

To Those Who Hear the Call

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Why now? Out of all possible moments in all possible universes, why this one? Why am I here? Graviton sat on the raised lip of an old, five story building, ignoring the diluvial rain. A second year Master's student in FCU's Heroics/Villainy program, he needed to practice his monologuing. He'd thought tonight's ambience would have helped, and had ignored this week's required readings when he'd heard the weather reports. He was wrong.

The rain tortured the thin, metal access door, horizontally flush with the tarred roof; stifled thunder filtered through a city skyline barely visible in the gray; and instead of alliterative soul-searching he'd spent the last few hours kicking his legs and mindlessly repeating the questions his workshop instructor, Electroflex, had suggested.

Graviton wore street clothes—torn jeans and a Modest Mouse T-Shirt under a denim jacket—having little desire to wear his uniform, proudly or otherwise. Most days the black and midnight blue ensemble, emblazoned with an electric blue funnel of the kind used to diagram black holes in high school textbooks, only pissed him off. He glared at the drone hovering nearby. It was small, unobtrusive, basically a digital camera that recorded him constantly. Every night, before its memory was overwritten, he was supposed to download the files and search for snippets to add to his thesis compilation. It was an honor to have that nagging reminder, only second years were allowed to requisition them, and he'd already destroyed two.

The obliterations—metal and wires and glass implod-

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ing into a useless chunk about the size of a ping-pong ball—weren't completely intentional. Some nights the subtle whine of the drone's engine just became unbearable, drilling into his mind, and he had to silence it at any cost. The professors were understanding: "This is just part of your style. The moody anti-hero is a well-established archetype. Now you just need to put your personal spin on it." The Engineering Adjunct staff, which built the damn things, wasn't. They were more concerned with schematics, stress tolerances, and technical precision. Graviton hadn't even rushed up the building's inside stairwell and burst through the access door. He could have used a Muay Thai flying knee because it was more dynamic on video. He could have gestured dramatically and blown the door off its hinges. Either would have been a great addition to his compilation, but he'd just neutralized gravity and floated up here, not even going inside, and peered into each window as he glided past. Sturdy black frames divided them into four rectangles each and the cracked, graying paint on their interiors prevented him from seeing through.

He lay back on the lip of the roof, felt it drop away beneath his left shoulder as he placed his hands behind his head, and closed his eyes. The lukewarm rain massaged his clenched face into blankness. His thesis, due in three weeks, was less than half completed. Forty-two days later would be his thesis defense; standing before a panel of three he would have to, using his thesis, convince them he was heroic enough to graduate. Unfortunately, jaywalkers and speeders took up so much of his current footage he now wished they'd run into each other.

That he stopped speeders and chastised jaywalkers didn't

bother him; Superman in the 40s did the same and even sold war bonds. Still, that wasn't all he had done. Fighting Nazis and saving the world had entitled Superman to occasional lameness. But now, crime had been eradicated except for the government-licensed mischief of the League of Evil.

There was a heroic exhibition tonight, downtown at the Luminar Auditorium, where visiting heroes and villains squared off against the program's students. Admission for non-participants was \$5, the public was entertained, MFA students got practice and exposure...it was a win-win situation for everyone involved. Graviton skipped it like all the other exhibitions. You only needed to support something when it was already irrelevant.

That was why he was considering dropping out. There was no need for greatness anymore. Superheroes were more prevalent than ever, as were licensed supervillains, but everything that could be done—every pose, flair, and catchphrase imaginable—was already someone's shtick. Unsurprisingly, the atmosphere had turned vicious. Just reading the reviews made him sick: "But the winds—created by his own frantic motion, I might add—ended up whipping Dynamane's cape around his head, making him less hero than fool. Unfortunately, that's what happens to those who apparently haven't heard of matching costume with power suite." "T.C. Everett has finally managed to shake off his adolescent infatuation with Captain Marvel and produce work worthy of the moniker 'heroism.' It's sad not only that he squandered his potential for so long, but that he is still slightly hampered by the worst mannerisms of the Big Red Cheese."

