

*So, as you can see, the first impression I made wasn't exactly a ringing success. The article never got published, for those interested. And we both kept to our promises. I forgot his secret identity, he kept an eye on me. Nothing harassing, I mean, it's the Samaritan, but Clarkson would check in occasionally, especially if he thought I was going too far. Some of them weren't even my fault. Anyway, this continued for a few years, and then things changed.*

More recently, but still several years ago, well past sundown and verging on midnight, heavy knocks bang out through the house in a salubrious district. Dr Pranger grouses to himself as he shuffles towards the door, rubbing sleep from his eyes and yawning. "What do you..." he stops. The broad-shouldered figure is clad in a pure white bodysuit a slanted S of red cutting from his left shoulder to his right hip. His imperial red cloak waves in the night air as he floats above the steps.

"I...need your help."

"Me? What do..."

"No, I really need your help. Krakatoan."

The Doctor takes a step back, his mind reeling as the hidden memories spill back in a rush. "Jesus. Come in, before someone sees you."

The Samaritan floats in. "Nice place."

"I do alright. Now, what do you want?"

"It's serious..."

"I know it's serious. You used the trigger word, for fuck's sake. I was sure you'd never ever do that. What worries me is what's so serious that you would come to me in the middle of the night needing my help!"

"They're watching my normal allies. They'll kill her if I make contact. You're my only hope."

"Well, shit. Start at the beginning. Who's they? Who's she? What..."

"Lana Losi. She's been kidnapped. They had someone deliver me this." He pulls out a photograph of a woman in a smart blouse and red skirt, her hair cut pixie short. She's sitting between two men in masks, blue and green armour and very impressive-looking guns, holding up a newspaper with today's date in classic 'proof of life' pose. "He said they were monitoring me, so if I went for help they'd kill her."

"So you came here? Thanks a bunch."

"They don't seem to be following me, and now you've got another incentive to help."

"That's...devious. There may be hope for you yet."

"Will you help me?"

"How? I can't exactly search the city for her and if you give me any way to call in others, they'll assume you've get through their net and kill her, won't they?"

“I have a prisoner...”

“A prisoner?”

“The one who gave me the photo. But he won’t talk.”

“No, probably not. So you want me to what?”

“Can you make him tell me where she is?”

He sighs, “Let me get dressed and let’s go see.”

As soon as possible, Dr Pranger is dressed in his black suit. “Not yet.” He digs into a nearby drawer and pulls out a dark hood. “Halloween costume, before you ask. But feel free to check it if it matches someone on your systems later.” He pulls the hood over his face, adjusting the fit. “I’m not letting them recognise me, just in case. I’m not bulletproof like some people.”

The Samaritan grabs him under his shoulders and soars into the air almost before the door finishes closing.

“You’re worried.”

“It’s fine. I don’t need you to psychoanalyse me.”

The air buffets the Doctor’s body, chilling him before the Samaritan plunges down to an abandoned warehouse. He effortlessly slides the loading doors open as the Doctor rubs his hands to restore circulation. Inside, a lone figure sits tied to a chair under a single light. The figure looks up.

“Oh, you’re back. Who’s your friend? Think he can put the frighteners on me when you can’t?”

“You tried to frighten him?”

“Nightwatch makes it look so easy.”

“Nightwatch is a tightly-controlled high-functioning psychopath, in my professional opinion. Of course he’s scary. You’re...you’re the Samaritan. It would be like Santa Claus threatening you.”

“Exactly! That’s what I...”

“Oh, shut up, you, you’re the reason I’m out of bed at this ungodly hour.”

“You can’t make me talk neither. The Iron Emperor will take care of you just as well.”

“The Iron Emperor?”

“His boss.” The Samaritan shrugs. “I don’t recognise the name, but there’s a new city-conqueror popping up every other minute.”

“The Emperor will...”

“Yes, yes, he’ll crush us, I’m sure. Let’s talk about you.”

“Me?”

“You. Relax and fall into a trance for me.”

His head lolls forward.

“I thought you said you couldn’t do that.”

“It’s a light trance and he’s a low-rent thug. His mind barely functions on its own. Anyway, it won’t last long or be that helpful to you unless I deepen it. So, Mr Goon...”

“Smsn.”

“Mr Samson, you’re at the top of a staircase and you’re going to walk down 100 steps and when you reach the bottom, you’ll be deep in a real trance. When that happens, you’ll cluck like a chicken and sit up. After that you’ll answer all my questions truthfully and honestly, won’t you?”

