

NEVER ENDING BATTLE



NATHAN ALDERMAN

You want to know the problem with a never-ending battle for truth and justice?

If it never ends, *you're doing it wrong.*

#

The ground is for poors. Real money takes the skies. They think they're safe from me up there. Heh. Suckers.

In a converted C-130 doing 350 miles per hour at 30,000 feet over Western Europe, behind inch-thick armor plating that's gotta be absolutely ruining the fuel economy, surrounded by a squad of the filthiest, most blood-soaked, 100% totally legal mercenaries money can buy, in a briefcase manacled to the wrist of a sweating, fishbelly-white man in a suit worth more than his life, sits an absolute fortune. I'm looking right at it. The man carrying the case is looking right at me.

Technically he's looking *around* me. But he doesn't know that.

"Heat sweep," calls the number two merc over the deafening whine of the engines, glancing at his watch. Guess it's been five minutes already. The others lower their guns, raise their thermal imagers, and repeat the command, like a family of meerkats popping their heads out of the ground. Adorable.

They know I can fold matter. Everybody knows that. They know I can fold space, obviously. They know I can fold light. Do they really think I can't work with the rest of the spectrum? Please. I figured that out like three weeks in. I'd feel sorry for them if I hadn't taken the time to pay my dark web friends to pull their files.

I don't feel sorry for any of them.

Well, okay, maybe that guy way in the back near the ramp. He's new, and he's never actually murdered anyone. At least, anyone who wasn't trying to kill him right back. I decide I'll go easy on him.

I fold myself right behind him and let the visible light spectrum wash back over me. Right now my mask's kind of a classic Renaissance number: sharp nose, devil horns. Oldie but goodie.

"We made it over France about fifteen minutes ago," I shout, loud enough to make sure he and everyone else hears me. "Ever been? It's nice this time of year."

He turns, raises his gun, and I fold us both about a hundred feet straight down.

It's cold, it's loud, it's hard to breathe, and we fall. I go limp, let myself bullet toward the ground. I act like I like this, because God knows I've had the practice, but honestly it still freaks me out. The wind roars in my ears and I can still hear him screaming, see in his eyes how he's replaying every life choice that led him to this moment. Good.

Then I fold him into the pool at a rental house in Nice. I cased the place beforehand to make sure it was vacant. That the pool was, you know, filled with water. I even left him a towel poolside. Five-star treatment all the way.

I mean, I'm number five on Interpol's most wanted list, number four on the FBI's – and perfectly fine with that, no yearning to enter the top ranks, because those dudes are *scary* – but I have rules. Mostly I'm proud of them, sometimes they suck, but they're still rules, and I still have them.

I couldn't live with the consequences if I didn't.

Me, I'm still falling, and I've learned through literally painful experience that momentum gets conserved through a fold. (Broken ribs heal, but I'm never getting those teeth back.) But I've also learned to work with that.

I fold myself 180 degrees, so now I'm shooting back upward, and I wait till apogee's eaten all my momentum to fold back onto the plane.

I come in right next to the poor sap with the briefcase. "Evening, Sam," I whisper in his ear, folding my mask into kind of an *oni* thing. Cultural appropriation, I know, but honestly that's the very least of my many, many, *many* crimes. "I fed your cats. Brought in your mail. Looked under your bed. Those are some surprising recreational choices, Sam. Color me impressed."

I don't so much *hear* as *feel* the very expensive keen of a brace of focused-energy rifles as they simultaneously charge up to blow large, well-cauterized holes in me.

"Excuse me, Sam," I say, taking in the firing squad. "Back in a second."

I'm guessing they've got the wavelengths set to organic matter only; I know for a fact their client considers human life cheap, but planes *cost*. Am I in trouble? Three, three-and-a-half on a scale of ten. I mean, yeah, I can fold light, but the thing you may have heard about light is that *it's very fast*, and honestly the trouble for me is not so much in the folding as the catching.

Of course, for that to be a problem they have to actually shoot at me first. And it's hard to do that when the end of your rifle just became the sizzling metal version of a paper crane, like all of theirs did. Oopsie. I'm a bad, bad man.

So, as I've mentioned, are they. They drop the guns and draw knives. I don't like knives. First off, they hurt, a lot. Second, emergency medical physicians neither appreciate it nor do their best work when you abduct them to stitch you up, no matter how well-equipped your personal

infirmary, or how sincerely you promise you'll bring them right back just as soon as you stop bleeding to death. Third, knife blades are so short that they don't leave me a lot of room for artistic expression.

I need to start spreading a rumor I'm vulnerable to swords. I could do so much with a sword. Balloon animals! Haven't done one of those in ages.

Instead I just fold the back hatch of the plane into an elaborate orchid, gritting my teeth as the metal rends and shrieks into neat geometric planes. My ears pop. Suddenly all these assholes have bigger problems than stabbing me, like "trying to remain conscious in a low-oxygen environment" and "grabbing onto something before they get sucked out into unforgiving sky." (They manage to do so, and I would have sent them somewhere on the ground if they hadn't. Nowhere pleasant, but still.)

Me, I'm folding the air around me. No wind to knock me off my feet. Might as well be standing in the desert at sea level. My new friend Sam's good, too; he's strapped in, got some nice emergency oxygen in easy reach. Probably a little cold – my coat's only doing so much, and I wore the winter one with the thick wool liner – but the deck tilts beneath us as the pilots see the loss of pressure warning and drop our altitude, so he'll warm up soon enough.

"Now, Sam," I say, jiggling the chain between his manacle and briefcase with one finger. "Where were we?"

I, as it turns out, was just about to get smashed against the bulkhead by the unmistakable full-body bruise of a sonic pulse. God, I hate these things. They screw up my inner ear, which for some stupid reason knocks out my ability to fold myself or anything bigger than a softball

through space for a few seconds. I really wish I hadn't discovered that on camera, in the middle of robbing the Oscars, in front of like a billion people, because now *everybody* sonic-pulses me.

Plus it always makes me puke.

