

## THE PEACEKEEPER'S STORY

### "ASCENSION"

#### AUTHOR'S PREFACE:

I've always enjoyed writing about superhumans. I've been making characters since I discovered comic books during my summers with my grandparents, rifling through my Uncle Kent's extensive and beautiful collection of (among others) Uncanny X-Men, Atari Force, and Teen Titans (Captain Carrots, too!). It must have been painful for him, allowing a snot-nose nephew access to his beloved books, but I thank him now, decades later.

Many post-modern academicians say that comic book superheroes are akin to modern-day mythology, an attempt to create new pantheons of worship-deserving beings. The analogy does hold some water, but I've always found it lacking in one area: why the hell would the gods, so called, take orders from mere mortals? When one is able to leap tall buildings with a single bound, one tends not to file their taxes, or show up for jury duty. When you are far more powerful than the law, your compliance with the law is entirely voluntary. I think that if humans were to bring forth a brave new specie of *Homo Superior*, the new powerhouses would stop taking orders pretty quickly, and would start giving them. The following is a story of how such an event might transpire. It's also the prologue for the selection "Avatar Reborn".

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The young White House staffer looked up from her busy hustle through the West Wing hallway, one arm full of files. She whispered sharply into the cell phone screwed into her ear, something about categorical denials to the reporter on the other end of the line. She froze at the sight of him, drinking him in from his heavy boots to the top of his short blond hair. His broad shoulders filled the narrow hallway, and he could see her turn her head slightly to see all of his impressive frame.

Her phone continued to squawk, but its tiny digital "hellos" were cut off as her hand swung down to her side, tucking it away. Her gaze was a combination of awe and flirtation. She hooked her hair behind her ear as she gave him a sly grin. He nodded a curt acknowledgement as he continued down the busy hallway, his deep blue eyes filled with more than appreciation at her attention: the most powerful superhuman on earth was fighting back tears as he moved clumsily through the White House corridors, late for an appointment with the President of the United States.

He continued to move through the West Wing, and people continued to stop whatever they were doing and gawk. These folks worked night and day with

the elected leader of the free world, and yet the mere sight of him caused them to stop in their tracks. A muscular black woman, dressed in a flag-patterned, skintight uniform, rose from a desk outside the Oval Office. She murmured into a small wrist radio as he approached, hooking a large scabbarded sword onto the belt that wrapped around her curving hips.

“Jesus, Tommy, nice of you to finally show up. What the hell’s the matter with your eyes?”

He looked up, as if in a daze, and struggled to answer.

“My dad-“

“Your what? Your dad? Honey, listen, unless it’s some kind of emergency, you’d better get your big fine ass into that oval office, pronto. The man’s been waitin’ to see you, and he’s not happy. I’ll walk you in.”

She swung the door to the President’s office open, and ushered him over to a leather couch by the fireplace. The President paced behind his desk at the other end of the room, his sleeves rolled up. He patted his sweating forehead with a kerchief as he railed at whomever was on the other end of the speakerphone.

“God damn it, Marcus, I don’t want to hear anymore bullshit excuses coming out of your mouth! I want these leaks stopped, and I want them stopped right now! Now, do we know who in the State department had access to those records?”

The deep voice coming over the phone croaked, “Mr. President, I can assure you that no one in my department was responsible for-“

“Oh horseshit, Marcus, I’ve had the F.B.I. in here all day briefing me on this shitstorm. Those photos came from the State department, and if you can’t find out who is putting this stuff on the front page of the New York Times, I’m going to hang a giant ‘for hire’ sign outside your office!”

The tall, graying President nodded to his chief of staff, and the small fat man stabbed the phone’s buttons to hang up the phone on the Secretary of State.

“First he bungles the Saudi situation, and now this. When is the French prime minister due in?”

The chief of staff abruptly chirped, “Tomorrow at noon, sir, a reception in the rose garden.”

“What’s the latest count on Callahan?”

“Four more, ah, *escorts* have come forward to the tabloid press, so far sir. Only two so far are confirmed as underage.”

“Jesus, how did you ever convince me to appoint him ambassador to the Frogs, Sherm?”

“He was your largest contributor from Ohio, sir, and we both know Ohio is what delivered the election.” Sherman Portsmouth was a living database of the party’s largest donors. It’s how business got done, and he was the perfect man to have at the President’s ear.

