

To Become a Hero

Twenty minutes left. The Marksman's eyepiece indicated how much time he had left before his mission was over, but it didn't indicate whether or not he would be successful.

Crime-fighting was almost becoming a routine. His back pressed against an alley opposite the First Bank of Madison City, he checked his custom pistol once again. Four tranquilizer darts, four criminals – if his intel was right. It was usually close enough.

Another ten minutes crept by as the Marksman idly fingered the pistol. Strange, he thought, that even a robotic hand could get bored. He would cross-check the software when he got home, but it could just be adapting to his brainwaves. When his arm below the elbow had been made of flesh and blood, he would constantly tap his fingers, play with stray objects, or practice making fists whenever a boring situation presented itself.

He used to be in boring situations all the time, he recalled. But those days were long behind, and now stopping a bunch of nameless criminals from committing a minor bank heist was among the least interesting of his exploits.

If his time ran out, though, his night would get even less interesting.

The Marksman could see his breath – the air was humid and cold, and the weatherman had predicted rain. So far, though, the night had been dry.

Eight minutes left.

When the Marksman's eyepiece ticked down to 4:59, his quarry appeared. Four men, dressed all in black, who approached the side entrance of the bank, one with a small toolkit. Two of the men brandished guns.

Maybe other superheroes would have made a big show of the event. They would have jumped in, told the perpetrators that their evil deeds would end, that they'd be sent to jail. Well, other superheroes had invulnerability or flight or laser-vision. Other superheroes had superpowers.

Instantaneously following a signal from his brain – HOSTILE – crosshairs appeared on the four targets. His bionic arm followed in response. He felt a subdued, numb sensation as his false finger pumped the trigger one, two, three, four times, and then the men were on the ground.

The cops would be around to pick them up soon enough. The Marksman's work was done, with four minutes and thirty seconds to go. He turned around and began to make his way back through the alley. There was nothing left for him to do here.

The eyepiece beeped, and he instinctively spun around, empty gun already pointed at the newly-identified target, who hovered before him, blocking the moonlight that beamed down from above the bank.

Form-fitting red costume, with a golden insignia on his chest and a face mask that covered his eyes, ears, and hair. Dark skin, bristly black goatee, smile pearly enough to blind a goddamn sun god. Emblem of the Madison City Superhero Alliance on his left breast. Madison City's favorite son.

"Paragon," the Marksman stated, dripping with all the amiability of a striking cobra. "Thanks for the backup, buddy. Couldn't have done it without you."

"Shut up, Silverstein." The Paragon landed at the mouth of the alley and took measured, purposeful steps towards the Marksman.

Three minutes left.

"So what's up?" The Marksman ambled towards a dumpster and leaned against it, holstering his gun and reaching up to scratch his back with his bionic arm. "You here just to ride me again, or could it be that you actually have something to say?"

"We go through this bullshit every two weeks, Silverstein," the Paragon continued, standing an arm's length away from the Marksman. "I tell you to get the hell off the streets, you shrink back into your apartment in terror, and lo and behold, you come back, ready to vanquish evil. Fight the goddamn good fight."

"Why, you're welcome, Paragon," replied the Marksman, stretching his triceps. "It was no problem at all to make the city safer from crime. I'm glad you appreciate my efforts."

The Paragon's eyes narrowed and a hand shot out to grab his adversary. His blow left a dent in the dumpster as the Marksman twirled out of the way and unsheathed a weapon he kept on his back.

Smirking, the Paragon turned to face him. "Cute," he said. "How gallant of you. Now you've got a freaking sword. And here I thought that you were some kind of gun nut."

"Guns are dangerous, Paragon. Didn't you see that Michael Moore movie?" The Marksman's eyes locked with the Paragon's, and he kept his rapier aimed at his enemy's heart.

Paragon was one of the standard-issue capes: super-strength, flight, limited invulnerability, all that garbage. He was the last son of a dying planet or caught in a nuclear explosion or bitten by a radioactive politician or something. The Marksman didn't have any of that, but he didn't need it. Perfect accuracy was his weapon of choice, and he knew how to use it.

