

Starblaze #4

"By the way, we got our phone bill today," Erin said.

"Yeah?" Jake thumbed the channel button on the remote. He just wanted to relax after his encounter with Brute earlier that day.

"Who do you know in San Diego?"

Jake's thumb stopped mid-click. "What?" he said, having heard her.

"I was looking at the phone bill today and noticed there was a long distance call to San Diego. We usually use our cell phones for long distance, so I was wondering who you called."

Jake thought this through for a moment. "I didn't call anyone," he concluded.

Erin poked her head around the corner. "You sure?"

Why is she bugging me about this? "Jesus, Erin! I already told you I didn't."

Erin's brow furrowed. "You don't need to be a prick, Jake. I was just asking."

"Well," Jake began, the bite of his words already softening, "I don't know, okay?" He jabbed the power button on the remote and the TV shut off. He floated off the couch and into their bedroom. His costume lay on the bed. Jake changed into it and called, "I'm going out for a while."

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Erin had just tossed the dinner salad when she heard Jake say something from the bedroom. She almost called out to him to repeat what he said, but she hesitated. Everything had been going so well between them, especially since his collapse, but the way he had just talked to her. . . . She knew he was having a hard time dealing with all these changes he was going through. *Come on, Erin*, she thought. *Like he's going through puberty or something*. Obviously this was much bigger than that, not to mention his apparent memory lapses about his . . . condition. *So, you can mope about how he spoke to you, or just chalk it up to nerves and help him*.

Erin washed and dried her hands, and went into the bedroom. It was empty.

"Hmm," she said. Then she turned around and went to get the phone bill.

* * *

Jake knew he was smiling and knew even more that he could not help it. And he didn't want to. He was flying and it was the greatest feeling. Better than sex, even. *I think*. . . . He was wandering, banking this way and that, as long as he kept moving. He chuckled to himself—he couldn't believe now that he had once been somewhat afraid of flying. But now there was just him, the air, and 200 or so feet below. And his flying had improved vastly since he started. He no longer wobbled when taking off and he never lost his balance while in the air.

After a while, Jake saw the WaMu Tower ahead. He went straight for it and picked up some speed. As he neared the building, he wondered briefly if anyone

happened to be looking out a window at him speeding their way. But then he realized how quickly he was approaching the building and arced upwards. As he moved up, he noticed the building was no more than a foot away from him. After nearing the top, he slowed to a hover, looking down. He recalled that the Tower was 50-some stories tall. Everything looked unreal up here. Here there were no complications, no worries. He felt at peace. And then, off in the distance, he saw it, and knew he had to go. He dashed off to visit Seattle's defining landmark.

As he neared the Space Needle, Jake hovered toward the observation deck. He wanted to see the looks on people's faces as they saw him. And saw him they did. One woman screamed and pointed at him. This caused others to gather. Many pointed at him, others snapped photos, and one little girl waved at him. Jake smiled and waved back. "Just wanted to say, 'Hi'," he said, though he was pretty sure they couldn't hear him. Then Jake floated up and came gently down on the roof. He sat. *Huh*, he thought after a few moments, *I thought the whole thing rotated.*

* * *

On the second ring, Erin wondered what she would say to the person who answered. *"Hi, I was just wondering who you are?"* On the fourth ring, she thought they were probably out to dinner or something and decided to hang up when she heard an older man's voice say, "Hello. This is the Happy Haberdasher, San Diego's finest men's clothier. I'm closed right now, but you can call or stop in between 9 AM and 5 PM,

Monday through Friday. Please leave a message after the beep.”

Erin hung up the phone and said, “What the hell?”

* * *

“What a dope,” Jake announced. *Sitting out here feeling . . . what? Mad?*

Ridiculous. He stood. He would go home, apologize to Erin for being a jackass, and then they would talk. Jake jumped off the Space Needle and fell for a couple seconds. The rush overtook him and he couldn't breath for a moment—he loved it. There was a time where he would tell people he was afraid of falling, not liking the “afraid of heights” phrase, but now. . . . Now he could fly, and there wasn't anything better than that.

