

# ***REDEMPTION***

THE MANY DEATHS OF DYNAMISTRESS

BOOK TWO

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with  
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*“Everyone is necessarily the hero of his own life story.”*  
*~ John Barth*

# ***INTRODUCTION***

“Super of the Month” Interview  
January 2008  
*Supers*

*Supers:* Dynamistress, thank you for your time and hospitality.

*Dyna:* My pleasure, but please call me Dyna.

*Supers:* Dyna, most of our readers will probably not know your name, yet.

*Dyna:* Which makes me wonder why you’re sitting here in my living room.

*Supers:* Well, as I mentioned to you on the phone, we often receive unsolicited mailings from teams when they add a new member. One of these was from when you joined the Bay Scouts.

*Dyna:* Where it clearly sat in your slush pile for a while.

*Supers:* True, but unlike the vast majority, yours made it out. We generally feature only metas who are already famous, as you know. But I just had a good feeling about you.

*Dyna:* Meaning that you learned of my involvement in the Nevada Incident and thought that would be a good hook.

*Supers:* That was part of it, sure. But I was actually more interested in the background profile that came with your submission. I believe it was written by the leader of the Bay Scouts.

*Dyna:* Scoutmaster.

*Supers:* Who is now retired, I understand.

*Dyna:* Due to a crippling injury, not by choice.

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*Supers:* Right. The Nevada Incident. By now, everyone knows about the strange gateway into another dimension. An alternate Earth, so to speak. It was one of the metas from that world who injured Scoutmaster, right?

*Dyna:* Yes.

*Supers:* And she later killed another member of the Bay Scouts.

*Dyna:* Listen, that whole episode isn't something I care to dwell on, if you don't mind. It's still too recent.

*Supers:* All right. So let's go back in time. You have a doctorate in genetics, and you used this expertise to give yourself your abilities, manipulating your own DNA to become a meta.

*Dyna:* After a fashion, yes.

*Supers:* That's an accomplishment many scientists have attempted, but without success.

*Dyna:* So I've heard.

*Supers:* What do you say to those who insist that such attempts at manipulating DNA are an affront to God?

*Dyna:* [Laughs.] I say if you have that sort of view, you'd have to consider the entire field of medicine to be the same sort of "affront." Is it an affront to God to use genetic treatments to restore hearing to the deaf or sight to the blind? To cure hemophilia?

*Supers:* Giving meta-abilities, most would say, goes well beyond correcting birth defects, which are not the norm.

*Dyna:* And in another ten or twenty generations, being born *without* meta-abilities may be considered a birth defect.

*Supers:* So you view it as the next stage in human evolution?

*Dyna:* [Long pause.] Honestly, it would be hard for me to say that. Evolution is adaptation in order to survive, driven by an outside trigger, such as a changing environment. But I can't see any particular stressor that's currently creating a need for meta-abilities.

*Supers:* The tendency toward meta-mutation is inherited, if I understand correctly, in a recessive fashion. Like someone having blue eyes even though their parents have brown eyes?

*Dyna:* That's right.

*Supers:* So tell us about your abilities.

*Dyna:* I generate a bio-plasma type of energy that I can expel from my body in different ways. Blasts. Propulsion. Even something like a force field around my body. And energy-enhanced physical strength.

*Supers:* That sounds awesome.

*Dyna:* It's pretty cool, yeah. [Laughs.]

*Supers:* But the actual experiment itself didn't go quite as planned. You performed your work on your off-hours at the lab where you were

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employed, without your company's knowledge. There was a fire. The lab burned.

Dyna: Yes. I was found culpable and had to pay restitution to the company.

Supers: Do you know how the fire started?

Dyna: *[Hesitates.]* No.

Supers: The court record indicates that you were drunk at the time.

Dyna: *[Hesitates.]* That's what they said, yes.

Supers: You worked as a bartender in college and here in San Francisco. I see you have probably a hundred different bottles of liquor in your home bar. Dyna, do you have a drinking problem?

Dyna: No.

Supers: What are you drinking right now?

Dyna: Dr Pepper.

Supers: Maybe a little Bacardi in there?

Dyna: Sorry, is this an interview or an intervention?

Supers: There just seems to be a trend.

Dyna: *[Silence.]*

Supers: Okay, so why did you do it in the first place? Most people probably couldn't comprehend the level of commitment you showed.

Dyna: Let's call it what it was: an obsession. I grew up dreaming of being able to do incredible things. And of being famous.

Supers: Lots of kids do.

Dyna: I know, but... *[long pause]* Let's just say that I spent too many years of my life being a child.

Supers: So, as a child, what other ambitions did you have?

Dyna: At one point, I wanted to be a singer.

Supers: So you're a frustrated rock star?

Dyna: Well, this was during the seventies, so...

Supers: So if you hadn't pursued your work in genetics, and didn't become a disco queen, what do you imagine you'd be doing, now?

Dyna: I dunno. Roller derby looks like a lot of fun. Can you make a living doing that?

