

# CHAPTER ONE

THERE'S A SIGN THAT TRAVELERS DRIVING THROUGH WASHINGTON STATE SEE AS THEY HEAD SOUTH on Interstate 5. This sign is a greeting, a warm metaphorical handshake extended to all motorists crossing one particular city's border. It reads:

"Welcome to Seattle, Washington".

And below that, it adds:

"For a Day or a Lifetime".

The sentiment that the city fathers try to convey with this bit of tourism copy is that Seattle would love to have you drop on in for a visit. It's an awfully nice place, after all, to spend an afternoon. We've got gorgeous wooded scenery to please the eye, a wide offering of historic landmarks to tour, plentiful waterways full of islands to boat out to and explore, majestic mountains to wander, and one very big science-fiction-looking Needle to ride to the top of for a panoramic view of the whole shebang. We've got big-city excitement mixed with quaint shops, seafood to die for (and if you feel like watching your seafood get tossed around by talented mongers in smelly aprons before you eat it, we've got a market that'll set you up with that particular pleasure, too), and a thriving and enviable artistic and musical culture to drink in. You may just like it so much that your one day visiting the Emerald City might convince you to relocate and spend the rest of your days walking your dog down along by the Sound, listening to Mariner games on your radio, and becoming, yourself, a part of the great human tapestry that makes Seattle such a special place.

Maybe just a day. Maybe a whole lifetime. Seattle's cool with whichever way you decide.

Can one day in a city really change the course of an entire lifetime? It can, and it has for many. As a matter of fact, once in a great while, that can even hold true for the city itself. The question, then, is whether one day in a city's history can irrevocably alter that city's own destiny, can change it and its place in the world for the rest of its own lifetime?

It can. And it did.

That day was November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1987.

IT WAS AN AVERAGE NOVEMBER DAY IN SEATTLE, CRISP AND CLOUDY, AND ITS CITIZENS WERE GOING about their pre-holiday business. At the University of Washington campus, students were walking to their Wednesday classes, the specter of upcoming finals vying for a spot in their busy minds with pending weekend parties, dwindling money from home, and frustrations with roommates that they were, by this point in the semester, about one more night of snoring away from stabbing to death with a number two pencil.

Behind the campus is an area named “Beggar’s Canyon” by the locals, dubbed such for being a common place for transients to take up residence. A barren and ugly place, it holds little interest for students who would much rather spend their free time carpooling downtown to find trouble, and is typically deserted (homeless campers notwithstanding). Seattle PD is aware that this makes it a convenient location for under-the-radar criminal activities, so they pay it semi-regular visits to check for any signs of undesirable enterprise.

November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1987, was not one of these days.

Regis Conte (his actual name, regardless of how much it sounds like a poorly thought-out alias) was a small-time player in the great Northwest cocaine wars of the 80s, but was looking to better himself and make his mark. A Miami Vice fanatic, he had a penchant for pastels and a not-so-new but still eye-catching boat that he preferred to do his business on. The problem that November was that *everyone* in the drug trade liked doing business on the water, and the Harbor Patrol had stepped up their board-and-search activities drastically in response (something they had dubbed “Operation Soundsweeper”).

Conte had some product to unload to some interested out-of-town buyers from Portland, and with the crackdown on the Sound going on, he decided an inland deal felt much safer. He opted for Beggar’s Canyon, a locale he’d used back when he was just making his living with stolen electronics (before Miami Vice had changed his life and his aspirations), and he and three members of his “gang”, if they could be called such—Mike Tredmore, Jeff Gibson and Tim Mascow—drove out to the pre-arranged gulley in Conte’s 1986 Ford Bronco II to meet up with their buyers, a foursome representing the Northwest hand of Mexico’s Casa Roja cartel. As the names of all the Mexicans turned out to be fictitious, we’ll forgo their use here.

The two vehicles parked on the hardpan and all eight low-rent criminals stepped out—wary, posturing, and making a show of pushing back jackets to expose their holstered guns. Careful words were exchanged and the deal began, with Tredmore, in response to a nod from Conte, going to the Bronco and coming back with a black leather briefcase filled with what Conte always referred to as “Bolivian marching powder” (because Sonny Crockett did so). The leader of Roja chicos inspected the merchandise, performing a shake test with a small vial, and nodded his gruff satisfaction with the quality. One of his men, hearing his Spanish-spoken command, backed carefully to their pickup truck and came back with a Nike gym bag. The boss took it and unzipped it, showing the cash to Conte, who did his own nod, not bothering to count it. The exchange was made, and the deal was seemingly done.

Until a man dressed in black, wearing a full cowl and mask, soared down from an overhead cliff where he’d been watching the whole ordeal, riding the cold winds with a pair of glider wings built into what could only be described as a super-hero costume.

His landing took out two of the Mexicans, victims of his thick-soled boots. Those Mexicans still conscious had no idea who he was. They were, after all, from out of town. But Conte and his crew were local, and did, occasionally, read the paper and watch the local news, and they recognized him immediately.

Phantasm.

The age of the super-hero had long since begun, and was, in fact, in its silver age. The greats like the Justice League and the Protectors had retired, and a new crop of heroes—some even the offspring of the greats, as was the case with Captain Thunder, Thunderbolt and Celerity—had captured the imaginations and adorations of the nation, thrilling the media with their city- and world-saving exploits.

Phantasm was not one of those kinds of heroes. He was minor-league, a local who had entered the hero game fairly recently. Where those heroes tended to form into teams, Phantasm showed no interest networking, preferring to keep to himself. Also unlike those household names, he drew a paycheck. He had taken a job as costumed security for Seattle’s Hudson Electronics, and spent his nine-

to-five on site, keeping the company and its patents safe from would-be corporate pirates. In his spare time, he had a hobby of making life miserable for drug dealers.

It was Regis Conte's day to be miserable.

According to Tim Mascow's account, Phantasm landed hard, in a crouch, and stood almost instantly, the tallest man in the canyon gathering. As he did, the poles that extend out his glider wings shot back into the housings in his sleeves with a sharp metallic scrape. And he paused. And he smiled.

