

One of the Boys

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Heroes are by their nature different from the rest of humanity. When it is carried to extremes, this can cause problems.

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A fist like a triphammer, the newspapers called it. He tensed the muscles in his arm again in that special way, that way nobody else on Earth could do, and he let the tension go, driving his hand forward.

The metal braces that covered his fingers smashed into the concrete with a sound like a cherry bomb. The blocks shattered, spraying dust and fragments in all directions, and his fist went right through; his arm sank into the wall up to the elbow. Shards of concrete smacked against his armor, rattling and ricocheting, and he didn't so much as blink,

Behind his mirrored visor a grin spread across his face. Punching through a wall—now, *that* was a satisfying sensation. He pulled his arm out and chose another spot, about a foot to the left. He cocked his fist and drew it back for another blow,

“Last chance, Morguson!” someone called from behind. “If we have to come in after you, you aren't gonna like it!”

He paused, fist ready. That was Red, offering the punk a chance to surrender. You always had to give the guy a chance to go quietly. Red was good about stuff like that—he never forgot the rules.

A spray of machine-gun fire came out through the hole he had just punched; bullets rattled off his armor, off his visor.

He didn't flinch; instead, aiming toward the source of the bullets, he punched through the wall again, spattering chips of concrete in Morguson's direction.

“Ow! Okay, okay!” came the shriek from inside. “Okay, I give! I'm opening the door!”

Morguson's voice. The little wimp was giving up.

“Do it, then!” he bellowed. “And drop the gun!”

“Easy, Captain,” Red whispered.

He froze, thinking. Had he screwed up, said something wrong?

No, it was okay. Red thought he was losing his temper and wanted to calm him down, that was all. That was fine. That was all in the pattern.

Had he been losing his temper? Maybe he had. Or at any rate, maybe the adrenaline rush from punching through the wall was getting to him.

That assumed it was adrenaline, and of course, nobody really knew. Whatever it was, it certainly seemed to have the same effect on him that adrenaline had on human beings.

Red wasn't mad at him. Red was helping him out.

That was good.

The door, that booby-trapped super-steel door that Morguson had been so proud of, swung open, and Stan Morguson stepped out, hands on his head. He blinked at the bright sunlight, took a moment to locate his opponents.

“Well, at least it took three of you,” Morguson said at last.

The Captain took a breath, planning to say something about doing whatever was needed in the name of justice, but he hesitated—was it the right thing to say?

And before he could decide, Swift said, “Hey, it was a slow night, you know?”

Red laughed; the Captain hesitated again, then he, too, chuckled heavily. He supposed that the incongruity of Swift’s casual remark, after a life-and-death struggle against a brutal killer, was humorous. Or perhaps it was just a relief of tension.

“All right, Morguson,” he said. “Let’s go.”

“I’ve got the law waiting down the block, Captain,” Swift said.

“And that reporter from Channel Nine, I see,” Red remarked. He winked at Swift.

The Captain turned, and spotted three police cars and the Channel 9 news van, all stopped in the street just fifty yards away. He tried to brush the powdered concrete off his armor as he walked toward the clustered vehicles.

Morguson didn’t put up any resistance; he kept his hands on his head as he marched along the sidewalk.

The Captain glanced at him. “Glad to see you know when to quit,” he said.

“Hey, I’m not stupid,” Morguson said. “I don’t want to mess with any super-aliens. Everyone knows about you and the Church *of* Doom, and I heard what you did to the Dickerson monster. I saw on TV what happened to that guy with the laser gun last week, too.”

“That was an accident,” the Captain protested.

Morguson shrugged. “Well, I don’t want any accidents happening to me, thanks. Better I should hope for a friendly jury.”

Red smiled; he always liked it when the bad guys were sensible. There wasn’t any fun in bringing in a raving loon. And the Captain was always so serious about everything—maybe extraterrestrials didn’t have any sense of humor?

But then, it was hard to think of a guy like the Captain as an alien. After all, he’d been raised on Earth from infancy; he was just a regular guy.

The Captain saw Red’s smile, but he wasn’t exactly sure why it was there. Was Morguson’s remark funny? Or did Red find it satisfying, maybe, that their reputation was so formidable?

The Captain wasn’t sure just which was the natural human reaction. His own response wouldn’t have been a smile at all.

He couldn’t let Red know that, of course.

Then he was distracted by the reporter's voice.