Supers: I don't know, but the Bay Scouts kind of sounds like a derby team name.

Dyna: *[Laughs.]* It does, doesn't it?

Supers: Did you skate a lot as a kid?

Dyna: Just up and down our street. The rink in my town was torn down before I was born.

Supers: You grew up in a rural area pretty much devoid of metas, isn't that right?

Dyna: If there were any in those parts, they quickly made off for places with actual crimes to fight. Or opportunities to commit them.

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- Supers:* And you ended up in San Francisco, where you soon became a member of the Bay Scouts, which was disbanded around the time of the Nevada Incident.
- Dyna:* Yes. And let me say what a great bunch of people they were. It was an honor being with them.
- Supers:* Let's hear about your very first assignment with the Scouts. I bet you were excited.
- Dyna:* *[Laughs.]* You'd lose that bet. My first assignment as a full member had us sent to investigate a stench over in Marin.
- Supers:* You're kidding.
- Dyna:* I wish.
- Supers:* Did you figure out what was causing it?
- Dyna:* Yeah, a cave full of slime molds and other fungi. Not the most exciting thing, but the worst part is that this investigation took me out of commission for months. I got really sick after accidentally inhaling some spores. Cryptococcal meningitis, it's called.
- Supers:* Anything with "crypt" in the name sounds unpleasant.
- Dyna:* *[Laughs.]* It was, but I got over it, with treatment.
- Supers:* So after the Bay Scouts disbanded, you joined the Gatekeepers. How did you score that invitation?
- Dyna:* Scoutmaster put in a good word for me. As did Captain Shepherd, who was the Bay Scouts' liaison to the Coast Guard. And Kimera was my "in." She's my sponsor in the team.
- Supers:* "Sponsor?" Sounds like an AA meeting.
- Dyna:* It means she's the one who felt I was a good fit for the organization and nominated me. Therefore, she was the one responsible for helping me become acclimated to the group itself.
- Supers:* Kimera was one of those replaced by the other-worlders.
- Dyna:* *[Silence.]*
- Supers:* Right, we're not talking about that. So let's look at some of the things that have changed as a result of that event. Is it true that it was your idea to convince the government to reveal the existence of the portal, and to use telepaths in the effort to return the imposters to their own world?
- Dyna:* Not sure how you learned that, but yes.
- Supers:* Public opinion of metas, and telepaths in particular, appears to be easing. Do you think that's a good thing? Many think we have every reason to be afraid of metas, and telepaths especially.
- Dyna:* I don't really pay close attention to these things, but yes, I've heard the rumblings. These seem to be the same folks, though, who are afraid of pretty much everything. They're afraid of immigrants. They're afraid of non-Christians. They're afraid of pretty much anyone different from themselves.

- Supers:* Can you really include metas in with those other categories, though? Metas can be quite dangerous.
- Dyna:* *Anyone* can be dangerous.
- Supers:* True, but most metas are inherently dangerous.
- Dyna:* So are non-metas, to varying degrees. An adult is inherently more dangerous than a child.
- Supers:* I think many parents might disagree with that.
- Dyna:* [Laughs.]
- Supers:* I see your point, but you have to admit there's a difference. Metas are far more dangerous than non-metas.
- Dyna:* A non-meta with a gun is far more dangerous than one without.
- Supers:* But nearly anyone can get a gun. Evens the scales.
- Dyna:* Yes, and that's a disturbing thought in itself. There are plenty of people I know that I wouldn't trust with a gun, all of whom have no restrictions on their ability to legally own one. So my question would be to ask why it is that the thought of any nitwit or misfit being allowed to have a gun doesn't scare these same people? There are far more of them than there are metas.
- Supers:* I don't think that's how they look at it.
- Dyna:* Of course not. Because these people are driven by fear, especially of things unfamiliar to them. They don't fear guns, because they're familiar with guns. Yet it never seems to cross their minds that they don't know gun *owners*. They keep chanting, "Guns don't kill people; people kill people," but are at the same time opposed to background checks of the people who want to buy guns.
- Supers:* Not everyone in support of gun rights opposes background checks, but I'll agree there are plenty who do. But you're not taking into account that if a person commits a crime with a gun, they can lose the right to own one. If a meta commits a crime with his or her abilities, we can't take those abilities away from them.
- Dyna:* But that's not the same thing at all. Taking away meta-abilities isn't like taking away a person's right to own a gun. It's like cutting off the person's hands so they can't fire a gun.
- Supers:* But people aren't born with guns built into their hands. Metas essentially are. And you must agree that, far more than metas who can "shoot" you from their fingers, telepaths are the ones to most be feared.
- Dyna:* And why would I agree with that? Because it's "scary" for someone to have the ability to read our thoughts? For a *very* tiny number of them to be able to manipulate those thoughts?
- Supers:* Yes! And that they can do these things without us knowing about it. That we could become someone's puppet. A telepath could, for example, walk into a bank, control the employees and security

guards, wiping from their minds any memory of the person having been there, and walk out with a fortune.

