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ALIX GRAVES IN MIRACLE WORLD

Thin pink line. Wider. Dividing the horizon from itself, ready to suggest new possibilities in Piro's field of vision. He resisted the urge, declined to acknowledge the expanded percept capability, even for his own edification. He would not be distracted.

Not that anything about this had been easy. That, he would readily concede. Distractions, technical and otherwise, had nearly carried him away. Nothing in his wide experience had prepared him for the day when his mother would finally die.

Now how would he get home?

Of course there would come no reply from his companion of so many years. The woman was dead. Unresponsive. And now he would have to find his own way. It had been much the same when his father had abandoned him to her care in the first place. What had he been thinking? What was Piro supposed to do with all this pink?

Whining about it now was not going to change anything. Dead was dead. Pink was pink. At least where her kind were concerned. It was actually rather remarkable that she had survived as long as she did, up there in the Earth's atmosphere. In this economy.

This soliloquy was going nowhere.

Stop.

Retrace.

Alix retraced his steps. He'd left the laundry and wandered into reception. He'd taken the stairs all the way down to the first floor. Everyone was gone. Half of the building was gone. What was going on?

He was going to have to figure it out on his own.

Just how he liked it.

He liked to feel he was earning his money. While it was true most of his clients could barely articulate what they wanted from him, he made it a point of pride to secure their approval of his work.

This approach also cut down on the lawsuits.

Standing in the rubble of the Chrysler Building, Alix was no longer sure what he was doing. Had the client even survived?

Tom spotted Alix, still standing there, obviously not knowing what to do. He walked over and said hi.

"Alix... my main...number one... guy..."

"I don't know what you want me to do here, anymore. The building's gone. What's left to surveil?"

"I'm not sure I like your attitude."

"..."

"Hey, don't they say the customer is always right?"

Alix shrugged it off. But Tom was right.

They'd think of something together.

Five years later. Not much had changed. Some of the rubble had been cleared away. The

Actron Team was now based primarily out of New San Francisco. Alix maintained his mostly silent vigil at the scene of the crime.

Most days were pretty slow.

Aside from the occasional tweet he rarely heard from his employers. He was starting to think he should look for other work.

That's when he heard from their mom.

"I heard you were dead."

"I get that a lot."

Alix slowly pieced it all together. She'd taken a voluntary leave of absence. She just hadn't told anyone she was going. Five years out of the game. Alix wondered if she could really pick it all up again, just like that. He had to admit it seemed unlikely.

The boys might have something to say about all this.

Well, it was none of his business.

"You what," Tom said, instead of asking.

"I took a leave of absence."

"We thought you were dead."

"I might as well have been," was all she would say.

"I think we all need a bit of time to process this," Piro suggested. Clearly the only level head in the room.

"I don't care what anyone says, I need to get reimbursed for travel expenses."

Piro shook his head and Tom left the room.

"Mom, he's right. Our budget was thrown completely out of whack. First Plinth, then you. We didn't know what to do."

The RAGNAROK had half a mind to take off again. This time for good.

Alix knew his services were costing Actron, Inc. more than they could possibly hope to recoup from his results. He wondered how much longer it could go on. In his spare time he began to work on his resume.

One day while perusing the job listings he came upon an operation out of New San Francisco that required a new chief of security. He disliked this sort of gig, precisely because it traded a regular paycheck for an increase in daily responsibilities. He decided to check it out anyway.

It turned out the fledgling startup was yet another arm of Actron, Inc. Alix resigned himself to his fate as an employee of the world's biggest purveyor of nothing.

It was soon after this that his powers manifested themselves for the first time.

The RAGNAROK gradually pulled herself back from the brink. There was no profit in taking herself out of the game again. Better to make them pay for it. Better to keep them guessing. if they really wanted her out of the way, well, they knew where to find her. She would wait for them to come and say it to her face.

Piro and Tom had no such intentions. They had a constant requirement for cheap transportation, and her services cost them nothing at all.

They couldn't understand what her problem was. She'd just come off a five year vacation and here she was already complaining.

For her part, the RAGNAROK agreed to resume her duties, gratis. She always had trouble saying no to her son.

Tom figured it was about time things got back to normal around here.

For Alix, a job was a job. He harbored no illusions that what he did at work had any real impact on the outside world (his early career as a corporate assassin notwithstanding). But this damned Actron, Inc. had got their greasy tentacles into everything. It was beginning to seem like there was no way out.

He discharged an energy bolt from the tip of his right index finger, exploding, and very nearly disintegrating a nearby electric pole. The entire city block was immediately plunged into darkness. So, here, too, even his anger at the Actron Team garnered repercussions beyond its immediate context.

If there was a way out of this he just couldn't see it.

The burst of energy from Alix's finger-blast lit up the RAGNAROK's sensor package.

A possible new recruit for the Actron Team proper.

She alerted the boys.

THE END