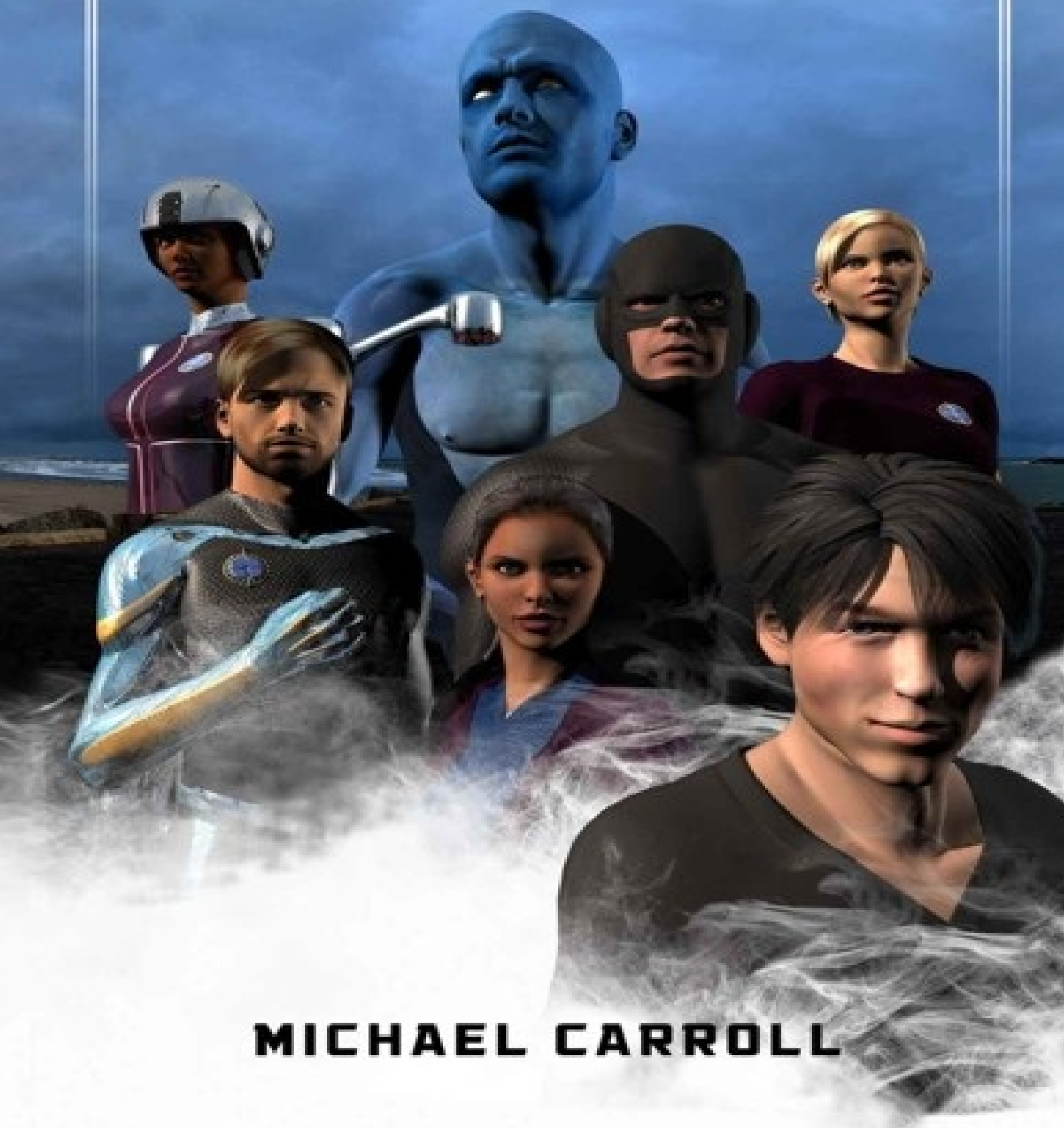


THE NEW HEROES CROSSFIRE



MICHAEL CARROLL

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CROSSFIRE

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Previously...

(AKA A Note from the Author!)

So, here we are in 2015, thirteen years after I first began working on the *Quantum Prophecy / New Heroes* series. We're not quite at the end yet, but we're getting there!

Crossfire is the eighth novel in the series. Yes, *eighth*! Some readers might be familiar only with the original trilogy, others only with the prequel series, so for those people the following will give you a taste of what you've missed! (But *just* a taste: for the full experience, you'll have to read the books themselves!)

The original trilogy (*The New Heroes*, published as *Quantum Prophecy* in the USA) opens twenty years after a huge battle in which all of the world's superhumans disappeared. There have been no superhumans (heroes or villains) since.

The chief protagonists are young teenagers Colin Wagner and Danny Cooper, who discover that they are developing superhuman powers of their own. They soon learn that they are the offspring of some of the original superheroes: it is revealed that superhuman abilities develop at puberty, and the device that stripped the original heroes of their powers has not affected those whose powers had yet to manifest.

Danny develops incredible speed, while Colin has enhanced strength and senses, and—later—the ability to manipulate many forms of energy.

Colin and Danny come into conflict with twenty-one-year-old Victor Cross, a hyper-intelligent superhuman who has very much his own ideas as to how the human race should be controlled. Along the way, they also meet Renata Soliz, a fourteen-year-old girl who was effectively frozen in time ten years earlier, shortly before the other superhumans lost their powers, and Solomon Cord, formerly the non-powered superhero known as Paragon.

In book 2 they move to Sakkara, a fortified base near Topeka, Kansas, where they learn that they are not alone: the base is home to twin sisters Mina and Yvonne Duval (who are later revealed to be clones of the supervillain Ragnarök), and sixteen-year-old Butler Redmond. Cross realizes that the new heroes could be a threat to his plans, and so begins a power-struggle with Cross backed by his powerful, rapidly-growing organization, the Trutopians, which culminates in Colin being forced to choose whether to save the life of his friend Solomon Cord or Renata's entire family: he chooses the latter.

The last book of the trilogy sees Yvonne joining the Trutopians to spark a devastating world-wide war. They are eventually defeated, Yvonne is captured and Cross is seemingly killed: however, at the very end it is revealed that Cross has faked his death and is actually in the process of creating a number of clones of Colin.

Tied in with the original trilogy is the short-story collection *The New Heroes: Superhuman* which includes two novellas—*The Footsoldiers* and *Flesh and Blood*—that focus on minor characters; both novellas are also available as e-books.

The prequel series begins about twenty-three years before the original trilogy, before the old generation of superhumans lost their powers...

