

Tuesday Night at Powerman's

By Ian Healy

Some days it doesn't pay to get out of bed. Others it seems like everything is going your way. I was having the latter. My name's Harry Blaine. I'm a cop in the East Bay Police Department. I also happen to be a paranormal, but that's my little secret. I'm strong enough to toss cars like shotputs and tough enough to laugh off bullets. Most days those abilities don't make a difference in my job. A day like today and I didn't even think about them.

Grimes and I had been on the run all day from one call to the next, but none of them were really anything serious. We changed a tire for an old lady on Santa Ana Boulevard. We broke up a potential bar fight. We directed traffic around a family of ducks that decided to cross Haxtun Street. We even pulled over a teenage speeder who was so nervous and polite that we gave him a warning and sent him on his way. People thanked us. People smiled at us. These things are uncommon in my line of work and they make a day memorable and enjoyable. Needless to say, I was insufferably cheerful when I got home.

I rushed into the kitchen where Alisa was cooking spaghetti and Italian sausage - my favorite - and swept her up in my arms. She squealed and beat me with her spoon, splattering sauce

everywhere. Leering, I lowered her to kiss her, sauce dribbling off my nose. "Don't you dare!" she giggled, pushing futilely at me. I chuckled and rubbed noses with her, smearing the sauce onto her face. I felt like I was twenty years younger instead of forty-one. I set her down and grabbed some paper towels and began wiping up the splashes. "What happened to you? Did you get promoted or something?" Alisa took a towel from me and wiped her own face.

"No, I just had a good day; the kind of day that I really don't mind being a cop." I opened the fridge and removed a pair of beers. Alisa gladly accepted one from me after I stuck my thumb under the edge of the cap and popped the top for her.

"Good. Then you can make the salad, handsome." She pointed to a pile of vegetables sitting in the sink. I started chopping dutifully, filling a large bowl with lettuce, carrots, peppers, and so on. In a few minutes my daughter Dannan wandered into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator and removed a soda. Dannan inherited her strength and toughness from me, her strong will from her mother, and missed out on either of our good sense. She had opted to join a superhero group called the Young Guns. It was more of a club for super-teens and they seemed to spend more time causing trouble than stopping it, in my opinion. I didn't like her to be a part of that lifestyle, but we had an agreement that as long as she lived up to her

scholarly obligations that she could continue running around in her denim costume.

"Hey kiddo, what's the good word?" I asked, brushing the last bit of salad debris into the trash.

"Nothing," she mumbled. Typical teenager, I thought, never answers with a sentence when a single word will do.

"You have a lot of homework tonight?" I finished cleaning up my mess and took a sip of my beer.

"No," she replied.

"Any plans?"

"Uh-uh." I could see she wasn't much interested in talking to someone as uncool as her father, but I was determined that my good day was going to continue and I was going to have a conversation with my daughter.

"Listen," I said, a thought occurring to me. "I've been thinking. How would you like to come to the gym with me tonight?" Alisa stopped stirring her sauce and glanced sidelong at me. I could tell she wasn't sure this was such a good idea.

"And do what, watch?" Dannan sat on one of our stools and kicked her legs indolently. She knew full well that there wasn't a gym in town that could even make her break a sweat. Or so she thought.

"There's a place near the docks. It's called Powerman's. Ever hear of it?" She shook her head. "It's a special gym.

They cater to...people like you and me." I could tell she was getting interested in spite of herself and continued. "They don't have machines - only free weights, but I promise you'll get a workout. What do you say?"

She finished her soda and squeezed the can into an aluminum chunk the size of a golf ball. "Sure, I guess. Whatever," she replied carelessly, which was as close to an affirmative answer I ever got from her these days.

An hour after dinner, we headed out. For the most part, the drive was quiet. Dannan resisted most of my attempts to engage her in any meaningful communication, but I was used to that. It was about a thirty-minute drive to Powerman's from our house. When I pulled into the lot and parked, Dannan stared suspiciously at the run-down warehouse with a single oversized door. There were maybe a half dozen other cars parked in the lot.

