



## FIGHT OR FLIGHT

**T**HIRTY STORIES WAS not high enough to silence a shrieking city. Though faint, Advent 9 heard the peal of police cars racing through the streets.

*It's wrong to chase the sirens,* he told himself.

He didn't need to be reminded. He was better now. They weren't a temptation anymore.

*It's wrong to chase the sirens,* he thought again, harder.

That got him groaning. Life was hell when his brain refused to turn off, and the night was only half done. With summer rolling in early and the sky hazy yet cloudless, the city broiled in its own sleepless energy. Uncurling on the ledge and staring at a half moon, he dangled one arm off the roof like a swinging wind chime. The commercials were going to end soon, so he put his second earbud on.

Seven Hummingbirds shared the roof with him. These ones weren't causing any trouble. Mostly they scratched their bellies and yawned, slapping pink tongues over their teeth or pawing at their antennae. Advent 9 still had to keep

an eye on them. He could winnow them down during the night. Then, maybe, he could relax.

He practiced smiling as the commercials ended. His favorite radio show was on.

“What I don’t get,” said the guest, “are these ads you see in supermarket newspapers asking you to find missing children. Saw one today where they aged the picture. To show what the child looks like now, you know.”

“Right,” said the host.

“So I see this one today with two pictures. One is the kid when he’s eight. The other shows him at eighteen.”

“Right.”

“But here’s the thing. The picture where he’s eighteen shows him smiling, wearing a nice button-up shirt with a good haircut and everything. And I’m thinking, ‘Who would want this kid to be rescued? He looks happy where he is.’”

Advent 9 snickered, tilting toward the edge. He wondered if the joke was—what was the word—“inappropriate.” People said that a lot around him.

“So I’m thinking if they really want you to find these missing children they should make them look miserable, right? They should ugly them up. Make their teeth brown. Give them greasy hair and scars. Cause that’s probably how they look now, you know?”

“You want to make them up like coked-out rock stars?” the host asked.

“Oh, is that where they all went? Well, mystery solved.”

Advent 9 laughed out loud—a rarity, even coming from his favorite show. The night seemed less hot, and it felt like he was having a nice time.

That didn't last. A Hummingbird poked its ferret nose a hair too close. He glared, letting it know he was watching. With the slightest mental push, he sent it scampering away. Lungs unclenching, he returned his focus to the radio, but the laughter was gone.

*It's wrong to chase the sirens.*

This time they blared long and hard, and came with spinning lights that turned the streets red, only to round a corner and vanish between the sheets of buildings. Maybe he did want to follow them. But he wasn't stupid. If other help was on the way, he wasn't needed. It had been a hard lesson to learn.

"Thanks for stopping by. Have a great evening." The host cleared his throat. "Coming up next: the last Power Edict is up for repeal. We'll argue both sides with Lisa and Hogan. Don't miss it. But I can't sign off without saying hello to my favorite listener. Are you out there, Advent 9?"

"Yes," he answered.

"If you're listening, I want to say thanks for everything you do."

"You're welcome," Advent 9 said, lacing his fingers.

"And don't stay up too late. You're too young to be working the graveyard shift."

Advent 9 frowned, wondering if he agreed. Without knowing how old he was, it was impossible to say. But he let that question go before it attracted more Hummingbirds. Questions were nasty that way.

As he started to unwind, a sharp tug yanked his mind from the radio. Was he imagining it? No. It was like someone pinching his stomach from inside. This was a call for help.

“Finally,” he muttered. He stuffed the earbuds in his pocket, switched off the radio, and checked the laces on his mask, which were nice and firm. Yawning, he rolled off the roof, plunging six feet before flying away.

The Hummingbirds followed in formation, wings beating too fast to see. Weaving around buildings would take too long, so he shot up the face of Highgarden Tower. His reflection raced him along the floor-to-ceiling windows on every level of the skyscraper. His mask peered at him from the glass, with eyes hiding behind gold-tinted lenses, and blond hair spilling out the top pulled straight down by his ascent. His mouth was set, ready for a fight.

His boots scraped the building’s needle tip before he climbed into the sky. The noise of traffic abruptly choked off at this height. There were no clouds or stars tonight, only the city’s electric aura.

The tug grew stronger and more frantic as he flew. Whatever trouble he was headed for had turned deadly, and he had to cross half the city and the bay. Looks like he’d picked the wrong roof to start from.

After crossing Old Harbor the lights vanished, replaced by black water stretching for miles. He let himself fall, picking up speed to blast across the bay, flying parallel with the suspension bridge. The night was colder down here, with a zest of salt in the air.

The uniform was good for this kind of flying. The blue mantle wrapping his shoulders broke the wind chill. The mask’s lenses saved his eyes from stinging spray. And the thick vest and boots kept water out. He passed the island

with the amusement park and a hundred ships but was still making bad time.

Above land again, he arced over a seaside neighborhood and found the right place, as the call changed to an alarm in his head.