Nearing the streets, Jake leveled out, weaving and bobbing around the trees, buildings, and wires. He was heading home, but he was going to take the scenic route. He noticed a few people looking upward and pointing, but most were oblivious to his presence. He ascended and picked up speed. In a few seconds he was nearing Lake Union. Then he dropped down, maintaining his speed, and “skimmed” the water's surface, creating a wake behind him. He wished Erin was with him, could fly with him and experience what this was really like. He hoped this feeling—this sense of wonder at what he could do now—would never leave him, but he was sure it would, some day, and he felt sad. But for now, at least, he was going to enjoy the hell out of it.

Jake pulled up again and headed east. He decided to patrol the U-Dub campus before heading home. But as he came toward the Burke Museum, he saw flashing lights. He slowed to a hover above three police cruisers. The officers were focused on the front of the building. A sedan pulled up and the man who got out started giving orders. Jake descended behind who he figured was a plain-clothes cop.

"Hi," Jake said behind the officer.

"Look, sir, you need to step—" The man then saw Starblaze floating in front of him. "Oh, it's you."

It wasn't the greeting Jake was expecting. "Can I help?" he asked.

"I don't—" But the cop's words were cut off again, this time by the sound of breaking glass, and the sight of a policeman flying through the broken doors. Jake barely reached the guy before he fell onto the street behind the police cars. The cop was bloodied and unconscious. Jake put him down on the street as gently as he could. He noticed the man wasn't breathing. *What do I do?* "He needs help!" Jake called. The plain-clothes cop was already on his radio, calling for backup and an ambulance. Then he looked at Jake.

"What are you waiting for? Get in there."

Jake stood. He flew in through the busted doors and stopped short, almost crashing into a wall. He whirled around, but saw no one. Whoever had thrown the cop (*who was probably dying—don't think about that!*) had left this area. *Was it Brute?* Jake

wondered. He was the only man Jake could think of (besides himself) that was strong enough to throw a man 25 feet. Then he thought he heard a voice coming from an adjacent room.

Jake stopped short as he took in the occupants. A few feet away was a tall, large man wearing a striped stocking cap. His head brushed the low ceiling with his height but was disproportionate when compared to the rest of his enormous body. He reminded Jake of the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man from *Ghostbusters*—large, round, and doughy looking. But what really drew Jake's attention was the man standing further into the room. He looked normal enough—average height and build—but in place of his head was a jack o' lantern, complete with triangles for the eyes and nose and a jagged mouth. And there was a flame flickering inside the head.

“Slough,” said the pumpkin-faced man, “toss him out too.”

The big creature grunted and took a lumbering step toward Jake, his right hand opening.

“Stop!” Jake yelled. Slough, to Jake's surprise, did, but only for a moment. “I don't want to hurt you!” Jake floated backwards, just keeping out of Slough's grasp. Pumpkin Head turned back around, inspecting something.

Jake fired a blast at Slough's hand, hoping it was just enough to ward off the thing. Slough howled in pain, clutching his hurt hand with the other. Then Slough growled and lunged at Jake. Jake fell through the doorway and they crashed into the

wall behind him. Despite the force field, Jake still felt the impact. He fired again with both hands. Slough screamed, stumbled back, and fell to a sitting position. Jake caught the glint of a tear running down the creature's small face, its lips frowning.

"I said 'stop!'" Jake commanded.

Pumpkin Head, without turning his attention from whatever it was in front of him, said, "Trow." Jake barely saw some movement off to his right when it was on him, legs wrapped around Jake's torso. This thing was smaller than him, and thinner, but its skin was ashen and it had pointed ears. It reminded Jake of an elf. But it was strong and moving so fast Jake couldn't get a grip on its arms. It swung its fists at Jake's force-field protected face. Jake winced instinctively as sparks flew off when the blades protruding from the thing's knuckles connected. It seemed as if he was shredding Jake's force field little by little. *Was that even possible?!* Jake heard Slough laugh. Then Trow threw back its right fist and plunged the blades at Jake's chest while its left hand kept striking at Jake's head. Trow hissed at Jake, its purplish eyes wide and a thin smile on its lips. Then Jake realized that the blades over his chest were slowly, millimeter by millimeter, getting closer.

