

PARANORMALS

WE ARE NOT ALONE

— SPECIAL SNEAK PREVIEW —

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Christopher Andrews**

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THIS IS A SPECIAL SNEAK PREVIEW OF

PARANORMALS

WE ARE NOT ALONE

a Novel by
CHRISTOPHER ANDREWS

BOOK TWO IN THE *PARANORMALS* SERIES

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Paranormals: We Are Not Alone

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ONE YEAR AGO

TAKAYASU AND VORTEX

Construction had begun on the new PCA headquarters. Normally, such destruction would have taken much longer to clear away, but with the paranormal help that Shockwave, Powerhouse, and others could provide, things were moving along much quicker. Powerhouse was a full-fledged agent of the PCA now, and he'd embraced his new job with gusto — they even let him keep wearing his ski mask. He was also Tommy and Sarah's new legal guardian.

In a temporary office set up nearby, Michael sat and considered the costumed man before him.

"Congratulations on your promotion," Steve told him. "I understand it's 'Lieutenant Takayasu' now. *Full* Lieutenant, right?"

"Yep," Michael confirmed. "Normally, I'd be required to hold the rank of Ensign for a minimum of a year before making Lieutenant *Junior Grade*. Circumstances have changed. And don't try to change the subject."

Steve sighed, wishing he could take off his

mask. But the Lieutenant still had not voiced his knowledge of Vortex's true identity, and Steve was reluctant to cross that line first. "I'm not trying to change the subject. I told you, I ... I'm just not prepared to join the PCA at this time."

"Which leaves me in a bit of a dilemma, doesn't it?" Reaching into his desk drawer, he produced a copy of the local newspaper. He didn't bother reading the article or headlines aloud — the grainy-but-recognizable photograph of Vortex (obviously posing) up on a rooftop spoke volumes for itself. "I can't afford to lose your help, but I can't have you running around outside of the law."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Vigilantism is still illegal, Vortex. Technically, that makes *you* a rogue."

"I know that, but think about it. Think about the reaction Lincoln had to the *idea* of Vortex. If I can inspire more people that way—"

"That's something you could do from within the PCA."

"Maybe, maybe not. I have something I want you to read..."

Fishing into a recently-added pocket on the inside of his cape, Steve produced Jeffrey Lawrence's now-crumpled essay.

Michael read it. Read it again. Thought about it, for several long minutes.

Steve waited.

"All right. You're on your own, *for now*, and I'll look the other way as best I can. If some other

agency goes after you, I can't help you, but for now I'll keep the PCA off your back."

"Thank you."

"Just don't go too far, Vortex," Michael warned. "Always remember: We're supposed to be the *good guys*."

Steve chuckled and made a show of slipping the essay back into his cape. "I think that was the point I was trying to make."

Michael smiled in return. "Yes, I suppose it was. Just don't expect me to shine some ridiculous 'Vortex-signal' into the clouds when I need your help."

Steve laughed openly. "No, we don't have to take it that far. But ... if you do need to reach me ... I think you'll know how."

Michael said nothing, merely nodded very slightly.

Vortex stood. Lieutenant Takayasu joined him. And they shook hands.

S.E.C.I.

“Doctor Foster?”

Charles Foster, Ph.D., looked up from his computer screen. One of his interns, Ken Starkey, that kid who looked like a long-haired Seth Rogan, stood in the doorway to his office, his hand hovering near the doorjamb as though he hadn't decided whether or not to knock before his vocal cords settled the matter. “Yes, Ken, what is it?”

“I got some stuff here you'll want to take a look at.”

“Sure, come on in.” Charles dropped his pen and picked up his *I Grok Spock* coffee mug, a holdover from his own days as an intern — his wife kept buying him replacements for it, and he kept quietly leaving them at home. He started to take a sip, but the lack of heat against his lips warned him in time; he needed a refresher. He kicked away from his desk, his wheeled chair coasting backward to the pot on the lower shelf behind him. “Have a seat. Coffee?”

“Nah, thanks.” Ken sat across from him. “Just downed a Red Bull.”

Charles made a face. “My son loves that stuff. I don't see how you can drink that caffeinated cough

syrup.” His beverage topped off and warm once more, Charles scooted his chair back into place. “What can I do for you, Ken? Did UT identify another new signal?”

“Uh, that’s not why I’m here, but since you bring it up, yeah, he identified two more right before lunch.”

UT, as in “Universal Translator,” was their nickname for Sam Bassett, the paranormal linguist who worked for Charles’ branch of SETI. An absolute Godsend to their work, UT could break down and translate the fundamentals of any language, no matter how complex, in record time; some elements — such as idioms, metaphors, personal nouns — were beyond him, but he could still manage in mere hours what might take normal linguists weeks, months, or longer.

Talk about job security, Charles mused from time to time.

“Code or spoken language?” he asked.

Ken consulted his ever-present tablet, dragging his finger over the screen once. “Uhhh ... one of each, actually. The spoken one’s going to be a real bitch, too. He thinks the speakers might be insectoid, or something. The other’s just another outer space version of Morse Code. He says he’ll have that one handed over to the ancillary team before he goes home tonight.”

Charles nodded, and as always these days, a part of him bemoaned the fact that something as wondrous as detecting signals of extraterrestrial

origin — not just one, but two! and both of them from just this morning — had become so pedestrian in five short years.

It wasn't always like this, of course. Not at all, God knew. Charles had been on duty when that first signal had come in, and it had been as explosive as that scene in the movie *Contact* — if anything, Charles and his team had been *more* frantic and ecstatic than the actors in the film.

Charles, then still a year away from his Ph.D., had been on duty with his two partners, Justin and Zeek, here at the Very Large Array in New Mexico, but their attention hadn't been on their job at first. This was less than twenty-four hours after the White Flash, and every news station was still trying to discern the proper focus of their attention — tangible fallout from the White Flash, like the million or so car accidents that followed ... or these perplexing, outlandish reports of some people developing superhuman powers?

That particular broadcast was, in fact, the moment when the term “paranormals” was coined: The President was finally going to issue a formal statement to the press, and the White House Press Secretary had come out to settle some preliminary matters. A few reporters posed straightforward questions about the many accidents and the new stars in the sky, and then one bold fellow asked if the President would be commenting on the rumors of a doctor allegedly going on a rampage in some hospital, reportedly killing people with a mere

touch, and a runway model turning invisible in the middle of an exclusive fashion show.

The White House Press Secretary rolled her eyes theatrically (a little *too* theatrically, many later said, suggesting that the gesture had been preplanned and over-rehearsed) and said, “Sir, we are here to discuss serious, real-world problems, not ludicrous rumors about a bunch of paranormals.”

But the reporters wouldn’t let it drop, not for the Press Secretary or the President, and from that point onward, the official term for those who changed was not “mutants” or “metahumans” or even “superhumans,” but *paranormals*.

Paranormals and *rogues*, unfortunately.

So Charles, Justin, and Zeek were, like everyone else, glued to the television set, watching history unfold ... and as luck would have it, Charles was the first to notice *another* history in the making not twelve feet from where they sat.

“Guys ...” he said in a low voice, his eyes now locked onto the computer monitor. His partners didn’t react, so he repeated, louder, “Guys.”