"This is it? You've got to be kidding," Dannan grumbled, getting out of the car and looking down the street with distaste at the rows of warehouses and factories. I reached into the glove compartment and removed the full-face hood I always wore when I came to Powerman's. I had decided long ago that I'd prefer to remain anonymous, even with the fairly exclusive group that frequented Powerman's. I knew for a fact that some of the men and women that I worked out with were on the wrong side of

the law, but they respected my privacy and I in turn respected theirs. If I ever came across one while I was working, well, that was different.

"Touch the ground," I suggested to her, pulling the mask over my head. Obediently, she placed a hand on the pavement and her eyes widened as she felt the uneven vibrations of ten-ton weights being dropped. She looked back at me and her mouth fell open as she saw the hood over my face.

"What's that for?" She asked. I told her.

"Call me Hood when we're inside. You're a friend of mine. The rules are simple. No fighting, even if you recognize someone inside. Put the weights up when you're done. Always use a spotter, and write an emergency contact number on the clipboard. Keep the location a secret, unless it's for another super-strong type. Any questions?" We walked to the entrance. Dannan shook her head, a mystified expression on her face. I motioned to her to open the door. She turned the knob and pushed on it.

"It's stuck...uh, Hood," she shrugged.

"You'll have to push a little harder, that's all." I smiled. Powerman didn't have a security system. In fact, he didn't even have a lock for the door. What he did have was a 750-pound block of concrete right behind it. Dannan pushed and the sound of concrete grating on concrete echoed across the lot.

The two of us entered the building and slid the concrete piece back into place. The warehouse itself was empty. We walked over to a freight elevator. We boarded it, I shut the grate, and we descended into the gym.

It was fairly deep underground, deeper than any of the sub-basements of any of the other buildings around it. From a safety standpoint, it was best if Powerman's had nothing else near it. The elevator ground to a halt. I swung open the gate and let Dannan take in the scene.

Powerman's was built by two paranormals almost twenty years ago. The Architect and Fusionne had been part of Company A, one of the premier superhero organizations of the late Seventies and early Eighties. When Powerman retired from Company A, he recruited the other two heroes to help him set up his gym. The Architect was gifted in shaping materials with his thoughts, whereas Fusionne could use her gravitational abilities to compress matter almost infinitely. She had provided the raw material for the gym by compressing the mass of a small island in the Aleutian chain that nobody would have missed. The floor, walls, and weights of Powerman's were hundreds of times as dense as the heaviest man-made radioactives. The foundation ran over three miles into the bedrock, spreading out the thousands of tons of mass over nine square miles. Once a paranormal named

Anchor had lost her footing and dropped a weight and it registered on seismic detectors halfway across the continent.

Dannan's eyes bugged out as she recognized three of the six people currently working out. I knew all six of them, and the list read like a Who's Who guide to paranormals. Powerhouse was benching a few thousand pounds with Clydesdale spotting him. ManMountain and The Amazon were taking turns doing flies with the ten-ton dumbbells in spite of the fact that they fought against each other in the field. They were glaring mightily but each respected the other's space. Captain Lunar, who like me worked out in a full-face mask, was just finishing loading up a straight barbell with six of the eight-ton weights. He called out to us in greeting. "Hey, Hood, just in time. I was waiting for a spotter." Off in one corner of the room stood a man doing shoulder presses by himself. His muscles bunched like knotted rags as he balanced the most weight anybody had ever lifted across his shoulders. His bald head was glistening with sweat and his goatee was soaked with it. Everybody in the world knew this man, or at least his alter ego.

"Is that...Giant?" She whispered in my ear.

"Yes, but here he prefers Steven. He's exempt from the spotters rule," I mentioned briefly. Giant was unquestionably the strongest man in the world. "Come on, let me introduce you around." I took her elbow and led her into the room.