Dyna: Do you realize just how few telepaths have that kind of ability? A ridiculously small number. You have more chances of being struck by lightning – twice – than ever encountering a meta with powers of that magnitude. To be afraid one of them is going to directly affect you would qualify as blatant paranoia. And you, as a researcher of metas, should know this.

Supers: I'm simply voicing a common thought among the non-meta population, no matter how paranoid it may seem. What you're saying is probably true, if you don't live in a metropolitan area. But metas congregate in the big cities, as you well know. Wouldn't chances be significantly higher, there?

Dyna: To encounter a meta, sure. But even with that, the fear of telepathic metas is still unfounded. I *am* a meta, and I've personally only ever met three telepaths.

Supers: That you know of.

Dyna: What do you mean?

Supers: How do you know all telepaths have admitted to being one? I mean, we can detect metas with testing, but we can't determine what abilities they have. Of all metas, telepaths would be most likely to lie, in order to protect themselves. Beyond that, how do you know for certain that one of the telepaths you've met hasn't mucked about in your head? Can you say with any kind of certainty that you haven't been programmed by to be a sleeper agent, ready to be remotely activated to act at their whim?

Dyna: I think you read too many spy novels. Look, let's get back to what started this. You wanted to talk about the way things are changing. So how about the fact that police departments and the FBI are utilizing telepaths in beneficial ways?

Supers: Such as?

Dyna: Finding kidnappers, child molesters, rapists, murderers, and so on. Haven't you wondered, for example, why the number of AMBER Alerts has dropped considerably over the past few years?

Supers: I wasn't aware they had.

Dyna: The government has been employing metas for such things for a long time, but has never made much effort to let the public know it. Some say it's because they think the public would freak out over it. Others say it's because the government is fine with the public maintaining a fear of metas.

Supers: There's also the issue of telepathic abilities being a violation of the civil rights of those upon whom they're used, especially the ones who turn out to be innocent.

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Dyna: Sure. But let's be honest. That's *status quo* for police work. It routinely abuses the rights of the innocent. And to some degree, it's probably unavoidable. So why choose to be offended by just this one type of offense?

Supers: So you're saying that because the system is already flawed, it's okay to add new types of abuse to it?

Dyna: Consider that the use of telepaths could *decrease* that abuse, by determining someone's innocence right up front. If a quick scan can verify an alibi, that person will never be dragged through a trial, never face that humiliation, never have to deal with all the repercussions, including incurring all those costs, let alone being found guilty for something they didn't do. It's not like our current system compensates those people when they're found innocent, before or after. If you're found innocent, say by DNA testing, after twenty years in prison, do you think you're adequately compensated upon your release? In probably half the states, there's no guaranteed compensation whatsoever.

Supers: I did know that, and I agree that it's outrageous. So, okay. Let's say you're right about all of this. So what's to prevent telepaths from being used to monitor everyone? As the expression goes, who will watch the watchmen?

Dyna: Who's watching them now? Who has *ever* been watching them? The debate about personal freedom versus security has been raging for a long time, but it seems to me that whenever you institute any form of "watchmen" – whether police, military, or meta – you are sacrificing a certain level of freedom. Is it even possible to ensure public safety without such a sacrifice?

Supers: Obviously, this isn't a question we're going to resolve, so let's switch topics.

Dyna: Good idea.

Supers: You said before that your focus was to be famous. But you didn't exactly jump on my interview request. Why is that?

Dyna: [*Hesitates.*] It just didn't seem right.

Supers: In what way?

Dyna: As I said earlier, I spent much of my life being childish. I've grown a bit since then and I suppose I didn't reply right away because I didn't feel I was deserving of appearing in your magazine. I hadn't done anything to actually earn any fame.

Supers: So what changed your mind about the interview?

Dyna: [*Laughs.*] Vanity, probably.

Supers: Obviously, your career hasn't gone as you'd anticipated. Are you disillusioned?

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Dyna: I suppose I am. But that's a good thing. I mean, who wants to live an illusion?

*Supers:* Tell us about what's different.

Dyna: Everything! Other metas are nothing like I'd expected them to be. The work certainly isn't what I expected. But the main thing that's different is my outlook and what I want to get out of all this. Or maybe a better way of putting it is that I don't really know what I want to get out of it, anymore. I just know it's not what I'd wanted before.

*Supers:* So what keeps you doing this?

Dyna: I dunno. Maybe just to embarrass my mother.

*Supers:* And if you couldn't do this anymore?

Dyna: I guess I'd go back to research, work in a lab.

*Supers:* But doesn't that pale next to being a hero?

Dyna: Oh, please. I don't consider myself a hero.

*Supers:* Why not?

Dyna: [*Shrugs.*] I suppose... because... I'm still not sure what that word means.