Super Human: The Helotry, a secret and very powerful organization, attempts to snatch the world's first superhuman—Krodim—from his own era some 4000 years in the past. They believe that it is Krodim's destiny to rule the entire human race, and they are willing to achieve this at any cost. To accomplish their plan they unleash a devastating virus on the world which debilitates all adults. It's down to only a handful of teenage superhumans to stop them... Abby (super-strong and very fast), Thunder (able

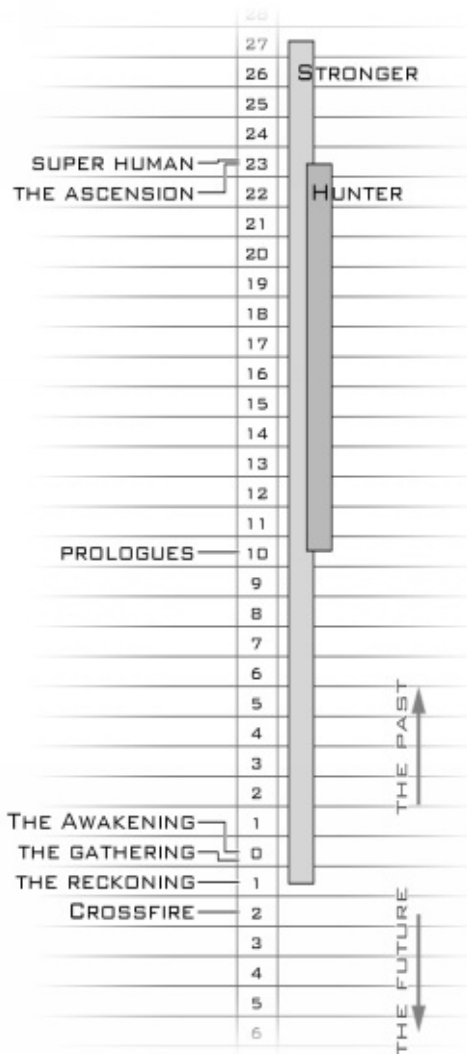
manipulate sound), Roz (telekinetic) and Brawn (thirteen feet tall, invulnerable, immeasurably strong) work alongside would-be teen con-artist Lance McKendrick (no super powers) to stop the Helot from bringing Krodin out of the past.

The Ascension: The heroes suddenly find that the world has changed: they are in an alternate timeline where Krodin has taken control of the USA and is attempting to subjugate the rest of the world. With most of that reality's superhumans already dead, only our heroes are aware that this is not how the world should be. Ultimately, Lance is able to defeat Krodin by using one of his own machines against him: Lance uses a teleporter to take Krodin out of the past—before he could change history—and transport him to the airless deserts of Mars. With that done, the time-line returns to normal, with only the young heroes aware of the change.

Stronger: This is Brawn's story, detailing his life from the moment his superhuman abilities first appeared to his encounter, twenty-seven years later, with Colin Wagner (which occurs in the middle of the third book of the original trilogy).

Hunter: Lance McKendrick's life-story. Covering a period of about thirteen years, we see Lance grow from a rather selfish, arrogant teenager into a confident and compassionate adult, against the backdrop of superhuman conflicts and world-changing events.

For an overview of how the books fit together chronologically, here's the official timeline (it's based on the notion that the first book in the original trilogy is "year zero", which means that *Crossfire* takes place about two years after that)...



A few final notes... At the request of the publishers, the US edition of the third book in the original

trilogy (*The Reckoning*, otherwise known as *Absolute Power*) contains an additional scene at the end of the book. For those who've never read that edition, I've included that scene as "Prologue 1" in this book.

The future of the series is, as ever, rather fluid. I do know exactly how it's all going to end, but I don't yet know *when*. Far too many different things can and do exert an influence on the best-laid plans... I can tell you that there will be at least one more novel in the series. And I'm not (yet) ruling out the possibility of "side" novels or novellas that are connected to the main series but work as standalone stories. You'll just have to wait and see! Do please check out the website (www.quantumprophecy.com) for the latest news.

But right now, this is *Crossfire*... The New Heroes are back!

What happened to Daniel Cooper after the Trutopian war? What about Renata Soliz, stripped of her powers? What new dangers will Colin Wagner face? And what on Earth is Victor Cross planning?

Keep reading, my friends... The answers lie within!

Michael Carroll
Dublin, Ireland, October 2011

Prologue 1

One year ago...

Danny sat by Renata's bed until he was sure she was asleep, then he gently pulled his hand free from hers and walked over to the window. Night was creeping over the horizon, the clouds orange-tinted from the fires in Topeka.

He knew he should be out there with Colin and the others, helping to restore some semblance of normality to the world, but they hadn't asked him and he hadn't felt inclined to offer.

The vision came true.

A sudden violent shudder rippled through him.

Oh God, it came true.

He realized now that he'd been scared ever since he'd seen the vision of his future self in the Californian desert.

Quantum had foreseen the deaths of billions of people, and had known—somehow—that Danny would be responsible.

That didn't happen, Danny thought. Thousands died—maybe even hundreds of thousands—but not billions. So either we changed the future Quantum saw or his vision wasn't about the Trutopian war.

What scared him most was that Quantum's visions had driven him almost insane.

Is that what's going to happen to me?

How long do I have before I can't take it any more?

He checked once more that Renata was sleeping comfortably, then silently left the infirmary and made his way to his own room.

As his bedroom door hissed open, the door to next room did the same. Niall leaned out, grinning and padded barefoot towards him. "Is she gonna be all right?"

Danny nodded. "Yeah. I think so."

Niall followed his brother into his room. "Can't you, like, see into the future and tell for sure?"

"Doesn't work like that," Danny said. "I can't control it."

"Dad said that the visions are like watching a tiny bit of a movie you've never seen before. You can see what's happening but you don't know exactly what it means. Is that right?"

"That's it exactly."

Niall climbed onto the bed and sat cross-legged, absently picking at his toe-nails as he looked at Danny. "They keep talking about how it's all your fault."

Danny stopped in the middle of pulling on his jacket. "They?"

"The news. They're saying that you forced everyone into going to Lieberstan, and if you hadn't done that then there wouldn't have been a war."

"The war has nothing to do with Lieberstan, Niall."

"Yeah, but they keep saying—"

"I know. They do that because if you tell the same lie over and over and don't give anyone a chance to hear the truth, then eventually you'll get enough people believing your story that the truth becomes the lie. Give me a hand with this, would you?"

Niall jumped off the bed and zipped up Danny's jacket. "Are you gonna get another robot arm?"