This time he earned a “Hmm?” from Justin; Zeek did not respond at all. Neither of them looked away from the television.

“*Guys*,” Charles said once again in a quivering voice, rising from his chair and crossing to their work equipment. His heart was pounding in his ears, so intense that he no longer heard the television.

Zeek remained oblivious, but Justin finally

registered his tone. “Charles, what—?”

“Guys! Get over here!”

Charles stood before the monitor, hunched over it, his trembling arms the only thing keeping him from collapsing to his knees. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. After all these years ... could this really be *it*?

“Oh, my God,” Zeek whispered near his right ear, as both men now stood on either side of him.

“Charles,” Justin said, “please tell me I’m not dreaming.”

“You’re not dreaming ...”

A signal. A transmission. Coming down from the heavens.

From *outer space*.

Then the stupor lifted, and all three men launched into action. Measuring, triangulating, calculating. And recording — oh, God, yes, recording everything! On the television, the President’s oft-interrupted speech went unheard by these three men as their life’s work and lifelong wishes came true beyond their wildest hopes. For unlike that scene in the Robert Zemeckis movie, this wasn’t just some random pulse, some loud tone that thrummed into prime numbers (although that, too, would’ve been cause for excitement). No, this was no code ... this was a *verbal transmission*, an all-out conversation involving two distinct voices in a language that had never been spoken anywhere on Earth.

The only question that remained was, what were

these two voices saying to them?!

Once they had determined, to the best of their ability, that this was neither a glitch nor a hoax, they knew it was time to start making some earthshattering phone calls. Being nominally in charge, Charles stood and placed his hand on the phone, but before picking it up, he turned to his partners and proclaimed in a melodramatic tone that was both giddy and somber, “Gentlemen ... we are not alone.”

Now, five years later, Charles Foster smiled with fondness and nostalgia (and a touch of embarrassment over his own grandiosity) at the memory — the crowning moment of his career, and his life. It was later determined, thanks to the acquisition of UT’s blessed paranormal ability, that those first two voices from beyond the sky had not been saying anything to *them* at all. Charles and his team had merely tapped into the conversation as a third-party, overhearing, funny enough, their discussing the results of some kind of outer-space sporting event. A little bit of a letdown in the immediacy of things, but not so much in the big picture — proof that we are not alone, as Charles had put it, could hardly be considered “disappointing” by any stretch of the imagination.

And it hadn’t stopped there. Within a week they had picked up another signal; this one *was* in code, and they spent the rest of the day verifying that it was nothing known to humanity. Two days after that, they picked up yet another signal, and although

this one smacked of being another verbal transmission, the language — hell, the vocalization itself — was so exotic they didn't know whether to assign it to the original transmission's category or create something altogether new. By the end of that first month, they had received and recorded almost a dozen different signals of extraterrestrial origin.

At any other point in history, this would have been *the* news! Every journalist in the world would have been clambering to interview them, every scientific institution begging to get in on the action.

But ... during all of these events, the Paranormal Effect had grown undeniable, and whether Charles agreed with it or not, superhumans among us trumped voices from light-years away. The scientific community was abuzz, of course, and astronomers were doing cartwheels over the seven new stars that shown brightly in the night sky (astrologists were still arguing amongst themselves over what the stars meant, if anything). But the general public was far more interested in the fact that their neighbors might be able to read their minds or see through their walls or who knew what else.

The only direct, undeniable connection SETI could draw between the Night of the White Flash and all of these new signals was the *timing*. The appearance of the Seven Stars and the sudden commencement of our finally receiving extraterrestrial signals was too fantastic to dismiss as coincidence. It was as though a veil had been lifted, a barrier of some kind removed to allow the Earth in

on some galactic secret.

Not that we're any closer to figuring out what that secret is, Charles mused. Then he mentally shook himself and said to Ken, "Okay. So if you're not here to fill me in on the latest pair of signals, why did you want to talk to me?"

"Well, " Ken said, scratching the side of his neck, "we're not entirely sure what to make of this. I mean we can't agree. You see, we picked up a new set of transmissions from our cousins last night—"

Charles nodded. "Yes, I got the email on that this morning." The "cousins" to which Ken was referring were the *Arthians* — so dubbed because their spoken language, of all the transmissions SETI had recorded, was the closest match to an Earth equivalent; it sounded a hell of a lot like Russian, and they had spent a fair amount of effort at the beginning verifying that it was not just that. As near as Sam the Universal Translator could tell, this race actually called themselves the *Taalu*, but the idea that a similar language meant other similarities was an appealing one. And so it was jokingly decided that these strangers were from the planet *Arth* (as in one-letter-off), and their nicknames shifted from "Arthlings" to "Arthians," and the latter stuck. Charles asked Ken, "What about them?"

"Well, you know that little trailer code that UT's been using kind of like a date stamp ...?"

Again Ken hesitated. Charles found himself growing both a little curious and slightly annoyed.

“Spit it out, Ken.”

In response, Ken leaned forward and offered his tablet. “Um, it might be easier, Doctor Foster, if you just take a look at this and, you know, form your own opinion first.”

Charles accepted the tablet and read the information on the screen. A crease formed between his eyebrows as he tried to make sense of it. He thumbed the screen a few times, reading more before saying, “At first glance, Ken, I’d wager our paranormal translator’s made his first mistake since he joined us. This data is contradictory. It doesn’t make sense.”

“That was my first guess, too,” Ken added with a nod. “But take a look at the footnotes back on the first page.” He watched, his eyes gleaming with anticipation, as Charles did so. “Do you see what I’m talking about?”

Charles sat forward in his chair, the tablet gripped with both hands. His heart was beating faster, his face flushing with professional excitement as it hadn’t in a few years. “That’s ... that’s got to be speculation. I mean—”

Ken nodded again. “Yeah. But he seems pretty sure, Doctor Foster. And Sam’s never made a mistake yet, you know? With a track record like his— I mean, as near as we can tell, he’s been one-hundred percent across the board.” He shrugged. “So, what do *you* think?”

Charles remained still for a moment longer, then shoved his chair back and rose to his feet, his eyes

never wavering from the tablet as he thumbed the screen forward and back. He couldn't hide his eager grin as he said, "I think I need to talk to Sam. Right now."

PCA

When he noticed he was in danger of leaving Ken behind, Charles made a conscious effort to keep his pace cool and even, to keep a stranglehold on his enthusiasm. First and foremost, UT really might be wrong — a first, but stranger things had happened for certain. But he also wanted to maintain a semblance of professional decorum; after receiving hundreds of extraterrestrial signals from dozens of different sources, half of his staff was even more inured to the exhilaration of new data than he was.

But this ... this could be different, very different. If Sam was *right* ...

Opening the doors to the transcription pool, Charles scanned the room to see who else was present. A couple of the other interns were across the room, hard at work on the new transceiver algorithm UT has suggested and Charles had commissioned. Zeek was smoking a cigarette out on the patio and talking on his cell phone. The others, as Charles had hoped, did not yet appear to be back from lunch yet — by lucky coincidence, Charles had given them approval to take an extra hour today for Matthew's birthday.

Until they nailed this down, Charles wanted to keep things as quiet as possible. Just to be sure.

