Prelude

Extraordinary.

That's what they used to call me. More specifically they used to call me Extraordinary Man. I never really felt that was a good name. But then again I never really felt that extraordinary. I was just doing what I could to help people. A lot of people need help.

I always wondered why more people never got involved. Why was I the only one who decided that someone should stand up, take charge and help others? Why wouldn't more people see that the more of us helping, the easier the burden would be on everyone. I guess part of the problem was most people thought it was too much of a burden. So I alone was stuck with the task.

I really can't complain. It was easier for me because of my abilities. Being able to hear a cry for help miles away made it easier to quickly help those in need. Being able to run faster than a steam-powered buggy meant that I could get there very fast. Being able to lift as much as fifty men certainly didn't slow my progress either.

A steam powered buggy? I am beginning to show my age. I haven't seen one of those in almost a century. The automobile changed all that, along with computers and the modern era. I can't even go as fast as these modern marvels can from city to city. And don't get me started on flying. I might be able to jump a thousand feet into the air but I've never been able to soar in the clouds. The only thing left for me to wonder these days is when I will die.

Don't get me wrong. I am not looking forward to death, nor do I seek its arrival upon my doorstep. And if you saw me and recognized me, you'd wonder how I have managed to stay young-looking for all these years, although I can see the cracks already starting to form in my face when I look in the mirror. I'm not immortal.

Extraordinarily slow metabolism is what the doctors told me. Or rather what they told my mother. She got worried when I was twelve and still looked like I was barely older than a toddler. I think it scared the schoolteachers more though. How would you feel if you were teaching advanced algebra to what looked like a four year-old? And let's not talk about physical sports. I was already showing above average aptitude in long distance running and high-jumping. If only I had been allowed to go to college back then or if there had been scholarships I am certain I would have been some famous all-star. I'd have probably been an Olympic Gold medalist. Such was the way of coming up from meager and modest beginnings.

I loved growing up in the Dust Bowl. Long after my parents died and I was left with the property, it gave me the peace and comfort that I longed for and desired. I spent many afternoons just running through the fields, feeling the wind on my face and not having to worry about some nosy reporter flashing a picture of me or asking me one hundred silly questions about who I was and where I came from. When I was in the fields I could truly be myself. When I was in the fields I was free.

But helping others was also in my nature. My parents raised me to feel that I was special and had gifts that I needed to share with the world. I never knew what they meant until long after they had died. Not until the world finally caught up with me.

I used to read the local newspaper. It used to be pleasant reading about what was going on in nearby towns, who was being elected, and what new territories where being officially named states in the union. Election time was always exciting, especially to read everything the opponents would say about each other in order to make people vote for them. Most never seemed to realize that most of us were too smart and could easily see through their poor attempts to slander each other. I mean, seriously, do you think any of us really cared if Earl had been spotted riding a pig in his field on occasion? I think we'd all done that at least once.

Then the local print shop got the telegraph, and news from all over the world started pouring in. News from around the world soon overwhelmed us with information about the comings and goings of people in the world. And it wasn't long after that they started having an effect on our lives with their call to get our votes for elections. Town mayors didn't seem all that important for a while when every couple of years you had to elect some senator or governor. And since there was seldom enough time to really go see, meet and get to know these individuals, most of us didn't even bother voting since there was no way to make an informed decision on the matter.

Of course it wasn't long before the radio arrived in our town. It helped to ease the information burden initially. Once we could hear people through the magic box as some called it, we were smart enough to tell who was on the level. Unfortunately not everyone had the same insight and generally the ones that got elected were people that had no business being in office in the first place. I thought the world had gone mad. And then it did.

I had read about countries going to war in the history books when I was in school. Somehow I had always felt them to be somewhat mythical because they didn't take place in my lifetime. I knew some of the old timers in town had fought in what history makers would call the Civil War, but that had happened before I was born and thus seemed in many ways like a life time away. I never thought I

would be alive to see nations in the world actually taking up arms against each other. And then the United States got involved and there was a call for all able-bodied men to sign up and go overseas to fight for what was right. Naturally I signed up and went.

The war to end all wars, as it was called, opened my eyes for the first time to just how closed off from the world I really had been. At first I got to meet new people from all walks of life in the army training camps. Then I got to see the big city of New York for the first time as I prepared to be shipped over to Europe. Something caught my eye back then that would eventually lead me to make that big city my home, at least for a while.