The critics, most of whom held MFAs themselves, re-

peated one message endlessly: *Who did you have to screw to get noticed? I bet they're ugly.*

The rain became cold. Graviton rolled off the roof, hung suspended for a moment, then sank. He dreamed of being a true hero, a giant striding through history, but in this era? The most menace anyone ever faced was forgetting a bus ticket. Last week, after class, he'd 'saved' an old woman. She'd been attempting to beat a man in mugger's black with her aluminum cane while holding onto a green bus-stop bench for balance. He'd stolen her oversized, sequined purse, and was blocking her blows with it while laughing.

League of Evil rules mandate that muggers can't try to escape until a superhero shows up. Graviton had almost flown by, but he was still in uniform and the crowd, which had gathered on the other side of the street—making space for the inevitable rescue—had spotted him. Cell phones, no doubt with cameras, were pointed in his direction. The masses wanted entertainment and it was his sworn duty to comply. But as soon as they'd had their fix, he'd be lost again among the independent artists and self-styled Hero Laureates of suburbia. Declining the customary one-liners, he'd simply landed between the woman and the mugger, used gravitational force to pin the mugger to the sidewalk, returned the purse, and debated flipping the crowd off.

The old woman blindsided him with her purse, smacking him in the back of the head. "Come here," she said. He complied. She leaned close; her breath smelled like Efferdent. "After all the effort I just went through, you could at least try." Graviton rolled his eyes and she whacked his shins with her cane. "Show some respect," she said, and hobbled off.

Graviton gritted his teeth and muttered under his breath. “I hope you trip on your saggy tits.” Vocally unimpressed, the crowd began to disperse. The mugger laughed.

It turned out to be Edward DaVinci Meowington III, doing homework for Villainy II: Form and Theory of Henching. He looked smaller without his customary greatcoat, monocle, and bowler, but his laugh still exploded infectiously. “I’ll have to remember that one,” he said.

“You look ridiculous,” Graviton replied.

“Not everyone gets to take over the world.”

Meowington doffed his ski mask and pulled out the League timesheet and a clicky pen. Graviton unfolded it, smoothed it on the bench, and filled out the pertinent information. Date: 6/12. Time: 4:32 p.m. Infraction: Mugging. Licensed: Y/N.

Meowington produced his criminal license. It was oriented vertically to show he was still a student, and the text underneath his shit-eating grin—he was wearing a monocle over each eye—authorized Class E villainy: mugging and petty theft up to \$200, assault in any degree but not battery, and extortion of public figures with rank no higher than alderman. Graviton circled the Y, signed his name, and handed the sheet back to Meowington.

“You forgot to rate my performance,” Meowington had said.

But did that really matter, Graviton thought, floating silently over puddles. He’d just circled the ‘5 - Excellent’ and let him go. The tsetse whine of the drone followed him incessantly as it whirred about, searching for the best shot. His gravity shield eased the downpour around him, creating

a mobile waterfall. He’d left the front clear for visibility, but occasionally he spun the opening around, smiling as the drone spazzed out, its pattern-recognition software unable to cope.

He stopped in front of the Fury Memorial Fountain. A larger-than-life winged woman, green with age, raised a sword in challenge to those who would defy the natural order of the universe. On the sword was inscribed in gold: *To those who hear the call, glory is forever.* Behind her a semicircle of angels trumpeted praise. The streams of water issuing from their trumpets drowned in the rain. Graviton floated closer and examined her face. So did the drone. The bronze had aged unevenly and several of the lights straddling the fountain’s edges were out. They’d been installed a few years ago to heighten the public’s understanding and appreciation for the importance of heroism, but now only lighted her haphazardly, chasing contorted shadows across her surface. What did she see? Graviton wondered. What did she see that was so sublimely compelling? Her eyes were directed skyward, completely indifferent to his presence, while rain reflected into his face.

He turned up his jacket collar and let his shield fully enclose him, the wrinkled water obscuring his view. He didn’t want to be an antihero. He didn’t want to be a commentary on society, ironic, postmodern or otherwise. He didn’t want to obsess over what victory poses went best with what lighting. All he wanted was one chance to prove that he had it in him, to become the vision he used to see.

