

GIGAPOLIS

S. CHRISTOPHER

Gigapolis

by S. Christopher

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Now

John-Paul fumed, fourth in a line of foot-tapping, watch-checking, and muted phone conversations. Of the four tellers at four open windows, one counted money and two giggled in whispered camaraderie, stealing glances at the final teller, who straddled an awkward line between death and sleep.

John-Paul tapped his foot and checked his watch. “You lazy bum,” he told himself, “you promised you’d have plenty of time to get your check and pay for classes before registration closes at 4:45.” The second hand on his watch taunted him as it completed another revolution.

A single main wall bisected the bank lobby with classic, pre-unification sensibility. Wainscoting showed off its dark ribs. Precisely spaced brass lamps splashed small ovals of yellowing light on the wall; penumbras enhanced the ceiling’s complex texture. Armless stuffed chairs chuffed in twos and threes between the lights,

promising far more comfort than they could deliver. A huge skylight provided actual illumination, recessed a man's height above the fake ceiling. Spidery shadows scuttled across the floor as the sun moved through the sky; the skylight had eight—no, twelve—metal fingers holding the glass in place.

Promotional posters advertised free checking, small business loans, and a fantastic rate on mortgages. John-Paul had a sick vision of himself scouring the posters for any hints of hidden meaning or at least obvious font kerning problems while waiting for a personal banker to return from lunch somewhere across the river Styx which separated the bank's ostensible customers from its tellers.

The lobby's single clock, embedded in cherry paneling above and just between the centermost cashier windows, had a tiny analog dial but no second hand. It jerked from 11:22 to 11:23. John-Paul pulled his arms together in a tight fold across his chest.

His backpack sagged as one strap slipped off of his shoulder. His mother's voice gently chastened him to wear it properly and to stand up straight. Homesickness swayed him on his feet. He imagined that he could enter Mark David's head to see through his eyes, but nothing happened. He chided himself for believing that one day their special twin powers would activate such that they could work together against injustice, evil, and the adult conspiracy that kept the passion and energy of youth from accomplishing great things.

The simple, bored incompetence in front of him ruined his appetite for grand conspiracies.

A shiver and a whisper passed through the room—a congregation of ghosts and wandering spirits—and he saw it again as if for the first time. Everyone else remained frozen in place, awaiting some mystical spring thaw. He idly fingered the phone in his back pocket, but Mom would be fixing lunch and Mark David at physical therapy. He tapped his foot to a strange staccato rhythm. Tap. Tap tap tap. Tap tap. Tappity tap tap.

The floor buckled. Shards of the skylight rained down seconds before a horrible thunder clap shook the block. John-Paul pulled the hem of his trench coat to cover his head, cape-like, as broken glass

sliced the air on its way to the floor. A second explosion robbed him of his footing; more glass tinkled and sparkled.

The somnambulist teller's eyes snapped open. She screamed and pointed out the front windows.

The other people in the bank gawked from windows and doors, but John-Paul stared up at the broken skylight. A patch of clear sky beckoned as the wild blue tugged at him. His feet voiced a desire to leave the ground. He tasted the wild freedom of impending flight until the cashier's shrieks became hysterical babbling.

A crowd gathered outside, shocked, in a semi-circle around a twisted bubble of metal and fiberglass. A diagonal smear split the intersection. Chunks of asphalt lay sprayed at its edges, exposing pipes and cables. The traffic lights at the corners bent in toward the rubble. A steep scar of shorn bricks decorated the side of the bank. A murmuring rippled through the air, one word repeated in overlaps: Protector.

In the center of the rubble, the remains of a door and its framing scraped and groaned with twisted metal protestations. Something inside banged fists or feet or tentacles, denting the outer layer. Finally it gave way; the door flipped end over end to land in a No Parking zone between two cars on the other side of the street.

A thick white glove emerged, a fist, smeared with ash and dirt. Wisps of smoke rose from the opening, thin streaks which became the thick graveyard fog of a well-funded rock and roll show. The fist relaxed into a hand and groped for a handhold. It half-pushed and half-pulled until an arm, an elbow, and a shoulder emerged.

The Protector pulled himself out of the debris and crouched beside a few tons of unidentifiable remains. He noticed the crowd.

"Oh dear," he murmured.

His cape was torn. Great gashes rendered his stylish logo unrecognizable. His boots smoldered: puffs of dark smoke slithered up his legs. A bruise formed over his left eye, threatening to swell and cloud his vision, and he ached all over. Every joint protested his upright state. Every muscle warned that unless he found a hot bath

and perhaps a double-dose of anti-inflammatory, he wouldn't walk tomorrow.

He focused his will on staying upright and avoiding reverse peristalsis.

