

## **They're Safe**

### *Before S-Day*

Micro Man stood atop a skyscraper in Tokyo. The rain fell down his copper-colored metallic suit. He wore a silver helmet that covered his whole face. Little copper balls rolled across it and each of them had a camera attached to it which sent video to the helmet of the suit which allowed him to see.

Soldier 32, H8ywire, Battle Gal, Western Man, and Orange Android talked to each other on the other side of the roof. Soldier 32 checked his ammo as the rain smeared the black paint strips under his eyes.

"H8ywire, you sure this rain isn't gonna mess with your circuitry?" Soldier 32 asked.

"Why would it? My mechanics are state of the art," it responded as the cogs inside of the robot crunched against their metal casing.

"Orange Robot, why is it that only six of us are left to defend from this off-world threat?" Battle Gal asked.

"Please don't call me a 'Robot'. I am a member of the Alpha Squadron, and I should be respected as such. As to your question, the rest of them are preoccupied with other matters," he said.

"Hmph. You'd think for something like this a few more of the capes would swoop down to help us," Western Man said as he adjusted his cowboy hat.

"Are there seriously no other heroes available currently?"

"Let me check the database. All of Asia's heroes are currently stationed for a predicted Kaiju attack. Australian heroes are currently fighting off a continent-wide mutant spider invasion. Europe's heroes are protecting the government from an attack by the King's Covenant. Antarctica has only one hero and Polar Vortex could not make it. Africa's heroes are deployed in South America as of now to help with the natural disaster relief. We are all that is left," the Orange Android responded. The rain glistened as it rolled down the orange panels covering his innards. It soaked into the long cape hanging from his neck. The blue lights in his eye sockets glew in the night.

"And who is that?" Soldier 32 asked as he pointed his gun toward Micro Man. His blonde hair was soaked by the rain.

“Hey, don’t you know anything about firearm safety?” Micro Man asked.

“That is one of the few American heroes that has any chance of making it past the first minute of this fight. Make no mistake. It is probable that none of us will make it out of this alive,” Orange Android said.

“Isn’t Justice supposed to be able to fly at light speed and punch with enough force to explode the sun? Why can’t he handle this?” Western Man asked.

“He’s busy,” Orange Android said.

“Doesn’t matter anyways. Ain’t nothing I can’t kill. You’re looking at the best bounty hunter on Earth,” Western Man said.

“Tighten up over there. Our sensors are going off. She is on the way,” their earpieces chirped out.

“Affirmative, Colonel York. The problem with that, Western Man, is this creature is not from Earth,” Orange Android said.

**Whhhherrrrr. THUMP!** The sky flashed white, and a metallic pod flew down then anchored itself into the roof. **Hiss.** The rain turned to steam as it pattered off the pod.

“At the ready! If we fall here, so does Earth,” Orange Android said as he raised his fists into the air.

**thump.** A metal scrap flew off the pod to reveal the darkness within. The heroes peered cautiously into the void. **SHING!** A golden trident flew out of the pod and into Soldier 32. **Shink.** The weapon penetrated his body and golden points erupted at his spine. Soldier 32’s eyes opened wide, and his fingers loosened around his gun.

“It . . . **kuk** . . . was an . . . **uck** . . . honor,” he choked out as blood filled his lungs.

**CRASH!** The pod erupted to reveal a seven-foot-tall purple woman that wore a blue suit and had a long yellow cape. **THUMP. THUMP. THUMP.** She ran forward toward Soldier 32 knocking Battle Gal and Western Man to the side. Western Man’s pistols slid out of his hands, and he darted after them. **Shlink!** The woman ripped the trident from his chest and kicked him off the building. Soldier 32 fell to his death silently for he could not scream.

“Hopefully the rest of you are stronger or Earth will fall quicker to Atomsplitter than I expected,” she said with a grin that revealed her yellow teeth. She mounted her trident into the concrete then cracked her knuckles.

“Team, this is it! Give it everything you got!” Orange Android shouted. Micro Man stood still in fear.

Orange Android flew forward, and the woman extended her arm. His body phased through her, and he reappeared behind. **Bzzzz.** Orange Android’s eyes flared as scorching rays blasted out from him. The beam ricocheted off her armor and pierced through Battle Gal’s body. Orange Android froze as he watched Battle Gal grasp at the gaping hole in her stomach.