“Why are we heroes?” was one of Electroflex’s favorite rhetorical questions. Before anyone could answer, he’d pounce. “To find out what being a hero really means.” Easy for him to say. Graviton had no problem imagining Electro-

flex, muscles impossibly sculpted, running down counterfeiters in a dark alley. Electricity would build in his boots, then arc around his suit as he picked up speed. And then, when the counterfeiters were cornered in a back alley, he'd advance, the reflections dancing in the whites of his eyes as sparks crackled around his wild mustache and shaven head, and grin. *What made you think you could get away with this in my city?*

Electroflex was also fond of expounding the virtues of "following your instincts." Graviton was ready to throttle him; most classes only showed him how wrong those instincts were. Don't smile after defeating a goon; save it for the villain. Don't overuse your powers due to enjoyment; a true superhero saves energy to increase endurance. Use fabric softener so that your uniform doesn't bunch up in embarrassing places. What could a classroom do except squelch the desire, the need for greatness, under a barrage of meaningless rules?

It wouldn't be so bad, Graviton thought, if they'd at least be consistent, but even the rules changed. Heroes are the advance units unless they'd be better protecting the rear. Heroes always try to achieve their objectives, unless they're the decoys. But even then they must appear to be the main force. Unless the villain needed to believe they weren't, in which case they might become the main force again. And then the confusion was deified, turned into a learning opportunity. "It's all part of the mystery of being a hero," countless visiting speakers had trumpeted. "Your career as a hero will be an attempt to figure out what heroics is."

Yet, more than likely, his actual career would be anything but. Graviton had discussed employment prospects with his thesis advisor, the Hunted Magus, many times. Only the

rarest of heroes supported themselves through heroics alone, and even Dr. Nevermore held an academic post. Teaching future heroes was a way to keep the passion alive in future generations while honing one's own craft, a noble calling for anyone. True, those without publication history were often relegated to Ethics 101, where the most important qualification was suppressing the urge to strangle unmotivated undergrads, but compared with the other options it almost seemed tolerable. Whenever he considered a career as a colorful, local-TV weatherman, flying into position in front of the blue screen and telling retirees the next week's weather was going to be "Super!", Graviton felt the urge to hang out on the roofs of tall metal buildings during thunderstorms. In a world bursting with part-time heroes, no wonder everyone retreated into mysticism.

"The curse—and greatness—of the hero is striving toward a goal you'll never know if you achieve." The Great Gods of History and Popular Acclaim bestowed their blessings according to patterns unknown to mere mortals. The pain of continual failure was bearable only if success was never proportional to effort. And as soon as someone managed to make it, everyone became sycophants eager for even reflected glory. Mach Amazing might be the best superhero alive. Billy Schismatic instructed the heart on the meaning of courage in all its forms. And Dr. Nevermore was the fourteenth best all-time hero in the rankings of critics who'd given up on themselves.

Meowington often brushed this off with, "You need to know who to screw to get a job and some people are just better lays than others. That's why I'm practicing." This was

inevitably followed by an exaggerated pelvic thrust. A smile slowly claimed Graviton's face. No one could figure out Meowington's happy-go-lucky attitude, but it was a relief after the monotony of repressed desperation. Graviton had initially thought it might be because the Villainy program was less stressful, but the other Villainy students were just as obsessed about student loans and employment opportunities and most drank heavily to compensate.

Graviton had met Meowington in the Heroics Workshop. All heroes were required to take at least one Villainy Workshop, and vice versa; knowledge of the other side apparently increased the potential for dramatic action. Before long, Meowington's sparkling smirk had estranged him completely from the often-stifling high seriousness. Two weeks ago he'd submitted a clip of himself gallantly enforcing the McDonald's three condiment limit. The camera panned in dramatically on a nefarious character, Meowington himself with a Hitler mustache, laughing maniacally as he scooped handful after handful of ketchup packets into a velvet sack emblazoned with the SS logo.

It then cut to a screen of silent movie text. "Soon my dastardly plan to beam calories directly into the fat heads"—new screen—"of consumer whores will be complete! Hahahaha!"

The good Meowington then appeared in a cloud of smoke, twirling a handlebar mustache, also fake. Both his greatcoat's cape, which framed his elbows, and his bowler were inexplicably pink. The camera angle precluded both Meowingtons from having to appear simultaneously.

More text. "Halt, evildoer! Have you no respect for the ancient and compelling traditions of civilized society?"

The evil Meowington's Vaudevillian shock.

"You?!"

Extreme close-up of the good Meowington squinting dangerously as he removed his monocle.

"Me."

