

Lionheart

by Stephen Heger

It has been two days since nearly seven billion people have gained some extent of super powers and I figure it will only be one or two until they tear this planet asunder. I have had to move from my third story loft and take refuge in the basement of my apartment complex. Periodically I look out of the window and all I see is a city destroyed. Only a handful of buildings taller than seven or eight stories are left as I scan the rubble strewn vista of debris, bodies, and carnage. Skirmishes in the streets lay waste to everything around them, leaving only bombed out buildings and corpses in their wake. In the blackening smoke-filled sky, supers look like swarms of bees swirling and attacking each other. The conquered fall through the air, plummeting through battles on high, and smash into the ground below like mortars. The truly lucky ones are instantly evaporated into ash and drift idly in the wind. Screams and war cries fill the air to the point of being deafening as shock-waves and thunderclaps from battles near and far shake the very foundation of both the building and my being.

But I've gotten ahead of myself.

For the past three months I have awoken in the middle of the night and I lie there, eyes wide open, arms draped across my chest as if I was already dead and ready to be put in the ground. Quite sure the being dead is just wishful thinking though. All I can do is gaze into the blackness as the spliced bits of memory play over and over in my head. My small, cramped apartment walls give way to the comforting darkness as sweat sidles its way down my naked flesh. The summer heat is showing up early this year. The sheets lay crumpled and bunched at my feet, while the errant, arid breeze through the open window brings little comfort.

I choose to call them dreams instead of nightmares for one important reason: my life is the terror and the visages I see as I slumber are the beauty and spirit that has been plucked from me. The dreams infect not only my sleep but they also leave an impression and consume my waking life as well. I can cloud my head with drink through the day and night but no matter what I do, the dreams always return. Their detail and power leaves me with such emptiness that when I awake there is nothing short of misery.

In those dreams I am flying around the sky at night. The stars shine down as I tear through the air high above the city all the while knowing I could visit any of those shiny little diamonds if I chose. As I had done a thousand times before. I turn and shoot higher and higher until tiny molecules of water that hung to my chiseled frame freeze in the coldness of the ozone. Still I go higher. I soar further, until the heat from the penetration of the atmosphere melts the ice crystals, turning to water, and just as quickly boil and evaporate away. The searing heat that I should feel as flames erupt around me are nothing more than a slight itch. A few seconds and I am in space and careening past a multitude of satellites and floating in weightlessness and solitude. I close my eyes and simply hover in this sea of tranquility. Minutes turn to hours. My mind clears and I am at the most serene juncture in my life. I smile at the realization of my good fortune. To have the ability to do this. I drink in all I can, then open my eyes and point myself back toward terra and then dive back through. Flames, then frigidity, as my velocity increases and I pass the speed of sound. I don't hear the sonic boom as much as feel the pocket of air behind me collapse into itself. Faster and faster I fly until I am a blur and plunge into the ocean. Into the inky blackness. That is when I wake up.

That is when I realize they are less dreams and more remembrances of things past.

At one time I was impervious. Bullets and lasers and atomic warheads were nothing but gnats to be swatted away. I could ascend to the sun and change the course of planets. I was a demigod, a lionheart, and a superstar. People loved me for what I could do and the lives I saved. I had never felt so full of life, warmth, and adulation. I was immortal and invulnerable to everything.

Everything except for the molecular blitzkrieg that slid between my cells and took the most precious of me from myself. From the world. Subatomic nanomachines or viral RNA reprogrammers that could come in and reconfigure my DNA and make me mortal from the inside out. Make me human. Make me like them.

Like you.

I soon learned that it made all of *us* supers like *them*.

Normal. Boring. Humans.

One day we waged extraordinary battles in distant galaxies between the super powered elite and the next we got colds.

We woke up and felt tired and achy.

Joints popped and creaked.

Bones broke and cuts bled.

It was the day that we all died as supers and joined the ranks of the human race. We had to worry about the mundane. Mortgages and bills and the prospect of getting any myriad of illnesses and diseases that we had long forgotten about. What do you do when you try to pick up the pieces but there isn't even a fragment there? Many of us post supers couldn't handle the thought of life without those

powers. We simply lost our identity and what we lived for. Maybe not who we were but what we had become.

On that first day, after all the supers lost their powers, more than half ended their lives. Some through mere mistakes and a new mortality, others through a razors caress or a bullet through the skull. The general populace thought them cowards. They wondered how they ever placed the hope of humanity in the hands of the unable.

