

DAEDALUS – by Jason Shepherd

Steve Austin concluded that George Carlyle was not a mad scientist, just a very ticked-off one.

Carlyle paced the conference room and glared at Steve. With his sparse frame, shaggy red hair and thick beard, he reminded Steve of a cross between Rasputin and Danny Kaye. “I want it known that I resent your interference, Colonel,” Carlyle barked. “I have been working on Daedalus for years. I came up with the theory on my own, and I can complete the project alone if I need to!”

Steve could feel a headache stirring in his temples, the place it always did when he talked to Carlyle. “Doctor,” he began. “I don’t want to sound like I doubt your abilities...”

But Carlyle was already warmed up. “Do you realize what we’re trying to do here? Daedalus is unprecedented! Think of it: an energy collection device that converts any type of radiation into power, safely and cheaply. It could revolutionize energy production for the entire world! It could open up the stars to the human race! It could render dangerous nuclear wastes inert! Daedalus is the key to the future, Colonel!”

Steve, who had heard that particular speech at least five times a day for the last three weeks, fought to keep from sighing. “OSI wants to help you create this new world; that’s why we’re funding this project. It’s also why we let you work out of your own lab here at Protronics. But we have a right to expect results, don’t we?”

From the other side of the conference table, Ronald Doyle coughed nervously. Protronics’ plant manager was the polar opposite of his boss: short and pudgy, with a balding head and heavy horn-rimmed glasses. “Colonel, we could work much more quickly if OSI gave us more money. Better lab equipment, more assistants...”

Steve shook his head. “We’re concerned about the money we’ve already spent. You told us you could make us a prototype for under ten million dollars; you’ve spent three times that amount with nothing to show for it.”

“Nothing?!?” Carlyle’s eyes were wilder than ever. “You can’t just expect scientific miracles at the drop of a hat!”

“And besides,” Steve continued, “I don’t want any more people involved in this project than necessary.”

Hank Garvin was Protronics’ head of security. He was a big man, with the thickening body of a high school athlete twenty years past his prime. He snorted in amusement. “What are you afraid of, Colonel? Spies? This is Wichita, Kansas. There isn’t a spy for two hundred miles.”

“I wish that were true,” Steve said. “OSI received word last night that a spy ring has contacted many foreign governments and syndicates with their plans to steal Daedalus.”

Garvin’s face grew red. “That can’t happen here. There’s no security leak here. Not with me and my men watching.”

Steve stood and walked over to the conference room window, pointing outside. “Do you see what I see, Mr. Garvin?”

“What?” Garvin squinted. “You mean our fence?”

“Yes, your fence.” Steve stared Garvin in the eye. “I’m concerned because it’s the same kind of chain link fence they have around a grade school playground. We’re sitting on something that could turn a nuclear missile into a pile of dead electronics, and all you’ve got guarding it is a bunch of minimum-wage security guards with minimal training and no firearms.”

Dr. Carlyle was still agitated. “Colonel, I will not tolerate this! I will call Mr. Goldman if I need to!”

“Oscar Goldman sent me here to deal with these problems, remember?” Steve returned to his seat. “Now, I know how difficult it is to produce technological miracles on a timeline. OSI wants Daedalus, Dr. Carlyle, but we can’t allow the project to continue if it’s going to be late, over-budget and riddled with security holes. Mr. Goldman has given me authorization to pull the

plug if I think it's best, or to take the whole show someplace more secure. That's the last thing I want to do, but if we don't see some results soon, then I won't have any choice."

There was a time when David Banner was in charge of laboratories far better equipped and more prestigious than those at Protronics, Inc., of Wichita, Kansas. Back then, he enjoyed a healthy budget, the respect of peers, the freedom to initiate his own research...

Well, times change, David told himself. He pushed his broom across the cracked and stained linoleum, his eyes wandering back and forth across worktables burdened with electronics and chalkboards full of schematics and notes. He looked over the latest calculations on Dr. Carlyle's personal chalkboard and shook his head. At this rate, Carlyle will never finish!

"David?"

David turned slowly, leaning slightly on his broom. "Yes, Miss Miller?"