"No!" Jake screamed and blasted. Trow landed several feet away, smoking from where the energy hit him. Trow wasn't moving.

Slough, still sitting, looked at Trow and whimpered.

Pumpkin Head finally turned around, looked down at Trow, and then at Jake.

He walked toward Jake.

“Allow me to introduce myself,” he said. “I am Mr. Dark. I procure antiquities for my clients and I do not brook any interference, from the constabulary or otherwise. Leave me alone and I will leave you alone, is my motto. But now, not only have you interfered, but you have killed one protector and injured another.” Mr. Dark stopped inches away from Jake, the flames from inside the pumpkin head now spilling out from the eye holes. “Some day, little man, I will return to collect on your debt.” Then flames poured forth from Mr. Dark’s eyes, enveloping Jake. He couldn’t see anything but the fire and felt the heat. Panicking, Jake blasted away again, but the flames kept burning, so he flew to his right and crashed into a wall. The fire sprinklers turned on, dousing him. In a few moments, the flames were gone. And, Jake discovered momentarily, so were Mr. Dark and his crew.

* * *

Jake sat in the back of a Seattle police car, a blanket draped over his shoulders. All he wanted to do was fly away, see Erin and have her hold him, and forget this night, if only for a few hours.

The door opened and the detective slid in beside Jake. He had something in his hand.

“Starblaze? I’m Detective Kramer. How we doing?”

Jake nodded. “Mmm.”

“I have the digital video from the surveillance cams inside the museum. It was weird, for most of the break in, we have nothing, like all the cameras stopped working at once, but shortly after you went in, we got this.” Kramer held out a palm-size video recorder. He flipped open the viewer and pressed the play button. It showed Mr. Dark turning around and walking toward Jake. Jake watched as the creature (not a man, he decided) “lectured” him. Jake flinched (and noticed that Kramer also noticed) when the flames poured out of Mr. Dark's eyes. Then Mr. Dark backed up into the dark room again and disappeared. The rest of the video showed Jake blasting at nothing and then hitting the wall. Kramer turned it off.

“We're still not sure what was taken. Probably won't know until tomorrow.”

“I killed him. It,” Jake corrected. “What happens now?”

Kramer looked at Jake a moment. “Look. I don't know that you killed anybody.” Jake started to speak, but the detective cut him off. “Despite what you and this pumpkin-headed freak claim. I have no evidence. And . . . if it wasn't for you I might have some dead cops. Plus, I was the one who told you to go in, so, I kind of owe you one.”

Jake sighed heavily. “Then I can go?”

“Sure,” Kramer said. He got out of the car and came around to the other side. Jake exited the vehicle. “Here.” He handed Starblaze his card. “If you ever need anything. Give me a ring.”

Jake took the card. "Thanks." Then he began walking down the road away from the museum. After a few minutes he realized that the crunching sound around him was his boots on the pavement. It was an odd sound.

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Trow lunged at Erin, only it wasn't Erin. Erin, here, was taller and had long, jet-black hair. As Trow's claws inched ever closer to plunging into Erin's chest (he was moving in very slow motion now), not-Erin turned to Jake and yelled, "Jake!"

Jake woke. Erin wasn't in bed beside him and the clock indicated it was nearly ten in the morning. "Erin!" he called out.

"Jake, come here, please."

Jake got out of bed and walked to the bedroom door. He'd forgotten how cold the linoleum was in the mornings. As soon as he opened the door, he saw Erin standing in front of the couch, looking at something.

"Erin?" She looked at him, but then her attention turned back to the apartment's entrance area.

"Erin, what is—?" Jake stopped. Standing in front of him was Ikon, all seven feet of him, his red cape draped elegantly over his broad, black shoulders. Jake could even see the muscles through the cape's cover. Ikon was one of the few supers Jake knew something about. He was an alien, hence his ebony skin and fantastic powers, and one of the few supers after the Krolan Invasion and disbandment of the Crusaders

that were still active. He made the world a safer place. He was someone Starblaze could look up to. *Holy shit!* Jake thought.

“Starblaze?” Ikon asked, all baritone and power.

Jake nodded.

“I need your help.”

by Eric P. Isaacson

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