

The Honorable

Biosphere

Issue #2: Accidental Genesis

Part Two

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Inside Paragon University, the apex of knowledge throughout the entire city, a hand reached across an expensive desk. It belonged to the Dean of Students at the Steel Canyon campus, an important man to his staff and city. Some months ago had begun Aaron's interest in a teaching job. He had fulfilled all the expectations the Dean ever had of any person applying for the job, and so the time finally came for his induction. Unfortunately it wouldn't be happening anytime soon. "You start next semester!" the Dean said as he shook Aaron's hand with an assertive grip. He could tell the Dean was enthusiastic about him to begin teaching, but it would have to wait. Aaron stood up from his chair with the man's hand still in his grasp. With a final shake and a smile he nodded to the man, "Thank you. I'll keep in touch."

Moments later, he was walking in the parking lot of the school, looking around at the buildings, when his mind raced back and forth as he remembered the disaster: the failure of the project and the coma Allison was put into. He felt responsible for it, and had been dealing with it for a few months now, but it still didn't feel right. Aaron knew you can't live in the past, but something inside him from that time remained, as present as the heart beating in his chest. Something that told him things wouldn't be the same. Despite this, he took up an interest in seeking a job. Lucky for him, an opportunity at Paragon University was just what he was looking for.

Just as he reached the door to his car, his phone began to ring. His hand, which was just stretched out for the handle, now reached down into his pocket and pulled out the cell phone. As soon as he brought it to his ear, it was met with a cacophony. His face scrunched up with disgust at first, the sound of a riot filling his ear. "Hello?!" he had to yell over the sound.

A woman's voice on the other line rang out, "Dr. Nellis! Please, you have to help me!" She was frantic, and kept repeating her cry for help. One would think this was a nine-one-one call.

Even though she obviously couldn't see him, Aaron brought his other hand up to the phone and motioned it as if he was trying to calm her down. "Relax. You need to calm down." It took two whole minutes before the excess noise stopped.

"This is Julia. I'm Mrs. Alfonse." There was some silence on Aaron's end.

"Edward's wife?"

She again asked for his help, mentioning that Dr. Alfonse was somehow in trouble. At the moment he wasn't prepared to deal with it over the phone, and thought perhaps a meeting in person could sort out the problem. After some time they came to an agreement to meet face-to-face and Aaron said his goodbye, shutting the phone off. He

opened the door and sat in the driver's seat, taking a moment to wipe his face, with the feeling of a long day ahead of him.

He took out his keys and started up the car, one hand on the wheel and the other on the shifter. The vehicle buzzed to life and Aaron was soon on the road. Driving in Paragon City, as most people know, isn't the most pleasant activity. First of all is the traffic. Second, it's the super heroes. Even though they're there to protect the city, they get in the way of cars all the time. Whether it's a super-speeder zooming through the lanes, or a jumper leaping across the roads, just driving in Paragon is a hazard. Some heroes even deliberately run in traffic to see if they can leap on top of or over cars.

Fortunately, Aaron encountered no problems as he made his way to El Super Mexicano. For the price it was a good place to eat, especially for a guy who is just trying to get by in the city till he finds a job. The staff was nice and offered a good selection of what seemed like Mexican dishes, though the famous Fuerte Bowl was pushing the image a bit. It was also the place he had chosen to meet Julia, and so he pulled into the parking lot.

In the next moments he exited his car and walked inside. The cling of a doorbell signaled his entrance into the restaurant. He took a moment to look at the people behind the counter. Though it was like most fast food places, with booths and a soft drink dispenser off to the side, there was an atmosphere about it that he enjoyed. Maybe it was the whole experience of being in Paragon. He could feel just how different the city was, even in a fast food joint.

Aaron approached the woman behind the cash register to order his food. She was no older than eighteen, with noticeably bronzed skin. With dark make-up around her eyes, she raised them from counting five-dollar bills and simply stared. He returned her gaze, not saying a word. After a time she cocked her eyebrow as if annoyed and turned her lips to the side in a dismissive expression, "Can I get you something?"