“No, Sherm, what delivered the election was my ‘Moral High Ground’ platform, and look how that’s turned out these last few months.” The President began to turn red, and he wiped his forehead again. He looked up, yelling at the Secret Service agents posted next to the door’s interior, “God damn it, Charlie, how long is the air conditioning supposed to be out today? Are those maintenance people aware that this is July in *Washington-God-Damned-Dee-Cee?*”

“I’ll get right on it, sir.” The Secret Service agent quickly exited through the door.

The President turned to Portsmouth, dabbing at his brow with the cloth in his hand. He sighed as he locked his elbows, and leaned forward on the desk, “What’s next on the agenda?”

“Ah, I believe he just walked in, sir. Your four o’clock with the Peacekeeper, sir.”

The president looked at the ornate clock on his desk. The time read eighteen after the hour. He picked it up, hefting the weight of the hand-crafted gift from the people of the Swiss Republic. Contemplating the precision instrument’s face, he looked towards the small waiting area on the other side of the room, packed with whispering generals, aides, and two superhumans. One was standing, the chiseled black woman with the sword, a government operative whose turn it was to pull protective duty here at the White House. The other was sitting on the leather couch, staring despondently at the coffee table in front of him.

“Well, aren’t I a dollar waiting on a god-damned dime,” he muttered through gritted teeth, and flung the heavy work of chronological art into the cold fireplace of the presidential suite. It broke into a thousand pieces with a deafening crash, small springs and gears sent bouncing and rolling throughout the oblong office.

The abrupt pandemonium froze the background hum of conversations instantly, and jolted the lackadaisical titan out of his intense, baleful stare. The president bellowed, “Glad you could join us, Mister Peacekeeper, sir!”

The giant man stood, gloved hands by his side. He stiffened as he took a deep sobbing breath, involuntarily drawing himself to his full height of six foot, ten inches. There were professional basketball players far taller than him, but few of them could rip bank vault doors off their hinges. The president scowled when he saw the Peacekeeper’s eyes welling with tears.

“What’s this?” he demanded, pointing one hand at the superhuman, and the other at his own eyes.

“Mister President, I--”

“Better yet, what’s this I hear about you refusing to honor DARPA’s request for blood and tissue samples for our new...what the hell’s it called, Sherm?”

“The next generation of ‘triple E’ chamber, Mr. President,” Portsmouth chirped. The chambers were the enigmatic source of the superhumans,

discovered four years ago during a massive particle accelerator accident in Texas. The uncontrolled rip in the fabric of reality left tens of thousands dead, and a few hundred lifted to a state of near-godhood. The Peacekeeper had been the most powerful of those that emerged from the devastation. The process had since been controlled and refined, but still resulted in hundreds of dead candidates for every one successful superhuman produced. The odds didn't deter thousands from risking their chance at unrivaled power.

The newer generations were intimidating, but nowhere near as powerful as the original, accident-produced titans. Other nations had mimicked the process, and an intense arms race to make more powerful metahumans was currently raging. The scientists working on improving the process were constant in their efforts to take just one more sample, run just one more test on him. The requests were never ending, and the man once known as Tom Betts was spending more time in laboratories and testing facilities than with his family or his duties. His refusal to submit himself to further tests garnered a summons from the President himself.

Events popping up throughout the Peacekeeper's day refused to cooperate with the White House's events calendar, however. There were television appearances to be kept in New York, an underground cavern full of coal miners to be evacuated in West Virginia, and a derailed passenger train to be recovered from the bottom of a canyon in Arizona. The train car had been full of students from an elementary school, among others, and was a scene of absolute carnage and calamity. The twelve-hundred foot plummet had reduced the small children and their teachers to a mash of human paste. A crane would have taken days or weeks to recover the bodies. He brought the crumpled wreck to the accident investigation site in a matter of minutes. The press and victims' families had been there, swarming and screaming questions and sorrows. He had left without a word, pausing only to comfort a weeping Hispanic woman who had lost her twin girls. He left at top speed, the Earth a blur beneath him, and was approaching Washington, D.C., when his personal phone rang.

That was twenty minutes ago. He'd spent the intervening time since then in a state of shock, pacing back and forth between the rows of solar cells on the roof of the White House's West Wing.