"Yeah. If they'll make me one. Thanks."

"But—"

Danny cut him off. "Sorry, Niall. But I don't want to talk about that now. OK?"

“Sure. But...”

“What?”

Niall looked away. “What about me, Danny? What powers am I going to get?”

“You might get the same powers Façade had. You know, being able to change your appearance.

He smiled. “Be pretty cool that, wouldn’t it?”

“I guess. But Dad was a bad guy. For a while.”

“I know, but he did the right thing in the end. He’s not a bad guy now. You just make sure you always do the right thing, and you’ll be OK.”

Niall looked up at him, unblinking. “You did the right thing, and look what they’re saying about you.”

Danny gave his brother another smile, showing a confidence he didn’t feel. “Things’ll work out all right in the end. Now go on back to your room. I’ve got to go out there and help Colin and the others.

He winked, then slipped into slow-time and left the room.

Seconds later Danny stood on the roof of Sakkara and looked out toward the city.

Quantum said that I would be responsible for a war in which billions of people are going to die. Well, I know I’m not responsible, but everyone is blaming me anyway. Is that what he was sensing?

The visions come without context.

I saw myself leading a group of kids away from an army, and that’s what happened. But in the vision, when they fired at me, I raised my mechanical arm and the bullets bounced off an invisible shield.

I figured that was something built into the arm, but it was Butler’s force-field.

And I wasn’t leading the kids, I was rescuing them.

He stepped up onto the low wall that skirted the edge of the roof, paused for a moment, then ran down the building’s sloping side and through the now-deserted army base.

Despite everything that had happened, Danny was a little cheered up by this.

I can move so fast that gravity doesn’t have enough time to take hold of me. It reminded him of a cartoon character running off the edge of a cliff. As long as the character doesn’t look down, he’s safe.

In slow-time I can do almost anything. I could—

He stopped himself in mid-speculation.

Slow-time. Why do I call it that? If anything it should be fast-time.

He couldn’t remember when he’d first started to use the phrase, but it felt right.

He remembered his old teacher, Mr Stone, telling them that speed was “distance over time.” “Thirty miles per hour,” Mr Stone had said. “That means that in an hour the car would cover thirty miles. Obviously.”

Danny skidded to a stop. He was now in the heart of Topeka, at north-east corner of Gage Park.

Time.

My powers are connected to time, not speed. That’s why I get visions of the future.

He thought back to Max Dalton’s power-damping machine in California. Colin had been trying to break through the machine’s armor-plating, and Danny had placed his arm on Colin’s shoulder in the hope of somehow imparting some of his speed to Colin, but it hadn’t worked.

Why did I even think that was possible?

He shifted back into normal-time, and looked around. This part of the city had been relatively untouched by the war, but a few hours earlier it—like the rest of the world—had been completely crystalline.

Renata was able to extend her powers beyond herself, so maybe I can too.

Maybe I can alter everyone's perception of time.

~~He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on his own future, tried to see what was coming.~~

There was nothing.

After the vision in California, all he'd had since were vague feelings.

But if it happened once, then it can happen again. Everything I saw came true. Does that mean the future can't be changed?

Something moving through the night sky caught his attention. Danny looked up to see Colin drifting down towards him.

Colin was grinning, but looked exhausted. "Thought that was you! It's crazy out there, Dan. I saw a man stuck on the roof his house and when I went to help him he threw a brick at me. Then he panicked and fell off and I almost didn't catch him. So, how's Renata?"

"She was asleep when I left her. I think she's going to be OK. Apart from losing her powers."

Colin nodded. "Well, I'm glad you're with us now. Steph and Mina and Butler are out on the west side trying to persuade a bunch of Trutopians to give up. They didn't hear Yvonne's message. There's probably a lot of them out there still fighting. Come on, I'll fly you over that way." He was already rising into the air, his hand out-stretched to Danny.

Danny reached out and grabbed hold of Colin's hand...

... And suddenly he was in a different place. A huge crater. Colin was at the center, lying on the ground, his entire body blackened and burned. He wasn't moving. He wasn't breathing.

Another flash, and Danny was looking at himself, about the same age as he was now, but with both arms intact. And there was another difference: this two-armed Danny had a look in his eyes that chilled him; a glare of pure hatred and ruthlessness.

Then a third flash. Danny was crouched on the ground, looking down at the dead body of a man he didn't recognize. But now, for the first time, the vision came with sound: A voice behind him said "You didn't have to kill him."

Danny jerked his hand back.

"What? What is it?" Colin said.

"Nothing, I just... Maybe I'd better go back and get some armor."

"Kay. I'll wait here."

Danny shifted into slow-time, and ran back toward Sakkara.

He couldn't let himself think about the visions now. *There's work to be done. People to be saved. That's what the good guys do, after all. And I'm one of the good guys.*

But he couldn't help asking himself, *Are you sure about that?*

Prologue 2

Kenya Cho paused half-way up the long straight hill. Ahead, the yellow glow of her home downstairs lights surely meant her parents were still up. She took a deep breath in the hope that would steady her nerves. *Be cool*, she told herself. *It worked last time, it'll work this time too.*

Kenya had spent the day with old friends who lived outside the community. That wasn't actually forbidden, but it was frowned upon.

The community—eight miles east of Fianarantsoa—was the first Trutopian establishment in Madagascar, and was home to almost two thousand people, more than half of whom had joined in the past six months.

Kenya's non-Trutopian friends constantly ribbed her about being in a “cult” but she didn't care—her family had been among the first to join the community, and it was plain to everyone that they were happier now than before. Her parents both had jobs, and she and her older brother Eugene were doing well in the community's high-school.

She liked the Trutopian ideals—they made sense. Work hard, obey the law, and you will be safe. Simple as that. There was no crime in the community, no one went hungry, you could always rely on your friends and neighbors for help.

Kenya understood the rules, and she believed in them. If she wanted to visit friends outside the community, all she had to do was ask her parents. They would put in a request with the local security office, who would look up Kenya's friends on their extensive computer database. It was an efficient system; if all went well, Kenya could expect a reply within a day. Two days at most.

So even though she knew she was breaking the rules and that could earn her family several demerits, she tended to just climb the fence, retrieve the old bike she'd hidden under a footbridge and cycle into Fianarantsoa to see Alarice and Mialy.

She'd been doing this every couple of weeks for months, and last time was the closest she'd come to being caught: Before she reached the front door she'd silently removed her jacket and boots and hidden them under the big bush on the front lawn. Then she'd opened the door as quietly as possible—it wasn't locked—closed it behind her and tousled her hair before entering the TV room.