(Again, not how one wants to be immortalized on a worldwide telecast. I sent Meryl Streep an apology card and enough cash to cover her dry cleaning bill. I really hope they got the stain out.)

I can't stop from horking, but I do at least manage to fold the space immediately in front of my mouth. I'm hands and knees on the deck, but my vomit makes an express trip onto the private bedsheets of a certain elected official who, let's be honest, *really* had that coming.

(It's not the worst thing he's ever had in his bedroom. Not even the worst bodily fluid. I know. I've popped in for a look around while he slept. I had to take *the longest shower* after that.)

"Been waiting for a shot at you, freak," booms an amplified voice. That would be the head merc, stomping across the deck at me in some kind of elaborate exoskeleton, lavishly appointed with the very latest in pointy shooty killy things. Excellent. I've been waiting for this ever since I read his file. I stretch out a hand – technically I don't have to, but it both *looks* and *feels* cool – and fold his elaborate armor open into a shape that Georgia O'Keefe would approve of.

And then it ... folds itself right back again. Huh. That's new.

"Oh yeah," Captain Testosterone over there shouts, as he – oh my God, he's *literally* beating his chest with one armored fist. This would be sad if I didn't know so much about him.

"We've been ready for you, asshole." Now I see the armor's ingeniously modular, tons of tiny

pieces with clever hinges that can reconfigure themselves on the fly. Frankly, that is *awesome*. I can't wait to see the civilian applications.

Then he hits me with another sonic pulse. Ugh. The helmet and coat baffle the worst of the concussive force, but I still dry heave, and it's not like I needed *more* bile in my mouth.

I gag, spit, and look up as the chief dickhead Robocops toward me. He raises one big metal-plated foot to crush my head like a beer can. "We didn't need to see you to see you coming." You just know he practiced that one in the mirror.

"Did you see this?" I cough. Then I fold his leg – not the suit, *his actual leg* – into a bowtie shape.

I wait for him to stop screaming long enough to suck in one big breath, and then I fold his right hand in half lengthwise. More screaming, and down he goes to the deck. I don't pull this trick often. But when I do, it's so, so worth it.

Now I can see the suit's power unit, and what I can see, I can fold. This one, I send into the lagoon at Epcot Center. Without it, the suit curls up and sloughs off, and it's just me and him.

"Captain," I say, giving my absolute sloppiest salute. "I see you made a soft landing after the dishonorable discharge. I mean, at least until this whole deal." He keeps ping-ponging between his ruined hand and his ruined leg, and I almost feel sorry for him. Almost. "What's the matter, Captain? I thought you were a legendary hardass. Or does that only apply to unarmed, wounded 14-year-olds?"

This guy took pictures after. Sent them to his friends. Bragged about having a "Willy Pete barbecue." From the position of what was left of the body, you could tell the kid had been alive and moving as he ignited. Captain Kill 'Em All wouldn't even be breathing free air if certain

folks in Washington hadn't decided that Actually, War Crimes Are Good Now, and beat the drum for this poor noble American hero. Bet right now he's wishing he'd gone to Leavenworth.

I open a fold and pluck a special little something out of storage back at the Blank Page. Hold it real close so he can see. An M15 white phosphorous grenade. If his eyes went any wider, they'd be obeying cartoon physics.

"I brought an old friend just for you," I say, and pull the pin.

A dazzling light suffuses me, the grenade vanishes from my hand in a shower of harmless sparks, and *oh come on* she couldn't have waited like five more seconds? There wasn't actually a *charge* in the damn thing. I just wanted to see this dirtbag sweat a little more.

But there she is, blonde hair streaming like Botticelli in neon, the glow from beneath her skin casting perfectly even and flattering lighting on her admittedly killer red, white, and blue uniform. America's Shining Sentinel. Our Lady of Illumination.

"Beacon!" I bellow, using my diaphragm to really project. Thank you, college production of *Evita*; the truth is, I never left you. "Do you mind? I'm kind of in the middle of a thing."

You don't really *hear* Beacon's voice; it floats through the inside of your head like warm honey. "It's been a busy night, Manifold, and I'm not really feeling the banter. How about we skip to the part where you're unconscious and in custody?"

Arguably we both know there's not a prison on earth that could hold me. I've heard some chatter about changing that from the Whisper Gallery, but they're still years away. "Aw, sweetums," I say, "for that you'd have to catch me."

That concludes the formalities. She punches a hard-light spike at me, and I fold myself and the head merc into the burn ward in Baghdad Medical City, just long enough to leave him

there to the kindness of strangers. Then I'm back on the plane, folding space into a fractal shield to disperse her next light blast. It makes a kind of cool disco effect on the walls, which she completely fails to appreciate when she punches right through it.

Yes. She *punches spacetime*. Beacon looks like your childhood neighbor's cool older sister and gives a great morning talk show interview, but people who underestimate her – a small and dwindling population, and I do not count myself among them – tend to rack up some serious hospital bills on top of their prison time.

I see the punch coming and fold myself behind her. As the pressure equalizes and we head groundward, the other mercs are starting to get up from whatever they managed to cling to, and boy, do they look unhappy. Two birds with one stone, then.

I make finger-guns and fold them each into very different coordinates in the space below the plane. Then, just as Beacon's turning, I fold myself onto the roof of the plane.

This buys me a few seconds. If I'd pulled this move without dumping the mercs, she'd be on me in, no pun intended, a flash. Being quantum-entangled with the universe has its perks, and I'm not just talking about her ridiculously perfect hair. I learned from our little set-to at Fort Knox back in the day that within, oh, about a fifty-mile radius, she can feel the space-time distortions when I fold. When I get away from her, I've gotta get *far* away, or not at all.

But she'll save the mercs. She always does. And while she's leaving afterimages through the sky to keep them from a well-deserved meeting with the ground, I'm folding the wings of the plane into squares.

Look, the folks in the cockpit wanted the plane to lose altitude, right? I'm just helping them accomplish that goal a little faster.

