

The Empire Express
by Christian O'Kane

The night was quiet. Even in a place as busy as Paragon city some nights were quiet. Villains were off raiding and looting some other town and no one had tried to rob a bank in two days! Even Lusca the giant squid that lived in the waters of Independence seemed to have taken the night off.

Misha was standing on the balcony that ran completely around the place they called home. The balcony sat atop the twelve story tall office tower attached to the Paragon City Union Train station. The station itself was mostly abandoned and they were the only two living souls in the entire, vast structure.

Misha Brightleaf, looked like a superhero. He certainly did not look like a normal human being. He stood a little over five feet three inches tall and his trim and muscular body weighed one hundred fifty pounds. Misha stood upright, had two arms and two legs and walked erect like a human but there all resemblances ended. He had the head of a red fox to match the long bushy vulpine tail and his body was covered with thick fur and markings of a red fox. Even his hands were covered with the fine, black fur. His legs had the extra joint and odd bend all canines had and called digitigrade. The legs ended in black furred paws.

Leaning against the railing next to him was carrying a bow that was as tall as he was. It was made of a complex composite of polymers and plastics carefully formed into a bow. It was a very powerful weapon and only Misha's cybernetically enhanced muscles could use it. The special arrows he could shoot from such a powerful bow were deadly, capable of penetrating the toughest armor.

"Could it get any quieter?" Stealth commented. The cheetah morph was standing close to Misha. Standing next to the anthropomorphic fox was another figure just as unusual. This one was also part human and part animal but instead of a fox this person had the sleek, spotted form of a cheetah. The tee shirt and jeans he was wearing did nothing to hide the slim and well muscled body he had. When he walked it was with all the grace and beauty of a wild feline.

Misha took a sip of the clam chowder he was eating. "Don't say that too loud," He joked. "You'll jinx it."

The cheetah gave a chirp of laughter. "We can't be fighting evil and saving the world all the time."

"I like the night," Misha responded. "There's something magical about the nighttime. Especially when no one is shooting at you."

"We've had motion sensor 337 trip down on the 9th floor," the nanites announced suddenly.

"Probably rats or pigeons," Misha responded. "The owners have never been able to keep all of them out. No matter how hard they try."

"We've already taken them into account," the microscopic machine life answered. *"The motion sensor tripped but not the IR sensors."*

Misha finished his soup. "All right. We'll take a look."

A short trip through some armored doors took them into the apartment complex that was their home. The two made a quick trip to the armory to retrieve Stealth's two swords and a quiver of arrows and some armor for Misha.

Soon the two were standing in the lobby that was the only official exit and entrance to their home. They stood there for a moment and looked at the elevator. "Too obvious," Misha said. Then they turned to the door next to it. We'll take the stairs."

Stealth opened the metal door that was next to the elevator. It revealed a stairwell whose drab and darkened interior contrasted sharply with the lobby they had just left. The two peered over the railing. The stairwell seemed to drop down forever and was only partially lit leaving most of it shadow and darkness.

The two walked slowly and carefully down the stairs, their footsteps echoing loudly off the concrete walls.

Stealth suddenly came to a stop. "I hear footsteps above us," he said and looked up.

"So do I!" Misha agreed.

"That's not possible," the nanites countered. *"Sensors show nothing up there."*

"We just came from there," Stealth snapped. "No one could be there. Must be an echo."

They held still for what seemed a long time. Listening to the silence that filled the stairwell. They listened for the slightest sound. The scrape of a boot or the rustle of clothes. But all they got was silence. Finally Misha reached a decision. He pointed down the staircase and the two started moving again.

They had only gone down a few flights of steps before they came to a halt again.

"Now the steps are below us," Misha snarled.

The two looked over the rail and down the opening that led all the way to the lowest basement.

Stealth caught sight of a flash of movement halfway down. It was the faint shift of a shadow that seemed to lean over the rail. He caught a glimpse of a face looking up and then it was gone as the shadow pulled back.

"I saw someone," Stealth shouted.

"I saw it too!" Misha added. "That's on the 6th floor!"

"The alarms and sensors picked up nothing!"

"Someone is playing games with us," Misha snarled.

"We're just letting our imaginations run away with us," Stealth countered. "There's no way someone can be in the stairwell. All the doors are locked and alarmed, and the stairwell itself has sensors too."

"All locks can be picked and alarms and sensors tricked," Misha countered.

"Why?" Stealth asked. "Why go to all that trouble? Just to play tag with us?"

"Good point," Misha nodded his head. "But this all could be a distraction to keep us away from the first sensor trip. We'll check nine first and the sensors there. Then we check the basement."

"Sounds like a good plan," the feline responded.

Slowly the pair started their journey downward. They paused frequently expecting to hear their unseen companion this time the only sounds that echoed were their own footsteps.

Eventually their travels brought them to a door labeled simply "9".

Neither of them opened the door at first. Misha spent several minutes carefully examining it for the slightest sign of a booby trap. Finally he took hold of the knob and gently opened the door.

A blast of cold air whipped past them as they stepped through the door and into the darkened room.

"What was here?" Stealth asked as he looked around. All he saw was dust and debris scattered on floors and walls. A few overturned desks and the broken remains of wood and metal whose original purpose was now unknowable. The sharp smell of decay and rot filled their nostrils. It all spoke of long abandonment.

"Offices for the Shore line division of New Haven railroad," Misha answered. "The whole tower was filled with them."

"The whole tower?" Stealth asked. "It's 15 stories tall. That's a lot of office space."

"Remember this was all before the invention of computers," Misha explained. "Everything had to be written up by hand or with a typewriter."

"Sounds mind numbingly boring," Stealth responded.

Misha gave a yip of laughter. "I bet it was boring. But it did the job."

Ring Ring

Ring Ring

The soft sound of a telephone ringing somewhere echoed around them.

The two stopped and looked around. "I hear a phone?"

Ring Ring

"That's not possible," the nanites commented. "The phone system up here has been disconnected. There's not even any electrical power up here."

"Special effects," Stealth countered. "Someone is playing a recording."

Ring Ring

"Why?" Misha asked as he looked around. But the sound seemed to be coming from everywhere.

"I don't know," Stealth responded. "As a joke?"

Ring . . .