“NO! Not Battle Gal too!” H8ywire’s speaker box screeched.

Atomsplitter grabbed Orange Android while he was dazed and threw him into the ground. His mechanical parts crunched across the concrete. She dragged him against the cement until he was balled up. **WHIP!** She threw the ball of mechanical parts at Battle Gal who was keeled over on the ground. **POP!** Her body erupted in red and shrapnel.

**Whirrrrr.** A jet booster sputtered on H8ywire’s back as the gears in its bodies whirled.

“I was programmed to serve under three rules. Do not harm humans. Obey my orders. Protect my own existence. Lucky for me you don’t qualify as human.”

**Schink.** Its arm retracted into its body and a metal saw blade spun out. **Fwoosh!** H8ywire flew forward as the jet kicked in. **Bzzzzzz!** The saw grinded against Atomsplitter’s gauntlets. She reached forward and sunk her hand into H8ywire’s chest. Its left arm retracted, and the barrel of a shotgun flew out. **BOOM!** H8ywire shot Atomsplitter in the face and she loosened her grip. **Fwoosh!** H8ywire flew back out of her hands.

Micro Man remained frozen. Western Man awaited the perfect shot. H8ywire landed on the ground.

“You robots all fail to impress me. No fun when you don’t get to rip a heart out,” Atomsplitter said as she dropped a chunk of metal from H8ywire’s chest to the ground.

“I stand tonight as the final dam preventing the flood of blood onto humanity. You will not prevail. On board weapons proven ineffective, activate protocol 66.”

H8ywire’s eye turned red, and it anchored its feet into the ground as the jet on his back burnt brighter and brighter. **FWOOM!** H8ywire let go of the ground and flew forward. **Bang! Bang! Bang!** H8ywire fired his shotgun as he flew forward. Atomsplitter stood unphased. The

saw on his left arm retracted and a thin spear formed in its place. **Shink.** The spear pierced Atomsplitter's skin and H8ywire stuck to her. **Whir!** His legs contorted to wrap around her.

"Do not let this sacrifice go in vain. Beep. Beep. Beep."

**BOOM!** H8ywire exploded and smoke erupted around Atomsplitter.

"You got kids?" Western Man asked Micro Man.

"..."

"Well, if you do, I'd take this chance to run back home to them."

Western Man spun his guns then pulled back on the hammers. **Click. Click. Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!** He rapidly fired into the smoke at the black shadow of Atomsplitter. A large purple hand appeared out of the cloud and waved it away. Atomsplitter stood unphased.

"I reckon since all I brought were guns this leaves me few options," Western Man said as he reached into his pocket. He pulled out some metal pieces and dynamite. As Atomsplitter walked forward he hunched over and fumbled with his guns. He turned back around to Atomsplitter and pulled up one massive gun with a bundle of dynamite in the barrel.

"Have a taste of some MANIFEST DESTINY!" Western Man shouted. **Click! Bang!** The dynamite chunk flew forward at Atomsplitter and she swatted it to the side. **Boom!** It exploded off in the distance. Atomsplitter stepped forward and picked up Western Man. He hit the butts of his guns off her head to no avail. She threw him off the roof.

"You! Why haven't you attacked yet?" Atomsplitter questioned Micro Man.

The carnage flashed in his brain. *All of them are gone. I am it.*

Pure instinct took over. Micro Man spoke into his wrist, "York, Atomsplitter took them all down in seconds. Where is my backup?"

"Quantum Break is on the way, we still have hope," the voice in his ear shouted.

**FWOOSH!** A woman in bright red spandex slammed into Atomsplitter. She slid slightly across the ground, but otherwise was undamaged. **BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!** Quantum Break slammed her fists against Atomsplitter. With each punch a rush of air blew past Micro Man. Atomsplitter grabbed Quantum Break. Her purple fist squeezed around Quantum Break's neck.

*She's not gonna win. You need to get in the game.*

Atomsplitter's eyes glowed red. **ZZZZZZZZZZZZ!** Micro Man saw Quantum Break's head glow red before the laser's from Atomsplitter's eyes broke through the other side. Atomsplitter threw Quantum Break to the side and her limp body rolled across the roof of the

building until she fell off the edge. Atomsplitter reached for her trident and pulled it from the ground.