As they approached Sam, Charles steeled himself for what he was likely to see: Sam had his professional-grade headphones on, which meant he was translating a transmission right now, which meant his eyes were going to have that *creepy* look that Charles found so unnerving.

“Good afternoon, Sam,” he said as he reached his destination, speaking up so that Sam would be able to hear him.

Sam Bassett — who Charles had always thought looked like a fair-skinned, hazel-eyed version of the actor Stanley Tucci — glanced up from his monitor ... but his eyes weren’t “hazel” right now; not while he was using his paranormal ability. When he was working, the hazel of Sam’s irises and the white of his sclera inverted.

Charles bit the inside of his cheek and refused to flinch.

Sam flicked only a brief glance at his boss before closing his white-on-hazel eyes as he removed his headphones. Setting them on the desk beside his keyboard, he opened his eyes to reveal they were once more completely normal — the Universal Translator had closed them, but now they belonged to Sam Bassett.

“Good afternoon, Doctor Foster.” He also nodded to Ken, who nodded back with a big goofy grin. “I’m guessing you’re here about the latest transmission from the Arthians?”

“Yes,” Charles said. “I’m— well, I’m intrigued, to say the least, about the conclusions you’ve

drawn.”

Sam smiled. “I’ll bet.”

Charles grabbed a nearby chair and rolled it over to sit alongside Sam’s worktable. Ken stepped over to his own desk and leaned against it, not even pretending to do other work as he watched to see how this was going to play out. “Before I get too excited, why don’t you take me through this from the beginning, step by step. I want to understand how you reached the conclusions you did. Because if you’re right, UT ...”

Sam nodded. “I know,” he agreed, still smiling. “Okay, let me pull up one of the Arthian transmissions from last month first.” He turned back to his computer and searched for the appropriate folder. “I’ve gotten so far behind on their transmissions, I’ve started spot-checking them and making note of their approximate age—”

“From their ‘date stamp,’ correct?”

“Yes, all the Arthian transmissions — except for the one, but I’ll get to that in a minute — have an ending footnote, sort of like an auto-signature at the end of an email. I’ve seen the same thing on a few of the others, like the Daluvianians.”

Charles stifled the urge to rush Sam on the parts he already knew; experience had taught him to let Sam talk things through at his own pace.

“It’s based off the center of the Milky Way,” Sam continued, “spreading outward at a speed-of-light ratio to indicate ... well, the best way to express it verbally escapes me, and I know you guys would

prefer a mathematical equation anyway, but still, thank God for my paranormal talent,” he said without an ounce of egotism, “because without having their galactic knowledge as reference, I don’t think mankind ever would’ve been able to translate and understand it well enough to use it.”

Charles chuckled. “You should’ve seen what a train wreck our translation efforts were before you joined us, Sam.”

Sam gave a humble bow of his head, then perked up when he found what he was looking for. “Okay, take this transmission for example ...”

Sam clicked his mouse, and a scratchy but audible voice played from his speakers. As always, Charles marveled at how much the language sounded like Russian — not speaking the language himself, if someone had played it for him and told him that it *was* Russian, he would’ve believed them.

“Based on degradation, bandwidth, background spill, background wash, and the date stamp,” Sam explained, “I’m putting this one just a few weeks after the previous Arthian transmission. There’s still a lot of speculation and circumstantial extrapolation involved, but all of those factors put together suggest that this signal originated approximately two-thousand-seven-hundred light-years from here.”

Charles smiled like a little kid glimpsing his first sight of Santa Claus. “The voice we’re hearing is from twenty-seven-hundred years ago.” *My, my ... maybe I haven’t lost that old sense of wonder after all.*

“Conventional wisdom and the laws of physics as we understand them dictate that conclusion, yes. But that’s why you’re here, isn’t it?”

Ken jumped in, commenting, “Radio signals travel at the speed of light in the vacuum of space.”

“Right,” Sam pointed at Ken, “a law of physics that we’ve accepted from the beginning. And because of the sheer number of signals we’ve been receiving for five years, we’ve had a lot of other things on our minds, so why question such a basic axiom?”

Charles remained silent, feeling that excitement growing.

“I’ve noted a few discrepancies here and there since I joined SETI, but they were all relatively small, so I figured we’d iron them out at a later date. Take this for instance ...” He scrolled halfway up the page, highlighting another Arthian transmission. “This signal was picked up about six weeks earlier, and yet the computer estimates the point of origin as *four light-years* further away. But it’s definitely Arthian in origin, so *if* it had come from the exact same planet or planetary system, we shouldn’t be hearing it for another four years—”

“Which means that the Arthians are spread out over at least four light-years,” Charles jumped in. “Which means they’re capable of interstellar travel.” His eyes widened at the prospect.

“Kick ass!” from Ken.

Sam continued, “But one thing we’ve had to continually do from the very beginning is slow a lot

of these signals down, way down. Not all of them — for instance, the very first one that *you* picked up, Doctor Foster, didn't need it — but the majority of them have. The key assumption has been that our intergalactic neighbors have been using software and hardware far more advanced than ours, so much faster that it'd be like comparing the processing speed of today's computers to an Apple IIe from way back when. One of the professors who toured through here last year even argued that this might be why we'd never heard anything prior to the White Flash, that our old equipment and computers were just too slow to understand what they were hearing and that the White Flash was a red herring."

Charles dismissed that with a wave of his hand, but did not interrupt.

"Then ..." Sam paused for emphasis. "... we received another set of transmissions from the Arthians last night, and now I think we might've been wrong all along."

Sam turned back to his computer just long enough to highlight another transmission near the bottom of the list, making it one of the most recent. Ken grinned in expectation of Sam's getting to the crux of their discovery.

"There were three transmissions, all so close together that the computer assumed they were interrelated. They're not. The timing was just a coincidence." He drew a deep breath, then continued, "These transmissions have led me to two conclusions, only *one* of which I shared with Ken

this morning.”

“Dude!” Ken blurted, offended.

Sam offered a crooked smile. “What we talked about was important enough, don’t you think, Ken?” He returned his focus to Charles and leaned in. “I don’t think these transmissions are nearly as old as we’ve been assuming. I think these people — *many* of these peoples, but definitely the Arthians — have faster-than-light communication.”

Sam paused to let that sink in.

Charles struggled to remain objective, to remain impartial. “I think Albert Einstein just rolled over in his grave.” Sam chuckled at that, as did Ken. “Nothing travels faster than the speed of light.”

Sam shrugged, and replied, “With respect to Einstein, he didn’t have all the information.”

“Clearly,” Ken jumped in. “But you still haven’t explained that! *If* they’re using some kind of FTL communication, how the hell are our *radio* dishes picking it up?”

“Signal spill,” Sam answered. “Hasn’t it bothered either of you how *clear* these signals are? I mean, sure, we have to clean them up a bit, but some of these transmissions come through clearer than my cell phone does.”

Charles nodded. “Yes, I’ll give you that one. Thousands of light-years — *tens* of thousands in some cases — and yet...”

