

The Gauntlet

By Patrick Todd Eric Morbach

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Prologue

It was roughly 9:38pm one Sunday night as Karen Shool was walking home from work, preferring a brisk constitutional than a stuffy cab ride. She thanked, quote, “God in Heaven” that it stopped raining a few minutes before the end of her shift. The breeze was cool against her silk skin, exposed by her sleeveless T-shirt. She also enjoyed the way the wind gently howled by her ear.

This was proof that, sometimes, the weathermen do get it right. She thought of what her grandfather used to say, “If you don’t like the weather in Reed City...deal with it.” He’d lived there as a boy, moving to Denver after college to “get a job and raise a family.” The way he’d talk about the city gave it a certain charm in Karen’s mind, part of which made her decide to move to his hometown.

Her apartment was only another two blocks away. She didn’t mind the exercise. She couldn’t afford to, without a car. Independence wasn’t easy, even with savings from past employment. Though her grandfather was also known to point that which was easily attained could be taken just as simplistically.

Reflections were interrupted as she noticed a large man walking towards her. It didn’t much occur to the woman that he was directly in front of her. She moved to her right, avoiding a collision. It was a common courtesy she was all too happy to give; a polite product of her upbringing.

Avoidance, though, was not what the man had in mind at all. Much to Karen's surprise, she was grabbed by her arms by the very individual she tried to evade, and she was carried into a

nearby alley. She struggled and kicked her feet to no avail. Her attempts at screaming were just as vain, as the lummoX had placed his right arm over her mouth. She tried biting it, but he didn't seem the least bit affected. The forcefulness of her captor told her to be still, for her own sake.

She noticed someone coming out from deeper into the alley she'd just been forced into. She thought, or rather, hoped that who ever it was could be of help. Possibly a Good Samaritan or a policeman. To her dismay, it was somebody that seemed rather indifferent to her situation. He puffed the last of his cigarette and flicked it into a sewer grate below. *No evidence for the police to follow if this one gets away*, the smaller man thought.

"Evenin' there, darlin'," said the now-apparent British smoker. "You can call me Filch, luv. The beast that's gotcha in 'is little bear hug is Twofold, f'r obvious reasons." He pulled Karen's purse from her as he continued. "See, I take the material stuff. Jewels, money, the usual." Why was he explaining this? Her panicked mind vaguely recalled the men from news reports but couldn't figure out why. "Twofold, here...well, he takes something too. Something a bit more...intimate."

Karen's eyes widened at the innuendo. This couldn't be happening to her! She didn't deserve this! But...it was happening. She couldn't stop it. *Why didn't I just take a taxi?* She began to cry, unable to escape her situation. Her feet still kicked the air, less than before. Her muffled grief made Filch smile but only because he found it redundant. Some women that they had attacked before couldn't bring themselves to talk about it to the police, as the news had reported. One woman ended up killing herself from the trauma. Yet neither man showed any trace of responsibility.

"They always cry, don't they, T?" Filch asked his partner. Though he was about to "busy" himself, so he didn't respond. His right hand now muffling Karen's cries, Twofold moved his leg up, essentially placing his victim on his knee as he began moving his left hand from her torso down. Karen's mind raced a mile per second. What was going to happen? Was he going to just throw her away like trash? Was she going to die, only to be heard as a

statistic on the evening news? Her breathing hastened and tears rained down on her assailant's tightly gripped hand.

Before Twofold's hand passed her waist, Karen heard him moan for some reason. Rather, the sound was more of a moan-grunt amalgamation, a kind of noise a disappointed father would give his son after an act of disobedience. The bulky thug reached his left arm over to the right side of his neck. Karen gave a slight sigh of relief, thinking something had stopped him, but a part of her thought he only paused, that he was going to continue at any given moment.

"What's the problem, ya big bloody bloke," asked Filch, who paused his fishing through of Karen's purse. Twofold pulled his hand back to show all present a dart that had struck his neck. "Someone aimin' bull's eye on yer neck, gov'?"

Then, something happened, as abrupt as the "dart bite," but far more effective. It was as if the very darkness itself struck Filch. One blow spun his back to Twofold and Karen and another sent the back of his head against the alley wall. He whimpered in pain until slipping into unconsciousness, and then he fell to the ground on his left side. He was so still, neither Karen nor the fallen Brit's partner was sure if he was dead or alive.

"Who's there," panicked Twofold, tightening his grip on his prey. His eyes moved quickly around the depths of the urban crevasse. "Any more funny business and she's dead!" His voice was serious enough, but he was also worried. He wasn't sure who had punched out Filch, much less if the attacker was still there. Was he even there anymore? Maybe Filch got clumsy? He just...slipped and it looked like an attack to a paranoid mind?

The answers came in the form of a long metal staff colliding at high velocity with Twofold's forehead. His tough demeanor and tight hold on Karen quickly diminished. He fell on his back onto the cold, hard, and wet ground just as Filch had fallen moments earlier, although the bigger of the two was still awake. Karen cautiously moved herself against the alley wall. *Where did that...thing come from*, she thought. She'd never seen anything like it before. It looked like a pole or a dumbbell bar.

Then she heard the footsteps from deeper in the alley. The young woman turned in fear to find a black clad and clearly

masculine figure melt from the darkness. Karen didn't know what to make of him. Was he associated with the fallen duo? Perhaps someone who wanted her as his own personal target? He was armed to the most proverbial of teeth to justify her latter fears and he spoke not a word. His presence was far too ominous for her comfort.

As he walked to pick up his staff, Karen noticed the full arsenal at the newcomer's disposal. Most of it was situated around him, on a belt shaped like an X with the bottom points conjoined with a line. The waist belt had pouches all around, save for one spot on the left side, where there was a strap for his now collapsed staff, and a holster on the right containing a gun not unlike a pistol with a silencer. The front of the X held a knife, a large spray can, a nunchuk; *I think that's what it's called*, Karen thought, and a smaller spray container. Karen recognized the smaller can as mace, as she had a similar one. Up until tonight, she'd had no reason to carry it around any more. She'd consider the irony later, had she the time or the sanity.

