

THE NEVER MEN

by Robert Zoltan

1

I was on a book tour for my latest comic creation, *The Never Men*, about a group of alternate reality time agents who are forced to assassinate or replace their alternate selves in hopes of averting a multiversal threat. In a small Northern California comic book store in Arcata, near the Oregon border, I sat at a table signing copies and answering the same questions I had been fielding for the last two weeks on the road. Though I was gratified for the large line of male fans that had turned out on this drizzly evening and the boost in book sales, I was starting to miss my warm home down south in the Hollywood Hills. This was the final scheduled appearance before I flew home, and I was relieved when the last person in line stepped up. All I wanted now was my cheap motel room, a nightcap, a hot shower, and a good night's sleep. Unfortunately, the universe sometimes gives us far more than we ask for.

"You've either got a great imagination or inside information," said a low female voice, sotto voce. The first issue of *The Never Men* was slapped down in front of me. I roused from my robotic trance and glanced up. When I saw the woman staring down at me, eyebrows raised in a challenge, I snapped to attention. Had I been casting a movie, she would have been perfect as one of the Never Men. She was attractive in a bold but sensual way, with piercing green eyes. Her tousled hair was proof that a strange kind of order can arise from chaos. She appeared to be in her early thirties, but something in her demeanor made her seem older.

"What do you mean?" I asked, half frowning and half smiling. I wasn't sure if I was being complimented or accused of plagiarism. She was leaning over me, and now glanced around the room in that ridiculous way that people do in old movies when they're speaking confidentially. I would have laughed had her performance been less convincing.

She stared at me for a moment, as if assessing something. Then she spoke almost as if to herself. "You don't know what I'm talking about."

"Well, I..."

"Is there someplace we can talk?" she asked.

I looked around. The last fans were quickly dispersing and exiting the shop. I looked at her for a moment and suddenly felt more flexible about my plans for the evening. I shrugged. "Why not? I think I'm done here. Did you...want me to sign this?"

"Sure," she said, in a careless manner. She then smiled at me so that only the sides of her mouth turned up. I signed the front of the book and handed it back to her. Her eyes never left me as she stuck it inside the pocket of a dark semi-translucent green trench coat. "There's a little cafe on the corner. Shall we?"

"Yeah, I just need to talk to the owner. Can you wait a minute?"

"I'll meet you there," she said. She gave me another smile that told me nothing.

"Oh, okay." Perhaps she detected a cynical note in my voice, for her smile suddenly turned warm. I felt myself blush for the first time in years. She then broke into a bigger toothy grin, a surprisingly goofy one, before turning away and walking out the door.

“Wow, if all the fans looked like that...” said the owner, as she stepped out the door. He and I were now the only two people left in the shop.

“I’m not sure she’s a fan,” I said, with furrowed brow.

“What is she, then?”

I shook my head and shrugged. “Not a guy.”

He laughed. I told him I was going to meet her, so we concluded our business and then I headed toward the door.

“Good luck, man,” he called after me.

“Thanks. I might need it,” I replied as I walked out into the mist.

2

It was a Sunday night. My fans had fled to their warm dry homes. The sidewalks were nearly empty. I walked down to the nearest corner of the block where I had seen a cafe. When I turned the corner, she was standing on the sidewalk waiting for me.

“Change of plans,” she said. “Let’s not go in there.”

“Why not?” I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. “Too bright.”

“You want to go somewhere else?” I asked.

She hooked her arm in mine and leaned in close to my face. “There’s not much else here. Can we go back to your motel room?”

It seemed a bit too good to be true. My jaded brain was rebelling against the situation. Fortunately, after two lonely weeks of mostly middle-aged male faces, my libido was getting the upper hand. Still, I had no idea what she wanted. I hesitated.

“Is that a problem?” she asked.

Then I caught a very faint, very feminine scent of jasmine. My cautious nature was throttled as if by a blackjack. “Uh, no. That’s fine. How’d you know I was staying in a motel?”

“Just assumed.”

“Okay. Well, let’s get out of this...rain, or whatever you call it. My rental car is over there.” I escorted her across the street, opened the passenger side for her, and then got in and started the motor.

“So are you from around here?” I asked, as I headed down the street toward the Highway 101 North entrance that would take us to my motel just ten minutes away. She continued to seem preoccupied, staring out her window as if looking for someone or something, and then, doing the same in her rearview mirror as we got on the highway.

“No,” she finally said, when I was starting to think she hadn’t heard me. “I flew in from...” she paused a moment, turning to stare at me, then finished, “Los Angeles.”

“Really? I’m from L.A. What are you doing up here? I mean, you didn’t fly two hours north just to see me.”

“What shall I say?” she asked, as if thinking aloud. “Visiting a friend? Does it matter?”

“Well, I was just...I don’t know, wondering why you came out to see me tonight. You’re not a lawyer, are you?” I glanced at her, while keeping my main attention on the road, and caught her again looking in her rearview mirror.

“A lawyer? No,” she said. “Why would you think that?”

“Oh, I have this paranoid fear. You know how some people have a recurring bad dream of being chased by a killer clown or showing up at school in their underwear? I have a recurring dream of being sued for copyright infringement.”