The two stiffened as the sound cut off suddenly. As unnerved by its suddenly stopping as its unexpected start.

"Hello?" The voice echoed clearly in the derelict room.

Misha did a complete circle, turning all the way around as he scanned the derelict and weather worn remains of the room. All he saw was dust, dirt and debris. "All right. We'll make a complete sweep of the whole floor. See if we can find out where that came from."

Stealth and Misha carefully made their way across floor moving around the shattered plaster, dust and debris that seemed to be everywhere. Half rotted fiberboard tiles lay scattered about on the floor and sagged down from the ceiling. A florescent light fixture lay in a tangled heap on the floor. Where it had landed when its supports had rusted though. Misha looked up at the ceiling and saw a pair of ragged holes with wires hanging down. He concentrated himself on the wires.

IR showed them as cold and an electromagnetic frequency scan showed nothing. If the wires had been carrying electricity there would have been at least a small amount of electrical discharge.

The fox slowly turned around trying to look all over. Seeing if anything stood out. But nothing did. No electricity, no active phone lines. The room was even at 62 degrees which was the outside temperature. "Nothing," Misha said "No one and nothing capable of making those sounds."

"If someone faked that I don't see how they did it," Stealth added.

"Let's check the sensors themselves," Misha ordered.

The sensors turned out to be six, palm sized squares set in the walls and ceilings in various spots. Checking them was easy. All they had to do was touch the sensor and the nanites did the rest. The tests showed that all the sensors were in good working order and hadn't been touched.

The two Supers made their way back to the stairs. Soon they found themselves on the steps leading lower into the old edifice. Moving slowly and carefully downward they listened for anything unusual. But the only thing they heard was the echoes of their own footsteps.

Their travels took them ever downward as the stairs seemed to go on forever. Eventually the stairs just ended in an old wooden door. At some point in the distant past the door might have been painted a light blue but it had long ago faded to a dirty gray. In faded blood red lettering on it was "1SB2."

Misha examined the door for a long time carefully examining from top to bottom. Longest of all he examined the dirt covered and verdigris covered door knob. Slowly he reached for the knob and gently turned it. After a quarter turn there was a loud click that echoed like a gunshot.

For all the corrosion and debris that covered it and its hinges the door swung open silently. The wood moving with no sound. It revealed a dark world beyond it.

Stealth looked through the doorway. He saw a massive open area with dirt floor and bare concrete wall lining the sides. "Where are we?"

"Sub basement 2," the nanites responded. "The records describe it as deep storage. Whatever that means."

"Probably just empty rooms," Stealth commented. "They couldn't leave the blueprints blank so they gave it an official sounding name."

"That sounds about right," Misha added.

On the wall next to the door, at head height was a metal sign. It was rusted and covered with dirt but they could just make out what might have been a yellow coloring with a black circle in

the center. Inside the circle was the yellow trefoil of a radiation warning. "Fallout shelter," was printed near the bottom.

"Fallout shelter?" Stealth asked. "This was a fallout shelter?"

"Probably added in the 50's with the Cold War/Civil defense craze," Misha responded. "The government declared anything underground as a fallout shelter."

"This is no place to survive the apocalypse," Stealth commented.

"No it isn't," the fox responded. "The whole civil defense idea that surviving a nuclear war was possible was a lie. It was meant to help improve morale. Still, the walls are thick and we're a good ways underground. It would protect you from the blast and the radiation."

"But what good would it do you? If it didn't its own air supply it would just be a death trap," Stealth countered.

The dirt floor was hard underneath their shoes but it still muffled their footfalls. The air down here was cool and still.

"The air is 53 degrees," the nanites announced suddenly.

"Down here I bet it stays at the temperature all the time," Stealth said calmly. "Winter or summer."

"Make for a great wine cellar."

"That it would!" The feline answered as his tail flipped back and forth.

The two continued their exploration but all they found was dark and damp tunnels filled only with echoes, decay and old memories. No matter how long they walked the tunnels seemed to stretch ever onward into the darkness.

Finally Stealth came to a halt. "This place is empty. We haven't seen the slightest trace of anyone being down here. Not a sound or a noise. Not even any footprints in the dirt."

"We're probably the only people who have been down here since they put up that sign," Misha pointed in the direction of the civil defense emblem.

Stealth looked around at the dark, dank tunnels that ran off in all directions. All he saw was bare walls, dirt and decay interrupted by the occasional spider web. "I can see why."

Misha shook his head. "If someone is down here we'll never find them."

"Agreed," Stealth said. "Let's get out of this creepy place."

The trip upward was easier in spite of all the steps they had to traverse. Eventually the two stopped at a door labeled "Basement."

After checking the door and frame, Misha opened the door and stepped into a darkened hallway.

"More darkness," Stealth commented sarcastically. "Is any part of this place brightly lit?"

"Lights require electricity," the fox explained. "Since they tore down the power plant and have to get power from the city, electricity costs money."

Stealth looked around inside the doorway. "Got it! Found the light switch."

There was a soft click. A scattering of small bulbs came on, gave a dim illumination to a large room. Pipes, cabling and ductwork of myriad sizes and shapes ran along the concrete walls, floors and ceilings and going in all directions.

"This is the basement level," Misha explained. "Above us is the street level. Above that is the lower mezzanine and above that the main concourse. The only things down here is the heating, ventilation, plumbing and electrical systems."

"The usual stuff you find in a basement," Stealth added. He looked at the map the nanites displayed right onto his eyesight. "This place is a maze."

"There are a thousand places someone could hide," Misha added as he looked around. He switched from normal low light vision to IR. Most of the vast room came up as dark, which considering the cool, wet environment was understandable. But one place came up a dark red color.

"What's that?" Misha asked as he pointed to the warm area.

The feline looked in the direction Misha pointed. "You mean that section of wall that's glowing?"

"Yes," Misha answered as the two made their way over to the wall.

"These walls are different," Stealth said. "They're made of stone, not concrete."

Misha pulled a flashlight from off of his belt and turned it on. The bright light seemed glaring. It pushed back the darkness which seemed to give ground only reluctantly. Outside the beam of the light it was still all enveloping blackness.

He played the light over the wall and saw that it wasn't concrete like the rest. This wall was made up of fieldstones carefully mortared together. "Why are most of the foundations in concrete but this part is in stone?"