The good Meowington threw a punch in bullet time, his fist inching inevitably towards impact with his opponent's teeth. The evil Meowington's face deformed and he flew backwards in slow motion. The picture became jumpy and partially superimposed with a text screen saying "No!!!!!!!!!! !!!!!!!!!!!!" as if the evil Meowington were being knocked out of existence. When he hit the wall, he exploded in a shower of ketchup.

The good Meowington flashed the camera a thumbs up and the video ended with a text screen: "Remember, kids: Stay in School."

Electroflex used the opportunity to segue into a discussion of age appropriateness and whether substitutes for blood were any less offensive than blood itself. The clock behind Electroflex's head read 3:40 pm, the fourth hour in a four hour class, and, as this was the third video workshopped today, the expressions of many students had shifted from well-meaning fatigue to quiescent retardation. A-Bu-La, Scourge from Rome, was examining her distorted reflection in the centurion helmet beside her and surreptitiously flipping a pen between extended and concealed grips. Fate Carroway, She Who Sees through the Mists of Time Itself, was making faces at the clock behind James Baschitz, a Scientific Adjunct student whose life apparently revolved around coming to class and scouting chemical spills. He was taking notes and triply un-

derlining important parts. The Scientific Adjunct program had recently been added—after all, those who make the gadgets are no less heroic than the heroes themselves—and James’s uncertainty was always just shy of critical mass. Meowington had closed one eye and was crushing people’s heads between his thumb and forefinger. Most, at least, nodded attentively when Electroflex concluded the discussion by saying some heroes, like Samurai Jack, had defined themselves by only fighting non-biological opponents. Graviton, who wasn’t Samurai Jack, reconsidered turning.

According to the League of Evil website, evil “offers a satisfying career path to qualified applicants, including the opportunity to confound clueless champions of justice and matching 401(k) contributions.” Unfortunately, a Master’s degree was only an entry-level qualification and applicants needed to pass a credit check. Apparently they didn’t want the first act in someone’s reign of terror to be defiantly defaulting on student loans.

The drone, confused, broke through Graviton’s thinning waterfall shield. He stared at it for a moment before violently clenching his fist. The ripple of gravitational force crushed the drone into a wad of useless scrap. Graviton let it go and it dropped with a protesting whirr, splashing into the fountain pool. The Scientific Adjunct staff would probably put a reprimand in his file—finally—but did that matter in a world where Mach Amazing could wear the FedEx logo on his chest and nobody gave a damn? Graviton sank slowly, his Keds touching the fountain pool, then sinking below with inaudible suction. The statue was still gazing upward, her inscrutable vision no longer visible to anyone but her. He kicked the

remains of the drone. Coins stirred and sank as he waded his way out of the fountain.

The rain abated, the storm now preferring dry lightning and whip-crack thunder. One more stop, and then Graviton would go home, change out of his soggy, chilly clothes, and search for video clips he wasn’t completely disgusted with. He was going to finish his thesis if it strangled him with his own bile, but first he’d visit the Nevermore Portal. A trans-dimensional gate that had served as Dr. Nevermore’s thesis project, it offered a one-way trip into worlds unknown and had never, to Graviton’s knowledge, been used. It accumulated dust in a quayside warehouse and he visited it when frustration became unbearable.

Graviton often lost hours sitting on the lumpy concrete floor, propped against the control panel. He’d stare at the matte-black metal frame, the foreboding loop of the portal itself. Before storing it, Dr. Nevermore had disabled the circuitry, but Graviton, in his spare time, had learned enough to repair it. On nights like this he’d activate it and listen to the faint electronic hum as bubbling static slowly congealed in the circular opening. Phantasmal patterns would race from side to side and he’d wonder what lay beyond until he calmed down enough to be productive. He never went through; the world might not be better on the other side, he might not be good enough, and, he told himself, he probably shouldn’t trust his hotwiring. But if it ever came to it, wouldn’t a chance at greatness be better than festering here?

Vacant lots and stained sidewalk flew by underneath him. The gate was in the “bad” part of town, an area under the joint jurisdiction of the League of Evil and FCU. It was used

both for advanced classes and professional development. Dr. Nevermore had requested the portal be placed there to ensure no one would blunder in and accidentally activate it. Graviton landed blocks away between the burnt skeleton of an apartment building and the crumbling walls of an abandoned bar. He planned to walk the rest of the way because some things deserved respect.