I probably would have enjoyed Europe more if I hadn't been thrust onto its shore with a rifle in my hands. The thought of having to kill another human being somewhat repulsed me, but I knew I had signed up for the job and that I was on the side of the right. I killed only when I had absolutely no other choice, and it shook me to my core every time I did. Even in the trenches at night I just knew there had to be a better way. And that's when I first started my activities.

Despite the best scouts and lookouts on the battlefield, not everything could be watched all the time, especially when it was dark. It didn't take long to learn a few of the scouts' routines before I was able to quickly make my way across the battlefield in the shadow of darkness and sabotage enemy equipment without them even realizing it. When the shooting started back up in the morning, it never lasted long as the enemy kept having to suddenly fall back on their positions from lack of resources. Even though I was never officially spotted, rumors whispered through our troops that a shadow figure of some kind had been seen helping us.

When the war ended and the surviving troops were returned home, I thought I had seen the last of my days in the military. Everyone was declaring the age of peace and prosperity and that we would never see another conflict of this nature in our lifetime. Who knew that twenty years later we'd be back at it again?

In some ways the Second World War was good for the world. This time almost the entire world did get involved, and it was surprising to many to see how quickly allies would switch sides when things started going against you. Of course this time I had a different purpose. This time I was a secret weapon.

I didn't want to see this war last longer than it had to. I heard rumors of the government putting together special teams for special missions designed to stop the Nazi forces quickly. I made them aware of some of my special abilities and was soon recruited in the military intelligence division and became a spy known as Soldier A.

My function was simple. Locate the weak spots in enemy forces, transmit the information back to headquarters, and let the other special operatives do their jobs. Most of them were snipers and demolition experts so they were left with all the killing and destructive tasks. It worked well and we were just about to finish the Nazis when the Japanese got involved with their sneak attack on Pearl Harbor.

Many of us on the special team wanted to change our target priority right there and then to Japan but our superiors kept us in line and focused on taking care of Germany and the Nazi forces. They told us they had another plan for Japan and we shouldn't worry and we wouldn't be needed. So we did our duty and before long Germany had surrendered.

We sat around waiting for our superiors to debrief us and send us to Japan. We kept thinking any day now we'll be back in action. But that day never came. In fact the day that came was the day that entered the world into the atomic era.

You would have thought that dropping an atomic bomb on any city in the world would have caused most of the world to wake up about current events. The problem I soon came to discover was that it just made matters worse. The war ended and I returned to my new home in New York City and became quickly aware that people were becoming even more removed from what was going on around them. Certainly people knew what was going on in the world, but the shock of the atom bomb I think scared too many people into thinking we were either too dangerous to do anything or simply inadequate anymore. And thus crime began to rise.

Organized crime had always been a problem in major cities, but that was in essence the beauty of it. It was organized. It stayed between the criminal organizations and the police. Some say it went more that just between them but that was never my concern. What became my concern was the rise in so called petty crimes. Since prosperity didn't easily come to all, some took to getting it anyway they could, and that often meant a life of crime.

The first time I decided to make a stand happened one night shortly after dinner. I was washing dishes in my apartment with the window open as I loved to listen to the sounds in the city. However that fateful night I heard the most disturbing sound I had ever heard in my life; that of a young woman screaming. A woman screaming in New York City was nothing unexpected. Some even thought it was a normal occurrence. But this scream was different. It had a very blood curdling ring to it; the kind that should send shivers up your spine.

The scream came from several blocks away. Most people will tell you that I was crazy for what I did next. Some said it was extraordinary I even heard it in the first place. But heard it I did and I was out the window with my feet pounding the pavement to its source before Joe DiMaggio could hit another home run. And it was a good thing I did otherwise the young woman would certainly be dead today.

I arrived in the back alley to see a rather desperate man with a knife in his hands hunched over a woman crumpled against the wall with half her clothes torn off and bloody. She was still alive and crying loudly, begging him to stop but he kept slowly moving towards her. Without any thought I quickly rushed in and grabbed the knife from his hands. He turned to lunge at me, but my combat training kicked in and I tossed him through the air like a rag doll against the wall knocking him out.

I picked up the woman and quickly rushed her to the nearest hospital. I managed to escape most of the questions from the nurses and orderlies in the commotion of getting her into the emergency rooms and went back to find her assailant. Fortunately he was where I had left him and still unconscious as that made it easier to drop him off at the police station with a note describing his actions. He was convicted after the woman recovered and gave eyewitness account that he was the person who assaulted him. What I didn't know was that I had been watched the entire time.