One minute, thirty seconds – more than enough time to wipe that stupid sneer off of Madison City's beloved sham once and for all. The Marksman waited for the Paragon to make the first move and counted: one minute, twenty-nine, one minute, twenty-eight...

Zero.

"What the hell?" The power fled from the Marksman's bionic arm, as his eyepiece shut down and the weight attached to his right elbow became unbearable. He crashed to the ground as a small ball of light appeared in the palm of the Paragon's cupped hand.

“I can drain electricity, Silverstein. Bet you didn’t know that.” The ball of light dissipated as the Paragon clenched his hand into a fist.

“Boy, you’ve got everything,” the Marksman muttered as he struggled to detach the now useless-appendage, still clutching the glittering rapier. “Now if you could only grow a pair, you’d be a real boy.”

“Sticks and stones.” The Paragon shrugged and grabbed the Marksman by the collar, yanking him up so that they could speak face-to-face. The Paragon’s breath was hot and smelled vaguely of mint.

“I’ve got a proposition for you, Silverstein. Want to hear me out?”

“Can I say no?”

The Paragon’s signature smirk returned. “Not really. Let’s get one thing straight: I don’t like you. When you first got that stupid arm-and-eyepiece ensemble and submitted an application to the Alliance, I thought it was the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Yeah, it was a much better idea to throw away an asset in the never-ending fight against evil. What was I thinking?” The Marksman struggled vainly to break his opponent’s grip.

“You wanna know what it takes to make a real hero, Silverstein? Try superpowers. I can fly. Madame Mystic can read minds. Hell, even Squid Man can communicate with mollusks.”

“Yeah, that’s great,” the Marksman shot back. “Talking with slugs. That’ll really help when the next supervillain attacks. Much more useful than a natural master of every weapon ever conceived by man, machine, or alien.”

“That’s not a superpower. That’s a parlor trick.” The Paragon threw the Marksman against the now-dented dumpster, who collapsed once again, still unable to rid himself of the useless hunk of metal. “That’s technology, the kind of thing the cops or the army could use. But you’d rather withhold it. You’d rather pretend to be one of us. What we possess are gifts. That’s what makes us heroes.”

The Marksman lowered his gaze and considered his fingernails. His voice was quiet. “I don’t think that the cops and the army should have to go through what I went through for this.”

“Boo-hoo. Life’s a bitch and then you die.” The Paragon reached into a concealed pocket in his ensemble and handed a folded piece of paper to the still-buckled Marksman. “I think you’re a joke, Silverstein, but Ms. Miracle thinks you might have what it takes to join us. She says it’s easier than trying to talk you out of it. I think you’ll probably just get yourself killed, which is OK as far as I’m concerned.”

The Marksman unfolded the crinkled paper, which contained a photo and a brief description of a girl in her early twenties. Blond, pretty, with blue, quivering eyes. She looked like she was already dead.

“Jane Lawrence,” the Paragon continued, “one of our girls in green over in Iraq. At least until recently. She was assigned to guard duty at an American holding facility, and basically started up a scandal that made Abu Ghraib look like Jailhouse Rock.”

“So what? I’m not going to Iraq.” The Marksman finally detached his false limb, and left it on the ground as he used his left hand and right stump to prop himself up.

“Fine, because she’s not there.” The Paragon eyed the metallic oddity on the ground. He looked like he was going to crush it. “One General Vakaran brought her

home, put her in a prison. But what a shame to let a creative girl of her talents go to waste, he thought. He signed her up as a volunteer for a super-soldier serum. Wanted to send her back overseas and let her loose.”

“So we’ve got our very own Captain America.”

“This isn’t a comic book, Silverstein. She got the serum, and it worked – then she broke loose. She’s somewhere in Madison City, but we can’t touch her.”

