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*This story is excerpted from the book, **The Masques Chronicles vol 2: The Bronze Age to the Modern Age** by **D.K. Latta** – if you enjoy it, please consider buying the complete book from Amazon. The two volume collection asks “what if?” there had been a Canadian comic book publisher like Marvel or DC, spanning the decades from the 1940s to today, and imagines the different stories and characters that might have been.*

This story is a bit atypical in that it is explicitly meant to be evocative of a particular cliché. That is, in addition to being a mystery-thriller, it’s an attempt to riff on the themed-manhunter archetype epitomized by Batman (obviously) as well as Moon Knight, Night Owl, Green Arrow (in the 1940s) and others. I had fun playing around with the dinosaur trope, imagining a background, arch foes, etc. built around that motif...

“The Depths of Depravity”

(from The Dinosaur Man & Cavegirl #107, March, 2008)

DETECTIVE-CONSTABLE ENRIQUE Peña stuffed a stick of nicotine gum into his mouth and looked about the dingy hotel room. He squeezed aside with a grunt as a CSI woman sidled past, the short hall linking the door to the main room too narrow to easily accommodate two. He moved into the room, careful to give a wide berth to the body sprawled upon the dirty carpet. He pushed up next to the open window to better get an unobstructed view of the scene.

The light breeze caused the curtains to flutter listlessly against the window’s peeling frame. Peña frowned, only gradually realizing there were two distinct fabrics

to the curtains: a faded flower-patterned cotton and a dark green material that had a tougher, almost leathery aspect.

“*Dios!*” he gasped, almost swallowing his gum.

A figure loomed outside upon the fire escape -- for how long he had gone unnoticed Peña couldn't guess. He was a tall man, the giveaway dark green was his cape -- or cloak as some might describe it. His head was covered by a half-face cowl of a stiff, scaly texture, with a small but distinct serrated ridge running up the middle of the brow and down the back. Below the eyes the mask jutted out two or three centimetres to overhang his exposed mouth and square chin like an upper jaw, small teeth lining the underside rim.

“Dinosaur Man,” Peña grunted, trying to reclaim his cool.

The dark, intense eyes of the caped manhunter darted his way. The figure ducked, his cape swirled, and suddenly the Dinosaur Man had slipped to the floor next to him.

The detective spared a glance outside, already knowing what he would see.

On the moonlit roof across the street perched a girl, probably fourteen or fifteen (or so it had been speculated) with raven hair, a tan complexion that suggested Latina or Indigenous, and a mask tied about her eyes. She was dressed in a form-fitting tan body stocking over which she wore a one-piece that was meant to resemble an animal skin -- like something Betty or Wilma wore in the old *Flintstones* cartoon.

Peña looked back at the tall man. “Come in, why don'tcha?”

Ignoring both the detective's sarcasm and the CSI and uniformed officers' curious glances, the Dinosaur Man stared at the dead body upon the floor. He had been a youngish black man, garbed in jeans and a yellow long sleeve shirt.

“What have you got?” came the deep the voice of the manhunter.

“Look, Dino -- wearing a Halloween costume don't make you a policeman...” The words died on his tongue as the tall man gazed at him coldly. *Dammit*, thought

Peña. *I did two years in Guns and Gangs playing footsie with bikers and street gangs. I don't get intimidated -- I do the intimidating.* But he couldn't hold the big man's eyes and instead looked down. "Neighbours reported sounds of a fight. Uniforms showed at 9:15 -- found him dead. We're just starting on our investigation. We haven't even ID'd John Doe here yet."

"Joseph Mutombo -- he's a Congolese national."

Peña's eyes widened in surprise.

"Not to my knowledge a Canadian resident. I know that he tried to contact Riel D'Arcy yesterday--"

"That millionaire?"

"-but D'Arcy was out of town until tonight and never spoke to him directly. Though I'm sure you'll want to verify that." Suddenly the dark cape flapped and he was out on the fire escape again.

"Wait -- how the hell do you know all that?"

The caped man glanced back over his shoulder. "I guess because I wear the Halloween costume." The green fabric flared and suddenly he was gone. Glancing across the street, Peña saw that the girl had vanished, too.

God, he thought ruefully -- he's training her to be just like him.

~

Two blocks away a car was parked in the shadows of an alley. It was dark green bordering on black and was of a curiously unspecific make, other than appearing to be a high end sedan. That was when it was in its inconspicuous mode. With the press of a couple of buttons, a sail-fin would rise out of the roof, and the headlights would be bisected by a horizontal bar creating the illusion of eyes. That was when its owner wanted the car to be noticed.

The Dinosaur Man slipped in the driver side and Cavegirl settled on the passenger seat. The car revved to life and pulled out of the alley onto a mostly deserted side street.

“We were too late?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said tightly.

His mood was grimmer than usual, she knew. “How well did you know him?”

“I was friends with his late father. Patterson Mutombo was the crew foreman when I was on a couple of excavations in central Africa. Joseph would help out.” He remembered the gangly then-teenager scrambling about the digs, camera in hand, acting as a kind of unofficial photographer for the excavations. The masked man smiled sadly. “But I hadn’t heard from Joseph in years and I have no idea what he was doing in this country.”