"Giving up's lots of fun, I hear," he said, grinning violently, his voice harsh and chill-inducing. "You guys ought to try it and find out."

Unfortunately for all involved, neither of the remaining two Mexicans spoke a word of English. One tried to rush Phantasm, and the other drew his gun. Mascow believes that this was the outcome Phantasm was hoping for.

The paycheck hero went through them like the proverbial hot knife through the Land-O-Lakes. He was a martial master, a machine of bone-crushing, precise skill. A lightning-fast head-kick dropped the charging Roja. He hadn't even hit the ground as Phantasm dove for the gunman. The unfortunate would-be assassin didn't even have time to get his weapon raised before the man the local papers referred to as the "dark comedian"—for his wisecracks that always accompanied the beatings he gave to the bad guys—had grabbed his arm and wrenched it behind him. A shot rang out, striking harmlessly in the dirt, and a second twist on the man's arm rendered his hand useless, causing him to drop the gun. And scream.

Phantasm has a thing about guns. He truly hates them. Something had happened to him as a young man serving his country in the war in Viet Nam. Whether it was one event or series of them—it's impossible to say, because it's something the hero himself prefers not to discuss—something had caused a life-altering quantum shift in him. He refused to ever touch a gun again, which put an end to his plans of a long military career. This also took law enforcement off the table. And yet, this change in him had kindled an irresistible compulsion to defend the helpless and punish evil men for their crimes.

In Phantasm's own words, his choices were either to go sign up for law school or to put on a mask and take to the streets. And in the courtroom, he adds, they don't let you kick people in the face.

His hatred for guns had an interesting side-effect. It made him almost perversely giddy when the bad guys decided to pull them out. Next to basketball and Charles Bronson movies, it was one of his favorite things in the world.

The Mexican mobster found this out as, in one fluid motion, Phantasm dropped, pivoted, and flipped the man, sending him flying head-first through the Bronco's driver-side window. At was at this moment when Jeff Gibson got either brave or stupid—depending on your point of view—and decided to lunge at their attacker. Gibson was a veteran of a lifetime of street and barroom fights, and fancied himself quite the pugilist. Yet when facing Phantasm, he seemed to be moving in slow motion. It looked to Mascow like Phantasm even paused and waited for his first punch, and, ducking under it, the masked man seemed almost disappointed. He responded with a pair of punches that seemed almost supernaturally fast, and the staggered Gibson fell back one step, the look on his face suggesting he wasn't even clear on what had just happened, or could identify with any certainty where he was.

Mascow, standing next to them, had pulled out his gun. He was terrified, holding it toward the hero, and says that he wasn't sure what he intended to do. He carried the gun for show, like most in their trade did, and had never shot another man and doubted he even could. Perhaps, he thought, he'd get lucky and their party-crasher would recognize the danger and back off...or, best-case, would run away and bring an end to this nightmare, and they could all go back to their lives.

Without even looking in Mascow's direction, Phantasm raised his arm and pointed it toward him. This is the last thing Mascow remembers. What he would find out later is that Phantasm had popped one of his glider-poles, and it had shot out and struck Mascow right in the forehead, knocking him cold.

Gibson tried another punch, but it was clear by this point that Phantasm was just toying with him. He ducked it, then did a back-flip that brought both his boots hammering into Gibson's jaw as they passed. Gibson somehow managed to stay on his feet. Phantasm landed, suddenly leapt diagonally at the Bronco, bounced off of it with his powerful legs and shot back toward Gibson in a devastating spinning kick that spun the former car thief around and sent him flying into the side of the pickup. His head made a loud and impressive dent in the truck's bed, and he dropped, face-first and unmoving, to the dirt.

This left Regis Conte with the undesirable honor of being the last man standing.

He stood there, his gun unholstered gun at his side, gripped in his quivering hand, the goose bumps all over his body either caused by the fear of the dark man standing ten feet away from him or just from the inadequate protection his salmon-colored jacket and lack of socks provided from the November chill. The silence was maddeningly thick.

Phantasm stared at him for a few moments that seemed like a season. And then he spoke, quietly, but expectantly.

"You got it in you?" he asked.

Conte was, for a pair of seconds, too petrified to move, his mind short-circuiting over the realization that either option meant some kind of pain, and neither was going to end well for him. He chose, in the end, the least painful of the two, and—wide-eyed—he threw his gun off into the bushes.

Phantasm nodded and grinned sadistically. "Smarter than your clothes make you look", he said.

Conte waited for whatever was coming next, but what came was something neither of the two men could have predicted.

Behind them, over the north end of the campus, a sound erupted, a noise that Karen Dillon, a grad student attending U-Dub that semester, described as sounding like "a thousand ducks in a blender". It wasn't the kind of sound (clearly, based on that description) one could ignore, and both men turned toward it. They turned just in time to see a beam of emerald light shooting down from the heavens, connecting somewhere on campus out of their field of view. The cylinder stayed corporeal for three seconds, and then it, and the god-awful sound that accompanied it, vanished.

Both men stood staring and speechless, trying to make sense of what they'd seen. It was Phantasm who finally spoke, turning his head to Conte.

"Guess it's your lucky day," he said.

The punch that knocked Conte out didn't *feel* lucky. Maybe the fact that Phantasm was gone when he awoke was the lucky part. But then, it was Seattle PD that woke him. While Phantasm had left his napping playmates to glide off to find out what had struck from the skies, an investigating SPD copter, flying over the hub-bub on campus a bit later, just happened to pass over the canyon and radio for someone to look into the two vehicles down there. Conte and his pals were arrested on numerous possession and firearms charges, and the Mexicans had an unfortunate meet-and-greet with immigration. The drugs were confiscated, but the bag of money, it seems, was nowhere to be found, and none of the beaten and incarcerated criminals thought it was a good idea to bring it up.

But that's a story for another chapter.