“Where *do* you get your ideas?” she asked. Her accusing tone of voice didn’t exactly put my mind at ease.

“I don’t know. Various sources, like every writer. Nobody creates in a vacuum.”

“Unless you’re writing in outer space,” she said.

I laughed and glanced at her.

She flashed me a pleasant smile then resumed monitoring her rearview mirror.

“Okay, you’re not a lawyer. What are you?” I asked.

“I’m not a lawyer, but you might say I’m your public defender.”

“I don’t follow you. You mean, like on message boards? Are you a fan?”

“Let’s talk in your room. We can relax, get acquainted, maybe have a drink. You have any liquor?”

“I do.”

“Perfect.”

I decided not to question her further. Whatever else she was, she was a professional at evasion. But the idea of having a drink and getting acquainted with her mollified me for now. For all I knew she was crazy, but I kind of like crazy, as long as it isn’t the Bernard Herrmann screeching violins type of crazy. After a long lonely time on the road and no one to go home to, I was willing to take the risk.

3

I parked in the motel lot. We took the outside staircase up to the second floor balcony and room 217. I used my key card and we slipped into the welcome dry warmth of the room. I flipped on the light and offered to take her coat, but she politely refused and turned the lock on the deadbolt. This rather innocent gesture took on added meaning as my vague expectations were becoming more focused. When she turned on the small table lamp and shut off the overhead room light, I became positively encouraged. I removed my coat and threw it over a chair, hoping she would follow my lead. But she just shook her head from the rain and examined her appearance in the mirror, running her fingers through her damp raven locks. Preening is always a good sign from a woman. But then she stepped over and surreptitiously peered through the curtains.

“What are you—”

“May I use your restroom?” she asked.

“Sure, help yourself,” I said. My brain tried to encourage me with images of her not wearing anything under her trench coat, but I was starting to think this was all a big waste of time, or worse. She was acting as if someone were following her. Maybe she was in some kind of trouble and she was using me for protection. Now my brain gave me a different image: an angry jealous boyfriend or husband banging on the door. I peered through the curtains, but the misty rain covering the window obstructed my view. I unbolted and opened the door. A car pulled into the parking lot and a man got out of the vehicle. He walked to one of the first floor rooms and went in. I practically breathed a sigh of relief. This was not the kind of excitement I had hoped for.

I heard the toilet flush. I closed the door quietly and relocated myself to the edge of the bed, my final gambit. When she emerged with her coat still on, I was actually

annoyed. When I saw her checking the lock on the adjoining door that led from my room to the next, my patience ended.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Just taking precautions,” she said.

“Against what? Look, I don’t—” I stopped as I saw her glance sharply past me at the front door. I followed her gaze. The door handle was slowly turning. I stood up, thinking it was either an ill-timed housekeeper or a confused lodger. Before I could take a step, I was startled by her firm grip on my arm. She had moved so quickly and silently that I hadn’t seen or heard her. She held her finger to her lips in a warning of silence. As she handed me my coat and pulled me over to the adjoining door that separated my room from the next, the intense grave look on her face kept me quiet. I had a sudden intuitive feeling of danger, the way one of my characters would in *The Never Men*. It was something I had never felt before.

I followed along, perplexed, my breathing suddenly shallow and my muscles tensed. She unlocked the dividing door and pulled it open. Another door behind that one led straight into the other room, which was surely locked from the other side. She passed her right hand near the handle of the door. There was a faint golden glow as if she held a weak flashlight in the palm of her hand. I heard a click. She turned the handle and pushed it open. As she pulled me through, I turned to see the front door of my room swing slowly inward. She closed the adjoining room doors silently behind us as we entered the room next to mine. It was dark and fortunately empty. Still grasping my arm, she led me to the room’s front door and stopped. She pulled me close and whispered in my ear.

“Head straight down the stairs to your car. Don’t ask questions, don’t look back.”

“What—” I started to object, putting on my coat.

“Shh! Just do it. You have nothing to lose by trusting me and doing what I tell you. Go straight to your car and get us on the highway as fast as you can. Your life is in danger. Follow me now, and do not look back.”

She opened the front door and peered out. Then she waved me to follow and glided across the wet concrete balcony in her heels past my room toward the stairs. I was right behind her. The door to my room was now closed. I noticed that the curtain, though still drawn, was slightly askew, possibly enabling me to get a glimpse inside at the intruder. An irresistible curiosity overcame me. I stopped at the window and wiped a small section with the sleeve of my coat to clear away the moisture. As I moved my face close to the glass, the curtain was jerked aside. I leaped back, startled, then stumbled backward against the balcony rail in shock at the face that stared back at me from the other side of the glass. I turned and ran in panic for the stairs. The woman was waiting halfway down the staircase, looking up anxiously.

When she saw the look on my face, she cursed under her breath and ran full speed down the stairs and across the lot toward my car. I sprinted after, got us in the car, and started it up as fast as I could. As I pulled out of the parking lot and onto the street, I glanced in my rearview mirror. A dark figure climbed into a car and the car’s lights came on.