Alice Miller always smiled when she talked to David. He always spoke slow and soft, and never made eye contact. "David, Dr. Carlyle spilled his Pepsi behind the far workbench this afternoon. Please make sure that gets cleaned up."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll get my mop as soon as I get done sweeping." David turned back to his broom.

Alice scooped up her purse and smiled again at the man she knew as David Bradford. "I'm leaving now, David. Have a good evening."

"Good night, Miss Miller." David waited until the lab door closed, then he straightened and strode over to the chalkboard. He pulled his small notebook out of his pocket and began to compare his calculations to Dr. Carlyle's, trying to find where Carlyle had gone wrong today.

It had been a year, he remembered. A year since he had been working at the Culver Institute in California, trying to isolate why some human beings displayed abnormal strength during high-stress situations. He had found a common link, gamma radiation, which he then exposed himself to... and altered himself. Then came the transformations, the explosion in the lab that killed Elaina Marks, and the search for the cure while the rest of the world believed David Banner was dead.

David had been in Wichita for a month, working as a night janitor at Protronics. He had read of George Carlyle's theories in an obscure academic journal, of his plan to build a device that was essentially a modified solar collector, only this would be able to collect any type of radiation. Maybe this device, this Daedalus, held the secret to draining off the excess gamma radiation in David Banner's body and ridding him of his curse!

Getting the job at Protronics had been the easy part; the difficult part was dealing with Carlyle's research. David made it a point to spend as much time in the main lab as possible, going over the work Carlyle did during the day and correcting his mistakes as he went along. Carlyle, David had decided, was on the right general track, but prone to sloppy mistakes that wasted too much time and money. David tried to make subtle corrections to get the project on track, always aware that he might be running out of time...

The lab door opened behind him. David quickly resumed sweeping, turning to see Doyle, the plant manager, staring at David through his thick glasses. "Bradford? What are you doing here?"

David made a show of fingering his broom and looking back at the chalkboard. "I was just looking. I was good at math in school."

Doyle's smirk was ugly, condescending. "I bet you were." He looked at the clipboard in his hand. "You've still got the warehouse to clean up."

"Dr. Carlyle spilled some soda behind the workbench..."

"Get it later."

David put his broom on his cart, gritting his teeth as he headed for the warehouse. Now that Doyle had basically kicked him out of the lab, it would be hours before he could credibly return. He needed those hours to work out the problems in Carlyle's equations, but there was nothing he could do about it.

The warehouse was the biggest space in the Protronics plant, the size of an indoor basketball arena, filled with stacks of electronic equipment and chemicals. Some of the materials warehoused were twenty years out of date or more; David had heard that Dr. Carlyle liked to stick with components he knew and trusted, and that Doyle liked to buy in bulk when it could save money.

David swept the warehouse loading dock, then gathered a stack of empty boxes that went into the bin, a mini-dumpster on wheels, eight feet long and five feet deep. David was in the middle of tossing in the last of the empty boxes when something slammed right behind his left ear, propelling his forehead into the bin hard enough to make the metal structure gong. The strength went out of his knees; he sagged, and was suddenly snatched up and hurled head-over-heels into the bin, crashing down among the empty boxes and other garbage.

David clutched his head in pain. His vision was full of sparks, his ears rang. He could feel the bin moving, but he didn't register what was happening until a wooden crate slammed into the bin right next to him, followed by another and another. He looked up and saw that the bin had been wheeled next to a rack of heavy equipment. Whoever had attacked him was shaking the rack violently, toppling the items into the bin on top of him. Another crate smashed into his knee, making him howl in pain. He grabbed his injured leg, then cried out again as a bundle of metal rods landed across his shoulder and side.

*They're trying to crush me!* he thought distantly. He tried to get to his feet, but the crate on his leg pinned him down. He thrashed and cried out, but the avalanche of items kept coming.

Then the shouting began inside his head, and the world faded to green...

Steve Austin and Hank Garvin were in Garvin's cramped office, arguing over security procedures when the fire alarm went off. Garvin snatched up his walkie-talkie. "What is that? What's going on?"