Another shock wave pulled the traffic poles inward. They groaned and bent and fell. The Protector threw out one hand and croaked "Get back!" to the spectators. They Obeyed, a single mindless mass, shuffling several simultaneous steps backwards.

John-Paul chuckled at the unintentional poetry of the crowd's gasps and applause. He remained at the bank doors, even as the other customers retreated.

The Protector scanned the scene again, eyes wary. He squeezed his eyes closed, then jumped lightly away from his craft, imagining a gentle descent. Instead, the pavement grabbed him out of the air. He bounced and threw out his left foot wildly to regain his balance, but the abused asphalt cracked and gave way. He slipped and landed face-first on the pavement.

"Oh, dear!" he mumbled again. Darkness rose up to claim him. He heard metal strain and give way and pop. He heard screaming and the sizzle of electricity from now-freed wires. Sparks rained down as the red tunnel in his vision constricted and that was all he knew.

Screams like deflating balloon animals escaped the crowd as the enormous metal poles knelt in obeisance toward the prone figure. Ozone crackled in the air. Rustproof paint wrinkled and blistered. A stampede began; waves of onlookers crashed in complex tides of chaotic retreat, describing complex Brownian motions of high-energy particles desperately escaping to regions of lesser energy. Abused metal screamed until, with frustrated sighs, the great bolts relaxed their grip on deeply rooted concrete. The intersection collapsed into itself.

Dust and small pebbles shot outward to cake adjoining buildings in gray grit. The stack of rubble broke its silence with a soft sigh and a gentle whoosh, gentle in contrast to the shrieks of the retreating crowd. A water pipe in the abused street gave way, first

with a hissing sprinkle and then a groaning gush after its fittings tore themselves apart. Dust and water mixed in the air to throw muddy spatters on the whole scene, on prostrate and kneeling onlookers wringing their hands as well as the unrecognizable mess of the accident and the balconies of luxury apartments several floors above the detritus.

Everyone else inside the bank had covered his face or cowered on the floor to shield her eyes. The noisy teller had run out of words. She thumped a grief tantrum on the floor, one hand pressed over her mouth and eyes wild. John-Paul scanned the debris for a flash of red or a moving white glove, but a breeze threw fat bullets of smeared spray against the glass door panes. Everything was already a dirty brown-gray.

Behind him something *wrong* twisted at the edge of perception. He shielded his eyes as he turned. A man-sized hole tore itself in the bank's drive-up teller wall. A puff of dried gypsum filled the gap for a second, then shards of brick clattered on the ground. One boot stepped through, and another, followed by a leg, knee, thigh, and finally a smirking man in a purplish-gray jumpsuit and a purple belt.

Sound assaulted his ears. First came the protests of studs and masonry and the building's steel frame. Then the man with the belt chuckled. Everything else ceased.

A phone burped. "Silence!" bellowed the man, throwing his hand wide. The door handles behind John-Paul stretched impossibly thin, then tied itself in a neat bow. He dove forward two steps. All eyes turned toward the intruder and the hole behind him and a whisper rang out from behind the teller desk. *The Twisted Man*.

Twist punched the wall next to his entrance. The building shook with an earthquake's low after shocks. "Silence, I said. My badness, do I need to spell this out for you? Hush. Do not speak. Do not whisper, murmur, wonder, hiss, retort, snort, chuckle, or cry." He paused. "Back up. You may cry or sniffle or sob quietly to yourself, for this bank is now mine. Though I suppose you could cry before then, but now you have a better reason."

He punched the wall twice again for good measure. The remains of the skylight's frame tore away. It landed in the middle of the lobby. Tiny shards of dirty glass skittered into the corners of the room. Muddy rain peppered the floor.

Twist kicked a chair. It skittered out of the way, crashing into and overturning a desk full of papers, paper clips, and an aging computer. Pamphlets fluttered through the air, like a family of legal-sized four-color butterflies migrating south for the winter. He stabbed at them with bored fingers as they landed. "I suppose," he started again, "you're wondering why I chose this bank. That's a good question. I would have asked that question of myself. I'd be happy to tell you." He jumped atop the teller counter. "While you're *opening the vault*." A series of mighty foot stomps punctuated that sentence. The desk's fake paneling cracked, and a finishing nail worked its way loose. It descended in a slow arc and bounced twice in tired, end-over-tip parabolas.

John-Paul smelled strawberries. An itch filled his muscles with the desire for a really good morning stretch before getting out of bed.

No one else had moved. The teller had gathered sufficient courage to turn her eyes toward Twist as far as they could go without moving her head. The kneeling man sat stunned several inches from a sharp piece of skylight frame that had dented and scuffed the tile next to his thigh. John-Paul eased out of his crouch to stand.