BACK ON CAMPUS, A MAN SAT BEHIND THE WHEEL OF HIS PARKED CAR, WATCHING COLLEGE students several years younger than him strolling the school grounds. A Whitesnake cassette was playing on his car stereo, a tape deck as outdated as the used car it was installed in, a car he'd bought several months before when he first arrived in Seattle to start his new life. Or, more appropriately, to escape his old one.

He wasn't a student at the University, but was there that day as part of his job. It was a job he was grateful for, but one that had required him to start over—career-wise—when he accepted it. He'd left New York with better standing. But staying in New York wasn't an option for him. He had to get away. His life had spiraled out of control in spectacularly terrible ways, and bad things had happened. Bad enough for him to hit what he thought was rock bottom, bad enough to give him his first moment of clarity—which, unfortunately, would not be the last in his life. He'd taken the first job he could find that was as far from New York as he could get. That job had turned Seattle into his new home.

He sat behind the wheel, absently watching the co-ed foot traffic, doing his best to conceal the can of beer he was nursing—just something, of course, to take the edge off. That's one of those things people tell themselves who don't yet get that drinking on the job is a pretty major sign that they aren't even close to being in the control that they imagine they are. He had a few minutes yet to kill before his occupation would take him to one of the buildings on campus, to go through the tedious motions of work he felt was beneath someone who'd accomplished what he had. He wasn't looking forward to it in any way. But, again...the Pabst Blue Ribbon took the edge off.

He finished his beer and reached into his sport coat's pocket for a breath mint (or three) to mask the evidence, and when the sound hit, it completely drowned out the Whitesnake track that was playing ("Here I Go Again"). Like everyone else nearby, he looked all around for its source, and finally saw it when the light shot down from the sky, a narrowing beam that seemed to shine right into the lens of the great telescope atop the McKinley Observatory. The beam stayed steady for several seconds as students all around his car screamed, pointed, and/or ran. Then it vanished.

Slightly rusty instincts kicked in, and he popped the tape, yanked out his key, and grabbed his well-worn backpack out of the back seat. Thankfully, there was enough running and general chaos going on around him that his own dash across the parking lot to a nearby admin building didn't draw any stares. He rushed inside, looking for anywhere private, and found a maintenance closet. Locking himself inside of it, he all but tore off his jacket, shirt, knit tie and jeans. From his pack, he yanked out a pair of thick boots and an oversized pair of red spandex pants. Before putting them on, he closed his eyes and focused, triggering the change that transformed his body—his muscles seemed to inflate, his hair grew long and wild, and fur sprang from his skin all over his body. The change took all of three seconds, and in that broom closet, filled with shelves of cheap one-ply industrial toilet paper and tubs of hand soap, now stood a seven-foot-tall, massive man-wolf.

One the press of New York, and recently Seattle, knew as the super-hero named Dr. Jackal.

He'd been the darling of New York City in his several years of heroing there, an extroverted action-junkie and consummate showman who always played to the cameras. He'd leapt from building to building on his supernaturally powerful legs, garnering shouts, cheers and exciting pointing from all who saw his passing. He'd waged a war on street crime, not because of any tragedy of his childhood, but because it was a damned good time. He'd fought super-villains, mostly the third-stringer types drawn to all the criminal opportunities the Big Apple offered, but occasionally some big-leaguers.

His crime-fighting exploits had been matched in news-worthiness by his hard-partying reputation, a hero who, unlike the greats of the golden age and his more conservative contemporaries, embraced fame and all the pleasures it afforded. He'd been a staple at many trendy NYC clubs, and a number of (much) less trendy bars across the five boroughs. And his appetite for beautiful women found an endless parade of models, actresses and super-hero groupies to feed it. The life of Dr. Jackal had been supremely enviable, and New Yorkers followed it almost daily in the Post, addicted to his outrageous antics and tawdry liaisons.

He'd worked solo, mostly, but during his last couple of years there he'd ended up teamed with a pair of fellow crime-fighters. One was a costumed private eye named Bloodhound. The other, a beautiful and lupine woman with powers similar to his own calling herself Fairwolf. The papers, quickly picking up

on their partnership, dubbed the trio “Three Dog Night”, and the name stuck. Instead of flashy street fights, Dr. Jackal found himself involved in investigations and crime-solving, thanks to Bloodhound’s expertise. Together, they busted up some major operations, and most famously rescued the kidnapped daughter of a high-profile CEO from a demonic cult.

They worked well together, maximizing each of their varied strengths, and grew quite close. Particularly the “Doc” and Fairwolf, whose constant flirtation was a thing of record. Still, for her own reasons, she never allowed things to go beyond that, a frustration that only made their back-and-forth more challenging, and more fun, for him. He enjoyed this new team dynamic in his hero life, and felt he was really making a difference in the city.

It all ended tragically, in a collapse shrouded in mystery and scandal. No one knows for certain what case they were working, but it was allegedly their darkest and most serious. By the time it was over, Fairwolf was dead, with few details more than that forthcoming (and the lack of a body leading many to doubt the fact of her actual demise), and the era of Three Dog Night ended. By all reports, Dr. Jackal and Bloodhound never spoke again. This event was not addressed in either of Dr. Jackal’s books, its terrible details known only, now, to two men who, for their own reasons, will not share them with the world.

Whatever did happen, it, along with Dr. Jackal’s further descent into his addictions, drove the hero to pack up and start over in a new city. He was out of the public eye for a time, but began appearing around Seattle, stopping a villain or helping with a disaster here or there, and Seattle was thrilled. The city, save for the seafaring Captain Compass (not technically a “super”), the alley-stalking, sporadically-appearing but press-avoiding Phantasm, and a just-recently appearing woman whose reputation was spotty at best (more on that in just a bit) did not have its own official super-hero, and quickly embraced the Doctor. Apparently his sabbatical had been long enough for him to miss using his powers for the people and basking in their cheers, because his sightings became more frequent, and soon lost their reserved nature and took on his old showboating aspect again.

This time would be different, he told himself. This time, in this city, he would have it all under control. So he told himself.