On the stranger's back, most apparent was a sword accessible to the left, another pistol, and two more knives. His legs carried the lighter of the load, the right with a rope wrapped around it, the left a smaller belt. His boots, while strangely familiar to Karen's eyes, had handles sticking out the back. His arms, too, were battle prepped. His left arm had a small crossbow mounted on his lower arm. His right housed only a whip with the handle strapped to the lower half, while it snaked up to and then coiled around the shoulder. Finally, his mask looked like an everyday ski mask, save for lack of a mouth-hole and a strange pair of goggles that protruded from the eyeholes.

"H-he..." Karen stuttered while pointing at a weakened Twofold, something inside telling her this stranger held no malice towards her. "He was going...he had me...he..." She couldn't put much of a single word in edgewise. Not that she had to. The walking arsenal raised his open left hand to her, indicating that he was well aware of the danger she had faced only moments ago. When a voice surprised her, asking if she was unharmed, she gently nodded.

They noticed Twofold trying to get up, and Karen jumped back. The nocturnal man reached his left arm and removed his sword. Prey and would-be predator alike watched, as the sword's sharp tip waved over the latter's neck. He began to sweat, but his fears were alleviated as it moved down towards his belly. Then the sweat started again twice-over as the blade hovered over his crotch. Twofold was speechless with worry. The stranger disappointedly shook his head, and with the speed of a wild bolt of lightning, he pulled the sword safely away and swiftly kicked Twofold between his legs. Less fatal and more lingering: that was the intent.

Sirens blared in the background as the once over-powering sexual deviant writhed in pain, groaning as he twitched in a fetal position. Karen moved her head out of the alley, seeing about three police cars headed her way. Someone in one of the buildings must've called the police, or maybe it was-- Karen turned back into the alley, hoping to thank the strange man for saving her so selflessly. He was not on the ground when she looked. Her ears pointed her up, hearing the dark figure climb up a fire escape. He was about halfway to the rooftop when she saw him.

"Wow" was the only reaction Karen could verbally muster. She was as amazed at the figure as a young child might be upon seeing a mighty airplane fly through the sky for the first time. Her gazing kept her from noticing that the police vehicles had all stopped outside the alley.

A total of five officers had arrived, only one not wearing a uniform. Instead he was wearing blue jeans and a faded brown trench coat that hid his orange shirt and holstered gun. He was a moderately tall brown-haired man that quickly noticed Karen and how she was looking at the top of an uninhabited fire escape. He then saw Twofold on the ground as the four other officers reached the alley.

Upon the command to do so, one officer dashed to a squad car to call for an ambulance. Two tended to the criminals, the larger now having passed out. The other tended to Ms. Shool, asking her if she was hurt and then if she knew what had happened.

The man in the trench coat looked over the area, hoping to find...well, anything. He heard the APB about the disturbance, and that the call came from a woman in one of the apartment buildings next to the alley. He used his flashlight to further his search, which had still come to no avail... until he came upon a dart near Twofold's leg. He was going to inspect it further until the officer next to Karen called for him.

"Detective Medder," he said as Karen kept staring into space. "Would you care to question the witness?"

"Sure," he responded, greeting on his approach to Karen. "Ma'am, I'm Sean Medder, RCPD."

"My partner just got a call. Convenience store robbery." Sean nodded, and the officer dashed to his squad car.

"Ma'am, are you all right?" She nodded, finally coming to her senses. "Can you answer a few questions?"

"Sure," she responded, a little more "there" than she was a moment ago. "My name is Karen Shool. I work at the video store just down the street."

"Good." Sean smiled, taking out a pad and pen. "Now, can you tell me what happened here?"

"I...I was walking home and that..." she pointed at Twofold, still asleep. "That monster attacked me. He grabbed me, and pulled me into the alley and he was gonna—"

"Ma'am, please, calm down. They're out of commission now. They won't hurt you." Karen took a deep breath. "Now, a little slower..."

"Okay. He...pulled me into the alley, and his friend took my purse. The big one...he was going to...violate me..." She began to tear up, taking her face into her hands and turning from the questioning officer. It was clear she couldn't bring herself to use the word, "rape". Sean stopped his writing and tried to calm her down, placing his hand on her shoulder.

"Miss, I know this can't be easy for you, but..."

Karen suddenly stopped weeping, her face now astonished, as if she had come upon an epiphany. "He came!" She turned back to the detective. "He took out the man with my purse and then attacked the big guy!" Sean was obviously and understandably confused.

“Who, Ms. Shool?”

“I don’t know. He was black and covered in weapons like a suped-up G.I. JOE.”

“Black? You mean he was an African-American?”

“No, he was *dressed* in black.”

Sean nodded, writing in his pad. “And where did he go?”

“Right before you guys got here, he climbed that fire escape to the roof.” In the distance, from the direction of the aforementioned convenience store robbery, the lights and sounds of an ambulance came barreling down towards the scene of Karen’s attack. Much to Sean’s surprise, it passed them. He had thought it was the unit to pick up the young woman’s fallen assailants.

“Ma’am, could you stay here one moment?” Karen nodded, and Sean rushed to his car. He called the pair of officers that left him with Karen, thinking perhaps the worst had occurred. He reached for his radio and spoke. “Medder to Car 15! Come in, Car 15!”

“Bedewski here,” responded an officer.

“You and Marc okay?”

“You saw the ambulance?”

“Yeah, thought it was for our perps.”

“Naw. The punk that tried robbing a Seven-Eleven was inside.”

“You guys got him that quickly? I know you're not that far away, but that’s pretty damn quick—”

“Not really, Sean. He was in a pretty bad way when we got here.”

“What?”

“Look, I can fill you in later. I got a witness to question.”

“I guess I do, too. Medder out.” He holstered the receiver and returned to his witness. “Ms. Shool, an ambulance will be here momentarily. They’ll check you out to see if you’re hurt, alright?” Karen nodded in agreement. “You have nothing to worry about.” He smiled, and she returned another, showing her confidence in having no more to fear from her unconscious attackers.