“I can't sleep,” she'd said to her father, who'd been hunched over the puzzle table painstakingly working on his three-foot-square, four thousand piece jigsaw puzzle.

Without looking up from her book, Kenya's mother said, “Have a cup of warm water. Not *too* hot.” Her father added, “And not a *full* cup, either. Otherwise you'll be peeing all night.”

But tonight, even before she reached the house, she knew that wasn't going to work. Something was different. Something was *wrong*.

She pushed open the door and her mother shouted, “Kenya? Get in here! *Now!*”

Oh wonderful. How am I going to get out of this one?

The door to the TV room swung open before she touched the handle, and her brother Eugene was beckoning her inside.

~~“I was just out for a walk. I had a nightmare and I...”~~ Kenya stopped, and looked around the room. Her parents were staring at the TV, which showed the Trutopian flag silently fluttering behind the words “Stand By.”

“What’s happening?”

“Where *were* you?” Her mother asked. “You *know* you’re not allowed out on your own after nine!”

“Never mind that. Sit down, Kenya,” her father said, eyes still on the TV set. “It’s bad. Regina Kinsella is dead. Murdered.”

Kenya felt as though she’d been punched in the stomach. “No...”

Reg Kinsella was the leader of the entire Trutopian organization. A tall white man; bearded slightly overweight, not exactly handsome... But there was something about him that Kenya had always liked. Sure, he was a politician, but he’d seemed honest, and passionate about his beliefs. When he’d taken control of the organization there had been only a handful of communities throughout the world, but now there were thousands.

Kenya dropped into her armchair and accepted the mug of coffee from Eugene without even noticing. “What happened?”

“His plane was shot down,” her father said. “Yesterday. Somewhere over Poland.” He turned to face Kenya, and the knot in her stomach tightened when she saw the fear in his eyes. “We... We don’t live in Madagascar any more.”

Kenya wrapped her hands around the hot mug and peered at her father through the steam. “What?”

Eugene said, “We’ve seceded. Broken away. From now on, the Trutopian communities are our own nation.” He shrugged. “I don’t know how they’re going to enforce that, but... The borders are closed. No one in or out. The whole world’s going crazy—there’s been attacks on Trutopian communities everywhere.” He lowered his voice. “You were lucky to get back in, sis.”

At that, their mother’s head whipped around toward Kenya. “What? Where *were* you?”

“Nowhere! I was just—”

The image on the TV flickered. Now it was showing an empty podium that displayed the Trutopians’ logo. A dark-haired, pale-skinned teenaged girl emerged through a flood of camera flashes to walk up to the podium.

“Who’s she?” Kenya asked.

“Shhh!”

On screen, the girl stood before the podium and was silent for a moment while she adjusted the microphones. Then the camera zoomed closer, and she began to speak. “The governments of the United States of America, Brazil, Germany, Australia and Poland have all declared their intentions to invade Trutopian territory. We will not allow this to happen. I have a message to all the Trutopians listening. You all understand that what we’re building here is a utopia, a perfect world. But it’s not logical to build a perfect world on imperfect foundations. The old world has to be destroyed before the new one can begin.”

Kenya felt the flesh raise on her arms, the hairs on the back of her neck stiffened. “Oh no...”

Eugene dropped down next to her, put his arm around her shoulders. “It’ll be all right.”

The girl on screen said, “It’s clear that the rest of the human race is not interested in living in peace. We’ve tried to make them understand, given them every opportunity to join us. They have refused. They have attacked us, time and again. No more. Now it’s time to stop *talking* about peace and start making it happen. Some people say that fighting for peace doesn’t make a lot of sense. They’re wrong. It makes perfect sense.”

The girl stared into the camera, and Kenya—somehow—*knew* that the girl was speaking directly to her. “~~You will fight and kill anyone who is not a Trutopian. You will keep fighting until we are triumphant.~~”

Three weeks later...

Kenya screamed, kicked and punched as the six burly soldiers threw themselves at her, forcing her to the ground. One of them managed to wrestle the now-empty pistol from her grip, but still she didn't stop. Another soldier, a woman—lying face-down across Kenya's stomach while her colleagues struggled to hold onto the girl's arms and legs—yelled out, “We need some help here!”

Others came running, some breaking away from their task of corralling Kenya's friends and neighbors.

Kenya jerked her left arm free and slammed her elbow into the side of the woman lying across her.

She grunted in pain, but held on. “You stupid little fool—we're trying to *help* you!” Another blow to the kidneys, and the woman screamed. “She's only a *kid*! How can she be this strong? Someone—get the tranquilizer gun!”

“I'll kill you!” Kenya screamed. “I'll kill you *all*!”

Kenya felt something sharp stab into her left calf, and the world began to swim. The pressure on her limbs and body seemed to ease, but she could barely move. Her eyes flickered closed, the noise around her suddenly seemed muffled and distant.

She knew she was blacking out, and tried to fight it.

A faraway voice said, “What's wrong with her *skin*? All those scars... How could anyone take so much damage and still be moving?”

The woman's voice: “No wonder she gave us so much trouble. We should have *known*. Get on to the base. Tell them we need help ASAP—we've got a superhuman prisoner. Tell them to contact Sakkara.”

Chapter 1

Danny Cooper shielded his eyes against the early-morning sun as he looked up at the cracked, bullet-riddled statues mounted on the top of the Brandenburg Gate.

“Oh man... Look at that. Herlind said it’s been here over two hundred years. Two world wars and it’s still standing.”

“*Three* world wars,” a soft voice said from behind him. “If the Trutopian war doesn’t count as a world-war, I don’t know what *does*.”

Danny turned to see Mina Duval sitting cross-legged on the ground in the middle of the plaza, absently picking at a small scab on the back of her hand as she stared up at the gate. “Taking another break?”

Mina smiled back. “I’m conserving my energy, centering my focus. Or focusing my center. One of those.”

“Don’t take too long about it.” He turned around slowly, surveying the damage, and the extensive repair work that had begun the day after the war ended and was still a long way from completion.

On the northern side of the street, a builder carrying a scaffolding pole on his shoulder turned to answer a shout from one of his friends. The rear end of the rusty pole swung around, on a direct path for the back of the supervisor’s head.

Danny slipped into slow-time and walked over to them. He recognized the pole-carrying man as Wolfgang. He was tall, slim, permanently cheerful, and—Danny had quickly concluded—not the brightest. On their first meeting Wolfgang had extended his right hand to shake Danny’s, then quickly pulled his arm back when he realized Danny didn’t have a right arm of his own. Wolfgang had blurted an apology in German and then in English, and, when Danny told him that it wasn’t a big deal, no harm done, the cheerful young man said, “So we’re cool? Friends forgive friends, right? All is well.” Then he’d extended his right hand again, and blinked happily and patiently at Danny while he waited for his hand to be shook.