“Head to the highway and go south,” she said. I didn’t reply, just kept my focus on the road and on getting us to the highway entrance as quickly as possible. My heart was racing and my thoughts were in a jumbled panic.

“You saw him, didn’t you?” she asked. “I told you not to look back.” But there was no accusation in her voice, only sympathy.

I couldn't speak. What I had seen was impossible, but undeniable. The face staring back at me out of my motel room from the other side of the glass had been my own.

4

A hundred questions were spinning out of control in my brain, careening off the walls of my consciousness, and crashing in unanswered flames. My mysterious companion seemed to sense my distress. She proved to have the wisdom that I sensed she had by leaving me be until I broke the tense silence.

"What..." I began then stopped. I glanced at her. Despite the drama of the situation, an uncanny stillness looked back at me from behind her eyes. I felt myself calming down. After another ten minutes, I tried again.

"What's going on? Who was that? Who are you?" I asked.

"I'll answer your questions as best I can. But first, let's focus on the situation at hand."

"I don't even know what that is."

"I meant driving the vehicle. Can you manage that?"

What I had seen had shaken me to the core. I had already been tired. Now I felt overcome with physical and emotional fatigue. "I don't know."

"You want me to drive?" she asked.

I didn't know if I could trust her, but I felt too stressed and tired to continue.

"He's right behind us," she said.

I looked in my rearview mirror. There was a car about one hundred feet behind, another one much further back.

"Look," she said, "I know you want some answers, but for now, would you please just do as I tell you? Would you please trust me, at least for now?"

"Okay," I replied with a deep sigh. "I'm fatigued. I won't last long."

"We can't stop right now," she said. "We're going to have to switch places while we drive. Ready?" I switched on the car's cruise control, hoisted myself up, and moved over the dividing panel. She lifted herself up, ended up on my lap for a moment, grabbed the steering wheel, and climbed into the driver's seat. The car maintained its speed and then accelerated quickly as she stomped down on the pedal. I buckled my seatbelt and looked in my side rearview mirror. The car behind us was now only about fifty feet away, its headlights glaring through the moisture that had turned from drizzle into full-fledged rain. Being relieved of driving, I was able to focus enough to start asking some questions.

"Who was that guy?"

"I think you know," she said. But I didn't. As far as I knew, I had no long-lost twin brother. It hadn't been a mask. I didn't understand why she thought I would know, and some kind of existential dread stopped me from pursuing that particular question for now.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"You could say I'm an agent on a mission. I'm here to save you from yourself."

I gave her a frowning grimace.

"That's a little joke," she said, giving me her stiff smile. "Get it?"

5

“No.” I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples. My body was tired, but my mind was racing. It wasn’t the only thing. Our speedometer was pushing 90 mph. I glanced back. The car behind us was keeping pace.

“Don’t do that,” she said.

“Why not?”

“He might think you’re still behind the wheel, which suits me fine. If you want to look back, use your mirror.”

“All right.” I decided to ask something more practical. “Where are we going?”

“LA,” she said.

“I can’t. I’ve got a ticket to fly there tomorrow morning. And this is a rental car.”

“It’s too late for all that. We’ve got to improvise.”

“I didn’t return the room card key,” I said, feeling in my pocket. “Shit, my suitcase is still back in the room.” As an answer, she gave me an intense stare.

“Okay, okay,” I said, “unimportant details. Assuming I’m really in danger.”

“You are. He’s here to kill you.”

“What?” I squinted at her. “Why? Why would someone want to kill me? Who is he? Someone from a rival comic book company?”

“I’m glad you’re keeping a sense of humor about it,” she said.

“I’m not!”

“Well, it can help sometimes.”

“Who is he?” I asked again.

“He’s you from another universe, here to replace you.”

I just stared at her, dumbfounded. I couldn’t dismiss it as a crazy joke because I had seen him. I stared forward again at the yellow road line that we were devouring, almost as if I were trying to hypnotize myself into being somewhere else. A few minutes before, I had thought that I was going to get laid; now I found out that I was going to get laid out, possibly in a coffin. “That’s impossible.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because...because it just is.”

“Like the placebo effect or non-locality? Or how about life appearing on Earth?”

“What?”

She growled. “Get with it! You’re a science fiction writer. You know a lot of the science fiction of today is the science fact of tomorrow.”

“Well...yeah, okay,” I said rather sheepishly.

“Don’t mean to browbeat you,” she said. “I just expected better from you based on the stuff you write.”

“But that’s all fantasy...wait a minute. You said something back in the comic shop. About me either having...”

“A great imagination or inside information.”

“Yeah. What did you mean?”

“Your comic book, *The Never Men*. It isn’t just fantasy.”

I squinted at her again, perhaps trying to bring some sanity into focus. She just kept her eyes on the road while snatching regular glances in the center rearview mirror.

“Wait. You’re telling me what I conceived—”

“Or possibly somehow *perceived*.”

“—in my comic book, *The Never Men*, is actually true?”

“Bits of it,” she said.