Time to check in with my good friend Sam. He's clinging to the safety harness on his seat, somehow even paler, which is really quite an accomplishment, and hugging his briefcase to his chest.

"You okay, buddy?" I ask as the plane's angle of descent notably steepens. "You're looking kinda queasy. Let's get you out of here, huh?" He tries to swat at me with the briefcase, but he doesn't dare let it go – they wouldn't have hired the mercs if this guy could fight – so it's easy to get in under his guard and undo the buckle. We start to float up together as the plane goes full vomit-comet freefall. Through the ruined cargo ramp above us, I see Beacon appear, lugging comical armfuls of terrified mercenaries, and looking less than pleased with me. I get the impression she *hates* saving planes. She does it like once a month. Must get boring.

I wave to her, and then Sam and I go through a fold to nowhere.

#

I mean, everywhere is *somewhere*. This particular place just has a lot less *where* than you'd expect.

I found the Blank Page about a week into my criminal career – not that I knew I was on that path at the time – and my reaction was a lot like Sam's is now: Just a whole lot of incredibly loud screaming. Great place for it, as it turns out, since this particular pocket dimension happens to be an endless white void. Or, I guess, something our brains perceive as a white void because we're not equipped to comprehend what it really is.

It's nice. I built a house here.

I let Sam scream it out while the Blank Page eats our momentum – it's really good at that – and when we've finally slowed to a halt, I fold us into my guest room.

I wish I could say it were cozy, but I don't tend to have guests around for very long, so mine is more a featureless box with no doors or windows, just a single hard chair and table. For extended guests there's a toilet waiting behind a wall I can fold away. (Like all the facilities here, it flushes through a randomly cycling series of folds above the lawns of a select list of Fortune 500 CEOs with dirty little secrets.)

I do also have snacks and spring water, though, I'm not a monster.

Sam hugs solid floor like it's his mom. One last shriek trickles out of him, helium from a party balloon, and then, because he's gotta regain some modicum of dignity, he crawls up into the chair and sits there, still hugging the briefcase.

"Hi, Sam," I say, offering the snack basket. "Granola bar? I've got oat and honey and ... ooh, one chocolate chip left." He shakes his head, so I help myself. Folding is hungry work.

"Why, uh, why am I here?" Oh, this poor man. He even *sounds* like a corporate training video.

"I think we both know that, Sam," I sigh, sitting on the table opposite him. "Your employer's been a naughty, naughty man." My mask becomes a multitude of wagging fingers. I fold the briefcase out of his arms – he yelps – and turn it inside-out in the air, catching the two plastic bricks that fall out. "You say you're going to a trade show. You transport everything physically so there's no data trail. I mean, sure, you can call them a private research firm if you want, but we all know those folks you had lined up to buy these beauties work for the Russian government."

“I didn’t know!” Sam bleats. Oh, *Sam*. I just shake my head at him. On the table my granola bar wrapper folds itself into a little stickman, who does likewise. We all know Sam’s lying.

“It’s part of the terms of service, okay?” Sam insists. “We’re not liable if no one reads them. It’s, uh, it’s been decided in any number of arbitrations.”

I test the heft of the hard drives, one in each hand. “It’s amazing how many million people’s data can fit on a couple of these nowadays. All the little details your boss has been harvesting from his unsuspecting customers. Enough, to, I dunno, tip an election or two with the right targeted ads and disinfo campaigns. For starters. Now, Sam, did your boss *really* think no one would find out?”

Frankly, Sam looked more comfortable when he was screaming into the void. “How did you – we didn’t even use email. We didn’t talk on the phone. I only knew like, half of this for sure?”

I give my mask ridges like the scales of a dragon, and some serious brows to match. I call this one The Intimidator. “Your boss can’t hide from me, Sam. No one can hide from me.” Because, I don’t say, I’ve got pinhole-sized folds in spacetime in his office, and every room in every one of his houses, and his private jets. Those were the trickiest. And I’ve got a teeny-tiny microphone on the other end of every one of them.

I can see Sam visualizing the end of his current career path. “So, uh, so what do you want?”

“Not much, Sam. Just a shit-ton of money. Let’s say, oh, a hundred times that pittance the FTC just slapped you guys with for all your little privacy oopsie-doodles.”

Sam looks like he's trying to swallow a human fist. I pat him on the shoulder reassuringly. "Now, Samuel, amigo, don't look at me like that! I've seen your books. Your boss is good for it."

I fold a card out of thin air – man, I love doing that – and slide it across the table to Sam, trying not to let the weird stinging I'm starting to feel across my chest and abdomen spoil the glow of imminent victory. "Now, I'm gonna send you safe and sound back to your shiny corporate campus. And you're going to take this number straight to your boss. He's going to wire the money to this account number in the Caymans within 24 hours, or I'm going to spill everything on these drives, and what you were planning to do with it, to a whole lot of people whose keen interest in that information will not please your shareholders."

He takes the card with both hands, the stub of his manacle jingling sadly, and nods.

"You've got the number, Sam?" Nods again. "Not gonna lose it?" Shakes his head. "Sure you don't want a snack? I've got yogurt pretzels." Another shake. "Fine. I'll see your boss's money in 24 hours. Give him my best, would you?" My granola-bar-wrapper man on the table waves bye-bye.

And then I fold Sam off to what I'm pretty sure will be his last day at work. Eh. He'll land on his feet. Literally, at least.

Of course, the second I get the ping from the Caymans that my money's arrived – thereafter, minus my finder's fee, to be sent to assorted deserving charities, through a web of shell companies so complex that I'm pretty sure there's a Minotaur in there – I'll be sending everything on these drives to the media, and the regulators, and a few sympathetic ears in Congress.

I've got a rep to protect as the world's greatest master criminal. I will not be upstaged by some pasty malcontent in Silicon Valley who can't even be bothered to put on a costume. (A hoodie doesn't count. Jesus, man, buy some *style*.)