These newly dead.

The rest of us, the ones who had also lost everything, knew why they did it and barely held back from doing it ourselves. We learned what it was like to wake up and go to work. We got those jobs that we needed to survive. We filled out applications and went on interviews and learned to truly hate what it is to be mortal. To live that daily grind. I got a job that I learned to despise and talked mundane talk about the game and learned to put on a fake smile. I tried having friends and dating and all the things I was supposed to do but it always fell apart. I couldn't relate to their worries nor they mine. I tried and tried. They just couldn't understand what it was like to feel like god and have it all stripped away in a moment. There is no way to truly describe that sense of loss. As a super, I knew death intimately. Several friends I had known for what seemed like a lifetime had their lives snuffed out like a candle. But this time it was different. We were mourning so much.

After work I learned to go home and drink and cry and scream and think of ending it all. Every night I placed the revolver in my mouth and felt the coolness of the barrel sit atop my tongue. The taste of gun oil and metal attack my taste buds as my teeth rattle against the cold, hard steel and I begin to squeeze the trigger. My hands and body would begin to shake as I clamp my eyes shut. My heart raced and fluttered as I tried to welcome the end.

But I could never do it.

Every time I would relax my finger and think that this is not what a hero would do. This was the way a coward would bow out. Then the thought would burst into my skull that I was no longer a hero or a coward. I was an everyman. I existed in that gray area in between what was determined by mood or whim.

So I drank more and more.

It had been this way for three months since the culling. Day in and day out. Grind, grind, grind. Several of the larger cities that had a higher density of supers have meetings available with counselors and the like. I had opted out of any and all counseling or whatever passed for it this week. Some have been able to adjust to this quiet life and have found solace in two point five kids, a white picket fence and a spouse. Others have found god in the process and have become more meglomaniacal than before - never thought that would be possible. The one I find the most ironic in the fact that we are living proof of evolution and are now a part of the ever burgeoning science of devolution. When our bodies began becoming available, the scientific community circled the corpses like vultures circling a carcass. Scientists and geneticists poured over the dead supers remains and sliced and diced and ran through their entire genetic make-up and came up completely empty. Any preexisting genetic anomaly had completely been removed. They never found out what had made us unique nor did they ever find out where or how the virus that originally stripped us of our powers came from. Hypotheses ran from a secret government or scientific lab creating the virus to mother nature finding a way to undo the mutations of her offspring. A way to right her genetic wrong. All the governments were screaming at every research facility to come up with an answer so they could be the first to duplicate it on a mass scale. To be the first to create the ultimate soldier. A super killer.

Billions of dollars had been poured into it while the rest of the world starved and fought.

I received a call today from Eric on my way home from work and sat in the car to catch up with him. He is the only ex-super I keep in any type of contact with anymore. We used to team up quite often back in the day and we caught up every three days or so. Not sure if we just kept checking to see if the other was still alive or not but it helped. Eric had called today for a very specific reason and that was a rumor circulating that somewhere in the upper part of the state, someone had regained their powers. His source, he said, was sketchy at best even as I tried to stop my heart leaping in my chest. This was easy to accomplish just by thinking about the reality of the situation and all hope was instantly suffocated. Why now? Why only him? After my initial pang of hope withered I blew it off and threw it in with the myriad of other hoaxes and scuttlebutt that rose on a daily basis. We chatted a bit more about nothing of any importance and then hung up.

I worked my way up the three flights of stairs and went into my apartment. Work had been typically mind-numbing today. On queue, I became the rat running through the maze I had memorized and repeated daily. Go to the refrigerator, grab two beers, pop one and guzzle. Toss the empty in the garbage and open the next. Walk to the chair. Sit and unscrew the whiskey bottle. Two slugs followed by a sip of beer and then hit the remote to further my brain into a mushy state.

Repeat.

I mindlessly flipped through the channels as the whiskey radiated from my stomach to the rest of my body. I stopped on the local news and there it was. Amateur footage of someone flying through the night sky and aiding in a fire rescue in New Avalon. My pulse raced and no matter how I tried to put away that sliver of hope, it kept

rising to the top. What ifs and possibilities raced through my mind as I thought about the prospect of getting any little part of my former life back. To move beyond this stagnant, moribund life I found myself living.

