

# **H.E.R.O. - Metamorphosis**

by Kevin Gerald Rau

Promotional Material – includes about 10% of the novel

H.E.R.O. - Metamorphosis  
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Published By  
Kevin Gerald Rau

Editors  
Dan Henry  
Kimi Johnson

All characters are original and fictional. Any likeness to real people is purely incidental.

Cover created by Kevin Rau.

The H.E.R.O. series includes:

H.E.R.O. - Metamorphosis (Book 1)

H.E.R.O. - New Markets (Book 2)

H.E.R.O. - Rise and Fall (Book 3 - Short Novel)

H.E.R.O. - Dark Research (Book 4)

H.E.R.O. - Horde (Book 5)

H.E.R.O. – Paragon (Book 6 – coming roughly Feb/Mar 2012)

Wondering what the some of the characters look like in detail?  
<http://www.kevinrau.com> has images of many of the heroes.

Thanks to Dan Henry, Christina Aspen, Bob Bintzler, Jody “Bud” Smet and my online friend Pach for being all too willing to club the seal sitting on my head as my fingers typed away with a mind of their own, in some cases putting down the strangest things...

## Chapter 1 – Food Courts and Untimely Explosions

### Stephanie's Viewpoint

*Twenty, and my life is ending.* I lay there in a pool of blood, and thought that this life was too short. My name's Stephanie Quinn, at least the only one I had at the time. I couldn't believe I might die without doing anything really cool with my life. It was just wrong.

It was late Saturday afternoon. A few minutes prior, we'd been sitting in the food court of the local mall. The place bustled with a crowd hitting up the fast food joints. Much of the crowd watched the big screens mounted up above us. Breaking news warned the public about a new meteor shower coming down over Metrocity's region. They expected it to cause a renewed outbreak of the gene “supervirus” today. That’s not a virus that spreads, by the way. We just called it that because it infected people and significantly changed their DNA, their connection to the universe, their life.

It was always an interesting topic to my friends and I, considering my dad was a super, though I wasn’t. In fact, my two best friends had a parent who's a super. One might think the fates conspired to push us together, in reality it was more of a plan by our parents.

I was enrolled as a junior at Metrocity University in the genetics degree program. We’d watched the media on this event as it approached, and hoped to study a super, or metahuman at some point.

My eyes were glued to the news report, so I asked Rael if he'd be a dear and get us all some nummy flavored coffee from Gloria Jeans. Lance would do it, but I just loved twisting Rael around my finger, even more so considering he's such a tough guy. He loved it in secret, and it gave him a chance to hover behind someone in a line and intimidate them. Like I said, tough guy. I grinned at him as he headed off.

Our watching of the news was interrupted by fireworks in the sky. The glass dome over the food court made it a good vantage point to sky watch, and some rather spectacular detonations occurred directly overhead as meteors exploded up in the sky. One made it very low over the city, perhaps even the mall, and we felt and heard the boom as it burst low overhead. The din from the crowd buzzed with awe and excitement. The lights dimmed momentarily in the mall, it appeared to affect every business visible to us. I was struck with a headache, perhaps from the flashes and booms.

I rubbed my temple as Lance and I returned to watching the live news coverage of the tiny meteors burn up and explode as they entered the atmosphere. The anchor on T.V. began a discussion with some scientist about radiation testing when I heard a scream behind me. Lance looked past me, and I turned my head to see some guy in a strange contorted position. He stood with his back arched, hands clenched in fists, his face a mask of great pain. The guy's body actually glowed. *He's either a supervillain about to do something nasty to us all, or he's being affected by the meteor virus.* For a moment I was jealous. I didn't have much more than a moment.

From off to the right Rael sprinted toward him, leaped over a few tables, and people too. I think almost every face in the entire food court turned toward either the screamer, or watched Rael move through the area. I wondered if he'd help the guy, or perhaps get him on the ground, but no, in typical Rael fashion, he threw some kind of flying ninjitsu punch at the guy's head. The guy exploded right where he stood when the punch landed.

I don't mean an explosion of blood or some such.

No, he literally blew up, like a grenade or dynamite. Chairs, tables, people, everything was thrown away from him. I flung my arm up to ward off a flying chair, and a huge man's body slammed into me. The wave of concussive force followed a fraction of a second later, blasting me back. I felt energy pass right through my body, and I must have lost consciousness for a minute.

I came to and found myself lying on the ground. Something held down my lower body. I moved my head enough to see that it was some really fat guy. My vision was blurry. I felt blood dripping down my head, and my left arm bled from a massive gash along it.

I spotted Lance lying near me. He's a huge guy, probably 6'6" and 300 pounds of gorgeous muscles, brunette with medium wavy hair and steely gray eyes. He's a heavy weight lifter, rugby and football player. Lance's back arched, hands clawed at the air, and his face contorted in great pain. His skin split apart along muscle groups, new muscles bulged out, and the skin re-grew over the new muscle. Blood flowed from his body in dozens of locations. Some of the blood I lay in appeared to be his.

*Wait a moment, why am I not feeling pain?* That thought snapped me out of my fugue as I suddenly became acutely aware of a dozen wounds doing everything from causing stabbing sensations to a sensation similar to someone punching me repeatedly in the back. My head throbbed especially badly.

I lifted my head to look around better, and saw people lying scattered about the food court. Many lights were out, and furniture

had been flung in a wave away from the blast guy. Cries of pain, screaming and moans seemed to be coming from everyone. It was like a war zone.

My forehead hurt, I put my palm against it, and accidentally exacerbated a wound there. Liquid ran down over my eyes and I realized my forehead was split open.

I tried to find my purse to get my phone out. I wanted to dial 911, people needed help here. I saw the purse; it was just past Lance, out of my reach.

*Great.* I felt rather drowsy, but very warm, perhaps that was the pain. *Aren't you supposed to feel cold as you lose blood?* The sensation of heat grew, and I suddenly had the feeling of fire coursing through my blood. You ever really feel your blood pump through your system after inhaling a strong coffee? Yeah, similar to that, but on fire. My back arched, I lost control of my arms as they clawed at the floor, and heard exceptionally loud screaming. *Wait, is that me?*

As the pain roared through my system, all I could think of is fire, pain, and the sense of being burned at the stake. I felt great empathy for anyone caught in a fire at that moment. *Dying would be fine right about now, just end the pain, please!* I felt a wave, or pulse of something from my center. It pulsed through me, and I felt a little less pain. My skin tingled, and a wave of goose bumps went down my entire body. It was a strange combination of pain and pleasure I felt. My skin continued tingling for a while, but the pleasure receded, leaving only the pain again.

I wanted to hold Lance's hand, but I fought against the contorting of my own body. It probably didn't help that the fat guy kept me from moving half my body, and my left leg didn't appreciate all that weight on it.

*We're changing, I'm sure of that. Hard to think clearly though. I need to do something here...*

I had just enough awareness to notice Lance's thrashing slow to a stop. A few moments later he sat up with a surprised look on his face. He saw me, and reached over to grab my shoulder. I heard, wait – no, I **felt** a crunching in my shoulder as he crushed the muscle and bone without effort where he grabbed me, and I screamed. I reached toward his arm with my left hand, but adding this new pain to the mix was just too much. I think I heard him say something, but everything went black....

## Chapter 2 – Escape from Authority

### Lance's Viewpoint

Normally I'm not a big fan of going to the mall. However, when one of my best friends wanted Rael and I to join her to do some clothes shopping, I wasn't about to resist. Yeah, yeah, normally I'd avoid shopping with most women like most other sane men, but Stephanie's beautiful and fun to be with, and I knew that she knew that shopping was boring for guys. So she flirted a lot with us when picking out clothes. She's a tiny gal, about 5'3", brunette with shoulder blade length hair, hazel eyes, slim but not skinny, and busty. *Yeah, shopping with her was downright fun. Literally. No joke there. Gotta say, I wonder if she uses me as a giant bag carrier at times, though....* Rael mentioned to me in the past that it's better than watching porn, but I'll leave that assessment to him.

We decided to eat at the food court first, and met at a table near the center, where we could watch a television. Big news was up about a new meteor shower happening today. Not like they figured it would drop basketball sized lumps on us or something, but the exciting thing was the radiation from these things. Apparently saving the world back in the 80's with experimental nukes against a big asteroid headed toward earth made strange things happen. Something about the nuke energized the matter in the asteroid, and a cloud of small asteroids floats around the planet now. When meteor showers occurred on occasion, irradiated particulates in the air caused some rather spontaneous mutation in humans. *Interesting stuff.*

My mom's a super, as are Stephanie and Rael's fathers. They guessed that we had a high likelihood of becoming 'gene activated' at some point. I know for a fact that my mom hoped for it. To that end, she got me into classes and training most of my life for that possibility. Nothing special had worked out so far for me, but I wouldn't be surprised if mom's genetics hadn't given me an edge up on my physique – that and a lot of weight lifting, exercise, martial arts, and sports. I worked as a bouncer, a pretty easy gig for a big guy who is well built and towers over normal sized people.