# ONE

*“I think the promise of fame and what it holds to you as a child and dreaming of it is not what it is. What it is, I’m not complaining about, but it’s just different than the reality you dreamed.”*

*~ Rosie O’Donnell*

Once upon a time, children entertained themselves by using imagination to live out their fantasies of other lives. They would play out simplistic scenarios of good guys versus bad guys. Sometimes it was a clearly delineated case of stopping the bad guy. “Cops and Robbers,” for example. Sometimes it was a situation in which “good” and “bad” depended on a particular point of view, like playing “Army” or “Spies.” And sometimes it was a twisted version of good and bad, warped by history books written by the “winners” and the exaggerations of the entertainment industry, such as “Cowboys and Indians.” And of course, often it was what every kid viewed as the ultimate in good guys against bad guys – playing “Superheroes.”

Oddly enough, I didn’t engage in such games. But then, I guess that’s what comes of growing up with virtually no friends. The few I did have were other girls, interested mainly in playing with Barbies. I’d play along, but at some point, I’d tear off my doll’s clothes, revealing the colorful costume underneath that I’d applied with my brother’s model paint, and announce that I was ready to save the world. Then my friends would yell at me for ruining the game and not play with me again for a month.

And that's what I thought the metas did – save the world. I wasn't ever quite clear on how. The news never revealed any incredible threats like the ones in comic books. There were no super-powered megalomaniacs out to dominate the world (at least, that we knew of), no teams of “super-villains” on rampant crime sprees, or anything else grandiose and obvious. It was always mundane stuff, like thwarting muggings or rescuing people from some minor catastrophe or another. Important, to be sure, but not big. Not glorious. Not things that would make people adore them. Except, I suppose, for the people saved from harm.

Despite this obvious reality, I never honestly believed it. I just *knew* there were teams out there given assignments that never made it onto the news because they were just too big or sensitive, against threats so heinous that they'd cause the populace to freak out. Like alien invasions. But in fact, the alien invasion happened on my watch, and wasn't like any I'd ever imagined.

Project Echo. That's what the Department of Homeland Security named it. But the press referred to it as the Nevada Incident, so that's how it's known. Much as I wanted to forget about it, it fills my dreams with death. In my dreams, everyone dies, and always due to my own negligence or outright stupidity.

It seems wrong to think about my own happiness when people died, especially when two of the deaths were my doing. But the ironic truth is that two events came out of the Nevada Incident that brought a lot of joy to my life.

The main one would be my friendship with Sinta, my Bay Scouts teammate who became my roommate after the group disbanded. In truth, she's almost like a daughter to me. But since I'm pretending I'm not twenty years her senior, I'll say she's like a little sister to me.

The other event would be my membership in the Gatekeepers. In the month following her return from the other world, Kimera and I spoke at length about the Nevada Incident. When she learned of my role in the clean-up of that mess, including my recommendations to DHS, she passed it on to the leadership of her team. They verified everything with Captain Shepherd and Scoutmaster. And that's how I ended up getting the invitation.

The Gatekeepers is a very different sort of group than the Bay Scouts. For one thing, the pay is way better. My base salary was a good bit more than what I made even with active mission bonus pay with the Scouts, so my active mission pay with the Gatekeepers was quite attractive.

Another difference is that the Gatekeepers is much larger. The Scouts never had more than a dozen members at any given time. During my tenure, it had nine, including me. The Gatekeepers' roster averages around forty-five.

One advantage to having a large roster is that you have a wide array of abilities, making it likely that the Gatekeepers can handle just about any situation that arises, and have the ability to pair the less experienced, new members with more seasoned metas, ensuring that the newcomers are kept relatively safe while learning the ropes.

The main disadvantage, though, is considerable downtime. Because there are so many members, assignments don't come all that often for anyone who hasn't got a certain level of seniority. Generally, the longer you've been with the group, the more assignments you receive. So a good bit of my time was spent doing what I'd have been doing as a solo agent – going out to find trouble. Except now I was at least drawing a salary for it, not relying on bringing in bail jumpers, as I'd once had to.

One of the more interesting differences between my two teams would be the organization structure. Daniel was the leader of the Scouts. Period. We all had input, but he was the decision-maker. The rest of us followed. The Gatekeepers, though, has a distinct hierarchy. The top guy of the group holds the title of Legate. Under him are two Prefects. Under them are six Tribunes. The “Romanclature” is a bit silly, in my opinion, but they've always used it. Each year, nominations are made for the officer positions. Self-nominations are not allowed. There is no overt campaigning, since the members know each other well enough to make a decision. From the nominees (including those already serving), eight are elected by the group as a whole. From these elected Tribunes, two are selected as Prefects by the Legate (which itself is pretty much a life position), similar to how a president chooses his cabinet. There are no restrictions on how many times an individual may be elected. The current Legate, Invictus, has held that position for nearly two decades. In fact, he has been with the Gatekeepers since its inception and rumor has it that he was the one who suggested using the Roman names for the leadership ranks in the first place.

Invictus isn't a young man, obviously. He's at least a dozen years older than I am, and I'm not likely ever again to be carded at a bar, despite looking younger than my years.