The next hour was one of the most enjoyable I had ever spent at Powerman's. Everyone took to Dannan immediately. Powerhouse helped show her the right way to perform different lifts. ManMountain spotted her while we found her maximum bench press - something on the order of twenty-eight tons. The Amazon offered to teach her some useful dirty fighting tricks. Captain Lunar made a bad joke and everybody laughed. Even Giant came over and solemnly shook her hand, saying he was pleased to meet her.

Later, I took a short break with the Captain while we watched Dannan flirt with Clydesdale. I must have reacted unfavorably because Lunar put his hand on my arm. "Don't worry, Hood, nothing will come of it. Clyde's a straightforward fellow. As much as a mercenary thug like him can be, at any rate," he amended. He handed me a water bottle, which I accepted gratefully. "She moves very much like you. You and your wife must be very proud."

I started at that, coughing as water ran down the wrong pipe. "How did you-?" I spluttered.

"Relax, Hood, I'm not going to tell everyone your secrets. You forgot to take off your wedding ring once, so I surmised you were married. You move like a married man and a father instead of a bachelor, and I ought to know." I had forgotten that one of Captain Lunar's powers was his ability to gain information

through observation of motion. He could identify the pilot of a plane by how it flew, or what a man was thinking by how he jingled his keys. "I've seen your daughter fight with the rest of the Young Guns. She's undisciplined, but she always wants to do the right thing. You've been a good father and role model to her, in spite of what she tells you."

I grinned wryly at that. The man really could read people like open books. "Man, cut that out. It's creepy!" Under his mask, he smiled.

Dannan and I finished our workouts and said our goodbyes. Everyone invited us to come back. Clydesdale told her to come by on a Saturday so she could meet Powerman himself. The Amazon gave Dannan her phone number and told her to call so they could go shopping sometime. As we waited for the elevator to return to the gym level, Giant stepped up to us. The man had the presence of an earthbound god, a strength and power so tangible that you could feel it when he spoke to you.

"Bombshell," he said quietly, speaking to Dannan. The silver cross around his neck glinted in the overhead fluorescents. "You're doing good work. Never let that change." With that, he took a deep breath, turned his eyes toward the ceiling, and vanished.

Dannan let a word slip from her mouth that I had forbidden her ever to say. I couldn't blame her; I'd said the same thing

the first time he did it in front of me. "Don't say that," I commanded, but without much in the way of parental force. Having Giant speak to you was a lot like it must have been for Moses on Mount Sinai. We stepped onto the elevator and rode back up to the surface. "How do you feel?" I asked her.

She flexed her shoulders and arched her back. "A little sore, I guess. It was fun. Can we come back again?"

"As often as you want," I replied. I felt a bit stiff in the arms myself, and decided that a hot shower with my wife would be just the thing to wind down the evening.

"Dad?" Dannan asked me as she buckled her seatbelt. I pulled the car out of the lot and headed for home.

"Hmm?"

"Some of those guys, those people, were super-villains, right?"

I nodded absent-mindedly. I knew that Clydesdale and ManMountain both had warrants out and were wanted for everything from petty larceny to assault. Captain Lunar was wanted for questioning in connection with a couple of dead gangsters we'd found in rather unusual circumstances that would have been tough for anyone else to arrange.

"I couldn't tell who was and who wasn't. Is that wrong? I mean, does it make me a bad hero?" Dannan twisted her hair around one of her fingers.

"Of course not, sweetheart," I replied. "Sorry," I quickly said when she winced at the word. "It just means that under the right circumstances, even the most diverse people can get along with one another."

She looked wistfully out at the city lights passing by. "It's too bad that can't happen all the time," she said.

I looked over at her and saw simultaneously a great superhero, self-assured and powerful, and the little girl who had tumbled into bed begging for a story from me. Face it Harry, I said to myself, she's growing up faster than you like. "Maybe someday, kiddo. Maybe someday it will."

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