"This is Deborah Hatch, on the scene as three of our more famous citizens convince a wanted criminal to surrender to police. The three mystery men who call themselves Captain Cosmos, the Red Rover, and Mr. Swift have apprehended a suspect who may be the so-called Electrothief, the person responsible for the recent rash of high-tech break-ins and killings plaguing the city." She had been facing directly into the camera; now she stepped aside and turned slightly, so that her viewers could see the four people approaching, Stan Morguson with his hands up, Red Rover smiling, Mr. Swift grinning, Captain Cosmos strutting proudly.

"Hey, baby," Mr. Swift called to her.

The Captain threw him a quick frown. That was no way to talk to the press. Swift couldn't seriously be making a pass at a reporter in front of the camera! That was something to be done in private. It didn't fit the heroic image.

"Down, boy," Red muttered.

Swift grinned even more broadly, but he didn't say anything more; instead he waved at the camera.

An officer came up, gun drawn, and took Morguson's arm. "He's all yours, boys," Red said, releasing his hold. "His gun's back in the house there. Pat him down, read him his rights, and take him away!"

Other police arrived, and proceeded to do just that. Deborah Hatch was still talking into her microphone, but nobody was really listening. Mr. Swift was watching her closely, though; the Captain noticed that.

A plainclothes officer was approaching; Captain Cosmos straightened up, trying to look his best. He still had concrete dust on his sleeves, he noticed; he brushed at it.

"You boys want to come on down to the station and give us some statements?" the plainclothesman asked.

The Captain puffed out his chest, but before he could say, "Certainly, sir," Red had replied, "Hell of a way to spend a Friday night, but I guess we could stop by."

"That'd be good of you, I'm sure," the cop said sardonically. "I suppose you'll give us the usual grief about not using your real names?"

Before any of the three could reply, another car pulled up, drawing everyone's attention.

"Oh, Christ," the plainclothesman muttered.

"What is it?" Captain Cosmos asked, instantly alert.

"It's the goddamn mayor."

"Yup," Red agreed, grinning, "It's Hizzoner hisself."

Ms. Hatch was shouting at her cameraman, who swung around just in time to catch the Honorable Albert Mazilli climbing out of his limo.

His Honor waved to his constituents, as embodied by the unshaven teenager in the baseball cap and blue jeans with the TV camera on his shoulder. Mazilli took a few seconds to orient himself, then walked—no, *strode*—over to the waiting crimefighters.

The camera followed him every step, and Hatch held out her microphone, calling, “Mr. Mayor, what brings *you* here?”

He waved her away and marched directly up to the colorful threesome. Mr. Swift stood with hands on hips; Red Rover leaned against a lamppost; and Captain Cosmos stood straight, chest out, resisting the temptation to salute.

The mayor thrust out a hand, and the Captain took it, carefully not squeezing as they shook. Red and Swift exchanged glances.

“I just wanted to meet you boys in person,” Mayor Mazilli announced, speaking toward the microphone. “To thank you for your amazing triumphs over the menaces to our society, and for the efforts you’ve made to stop crime in our city.”

“Our pleasure, Mr. Mayor,” the Captain replied. He threw a quick glance at Red, who smiled and shrugged.

“And I know you’re busy men,” Mazilli continued, “but I hope you’ll be able to find time to attend a reception in your honor, and in honor of all the brave volunteers who have stepped forward to fight crime in the streets and other dangers. I’ve taken the liberty of arranging one, to be held at City Hall on Tuesday evening.” He reached into his jacket and pulled out three square envelopes, handing one to each—obviously formal invitations.

“*Thank you, your Honor,*” the Captain said, accepting his. “It really isn’t necessary, and I can’t say how much we appreciate it.”

“Then you’ll come?”

The Captain hesitated, glancing at his companions.

“We can’t promise anything, Mr. Mayor,” Red said, “but we’ll try.”

Mr. Swift nodded agreement.

Mazilli turned to face the camera, and said, “And of course, the press will be welcome—I hope we’ll see *you* there, Ms. Hatch.”

She smiled. Swift and Red exchanged glances.

“I think I can make it, after all,” Swift said.

Mazilli turned back to the crimefighters.

“There’s one more thing,” he said. “When I heard you men were down here, after this... after this alleged criminal, I hurried down here because it was the only way I knew to reach you. Now, of course, you’re not the only, um... independent crimefighters in town—I believe there are at least two others...”

“The Night Man,” Captain Cosmos agreed.

“And the Amazon,” Swift added.

“Yes, well, I haven’t been able to contact them, and I’d like to see that they’re invited, as well.”

“If we see them, we’ll tell them,” Red said.

