

Chapter One

I Went to New Orleans (and all I got was this lousy prisoner)

I'm so screwed.

They're coming for me and I'm no match for them.

There've been dozens of times I've wanted to quit the supervillain business, but never like right now! Hell, I was in semi-retirement when everything went to crap, delivering some orders to what few clients I still had.

This janitor's closet in a rundown warehouse is where I'll likely make my final stand. The alarms inside the armor warn me that power levels are down to twenty-two percent – not good. Below fifteen, the flight system won't activate.

I scan the walls looking for a power source, any electrical current that I can tap into. Nothing ... the building is as dead as I am about to be.

If this was just the Gulf Coast Guardians, I'd have a shot. Of the four Guardian teams, they're definitely the junior varsity squad. If it was the Biloxi Bugler, I'd kick his ass and mock him (and his sonic bugle) while I did it.

It's not. I'm not that lucky. I'm never that lucky. It's the story of my life. Instead, it's the Olympians, the foremost hero team in the whole world and I'm a minor supervillain at best.

Yeah, those Olympians, twelve college kids who disappeared on a cruise in the Mediterranean. A year later they returned with powers and training from the original Greek Gods. Against them, Calvin Matthew Stringel, reasonably talented, but hapless inventor currently known as "Mechanical," doesn't stand a chance.

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The power meter drops to twenty-one percent. Hermes is zipping through the main room, but if I stay still and conserve energy, maybe she'll give up.

Just because she is super fast doesn't mean she's super thorough! The lack of lighting in the building is hurting her and she's making lots of noise out there and being overly clumsy.

Of course, those *things* controlling her mind haven't quite mastered the operation of the fastest woman alive.

Yup, the world's been taken over and I missed it. All I know for certain is that The Evil Overlord was hiring geneticists like crazy late last year. Now these bugs, about twice the size of a grasshopper, are attached to everyone's neck and society seems to be reorganizing into a hive mentality. Granted, it would probably make standing in line more tolerable, but I'm not quite ready to sign up.

Given that it's been two weeks since this started and there has been no worldwide broadcast from the megalomaniac, it's a safe bet that this is an experiment gone awry rather than a plan masterfully executed. Good riddance to him anyway. The lousy cheapskate stopped using me as a supplier and stiffed me for two shipments of pulse cannons! Technically, I should thank him. Had he paid up, I probably wouldn't have wasted my time on that penny-ante jetpack sale in Montgomery and wouldn't have been in my suit when the bugs came.

The only reason I'm not already part of the "New World Order" is that I haven't taken off my battle armor since civilization was forcibly reorganized. Things are getting a bit ripe in the old Mark II CAL suit. I'd ventilate, but the stench would be a dead giveaway.

Laying low helped me up until yesterday, but it didn't last. It never does, does it? Initially, I only had to deal with the normal folks and was more than a match for plain old policemen and the National Guard. Puh-leaze! I might be a washed up, unemployable electrical engineer, called a "petty, second stringer, wannabe imitator" by Ultraweapon (with his fancy multimillion dollar suit), but I'm not a pushover. I've got force blasters, enhanced strength, and a flight pack.

Am I that much of a threat to the bugs? Maybe I'm all the threat that's left? God! That's a scary thought! Either way, the bugs trotted out the big guns. They didn't waste time sending other super groups after me. I get to tangle with the Olympians! It hasn't been much of a fight so far, unless getting my butt kicked from one end of New Orleans to the other is a "fight."

A jettisoned powerpack set to overload got me this far. Ares' dived on top of it to protect his teammates and possibly that thing on his neck. The blast didn't destroy his nigh-invulnerable body, probably just gave him a really irritating skin rash, but it did buy me enough time to fly a mile or so away before Apollo's fireball sent me crashing into this row of warehouses.

Wasting no time, I blew a hole into the next warehouse and the next one hoping it would look like I ran that way. Then, I found a hiding place here to assess the damage to my suit.

Hermes, a thin black woman who was a onetime NCAA champion track sprinter, continues to look around. She just won't leave. There's no choice. I have to try and take her.