“Alright. Atomsplitter just killed our heavy hitter. I need an evac now!” Micro Man shouted.

“I am not evac-ing you Micro Man. If Atomsplitter escapes us she will level a city every hour. You have to fight her,” the static covered voice said.

“Did you just see what I saw?!?! She is going to kill me! How am I supposed to fight her?”

“Judging from your file . . . I assume you will use some microbots or your size manipulation powers to defeat her.”

“Are you insane?” Micro Man exclaimed.

“I would like to think I’m not. Listen, just hold her off for about eight minutes. I called Justice. He is a few galaxies away, but he can get to you eventually.”

“Alright . . . I can do that. Is the building clean of people?”

“Yes.”

“What about the city?”

“How much do you need cleared?” the voice from his ear asked.

“I need a five-block radius ASAP,” Micro Man said.

“I’ll let you know when it is clear.”

*Come on. People are counting on you. Focus.*

He thought of when his daughter tripped about three years ago. She laid on the ground hugging her knee as he walked over. Her braided, golden hair laid on the cement next to her head.

“What’s wrong, sweetie?” he asked.

“I scratched my knee, dad.”

“Aw, let me take a look.”

She moved her hands away from the scrape to reveal it to her father.

“How do you feel?” he asked.

“Sad. It hurts,” she said as she sniffled.

“You know I sometimes get hurt while I’m out there.”

“How do you deal with it?”

“I try to tell a joke. It distracts me,” he said.

“Can you tell me one?”

“Alright, here’s one. Ask me, ‘What’s up?’”

“What’s up?”

“The gas prices,” he said with a smile.

“I don’t get it . . .”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t, I guess. Here, let me try this one. A man walks into a bar. What does he say?”

“I don’t know, dad.”

“He says ow!”

She laughed quietly as he reached his finger over to wipe away a stray tear.

“Does it feel better?” he asked.

“I think so, dad.”

Micro Man smiled as he snapped back to the present.

“Just tell a joke . . .” he muttered as the fear left his body to be replaced by practice in the field.

“Here goes nothing,” Micro Man said as he reached for his feet to stretch out.

“Good luck, Micro Man.”

“TINY MAN! I LEFT YOU FOR LAST. On my world, it is good etiquette to kill the weakest last,” Atomsplitter said as she pointed her trident at him. Her voice boomed making Micro Man’s hair stand up.

“Yeah, well on Earth we do normal things like hold the door for each other!”

She ran at him.

Micro Man reached into his belt and pulled out a small metallic ball. It was the size of a penny and it had two wings wrapped tight against it. He pulled up a holo keyboard on his wrist. The rain poked holes in his hologram temporarily as the drops fell through while he typed away.

“On my mark I need two microbots set to detonate in fifty seconds, one microbot for flight, and all other available microbots set to storm,” Micro Man muttered as Atomsplitter got closer to him. Atomsplitter pulled her trident back and with a grunt she flung it forward.

“NOW!” Micro Man shouted as he smacked his right wrist. **ZIP ZIP ZIP!** Micro Man disappeared as a microbot flew past the trident. He held tight to the microbot as it buzzed through the air.

“WHERE DID YOU GO, METAL MAN?” Atomsplitter shouted.

**bzzzbzzzzzzzzbzzzzzzzzBZZZZZZZZZZZ.** The wind blew around Atomsplitter. Copper waves rolled through the air. Slowly the city below became less visible as more microbots swarmed around Atomsplitter. She swatted at them, but as she knocked some to the ground, more took their place. **BZZZZZZZZZZZZZ.** Her eyes turned red, and she blasted the clouds of microbots to no avail. **BOOM!** Atomsplitter clapped her hands and the microbots flew backwards in a shockwave. **pop, pop, pop, pop.** The microbots began to fizzle and slowly fall out of the air.

Micro Man flew past her avoiding detection and landed inside Atomsplitter’s ear. He ran in until he reached a wall of textured, purple pulsating flesh.

“Good thing this race has an eardrum,” Micro Man whispered.

He threw two microbots as hard as he could into the ear then he started running. **BOOM! BOOM!** Micro Man leapt out of the ear and slapped his left wrist. **Zip, Zip, Zip.** The explosion knocked him forward as he returned to normal size. He tumbled across the ground and one of his shoulder plates flew off. **Dink, dink, di...nk.** He watched it fly off the building as his vision began to blur.