“That’s—”

“Yes, I know. Impossible. I’m not saying it’s *exactly* true.” She shook her head, appearing exasperated. “I knew I should have just told you a fake story. I had several prepared, but I don’t think you would have believed them anymore than what’s really happening.”

“Which is?”

“Something you wouldn’t understand, even if I had time to tell you.”

“I’m not stupid.”

“No, you’re from the 21st Century,” she said.

“And you’re...”

She waved her hand. “Let’s not go there right now. Think of it this way. Your comic book is like...well, no offense, a comic book version of a third-hand story of rumors and innuendo about something that’s really happening in the far future.”

“That’s...”

The glare she gave me caused me to rethink my word choice.

“...incredible. I thought I just made this stuff up. Some of it came to me in dreams.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” she said.

“How could I know these things?”

“Even we don’t know that,” she said.

“But you’re sure this alternate version of me wants to kill me? And you say you’re here to protect me.”

“Right.”

Writing comic book plots for a living makes you think of all the angles. I wondered if maybe *he* was here to protect me and *she* was the one trying to kill me. Was there a hole in that plot? Yeah, big enough to drive a car through. If she had wanted to harm me, she could have already tried. I was bigger than her, but I had a strong feeling that she outclassed me in that area as much as she did with information and knowledge. I sat at a computer and wrote for a living. I don’t know what she did, but I had a strong feeling that she was as dangerous as the man chasing us.

“Who are you?” I asked again.

“I’m one of the Never Men.”

5

“Are you serious? You really call yourself that?” I asked. I would have laughed, but the truth was, she scared me.

“No. I’m referencing your story so we can actually have a conversation about this. It will make as much sense to you as anything I could tell you.”

“Okay, fine. Do you have a name?”

“Yes.”

I waited. Finally, I rolled my eyes and stared out the window. The rain had stopped.

“How long are we going to drive?” I asked.

“Till we get to L.A.,” she said.

“That’s at least ten hours. I don’t know how much I can drive. I’m wiped.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll drive. I don’t tire easily and need little sleep.”

7

We were now weaving through the wooded area south of Humboldt and would soon be entering curving mountain road. Although the rain had stopped, the highway was still wet. My stomach clenched up as she took the curves at 60 mph and pushed 100 mph on any lengths of road that were straight long enough to gain that acceleration. Such reckless driving would cut our time considerably—either by an early arrival in L.A. or our untimely demise. My confidence in her was boosted by the fact that she seemed to drive with complete ease and composure. I glanced in the rearview mirror. The car behind us was keeping pace. If I had any doubts before, I now knew it was tailing us.

“Why don’t you try to get some sleep,” she said.

I was going to tell her I wasn’t good at sleeping in the passenger seat, especially while the person driving was either a time agent from the future or a psychotic maniac, and while we were being tailed at 100 mph by my evil double who was trying to kill me. But I was learning it was pointless to argue with her. Hell, it seemed pointless even talking with her. But she was right; at least I could rest my eyes.

For the next hour she drove like death was on our tail (according to her it was). I dozed fitfully, occasionally jerking awake, thinking we were crashing to our deaths. As we wound down through the mountains, my troubled mind wandered strange paths.

I thought and dreamed of the Reality War. It was not so much a war as a constant, ongoing, chaotic conflict with vaguely defined lines between sides with complex and sometimes covert purposes. The Never Men were people who gave up their lives and left their worlds as if they had never been, forever traveling the multiverse usually to serve the purpose of one of three competing ideologies (there were more than just three groups, but these were the main players): first, the ironically named Love Corporation was an intergalactic business entity that believed in private ownership of everything in existence (by them of course) and shaped reality to its purposes by very economic, commercial, and if necessary, violent means; second, The Order, was a quasi-religious and political group believing in a God that was using them as his tool to bring divine order and revelation to the cosmos at any cost; and third, the Travelers, were a loosely knit underground group who believed that underlying all reality was an ineffable Mystery, a cosmic dance that should be left to form freely from myriad personal expressions of all life forms and forces. Both Love Corporation and The Order, despite their differences and despite often wearing a beneficent face, sought power and control; the Travelers supported, and when necessary fought for, freedom and self-determination, believing them to be aspects of the fundamental character of underlying reality.

The woman driving my car didn’t match any of the characters in my comic book, but she didn’t seem the corporate or fundamentalist religious type, so I think she would have fit in well with the Travelers. They were rebels, outcasts, libertines, mystics, rogues, shamans, artists, heroes; kind of like wandering Zen bohemians. Yeah, that would be her style: freewill, freedom, free drinks, that sort of thing. My alleged alternate-self assassin would be either a zealot of the The Order, or a corporate drone or secretly outsourced assassin of Love Corporation, most likely the latter. The Order and Love Corporation occasionally worked together, but it was always an uneasy alliance, and in the past, had even engaged in direct conflict. The biggest concern of the Travelers was that those two groups would join forces. But there were so many other factions beyond the three main organizations (including some non-human) that it was hard for any one group to dominate. As long as that was the case, the Travelers were able to prevent The Order or Love Corp from gaining too much power in the inhabited worlds.