“What’s the matter, Paragon?” the Marksman grinned. “Afraid to hit a girl?”

“She’s legally the responsibility of the U.S. Army. That’s out of our jurisdiction. You want to track her down, though, be my guest. You’re not one of us – we don’t give a damn what you do.”

“So what, I’m your lackey now? No thanks.” The Marksman crumpled up the sheet of paper and threw it at the Paragon’s feet.

The Paragon grabbed the sheet of paper and flew in front of the Marksman, hovering. “You wish you were good enough to be a lackey. You’re nothing but a vigilante.”

“Oh, don’t go throwing the v-word around. It isn’t nice.”

“Bring her to us by tomorrow night.” The Paragon slammed an open palm into the Marksman’s chest, stealing his breath, and leaving the paper firmly attached to his shirt. “You want to be a superhero? Do something right for once.” And with that, he flew off.

The next evening, Joshua Silverstein sat at his dining room table. He glanced to his left: fourteen stories above Madison City, he could see that the sun was just beginning

to set, and its rays reflected off of the river, illuminating the bridge out of town. To his left, the television droned on the counter separating the dining room from the kitchen.

Joshua looked up when he heard a familiar voice emanating from the glowing box. “It was my pleasure to foil that robbery last night,” the Paragon spoke, smiling, and shaking the mayor’s hand. “The Superhero Alliance will always protect the citizens of Madison City. We’re here to fight the badguys.”

The Paragon flew out over the crowd, high-fiving little boys and girls as he swept past them. The newscasters’ eyes beamed; their voices blazed in admiration. Joshua flipped the TV off, sighing. He surveyed the bed where his wife used to sleep, and his eyes came to rest on the adjacent closet, where his costume now rested: a mask, a trenchcoat, gray shirt, blue jeans. The eyepiece and bionic arm were charging on his dresser. They’d be ready soon.

So would he. The glare of the sun made Joshua’s reflection visible in his laptop screen as he completed a client’s tax return. His black hair had grown to shoulder length and he had developed a stubbly beard since he started working from home, but that was good. It added to the mystique.

He reached for a nearby coffee mug, only to discover for the millionth time that his right arm ended at the elbow. With a drunkard’s grace, he grasped the mug with his left hand and dribbled coffee on his keyboard as he brought it to his lips. Tonight, the world believed that Joshua Silverstein would enjoy a quiet evening at home. But the Marksman had a job to do.

He found Jane around 8 PM, down by the riverside pier. She was dressed in ratty desert fatigues and a matching hat and boots. The Marksman had been building-hopping to find her, and found a ladder immediately. As he climbed down, his eyepiece designated a HOSTILE target, and an arrow at the edge of his perception indicated which direction she was to be found.

As the Marksman approached her, he unholstered his tranquilizer gun. Four darts, one target – he wasn't taking any chances. With his fleshy left hand, he drew his rapier. He could always switch hands if she got too close, but drawing it would take too much time.

Although the Marksman had only fought one supervillain – the Matador – during his short tenure as a self-proclaimed superhero, he had learned everything he needed to know during their confrontation. The Marksman was weak. He had no real superpowers, and without his eyepiece and his arm, he was useless. To defeat an opponent, he had to think faster and take all possible precautions, because once the fight started, it was too late to change the outcome.

The Matador had given the Marksman a few scratches and bruises. The Marksman threw the Matador into the Madison River and claimed the villain's sword for his own. Universal law dictated that since the Matador's body was never found, he wasn't really dead, and that he'd be back for revenge. But it was too late to change the Marksman's fate; his lesson had already been learned.

Now the Marksman advanced towards Jane from behind. She shivered as a few raindrops fell, one night behind schedule. "Jane Lawrence?" he called, and aimed his gun as she turned around.

Rivulets of salty water fell from her eyes and stained her cheeks. She sniffled and adjusted the brim of her hat. “Vakaran sent you,” she stated.