“Well, good, then, that’s fine...” The mayor smiled, and shook the Captain’s hand again, then turned away and, with a wave to the camera, headed back to his car.

“What was all *that* about?” Swift asked, as Mazilli stepped down off the curb.

“Election coming up,” Red replied. “I guess Hizzoner has decided we’re hot stuff, wants it to look like we’re on his side.”

“Oh, but we can’t take sides in partisan politics!” the Captain said, shocked.

Startled, Swift turned to stare at him; Red snorted.

“Why the hell not?” Swift demanded.

“Well, because... because we’re a symbol, and... and... it just doesn’t seem *appropriate*.”

Swift stared at him, and Red said, “I don’t recall giving up my constitutional rights just because I like to put on fancy clothes and punch out drug dealers.”

The Captain blinked and considered.

It was true enough; there wasn’t any real reason that superheroes couldn’t take sides in politics. He had had some vague idea that they were supposed to be above all that, and besides, if the truth be known, he didn’t really understand politics.

But he wasn’t going to argue.

“You boys coming?” the plainclothesman called, rescuing the Captain from having to say anything more.

Giving statements was a familiar routine—not particularly difficult or tiring, but not very interesting, either. Captain Cosmos went through it automatically. Afterward, he waved to the squad room and marched proudly out of the police station.

He was a good deal less proud when he reached the men’s room at the Station Square Mini-Mall; he was almost furtive as he slipped inside and took the stall on the end. He stood on the toilet and pushed up the ceiling panel, found his duffel bag, and hauled it down; he pulled out his shirt and jeans, then carefully stripped off his gleaming brass-plated armor and tucked it away.

It was late; for a moment he considered keeping on Captain Cosmos’s gleaming black boots, but then he caught himself.

Unforgivable carelessness! He must never let his guard down; enemies could be lurking anywhere. Any clue to his true identity could be dangerous.

Though he wasn’t exactly sure how. It was just part of the way this costumed hero stuff was done.

The boots went in the bag, and the sneakers from K-Mart went on his feet.

On the stairs at his building that dark-haired woman from A-21 leaned out and watched as he climbed to his own apartment. She did that a lot; didn’t she have anything better to do than watch her neighbors?

Or was she only watching *him*?. Did she suspect that he had secrets?

He sighed as he unlocked his door.

He stepped into his living room, into the welcoming warmth and humidity, into the familiar smells from his kitchen, and he relaxed.

It was a slow weekend; he patrolled the city solo most of Saturday and didn't see a thing. The police radio in his helmet didn't mention anything but speeders.

Well, that was no surprise. You couldn't expect to fight monsters or crazed cultists every day. Once or twice a year something like that would come along and make the whole business worthwhile, but usually, he didn't have anything to do that the ordinary police couldn't have handled, if they'd had the time and manpower.

Sunday he and Mr. Swift met up for lunch at Ernie's, and afterward went down to the Projects off 14th and nailed a couple of small-time dealers; the punks ran at the sight of the Captain, and Swift was there to trip them up. Red didn't show.

"I think he's got a date," Swift said.

The Captain nodded. Swift threw him a glance. "You got any hot prospects for the evening?"

"No," the Captain said.

"Spending the evening rereading Dickens, or something?" Swift smiled indulgently. "C'mon, Captain, fess up—you're the type who'd rather pick up a book than a girl. Or maybe you've got a wife and kiddies waiting at home?"

"I don't talk about my private life, Mr. Swift," the Captain said. "You know that."

At the police station the booking sergeant remarked, "It took two of you to catch these guys?"

"Slow day," the Captain said with a shrug. He threw a look at Swift, who smiled approvingly.

Monday he heard on the radio that some loon had holed up in his house with a machine gun, holding his own daughter as a hostage; the Captain debated asking his supervisor for the afternoon off, but Red Rover took care of it, getting into the house through a back window, getting the girl out, and then disarming the perpetrator. Nobody was quite sure how he'd managed it.

"Took a long lunch," Red explained, when the Captain phoned him that evening and asked. They'd all exchanged phone numbers.

"No, I mean... oh, never mind."

"No, I'm kidding, Cap." Red laughed. "But you know I don't explain how I do my stuff. Any more than you do."

"I don't have anything to explain," the Captain protested. "I was *born* this way."

"Hey, I know, didn't mean to razz you or anything," Red answered, his tone almost apologetic. "But I don't explain, not even to you."

"Okay," the Captain said, accepting Red's decision.

"You going to the Mayor's reception, Cap?"