"Well?" bellowed Twist. He kicked another monitor toward the teller. She cringed and whimpered. It dented the wall behind her, sending plastic splinters in all directions even as it trailed stripped wires. "Open the vault! This is the banking district. They call it the banking district because there are so very many lovely banks here. Do you know how many banks there are within walking distance? At an average walking speed of four miles per hour, minus one mile per hour for crosswalks, and at an average time per bank of twelve minutes, there are *oh so very many* banks."

The bank manager—a pudgy woman with short blonde curls—poked her head out from under her arms. "Um... we don't... that is to say, I'm sorry sir but... we don't actually, not in this branch... it's

just... we don't have a vault!" A single bead of sweat escaped her hairline. It joined its muddy comrades pooling on the floor.

Twist leaped over the counter, triggering another spray of paperwork, to land in front of the woman. "Why does it keep doing that?" he snapped, pawing at and crumpling papers with both hands. He hoisted the woman by the lapel of her blazer. Her feet dangled, and one shoe fell off. It careened off of the counter and landed near the ruined monitor. She gasped and stared at his hands.

She wore a black pantsuit over a maroon shirt that revealed just enough cleavage to indicate that today was casual Friday. Twist stared into her eyes, but a stray sunbeam sparkled off of a metallic gold "10-10-10" broach. His grimace twisted. "What's this? You don't have a vault, but you *do* have a Protector ribbon? What do you have to protect if you don't have a vault? Hmm? Tell me! What! Do! You! Have! To! Protect!" He raised a finger. The pin tore itself away from her jacket and the ribbon untied itself in mid air before hurtling toward John-Paul. He thought he heard thunder.

He shifted his weight slightly, and the pin embedded itself harmlessly in the well-worn wooden wainscoting by the front door.

Twist turned and leapt off of the counter, still carrying the woman. Her remaining shoe dangled two inches off of the ground. He reached for and tore away a cash tray. "Do you think I came here for money? I could have money if I wanted money!" He waved the tray in front of her face, then threw it at the kneeling man. The underside of the tray hit him in the forehead. He fell backwards, drooling. Coin rolls bounced and rolled and tens of thousands of dollars clouded the air.

Twist dropped the woman. She landed lopsided on her heels, then sat down hard and scrabbled, crab-like, away. "Why is it doing that? STOP THAT! Ugh!" He pounded his fists on the counter again. A stapler bounced off the floor by his feet. His roundhouse kick sent it flying out the hole he'd come through.

John-Paul's phone burped again. It was Mark David's ring. He slapped his pocket to find the silence button, but it was too late. "I thought I told you to be quiet! Are you mocking me? You're not going to like what happens if you're mocking me!" Twist punched

through another monitor and hurled it one-handed at John-Paul's head. He sidestepped; it missed, shattering one glass door. Trailing wires grazed his face as he turned his head away. "I think you get the picture," screamed Twist. He stalked toward the manager.

This time, the light played off of a key dangling from a curly plastic stretch bracelet on her wrist. It was unspectacular, neither out of place unlocking the front door of a house in the suburbs or a stand-alone garage in a gentrified downtown neighborhood. Something on it caught his eye, and he wagged his eyebrows at it. "You don't have a vault, but you do have something locked up here? Keys are for locks. Don't you!"

She looked at the other tellers, but he snapped his fingers in her face. "Don't wait for an explanation, answer the question! What do you have locked up here!"

She stammered. "We *don't* have a vault, but we *do* have a small safe."

"Aaaaaaaahhh!" he screamed. John-Paul's ears popped. "Do you think I'm so literal that I have to have an elephant-sized door with a huge spinny wheel and little poofs of pressurized air escaping and an enormous wall full of tiny heavy drawers? NO! I just want what you have locked up and hidden here. It's picturesque language." He leered. "I'm so glad we worked *that* out. March." He pointed vaguely elsewhere and tucked his thumbs into his purple belt, rocking on his heels. "Next you'll tell me you don't have a safe, because obviously if I'm here, it's no longer safe."

"I can't," she sniffled. "It takes two keys, and my assistant isn't..."

Twist raised his hand. "You should think very carefully about how you are going to finish that sentence. *Very* carefully."

She squeezed her eyes shut. Another fat tear escaped.

John-Paul felt an immense wrongness wrinkle near him. His vision blurred around the edges; objects smeared as he moved his eyes. A golden glow filled his senses. Salty sweat and sour fear hung in the stale air just as the tang of copper-tainted water sprayed in the

street. Dust clouds billowed with tiny puffs as more of the wall collapsed. Individual muscles and tendons in Twist's arm tensed as he prepared a vicious backhand that would probably send the manager sprawling head-first into a crumpled heap under the drive-up window, breaking her neck instantly if she were lucky.

Surprise blinked his eyes as John-Paul saw himself move.