It was just outside a brick-walled park, which an expensive car had crashed into. Advent 9 looked for the animal who'd called him—another Hummingbird who swooped and hissed at four men surrounding the car.

They hadn't noticed the creature.

Dressed in matching black with red jackets, they moved in. One smashed the windshield with a baseball bat, letting out screams from the woman trapped inside.

"Morgans," Advent 9 growled. No common criminals. They would take the lady's life and leave her jewelry untouched on her corpse. They were monsters, and they only stopped when *he* stopped them.

The batter circled the car, breaking every window. The next guy, with a gasoline can, splashed it inside, laughing like a maniac.

When the third man fished a lighter out of his pocket, Advent 9 dropped like lightning, flying boot-first into the Morgan's face. The lighter spun into the road as its owner was launched fifteen feet. Advent 9 landed. The Morgans jumped.

"That's him!" the gas man shouted.

A third Morgan blurted, "Rex, your gun."

"Right." The batter dropped his weapon and pulled out a handgun. "Careful now, hero. One step and you're . . ."

Advent 9 strolled up to the car.

*Bang!*

The bullet flew up to his nose.

*Fuzz.*

In a blink, Advent 9 became a colorful haze in the air. He reappeared a step to the left and felt the bullet sail by his ear.

Rex fired six more times, each bullet striking places Advent 9 had just been. Sweating, the Morgan pointed his weapon into the car and screamed. "I have hostages!"

The hero shrugged. "Yeah? Well, who doesn't?" He grabbed the car's bumper and swung the vehicle like a hammer, mowing Rex and the gas man like grass. The two criminals lay in the street, gasping. The gas man clamped his hands on a bleeding knee.

Satisfied, Advent 9 searched for the last Morgan, and found him standing, transfixed.

Why hadn't he run? The last man always ran. It was a rule. If lawbreakers wouldn't follow the rules, how could he do his job? It was infuriating.

The hero crept closer, but the Morgan didn't move a muscle. Was he paralyzed with fear?

"I-I'm ready," the Morgan said.

Advent 9 blinked. "You know what's coming, right?"

The man nodded.

The hero shrugged. "Okay." One chop of his hand brought the Morgan down, his collarbone buckling under the blow.

Advent 9 kicked Rex's gun into a storm drain. He searched for any threats he had missed, but there was nothing.

So he waited.

He didn't have to wait long. The Hummingbirds emerged

from the trees, from behind lampposts, from open mailboxes. With the danger gone, they floated together into the battlefield.

And danced.

Feathers flapped in a midair tumbling display that became backflips on the ground. Ferret smiles were shot all around with lolling tongues. Somehow, Advent 9 had picked up five more since leaving the rooftop. One curled itself into a doughnut for the others to roll between them when they weren't leaping over each other.

Advent 9 groaned. "Does it have to be every single time?" There had to be some other way to celebrate his victories.

Whatever. It was time to find a new ledge, listen to the radio, and wait for another call. Tonight had been a bust so far but it could still be salvaged. He kicked off and started soaring.

"Wait!" shouted a woman below.

He stopped, caught off guard, and circled back to the lady who'd stepped out of her car. Two girls, maybe ten or twelve, stood there shivering. He smelled gasoline on them.

"Uh," he began, "is something wrong?"

"You saved us."

"Well, sure." He shrugged.

"I called the police."

"Good." He mentally reached out to the Hummingbirds patrolling other blocks. They saw cars coming. "They're a few minutes out. Stay out of the car to dry off." He floated away.

"Wait!"

He sighed, coming back.

"Those men."

"They're not going anywhere," he said. "They probably won't die, though that one might never walk again." He stroked his chin.

"Well okay, but . . ."

"Everything is fine." He frowned at her. "Uh, you're welcome?" Was that what she wanted?

"Aren't you going to stay with us?" she screeched, falling to her knees, and Advent 9 covered his ears. She hadn't been this loud when the Morgans had tried to kill her. "Please. Please. This has never happened to us before. Please stay until the police come."

He grimaced. "No, I don't do that."

"But—"

"There are no other criminals in the area. You're safe now." Before she could scream again, he took off flying till she shrank to a distant speck behind him.

He tried to forget it but couldn't stop wondering what her problem was. Being a hero might seem complicated but it was quite simple. You wait for a call, find the trouble, save the victims, then leave. Wait, find, save, leave. The sun comes up and the hero's job is done. The sun goes down and it begins again. How could anyone not understand?

He was in no hurry, so he kept low, ducking around buildings. But he didn't escape the Hummingbirds. They rode in his wake. Except the one he'd left behind to keep watch.

On a crowded strand of the eastern shore he found a nice high-rise and sat on a corner of its roof. Angry sounds of traffic rose from the street. The awkwardness of the mission faded.

The earbuds called his name. He'd need his radio to get



rid of the *eleven* Hummingbirds on the roof with him. Not all were weak enough to *push* away.

He flipped the switch on his radio and was jolted by what he heard. Music. Not an advertisement's jingle or the opening of a talk show, but *real* music, like an axe on his eardrums.