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Ted sat quietly at a small table in a cafe.

“Sorry I’m late!” a woman said as she sat down across from him. Ted stood in awe of her beautiful, vanilla hair that cascaded down her shoulders. He looked into her big, blue eyes.

He ran his hands through his short locks of black hair then said, “No, you’re on time! I actually got here a little early.”

“Well, sorry to have kept you waiting then!”

“How has your day been so far, Janet?” Ted asked.

“Not too ba--What is that on your face?” she said as she raised her finger to point at a burn across his right cheek.

“Nothing at all, just a scuffle I got into the other day.”

“You’re not like a boxer or something, are you? I don’t even know what profession gives you something like that. I’m not looking to date someone who is going to get themselves killed.”

“No, I’m not a boxer.” Ted chuckled then said, “I do something better for a living.”

A waiter approached them then asked, “What can I get for you both today?”

Janet looked toward Ted. Her mouth opened. “**EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE**”

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Micro Man’s eyes ripped open. Atomsplitter rocked back and forth as she held her hands up to her ears. He could tell she was screaming, but he couldn’t hear anything over the high-pitched ringing. Slowly, he heard the microbots rolling across his helmet. He shook his head then stood up.

He dashed over to Atomsplitter and jabbed at her. **thud. thud. thud.** His fists bounced off her stiff body. Micro Man pulled back his arm. As he swung his left arm up, he slapped his left wrist. **Zoop! Zoop! Zoop!** Micro Man grew three times his size as he uppercut Atomsplitter. Now twenty feet tall, the ground cracked below him. He grabbed Atomsplitter and smashed her against the concrete roof repeatedly.

“Almost at three minutes passed,” the voice from his watch said.

Micro Man threw Atomsplitter against the ground. He bent his legs to jump into the air. As he pushed off the ground, he smacked his right wrist. **Zip! Zip! Zip!** Micro Man shrunk to just one tenth of his normal size and he flew up through the air. Once about thirty feet up, he smacked his left wrist. **Zoop! Zoop! Zoop!**

**CRASH! CRASH! CRASH! CRASH!** Micro Man smashed through the floors with Atomsplitter stuck beneath him. They landed on a floor where weight racks, treadmills, and lifting benches surrounded them. A crack had formed across Micro Man’s visor and all the lights inside it went out. “Just the Two of Us” by Grover Washington played quietly.

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“Just the two of us. We can make it if we try,” Ted sang quietly to himself as he stood in the kitchen. He used one hand to stir spaghetti on the stove and another to hold an ice pack against his ribs. The front door opened, and Janet walked in with their daughter, Morgan.

As he looked at the stove, he heard Janet say, “Morgan, take those shoes off. I don’t want mud all through the house.”

“Alright, Mommy.”



*thump. thump. thump. thump.* Morgan ran into the kitchen and embraced her father.

“Daddy, you missed it! I scored my first goal of the season!”

Ted winced then set down the ice pack.

“Wow! That is awesome sweetie!”

“I’m sorry. Did I hurt you, Dad?” Morgan asked.

“No, not at all. I just had a long day at work and I’m a little tired.”

“You think you will ever get to make it to one of my soccer games, Dad?”

“We’ll see! Hopefully, but my work is a little crazy,” Ted said.

“Oh . . . okay,” Morgan said meekly.

“I’ll be there for all your games, Morgan,” Janet said.

Morgan looked up to her dad and said, “VERY CLEVER, HUMAN!”

Atomsplitter stood up and cracked her neck.

Micro Man ripped his helmet off and gasped for air. He grabbed the microbots rolling across it and put them in his pocket. Blood trickled down from his nose. He rubbed his hand across his face then stood up. Atomsplitter approached him. Dark, purple blood dripped from her ear.

“There is more where that came from,” Micro Man said.

Micro Man reached for the weights next to him and tossed them at Atomsplitter, but she flicked them away. **ZZZ!** Atomsplitter blasted lasers from her eyes at Micro Man. He rolled away so he was behind a weight rack. His tongue was dry as sweat beaded on his forehead. He paused to catch his breath.

“About four minutes left,” the voice from his watch said.

“Great--” Micro Man began to say.