"The wall looks blackened," Stealth leaned close to the stonework. "Has this been burned?" The feline reached out a hand slowly towards the stone wall in front of him.

Misha clasped his hand onto his friend's wrist. Stealth looked at the fox who was shaking his head. "Bad idea."

The feline turned his head to Misha. "Why?"

"I . . . I don't know," Misha stuttered. "It was just a sudden thought."

The feline hesitated for a moment the he reached and touched it. "This wall is warm!" Stealth said, surprised.

"What?" The fox gently reached out and placed his palm on the stonework. The wall was rough as he had expected. But instead of being cool it was warm almost like he was holding a warm cup of tea.

"Remarkable. This section of wall is twenty four degrees warmer than the rest," the nanites commented.

"Why?" Stealth asked.

Misha shrugged. "No idea. Perhaps it's due to it being stone instead of concrete. Maybe there is some hidden pipe or the like behind it."

"Nothing on the records or diagrams," the nanites injected. *"But we are some twenty meters underground. The possibility of unmapped features must be considered. You humans seem to be always burying things and then loosing track of them."*

"This is older. Must be left over from the previous station," Misha said.

"Previous?" Stealth asked.

"This is the second," the archer paused a moment, "Or maybe the third station here."

"Third," the nanites commented. *"The first station burnt down and the second was torn down to build the current structure."*

"That explains the scorch marks," Stealth commented.

"The more we explore this place," Misha commented. "The more questions I have."

Misha stopped in front of a gray, metal door. Printed on it in clean, crisp, new lettering was the word "Concourse." Stealth noticed that the door was of case hardened steel and the hinges were reinforced. The lock was a modern, magnetic keypad that was the top of the line.

Misha simply touched a finger on the lock and the nanites automatically entered the needed twelve digit code. The door swung open and they stepped out into a good sized vestibule. The room was about thirty feet wide. On the wall next to them were three doors labeled "Elevators." Opposite them was a doorway. The lettering over it "TO BUSES AND TROLLEYS." Beyond the doorway steps lead downward in the darkness. To the left were set of three, large doors of bronze and brass. The windows in them showed the darkness of the night with the lights of the city twinkling in the distance.

They stepped out into the Grand Concourse. The walls fell back as the ceiling soared high overhead. They were in a vast open space that was at least three hundred feet long and eighty feet wide. The ceiling was over sixty feet high and carried a beautiful mosaic of the night sky, complete with stars and the moon. Underfoot the floor was decorated in intricate mosaics. Everywhere the supers looked was marble and granite.

In the center of the massive place was a large pillar over ten feet high and made of shining, freshly polished brass. It was crowned on top by a large, illuminated clock. It's black hands were still faithfully ticking out the hours.

To their left was one corner of the massive hall. Over their heads the lettering " TO STREET & OFFICES," dutifully identified where they had come from.

The closest end wall was lined with storefronts. Lettering over them announced" TAILOR SHOP, BARBER SHOP, BOOT BLACK," announced the activities that used to take place there. But those days were long gone and now they were simply openings in the walls. Inside their blacked interiors they could make out the vague shape of objects. Ghosts of what had once been.

The two slowly made their way out into the middle of the concourse and over to the clock. Their footsteps echoed loudly in the vast hall. the sound bouncing around before returning to its creator from an unexpected direction. Misha found himself looking all around at the massive space. "Can you imagine the amount of people who have been through here. All the history it's seen."

At the far end of the concourse was the opposite end wall. Huddled against the end wall at floor level and running the full width of the room was the ticket booth. It was substantial and was actually a wooden, one story construction, complete with a flat roof.

On the roof of the ticket counter stood a large signboard watching over the station. It was at least twenty feet wide and ten feet high. Rust, corrosion and dirt covered parts of the sign and a

thick layer of dust covered everything. One end rested on the roof of the ticket counter itself. One support having long ago rotted away. Bold lettering in brass announced proudly 'Train Information'. Below that the board was divided into two parts "Arrivals," and "Departures". Beneath those words the board had slots where the old style mechanical flip letters were. When set to announce an arrival or a departure the metal letters would flip over with a loud clack, clack, clack till the right words and times were displayed. Now the board was empty. The slots all set to show blank. Once it had announced the comings and goings of trains headed all over the county. Now it sat empty and abandoned. A sad memorial to bygone days of great, named trains and luxury travel. When getting there WAS often the best part of the trip.

CLACK

CLACK

CLACK

CLACK

The sounds echoed loudly and ominously in the vast hall.

Misha and stealth just froze in place.

"Tell me I didn't hear that," Misha said slowly.

Stealth didn't speak but slowly shook his head from side to side.

Misha took a deep breath and slowly turned in the direction the sound had come from. Almost of their own accord his eyes wandered over to the large signboard. One line of the arrivals board had changed. It read "Empire Express from Boston To New York Arrives :1:35 AM."

"It's 12:35 now," Stealth said slowly. "What happens in an hour when it arrives?"

The fox didn't speak but just kept looking at the arrival board.

It started quietly. At first it was no more than a faint suggestion at the back of their mind. Easily dismissed as their imaginations running wild in the vast, empty old hall. But soon it grew to a faint whisper. Clearly audible but the sounds were too faint to be understood. Gradually it grew to a murmur and individual sounds became distinctly discernible. People talking, arguing, asking, demanding, people walking and shuffling. They found themselves surrounded the sounds of a large crowd but the darkened hall around them was empty. They looked to be alone but their senses and their instincts said they weren't.

"Do you have today's New York Herald?"

Misha turned in the direction of the voice. He found himself looking a booth made of fine grained wood and edged in brass. The wood was now covered with grime and layers of dust and

dust and the brass was tarnished and corroded to a dull gray. A sign at the top announced proudly "The Union News Company," in gray lettering that might once have been brass. Below the counter were faded posters that advertised products that didn't exist anymore.

"Yes sir!" A voice said. It seemed to come from behind a counter that hadn't seen a live person in decades. There was the faint rustle of paper.

"There's plenty of time," A male voice said.

Misha's sensitive ears located the source and he looked in that direction hoping to see the speaker. But all he saw was empty space. It didn't stop the voice.

"The train doesn't leave for an hour," the voice said from thin air.