Now, Danny walked slowly around Wolfgang. The man had his hi-viz jacket on inside-out, one of his bootlaces was untied, and when Danny passed behind him and ducked under the pole, he saw that Wolfgang’s jeans were way too big for him: they had slipped down around his waist revealing to the world that he had tucked his t-shirt into the back of his underwear.

Danny slipped back into real-time and put out his hand to stop the pole from colliding with the supervisor’s head. It thumped against Danny’s palm, and Wolfgang turned his head around to see where the obstruction was.

“Hey-hey, Daniel Cooper.”

“Hey-hey yourself, Wolfgang.” Danny nodded his head back toward the woman as he led Wolfgang away from her. “You almost decapitated your boss.”

The German man cringed for a moment. “Ooh. Danke. That would have been bad.” He nodded and continued on his way across the street.

The crew’s supervisor, Herlind, said, “Ah, Mister Cooper.” She consulted her ever-present clipboard. “We are making fine progress.”

“There’s still a long way to go,” Danny said. “I thought *London* was bad, but the Trutopians really did a number on this place.”

“This is not the first time the German people have had to rebuild their cities.” She shrugged. “But the Trutopians can’t be blamed. They were under the control of that superhuman girl. They...” Herlind hesitated. “No. I should be honest, with you if no one else. We. Not they. *We*.”

“You were a Trutopian?”

Herlind looked around, and, her voice low, said, “I can remember everything. Some people say they were in a trance, and have few memories of the war. Perhaps for some, that is true. Not for me. I wanted to kill everyone who was not a Trutopian. It was... a need so desperate that it consumed me. I was filled with fury and a madness that made sense at the time.” Without looking at Danny, the woman added, “I was lucky. I didn’t kill anyone. But I wanted to, and I *tried*. Then the message came that we should stop fighting. If it had come a few minutes later, I would have had the blood of many people on my hands.”

Danny didn’t know what to say to that.

“So now we work to repair the damage we caused. We can do no less.” Herlind smiled, and tapped him on the shoulder with the edge of the clipboard. “You and your friends saved the world, Danny. You should not have to also clean up the mess afterward. But we are grateful. Your friend Mina is very useful.”

They looked over to where Mina was still sitting on the ground, and Herlind added, “Much of the time. Now, go. Back to work. You understand of course that what I have told you is private?”

Danny nodded. “Sure. We’ve all done things we’re not proud of.” He gave the supervisor a nod and she turned away.

He slipped into fast-time and returned to Mina.

“Got it!” she said as he approached. Mina had successfully removed the scab from her hand and was now holding it up on the tip of her index finger. “That hurt a bit, though.”

“If it hurts, don’t do it.”

“Wise words. Saw you saving the dipstick from getting into trouble again. That’s you all over Danny.” Mina rolled back heels-over-head and landed on her feet. “That’s what Renata says about you. You can’t *not* help people.”

“So you and my girlfriend talk about me behind my back?”

“Yep. Well, we’d be stupid to do it in front of your face. She said that Colin said that you were like this back home, too. Always taking responsibility.”

“Yeah, but what’s wrong with that? If you can help someone and it won’t cost you anything, but you choose not to, well, then you’re just a jerk.”

Mina spread her arms and turned around slowly on the spot. “Um, hello? I *am* helping people?”

“I don’t mean you specifically.” Danny looked at the civilians helping to clear the rubble and drag the burnt-out cars off the street. “Lot of them still blame us for all this.”

“They blame *you*,” Mina said. She shrugged. “Sorry, Danny, but you’re just going to have to live with that. You can’t change most people’s minds. All you can do is, like, tell them the facts and hope they figure out the truth for themselves.”

The radio clipped to Danny’s ear beeped, and Warren Wagner’s voice said, “Dan? You’re needed. Gunfire. Kulturforum.”

Danny hit the button on the radio’s microphone. “Got it.” To Mina, he said, “Now Warren needs help. Where’s the Kulturforum?”

Without looking, the girl pointed to the left. “Potsdamer Platz. Southwest. About a kilometer.” She jumped to her feet. “Go. I’ll carry on here.”

Danny nodded, and started to run. Some of the other members of the New Heroes didn’t care for Mina, but Danny liked that she wasn’t afraid to say whatever was on her mind.

Mina was fifteen, a little younger than Danny, and her ability to always be able to tell when someone was lying meant that a lot of the adults at the New Heroes’ base kept their distance from her.

It didn't help that Mina and her sister Yvonne were clones of a man called Casey Duval, who—using the name Ragnarök—had been one of the world's most dangerous superhumans.

Danny raced through the rubble-strewn streets so fast that the people working to clear them seemed as immobile as the statues on top of the Brandenburg Gate.

To his own perspective, he was moving at normal speed—barely a quick jog—but that wasn't how his powers worked. Speed is simply distance over time: Danny knew he wasn't actually running hyper-speed, he was altering time around him.

In real-time, from anyone else's point-of-view, he covered the distance from the Brandenburg Gate to the Kulturforum in less than a second.

He spotted Mister Wagner crouching behind the mud-clogged tracks of a yellow bulldozer with three other adults—all businessmen wearing crisp dark suits that were now dusty at the knees and elbows—on the main plaza.

Danny shifted into normal time as he crouched down next to them, and three businessmen jumped back, startled, but Warren Wagner simply glanced at him and nodded. He pointed to a three-story brick building. "Near as we can tell they're holed up there. The, uh, the Kupfer..."

One of the German men said, "Dem Kupferstichkabinett. The museum of printing."

"Right," Warren said. "Internal security is still down. We don't know how many, or what they're carrying. You can handle this?"

Danny nodded. "What do you want done with them?"

Another businessmen—short, with a heavy build and obviously dyed hair—said, "No, you cannot send this boy! He is..." The man looked sheepishly at Warren. "He lacks the... He is not the one to. We need the *other* boy. The one called Power."

"That's my son," Warren said. "He's back in the States. I promise you, Danny can take care of this."

The man didn't seem convinced.

Danny sighed, then patted the stump of his right arm—missing from just below the shoulder—with his left hand. "This bothering you? You don't think I can do it because I've only got one arm?"

The short man looked offended. "Certainly not! I'm saying that you should not be the one to talk on these bandits! You are only a boy. You can't even grow a proper beard yet!"

Warren said, "Yeah, you might want to shave that off tonight at the hotel."