One segment of the news was very cool. A super named Hellshock was interviewed about tonight. He mentioned that all supers and authorities were on alert and ready to handle any problems that occurred. I couldn't get enough of comic books, news on supers and

the H.E.R.O. organization, and even the tabloids that specialized in supers. I've been a huge fan of heroic type supers for as long as I could remember.

So we watched the news, and Stephanie asked Rael to go get us all some flavored coffee. Yeah, she gave him that sweet face, too. I chuckled as he stood up. I think it made him unhappy, he glared at me a moment and stalked off toward the coffee shop. *Sucker! Not like I'm immune to that look. She just somehow makes you feel so damn good about helping her with something.* We'd all been friends for over ten years, and she knew the buttons to push.

I watched him head off. It was like watching a cat that's always ready to pounce. He's only about 6' tall, black hair that was a few inches below the shoulder, and weighed perhaps 190 or so, but he had plenty of muscle on that frame – lithe muscle. His skin was decorated with a tattoo of a dragon's claw on each forearm, and little demons on each bicep. It was funny watching her eyes follow his backside until he got out of obvious sight. He tended to do the same thing to her. *Wait, I'm pretty sure that's always, not tended, bab! Man, I hope I'm not that obvious. I find it interesting that people tend to part the way for me because I'm darn big. They part the way for him I think because he projects an aura of danger. Or is that hostility?* Rael loved to fight; he was the only one in the dojo that commonly fought multiple opponents at a time.

A little boy and his mom sat next to us, he stared at me, and finally poked me in the arm as I'd been watching Rael. I smiled at him. He looked at my arm, so I flexed for him. Having 22" biceps attracted attention I guess. I said, "Hey buddy, drink lots of milk and stay active, you can get as big as me." *Well, maybe not, but hey, gotta have something in life to shoot for.*

We watched the news until a meteor exploded overhead, causing a boom and mild shaking in the area. The lights actually dimmed from it. *Very cool. This is going to be a killer night for news on supers!* My shoulder suddenly hurt - I must have strained myself when I worked out in the morning; I massaged my biceps as I watched Stephanie. My friend appeared to have a headache. I was about to ask her if she would like me to go get her some aspirin or something when I noticed a guy stand up a few tables behind Stephanie. His eyes glowed, and his head twitched. He did an odd pose with his arms out, almost like you'd see a wrestler do after winning a match. Then he screamed, arched his back and made fists with his hands. I blinked, a bit surprised at the raw agony of his scream. Then his entire body began to glow.

*Won, this guy is a super, or he's about to be due to the meteor shower!* That screaming and the glowing didn't look like a good start though. I

tried to think of a way to help someone change, but didn't recall mom ever mentioning what the experience was like in any detail.

Practically everyone turned toward him at this point, and no one moved. Wait, one person did. Rael sprinted toward the guy. It only took him a few seconds, and he leapt at the guy. I figured he'd tackle the man. Instead, he threw a haymaker at him. Good punch, he landed a solid score on the side of the guy's face.

The guy blew up. I didn't have enough time to think. I moved in front of the boy right next to me and shielded him, and tried to grab for Stephanie's arm to pull her to me. I was far too slow for the distance, for she had twisted in her seat to watch the guy as well. A fat guy flew through the air toward us, and the blast, table, and what seemed like everything else impacted me. It felt sort of like a really aggressive fullback plowing into me at top speed. The energy of the explosion went right through my body.

I lay there thinking about the damage I might have sustained, and heard people screaming and crying all over the place. The little boy sat up next to me, nothing had hit him. I said, "Good kid, find your mom." *Hmm, this is going to be ugly. Hey, most of the lights are out again.* I leaned up to check on Stephanie, and felt a burning sensation. It grew until my entire body felt like I was thrown into a fire pit. I couldn't help but thrash on the floor. Then on top of the burning sensation, I felt muscles and skin tearing.

I slammed one arm against the floor from the agony, and dimly heard tile shattering. *Hope that wasn't expensive....* I realized that we'd been gene activated. Made into supers. Mutated. I would have cheered if this didn't hurt so darn much. Through pain-filled eyes I saw how bloody my arms were becoming, as the muscles bunched up, grew, and split the skin. It seemed to be healing over, but wow, I'd never felt pain like this.

I saw Stephanie reach out toward me, or at least try to. I wanted to reach out, but my arms kept flexing of their own accord. They weren't in my control due to the pain ... and the growth.

Her expression changed as though she was in deep thought, and the pain rapidly faded. I smelled something pleasant, like a flower. The scent faded, and the screaming and moaning stopped from the people in perhaps a thirty foot radius of us. Everyone except her. A quick glance around showed everyone else changing from pained expressions to confusion or relief. Her face was still contorted in pain though.

I sat up, reached out to her, and grabbed her shoulder. I felt something give when my hand closed, like bones crunching under my fingers. She screamed and passed out. *Damn. I think I'm gaining some kind of super strength, but I feel bad.*



I wanted to help the people here, but already heard sirens, and if they found new supers of any type here they might think we caused all this damage, not to mention all the injuries. *Oh man, battery on a crowd scale. They might even call that terrorism or something.* For that matter, they might lock us down to study us, dump us in some government test program, or heck, just put us away all drugged up. *I'd rather things be in my control than someone else's. I wanted to get stabilized, and then get to H.E.R.O. headquarters to sign up as a new H.E.R.O.*

*So the temporary important thing was to get out of there before people could remember our faces. Dang, I hate feeling guilty when I didn't do anything wrong. Well, except smashing the floor. I'll have to find a way to pay the mall back for that.*

Stephanie had lost a lot of blood from the head and arm wounds, not to mention she had to have some broken bones. *I feel so bad about the shoulder damage – nothing like piling crap on the dung heap. I'm glad she's unconscious right now.* I could see her wounds closing even as I watched. *She got regeneration at the least, pretty decent too, from what I've read about supers.*

I looked around, but people were now sitting up, and panic started to set in on some of them. *I can't worry about Rael. He's a fighter, he'll get out. That and he'd be pissed if I didn't take care of Stephanie while worrying about him. Man, I can't believe I just crushed her shoulder. That had to hurt like heck! God, I suck.*

I rolled the big guy off her and picked her up carefully, snagging her purse with my pinkie on the way. *Wow, she feels extremely light. Damn, she weighs, what – 110 pounds? She feels like she weighs almost nothing.* I felt the fire going through my body again. My muscles bunched up, and I actually **saw** my forearm tighten, tear the skin, grow, and heal over. It created a bloody mess on my clothing and the floor. *Holy crap.* I was glad I didn't feel pain any more, but I kept my main concentration on holding Stephanie safely. If my muscles exploded again, I'd rather not crush my best friend. For that matter, I noticed her skin moving, and could tell she was gaining a little muscle as well. *Not enough to break the skin, or bulge her arms or anything, but extra toning. Her bod's tightening up even more. She'd probably be hoping for an even higher I.Q. to do even better at college. Nerdy sometimes, but she's still my pal.*

I almost slipped and fell as I moved. I'd bled through all of my clothing and made such a mess of the floor. Many people had obvious cuts and some broken limbs from objects crashing into them, but none had blood absolutely coating them. *Man, people were lying around everywhere.*

I would really rather have stayed and helped. I've had first aid training, but if I could break Stephanie's shoulder just by grabbing it, I

was more of a danger than a help to these people. Plus, I believed most people would be more frightened of Mr. Blood Covered Horror Film Dude at that point anyway. My shirt and pants felt soaked. Steph didn't look so blood soaked, though she'd probably have looked good even like that.

I glanced around the food court area. *Hmm, I think the authorities will focus on the food court entrances.* I jogged down a side tunnel, looking for one of those emergency exits set between stores. People stared at me as I ran with her. *Must be the blood on us both. Man, people are mental; they should have cleared the darn area when the explosion went off.*

I pushed the door open with my back to prevent damaging it or leaving fingerprints, and jogged down the hallway. I tried to keep her steady in my arms. *Yeah, that'd look good; bang her head on the door frame as I run through or something. So Mr. Casey, how did your friend sustain these injuries? Uhh. I clubbed her on the door because I'm an oaf? Yeah, not good.* I got us through the outer door as squad cars pulled up to the food court entrance off to our right.