“She was saved by an Extraordinary Man.” Those were the newspapers’ headlines across the world. And that was the name the world would remember me by for the rest of my life.

No one had actually seen my face, which worked to my advantage. It also meant the military didn’t have to put me into any kind of protective program which they certainly thought about doing. My former superiors had recognized my quick work easily and thought to recruit me as some kind of special government agent. At first I said no. But then as more and more crimes started happening around the city, and the more I “got involved” with stopping them, I soon figured it would only be a matter of time before I would become public. So we created my “hero” identity.

The costume was, well, tight. I always made sure to wear something underneath it. The military had been experimenting with a new type of body armor that was thinner and light-weight yet was capable of stopping a .45 caliber bullet. It could stop it but still felt like I got hit by a truck every time some low life criminal opened fire on me.

At least they always hit me in the chest rather than anywhere else. The costume had a big yellow X across the chest. I thought it made me stand out too much but their researchers said that based on psychological studies having it would increase the chance of criminals aiming there so they could concentrate armor and padding in the one location. I couldn’t blame them for being right.

The rest of the costume was dark blue with black trim, much like a police uniform. They wanted me to look official as much as possible so that I wasn't just an ordinary citizen taking the law into my own hands. I mostly agreed with that idea but often thought that if more people had gotten involved in stopping petty criminals then we wouldn't have needed me so much in the first place.

The costume was made complete with a hood and mask both to conceal my true identity as much as possible as well as provide additional protection just in case some lunatic decided to actually aim for my head. Thankfully I never got to experience what that felt like.

And so off I went each night after work, donning my costume and becoming a costumed crime fighter in the name of the law. And for the first couple of years everything seemed good. Crime rates began to significantly drop, people began to feel safer walking the streets at night, and an overall sense of wellness started back into the city.

And then the criminals started wearing costumes too.

I never quite understood why they started doing it. I understood that most of them grew up with hard lives and just didn't know any other way. They grew up in a take what you can to survive world, which in many ways I thought society was partially responsible for creating. But the ones that started showing up in costumes of their own, saying they deserved what they were trying to take, I could never quite figure out.

Some of them I figured just wanted extra attention. There had become a certain attraction to being captured by "Extraordinary Man." At first it was only one costumed criminal a month but before long it seemed every low life with a mask and a sewing kit was trying to rob a jewelry store just to get their name in the headlines.

And it wasn't just criminals getting in on the act. The number of people that wanted to be my sidekick was probably the first thing to really make me think twice about everything I was doing. It's not that I didn't want help, and certainly there were a couple who actually were helping, but most of them wouldn't do anything if I wasn't around.

And then the line was finally crossed. A villain by the name of Dr. Vitiate decided to up the odds. The first time I ran into him and every time after he was always very crafty. He started his career as a bank robber and eco-terrorist with an interesting ability to be able to pick any lock. Rumor had it he was an understudy of Houdini which possibly explains why he never stayed captured for long. The newspapers

used to describe our clashes as epic confrontations between gods. Truth be known he probably was more intelligent than me but in the end it would always appear he was his own worst enemy.

And then he started to raise the stakes. He started using innocents for hostages and bargaining chips. At first I would just go in, rescue the hostages and apprehend him. But each new time it got tougher, as if he was testing me. Then one day I finally failed the test and a person died.

No one was ever supposed to be seriously hurt because of my actions. Certainly no one was supposed to die. But someone did, and then I knew it was time to leave the public spotlight.

I made sure that Dr. Vitiate was locked up in a state-of-the-art prison facility with twenty-four hour guarded surveillance. There was no way he was getting out this time. I stayed around to personally guard him through out his trial and conviction. And then, once I was certain that he was safely locked away in his cage, I left.

It was really hard to leave. For the first couple of weeks I had to fight the urge to put on my costume and stop whatever crime was being committed. But it didn't take long for the costumed criminals, as well as the rest of the world, to figure out that I wasn't going to show up anymore.

I remember the headlines. "Extraordinary Man takes Extraordinary Leave" and "Where Has Extraordinary Gone" were among my favorites. But the stories stung me not only with their questions of my motives, but more with their driving home of despair, as if without me there was no hope in the world. I left the big city with a tear in my eye that day.

I never asked to be the savior of the world. I was just a man trying to a make a difference. I was only trying to save lives and inspire hope. The world wasn't really ready for that.