"I think I will," the Captain said slowly.

Tuesday he changed at Station Square again—it was about the best drop he'd ever found, and it was more comfortable than changing in the car. He knew it would be safer to switch again, but just this once, he thought he could risk it.

The walk to City Hall was longer than he'd thought, though, and he arrived late.

The guard at the door waved him through, and he found himself in a big room crowded with people, men in expensive suits and women in fancy dresses. They stared at him as he entered, and he smiled at them all, his best public smile. Only his mouth was visible below the visor; if his eyes weren't smiling, no one could tell.

He didn't have the faintest idea who any of these people were.

Then he spotted Mr. Swift's helmet; its metallic blue sheen stood out from the innumerable heads of hair in various shades of brown and gold and gray.

And Red's wraparound blade sunglasses were there, too, far across the room. A moment later the Amazon's bronze helmet emerged from behind a pillar near the table of hors d'oeuvres.

Each of them had a small crowd clustered about him or her, and with a start the Captain realized a crowd was forming around him, too. Most of it was people who looked at him and then moved on without getting in his way, but not all of it. A young blond woman in a sleek red gown set herself directly in his path, and smiled up at him across her glass of champagne.

"I've always wanted to meet you," she said.

Disconcerted by the unfamiliar surroundings, he let the natural response slip out: "Why?"

Immediately, he caught himself; he should have said something like, "I'm flattered."

It was too late, though. The woman cocked her head to one side, still smiling, and said, "Because you're a mystery—you're big and strong and brave, so you should have a face like a god, but nobody's ever *seen* your face."

"It's just a face," he said. "Same as anybody else's."

"Oh, I'm sure it isn't like anybody else's," she protested. "I'll bet it's a wonderful face. Can't you raise that visor and let me have a peek?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

"How do we know you're really Captain Cosmos at all, then?"

That stumped him for a moment.

"You don't," he said at last. "And showing you my face wouldn't help any, since nobody's seen it before."

"I bet I could tell."

He didn't bother to answer that.

"You're from outer space, aren't you? That's how you can do all those amazing things?"

"I don't really know myself," the Captain admitted. "Wherever I'm from originally, I came here as a

baby, and I grew up right here in the U.S.A.”

“An all-American boy, huh? I knew it. Some people say you wear that visor because you’re really a robot, or a monster, or something,” she persisted. “But I’m sure you’re not.”

“I’m not,” he said shortly. It hadn’t occurred to him that anyone might think he was hiding his face because there was something wrong with it. He didn’t like the idea. Bad enough to *be* an alien without looking alien.

“Now, that’s what I said,” the woman purred. “I told them I thought you were a real man. I’m sure there’s a human face under there, and I’d love to see it. I bet you have the bluest eyes.”

“I’m sorry,” the Captain told her, “but I couldn’t possibly raise my visor in public.”

“It doesn’t have to be public,” she murmured. “I’d be glad to go someplace private with you.” Her fingers were stroking the rim of her glass.

Behind his visor, the Captain frowned. This woman’s curiosity seemed entirely unreasonable. Why was she interested in seeing his face, and being so persistent about it? Was she a spy for some underworld organization, perhaps, trying to learn his identity so that they could track him down when he was off duty and off his guard?

“I just got here,” he said.

“Later, then?”

“I don’t think so,” he replied. “I should go say hello to the mayor.” He gestured vaguely across the room.

She pouted, but let him go.

He made his way through the crowd, making polite noises to various strangers as he went. A murmur drew his attention back toward the door for a moment; he turned to see the Night Man entering, his disreputable hat jammed down even further than usual.

The woman in the red dress was still watching the Captain. She smiled and made a little wave at him. He waved back, unwillingly.

“Who’s that in the hat?” someone asked.

“ ‘It’s dusk,’ ” “ someone else quoted from the newspaper write-up; the Captain frowned. ” ’He’s punched in, and he’s looking for someone to punch out.“ ”

“Oh, it’s the *Night Man*,” the first person exclaimed in recognition.

The Captain was annoyed. That bit was practically the Night Man’s slogan now. The darn newspapers had never come up with anything that memorable about *him*, even though everyone knew he was twice the hero the Night Man was.

True, the Night Man probably had more citizen’s arrests to his credit, but they were all small fry. He hadn’t captured any monsters. He hadn’t fought anything like the Church of Doom, or the cave-dwelling mutants with their brain-deadening rays. He didn’t have any of the Captain’s superhuman talents and abilities. The Captain snorted; he’d like to have seen that punk in the hat even bring in someone like the Electrothief! *He* couldn’t punch through a concrete wall!