He realized she was waiting for him to make his order, "Oh!" he reached into his coat pocket to pull out his wallet, looking up at the menu at the same time. He didn't want anything too filling, just a meal to hold him over. Analyzing it with his mouth shut and eyes narrowed he turned his attention back to the girl, "A number four please."

She tapped the screen and pursed her lips out, "Kay. Will that be for here or to go?"

"Here, please." Aaron opened up the sides of his wallet as he waited for her to tell him the amount owed. The flash of green numbers on the register showed the value of his meal, and he quickly exchanged the bills with the girl. She handed him a paper cup, motioning to the beverage dispenser on the side. He walked up to it, twirled the cup in his hand and then held it out to push on the tab for ice. As the cubes of frozen water dropped into his drink, he couldn't help but think of their composition.

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In Aaron's mind flew images and ideas about science and everything else. Whenever he wanted to think about something, it was as if he were going to a movie theater. Inside his head he could generate images, remember exact documents, and apply research. As he watched the ice falling, he daydreamed. He thought about the oxygen and the hydrogen in water, and the hydrogen bonds between them. He also thought about the look of the molecule itself, like a Mickey Mouse hat. Pulling his cup away from the tab, he couldn't help but smile at the thought; he liked quizzing himself.

The shout of what seemed like the manager made him turn his head in the direction of the counter once again. The man yelled out his order, and after filling his cup with Iced Tea, he walked over and seized the bag. For a brief moment he was able to see the look on the manager's face. It was one of distress and anger. Aaron backed up slightly, with the backwards motion of one foot. He didn't like attitudes like that, and it naturally made him back away.

He took a seat in one of the booths by the window, waiting for Julia to find her way to the place. Carefully unwrapping the top of the brown bag he took out his taco and french fries. Unaware of the clang of the bell indicating that a person had entered the restaurant and then had proceeded to walk over by his booth, he munched on the end of the taco. His eyes were closed as he could only momentarily hear the crunch of his chews. The stranger sat across from him and fixed her hair, she seemed uneasy and anxious. Aaron opened his eyes and was caught off-guard at seeing Julia in the seat opposite his.

Aaron ate what remained of the taco as he exclaimed, "Julia, nice to see you." He smiled as he used his shirt sleeve to wipe the side of his mouth.

"Thank you, Doctor." She pushed a strand of hair away from her face, "There's something wrong with Ed." She looked down at the table in worry. Her eyes widened as she explained, "He hasn't been home in a week, and nobody knows where he is." The area under her eyes turned red, "When I try to file a missing person's report, the police tell me his work verifies he's there." She looked up at Aaron's face with a tear on the side of her eye, but quickly wiped it away. "I don't have anybody else to turn to. You were friends with him, Dr. Nellis. Maybe you can find him."

He was silent as he listened to her. A serious expression remained on his face, listening to her sorrow. Before him was a challenge, to discover what happened to Edward. He considered the options, though it was obvious which choice he would make. The pain she expressed influenced his drive to take on the mission, "Sure thing, Julia. I'll get right on it."

She sparked back to life for a brief moment. The color of her hair shined brighter in the light from the window. The sadness had manifested into hope, the hope that Aaron could find out what happened to her missing husband. There they sat and talked for a

while longer as he ate. With a goodbye and another walk to his car, Aaron set out on his task.

There's a feeling people tend to experience when revisiting places of tragedy. This is what Aaron felt as he drove into the parking lot of the Sai Labs building, the same one where he had worked on Project Sphere. Montgomery and Edward still worked there, putting their brain power behind other scientific endeavors. Aaron told the secretary that he had an appointment to see Montgomery, one he had set up the next day after speaking with Mrs. Alfonse. She directed him to have a seat while he waited.