“Right,” Sam stated. “‘And yet.’ That’s what I think has been happening, at least over the past five years. Something has changed. If the White Flash

could rewrite the DNA of human beings, who says it hasn't changed the fabric of the universe itself, too? I think this faster-than-light communication of theirs is 'leaking' radio transmissions that we are now able to pick up, slow down, and understand. The irony is that if, for whatever reason, they were deliberately trying to keep us out of the galactic loop, they probably have no idea that we can hear them now. If they have FTL communication, why would they bother checking for *radio spill*?"

Charles straightened. "An interesting theory, Sam. But if your paranormal ability is linguist in nature, I'm not sure how that qualifies—"

Sam flicked a finger at the highlighted line on his screen. "*That* Arthian transmission originated just eleven-hundred light-years from here."

"You're positive, Sam?" Charles demanded. "You're absolutely, one-hundred percent certain that it is another *Arthian* transmission?"

Sam nodded. "I'd swear it in any court of law. Even if I didn't know the language, the different races we've picked up all have their own 'style,' like the difference in people's handwriting. That signal is spoken in the Taalu language, and was transmitted using Taalu technology. It's *them*, Doctor Foster. It's a hell of a lot closer than the majority of the others. *And* the date-stamp puts it at just *thirty-seven years* newer than the transmission I just played for you earlier."

Charles finally allowed himself to express the exuberance he'd been holding back. "And if they

traveled sixteen-hundred light-years in just thirty-seven years' time ...”

“Then they must be able to *travel* faster than the speed of light. Which makes the idea that they might be able to *communicate* faster than light a much easier pill to swallow, huh?”

“You could say that.”

“Hot damn,” Ken broke in, “Roddenberry called it! But what if they traveled that distance over a long period of time? I mean, if they had generational ships or cryogenic ships or something, they *could* have traveled the distance at sub-light speeds. Maybe the transmissions *are* as old as we first calculated, but the Arthians are just, like, really spread out, a big galactic empire.”

Charles shook his head. “No, we’re talking a distance of sixteen-hundred light-years, Ken. The time it would take to cover that distance at sub-light speeds, even if they were able to push close enough to light-speed to use time dilation to their advantage...” He shook his head again. “No, Sam’s right. They must have faster-than-light travel — whether it’s warp speed, worm holes, jump gates, it really doesn’t matter. And they almost certainly have faster-than-light communication. And *that* means we’ve been wrong about how old these messages are.” He guffawed once. “Jesus, we’re going to have to completely rewrite the software for this. Factor in just how much we have to slow down the transmissions, factor in Sam’s date-stamp, factor in ... it makes my head hurt just thinking about it!

“I’ll call a staff meeting for tomorrow morning. There’s going to be resistance to this, Sam, a *lot* of resistance. That’s just how these things are. But I want the SETI team here updated on this right away. Then we’ll work our way outward, one step at a time.”

“I understand,” Sam said.

Ken clapped his hands once and spread them wide. “Okay, am I the *only* one here who’s dying to know about that *other* conclusion of yours? The one that you kept secret from *me*. Come on, dude. Give!”

For the first time, Sam showed obvious tension, appearing reluctant to continue. Charles raised an eyebrow. *What in the world—?*

“Doctor Foster,” Sam lowered his voice, “it might be for the best if we kept this, um ... just between the two of us. For now.”

“Hey!” Ken protested.

Choosing to err on the side of caution, Charles said, “Ken, why don’t you go grab yourself another Red Bull ...”

“But—”

“Ken.”

Downhearted, Ken shot Sam a dirty look as he sulked away.

Charles turned back to Sam. “Okay, UT, you’ve got my attention. You have the floor.”

Sam peered over to where the other interns were working, then rolled his chair a few inches closer to Charles, leaning forward and lowering his voice

even further. Intrigued, Charles mirrored him.

“It’s about that third transmission,” Sam said. “The last one that came through with the others.”

“What about it?”

“It appears,” Sam said, “that it originated just seventy light-years *from here*.”

Charles’ jaw dropped. “You’re kidding.”

“I’m not.”

“Well ... why didn’t you mention this before, in front of Ken? Doesn’t this further your theory?”

“Oh, it does,” Sam agreed, though he still seemed unhappy about it. “Very much so.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Two things. First, I’m not entirely certain about it; neither is the computer. This final transmission is a little different from the others. They’re speaking the Taalu language, and it carries the Taalu ‘handwriting’ I talked about, but between the bandwidth and the date-stamp ... it’s like they were trying to keep quiet, to whisper, so to speak.”

Charles knew all about bandwidths, but ... “What was wrong with the date-stamp?”

“It was sort of abbreviated. Like if someone wrote the date as ‘oh-seven-forty’ instead of ‘July, Nineteen-Forty.’ ” He shrugged. “That’s just an analogy, but ... I think they were trying to broadcast covertly or something. Or hell, maybe it was just, I don’t know, a ship-to-ship transmission instead of planet-to-planet. If I’m right about their not knowing we can hear them ...”

“Okay,” Charles admitted, “that’s a little

curious. What's the other problem?"

Sam glanced at the interns one more time before answering. "The proximity between the Arthian's usual point of origin and the newer ones ... Doctor Foster, they're not just *generally* closer, not just spreading out like the 'empire' Ken mentioned. They're getting *directly* closer. I mean, I cross-checked it with the astronomy database, to be sure." He looked Charles straight in the eye. "It's an almost perfectly straight line, Doctor Foster. That's why the three messages happened to arrive so close together even though they originated so far apart. And that last one — the close one, the quiet one — *specifically* mentions a yellow sun. That could be a coincidence, sure, but I don't think so." He released a tight breath. "Charles, they aren't just getting closer ... I think they might be coming *here*."

All at once, Charles understood why Sam the Universal Translator had kept this to himself at first. This was *huge*. The Taalu — their "cousins," the Arthians — might be coming to Earth.

As a member of SETI and lifelong dreamer, it was probably the most exciting news he could have possibly imagined.

But as a husband, father, and a man living in a world that had already gone crazy five years ago with the Paranormal Effect ... the idea scared him.

YESTERDAY

THE PARANORMALS TODAY
BY JEFFREY LAWRENCE
6TH GRADE - MISTER RAGLAND

Hello. My name is Jeffrey Lawrence. I am a 6th-grader in Mister Ragland's class. Last year I wrote an essay for Miss Wallis' class about the Paranormals, and I must have done a good job because Miss Wallis turned it in to the Principal and they ended up having a whole big meeting about it and even passed out copies at the P.T.A. (that's for Parent-Teacher Association) and everything. But the best part is, I got an A+!

Now the school has a regular P.T.A. meeting every 9-weeks to talk about the Paranormals and how kids are handling it and if there are any kids who have turned Paranormal in our school (there was a kid named Richard Anyon who

disappeared a few months ago, and the rumor was he had turned Paranormal but it turned out his Dad had taken him away from his Mom).

Since I wrote the essay that started the meetings a year ago, Mister Ragland asked if I would write a new one, to share my feelings and thoughts about what all has gone on and changed for the past year. I told him I would if I could do it instead of reading this boring book he gave us for English. He said he would think about it so I wrote this right away to convince him.