Donning his widely-recognized spandex, boots and black fingerless gloves, he stowed his backpack in the closet and raced out of the building, charging toward the Observatory to the surprise and delight of students, whose fear of the unknown quickly turned to the excitement of being near to a super-hero confrontation. He ignored their cheers and stayed focused, rushing past them and entering the Observatory’s main door, where crowds stayed gathered outside at a safe distance until someone told them what was going on.

As he ran up and down the halls, trying to find his way to whatever had happened, he rounded a corner and nearly ran right into another man, someone else who had just entered the building from another, less obvious means (as was his habit). Dr. Jackal and Phantasm both stopped, both took defensive poses, and paused for the couple of seconds it took them to positively recognize each other. This recognition came from the papers and the local TV broadcasts; the two heroes had yet to bump into each other around town until this moment.

And in that hallway, next to a drinking fountain and a bulletin board that advertised an upcoming Astronomy Club mixer, and unbeknownst to either man, a major historical moment occurred. Moments of destiny rarely announce themselves with trumpets and singing angels. They just happen, and are usually only recognized for what they are in hindsight. This meeting, quick and simple as it was, marked a turning point in the history of Seattle, of super-heroism, and of the world.

“You’re Phantasm, right?” Dr. Jackal asked, speaking first.

Phantasm nodded. He didn’t bother stating the obvious about Dr. Jackal’s identity, but instead said, “You know what’s happening here?”

Jackal shook his head, and said he's just heard that "weird-ass noise" and saw the light hit the telescope. Phantasm nodded again and announced that the main observatory entrance was up ahead, and he quickly took off in that direction. Dr. Jackal followed, officially making this into a team-up.

They reached the double-doors and heard a couple of screams inside. They fell into unison smoothly, each backing up to a different side of the doors. Phantasm whispered harshly for Jackal to go left, and Jackal nodded. Phantasm counted off "three" with his gloved fingers, and the two heroes threw open the doors and leapt inside.

The sight that greeted them was, to understate it, unexpected.

A woman was floating in the air, about fifteen feet above the observation stairs, hovering below the domed roof. She was stunningly beautiful, with long, thick red hair and a revealing outfit that looked like she'd just come from a renaissance faire, its fabrics of numerous colors. In one hand she held a long wooden staff that had a glowing orb affixed to the top of it. The woman herself seemed to be glowing.

And she seemed confused, looking around at the students and faculty with as much bewilderment as they were clearly showing toward her.

The two heroes stood next to each other, staring up at her. It was Dr. Jackal who finally broke the silence.

"So...Santa got my letter, I guess..." he muttered.

THE GRAVITY-DEFYING YOUNG WOMAN IN QUESTION WAS PHANTASHIA, FLOATING ABOVE A WORLD that was not her own. She was, in fact, from another dimension. Home, to her, was a fantastical world called Dynsphere, a land of magic and myth, sword and beast. Her father, a mountain of a bearded man standing over eight feet tall, was what passed for a king to her people (more of a Sorcerer-in-Chief, if you will), making her, for all intents and purposes, a princess.

This is the point where any Forte hero telling you this story would see the look on your face (and not be surprised by it) and say, "No, I am not making this up."

But she was much more than a princess to her people. She was a very powerful and learned sorceress, born with more innate mystic ability than even her father, a fact that was a point of great pride to him. She was the protector of her land, one that faced threats and incursions from other worlds and other realms, and from ancient monsters and dark mages bent on destruction. Her people counted on her to stand between them and all these dangers.

Of course, none of her people suddenly seemed to be anywhere around...

Phantasia was completely dumbstruck (somewhere, Phantasm is reading this and cracking a smile. But that, too, is for a later chapter). She had been meditating at a mountain temple, high above her home city. And then, she was just...here. Wherever "here" was. The things she was seeing were beyond anything her eyes had looked on before. The building, so strange in its construction. The machines—as you might have guessed from the description of her home town, technology had pretty much peaked at the iron age. She knew nothing of telescopes, computers, wristwatches or fire extinguishers.

And the clothing on the mysterious strangers below her, too, was bizarre to her eyes. Those of us who remember 1987 and its fashions, of course, could hardly blame her for the sentiment. I like to think that, like any movie in the past fifteen or so years involving visitors from another world or time, there had to be at least one kid there with a blue Mohawk. Cosmic tourists always seem to run into our cartoonish punk rocker stereotypes first.

The irony of it all was that the two people that *did* look halfway normal to her were the werewolf and the guy dressed like the grim reaper.

She looked down on them curiously. Phantasm kept his guard up. Jackal dropped his immediately because—in the words of Phantasm, recalling the moment—“there were breasts”. Jackal took a few cautious steps forward, as though he were approaching a skittish woodland animal, and said hello. Phantasia, fortunately, understood him, as one of her constant spells allowed her to understand the words of any sentient being. She asked where she was, in the other men’s language, looking around again at the expansive dome. Jackal told her, but his explanation, of course, did little to answer the question for her. She asked, then, how she had gotten there. Jackal smiled and told her they were wondering the same thing, and he asked her if she could maybe come down from up there and talk it over with them, and maybe they could figure it out together.

She floated, gracefully and effortlessly, to the Observatory floor, causing the assembled civilians to back further away. She seemed troubled, Dr. Jackal remembers, at the fear in their gazes, and with the thought that she was somehow causing it. He saw compassion in her eyes (in those few times he managed to look up at them...again, this coming from Phantasm) and relaxed, having decided she was no threat. He was, in fact, transfixed and fascinated by, of all things, her scent. One of Dr. Jackal’s abilities is a super-canine sense of smell, and the fragrances she carried with her were otherworldly ones that he’d never encountered. His nose was having a Magellan experience.

After Dr. Jackal turned and assured the room that everything was okay and they were in no danger (while Phantasm stood ready to throw a punch should the magical super-model’s actions suggest otherwise), the trio talked, and Phantasia told the story of who she was, leading both Earth heroes to consider the possibility that she was insane. Now-retired astronomy professor Burt Cadie remembers standing silently with the rest of the onlookers, watching the trio talk. He and the others were calm now, and raptly intrigued at what they were watching. He says he wishes he could go back in time, tap himself on the shoulder, and tell his younger self that he was witnessing history being made.