I felt the painful fire go through my veins again, and it was all I could do to prevent myself from crushing Steph to my chest as my arms spasmed. It was like being clawed all over for some reason. *What happened to that pain resistance? Darn it, this hurts again.* I fell to my knees, and did my best to keep Stephanie off the ground. I watched the skin on my fingers rip open, and muscle and tissue grew as I watched. My body began glowing yellow from the inside. I could see some kind of fumes coming out of my mouth and nose. My hands ... actually **grew**. *I think I just gained an inch or more of hand span on each hand right there.* I couldn't move for the thirty seconds or so it took for my hands to rebuild.

The pain hurt so much I pounded on the concrete sidewalk with my right fist. It shattered as though hit by a piece of construction machinery. Fresh blood trickled down my body in a dozen spots, ensuring my clothing stayed drenched in blood. Talk about major hurt. *What, did I ask to super size the pain?* I believe only my fear for attracting the attention of the police kept me from screaming during that process. I knelt there panting on my knees, Stephanie held in one arm, the other hand on the ground to keep me from falling. I saw the last of the skin seal over and the pain from that round of transformation stopped.

The changes didn't stop as something new occurred. I felt heat, or energy, something I didn't understand coming from deep in my core in a new round of ... change. Rather than pain this time, a rush of power flowed out into my limbs. It's like I had the biggest weight lifting rush in my life. My body felt energized ... powerful. Shadows danced around us as my own body lit the area, and people stared our

way from the odd light. Some people in the parking lot walked toward us and the flashing lights on my right. *Great. Now I glow?* I had become a beacon in the darkness, attracting the attention of everyone within sight due to the oddity. My body finally felt right, more than right, it felt powerful. *Come on, Lance. We have to get out of here now.*

I leapt to my feet, only to go airborne. *Holy crap, can I fly?* I reflexively clutched tighter to Steph, and felt her upper left arm snap. *Darn it, I'm a freaking brute now.* We went up into the air a hundred yards or so as we flew across the parking lot and continued over the buildings across the street. The experience was thrilling and terrifying all in one. Our upward flight slowed, and our angle changed for the worse. We were headed back down. No flight. I started to panic as we rapidly descended. The light from inside faded. This landing couldn't go well. I twisted my body so I would land on my back. *We're goners here. I hope I can cushion our fall.*

We came down a few streets from the mall, in a residential area. I could only pray that all this muscle gain also meant I was becoming armored, like most brick supers seemed to be. If so, perhaps we could land safely and get the heck out of there.

We crashed into the ground behind a house. The hard concrete patio we landed on shattered as my back smashed into it. Her head cracked against mine, and the lights went out.

## Chapter 3 – Pain is Good

### Rael's Viewpoint

*Coffee duty. Just call me the damn butler already. Babe asks me to get some Gloria Jean's coffee for the group, and sucker that I am, I go do it. Truthfully, I couldn't help but feel pretty good about doing what Stephanie asked though. Sure, she's one of my best friends, but she's smokin' hot. Brunette, shoulder-blade length hair, buns that made you want to just grab them every time you see 'em. When she bent over I think I had a habit of stopping and drooling, slack-jawed. I try not to, but I'm not sure I succeed. Sometimes I didn't bother trying. I grinned to myself. Well, she's also my best friend, so I guess I'd do it for that reason too. I wish she'd get the hint and go out on an official date with me though.*

My bud Lance stayed at the table. *Probably a good idea. If I saw some jerk hitting on her I'd probably start a fight. Hey, she's not my girlfriend ... yet, but Lance is built like a brick shithouse. No one will come close with him sitting there in his under armor body fitting shirt. People probably think he's a pro wrestler or something. For that matter, he could do it, he's athletic enough. In better shape than most of those guys, anyway. Hell, if he ever does go super and wear tights, women will swoon over him. Screw that, **men** will swoon over him out of jealousy.* He and I rented a house together, and I'd learned that he'd probably have heart failure if that actually happened. *Straight as an arrow.*

He definitely got his build from his mom. She's a super – a brick to be precise. She did reconstruction of damaged buildings. Big woman, she's about 6' tall and for a woman has bulging muscles, although her build isn't really broad or unusual other than the height. Really good looking, you'd think she were at most twenty five. Lance inherited those looks, the muscles and the unusual height, but no super abilities yet.

*That warm and fuzzy feeling I had didn't stop me from the desire to smack the punks in front of me at the store, but that sort of activity doesn't go over too well with the AUTH-OR-ITAY. Sure would make me feel better though.*

I thought the day over for a moment while I stood in line. I found it kind of odd that Steph's dad actually called **me** up, and mentioned that she really wanted to do some clothes shopping at the mall. She's not the least bit shy, if anything, she knows she's hot and flirts due to it. I'm not stupid though, I told him that of course we'd go with her. I didn't even know her dad that well. He had always sent

her over to play with Lance and I over the last ten years. *Whatever, it got her out with us tonight.*

The wait in line for the coffee annoyed me more than normal. Something put me in a bad mood, and my blood pounded so much I had to focus on some mental kata to calm myself down. After picking up the coffee I walked back toward the table Lance chose when I saw some dude stand up and scream. I figured he was a druggie of some sort. For a moment I kind of hoped for a chance to help mall security beat down some punk. *That'd be fun.*

Anyway, he arched his back, arms out, hands forming the shape of claws. *Man, I wish I had claws, just not the freaky huge bug claws some mutants have.* I've got cool dragon claw tattoos on my forearms - dragon claws would be awesome. A nimbus of light started glowing around him. *Oh, a super of some sort!* I kind of lost it at this point. I wanted so bad to beat on somebody that I didn't think. No idea where the drinks ended up, because I hauled ass at him.

I'd trained extensively in martial arts and gotten very good at street acrobatics, so getting past the people and tables to the dude took a few seconds at best. I leapt completely over one table, ran past a few others, plus plenty of people who all just stood or sat still watching my target. Everyone had stopped. *Act people! Get off your butts and quit watching me and him!* I used a hand for leverage as I leapt over another, larger table, and closed the distance between us. I went for a simple, yet powerful roundhouse to the face in an attempt to put him down fast. I figured security wouldn't mind me helping, what with him glowing at all.

It was a beautiful roundhouse. Of course, he barely moved, and hadn't reacted to my swing at all. My fist connected, his head snapped to the side ... then I think he exploded. Hard to explain, he had this glowing effect around him. Then when I hit, a concussive wave blew out from his skin. It felt like I got hit with a hundred punches all over my body. A sensation of fire tore through my entire system, and I flew through the air.

All that training sure was worth it. I instinctively rolled when I hit the ground. My body stopped in a crouched position, I tried to shake off the feeling of the blast, but didn't succeed overly well. The fire ripped through me, but felt ... **good**. Yeah, it was painful, but it was a good pain. *Though kind of like being on some good drugs, perhaps. Wait, not drugs ... Red Bull, an entire four pack of them at once.*

I had trouble concentrating due to all the energy coursing through me. An almost bestial rage tore through my mind. Sure, sure, that was almost normal for my rather hostile-oriented mind, but this was ... exceptional. Pain tore through my body as well, but I'm into that

on a normal basis. *Friends think I'm twisted, but hey, I'm okay with that.* That and I liked to train my martial arts against multiple opponents; a person got hit more often doing that.

The pain was focused more in my hands than most of the body, and the last digit on every finger split and lengthened. They mutated into ... claws? *For real? You've got to be kidding.* Something was up with my mouth as well. My jaw popped painfully. I could taste blood. The liquid ran out of my mouth, I wiped my hand across my chin only to add a lot more blood to my already bloody hand. *Aw crap, I better not change into some kind of werewolf.*

The skin on my forearms and hands split, new muscle grew, and the skin reformed over it. It hurt like hell. *This is amazing.*

I tried to focus on something other than my hands and jaw, and realized there were people screaming and whining all over the food court. People lay about everywhere, as if a bomb went off in the center. A woman was twisted into what had to be a horribly uncomfortable position next to me. I reached over and straightened her out.