It has now been almost 6 years since the White Flash happened and people started changing. For a long, long time a lot of people who got powers from the Paranormal Effect used their new powers for crime. The Government put together a group called the P.C.A. (that's for Paranormal Control Agency) to fight the super-powered criminals, which are called Rogues. I thought it was sad and uncool that no one wanted to be a super-hero instead.

The best part is, I put that in

the essay and I got my wish! A real live super-hero finally showed up! His name is Vortex. He can shoot lasers and some kind of pressure stuff from his eyes and he's really tough and he can kick as high as my Dad's head. His costume is black and gold and a little shiny all over, and it has a cape and everything. His symbol on his chest is kind of weird (my big brother calls it a "trippy spiral"), but I like it. Vortex helps the police with Rogues whenever the P.C.A. isn't there, and sometimes he'll help the P.C.A., too.

I think it is a very good thing that we finally have some Paranormals wanting to be super-heroes instead of Rogues. Mister Ragland wanted me to talk about how I feel, and that is how I feel. Some people complain that Vortex is a vigilante but I think that's a lot better than being a Rogue.

The sad part is that not more people have been following Vortex's example. Some people have, and that's cool. There's a woman in New York City and she can put people to sleep with her voice. She calls

herself The Siren, and she helps the police with Rogues. She doesn't wear a costume, but she wears a mask. There's also a brother and sister somewhere in Canada who can smell when people are lying, and they have been helping the courts up there and the police when they can. I don't think they have superhero names, but Canada doesn't have their own P.C.A. yet so I think that makes them sort of like superheroes.

There was also a guy in San Francisco who called himself The Magnet, but the sad part is that he didn't last very long. He had a white costume, and he could move metal like that villain in the "X-Men" movies, but he wasn't very fast at it. The second Rogue he tried to fight also had a gun with him and The Magnet wasn't fast enough to stop the bullet and he got shot in the chest. And then he used his metal-moving power to pull the bullet out, but it turned out that was the wrong thing to do and he bled to death. I think the fact that he died so fast may have scared other Paranormals into not

trying to be super-heroes, and that is sad, too.

But I still think that things are better now than they were a year ago. We have Vortex now, and even though the P.C.A. headquarters got blown up last year, the P.C.A. has stuck with it. And there are two guys who help the P.C.A. who are kind of like super-heroes, too: There's a guy they call Powerhouse who is really strong (he wears a ski mask and gloves, but no other costume parts), and another guy they call Shockwave. There are some other Paranormal helpers, but Powerhouse and Shockwave are the ones they talk most about on the news.

Some other stuff has gotten better, too. They have started passing some laws that make it illegal to fire people who turn Paranormal unless they are Class One (that's for Paranormals whose powers can be very dangerous). Class Two Paranormals (that's for Paranormals whose powers are harder to make dangerous) would be just as protected as people of different races or religions. But sometimes

people find it hard to agree on how to decide what is a Class One or Class Two, and some people even want them to make up a "Class Three" for Paranormals whose powers are really hard to make dangerous.

But like I said: I think that things are a lot better now than they were last year. More and more Rogues have been put in jail in places like Alcatraz Island and the Nevada Desert and a real close prison called "The Rogue Pit." People are finally not being so scared just because someone turns Paranormal. And it seems like there might not be quite as many people turning Rogue as there used to be.

And I think a lot of that is thanks to Vortex! If I ever turn Paranormal, I'm going to follow his example. And I hope that I am half as tough as he is!

TODAY

VORTEX

Kimberly Bryce screamed when the rogue burst forth from the storm drain ahead of her. The terrifying paranormal moved so fast!

If only she had followed her father's advice never to talk to strangers, if only she had followed her mother's example of treating every man as a potential threat, she might not be fleeing for her life right now. But she could play the "if only" game all day, it wouldn't get her away from the snake-man.

Throwing an arm around the street sign as she passed it, she spun into a nearly perfect ninety-degree turn and kept running. The snake-man thrashed his tail at her, coming so close to her legs she felt the air whip past her left calf. Hissing in frustration, he dove back into the storm drain, no doubt seeking to cut her off once more. So she stopped, caught her breath for two seconds, then doubled-back the way she had come.

"Help!" she called for the fiftieth time, her voice barely carrying by this point. "Help, someone!"

This close to the campus, she was surrounded by

low-income apartments, crammed with students who had made it past their freshman years. Even midday like this, *someone* had to be home, had to hear her pleas for help. But with the exception of one middle-aged woman who shouted from her cracked front door that she had called the police, no one had responded. Kimberly had, in fact, heard a police siren twirp a few streets over a minute ago, but when she had turned in that direction, the snake-man had almost gotten her. And every time she tried to work her way back toward the campus, where she *knew* she would find people, he kept cutting her off, using the storm drains over and over again to outpace her as he could not do on foot. So she kept going, kept calling for help, and kept praying ...

Kimberly had been walking to her first afternoon class after lunch. Normally her roommate would've been with her, but not today. And any prior day this semester her boyfriend might've tagged along, but they had a huge fight over the weekend and he was still giving her the silent treatment. So she had been alone as she walked from her apartment toward the college, but when the homeless man first approached her, she didn't think much of it.

As she waited for a lone car to pass before crossing the next residential street, the vagrant had drifted toward her and mumbled something she did not understand. The first thought that went through her mind was her mother's advice, which would've been to run screaming for the hills from any male

who approached her without three forms of photo identification. Rolling her eyes at her phantom mother, she instead replied with a courteous, “I’m sorry?”

“... etty,” was all she heard this time. The man’s voice had been very whispery, like he suffered from extreme laryngitis.

Assuming that he was probably asking her for money, she had replied, “I’m sorry, I don’t carry any cash on me.” She indicated her two textbooks and notebook, displaying her lack of a purse.

The homeless man drew nearer, and for the first time, she had caught a whiff of his terrible smell. It wasn’t just body odor, either; he smelled very musty, very dank. It wasn’t at all pleasant, and she had taken a step back.

“... retty,” he tried again.

Easing further away, she had replied, “I’m sorry, sir, I can’t understand you.”

The man had cleared his throat and repeated, “You’re pretty.”

That was too much. Maybe she should’ve thanked him for the compliment, but instead she had said, “I have to go now. I have to get to class.” She looked away and started crossing the street.

“Don’t turn your back *on me!*”

Shocked by his audacity, Kimberly had whirled around to give him a piece of her mind ...

In a matter of seconds, the man changed. Nothing showy or dramatic like a werewolf transforming in the movies — he threw his head

back, revealing that his matted hair was just a wig. No, that wasn't right, because the hair had fallen away in separate clumps — he had not lost a wig, but had shed his actual hair. And as his face elongated, his features flattening, he had shrugged his shrinking shoulders and slithered right out of his dirty clothes. And just like that, a man-sized reptile stood before her, his arms and legs shriveling as his torso extended.

Dear God, drifted through her mind. *A real paranormal.*

The snake-man opened his mouth to speak, but where his voice had been hoarse before, now it was so hissy all she understood was, "... inside you ..."

She dropped her books and ran. And now, God only knew how much later, she was still running. In broad daylight down freakishly empty residential streets, she was running for her life from the first paranormal she had ever met.