His finger *Fuzzed*, striking the buttons with super-human speed to find a talk station. Then he fell backward, exhausted.

The radio waves seemed to be full of filler, like packing paper surrounding the real stuff. He couldn't stand it.

He waited as the night grew cold. Hours passed without any calls. On the airwaves, a man and woman tried to outshout each other about something Advent 9 had never heard of. He smiled, relaxing. It could've been more exciting, but not every night could be a blockbuster. Still, considering how many sirens he'd heard, it felt like there was a shortage of peril in the city.

A static hiss washed through the radio. He sat up to find a clearer signal. The Hummingbirds rested, crawling the walls like flies, buzzing their wings or huddling in corners. He sighed. One day, he'd figure them out.

The static grew worse. When Advent 9 stood, it got louder and shorted-out the voices behind it. Wiggling the antenna got him nowhere. He didn't understand. The sky was cloudless with nothing to block the signal.

He switched stations. Nothing changed. Curious, he surfed through the channels, and found every one had vanished under static. The radio didn't seem to be broken. It had been working only a minute ago. Where was all the noise coming from?

Then the static stopped. A microphone popped and someone on the other end took a deep breath.

“Good evening, Hearth City. This is your doctor speaking.”

That voice. He recognized it.

“I have bad news. And you will be hearing it everywhere.”

Advent 9 flipped through fifty stations. They all played the same message.

“By now, you’ve noticed every wireless signal in the city has been infected. You have no television, no cell phones, no internet, no air traffic control, and no police dispatch. All your glowing trinkets have taken ill, and all emergency services are suspended. Even if you manage to call 911, they will have no way of sending anyone to save you.”

The speaker cleared his throat. “Such a nasty disease, but conveniently curable. All you have to do is return my property. Inside your police vaults you will find articles of advanced technology unlawfully seized from my past places of business. Deposit them in the open—anywhere in the city will do—and withdraw to a safe distance. I will make the pickup at three AM. After that time, your precious toys will completely recover.”

Advent 9 ground his teeth. The doctor had corrupted the city’s radio waves. Well, he wasn’t going to get away with it. He was playing with fire this time.

“Oh, and as a doctor I must recommend against any untested alternative treatments, such as sending a certain masked lawman to intercept me. However, if he wishes to call on me tonight, he will find me where we first met. But consider this, Advent 9: if you check in to my clinic tonight,

it will be our last session. Once again, Hearth City, good evening.”

The message looped, taunting the hero again. He seethed.

The place they'd first met? Advent 9 remembered. A moment before, that place had had no Hummingbirds. Now he felt them converging, pulling at his brain, summoning him. It took all his willpower to keep from running into whatever ambush awaited him there.

But he couldn't resist forever. The doctor had threatened his city too many times. Tonight would get a lot worse if Advent 9 couldn't use his radio. If the sirens stopped, people would need him in every part of town. As a hero, he couldn't stand still.

He took ten steps onto empty air, suspended between two buildings. A deep breath focused him.

He shot away. Surrounded by ghostly creatures with shimmering wings, he sped like a meteor toward the city's heart.

Tonight he'd tangle with a supervillain!



## 2

### THE FINAL BATTLE

**T**HE MASSES KNEW him as Dr. Felix Antiworld—a fine name, no matter what anybody said.

He adjusted his tie in the parabolic mirror he'd propped against a column. A bowtie, naturally, not the silken leash the rulers of the world knotted around the throats of their dead-eyed, pen-pushing subordinates. He was a scientist. Scientists were gifts to humanity. *Scientists* wore bowties.

Satisfied the colorful bow overshadowed his white collar, he swept away from the mirror, ready for the fight of his life.

"This time," he announced to an empty lobby, "I'm ready for him."

If he was honest with himself he'd admit the old train station made for a poor laboratory, particularly after he'd filled it with garbage. Mostly the husks of ordinary devices: air conditioners, auto transmissions, microwaves, and computers—shelled like oysters and harvested of valuable parts. The space had a lot of sharp edges and required careful foot-

ing to get anywhere. But it was all part of the perfect plan and it came with the biggest imaginable payoff.

At long last, he was going to kill Advent 9.

That was the real reason for tonight's experiment. He didn't really believe the police would return his old inventions. Though they were worth having. The anti-gravity generator, the cold-fusion hyper-anodes, the FTL telescope, the lightning-shooting satellite, and the flask housing the nanobot planet were all extraordinary things by anyone's standard. But Dr. Antiworld had outgrown the extraordinary. What he'd achieved in this abandoned corner of the city was the *impossible*.

"People won't use that word anymore when I'm done," he muttered. "After tonight, nothing will be impossible." Holding his breath, he glanced at his greatest creation.

The Biconcave was full of endlessly churning shapes moving through a black tempest. This was a small one, no larger than a storage shed. It hovered in a perfect sphere, unsupported above the ring-like Shackle generating it. In its fathoms he saw the silhouettes of animals, trees, flowers, and human faces. They flashed into focus, blue and violet rising from the black, before dissolving into noise, rejoining the storm. It was terrifying enough to be beautiful.