Speaking of costumes, this burning feeling on my chest's getting uncomfortably familiar. Like a bad day at the beach. I fold myself out of the guest room into my bedroom and shuck my work clothes. There it is, across my torso – longitude and latitude, date and time. She sunburned it onto my skin. Backwards, even, so I could read it in a mirror. *Man*, she's good.

As I fold over to the infirmary to rummage for the aloe vera, I ruminate on how I had this coming. Last time I folded the paper with the meet details under the elastic of her bra strap, which come to think of it was probably a bit much.

Once I'm patched up and fortified with some naproxen – I'm gonna feel those sonic blasts in a few hours – I get my comfy sweats on, then fold over to the Whisper Gallery to check the recordings for interesting keywords. Slow day, although the one intern in Congressman Randall's office finally broke up with her no-good boyfriend, which is a relief. And wow, if people heard the kind of language the Senate Majority Leader uses in private, I gotta think he'd lose at least some of the values vote. Ha. No. Who am I kidding.

I drop by the studio, where I've been keeping all the stolen Confederate monuments. I'm gonna give them back. Just deciding which ones to fold so that their heads are literally lodged in a suitable orifice, and which ones to turn into giant fists with upraised middle fingers.

I pop into the Panopticon and make the mistake of trying the news, but it's still wall to wall nightmares, all children in cages and the smiling people who put them there. When Pierrot le Ghoul does that – I mean, he literally put children in cages, last month – he gets a beatdown

from Invisigoth and a free trip back to what is apparently the world's least secure psychiatric hospital. No one cheers for him. No Senators make his excuses. How does that make sense?

Of course, the kids Pierrot took were rich and white, so people, you know, *cared*. The guy's crazy, but he's not *crazy*.

I could end this shit right now. Like right this second. I've thought about it so many times. I could.

And I couldn't.

This is gonna come up at the coordinates, isn't it? It is. And I'm dreading that part in particular, as much as I look forward to the rest.

But I've had years of practice at *not thinking about it*, a skill that only gets handier with each passing day. So instead it's off to the couch with my laptop to catch up on some binge-watching, pop in the coordinates from my sunburn, and start checking out Yelp reviews.

#

You hear the Midwest is flat, sure, but you never really understand that until you go there. Even the ramp off the interstate is more of just a gentle bend in the road. I park behind the convenience store and its shabby gas pumps, back where the concrete's getting colonized by hardy weeds that wandered over from the farm next door, and bask in the nothingness. A thin mist's falling under gray skies, and the air smells like cardamom.

I'm driving one of the many anonymous, shitty cars I keep in the Blank Page for occasions like this, when I have to go out in civvies. I mean, the mask covers my whole face and does a decent job modulating my voice, and I can always selectively fold the light coming off my face to distort my features a little. But having people look at you funny because oh my God a

man just appeared out of thin air, or walked to a place you can only get to by car, tends to draw more attention than I want. The first time your trip for takeout dim sum gets interrupted by the FBI and SWAT, you start to take these things into consideration.

My phone dings in the parking lot. The wire transfer's gone through, and my systems are sending out all the dirty little secrets Sam was toting. That seems like a good sign.

I take my time walking in, past the convenience store shelves to the tacky-tacky little linoleum dining room with the cheap tables. I'm early, like fifteen minutes early, but I know she's already here.

"Hey, Cam." She looks up from a newspaper and waves me over from one of the few booths by the window. It's good to hear her voice – really *hear* it, traveling via ordinary sound waves and everything. She's short and brown and curvy and she won't do a thing with those eyebrows no matter how I beg her, and she's one of the most brilliant people I've ever had the privilege to know.

The bruises from yesterday leave me a little stiff getting into the booth, but I manage. "Hiya, Lucy," I say. "Glad to see you."

"Moving a little slow there," she grins.

"Yeah, well, the sonics hurt, but you know that."

"Please. Try being –"

"Disassembled. I know." Every time with this story. It wasn't even one of mine. Too brute force. Me, I like the classic deathtrap – the kind people make fun of for being easy to escape, because they don't realize it's actually just there to slow you down. "You got atomically disassembled the one time and now it's all you ever talk about."

“Because it hurt. A lot.”

“And you survived.”

“Damn right I did. And you *know* how much I hate saving planes, *culito*.”

“Damn right I do.”

And here we are. Beacon and Manifold, having lunch at the best Punjabi restaurant in Nebraska. Hoping we don’t have the same fight as always. Knowing we probably will.

#

Only the three of us know how it happened. Lucy, in the one blemish on her otherwise spotless record, told the government some cockamamie pile of BS, Mitch backed her up, and I’ve never been interested in contradicting them.

“Mitch” would be Mitchell Morgan, popularly known as Beacon’s Best Buddy. He and I were a thing before he and Lucy were a thing. Great guy, really. The fact that he’s never once bridled at being identified as, and I repeat, Beacon’s Best Buddy in the popular imagination backs that up. I keep telling Lucy she should put a ring on it. I mean, it can’t be easy living with the rumors that your long-term boyfriend’s spent years secretly shacking up with the world’s greatest superhero, who is of course also you.

Of course, Lucy being Lucy, she worries that if she makes it official, she’ll make him a target. I started calling her Lucy for this exact sort of ruthlessly pragmatic pessimism; you’re all set to kick that football, and she can’t help but yank it away. Poor Mitch already gets kidnapped by Baron Bathysphere or whoever at least once a year. If anything, getting hitched to his decidedly ordinary non-Beacon fellow physicist at the Pinnacle Institute would probably take a

little of the heat off him. But maybe she figures she doesn't need the extra stress. God knows she has enough of it as is.

Mitchell Morgan. Luz Libertád. Cameron Reece. (That's me, in the *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* t-shirt and the unfortunate haircut, making yet another little paper crane while Mitch and Lucy do math. It helped me think. Still does.) The only living souls who know the truth about that little accident after hours at the particle accelerator, where we were all earning graduate credits for Professor Lancashire and his cushy government grant.