The woman's claim of the duplicate me trying to replace me definitely fit in with my story line of Love Corporation's latest strategy of murdering and replacing key individuals who had powerful extra-dimensional awareness or held a decisive place in the multiverse. They called it "replacement." And I, according to this woman, was one of those being replaced. But of course, the one flaw in her whole story was...it was just a story! A story I had written! Yet I had seen the face on the other side of the window, had been inches away from it. The face had been mine. Could I have been mistaken?

"What are you thinking about?" she asked, as we finally left the mountains behind and hit a straighter flat part of the Redwood Highway nearing Garberville.

"About...him." I pointed my thumb backward. "You sure he's not just an actor who looks like me? Tell me this is all just some kind of weird scam to steal what little I have in my bank account, or to drive me crazy or whatever. I'll forgive you. I'll even go along with it. He's your partner in a scam, right? You hired him to play me."

There was sympathy in her smile as she turned to me and shook her head. "No. Sorry. He's you from another universe. A you working for a corrupt power-hungry conglomerate. He's the bastard version of you."

"I thought *I* was the bastard version of me." She barked out a short laugh and briefly gave me that big goofy smile I'd seen in the comic store. It made her look sweet and dorky and adorable, and dangerous in a completely different kind of way.

She said, "No, hate to disappoint you, but you're kind of sweet."

"Great," I said. "A sweet little lamb waiting for the slaughter."

"Don't be silly. Most men in this situation would have already been dead, and probably gotten me killed along with them. You've done fine up till now. I have a feeling there's a lion in you waiting to come out."

"You really think so?" I asked, feeling a subtle surge of confidence.

"Yeah. A handsome lion."

I lifted my brows and looked at her. "Handsome?"

She gave me a sidelong glance and a completely different kind of smile.

Our little moment was shattered like the glass on a cheap picture frame when bright lights blinded us from behind, and the car that had up to this point been content with keeping pace accelerated with a bang into the rear of our vehicle.

6

The way she reacted, I could have sworn she was a professional driver. Not only did she not lose control, but in one fluid motion she slipped into the other lane, hit the brakes, and swerved onto an exit ramp that I hadn't even seen coming. The other car whipped past us, missing the exit.

While I was waiting for my stomach to catch up with us, she was laughing in malicious glee.

"Got him!" she said. "I've been waiting to do that for the last fifty miles. You fill 'er up. I'll head to the little girls' room, then you can do your business if you need to. Boy, he must be steamed."

"We're going to stop now? Do you think that's a good idea?"

"We're almost empty."

"Oh."

“Don’t worry, it’s a busy, well-lit service station. He won’t risk a confrontation out in the open. I know his thinking. He’ll probably wait for us somewhere down the road.”

“Where the hell did you learn to drive like that?” I asked, as she pulled up to the pump.

“Many times, many places,” she said. She got out of the car, threw me the keys, and walked swiftly toward the station’s convenience store.

“Wait,” I said. “What if he does come back?”

“Improvise,” she shouted, without turning around.

Despite my fatigue, my body was pulled taut as a wire. My stomach fluttered as I pumped the gas and glanced continuously in the direction of the highway. A dark car pulled into the station and I tensed up. It stopped at the next island. The door opened and a short heavysset woman got out. I exhaled, not even realizing I’d been holding my breath. I could feel cool air on my forehead from the sweat that had suddenly formed.

When the tank was full I walked toward the station. My companion emerged with a bag and flashed me a brief smile as we passed. I relieved myself in the restroom, and then washed my hands and face. I stared into the mirror. Was this the face I saw at the motel, only backwards? I suddenly wondered if I should call the police or something. I still couldn’t think straight.

When I emerged from the restroom inside the service store, she was in the car waiting at the front door with the engine idling. I walked out and got in the car. She pulled out before I even had my door closed. In seconds we were back on the highway and speeding south again. I wasn’t sure where we were, but I assumed a couple of hours north of San Francisco.

I opened the bag she had brought out of the store and found two bottles of tea, a bag of almonds and...

“Chili-covered Mangoes?” I asked.

“Extreme spice and sugar, in case you need a quick wake up.”

“Actually, I was hoping to try and sleep again. I mean, if you think it’s safe.”

“Seems safe for now,” she said, “but it’s hard to tell. I’m sure if something happens you’ll wake up, like if our car is suddenly careening over a cliff or some such thing.” She smiled.

“Oh, thanks,” I said, “that’s really going to help me fall asleep. I already hate trying to sleep in the car because right when I start drifting off I jerk awake, thinking the car is, I don’t know, about to suddenly careen off a cliff or some such thing.”

She offered me some almonds and I ate a handful and drank some tea before sinking down into my seat and closing my eyes. I was so tired that this time I miraculously found myself waking up feeling rather refreshed, though rather disoriented. We passed a sign that showed we were now on Highway 5 South headed to Los Angeles.

“Good morning,” said my female driver.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“Just past 1 a.m.,” she said. “We passed San Francisco awhile ago. Sorry you missed it.”

“I’ve seen it. You okay driving?”

“I’m fine. But thanks to the tea, I do need to use the little girl’s room soon, and we can re-tank.”