The voice on the other end of the radio was panicked. "There's something in the warehouse! Send everyone down to the warehouse right now!"

Garvin looked at Steve, puzzlement in his eyes. "Wade? Is it a fire?" he asked into the radio.

"It's not a fire!" The security guard's voice was hysterical. "Send everyone right now!" Then a noise came over the radio speaker, something like the roar of an animal.

Steve followed Garvin out the door as they rushed for the warehouse. It was all Steve could do to keep himself moving at normal human speed, following the security chief through the corridors to the warehouse entrance, where several of the security guards were arriving.

"What is it, Hank?" one of the guards asked.

"Don't know," Garvin panted. "Maybe Wade saw a mouse or something."

The double doors to the warehouse burst open as a fifty-gallon steel barrel flew through them. It slammed into the opposite wall with enough force to crumple the front half of the barrel accordion-style, loosing a shower of plaster and ceiling tiles. Immediately after came a security guard, white-faced and drenched in sweat, running full-speed for the nearest exit.

The guards stared at the rapidly-vanishing man, then everyone jumped at the unearthly bellow that echoed through the warehouse, followed by a horrific crash. Steve pushed through the double doors and stopped at the sight before him: a seven-foot-tall man-shaped creature, shirtless and heavily muscled, emerald-green in color and with unearthly all-white eyes. It was pushing down racks of equipment and flinging fifty-gallon barrels as if they were soda cans, all the while bellowing an inarticulate roar.

Steve Austin had seen many fantastic things in his lifetime. He had walked on the Moon. Since his accident in the M3F5 and refitting with bionic limbs, he had fought diabolical plots and saved the nation and the world. He had faced mad scientists, natural disasters, robots, spies, terrorists, aliens, and just about every variety of criminal there was.

But this... this was different.

Garvin grabbed one of his men by the shoulder and shoved him forward. "Get in there! Surround that... whatever it is!"

The guards now rushed forward, drawing their nightsticks as they formed a ring around the creature. The creature glared at them and shook its mighty green fists, now growling like a grizzly bear.

Garvin stumbled back to Steve, clutching his own nightstick in one white-knuckled fist. "What is that thing?"

"I don't know." Steve switched his bionic eye over to infrared; the creature radiated about 30% more body heat than a human. He went over to a spectroscopic scan and saw that it was surrounded by an aura of low-level gamma radiation. *It reads all wrong for a robot... is it an alien? Some kind of mutation?*

Bobby Cole was twenty years old, the youngest security guard at Protronics. The other guys called him all the usual nicknames like "the kid" or "junior." Bobby would always smile and laugh, but deep down he hated to not be taken seriously. When the creature turned to growl at the other guards, Bobby saw his chance. He lunged forward, gripping his nightstick in both hands, and unleashed a brutal home-run swing at the back of the creature's head, where it impacted with a dry *craaack!*

The enraged creature spun around to roar full-force at Bobby from less than two feet away. Bobby stared into the ferocious face in front of him, which would haunt his nightmares until the day he died, and fainted dead away.

The other guards let loose, piling onto the creature and swinging their nightsticks wildly. The creature responded in kind: grabbing men and hurling them aside, pushing them away, all the while bellowing its fury at the unprovoked attack.

Steve grabbed Garvin's arm. "Do you have a gun?"

"In—in my office!" Garvin gasped, watching as the creature flung a two-hundred-pound guard thirty feet through the air to slam into a stack of crates.

"Get it!" Steve shoved the security chief back into the corridor, then turned to face the creature, which had just cast aside the last of the guards. Steve advanced slowly, keeping his hands where the creature could see them. "Easy, now. I don't want to hurt you."

The creature roared at Steve and shook its fists in defiance.

Steve cocked his head to the side. "Do you understand me? Do you speak English? Habla español? Parlez vous français ? Sprechen ze deutsch ?"

The creature charged forward. Steve sprang out of its grasp – it was faster than it looked. It lunged again, trying to grab Steve's arm. Steve ducked and planted a bionic punch in the creature's rock-hard belly, driving it back a step or two. It looked down at its stomach in surprise, then back at Steve with an incongruous toothy grin.