Moments later, two ambulances arrived, which did not go unnoticed by the nearby citizenry. Several apartment dwellers of various ages and races could be seen looking out their windows to inspect the commotion: a Caucasian mother trying to calm her young child back into slumber, a middle-aged Hindu whose gut revealed he had not regularly exercised in a long time, an Arabic boy who defied his father's regulation of bedtime. All, and more, watched the scene as best they could as paramedics dashed to the alley where the attack had earlier been foiled. Two of them inspected Twofold as one of the officers that initially arrived on the scene left the form of the sleeping mammoth, with a plastic bag in one of his gloved hands. He walked to Detective Medder, who was still accompanied by Karen Shool.

"Sir," said the officer, handing the bag to Medder.

"Looks like it could be poison-tipped. Or a tranquilizer. Take it to the station, see what our people can figure out." He returned the evidence, and then turned to Karen. "Ms. Shool, I think you should go with the paramedics." Karen nodded as she was led to a pair of paramedics, both leading Filch to the detective.

"This one's fine," said one of the medics. "Just a bruised head, shoulder, and ego."

"Kiss m' ass, ya bloody quack," spat Filch.

"My purse," said Karen, a little sheepish, even though Filch wasn't all that intimidating. It was his presence alone that made her...uncomfortable.

"You said this man was handling it?" Karen nodded again. "Well, you won't be getting it back right away, then. We need to check it for prints while you get looked at." Detective Medder traded with the paramedics, Karen going with them while he took the handcuffed British thief. "What about the other guy?"

"Ask the guys carrying him into the ambulance," said one of the medics with Karen. Sean saw Twofold with a blanket over him on a stretcher. Pulling his perp with him, Medder walked speedily over to the other assailant, who was still unconscious.

"What's the story with this one," he asked.

"Not sure," said one man. "He's got a bad bruise on his forehead, and he's still not awake. He might have a concussion."

They loaded the large black thug into the ambulance and drove off.

Medder led his restrained companion to his car as the ambulance with Ms. Shool left. Ignoring Filch's obscenities and poor attempts at pleading innocence, Sean pointed his dark tan Oldsmobile Eighty-Eight into the direction of the police station and left the scene. He looked in the rear view mirror to find he had avoided the arrival of the media.

Chapter 1

The clock at Reed City's third precinct struck 11:35am as Emily Garwin typed on her computer keyboard. She helped in the interrogation of Preston "Twofold" Maxins and Arthur "Filch" Finwell. The latter's nickname sounded alien to the detective, as well as borderline obscene, until a quick dictionary search revealed it to be synonymous with theft.

Preston didn't say much of anything beyond several demands for a lawyer. She'd guessed he'd been in that kind of situation before, given his body language. He did his best to look intimidating, which wasn't too hard considering his size (from which he derived his moniker).

The medium-sized British man was more jumpy. At first he was nervous, but he quickly calmed himself. Unlike his "associate", he had no arrest record. *That would explain the tension*, she thought. Yet, given *his* epithet, chances were that he wasn't the most law-abiding of citizens.

Since the would-be victim had no serious harm come to her, the evidence against them was circumstantial...so far. The police merely found two unconscious men in an alley with a slightly hysteric woman. That was the story thus far. The young lady had not yet come in for questioning. *Maybe we should call past rape victims. Bring them in...we can nail these pigs on other charges.*

Not all was lost, though. There were bite marks and saliva on Preston's arm that should match Karen's. The zealous Englishman even identified them by their monikers, as they had in the past. It was a sign they wanted the victims to be afraid. Perhaps it was an aphrodisiac for the rapist. *Sick, sick world.* She sipped her coffee as her partner approached.

“Sean,” she began half-sarcastic. “Anything else you'd like to add on this?” Sean looked over what she had typed.

“I don't see anything about the dart wound.”

“What wound?”

“Medics told me Preston had a small wound on his neck, most likely from the dart we found. They took a sample of the guy's blood.” Emily began rapping upon her keyboard again.

“They find anything?”

“Looks like a sedative. Jadir says it was likely homemade. Other than that, seems good to me,” he said of the report. “Better than I could've done. I hate typing.”

“In the age of the Internet? You must feel pretty lost.”

“Nope. I can always have you do it for me.” He smiled, almost about to laugh, and Emily gave him a scowl and smirk wrapped into one facial expression.

“Cute.”

“Karen Shool, the woman who was attacked by these perps, and her attorney are here. Care to join in the questioning?”

“Why the invitation?”

“I think you'll want to.”

“Because...?”

“Well, you are the one as mad as a hatter for the city's mystery hero, right?”

Emily put her coffee down and glared at her partner. It was something she should have caught onto sooner. An oversight, she assured herself. Sean began to walk to an interrogation room where Karen waited. Emily followed, and then noticed what room they were entering, stopping suddenly before entering and pulling Sean back by his left elbow. He hopped back twice on one foot as a result.

“Why is she in Interrogation 2?” she asked.

“It's private, and it's the only available room,” he responded. “Would you rather try and get info from her in that racket?”

She took a second to acknowledge the noise from other officers working. A few were on the phone, others were talking with their fellow cops, and there were some detained citizens of ill-repute that were verbally expressing distaste to being stuck in

the precinct, and loudly so. Accepting his point, Emily shrugged and walked into the room.

“Ms. Karen Shool,” Sean introduced, as Karen rose from her seat at the table in the center of the room, “this is my partner, Emily Garwin.” The two women shook hands, then Emily and Sean greeted Karen's attorney, a stout woman in her mid-to-late 50's by the name of Joanna Chalk, and the two officers sat down at the table. Ms. Chalk sat beside her client.

“Karen,” Emily began, “Could you tell us about what happened to you last night?” Karen took a deep breath and faced the officers as Emily pulled a pen from the inner breast receptacle of her overcoat and a pad from her pants pocket.