“Don’t you dare cry,” the Marksman reprimanded. “Don’t you dare cry like your victims in Iraq cried. The General didn’t send me, but I’m taking you in just the same.”

She giggled and choked, something incredibly girlish and pitiable. “I’ve thought, you know. I had a lot of time to think about what I did. I was angry. But I shouldn’t...” Jane paused and tried to swallow the lump in her throat. “I’m just scared, I guess. I didn’t ask to be experimented on. And I’m so scared about what Vakaran will do if I go back.”

The Marksman hesitated. He knew better than to lose his chance to disable the quarry, but he couldn’t understand why shooting a frightened girl was supposed to make him a hero. Maybe it was the kind of thing that made the Paragon a hero.

Keeping the rapier in his left hand, he holstered his gun, and sat beside the girl. She said that her name was Janie, and she had enlisted in the army once she was old enough, because she really thought she could make the United States safer from terrorists. She didn’t want to be a super soldier. She didn’t know how to control her powers, but she wanted so much to make up for what she had done at the holding facility.

The Marksman was about to ask her just what sparked her to such cruelty when a shadow loomed over him, obscuring his vision and darkening the murky river. “You’ve done well, Silverstein,” the Paragon observed as the Marksman turned around to view him hovering, arms crossed, looking heroic as usual. “Now hand her over.”

“I thought you said this was out of your jurisdiction,” the Marksman responded, standing up, and surreptitiously transferring the rapier to his weapon hand. The gun would be useless at this range.

“I can turn her in, I just couldn’t track her. Military law is full of fun technicalities like that,” the Paragon explained as he held out his hand. “Here’s how it works. We fight, I win, I take her in, and get my usual accolades.”

“Sounds like a pretty bum deal for me.” The Marksman tightened his grip.

“Not exactly.” The Paragon landed and approached Janie. “This was Ms. Miracle’s idea. Who’s the Marksman? No one’s ever heard of him. But pit him against the Paragon, and suddenly, you’ve got a badass who was ballsy enough to stand up to the strongest hero in Madison City. Two weeks from now, we play the villain redemption angle, and boom, you’re one of us.” He smirked and extended his hand.

“Congratulations... Marksman. I didn’t think you had it in you. Now hand her over.”

“I’ve got to hand it to your little Alliance, Paragon.” The Marksman ignored the outstretched hand and interposed himself between the Paragon and Janie. “I thought you were truly the Head Asshole, but I guess that the rest of your clique is just as conniving. Good on you.”

The Paragon’s hand became a fist, and his eyes narrowed behind his mask.

“You’re making a big mistake, Silverstein. Ms. Miracle kept me from bashing your skull in, and now she’s offering you a chance to join us. You aren’t going to get another shot.”

“So I can join your posse as long as I turn over a troubled girl to a madman? Is that what makes you a hero, Paragon?”

“What makes us heroes,” the Paragon hissed through gritted teeth, “is that we follow the law. We don’t make our own.”

With his left hand, the Marksman motioned for Janie to run. “Whatever happened to ‘an unjust law is no law at all?’ Or was St. Augustine a vigilante, too?”

“OK, *Marksman*, let’s play it your way.” The Paragon rose a few feet into the air, and a powerful gust of wind nearly blew the Marksman off of his feet. “You want to be a supervillain? That’s fine. That means you get to contend with me!”

As the Paragon drew his fist back, he noticed that behind the Marksman, Janie was nearly tripping over her own feet, escaping. The Marksman glanced over his shoulder, and smiled as he remarked, “Oh, that’s too bad, Paragon. What was that about you not being able to track her? Boy, that law’s a bitch.”

“No one makes a fool out of the Paragon, you self-righteous imbecile!” He aimed a fist and threw a punch powerful enough to level buildings. The Marksman brought up his rapier to block the blow. Seconds later, his sword and arm lay in a pile of scrap metal, and he was on the ground. His eyepiece buzzed and whirred futilely.

The Paragon prepared for another volley. Janie didn’t look back as she ran.