"Uh-oh." Steve said.

The creature took a wild swing at Steve's head this time. Steve grabbed the massive arm as it went past and pulled sharply, putting the creature through an aikido throw that propelled it into a rack of equipment. It roared again, snatched a bundle of pipes off the rack and hurled them back at Steve, who batted them aside with a swat of his bionic arm.

They circled each other warily. Steve paused, took a few steps backward, then charged forward, driving both feet at the creature's chest in a double-kick. The creature stepped out of the way and gave the astronaut a push in the side as he flew past, slamming him to the floor like a cat batting down a fly. Steve rolled aside and came up in a fighting crouch.

Garvin charged back into the warehouse, sweating and panting, a revolver in his fist. He pointed the pistol in the creature's general direction and let loose a trio of shots that screamed off the concrete floor and cinderblock walls.

"Garvin! Cease fire!" Steve shouted. "You'll hit your men!"

The creature took advantage of Steve's distraction to grab him by the shoulder and fling him to the side, sending him into the side of the garbage bin. Garvin stood paralyzed as the creature turned and ran to the warehouse loading dock. It punched a jade-colored hand through the sliding metal door and peeled it open as if it were tinfoil, then stepped through the opening and ran off.

Steve rolled up into a sitting position and glanced back at Garvin. "Nice shooting, Tex."

Garvin lowered his pistol, staring at the hole in the door. "How did it do that?"

"I don't know, but it sure made it look easy." Steve started to get up, then frowned. He scooped up a loose ID from the floor. "This isn't one of yours, is it?"

Garvin walked over and took the card to study it, then shook his head. "This is a maintenance card. This guy's one of our janitors, not security."

Steve took the card back. "Then I think we definitely need to talk to this..." he looked at the name again. "...David Bradford."

"I don't know what it was, Oscar." Steve Austin leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He shifted the telephone receiver to his other ear and used his free hand to rub the back of his neck. "All I can tell you is that it was big. And very strong. And very, very green."

Back in Washington D.C., Oscar Goldman and Rudy Wells exchanged worried glances. "You said your eye showed gamma radiation?" Rudy asked into the speaker phone.

"Uh-huh. Not much, but it was definitely there."

"What was your impression of it?" Rudy asked.

"I'm not sure. It reminded me of Sasquatch in a really bad mood, especially after that guard hit him. If it is a robot, it's definitely not from Earth."

Oscar got out of his chair and began pacing his office. "And Carlyle didn't know anything about it?"

"He said he didn't." Steve moved from rubbing his neck to massaging his forehead. "He didn't even want to believe us. He listened to me and Garvin and all the guards, but he acted like we made the whole thing up."

"I can understand his attitude," Oscar said. "We ran your description through the computer, and it matches a series of stories printed in the National Register in the last year about a monstrous green man who appears all over the country. Pretty lurid stuff."

"Too lurid," Steve agreed. "What about David Bradford?"

"That's pretty interesting, too." Oscar glanced down at a file folder on his desk. "We ran his employee record, and it looks like David Bradford didn't exist before last month."

"Score one for Protronics' screening process."

"I can have him picked up any time you want."

"Not yet, I want to talk to him first," Steve said. "I need to see what his connection is to this big green fellow."

Oscar nodded into the speaker. "I'm also making the arrangements to move Dr. Carlyle and essential assistants to a secure facility in New Mexico."

"Can you give me a day on that, too, Oscar?"

"So you can set a trap?"

"Exactly. If we put on enough of a time crunch, whoever is behind this whole thing will have to make their move in the next twenty-four hours."

David Banner hunched his shoulders inside his jacket as he walked through the front gate. His first instinct was to get back on the road, get out of Wichita before things got too hot, but he could not abandon Daedalus. Not yet, not this close to finding a cure.

The locker room was empty. David went to his locker, opened it, and quickly changed into his uniform. He reached into his jacket pocket for his ID, then swore quietly when he found the pocket empty. He began to pat down the pockets on his street clothes, then on his uniform, searching for the missing card.

“Is this yours?”