Kimberly, who was majoring in sports education, had run track her whole life, but even she could not keep up this pace forever. If she didn't pull a muscle and fall flat on her face, she might simply slow down to the point where the snake-man would finally get her. She could only be grateful that it hadn't already occurred to him to revert to his original, human form and try catching her on foot instead of slithering through the waterways below. Maybe he'd been using his paranormal form for so long, he no longer thought in norm terms? She didn't care, she just wanted someone to please,

please help her!

At the intersection ahead of her, a plain, grey sedan with tinted windows sped through the crossroad, moving too fast for her to flag it down ... except, much to her exultation, the driver slammed on his brakes, skidding to a stop with only his trunk still in view.

Kimberly waved her limp arms in the air, an impaired effort by now but it was the best she could do. “Help!” she gasped. “Over here!”

Dear God, she prayed, please don't let the monster get between us. Please ...

But that was exactly what happened.

Before she could call out again, the snake-man flowed out of the storm drain ahead of her, blocking her path to salvation. His head bent to the right, away from her and toward the car, and her first impulse was to call out a warning — not her smartest instinct, but that's the kind of person she was. Then the monster's head swivelled back toward her, that long neck writhing around atop the remnants of his humanoid shoulders, and his reptilian eyes widened in pleasure upon sighting her. His withered legs relaxed back onto his tail, which coiled like a spring, preparing to launch at her again with that lightning speed she had been fortunate to evade until now. She stumbled to a stop, tensed to dodge him once more, but her legs were trembling and she couldn't catch her breath. Like it or not, she realized that her amazing luck had come to an end.

Then a male voice shouted, “*Duck!*”

Kimberly had no idea who had shouted or what good that might do, but she was past the point of asking such questions. She dropped to the ground.

The same instant the snake-man leaped at her, his tail launching him faster than any norm could dream of, the air behind him rippled, twisting and spiraling like a miniature cyclone. The rogue gasped in shock as he was knocked forward, no longer propelled by his tail but now as helpless as his prey had been a moment before. He passed over her, not touching the ground again until he had sailed almost all the way to the next intersection. When he landed, he rolled head over tail until he finally slithered back into the nearest storm drain, leaving a fair amount of slimy blood on the pavement along the way. She heard him hissing loudly in pain and anger as he vanished.

Was that it? Was he gone?

“Miss?”

Kimberly yelped and cringed away. Running on her last dregs of adrenaline, she kicked out behind her before the owner of the voice could grab her, squeeze her, drag her down below ...

“Whoa! Whoa! It’s okay! It’s just ... uh, me.”

Kimberly finally looked around to see who had spoken, an apology forming on her lips as it dawned on her that she had just tried to kick her savior. The *sight* of her savior, however, brought her up short.

“You, uh, you might’ve seen me in the news,” he said. “My name is Vortex.”

Still crouched on the ground, Kimberly looked

him up and down, taking in the black-and-gold costume with its almost-metallic sheen, the cape, the funky spiral on his chest, the mask. “You gotta be kidding me ...” she whispered.

“I just picked up the call on the police scanner,” the costumed man explained, “and I was right nearby, so I knew I’d get here before the PCA.” He knelt beside her. “Are you okay? Do you need medical help?”

She shook her head. *Who was this idiot?* “No ... no, I’m just ... worn out ...”

“I’ll bet,” Vortex said, offered her his hand. “It sounds like you’ve been giving this guy a merry chase for, what, fifteen minutes now?”

Reluctant to take his gloved hand just yet, she shook her head again as she rubbed her aching thighs. “I don’t know ... how long ...”

The police siren chirped again, just one street away now. Vortex glanced that way, gesturing again with his offered hand. “You’re safe now. The police will—”

The snake-man exploded from the storm drain across from them. Before Kimberly could scream, the monster hit Vortex, tackling him to the ground, his long tail encircling the costumed man.

Vortex bucked and rolled, scrambling around with his legs, trying to keep the rogue’s tail from sliding into place across his chest. He managed to work his right arm through the coils, but that was it. He kicked back, reaching over his shoulder with his free hand, kept turning his head left and right as if

desperate to see his attacker, but the snake-man's torso pressed against his back, adding more pressure to his abdomen.

"Leave ... leave him alone!" Kimberly called. She tried to stand up, but after all that running, her legs weren't anxious to work for her again. Her left thigh was threatening her with a Charley Horse, and both calves were trembling. If only she hadn't been so distracted by her rescuer's silly Halloween costume, she would've warned him about the storm drains!

The rogue twisted his neck around until he was facing her, a corkscrewing endeavor that nauseated as much as terrified her. His mouth opened, and it took her a moment to realize he was trying to smile at her. "Hiiim ... then yooou ..." he hissed.

Kimberly redoubled her effort to stand.

The snake-man laughed at her, extended a pair of dripping fangs, then whirled and sunk those horrible teeth into Vortex's neck.

Except they *didn't* sink into his neck. They dug in only a fraction of an inch before stopping, and one of them snapped under the pressure.

The rogue roared and spat in pain, shook his head, then flexed his tail muscles with such force, Kimberly heard an audible *pop!* as Vortex's right shoulder was wrenched from its socket. Unlike his opponent, Vortex swallowed most of his strangled anguish, but not all of it.

The shock of these violent exchanges finally drove Kimberly to her feet. But what should she do

next? She could not imagine how to help her would-be savior, yet the idea of leaving him to his fate sickened her. Could she run for the police? They were nearby. But how fast could she move on her wobbly legs?

As the questions plagued her, the snake-man pressed his torso against Vortex's back, forcing his prey forward, his tail digging deeper into the man's guts, cutting off his ability to breathe. Any moment would see Vortex black out, and then she would again be alone with—

The end of the snake-man's tail whipped along the ground between Vortex's legs, seeking to wrap around his knees. As she watched, twin beams of red light shot from Vortex's eyes, burning through the reptilian flesh in an instant and slicing at least twelve inches of that tail in half.

The snake-man had roared when his fang broke, but this time his eyes flew wide and he screamed. Vortex hit the tail again, lasering from the center outward so that part of it now hung loose, held together only by an inch of scaly flesh. The rogue screamed louder.

Twisting around on the pavement, Vortex planted his feet and bucked against the snake-man, and when his chest puffed out, he lasered through part of the body of the tail where it wrapped around his torso.

The rogue could not take anymore. Flopping around like a fish, he unwrapped himself from his former prey, panicking to get away from the burning

assault.

As soon as the pressure relaxed, Vortex bent forward again, this time of his own free will, and kicked backward — his boot caught the shrieking rogue in the face, knocking him away. He spun on one knee to face his opponent. The air between them rippled like asphalt under the sun, and the rogue's head snapped back as if struck by a sledgehammer. He collapsed to the pavement, unconscious.

Vortex struggled to his feet, his right arm hanging loose at his side, the shoulder bulging at an unnatural angle.

Kimberly limped over to his side. “Th-thank you,” she said.

Vortex sort of chuckled, but it sounded more like a brave effort. “It’s my pleasure, miss. It’s what I do ...” He looked to his left as the police siren chirped yet again. “Sounds like the cops are almost here. And we have an audience, too.” He nodded his head to the side.

Kimberly followed his gesture, seeing a heavysset Asian man in a grey jumpsuit standing out on his porch. He was chattering into a cell phone, probably to 911.