Then he caught himself. Professional jealousy was unbecoming in a crimefighter; after all, they were all on

the same side.

Someone laughed, loudly and brightly; he turned to see Deborah Hatch near the podium, a drink in her hand, talking to Mr. Swift. Her cameraman was nearby, watching disinterestedly. Red Rover and the Amazon were talking over by a pillar.

The Captain supposed that Red and the Amazon were exchanging ideas on crimefighting, and Swift and Ms. Hatch were probably talking about how the media could help in the war against crime. That was all fine.

But what was *he* supposed to do? He started to turn around, looking for someone to talk to, when a man in a black suit strode out to the podium and tapped on the microphone.

The Captain listened intently as the man introduced the mayor, and then as the mayor made a little speech thanking the costumed crimefighters for their efforts.

“We don’t know who you are,” His Honor said, “but we’re glad you’re here.”

The Captain smiled at that, smiled behind his mirrored visor, smiled his odd, stiff smile that he had taken so long to learn as a child—He didn’t know who he was either, in a way. His adoptive parents had told him what they knew, about how he had been found in a dumpster the night the UFO exploded over the river, about how they’d found out he wasn’t really human—but nobody had told him any more than that, because nobody knew.

But no—he *did* know who he was. He was Captain Cosmos, defender of the innocent. Where he came from didn’t matter. He had struggled hard all his life to learn to be a human being, and he had managed it, and now he was also something more than that. He was a hero.

“Hi, Captain,” a woman said. He felt a touch on his arm and turned to find a young brunette smiling up at him.

“Hello,” he said.

“My name’s Jenny,” she told him.

“Hello, Jenny. Pleased to meet you.”

“Do you have any plans for after the reception, Captain?”

“Well, actually, I suppose I’ll take a look around for burglars,” he said.

She made a disappointed noise, but he didn’t really understand why. Wasn’t he *supposed* to look for burglars?

The mayor finished his speech, and any further conversation was lost in the applause.

He didn’t stay long; he shook hands with a few officials, then said goodbye and left. When he looked back he saw other people leaving, as well. Red and Swift and the Amazon were still inside, as was the Channel 9 news crew, but the Night Man had vanished even before the mayor’s speech ended.

On the way back to Station Square he sometimes glimpsed people in fancy clothes strolling along—others who had been at the reception, of course. There was one woman in a black coat who seemed to be going the same direction he was for a surprisingly long way; she had a high collar up, and seemed to turn away every time he looked in her direction, so he never got a look at her face.

He changed in the men's room. When he was out of costume he felt both better and worse—better because it was a relief to be out of costume, to be offstage, as it were, and worse, because now he was nobody in particular, he wasn't Captain Cosmos anymore, just an ordinary person.

And being an ordinary person was *hard*.

At his apartment he heard someone come in the door behind him; he paused on the stairs to look, and saw a young woman he didn't recognize in the hall below.

She turned to the row of mailboxes and buzzers, and he went on upstairs. As he opened the door to his own apartment he could hear whoever it was down there, talking to the woman in A-21.

That was Tuesday night.

On Wednesday, when he got home from work, he found a woman sitting on the stairs. He hesitated, unsure whether to squeeze past silently, or to say something.

"Hello, Mr. Jenkins," she said. There was something odd about the way she said it.

He blinked. "Hello," he answered mildly. "How do you know my name?"

"Mrs. Almido told me," she said, gesturing toward A-21.

Was that the woman's name? "I didn't know *she* knew it," he remarked.

"She got it off the mailbox," the woman on the stairs explained. "What's the F stand for?"

"Frank," he said, puzzled.

"Frank Jenkins," she said, getting to her feet and dusting off her skirt. "I'm pleased to meet you." She held out a hand. "I'm Rosalie Dutton."

Jenkins took her hand gently, being very careful not to squeeze. He noticed her coat lying on the steps, a black coat that looked familiar.

And there was something about her face, too. He wasn't good with faces, not good at all.

"Have I seen you somewhere?" he asked.

"You might have," she admitted. "Listen, could we go up to your place?"

He hesitated. "Why?" he asked.

"To talk," she said. "Just to talk."

He frowned, trying to figure out what she wanted. "I don't think that's a good idea," he said.

"I think it is, Captain," she said.

He stared at her.

"You want me to talk to the reporters, instead?" she demanded. Her voice was not very steady, he noticed—but as usual, he didn't know what to make of that.