I'm pretty sure that dude was the bomb. If the popping, fire, and wracking pain weren't going through my body I'd so have been all over the bastard. *If not for the pain, this rush would be great. Must be all the Red Bull. Wait, I didn't drink any Red Bull. Adrenaline must be pumping through my system. Hmpb.*

I looked for Stephanie and Lance when it suddenly felt like someone stabbed me in both of my eyes, and I could barely see. I felt blood ... or something ... run down my face, and couldn't help but let out a howl of pain and anger. *Okay, now I'm worried. I've never heard of a blind super though, so I'm really, really hoping this is a temporary thing. Better not turn into a freakin' bat either, that'd piss me off.*

I smelled something amongst all the blood. The pain faded away in a wave. Very strange, I couldn't understand what would cause that to happen. The Red Bull and fire were still in the veins though. The screaming and whining stopped around me. Well, not all of the whining. *Stupid people.*

I blew a lot of blood out of my nose. I think it got broken in the blast, or when my mouth changed. Afterward I could smell more clearly. That odd flowery smell was gone. I smelled blood, which wasn't a first for me, but I could tell there were **different** blood types in the room. *Holy crap, I can smell the difference in different people's blood, I think. Aw, man, I **am** becoming a werewolf.*

I still had problems seeing, and my eyes didn't feel right. I blinked furiously in an attempt to clear out whatever was in my eyes. Like my jaw, I could tell my body was reworking something there, just

not with the bone structure. I touched my face...there was a lot of blood on my cheeks. *That really does rock growing claws, but won't if I can't friggin' see.* I felt the skin split under my finger where I touched my face. Sharp. I growled out of annoyance at the pain in my eyes. I certainly wasn't about to dig my fingers into them.

Sirens screamed in the distance, plenty of them coming. It struck me that my fingers were now claws, and I was drenched in blood. *Great, I'm the hero of the day, and I'm probably a poster child for some kind of murderous supervillain. A bloody chin and wolf fangs would probably fit right in to make them just gun my ass down.*

I decided I'd rather not be arrested, or brought to a hospital. *Dumbasses would probably try to cut off my new claws in an attempt to "help" me, anyway.* The blood was mixing with a lot of saliva in my mouth. It suddenly struck me that all this blood smells good. It made me run my tongue over my lips, only to discover that I had fangs. *What the hell is happening to me? Yeah, Rael, you know you're going super, but this feels more like a horror flick.*

*Fine, figure it out later, Rael. For now, get the hell out of the initial zone. Can't even see well enough to try to get with Lance and Steph.* The fire in my blood had mostly cooled by now. I still had a lot of energy though. I blinked until I got the rough visual of one of the fast food joints in the food court. I crawled over to it, and climbed over the counter. Nothing like the sound of hard claws scraping across a metal counter to raise the hair on the back of your neck. *No bitching, so I'm guessing the counter workers were knocked out from the blast ... or are hiding.*

I crawled toward what I hoped was the back of the shop, and felt a body ... female. Damnit, I couldn't see well enough to see if she were awake. Chest was moving up and down, so she was breathing at least, and I felt a heartbeat. She was lying mostly flat, and didn't move at my touch, so she had to be unconscious. I figured her chances would be better if the police see her soon rather than wait for them to look behind counters. I picked her up carefully, being mindful of the claws. I moved backward to the counter until I bumped it, and carefully laid her on it. At least they'd see her now. *Hey, I'm a bastard at times, but my old man raised me to want to be a good guy too. Actually, since he was a H.E.R.O. back in the old days, it might just run in the family after today.*

I quickly scrambled in the other direction, again noting the disturbing sound of my own clawed fingers on the tile flooring. I found a swinging door. Some crawling took me toward the back and I successfully found a back room. I hoped they would have a door back there. I rubbed my palms against my eyes, they burned, and I hoped the dimness would fade soon. I bet that the police wouldn't be looking there, what with the carnage in the main food court. I knocked over a

few boxes of supplies while I fumbled around. A little additional searching and I found an external door for incoming supplies. The claws made opening the handle a real pain until I grabbed the handle with the upper segments of my fingers. The fingertips, or claws in my case now, just didn't grab overly well.

I decided to try something radical. *There has to be a rooftop over the hall or room I just came from, if I can get onto the roof I can hide and hopefully heal or finish changing.* I couldn't see for shit, even outside. Just outside the door, I tried leaping up at the mall roof. Pretty hopeful being as I couldn't see much, but I couldn't think of many good alternatives. Running out into a parking lot while nearly blind seemed pretty stupid to me.

I jumped up at the wall, but there was some kind of overhang on the roof. I smashed my head against the overhang and flopped back down, landing on my back. I rubbed my head with my palm. *No one better have a cell phone camera on me right now, I'll be pissed off.* When I put my hand down too hard to get back up I heard a crunching noise and felt my claws enter the hard material they had on the sidewalk. I stretched my neck to get the kinks out after that blooper. I ran my palm against the sidewalk, it was made of concrete. *What the hell?* I ran my new claws along the concrete, and scored a series of grooves in it easily. *Enough playing, Rael, get out of sight.*

After backing up about five steps, I easily made the roof in one jump. *Wow, this will rock ... if my eyesight comes back. I want to lie down and just rest for now. At least the damn cops have turned off their sirens now that they are here....*

My eyes tingled, and then felt itchy. *Yeah, I'm wise enough to know not to try to touch my eyes with these new pokers, but damn, this is annoying.* It made me clench my fists hard, and I realized that I was stabbing my own palms. It must have been adrenaline that stopped the pain in the food court, because I started to hurt all over again. *Since when does adrenaline completely wipe out pain for a while? Something else is at work here.*

A dim light began to appear in my vision, and it brightened as I waited. *Hot damn!* After a few dozen seconds I was able to crack my eyelids open a notch. I could see again. It seemed damn bright out, but I was positive it should be darker by now. The parking lot lights were all on, but it just didn't seem that dark. I whispered thanks to multiple religions and deities at that point.

*Sweet, if I decide to be some kind of mole man, I might be able to see in the dark. Wait, can't werewolves see in the dark? Damn it all.*

I examined my hands. I saw the claw damage almost healed on the palms. Thinking about injuries reminded me of Stephanie and Lance. *I need to find out what happened to them. I can't very well just walk down*



*there all bloody. They'll want to question me. Can't just go into a store and buy clothes, someone might rat me out.* I was frustrated as hell, and just wanted to beat the crap out of someone. I accidentally made a tight fist, and my claws again stabbed into my palms. I looked, and the palms healed as I watched. My claws were wicked sharp, and made my fingers about an inch longer than normal. For that matter, I no longer had fingertips - the entire last segment had been replaced by this hard black claw on every finger.

I caught sight of a pair of police cars tearing off, and actually saw the lights stop perhaps half a mile away. *Hmm, maybe Mr. Bad Guy is trying to get away. Good, there's someone to vent some anger on.* I hopped down off the roof, and jogged that way, staying out of the bright lights so the blood didn't show so much. The pain was mostly gone across my body, and the activity felt good. Really good, I traversed the half mile in record time for me, perhaps a minute at most.

I found the police cars easily enough. When I arrived, a small crowd of locals stood about watching some officers heft my friends into the back of the two cars. *What the hell is this? How did they get over here?* From the looks of it, they were unconscious. *Wouldn't they call in an ambulance? Damn you Lance, I don't care that you didn't find my ass, but to go and get both of you arrested....* I couldn't help but growl deep in my chest.

*Wait, I bet every ambulance in the city is dealing with situations like the food court mess. They can't be that badly injured to be manhandled like this. They even cuffed my friends. Bastards. And that's not my friends I'm talking about. Hmm, they had to have changed too. Dad was right. No wonder he never gave me crap about getting into such rough, umm, extracurricular activities.* I said a silent thanks to the old man for helping me prepare for this day. *If anyone can prepare for replacing their fingers for claws, that is.* For a moment I wondered if his town was having a big scene like this as well.

The squad cars both drove off after getting some statements from a few people. I very carefully watched the guy they spoke to the most, and which house he went home to. My plan began to come to mind....

I snuck around to the guy's house, and knocked on the front door. I stood off to the side enough so the eye hole couldn't get a good look at me. No need to have bothered though, the guy must have thought that with the cops around so recently he could just open the door immediately. *Or perhaps this is just that safe of a neighborhood. Hab, not tonight, buddy.*

I figured I looked reasonably scary at this point, so as soon as the door started opening, I pushed it open all the way and walked in at him. He was a large guy, overweight and middle aged. Glasses, clothes

look like the casual business type. *Don't people making decent money get laser eye surgery to get rid of glasses?*

The color drained from his face, and a shocked look crossed his face. I smiled wickedly and held up a clawed hand. Damn, I enjoyed intimidating jerks like this. My skin tingled; I felt a rush as I glared at him. “Repeat what you told the police, now,” I growled.

“Oh, my god, don't hurt me!” he says. I snarled slightly and continued to glare. He spoke rapidly, “I didn't see that much. I was watching Wheel, and what I thought was a bird caught my attention. I looked outside in time to see this huge guy and a brunette girl crash onto Jim’s patio. The guy landed on his back, the girl on top of him. She kind of bounced like her head smacked his, and they both just lay there.”