Karen described her journey home after her shift at work, which was followed by a large man of Maxins' description forcing her into an alley. Subdued, she encountered a British man, fitting the portrayal of Arthur Finwell, who confidently explained the duo's modus operandi. She seemed a little disturbed as she spoke of them. Karen added that Finwell had an indifferent look on his face, as if he didn't care if she would live, be raped, die, or any combination. Joanna whispered in Karen's ear, asking if she could go on, or if she needed something. Karen assured her she was going to do this.

“Then what happened?” urged Sean.

Karen's face lit up noticeably as she described, as best she could, the dark stranger that had saved her. Emily noted the black clothes, strange goggles, oddly familiar construction boots, and weapons from head to toe. Though she didn't know it, Karen had forgotten some of the artillery that the man wore. What mostly stuck in her memory were the dart, bo, and sword.

“You're sure it was a man,” asked Emily. Karen shook her head, positive that it was indeed no feminine form that had taken down her captors. “Did he say anything to you or either of your attackers?”

“No,” Karen shrugged. “Well, he asked if I was okay, but I was so out of it, I couldn't tell you what he sounded like.” She concluded her story with the stranger escaping up the fire escape as the police came.

Sean quickly dashed out the door, not saying where he was going. His exit birthed a breeze that shoved some of Emily's hair from behind her head over her shoulder. Emily simply pushed it back, as if not noticing Sean's abrupt actions.

"Were there any distinguishing marks or writing on anything he wore?"

"Not that I saw. But his boots...they looked like construction issue boots or somethin'."

"Now, Ms. Shool, would you be willing to point out the men that attacked you?" Karen shook her head. "Would you also testify against them in court?" Again, an affirmative reply. "Good. With your help, these monsters won't hurt anyone again." Emily put her pen and pad into their respective receptacles on her person. "I suppose that will be all until we show you a line up. Thank you, Ms. Shool, you've been very cooperative. And Ms. Chalk...?"

"No problem that I can see for my client," Joanna responded.

"She's an old family friend," Karen explained. "After I moved to the same city as Joanna, my Dad called it a 'blessed coincidence'." Ms. Chalk smirked at Karen's light-hearted tone.

"Just doing my job."

"Not that I don't appreciate it."

Emily interjected. "I'll take you to the line-up in a moment." Sean rushed back, keeping the door open, with a piece of paper folded in his hands like a pamphlet.

"Some men and I are going to check out the rooftop," he said.

"Okay. I'm taking Karen to the line-up."

"Later." With that farewell, Sean sprinted towards the exit, with some other officers following behind. The door began closing on its own as Emily stopped it, opened it further, and gestured the young woman and her attorney out. She shut the lights off, closed the door, and led them to identify the men that had wronged so many in the past.

It became nearly 12:30pm as Medder and his fellow officers arrived to inspect the building top Karen's savior had fled to the

other night. They inspected it closely. Any spec of dirt, cloth, residue, anything. In his zeal, he neglected to tell Emily about why he left the room. He wanted to get a search warrant as fast as possible, so he'd checked frequently until he got it. He may have been rude, but Emily would forgive him. Being partners, he guessed she'd have to.

He spent twenty minutes on the roof with nothing to show for it. Nearing one o' clock, he gathered the other officers, who also came empty-handed. *No matter, I suppose, he thought. We can search the whole building, if need be.*

"We're splitting into two teams of three, people," he told the others. "Me, Chesney, and Thendes will start from the bottom, up. Every apartment. Fellen, you, Shalet, and Bynes will start at the top. Got your copy of the warrant?" Fellen raised his copy up. "Good. Let's go."

The officers opened the roof entrance to continue their search. Medder's group headed to the ground floor to begin their share of the task. It was another five minutes or so before they reached the first dwelling on their agenda. Medder had one hand in his coat pocket, ready to show the warrant as his other hand struck the door with its knuckles several times.

"One second," said a male voice within. Sean guessed, from the voice, that the man was probably 25-30 years old. Possibly Hispanic, but he'd only said two words. Footsteps made their way to the door, which was then opened to reveal just as Medder had guessed. A young Hispanic man in his mid-twenties stood before him, wearing jeans, sneakers, and a black shirt with white text saying something about penguins and his sanity. He seemed surprised to see who was at his door. "Can I help you, officers?"

"There was an incident last night, and an individual escaped the scene. It's possible he found refuge here. We've a warrant to search the building."

"Uhhh, come on in." He seemed nervous about something, but Sean dismissed it as being uneasy about a surprise search. If he weren't a cop, Sean would probably react the same way. His two cohorts began searching the apartment as the young man stepped aside and Sean stepped in, lagging behind the other officers, then turning back to the young man.

“May I ask you a few questions, Mister...”

“Cory Mendez,” he responded, nodding his head, agreeing to the questioning. “Sure, anything.”

“Where were you last night between 9:30 and 10 o’clock last night?” Sean took out a pen and pad.

“I was here, watching T.V. Flipping around, really.”

“Anyone with you?”

“No.”

“Did you hear anything around that time?”

“Not until I heard sirens. I looked out my window when I saw the lights flashing. I saw a guy on stretcher and a girl going into an ambulance.”

“That’s all?”

“Saw you there, now that I think of it. Had some guy in ‘cuffs.’”

“Right.”

“Sir,” said Thendes, coming out from Cory’s bedroom, “This room’s clean.”

“That quickly?”

“Uh, it’s been ten minutes.”

“Really?” Sean confirmed Thendes’ statement when he looked at his watch. “Any place you and Chesney haven’t checked?”

“Just the kitchen.”

“Get to it, then.”

“Hope you don’t mind my asking,” Cory began, “but what exactly are you looking for?”

“Not overly sure, myself.”

“Nothing sir,” said Thendes, finishing the search.

“Alright. Thank you, Mr. Mendez. You’ve been very cooperative.”

Sean left the apartment, followed by the other two officers, off to the next apartment search. Cory was relieved that he was not in any trouble. He proceeded to see if the police had messed up his room. Surprisingly enough, the room was kept as it had been before the search. Nothing tossed about or rearranged like they did in any movie he’d seen or rumors he’d heard. *Maybe they used to be maids.*

Emily Garwin had long since finished her business with Karen Shool, who gave a positive identification on her attackers of the previous night. She added that to her report to the Captain, but waited to give it to him, still wanting to get what her partner had obtained from the apartment complex. So far, last night's rescue of Karen pointed to the same mysterious stranger that had been reported and seldom whispered about for the past several months. Or years, as some of her notes suggested.