"What's going on." Stealth whipped his head about looking intently at the area around him. "Why can't we see them?"

"I don't know!" Misha snapped nervously. The fox had his bow out and an arrow nocked. His ears were laid flat against his head and his tail was tucked up against his body. "I don't know anything about ghosts."

"GHOSTS?" Stealth snapped. "Who said anything about ghosts?"

"What else could it be?" Misha countered.

"Someone trying to scare us," the feline countered.

"They're doing a good job of it," Misha commented nervously.

"If it was a live person we should have some sign of them," the nanites interjected. "We've seen no increase in electrical use. And no unexplained energy use of any sort. If this is some elaborate fake then it's a very good one."

"What is it if not the paranormal or a deliberate fake?" Misha asked.

"A dimensional or chronological leak through," the microscopic machines offered. "Similar to the Madrid events of 1985."

"So we might be seeing events that happened in the past?" Misha asked. "Or something that IS happening in some other dimension?"

"Yes," the nanites explained. "But the lack of a chronotonal energy wave precludes time travel."

"We have contacted the Portal Corporation. Dr. Macintyre reports that they have detected no interdimensional activity in our area. She is continuing her scans but the lack of any attendant Webb particles leads her to think it's not interdimensional."

Stealth suddenly held up his right hand. "Wait! Listen."

Misha held still and listened but all he heard was silence. "The voices have stopped."

Why did they stop?" Stealth asked.

"I don't even know why they started," the fox responded.

Misha glanced over to the left a moment then turned back to his friend. He opened his mouth to speak but stopped. Then he turned and looked over to his left again. "What?"

On the left side of the concourse was a doorway. The corroded brass letters over the doorway read simply "Restaurant."

Two massive U shaped counters filled the center of the area. Spaced evenly around the counter were seats. The paint on the walls was peeling off and their footsteps crunched on the fallen plaster as they walked.

Sitting there on the counter was a cup and saucer made of white porcelain. It was filled to the brim with steaming hot coffee.

Misha's eyes grew wide and he laid back his vulpine ears. "Where did that come from?"

Stealth shrugged. "I don't know."

"Is it safe to drink?" Misha asked.

"One way to find out," Stealth said. The feline picked up the cup and sniffed it. "It looks like coffee and smells like coffee." The feline took a sip of the coffee. His eyes went wide and his tail went rigid. "Wow! That's strong."

"Testing. Contents are $C_8H_{10}N_4O_2$. The water content is chemically consistent with this water available in the station," the nanites commented. "Probable source of the coffee is Columbia. No later than three years ago."

Misha took the cup from his friend and took a good drink. The taste was strong and powerful. "That's good coffee. It is strong. That would put hair on your chest."

The cheetah morph pulled up his shirt revealing the spotted fur that covered him. "I already have hair on my chest."

"See! It worked," Misha handed. He handed the cup back to Stealth.

The feline took it. "You don't want it?"

"I don't like coffee," Misha said. "I'd prefer some nice hot tea."

CLINK

The two froze in their steps. There was silence for a moment.

Stealth slowly turned around and looked at the counter. "Ah Misha."

The fox super had his back to the counter. "Don't tell me. There's a cup of tea there."

"Tea and a buttered roll," Stealth answered. "Toasted roll."

Misha turned and here indeed on the counter was another cup and saucer. This one was filled with hot tea. Next to that was a plate upon which was a fresh Kaiser roll. Misha sat down and examined the two. The scent of fresh tea fought for attention of Misha's nose with the sweet smell of a toasted roll.

He looked at it carefully for a minute examining the saucer, cup and the contents of the cup. Misha was looking for even the slightest irregularity but there was none. carefully he picked up the cup and held it to his lips.

The sharp smell of a half a dozen different types of tea came to his nose. Misha spent a moment savoring the smell of each one and how they all blended together to form a savory aroma. The smell was nice, the taste was even better.

Analyzing. Tea. Several blends but probable place of origin is India. Also the water used is chemically the same as the local water. This tea is sold locally. You can get it in a dozen different stores within a twenty minute drive of here."

Slowly Misha reached out to the roll and gingerly took hold of the top. With great care he lifted the top of the mysterious bakery product. It revealed that it had been toasted and the inside surfaces were a golden brown. It was also covered with a liquid that looked like melted butter. He put the bakery lid back into its rightful place. Then he picked up the roll and bite down onto it. The fox chewed for a moment letting the savory taste linger in his mouth.

"The grain is from Kansas," the nanites commented. "Western Kansas. There is a 87.35% chance from within 100 miles of the town of Tribune. The butter is 98% likely from within 100 miles of Pine River, Wisconsin."

The feline held the coffee cup up. "These are real. We're not imagining these things." He waved the cup filled hand at the other cup and the plate. "Where did all this come from?"

"A more accurate question might be how did it get here?" The nanites added.

Misha finished eating the roll, enjoying the taste. "Ok. How did it get here?"

"*We don't know,*" the nanites responded. "*We were hoping you had some ideas.*"

Stealth picked up the plate. It was a really thick and solid piece of porcelain and had some heft to it. "This is heavy duty stuff!"

"It's commercial grade," the fox explained. "Meant to handle serious wear and tear."

"Don't bother with a bow and arrow," Stealth joked. "Just throw these at people."

"Never!" Misha said in mock horror. "These are cool. I know people who collect this stuff."

Stealth held the plate up in front of his face. "This stuff?"

"This isn't decorated," Misha explained as he took the plate from his friend. "Some of the china for the railroads was heavily decorated."

He placed the plate back onto the counter. "It's time we get back to work."

"We can't just leave without paying," Stealth said.

"Oh! Good point," Misha said. He fished into his pocket and produced a \$5 bill which he placed on the counter. "Thank you and keep the change." The two started walking towards the door.

KA CHING!

The two paused for a moment.

"Was that a cash register I heard?" Stealth asked.

"Yes," Misha answered calmly.

"Are we going to investigate it?" The cheetah morph asked.

"No," Misha answered with a shake of the head.

"Good."

There was a distinct chill in the air as the two stepped back into the main concourse. It made Misha ruffle his fur.

"It got colder in here," Stealth said..

"Darker too," Misha added.