David turned to face Colonel Steve Austin, who stood there holding David Bradford’s ID card. He reached out and took it. “Thank you, Colonel.” He smiled shyly. “I saw you walk on the Moon, on TV.”

“Oh, that was a long time ago,” Steve said. “I want to ask about you. We found your ID in the warehouse last night.”

David froze. “What do you mean?”

“You were working last night, weren’t you, David?”

“Yes...” David fought to keep his face blank while his mind raced. What did Austin know?

“Were you in the warehouse?”

“I clean the warehouse every night,” David said. “I went in there to clean up some boxes, and there was something in there.”

“What was in there?” Steve watched David closely. He had talked to David’s supervisor and the other janitors; they had all told him what a nice person David was, albeit a little slow mentally. But Steve could see something happening in the janitor’s eyes as he struggled to answer the questions. Steve was starting to believe there was much more to David Bradford than met the eye.

“I saw this... thing...” David began. “It was big and really mad. It yelled at me and started throwing things around... I got scared. I ran away.” He cast his eyes down, as if ashamed. “I ran out the fire door. I didn’t want people to know.”

Steve took a deep breath. “Okay, David. I just wanted to know what happened. Don’t worry about it.”

David clipped his ID to his shirt pocket and smiled. “Nice to meet you, Colonel. I hope I get to see you again soon.”

“I’m afraid not, David.” Steve eyed the janitor again. “I’m here with the Daedalus Project, and we’re moving it to New Mexico in the morning.”

David felt his stomach flip over. “That’s too bad.”

“I know it is.” Steve shrugged. “It’s just not safe here anymore. Too many green giants.” He gave David a friendly slap on the shoulder and left.

David waited until the sound of Austin’s footsteps disappeared, then he sank onto the locker room bench, trying to keep himself calm. *New Mexico?? I’ll never be able to get to Daedalus there!* He felt his chance at a cure slipping away, and fought to control himself.

After a moment, David stood, straightened his uniform and looked at the wall clock. The night shift would be going on in five minutes. If he was lucky, Dr. Carlyle would stay in his office getting things ready for the move. Maybe there would be time for David to slip into the main lab and work on Daedalus.

David felt his hands tighten into fists. *If I can get in and get it working, then I have to use it on myself tonight. Now is my chance!*

They met in the basement, where no one could see. There were five of them, regarding each other with solemn tension.

“It’s official,” the leader began. “Goldman has ordered Daedalus moved to a location in New Mexico tomorrow. Carlyle is furious, of course.”

“So we must act tonight?”

“Yes,” the leader replied. “There is no other time.”

“What about Steve Austin?”

“He will die.” The leader’s tone was flat and final. “David Bradford, too.”

“You can’t be serious. He’s just a janitor.”

“He knows more than you think. He spent a lot of time in the lab, and always afterwards Carlyle would make progress. And he was in the warehouse when that thing appeared. The two of them are connected somehow, I know it.”

“Bradford has already clocked in for the evening.”

“Excellent. We can accomplish all our objectives at once.”

He ignored the sweat stinging his eyes, the throbbing pain in his lower back. David Banner blocked all those things, focusing on the fine connections on the circuit board before him. He applied a tiny drop of solder to a connection, waited few seconds for it to cool, then tested it with the voltage meter. He nodded at the reading, then went on to the next connection.

He was lucky – the lab was empty when he arrived, so he was able to start work immediately. The Daedalus prototype had not yet been packed away, so it was simple for David to open the device up and begin working directly on its innards, trying to get the device functional.

One final connection. David set down the soldering iron, tested the connection, then closed the device up. He attached the cigarette-pack-sized battery and turned Daedalus on, smiling as a series of green lights lit up.

David straightened, groaning at the pressure in his back. The clock read just after midnight; he had been working for three straight hours. The assembled Daedalus device was an aluminum cylinder fitted with circuit boards and exposed wires; it looked like Dr. Frankenstein’s thermos, but David only saw the potential it contained within. He scooped it up gently as a baby and walked it over to the far workbench, where he fitted it into a vise so that it aimed at a blank section of wall. He took a deep breath and reached for the trigger mechanism.