“Ys.”

“Good. Start walking down the steps and into your trance...now.”

“That’s...unnerving to watch.”

“You’d rather I pretended to be Nightwatch and threatened to break every bone in his body, alphabetically?”

“No. And he wouldn’t say that.”

“Really?”

“It’s too close to being funny.”

Pranger blinks, “Was that a dig? Anyway, you came to me for help, so let me do things my way to get you that help. In fact, it would be better if you weren’t here.”

“Why?”

“If he sees you, he might remember why he’s not supposed to be telling me this. If you don’t trust me...”

“It’s not that...”

Pranger raises an eyebrow behind the mask.

“It’s not just that, then. I need to hear what he says myself. You might miss something out that’s important.”

“I’m insulted. Fine. I’ll deal with that when...”

“Buk-buk-bukaw!”

They look at Samson, sitting upright in the chair.

“Good, now, Mr Samson. First, we’re here alone. Just you and I talking. If you see or hear anyone else, you’ll ignore them as if they didn’t exist. They won’t impinge on your mind at all. You won’t see them or hear them. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

“And unless I’m directly addressing you, you won’t pay any attention to what I say, either, will you?”

“No.”

“Good. You work for this Emperor, yes?”

“The Iron Emperor, yes.”

“Have you seen him?”

“Yes.”

“Describe him for me.”

“He’s tall, like eight foot, maybe nine. Wears this blue-black and green power armour, with a purple cape. Barry claims he’s seen him without his helmet and says he’s got this really twisted and scarred face, but Barry’s a liar. He said he knew the Samaritan’s secret ID last week an’ everyone knows the Samaritan’s way too busy to have a whole other life. And his armour has these blade things on his arms, used them to slice up Larry when he said summint he didn’t like. Spikes on the shoulders.”

“There’s always spikes on the shoulders.” The Samaritan mutters, “It’s practically a law.”

“Does the armour do anything special?”

“I dunno. He picked up Larry one-handed so it probably has some kind of strength boost, and it must be pretty tough if he thinks it’ll help him with the Samaritan, but I dunno how or what. I ain’t exactly in the upper circles, you know.”

“Yes, I know. It’s always so unfair when they exclude people of your talent, isn’t it?”

“Too right.”

“Did he tell you to bring the photo to the Samaritan?”

“Nuh-uh. That was one of his whatsiname lootnants. Said it was important.”

“Did he say why?”

“Nope. No one ever tells me why I’m doin’ somethin’. Just that the Emperor wanted me to do it and I’d get a reward so I did.”

“Were you supposed to report back?”

“Nah. He said I didn’t need to come back for a coupla days. That they’d have dealt with Samaritan by then an’ if I came back too soon it’d compromentalise things.”

“And where would you be coming back to?”

“I dunno. I shouldn’t...”

“Oh, come on, with all those defences? I’m not going to go charging in there. I’m not the Samaritan.”

“Yeah, that’s a point. There’s guards, an’ blasters, an’ traps all the way down. You need a passcode to get through.”

“Do you have one?”

“Nah. I was escorted with the rest of us that time I was there.”

He looks over at the Samaritan. “Ok. But where did you go?”

“We went out from Bleeker’s, you know, on the West Side. Anyway, there’s a junkyard about five blocks east of there. The entrance is hidden under a pile of cars that kinda unsmoothes itself to let you in.”

“And that’s where they’re holding Ms Losi?”

“I guess. They’ve got a whole base thing underneath so sure maybe. I ain’t seem ‘em being anywhere else an’ they ain’t gonna want to risk the Samaritan seein’ em movin’ her if they don’t have to, you know?”

“That sounds very smart, Mr Samson. Could you draw me a map of the layout of the base you saw?”

“Sure. If I weren’t tied up, an’ had somethin’ ta draw with. I ain’t no Michaelangelo or nothin’, though.”

Pranger turns, “Could you go get me a pad and some pens for Mr Samson?” The Samaritan speeds out the door before he’s turned back. “While we wait for him to get back, what else can you tell me about this place? You’re an observant kind of guy.”

“The Emperor spends almost all his time sittin’ on his fancy throne an’ all. Like he didn’t wanna stand up, you know. I don’t spend that kinda time on the john.”

“Throne?”