The two super heroes stood in the middle of the concourse. For the moment the large hall looked to be empty. There was no one in sight but Misha couldn't help but feel like they were being watched. He scanned the whole hall trying to look into every shadowy nook and dark corner. But all he saw was dark shadows and empty areas. Worse than the emptiness was the silence. The large empty hall was always quiet. A place of soft sounds and quiet noises. Dripping water, the creaks and groans of wood, metal and plaster slowly failing and the wind whispering through broken windows. The type of sounds you'd expect in a place devoid of life. But now the massive place was silent, truly, wholly dead silent. Not a drip, not a creak or a moan. Even the air was dead still.

"I thought the creepy voices were bad," Misha said slowly. "But this silence is worse."

"Agreed," Stealth looked around nervously.

CLACK

CLACK

Stealth hissed loudly and Misha uttered a deep, primal growl. Slowly the two turned and looked at the trainboard. It had changed slightly. "Empire Express from Boston To New York Arrives :1:35 AM. Status: Arriving. Track 7."

"So," the cheetah morph said slowly without taking his eyes off the large board. "What do we do? Do we go to track 1 and see what arrives?"

The fox morph nodded his head slowly. "Yes we do."

"Meeting the train sounds like a bad idea," Stealth commented.

"Not meeting it would be an even worse idea," Misha countered.

Squeak

Squeak

Squeak.

The two looked in the direction the sound was coming from. They found themselves looking at one of the luggage carts that were scattered all over the station. The massive wood and metal cart was moving across the floor at a slow and stately pace. No one was pushing or pulling it but it was clear the cart was moving with a distinct purpose.

Both intrigued and frightened the two followed the cart as it made its way across the concourse. The cart swerved to the left as if avoiding some obstacle only it could see. Finally it's

slow journey came to a large dark doorway. The corroded lettering "TO BAGGAGE" announced what lay beyond the darkened doorway.

Once past the doorway they found themselves staring at a pair of glass doors set into the wall. Walking up to the doors they peered into the glass and saw glimpses of items beyond. Shadowy shapes barely glimpsed in the dark. A paper sign taped to the door announced. "Museum closed. Please come again." Another sign announced "Museum hours Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday 10am to 6:30 pm."

"I see movement inside," Stealth said. The feline hero had his face pressed against the glass.

Misha peered through the door. "What did you see?"

The feline shrugged. "It wasn't clear. All I caught was something moving."

"We've contacted the alarm company and informed that you're conducting a security sweep," the nanites said.

"They're contacting the police," the nanites added.

"Contact the police before they contact us," Misha said.

"And tell them what?" The nanites asked. *"You're hunting ghosts?"*

"Put them through to us," Stealth interrupted.

"This is Police central dispatch," a voice said suddenly in their heads. "This is Phyllis. Who am I speaking to?"

"This is Stealth and Misha Brightleaf," the feline superhero explained. "We're at the train station."

"What are you doing there?"

"We're hunting ghosts," Stealth answered honestly.

"Enough with the stupid jokes," the woman's voice responded. "What are you doing there?"

"We're on a mission," Misha added. "We got a tip that there might be a break in at the station. So we headed here to check it out."

"Is that so?" The woman responded. "I can't take your word on this. We are already dispatching a unit."

"All right but warn them that two supers are on site," Misha added. "I'm done talking. We've got work to do!" And with that he broke the connection.

Stealth gave a yip of laughter. "That will slow them down. They'll sent out a SWAT team and that will take time."

Misha peered closely at the lock and saw something scratched there. "MCM1." He reached into his pocket and produced a ring of keys. The fox started to rifle through keys.

"Do you have keys to the whole place?" Stealth asked.

"Yes. The group that owns the place gave them to me," Misha nodded his head. "Didn't I give you a set?"

Stealth narrowed his eyes and laid his ears back against his head.

"Oops," the fox said in an embarrassed tone.

Misha inserted a key into the lock slowly. When it was all the way in he didn't immediately turn the key. Instead he waited, looking and listening for anything unusual or dangerous. Finally he gently turned the key.

CLICK! The sound seemed to echo loudly in the station.

The fox winced noticeably then frozen in place with one hand on the key.

Stealth looked around nervously. His eyes saw the great open space around them. He saw the inlaid marble floors beneath their feet that still glistened in spite of all the years of hard use. The granite stone walls even covered with dust showed the skill and pride of masons now long dead. The feline's sight went to all the shadows and dark places looking for any sign of trouble. Someone or something that could attack them. A flicker of movement off to right brought his head around looking for danger. But all he saw was darkened shape of a wooden booth set against the wall. There perched on the counter amidst the dust and spider webs was a very large rat. The black rodent stared boldly at him. The creature turned and leapt off the counter and into the darkness behind.

The ghostly voices had gone and all his ears picked up were the faint sounds of an empty building. The ruffle of old and fading cloth banners and the faint rustling of some small creature hiding amidst the debris and ruin. His sensitive feline nose detected the molder of decay and rot and the musty smell of long abandonment and decay. He also picked the smell of old oil and coal smoke. And over all of those his nose detected a faint smell of many people. Men, women and children. People who had passed through this massive place and were now long gone but their scent remained. A scent so faint as to be more imagined than truly smelled.

Finally he turned back to his friend and shook his head.

Misha removed the key from the lock and dropped the ring back into his pocket. He didn't open the door at first but instead the ranger examined carefully the gap between the two doors. Then he ran his eyes over the edges of both doors.

"Well," The fox stepped back. "I don't see any booby traps or alarm wires."

Stealth grabbed hold of the handle and pulled the door open.

A blast of cool air assaulted them as the doors opened. The faint hum of machinery and a soft breeze told of air conditioning. The two animal like supers found themselves standing in a small lobby. Off to their left was a large counter/display case that displayed all manner of books models and trinkets for sale. Hanging on the wall behind the case were posters and tee shirts. A cash register was perched on one end of the counter and taped to it was a sign "Purchase your tickets here." A thin light came through from the hall behind them but it barely illuminated the patch of floor where they stood. All the rest in front of them was in darkness.

"I'm tired of being in the dark," Stealth walked over to the counter and slipped behind it. Some searching along the wall amidst the shirts and posters earned him what he wanted. There was the soft click of a switch and the lights came on.

In the past this room had been the baggage claim/drop off area. This was where departing passengers dropped off their luggage before heading off. Or where they went to see if their luggage had indeed followed them to the station or was lost somewhere in the unknown.