Emily gathered all the information the department had on the stranger and kept it in a drawer in her desk. She also had copies in her apartment, in case she comes down with insomnia and needs something to work on. It was more than her job now. There was an underlying intriguing element to this case.

A month and a half had passed after the first reported incident mentioning a costume before the department decided to investigate the matter seriously, and Emily offered to lead said investigation. Ever since she was little and her father was out risking his life on the streets every day as a police officer, she had grown a respect for what cops did and couldn't tolerate people who didn't recognize that kind of sacrifice. Little else made her madder. Hearing about a possible vigilante in Reed City motivated her decision to lead such an ominous search. Even though the very real possibility that it was one big wild goose chase existed, the equally real prospect of someone taking the law into their own hands being loose on the streets didn't appeal to her.

She never much talked about the mystery man to others, except Sean. Unless someone had new information, she thought it was not very efficient to engage in idle chitchat on the subject. Also, there were some that weren't quite certain as to this vigilante's existence. *Fortunately*, she thought, *no one in the media has gotten much whiff of this guy...yet.*

That would be quite a circus, Emily mused. If the news got more evidence beyond unsubstantiated rumors, every drama-driven news show on every channel would be talking about a crime-fighter every night, hounding the police for answers, and

sending the people of Reed City into a state of fear for their lives. Emily was rather surprised that those that claimed to have been saved by some modern-day Zorro haven't gone on for a segment on Dateline. *They're either too afraid of the obscurity or their stories weren't interesting enough.*

"Detective Garwin," exclaimed a portly officer several feet from her desk.

"Gildez," she responded. "What is it?"

"I questioned the 7-11 clerk last night."

"And?"

"He described a man dressed in black with several weapons all over him."

"Those were his exact words?"

"Actually," Marc Gildez took a paper pad from his pocket, opened it to a particular page, and gave it to Detective Garwin. "Those *are* his exact words." Emily looked at the page then checked the following page to see if there was any more information he'd written. Finding only the one page she needed, she tore it from the pad and placed it under her keyboard.

"Thanks, Marc, I appreciate this."

"No problem."

"I owe you one."

"Dinner tomorrow night?"

"Sorry," she smiled, "I don't date coworkers."

"Dang," he snapped his fingers, feigning sorrow. "Ya broke my heart."

"Gonna go cry in your beer?"

"Only when my shift's over."

"See ya later."

"Same rejection tomorrow?"

"I'll be there."

"Sweet."

"See, Marc, isn't *this* relationship of ours better than one involving going to the movies every Friday?"

"Tell that to my Mom."

"No thanks." Marc left Emily to her work. She concentrated on adding clerk Steven Alden's account to her report.

A thug tried holding him up with a shotgun. Someone in all black and weapons busted in, kicked the shotgun out of his hands, and slugged him several times until he fell, writhing in pain. Before the police responded to the alarm, the stranger was already gone, out the way he came. Nothing especially new, but now it's less likely that the apartment complex is the vigilante's base.

The entire matter seems to have only taken a few minutes. Was he in a hurry? Did he guess how quickly the police were going to respond? *Maybe he's just xenophobic.* Emily snickered at the thought. Just what this town needs: A joker with a hero complex.

Then the thought struck her...the store security camera. That would have to show the vigilante in action. She rose from her chair and hastily followed the distant Gildez, to see if the tape had been recovered.

Medder and his lot finally arrived on the same floor as Fellen's group. The search didn't take quite as long as the Detective had anticipated. There were several empty apartments that made the task at hand much easier. Shalet walked up to Sean after completing an apartment's search. Before Medder's team stepped into another, he stopped Sean.

"Sir," began Shalet, "I was just told something you might find interesting."

"Go on," said Sean.

"A woman whose apartment we just searched said that before her son left for school, he kept ranting about seeing 'Snake-Eyes' last night."

"Snake-Eyes?"

"All the Mom could tell me was that it was a G.I. Joe character."

"How old's the kid?"

"Seven years old, sir."

"When does his school let out?"

"Three. It takes him 10-15 minutes to walk home."

“Make sure someone’s here to get the kid’s story.”

“Right, sir.” He left to return to his work as Medder did the same. From that point, there were only...five more domiciles to check out. Then they could return to the station, and Emily could get another dosage of this so-called "Reed City Vigilante." *Maybe not 'so called,' anymore,* he thought.

When he entered this new apartment, Medder found Chesney questioning the young woman who lived there. She was thinly built, but not scrawny. She wore a navy blue tank top and gray sweat pants, and quite attractive for a young woman, looking roughly 20.

Sean decided he'd do some searching in here. This was the fourth apartment in which he helped look for clues. He went into the bathroom, while Thendes scoured the bedroom. Gently, Sean lifted the toilet top off the tank. *You never know,* he said in his mind. In the water, he found something floating. He peered closer and found it was a zip-lock bag filled to capacity with what was clearly marijuana.

He resisted the urge to take the bag and arrest the woman, but he was not warranted for such an action. He'd have to come back later, not letting on what he'd found. If the woman discovered that her stash had been uncovered, then she'd have plenty of time to dispose of it. Sean also could've sworn he saw something white and powdery in the bag as well. Perhaps it was a bag of some other drug hidden amongst the green. He replaced the lid and searched the rest of the bathroom, finding nothing else. *Damn shame. The girl doesn't seem the type.*

“Nothing in there,” Sean said coming out of the bathroom, finding Thendes closing the closet after searching it.

“Couldn't find anything either, sir,” said the officer.

“I suppose that’ll be all, ma’am,” Chesney concluded. The officers left and Sean hoped the girl was none the wiser.

3:30 reared its head and Emily found she had not yet had any lunch. It was one of the signs that she really ingratiated herself into the report. Gildez told her the unfortunate news that the

single camera in the place had been shot by the would-be robber. As it turned out, the man had been in there several times...probably looked around for the camera so he'd know what to shoot when he tried to rob the place.