"Excuse me." He jumped from his position by the door across the lobby, landing on the other side of the teller desk. "Is that a jumpsuit? With a belt? A purple belt? Really?"

Twist had started to turn as soon as he heard John-Paul's sneaker leave a dent in the tile by the door, but John-Paul ducked under the retargeted backhand, and came up inside to pin Twist against the wall by both shoulders. "Are you mocking me? Are you *mocking* me! I warned you before, and now I am NOT happy!" He squirmed to face the manager. "Hold on a minute sweetie. We are *not* finished yet, but I'll get back to you after the beep. BEEP!" He brought up his knee and brought down his head. John-Paul had to relax his grip and dance away to avoid both.

Twist spit. "Good work, kid. Now you've made me angry." He threw a punch where John-Paul's head had been a moment earlier. "This is going to hurt you." He aimed a precise straight-leg mid-section kick, John-Paul flipped his trench coat to deflect and tangle Twist's foot before wrenching him to the ground. "More than it's going to hurt—WHY DON'T YOU STAND STILL FOR A MINUTE AND LET ME POUND YOU!" Twist flipped up to his feet and raised his fists.

A golden glow trapped the scene in amber, revealing where Twist would aim. John-Paul willed himself not to be there for the first, second, and third punches. He gathered his strength again to feel the floor wrinkle under his feet. He jumped, just as Twist's final, weaker punch missed. The velocity swung the other man wide, and they few together through the hole in the wall where the wall still crumbled away from its exposed metal bones. John-Paul felt his left arm leave about a sixteenth of a pound of flesh on a brick as they landed heavily in the parking lot in a surprised tangle.

They bounced once, then stopped in a spray of fresh bark chips and dirt clumps. A tiny thunderclap struck, and John-Paul shook his head to clear the tinnitus. He scrambled to identify his own arms and legs.

Twist gasped, sucking in air, and his left hand grabbed at his solar plexus. The other hand felt its way toward John-Paul's belt and pulled him back to the ground.

"Leggo!" He freed his left arm. "Let go of me," he threatened—and fell into Twist's eyes. Deep pools of green flecked with purple spread wide, flicking back and forth, refusing to rest or focus. Wide white rings surrounded each iris. Tears gathered in the inner corners by his nose.

Something snapped. John-Paul pivoted from his right hip to land solidly on his back. His head narrowly missed a wicked-looking brush hunkered in a berm between cars. The underside of his thigh slapped the concrete railing, jarring his teeth. The thought of the imminent bruise and an awkward week of limping demanded his attention.

Twist finally sucked air between his teeth in throaty, wet gasps. Then he giggled and gagged on a chuckle, and giggled again.

John-Paul lay on his back for a second. "Where am I?" he began. He had been in a bank, and now he decided that he was underneath a sky of patchy clouds smelling of copper and rain. Someone cackled nearby. His ribs felt raw. He wiggled his fingers and his toes. Crooked fingers grabbed his collar and yanked him halfway off the ground.

"Oh that was stupid, boy. Very stupid of you." Twist slammed him into the ground. Wet bark scattered, leaving a bare spot of sun-baked mud. "I was having *so* much fun in there, and you had to play hero. Do you know what happens to heroes? Do you know why there are heroes? FOR ME TO SMASH!" The mud cracked under repeated impacts.

John-Paul's eyes snapped back to his assailant. Twist's unfocus had given way to preternatural concentration. His mouth was a raw

slash of determination as his one-handed rhythm of rage pounded John-Paul into the ground.

John-Paul forced his left leg to bend beneath him and timed the rhythm to push himself off of the ground just as Twist pulled again. They flipped through the air. Twist lost his balance and landed on his backside, while John-Paul wobbled and skidded on his feet. Golden sparkles danced away at the edge of sight. He shook his head and threw his arms to the side, flexing his fingers. Something sharp popped in his back. He felt inches taller as he stood over the crumpled figure.

“Smash this.”

He hoisted Twist in the air by the collar, then punched him once, twice, and three times with his left hand. Each blow stole madness from his eyes. John-Paul let go, and the other man slumped back against a car to slide slowly to the ground. His head lolled to the right. His body shuddered between his shoulders and his knees, sending tiny, uncontrolled jerks to his fingers and toes.

John-Paul ran a hand through his hair, dislodging clumps of dirt and tiny pebbles. He winced at the bruise in the making behind his right ear. He brushed more dirt off of his trench coat and jeans. A brief bright flash of light caught his attention, and he crouched and half-turned, raising cautious fists. A large camera lens several feet away tracked him as the flash went off again.

“Um,” he said.

“One more picture?” asked the camera. “C’mon Big P, I have in mind a front page shot above the fold.” A lithe hand spun a dial on the lens. The shutter clicked staccato.

“Um,” he said again, glancing between the camera and the drooling Twist.