This time I was the one who telephoned Eric and we discussed the situation at length. So many unanswered questions that seemed to just open the door to a hundred more. Had this persons powers manifested after the virus had been let loose or was he, or she, somehow immune to its effects? Had there been some sort of 'cure' that could reverse the effects of the DNA re-mutation and if so, who had discovered it? What were its limits? We prattled on for hours and both hung up the phones with nothing more than our self-generated hypotheses and theories.

I don't remember falling asleep that night and it was the first time since I lost my powers that I didn't have the dream. There was a certain finality to everything by its absence. As if my mind and my heart had finally given up on it. But that morning I had been awoken to the rattle of my apartment building and sirens blaring through the streets. I knew without truly knowing that it was to be the least of my worries. I sat upright both fatigued and weak after a less than fitful night of sleep and stumbled to the window bleary eyed and far from awake. As my eyes adjusted to the light outside I looked out at the cityscape which looked exactly how I visualized armageddon to be. Although I couldn't see to the streets well, the vista was lined with burning buildings belching black smoke into the air. Through the sirens and alarms I could hear people screaming in unison with rolling thunderclaps assisting in the cacophony. I tore myself away from the violent scene and dashed for the remote by the side of the bed. I quickly flew through the channels of the television to see what the media was reporting. It was sheer bedlam. Overnight there were hundreds of thousands of reports flooding in from around the globe of people spontaneously exhibiting every level of power. Live video footage littered every television channel with images of mass

hysteria, chaos and death. It was an instantaneous global plague. A pandemic that took less than twenty-four hours for it to completely rip through the planet. The problem with so many supers instantly developing is that they have no control and, especially in this case, no one to teach them how to use it. But with everyones unknown power came the inability to understand or use it properly. Somewhere on the west coast, Portland was thought to be the epicenter, someone woke up with the power to split an atom with a mere thought. The whole of the Northwest was now bathed in radiation and a nuclear winter. More and more stories flooding in. Images of Paducah, Osaka, Albuquerque, and Oslo flitted across the screen as they were engulfed in fires, explosions and death.

I sat at the edge of my bed stunned and with an emotion that I had long since forgotten; incalculable fear.

I flipped through the channels and settled on a local broadcaster. She was rattling on about an attack on Israel by several hundred Palestinian supers. Before the newscaster started her next sentence someone had burst into the station, ran over to the announcer and tore her apart. Limbs were removed as if the perpetrator were tearing leafs of paper in half. Screams erupted throughout the news station as blood spurted like rain. Seconds before the 'We Will Be Right Back - We're Experiencing Technical Difficulties' notice could cover the carnage, another super burst in and punched the other solidly in the jaw which exploded on contact. Though the video had been cut, horrible sounds continued from the television. They had forgotten to stop the audio. It sounded the way an abattoir would sound if it could vomit everything it had ever been privy to in its existence, all at once.

I turned the television off.

Minutes turned to hours as I sat and thought and came to the conclusion that the virus or genetic mutation that had rewired the

previous supers, including myself, genetically from the ground up and removed our powers had done the opposite for the rest of earths population. The virus had reconfigured them, each and every one, with their own unique set of powers but still left us barren. It was never birthed to undo our genetic structure but to create the method of our annihilation. These new supers were side effects of nature curing itself of the cancer that had grown into a pandemic. We were given absolute power to destroy ourselves absolutely.

The hundred or so of us from before had to be the only powerless left. Superhumans rampaged through the streets fighting each other while we cringed in our run down apartments or scurried to the hills like frightened little mice. It was that or die in the crossfire like everyone else.

Petty crimes and great tragedies unfolded with the everyman having the power of a god. Vendettas took out whole city blocks and trivial squabbles erupted into all out war that leveled cities. The religious have all taken to proving that their chosen god is right and have been converting the non-believers through every means necessary, whether that be through torture or death. Eschatologists had their proof that the judgement day was at hand and soon their messiah would float down through the clouds and lead them to salvation. Except when thousands have the power of their god they tend to want to become that idol of worship. By the end of that first day, Muslim Jihadists and right wing Christians had converted their temples to heavily fortified compounds. The Vatican was now a stronghold for the Western army that engaged in all out war with the the Muslim controlled Mecca. The earth between these two sites is nothing but a battle scarred wasteland of devastation and nuclear fallout. Bodies of the devout and the caught-in-the-way litter the the area in-between by the hundreds of millions. There's not much in the way of any other religion left. It's join or die for the most popular kids in the class. I know this as there are some that still see it fit to report what is going on worldwide via the web. Chroniclers of mans

downfall for the next set of evolutionary accidents that may find it. I periodically check the fixed webcams and sites that still try and pass on any information they can via my laptop. The horrors that flit across the screen give light to the fact that most of what we have done as a society is only skin deep. Once that is stripped away we are nothing more than rabid, deranged animals bent on servicing our own agendas. Those supers with the greatest power leading those that are weaker or destroying those that refuse to follow.