Emily then realized, in mid-thought, that she hadn't even gotten a call from the Captain demanding her information. She guessed that he decided to be patient, as this particular report may one day prove to be useless. She was about to send the document out when she saw Sean walk up, with the other five officers dispersing behind him. He rushed to her desk, as Chesney and Shalet went to the Captain's office.

"Turn your report into the chief yet," he asked her.

"Not yet," she assured him.

"Good. There's a witness that should be included."

"Who?"

"Tyler Thorh, 7, was woken up by police sirens. He looked out his window, on the opposite side from the event, and said he saw 'Snake-Eyes' climb down the fire escape on his side of the building."

"'Snake-Eyes'?"

"A G.I. Joe character. It's okay if you never heard of him. Y'know...being a girl and all." He handed her a small piece of paper with a vague sketch. "I managed to get a very hazy description from him. It's not much, but better than nothing."

"Good idea."

"Art class is paying off more every day."

"The security camera at the 7-11 was shot, so this should help out." Emily looked at the picture of a man, from the shoulders up, in a mask with goggles.

"We probably shouldn't rely on it too much, since it's from the perspective from a seven year old that was likely half-asleep."

"Of course." She saved her work on the computer and tucked the sketch into her file. "First, I need lunch. I barely got a breakfast and am currently running on three cups of coffee. If I don't get any real food soon, I'll go postal." She walked towards the exit with Sean following slowly.

"In that case, I'll be a few steps behind you."

"Crap."

“Okay, so it was a bad joke, but—”

“Look.” Emily pointed out the glass of the doors. Sean saw several people, most with microphones standing in front of other people with bulky cameras. “They’ll eat us alive and then ask for seconds.”

“Does that mean lunch is cancelled?”

“There’s always a way out.”

“An old-fashioned shoot-out?”

“I’d love nothing better.” Her voice barely sounded enthused at the jest.

“Then let’s do it. They’re only news reporters! Who’ll miss’em? Better still, who’ll report it?”

“Let’s just go. Otherwise we’ll look like we’re hiding something.”

“We are, technically.”

“They don’t need to know that.” The duo walked calmly out the door, down the five steps from the building to the ground.

Like a pack of wolves, the reporters rushed them, pointing their microphones and tape recorders at them in case they said anything useful. They began speaking all at once, so it was hard to get a word in edgewise. “Have you heard” this, “Your comments on” that, as well as demands for information the police assumedly had on so-and-so.

Sean and Emily could understand some of it as they refused the advance. They had their jobs to do, even if the Detectives weren’t in full agreement with their tactics. As expected it was all about the “heroic Samaritan” traipsing through the city at night. Neither detective wanted anything to do with the media and forged ahead to Sean’s car, the nearest one. As Medder started the car, he had to honk the horn several times to make the press let him back up and leave.

“And that’s why I wish I drank,” was all Sean said as he drove away from the band of reporters, some of whom hacked and coughed from the exhaust.

The day was bright and comfortable, despite the previous night’s disturbance. News of the event, what little could be gathered, were scattered among newspapers and brief reports on the radio. Nothing concrete, nothing proven, only skepticism and

assumptions. Precisely what Emily wanted for the time being. She had the only known evidence about whoever was prowling Reed City's nightlife, and to release it to the public, the department felt, may only make matters worse. Until they could find out who was behind these incidents, informing the citizenry would not only cause mass panic, but also tip off the stranger that he or she is being tracked. *Wait*, Emily thought. *Karen said it was a man.* **HE** would know he was being tracked.

"I've seen him," said a man on the radio, catching Emily and Sean's attention. The self-proclaimed witness had an obvious Indian accent, but it seemed mixed with homegrown, American slang from the Bronx. "He was pretty big man, black—"

"Black," asked another man, the interviewer. "He was a black man?"

"No, he was dressed in black."

"I'm sorry. Go ahead."

"Thank you. As I said, he was a big man in black clothes, covered in weapons."

"What kind of weapons?"

"He had knives, a gun, a sword, rope...Hell, I think even a whip."

"So you're saying...our streets here in Reed are being hunted by some nut with all these weapons? Isn't that a little far-fetched?"

"I wouldn't say hunted, man. Or 'nut'. I think it was more like...protectin', y'know? Kinda like a modern Zorro with an attitude."

"Whattaya mean protecting?"

"Well, I saw him knock down some guy that was harassing someone else. Turns out he was a dope dealer."

"The guy that *got knocked down* was a dope dealer?"

"Yeah. The masked man made sure the other guy stayed, 'til the police came."

"And it was you who called the police?"

"Yep. Thought the situation looked odd, so..." The men chuckled.

“Oh really? What’s so odd about super Zorro on our streets?” The interviewer calmed himself down and continued. “And you gave this report to the police?”

“That I did.”

“And they can confirm your story?”

“I believe so, yes.”

“I see. Well, thank you, Mr. —!”

Emily shut the radio off at that point. She finally recognized the man as someone in her vigilante notes, but she didn’t want to concern herself with that right now. She was too damn hungry. Sean pulled into a restaurant with outside dining.

The two officers left the Sedan and within moments were seated at a table. They gave their waiter their orders and relaxed awaiting their entrees. The silence was a tad uncomfortable for Sean.

“I didn’t say anything before,” he began, “but I’m gonna guess you don’t really wanna discuss...him?”

“Good guess,” she replied. “I’ve spent all day at the computer, recording data on him. I need a break.”

“Okay, I respect that. Just wanted to know what topic to avoid, is all.” Their waiter, Randal, approached them, a dish of food in each hand. He placed a hamburger with the works and a side of onion rings in front of Sean, then placed the Parmesan cheese-covered spaghetti with garlic bread in front of Emily. They thanked him and Randal left to his other duties. Sean looked at Emily with a raised eyebrow as she began eating her meal.

“What is it, Sean?”

“I just don’t get it.”

“What?”

“Spaghetti for lunch. If it’s not reheated, it just seems wrong.”