The camera dropped to reveal a pixie-like face with big green eyes and a button nose. She had chin-length walnut hair, with two longer bangs on either side. One earring was a silver dolphin and the other a silver gecko. “Heh,” he said.

The camera girl’s tiny, amused smile disappeared into pursed

lips. “Wait, who are you? You’re not the Protector. That’s Twisted Man, and that damage over there sure *looks* familiar, but. . . .”

John-Paul looked back at the bank and its new egress. His muscles dissolved into tired water and he staggered. Camera girl took two quick steps and ducked under his arm.

“Careful,” she said. “This guy may look crazy but he’s strong. At least that’s what they say. You’re crazy yourself to take him on, but you really did a number on him. C’mon, let’s sit you down.” She eased him onto the curb.

He found his voice. “Are you a reporter?”

She swung her camera to her right hip and sat. “J-school student actually, but I have an internship at the paper this year. How’d you know?”

“No one else uses that many clichés before introducing herself.”

Her blush highlighted freckles on her nose that he hadn’t noticed before. She offered her hand. “I’m Pandora. Pandora d’Avril.” She blushed again as she saw his eyes drink in a streak of mud across the palm, and she quickly rubbed it away with her left hand.

“John-Paul Harrison.” An electric glow descended at their touch. He stared at her hand to savor the lingering, then looked up at her eyes to see her tilting her head and staring at him.

“How’d you do that?” She nodded toward the wall and then the unmoving Twist. “I’ve seen pictures of other guys who went up against supers like him, and most of them couldn’t stand up afterwards. You have a nasty bump on your head right there, and you were wobbly walking, but you’re all in one piece.”

“What kind of a name is Pandora?” Her expression told him everything he’d forgotten about not saying what he was thinking. “Oh. Sorry. I mean, I’ve only been officially in town for two days, and there’s some serious bizarre here I don’t remember from visiting when I was younger.”

She giggled. “Tourists never see the real deal unless they have someone to show them around. I haven’t been here long myself, but I know enough not to pass for a gawking farmboy.”

Her smile and her laugh and her question stopped bouncing around in his skull long enough to tickle neurons to send electric impulses to other neurons and endocrine glands. His memory flashed briefly back to the third punch he landed on Twist and a squishy cracking sound. Looking again at the man in the jumpsuit with the purple belt, he didn't see a cackling and menacing villain, just a wiry figure folded messily into a heap, blowing saliva bubbles.

John-Paul jumped up and pointed, forcing his left knee to bend in the correct direction. "I just maimed that guy!" Blood drained from his face with a cold fury.

Pandora snorted. "I've seen pictures of him in the morgue, toe-tagged and short sheeted. He's as indestructible as the Protector." She fiddled with her camera. "But wait, if you're not the Protector, then he's around here somewhere and I have to get there before someone else gets the sco..." She caught John-Paul's smirk. "I mean, takes better pictures than I do. Which no one else does. At least none of the other interns."

A buzzing prompted him to grab the girl and throw his trench coat wide to shield them. A tremendous boom shook the ground and rattled his eardrums. Shards of broken building and hot metal rained. She smelled of vanilla and cherries. A soft pop echoed between the buildings, followed by a soft sigh.

His unshakeable confidence surprised him. "Don't worry about him anymore. We have bigger problems."

She extricated herself and toed a large piece of brick out of the way. Her stare dropped twenty degrees as she fixed her fists to her hips. "What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "It seemed like a good thing to say, you know, like 'We're safe, but for how long?' or 'That's the end of that chapter!'"

She sucked her bottom lip. "Bizarre. Why don't we..." A thin wail pierced her words and she trailed off, eyes swiveling and head following to track a white and blue police cruiser squealing to a stop yards away. "So much for *that* idea."

Two uniformed officers disembarked. The driver was thin and

blonde with rough eyes and what might someday be a mustache given six months of proper disciplined fertilization and watering treatments. The passenger was solid with black hair and a posture which signified that nonsense had to straighten up and swallow its back talk or face being shipped off to the kind of military school that produced officers with the kind of posture that signified the circular nature of his presence. They beamed and swaggered up to John-Paul.

“Heya Big P,” said the driver. “Heard about the bumpy ride, but you always bounce back, doncha?” He slapped John-Paul with an awkward whap that fizzled halfway through with the gradual dawning horror of unexpected and undesired familiarity. “You guys sure did a number on the bank this time.”

The passenger nodded toward Twist. “Chasing Twist again, Harvey. No surprise there’s little collateral damage. Is this guy seriously off his meds again, Protector? You slap him less silly?”

John-Paul swallowed. “Um. . .” he cleared his throat. “I just. . .”