“So there’s no reason he would’ve known millionaire Riel D’Arcy, dilettante archaeologist and paleontologist, was the Dinosaur Man when he left that message yesterday asking for help?”

“Not likely, no.” He slammed his gloved hand against the wheel. “Dammit! If only that case with The Totem Master hadn’t taken so long to wrap up we would’ve been back in town yesterday and I’d have got his message sooner.” Then he shot her a dark look. “And I wasn’t a dilettante.”

She whistled innocently and glanced out the window. “That’s not what they said on *Quirks n’ Quarks*.” Then she glanced back at him. “So we got nothing?”

“Not quite. Even at a quick glance I could see the room had been ransacked. However I spotted a cell phone peeking out from under the bureau -- whether it fell there or he deliberately hid it there we’ll never know.” Strapped across his chest was a bandolier and from one pouch he drew an object no bigger than a memory stick. “While I was talking with the detective I was able to surreptitiously sync with any cell phones in the room and download their data, recent calls, that sort of stuff.”

The girl took the device and nodded at it appreciatively. “You point out the cell phone to the cops?”

“I’m sure they’ll find it themselves if they’re any good at their jobs.”

There was a silence for a moment. Then Cavegirl said, “So -- maybe I should give ‘em an anonymous call when we get home and tip them off about it?”

“Probably a good idea.”

~

“Home” for the Dinosaur Man & Cavegirl was The Riverbank Museum of Pre-History and Antiquities, on the same property and just over the hill from the D’Arcy family manor. Located near the historic centre of the city the museum backed onto a large park and with a river running nearby. Its central location made it convenient both for visitors -- and as a staging ground for the city’s cloaked manhunter, the forest and river allowing multiple routes to approach and exit it unseen.

Their secret headquarters was an unused wing of the museum -- sealed off so long ago most had forgotten it even existed.

The museum had been substantially endowed by the wealthy D’Arcy family a couple of generations ago supposedly as a PR effort to counter balance negative press over some of the family’s less than admirable business enterprises. Growing up it had fuelled the fascination of young Riel D’Arcy who wanted little to do with the business side of the family, instead devoting himself to a pursuit of knowledge. As a young adult he travelled the globe, joining some expeditions, personally financing others. He was only dragged back to the city by the murder of his brother, who had been running the family businesses. He re-discovered a city drenched in vice and corruption, and D’Arcy Enterprises itself not untainted, all barely resembling the innocent memory he had of the city from his privileged upbringing. Riel realized the only way he could find the truth of his brother’s murder, and excise the rot at the heart of D’Arcy Enterprises, was through his own agency.

Though he had no super powers, he had quite unintentionally accrued an array of unusual skills. He was in superb physical shape after years of foraging through jungles and free climbing inaccessible peaks in his quest for bones and ancient cities; not to mention having been well-trained in self-defence both as a hobby (stuck in hotels for weeks on end because of rainy seasons or civil strifes, he took to studying with master sensei just to pass the time) and as a practicality, his travels often taking him into bandit country. And his experience as a studier of antiquities -- extrapolating entire dinosaur skeletons from tiny bone fragments, or locating ruins based on cryptic references in ancient scrolls -- proved a unique grounding in the art of criminal deduction.

Because of these predilections he had settled on the Dinosaur Man as his nom du crime-fighting -- imbuing his alter ego with the mystique of antiquity and strength. And utilizing a conspicuous motif he reasoned would make it harder for people to think past the identity in their hunt for the man behind the mask.

He was not given to self-examination, but if he were to ponder what drove him to pursue the life of a crime-fighter beyond the initial murder of his brother, he might well have seen its roots in his fascination with extinct animals and dead civilizations. Life was fragile. Without a protector, even noble societies could fall.

Weirdly, his motif of antiquity had found reflection in various of his adversaries over the years, such as the beautiful Art thief, Sadira, who disguised herself in mummification bandages and went by the name The Mummy -- and whose relationship with him had become...complicated...over the years. Then there was the Mad Crusader. And Megalodon-Man. While his primary adversary for many years had been the mobster Woolsley Mammoth, better known by his nickname "The Mammoth" due to his idiosyncratic appearance. Once The Mammoth would have been at the top of his suspect list for any unsolved crime. But The Mammoth died

two years ago while trying to escape the police. And the Dinosaur Man couldn't say he missed him.

The Excavation -- as he dubbed this forgotten wing of the museum -- had once been decorated for a planned exhibition, but one which had been indefinitely postponed during an economic slump. It was first roped off, then eventually boarded up, years ago. But now it provided a most appropriate backdrop for his covert activities. Along one side of the chamber the plaster cast bones of a dinosaur blistered from the wall, as though a half exposed excavation, while a diorama depicting a pre-historic landscape was set into another wall. Old crates were stacked in the corner, some containing uncatalogued treasures from the days when museums were crazy for acquisitions.

During lulls in crime-fighting he would treat himself by opening a crate and seeing what lost treasures might await.