But he didn't have time to get lost in the show. He'd seized the airwaves. His message was playing in every corner of Hearth City. It could only be minutes before the boy found his way here.

*That boy*, he thought, cradling his skull. A headache was coming on. Advent 9 was a never-ending pain. It had been



six years since the doctor's once-illustrious winning streak had been ruined by a child in fancy pajamas.

The boy should have been easy prey for a man of his intellect, but the boy always escaped death, much as the doctor always escaped capture. It defied reason. And nothing would change so long as they kept stalemating each other.

Tonight would be different. The doctor couldn't say with scientific certainty that all would change for the better, but things *would* change. They would never return to the way they had been. Not after *it* woke up.

He laid a hand on the machine's central console, checking metrics. The five throttles were safely on the lowest setting. Temperature was within the ideal range. Gravitation was stable. Feeling confident, Dr. Antiworld turned one dial a touch to the right.

The Biconcave reacted. Swirling clouds coalesced and a large black form rose from the depths—a faceless, fingerless mannequin resting on spread knees. It stirred, rocking its head and twitching away from the lights inside the train station. The struggle was short. After a moment it slumped again, asleep.

"Patience," Dr. Antiworld whispered, as much to himself as to *it*. The sphere could not be safely opened until Advent 9 arrived.

Dr. Antiworld faced the immense front doors, waiting. The station's wiring was beyond repair, so he'd brought his own lighting. Construction lamps with halogen bulbs had turned night into day. They exposed the boarded windows, rafters splotted with rust, and cracks in the walls. Mortar oozed between orange bricks, and sheets of spider webs

wrapped the iron handrails on the stairs, their fat architects dangling inside. Not the best laboratory, but a damned good lair.

As an afterthought, the doctor slapped a hand on his lab-coat pocket and felt the rounded outline of his vanishing ray. The gun ensured an easy getaway. He wouldn't need it tonight, but it relieved him to see it carried a full charge. He could stay unseen for weeks if necessary. Calm now, he kept unblinking eyes on the door.

"Twelve ... eleven ... ten ..."

The doors buckled with a sound like gunfire. The metal beam holding them cracked. The next knock threw one door, thick as a bulwark, off its hinges. It slapped the floor, and the building resonated with the impact.

A stranger might have mistaken Advent 9 for some kind of robot. With metallic lenses on his eyes, a mask covering almost his entire head, and stiff posture, he appeared less than human. His hands and mouth were exposed, but those were inflexible and clenched.

That chin was hairless, but he was taller than the doctor. A scientific guess would place him at fifteen or sixteen years old, not that it mattered. His almost-entirely white costume soaked up the dust of the station. The boy was a magnet for filth.

Dr. Antiworld dipped his head, the last respectful gesture he would pay to his enemy.

*STAY HERE*, ADVENT 9 mentally commanded the Hummingbirds before plunging through the sawdust cloud that was



rising from the fallen door. Eight of the creatures unexpectedly obeyed, clinging to the building's brick face. The remaining three followed him inside.

They flew in strict formation, until anything caught their interest. The ravaged doors distracted one. Another bolted to the roof and weaved through the rafters. The last ignored everything else and took a threatening jab at the old man.

Dr. Antiworld seemed unaware of the Hummingbird. He looked exactly like what he was. With bloodshot eyes that didn't blink, a psychotically clownish bowtie, and a starched lab coat, he was practically wearing a sign that screamed, "Mad scientist." The wiry white tufts on his scalp did nothing to temper the image. Even the way he cleared his throat sounded wicked.

"I don't suppose you thought of sneaking through a window? Those original doors were irreplaceable."

The one Hummingbird tried to scratch his eyes, but Dr. Antiworld walked through the attacks as if the animal wasn't there.

"You're being stupid," Advent 9 said. "I'm here to fight you. You expected me to ring the doorbell?"

"I was polite enough to send an invitation. Was it too much to ask that you return the favor?"

"You're holding the city hostage."

"Which justifies your rudeness, how?"

Advent 9 hissed. "Whatever you're using to hijack the airwaves is sending a signal. Once the police track it, they'll find you."

"That would work *if* the signal was coming from here. The police won't be joining us tonight. If anyone is outnum-

bered, it's you. In fact, it's only fair I give you an opportunity to leave and—Hey!”

Advent 9 ran through the columns to the nearest line of scrap metal and leaped.

A small keypad flicked from the doctor's sleeve. He crunched a button. Advent 9 felt a rush of wind.

Something fell from the rafters. The hero caught it before it flattened him but was forced to his knees, which slammed the floor hard enough to send a few broken machines bouncing. Seeing stars, he looked up to discover what he was holding.

It was a concrete girder, much like the ones that held up freeway bridges. Broad as a sidewalk, it had fallen two stories, pinning him to the floor.

“You know what's the worst part of being your nemesis?” the doctor taunted. “There are many examples to choose from, but the one that really *bites* is how unremarkable you are.”