“Big, huge metal thing, fulla them power cables and science things. Didn’t look very comfy like, always crackling when he was sitting in it an’ alla the screens showed whatever he wanted. Cameras all over the city trackin’ the Samaritan.”

“Did they say how they were monitoring him?”

“Nah. You don’t ask things like that of people like this. Don’t know, don’t need to know.”

“Quite.” The Samaritan returns, holding a dog-eared pencil and pad. “Where’d you get those? I don’t imagine anywhere’s open.”

“Dockworker’s office was unlocked. I’ll put them back when we’re done.”

“We’ll make a morally grey human being out of you yet.”

“No.”

“Get Mr Samson out of his ropes and I’ll get him to draw us a way in.”

“Then what?”

“Then you go and save the day as usual, I suppose.”

“I meant about him.”

“I’ll take care of that before you leave, don’t worry.”

“How?”

“You’ll be here when I do it. Trust me.”

“You don’t make that easy.” He grabs the ropes, deftly untying them.

“Huh. You must be an actual boy scout to be that good with knots.” He hands over the pad and pencil. Sampson starts drawing a crude map, making notes of weapon emplacements and guard posts. “Unless there’s something kinky going on...”

“My private life is not your business.”

“Of course not. While you were out, he said the Emperor spends a lot of time sitting on some kind of power throne, so it may be his armour can’t function for long independently.”

“I...thank you for this. You could have turned me down.”

“Done.” He holds up the map.

“Thank you, Mr Samson. Now, you’re going to go on a little vacation for a few days. Go home and go to sleep. Wake up in, oh, say two days, with no memory of anything that’s happened since you handed the Samaritan that photo. From when you go to sleep until you wake up, your mind will be utterly blank, your body will be in a state of hibernation, metabolically slowed right down. Before that point, nothing except direct danger will wake you. When you wake up, you’ll feel refreshed and alert. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any other questions for him?”

“No. Vacation?”

“I can hardly make him think he went to Tahiti, can I?”

“I’m told it’s a magical place.”

“Indeed, it is.” They watch Samson walk out the loading bay door.

“So, here’s the plan...”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, I am not part of this plan. Unlike you, I am not bulletproof and I am not keen on blood, especially mine!”

“Please, I need...”

“Oh, not the puppy dog eyes.” He throws his hands in the air, “Fine. I’ll listen to the plan, but this doesn’t mean I’m agreeing to it.”

The Samaritan points at the map. “Here’s the central chamber. This area here is unmapped but there’s a corridor marked, so it’s likely to be where they’re holding Lana.”

“Seems likely. How do you plan on getting past the Emperor?”

“I don’t. That’s your job.”

“My job?”

“All eyes will be on me. All eyes are always on me in this sort of situation. You should be able to sneak away without being noticed.”

“How do you intend getting me in there past all of the guards?” he points at the various stations marked with Xs.

“Straight down makes a great shortcut.”

“I can’t fly, remember?”

“I’ll carry you down.”

“That’s not going to help me be sneaky. Anyway, dumping me into the main chamber is an unnecessary risk. If you come down in that tunnel, you get surprise, I get a chance to move deeper while you draw everyone’s attention the other way.”

“That sounds like you’re agreeing.”

“I’m only human. Saying no to you feels like kicking a fucking puppy. It’s a good thing you’re superhumanly good, or you’d be a nightmare to deal with.”

“I’m not superhumanly good.”

“And only you think that. You’re sure you can get me in unharmed?”

“I’m sure.”

“I am going to regret this, aren’t I? Fine. Let’s get goeeep.” He yelps as the Samaritan scoops him up, soaring into the sky. “This is incredibly undignified.” He mutters, his legs dangling over the Samaritan’s arm.

They sweep over the city, past the junkyard and hover in place. The Samaritan’s eyes glow in the moonlight as he stares down. “This is the place. The area to the back is shielded, so must be important. Ready?”

“If I say no, will it make a difference?”

“Of course it will.”

He steels himself, “Then I guess I’m ready.”

“Good. Hold on tight.”

“Trust me, that will not be a problem!”

The Samaritan plunges down boring into the ground, his eyes glowing red to burn lower until his fists smash their way into the metal-reinforced tunnel. “That way. Go.” He heads in the opposite direction, “Sorry, gentlemen, site inspection. You appear to have a great big hole in the roof.”