But right now he sat before his bank of computers, his cowl pulled back, examining data scrolling across his screens.

Cavegirl hoped up to sit upon a nearby crate, breathing heavily from finishing an impromptu work-out on the practice mats while waiting for him to sift through the pilfered cell phone files. She took a swig from a bottle of water. "What say, Big Chief?" she asked casually.

He didn't take his eyes from the screen. "Big Chief -- is that something where you can say it but it'd be rude if I did?" he asked wryly.

"Your people stole my people's land -- so I get to use racially provocative language and you don't. Fair's fair," she quipped.

"Is that what they teach you at that Native Friendship Centre you go to?"

"Hey, you're the one who said I should drop in there from time to time."

A few years previous he had been helping his old friends, Michael and Annie Mightyvoice, verify archaeological evidence for a tribal land claim suit. But things

turned deadly when the suit interfered with the ambitions of a corrupt developer. The Mightyvoices were murdered over it and Riel learned he had been named as the guardian of their young daughter, Molly. Even though he had brought her back to the city with him, he had tried to do right by her and her parents' memory, keeping her in touch with her culture.

Deep down inside he suspected her parents wouldn't have wanted her recruited into his personal war on crime. He shot her a surreptitious glance. But she was growing up strong, smart, and brave -- a young woman any parent would be proud of. He could only hope they would forgive him.

Shaking himself from his reverie he turned back to the screens. Tapping his mouse he closed a succession of tabs. "Four of the data streams are from cell phones belonging to the officers and forensics people on site -- unlikely to have a bearing on this case." He held at the single tab left open. "That leaves these files as being from Joseph Mutombo's phone. There's Riel D'Arcy's number that he called yesterday," he hesitated, knowing Cavegirl liked to tease him when he spoke of himself in the third person -- but it helped him to keep his dual lives demarcated. "And then there's this." He clicked on a picture folder.

Cavegirl inhaled sharply.

One image showed raggedly dressed black men in loose shirts and hard hats looking gaunt and sickly. Another, shockingly, appeared to be a mass grave with maybe a dozen bodies piled on top of each other.

"That's it then," she said hoarsely. "Evidence."

"Yes -- but of what? With Joseph dead there's no way to tell where these were taken -- or even when." He hesitated, then clicked on the final shot. A blurry image filled the screen

"What the hell-?" Cavegirl asked.

"Language," he chided.

“Sorry -- what the effin’ hell is that?”

He pursed his lips but ignored her sarcasm as Cavegirl leaned forward. There was darkness around the edges, suggesting an unlit interior of some sort -- possibly a cavern. That would gel with the mining hats on the men in the other picture. At the centre of the image was an indistinct light, or glow. “Weird. So -- is this what got him killed?” she asked.

“Can’t be sure. But we’ll assume it’s relevant.” He closed the file. “When I knew Joseph he was into photography, so I’m guessing he owned a proper camera. Presumably these were samples of a larger sequence of pictures that would provide the context.”

She nodded determinedly. “What should I do?”

“Don’t you have school in the morning?”

“It’s spring break,” she said rolling her eyes.

“Fine. Hack into airline records, see if you can find when Joseph entered the country. If we assume he called Riel -- me -- at the earliest opportunity, then he probably only arrived in the last few days.” As the teenager plopped into a chair before another computer console, he added, “Don’t assume he used his real name on the ticket. We don’t know what trouble he was in.”

“This ain’t my first rodeo, Big Chief,” she said flippantly as she started typing. “What’re you doing?”

“Seeing who else he called in the last few days...”

~

Yvette dragged the rubber band off her pony tail, wincing as it took a couple of hairs with it, then shook her blonde tresses free. Shutting off the desk lamp she reached unthinkingly for the sweater over the back of her chair. She frowned on feeling an unfamiliar material. Turning she found herself clutching a heavy dark green

fabric draped over her chair. Lifting her gaze she stared into a masked face barely limned by the moonlight spilling through her window.

She stepped back, bumping into her desk.

“Yvette St. Onge?” His lips barely seemed to move.

“That’s -- that’s what it says on the desk,” she answered, trying for a glibness she didn’t feel. “You’re that Dinosaur guy -- I half figured you were an urban legend.” Most of the staff having left for the day, Yvette subconsciously held her purse defensively in front of her.

When he had first appeared on the scene the Dinosaur Man had been branded an outlaw. But that was when the local cops were rumoured to be rife with corruption and had a vested interest in discrediting him. Over the years the Dinosaur Man’s stock in the city had risen -- a little -- coinciding with the police becoming less infamous. These days she’d even heard rumours of him being accepted -- albeit grudgingly -- at crime scenes.

“I’m looking into the murder of Joseph Mutombo.”

Yvette blinked. “The crime beat isn’t really my territory. And I don’t think I know-”

“Your number was in his phone. He was from the Congo.”

“Oh -- him! I didn’t make the connection. Yes, I remember. He contacted me about a story. Wait -- you said murdered?”

Taking the question as rhetorical, the Dinosaur Man said, “What story? Why was he talking to a Canadian reporter about something in central Africa?”