Advent 9 grunted. The immense weight settled on his shoulders, and he shrank in its shadow.

“Don't get me wrong. You are, technically, superhuman. I've seen you lift cars and uproot streetlamps, but compared to the heroes from the old comic books you're nothing spectacular. For Apollo's sake, how could I have been stopped so many times by someone so ordinary?”

The concrete beam was too heavy to throw, and Advent 9 couldn't move without dropping it on himself. Grinding his teeth, he lifted it enough to get one foot on the ground. “Gah!”

“Try not to void your bowels,” the doctor mocked. “This

place is filthy enough.” He gazed around the room. “You remember the last time we were both here? You were a lot cuter then.”

Advent 9 remembered. He’d never admit it, but there had been a time when he’d been afraid of the doctor. The man had blown up a prison, poisoned the mayor, shot down the president’s plane, and buried a woman alive.

That first fight had been an accident. It had been a rainy day and he’d picked the wrong roof to hide under, never suspecting that a killer lurked inside.

“Yeah,” Advent 9 replied. “This place has gotten older and uglier. Like you.” Gaining both feet, he levered himself and stood, shrugging the massive I-beam off his back. It landed with a crash and sank an inch into the brick floor. Advent 9 stepped forward.

“You’re only hurting yourself by attacking me,” the doctor warned. “I’m giving you a big hint. It might save your life.”

Advent 9 kept advancing.

“No? Well, don’t expect me to apologize.” The doctor hit another button. This time Advent 9 glimpsed the danger before it hit him.

Sentry guns descended from the ceiling, barrels already spinning.

“Shit!”

This was nothing like a thug firing at him in an open street. A symphony of gunfire converged on the hero. A subtle change of air pressure warned him before each bullet hit.

He *Fuzzed* around each one but had no time to rest between shots. The guns had eyes. They swiveled when he moved, following as he flashed from one spot to another.

Their fire threw up volleys of brick shrapnel sharp enough to pierce flesh. In seconds, he had to dodge those too.

The floor grew rutted as masonry dissolved under spraying lead. After a minute, it ended. Thundering bullets became snaps of empty chambers. Muzzles glowed red. The guns raised back into the rafters without a sound.

“Did you . . .” Advent 9 puffed and wheezed, trying to stay on his feet, “forget how fast I am?”

“Hm?” The doctor grunted as if just noticing him. “Oh, your second power, reflexive speed. It’s useful for short distances. *Very* short. But when we consider your running speed, slower than many boys your age, it’s a wash, wouldn’t you agree?”

Sweat clamped Advent 9’s mask to his face. Brick slivers clung to his uniform, and the station’s air rippled with heat. The doctor approached him and glowered. The hero sucked each breath, lungs burning.

Dr. Antiworld laughed. “And what help is great speed without great endurance? If only the world knew what a wimp you really are.” He shook his head. “I’ve made up my mind. You’ve had enough chances to walk away. If you try to leave now, I’ll kill you while your back is turned.”

A Hummingbird snapped at the doctor’s ankles, angry enough, but not solid enough, to raze his bones.

Advent 9 spat sweat off his lips and straightened, glaring at the shorter man.

“Your talent for killing people does not make you dangerous to *me*. I didn’t start any of this. I wanted to be left alone. You called me here. I’m tired. And I’m bored. If you want to live to see tomorrow, stop fighting and return my radio.”

The doctor chuckled. "You miss the radio? That's why you're here?"

"I was listening." Advent 9 put hardness into his voice but the old man just rolled his eyes.

"You want to kill me because I turned off your rock music." The doctor snorted. "Kids never change."

Advent 9 took a swing. His fist almost clipped the doctor's nose off. The man hopped clear, stunned. He scrambled backward while Advent 9 socked his way through the station. The doctor ducked behind bulky machines. Advent 9 smashed them with his fists and flew over the jagged metal the old man tiptoed through. The fight moved crookedly through the clutter, heading for the lobby's center, where the hero would end this.

The madman jumped a desk, throwing papers like dandelion seeds. Advent 9 burst through the snow and pinned his enemy against the tallest pillar, pressing his shoulders to the bricks.

"All right," the doctor said. "You've beaten me again. Should've known better than to cross you. Sure learned my lesson. From now on I'll dedicate my life to building hospitals."

Advent 9 gasped. "Holy crap. Really?"

The doctor blinked. "No," he spat. "Sheesh. I can't imagine how many brain tumors you got in there, boy, but Asclepius himself couldn't heal you."

The hero tightened his grip. "I'm not stupid."

"Maybe. But you're not smart enough to realize where you're standing."

"Huh?"

“Look behind you.”

Advent 9's eyes didn't move. Of course the doctor wanted him to look away. It was the oldest trick in history. Freeing one hand, the hero readied a punch.

*Thump.*

“Gah,” the doctor cried out.

But Advent 9 hadn't moved. His raised knuckles remained in the air, quivering.

*Thump.*

It came from above and behind him, loud *and* quiet, as if made with great force but far away. It sounded dangerous.