“This coming from someone with onion rings with his burger? Don’t French fries normally accompany a traditional burger meal?”

“They’re the same thing! Just...a different vegetable. And in ring form.”

“I don’t know why I even bother talking with you.”

They continued consuming their meals, Emily a little more aggressively than her partner. *She wasn't kidding about not eating all day*, Sean thought. He concerned himself with his own feast until a moment later.

Down the sidewalk along the restaurant, a woman walked, seemingly toward them. She was an attractive woman in a dark blue dress suit with creamy mocha skin and dark brown hair. Her hands were behind her back, which Sean found odd. He bit into his burger, trying not to imply he was ogling her. He was, a little, but he didn't want it to look that way.

"That's weird," Emily said.

"What?" asked Sean, worried that she caught him staring.

"The guy with a camera. He looks lost."

Sean turned and saw a tall man with a big camera, looking around aimlessly. Then he looked back at the approaching woman. There was something to this. *I'm a Detective. I should be able to figure this out...* "Oh, crap!"

"What is it?"

"Emily Garwin," asked the blue-suited woman with a microphone in her hand and the cameraman behind, aiming it at the police. Sean was too late. "Tessa Heatherton, News 13. May I ask you about—"

"No," she responded with indignity.

"I wanted to ask about the alleged vigilante..."

"And I said no."

The harassment continued as a young white man across the street looked on. Emily didn't want to leave her seat or answer any questions, but the reporter was getting on her nerves. That was plain to the on-looker as he adjusted his sunglasses.

He heard a distant sound, like claws clacking on the pavement and looked to his right. He saw a thin black man, about his height with a German shepherd tethered to his right arm, a blind man's cane in his left and dark glasses on his face. At the same time, he noticed the Channel 13 News van right next to him. He gave a sly smirk as he knelt down and struck his left palm several times with his right fingers.

"Cesar," said the man. "Hey, Cesar." The dog saw the caller in the distance and began to struggle towards him.

“Aw, damn,” said Cesar’s master. “Dammit, dog, would you knock it off?” The man struggled, but the dog had his way. He finally reached the one that had called him and was getting scratched behind his ear.

“How you doin’?” the young man asked as the dog wagged his tail.

“Why you gotta do that to a blind man?”

“If I do that to a blind man, I’ll be sure to apologize to him.” He looked down at the dog. “Have you been a good accomplice? Have you?” He then looked back at the master. “Who’re you hiding from now, Kurt?”

“Who says I’m hiding?” His friend glared assuredly until the truth leaked out. “Girlfriend’s ex. Has some messed up mentality that my coma will reunite ’em. Hopin’ he won’t attack a blind man with a dog.”

“Uh-huh. Well, can I borrow Cesar? And your cane?”

“What for, man?”

“Helping a friend of my Dad’s, is all.” Kurt raised an eyebrow. “Just for a minute or two.” Cane and canine were relinquished out of curiosity. The yet-unnamed man then walked with Cesar to the front of the news van, tapping the concrete with the cane.

“Where’d you learn to be blind?”

Kurt’s comment notwithstanding, the now “blind” gentleman looked around as people passed by. No one really seemed to pay attention to him as he and the dog climbed onto the nose of the van. He looked across the street, where Emily and her partner had just dismissed a waiter to get their bill and some carryout boxes. Man and dog then leapt to the roof of the van, drawing the attention of many people on his side of the street as he tapped the cane upon the vehicle.

Sean Medder, who was mostly silent as his partner and the reporter battled with their words, looked at the spectacle across the street. He did so with the interest of one slowing down while passing a car wreck on the side of the road. He didn’t say anything to the other three people about him as he began to chuckle.

The “blind” man was walking around in a circle on the van, arguing with the dog. Sean’s light snorting grew into noticeable mirth seconds later, and Emily looked at him confusedly. She, the reporter, and the cameraman looked at the news van he found so amusing. Emily almost broke out in laughter at the sight, but gave only a shocked, yet smiling expression.

As the waiter returned to the now quieted table with bill and “to-go” boxes in hand, Tessa Heatherton quickly left the Detectives to their meals as her cameraman trailed her to the van, stopping only when a car would have otherwise run her over.

“Does that guy look familiar to you?” Emily asked as she poured her meal into the Styrofoam box.

“Not really,” Sean replied, having finished the same and now paying for the meal with his credit card. “Maybe they’re taping one of those hidden camera shows where they screw with public life so they don’t have to pay writers.”

“Could swear I’ve seen him before.”

“Past life, eccentric celebrity, sounds like a good mystery either way.” The waiter returned, took the credit card and bill, and went back into the restaurant. “Maybe we should work on the one we already have.”

“Now I know.”

“What?”

“That’s Turner.”

“Turner? Who’s Turner?”

“Benton.”

“Benton? As in, Chris Benton?”

“If you want to get technical, Turner is his son.”

“Really?”

“See Sean, when a married couple love each other...”

“If you really want to continue,” Sean said as the waiter returned with his card. “I will have to ask for details.”

“C’mon.” Emily pulled a five-dollar bill from her pocket as a reward for the Randal’s service and patience. “We’ve got work to do.” They headed back to Sean’s car as Tessa was still trying to contain the man who was atop her van.

“Cesar,” Turner asked, “are you sure this is the Freyton Bridge?” The dog let a soft but loud woof.

“Sir,” Tessa pleaded, “You’ll have to come down from there!” She and, unbeknownst to her, Turner looked to find the officers she was bothering had left. Heatherton had hoped that they could handle the situation, being cops and all, but it seems she’d have to deal with this herself. “Sir, you’re on a news van! You need to come on down.”

“Really? I *thought* traffic was slow for Freyton. C’mon, Cesar!” The quadroped led his friend onto the nose slowly then Tessa coaxed him into jumping to the ground. “Y’say that was a news van I was on?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m sorry about that.”

“That’s alright.”

“Hey, look,” Turner pointed behind the young reporter. “Pulitzer Prize winning material, 12 o’clock!”