Charge force blasters and set for wide area pulse dispersal. My neural interface issues the commands and I feel the suit respond. I'll waste power that I don't really have. She'll come at me like a missile with that metal rod of hers in her hand. Screw up and she'll give me the "Nancy Kerrigan treatment" a dozen times before I can blink.

It's not the first time someone's tried this stunt with her and there's no way it would work if she was "in control," but it's the best option I have. Bursting out of the closet, I get her attention. Sure enough, she accelerates. In the dimly lit warehouse, I trigger a flash from my waist mounted spotlight to partially blind her and immediately trigger the force pulse.

The embedded scanners still functioning register the gust of wind behind me as she stumbles out of control, smashing into empty crates. My auditory sensors pick up her moans, but they're fading as I sprint away. The rest will be hot on my heels. Normally, I'd be proud. I just took out an Olympian! How come I feel like I'm going to wet myself?

Screw it! Back out the way I came in! *Activate flight system!* I shoot right out the hole in the roof and directly into Apollo's fire bolt. *Fire retros! Fire retros!* They cushion the fall and I manage to land on the roof. Sixteen percent! Damn, that hurt! Don't just lie there waiting to die, move it!

Something smacks into the helmet and rings my bell. What now? Psionic blast, that means Aphrodite. There she is, leaping off her hover-sled. Sure, I've got her pinup, but I've never seen her up close before. Damn, she's hot! But she's not the most powerful, so maybe I can stop her. Shields almost down! Apollo's next fireball will start melting the suit with me in it. Suck it up Cal; you're not getting out of here alive. Might as well try to take one with me – maybe she'd even want me to?

Concentrated blast! Got her! Sorry, beautiful. Twelve percent! Maybe if I sprint to her hover-sled? Dodge left! Phew! That was close. Aw crap, she's getting back up; I didn't even do that right.

Apollo and Zeus both land between freedom and me. They're too strong to take in hand-to-hand combat, not that I'm going to get that close anyway.

I try another blast. Zeus shields it way too easily. Aphrodite stumbles to their side as Apollo conjures a big ass fireball. Funny, I didn't bring any marshmallows. All I have left is a tiny wiener and it's about to be roasted.

She speaks, “No! The colony wants him alive. You will join us in servitude. Zeus, overload his suit.”

Now there’s a change. Lame proclamations from the good guys. What’s the world coming to?

Cerulean energy builds up around the Olympian. It’s a pretty idiotic maneuver. I can absorb the energy and recharge. Even with the bugs, they can’t be that stupid.

He falters, “Are you certain, Aphrodite?”

Her psi-bolt fires and stuns ... Apollo? Zeus spins toward her, but she nails him and he falls to the ground.

She looks at me and shouts, “Don’t just stand there! Your blast was enough for me to overwhelm the damn thing on my neck. We’ve got to get out of here!”

Okay, new plan. Escape with the ultrahottie. Her idea’s a helluva lot better than mine.

“I need some power!” I yell.

Stopping at Zeus, I grab his hand. Yeah, it is another technique copied from Ultraweapon, but who cares? What’s “rich boy” going to do, sic more lawyers on me? Spread more lies about me stealing designs from him? Who cares? I drain the Thunder God for a quick recharge.

“Hurry up!” she exclaims.

Yeah, she sure is pretty ... pretty impatient that is. Twenty-six percent, twenty-nine percent, come on!

“I still need more.”

She smacks the handlebars on her sled in frustration, “There’s no time! The others will be coming.”

The lady has a point. At full power, I wasn’t exactly kicking butt and taking names. Thirty-three percent sounds like a winner.

Activate flight system! “How fast can those sleds go?”

She’s already headed off the roof. “One-twenty!”

“Too slow! We can go faster if I carry you. Grab on!” Just about every guy’s dream is to wrap their arms around Stacy Mitchell. She’s the most heavily photographed woman in the world, and I never thought that it’d be happening to me. If I survive, it’ll definitely go in my memoir, or at least in an e-mail submission to an adult magazine.

I scoop her off her seat and throttle up. Two hundred fifty miles per hour is my top speed unloaded, but I can easily hit two hundred with her. New Orleans is already fading into the background.

Over the rush of the wind she screams, “You’re Mechanical, right?”

“It’s actually Mechani-Cal. Oh, never mind. Just call me Cal.”