She stared at the implacable figure in the shadows. Then she shrugged and switched on her desk lamp. “What do you know about Canadian mining companies overseas?”

He hesitated. “I know some have dubious reputations.”

Yvette looked impressed. “Most people just stare at me blankly if asked that question.”

He shrugged. “Let’s just say I’ve had some experience abroad. I’ve heard stories.”

“Well, you’re right. Some of these mining operations do have, as you say, dubious reputations. Poor working conditions, environmental depredation -- all the way up to links to union busting and murder. Some have private security contractors and ties to corrupt local governments and militias who are only too happy to help keep big business rolling along. Mutombo is -- was -- a freelance photojournalist. At least an aspiring one.”

Behind his stoic expression, the Dinosaur Man remembered Joseph snapping photos of the digs his dad, Patterson, oversaw.

“I’d written a bit about mining scandals before -- so he thought maybe I could help him get the story out. More fool him.”

“What do you mean?”

She shrugged wearily. “There’s not a lot of editorial enthusiasm for stories about Canadian misconduct in the so-called developing world. For every piece I’ve got published, a dozen more are spiked, or never even get past the pitch meeting. The public doesn’t care about that, so they tell me. It’s not ‘relevant’ to most Canadian’s lives. Translation: we want to see ourselves as the good guys -- peace keepers and Médecins Sans Frontières and such; we don’t want to read about when we might be the bad guys. There’s no boost in circulation from exposing those scandals, no votes to be had for politicians in policing what companies do outside our borders. Not to mention some CEOs are big donors to politicians and on the board of some media organizations. So I told Joseph we could meet up but I couldn’t guarantee anything. He never got back to me, though. I guess now I know why.”

“Did he tell you what the story was?”

“Not the details, no. Just that he had pictures.”

“Those are long gone, I’m guessing. Mostly,” he added, thinking of the few images on the cell phone. “Who did you tell? About Joseph contacting you?”

She recoiled. “Hey now -- don’t put this on me. I didn’t-”

He raised a palm. “I’m not accusing you. But Joseph was killed here, not in Africa, and according to airline records he arrived a couple of days ago under a false name. That implies it was something on this end that triggered the murder. Someone he contacted or spoke to here.”

She put her fists on her hips, frowning. “Well -- Joseph mentioned knowing that local millionaire philanthropist, Riel D’Arcy, from back when D’Arcy used to go around digging up bones and whatnot -- or maybe you never followed the society gossip columns.”

“I’ve heard D’Arcy was something of a dilettante,” the Dinosaur Man said drily.

“I think he was planning on contacting D’Arcy, to see if he could help him. And of course there was the mining company itself. That was the other reason Joseph was here -- this is where its headquarters is...”

~

Riel D’Arcy was dressed in a tan blazer and matching slacks as he sat in the corner office of Dark Continent Explorations and Development -- a rather colourful appellation for a company that ran operations in various countries in Africa, as well as in South America. It was a lushly furnished room with a beige carpet; the two exterior walls were entirely glass, allowing the sun to shine in -- though a tint to the panes kept the glare from being oppressive.

A handsome man with a ram rod posture, Riel tugged nonchalantly at his cufflinks, then pushed his sunglasses higher up his nose. The sunglasses seemed an affectation indoors. But the frame was a receiver, feeding signals to the flesh-coloured

piece in his ear that, were anyone to be so gauche as to ask about, Riel would explain away as a hearing aid.

“Not sure why you get to do the schmoozing,” grumbled a voice in his ear, “while I have to crawl around through mucky air ducts. I swear I just saw a spider as big as my hand.”

Riel’s expression remained unchanged as Cavegirl kvetched in his ear, the girl some floors away, infiltrating the building in a decidedly less forthright manner than he. But he had strategized that a two pronged investigation was in order.

“Ah -- Mr. D’Arcy,” a voice interrupted his thoughts. Riel rose as a stocky man in a dark suit blew into the room. He stabbed out a hand with a curt efficiency and Riel shook it with a practiced lack of force to go with his non-threatening reputation. “Sorry to keep you waiting. I’m Conrad Kroenenberg.” The shorter man moved quickly around his desk and sat. “What can I do for you?”

~

Cavegirl caught the air-vent mesh before it fell clanging to the floor and dragged it back into the duct with her. Then she slipped her legs out and dropped nimbly to the floor. She was in a dark hallway that an earlier perusal of the building’s schematics had identified as mostly a maintenance and storage floor, unlikely to experience much regular foot traffic.

While Dinosaur Man -- currently Riel, she reminded herself wryly -- chatted up the CEO, her job was to tap the computer system. Normally that was a job she’d do from the comfort of The Excavation, maybe with Fefe Dobson blaring on her headphones. But Dark Continent Explorations and Development -- that name alone made her want to punch someone -- had proved to have firewalls up the whazzoo, making it next to impossible to hack from the outside.

But hacking it from inside the building, using its own terminals? That was another matter.

Padding down the empty hall, she went looking for an unattended PC.