Dr Pranger runs the other direction, skidding to a halt as he comes up against the first checkpoint. “I did not think this through, did I?”

“Hey, who are you?” Weapons raise, the interior of the barrels glowing alarmingly as the sound of metal crashing into invulnerable flesh, or vice versa, echoes down the corridor.

“Trance!” he shouts. The helmeted heads droop. “Thank fuck that worked. Now, I am your commanding officer and you’re my guards. Form up and protect me from the infiltrators who have disguised themselves as your comrades. And with each step, that reality becomes more enforced. Understand?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“Excellent.” He makes his way down the corridor, flanked by the former guards. At each waypoint, the moment of indecision their presence causes proves enough to let him add more guards to his entourage, reinforcing their new role with each step along the corridor until they reach the end at a series of blank walls.

“Where’s the prisoner?”

“Prisoner?”

“Lana Losi.”

“Not down here. The Emperor cleared everyone out of the ops room when she was brought in and we haven’t seen her since. His main captains left on missions after that, but none of them had Losi.”

“What? Where would he... That makes no... oh, shit. They wouldn’t... That’s... Fuck, of course they would, the devious, evil little shits. All of you, to the ops room, on the double!”

The tramp of double marching feet echoes along the corridor, the sounds of battle getting closer until they emerge into smoke and chaos. The Samaritan and a giant in midnight-blue armour with green highlights battle in the middle of the room. Dents cover the armour, sparks showering from one significant hole in its hip shallow slashes marked with bright blood crossing the Samaritan’s chest. More of the faceless guards are scattered around, some firing wildly, some lying senseless on the floor. Screens flicker with static, smoke belching from those shattered by the careening blasts.

“Ok, Phillip, time to see if you’re right.” He tries to concentrate, but the noises are too loud, the smoke burning his lungs, and far too many beams of... something flying around. He ducks back. “Ok. No problem. I just have to concentrate. Block out everything.” A particularly loud metallic peel tries to disrupt his concentration as it sets his teeth on edge. “Everything. And... fuck it, sometimes I hate being right. Bastards. Right. So now that I know, how do I tell him?”

“Sir? Those infiltrators are pretty dug in over there.”

“Hmmm? Oh, yes. Can you keep them behind cover so they stop interfering?”

“Yes, sir! Squad, suppressing fire.” Their guns fire, a high-pitched vroom accompanying the bolts of green light.

“Well, that’s helped. So...” he closes his eyes, slipping into a trance and focusing himself as the noise and smoke and fear fades away. “*Samaritan!*” The Samaritan clutches his head, a fist the size of person’s head slamming into his chest, “*Sorry, sorry, not really used to doing things in this environment. Losi is inside the armour.*”

“What?”

“*It’s a trap. When you cripple the armour, the power supply will overload. You’ll survive the explosion, but...*”

“How...” “*How do we stop it?*”

“*I don’t... ok, that might work, maybe. When all hell breaks loose, tear it’s chest open and get her under cover.*”



“This isn't all hell breaking loose?”

“Sergeant! On my signal switch all fire to that throne. Full power.”

“Sir?”

“You heard me, soldier!”

“Yes, sir!”

The Samaritan flies into the Iron Emperor's chest, digging his fingers deep into the metal. “Now!!” The guns change target, bolts of harsh green light concentrating on the giant throne. The men know their job and pick their targets., Power cables crack, raw electricity crackling cross the throne. Capacitors shatter. The Throne explodes. In the smoke and wrath, metal tears, hands yank warm skin out of a cocoon of wires and a giant suit of empty armour topples onto the throne before it adds to the conflagration. Glass rains in a glittering rain as the screens shatter. The firing ceases as everyone gets knocked to the floor by the blast. The Samaritan wraps a fragile human frame in his cloak, shielding her with his body.

“She's alive. She's alive.”

Pranger picks himself up off the floor, his suit torn, covered in dust. “Go. I'll handle this.” The Samaritan looks concerned. He hesitates.”I said go!” The Samaritan goes. “Right!” he shuts, “Everyone in this room who isn't already in my squad, trance! And sleep!” he coughs on the smoke. “I'll deal with you later. My squad, round up everyone else in this facility and bring them here under guard.”

The lead squad member salutes. “Yes, sir.”

He coughs again, tugging on his ripped sleeves, “Fucking hell! This was fucking Armani! Now to make sure none of these thugs remember I was ever here.”