“Whatever! Have you got a hideout or something we can use? Zeus might be down, but he’s not out. He’ll start tracking you eventually.”

“Yeah, I’ve got a place near Pascagoula, but I want to head north for a minute or two more before we change directions, and then make for the Gulf of Mexico.”

“Do you know anyone else that isn’t infected?” She sounds almost hopeful.

“I was looking for that shelter the Swamp Lord was broadcasting about on the shortwave. It’s supposed to be around here. Do you want to try for it instead?”

My external sensors strain to pick up, “Don’t bother. We were just there.”

“I guess that makes my answer ‘No.’ I’m making the direction change now. We’ll head out about a mile or so into the Gulf and then slow down and fly just above the waves, below radar. Poseidon wasn’t with you was he?”

There’s a bit of fear in her voice. “No, he’s looking for submarines in the Atlantic. Over the water’s fine, but don’t go too slow. Another bug could land on me.”

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Forty minutes later, I'm on the ground at my "lair." It's a small junkyard whose owners sold off after Hurricane Katrina. I picked it up for next to nothing, which was pretty much what I had at the time. Still, there's lots of scrap metal and wiring to use. And like anything else, a villain's hideout is about three things, location, location, and location. In this case, the more remote the location is the better.

"Are you okay, Aphrodite? Should I call you Stacy?"

"Yeah, I'm just a little nasty from the sea spray. Let's just stick to Aphrodite for now, okay?" She surveys my property for a moment, before adopting a sad look on her face. "Please tell me this is just a place to stop and not your hideout? Do you have a shower, or should I just look for the outhouse?"

Great, the girl of everyone's dreams just dissed my hideout. I sputter, "Wait, I've got more underground! It gets better, trust me!"

Is it just my imagination, or did I sound a little like a junior high schooler there? I make a mental note not to ask her to sign the swimsuit calendar hanging above the workbench.

Her demeanor doesn't improve once she gets inside. "Weren't expecting company, were you?"

Moving some clutter out of the way, I reply. "No, but up here is *meant* to look like a junkyard." I pull the lever in the pantry to reveal the secret staircase and cut on the lights.

She gets to the bottom of the steps and looks around, "And this is supposed to be better?"

Come to think of it, the downstairs is a bit messy too. But damn she's bitchy! So much for all those fantasies. "Bathroom and shower are over there. Clean towels are on the shelves. I'll check the shortwave. We're off the Internet here. I'm pretty sure the bugs have people looking for any IP traffic. Are you okay?"

She's shaking and looks like she's going to be sick. "I just need to clean up, excuse me." She runs into the bathroom and slams the door so hard that it comes off the upper hinge, leaving me standing in the middle of the room.

Quickly, I activate the passive sensors placed throughout the junkyard and swap in a series of fresh powercells for the nearly exhausted ones in my suit. The old ones go on the charging unit and the amplifiers in my helmet pick up the retching of the "Luv Goddess" into the toilet. I should cut her a bit of slack, coming off of being mind controlled, and try to be a better host. I'm running a hand scanner over the exterior of the armor, performing some diagnostics when the shower starts. It's tempting to cut on the camera in the bathroom – to make certain she's okay – naturally.

I'm a criminal, a thief, and an arms dealer. I'm not a Peeping Tom. Then again, there's just one little command line between me and the pinup heroine, and she's "nekkid!"

Fortunately, I'm blessed with a very flexible set of morals – almost professional gymnast flexible. I put a gauntlet on the pad to transfer the command when her voice interrupts me, "Cal?"

"Yes."

Her tone is much less angry, "Listen, I'm sorry if I didn't sound thankful for you helping me out. I'm pretty weak right now and I need to charge my powers."

Well there's a nice change. "Hey no problem! Take as much time as you need."

There's a bit of laughter. "You don't understand, Cal. You know all those rumors that my powers are sexual in nature?"

My heart beats faster. Could it be? "Uh, yeah I'd heard a few. Aren't you always denying it?"

"It's not something I'll admit in public, but the rumors are true. I could do this by myself, but trust me, it'll go much faster if you get out of your suit and join me."

No friggin way! "Sure! Just give me a minute or two to get out of my armor!"