“*Now* they come out,” she grumbled, bitter.

“Yeah,” Vortex commented, “most people dive for cover when a paranormal fight starts. Can’t really blame them.” He started shuffling toward the grey sedan, still idling in the intersection. “I need to get going now. The police will—”

“Wait!” she said, mindful of his injured right arm. “We should get you to a hospital.”

“Can’t do that,” he said as he kept moving.

“Please, Vortex. I ...” Kimberly didn’t know what to say, and so what came out next surprised her. “I’m sorry.”

The masked hero stopped, turning halfway to look back at her. “You’re ‘sorry’? For what?”

“I ... I thought some, uh, belittling things about the way you’re dressed when you showed up. That was mean. You saved my life. So, I ... I’m sorry. And thank you again.”

Vortex looked at her for a moment before nodding his appreciation, then he glanced past her. She turned to see the police car rounding the corner two streets down and driving toward them, its lights flashing.

“Tell you what, miss,” Vortex said. “They’ll stop soon as they see the rogue, but that might not give me enough time. If you could maybe stall ’em, keep ’em distracted ‘til I get back to my car ... that’d be awesome.”

Kimberly Bryce nodded and said, “Thank you,” one more time. Then she turned away, hobbling toward the oncoming police car and waving her arms as big and wide as she could.

PCA

“Okay, Steve ... are you ready?”

“No. Just do it.”

“Okay ... three, two, one.” *Snap!*

Steve Davison bit down on his leather wallet until his jaws twinged, and squeezed the edge of the wooden work table he sat upon until his knuckles turned white, but he absolutely refused to give voice to his pain. He knew that if he did, his swearing would echo throughout the training center — the training center, where Vortex stayed in shape, trained with the weaponry of his mechanical eyes, and, when injured, where he withdrew to lick his wounds.

Fortunately, in this case, he found that once Ardette Blounts maneuvered the joint into its proper place, the throbbing pain was rapidly replaced by a heavy ache that was nonetheless an improvement over how he'd felt a minute ago.

“Oh, Jesus ...” Alan Russell, looking green around the gills, moaned as he ran a shaky hand through his thinning hair. “I know it has to be done, I know, but God how I hate the *sight* of that ...”

Steve spat out the wallet. “I’ll take the sight if you take the feeling.”

Alan rewarded that remark with one of his patented half-grunts. “No, thank you. You’re the masochist here, not me.” Then he said to Ardette, “Are you sure we shouldn’t wait for Jeremy to handle stuff like this?”

Ardette cracked and shook a chemical cold pack, wrapped it in a thin washcloth, and placed it against Steve’s bare shoulder. Given that Ardette had been taking first aid and other medical classes that catered to the layperson, Steve wasn’t surprised

when her reply came out a little peevish. “Jeremy can’t help with the actual dislocation, only the aftermath. Speaking of, why don’t you make sure Steve’s uniform is out of sight and call him?”

Alan replied, a bit placative in response to her tone, “I already called him. He should be here soon.” He walked around to where they had tossed the Vortex uniform after helping Steve out of it, to tuck it inside its designated footlocker.

Ardette moved the cold pack to evaluate the discoloration around Steve’s shoulder, hissed through her teeth when she saw the back portion was almost as black as her own skin, and replaced the pack. “I really wish,” she commented, “that we’d been able to get that skeletal reinforcement in your uniform to work. It might’ve prevented this from happening, *again*.”

Steve started to shrug, but a spike of pain reminded him to keep his right shoulder still. “It wasn’t worth the hassle,” he assured her. “It restricted my movements, and it chafed like a son of a bitch. Present situation notwithstanding, I can live with the tradeoff.”

Steve had been speaking to Ardette, but it was Alan who grunted again. Steve knew well enough where his priorities fell: Anything that could help protect Steve through his insane adventures as Vortex should get top priority, raw skin be damned.

But any verbal comments Alan might have made were cut short by a knock on the closer of the outer doors. All three of them took a quick look around,

spot-checking for anything that might scream *Vortex trains here!* to the world. Finding nothing, Steve nodded to Alan, who hurried over to escort Jeremy Walker inside.

“Hello, Mister Russell,” Steve heard Jeremy say when Alan opened the door. “Another MMA injury?”

“Yes, I’m sorry to say. Come on in.”

As Alan held the door open, Jeremy Walker stepped into view. Steve waved to the young black man with his good hand; Walker reciprocated and strode their way.

Walker was a former middle school teacher who lost his job after going paranormal; he could never prove that was *why* he was let go, so he hadn’t bothered with a lawsuit. A few weeks later, he was hired by *Davison Electronics*. Steve’s company already made an effort to provide work for paranormals who had fallen on hard times, but once it came out exactly what Walker’s new ability was, his case took on a higher priority: Jeremy Walker was a paranormal healer.

Now Walker worked on-call assisting with any employee injuries, and he was paid bonuses on the side for helping patch up *Davison’s* owner, who had an unfortunate passion for mixed martial arts (a viable enough excuse, once Alan and Ardette made sure everyone knew about Steve’s kick-boxing and gymnastics background).

“Would you have any problem performing these extra duties?” Alan had asked Walker during his

interview. “I must disclose that Steve indulges this dangerous habit of his day and night, so you might be called in at some very odd hours.”

“Mister Russell,” Walker had answered, “I’m black, I’m gay, and now I’m paranormal — I’ve hit the minority trifecta. For guaranteed employment at the salary you’re offering, I’ll be at Mister Davison’s complete disposal.”

Now Walker took off his jacket as he reached Steve. “How are you doing this afternoon, Mister Davison?”

Steve smiled; he’d asked Walker to call him “Steve” before, but it clearly wasn’t soaking in. And if he thought anything of Steve sitting here in nothing but a pair of kick-boxing shorts, it didn’t show. “I’d be doing a lot better if I’d just kicked the guy instead of going for that headlock.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Walker replied as he tossed his jacket onto the table. “Mizz Blounts, you can take away the cold pack.”

When Ardette complied, Walker placed his hands upon Steve’s shoulder and closed his eyes. The pain relief was almost instantaneous, and Steve could feel the swelling diminish in seconds — not all the way, Walker wasn’t that good yet, but it shrank by half.

Nothing in this world, Steve thought, feels as good as the absence of pain.

After perhaps ten seconds total, Walker opened his eyes and took his healing hands away. “Please remember to take it easy with the MMA for a few

days,” he reminded Steve. “I’m getting better and better at this, but for now, I’m more of a ‘paramedic’ than a ‘parasurgeon,’ okay? How’s your neck feeling?”

Steve shrugged, pleased that he could now do so. “It always bothers me, but seeing the chiropractor three times a week and the massage therapy helps keep it loose.”

“Here ...” Walker closed his eyes again and placed a hand around the back of Steve’s muscular neck, giving a healing zap to the year-old injury. Steve’s neck had never recovered from when a paranormal who could turn into a monstrous bear smacked him upside his head, but since he couldn’t own up to that, he had told Walker that the chronic discomfort was the result of really bad whiplash. Would it make a difference if he explained the real injury? Maybe.

For now, though, Walker’s touch knocked the familiar pinch down a few notches, for which he said, “Thanks, that’s better.”