An hour passed and still he wasn't invited into the man's office. The secretary spoke from her desk, "Mr. Montgomery isn't in today. He won't be able to see you." Frustration built inside of him until finally he stood up. His eyes burned with annoyance and his lips were frozen in a scowl. Aaron walked past the secretary and pushed open the doors to Montgomery's room. Inside he found the old man playing a game of golf on his large plasma television.

"Dr. Nellis!" Montgomery was in surprise as he saw Aaron boldly burst in.

The guest stood there for a moment, a small portion of hair draped his forehead. "Your secretary told me you were out today."

Montgomery was quick to answer. He dropped his putter on the floor and walked off the simulated grass. "Oh, my apologies. Tha' secretary is new and ain't know a thing of hospitality, my boy. She musta' been confused." As he approached Aaron and patted him on the shoulder he looked at the woman who had rushed to the doors. She looked scared as Montgomery gave her an irritated glare. Wrinkles formed in his head as the anger became visible, brown eyes consumed in hatred. After a moment's pause, she turned and quickly regressed to her desk as Montgomery welcomed Aaron into his office.

"Please, have a seat." Montgomery sauntered around his desk and sat down in his brick-red leather chair, watching as Aaron heeded his advice and sat in the chair across from him. "What can I be doin' for you today?" He locked his hands together and tried to appear as friendly as possible. Though this was all an act, and he didn't want Aaron to catch on to the way he was really feeling.

Aaron looked directly into Montgomery's eyes. "I need to speak with Edward. His wife is worried about him. She mentions that he hasn't been home in days, but that his work reports he's present. You know anything about this?"

Montgomery's visage quickly began to decay with Aaron's words. Each mention of Edward or his wife made him twitch. His bald head began to shine slightly with sweat. A cold shiver soon overcame the old man as he listened. Finally he mustered up a response. "Don't you worry nothing about that. Edward an' his wife are just having some marriage problems."

Aaron sat in the chair opposite of Montgomery, simply staring at him when the Southerner answered him. He couldn't simply accept that as an answer. Whisking away the strand of hair from his forehead, he puzzled, "...No, that can't be the reason. She's too worried about him. Where is Edward now? Can I speak with him?"

The old man sunk a little deeper into his seat as if he was expecting it to swallow him up. "He's out."

It's hard to tell half the time when people are lying or telling the truth. Only with Montgomery was it obvious. Aaron stood up from his chair, his voice rising as his eyebrows turned slightly inward, an expression of his frustration. "I don't believe you for a nanosecond, Montgomery. Now tell me, where is Edward? I'm tired of empty answers."

Montgomery's hand reached under the desk, placing a stubby finger on top of a button hidden under the wood. "I think it's right time you left, Dr. Nellis." Aaron was about to reject as two taller men in suits entered the room. They both wore sunglasses and had strikingly similar body builds. Perhaps they were twins. Each had a smile on his face, demonstrating clearly that these men both loved their job.

As they hoisted Aaron up by his arms they ruffed with him, throwing him lightly to the left or the right. Being security guards built up a superiority complex in the men. Montgomery played on this as he walked around his desk once again, flicking a finger in front of his face. "Respectable scientist 'ey? I don't know any respectable scientist that starts trouble in a man's office." He turned his head slightly, "Tha's not a doctor, tha's a troublemaker..." He stopped speaking for a brief moment, and in a dramatic pause he stared at Aaron's face. With stress on the sound, he issued his final word, "Boy."

He continued speaking to Aaron like this as they exited the office, walked down the hallway and outside to the parking lot. Each step was controlled and made difficult by the throws and tosses of the security guards. Aaron sunk his head down; he was annoyed at his current situation. His planning was to have gotten some information to give to Mrs. Alfonse., but now he was being kicked out of the building. As the group made their way across the blacktop a scream pierced the air.

It wasn't like anything Aaron had ever heard before. Not a wolf's howl, a lion's roar, or any other animal. It cut into his fears instantly; he couldn't imagine what kind of beast made that sound. He wasn't alone in this experience of terror—the security that was holding him loosened their grips instantly, and Montgomery's face sank into a jaw drop. He was frozen for a moment, and a drip of sweat ran down his temple.