As for my former team members, I visit Daniel a couple times a month. His speech eventually recovered to mostly normal, but he's never regained full mobility. And while still emotionally devastated at his forced retirement, he's made the most of his time by doing a lot of volunteer work, much of it with disadvantaged children. He is also frequently requested as a speaker for schools, scouting groups, and similar organizations.

Jack took a job with a robotics company, while continuing his study of zero-point energy on the side. Ping Song essentially left the “hero” biz and continued working with the University of California in computer science.

And speaking of science, one entire floor of Golden Gate Citadel, the Gatekeepers' headquarters, is nothing but a variety of different scientific

labs. Very handy for my continued work, even though none of them have a focus on genetics.

And yes, I do need to continue with my work. Every few years, I need a “booster,” so to speak. Of course, I not only reinvigorate myself with these updates, but I also work on new enhancements. After joining the Gatekeepers, I worked on an enhancement that would boost metabolism efficiency and energy storage capacity. While it’s awesome to eat anything and everything without worry of blimping out, having to consume so many thousands of calories per day can become damned inconvenient.



Fame is a funny thing. I’d craved it from the time I was a little girl, and foolishly thought I deserved it. Now, on the cusp of thirty-seven, I knew I hadn’t earned it, but here I was, about to be famous, even if temporarily.

When the issue of *Supers* with my photo on the cover was released, Dana came down from Sacramento for the weekend and took me out to celebrate. It was the January 2008 issue, which means it was released in mid-December of 2007, since the publishing industry has never been able to read a calendar.

Dana began the weekend by yelling at me.

“You did *what*?”

“I bought a stock,” I repeated.

“A stock? One single stock?”

“Is that bad?” I said as I brought coffee from the kitchen.

“Well, what happens if it tanks? You’re screwed. It’s better to have a broad portfolio, for safety.” He accepted the coffee as I sat down next to him.

Feeling progressively embarrassed, I said, “Well, the shares were only like five bucks each.”

“Mm. So how many did you buy?”

“Fifty thousand,” I said.

“*Fifty thousand dollars’ worth*?” Dana nearly choked on his coffee.

“Um...”

His eyes widened. “Tell me you didn’t buy fifty thousand *shares*.”

“Okay. I didn’t by fifty thousand shares,” I lied.

He sighed deeply and shook his head. “I had no idea you even had that kind of money.”

Immediately, I felt guilty, remembering how much I owed him for all his help over the years. “I’m sorry. I should have finished paying you back, first.”

He dismissed that with a wave. “I just didn’t know that DynaPaste was selling so well.”

“PowerPaste,” I reminded him. “But yeah, it is. The company has marketed it pretty aggressively to all the GNCs, Vitamin Shoppes, and other

such stores all around the world, not to mention supermarkets, department stores, and pharmacies. If even half of those stores buys a few boxes of the stuff each month?" I shrugged. "That's a hell of a lot of sales the company is making. And that's not even figuring online sales. Sports nutrition is something like a thirty billion dollar a year business."

"Wow. I had no idea. So what piece of junk did you buy?"

I stirred half-and-half and sugar into my coffee. "I heard of a company last year that's producing an anthrax vaccine. Jumped out at me because of that cousin of ours who was killed by it back after 9/11."

Dana frowned. "How were we related, again?"

"Oh, I have no idea. Some twisted branch of the family tree. Fourth cousins twice removed, or something only a genealogy freak like our mother would know."

Dana nodded, then sighed again. "I just hope you don't lose your shirt."

I looked down and shrugged. "Not one of my favorites, anyway."

We spent the weekend going out for meals, hitting the bars, and so on. At one point, Dana said, "This might be the last time you're able to go out in public without being swarmed by fans."

I just laughed. That might have been true if I'd already had some fame before the magazine's release, but I was an unknown. Probably only one percent of readers in San Francisco would have heard my name before picking up the issue, and no one outside of California would have, other than my friend Rhonda and her family back in Pennsylvania.

I'd been in a mild state of shock since the interview. It had been one surprise after another. I'd been surprised to be asked in the first place, further surprised that the interview was in-person, and that there was also a photographer. Even then, I didn't expect it to be published, so it was a surprise when the editor-in-chief not only accepted it, but also chose me as "Super of the Month." And I suppose I shouldn't have been, but I was surprised by the immediate attention it garnered.

I wasn't approached at all during my weekend on the town with my brother. But soon after, people started recognizing me on the streets. Most were cool about it, limiting it to, "Oh, hey! You're Dynamistress!" and asking for my autograph or to take a picture with me. I didn't mind that at all. Though the public attitude toward metas had improved, there were still plenty who reviled us. I got a lot of fearful looks.

My occasional employer, the Red Devil Lounge, asked me to do a stint behind the bar. They'd lost their main attraction when Rachel, their for-real "Devil Girl," moved to L.A. They obviously wanted to use my new celebrity to pull in lots of customers. I was open to the idea, but told them I would not be held liable if anyone decided to attack the bar in order to get at

me. Unsurprisingly, they chose not to pursue the idea. They also said I should probably not expect any more shifts, even though I hadn't worked one in months. Nothing personal, of course.