~

“I’ll confess, Mr. D’Arcy, I’m a bit confused-”

“Please -- Riel. Mr. D’Arcy sounds like we’re at a Jane Austen book club.”

Kroenenberg stared at him blankly, missing the reference. “Uh, very well -- Riel, what I was saying is that you have a reputation for environmental causes and championing the preservation of historical sites. Not exactly the sort of interests that sync up with resource development.”

“We all have bills to pay, don’t we?” He laughed blithely, playing the part of the rich hedonist. “But more pertinently, that’s the point,” he continued, more earnest, “I don’t see the two goals as mutually exclusive. After all, both entail digging things out of the ground -- what’s uncovered might be valuable to one but worthless to the other, and vice versa. So D’Arcy Enterprises is interested in partnering with certain mining companies -- of good reputation of course -- in an attempt to intertwine our interests. It’ll expand my portfolio, which will keep my bookie -- I mean my accountant,” he said with a laugh, “happy.”

From the plug in his ear Cavegirl said: “Don’t overplay it, Shatner.”

Riel pursed his lips, but pressed on, “Meanwhile you-”

“-we’ll enjoy a complimentary association with a company that has rehabilitated its own public reputation in recent years,” Kroenenberg finished thoughtfully.

“And I’ve accrued a number of global back channel contacts over the years that might help smooth over misunderstandings that lead to work stoppages and strikes.”

“I see. Well, this is certainly intriguing, I’ll admit. DCE&D is actually in the process of expanding its operations and is certainly open to acquiring new investors and partners -- though nothing we’ve gone public with yet. Of course it’s a little unorthodox you just dropping by out of the blue.”

“Well before any proposals are pitched I figured I’d just drop in, slap a few palms. I always feel business is best when it’s casual. I’ve landed more deals over a billiards table than I have in a boardroom.”

“And just where do you see our mutual interests dovetailing -- to begin with?”

“Well, just as a ‘for instance’ -- the Congo,” Riel said lightly, but his eyes were focused on the other man like a hawk.

Kroenenberg’s expression didn’t change.

“I believe you have a few mines in that part of the world -- yes?”

“I believe we do,” Kroenenberg said casually. “Though I’d have to re-familiarize myself with the details of the operations.”

~

Cavegirl had assumed she would need to sneak onto a busier floor to find a computer terminal. But instead she discovered a custodian’s office on the floor she was already on. A deft jimmying of the lock and she was at the computer -- a terminal linked into the company server. She deliberately cracked her knuckles, then set to work. She plugged in a memory stick on which was stored a hacker virus she used to help facilitate such cybernetic investigations and began diving into the electronic bowels of the company.

She glanced at the door, knowing her time was limited.

It was mostly a game of hit and miss. She did random searches on various topics: from active projects in central Africa to Joseph Mutombo’s name; scanning for any local operations that might have been signed off on in the last couple of days (not that she expected a hired assassin to be identified as such on an invoice). Anything that popped up she copied un-read onto a blank memory stick to be studied later.

Suddenly a crimson square flashed up on her screen: “Unauthorized Access.”

“Oh crap,” she muttered.

The room plunged into darkness.

“I triggered a security protocol,” she hissed. “Someone cut power. Are things still normal with you?”

~

A few floors below, Riel D’Arcy barely flinched, though his muscles tensed. “Yes,” he said tightly.

“Yes?” Kroenenberg queried.

“Yes -- I’m sure we can find some mutually advantageous projects.” He unfolded himself and stood, his keen eye noting the red button flashing subtly on the other man’s desk phone. “Unfortunately, I just remembered I have to abort this meeting and dash like a raptor, as they say.” There was no ‘they’ who said that, of course -- it was the agreed upon code for Cavegirl to get out of the building, quick.

Kroenenberg’s eye suddenly spotted the flashing red button and he stiffened. “Uh, of course,” he said waving Riel away absently. “Get in touch.” His hand jerked for the phone -- then he pulled back, as though it were hot.

Riel realized Kroenenberg didn’t want to answer it while he was still in the room. Striding quickly to the office door he slipped outside -- but paused in the hall, patting his pockets as if searching for his car keys. He strained to hear the conversation inside, but all he could distinguish was a curiously timid, “Yes, sir.”

Kroenenberg had a mysterious superior, it seemed -- and one who scared him. Curiouser and curiouser, he thought. Riel hurried past the receptionist’s desk and impatiently thumbed the elevator button. That red light call was doubtless connected to Cavegirl’s situation, which meant Kroenenberg was even now being alerted to an intruder. Riel wanted to be out of the building before it occurred to anyone to put the building in lock-down.

He opened his mouth to call to her, but two other people slipped onto the elevator with him, forcing him to stay silent.

~

Cavegirl shoved the memory sticks in her belt and sidled up to the door. The hall outside was black as pitch. Pressing one hand flat against the wall, she started blindly down the corridor toward the air duct.

Then she stopped. Further along was a slight glow, like the first creeping sense of dawn. She hesitated, knowing she should just get out of there. Instead, feeling an instinctive chill, she moved toward the glow which seemed to be emanating from a room.