And that's another couple of days, Danny said to himself. He was so tired of people telling him to shave that he had secretly vowed to only shave when he managed to get through two whole days without anyone bringing it up.

The German man continued. "You don't have the necessary training. This situation requires an experienced negotiator!"

"Yeah? Well, Colin's younger than me, and he doesn't have that much more experience than I do."

"But they are armed and your friend is bullet-proof, yes?"

One of the man's colleagues flinched at that. "Please, don't let there be gunfire!"

"Yes, the museum contains many, *many* priceless—"

Danny shifted into fast-time, and strode towards the building.

They just don't understand, he told himself. But he didn't blame them for that. Even some of his fellow superhumans couldn't fully grasp the extent of his powers.

When Danny was moving in fast-time, everything else was stopped, or moving incredibly slowly. He could pluck a bullet out of the air. He could switch off his bedroom light and read an entire comic book before the room grew dark. Once, in Havana, he watched a flock of hummingbirds drifting with

glacier-like speed through a field of flowers, each one seemingly frozen in the air as though they were intricate, delicate statues that were somehow exempt from the laws of gravity.

The main door to the print museum was open just enough for him to squeeze through, and for that he was thankful. At the speed he was moving, if he had to push open a door the impact might shatter the glass, warp the metal and possibly ignite the wood. Not that he would even notice—he'd be long gone before the effects became apparent.

Danny explored the museum at what was for him a sedate pace. He looked at the paintings and watercolors fixed to the walls, and attempted to read some of the plaques next to them. But the plaques were mostly in German, and his own grasp of the language was barely enough to enable him to buy a soda from a store.

He found the Trutopian soldiers in an office on the top floor. Four of them, each sitting on the floor with his back against the wall, weapons aimed at the door.

The men were in their thirties or forties, he guessed. They were thin, their clothing ragged and their hair long and untidy. Their eyes had the crazed look that he'd seen far too many times since the war ended.

The Trutopians had been ordered to fight and kill anyone who was not a member of the organization, and it was not an order they were able to resist. The order had come from Mina's sister Yvonne, a former member of the New Heroes who—they had discovered far too late—had been hiding her ability to manipulate other people's thoughts and emotions.

After the death of the Trutopians' leader Reginald Kinsella, Yvonne had made a televised broadcast that cut into every television and radio channel. Unable to resist Yvonne's instructions, almost every member of the organization who heard her words found himself or herself grabbing anything that could be used as a weapon.

Instantly, the world had erupted into war. Almost a million people died before Yvonne was captured and forced to reverse her order, but there were hundreds of thousands of Trutopians who were too busy fighting and killing to hear. So Yvonne broadcast the order to desist again and again, several times a day, for a month.

Then someone—the New Heroes had never learned who or exactly how—managed to get close enough to Yvonne to shoot her in the throat. She survived the attack, but could no longer speak.

Now, there remained thousands of Trutopian warriors—like the four men in the Kupferstichkabinett—who never received the order to stand down.

Danny moved through the men quickly, unclipping the magazines from their guns, stripping them of knives and grenades. He took extra care when removing their guns from their hands, aware that if he simply grabbed the weapons from them he would break their fingers.

He bound their wrists and ankles with the strong cable-ties he had tucked into his belt. The ties were already partly-closed, ready to be slipped over hands and feet: without a second arm, Danny couldn't easily fasten the ties.

The work done, he stepped back and looked down at the men. Though he knew that they had probably killed dozens of people, Danny couldn't hate them. They had no control over their actions, and unless someone found a way to reverse Yvonne's programming, they would never be able to break free of their murderous rampage, permanently wired to kill anyone who was not of their own kind. People like Herlind were the lucky ones, though Danny knew that they probably would be tormented with nightmares for the rest of their lives.

After checking that there was no one else inside the building, he returned to the plaza and again crouched down next to Warren, then shifted back to real-time.

The short businessman said, “and delicate artifacts that...” The man frowned at Danny. From his perspective, there had been nothing more than a flicker.

“All done?” Warren asked.

Danny nodded. “Four of them. Tied up, stripped of their weapons.” He gestured towards the building. “They’re on the top floor. See that window, third from the right? They’re in there.”

“Good work.”

“Listen, Mister Wagner... *Look* at this place. They—”

Warren raised a hand to cut him off. “I know.”

One of the German men looked up. “Was ist er?”

“Nichts,” Warren said. “Es ist nicht wichtig.” He pushed himself to his feet, and led Danny away from the men.

“Colin and Cassie searched this whole area two months ago,” Danny said. “No way those Trutopians were here then, and I don’t see how they managed to get this far into the city with all the police and security cameras.”

“I think it’s pretty clear that they have help, Dan. I’m tempted to think that someone’s deliberately trying to make our job harder for us, but it’s more likely that it’s a combination of bribery and incompetence. Same as everywhere else. Go back to the gate, help Mina. I’ll see if I can get anything out of the prisoners.”

Aside from the machine room, the gymnasium was the only place big enough in Sakkara to house Brawn. At thirteen feet tall, the blue-skinned giant could only make his way through the base’s corridors by crawling on his hands and feet, so to accommodate him one of the gym’s side walls had been removed, a huge door has been installed, and, outside, large steps had been constructed leading down the building’s sloping sides and to the ground below.

The gym was where the New Heroes who were still in America tended to gather in the hour or so they had between going off-duty and getting the six hours’ sleep on which the base’s medics insisted.

Now, Warren Wagner’s son Colin sat with his friends Cassandra Szalkowska and Butler Redmond as they listened to Brawn relating another of his adventures.

“And after Spain, where did you go?” Colin asked. “Because that was like only a few weeks before the final battle with Ragnarök, right? How did you get back?”

Brawn frowned for a moment. “Casey’s people picked me up. He wanted me there for the battle. Though I still don’t get why you keep calling it the *final* battle, Colin.” He inclined his head toward the nearest window. “Haven’t you been paying attention to what’s been going on the past couple of years?”

Colin glanced toward the window. Though there was nothing to see of Topeka from this distance, he was all-too-aware of the damage the city had suffered.

Butler yawned and leaned back so that he was stretched out with his hands tucked behind his head. He appeared to be floating a good six inches above the floor. “Must have been something, though, to have that sort of strength. I mean, you threw a bus over a *hill!*”

A voice from the doorway said, “Forget that. Tell them about the time you held your own against me, Titan, Josh Dalton and Thunder.”

They looked up to see Colin’s mother walking towards them with Colin’s baby sister in her arms.

