

WONDER CITY STORIES

SAMPLE

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*For two of my superheroes*

TOM HOGAN

*and*

JENNIFER FREEMAN

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## Making an Impression

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MEGAN TOOK A RUNNING START, SIX LONG STEPS, AND THEN LEAPT OUT into the air, leaving the stability of the great golden sphere behind, flinging herself into a downward arc to the ground eighteen stories below.

The humid September air sumptuously caressed her butched hair as she enjoyed the last view of Wonder City sprawling away from the hill she dropped toward. She flipped off the sky and anyone who might possibly be in it, like maybe Carson. Then she reoriented herself, as her mother had drilled into her, to get her feet under her for landing. Finally, she looked down.

A woman in blue was walking with immense inevitability toward Megan's intended landing point.

There was a moment when Megan scabbled helplessly in midair, feeling more like a cartoon character than one of America's noble paranormals. Failing to spontaneously acquire the power of flight (hey, it had happened to other people), Megan bellowed as many warnings as gravity allowed.

The woman looked up at the last moment, her freckled face blanching and her eyes going wide.

Megan shut her eyes and braced herself for something really horrible. She was baffled and relieved when her landing was a hard, cracking impact, the sudden slam of her skin and muscle and bones into reinforced concrete, with nothing between her and the rock.



An hour earlier, Megan had stepped off the bus from Las Vegas, luxuriating in being able to stand fully upright for the first time in at least 5 hours. She retrieved her enormous backpack from the storage bin and looked around in the late afternoon sunlight.

Wonder City was nothing like Vegas. The east coast had greenery everywhere, what with water regularly falling from the sky. It was more like Berkeley had been, but also entirely different. California was a land unto itself, and held memories she was trying her damndest to forget as soon as possible.

Her gaze was drawn magnetically to the Perisphere and Trylon, the crown jewels of Wonder City shining in the late afternoon sun. She'd heard that the original Trylon and Perisphere from the World's Fair had been moved here from New York City by a supervillain who'd loved them. Since then, the originals had been destroyed, and at least two sets of replacements had too, all in paranormal battles. This latest set had survived more than a decade, so long that City Hall was starting to use them on stationery.

Megan considered where to go next. She should find a place to stay until she could get an apartment. The Y was her mother's suggestion, which, by dint of being her mother's suggestion, very nearly ruled it out.

She looked at the Perisphere and Trylon again, shouldered her pack, and set out to walk the lines of streets from the east side of town up the hill to Helicine Park. She'd come here to see the city, and to try to wipe out her fears. She might as well start at the top.

There were, surprisingly enough, lockers large enough for her backpack in the lowslung building that served as the entrance to the park. After stowing all her worldly belongings, she went to the counter and tried not to loom over the woman in charge of the lockers.

"The stairs're through there," the woman said, jerking her head back and to the right. "Elevators there." Back and to the left. She barely looked up from playing a game on her StarLeaf tablet.

Megan ducked through the doorway and took the stairs. About half-way up she thought, *What the fuck have they done to their air here?* As the muggy September afternoon closed in, she found herself panting because the air felt thicker than she was used to, wet and harder to breathe somehow. She gasped her way to the top, feeling very slow and out of shape.

She was able to catch her second wind waiting in the short queue at the top. There were several paras waiting to stand on the top of the Perisphere. The guy in front of her was a balding, graying, middle-aged guy she had to help on with his cowl when it was his turn. He went and stood at the very top and gazed out. She could hear him delivering some kind of monologue, but, thankfully, the wind peeled his words away from the group on the platform.

After his fifteen minutes were up, Megan went and sat on the flattest bit of the outward curve of the Perisphere. She avoided thinking about what a magnificent target she'd just made of herself, especially for someone flying very high overhead.

*Why do paras like to sit on top of tall objects?* Megan wondered. *Does it have something to do with suicidal urges? Or defiance of same?* She considered that for a little while and settled on, *Maybe it's just the view.*

Wonder City's streets rolled away from Helicine Hill on all sides: to the tankers on the river to the east, the skyscrapers of downtown to the south, and the march of row-house-lined streets up to the posher neighborhoods to the west. Behind her, to the north, rose the steeply-pointed Trylon, which one could see, apparently, from nearly anywhere in the city. Beyond that were the French Hills, where the really wealthy people, as well as several superhero teams and a not-inconsiderable number of supervillains, resided.

A city full to the brim with paranormals. *Why* had she come here? Oh, right, *because* it was full of paras.

It had seemed like such a good idea.

"Sorry, miss," said a woman in a security uniform who flew up next to her. "Your fifteen minutes are up."

"Thanks," Megan said, standing up and resolutely not looking skyward. *Is he up there? What does it matter if he is?*

"Are you a flier or a jumper, miss?" the security guard said.

