted slumber. “I trust my friends. I do. But still, it’s getting so every time I make my rounds and come up on a camp, I wonder.”

Scowling, Matt wondered why he hadn’t heard about this before, then decided he knew. Death Metal still doubted that Dr. Umbra had completely renounced his superhero ways. Thus, he was avoiding dissension in the ranks by not involving Matt in his more ruthless schemes except when necessary.

“Well, Clarence,” Matt murmured, “you just might have a point.”

Gwen cocked her head. “What?”

“Nothing. Just that I’m going to kick the WMDs out of Stillman. Right now, tonight.”

“That would be wonderful.” She faltered. “But if you read News and Warnings, you saw that Dr. Umbra’s joined the WMDs. And I know he’s your friend.”

Matt grinned. “It’s all right. I’m almost positive he won’t be there.”

“I advise against this,” Solomon said. “It is imprudent for four reasons.”

Matt felt a pang of irritation, but he supposed he owed it to the AI to talk the situation over. “Excuse me for just a second,” he said, hopping back down off the mattresses.

The air in the store’s employee restroom was thick with the eye-stinging stench of the waste buckets. Probably Red Bear’s sense of smell was making it worse. Matt closed the door and whispered, “Okay, please, make it fast. What four reasons?”

“One: It is nearly dawn. Moving around in daylight increases your chances of being detected by the wasps.”

“Stillman’s not far, and I can deal with a couple guys with guns in nothing flat. They’re likely to run as soon as they see me coming.”

“Two: You just raided an extraterrestrial bastion. As a result, the aliens have in all likelihood dispatched additional patrols. This too increases your chances of detection.”

Matt shrugged. “If I have to sweat a few more wasps, how is that a bad thing?”

“Three: Your master strategy requires employing the WMDs as troops. This will be impossible if you kill or incapacitate them.”

Matt’s fists half clenched. Maybe it was the stink searing his nose that made it tough to remember Solomon was only trying to be helpful.

“I’m not going to kill or cripple anybody. Definitely not anybody important. The supers won’t even be there.”

“Four: You are in less than optimal condition.”
“Now, that’s just crazy. I feel better than I ever have in my life.” Truly superhuman in a way that Dr. Umbra’s gadgets just didn’t deliver.

“Please recall that you have already fought Tabula Rasa and one squadron of wasps. Should you undertake yet another mission, it will be the third in under twelve hours.”

“Yeah, but I’m not tired. The wasps at the college just felt like a warm up, and I almost forgot about Tabula.” He realized with a flicker of surprise that what he’d just said was literally true. The nightmarish chase through the Castle now felt faded and unimportant, like a movie he’d watched years before. Like something that had happened to someone else.

“Even if you do not feel fatigued, it is inadvisable to push yourself too hard. You are unfamiliar with your new body and cannot know its limits.”

“Look, I promise that after I do this one little job, I’ll come back to the Castle. Okay?”

“My purpose is to assist you in defending Jackson City in whatever way seems best to you.”

Matt grinned. “And that didn’t sound passive-aggressive at all.”

He gratefully exited the reeking lavatory and made his way through the lantern-lit gloom back to Gwen. She’d jumped down from the stack of mattresses, too, and slung her messenger bag back over her shoulder.

“Are we ready?” she asked, and then frowned up at whatever it was she saw in his expression. “You’re not going to say anything stupid, are you? You know the work I do every day, by myself, without a superhero around to bail me out if I get into trouble. And I can help you. I can point out where the WMDs are set up.”

Matt smiled. “Okay. Just don’t get too close to them, and stay under cover when the trouble starts.”

The streets were still dark, but not as dark. The first gray hint of light in the east was making a start at bleaching away the shadows. Gwen was still wary, but, without defenseless, traumatized people to shepherd along, not as tense as before.

As she and Matt swung around the remains of a crumpled Fat Boy with a blackened corpse still clinging to handlebars, she whispered, “You know, this was my dream.”

He grunted. “I’m guessing you don’t mean dying on a motorcycle.”

“Spending time with you and the others like you. Covering superheroes and supercriminals. It’s why I was studying journalism.” She made a rueful little puffing sound.

“Only...?”

“Only when I finally met monsters and supervillains in real life, they scared me to pieces, and the way they treated regular people broke my heart. Now here I am picking my way through dead bodies. I guess when I imagined being a reporter, I didn’t realize what the ugly parts would be like.”

“Maybe when the wasps are gone, you can write about politics or business or something.”

“Not a chance! This is still what I want to do. I just have to be strong.” She scanned the sky for flyers. “Is it ever hard for somebody like you?”

The question almost surprised a laugh out of him. If things were different, he might have told her about the fear that stabbed through him when he headed into a fight, the constant worry that he’d screw up and people would die as a result, and the loneliness
of always pretending to be someone and something he wasn’t.

But he couldn’t say any of that, and suddenly, he didn’t want to. Those feelings didn’t just seem wimpy but out of date, like they’d faded when he wasn’t paying attention. The heroic lie he made up to give her actually felt more real:

“It can be hard, but not in the way you’re talking about. I guess I was kind of born for this.”