“Paragon and Hesperus were there too, Caroline,” Brawn said, and Colin noticed a look pass between his mother and the giant. The same look that all the adults had when their dead friends were mentioned.

“She’s just not settling,” Caroline said. “Cassandra? I hate to ask again, but...”

The fifteen-year-old girl pushed herself to her feet. “It’s OK.” She reached out her left hand and gently caressed the baby’s forehead. “She’s scared... But she doesn’t know why. She’s picking it up from you.” Cassandra looked into Caroline’s eyes. “Something happened... You were watching the TV news. You’re worried about Danny and the others. She doesn’t like it when you’re worried, Mr. Wagner.” She leaned closer, pressed her cheek against the baby’s forehead. “Shh, little one... It’s OK. Everything is all right.”

A few seconds later, the baby’s eyes fluttered closed, and she was asleep.

Butler said, “Man, if you could bottle that...”

“I’d buy it,” Brawn said.

“Me too,” Caroline said. “She turned to her son. “Five more minutes, Colin, then go to bed. Even you need to rest from time to time.”

Colin nodded. “Sure.”

“You have no intention of sleeping tonight, do you?”

“Nope. Me and Razor are working on the new armor.”

His mother raised her eyes. “Of course you are.” She walked back toward the door. “Thank you, Cassandra.”

As Cassandra sat down again, Butler asked, “What’s it *like* inside a baby’s mind? Is it much different than a person’s?”

“Butler, babies *are* people too, you know,” Cassandra said.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.”

Colin couldn’t help liking Cassandra, even though—at first—he’d done his best to avoid her; he didn’t like the idea of someone being able to read his thoughts. But her telepathy had proven to be a great asset to the team and now it was hard to imagine not having her around. It helped that Cassandra had what Razor had called “read-only” telepathy: she wasn’t able to change people’s thoughts or emotions.

A year ago, when the New Heroes rescued Cassandra and dozens of others from the prison camp at Lieberstan, she had been very quiet and nervous of strangers, but since then she had grown much more confident and was more than capable of holding her own against Butler.

Butler asked again, “So what *is* it like inside her mind?”

Cassandra shrugged. “Babies don’t think in words the way we do. Just feelings, really. In some ways it’s clearer than everyone else’s mind, though. When she wants something, she *really* wants it, you see what I mean. It’s not all mixed up with other emotions.”

Brawn said, “I know you can’t read *my* mind, Cassie, but can you pick up anything at all?”

“Yeah, I can tell there’s something there, but I can’t make out any of your thoughts. That’s just the way it is with some people: I can’t read Impervia either. And Mina had problems reading your aura, didn’t she?”

Under his breath—but still loud enough for the others to hear—Butler said, “Yeah, because there’s no such thing as an aura and Mina’s crazy.”

“She’s not crazy,” Colin said. “Just different.”

“We’re all different. And *she*’s crazy. Auras.” Butler shook his head. “What a pile of new-age hippie garbage.”

Cassandra said, “Whether or not auras are real, Mina can see *something*. You said it yourself, Butler: It could be that her power is a form of telepathy or empathy and it affects her vision. When I listen to someone else’s mind I hear words. She sees colors. That might be the only difference.”

“Aw, he’s just jealous,” Brawn said. “Mina’s faster and stronger than him, *and* she can teleport herself short distances. All Butler can do is make a big bubble.”

“It’s a force-field!” Butler said. “Stop calling it a bubble. And what powers do *you* have? The power to be thirteen feet tall, blue and bald. Well, *that’s* useful!”

Colin rose into the air. “All right, that’ll do. It’s nearly two o’clock in the morning, so get some sleep. We’re leaving at eight.” He floated over to the door, then out into the corridor.

A pair of weary-looking soldiers nodded a greeting as he passed them, no longer even remotely surprised to see a flying fourteen-year-old boy.

As Colin approached the base’s machine room, the door opened and Razor peered out. “What keeps you?”

The older boy held the door open as Colin drifted past him.

“Brawn was telling us about when he was in Spain.” Colin looked around the room. “No one else on tonight?”

“Nah. Apparently someone’s invented this thing call ‘sane working hours.’ They only work, like twelve hours a day.”

“Wimps,” Colin said. He dropped to the floor next to Razor’s workbench, and examined a blueprint on the over-sized computer monitor. “What’s this? More new armor? You’ve got the scale wrong.”

“No, I haven’t.” Razor grinned. “New idea.”

“I love it when you have new ideas. What’s this one?”

Razor combed his hands through his long dirty-blond hair. “This is the one that brings everything to a whole new level. We get *this* working, we’re gonna be unstoppable.”

Chapter 2

At the short but wide bridge that marked the Western end of Unter den Linden, Danny slowed to a stop and shifted back into real-time. “See?” He held up a paper bag containing three jelly donuts. “And here’s the receipt. Charlottenburg, in less than ten minutes. That’s six and a half kilometers there and back.”

The young German man with the stopwatch looked at him with a raised eyebrow. “Hm.”

“What?”

One of the man’s two colleagues said, “Ten minutes?”

“There were other people ahead of me in the bakery. I wasn’t going to push in line.”

“But you moved too fast for us to see.”

“That’s the *point*,” Danny said. “That proves I can do it.”

“No, it only proves that you went from here to Charlottenburg and returned. We don’t know that you *ran* all that way. Perhaps you teleported, like your friend Mina.”

“Well I didn’t. I ran,” Danny said. “And you owe me two Euros and fifty cents for the donuts.”

A voice behind Danny called out, “Hey!”

He turned to see Gerhard, the supervisor of this crew, staring at them.

“You are here to *work*, Daniel Cooper!” The man said. “You are not here to show off!” He beckoned Danny closer. “You’re strong, right?” He pointed to the line of burnt-out cars on the side of the bridge. “We need the cars moved.”

“Mina’s the strong one, Gerhard,” Danny said. “I’m the fast one. Can’t you tow them out of the way?”

“The small truck is busy, and we cannot risk using the big truck until we’re sure the bridge hasn’t been weakened.” Gerhard took off his hard-hat and scratched his head with the corner of his clipboard. “Some of the workers here are saying that this is *your* mess, Daniel. You learned of the government’s superhuman prison in Lieberstan and you told the whole world. You forced them to act.”

Not this again, Danny said to himself. Aloud, he said, “Yeah, I did. But that had *nothing* to do with the Trutopian war. They’re two completely separate events. The Trutopians had no connection with the prison.”

Gerhard smiled. “Perhaps. But you are really as fast as they say, yes? Could you travel from here to Bremen and back in an hour?”

“Sure. How far is Bremen?”

“By road, almost four hundred kilometers. So you can do it?”