"A jumper."

"If you'd be so kind as to hop down on that side over there, by that sign," the guard said, waving toward the southwest region of the Perisphere. "The concrete's reinforced for impact there."

"Sure thing, Officer—" Megan glanced at the woman's nametag "—Nakamura. Thanks again."

"No trouble, miss," the guard said, and she zipped back to her post to signal the next para who wanted to pose, soliloquize, stand, or sit on the Perisphere.

Megan followed the jumper sign's instructions: she shouted a few warnings then took a running jump.



"Oh my god, I'm so sorry!" the woman in blue said, running to Megan's side. "I didn't realize I'd ... I was listening to my StarSeed ... I took a wrong turn ... um ... are you all right?"

Megan peeled herself off the pavement slowly, thoughtfully testing each individual joint and bone before committing to anything so rash as becoming vertical. *At least I didn't actually smash her like a bug.* "Yeah," she mumbled, then paused to spit out a few pieces of gravel. *At least that's not on my conscience too.* "I'm afraid," she added ruefully, after determining that her spine was intact, "that I'm more of a plummet than a jumper."

"Oh, god, I'm so so so sorry," the woman said, wringing her hands and ducking her head between her shoulders every time she repeated "so"

Legs, knees, ankles, all fine. Megan rolled over, sat up, and focused on her former landing obstacle. High school? College? Megan tried to guess her age, then settled on, *Not much younger than me. Still in college, though.* The woman wasn't very tall, was white, and had sandy brown hair slicked down against her head. She was wearing a one-piece leotard-type costume swirled through with different shades of blue. *A superhero. Of course, it had to be a superhero.*

"Aren't there signs about jumpers out here?" Megan said. She glanced around and immediately spotted several signs with bright red light-up blinking borders.

"I missed them," the woman said, ducking her head again. "I was ..."

"Listening to your StarSeed. Right," Megan said, flexing an arm thoughtfully. Then she frowned and looked at the other woman, who appeared to be ... dripping? "Wait, how *did* you get out from under me? And why are you ... wet?"

The woman blushed bright red and turned away. "I...I...I have this *stupid* power."

Megan stood up slowly. *Aren't they all stupid?* Invulnerable bones, invulnerable skin, invulnerable innards, but joints and head still ache after something as ungraceful as that. "Do tell," she said, pleased to find that she wasn't dizzy.

"I can't control it. I teleport when I'm in danger, if I see it coming." She ran her hand down the sleeve of her costume, squeezing out water. "And

I *always* end up wet.”

Megan shrugged, despite the pain. “Well, I’m glad you’re all right. Just, ah, be more careful?” She turned to make her way stiffly down to the lockers where she’d stored her backpack.

She was heading for the park exit when the woman caught up with her. “Can I buy you coffee or something?” she said a little breathlessly. “To make it up to you? I’m really sorry.”

Megan took a deep breath, about to make a snarky remark about how she didn’t date people who tried to kill her — *anymore* — then let it out when she saw the woman’s rueful expression. “Sure,” she said. “I’m Megan,” she added, bravely offering her hand to a superhero. Was this some sort of plot? To ... get her to a crowded coffeehouse and feed her coffee. Maybe not. But the plots back in Berkeley had gotten kind of weird and desperate there after a while.

“I’m Nereid,” the woman said, shaking the hand more firmly than Megan would have expected. She gestured in a general sort of direction and they turned to walk down off Helicine Hill. “Are you new in town?”

“Yeah, just got in an hour ago,” Megan said. “It seemed like a bright idea to come here first thing off the bus, but I’m not sure why now.”

“It is kind of romantic, isn’t it?” Nereid said, shooting an admiring glance back at the Perisphere and Trylon.

“I guess it is,” Megan said, wondering if she would ever feel less romantic than she did at this moment. Probably. “Hey, do you know where the YPCA is?”

“Oh, yeah, I can give you directions from the coffee shop,” Nereid said. “It’s not far from there.”

“Thanks,” Megan said, and added, “I need a cheap room for the night.”

“No problem,” Nereid said. “Their rooms aren’t bad, I hear.” She squinted upward at Megan. “How tall *are* you anyway?”

“Just short of eight feet,” Megan said, having been asked that particular question slightly more times than she’d been asked what race she was — both uncountable. “I never made it the last half inch.”

“That’s pretty tall, still,” Nereid said. *Thanks, Captain Obvious.* “If you’re in spandex, it must be hard to keep a secret ID.”

Megan frowned. *Spandex? Really? That’s what they call them here?* “I’ll never need a secret ID,” she assured Nereid.

“A lot of people change their minds when they move here,” Nereid said.