I suddenly felt the way I do when waking up with a stranger in my bed after a one-night stand. Who the hell was this woman and what was I thinking? I still didn’t even

know her name, but now that seemed irrelevant. I doubted she would give me her real name any more than she had given me the real story. And what was this all-night road trip based upon? The word of a complete stranger and a face briefly glimpsed through a misted window. It's true it had looked like me. But now I wasn't so sure. I had been startled and the window wet from the rain. Was the most likely explanation really that a beautiful (and that was certainly the factor that had sucked me into the whole thing) time traveler had arrived to protect me from an alternate version of myself sent to kill and replace me? Maybe a scam didn't make much sense, but it was a helluva lot more likely. Or how about this? That guy was her crazy ex-husband. Or a fellow con artist that she cheated. The truth is, this guy was probably after *her*, not me. She was probably trying to use me for protection, not the other way around. Maybe she just needed a car. Suddenly, either of those explanations or some other equally mundane one made complete sense.

As the next hour passed, I realized how emotionally, mentally, and physically exhausted I'd gotten from the comic book tour, which itself came at the tail end of a demanding work month: one too many late nights, one too many late flights, one too many cocktails, and one too many fans demanding attention and answers. I had been on the verge of a mini-meltdown, which was now being externalized in some strange Jungian fashion as this bizarre psychological night passage, complete with female archetype and shadow self intent on my destruction. The few hours of sleep I'd just had in the car had brought me, at least temporarily, back to my senses.

She announced a restroom stop and took an exit ramp to a gas station with a 24-hour convenience store. She threw me the car keys and asked me to top off the gas. I pretended to do so as she headed into the station. As soon as I lost sight of her, I got in the driver's seat, started up the car, and took off. I got back on Highway 5 heading south, opened the Chili-covered Mangoes, and settled in for a quiet four-hour drive.

7

The whole thing started to seem pretty comedic and I would have laughed if I didn't have hours of driving to go before I reached L.A. If she were some kind of time traveler, then stranding her at a convenience store in the middle of nowhere would not inconvenience her. If she were not, then to hell with her. I cursed my curiosity and my libido for getting me into this. I'd have to call the rental company tomorrow and return the car in L.A., and call the motel and have my luggage mailed to me. No big deal. What I hated was driving long distances late at night because of sleepiness and fatigue. Starting to drift off while at the wheel totally freaks me out. But after what I'd been through, I didn't want to stop at a strange motel. I needed the familiar comfort and safety of my home.

So I did whatever was necessary to stay awake. I listened to loud music, drank the other bottle of tea, ate more almonds, finished the Chili-covered Mangoes, rolled down the window and screamed obscenities at the top of my lungs into the cool night air. I finally found myself passing over the mountains through The Grapevine and saw the glittering, dusky lights of Los Angeles spread out below me. About forty-five minutes later, I was taking the exit to my Los Feliz neighborhood, just south of Griffith Park, and in ten minutes I was turning the key to the door of my dark apartment. It was just past 4 a.m.

I stepped into the darkness and made my way across the living room carpet toward the lamp on the table next to the couch. I turned the switch with a click, and like in one of those recurring dreams that suddenly turns into a nightmare, the light didn't work. Simultaneously, I heard a slight rustling sound behind me. I knew for certain that someone or something was with me in the darkness.

Suddenly, the possibility that everything the woman had said was true hit me in a wave, and a chill passed through me. If she were somehow already here, then it had to be true.

"Is that you?" I asked.

The voice that responded confirmed her amazing story. It was a vaguely familiar voice, but not hers. It was a man's voice. I couldn't place it for a moment. Then I realized where I'd heard it: on recordings of all the interviews I'd done. I froze in fear.

8

"No, it's *you*," said the voice. Then came a quiet mirthless laugh. "Sit down, my friend. What lies did that bitch tell you?"

Though I was afraid, my mind was still working. His response told me several things: he could see me well enough in the dark; he didn't know what I knew; and, judging by his manner of speaking, he may have been some alternate version of me, but he wasn't me.

I realized I hadn't even closed the front door. I thought of making a break for it, and must have made some subtle movement in that direction.

"Naaaahhhh. Sit down."

He was obviously very perceptive. I still couldn't see where he was. I decided the best thing to do at this point was to at least appear to be cooperative. I sat down in a chair. His dark form suddenly appeared to my right. He moved to sit on the couch opposite me.

"Good man," he said. "Now, what did she tell you?"

The knowledge that this man was probably going to try to kill me had me almost paralyzed with fear. I felt a horrible tension in my neck and a shrinking in my solar plexus. My palms were sweating. I couldn't feel my feet. I was so scared that I had difficulty talking, something I hadn't experienced since I was a small child. I decided not to try and be clever and bluff him because I didn't know what the hell was going on. Suddenly, one of the self-assured heroes in my comic book came to mind. I tried to take on this persona, almost as if I were speaking from a script.

I took a deep breath and said, "She said you were sent to kill me, to replace me." My voice came out even and calm. I could do this.

"I don't have to," he said. "Kill you, I mean. Yes, I do have to replace you. But there are options. Like *relocation*."