Dr. Antiworld craned his neck, peering around Advent 9's head. “That's a good boy,” he muttered.

Advent 9 followed the doctor's gaze, keeping one hand on his prisoner. He hadn't noticed it before, but behind him was pure darkness, a giant black bubble hovering above a sinister machine, as if the starless night had found its way indoors.

Inside was a person, struggling and flailing against everything surrounding him.

*Thump.* A hand crashed against the inside of the bubble-like sphere.

*Thump.* It clawed the surface aimlessly.

*Thump.* It rubbed its eyes, and the mouth quivered before opening in a silent roar.

*Thump.*

Four Hummingbirds gathered around the bubble, curious, prodding it with their snouts.

*Thump.*

They scattered in alarm like pond fish in a rainstorm.

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

**THUMP.**

Advent 9 reeled toward the doctor, pointing at the figure in darkness. "What is that?"

The doctor smiled. He brought his mouth to Advent 9's ear. "That," he whispered, "is you."



### 3

## SOMETHING OUT OF A COMIC BOOK

**R**OUGH CORNERS BIT into Dr. Antiworld's shoulder. The boy had him pinned against the column, close enough so the doctor could read the "A9" monogram stitched on Advent 9's shoulder—the one identifying emblem on his uniform, normally hidden by the hero's blue mantle.

The boy growled, "That thing isn't me."

The doctor shrugged. "Your confusion is understandable. Science teaches us one person cannot be in two places. Still, it's you in there." He nodded toward the Biconcave.

"Explain."

As always, the boy *sounded* as if he were speaking to the doctor, but even barking threats his gaze was elsewhere: the ceiling, the floor, or the farthest wall. And when, by pure accident, those lenses met the doctor's eyes, they jerked away. Advent 9 refused to treat him as an equal. He had no manners.



"He is what you are," the doctor said. "He is also what you are not."

He? Yes. The person in the Biconcave had fingers now, and short hair unfurling in the sphere's black wind. With a mouth and nose and ears, he was more than an abstract figure. "He's a different version of the same person."

The boy squinted. "He's a clone."

"No, another you."

"You can't beat one of me. Why would you want to fight two?"

"Oh, I won't be fighting either of you. That's the brilliant part."

A shove knocked Dr. Antiworld into the bricks. Advent 9 was holding back, but the blow made the doctor's neck sing with pain.

"Start making sense," the boy demanded.

"Heh. Well, since you asked so nicely." The doctor blinked until stars stopped swimming through his eyes. "The person in there is a perfect copy of yourself, down to his atomic structure. He looks like you and has your three powers, but his disposition and personality are the reverse of yours. He hates you and opposes all you protect. No two people in history have been more incompatible or more evenly matched."

"You're going to make us fight?"

"No, I'm going to *watch* you fight."

"Then what?" the boy asked, crushing Dr. Antiworld's collar.

He shrugged. "Then you kill each other. Then I go have breakfast. I fail to see the complication."

He gasped as Advent 9 unhandled him. The boy pointed at the sphere. "Stop this."

"I can't. I'm not the one *doing* it." He smoothed his crumpled bowtie. "You should have stayed away, boy. If you hadn't come here, he couldn't have crossed over. Now it's too late."

Advent 9 shook his head. "I won't let it happen." He walked away, and the doctor chuckled. The plan had worked, the trap was sprung. Now all the boy could do was squirm on the hook.

The more Dr. Antiworld tried to compose himself, the more he lost it, laughing with a screeching timbre. He knew he looked insane, but his insides burned with happiness. He couldn't hold it in.

Standing under the Biconcave, the boy raised a fist. Did he think he could punch it to death?

But the boy hesitated. He stared at the creature trapped in the globe. The whites of its eyes appeared, staring from the black clouds, and flesh-tones of his skin peeked through. Was compassion or curiosity staying Advent 9's hand? Either way, it was hilarious.

Getting a handle on his mirth, Dr. Antiworld said, "There's something else you should know about him, boy. The world he comes from is incomprehensible, but I learned one thing. His name is Trancedragon."

Lightning flashed in the Biconcave. The silhouette of a thrashing young man cut through the clouds. The once-perfect sphere rippled as if it were being twisted, appearing alive as it died.

The bubble burst, the darkness dissolved, and a skinny boy fell out, pale and naked.

Advent 9 caught him, then dropped him immediately. He retreated a step, eyebrows rising from behind his mask.

The doctor noticed the resemblance. He'd never seen Advent 9's entire face, but the hero's reaction left no doubt this boy was his exact twin. Like many teen boys, he was all elbows and knees, with fingers too long for his hands, and hands too big for the rest of him.

Slapping those paws on the floor, he rose and peered around, eyes shining in the construction lamps. He saw the doctor. He saw Advent 9. He searched the lobby, tight-lipped, whimpering.

Then screamed like an animal.

Delightful. Dr. Antiworld could not have been more pleased. Without speaking a word, Trancedragon already lived up to the doctor's hopes. It was written on the naked boy's face. The rage. The sadness. The fear. Long tears rolled as he howled.