Montgomery made a dash for the doors, yelling all the way, "Dear God it's back!" he shut them forcefully as he ran into the building. The security followed but were locked outside of the building. They banged on the doors in futile protest. Aaron was left alone in the middle of the parking lot, without any idea of what was going on. Another scream

rang out, except this time it was closer. The two men in suits looked at each other in fear, and went into a back-to-back formation, walking away from the door and turning with each other.

Suddenly one of those men made a dash. He ran across the lot to a black four door car, opening the driver seat in an attempt to escape the scene. Though his eyes were hidden behind sunglasses, the hopelessness was present in his movements. He fumbled and almost fell from running so fast, but it wasn't enough.

A large thud shook the ground as the creature landed beside the security guard's car. It turned up chunks of blacktop as its claws dug into the ground. Its shoulders were wide, and its red skin was cracked. Spikes adorned its body in multiple places. An assortment of three stubbed ones rested on each shoulder, while its hands were each lined with several. On its forehead rested a row of seven, and across its body a chainmail of protruding points. The skin around the spikes was softer, and a thin layer was visible on the brim of the openings.

The spikes on its body unsheathed out of its skin like multiple swords. Scrunched up holes of skin along its body stretched and allowed the passage of the brutal weapons. Its entire body was like a compact weapon, storing the hidden spikes until the command to destroy came across its brain. With a roar more of the spines stuck out of its frame, from its hand, chest, and back. Now fully dressed in its armored hide, the monster looked down at the guard.

Slightly larger than the height of the guard, it leered over him with orange spikes fully exposed. The monster picked up the man before him with one hand. The nails stabbed into the guard's sides, and he threw his hands down on the fingers of the creature to try and stop him.

All the while Aaron and the other guard watched this. Aaron's eyes widened in shock, and he was unable to do much besides watch. A spike shot out from the monster's other hand, and he thrust it into the man's back. Blood soon started to seep out the suit and drip down the monster's arm. It was certain the man was dead, and the creature plopped him on the ground like a useless doll.

That was the first time Aaron had ever seen a human being die before his eyes. He could never have imagined the feeling it would bring. It was something unbelievable to him, the sight of another person losing consciousness, never to wake again. His mouth opened wider as his glasses fogged up more. The monster quickly dashed across the parking lot to treat the other guard in a similar fashion. Aaron was at a loss for words.

With the other man the creature had stabbed him through the eye. The spike on its hand easily broke into his skull, damaging his brain to the point of death. It let the man's head drop off its spike, and the body of the guard fell on its side, blood dripping down his cheek. There was sadness to his face, the sanguine running down it like a final tear. The

creature remained hunched over, breathing heavy as if it had completed a hunt. Aaron stood unsure of what to do.

It's natural in both animals and human beings alike to respond either flight or fight in situations such as this. Aaron was in no way a fighter, not in any sense of the word. Even as a child he had never been in a fight, or as he became a teenager. The feeling rose in him despite this, and he recognized it. He looked around on the sidewalk to see people gasping. Women clutched their mouths in horror, and men stared blankly at the murders. He was frozen before the sight of the creature, unable to move or do much of anything.

It howled again in the air as it played with the head of the dead security guard. It slashed his face scarring it with the spikes on its knuckles. The eyes of the beast dilated with the signal of thought, and it turned quickly to see Aaron standing in the parking lot. An instinct to kill overcame the creature once again, and it ran for him. He could feel the heavy pounding of its steps in the vibration of the pavement as it darted towards him, an overwhelming fear making the hairs on his neck stand up.

Soon it was in front of him, lashing its hand out for his chest, the spike in the palm of the creature ready to strike at Aaron's heart. With only seconds to act, Aaron threw up his arms to protect himself, but it was a moment too late, and the hand found its way through. He shut his eyes and locked his teeth together tightly. The force from the creature pushed him backwards, but his stubborn feet kept him upright. The blacktop was turned up by the trail of footprints.