“I believe it,” she said. “You know, you never told anybody where you came from or how you got to be the way you are. If this really is the end of the world...” She stopped abruptly and lowered her voice even further. “The checkpoint is at the next intersection.”

Matt squinted against the predawn gloom. “I don’t see them.”

“They don’t want you to. They want people to walk right up so they can catch them by surprise. One man is in the hair salon, the near building on the right. The other one is catty-corner across the street in the bank.”

“Are there only the two?” Matt asked.

“As far as I know.”

“Stay here.” He crept forward.

He made it part of the way to his goal, and then lights flared to life around him. Either one of the sentries had spotted him, or else he’d triggered a motion detector. He charged, racing toward the intersection as fast as a car.

A rifleman appeared in the recessed doorway to the bank. He yelped when he realized who was running toward him, then fired bursts as he retreated into the building.

Matt zigzagged, dodging, although he wasn’t terribly worried about being hit. It didn’t look like Svergr had outfitted the thugs with special weapons, certainly no energy bazookas like the Bear Killer, and he had a hunch he could handle anything less.

He found out for sure when he ran into the intersection. Intent on catching the guy who’d shot and run, he’d forgotten all about his partner until a second automatic weapon clattered, and stinging impacts knocked him staggering off balance.

Fortunately, that was all they did. Bellowing, Matt lurched around. The second rifleman turned white, dropped his weapon, and scrambled back inside the hair salon.

Matt gave chase, plunged right through the door and its frame, and caught up with the WMD amid a shower of crashing glass and clattering wood. He grabbed the thug by his shoulder, swung him over his head, started to spike him like a football, and realized at the last possible instant that he was using too much strength. He still slammed the guy down hard enough to keep him from getting up again but was fairly sure he hadn’t killed him.

“This has not proved to be the quick, quiet surgical strike you required,” Solomon said. “I recommend a tactical withdrawal.”

“Screw that,” said Matt, pivoting toward the hole where the door had been. “One down, one to go.”

“It is possible,” Solomon said, “that the remaining sentry has called for reinforcements. In which case it may well be that the superpowered WMDs will come rushing to confront Red Bear.”

The front of the hair salon exploded.
Or at least that was what it seemed like, with a crash and an irresistible shove that hurled Matt backward, slammed him down, and dropped weight on top of him. It was only when he shoved the mass away that he recognized it was a tanker trunk, with sour, foul-smelling milk spattering down from the ruptured insides. It had tumbled the length of the salon, smashing barber chairs, partitions, tanning beds, and probably the unconscious rifleman on its way.

Tripping and sliding on debris, his head ringing, Matt stumbled to the side wall and ripped out a chunk of masonry three feet wide, shattering a display window in the process. He lurched out onto the street and cast about, trying to spot Death Metal before the villain could make a second attack.

And he did spot him in time, although in fact, middle-aged with thinning hair, broad-shouldered and barrel-chested, dressed in his metallic panel shirt, jodhpurs, and high boots, the leader of the WMDs didn’t even look like he was trying to follow up. He was just floating overhead on a vehicle like a motorcycle with stubby bat wings instead of wheels.

Matt threw his chunk of stone.

Unfortunately, Clarence was ready for it. Shifted either by Svergr’s mechanisms or its rider’s ability to throw metal around with this mind, the vehicle slipped out of the way.

Matt pivoted and sank his fingers into another chunk of wall.

“There’s no need for that,” Death Metal called. “I’d rather talk than fight.”

“That’s why you just tried to crush me.” Matt ripped the stonework loose.

The supervillain leader laughed. “Oh, come on. I was just testing to see if my soldier was right, and the real Red Bear had returned. If so, a little jostle wasn’t going to kill you. Do you know Dr. Umbra’s still alive?”

The mention of his own name—well, fake name—made Matt hesitate. “Uh...yes.”

“And he doesn’t see a need to fight against his fellow enhanced humans anymore. He thinks all of us who are left from either side of the law should band together to kill the aliens. What do you think?”

Matt’s arms fairly tingled with the urge to throw the masonry. But Solomon was right, he did have plans for the neo-Nazi bastard, and it would be weird to lash out at a guy who was enthusiastically parroting his own ideas.

“I think you hurt people. I can’t allow that.”

Death Metal snorted. “Not even to save the entire human race? Don’t bother answering. I already know what you’d say. You never compromise your principles, do you, no matter what. So I suppose that if we’re going to work together, I’m the one who’ll have to bend.”

“Really? That’s hard to believe. I didn’t hear about you making any changes after Dr. Umbra teamed up with you.”

“Your teammate has valuable skills, but he’s not a force of nature. You are. To get power like yours on my side—“

“Behind you!” shouted Gwen.

Matt spun around into a flash of red light. Pain ripped through him as his arms and legs started to twist into corkscrew shapes.

His new sense of smell shut down, and he had to take gasping, slobbering breaths through his mouth. Everything blurred. The crimson energy was changing—or melting