Atomsplitter kicked over the weight rack and it knocked Micro Man to the ground. She reached down through the weights and picked him up. **THUD!** She punched him in the stomach, and he flew into the wall. He let out a gasp of air. Blood splattered from his mouth as plaster erupted around him.

“. . . . .” Micro Man tried to speak but the air was knocked out of him. He pulled up his holo keyboard and clicked away. Following that, he reached into his belt and pulled out some microbots.

“Surrender and I will kill you quickly,” Atomsplitter said.

Micro Man shook his head in disdain and threw a microbot at the ground below. **boom.** He slapped his right wrist. **Zip! Zip! Zip!** Micro Man shrunk down and fell through the small hole in the floor. **boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom.** He fell through the openings in the floor as he used up the microbots left in his pocket. One microbot remained as he fell into the next room. **KERPLUNK!** Micro Man fell into a pool in the basement of the building.

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Ted was holding the baggy hands of a dying man. Ted’s clothes were soaking wet, but the room was dry. He swallowed heavily while the man waved Janet and Morgan out of the room.

“You’re going to be ok . . .” Ted said. His body shook violently to try and warm up.

“Don’t kid yourself. I’ll be dead by dawn. Just promise me you will look after my daughter . . . that’s what matters to me. Please put this superhero stuff behind you,” the man croaked.

“But . . . I can’t pro--”

“Just please say it. I can’t die until I know there will be someone else here for my daughter,” the man whispered to Ted.

“I . . . will . . . watch her,” Ted said in between deep breaths. His teeth chattered.

“SAY it . . .”

“I’ll stop being a superhero . . .”

“Thank . . . you . . .” the dying man said. Ted looked over at the heart monitor. **Beep. Beep. Beep. Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz.**

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**Zzzzz.** The wristband on Micro Man’s right wrist fizzled. Micro Man awoke and ripped it off. He gulped water from the pool to quench his thirst. It burned his throat as it went down. **crash. Crash. CRASH!** Atomsplitter fell through the ceiling and into the pool. The force from her landing in the pool formed a wave that pushed all the water out and Micro Man onto the deck by the deep end.

“Are you done running?” Atomsplitter asked from the bottom of the now empty pool.

“Depends, are you done killing?”

Micro Man reached into his pocket. *One microbot. Schkkkkkkk.* Atomsplitter scraped her trident across the pool floor as she approached him from the shallow end. Her eyes slowly began to glow red. Once she reached the deep end, she looked up at Micro Man. He leapt down at Atomsplitter. *SCHINK.* Atomsplitter thrust her trident up and impaled him. He reached toward Atomsplitter pushing the trident further into himself. He reached forward and jammed the microbot into her right eye. *Bz Boom!* The force of the explosion knocked Micro Man back into the side of the pool. When he collided with it the trident flew out of him and landed to his side. Purple blood gushed from Atomsplitter's empty eye socket. Murky, red blood slipped out of Micro Man's stomach.

"Just about two minutes left. You can do it, Ted!"

"I . . . don't know boss. It isn't looking so good right now," Micro Man choked out.

"RETCHED HUMANS! WORTHLESS! You fight for what reason?!?! You simply extend your suffering. Blood drips from your essential organs and you still chatter," Atomsplitter roared.

"I guess they don't have . . . children where you come from . . ." Micro Man mumbled.

Atomsplitter walked toward Micro Man. He picked the red tipped trident up from the ground and pointed it toward Atomsplitter. She smacked it away and grabbed Micro Man. She threw him up through the ceiling. *CRASH!*

Micro Man flew up into the lobby and tumbled across the ground. He laid sprawled out.

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Ted dug through the closet for his suit. His hands were bleeding. They stained all the clothes he touched dark red, but he didn't seem to care.

"Ted, what are you doing?" Janet asked.

"Honey, they need me! There is something big coming. It's really bad." Ted rubbed his bloody hand through his hair. The streaks of white he possessed turned crimson.

"I don't care. We need you! I thought you promised my dad you were done with this five years ago! Your daughter needs you! I NEED YOU!"

"You don't understand what is coming. If I don't stop it, it could come for you guys," Ted said.

“Please, Ted . . . it’s been twenty years of you doing this. You’ve done your job to protect the world, to protect us. There are others out there just like you that can handle this. Let someone else fix it,” she pleaded.