“I could do it in a couple of minutes. Why?”

“My company has some documentation to send here. Authorization to close the bridge for two days. My colleague was going to bring the documents by car, but she would have to drive through the night, so we won’t be able to start until tomorrow. If you were to collect the documentation, we could begin this evening.”

Danny nodded. “Sure. Which way is it?”

The supervisor pointed to the west. “Follow the signs.” He scribbled an address on a blank page of his clipboard, and handed it to Danny. “Bremen isn’t like your American cities with the roads in straight lines and at right-angles. It’s more like Berlin—so you go here, to the stadium on the west side of the city. It should be easy to find. I’ll phone my colleague, ask her to meet you there.”

“OK. When she gets there, let me know and I’ll leave. Tell her to wait about five minutes. Just in case I *do* get lost.”

Danny spent the next half-hour working with the young German men trying to clear the wrecked cars off the bridge, but he knew he wasn't much help. He was no stronger than an ordinary teenager and having only one arm made everything a lot more complicated. In the end, the others told him to steer while they pushed.

Anybody could do this, he told himself. They don't need me.

As the Germans shouted instructions to him—"Links! Nien, Ihre *andere* links!"—he started to wonder whether he'd be better off going home. *I'm supposed to be a superhero, not a laborer! I helped save the world, and now here I am sitting in a burnt-out car trying to remember the German words for left and right.* "Links is left, yeah?" he shouted out.

"Ja! Left!" A voice called back, followed by a muttering that sounded very much like "idiot." Then, louder, "They both begin with L! It's not difficult!"

Not for you, Danny thought. You're bilingual.

Danny awkwardly steered the car as the others pushed, and as they reached the far side of the bridge Gerhard told Danny that it was time to go. "My friend is waiting for you in Bremen. Her name is Lenita. You'll recognize her—she looks a little like Nina Hagen." He unscrewed the top of his thermos flask and poured a measure of sweet-smelling milky tea into the cup.

Danny climbed out of the car. "I've no idea who that is," he said, brushing gray fragments of charred seat-cover off the backside of his pants.

The supervisor sighed, and sipped at his tea. "No one listens to the classics any more. She will be standing by her car. A white Toyota."

"OK. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Danny switched to fast-time mode—or slow-time, he was never sure which way to think of it—and began to jog back along Unter den Linden, heading west.

Though he was happy to help out, he sometimes felt that others took his powers for granted. More than once, he'd had to explain how they worked to the other New Heroes: "Look, guys... If I'm in fast-time and I travel thirty miles, it might only be a second from *your* perspective but from my point of view it feels like about four hours."

Now, with Bremen two hundred and fifty miles—or more—from Berlin, Danny faced a round trip of five hundred miles. To him, that was going to take the equivalent of about four days. He sometimes worried that by the time he reached the end of a long journey he might have forgotten what he was supposed to be doing.

After he passed through the Brandenburg Gate again he took a slight detour to the hotel Tiergarten where he, Mina and Warren Wagner were staying. Seconds later he was back on the road with his spare pair of sneakers stuffed into his backpack—he figured he'd worn out over eighty pairs in the past year—and his MP3 player on shuffle.

When he reached Helmstedt he left the autobahn and zipped through the town until he saw a public restroom, then, relieved and refreshed, he returned to the road.

In Bremen he followed the road signs to Weserstadion and spotted a middle-aged, dark-haired woman waiting by a white car. He checked that the car was a Toyota—Danny had never had much interest in cars and tended to categorize them by color and size rather than make—then shifted back to real-time.

The woman shrieked and jumped back when he appeared right in front of her.

Man, I've got to remember not to do that! "It's OK, it's me. Danny Cooper. Gerhard sent me, from Berlin. You're Lenita?"

She nodded. "The way you appeared like that... Unglaublich!"

That was one of the few German words with which Danny was familiar: he'd heard it often enough over the past few days. "I know. Sometimes even *I* don't believe it." Leaning against the side of his car, he pulled off his sneakers and put on his fresh pair.

Lenita took another step back, her nose wrinkling.

"Uh, yeah, sorry," Danny said. "My shoes can get a bit pongy after a few hundred miles." He pressed the velcro straps tight, then put the old sneakers into his bag. "Gerhard said you have some documents he needs?"

She handed him a large envelope. "Now, you must make sure that he get this, yes? Otherwise it'll be a whole mess trying to get replacements."

"No problem." He stuffed the envelope into his backpack next to his sneakers. "OK. I'll be back in Berlin in a few minutes. I'll get Gerhard to phone you so that you know he's got the documents."

He was about to slip back into fast-time when Lenita put her hand on his arm.

"Wait... You're the one from the news, aren't you? Shortly before the war, you were talking about that place in Lieberstan. The prison camp for superhumans."

"Yeah, that was me. But, look, the war was nothing to *do* with that!"

"I know. I just... You did the right thing. Places like that should not be allowed to exist. My grandfather was in Dachau during World War Two. It was a horrible, horrible place."

Danny wasn't quite sure how to react to that. "Did, uh, did he survive?"

"Yes." She stared at him, unblinking. "He was a guard."

"Oh. I see."

"When you spoke of the prison on television, you said that some of the people were there only because they had a connection to... How was it you put it? To someone the authorities considered to be a threat."

"That's true," Danny nodded. "They were the families and friends of known supervillains."

"Then you understand that people should never be punished for the actions of their ancestors."

Danny found his mouth had gone dry. "Of course they shouldn't." He fought the sudden urge to tell the woman about his own father. Or, rather, the former supervillain who'd spent eleven years masquerading as his father.

Finally, she seemed to relax. "That's good. Thank you. It is an honor to meet you." She reached out her right hand toward him, then pulled it back. "I'm sorry... Your arm."

"That's OK. I should go. It was nice to meet you." He moved into fast-time, and left Lenita standing by her car, aware that by the time she even noticed he was gone, he would be dozens of miles away.

Danny arrived back in Berlin to find Gerhard still standing in the same spot. He had his head tilted back as he drained the last of his tea from the thermos's plastic cup, and his bright yellow hard-hat was in the process of falling from his head.

Danny plucked the hat out of the air then moved a few feet back from the supervisor before he switched back to real-time. "Got it," Danny said. "You have to phone Lenita and let her know that I made it back."

Gerhard lowered the empty cup and smiled, then frowned when he spotted his hard-hat in Danny's hand. "What..?"

Danny handed it back. "It was falling." He slipped the backpack off his shoulders and crouched next to it on the ground as he opened it. "Got your documents here."

"Thanks. So, was I right?"

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