Jenkins glanced quickly around the hallway. Nobody else was in sight, but there was no telling who might be listening through the flimsy doors.

“All right,” he said. “Go on up.”

She smiled triumphantly—and nervously—and turned and ran up the stairs.

He came up more slowly, trying to think what he should do.

He really couldn't settle on anything until he knew more, he decided as he stepped out onto the landing. He reached past the waiting woman, key in hand, and opened the door of his apartment.

The familiar warmth and smell of home rolled out, and he smiled; that took some of the stiffness and worry out of him, just feeling that hot, damp air.

A new expression flickered across the woman's face, one he didn't quite catch—he was never very quick at these things. Then it was gone, and he waved her in.

Rosalie Dutton was facing her moment of triumph, and somehow, it wasn't quite what she had expected. She had finally tracked down her hero, the man she wanted—but there was something in his face that made her uneasy. His features weren't as regular as she had expected; his hair wasn't the blond she had imagined it would be, but an odd shade of light brown.

And when the door of his apartment opened, the air that rolled out was thick with moisture, hot and heavy, and it carried an odor of ammonia and other things, as if a hundred different cleansers and chemicals had been spilled in there somewhere.

She entered, slowly, looking around. He saw her throat work as she swallowed.

“You... you keep it pretty warm in here, don't you?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I guess,” he said. “I don't like the cold.”

“Oh.” She looked around, at the books, the big table, the hassocks, the single chair. She seemed far less certain now than she had on the stairs. He wished he knew what she was thinking.

She had expected to find a modest and tasteful little abode, an ail-American setting straight out of fifties television; what else would be appropriate for a big Boy Scout like Captain Cosmos?

Instead, she was in this sweltering, malodorous, vaguely bohemian apartment. There was no sofa, no end tables; the furnishings that *were* there were mismatched and worn.

Her dream was not coming out right.

He closed the door and asked, “Now, what can I do for you, Ms. Dutton?”

She turned to stare at him.

“You're Captain Cosmos,” she said.

“What makes you think that?” he asked, trying to sound noncommittal—though he wasn't sure why he bothered; maybe in the comic books people could be fooled out of such discoveries, but he was pretty sure he wasn't going to be able to pull it off. This woman, whoever she was, had found him out.

“I followed you,” she said. “I've been following you for weeks, whenever I could, learning your tricks, and finding ways around them. When I followed you from the reception last night I finally managed to see you out of costume, and to stay with you all the way here. I watched you go in that men's room at the Mini'Mall, and I saw you come out, and I was sure it was you despite your tricks, because there wasn't

anyone else around you could be, and there aren't many men your size. I mean, I was sure, but I wanted to be *really* sure, so I talked to Mrs. Almido, and she told me about how you go out every night, you're almost never home, you never talk to anybody, never have visitors here—*she* thinks you're cruising gay bars, you're so big and handsome but she never sees you with any women, you don't even talk to women. I don't think so, though; I think you're out on patrol."

"And what if Mrs. Almido's right?" he asked mildly. "Or what if I'm a burglar, or a serial killer, and I go out robbing or murdering people?"

"

"But you're not," she said, without conviction. She glanced involuntarily around at the odd furnishings. "You're Captain Cosmos, the super-crimefighter."

"And what if I am? What would you want with me?" Somehow, her uneasiness seemed to be making him more sure of himself. After all, he was on his own home turf; he could smell that wonderful chloride tang from the kitchen, the air was thick and moist, the temperature was a comfortable 90 degrees or so.

She was perspiring, he noticed; her forehead was damp. She stepped closer to him, very close.

"You saved me from a mugger," she said, her voice low. "Three months ago, on the waterfront, after a late movie."

"Suppose I did," he said. "What of it?"

"I never got to say thank you," she said, a bit desperately. She was almost touching him now.

When he didn't react immediately, she turned and looked at the furniture again, and added, "There's no couch." She knew she sounded like an idiot, and she hoped that she wasn't offending him.

But then, she had come barging in here, invading his privacy—he had a right to be offended, didn't he?

This wasn't at all the way she had envisioned it. She had seen him, after some initial shyness, sweeping her off her feet and carrying her into his bedroom.

Instead, she was standing here talking about couches, and that weird chemical smell was getting stronger and stronger; her nose was beginning to sting. It was like one of those horrible dreams where everything went wrong, where no one would listen to her, no matter what she said.

"No," he said, "I don't like them." After a second's pause, he added, "Have a seat anywhere, if you like."

"What about you?"

"I'll stand."