“They looked unconscious, and I could see from here that they were covered in blood. I called 911, and went out to check on them. I checked their pulses; both were strong, so I just waited. I think the guy is a super – hero or villain I don't know, but he was wearing one of those tight form fitting shirts, and has muscles bulging to here.” He made a shape with his hand over his arm as if he had a gigantic bicep.

“She's probably one too, not many women have figures like that around here. So then the police arrived, I told them about it, and they picked them up and piled them into a pair of squad cars. One of them called in on his radio that they had another pair of supers near the mall that had lots of blood on them, but didn't appear badly injured and that they'd bring them to the hospital in the squad cars.”

*I don't recall hearing the glass shattering in the ceiling of the food court, so I'm not sure how the hell they flew here, but he says they both had strong heartbeats in their necks, so falling dozens (hundreds?) of feet didn't do them much damage. Nice. I hope I'm an armored jumping frog too. Wait a second, that's just not right, if pretty little Stephanie gets armored up and I don't. Hmm. And not the frog part either. Cricket maybe? Bah, what jumps that isn't lame? If they were flying why did they crash like this?*

I told the guy, “Thanks for your cooperation, and have a great life,” then headed out. *I need to find out which hospital they'd bring potential supers to. That might be why they shoved them in the back of the squad car as well, they want to restrain them or test them. Oh hell.*

I checked my cell phone; it must have broken when I got blown back. *Good thing I have insurance on the damn thing.* Okay, I needed to get my car and head back to our place to change.

The pain in my body was gone now. I actually felt extremely good. It didn't take as long to get back to the mall parking lot. *Wow, I'm a lot faster.* The police appeared focused on the food court, so it was easy enough to get to the car from the outside of the lot. *Glad I got out*

*while I did though; it looks like they are questioning every damn person leaving the mall building. I almost wish I had criminal inclinations; the city is relatively unprotected right now.*

*My eyes narrowed as I thought about that. I need to get them out of wherever they are being held as soon as possible. Once the police aren't so focused on the mall, they can put more security on the hospital, unless there is some kind of dedicated security force there.*

*Speaking of which, what if they are sedated? I'm a strong guy, but Lance is BIG. The dude is about 6'6" and weighs a good 300 pounds. If I have to get rough, I might have to save Stephanie first and have the two of us come back for him. Do comic book heroes ever get drugged? Damn, I should have read that crap more often. Lance was always the one so goo goo eyed over superheroes.*

## Chapter 4 – I'm Not Going Down

### Lance's Viewpoint

I came to, and realized something jolted me. *The fire's gone; I only feel a dull ache over most of my body. That was probably the impact from the huge fall. I'm hungry too, famished actually. I'm in the back of a car.*

I barely had time to look around when the doors on both sides opened up, and a couple of guys grabbed my arms. They dragged me out, but at this point I didn't like what was happening. Someone grabbed my neck in a sleeper hold. My hands were stuck behind my back for a moment, and I felt a momentary restraint as I pulled my arms apart, then my hands were free. As soon as my feet hit the ground I bunched my legs to push off and try to tumble this group of guys. Someone dressed in white dove at me right when I pushed, and I felt something sharp jab at my left bicep, but it didn't hurt.

Then I was airborne, along with the guy who had his arm around my neck. The other guys on my arms couldn't keep their grip and I slid out of their grasp. *It felt like wrestling with oil slathered on me. Wait, that'd be blood. Oh, crud, I'm flying through the air with someone attached to me, he's going to get squished on impact.*

The guy on my back screamed, and I think he tightened his elbow grip on my neck. It's hard to tell, because it didn't hurt or cut off air flow.

I twisted my body, hoping to get my body in the way of the ground. I caught a moment's glimpse of something in the air, and then my head impacted with a light pole. My only thought was to grab it and stop us, and I succeeded in hooking my right arm around the pole, causing us to twirl around it multiple times on the way down. I yelled, "Woohoo!" as we spun around. *Odd, my head doesn't hurt from banging into the pole.*

*Dude's got a death grip sleeper hold on my neck.* He didn't fly off while we spun around, although he screamed the entire time. There were cars at the bottom of the pole, and we spun around toward this SUV too fast. I extended my legs, hoping to reduce the shock as we hit. One leg smashed into the side of the SUV's door, the other went into the window, but the leg on the door slowed us down.

The window shattered loudly, the door side crumpled inward, and my gut slammed into the top of the vehicle frame, denting it slightly. Apart from the momentum it felt like a weak punch, nothing

severe. The weight of the guy driving into my back doubled the strength of the impact, and I felt the frame at the top bend in further.

The guy dropped off me, and I tried to extricate myself from the window. Glancing down I saw that the man, who was actually an officer, laid below me, and that stopped me from just flopping out to the ground. I grabbed the SUV's top and felt it dent in where I was gripping. *No wonder I hurt Stephanie, I'm bending car parts, though most cars aren't heavy metal these days. Wait, the glass isn't cutting me. It's making a mess out of my jeans though. Hey, I have cuffs on me, or at least I did. When did I break those apart?*

I dropped to the ground next to the officer. *Oops, I hurt a cop; this isn't going to be good.* I went down on one knee to check on my flight partner, and he was stunned, but didn't look obviously injured. *Bet he pulled the shoulder of the arm he held me with though.* “Don't move, I'll get you some help.” *Wait, I'm running from these guys. Darn it.*

I heard a bunch of footsteps as people ran over to the area, and as I stood up a group of police aimed their weapons at me. A hospital doctor, nurse or some such was with them.

Quick internal assessment.... I really didn't feel hurt, even the impact with the SUV didn't hurt me. I glanced at my left bicep, and didn't see fresh blood from being stabbed – *but then again, it didn't really feel like being stabbed by a needle or knife.* In fact, apart from that general soreness I'd felt earlier, I just didn't feel injured.

I could have run, but that would have left Stephanie here somewhere. I could fight, and rescue her, but I knew for certain that she had a broken shoulder and arm just from me. I sighed. *Heroes don't run. Not to mention, I want to get into the government's H.E.R.O. system, and fighting them now would probably prevent that. Mom always taught me to be the good guy, be a hero if I get a chance, there aren't enough of them.*

I put my hands up at chest level, palms out in an attempt to look less threatening. I said, “Sorry guys, I didn't mean to fly like that, and waking up to people manhandling me wasn't conducive to being calm.”

One of the officers in back talked on a cell phone. I got the sense that he was recanting the story of what just occurred to someone. He scowled, snapped the phone shut, and walked forward. “Put your guns down, guys. You, don't move. You aren't under arrest ... yet, but if you take any more actions you'll be charged with everything from resisting arrest, battery, assaulting an officer, and anything else we can pull out of the book. Do you understand that? Are you willing to comply?”

Another officer, who had his revolver aimed at me said, “What are you talking about? This guy almost killed Johnson.” Cell phone man stepped up and whispered something in the guy's ear. I caught the

word “armored” when he gestured toward me, and the words “fight” and “brick.” The second officer lowered his weapon, but didn't put it away. He didn't look happy.

I doubted that I could hide the shock on my face. I said, “Yes, sir. I'll comply, though can we get some assistance for the officer here? He might have some internal injuries from the impact.” *Never hurts to show concern for a downed officer, and I really was concerned about him.*

Cell phone officer said, “My name's Thompson, what's yours?”

I replied, “Lance, Lance Casey.” Thompson's a small guy, perhaps 5'6” tall, and wiry. Glasses and a hawk nose complete the look. *He doesn't look hostile at me right now though, that's good.*

“Well Lance, come with me. You two and the nurse help Johnson. Tim, you're with me.” Tim turned out to be the last officer.

The nurse looked meaningfully at Thompson, and showed something in her hand just out of my sight behind her leg. Thompson shook his head, and motioned me to follow him.

Keeping her on the right side, I walked around the far left side of the officers to follow Thompson. She held her right hand behind her leg and watched me as she headed over to Johnson. *Yeah, she's got a needle or something in her hand, I'm sure of it.* We walked toward the building, Thompson, Officer Tim and I. Tim was uncomfortable, to say the least, and kept his hand on his pistol. The safety strap was off. As we walked I said, “Wait, I need to find out how Stephanie is doing, she was injured when we were at a house near the mall.”

Thompson said, “First, you aren't in a position to demand anything. Second, we've been out here dealing with you since you've arrived, so we don't know any more than you do. I know that a woman was brought in a second squad car, and that's it right now. This place is a madhouse tonight.”