They laughed. “No need to explain, big guy. Always with the snappy comebacks. *I love* your work. I bet you get that all the time, though. That’s why I joined the force, you know?” Harvey knelt and shone a penlight in Twist’s eyes.

“You’re gushing.” The larger officer’s nametag read “Brown”. “Any concussion?”

“Out cold. Sheesh, Big P. There’s not even a mark on this guy. I don’t know how you did it, but you pounded the . . . er, snot out of him and I don’t see a scratch. Last time you cracked a couple of ribs, not that I particularly mind. Rough job, but he knew the risks when he signed up for it. I remember when he planned to pinch off both ends of the Crosstown Bridge and dump it in the river during that bicycle protest rally, and. . .”

“C’mon Harvey, just ask for his autograph already.” Brown pulled two notebooks from his shirt pocket and thumb-flicked the cap off of a pen. As John-Paul completely failed to take the bundle, Brown let out a low whistle at Pandora. He leaned in. “Man, I wish

I had your job, rescuing cuties like this. How does Clownfish not get jealous?”

She stared back, eyes narrowing at the failed stage whisper. John-Paul watched three-dimensional puzzle pieces rotate and slide together in a frictionless dance. Her pupils tore a hole in the air around him. He felt like a bug helpless under a magnifying glass, forced to give up his secrets and doomed to slot forever into a tidy, two-cubby taxonomy. He shrugged and returned to the relative comfort of scribbling platitudes in unreadable scrawls.

Brown beamed. “You’re the best, man. Seriously. It’s a pleasure to clean up after you. I don’t know what we’d do with out you, and. . . aw, man. Now I’m gushing. Listen, give us a couple of minutes to tape off the scene here, and then we just have a couple of questions to ask and then maybe your little friend there could snap a couple of shots, you know, if that’s okay, and we’ll be off. It’ll only take five minutes, big guy. What do you say?”

Harvey let Twist’s head drop back to his chest. A puddle of drool had already soaked through the jumpsuit. “Three minutes. We’re old pros at this, even if we’ve never worked one of your cases before.”

Pandora stepped between John-Paul and the police. “I’m outta film, and he’s not finished rescuing me. Why doesn’t he come down by the station later and catch up when he’s off the clock? What’s your station number?”

Suspicion jumped onto their faces, but disappointment crowded it out. “Aw,” said Brown.

“Oh,” said Harvey.

“It’s 348,” Brown offered. “On the corner of Cass Street and. . .”

“He’ll be there.” Pandora waved her hand. “You boys are doing great work, but we really must be off.”

They stood to offer their hands. “Serious pleasure, man.” Brown had a sturdy handshake, with more warmth and passion than John-Paul expected. Harvey offered a vigorous pump. John-Paul mumbled something gracious and stole back his hand. The tilt of Pandora’s head and subtle shift of weight at her hips warned him to fol-

low her right now, or else the next heavy object she could lift would get his attention like a blow to the head. He sped after her, pausing only to offer a nervous fingertip wave as the police called after him.

“Remember, 348!”

“Good to meet ya, Big P! We’ll catch up later, okay?”

He jogged to catch up. “Do you have any idea what they...?”

“None,” she snapped. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“But you were taking pictures of me earlier, and you seemed...?”

She spun, aiming her index finger at a spot in his forehead just between and an inch above his eyes. “You are talking. You should not be talking. Stop talking. Now.” Something soft and metal flashed in her expression.

He pushed her hand away. Her fingers were soft and warm. “Fine. I’m not going to ask about something that’s so *obviously* painful, but in the past eight minutes something crashed into the building I was in, landed in the street, and exploded. Some sort of robber, I suppose, broke into the building I was in and threatened the cashier who ignored me in line for half an hour. I beat him up, then gave the police autographs instead of a statement before they arrested me for assault and, who knows, manslaughter, and now I’m following a cute girl where? I don’t even know. Also I’m bleeding.” A thin red snake slithered down his hand through his coat and dripped on the tip of his shoe.

Pandora closed her eyes and counted to ten through a long sigh. “Okay. John-Paul. That’s you, right? If you ever repeat this, I will beat you with my shoe, but I don’t know what’s going on either, and something I can’t explain tells me that if you stick around, someone will figure out that you’re not the Protector and something bad is going to happen. You won’t like it. I won’t like it. We are going to my apartment until the noise dies down. You can wash up there, and I’m going to look at these pictures and figure out what’s going on, and that’s going to be that. You can let go of my hand now.”

He stared, then released her. Pandora stomped off at a pace no less determined before, but her shoulders slumped into a more re-

laxed position. She chewed the inside of her lip to keep from smiling. “I’m over here,” she pointed.

A yellow scooter sat in the shade of a tree, chained to a parking meter. John-Paul followed Pandora across the empty street. She opened a small compartment on the back and removed two helmets before stowing her camera gear. “Put this on.”