Megan stopped walking. “Not. Me. Okay?”

The expression on Nereid’s face melted to stricken contrition, and her

shoulders slumped. “Sorry.”

Megan was beginning to feel like she was kicking a puppy repeatedly. “Look, it’s okay,” she said, gently patting Nereid’s shoulder. She wished she were better at dealing with people when they cried, or were on the verge of crying. She expected that should’ve been something she learned in getting her psychology degree. *Oh, well.*

Nereid nodded, keeping her face averted, and led Megan down a street. *Make that a three-legged puppy. With big dark eyes.*

The Great Scot Coffeehouse was large and crowded, with a high, echoing ceiling that ruined the acoustics so that everyone had to shout to be heard. The counters were brushed steel with mirror-polished chrome trim.

Nereid and Megan added themselves to the end of the line. They waited without speaking, because the clamor made the usual get-to-know-you conversation impossible. Megan’s back prickled with the awareness of the whole crowded shop behind her.

“Hi, Simon!” Nereid bellowed when they reached the counter and their barista, a short, strikingly handsome young man with light brown skin, a flat-top haircut, tinted wire-rim glasses, and an impeccable van Dyke. Her order was lost to Megan amidst the noise, until she turned and said, “What’ll you have?”

“Er.” Megan scanned the signs desperately for terminology, then gave up. “Coffee. Plain. Normal. Black. The largest. Whatever it’s called.”

Simon flashed her a brilliant grin — his teeth were movie-star-white. “I usually call it ‘the vat!’” he said, holding up the biggest cup, which resembled a child’s sandbucket.

“That, please,” Megan said, returning the grin. Now that her joints were no longer aching like she was 80, she had some time to focus on the other members of her generation, and Simon was terribly nice to look at. Nereid was nice too, in a middle-America girl-next-door kind of way. *But oh, no, no superheroes, never again. Never. Again. Not even girl-next-door.*

Nereid paid with a dark blue credit card that was spangled with glittery stars. “I’m a member of the Young Cosmics!” she shouted by way of explanation.

Megan took her vat from the still-grinning Simon.

“Come back soon!” Simon said.

Nereid found them a table in a back corner where it was marginally less deafening.

“So, are you in college?” Megan said, avoiding the topic of Nereid’s superhero group like dog shit on the sidewalk. She took a scalding gulp of coffee, then stopped short, noticing the phone number on the side of the cup.

Nereid started to laugh. It looked better on her than guilt. “Better be careful, he’s a notorious heartbreaker!”

Megan gave her a dubious look. The message didn’t seem very ...heart-breakery. Written on the side of the cup, in the thick black marker the baristas used to note drink details, was a phone number, a cartoon heart, and the words, “Please? — Simon.”

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## Pied-à-terre

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THE YOUNG PARANORMALS CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION HAD PROVIDED A youth hostel for paras coming to Wonder City since 1964, the bronze plaque in the lobby proclaimed. A glance around the lobby told Megan that the YPCA apparently hadn't been redecorated since it opened: a couple of square, grimy, orange couches were shoved against the chipped industrial grey plaster of the walls and the indoor-outdoor carpeting showed signs of having been green once upon a time. The fumes of chlorine from the distant swimming pool stung her eyes.

The elderly man seated on a stool behind the counter peered at her, setting his book and magnifying glass aside. "Can I help you?" He was wearing a blue and white tuxedo-styled superhero uniform nearly as wrinkled as his face, with a golden half-cape tossed over one shoulder. His hair was completely white and thinning on top.

"I need a room," Megan said tiredly.

He nodded brusquely. "Fortunately, our ladies' rooms aren't as occupied as the gentlemen's rooms," he said, giving her an approximation of an encouraging smile.

"That's, um, great," she said. His nametag read: Hi! I'm Mr. Metropolitan!

"Runaway?" he said.

"What?" she said distractedly.

"Are you a runaway?" he repeated.

“No.” She watched him scribble on a form. “Do people really tell you when they are?”

“You’d be surprised what people tell you sometimes,” he said with a sigh. He snapped the form onto a clipboard. “Please fill out the top section, and don’t write in the shaded areas.”

She sat on one of the orange couches and discovered that the cushioning had long since disintegrated. A spring jabbed into her thigh.

A few minutes later, she handed the clipboard back to Mr. Metropolitan. He glanced over it, and she watched his gaze come back to the top of the form. “Megan Amazon?” he said. “Not the Amazon’s daughter?”

Megan pressed her lips together tightly over, *Oh fuck not another one of Mom’s old friends... or enemies*, and settled for, “Yes.”