I'd never been great at the whole secret identity thing, so it wasn't long before I got my first phone call from a fangirl, a spunky kid named Macy. I actually got quite a kick out of it, spending at least half an hour talking to her the first time. She called often, and one day she said, "There should be a Dynamistress fan club, I'm thinkin'."

I laughed at the idea. "Why?"

"Because you're cool! And you've been so nice, always taking my calls and stuff. I just want to do something nice for you."

"Mace, I think you may be my only fan, but if you really want to spend your time on that, you have my blessing. Though it's totally not necessary."

"I'm *not* your only fan, and I'll prove it! Your club will have fifty members inside a month."

"Unlikely."

"Bet you ten bucks."

"You're on."

"Awesome! I'm gonna send you an email, okay? With some stuff I'll need from you."

"As long as it's not a blood sample."

Of course, it wasn't just fans who'd call. The occasional male caller would ask if I wore panties under my tights. I'd get calls asking me to be a spokesperson for a particular group or product.

Eventually, I got rid of my landline and utilized my cell phone exclusively. Got a different email address, which I gave to Macy, along with my cell number. She texts me. A lot.

Access to our apartment building is only by key or by a tenant inside buzzing you in, so no one showed up at my door, but occasionally I'd see people outside who seemed to be waiting for someone. If I suspected that person might be me, I made my exit via the fire escape. My apartment was at the back of the building, with the fire escape hidden from street view.

Truthfully, though, I wasn't worried much about my identity being so easily discovered. The only living people I considered my "enemies" were in prison. And of those, the only one who might pose any sort of threat was Hellion. But as I'd always told Rachel, he was a punk. I wasn't afraid of him.

There was always the possibility that some up-and-coming villain would try to make a name for himself by taking out Dynamistress in her sleep. But to be honest, my name wouldn't give anyone much street cred.

There was a bigger downside to my fame, though, which was that it caused some issues among the ranks of the Gatekeepers. I still had only the barest familiarity with probably half the team, and there were several I only

knew by what I read in our database. And every last one of them had been at this business longer than I had. Though the group itself was mentioned frequently in *Supers* and other publications, only a few of the current team, such as Invictus, had ever been “Super of the Month.” He’d even been “Super of the Year,” back in 2001. He’d taken a dozen of the Gatekeepers with him to New York City after 9/11 to help in the recovery.

It would be nice to say that these renowned metas were above pettiness, to say there was no envy, but some of them weren’t and sometimes there was. It didn’t make for the best working environment.

Fame is a fleeting thing, of course, unless one works to maintain it. The popularity I enjoyed by being “Super of the Month” in January would last, I figured, perhaps six months, with each month bringing less attention than the one before. The memory span of the average reader seemed to be about that long. The memory span of my teammates, however, seemed to be infinite.



There was, actually, one other surprise that came out of the *Supers* interview. I fell in love.

K.T., the girl who’d interviewed me, was an adorable brunette with big eyes, freckles, and a sparkling demeanor that was positively infectious. After the interview, we’d talked casually as the photographer packed up his equipment and headed out. We’d joked about some story that had then recently been in the news, and she ended staying for pizza and some of Dana’s latest batch of home brew.

Over the ensuing weeks, we spent a crazy amount of time together. We met for lunch, movies, and such as often as possible when I wasn’t on assignment with the Gatekeepers, sometimes spending entire days together.

She had a goofy sense of humor that I found cute beyond words. Her laugh made me melt. She got the biggest kick out of some of the simplest things. One day, we idly roamed the aisles at the supermarket, not shopping, just pointing out to each other what our favorite foods were. We discovered we both loved Fig Newtons, Yoo-Hoo, and Honey Nut Cheerios. And we both disliked crunchy peanut butter, ranch dressing, and radishes.

“I knew the first time we met,” she told me one day, “that we were soul friends.”

“Soul friends?”

“You know those friends you have where years can go by without communication, and then you see them and it feels like you just saw them yesterday?”

I’d never had a friend like that, but I just smiled and nodded. I smiled a lot with her. Falling for K.T. was so easy. It was a crush of the first order, the sort that made me giddy and stupid. The problem was, my heart was still

hurting from Rachel's abrupt departure. Even though our relationship hadn't been what you'd call romantic, I still missed it. I missed her. And I'd become convinced that I simply wasn't any good at relationships and shouldn't even put myself out there, anymore. So I didn't tell K.T. of my feelings. I just enjoyed her company, loved her without saying so, and pretended this was an acceptable substitute for romance.

We talked shop a lot. She'd been working as a stringer for *Supers* for more than five years and her knowledge of metas put mine to shame. My obsession with knowing everything about them took a back seat to my studies in college, after all, and never really returned to the same degree.