A museum, no matter how small always acquires many things; books, letters, clothing, tools. All manner of items both mundane and unusual and they are all called artifacts. And such items need a place to be displayed. So the Paragon City Railroad Museum (a registered 501(c)(3) group) had converted the baggage area. Individual displays were scattered about the room in close clusters by subject and each was highlighted by a bright light. The light was kept low in the rest of the room. This was to draw people's attention to the displays. It also helped disguise the fact that the floor needed refinishing and the ceiling was desperately in need of repainting. It turned the room into a maze of cubicles, niches and rooms with shadowy corners and an ocean of darkness interspersed with small islands of light.

"Oh that's a great help!" Misha commented sarcastically.

"And I thought the basement was creepy," Stealth muttered.

"All right," Misha said. "Stay close and we'll sweep the place from here to the other end. Thankfully it's not too big."

Together the two moved into the museum. They walked past displays telling of the railroad past of the Paragon city and Rhode Island. One display had a model of a old wooden passenger station.

"Hey!" Misha said. "Remember those stones we saw in the basement? I bet you that's the station those stones belonged to."

Stealth leaned closer to the model. "Hard to imagine that little station were here before this huge station!"

The way forward split here with darkened paths going left and right of the model display.

The feline looked down both ways and all he saw was small islands of light in the distance. "I'll go that right and you go left."

Misha nodded his head. "Fair enough." Without looking back the fox stepped away and vanished into the darkness.

The feline looked around him trying to discern the shadowy shapes in the darkness. He caught a flash of movement off to the right. He swung around and caught sight of a figure standing some twenty feet away. It was standing in the darkness between displays. At first he wasn't sure if it was a person of just his imagination making things out of nothing. Then the shadowy form moved ending all doubt.

Stealth didn't speak out loud or even make any sudden gestures. He didn't even use the radio or other cybernetic communications that the nanites had built into him. Afraid that that anything might warn the figure. Slowly and carefully he moved closer to the figure. He placed each paw deliberately moving as quietly as possible.

The figure moved away from the exhibit and seemed to drift along down. Stealth found himself weaving among the exhibits. His target paused for a moment in front of one and the feline stopped as well. Only when the shadowy visitor moved on did the quiet super start moving again.

The feline stopped and looked at the exhibit. he found himself looking at a mannequin dressed in some type of uniform. The mannequin was dark colored and he realized it was supposed to represent a black man. A sign over the figure announced "Pullman Porters: Civil Rights Pioneers."

Stealth couldn't stop to read more as his mysterious target had moved onward and deeper into the darkened room. He followed the person to another display.

The person seemed to turn and look straight at Stealth. His eyes seemed to bore into the feline and he felt a primal fear start to rise. Then the figure turned and looked at the display. Suddenly the figure vanished. It didn't turn and move away or disappear in a puff of smoke. It simply vanished. One moment it was there and the next it wasn't.

The feline super drew both of his blades and moved up where the figure had been. Wary of an ambush he looked around but didn't see anyone. His eyes fell on the display.

"MISHA!" He shouted out loud.

The archer rushed over to his friend. He had his bow in hand and an arrow nocked.

Stealth was standing in front of the display whose bright lights contrasted the shadows of the rest of the room.

In the center of the display was a large piece of twisted and torn metal that at first defied definition. The nanites displayed the exact dimensions of the object down to 3 decimal places but they were unable to explain what it was. They did offer 227 potential answers.

Misha recognized it after a long moment. One part was cast iron, semi flat with a thick rim on one edge that had a sharp curve. "That's part of a railroad wheel. The rest of that used to be a truck that held the wheels."

Pictures hanging over the case showed black and white photos of tumbled, twisted and shattered passenger cars.

"Wreck of the Empire Express," A sign at the top of the display announced.

Stealth pointed to a display below the sign. "Look at the date and time it happened."

Misha muttered curses in several languages. "That's 100 years ago tonight."

"So, what do you think of our newest display? We just finished it last week."

Both turned in the direction of the voice and found themselves face to face with a tall, heavy set black man wearing some nondescript clothes.

Stealth reached for the hilt of his swords but stopped. "You are?"

"Philip!" Misha exclaimed cheerfully. "We thought someone might have broken into the museum." The fox extended his left hand.

The new arrival grasped it and shook the offered hand firmly. "It's good to see you again."

The fox archer turned to his feline companion. "Stealth. This is Philip Ward. He founded and runs the Paragon City Railroad museum."

"Our apology for waking you up at this late hour," Stealth said as he shook the man's hand. Philip's hand was cool to the touch but it felt strong and alive.

Philip gave a wave of the hand. "No problem. So did you find anyone?"

Misha shook his head. "No. I think we're just chasing ghosts."

Philip gave a wry smile and nodded his head. "So what do you think of our new display?"

The two looked at the display. "So what happened back then? And what's with that?" Stealth pointed to the wrecked truck.

"It's believed that caused the accident," the curator explained. "It was on the first car in the train that night. The train was arriving in the station when the truck fractured. It derailed and went tumbling into the loaded passenger platform. Then the other cars slammed into the wreckage."

"At least that's the story we've had. I was surprised to learn what really happened," the man said.

"Oh?" Misha said. "How?"

"Recently I got to talk to the engineer in person," Philip commented.

"I thought the engineer was killed in the wreck," Misha said.

"Oh he was," Philip commented with a touch of humor.

"What?" Both Misha and Stealth turned to look at Philip but the man was gone.

"Where did he go?" Misha asked and looked around slowly.

"He's gone." Stealth responded.

"WHERE DID HE GO?" Misha shouted as he looked around. This bow was out and he had an arrow nocked. He looked all around but they were alone.

"I don't know," the feline answered in clipped tones. His teeth were bared and his ears laid back against his skull.

"Ah . . . , " The nanites stuttered. *"He can't have been here."*

"We just saw him," Misha countered. "I just shook his hand."

"Or did we?" Stealth said nervously.

"Ah . . . well you see."

"What?" The fox walked over to where he had last seen Philip.

"Philip Samuel Ward died six months ago."

"WHAT?" Misha looked around. "He was just here," the fox said, bewildered. He looked down at his left hand. "I shook his hand."