The call was from his mother, unintelligible through her choked sobs. His sister came on the line, and told him that their father had been killed in a car accident an hour before. Moments passed in silence, and he sat down against a solar cell, crushing it. He and his sister simply cried to each other over the phone for minutes. Eventually, his mother was able to compose herself, and asked to talk to him. He should have left immediately, but she insisted that he finish his meeting with the President first. His father, Ed Betts, had been an avid supporter of the man. She told him that his father would have wanted him to fulfill the President's request. He reluctantly agreed to finish his business in Washington, and then he would head back to Texas as fast as he could fly. He hung up the

phone, and was now here in the Oval Office, facing the fury of a President kept waiting.

The man had been ranting the whole time Tom Betts had been lost again in thought. Upon realizing that the superhuman had again tuned him out, the President closed the distance between them.

“God damn it, I’m talking to you, son! Snap out of this crybaby bullshit, and listen up! What’s your problem, anyhow?”

“My- my father just-“

“Your father? What are you having, daddy issues? I’m got a lot more here on my plate without having to deal with your fixation with your god damn pappy-“

The President was visibly frothing, and with the “p” in “pappy,” launched a fleck of tirade-propelled spittle. It landed smartly on the Peacekeeper’s cheek.

The giant man’s blue eyes locked down and to the right, trying to see the offending saliva. Shock became horror. Horror became disgust. Disgust twisted into fury. He seized the President by the shoulders, and lifted him like a rag doll into the air. The world began to blur as a snarl overtook his face.

He sank his fingers into the President’s deltoid muscles like a butcher squishing ground hamburger meat between his fingers. A small squeak emerged from the politician, his eyes wide with pain and surprise. The superhuman who had escorted him in, given the name Delta by the press and the government’s publicists, tried to grip the nearest of the Peacekeeper’s massive arms to pull the President to safety. He kept his hold on the helpless man tight, and with the flick of an elbow, sent her through the wall. The cluster of military and civilian officials began to scatter amidst a chorus of screams, while the secret service agents fumbled with the locks on briefcases they kept by their sides.

The Peacekeeper brought the bucking President close, hissing, “My father died an hour ago in a car accident, you worthless piece of shit. He was a good man, and I won’t have you disrespecting him and his name.”

The President’s eyes rolled back, blood streaming from his mouth. He had bit the tip of his tongue off from the pain, and crimson poured down his chin.

“He voted for you, believed in you, and look at you now, just a sack of crap trying to hold together an administration full of pederasts and perverts. You make me sick, you god damn--”

He slammed the President into, and through, the massive wooden desk that dominated the windowed side of the Oval Office. The historic 19<sup>th</sup> century piece had been a gift from Queen Victoria, hewn and ornately carved from the hull of the *HMS Resolute*. Under the sudden assault, the solid furniture had acted as an anvil to the President’s body, splattering his entrails across the room, but had been unable to stand up against the titanic follow-through of the Peacekeeper’s assault. Blood, body parts, and splintered timbers filled the chaotic room.

Secret Service agents were now streaming through the door, horror sweeping through them as their eyes took in the charnel view. One managed to

deploy his LRP, a miniature rocket-propelled grenade that was tailor made for dealing with superhumans at close ranges. The black tube was no longer than a large thermos, held close by both arms as it was fired from the hip. The small rocket would have stopped most superhumans, its shaped charge punching a jet of molten metal into megadense flesh. The Peacekeeper was no ordinary superhuman, though, and the explosion that would have pierced tank armor merely blew a ragged hole in his blood-stained uniform's shirt. The room filled with scorching dust and the smell of rocket propellant. Another agent, the returning Charlie, brought his RPG launcher to bear, but the streaking warhead was deflected by Betts' outstretched hand. It blew a hole in the ceiling, raining plaster and fragments of crown molding across the room with a deafening boom.

The dust cleared, and something moved at the Peacekeeper, a glint of flashing steel moving almost too fast for human eyes to track. Delta had rejoined the fight, slashing her experimental sword across the adam's apple of the Peacekeeper at supersonic speed. The blade snapped with a shriek, its monomolecular edge no match for the toughest throat on the planet. The foot-long fragment imbedded itself in the bullet-proof glass of the office's windows, spiderwebbing them.

She tried in vain to maneuver around him, trying to hammer the back of his head with her fist, but he was too fast, even for her. He caught her by the jaw, and lifted her off the floor. Using only one hand, he slammed her through the floor. Far more resilient than the President, the devastating blow still managed to knock her unconscious. She groaned and lay still, partially buried by the debris.