His face rippled into a sea of a thousand wrinkles around a smile that showed surprisingly strong white teeth. “I liked Maggie an awful lot. Saw her at the old gang’s Christmas party every year. Great kid. I can see the resemblance now.” He opened a cabinet under the counter and selected a key. “I hope she’s doing all right?” he said, holding the key just out of polite reach.

“She was fine when she saw me off on the bus 22 hours ago,” Megan said, recalling her mother’s stolid, grumpy expression at the bus station and typical refusal to wave goodbye.

“Good to hear,” he said, handing over the key. “No battles indoors; we have a hot button to the Gold Stars. Third floor, turn right, all the way at the end of the hall. Quieter there,” he said, winking.

She summoned all her energy into a smile. “Thank you, Mr. Metropolitan.” “Call me Ira, sweetheart,” he said.

She managed to nod quite civilly, she thought, before hoisting her backpack and hurrying to the stairwell. She took the stairs 3 at a time.

After locking herself into the tiny cubicle, she sat down gingerly on the single “extra-long” bed that was still too short for her. “Well,” Megan said to the beige cinder blocks, allowing herself to shudder finally. “Here I am.” *Is this whole facing my fears thing such a good idea? Was this a clever plan?*



## Time and Again

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IRA FELDSTEIN PLACED HIS NAMETAG, KEYS, AND WALLET IN THE OLD GLASS candy dish on the high wooden table in the front hall. He retrieved the faded sticky note from the floor, found a roll of masking tape, and reattached the note to the lower edge of the mirror over the table. Hopefully, he couldn't help but see the "REMEMBER KEYS WALLET NAMETAG STOVE" when he left that evening.

"Good morning, Ira," Suzanne said as she emerged from her bedroom in suit and heels, sweeping her shoulder-length brown hair out of her collar.

"Any change?" he asked his daughter-in-law, in tones that marked a long-routine question.

She shook her head and added, "I made meatloaf last night. Leftovers in the fridge."

He thanked her and went to his own room. As he changed out of his uniform, he thought that Suzanne was looking older, more worn around the edges. He thought he'd make something nice for her dinner tonight. Perhaps his mother's potato kugel.

"Have a good day, Ira," she said through his bedroom door. "Remember the new physical therapist is coming at three. I should be home by five tonight."

"Okay," he said, opening the door and smiling at her. "It's no trouble if you want to take a couple hours for yourself, though. I don't have to be on the desk till eight."

"Thanks, Ira," she said, shaking her head. "But I'm just so tired these days."

After Suzanne left, Ira went to the next room.

“Hello, son,” he said as he entered. He stepped to the bedside and looked down at Joshua: craggy and wasted and peaceful, his tightly curled red hair starting to show some gray. Josh had opened his eyes sometime since Suzanne had checked on him. The first time it had happened so long ago, Ira and Suzanne had been mad with excitement. But then, as now, the searing blue eyes remained blank and sightless. Ira reached down and closed the lids gently. “Your eyes are just like your mother’s,” he said for perhaps the thousandth time.

Ira gently slid his arms under Josh’s shoulders and knees and lifted. His superstrength wasn’t what it once was, but it was enough to handle his son’s tall frame. Poor Suzanne used to wear herself out trying to haul him around. “Time for your bath, boy,” he said.

Then there was the hospital johnny and the diaper and the feeding tube, and all the other messy things that Ira took care of. It was the least he could do, he felt, given the ridiculous hours Suzanne often had to work.

“You remember Maggie, Josh? The Amazon? The one who stopped me from going into the Great Gulf after your mother. Well, her daughter, of all people, showed up at the Y last night, looking for a room.” He lifted Josh out of the bath and dried him. “She’s a fine-looking young woman. Same black hair and big brown eyes as her mother.” He paused thoughtfully, then added, “A bit darker than Maggie, though.”

Ira got Josh into a fresh johnny and carried him back to the bedroom. “I think your mother would’ve liked her,” he said, pulling the covers up over his son.

He sat down in the chair near the foot of the bed and leaned his head back. “I wonder if Maggie remembers your mother. Most of the others have forgotten her, with all the time twitches since the Gulf. And, hell,” he said with a rueful laugh, “no one else at all remembers that the first Golden Guardian wasn’t a man, so how can I expect them to remember my Tin Lizzie?”

Ira was still for a moment, then snorted. “I looked up your listing on Parapedia last night. Do you know what they say about that fella who drank the Godstuff and nearly killed you? That he was a supervillain who infiltrated the Guardians called Skywraith, which I’ve never heard *anything* about. They told us back then that he was the Iron Guardian, one of your teammates.” He rubbed his face and temples.

“All this time stuff gives me a headache.” With a groan, Ira lurched to his feet. “Well, I’m going to get something to eat. There’s always time for an old man to talk rubbish later.”