The public's opinion of metas was slowly improving, and we agreed that the main reason was that they knew about the other world. They regarded it as more of a threat than Earth's metas and viewed the existing super-teams similarly to how they viewed the police. Many distrusted them, but sure as heck wanted them around when something bad was going down.

Possibly in an effort to reinforce the positive view of metas, teams began to take on different duties than they previously had. Many groups, including the Gatekeepers, help out during earthquakes, fires, and other disasters, typically with search and rescue. Of course, this didn't mean our reputation was pristine. There will always be people who use their abilities to help themselves instead of others.

Case in point, sports. For years, all players had been tested for evidence of the meta "gene." Any who tested positive were barred from playing. But as the world soon learned, it wasn't just the players who needed to be tested.

The previous year, for example, there had been a huge scandal in football. A coach for the New England Patriots was a telepath. During a game against the New York Jets, he was caught (evidently by another telepath in the stands) reading the thoughts of the Jets' coach and using that knowledge to the Patriots' benefit, such as changing formations to match the Jets' planned play. It was a highly contentious incident that resulted in large fines and penalties against the Patriots.

More and more scandals came to light, the most recent of which was that the caddy of a professional golfer was discovered to be a minor telekinetic. A little mental tap here or there while putting turned out to be crucial to winning many championships. He was a very highly paid caddy, until his talent was exposed.

While the sports industry was rocked by all this, the real surprise for many was the discovery that so many metas in the U.S. were unregistered. It caused those tracking such things to raise the estimated number of metas by almost twenty percent.

There is no consensus on what effect this had on public opinion. On the one hand, knowing there were more metas in the world made a lot of people uncomfortable. On the other hand, the knowledge that these people

had been living among them with no ill effects made other people shrug their shoulders, deciding it wasn't such a big deal, after all.



"She sounds great!" Fabian said as he worked on my hair. I sat in the chair, staring at my reflection as he clipped and combed.

"She is," I said, smiling. Fabian had been my hair stylist since Sinta and I moved in together. He knew more about my life than most people, simply because there's not much else to do but gab when you're having your hair done.

"Have I told you that you're my favorite client?" he said.

"That's because you see me so often," I said. "And I'm a big tipper."

"True. I swear you must grow an inch a week."

"I don't think it's quite that fast."

"Never contradict your stylist," he said, flicking a lock of my hair from his bright pink shirt.

"Have I told you how weird it is to have a bald hair stylist?"

Fabian laughed. "I shave my head because it's just not possible to have hair as fabulous as the rest of me."

"I see," I said with a chuckle.

"So you're going to tell her you're into her, right?" he said, turning the conversation back to K.T.

"I... don't think so."

"Then you're the dumbest member of the Gatekeepers I know."

"How many do you know?"

"One," he said, with a flourish of spray to finish my new 'do. "All done."

"Love it," I said, rising from the chair. "As always." I gave him a hug. "See you in a couple weeks."

I walked a few blocks down Haight Street on my way home. I loved the eclectic shops and eccentric people. I couldn't imagine a place more different from my tiny home town in rural Pennsylvania. My white hair didn't really stand out, here, though I did occasionally have someone ask me where I have it done.

At home, I checked my email. Among them was a short one from Macy: "D: You owe me ten bucks!"

I went online and Googled myself. And there it was, my own website, in blue and white, adorned with a border of big, white double-helices. There were photos of me, a bio put together from the *Supers* interview and Macy's conversations with me, and a sign-up for the fan club.

On the Contact page was a photo of Macy and a blurb introducing her as the webmistress. It was nice to know what she looked like. Macy had

the Asian features of her father, but the Spanish skin tone of her mother, with long, dark hair and almost-black eyes. Cute kid. There was a post office box address, too, which I hoped already belonged to her family. I didn't like the idea of her spending money to maintain one for this silly page. For that matter, she had secured a domain name and, since there were no ads on the page, it seemed she was paying for hosting.

I wrote her a check for five hundred.



In February, Sinta and I celebrated our seventeenth and thirty-seventh birthdays, respectively. Jack and my brother joined us and we went out to lunch, then had a Pixar movie marathon on DVD at home. Dana brought cake and ice cream, both of which he claimed to have actually made, himself. I told him he'd make someone a nice little wife one day.

That jab, though, was inspired by a bit of jealousy on my part. When I'd first moved to California, Dana and I spent all kinds of time together. He'd come to the city every weekend, making sure I was getting settled in and acclimated to this new life of mine.

But as time went on and I became more involved with the Bay Scouts, I'd see him less and less frequently. We'd talk on the phone a good bit, but that was never the same. Lately, we'd been going weeks without talking. Life had become busy for both of us. He had his counseling practice and I had my new team, but more significantly, he had a new relationship that seemed to be serious.

Aside from a brief fling he'd had the year following his divorce a decade before, this was the first relationship he'd had. And despite being busy myself, I resented that this woman was stealing from my time with my brother. He was the only family I cared about, and I missed him.

But, I reminded myself, at least I had family. Sinta didn't. The Bay Scouts had been her family. I guess that's part of why I asked her to live with me. The other part, of course, is that I just find her to be a delightful girl.