Ted grabbed a suitcase out of the closet then stood up. He said, “I do this because I love you and Morgan more than anything in the world. She won’t get any more time with me if we’re all dead.”

“Please . . .” she said. Her eyes glistened.

Ted reached his hand out and put it on Janet’s shoulder. A damp and sticky brown spot grew across her green shirt. The blood mixed with the soft cloth and spread across her body.

“Don’t . . . come back then,” she said.

“ . . .okay,” Ted said as he quietly walked out of the room.

“Ted, don’t die please.”

Ted looked back at her. **THUD!** The ground erupted below them.

Atomsplitter landed right in front of Micro Man. He attempted to crawl away from her. Micro Man laid on the ground and pulled himself forward leaving a red smear behind him. He rapidly gasped for air as his body erupted in pain. Micro Man was ripped back as Atomsplitter grabbed him by the leg. He couldn’t feel her hands wrapped around his ankle. **HRGHH!** Atomsplitter threw him up against the ceiling. **Crash!** He hit the ceiling then fell back down. **SMASH!** She slammed her fist into Micro Man as he fell to the ground. **CRASH!** Micro Man flew through the wall of the building, and he skid to a stop against the street. It was quiet outside.

Atomsplitter stepped through the hole Micro Man left in the building. He closed his eyes. It felt like ice had filled his veins and while he couldn’t feel much of his body, he knew that he was shaking violently. Snot dripped from his nose.

“You fought well, Micro Man.” she said.

“I think . . . I could say the same to you.”

“You jest, but this is no laughing matter,” she said.

“It is to me.”

“Alright, Ted. The city has been cleared.”

Micro Man reached his left arm towards his right wrist and grazed it. **ZOOP! ZOOP! ZOOP! ZOOP!** Micro Man grew larger and larger. His skin felt as if it would rip apart as his

body increased in size. **ZOOP! ZOOP! ZOOP! ZOOP!** His very atoms felt as if they were separating from each other as they grew hundreds of times their size. The electrons moved farther and farther from the protons at their core. Micro Man screamed in pain as he grew to be as tall as the skyscraper he stood on only minutes ago. He reached down and ripped the building from its base then spun it toward Atomsplitter.

**CRASH! CRASH! CRASH! CRASH!** Floors collapsed in on themselves against her. Micro Man screamed with rage as he crumbled the building to dust. As the final floor smashed into Atomsplitter, Micro Man continued to slam his gargantuan hand into the ground until it grabbed her. He ripped her from the ground and threw her into the building next to them. **CRASH!** Micro Man leapt into the air and slammed down on the building. He fell through each of the floors knocking Atomsplitter down with him. Once the building was destroyed, he got up and jumped into the air. He curled his legs and crashed into the ground. **KA-BOOM!** He got back up and rapidly punched the ground. Micro Man roared as his fists the size of garbage trucks slammed into the street forming a crater. He stopped to inhale. With each breath, winds the speed of over sixty miles an hour blew past him. **Zoop! Zoop! Zoop!**

Micro Man shrunk down. He stood in a crater over a hundred feet wide. In the center, the dust settled. He saw a black outline stand up and walk towards him.

“Im . . . possible,” Micro Man said as he collapsed to the ground in exhaustion.

Atomsplitter emerged from the cloud of debris. Limping, she slowly approached him. Oozing, purple cuts were scattered across her body. Her eye socket had stopped bleeding and instead was now a damp, black gash.

She picked him up and ripped off his chest piece. His boots were pulled off his body, next she peeled off his leggings, his sleeves were pried off, and finally she tore off his gauntlets. Micro Man squirmed to try and shake free from her grasp. She grabbed the wristband from his left arm and crushed it to dust. Ted hung in the air wearing a white spandex suit.

“No more running. Your time is up.”

**beep. beep. beep. beep.** The gauntlet on the ground rang quietly.

“Actually . . . I think yours is . . .”

**shhhhhhhHHHHHHHHH . . . BOOOOOM!**

A golden blur blew past Ted and into Atomsplitter. She loosened her grasp on Ted and the shockwave from the collision knocked him back. **BOOM! BOOM! CRACK! BAM!** Justice

slammed his fists against Atomsplitter. With each punch, Ted was knocked farther and farther back. He closed his eyes.

*They're safe.*