The absolute hottest woman on the planet is in my shower and waiting for me to come in there and charge her powers! Thank you, Lord! This makes up for all the times I've been screwed over. This makes up for the two years behind bars after the Bugler beat me as "ManaCALes," before I

made the armor. This makes up for every break I never got. This makes up for ... Oh hell, this needs to be recorded for posterity. *Activate internal cameras. Record lower-level bathroom.* This is going to be great! This is going to be fantastic!

This is ... a trap? No! No! No! She's not even naked and she has her wrist communicator activated! I glance at the external display. Nothing, but then again, the Olympians could probably be all over the place. Shit! What am I going to do?

"What's taking you so long?" I see her whispering into her communicator. We now return to our regularly scheduled episode of *Cal Can't Catch a Break!*

"Sorry, it's going to take about five minutes to get out of the armor." Okay, bolt-box time! Spare powercells go in as well as two cases of NASA food paste, some goodies I picked up at a gadget swap meet, the laptop, and the half-finished MARK III CAL suit that I've been working on for the past two years. There's no way they're getting that!

"Cal, will you hurry up! I'm getting lonely in here."

"Almost done!" Smacking the big red "panic" button on the wall, I activate the not-so-passive defenses. Gun emplacements mounted in rusted hulks come to life with active targeting scanners. Big surprise! There are several heat signatures out there. My "junkyard doggie" bursts out of a dilapidated doublewide trailer. He's a big old loveable hunk of iron with claws for hands and four pulse cannons mounted on him.

If I'm lucky, he'll last two minutes.

The sirens alert the lovely in the bathroom that all is not well with her little plan. She bursts out! "You could have gone the easy way, but no! I get my bug back when I bring you in!"

"No thanks. I think I'll pass."

"Fine you third-rate Ultrawannabe. I won't be gentle!"

Psi-bolts smash into my shields, letting me know that the earlier ones were just love taps. She's got a thick skin, so I give her a full broadside. Aphrodite leaps out of the way, but trips over all the technojunk strewn about. I've got to finish her fast! Shields continue to hold against her barrage. I fire again, slightly to her left driving her toward a beat up freezer and fire right at it when she's in front.

My target dodges, but the secondary explosion from all the chemicals stored in the fridge catches her. I seal the suit against the fumes and activate the two-minute self-destruct. Picking up her communicator, I scream into it, "You'll never take me alive, Olympians!"

Dropping it, I crush it under my feet and look at the stunned Aphrodite. I could leave her and let the destruct finish her, but it's obvious she's still under their control. The effect has to wear off! I give her a heavy Taser pulse to make sure she's out, throw her over my shoulder, and I grab the bolt-box.

One glance at a still functioning screen shows that the doggy's getting pounded. I liked this base. Oh well, two miles of tunnel to fly through and then north to the backup base, "The Pig Sty."

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"Where am I?"

"My other base." No need to tell her that she's in South Eastern Alabama at an old pig farm near the Mobile River.

"Let me go!" A psi-bolt slams into the reinforced steel door of the cell area. The previous owner of this base used barbed wire of all things for a cell – idiot! Fortunately, I spent some time fixing it up. Still, I already miss the junkyard.

"No!" I shout.

"I can contact them telepathically."

"Not from sixty feet below ground in a shielded cell you can't."

Five more psi-bolts impact against the door. The last one is noticeably weaker. “Please, Cal, I need to go! I won’t tell them you’re still alive. Just let me go.”

“Why do you want to go so badly?”

She turns on the water works and I flip on the shielded box camera that I installed behind her polished metal “mirror” an hour ago.

Aphrodite is on the floor crying and convulsing. Rerouting the camera feed over to the suit, I walk to the cell. Scooping a head off some robot thing I never finished building; I pull back the metal plate and stick the robot head up to the peephole.

“Are you okay in there?” *Wham!* The head is blasted out of my hand by a rather strong burst of energy from her. The heads-up-display shows her with a wild look in her eyes as she leaps to her feet. I barely get the cover back on before her fists and mental energy begin impacting on the door. She was playing at being weak and tried for a sucker punch.

“That wasn’t very nice! I’m trying to save you.”

“I don’t want to be saved! Let me out! I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you! Let me out!”