Now, Mitch gets none of the blame. He stayed nice and safe up in the booth, catching one of his famous ten-minute power naps. It was like three in the morning at that point and we were all a little punchy. You probably remember that unique peak of stupidity you reach in your early twenties. Ours involved sneaking some after-hours time with billions of dollars of government equipment to prove the existence of dark matter.

Technically, the accident was both our faults. Her, for suggesting some component along the path of the beam was busted, and we should go into the machine to fix it, at three in the morning, hopped up on energy drinks and particle physics. Me, for the typo I made in line 1,387 of the code for the test we were running. The single misplaced character that unexpectedly hiccuped and turned on the accelerator without warning, way past the planned power threshold, without time for Mitch to shut it down, and with us inside.

And then –

(I think I don't let myself remember. Sometimes I think I can almost remember. That's even worse.)

Neither of us has ever said what we saw. Neither of us has ever asked. All I know is eventually I had to discreetly purchase the house I lived in when I was eight. Because when you wake up screaming in the middle of the night, in your pajamas, in your childhood bedroom – not where you went to sleep – it turns out the people who already live there don't really take it in stride.

When we came back it seemed like we'd never been gone. Maybe the power had cut out. We had no sense of lost time. It was dark inside the machine and Lucy said something about wishing for light, and then she *was* light. And then I wanted more than anything to be someplace safe, back at Mitch's, and the universe kaleidoscoped around us and we fell onto Mitch's coffee table and he dropped his bowl of oatmeal and screamed like a cockatiel, because we'd been dead for a month.

That was the first thing he did. Second thing was breathing into a paper bag for a few minutes while we all sat on his couch. Third thing was to go in his closet, haul out every old sensor and measuring device he had, and then start writing a spreadsheet. Like I said, great guy.

Lucy and I had seen this Spielberg movie before, and we both agreed that it probably ended in a bright sterile room someplace classified, with a whole lot of sharp objects and dispassionate observers. So we took our time coming back to life. We did what scientists do. We ran experiments.

Me, you know my whole deal already. Lucy – how do I put this? Lucy had basically *become* the Grand Unified Field Theory. The most powerful force in the universe, the key to discoveries mankind had been striving for in centuries, was maybe five foot eight in her least

structurally sound heels, and (despite basically achieving godhood) still had the kind of farts technically banned by the Geneva Convention.

I've stolen and returned the Mona Lisa on fifteen occasions, with a unique selfie for each one – my favorite is the one where Mona and I are about fifty feet above Victoria Falls and plunging fast – and that time figuring everything out remains the most fun I've had since I got these powers. I folded into NASA, stole a spacesuit, and walked on the Moon. Lucy flew up and met me. We had a picnic next to Neil Armstrong's flag. Pretty sure she sleeps up there some nights, in the quiet of the dark side, when the cries for help get too bad. I drop by the little cottage she built every now and then and leave a mint on her pillow.

Haha, fun times, upbeat montage. You know where this is heading.

One morning we turn on Mitch's TV and there's good old Professor Lancashire, holding a press conference to announce his bold new commercial venture. Mitch had gotten quietly but firmly fired after our little stunt, as one does when one's friends get vaporized on Uncle Sam's dime while one is literally asleep at the switch, so he didn't see this coming, either.

Didn't take us long to check out the patent applications and see that Lancashire was stealing his "dead" students' work, without so much as a thank you. Worse yet, he'd taken the data from the night the accelerator more or less killed us – the breakthroughs from the experiment Mitch and Lucy designed, the code that I wrote – and turned it into weapons. And he was making a mint selling to everyone the US government would allow him to. And, as it turned out, quite a few it wouldn't.

Mitch did his best, poor guy, to referee the screaming match Lucy and I got into that night. I mean, we were both pissed at Lancashire. Lucy could have drop-kicked him to Alpha

Centauri. But I was serious when I said I wanted to fold him into an active volcano. And Lucy knew it. She said my soul wasn't worth it. Quintessential Lucy.

She said we'd figure something out. Work the system. Prove he'd stolen our ideas. I said that was bullshit, and that the system was designed to work for people like him over people like us every time.

I don't blame Lucy for thinking differently. Her grandpops was a *bracero*, her dad enlisted in the Army, and here she is on a bullet train toward a Ph.D. Her whole life story is a tapestry of keeping your head down, working your ass off no matter what, and getting what you deserve.

My dad was a hedge fund asshole who fucked his way through a soap opera's worth of comely executive assistants while Mom sat at home on the couch, letting the depression eat her alive. He tossed me out of the house the first time I brought a boy home, because that, wow, *that* ran against his strict moral fiber. And all the years I was washing dishes or serving beers or any of the other shit jobs I did until I finally landed the scholarship that brought me to Lucy and Mitch, I got to watch his houses get bigger, his cars get louder, his wives get younger.

Yeah, I know how the system works. And who it works for.

That night, that was Beacon and Manifold's first real battle. Lucy got so mad at me she was making half the stuff in Mitch's apartment levitate without even realizing it. At last I just folded myself off to the top of St. Paul's Cathedral – bad choice, it was rainy and cold as hell – and shivered and fumed and waited for her to come find me so I could apologize and we could go home. She didn't.

So a week later I put on that first crude version of the mask, and I folded into the middle of the groundbreaking of old Lancashire's corporate HQ. Folded the giant scissors he used to cut the ribbon into a pretty damn good approximation of the face of a screaming child. Bent the cops' gun barrels at right angles, and made their squad cars into great big origami swans.

And just as I was about to send Lancashire on a very short, one-way Hawaiian vacation, she showed up. I didn't recognize her at first, but I sure recognized the powers. And that look in her eye, so disappointed, just before she pulled her punch so that it only dislocated my shoulder. (Last time that ever happened, by the way – her pulling a punch, or me letting one land.)

I got away. Took all of Lancashire's notes and IP with me, even the stuff he'd kept in his safe back home. He couldn't replicate it because he hadn't come up with it. His company collapsed in a pile of lawsuits, and that was before Beacon nudged one of the many reporters bugging her for an interview toward the wire transfers his company had been getting from some very suspicious locales.