“Why do you have two helmets?”

“I’m not answering why questions today. Are you coming?”

By the time he had the helmet on and fastened, she was on the scooter and had started the engine. He stared. “Uh, where do you want me?”

She stood and patted the seat. “I’m gonna have to sit on your lap. Don’t get any ideas. Also don’t bleed on me.”

“Bleed...?”

She pointed to his left hand. “This shirt’s dry-clean only, so drip into the wind. Can you ride one-handed? I’ll take it easy.”

John-Paul scanned the empty street. He climbed aboard and Pandora plopped down on his lap. “Oof,” he said.

She kicked away from the curb and accelerated, and his right arm tightened reflexively around her waist. He tried to ignore how she felt beneath his arm. She threw her head back against his helmet. “Ouch,” he said.

“My eyes are up here,” she yelled. “Yours should be too.”

He shifted his weight. She corrected with a swerve. Then they were off, his right arm holding her, her eyes fixed on the road, and his left arm out to the side, shooting ruby drips through the air to splatter into tiny gems on the pavement.

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Pandora zipped into a narrow driveway between respectable brick buildings. The driveway widened downhill into an alley between a

tan cinder block wall and an open garage beneath a building. She parked and hopped off and shook out her hair before he realized that they had arrived. By the time he removed his helmet, she had gathered her equipment and stood by a pair of fireproof doors. "Leave that on the handlebars," she said.

She waved a key fob at the wall. Thick bolts slid out of place and a metal screen unrolled over the garage's entrance. John-Paul tried to slide ahead to open the door, but she ducked inside two steps ahead.

The doors opened into a narrow stairwell painted in industrial grays. The air felt ten degrees cooler. Pandora's flip flops ricocheted slap-slaps up the stairs. On the second floor landing, he sidestepped a red wrench lying on the floor beside a pipe as thick as his thigh. A huge wheel the color of post-mold cheese rusted at waist height. Pandora pushed open an access door on the third floor.

Instead of rubber mats on rough-painted concrete floors, the hallway's modest carpet reminded him of the modernist movie theater that closed when he was fourteen. He tried to ignore the feeling of the floor springing beneath his steps, but failed, feeling a Moon Bounce between the rebar reinforcements of the building's floor. He managed to wrestle his eyes away from Pandora to pause before a window. A tree-lined street stretched straight for blocks. Purple mountains lurked in the distance. Brass poles and building numbers complemented the reds and rich earthy browns of the buildings across the street.

"Nice neighborhood," he said. She shrugged and waved her fob at a door labeled 308.

The room was sunny and spacious, monk-sparse of furniture. A glass far wall opened onto a narrow balcony. Sunlight streamed in above his head from wide windows over the door. To his left was a kitchen covered in ivory enamel held in place with blue trim. The long wall on the right was canary yellow, broken only by what he assumed was a coat closet and stairs covered in shaggy white carpet. Pandora threw her jacket over the side of a hulking tan couch previously out of sight against the kitchen's half-wall. She gestured.

“There’s a bathroom beneath the stairs. It’s not big, but you can wash up in there. I’ll find you bandages.”

He walked in. Something caught his eye on the wall opposite the stairs. A framed poster dominated the room where he would have put a television. Three separate panels expressed time and motion. A ruined city lay unlamented at the bottom of each; buildings twisted and creaked and offered exposed steel bones skyward in silent screams. The sky glowered and howled. Thick clouds swirled and shot lightning at each other.

A lone bird stretched mighty wings to fly right to left in the first panel. Blinding white plumage burned its image into his retinas even as the wind from its toil ruffled his hair. In the second panel, tendrils of smoke or cloud or darkness embraced the bird as lighting flashes illuminated distant hills of rubble.

There was no bird in the third panel.

“I hope you’re not dripping. The floor is real hardwood.” Pandora called from the top of the stairs.

John-Paul half turned, flushed. “Oh no, I was just. . . I think it’s mostly stopped bleeding now.”

“Eratosthenes,” she said. “Some nickname a bunch of painters and poets and revolutionaries used to use back in the Reconstruction days. It was here when I moved in. I like it, I guess. Nice use of contrast of color and theme. They weren’t very popular, but sometimes the truth isn’t.”

He scanned the poster again. “The Gathering Storm? Sounds pretentious.”

A plastic bag full of bandages and antibiotics bounced off his head. “Art criticism can wait. Go clean up. Just throw your coat on the couch.” She popped back around the corner. Unlike the hallway, her floors didn’t creak.

The bathroom itself was long and narrow. The first switch he flipped bathed the walls in a dull red glow. The second switch added yellow. He sat on the toilet and examined his arm; it glowed golden under the lights. A thin scrape ran from mid-arm to his elbow, where

it deepened to a clotted puncture. This was the source of the blood. He winced in anticipation, but it felt mild under his probing finger.