It was an expression Advent 9 could never have imitated. The hero remained silent, stoic—a bit shaken but still his cold self as he watched such agony.

Part of the doctor, the rational part that nagged him into saving his own skin, said now was the time to use his vanishing ray. Both boys were so distracted they wouldn't notice him sneaking away from a fight too dangerous to watch up close. Better to run. It would be smart.

It would not, however, be scientific. The experiment wasn't finished. Only when hero and dragon died together would he know his hypothesis had been correct. He had to stay to observe.

Trancedragon trembled in his bare hide. Reaching out, he caught Advent 9 by the wrist.

“Off!” the hero barked, shaking himself free.

The dragon gaped. Shivering, he tried again, approaching his brother with throaty, pleading noises.

Advent 9 threw himself out of arm’s reach. “Stay away.”

Holy Hygeia, it was happening so fast. After one gesture, Advent 9 hated his twin. And Trancedragon, naked and spurned by the one he reached for shook, snarled, and lunged, throwing a wilting punch that wouldn’t have meant much coming from an ordinary boy.

It hit Advent 9 in the chest and sent him flying through piles of scrap. He skidded to a stop near the entrance and scrambled to keep his feet, his mask torn.

The dragon charged, mad enough to kill. The doctor followed, ducking behind piles of junk to keep from being noticed. The melee was playing out as he had predicted. How humbling to see months of calculations proven all at once. Not even God could have executed a plan with such scientific precision. The power of creation belonged now to Dr. Felix Antiworld. Reshaping the world would be a small matter after what he’d accomplished tonight.

He couldn’t keep from cackling as sweat and tears ran down his face. If the boys noticed, they didn’t show it. They were well on their way to double homicide.

Trancedragon kept landing blows on Advent 9, and the hero snuck in some lucky punches against his twin. Mostly, they *Fuzzed* to avoid each other’s attacks. Neither gained ground.

As the doctor drew closer he wondered if they’d both die

of exhaustion. His theory allowed such an outcome. But the odds favored a symmetric strike killing both. That was important. Neither could come out alive. No mess to clean up. No loose ends.

*Pay attention, Felix*, he chided himself. *You need to remember this moment so future scientists can study it.* He cursed himself for not bringing a video camera.

One well-placed kick sent the fighters flying apart. Their heels ground to a halt twenty feet from each other. The naked one convulsed with rage, snarling.

Advent 9 stared, his gaze filled with intensity. But intensity of what? Not anger or fear or anything recognizable. Despite his change of expression and posture, he remained unreadable. Dr. Antiworld wondered if the boy ever felt anything.

Trancedragon found the freeway girder Advent 9 had dropped, embedded in the brick at his feet. Reaching, the dragon clutched the beam . . .

. . . and lifted it with one hand.

The doctor stopped laughing.

The jolt from gladness to terror sucked the wind out of him. It happened too quick for him to piece together what he was seeing. He clutched his chest, only understanding something terrible had happened.

The dragon swung his weapon, carving a rut in the floor as long as the building. Advent 9 dodged, but the dragon swung a second time. He handled the girder like a baseball bat, knocking out pillars like stacks of tissue boxes. The structure creaked and rumbled. Rafters and roofing landed on scrap metal in a downpour of orange dust.

Dr. Antiworld watched the girder fly through the space

where Advent 9's head had been two heartbeats ago. The concrete sword fell again and again, ringing like a cannon barrage through the station.

No, this wasn't possible. Advent 9 was not strong enough to swing the beam like a toy, so Trancedragon shouldn't be able to. The doctor had used the most sophisticated methods to predict tonight's outcome. He'd triple-checked his work and considered every contingency. So how was this happening?

A few more hits and the beam broke in two pieces, rebar skeleton poking out. Bitterness disfigured the dragon's face. The hero squatted, gripping his knees. He couldn't keep taking such punishment.

The doctor slapped his mouth. Trancedragon was about to *win*. He was stronger than Advent 9 and could kill him without being killed. After that . . .

"Oh shit."

Trancedragon raised a hand, palm facing his enemy. Was the doctor imagining it or was the room getting hotter? Squinting, he saw lines forming in the air around the dragon.

It was red lightning, crawling up Trancedragon's body like undulating snakes. The room cooked where he stood. In his palm appeared a swirl of glowing plasma.

It erupted into a stream of heat and light, straight as a laser.  
*Fuzz.*

Advent 9 blurred around the blast. It soared to the far end of the train station, slamming the wall. When it vanished, an entire corner of the building had been erased.

The station's roof *veered*. More rafters fell, chiming like

bells as they struck the floor and bringing half the station down with them. The doctor shielded his head.

That blast had been what astronomers call a solar flare. Trancedragon had created one indoors. It was scientifically impossible, not like anything found in the real world.

It was more like something out of a comic book.