"We talked to him. We even shook his hand." Stealth snarled.

"We are 98.7% sure that he is really dead," the nanites responded.

"Why didn't you tell us this before?" Stealth asked.

"What? And ruin a class 4 paranormal encounter?"

"Besides. We weren't sure it was him at first."

"Was it?" Misha asked nervously.

The nanites were quiet for a full minute, a sure sign that they were in the midst of an internal debate only they could hear.

"Well. We were unable to detect any life signs. Nothing at all. Skin temperature, pulse, no brain functions or nervous system," the nanites said finally. *"But we can confirm it was NOT a hologram, robot or a sensor trick."*

"We have confirmed his death," the nanites added. *"The authorities have confirmed he is deceased."*

"You didn't know he was dead?" Stealth asked.

"Well I have been kind of busy," Misha snapped.

"Too busy?" Stealth quipped.

Misha glared at Stealth for a moment. "So? Was it him?"

"Ah . . . " The nanites stuttered. *"Maybe."*

"It's 1:15am," Stealth commented. "We have a train to catch in twenty minutes."

Misha gazed at his left hand and slowly flexed his fingers. "I shook his hand." The fox looked around one more time. "All right. Let's go."

At one end of the concourse a large opening lead off into the darkness. Over the arch was the words "TO TRAINS" in bold but corroded, brass lettering.

Misha took out flashlight and its beam cut a path through the darkness revealing a twenty foot wide corridor. The marble lined hallway stretched off into a distance that even the beam of light couldn't penetrate.

Slowly the two walked down the corridor. The beams of their flashlights bounced around illuminating small, decayed parts of the station.

"Someone has been here before us," Stealth said and pointed the beam of his flashlight at the floor. There in the dust and dirt on the floor was clearly visible a mass of footprints that lead off down the corridor.

"No one has been here in months," Misha said. "This part of the station is off limits to the tours."

"Why?" Stealth asked.

"Some structural instability," the fox explained. "But we should be safe."

The cheetah morph came to a halt. "Should be?"

"You think I would take you to someplace dangerous?" Misha asked.

"Yes," Stealth answered flatly. "You've done it before. When we went to Aberdeen Maryland."

"And don't forget Maine."

"Oh yes! Maine. You had me jump out of a perfectly good airplane," Stealth commented sarcastically.

Misha sighed "Good point. But trust me this is safe. It's been reinforced underneath. They keep the tourists out for insurance reasons. Now can we get back to the trouble at hand. Who made those tracks."

"Let's follow them and see where they go," Stealth suggested. "There's nothing much to see down there. If they're from one of the tours they'll turn back soon enough and go to the more interesting places."

On the right a large gateway suddenly loomed up. Two concrete columns each with an ornate lamp flanked the brass doors. A metal sign on the left side of the doors read "Track 1," while one on the right read "Track 2."

The two paused for a moment and examined the gate carefully be wary of any ambush. When they believed it was safe they slowly made their way past it. Stealth turned around and looked behind them to be sure nobody or nothing was following them.

They passed a wooden bench that was in remarkably good condition except for a layer of dust.

A rusted, battered and twisted sign laying on the floor to the left side of the doorway announced "-rack 7". Still attached to the wall was a small announcing sign with the same flipping letters like the large one in the concourse. It already read "Empire Express, 1:35AM. Arriving". Still attached to the wall to the right of the doorway read "Track 8." Its announcing board was empty. The doors that should have closed the doorway lay rotted and smashed on the floor. A thin wisp of smoke came through the opening and hung in the air nearby.

Peering through the doorway they saw steps that led downward but the smoke grew thick and thicker the further down they looked. Only the first few steps were visible. The rest into a smoky blanket that Misha's flashlight couldn't penetrate. There was the sharp smell of coal smoke in the air.

"We have 100% reflect on all sensors," the nanites said nervously. "Radar, Ladar, sonar, low light television, IR. Nothing can penetrate it. They aren't being jammed. The sensors are just not penetrating."

"That's not possible!"

"Since it's happening it must be possible."

"Of course you can't penetrate the creepy smoke," Stealth said sarcastically. "Then it wouldn't be creepy."

"If you little nuts start playing creepy music I'm going to have a hairy conniption."

CLACK! CLACK!

Reluctantly they both looked at the train board and saw the word ARRIVED.

"Oh shit," Misha muttered.

Stealth didn't speak but his eyes were wide and the fur on his neck was erect. Slowly and deliberately he reached behind him and drew out his two swords from their scabbards.

"Well," Stealth said softly. "Do we stay here in the dark and creepy hallway or go down into the dark, smoky and creepy platform."

Misha turned and looked at his friend and the feline looked back at him. No words were spoken but they exchanged information anyway.

The fox archer turned and looked down the darkened stairway for a long moment. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Misha opened his eyes and took a step down into the smoke.

In moments the world he knew vanished. Sight and sound was reduced to the smoke around him. No noise came in and all he heard was his own ragged breathing. His nose was filled with

the sharp tang of coal smoke. He moved more by instinct and training taking it step slowly and one at a time. Misha tried to remain calm and think that it was just smoke, nothing else. But he kept seeing things out of the corner of his eyes. he would look right at it but nothing was there. He wasn't sure if he was seeing some ghost that was really there or just being created by his imagination.

As Misha kept moving downward doubts started to creep in. Where was he? Shouldn't he have reached the bottom by now? Fear started to creep into his soul and part of him wanted to bolt and run back up the steps. But his training and courage wouldn't let him. He placed each step carefully and deliberately. The vulpine tried to rein in his imagination and concentrate on moving onward.

Suddenly Misha stepped out of the fog and back into the world. It felt like a great weight had lifted. He stopped and took a deep breath to settle himself. He looked downward and saw a world that hadn't existed in a century.

The stairs continued for another four steps before ending on a long, passenger platform that was packed with people. The women were wearing floor length dresses with large frilled, feather bedecked hats. The men had on suits, jackets and straw hats. All of a style that had gone out of fashion with the sinking of the Titanic. They were walking along, talking, sitting or just standing there. Looming over them all on the track to their right was the tall, slab side of a passenger car. It's steel sides had been recently cleaned and they glistened in the light that illuminated the platform. Through the clean windows he could see people seated inside talking. He saw a young boy of around ten who had his face pressed against the glass. The child's face was alive with excitement as he looked at everything going on.