## Chapter 5 – Cars and Bugs

### Lance's Viewpoint

We almost reached the building when a squad car tore into the parking lot toward us. The top of the car was dented upward severely ... from the inside. A struggle was going on inside it, and the vehicle showed no signs of slowing down. Tonight was a busy night at the emergency entrance, and there's no way the car would avoid plowing into people, from civilians to nurses to policemen.

*You're armored, and super strong. Now's as good a time to die trying to save people as any other.* I sprinted out in front of people toward the car.

I heard from behind me “Hey, you're under arrest!” A gunshot went off and I felt an impact in my right shoulder blade. It didn't even hurt. *Kind of feels like someone just came up and poked me with their finger, actually.* I ignored it.

Something in the back seat of the car had smashed through the safety barrier, and grabbed the neck of the officer driving the car. He was pulled back halfway into the rear seat. The officer in the passenger seat unloaded his gun into the thing in the back seat.

I shifted into a blocking position, right foot out behind me, left arm up and ready to shoulder block the car. *This is going to hurt....*

Sure enough, the car skipped up over the curb and bounced toward me. I pushed my rear foot down hard for more pressure. The concrete gave way, and my foot dug in. The squad car slammed into me, and the front of the car wrapped around me. Metal screeched horribly as the car hit, and it felt more like a running back plowed into me than a vehicle.

The car came to a sudden stop, and I stumbled backward, falling on my backside due to my rear foot being dug into the sidewalk. I felt jolted, but nothing really felt damaged or broken. *Hot dang!*

The left rear door of the squad car flung off the vehicle, banging loudly as it bounced on the blacktop and into another vehicle. *What the heck is that?* Some kind of ... mutant ... crawled out of the car. It was a person gone horribly wrong. Big bug eyes, huge mandibles at the jaw, skin was dark, and the arms ended in big pincers. *Wasn't there a movie about this?*

He, or it, screamed, looked around, and leapt at the people all standing there staring at it open mouthed. *Oh, crap, it's going to eat somebody.* I scrambled to my feet, right when it grabbed a man who was

holding a woman with a bloody mouth and throat.

She screamed. *Oh. My. God. This is the mother of all screams.* It felt like someone cranked up a rock band's huge speaker system, then let loose a bloodcurdling scream of terror meant to be in a horror flick at the microphone. I felt the vibration through my bone structure. My vision actually blurred. Glass shards flew everywhere as every window in the area shook apart.

Bug man fell back, and all of us in the area dropped to the ground and clutched at our ears. My ears felt like they'd burst, and I now had a migraine headache.

Hands at my ears, I looked around while grimacing. Half the people were unconscious. Screamer woman clutched at her man. *I'm guessing that's her husband. Nice move lady, you took him out too.* Bug man frothed at the mouth. He looked pissed off. Glass lay all over the ground and people.

*He's not going to flee, he's angry. He's going to hurt people here if someone doesn't knock him out, and if he doesn't hurt people, miss screamer will do it. I've got to take him out.*

I rolled to my feet, stumbling a bit. The eardrum damage threw off my sense of balance. Bug man noticed the movement, and must have figured I was a threat, because he stumbled toward me in a stance much like a drunken predator.

I waited until he was almost on me, and then leapt upward at him as I tried to tackle him. He grabbed at me with the pincers, and caught my right forearm with his left. As I smashed into him, he bit my right shoulder. Those must be quite the mandibles, they tore into the shoulder, but my leap carried us much farther than I expected.

We flew through the air. *What the heck, does my super name have to be Jumping Jack or something?* My angle took us toward the hospital, and we smashed into a window, handily going through it. *Must have gone some distance, all the nearby windows were shattered.*

We landed on a TV, bounced to the floor, and banged into the bed frame before we stopped. *That didn't hurt either; I'm beginning to enjoy this super hero stuff.* An older lady on the room's bed screamed at us ... about interrupting her TV show? *Lady, we're in a super fight right now, step off....*

Bouncing around the room caused us to lose our grip on each other, and we both scrambled to our feet. My inner ear wasn't working with me, and I fell over. I grabbed for support and crushed a small chair as I landed. He dove at me, and I kicked up at him as he did. I landed the blow, but he grabbed hold of my foot, and tore off the shoe as my kick tossed him backward. I yelled, "Hey! That was a perfectly good, well, bloodied shoe you jerk!" It was a good kick. He went



airborne, and rocked the door and frame from the impact against it.

He stood there stunned a few seconds, and I successfully scrambled to my feet. I rushed him, using the extra force of the rush to add strength to a gut punch. The darn inner ear kept me from running straight, and I caught him on the right side of the abdomen.

His body was armored; some kind of chitin covered his torso. My fist went through the chitin and into the meaty flesh behind it. It made a loud crunching sound as my fist went through. The door behind him exploded from the force, and he was propelled through it and the hallway beyond into the wall on the far side. An orderly stopped in the hallway just before he flew past her. I'm positive she got a case of whiplash watching him fly across the hallway in front of her. My punch embedded him in the far wall at an odd angle due to the spin the off center punch caused. The mandibles especially appeared to be giving him trouble in extricating himself.

I climbed through the doorway, and noticed that my right arm wasn't working well. He worked at pulling his head out of the wall when I stumbled over to him. *Nice for me, like most people he worked at getting his head out first.*

I grabbed his hair with my left hand, shoved his head down and plowed my knee upward into his head. I felt a mandible snap upon impact. His head jerked, but my arm strength was good enough to keep him pretty much where he was. His head absorbed almost all the concussive force of my leg. He slumped to the ground, and I'm pretty sure I'd broken something other than his mandible.

He bled from his face, and one mandible now hung at an odd angle. I checked his pulse, and shook my own head as my vision blurred up.

I stood up, feeling blood pounding through my system. My entire right arm was numb, as was my shoulder and part of my chest at this point. The corridor was spinning. *It has to be poison.*

I looked at the orderly and asked, "Aaar yuu all riight?" The room got even blurrier. "Poison, hee bit mee." I pointed at my shoulder, and felt the room spin faster. *Car doesn't kill me, but poison will? This sucks.*

I stumbled down the hallway, when the floor rushed up at my face. Everything went black.

## Chapter 6 – Time to Act

### Rael's Viewpoint

It didn't take long to get home. I threw the bloody clothes in the washer right away and started a cycle. I hoped some of that blood would come out. I flicked on the news to try to catch some useful information while I cleaned up and changed.

Then I caught my image in the mirror. My eyes had become slitted, and the color of the iris was totally different. They were now green, and the pupil was catlike. Some of the light reflected from them, causing a glowing look, as though I had a colored light behind each eye. *Now I understand why I see in darker areas better.*

The nose still looked normal, but my mouth was wrong. I had to stare at my image in the mirror for a minute before I realized my mouth was ... wider. I grinned, and ... wow. I had fangs – the upper and lower canine teeth were far longer, and larger at the base as well. Damn sharp now too. My jaws opened wider too. *That's just strange. Well, it's far better than being a wolfman, I still look human. More catlike than wolflike though.*

*I'm damn glad that pain is gone. Hub, my muscles are larger.* Still very well defined, and nothing like a body builder, but I liked it. The feet were still normal, my hair the same. No noticeable changes elsewhere. *Bummer.* Wait, the ears were different. The shape was slightly different, as in the cone area to direct sound, and they had a slight tip to the rear top now. I wasn't up on my biology, so I wasn't sure what that'd do yet.

I quickly cleaned up and changed. *Note to self: claws cut yourself.* These babies didn't appear to be retractable, like a cat's claws. For that matter, they weren't like any animal's claws that I was aware of. The entire fingertip was hardened and sharpened into a point, with the lower joint down to the tip now being made of some dark brownish black material. They actually reminded me of what you'd see on a picture of a demon or devil. Strong, very strong material – this isn't bone, and I didn't have a nail on top of it.

*I don't want to alert anyone at a hospital until I'm ready to break them out, so I'm not sure I want to keep these babies out in the open, they look downright wicked.*

I heard the news talk about the meteor shower while I was cleaning up, and discovered that there were other “trouble” spots in the city. New supers that weren't in control of themselves were being

brought to Iron Cross General Hospital.

*I'm damn sure I won't be able to just walk around a secured facility, so I'm hoping that there are still windows, and tall buildings nearby.* I changed and grabbed a pair of binoculars, plus a pair of metal cutters. *Yeah, these babies ought to make fast work of most restraints.* After a moment's thought I grabbed a sledgehammer to bring along as well. Energy booster pills as well. If either Lance or Stephanie were sedated, hopefully they'd counteract whatever my friends had been given.