Thanks to that investigation, and Beacon's personal testimony, Lancashire's rotting in jail now. I go visit him sometimes when he's sleeping. Leave a plumeria flower on his chest. A little souvenir of the islands.

A whole lot later, I'd ask Lucy why the disguise. Sure, right, complete control of every atom in your body; I'd probably go around wearing *Fight Club*-era Brad Pitt 24/7, if we're honest. But why the blonde hair, the white skin?

She just looked at me for the longest time. So yeah, maybe I'm not the only one who knows how the system works.

Anyway. You know the rest. Lucy cooked up a hard-light duplicate of Beacon and had her taller, blonder doppelgänger announce that she'd rescued poor lost Luz Libertád from – you know, I can't even explain it with a straight face, it's so stupid. People will believe anything if you're literally glowing and levitating when you say it, I guess.

Cameron Reece stayed dead.

And Manifold started rearranging the world into a shape he could stand to look at, one nasty little stain on humanity at a time.

But every time I'd get the drop on some craven dirtbag who definitely was not a proxy for any unresolved feelings toward my dad, every time I'd think, *this time for sure, this time I'm gonna unfold his torso and let him get a good look at just what he's made of* – I'd see Lucy's eyes, disappointed, staring out at me from someone else's perfect face. I'd settle for robbing the asshole blind, with a generous side of public humiliation, and maybe a limb or two rearranged if they got salty. And *this time* would become *next time*, same as always.

I think in the end that's what saved me: the not killing anyone. Saved me from her, from myself, from the fact that living as a supercriminal in a big white void is not exactly good for the old mental health. I was getting to the point where I'd abduct perfect strangers from public transportation just to have someone to talk to. I'd put out the good towels, cook a nice meal. But it ruins the vibe when you're trying to have a discussion about art and they're showing you pictures of their kids and begging you not to kill them.

Sure, I always made it up to them. Discreetly paid off some debts, plopped a legally purchased car in their driveway, that kind of thing. But around the time there were enough

“Manifold Survivors” to fill a panel discussion on the news, I started to see how those gestures might come across a little empty.

She reached out first. I came home limping and dizzy from an unsuccessful attempt to make a large public withdrawal from the Federal Reserve, and there, scorched into the lining of my coat, were the coordinates to what turned out to be the middle of the Gobi Desert. I brought a quantum destabilizer – not enough to kill her, but she’d have a bad twenty minutes or so. She brought a null field generator – I could have escaped it, eventually, but points for effort – and takeout from our favorite Thai place in grad school.

Eventually we left the deathtraps and countermeasures at home. Those things take *effort*, and when you come home from work at the end of a long day, you just don’t have the energy, you know?

You don’t meet a lot of people you can talk to in this line of work. Most of the folks on my side of the line are, phew, woof. Psychopaths are supposed to at least possess superficial charm, but maybe the megalomania cancels that out. Plus I’ve stolen from or double-crossed most of those dinks at this point, so they already want to kill me.

I guess Lucy could go chat up Invisigoth or something, but that dude has no off switch. I pulled a job in his city once. Never again. Not that I couldn’t take him; he’s a guy in a suit with some cool stuff he bought with his parents’ money. It just took too much effort to keep from laughing every time he opened his mouth. Sometimes when I’m feeling particularly low, I’ll glare at myself in the mirror and tell myself to TASTE DARK JUSTICE, and then I’m on the floor and I can’t breathe and my ribs hurt, but in a good way. So yeah, I’ll bet he’s a riot at parties.

Lucy pledged her life to upholding truth and justice and blah blah blah. I'm here to break shit artistically, get that money, and hurt people who have it coming.

Our professional lives, all the stuff that makes the papers, that's not kayfabe for the rubes. If I were in costume and she were suited up and we were, say, in the Bank of England, she would be trying in great earnest to chuck me in jail, and I would absolutely and unrepentantly deserve it.

But she's still my best friend. And I, thank whatever applicable deity or scientific principle you care to, am still hers.

#

America's Shining Sweetheart orders lamb biryani from the kind-eyed lady who comes to take our order. The Fractal-Folded Fiend – that's yours truly – gets the mango chicken. We split some palak paneer and garlic naan.

"This is so good," she sighs, eyes closed like the taste of tandoor-baked flatbread is drowning out the bazillion different cries for help she must be hearing from everywhere on the planet at once. Maybe it is. I hope so.

"Do you think Invisigoth and Pierrot le Ghoul ever do this?" I say. "Like, maybe there's a certain McDonalds off the interstate outside of Knightsburgh..."

"Oof," Lucy winces. "That's like the only way those two could possibly be more unhealthy."

"TWO BIG MACS AND A DIET COKE," I growl, in my best Invisigoth: Imagine a pissed-off Cookie Monster who had a really shitty childhood. "AND CAN I GET FRIES WITH THAT."

“You shouldn’t make fun,” Lucy scolds. “You’re the one who teamed up with Pierrot.”

She will never let this go. “Look, I’ve told you, I thought he was doing a bit.” Turned out, right around the time the busload of kids and the barrel bombs showed up, that nope, he was *not* carrying out the whole homicidal-maniac thing ironically. I took the kids home, kept the ransom and the contents of his Swiss bank accounts, and left him folded in a pretzel outside Police Headquarters. He’s like quadruple-jointed, so that was basically a quiet Wednesday for him, but still.

“I told you it was a bad idea,” she grins.

“And apparently” – screw it, I’m stealing the last piece of naan – “you’re going to keep telling me.”

“As long as it remains a bad idea, yes,” she says. “Yes I will. So only until the sun goes out.”

She smiles, but up close I can see lines around her eyes, a few threads of silver in her hair, and it worries me. Complete control over every atom in your body means that whether you want to or not, you look how you feel. And I’ve seen her looking better, even when she’s not all tall and blonde and glowy.

“So how’s Mitch? How’s the lab?” I ask.