Graviton further mangled a twisted stop sign, defunct streetlights, and dented dumpsters as he passed by. Not paying much attention to his surroundings as they shifted to warehouses and loading equipment—the only people out at this hour would be doing last-minute preparation for tomorrow’s classes—he tossed a particularly ugly Volkswagen into the harbor and listened for the splash.

An appreciative whistle caught his attention. Meowington, in greatcoat and bowler, was haunting a trashcan fire in the shadows between a row of Porta-Potties and an equipment hangar. He twirled figure eights with his drone, which struggled at other the end of a chain. When he saw Graviton, he beamed.

“Screw German Engineering,” he said. “They should stick to techno and world domination.”

Despite himself, Graviton smiled.

“Want to hear a riddle?” Meowington continued.

Graviton chuckled. “What?”

“What has two thumbs and just finished his thesis?”

Meowington let the drone go—the chain dissolving into quiet silver light—and put the trashcan between himself and Graviton. Flickering, he looked gleefully evil.

Graviton played along. “I give up. What?”

Meowington hiked both thumbs at himself. “This guy!” Lightning flashed, emphasizing the ridiculousness.

“Congratulations.” Graviton offered a handshake, wincing as the thunder followed, uncomfortably close.

Meowington waved it off. “Not yet, not yet. It takes time to savor the moment. What have you been up to?”

“Avoiding my thesis. I’m not happy with any of it.”

Meowington’s drone floated around, taking shot after shot of the two in conversation.

“Speaking of theses,” Meowington said, “where’s your, uh...” Meowington mimicked the general size and shape of an observation drone. The image of one began to grow in the air, its luminescence unaffected by the firelight. “...ball and chain?”

“Things happen.”

“That they do.” Meowington’s hands continued to work. The image grew brighter and more detailed, bleaching the color from his face. The trashcan flames leaned toward it as if lending it substance, and then the drone-image began to cast its own shadow, which danced among the Porta-Potties. “Want me to...?”

“Nah.” Graviton gestured and a concrete chip the size of a quarter floated into the air. He spun it several times before zipping it through the drone-image, now nearly lifelike. The image rippled, concentric circles of color racing in all directions, then burst. “I’ll take the hit.”

A flash of anger crossed Meowington’s face as the beautiful image in his mind exploded in a shower of stinging sparks. Reality always disappointed when compared with

possibility and no one else could see the difference. At least Graviton didn't try to hide his ridiculousness—he didn't even realize he was being stalled. Meowington considered the months ahead and the mischievousness returned to his eyes. “Just though I'd offer.”

Graviton thrummed arhythmically on the trashcan. “How long have you been out here?”

Meowington grinned and tipped his bowler. “Like I said, it takes time to savor the moment.”

Graviton's gloom and irritation returned. In a way, Meowington pitied him. Graviton raised one eyebrow and lowered the other, his expression radiating impatience and disdain. “And how long is that likely to take?”

“I'm not sure. Let me check.” Meowington stuck a hand in his coat pocket, pretending to search for a pocketwatch while he created one. When finished, he brought it out and frowned at the blank face as if deciphering a foreign language. Then he laughed. If nothing else, this should alleviate the boredom. “Five seconds.”

The explosion was felt before it was seen or heard, a ripple in space deforming everything in its path. Both Meowington's and Graviton's defenses instinctively awaken and Meowington's drone records two glowing figures before its destruction. Meowington is shrouded in a shimmering cocoon that pulsates with waves of color as debris impacts its surface. Graviton seems encased in blown glass, protected by translucence as the wind and debris swerve around him. A forklift buckles, corrugated aluminum walls shudder and split, and cracks erupt in the poured concrete roads. Four broad build-

ings away, pyrotechnic flares illuminate the decrepit buildings and singed sky. The translucent image of another universe flickers briefly, superimposed, backlit by the continual bolts of rust-colored lightning attracted by the destruction, then nothing. The silence is absolute.

Graviton stares at the aftermath of the Nevermore Gate's destruction. It's as if all his hopes have just been annihilated.

Meowington's voice echoes Cheshirically, like a drunken prophesy kicking over tables in a bar fight. *Now you'll never have to wonder if you'll ever be good enough again.* And whistling, off he goes.

Graviton stands numb and frozen, until fury burns him free. He doesn't know what he will do to Meowington when he catches up, but the world disappears as he chases after, obliterating every intervening obstacle in fury.