Two more Secret Service rockets impacted off his head, tearing apart the interior of the office and blowing out the windows. He barely noticed, motioning instead for them to stop with a wave that conveyed annoyance and impatience. Incredibly, they complied.

He turned to the one named Charlie. "You. Get me a phone in here that works."

Pointing to the first agent that had opened fire, "You, gather the press corps, and tell them to meet me here in five minutes."

An air force general pushed his way back into the room, coughing from the swirling dust.

"What the hell have you done, here, you monstrosity? You've just killed the god damn President of the United States!"

"General, bring that colonel in here with the nuclear football, the launch codes for the missiles."

"I'll do no such thing, you-"

The officer was reduced to a pink mist as two massive hands pulled his torso in half. Flinging the human debris aside, he pointed to the cowering chief of staff in the hallway.

"You, there, Sherman, do I have to ask twice? The codes. Now."

“Right away, sir.” Portsmouth looked down the hallway as he wiped presidential blood off the side of his face. “Colonel Hutchins, front and center immediately, and bring that briefcase with you!”

He heard Delta groan again from the next floor down. He stepped astride the massive hole in the Oval Office floor, and looked down on her. One arm was obviously broken, its awkward angle curled close to her chest. He floated down through the hole, scooped her up, and laid her down on the leather couch back in the Oval Office. She looked at him with hatred and disgust, and silently mouthed a single question through her pain, “Why, Tom?”

Betts spoke through fierce tears, his blood-splattered face a visage of wrath and a determination that could twist steel. Whatever had snapped in him was now in control.

“We’re done subjecting ourselves to these...these weaklings; these insignificant specks. You and I, we weren’t meant to be ruled by flesh-pressing politicians, or, or baby-kissing congressmen. Don’t you see, Delta? We were meant for more than this, and I’m going to make it happen.

“I’m done taking orders from them. I’m going to make things right, and they’re either going to follow me, or I’m going to grind them to bits. They can’t stop me. Hell, you couldn’t stop me, and you’re pretty much the fastest one on the planet.

“But I can’t do it alone, Delta. I’m going to need your help. I’m going to need the help of the others. All of us, all of us who came out of those chambers, we’re going to make things happen. There won’t be any more squabbling about borders, or wars launched on account of religions, or children starving while some United Nations jackass wrings his hands and does nothing. We’re going to make a difference. Are you with me?”

She hesitated, her eyes still burning, and began to shake her head. The Peacekeeper cupped her jaw, and squeezed slightly, just enough to feel her facial bones flex under the titanic pressures. She stiffened as he clamped down.

“Delta, make damn sure you make the right decision. We’re talking about your future, here,” he uttered with menace. Her side-to-side motion quickly became a nod. There was no arguing with him. There was no beating him. The combined might of a dozen other superhumans would have been a candle in a hurricane compared to his strength and power.

“Good. I’m glad I’ll be able to count on you. And if I can’t...well, look around.” The threat was more than implied. The presidential innards still dripped from the ceiling and walls, scorched here and there by ineffective handheld rockets. They were the hallmarks of his extremely persuasive debating style.

He helped her to her feet. Holding her elbow, he braced her, and pulled. She screamed, but the pain from her dislocated shoulder ceased, and her broken forearm was set instantly. They walked through the Oval Office’s door, leaving the bloodstained room behind as they made their way to the press room. The halls were filled with horrified onlookers, press, staff, and impotent Secret Service agents. They all stood, shocked into inaction by his bloodied appearance.

Charlie appeared when the halls and aisle ways became jammed, pushing a channel clear for them to the podium. Betts took an offered towel, and dabbed away the larger smears of flesh and blood that covered him while the spooked camera operators kept their lenses on him. The only sound in the room was the clicks and whirls of camera. The tension was monstrous. No one dared even cough.

The Peacekeeper took to the stage. He regarded the podium for a moment, with its fine stained wood and intricately crafted presidential seal, then gingerly ripped it from its mounts. He set it aside as the tempo of cameras flashing staccato strobes across him suddenly escalated, furiously attempting to capture the historic moment. He turned to the gathered media, and winked to Delta, who stood nursing her arm in the front row.

“Thank you for coming, y’all. My name is Tom Betts, although you might know me as the Peacekeeper. I’m here today to tell you how it’s going to be from now on...”