~

Riel was halfway out the elevator into the lobby when he stopped, Cavegirl's voice in his ear. "I'm not sure what I'm seeing. It's a light. It's -- it's just like in Joseph's picture-!" Her voice cut off.

"Move it, bud," one of the other elevator passenger's shouldered belligerently past him, Riel having frozen in the gaping door. Shaking himself, he hurried across the marble floor of the lobby, ignoring the suspicious glare from the security guard at his desk. He burst out into the sunlight and hissed, "Cavegirl, are you there?"

There was no response.

~

Cavegirl awoke with a grunt -- and immediately regretted it. Her head throbbed from where someone had conked her on the back of her skull, and she was bound, sprawled out on a cold floor. A trio of men in DCE&D security uniforms stood about, armed, looking like the street thugs they had probably been recruited from.

In her time as the Dinosaur Man's sidekick she had woken in a number of lurid locales -- Gothic castles, abandoned farm houses, damp caves. Once she had opened her eyes to find herself sinking into muskeg! Yet the very mundanity of her current surroundings made them all the more unnerving. The floor beneath her was bland corporate linoleum, fluorescent tubes overhead creating a patchwork of shadows and

light, while computer banks ran along one side of the room, broken only by a space where a platform had been ensconced.

On the platform was a clear jar about 2/3rds of a metre tall. In the jar something glowed.

A voice was speaking. It was familiar although she couldn't quite place it.

"..things are getting out of hand. First that African photojournalist starts poking around. Then Riel D'Arcy shows up, asking about the Congo like I'm stupid enough to think it's a coincidence. And now we've got Cavegirl sneaking about." A stocky figure in a dark suit came into her line of sight, waving his hands in agitation. Suddenly she remembered where she had heard his voice: over her communicator. It was Conrad Kroenenberg. "And where she is-"

"The Dinosaur Man cannot be lagging far behind." The second voice was deep, even booming, and sounded even more familiar. "That was almost inevitable. One cannot indulge in illicit enterprises in this metropolis and be unaware it might well solicit the infernal investigations of the so-called cryptozoological crime-buster. Indeed, it is arguably fortuitous that it did so now, so that we may deal with him in our own time, rather than at a more impertinent juncture."

"Glad I could be so accommodating."

Kroenenberg and his thugs whirled. At the far side of the room loomed the Dinosaur Man, his dark cape rippling dramatically about him. At first Cavegirl was unsure what was causing that; the only thing behind him was an open service elevator. Then she realized he had probably sneakily crawled up the elevator cable and pried the doors open. A breeze must be wafting up through the vast, empty well at his back.

"Wha-?" gasped Kroenenberg. "But -- but we sent everyone home, activated all the alarms. We were supposed to know if he so much as breathed on the windows," he said, turning to his unseen boss.

Cavegirl smirked. It hadn't occurred to them that while hacking their computers she had up-loaded a virus to compromise their security system. Dinosaur Man hadn't expected her to be caught, but he had anticipated they might want to sneak back into the building at some point. Likewise, a GPS signal in her belt had allowed him to home in on her location. Not that she would tell them that. Let it just add to her mentor's mysterious reputation.

"You okay, Cavegirl?" he called.

"Been better," she said.

Dinosaur Man turned on Kroenenberg, his thugs about him like a Praetorian Guard. "What's this all about, Kroenenberg?"

"What is it ever about?" boomed that disturbingly familiar voice. "Money! Power!" And then a shape came lumbering out of the shadows. Cavegirl gasped, realizing she had seen the man's hulking silhouette but mistook it for a piece of furniture.

Now she knew why he sounded familiar.

"Mammoth!" hissed the Dinosaur Man.

Woolsley Mammoth -- a.k.a. The Mammoth -- stood about seven feet and was over a metre across at the shoulders. Dressed in a custom-tailored brown suit he leaned on a walking stick that she knew from bitter experience was reinforced with iron. He wore his chestnut hair long and shaggy, but it did nothing to cover his ears which were about as big as a human's ears could be without getting him into the *Guinness Book of World Records*. His mustache was waxed into curving points at each end, his nose was long and drooping, and his beard was braided into a ponytail that hung down over his massive chest like a trunk. "And so we meet again, my old enemy."

He was one of the Dinosaur Man's oldest foes -- a puppet master who had controlled the city's mobs for years while the Dinosaur Man gradually snipped away at

his strings, curtailing his operations, thwarting his schemes. But they thought he had died a couple of years ago in a spectacular yacht explosion while attempting to run a harbour police condone. He had escaped obviously. Maybe they should call him the Sabre Tooth Tiger, instead, she thought -- because he had nine lives.

She'd have to remember that quip for later, she thought -- if they survived this.

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The two old enemies faced each other across the dimly lit room, one of the fluorescent bulbs flickering irritatingly overhead. The Mammoth stood imperiously, leaning upon his cane, while the Dinosaur Man was as much shadow as form as his dark cape flowed about him. The others in the room had become mere extras in the drama that was unfolding.

"I'd say I thought you died," growled the Dinosaur Man, "but that would be superfluous. So I repeat: what's this all about? I take it you're the one really in charge here -- but what's a street mobster like you doing as CEO for a corporation with international interests?"