Desperate for a response, she reached out and stroked his arm.

He didn't react.

"I've been trying to find you for months," she said. "When I heard about the reception, I knew I had to be there."

That startled him. "I don't remember seeing you there."

“I just watched.” She pressed up against him. “I saw those other women talk to you, and you seemed to think they were pushy, or something, so I...” Her voice trailed off as she looked up at him. She frowned.

Maybe the whole dream was based on a wrong assumption. Maybe the all-American hero wasn't quite what people thought he was. She was sweating, and the stench was beginning to get to her; she didn't think she could stand any more subtlety—and she wasn't really being subtle at all, in any case.

So she would have to be absolutely direct.

“Damn it, *are* you gay?” she demanded. “Is that it after all?”

“No,” he said. He had finally realized what she wanted, though he still had no idea why; he certainly hadn't meant to lead anyone on. He paused for a moment, debating, then decided on the truth. “I don't want men, either,” he said.

She stared into his face, his eyes.

His eyes, she thought, were a very strange color, a shade of brown she had never seen in eyes before, and there was something odd about the shape.

Or maybe there was something wrong with her eyes. They were beginning to sting from the fumes, whatever they were.

At least, she thought it was the fumes, and not tears.

“I'm sorry,” he said.

“You don't like women?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I like you all fine,” he said. “As people. But that's all.”

“You don't...” She hesitated. This was all wrong. She knew she should just turn and run out, but she had come so far. “You don't, um, want...”

He shrugged. He wondered if he ought to blush, but that was something he had never learned to do. “Well, not with anyone I've ever met,” he said.

“Are you...” She hesitated. “I mean, is there something physically wrong?”

He shook his head. “There's something missing,” he said. “But it's not anything simple or obvious. I don't know what it is. I don't know if it's in me, or in all of you, but whatever it is, it isn't there.”

She pulled away. “This isn't at all how I pictured it,” she said, her voice unsteady, and he could see that her eyes were now as moist as her forehead.

“I'm sorry,” he said.

The barrier was broken, and the words poured out in a torrent of confusion and misery. “It's all so weird, I mean, I wanted you so much and you aren't interested, and you keep it so hot in here I can hardly think, and there's no place to sit, and there's that smell, what is that?”

“Well, part of it is just the way I like my air,” he explained. “I suppose it's like air freshener would be, for you.”

“Part of it?” She wiped at her nose, which was beginning to drip. Sweat smeared her makeup.

“Well, there’s that,” he said, pointing to the tray sitting in the window to the kitchen.

She turned; her vision was beginning to blur, but she could see the tray and its contents.

“Oh, my God,” she said. “What is that?” She took a step closer.

“My dinner,” he said.

She gagged, and turned to stare at him. Her face was pale.

“Ms. Dutton,” he said gently, “if I really *am* Captain Cosmos, even given that I came from outer space, have you ever wondered how I could be so strong? How I can see in the dark, and all the rest of it?”

“I thought... I thought it was fancy equipment, from your spaceship...”

He shook his head. “I was born with it,” he said. “I see deep in the infrared, I can bench-press about a ton, and that’s just standing here in my regular clothes.”

She still stared.

For one thing, if she didn’t stare at *him*, she might see that dinner again.

“I’m *not human*, Ms. Dutton.” It hurt to state it outright like that, but he knew he had to.

“Then what *are* you?” she demanded desperately.

“I don’t know,” he replied soberly. “Nobody does. I was a foundling.”

“But you *look* human.” She could no longer see his face clearly; her head was swimming.

He shrugged.

“You *act* human,” she insisted. “I mean, you speak English and everything.”

“I grew up here,” he said. “I’ve lived among humans all my life, and I’ve tried very hard to be one of you.” He sighed. “It’s been *very* hard, sometimes.”

She didn’t understand. He was a man, wasn’t he? She couldn’t think clearly. She tried to fight back to the dream, to the lovely vision of the great handsome hero carrying her off to his bed. “Then can’t you... I mean, if you grew up here, can’t you... don’t women...”

“Something’s missing,” he repeated. “Maybe it’s a smell or something, I don’t know. It took me years to figure out what I should eat, you know that.” My parents tried, they gave me everything they could think of that might help, but I spent half my childhood throwing up. And as for sex, I haven’t even begun to figure it out. “His voice cracked slightly as he added, “I don’t even know what the females of my species look like!”

She stared, and took a step backward, almost stumbling over one of the hassocks. Those flat brown eyes were locked on her own. He flexed his muscles, not like a man might, but like an animal dislodging fleas, unthinkingly; and for the first time, she realized that those muscles moved in ways a man’s muscles did not.