*Wait a second; now that I've cleaned up, I realize my sense of smell is far more acute. That could help me out. So that's why I could smell different people's blood so clearly. I'll have to remember to avoid bloodying my own nose when I want to smell something.*

I grabbed a shirt from Lance's dirty laundry basket and put it in a plastic baggie. I couldn't believe how well I could smell, well, Lance. I looked around the living room, but couldn't think of anything here that would work for Stephanie. *Screw it; I'll stop by her house. Hey, I could pick up a change of clothes for her as well, she'd like that, and it'd give me a reason to, ah, look at her things.* I grabbed a change of clothing for Lance to throw in the car as well. *I know Lance, he'd give me an inquiring look, and raise an eyebrow at me if I brought Steph some clothes, but forgot him.*

Before leaving the house, I tried scratching the concrete on the driveway. The claw dug in easily. Typing was going to be a bitch without a soft fingertip though. I shook my head and headed to the car.

I drove over to Stephanie's house. It was nighttime, so it was easy to nab her hidden key to let myself in. *My car's been here many times before, so that shouldn't raise any suspicion.*

After heading into the house, I looked for her clothes hamper. I smelled a few articles of clothing, but focused on shirts, because if I had to give her a pair of underwear back and explain that I took it to smell and track her down with, I'd probably hear a mouthful. Though both seemed to retain her scent pretty well.... I selected a shirt and put it into a plastic bag. *Come to think of it, her entire places smells distinctly of her. Is this what dogs smell? Maybe that'd give me a reason to smell her.... No, not going down that road, she'd club me, though I'm sure I'd like it.*

I spent a few minutes going through her drawers, and wished I had more time to lounge around in there. I felt pretty dirty minded going through her clothing, and grinned at the thought. I picked out some skimpy panties, a hopefully tight shirt, some pants and socks, and a pair of tennies. Yup, I wore a wicked grin.

I threw the fresh clothing bag in the trunk. I headed out then, and drove quickly to the hospital. I parked near a side entrance, parking the car so I could make a fast escape if I had to carry

Stephanie, *or in Lance's case, drag him.*

Damn, the place was **busy**. The emergency exit had a lot of squad cars already in the area. Big police presence, this was going to make this more ... interesting. Smoke came out of one smashed up police car right in front of the entrance. I wondered if a fight had broken out that could provide me with some chaos to work with.

I got this crazy idea of tying a super long rope to me so I could just rappel and run along each level to look in the windows. Doubt it'd work, but I needed to come up with something clever.

*Hmm, I could mug a cop and temporarily use his uniform, but that might cause more trouble later on. I could do the same to a hospital worker. I'm not good enough with computers to try to back into one ... unless I force someone else to log on, and do a search for one of their names.*

I figured I'd try the smell route, being as internal rooms wouldn't have windows. The sledgehammer I left in the car, that'd attract too much attention, same with the binocs. I took the paper bag that contained the plastic bags of the worn clothing with me, and put the metal cutters in the paper bag. I took a deep breath of her shirt before I closed it back up, hoping to memorize her scent.

I was about to take a side entrance when I realized that I'm not doing anything illegal ... yet, and the emergency entrance is the one most likely for her to have gone through if she were unconscious. It would also give me a chance to see what was going on up front. I concealed the claws as much as possible by making a fist shape. The paper bag helped a lot on the left hand.

I walked fast around to the front entrance, and found a number of police officers standing around a squad car. The engine smoked slightly, and the front looked like the driver plowed into a tree, except there's no tree there. It didn't have any windows left in it. *I'm surprised they haven't called in a fire truck.* The sidewalk was ripped up, and a spattering of blood lay here and there all over the concrete. I got a strong whiff of Lance's scent in the area. *Did he already get into a fight? Holy shit, did he bash up the roof of this cop car and bust out the door? Great, the shit's going to hit the fan now. I might as well not hold back at this point.*

The windows within thirty or forty feet of the entrance were all shattered. A custodian still worked at cleaning up the glass around the emergency room entrance. I could see a fight damaging a few of them, but every one of them was destroyed. *Very strange.*

I smelled Stephanie's scent as well, but it was faint, confused with the smell of so many other peoples sweat and blood. *Damn.* I headed into the emergency room's waiting area, the place was busy. I went up to the counter, and looked at one of the counter ladies. She's a big woman, real big. Sandy brown hair puffed out like some kind of

mane. *Almost scary looking.* She studiously ignored me until she happened to glance up and caught sight of my eyes. Then her jaw dropped and she just stared at me.

“I’m here to check on my sister, Stephanie Quinn; she came in a little while ago.”

She looked like she was debating telling me to go wait in a line or something, so I stole a line from Lance, “Please, I’m really concerned, and our Dad lives in Boston, so I’m the only one she has around here.” *Damn, I’m not smooth enough; I should have brought chocolate or something to try to bribe someone in this situation. I’m too used to intimidating people. Bah, intimidation works often enough, don’t kid yourself.*

She looked momentarily appeased, did some quick typing, and said, “I’m sorry, she’s in the quarantined area due to the meteor shower, and is listed as being allowed No Visitors.”

I asked, “Can I get the name of her doctor so I can at least find out her condition?”

“Dr. Antais is her physician, but he’s bound to be extremely busy tonight with all the activity.” She waved at all the people in the emergency room. “He’s also probably staying with patients in the quarantined area, and you won’t be allowed in there.”

I thanked her, and wandered for a moment while I tried to think of what to do next. I overheard some guys talking about how this huge guy charged the police car, and then the ‘scream of doom’ that shattered every window and laid out every person nearby. He just mentioned the bug man attack on the big guy right out in front of the entrance when I realized he might be talking about Lance.

Okay, I couldn’t help myself. I needed information. I stepped over to the speaker. He looked like a nerd: glasses, ruffled hair, and ill fitting clothing. His t-shirt had a slogan of some kind that stated “THAC0.”

I caught his attention with my right ... claw. His eyes stayed focused on the claw for a few seconds and then moved up to my face. I gave him a wide smile, and made sure my canine fangs were easily visible. He looked properly unnerved.

“What was the big guy wearing, and what did he look like?”

“He was huge, definitely a super. Way over six foot tall, built bigger than a pro wrestler. His costume was body fitting on the upper body, although I think he wore dark jeans. He was all wet, and his face and arms were bloody. Darker hair, and that’s about all I got a good look of. There were people in the way, and then the bug man attacked him.”

“Did this guy bust out of the police vehicle?”

“No, the bug guy busted out of the squad car, and injured two

officers that brought him here. The big guy is the one that stopped the car from hitting the hospital.”

A guy a few seats down piped up, “Don't forget the cop that yelled that he was under arrest, and shot the super. They were saying that the bullet didn't even faze him.”

I asked, “The bug guy got shot?”

“No, the big guy got shot.” *Big guy, bug guy, clarify things, bookhead.*

He continued, “The police are really twitchy tonight. I've already seen some crazy looking people brought in tonight, and at least a dozen injured officers have been brought in just in the last hour. Hell, the news is talking about a bomber at Green Park Mall just an hour or so ago.”

*That makes some sense, confusing a super with a bomber. I hope they don't start treating that as a terrorist action though; they'll dig more, and call in heavier hitters. “So where are the big guy and the bug guy?”*

“Dunno. The big guy grabbed him and leaped out of the crowd out there right after the woman screamed and destroyed the windows.”

*Well, that changes a lot. Lance wasn't being arrested or detained after all. Not only that, but it sounds like he got away. I'll ask the police later what happened with him; see if they'll help me out. Not yet though, in case he's not on good terms with them.*

## Chapter 7 – Rael Stromm, Superspy

### Rael's Viewpoint

A police officer helped a woman up onto a stretcher, and a nurse went over to check the patient over. The woman had a lot of blood on her clothes, but what really stood out was the silver skin. The nurse and an officer rushed the woman off into the hospital, heading through a double door.

*Wait a second; if that's a super, they are likely to bring her to the so-called quarantined area.* I double-timed it after them, and the place was busy enough that no one challenged me. *Rock on, Rael Stromm, superspy.*

They arrived in a secondary area where they worked on emergency treatment of some people, and began cutting part of her clothing off. Then I caught a familiar scent. I quickly opened the paper bag, the one with Stephanie's shirt, and took a deep breath. I wrapped that back up and started trying to follow the scent.

I didn't get more than twenty feet when I heard the nurse say she couldn't get a needle in. I debated walking away, but here was someone in trouble. *Ab, shit. Dad said to help people out, it builds good karma. But I need to help Stephanie, yet if this chick doesn't get some help...*

I sighed and walked over to them, and they both glanced up at me. The nurse was a middle aged woman, curly brown hair, kind face, looked to stay in decent shape. Name tag said “Kim.” She looked a little wore down, as though she'd been running on high gear for hours, possibly on top of a long shift. The cop's also middle aged, had a mustache and a stocky build, but wasn't really overweight. His brown hair was graying.