Both Tessa and her cameraman turned around instinctively to see what the “blind” man had been referring to. They looked for a moment until the epiphany struck Tessa that the visually handicapped pointing anything out to those with sight was impossible. Angry that she’d been taken in by so simplistic a ruse, she turned to face the trickster only to find both he and his canine had vanished.

Scowling at her coworker, she gnashed, “Get. In. The van.” The pair climbed in and drove off as some people continued gawking at the spectacle of the last few minutes. Turner, who had been hiding behind the corner of the nearest building waved the passing automobile goodbye, smiling.

“You live a dangerous life, man,” said Kurt, walking up next to him, shaking his head and laughing.

“What’re they gonna do,” Turner asked him. “Run a story about it? I can see the headline now: ‘Gullible Reporter Fooled While Harassing Police.’ Wanna get some lunch at the Runaround? My treat.”

“They won’t let Cesar in there.” Cesar, having heard his name, nuzzled his head under Kurt’s hand, prompting a scratching.

“They will,” he handed Kurt his cane. “After all, his master is blind.” The two smiled and made their way across the street, Kurt striking the concrete with his cane.

Emily and Sean had long finished their late lunch/early dinner at the precinct. They both were in front of her computer compiling the evidence they had. Sean tossed his to-go Styrofoam box in the waste basket aside Emily’s desk.

“Think we should put in a picture of ‘Snake Eyes,’” Sean asked.

“Yeah, I’m sure that’ll really help the investigation,” she retorted with her dry wit.

“Hey, that’s what the kid thought he saw. It’s not much, but it’s more than what we’ve gotten lately.”

“Keyword being ‘thought’, Sean. I’ll grant you it’s been a while since I’ve heard a description beyond ‘Zorro covered in weapons’.”

“On the other hand, it **would** be rather silly, sending the captain a G.I. JOE character and saying *that’s* our perp. Maybe send a picture of Batman next?”

“I think a text description of the kid’s account should work.”

“Better yet, hire the guys Conan O’Brien uses to do those ‘If They Mated’ segments on his show. Mix Batman, Zorro, and Snake Eyes and see what we get.”

Emily gave a quick glare to her partner then returned to her typing. “Remind me how you rose to the rank of detective?”

“I won the coin toss. We picked who’d be your partner by drawing straws. I lost.”

“Well, while you’ve been cracking jokes, I’ve finished the report.” Emily watched as the printer beside her computer slid out the culmination of her work.

“Let’s be honest,” Sean said as he searched in vain for any remnants of his beverage before sending the cup to join his aforementioned box. “What does filing police reports have to do with police work?”

“Is there any reason why you’re so sarcastic today?” Emily gathered her report.

“Don’t know. Might have something to do with our investigation.”

“You’re not taking this seriously?”

“For the most part, I am...but it’s hard. Take a serious look at this: We’re looking for a guy that may not even exist! Someone who supposedly runs around at night in black clothes covered in weapons...A SWORD, Emily! Who carries around a sword?” Emily stared off into space at that moment. “It’s like a bad cartoon show—!” Sean finally noticed the dazed look on Emily’s face.

“The sword,” she finally said. “Why didn’t I...”

“What’s wrong?”

“Karen Shool,” Emily said as logged onto the internet. “She said the guy had a sword.”

“And so did the other witnesses. I just said ‘sword’—”

“But if we can figure out what kind of sword it was, maybe we can get ourselves a better lead.” She found a search engine, typed “various sword types”, and began her digital quest. There was a moment of awkward silence.

“Want me to hand this into the chief,” Sean queried.

“Not yet. I want to settle this sword business before my shift ends.” The printer ejected out the fruits of her labors: two pages, filled with pictures of basic sword designs. She rose from her seat, put on her jacket and grabbed her papers.

“If you miss another report...”

“I won’t,” Emily moved Sean from his stationary position into her chair, making him face the computer screen. “Because you’re going to wait here for my call, type the info, print it, and THEN hand it into the Captain.” Sean stared dead at the report window on the screen as Emily headed out the door.

“This is for that ‘lost at drawing straws’ remark, isn’t it?”

Turner Benton, with the day’s paper under his left arm, walked up the stairs with Kurt and Cesar. Theirs was a satisfying lunch, most particularly for the German Shepherd, who’d earned a small piece of bread from a nearby little girl for being “cute”.

Her parents scolded her, but she felt it was worth it (as did Cesar). Turner nodded a goodbye to his comrades as they headed into their apartment and headed to the far end of the hall to his own. He unlocked the door, entered, and locked it again.

His sink had a few unwashed dishes from the past two days. His TV area needed dusting and the movies needed neatening. The clipped shut, half empty bag of corn chips and the open box of Pop Tarts next to it...they should've been put away that morning. The jacket that had been precariously hanging on the back of his chair decided to drop to the floor. All of that, though, would have to wait; he had a greater concern. He sat in his chair and analyzed the front page of the Reed City Trumpeter.

The most glaring story concerned a local middle school's "athletic prodigy", who'd completed a triathlon in record time. A few other stories nearby included a lawsuit about prescription drugs, a man that inexplicably survived being hit by a car, what Turner considered a fluff piece about Mayor Vilmer (*the picture has him walking his dog*, he thought to himself. *It's a fluff piece.*) He thought back to his escapade earlier in the day, half-expecting Tessa Heatherton to film a piece for the 5 o'clock News about a "blind" man scaling her news vehicle. He chuckled again at how she looked behind her at the instruction of someone who "couldn't" see. He and Kurt laughed about that all through lunch. He continued scanning the periodical, looking for one name. Anything, any connection, the slightest mention...

A half hour passed, and he didn't find what he'd been looking for. He wasn't sure whether or not that was a good sign. He noticed a column on the front of the Local section. Actually, one word caught his eye, at the bottom: "vigilante." Columnist Peter Javon, after giving a spiel regarding rudeness on the road, offered the following as his closing of the day's text:

If you're interested in the bountiful rumors of a vigilante lurking about the city, be sure to keep an eye on my column this week. I'll be taking a close look at what everyday folks like you are thinking.

"Hm," Turner said indifferently as he turned over to the funnies.