After a couple of minutes, police stormed into the room, and it was Jackal, again, who held up his hands and asked for calm. He began to try his best to explain the not-very-explainable situation to the officers when an aging campus security guard—a man named Tom Revere—came up and complicated the situation further. With the chaos of the moment having passed, he had finally noticed that someone was missing. A graduate student named Jackie Carter had been at the top of the telescope stairs when the light and sound had unexpectedly struck the room. She was now nowhere to be seen.

Dr. Jackal, hearing this report, climbed the steps and sniffed around, catching the young woman’s scent. His attempts to track it told him that she hadn’t gone anywhere at all. By all indications, she has simply vanished. Phantasm voiced the idea first—if this strange phenomenon had brought Phantasia to Earth, was it possible that it had also transported Jackie to Phantasia’s world? They talked this over, and would find out, eventually, that this theory was true. As the details of the Washington college student’s extraordinary journey to another world are beautifully detailed in her own book (*Through the Looking Glass*, Random House, 1994), I’ll leave the telling of that tale to Jackie herself.

Leaving the police to ask Phantasia some questions (letting this happen more for amusement than anything else), Dr. Jackal and Phantasm stepped aside and had a whispered conversation. This was new territory for both of them. Dr. Jackal had been a super-hero for some time, but had mainly dealt with costumed thieves and ordinary muggers. Phantasm had yet to even face a proper villain—if one measured villainy in terms of masks and spandex. Women from other dimensions were generally the specialty of groups like the Justice Squadron, who were, unfortunately, not around to offer suggestions. Phantasm, still subscribing to the idea that—glowing and floating aside—the “broad” might have just been “nuts”, felt that possibility ought to be looked into first. Standing nearby, and apologizing for eavesdropping, the uniformed Tom Revere mentioned that his son was a psychologist working at nearby Samaritan Hospital, and that the younger Revere (that being Dr. Thomas Revere, who’s now a professor of Psychology at the school where his father once broke up rowdy frat parties and ticketed illegal

parkers) might be able to give them a yes or no on the “nuts”. Both happy to have something resembling a place to start, the heroes agreed and thanked the man, who offered to drive them all over and introduce them. This helpful, affable stranger would end up meaning a lot more to Forte—and particularly to Phantashia—than a simple lift to the hospital. With no intentions other than a good deed, Tom Revere quite accidentally became an important part of early Forte history.

They rescued the poor head-scratching police officers from Phantashia’s headache-inducing answers by taking her aside and telling her they wanted to take her to see a local “healer” to make sure she was “all right”. She let them know she felt just fine, but would enjoy a chance to see more of their strange world, since it seemed she was to be there for a while. This agreed, they finished business with the police (who were more than happy to hand off this responsibility to a couple of super-heroes) and headed for the exit together, with Tom leading the way as he carried on a pleasant conversation with Phantashia, not seeming flummoxed at all by her glowing staff or talk of mythical realms.

And outside, the crowd was waiting.

It seemed that half the campus (likely more) was gathered outside the observatory, passing frenzied rumors amongst themselves and waiting to see what had happened inside. And out came three super-heroes, all startled at the sight of the unexpected mob—and the press.

Today, Melanie Polka is recognized all over the globe as a trusted GBS News anchor. But in November of 1987, she was still a local TV news reporter, still dreaming of a chair behind the big KLTX-15 desk but grateful to have finally gotten out into the field. Most of the stories they sent her on were the most benign kind of fluff (the zoo might as well have given her her own parking spot, as many animal births as she’d “covered” there), but she knew (and maybe only she knew, but that was okay) that inside, she was a serious journalist. Hard work and relentless drive (which she did possess) would pay off one day.

Or, being in the right place at the right time might also do the trick.

Melanie and her semi-regular cameraman, the (today) award-winning Steve Yu, had been on their way to the campus to do a story on the U-Dub cheer squad—which had just gotten into the championship round of the College Cheerleading and Dance Finals (just the kind of news she dreamed of cracking when she chose journalism as her life’s passion—when the light hit. The driver of the KLTX news van feared he might lose the hearing in his right ear for all the screaming Melanie was doing for him to drive faster. She had feared they’d missed the scoop, but she and Steve had all-out run to the Observatory, and had arrived and pushed their way to the front of the crowd just as the heroes had stepped out of the building.

Melanie didn’t miss a beat, and had a mic in the trio’s faces before they could even process the sight of the crowd in the quad. Melanie had radioed the station and gotten them set up a live cut-in (which was no small thing to convince them of, as she was, after all, the baby-sea-otter-girl), so when Steve’s camera went on, the broadcast went live.

The right place. The right time. And Melanie Polka gave the city, and the world, the first look at, and the first interview with, the founding members of Forte.

She was flawless, managing not to huff from the long sprint she’d just completed. She wisely aimed her mic right at Dr. Jackal, who, a news professional himself of a sort (a veteran of *being* news, that is), fell right into the rhythm with her, arming and firing his roguish, dazzling smile. She asked all the right questions. He gave all the right, safe answers, assuring the people of Seattle that there was no danger, that he and Phantasm were teaming for an investigation that the woman with them—Phantashia—was assisting them with.

As he spoke of still gathering information and having no clear answers on the light from the sky yet, Phantasm kept hearing one particular word of Jackal’s in his ears. Teaming? Him...Phantasm...teaming? Teaming was something he actively avoided, and certainly wouldn’t have purposely chosen to do it with

a grandstanding hairball and a crazy witch-woman. And yet, there he was, on camera, being announced as part of a “team”. He found himself wishing he’d just stayed in the Canyon.

Melanie managed to have a question for each of them, forcing them all to talk, and Steve followed the pattern like the pro he was, zooming when needed, pulling out when it felt right, giving Seattle a great look at each of them individually, and of them together. Seattle had never seen three super-heroes together at one time in their town, and the sight was immediately intoxicating, and drove the city pleasantly insane.