“Good,” Walker said. “Is that everything ...?” His eyes glanced down Steve’s torso, which bore scars and other signs of old wounds that couldn’t really be explained via mixed martial arts.

“Yeah, I’m good,” Steve told him. “Thanks for coming. Your compensation will be in your next direct deposit.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, Mister Davison.” He collected his jacket and followed Alan back toward the door through which he had entered. Just before

they moved out of range, Steve heard Walker comment to Alan, “Mister Davison really should take it easy, Mister Russell. He’s already got more scars than Christian Bale in *The Dark Knight*. What kind of rules do they follow at these fights ...?”

Then the door closed behind them, and Steve could only imagine the mutual Steve-should-take-better-care-of-himself fest Walker and Alan would share before the younger man left.

But Steve wasn’t the only one to note Alan’s unexpected absence, and Ardette decided to take advantage of it. “Tell me the truth, Steve: How *are* you doing, really? It’s just us, so no bullshit, please.”

Steve sighed as he gently rubbed his still-aching shoulder. “Being Vortex is getting harder,” he admitted. “I’ve only been at this for *one year*, Ardette ... but the injuries are really starting to stack up on me, faster than Jeremy can keep up. I feel like I’m racing past my prime at an accelerated rate.”

“That’s not good,” she observed, “when you consider that you’re barely old enough to walk into a bar.” She folded her arms and leaned against the table beside him. “Alan worries about you, you know. I mean, really worries, not just ‘mother hen’ worries. Sometimes he has trouble sleeping, tossing and turning all night long ...”

Steve’s eyebrows shot up. This was the closest either she or Alan had ever come to openly admitting that they had a romantic relationship. It was on the tip of his tongue, as it had been many

times before, to finally flat-out ask her about it ... but, once again, he opted to keep his questions to himself and respect their privacy. After all, it wasn't all that different from his relationship with the PCA's Lieutenant Takayasu — Steve was almost certain that Michael knew he was Vortex ... and yet, thus far, they had avoided talking about, directly (“plausible deniability” and all that). Sometimes it felt silly, playing the game, but once that line was crossed, they couldn't go back.

“Alan still wishes you'd officially join the PCA,” Ardette was saying. “That's what he wanted all along, you know, when he gave you the eyes. That way you'd have some consistent, dependable backup, instead of going the whole ‘lone superhero’ route.” She nudged him with her elbow. “And think how much easier today would've gone if you had a partner, hmm? Someone to watch your back?”

“I know ...”

Steve stopped rubbing his shoulder, then gestured past Ardette. She glanced over, spotted what he wanted, and passed him the bottle of lotion. He spurted out a glob onto one hand and began applying it under his arm — the skeletal reinforcement might not have worked, but the uniform still chaffed when he wore it too long; such was the tradeoff for the protection of his micro-chainmail suit.

In a quiet voice, Steve said, “I know I won't be able to do this forever, Ardette. But I still don't feel like I've accomplished my number one goal, a goal

I had in mind even before I helped take down McLane's group ...”

Ardette closed her eyes in anger at the mention of the bastard who slaughtered Steve's entire family.

“... to inspire new and old paranormals to turn *hero*, not *rogue*. I'm glad that some have tried, I am. And I'm sorry that the Magnet got himself killed in the attempt. But I had dreams of, I don't know ... a bigger effort? A greater turnout? A true Class One stepping up to the plate in spectacular fashion?” He chuckled under his breath. “Hell, maybe I should change my uniform colors — go from black-and-gold to something vibrant, like blue-and-yellow, you know?” He flipped a thumb toward the door, after the departed Jeremy Walker. “Tone down the Christian Bale and put a little more Christopher Reeve in my approach. Maybe that would help. What do you think?”

Ardette considered her answer before saying, “I think ... that you are describing a very noble, very laudable goal, and I do not doubt for a second that you really mean it. But, Steve, I can't help feeling that you're also hiding behind it, that there's something more you're avoiding talking about. Am I wrong? If I'm wrong, just say so.”

Steve was quiet for a while, long enough for Ardette to decide she wasn't going to get anything else. She was on the verge of patting his leg and stepping away from the table when he finally spoke up.

“I ... I sometimes think that maybe I'm sort of

‘addicted’ to being Vortex. Between running the company (with tons of help from you and Alan) and putting down dangerous rogues...”

He fell silent again, but this time Ardette knew to wait.

After close to a minute, he continued in a voice heavy with emotion. “Vortex keeps me from thinking about my family. Mom and Dad, Jonathan, Dan, Aunt Carol, Uncle Del ... every one of them ... all dead, all *murdered*. Goddamn it, my brother was incinerated *beyond recognition*, so he’s still technically ‘missing’ — we didn’t even have a body to bury!”

A tear trickled down his left cheek; he wiped it away with an irritated jerk. It was an odd sight, Ardette thought — his crying without the slightest hint of bloodshot in his eyes, his artificial eyes.

“Then, to top it all off,” Steve continued, “I had McLane within my grasp, I was hellbent on executing him ... and it turned out that I’d already *accidentally* turned him into a brain dead vegetable while I was fighting his stupid pawn?” He released a bitter guffaw. “I’m still processing that cruel twist of fate — I got my revenge without even knowing it. By the time I laid hands on him, it was already done. He was already gone, lights on but nobody home.” He glanced at her. “How screwed up is that?”

Ardette had been mostly unmoved by his “inspiring hero” explanation — admiring of his dream, but dubious of his inner motives — but this ... this private admission, a more detailed confession

than he'd ever before offered ...

Placing a gentle hand on his knee, she said, "Steve, if you ever need to talk about this ..."

He chuckled as he wiped his cheek again. "I thought that's what I was just doing."

She smiled with him. "Okay, granted. But you've been holding on to this for a year now. You're not alone, Steve. I'm here for you — and I don't mean because I can pop your shoulder back into its socket."

Steve laughed. "I know. Tell you what ..."

But the nearest training center door opened again, revealing a demoralized Alan. The older man hustled over to them, while managing to look like he didn't really want to do so.

Ardette glanced at Steve, but because of his implants, his wiping the tears away removed all signs that he had just been crying.

"Against my better judgement," Alan said as he reached them, "I have some news to share with you, Steve. But if I didn't know you'd chew my ass out later if I kept my mouth shut about it ..."

"Alan," Steve said with equal parts humor and fatigue, "you look constipated when you get like this. Just spit it out."

Ardette barely held back her laughter — *Dead God, that's so true!* — which earned her a glare from Alan. He pressed on, "Another rogue is on the loose, tearing up a low-income apartment complex a few miles from here. The regular police are already on the scene, but they're not having any

luck. The PCA's been notified, but ... I knew you'd want to know."

Steve considered this; he also considered his injuries. For a moment, it looked to Alan and Ardette as though he might actually let this one slide...

Vortex hopped off the table. "Get my uniform."

PARANORMALS
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher Andrews lives in California with his wife, Yvonne Isaak-Andrews, their beautiful daughter, Arianna, and their Pug, PJ. He is working on his next novels, and continues to work as an actor and screenwriter.

Excerpts from all of Christopher's novels can be found at www.ChristopherAndrews.com.