She eats like someone has a gun to her head. Probably wondering how long she has before someone, I dunno, unleashes a giant robot on Osaka. Don’t laugh. It’s happened. “Good, they’re good,” she says, with her mouth full. “That grant funding came in, so we can start building the new thorium reactor.” She stops, gives me the stinkeye. “That wasn’t you, was it? The grant money?”

I raise my hands in protest, the picture of innocence. It really wasn't me. But she has this thing about accepting "ill-gotten gains," no matter how much I try to explain to her how those gains were gotten by the people I got them from. She won't even let me pick up a check. Which, hey, free lunch. I'm not gonna complain.

She keeps me on the hook a second longer and then gets back to eating. "Mitch says hi. Sends his love. You're invited for Thanksgiving, by the way. He's insisting on doing the turkey this year."

"Oh, that cannot end well," I say. Mitch can do four-dimensional math in his head, but put him in a kitchen, and the kind of havoc he perpetrates make me look like an amateur.

"Which is why you should come. Zip zap, a little space fold, discreet turkey switch. He'll know if I try to do it. He says the food tastes magical. But you're crafty like that. You could pull it off. And bring Dylan. How is Dylan, anyway?"

Honestly, right now I would rather be hit by a sonic blast. I'd welcome it. "He's good, yeah. Dylan is good. He's in Paris, editing a new novel. And dating the author. Who is twenty-five."

Lucy sucks in air through her teeth and grimaces. "Oh, Cam, I'm sorry."

"It's fine," I lie. I've been folding into his apartment once a week to hide his keys and mess up the cataloging on his record collection. "You know how it is. I was always too tired to go to the club. And he kept asking where I was disappearing to."

"I knew he was wrong for you," Lucy sighs, shaking her head.

"Oh, come on, you loved him. You literally just invited him over for Thanksgiving."

“One with the universe,” she grins, pointing at herself. “I knew. He was wrong for balls balls *hijo de puta* dammit!”

Uh oh. I know that look. She’s multitasking.

“Is everything okay?” The fine muscles around her eyes are taut. She’s focusing on the middle distance. Something somewhere in the world has gone wrong, and she’s handling it. “Do you need to go?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” she says, clearly not. “Crane collapse in Chicago. The dupe’s got it.” So she’s having lunch with me and remote-piloting a hard-light copy of her alter ego hundreds of miles away. I’ve seen her do this before, but if she’s hungry or tired it gets a lot harder for her.

“I’m gonna go to the bathroom,” I say. “For totally normal excretory reasons.”

“Sit, eat,” she says, but she’s staring at the formica tabletop. “It’s okay. It’s okay. We deserve an hour off.”

“I’ll be right back,” I say. “Won’t even know I’m gone.” I get directions from the waitress, lock myself in a stall in the blessedly clean accommodations, and fold to the top of the Willis Tower. Got it. Blur of light firefly-darting around a listing crane at the river’s edge just north of the Loop.

I move to the roof of Marina City, light folded around me, invisible, just in time to see a chunk of the crane tear loose in Beacon’s hands and rake across the glass face of a skyscraper. I fall forward off the roof into spacetime and come out inside the building as the floor tilts, glass everywhere, people sliding and screaming deathward.

I fold the glass up and around us, scoop the people safely to the ground, wrestle with a buckling support column that wants to bend and take out this whole face of the building. Finally

I show it who's boss. Heh. Maybe I should launch a side career as the heroic Dlofinam, the Un-Folder.

By now Beacon's got the crane back upright, welding it in place with heat beams from her hands. I join the crowd on the ground, still invisible, the people I saved looking at each other stunned and asking questions.

"Beacon saved us!" I shout from inside my little envelope of light. "Oh, man, Beacon saved us all!" And that bends the crowd chatter into cheering. I head back to Nebraska, flush, wash my hands, and brush some plaster dust off my jacket before I rejoin Lucy. Sweet. She ordered us the sticky rice pudding for dessert.

"You know me so well," I say, digging in before I've even sat down.

"You didn't have to do that," she says, but she's wearing that particular expression where she wants you to think she's mad but she's really not.

"No idea what you're talking about," I said. "Nice restrooms here. Very clean."

I see her hands trembling on top of the folded newspaper, a split-second before she gets them to stop. She lets out a long deep breath.

"Hey," I say. I put a hand on hers. "Seriously. This doesn't look like okay."

"It's just so much," she says, barely more than a whisper. "I haven't had more than two hours' sleep in months. Last time I went to the moon for a night, I woke up and a jetliner had gone missing. All those people I could have saved. I don't need sleep. I'm not supposed to. But I still *feel* like I need it." She pokes listlessly at her pudding with the tip of the cheap diner spoon. "If they – if people could just stop – just for five seconds stop and –"

She sighs again and pushes the newspaper away. “This is my problem. I need to read less of this. It’s not helping anything.”

Don’t say it don’t say it don’t say it. “You could,” I say. “You could help everything.” And see, this? *This* is why I’m a supervillain. I see the fight in front of me. I could very easily step around the fight. And I lift up my big dumb feet and walk right in.

“Don’t.” There’s a bright line in her voice. “Don’t start.”

Change the subject. Come on, sports. The weather. Reality television. “Fine. I’m the bad guy, then.” Cam, you moron. “I could help everything. You think I haven’t thought about it? I found this spot in the Pacific where none of the shipping routes go. No planes fly overhead. Just open water. A square mile of ocean could make the world such a better place.”

“I’d stop you,” she says. “You know I would. I wouldn’t hesitate.”

“And if you did,” I say, “do you honestly think that would subtract from the net evil in the world? Or add to it?”

“And what then?” she asks, hands clenched to fists. Yep. Now we’re in this. No way out but through. “How many people are you going to fold away? Where does it stop? And what if the next guys piss you off? You gonna see to them, too?”

“Well, I mean, large swaths of the federal bureaucracy effectively run themselves —”

“Don’t you dare joke about this,” Lucy says, and means it. Static electricity crackles and sparks on the salt and pepper shakers.