Dr. Jackal closed the interview down, tactfully and masterfully, seeming to know exactly how long the director back at the station wanted it to be. He promised Seattle more information would be forthcoming, and promised Melanie, with a smile, an exclusive when it happened. This moment set two things into motion. First, Forte’s long-lasting relationship with Channel 15 for years to come. And second, a soon-to-happen but not-long-to-last romance between Dr. Jackal and Melanie Polka, one that he would detail in his trashy second self-idolizing book, *Nights of the Jackal*. There are debates as to whether that bit of tabloid seediness hindered or launched Melanie’s network career, but it most definitely created her years-long love/hate relationship with the team.

There are also debates as to exactly the moment the team officially became the team. But as far as Seattle was concerned, the final shot of Dr. Jackal, Phantasm and Phantashia, together on the steps of McKinley Observatory, a visual promise of the chance of Washington having its very own and very first super-hero team, was the moment that Forte was born.

ELSEWHERE IN SEATTLE, A WOMAN IN HER TWENTIES WAS SITTING ALONE IN HER HOME, ON HER living room couch, wiping periodic tears from her face with the back of her hand. She barely had the energy to do that. She was immobilized by that special brand of deep depression that saps all your strength—physical and spiritual.

She stared at the wall in front of her, oblivious to the flickering TV or the birdsong outside her window, lost in her own dark thoughts, oscillating between sorrow and self-loathing, between grief and a general helplessness at life’s arbitrary unfairness. Every time she thought she couldn’t get any lower in these couple of weeks, she’d descend to a new level of overwhelming gloom. This latest one found her at an inevitable crossroad, and at the precipice of a decision.

She was known—unfortunately best known for reasons she had never dared to imagine—as “The Mist”. She was a super-hero...or at least had tried to be. A young woman with a heart filled with a yearning to make the world a better place, to help the people of her community and protect them from harm, she had made a life decision that had surprised her more than anyone else in her life (that is, if anyone else in her life knew she’d made the choice, which they didn’t). Turning to science, her great love and area of expertise, she’d created a belt for herself—one powered by a rare isotope—that allowed her to do extraordinary things. With it, she had control over the weather. She could create winds and bring rain. But even more amazingly, she could turn herself intangible and pass through walls, or float on the air currents. While there were endless applications for such an invention—ones that surely could have made her fantastically rich—she chose to use it, instead, to become a crime-fighter. A silly dream? Perhaps. But it was one she hadn’t been able to let go of since it first entered her mind (in the middle of a shower, she recalls clearly, while lathering her hair up with Alberto vo5). She’d designed herself a costume, and an identity to go with it. And after she’d practiced enough to reach some measure of confidence, she’d taken her great experiment out of the lab and into the field. Theory became application. And she became the Mist.

Her first outings were at night, if for no other reason than she was embarrassed for anyone to see her in her tight, ridiculous outfit that had seemed like a good idea on paper. She floated from roof to roof, looking for her chance to face her first real field test. The first couple of nights were without incident, a fact that both frustrated and relieved her. But finally, the sound of a woman's cries gripped her with fear and blasted adrenaline through her body. She rushed to the edge of a roof and looked down on an elderly couple in an alley, menaced by three young punks that practically oozed violence from their pores. Thoughts of her own grandparents overrode any hesitation, and she leapt from that rooftop, floating down behind the scene of the pending crime, yelling at the attackers to draw their attention. They turned, and she took satisfaction at the sight of their gaping stares. A floating woman made a hell of a statement, and brought any number of childhood superstitions about ghosts and witches right to the surface.

She tried to look tough, and told them all to stop what they were doing and put down their knives. One of them, more out of terror than bravado, whipped out a .38 and started frantically shooting at her. Despite herself, she threw up her arms and squeezed her eyes shut, certain that her fanciful (and suddenly preposterous) idea had just ended her life. But she felt no piercing of organs, no shattering of bone. Her belt had lived up to its specs. The bullets had passed right through her, and the gunman stood wide-eyed, pulling the trigger again and again on empty chambers.

She had no chance to test her other abilities, because the three hoodlums (one of whom had a dark stain now on the front of his jeans) screamed and ran. She might have chased after them, but the adrenaline was now subsiding and the reality of a near-death experience was sinking in, so she just let them go. She landed on the ground, asking the terrified couple if they were all right. To her relief, their fear of her quickly turned to wonder and gratitude, and they thanked her profusely for saving them. She found herself blushing, and smiling. They asked who she was, and she used her super-hero name out loud for the first time. And the next morning, as she anxiously went to get the paper, she saw it in print for the first time on the cover of the *Seattle Star*. The couple had wasted no time contacting the paper to tell their tale. *Seattle, the Star* reported, seemed to have another super-hero. She beamed with pride and satisfaction, and considered buying a frame for the article, but realized that wasn't the smartest way to maintain a secret identity. She read it, though, perhaps a dozen times that morning, all but memorizing it. Her plans had worked. The Mist was now a reality.

An attempted convenience store robbery two nights later was the first test of her offensive capabilities, as this pair of thieves showed no signs of running. Her mini-storms took care of them easily, though they did cause a mess in the store that she felt bad about. What she felt worse about, initially, was actually knocking two other human beings unconscious. She'd never liked violence, and wished that it wasn't necessary, but she wasn't going to be lucky enough to scare every criminal off that she faced. The police arrived quickly, as did an ambulance, and she answered the officers' questions slowly to draw the interview out, wanting to be there to make sure the robbers hadn't suffered massive head injuries or paralysis. Both were revived just fine (though with well-deserved giant headaches) and were taken into custody. Score another for the Mist. Her legend had begun.

Her excitement lasted for three more days.

Driving home from her "day job", she was listening to the radio when a news report cut into the talk show she'd been enjoying. It spoke of an apartment building on fire, a blaze so sudden and ferocious that firefighters were still in route to the scene. It also spoke of tenants reportedly trapped inside the building on higher floors. She gasped at the thought as she normally would have, frightened for the people involved, wishing there was something she could do—and then she remembered that she was a super-hero. Better yet, she was a super-hero whose powers were perfectly suited to handle a crisis like this. The adrenaline rush was back, and she stomped on the gas pedal and sped to the scene.