Or was that just the distortion of her vision? Everything had become nightmarish; she felt sick and feverish.

He watched her. This was more than he'd told anyone, ever—he hadn't even talked to his parents about sex. He'd told the others, Red and Swift and the Amazon, that he was an alien, but he had never given them any details. When the newspapers had reported he got his powers from outer space, he had never denied it.

But until now, he had never really told anyone what that meant.

"We're different species," he said relentlessly. "We look alike, but that's just a coincidence, or maybe protective coloration, like those butterflies—monarchs and viceroys."

"But then why..." she asked. "I mean, why are you a crimefighter? Why do you care about the rest of us, if we aren't the same species?"

"I don't, really," he admitted. "But I *want* to be human. Or at least, I want to fit in. I'm doing what a human would do—aren't I? Isn't that what you're supposed to do, if you've got special powers? Be a hero?"

She didn't dare argue with him. She couldn't keep her words straight, though. "I guess... but why do you want to, if..."

He did the thing in his throat that corresponded to a sigh. "I may not be human," he said, "but I get lonely. I want a social life."

She blinked, trying to clear the haze. "That's a social life? Chasing crooks?"

"I'm one of the boys," he said. "With Red Rover and Mr. Swift. And the cops, the Amazon, the Night Man, the press people, even the mayor, they all talk to me, and I know what to say back."

She was nearer the door, now, and the air seemed cleaner. She asked, "But couldn't you, you know, get to know your neighbors, go to parties, things like that? You have to go out hunting drug pushers to meet people?"

He shook his head. "It doesn't work, having a regular social life. It's too complicated. I don't get the jokes. I don't pick up the signals. It's all gray and blurry and hard to follow, there's sex in everything, and the food I can't eat, and the body language I never learned to read. I tried. Believe me, I tried. But my brain just isn't wired the same way yours are; all the ways you people just naturally communicate without words, things you take for granted, I don't have."

"So you chase crooks?" she croaked. It still didn't seem to make sense to her.

He shrugged. "You always know who the bad guys are," he said. "You know what the point of the whole thing is."

She didn't say anything. She wasn't sure she could still talk.

"So now you know," he said at last. "Not just who I am, but what I am."

She nodded.

"I don't want you to tell anyone," he said.

Even across the species boundary, she thought the threat in his face was clear. "I didn't think you would," she said, her voice a rasp.

"Or you'd have told them yourself."

“So will you stay quiet?”

She nodded.

He stared at her, hesitating. Then he plunged.

“You know,” he said, “I can’t read your face very well. I don’t understand how you think. I don’t know if I can trust you.”

“You can trust me,” she protested, whispering. “I won’t tell anyone.”

“I don’t know that,” he said. “So let me tell you something, Ms. Rosalie Dutton. You aren’t my kind. You could ruin everything. If you tell anybody any of this stuff, I will hunt you down, and I will kill you. With my bare hands.” He picked a book off the nearest shelf, a thick hardcover, and crushed it between his hands. Shredded paper fluttered to the floor.

She stared in horror at this final ghastly perversion of her dream.

“But you’re a hero,” she whispered. “One of the good guys.”

“Yes,” he said. “That’s the role I picked. I like it. And I want to *stay* one of the good guys. I don’t want to be an alien monster. Don’t make me be an alien monster.”

“I won’t tell,” she said. “I swear. I won’t say anything. Ever.” The room was swimming; she couldn’t breathe, her face was soaked with sweat, her hands trembled in fear and confusion.

“Good,” he said. He glanced at the serving window. “Would you like to stay to dinner, then?”

She gasped, and fainted.

He watched her fall, frowning.

As he picked up her limp body, he wondered if he would ever really make good on the threat, and he didn’t know. He didn’t think he would ever need to; he thought Rosalie Dutton would keep her mouth shut, but he didn’t really know.

He slung her over his shoulder. Fresh air, Earth air, would revive her, he was fairly sure. He would leave her somewhere safe, and with any luck, when she came to, she would think it had all been a dream, and that would be the end of it.

Of course, if she didn’t think that, she might talk. She might go to the newspapers.

If she talked, everyone would say he was an alien monster. Maybe he should just kill her, wring her neck and dump the body somewhere.

But if he killed her, maybe that would mean he really *was* an alien monster.

No, he thought, I’m not an alien monster, I am *not*.

He was, he assured himself, one of the boys.

He was just one of the boys.