They did a double-take when they saw my face. “Let me try to break through the skin on the inner elbow, and you try the needle.”

The nurse said, “You aren't supposed to be in here, you'll need to leave, now.”

I lied through my now-pointy teeth, “They asked me to help out in the quarantined area; with so many officers being injured they wanted a few of us on hand to help out.” They picked up immediately on who the “us” referred to.

The fates smiled upon me, the officer said, “Hmph, well that's a damn good idea. I thought they had everyone on the H.E.R.O. program out helping at the damage scenes though.”

I said, “I'm not in it yet, I'm just volunteering for now until I

can get in, shouldn't we focus on her now though?" *Yes, yes, yes! I might just have an IN on this area.*

The nurse said, "Yeah, but I can't find a pulse in the arm. Without that it won't help to cut through the metal, and we aren't sure how deep the metal goes. The neck would work, but..."

I replied, "But that's more dangerous. What's the alternative? Let her die or something? So I cut her neck, and we try to avoid the jugular..." *Did I just say that? AVOID the jugular? Man, I usually think to hit vital points.*

I made sure the nurse was ready, and I held down the metal girl's head, and then carefully tried to make a cut down along the neck where the nurse indicated. It made an awful screeching noise, and I'm sure that we got a bunch of nasty looks.

All the while the metal girl was squirming in pain, and I wondered if she was going through the same fire pain I did. *Why isn't her transformation done? Mine only took a short while. At least it seemed that way to me.* I scratched the metal on her neck repeatedly, wearing away at the metal until a small amount of blood welled up. The nurse quickly jabbed in the needle and administered the drug. *What do you know; claws aren't just killing apparatus after all.*

The girl slumped down to the table. The nurse said, "She looks like she's going through the initial changes, we've had a bunch of them tonight." She did a quick exam of the girl's body, and didn't find any noticeable damage anywhere else on her body. Especially difficult when the skin appeared to be made of metal, and was uniform in color everywhere. The metal blocked the view of potential bruises that would indicate sub dermal damage.

*Wow, metal girl's hot.* It was kind of like they poured silver over a stripper's body. Her hair was black, still non-metal.

She interrupted my thinking. "They appear to change, and heal rapidly at the beginning, so it will be more useful bringing her to a room to see if anything severe occurs rather than try to get through this." She tapped her fingertip on the girl's arm.

I again noticed her nametag said Kim on it, and I asked, "Kim is it? You want help bringing her to a room? I'd imagine you guys want every officer on hand up front."

The officer agreed, and said to Kim, "If you have this under control?" The nurse nodded, and the officer walked back to the front area. She put a cover over the girl, and brought the clothes she cut off to a bin. I stuck with her to avoid anyone else asking questions of me, and stopped at the trash bin. I smelled something...

Stephanie ... I smelled her. *Wait ... that means they cut off her clothes here as well and probably threw them in the hamper. I'm in the right place,*



*now to get to the quarantined area to try to find her.*

Kim looked at me strangely. My mind raced, and I pointed at my nose. “Acute smell, there's a lot of blood and sweat on the clothes in here. It's distracting.”

She nodded, still watching me closely, and headed back to the metal girl. She motioned for me to grab one end and push, and she pulled as we headed further into the section. Stealing looks at metal girl, I considered the possibility of carrying out Stephanie in one arm and the metal girl in the other. *Hell, you could probably drag her out by her hair. Bouncing that metal body around isn't likely to hurt her.*

We took an elevator headed up several levels, and exited onto the new level. The reception area had four security guards. *Wait, these aren't police, they are private security, armed with pistols and rods.*

I kept my hands around the cart push bar, and kept my eyes lowered, mostly shut so the slit eyes weren't obvious. The nurse pulled us to the nurse's station, and asked for an open room. She took a quick look in the purse of the metal girl, and filled out a slip with the personal information, handed it to the woman at the station, and pulled us toward the room we'd been directed to.

I helped her get the girl onto the bed; she was extremely light for being made of metal. While Kim did a final check on her, I debated my options. *I could just try walking down the hall, but there are security guards spaced out at regular intervals of these rooms. I could ask the nurse to just walk me down each corridor to see if the security needs my help, but then she might wonder if I'd truly been 'assigned' here. I could confess to her, but that might not go well either. Damnit. What would a comic book hero do? Just bash in to the villain, I'd think.*

I glanced at the nurse, and realized she'd been watching me. *Shit. Was I that obvious?* I put my hand down; it turned out I'd been running it through my hair as I considered the options.

Kim said, “You weren't really asked to help out here, were you?”

*Damn. She's smart, and observant.* I answered, “Yes, and no. The hospital and police didn't ask me to help, but there really are a lot of police injured tonight, and I figured you could use the help. But I'm really here because a friend of mine was brought up here, and I need to see how she's doing.”

Her eyes were large as she asked, “Are you going to hurt me?”

I had a surprised look on my face, and honestly answered, “Of course not. I was just trying to think of how to find her without having a problem with security.”

She stared at me for a long time, debating.

I sighed. “Kim, listen, that's my best friend being pretty much held hostage here. She wasn't brought here willingly. I'm going to do

quite literally anything I need to in order to get to her. I want to do this all friendly-like, but if I have to go **through** those guards to find my friend, I'm going to do it. I care about her that much. Does that make sense to you?"

She still looked dubious, but I think appealing to the heroic guy figure worked for her. I continued, "I'd really love to just get to her room and be with her. If she is going through the same thing I did when I ... changed ... I'd like to be there to hold her hand." *I must be channeling my inner Lance; I barely recognize the words coming out of my own mouth. God, I sound like such a suck up.*

"What is your friend's name?"

"Stephanie Quinn, two n's."

"All right, you follow me to the station, stay outside the desk area itself. I'll see if she's in the computer, and bring you to her room. If someone comes after me for helping you, I'm going to tell them you threatened me. We'll stop at a few rooms before hers so as to not attract attention if her room is too far away."

"Fair enough, and thank you."

"What's in the bag?"

I almost forgot I'd been holding it. I said, "A shirt of hers, and metal cutters in case I needed to rescue her."

"You really would break her out of here, possibly hurting others in the process, and endanger her?"

"Yes. Why are all the new supers being kept in a 'secure' area? Why so many guards? Why sedate them all like you did this girl? When I changed, the pain was immense, but it went away after a little while."

"Blasters, mutants, and psychics. A new super that can't control their power can do a lot of damage to others just by getting angry. Others become ... monsters. They just attack others; some even try to eat people. And every new super being brought in tends to be in pain for a good hour or more. That's a 'little while' to you?"

*Damn ... monsters? Blasters. That must be like Hellsbock, a super that blasts lightning from his hands.*

"Err, no. I thought it was only a few minutes. Well, I'm pretty normal, barring the odd hands, eyes and teeth. My friend Lance just changed, and people downstairs are talking about him stopping some mutant bug guy. That's two out of three of my friends that have changed tonight, and we aren't attacking people."

"But you are willing to."

I shook my head. "No, I was willing to before, but not just to fight with people, or start a problem. Certainly not to eat someone. I would have done it to protect or save a friend. Well, anyone really, but especially a friend."

“Not to sound negative, but you've got the characteristics of the mutants, or monsters. The claws and teeth. Most of those that look similar to you get ... bloodthirsty. You might be more dangerous to others than you think you are.”

*Great, I might have an inner demon. Guess I'll have to watch my anger management issues.*

She asked, “What's your name?”

“Rael.”

She edged past me to the door, opened it, and walked out. I watched her, and followed after a moment. She walked around the counter to the empty seat at the nurse's station. I figured I ought to play up the role I'm playing here, and headed over to the security guard nearest me.

I nodded to him, and noticed he was looking closely at me. He noticed the claws and eyes after all. I could see the look in his eyes change to one of caution.

I said, “Man, all these people changing, it's making it a hell of a night, huh?”

“Yeah. Why are you up here?”

*Damn, talk about being blunt.* “Police are dropping like flies out there; they don't have the personnel to deal with this wide of an outbreak. They thought it would help having one of us up here in case a freak goes crazy. No use getting more people hurt up here.”

“We're equipped for it. So long as the docs keep the freaks drugged up it's all under control. We really don't need ... **you** ... up here.”

*Nice to know they aren't biased, pfah. I'll have to keep that in mind – they sound more likely to attack on sight than to talk. Fine by me, it's your ass, jerkoff.*

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