ADVENT 9 CRAWLED FROM the wreckage pouring into the station. He'd never wanted to know what burning bricks smelled like, but he'd never forget the sting in his sinuses. He could see the city through the hole in the train station's wall. If he could've moved, he'd have run. But his breath rasped out of him now, too spent to fly away.

The Hummingbirds had been frightened off, escaping through cracks in the wall. At any other time, he would have enjoyed their absence. But without their extra eyes, blind spots had appeared all around him.

His own face peered at him from across the room. How was that possible? He'd heard, once, that even identical twins have subtle differences.

Well, this was *not* his identical twin. Nothing was hidden. Advent 9 saw every mole, every hair, and every muscle. They were *perfect* duplicates. As his own legs got rigid enough to support him, he shambled toward the dragon.

"Uh . . ." moaned the other Advent 9. "Neh. Huhr. Mmn." He hugged himself, looking sick as threads of drool spilled out of him. "Wh . . . what did you do to me?"

The hero jumped. He'd never imagined his own voice could be so disturbing.

“Hnn. Nnh. No.” The dragon’s head snapped. Lashing one claw, he threw a chunk of brick at his twin.

Advent 9 ducked in time to save his face, but the laces on the back of his head got shredded. Off came the mask. The hero tried to cover his face with his arms, but it was too late.

The other Advent 9 pointed, eyes shaking. “Ga-aa-aa-ah!”  
*Krackow.*

The dragon blurred across the lobby, reappearing before Advent 9 to kick him in the jaw. The hero snapped backward.

*Krackow.*

Another kick slammed him from behind, throwing him forward.

*Krackow. Krackow. Krackow.*

With every blow, welts blossomed up and down Advent 9’s body. Each hit reminded him of the time he’d caught a wrecking ball in mid-swing. Trancedragon bum-rushed the hero from every side, giving him no chance to fight back or even hit the ground.

It ended with his throat in the dragon’s clutches, his body hanging like an empty wind-sock. The copy wept, eyes puffy.

After fighting his hardest, Advent 9 had still lost. Helpless to do anything else, he chuckled through the chokehold. And he didn’t care if it was *inappropriate*. This moment was too insane to contemplate. He gagged on his laughter.

Trancedragon drove a thumb into the hero’s neck, pinching it tighter. Brown clouds surrounded Advent 9’s vision.

“Stop!”

Trancedragon swiveled toward the voice, bringing Advent 9 around to see the doctor standing there, holding a strange white gun.



"This," the doctor began, "is . . . uh . . ." he scratched his moustache a moment, staring at the device. "It's a death ray, the most dangerous weapon in existence. Behold." He pointed the gun. It fired a yellow pulse at a cracked refrigerator, which vanished.

Advent 9 couldn't believe it. How long had the doctor had such a weapon? Why hadn't he used it until now?

"It can kill anything," the doctor said. "You put the boy down right now, then leave. You hear me?" He snarled at his creation.

*Krackow.*

The grip around Advent 9's neck disappeared. He crumpled as his twin rammed the doctor at blurring speed and knocked the gun from the old man's hands. The doctor wailed but wrapped both arms around Trancedragon's bicep.

Advent 9 stood and lumbered toward them to seize the enemy's other arm.

The moment Advent 9 grabbed his double, he saw the doctor staring at him. His moustache trembled on a bloodless face. This was the first time they'd ever been fighting the same thing. The strangeness of the moment made it linger.

Advent 9 had never been good at reading people's expressions, but he understood the doctor had not planned this. And Advent 9 had as much right to be frightened. The danger was real for both of them.

Trancedragon threw them both to the ground. The impact sent pain snaking up Advent 9's tailbone, sizzling his spine.

The dragon roared. New rings of red lightning coursed up his body with his palm aimed at the old man. But Dr.

Antiworld couldn't *Fuzz*, and Advent 9 couldn't reach him in time. The coming blast would end his life.

The hand shook there for a moment, pointed right between the doctor's eyes. Advent 9 struggled to his elbows in time to see the light surge . . .

. . . and Trancedragon slide it to the left.

A braided column of red light shot from the enemy into the bare floor between the hero and doctor. Under his hands and feet, Advent 9 felt it burrowing through brick and bedrock, a stake rammed into the planet. The flash left a six-foot-wide hole in the train station. As soon as the light faded, the edges began crumbling into the pit.

"Oh, no," the doctor muttered. "No, no, no." He scrambled from the yawning mouth, but it grew too fast, from a crevice to a chasm, bricks flowing over the edge like a waterfall. "Oh blessed Panacea, please, *no!*"

He vanished into the deep.

The counterfeit leaped back, escaping the growing pit. Advent 9 grasped for any kind of hold but felt the bricks break beneath his hands, the liquid ground dropping him to where the doctor had gone.

Too weak to run, he glanced at the monster who had beaten him, standing naked on the grave he'd dug for his brother.

The dragon reached out. "Wait," he called, teary eyed. "Don't go."

But Advent 9 was already falling. The world turned sideways and he tumbled down the tunnel. The light above shrank to a pinpoint and vanished.