She got as close as she could, with a madhouse of auto and foot traffic and the wailing fire truck sirens blasting all around. She pulled into an alley, got out, looked quickly around for any observers, and jumped into her back seat, pulling off her clothes and yanking her Mist costume from her gym bag. She wasn't sure which terrified her more—the impending foray into a life and death situation or someone walking by and wondering what she was doing thrashing around in her underwear in the back of her car. Suited up, she floated into the smoky air and crested the nearest building, and her heart caught in her throat as she saw the run-down tenement with smoke and bright flame pouring from its windows.

With only a minor pause to collect her courage and wits, she floated toward the inferno, instantly drawing shouts and finger-points from the street below. She passed through the wall, intangible, until she knew the status of her entry point, and this particular apartment was smoky but sans flame, and already abandoned. She ran into the hall, coughing, her eyes already stinging, listening closely for the tell-tale sounds of screams. She heard them, coming down a stairwell, from the next floor up. She went ahead and (with gratitude from her watering eyes) turned ghostly once more and simply rose through the ceiling.

This hallway had the fire. Lots of it. She listened again, and followed the screams to an apartment several doors down. She passed through the entry and found a wife and son, huddled together by a window, with the burning remnants of an upstairs home on their floor, blocking their exit. They were calling to firefighters below. Mist passed through the flames, took solid form on the other side, and called out to them. Both, obviously, were surprised. But the boy—Leonard Reyes, age ten—had seen the photos of her shown on the TV news, and excitedly called out “The Mist!”. If she'd been less terrified at that moment, she might not have been able to stop a smile from forming.

She told them to stand back, and that she was going to get them out of there. Aiming her arms and concentrating, she brought a sudden, concentrated torrent of rain right down on the flaming debris. With it out, she was able to get the Reyes family around it and out the door, and she led the way down the hall, down the stairs, putting out occasional hot spots as they went, and did, in fact, get them out of there. They ran out of the building ahead of her, and entering firefighters stopped in their tracks and stared at Mist (some mostly at her figure, she admits to noting with satisfaction, feeling suddenly less self-conscious in her costume under the appreciative eyes of hunky firemen). She told them she was there to help, and that there were still people up there, as she'd heard other calls on her way down. In a long-standing American tradition amongst firefighters, police officers and soldiers when someone in a costume says they're there to help, these men simply shut up, asked no questions, and rushed in with her.

Along with SFD's bravest, she went floor to floor, mostly providing water to support them, helping them get a handful of others to safety. After a few of these, and while they were ax-hacking through a door, she heard another faraway scream. She told the firefighters she'd be right back, and ran down the hall, trying to see through the smoke. The screams got louder, and she was able to pinpoint them to an apartment at the end of the hall. Approaching it, she could already see the licks of flame coming from under the door.

Desolidified again, she flew through the door, and this time found nearly the entire home in flames—walls, furniture, carpet, everything. Fire walled her in on all sides, and an ancient panic gripped her, prehistoric instincts telling her to flee. What if she lost concentration, or her belt suddenly gave out for some unforeseen reason? She'd be burned alive where she stood, dying the most horrible death she could imagine.

But again came the screams, and they focused her. Moving toward them, she could finally make out their source. There was a girl—Cassandra Paul, age fifteen—outside an open window, on the fire escape. The girl's parents both worked, and she was home alone this time of day. The promising

freshman from Roosevelt High was trapped outside. Her home was lost to the fire. There was no exit above. And flames blocked her passage below. She was in a complete screaming panic.

Mist rushed to the window and yelled to the girl, who spun around, eyes almost impossibly wide. She looked, to Mist, younger than fifteen, maybe because of her braces. Lines of tears carved paths down her soot-coated face. Mist didn't think she'd ever seen any face so perfectly capture terror. The terror came from being trapped as she was, fire reaching up beneath her—while it didn't leave all together, a spark of desperate hope changed it just slightly. It's not clear if Cassandra, like Leonard, recognized who Mist was, but all that seemed to matter was that someone, anyone, was there to answer her prayers.

Mist promised everything would be all right, and told her to hang on. She turned and faced the inferno that was once a safe and happy home for one family, and she got to work conjuring rain again. The fire fought back, it seemed to her, based on the way it hissed at her. But she was going to clear a line right to the front door, and would walk this girl right into the hall and out to the waiting firemen.

Maybe it was the hissing, or the roar of the wind that came with her deluge, but she didn't hear the fire escape wrench free from the building's side. It was Cassandra's renewed screams that let her know something had gone terribly wrong.

She turned and saw that face again—so scared, so helpless, and now hysterical—and Cassandra started moving away from the window as the escape lost the last of its grip. Mist jumped, throwing her arm out, and landed with her stomach on the window sill. Her hand reached out and grasped at Cassandra's fingers, and for a moment, had them. But the ceiling above finally, and loudly, collapsed, and a beam came right down on Mist's back. Or, it would have, had not instinct alone caused her to go intangible. The beam passed through her body. Cassandra's fingers passed through her hand. Mist had one last look at those wide, wet green eyes before the girl who'd planned to spend her adult life training and working with horses (on a ranch she'd own with her country-but-not-redneck husband) fell four stories to her death. And did so in front of countless horrified witnesses below—none of them more horrified than the trembling, near-catatonic heroine above.

The media had been prepared to be merciful. The initial stories pointed out the people this (clearly) novice hero had saved, and characterized Cassandra's death as a terrible, unavoidable accident. The fire department, for their part, endorsed this as well. Cassandra's parents, particularly her mother, were not so forgiving. Insane with grief—one made worse by the knowledge that this fire was soon found to be arson, one of the earliest works of the Seattle Scorcher, the mad firebug who cost the city over a dozen lives and millions in property damage before fire investigators and police ended his reign of terror—they pointed their rage at the incompetent vigilante who had let their baby die. A debate grew quickly, and the media can't resist a debate. People took sides—pro-Mist, or anti-Mist.