Inside Aaron's mind was silence; he wasn't sure if he was alive or dead. Feeling his heartbeat he realized that he had not passed on, and opened his eyes to find his shirt ripped open. The spike had torn through it, but stopped at his skin. He could feel an uncomfortable pressure, not like a pain, but rather a minor annoyance. He stood there in awe and turned his attention to the creature, who also was surprised at his survival. Breaking the gaze, Aaron threw a fist at the monster's face, hitting its jaw dead on and throwing it back a few feet. A crack resonated in the air and Aaron rubbed his fist. It took him a moment to realize what he had done.

He saw that the monster's attacks did little to him, and that he had just punched it away from him. A light of pleased confidence shined its way in his mind, any threat of danger now gone. Aaron smiled turning up the sides of his lips; standing before the creature. The monster itself was caught off guard by his apparent strength, touching its face in pain. He walked over to it and proceeded with another punch, hitting it in the stomach and arching its back. Slight agony was in his hand again, but it left just as soon as it came. The motion of his arm pumped the creature away again, but in response it leapt at him. The two locked their hands in a grip, and the creature roared in his face.

Putrid spit flew out and splattered across Aaron's forehead, forcing his eyes to squint slightly. The hideous mouth of the monster made him turn his head away from the beast, letting his guard down for a moment.

The creature pushed forward, attempting to shove him to the ground, but Aaron picked up on this and quickly returned to action. He backed up and then suddenly stepped to the left, unlocking his hands from the monster's. The force from the creature's own body propelled it forward, and for a moment it was defenseless. Aaron used this moment to clench his right hand tight. The muscles in his arm flexed as the knuckles on his hand showed prominently. Putting as much energy behind it as he could muster, Aaron threw a punch that clocked the monster in the temple.

The sound that ripped through the air was like thunder, and the creature's body slammed to the ground. The side of its head hit the blacktop and made a dent, allowing a chunk of its top spike to break off. Aaron's arm felt like it had just snapped, and instinctually he held it close to his body and screamed. There was silence as Aaron winched and held his arm tight, and the monster stirred slightly as it pushed up on its feet. It was hurt and as soon as it was on both legs, it proceeded to dart away, leaving Aaron standing there with his arm against his waist.

Aaron wondered in his mind what had happened. The only obvious assessment was that he had done something terrible to his arm. It throbbed and ached with pain, blood pulsing through the veins he could feel against his fingers. Before leaving the site he looked down at the chipped spike. Droplets of strange liquid surrounded it, and he noticed them as he reached down to pick it up. Using his other hand he snatched the souvenir of the battle up and placed it in his pocket, making his way to the yellow line as he walked down the sidewalk.

He didn't notice the citizens around him, lost in his own world. Aaron was blind to their worried expressions and fearful faces, caught up only in his thoughts. They kept repeating the same message, like an eerie but solid truth. He had fought and defeated a monster, something that he would have imagined impossible. He didn't know the reasons why, but the fact remained.

A while later, and now he was inside one of the many labs in Steel Canyon's University. Around him were many machines, but two exclusively worked tirelessly. One was processing an X-ray he had taken just moments ago, while the other analyzed the spike he had taken. The first rang out in the air with the sound of completion, drawing his attention to amble over and pick up the picture. He hung it inside a light up display on the wall and saw the results of the photo. Small hairline fractures populated his entire arm, but they were nowhere near serious. As he was thinking on the X-ray, the other machine dinged. A roll of paper curled outside a flap on the end, prompting Aaron to snatch it off. The results made his eyes widen with surprise. Hurriedly, he paced over to the phone and grabbed it, dialing the number for Mrs. Alfonse.

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“Hello, Julia?” He waited for her to return his words.

“Dr. Nellis? Yes?” Her voice was shrilled, as if she was suspecting bad news at any moment.

“I think I know what happened to Edward.”

To be continued.