The first realization that something was coming was a slight tingling in their paws. Slowly it grew till they felt a faint tingling. In the distance down the track was a faint yellow glow. In the back of their hearing was a faint rhythmic pounding noise.

Whoo Whoo! The sound, clear sound of a distant train whistle sounded. It's mournful cry sounding like a lost soul wailing in the dark.

Whoo Whoo! The sound echoed through the station bouncing back and forth.

Whoo Whoo! That last note seemed to hang in the air for a long time as if unwilling to die. Eventually the sound did finally vanish.

The rhythmic noise grew louder as the trembling got stronger until they could feel it all through their legs. The light grew stronger and larger with each passing moment. Suddenly a massive form loomed up out of the darkness. The massive metal beast hissed, clanked, wheezed and snorted as it rolled into the station amidst a swirl of steam and smoke. The ground shook rocked as the massive beast thundered past.

"He's moving too fast!" Misha commented.

"He'll never stop in time," Stealth added. "He'll overshoot the station."

The bright beam of the headlight finally flashed past and the massive black massive of the engine itself rolled past. Great clouds of steam and smoke billowed around.

"MISHA!" Stealth shouted and pointed. "The cab."

The cab of the locomotive was parallel to them and they could see into the cab for a moment. Misha caught sight of a figure in the engineer's seat that was slumped over laying half out the window. That roared past and he caught a momentary glimpse of the interior of the cab. Through the doorway he saw another figure (undoubtedly the fireman) sprawled on the metal plates that made up the cab floor. A large coal shovel lay next to him.

In an instant the locomotive was past and the slab sided form of a passenger car followed. He caught sight of people in the windows as they flashed past. Suddenly the end of the car bounced off the rails and slid sideways along the platform. The massive object smashing everything and everyone in its path. He saw bodies sent flying as other were smashed to blood and pulp as the car rolled and smashed over them. The car kept rolling and smashing like an unstoppable juggernaut. Then it hit one of the metal posts that held up the roof that covered the platform. The massive car was made of wood and shattered instantly sending foot long splinters flying in all directions. The metal and wood messengers of death sliced through flesh and bone with sickening ease. Turning what had once been alive into mangled and bloody corpses.

The second car slammed into the wreckage of the first and the third hammered into the twisted debris. One end of the third car swept across the platform and slammed into the car on track two. This car was a new one and made of steel so it didn't explode. Instead the side bent in as the car itself tumbled to the ground. Yet another car rammed into the wreckage adding more debris and pain to the wreckage. Finally after what seemed an eternity things came to halt. There was silence for a moment and all they heard was the snapping of wood and the ring of metal on metal. Then the screams of anguish and pain started.

His instincts and training took hold and without thinking Misha raced down the steps to try and help.

The moment his boot covered paw touched the pavement it changed. Everything, the screaming wounded, the bloody dead and dying who lay amidst the shattered and burning wreckage started to fade. Slowly it all dimmed and blended into the night. It all grew more and more transparent with each passing moment until they were merely shadows moving in the dark. With it went the screaming and cries of pain which grew fainter and fainter till it was just a whisper on the wind. Finally both sight and sound of the past were gone.

The two found themselves standing on an empty, concrete and weed covered platform in the middle of the night. Around them was only soft darkness and silence.

Off in the distance they heard a dog howling mournfully.

"What happened?" Misha asked as he whipped his head about. All he saw was an empty and abandoned platform.

"It's over," Stealth said calmly. The cheetah morph was standing next to his friend. He had his swords in hand.

"What's over?" Misha asked nervously. "What happened?"

Stealth sheathed his swords and shrugged. "I don't know but it's done."

It had been a strange night. It was an equally strange morning.

The nanites dumped to the internet the entire video of Misha and Stealth's experiences (suitably edited for security). It was only on Youtube for an hour and it already had 25,000 views. People were calling it the finest grade 4 paranormal encounter ever recorded.

The Central Station Restoration Project announced that the annual Halloween party would go on as scheduled. But due to demand for tickets (\$35 tax deductible charitable donation) it was being moved outside to the parking lot. They were also hosting Ghost tours. Tickets were \$30 per person (also tax deductible). Within 24 hours they had sold six thousand tickets.

N.E.P.S (The New England Paranormal Society) in cooperation with CSRP and the Paragon City Railroad Museum announced that they were planning a live, six hour TV special for next year on the anniversary of the wreck.

Brian Rathwell (current head of the museum) announced. "I'm glad to see that Phil is still around watching over things. But if I see him I'll probably scream like a little girl and run."

Colonel Haslett was surprisingly quiet during Misha's report to him. His only comment was that he was grateful that the nanites had left out all mention of the American Army. He also offered the services of SOCOM's own paranormal consultant.

Conrail - who owned the tracks that ran past the station and ran over 30 trains a day on those tracks made an odd statement. "We reserve the right to withhold any comments about the paranormal. We also pay respects to those who died that night. But we are tired of getting reports of train derailments at a station we never owned or served."

The oddest response came from the Police. Misha had expected the Paragon Police Department to arrive in force. Usually the mere mention of a super would bring out the Powered Suit Squad or at least three or four patrol cars. Or both. It was a full two hours before a patrol car pulled up to the grand entrance of the station and an officer got out.

The tall, lanky, black haired police officer had the twin bars of a captain. Misha recognized him as captain of the 13th precinct (Lucky 13!) the local police station. The man had thirty years on the force and had seen and survived riots, demonstrations, robberies, assaults and attacks by numerous villains, gangs and super villains. He had even survived the Rikti (and had the scars and decorations to prove it). "So, what mischief have you been up to?"

Stealth gently poked the officer in the chest with an extended finger. "So," he asked the nanites. "Is he alive?"

"Yes," they answered. *"At least he's not been declared dead yet."*

Captain Wanslowski listened quietly as the two supers gave a full explanation. His face was calm and showed no emotions. "So," he said slowly after the two supers had finished. "What did you learn?"

"That the engineer and fireman were both dead before the first car derailed," Stealth said slowly. "That means the locomotive was a run away and that caused the crash."

The officer slowly nodded his head. "So. What or who killed the crew?"

"One way to find out," Misha answered. "In 364 days."