"Because, my dear boy, I've seen the light," chortled The Mammoth. "All those years hustling and scheming, running drugs and bank rolling gambling dens, I thought I was the pip -- as they used to say. King of the hill. But you proved to me just how precarious my position was when a man in a Halloween mask could tear it all down. You and your girl-cub, of course." He glanced at Cavegirl. "I see her breasts have come in since last we bearded each other. Now I know why you kept her around. Grooming her in more ways than one, eh?"

"Jeezus -- he's practically my dad," Cavegirl said. "I literally just threw up into my mouth, you disgusting freak."

The Mammoth chuckled. "I do miss such rapier repartee. But my point is: times change. Trading blows with masked gallants is passé. After my last humiliating defeat I experienced an epiphany. The key to eluding the law, I realized, is not staying low --

but moving up. To become too big to fail, as they say. In short: I went legit. Well, more or less. I acquired a few stocks, wormed my way onto a few boards -- blackmailed a few executives, had one or two thrown out of their penthouse windows. And here I am -- a captain of industry. At least in a silent partner capacity. When I used to order an occasional hit I was deemed a criminal -- now I poison rivers and am regularly responsible for the deaths of hundreds and my company trades on the TSE. While you," he regarded his old foe pityingly, "you delude yourself into thinking you're a hero for keeping a few city blocks relatively safe for midnight strollers. Ah, how sad and pathetic."

"One thing hasn't changed," said the Dinosaur Man, his voice like flint. "You always did love the sound of your own voice. Now why don't you answer my question? Actually, let me start." He nodded toward the glowing material in the clear cylinder. "You've uncovered a rare-but-toxic energy source in a mine in central Africa. Now it's your turn."

"He knows!" gasped Kroenenberg, clutching his face. And even the Mammoth's face grew just a little ashen with surprise.

The Dinosaur Man didn't "know," of course -- but he was able to draw inferences from the puzzle pieces he had, including Joseph Mutombo's photographs and the tell-tale glowing substance nestled against the wall.

"I call it Uranium X," said the Mammoth, trying to re-dominate the conversation -- as the Dinosaur Man noted, he was addicted to the sound of his own voice. "It's not true uranium but an incredibly rare phosphorescent radioactive element. It can be refined into weapon's grade plutonium for half the cost of actual uranium, but with a much more limited half-life. I speak of weeks rather than centuries. Useless for reactors -- but as a weapon? One could detonate a nuclear bomb in the city of your choice -- and the surrounding countryside would be liveable again in a month. In

short, my do-gooder friend -- no more deterrent. Nuclear war without the Armageddon.”

Cavegirl stared at him, mouth agape. It was no joke now: she really had almost thrown up into her mouth.

Even the Dinosaur Man looked shaken. “Dear God,” he whispered.

“Hah! Not so smug now, are you? Unfortunately we have so far only uncovered this tiny amount, but we are confident that now we know what to look for, more can be located. When those miners started dying from radiation poisoning we covered it up -- but that damnable photographer was poking around. So I had what little we excavated shipped here and figured no one would pay too much attention to yet another story of third world iniquity. But the photographer was persistent, and followed. Fortuitously the editor for a local periodical does us favours from time to time -- spiking unflattering stories and the like -- and he happened to overhear one of his reporters taking a call from the photographer. I knew then he had to be silenced. How you became embroiled in this I cannot imagine -- and in, what, less than two days? I can but salute your perspicacity.”

“And the end goal of all this?”

“Come come -- don’t be tiresomely naive. What do you think? Terrorists, rogue nations -- even the super powers. Who wouldn’t want a nuclear bomb with half the clean up? Supply and demand. Why, if you’d like a little nuke to add to that inexhaustible supply of gadgets you use, I’d even be amenable to supplying you.”

“And you don’t care about the death and devastation? How could you be so evil?”

“Dear boy -- you’ve missed my whole point. DCE&D was violating human rights long before my, uh, hostile takeover. Canadian manufacturers happily sell arms to odious regimes around the world with the government’s blessing. In a very real

sense, it's you who are the outlaw, with your out-dated notions of morality and justice, while I have merely ascended to respectability -- to the establishment."

There was a long silence in the room, the only sound filling the uncomfortable void the susurrations of computers and the bee-hum of fluorescent bulbs. Finally, the man in the cape spoke. "You forget, Mammoth, that your kind of 'respectability' is like mould -- it can only survive in the shadows. There's a dead man in the morgue downtown, a mass grave in Africa, and you've got a radioactive canister which you smuggled across who knows how many borders. That's a lot of light shining on your twisted enterprise. You ready, Cavegirl?" he called suddenly.

"Getting kind of bored actually, Big Chief." Cavegirl leapt easily to her feet, her severed bonds falling away. There was a retractable blade along the big toe of each of her boots -- Dinosaur Man had the same; he called it his *Deinonychus* claw. In all the time they'd been fighting crime, very few villains had clued into the presence of the hidden blade.