Instead of a mirror, a large series of empty shelves stuck out above the sink. He washed up and down his arm, dabbing at the edges of the scab, then toweled dry, trying not to stain a fluffy white towel.

He left the bathroom, dabbing at ointment seeping out from under the bandage. “Sorry about the towel,” he started. Pandora sat on the couch with her legs folded under her and her right arm dangling off of her knee. He hadn’t noticed the television behind a footrest. The volume was low. Captions scrolled across the screen.

A pile of debris smoldered and spit muddy steam in infrequent bursts. Police tape lined the square; officers clumped in twos and threes, nodding sagely or rubbing their short hair with their hat hands. The camera angle shifted from overhead to handheld and went shaky and fuzzy in a handheld unit. A ratty blue scrap of fabric the size of a baby-doll t-shirt flapped in the breeze.

Pandora stared at him. He offered, “Some bleach or peroxide should take it out. I can do it if you want. The towel, I mean. Okay. You’re giving me a look. I don’t speak looks.”

“Don’t you recognize that?”

“Some bomb exploded somewhere. It happens.”

The scene changed again. An agitated Harvey waved his hands. The captions struggled to keep pace, then devolved into gibberish. Brown stood nearby, face ash-gray from mud—and something else.

“Do you recognize them? Yes?”

“The cops we just ran away from. So?”

She turned up the volume. “. . . just talked to him a few minutes ago! Look, he autographed my notebook!” Harvey waved a paper. The camera focused just long enough for John-Paul to recognize his own scribble.

The helicopter view swung around to the front of the bank. “So far, we have no further confirmation that anyone else saw the Protector leave the accident, but we remain hopeful. I’m getting an update

that we have a camera inside the bank now, is that... is that right? No... we'll switch to that just as soon as we can get inside. We've had a report that we have some eyewitnesses in..."

Pandora muted the sound and threw the remote on the cushion. "Humor me. Who are you?"

Blood roared in his ears. "I was just in the bank to get a cashier's check. The ground shook, the skylight broke, and then that guy in the jumpsuit crashed through the wall. You saw everything else." He paused and stared back, then decided to find his shoes fascinating. "How about *you* tell me what you think is going on, and then... well, we'll figure that out."

She sighed, and he watched her count silently again. "Alright. Fine. Like I said, I was minding my own business, when work sent out a text to see if anyone was in the area. I was. I hadn't seen anything on the schedule, but I was lucky to have my gear with me, and figured I might be lucky enough to get an editor to bite on a few lucky shots. I made it to the bank just as you and Twist came flying out of there. I'd taken a handful of pictures before I realized that you weren't the Protector." She checked her hair for split ends. "They're saying on TV now that, um, they think he's still in the wreckage."

"Those cops sure thought he, or me, whoever... was up and walking around."

She shrugged and started her bangs. "You autographed their books. They're happy."

"I've never seen him. Do I really look like him?"

"I have no idea. Not really. Maybe you were just in the right place at the right time, and it's just a silly coincidence. What about the other guy?"

John-Paul slouched against the wall and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "I doubt he even noticed me until I made some noise." Something felt wrong. His wallet was gone. He patted his pockets, then forced the sick feeling in his stomach to recede as he turned his coat inside out in his search. Nothing. He checked his pants again. A cold feeling crept over his skin.

“What? What is it?” asked Pandora.

“My wallet. . . the last time I saw it was in the bank, when Twist saw me and when everything started to go weird. Weirder, anyway. Your city’s weird.” He pulled on his coat and ran to the window. Smoke smudged the afternoon sky like a greasy thumb print blurring a lens. He followed the road in his head briefly, fished in his pocket for a pen, then knelt by the couch and grabbed Pandora’s hand.

“What?” she said.

“Call this number,” he said as he scribbled in blue ink, “in. . . ten minutes. If I don’t pick up, call again every couple of minutes after that. We’ll continue this conversation then.” He fixed her with his best determined gaze, trying to emulate the golden glow he’d seen on her as she guided him to the scooter.

Two steps later he stared at the balcony door. “This opens, right?” She nodded. Then he was outside. He leapt over the railing.

“That’s three floors. . . !” she cried. When she reached the balcony, only a golden smear remained.

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About the Author

S. Christopher has worked in a recording studio, built houses, taught preschool, driven an ambulance, written software, unpacked dry ice from a truck, written training materials for a box-making factory, and gone on the road as a traveling actor. Compared to that, writing novels is maddeningly sane, even when his cats sleep on his arms while he attempts to type.

His first novel, **Gravitas**, is available from Onyx Neon Press. This is his second. For information on these and upcoming works, see:

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