“All right, David, what’s going on?”

David spun to see Steve Austin standing in the doorway. The astronaut folded his arms over his chest. “Looks like you’ve been busy.”

“Colonel...” David held up a hand in a beseeching gesture. “I know this must look very unusual, but please let me finish. I have to use Daedalus on myself.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. Why do you have to do that, David?”

David took another deep breath. “I have a medical condition. I was exposed to a radiation overdose. The radiation has bonded to my mitochondria, into my DNA itself. I must use Daedalus to cleanse my system.”

Steve studied David’s face. He had been expecting guilt or denial, not pleading. *Either this guy is a fantastic liar*, Steve thought, *or he’s telling the truth. At least, the truth as far as he understands it.* “Is it cancer, David? We can get you treatment.”

David smiled sadly. “You think I’m crazy. I wish that were the case, Colonel. But I need to do this.” He reached for the trigger switch.

“Don’t...” Steve started forward as Daedalus began to hum. His eyes widened as his legs buckled out from under him, sending him to the lab floor. Steve tried to prop himself up with his bionic arm, but it refused to respond. At the same time, his left eye went snowy.

*Daedalus! It’s draining off my atomic generators!* Steve thought.

David stared as the astronaut crumbled to the floor. “Colonel?” he asked. “Are you okay?”

Steve rolled onto his side and used his left arm to push himself up. “Turn it off, David!” David looked at Daedalus, humming benignly, then down at the astronaut. *He’s bluffing. Unless he’s atomic-powered, there’s no way this can affect him.*

*But... can I take that chance?*

David sighed and shut Daedalus down. “Hold on, Colonel. Let me help you up.”

“No, leave him.”

David and Steve looked up sharply as five more people came into the lab: Ronald Doyle, Alice Miller, two security guards and a janitor. The two guards both held drawn guns, which were leveled at David and Steve.

Steve rested on his left elbow. “Doyle? What are you doing here?”

“We’ve come for Daedalus, Colonel,” Alice Miller said. Doyle immediately went over to the lab’s file cabinet and began filling a briefcase with documents.

“So you guys are the spy ring, huh?” Steve asked.

“Please. We’re just smart businesspeople.” Miller smiled at David. “Hello, David. I see you’ve been a busy little bee.”

David looked at the guns, then at Miller. “What’s going on here?”

Miller walked over to where Daedalus rested in its vise, studying the device. “There are a lot of people out there who think Daedalus will be very useful. But, they think letting the U.S. government control it isn’t any good, because it won’t make them any money. We want to make sure anyone who is interested will have an equal opportunity to bid for it.”

Steve could feel sensation returning to his limbs, and his eye was clearing. He looked up at Doyle, who was still packing paperwork in their briefcase. “Guess I was wrong about you, Doyle.”

“You thought I was one of the good guys?” Doyle sneered.

“No, I figured you’d never have the spine for something like this.”

Doyle launched a kick into Steve’s ribs. Steve made a show of doubling over in pain; the ribs Doyle kicked were unbreakable vitallium, but Steve used the movement to gather his feet under him.

Miller looked up from the device. “You got it working! That’s very impressive. That should put another million on the asking price.” She winked at David. “No assembly required!”

Steve coughed, loudly. “What are you going to do with us?”

Doyle snickered. “No witnesses.”

“Exactly.” Miller agreed. She looked over at the janitor. “Carl, you know what to do.”

The janitor nodded and stepped out of the lab, returning immediately with a pair of gas cans. He began splashing gasoline all over the lab.

“Looks like it’s a blessing that you were here, David,” Miller said. “We had planned to kill Colonel Austin and destroy the lab anyway, but this makes things much more logical. It makes much more sense for Colonel Austin to die in a fire caused by a suicide bomber.”

David felt his heart pounding; his hands trembled. “You really don’t want to...”

Doyle stepped forward and drove his fist into David’s belly, doubling him over. The plant manager then punched David in the face, knocking him back into a rack of equipment.