She seemed younger than her years. So childlike in many respects. Despite the terrible life she'd had, she was so full of joy. I didn't understand how that was possible, but was grateful for it.

Sinta did, however, sometimes suffer from nightmares. She'd never discuss them, but I always assumed they were memories of the bad things she'd experienced while in foster care. It took her a while, but eventually she learned it was okay to come to me after these dreams. She would climb into my bed, curl up beside me, and pull my arm around her.

It reminded me of when I'd do the same thing as a kid, climbing into bed with Dana after one of my own nightmares. And I was still having plenty of those.



In April, I had a check-up with my physician. I was relieved to have health coverage again through the Government Employee Health Association. Most meta teams are parts of various government departments. Today, most of them are under the Department of Homeland Security, but groups formed before DHS was established have generally stayed with whatever department they'd previously been attached to. So the Gatekeepers are still part of the Department of Justice.

We ended with a spinal tap to check my cerebrospinal fluid for the presence of fungus. I'd been having this procedure done quarterly ever since recovering from my bout of cryptococcal meningitis. But that didn't mean I was used to it.

In truth, it's not very painful, since they numb me up pretty well. But any injection for me is tricky. My subconscious mind detects the needle as a threat, so I have to deliberately suppress my energy shield for it to penetrate easily. And occasionally, the positioning of the needle isn't just right and has to be done over. I hate that.

"Everything seems to be in working order," my doctor said when he was finally finished.

"For a change," I said, as I lay there waiting for the clotting to finish after the tap. "No major trauma, lately," I joked.

"Let's keep it that way," he said. "We should have the results of your CSF test tomorrow. I'll send you an email." He hesitated, then said, "I hate that I'm about to say this, but can I ask you for a favor?"

"Uh, sure."

"Thanks," he said, slightly embarrassed. "It's actually for my daughter. She's going through a phase of fascination with metas." I chuckled as he pulled out the magazine from under his clipboard. "Would you mind?" he asked as he handed me a pen.

"Of course not!" I said, turning to the photos inside. "What's her name?"

"Jenna."

"How old is she?"

"Eleven," he said with a smile. He pulled out his wallet and removed a photograph, holding it out for me.

I looked at the girl, who wore an enormous smile on her face, eyes twinkling. "Wow. She looks a lot like I did at that age," I said.

"We signed her up for your fan club," he said, tucking the photo back in his wallet.

"Cool," I said, and made a mental note to talk with Macy about being more active in the fan club, beyond approving the emails she'd send under my name. I shook my head and turned my attention back to the magazine. I

inscribed a little message to her and scrawled my signature before handing it back to him.

“Thanks,” he said. “This might make up for her not receiving a letter from Hogwart’s.”

When I got home, I pulled out an old photo album from the depths of my closet. I flipped past the baby pictures until I found some from when I was about Jenna’s age.

The resemblance really was striking. One photo in particular was a somewhat embarrassing shot that Dana took of me. I was dressed as a superhero. On my blue shirt was pinned a big, white letter “D” that I’d cut from a piece of felt. I had a blue domino mask that was too big for my face. Dana had let me use his terrycloth wristbands and headband that he wore when playing tennis. And a white towel “cape” completed the ensemble. I was striking a heroic pose.

I thought about the feeling I’d had when looking at Jenna’s picture. I’d never seriously thought about having children, for any number of reasons. But I couldn’t deny that I really did think of Sinta as a daughter, sometimes. I’ve always liked kids, but had never desired to be a mother. It was always a “maybe someday” thing, with “someday” being far in the future.

But I was fast approaching forty. And while I was in excellent physical shape, certainly healthy enough to carry a pregnancy to term, my eggs weren’t young, anymore. And that’s the real factor when it comes to the dangers of pregnancy at a later age.

I put the album aside. Then I got online and researched egg harvesting and cryogenic storage. Just in case the maternal urge ever became strong. And if it didn’t, they could always be donated to someone in need.



There was one other factor that caused some of my teammates to resent me, and that was my involvement in the Nevada Incident. I was called upon every so often to assist in returning a discovered “replacement” to the other world. In a sense, I was still working for DHS, and possibly always would be, given the debt I owed them for not holding me responsible for Dr. Gray’s death.

In mid-May, I was contacted by Captain Shepherd. “We have a bit of a problem,” he said and explained that DHS agents had recently located another of the “replaced” and had attempted to take him through the portal, only to find that they could not pass through.

“You mean the portal is gone?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “It’s there, and our monitors show no change in the readings, but no one can pass through. Our team is stumped. I was hoping you and Jack could check it out.”

## REDEMPTION

“Why us?”

“Because you got it working again once before, I guess. I know it was different, but you’re sort of our last resort.”

“I see,” I said. “I’ll contact Jack.”

“Already done,” he said. “A car will pick you up at oh-eight-hundred tomorrow.”

I didn’t know why, but I hung up the phone with a feeling of dread.