"She didn't mention that."

Again the mirthless laugh. "Of course she didn't. Did you believe everything she said? Not that I'd blame you. She's a looker, that one. Add enough sugar and you can't taste the poison."

I said, "No, I didn't believe her. As you can see, she's not with me, is she?"

"No, she's not. Where is she?" he asked.

I told him. This time his laugh was not without humor.

“Bravo! That’s the kind of stunt I would have pulled. Well done. Serves her right, sticking her anarchist nose where it doesn’t belong.”

I didn’t know exactly what “relocation” meant, but I didn’t trust him. He emanated a cold, calculating arrogance and worse, a disguised hostility that warned me of an imminent threat. It felt similar to when I was at the motel, as if I had some empathic or telepathic sense that was screaming out for fight or flight. But he was probably a professional assassin, and I was a comic book writer who hadn’t even had a decent workout for the last two weeks. I was hit with the sudden realization that I was very likely about to die. Of all the regrets I could have had at that moment, the only one I felt was abandoning the mysterious woman as I had. Despite how fantastic her story had seemed, I now knew that I had felt deep down that I could trust her, and that she had only had my wellbeing in mind, almost the same way I could tell that he didn’t.

He stood up. “So, are you ready to leave this world? I guarantee your new life won’t be in any way worse than the one you have now.”

“Sure, if that’s the only option,” I said. *Worse than the one I had now?* I suddenly realized what a wonderful life I had. And then it dawned on me that all of the people in my life—my parents, friends, artists, editors—would have to deal with this asshole, thinking it was me. I stood up and tensed myself. I knew he was going to kill me. I couldn’t escape him or beat him in a fight. But I sure as hell was determined to get at least one good hit in before I went down.

I could dimly see him now from the ambient streetlight coming through the blinds of the window behind me. He stepped forward, a slightly darker black than the blackness behind him. My heart pounded in my chest and my body trembled. I doubled my hands into tight fists as he got within a few feet of me.

And then, a dark angel flew in through the front door.

9

The dark angel moved in a black blur so quiet-quickly-deadly that I barely glimpsed it before it slammed into my doppelganger in front of me. The two became one dark mass of tangled limbs that crashed over a table, broke a vase, upended a chair, and collided with the far wall. I heard cries, thuds, grunts, and some kind of vibrating or humming sound. I tried the overhead light switch, but it didn’t work.

The two figures emerged by the couch as one dark writhing form. One of them seemed to have a dim golden glow coming from their hand, the other figure a similar glow of red. I was unable to see who was who, though I suspected my rescuer was the mysterious woman. I could have run out the front door, but if it was her, I was determined not to abandon her again, whatever the cost. They tumbled behind the couch. I moved closer, but was unsure how or whether to interfere. I tensed myself, waiting for some cue to act. It never came.

Within seconds from the time the figure flew in through the door, there was a final grunt, a thud, and then silence. Someone rose from behind the couch, a faint golden glow fading from their hand. I backed toward the front door.

“You sure know how to treat a girl,” said a strained female voice.

I let out a huge sigh of relief and moved toward her.

“Are you okay?” I asked, trying to support her.

“I will be,” she said, waving away my offer of help. She limped by me with a grimace and collapsed on the loveseat by the window to my left. Her head was bowed and she was breathing hard.

“I’ll get a candle,” I said.

“Don’t look behind that couch,” she said. “And this time, I mean it. Don’t look.”

“Okay,” I said. I went into the bathroom and retrieved a candle. I lit it with a match and placed it on the table. Then I closed the front door and came back and stood over her.

“You’re hurt,” I said.

She was not wearing the trench coat she had on earlier, just a dark green, almost black bodysuit with black trim, which had been torn at the left shoulder. And there, she had a rather nasty looking spot that had been cut and burned. Her face was red and covered in sweat and there was a small bruised gash on her forehead. Her wild black hair had been tied back, but a rebellious curl hung down over her left eye. She swept it away, but it simply fell back in place.

“I’ll live,” she said.

I ran to the bathroom and came back with a couple of wet towels and some antibiotic ointment.

“No, no,” she said. “That’s sweet. But just give me a few minutes.” She got up, limped to the bathroom, and closed the door.

I walked over and looked behind the couch exactly as she had told me not to do. His body lay on its side. I pushed it with my foot and it rolled over on its back. It was definitely me, but in better physical condition. Except for being dead. The eyelids were half-open, the eyeballs rolled up in the back of the head. A horrible bruised scorch mark was burned into his neck, shaped like a hand.

I went back to the loveseat and sat down, bending over with my head in my hands. I felt dizzy and slightly nauseated. I started to black out, and tried to sit up straight and breath deeply and slowly. I still felt numb and light-headed, but stayed conscious. Then I sunk back on the couch, exhausted.

I heard sounds from the bathroom: running water, a sharp intake of breath. She emerged a few minutes later. The rip in her garment was gone as if it had never been. The gash on her forehead was closed and looked like it had been healing for days. She looked fine, though she walked to the couch with a slight limp still in her left leg.