Dinosaur Man grabbed at his belt and snapped it free from his waist. It was one of his signature weapons, unfurling into a cord as long as his arm, ending in a dense ball that doubled as the buckle. It was loosely inspired by a weapon legend had it was used by the old Thuggee cult of India -- though he employed it in a less lethal way. Swung about it doubled his reach, and could be used to snag things almost like a bolo. It was also part of his motif, evoking as it did the tail of an *Ankylosaurus*. With a flick of his wrist he coiled it around the wrist of the closest thug and yanked, wrenching the man toward him and straight into his fist.

"Stop them!" screamed Kroenenberg, perhaps suspecting that the Mammoth's pompous arrogance was just showman's bluster and that they might, indeed, be in trouble after all.

Cavegirl leapt at the wall, kicked off, and somersaulted through the air, crashing into another thug even as he tried to take a bead on the Dinosaur Man.

“Cretins!” roared the Mammoth, wading into the fray. His reinforced cane barely missed taking Dinosaur Man’s head off. The caped man ducked and snapped out his sash, smashing the weighted end into the big man’s face. The Mammoth reared back, almost trumpeting with rage, and then charged again.

Cavegirl, meanwhile, ducked beneath a swing of the last remaining thug’s rifle. Then she kicked hard against his knee, and as he groaned and crumpled, she gave a karate chop to the side of his neck that sent him down. Then she turned on Kroenenberg.

The stocky man tried to feint past her, but she stabbed a foot in front of him, sending him sprawling.

Dinosaur Man and the Mammoth were reeling about the room, overturning swivel chairs, smashing into crates. Both men had bloody faces and bruised limbs from having landed a few solid blows each. The Mammoth, as always, had the advantage of size and weight. The Dinosaur Man had agility and skill, and his blooming cape made it hard to discern where his actual body was.

The Mammoth lurched forward, literally enveloping the Dinosaur Man in a bear hug as he hoisted the manhunter from his feet, wrenching a groan from the hero’s lips. But the Mammoth failed to pin his arms and the Dinosaur Man slammed his fists into the Mammoth’s conspicuous ears. The big man roared, his grip slackening just a little, and the Dinosaur Man pushed against the villain’s shoulders, slithering up out of the deadly embrace, his leathery cape lending a slickness to his form. He leapt away, delivering a parting kick to the Mammoth’s face.

Barely had he hit the ground than he pivoted away from the heavy cane smashing into the floor where he’d been. The caped man ducked and rolled, then came up, flicking his sash and snagging the big man’s cane. With a wrench, he tore it from the Mammoth’s grasp, catching it with his free hand.

The Dinosaur Man stood grimly, now with both weapons in his hands.

The Mammoth glared, snorting like a great wild beast, his chest heaving like a bellows. Then he turned and raced toward the open elevator.

“Wait-!” shouted the Dinosaur Man.

The Mammoth did not listen – any more than he noticed that the elevator doors opened onto an empty shaft. His startled scream was like the trumpeting of an elephant. Until it came to an abrupt stop some floors below.

Cavegirl considered making a quip about how the case had started at the bottom of one shaft -- and ended at the bottom of another. But she didn't.

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With Kroenenberg and the DCE&D security goons trussed up, the duo took their time ransacking the in-house server and dug up all the files they could find linking the company to the deaths at the African mine and the murder of Joseph Mutombo. Then they e-mailed copies to both Det. Peña and the reporter Yvette St. Onge (with an additional note about her editor's involvement). There was always the possibility the company's lawyers could object that the files were obtained illegally, but that would be hard to argue when they were sent from inside the company.

Then they departed.

Back at The Excavation, Cavegirl stared dubiously at the clear canister with its glowing material. “Tell me again why we filched this? And please tell me any kids I have won't have three heads.”

“The canister is shielded. You don't think The Mammoth and Kroenenberg would've been in the same room with it otherwise, do you? In the morning I'll contact the Borealis Excellence -- maybe they can get Confederation Man to throw it into the sun or something. It's best it didn't fall into the wrong hands -- giving it's not clear whose would be the right hands. That's why I deleted from the DCE&D computers all references to the strata at which it had been discovered, and the surrounding mineral compounds that would signify its presence to anyone hunting for more of it.”

Still looking dubious, the girl moved carefully away from where it perched on a shelf by one wall. Then she looked at her mentor. “Was he right? Mammoth I mean. Are we old fashioned? Out of step?”

He pulled back his cowl and looked at her. “Is there corruption in high places and injustices that can’t be solved with a right hook? Are people apathetic and too willing to turn a blind eye to crimes that happen elsewhere, in other countries, as long as it doesn’t happen here? Yes.” He shrugged. “But it’s always been that way. People like the Mammoth like to say things are changing because it makes their compromises, their choices, easier to justify. Cynicism chic. But really, all you and I have ever done is whatever we can. And that’s what we’ll continue to do, whether the villains wear costumes or tailored suits.”

She stared at him a moment. Then a little grin turned her lips. She nodded. “Yeah -- that’s what I figured.” She started to turn, then pointed at the canister. “But seriously, I’m not coming back in here until that thing’s gone.”

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