Steve gathered his feet beneath him and leaped up. Doyle was drawing back his foot to kick David in the face when Steve grabbed him by the belt and hurled him across the room into a bank of electrical equipment. The equipment spat a shower of sparks into the spreading puddle of gasoline, which ignited with a pop and a roar.

The two security guards leveled their pistols at Steve. The bionic man snatched up a stool and hurled it at them sideways, battering them down.

Then the roar echoed through the room. Steve squinted through the spreading flames at the massive green form that pushed aside a workbench and bellowed its fury at the world.

“Perfect,” Steve muttered. “Just what I need.”

The janitor took one look at the creature and took off running. The creature saw Steve and began stalking forward, dropping into a fighting crouch.

Miller stared at the creature, then suddenly turned back to Daedalus, still clamped in the vise. She wrenched at it, trying to pry it loose, and her fingers fell on the trigger switch.

Steve felt his limbs go numb again as he collapsed to the floor. "Son of a --!"

The creature took another step forward, then howled in agony. It fell to its knees, screaming in pain as Daedalus ripped the radiation from its very cells. It beat its massive fists on the floor, then reared back up and slammed a hole that size of a refrigerator in the wall, opening a path to open air that made the fire explode with renewed oxygen. The creature's cries grew louder and louder, rapidly going from pain to sheer animal rage.

Miller ignored the stifling heat and the suffocating smoke until she finally got the vise to release. She looked over her prize triumphantly, then frowned when she saw the energy levels Daedalus was pulling in. "It's overloading?" she muttered to herself, just before the device in her hands released its pent-up energy in a shattering blast.

From his position on the floor, Steve covered his head with his natural arm. When he looked up, peering through the harsh smoke, he saw what was left of Miller and grimaced.

The creature sagged to the floor nearby, its eyes half-closed. Suddenly, it looked around and seemed to remember it was in the middle of a fire. It rolled onto all fours, then pushed itself up to its bare feet.

"Hey!" Steve called. "Over here!"

The creature's eyes fell on Steve. It glared down at the felled astronaut and made a throaty rumble that reminded Steve of a lion contemplating dinner.

Then it scooped Steve up in its arms and rushed through the ever-increasing fire. It leaped through the hole it had made in the wall and out into the parking lot. Once it had gotten thirty yards from the burning building, the creature set Steve down gently on the pavement. It looked down on the astronaut for a moment, then turned and vanished into the night.

The Protronics building smoldered in the cold Kansas dawn. Exhausted firefighters rolled up their hoses while police interviewed witnesses, stealing glances at what was left of the building.

Far back from the attention, Steve Austin and Oscar Goldman drank coffee and watched the steam and smoke rise into the sky. Rudy Wells emerged from a van behind them. "Everything checks out, Steve," Rudy reported. "Your atomic generators are at 100%, so I don't think you'll have any residual effects at all."

"Good to know." Steve sipped his coffee. "I just wish we'd been able to save something from inside. How's Carlyle?"

"Catatonic." Oscar said. He gestured to a car parked facing the ruined building, where Carlyle sat staring at the remains. "He doesn't think he'll ever be able to duplicate his notes or the prototype. I'm canceling Project Daedalus as soon as we get back to Washington."

"It's a shame," Steve said. "It did work, after all." He rubbed his bionic arm.

Rudy poured himself a cup of coffee from inside the van and went over to stand with Steve and Oscar. "I wish I could have seen that monster of yours."

Steve nodded. "It saved my life, although it seemed a little dicey at the end." He sighed. "I just wish it could have saved David Bradford, too."

The semi's brakes hissed as it rolled to a stop. The driver called out to the hitchhiker trudging down the shoulder of I-35. "Where ya headed?"

"Where's the truck headed?" the hitchhiker called back.

"Oklahoma City."

"That'll do."

The trucker unlocked the door and waited until the hitchhiker climbed in before letting off the brake. He glanced over at his passenger, a medium-sized man with wavy dark hair and a lined face. "Been on the road long?"

"Seems like forever."

The semi climbed to fifth gear, rumbling down the highway on the road out of Wichita.

"I'm Bob, by the way." The trucker stuck out a meaty hand.

The hitchhiker shook it. "My name's David."

THE END