“That really wasn’t a bright move. Suppose you had killed me just there? You’d starve in there in a few days.”

Instead of a proper response all I get is screams and her pounding on the door. Arguing with the mentally unstable isn’t very productive. I make a few more attempts to communicate and decide to let her work out some of her excess energy.

Meanwhile, I need to figure out what the hell I’m going to do.

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In the morning, I open the suit’s service panel, dump the “poop chute,” change the water bottle, and screw in the food paste packet for breakfast. It’s a fairly self-contained existence, and since I’m not very choosy, I can keep it up for at least six months. If it’s good enough for the astronauts up in the space station, it is good enough for me. There’s a horrible thought, what are those poor SOB’s up there thinking right now, or did the bugs send a space-capable superhuman up there already?

Stacy Mitchell, on the other hand, probably doesn’t care for steak and eggs in an oversized toothpaste tube. The freezer is full of TV dinners and frozen waffles. I make her a tray and switch over to the containment cell feed.

“Shit! When did she do that?” I look at the display in dismay. She blew up the sink and toilet! There’s water everywhere! I interface with the main computer and tell it to cut off the water to that side of the base. She didn’t destroy the bunk – that’s where she’s curled up at the moment.

Sliding the top bar back, I look in, not wanting to tip my hand about the surveillance camera. “Hey! What happened to your sink and toilet?”

“Go to hell!”

“Well, I don’t see how this is making *my* life more difficult. The water will drain when I open the valve and I can probably replace the toilet and sink, but I’m not going to if you’re just going to destroy them again.”

“I’m going to kill you!” she says slowly, full of murderous intent. On the plus side, she sounds more coherent and less foaming-at-the-mouth today.

“I thought you were the ‘good’ guys? I guess that doesn’t mean as much anymore.”

“It’s going to be slow. I’ll make you beg before I kill you unless you let me go *right now!*”

It’s actually somewhat humorous listening to her. “Would you like some breakfast? Can’t kill me on an empty stomach, you know.”

Her energy goes through the tiny opening and hits the wall.

“So, not very hungry today? Okay then, I’ll bring you a bucket and send it in through an access door.”

“I’m not cleaning this up, you bastard.”

“You don’t need to. I told you the water will drain. The bucket is in case you need to go to the bathroom.”

“What?”

“Well I’m guessing you’re going to need to go to the bathroom sooner or later, and your toilet isn’t getting fixed anytime soon, princess. Before you get any cute ideas, I can filter my air. If you start flinging crap around your cell like some kind of goddamn monkey, you’re the only one that’s going to smell it. I’ve got a second cell down here and if you can be good for a few days we’ll move you to it.”

Her feet splash across the room as I shut the metal plate. She bangs on the door. “You can’t keep me in here like some kind of animal! I need a bug! Get me a bug!”

“Why?”

“I need one!” Her fists start pounding against the door.

“Again, why? They’ve turned you into some kind of slave. You should be happy to be free of them.”

“Please, just get me a bug. I’ll do anything you want. It hurts.”

That little exchange gave me volumes of information. However these bugs were made, whatever was in them is highly addictive. Explains why nobody just squished the bugs and went on their merry way.

“How do the bugs make you feel?”

She’s sobbing now, but still hammering away at the door. “They make you feel incredible. It must be like what people feel if I use my powers on them, except it’s so much more! Just get me one. Stun me and dump me somewhere, I don’t care. I won’t tell them where you are. I don’t even know where we are!”

I try to sound as calm as possible. “Stacy, I can’t do that. Everyone thinks we’re dead. I intend to keep it that way and you need to try to get out from under their influence.”

“Don’t call me Stacy! I’m Aphrodite!”

“No. Aphrodite’s a hero, an Olympian. You’re a woman named Stacy with an addiction. Aphrodite would know that these things were made by The Evil Overlord to enslave humanity.”

“I don’t care about him. I don’t care about you. Just let me go.”

The argument goes on for awhile, but I tire of listening and walk away. I’ve met a few addicts in my lifetime. Turning on some music, I head up to the workshop. Eventually, I’ll have to go out again and the Olympians are still out there. My chances will be better if I finally finish the MARK III CAL suit.