The most obvious and vocal of the anti-Mist minority was a group of mothers that came together to rage against the so-called heroes of America (though the Mist, specifically), the untrained and untested fools who hid behind masks and put others in harm's way by their own arrogance and inexperience. The group called itself S.M.A.S.H.—Seattle Mothers Against Stupid Heroines. The cruel and juvenile name did little to garner support for their opinions, and the debate, after several days of back-and-forth on local talk radio (this was years before the internet, so Mr. Marconi still hosted the rantings of the all-knowing public), was clearly won by the more forgiving, logical and compassionate citizens of Seattle. By the end of it, S.M.A.S.H. were just about the only ones still blaming the Mist for what happened.

Them, and the Mist herself.

She wasn't seen on the streets or the rooftops during that period of debate, nor did she come forward to explain or defend herself. This is because the woman beneath the costume could no longer look at the costume, much less put it on, and regardless, she barely left her home. She called in sick to her day job. She wept almost continuously. She couldn't close her eyes without seeing Cassandra's

face—Cassandra’s terrified eyes, her lips parted in her final scream, revealing her braces that would have come off before she was a sophomore. What little sleep she managed was filled with nightmares. A common theme in nightmares is the dreamer trying to catch someone (a loved one, perhaps) before they fall, but barely missing and not being able to stop it from happening. But for the Mist, her life had *become* a nightmare.

She had thought she’d prepared herself for being a “hero”. She’d read up at the library, going over dozens of interviews with supers classic and current, reading biographies, watching televised interviews. She’d thought she’d understood about the risk. But the risk she’d been thinking about was to her own safety, her own life. She had not anticipated this. She hadn’t planned on a little girl dying because she failed. She wanted to tell the parents how sorry she was, how she’d tried. But how could she? What words would make any difference? She forced herself to listen to their grief-stricken, hate-soaked interviews about this so-called hero. She did it for the same reason she listened to all the S.M.A.S.H. statements and debates. Because as much as those words cut her up inside, she felt she deserved them all. How could she have been such a fool, she wondered? How could she have taken such a silly idea so far and not seen this coming?

All she had wanted to do was help.

And now all she could do was run the scene over and over in her head, coming up with any number of solutions, so many things she could have done differently to save that girl’s life. A girl who would not go to prom, would not graduate, would not meet a nice boy at college at a picket line while protesting for some cause she’d probably forget all about by the following semester. If only Mist had moved faster. If only she’d gotten the girl inside first. If only the beam hadn’t fallen. If only.

By Wednesday the fourth, she has reached the (mostly) numb phase. The time of sobbing until she vomited had passed. Her tears trailed out now instead of poured. Aside from S.M.A.S.H., the Paul family and a few others (including one very outspoken afternoon radio talker, Douglas Sharpe, whom she’d never liked even before she became his favorite new punching bag), Seattle seemed to have forgiven her, but she was convinced she’d never be able to share their sentiment. Becoming the Mist, being a symbol and force for good, had meant everything to her. But now she was convinced it was something she’d need to put behind her, and somehow try to forget. Flying through the air and saving the helpless was something that would have to be left to those born to it. Clearly, she was not one of them.

As if on cue...

She happened to finally notice something different, more shaky, in the light from the TV set. She turned her head back to it and realized that during her long stare at the wall (how long it had been, she couldn’t even say), she’d missed something big going on. A live news report had broken into whatever soap or talk show or game show she’d been ignoring.

On that screen, she saw Dr. Jackal, Phantasm and Phantashia.

Wiping her nose with a tissue (empty Kleenex boxes were all over her home by this time, three of them on her coffee table alone), she tried to focus on the bizarre sight and figure out what was happening. She turned up the volume with her remote, and listened to Dr. Jackal speak to the reporter, smiling and confident, so sure of himself. She knew of him, of course, from her reading, since he seemed to love to do interviews more than any hero. She’d read about Phantasm in the papers. As for the redhead, she had no idea about her, other than being sure the girl was going to regret not wearing a bra in not too many more years.

She watched and listened, and at first, she admits, was bitter. Here were three heroes who had clearly just done something right and were being praised for it. They probably never got scared or doubted themselves (certainly Dr. Jackal didn’t) or had acronym groups created to call them names. She resented how easy they seemed to make it look. How natural they seemed. And, too, that there were

three of them. They had each other, it looked like (the text below the shot of them, added back at the station, read “A Seattle Hero Team?”). She was all alone. No one knew about her secret hero life, not even her recent boyfriend (who was starting to get worried about her, as much as she kept putting him off telling him she was ill). It must be nice, she thought, to have others like you around, others who knew what you were going through.

She blinked. And she read the words on the screen again.

A Seattle hero team?

Was this what was happening? Were heroes around the area banding together? The thought filled her with a yearning so desperate it was a physical sensation. These heroes seemed to know what they were doing, at least from the look of them (except for maybe the redhead, who just looked kind of confused). She thought of how things might have been different if she’d had actual super-heroes to talk to before she set out on her madwoman’s voyage, not just their recorded words. They could have had so much to teach her. They could have shared their own mistakes with her before she’d gone out and made them herself. It might have changed everything. It might have made the Mist something more than just a cautionary tale.

Could it still?

She stared at their images on the screen, wondering if it was too late to follow her dream, wondering if it might not be, as she’d just finally decided, all over. If she somehow reached them, found them, would they accept her as one of their own, help her become what her heart had told her that destiny was calling her to be?

She stared at them, having no idea that she was looking at the faces of three of the best friends she would ever know in her life. Having no idea that destiny was working in ways she could never have foreseen. Having no idea that together, the four of them would change the world.

NOVEMBER 4<sup>TH</sup>, 1987.

It was just another day in Seattle.

But it was a day that changed that city forever. A day that changed the course of human history. A day that changed the lives of four extraordinary people—and all the extraordinary people who would, over time, join with them. For all of them, a new lifetime had just begun. A lifetime of adventure and miracles. Of friendship, love and family. Of tragedy, loss and sacrifice. Of terrifying villains, alien invaders and angry gods. Of duty, honor and courage. Of changing lives. Of saving lives. Of saving all of mankind.

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