“Are you okay?” I asked, astounded at her quick recovery.

“I will be soon. I might have broken or dislocated something in my foot, but it’s being worked on now. Don’t ask, I’ll explain later,” she added as I opened my mouth to speak with a perplexed look on my face.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Really. I’m sorry I left you at that station.”

She sat next to me on the loveseat. “I’ll bet you are. But I had a feeling you might, so I gave you the opportunity. I knew the only way to bring his guard down was to leave you alone. It was risky, but it worked.”

“You planned that?” I asked.

“I improvised,” she said with a smile.

“He talked about a ‘relocation’ plan. There wasn’t one, was there?” I asked.

“Yes. He was going to relocate you six feet underground.”

“Sorry, it’s too soon to joke about it.”

She stared at me. “You looked, didn’t you? Behind the couch?”

I shrugged and stared at the floor.

She said, "Damn it, when are you going to start trusting me?"

"I'm sorry. I just...had to see."

She sighed and nodded. "Maybe it's best that you face these things. Do you finally believe me?"

"That it was really an alternate me? How can I not? You know...it's weird. I knew he was lying."

"You have what you might call a latent telepathic ability. I sensed it when we met. It might be one of the reasons that you're a pivot point for powerful reality shifts. I know this has been a long night. But it's not over."

"What do you mean?"

She said, "I wasn't just sent here to stop him. I was sent to recruit you."

"By any means necessary?"

"I'm not going to kill you, if that's what you mean. But *they* will."

"*They* will? But, he's dead."

She shrugged. "They'll send someone else. Soon. Probably another you."

"Shit. How many of me are there?" She didn't answer. "So, what am I supposed to do?"

"Come with me," she said. "You'll see and experience things you only imagined and wrote about in your comic book."

"Some of those things are pretty horrible."

"That's true," she said, nodding. "But some of those things are so wonderful that they'll outshine all the horrible things combined."

"What choice do I have?"

"You can stay and wait for them to come for you. Or you can leave with me. Tonight."

"Tonight!"

"Yes. We should already be gone."

"I don't know if I can do that."

Since seeing the face in the window, I had felt like a man overboard, adrift in a vast dark ocean. Now, I felt the panic of sinking under the surface of the unknown. Everything I had ever known was drifting away. She seemed to sense this and took my hand in hers. I knew she was probably only doing whatever was necessary to convince me, but when you're sinking under the waves, you don't question the intentions of the person offering you their hand.

She said, "I've been traveling alone for a long time. I could use a companion. I'll teach you the ropes. And you can keep me from going nutso." She gave me that controlled smile and a conspiratorial wink.

That latent telepathic sense she mentioned was continuing to awaken in my mind. I knew she was partly lying. And I somehow knew that the lie wasn't in her intent or the way she said it, it was in the facts. In my comic book, *The Never Men*, the agents seldom had a chance to establish long-term companionships with anyone. Their aloneness was part of their strength. They couldn't be controlled by threats to someone close to them because there was no one close to them. They never knew where they would be sent or for how long. And they were often sent on missions to worlds where they never existed and never officially would. That was another strength: they had no identity that could be traced, no personal history that could be exploited.

But maybe she really believed what she was saying. Or maybe, in her mind, a companion meant someone you were with for a few short months. In her life, maybe

that's how it was. It wasn't a very romantic notion, unless you believe that a lifetime of loneliness is romantic. It's not what I had hoped for. And yet, hadn't my life up to this point been very much that way?

As for her saying I had no other real choice, unfortunately, it rang true.

"Okay," I said, finally. "I'll go with you."

Her face relaxed and she now smiled with that vulnerable, goofy, girlish grin that I would come to know and love so well.

"Is it always this dangerous?" I asked.

"No. Can be," she said.

"I don't want to kill anyone," I said.

"You won't be asked to. But sometimes," she nodded toward the couch, "it's unavoidable."

I looked down at the carpet. "You saved my life."

"Maybe someday you'll save mine."

"I promise I will if I can." I turned and looked her in the eyes. "Okay. I'm in. So, what now?"

I expected instructions and explanations. Instead, she leaned in and kissed me. My first thought was that this didn't seem the right time or place. But then, it hit me. I'm not referring to the sexual charge, though that was there too. I found out later that her kiss was a catalyst. A subtle but powerful shift happened within me.

My physiology and psychic structure were being subtly altered even as our lips met and her tongue contacted mine. I felt my level of consciousness rise, and the perception of reality I had known up until then slipped from me like a pair of smudged faulty eyeglasses. I could psychically feel myself expanding into a new multiversal, multidimensional reality. I was sinking beneath the surface of that vast dark ocean. But instead of drowning, I was changing into a being that could swim through its depths, penetrate its darkness, and fathom its mysteries with a newfound power, vision, and awareness.

As she pulled away, I looked out on a new reality. I could perceive far beyond the world presently before me, and I could see in this world things I had never before perceived.

I had entered a wondrous reality that, only hours ago, I would have sworn existed only as a creation of my mind. But the alleged creator of that reality was so transformed that it was as if he had never existed.

I was now one of the Never Men.