“So you’re happy with all this, then?” I say. “You can live with it? With kids in jail just for existing on one side of a made-up line? That, and the other stuff, and the *other* other stuff, this whole roiling raccoon-infested fascist trash fire, that’s your idea of truth and justice?”

Lucy sets her jaw and clenches one manicured hand so hard onto the tabletop that it leaves dents. “That’s not the point.”

She looks at the damage, exhales. “Shit. I didn’t mean to do that.”

I wave my hand over the dents, folding them back into place. Peace offering.

“Okay, fine,” I say. “What *is* the point?”

She digs the heel of her palms into her eyes and takes a deep breath. “The point is that I’m not like them and I never will be,” she says. “I *can’t* be. Using power because you can, because you have it, whether or not you’re supposed to, whether or not it’s right. Power for power’s sake. I didn’t get this for its own sake. It has to mean something more than just me doing whatever I want because I feel like it.”

I sit with that for a second. Usually this argument ends with silent glaring and curt agreement to disagree. This is new. “Okay. I get it. I mean, it totally sucks, but I get it.”

“It absolutely sucks.” She lets out a sad little laugh. “And don’t even try to tell me you’d do differently. I know you. If you were gonna do your square mile of ocean thing, you would have done it a long time ago.”

“Yeah, well,” I say. “Like you said. If I start, where do I stop? What if I just make things worse? I don’t, uh —” My throat’s getting tight. Wait, am I going to cry? In an Indian restaurant in Nebraska? Please, man. Have some dignity. “I mean, I will ruin some greedy asshole’s day, month, year, life, seven days a week and twice on Sunday, and I will feel *great* about it. But I don’t want to be the kind of person who – these people have it coming, they *so* have it coming. But I don’t want to find out that I could do it. I don’t want to know how much I’d like it. Or worse, realize I didn’t, and then it’s too late. I don’t want to be that.”

I don't want to think about how you'd look at me.

I take a big old snork through my nose, muscle down whatever kind of emotion was about to clamber all over me, and try to clear my throat to cover it all up. Smoooooooooth. I am a functioning adult, yes sir. "Anyway," I say, tapping the newspaper. "You could do *something*. Put that foxy blonde to use. Hold a press conference."

"And then I'm on one side, and a good chunk of the country's on the other," she sighs. "And people double down, because that's what people do when they feel attacked, and plus there's a whole giant machine made out of greedy *culos* ready to feed on that. No. I picked the name because I wanted to be a guiding light. Lead by example, like my dad. No one's gonna listen to me if they think I'm judging them. But you, master criminal, mister *maldito*, you could break in any time you like. Send all those people to the Bahamas or Boise or wherever they wanted to go."

"A hospital," I say. "The correct answer is, 'a hospital.' But no, I've thought about it."

"And?" She pauses, last bite of rice pudding poised in midair.

"And I'm the bad guy," I say. "So if I'm helping these folks, they just look *more* like the enemy. And then maybe their guards get carte blanche to really get ugly with the ones who are left. More money. Thicker walls. Bigger guns."

"Everybody digs in," Lucy sighs.

"Everybody digs in," I say. "Raccoon-infested fascist trash fire."

"Too bad they can't, I dunno, put one of those camps over a diamond mine or something," Lucy says, smiling to the waitress and signaling for the check. "At least then you'd have an excuse."

I feel my heart lurch. Am I levitating? Has time stopped? Neither of those things is exactly impossible in my experience.

Lucy looks at me like I'm having a stroke, which has to be confusing, because she'd *know* if I was, and I'm not. I hope I'm not. "What? What is it? Cam, why are you looking at me like that?"

An unstoppable smile conquers my face.

"Lucy," I say, "you magnificent genius."

#

So, funny story, the Pinnacle Institute held a nationwide lottery to determine where to unveil its prototype portable thorium fusion reactor, keystone to our green energy future. And wouldn't you know it? El Paso, that lucky city, won.

The thing about portable thorium fusion reactors is they're *crazy* valuable. Total supercriminal bait. Look, if you generate a stable, self-sustaining reaction that releases more energy than it consumes, then frankly you're just asking for it.

And when, lo and behold, that dastardly Manifold showed up just as Drs. Mitchell Morgan and Luz Libertád were firing up the prototype for the first time – I made sure to cackle maniacally, because my cackle is *world class* and everyone should be lucky enough to hear it – who should happen to arrive moments later but Beacon? I mean, what are the odds?

If she happens to punch me into the middle of, oh, I don't know, a squalid detention center where the government's keeping hundreds of desperate, sick people under an overpass in oven temperatures with barely any access to showers, hey, she couldn't *possibly* have calculated that trajectory in the spur of the moment. Collateral damage. These things happen.

It's not like she has a lot of experience actually laying a finger on me. Funny about the dramatic increase in her success rate now. I must be having an off day.

And if, while we're shouting at each other about who will or won't ever get their hands on that reactor, which is worth billions on the black market, muahahaha, we use the walls and fencing and general overall structure of the detention center as impromptu shields or weapons? If amid all the smoke and chaos and destruction, large groups of people being held there suddenly find themselves folded to bus stations around the Southwest, along with the kids from whom they've been separated? If they're welcomed by various groups of wonderful human beings who, funded with generous anonymous donations from a certain incredibly handsome master criminal, were tipped off to show up with food and water and medical supplies and safe places to stay ready and waiting?

Oops. Can't imagine how that ever happened.

Or will continue to happen for as long as it needs to.

Beacon is absolutely one hundred percent kicking my ass. There's a nonzero chance I end today as a sort of loose puddle of collagen. My coat's ruined, a chunk of my mask is just a big sizzling hole, I've puked like twice already, and I'm sure I'll get in at least one more dry heave before I make my escape. If I make my escape.

Also my dentist's gonna be mad at me.

But right as she's winding up to knock me through what's left of the guard post, Beacon looks me square in the eye, and I swear to God she actually winks.

Bring on the punch. Bring on all the punches. I could *live* in this fight.