I have tried calling and contacting Eric via the web but there is nothing. Every infrastructure is slowly being whittled away. The electricity went out a few minutes ago and the water will eventually go too.

This was the end.

I have decided that it is only a matter of time before the building collapses around me or I get caught in some stray skirmish and killed. Not the way I had envisioned my demise.

I woke up that morning an hour before sunrise and grabbed my backpack that I filled with a few bottles of water, a small emergency kit, some beef jerky and a flashlight. I opted to not bring any weapons as that whole idea seemed laughable and completely futile. I crawl through the basement window and head out into the street and start towards the tallest of the buildings still standing. I scurry like a rat through the blackened alleys filled with charred bodies still heavy with the smell of their burnt flesh. Down through craters and pock marked streets littered with limbs and torsos of self proclaimed heroes and villains. My movements through the area seem to arouse no curiosity from above as I scurry and weave my way over debris, through all the carnage wrought by the new elite. In the distance I hear explosions echoing through the crumpled buildings and though the lack of light makes the going rough, I know that at least I cut my odds of being seen. It takes several hours as I make it through the

sunrise and into the morning. Every boom or explosion causes me to jump to cover and glance around frantically to see how close the action is getting to me. By the time I arrive at my destination my hands are nicked and cut and my clothes are tattered from the jagged edges of the broken concrete, re-bar, and glass. A sense of relief slowly seeps through my tiring body as I begin to try and find a way into the building. I scramble around the back of the structure and find a broken window not covered by debris and climb through. I turn on my flashlight and adjust to the blackness as I look for a thoroughfare to the roof. Without warning a sudden burst of thunder explodes outside the edifice and causes it to shudder. I drop to my knees, cover my head with my arms and wait for it to collapse. Seconds turn to minutes as light fixtures and drywall fall around me but it stays intact. The trembling ebbs and I stand once again.

It's all coming unraveled.

I exit the office and enter the foyer and see a door marked 'Stairwell' across the broken glass and wrenched metal pathway. I wander over and up the stairs and hope that the building has not collapsed somewhere further up.

I work my way up the stairwell knowing that everything does not end well for the hero. Sometimes you cannot save the day no matter what you do or how hard you try. Without my powers I have found it hard enough to live let alone regain the fearlessness I once had before. Events and tragedies happen before your very eyes and though you try to steer them in a favorable direction, the best you can do is roll with the outcome and try to survive it as best you can. That futility has swallowed me whole and though I now take the coward's way out, I know that I can finally be free. If I cannot live life in the capacity I so choose, then I can opt to end it in the way I see fit.

My flashlight dances across the door emblazoned with the words 'ROOF' as I open it and step outside. I stand on the same horizon that some terrible air born struggle is being fought between some group of beings bent on destroying the other.

And here I stand.

I drop my backpack and walk slowly to the edge of the building, tears rolling down my cheeks. The dull, heavy ache in my arms and legs surges and pools in my chest. There it condenses into the weight of the world. Saving someone's life takes courage, but it's easy - natural almost. Instinctual. But to resolve yourself to taking your own goes against everything ingrained in ourselves. It is a hard decision to make and harder still to follow through with. One step at a time I step up to the concrete precipice and feel a cool wind kick up. A fresh breeze that seems devoid of all the death and destruction occurring above and all around me. The sounds of mayhem that once filled the air fade into silence as the sun cuts through the clouds, both natural and man-made, and I feel the warmth of its rays one last time. I am both afraid and filled with nervous anticipation.

I have chosen to be free.

This is how it will end; on my terms and under my conditions. I wipe away the tears and take a slow, deep breath and I feel a smile blossom on my face. I raise my arms and lift my head as my weight shifts a degree and I lean forward. The heaviness in my chest dissipates as I fall back into that sea of tranquility.

And I become weightless again.

