

“INCREDIBLE”

Chapter 9

Author: **Derrick Ferguson**
Author's Email: derrickferguson1@aol.com
Publishing Date: March 15, 2008

Brought to you by: **The Hulk Library** (www.hulklibrary.com)

Seattle, Washington

The black and white police car smoothly came to a stop in front of the Dunkin' Donuts on Rainier Ave. The bright lights of the coffee shop illuminated the two faces of the police officers as they peered through the windshield of their vehicle, sizing up the situation before they went inside.

Dixie Mendoza was the senior of the two. With four years under her belt she was rapidly acquiring a solid reputation as a good, level headed street cop which was why she had been partnered with Arthur Maxwell, barely three months out of the academy. Maxwell was like most rookies, eager to prove himself under fire but he had a healthy streak of common sense, which Dixie liked and respected, and he didn't mind taking orders from a woman. Quite the big difference from Dixie's last male partner who took it for granted that he and Dixie were going to knock boots. He got knocked all right. Right out of the South Precinct once Dixie called in a few favors she was owed.

“Looks okay to me,” Maxwell said. “We goin' in?”

Dixie sighed. “I suppose so. Why does this always happen to me just before it's time to go off-shift?”

“We could have passed it off to another unit, y'know,” Maxwell said with a wide grin as he climbed out of the car.

“No, I couldn't. I know the guy who works here nights. He's an old friend of the family. It gets back to my people that Milo called for help and I didn't go, I'd never hear the end of it.” Dixie led the way inside the Dunkin' Donuts. There were only two people on duty. One was a black girl of maybe 18 or 19 with magenta hair and gold earrings only slightly smaller than hula-hoops who was talking a blue streak into a cell phone. From the extremely exaggerated way she

was cracking her gum while she talked, Dixie wondered if the party on the other end had any hearing left. Upon seeing the police, she lowered her cell phone and yelled; "It's about GOTdamn time y'all got here! How am I supposed to make a livin' when we got nasty ass perverts walkin' around like they own the GOTdamn streets?"

The other night worker, a brown haired youth maybe only a year or two older was waving for the girl to be quiet. "Shut up, Ofelia! I told you I got this!"

The girl rolled her eyes in a wildly exaggerated fashion and loudly returned to her conversation.

The youth motioned for Dixie and Maxwell to follow him. "This way, Dix. Thanks for coming."

"Anytime, Milo. What we got here?"

Milo pointed at the naked man who sat at the table furthest to the rear of the shop. He wore nothing more than the skin he'd been born with and his head was bald. He was looking out of the window into the damp Seattle night with an air of quiet confusion. His narrow hands were curled around a large Styrofoam cup of steaming hot coffee.

"What happened, Milo?"

The youth shrugged. "Guy comes in about an hour ago, bucky tail nekkid. Says nothin'. Walks to th' back and sits down where you see him now. Ofelia freaks out and I tell her to shut up. I walk over and try to talk to the guy. He just sits there. I give him a cup of coffee and he drinks it right down. That's his second cup. I call the cops and ask them to send you, Dix."

"Why didn't you just call an ambulance?" Maxwell wanted to know.

"Well, when I gives him his second cup he says somethin'...somethin' that makes me think I oughta call the cops instead."

"What did he say?"

"Somethin' about how he killed somebody named Betty."

Dixie and Maxwell swapped looks. Dixie motioned for her friend to hang back while she walked over to where the naked man sat. He certainly didn't seem dangerous. Average sized guy, average height. On the skinny side. Looked like

he'd been eating well enough, though. Now that she was closer she could see that he had a stubble of hair on his head. Maybe he'd escaped from an asylum or hospital psychiatric ward recently. He might even have been in a drug rehab.

"Sir? My name is Officer Mendoza." Dixie's voice was firm, the unmistakable ring of righteous authority. "I'm going to have to ask you to identify yourself."

The naked man turned his head slowly to look up at Dixie and her mouth went dry. She had never seen a human being with such a look of haunted despair on their face as this poor bastard. He looked as if he'd had a front row seat in The Infernal Pit's Neverending Damnation Show since Day One.

"Sir, where are your clothes? Where are you from? Can you tell us your name?"

"My....clothes?" The naked man's voice was a raspy croak. It was as if he'd been screaming for a long time. Screaming until the lining of his throat was raw. "I think...Red Eyes has my clothes...but I'm not sure...the satyr gave me clothes...but then Red Eyes..."

Maxwell whispered in Dixie's ear. "Whacked out on meth, y'think? Crank?"

Dixie shook her head. "I don't think so. If he was hopped up on meth or crank the last thing he'd be doing is sitting down calm as lemon pie. I'm thinking he escaped from a hospital or some kind of rehab." She turned her attention back to the naked man. "Sir? Can you tell me who Betty is?"

The naked man's eyes filled with tears so quickly it was as if somebody had turned on a water faucet inside his head. Tears coursed down his cheeks. "Betty," he gasped and his voice was a ragged sob. His slim hands gripped the sides of the orange table so tightly that they instantly went white as paper. "Oh, God...Betty!"

"Hey, take it easy, pal." Maxwell had eased his nightstick out of the loop on his belt. "You wanna take it easy, there. We're here to help you."

"Betty!" The naked man was shaking all over as if in the grip of a seizure. Tendons on his neck and arms stood out in plain relief as he jerked and quivered. Sweat popped out on his forehead and scalp as he threw back his head and screamed out "BETTY!"

Dixie didn't know what the naked man was going through and she didn't want to wait to find out. She drew forth a slim black tube and sprayed the contents into the naked man's face. The naked man inhaled the spray and his body

convulsed like that of an epileptic's as he fell out of his chair and hit the cold floor, legs and arms flailing for a few seconds before he was at last still. Maxwell looked at his partner in surprise and suspicion.

"What the hell was that you sprayed him with? That sure isn't standard issue."

Dixie shrugged as she stowed the tube away inside a pocket of her jacket. "If you learn nothing else from me, rookie, learn this: always have an equalizer up your sleeve that the bad guys don't know about. Hell, don't even let other cops besides your partner know about it."

"But what the hell is that stuff?"

Dixie had hunkered down next to the naked man and was examining his skin closely as she answered. "Remember a few months back there was a big raid on a couple of downtown warehouses? It was reported that they were being used some drug cartels to store and move product?"

"Sure."

"The story was bullshit. The warehouses were actually being used by A.I.M. They were packed with all kinds of weaponry and armaments. I was one of the officers assigned to help inventory and transport the stuff. Some of us started foolin' around with some of the stuff they had there, opening them up just to see what was in them and I found a crate filled with those tubes. Can you believe it had instructions with them? It's a knockout gas, guaranteed to put you out cold for two hours. I made a nice little chunk of change selling most of them to women in my neighborhood I know who work at night or who have stupid ass boyfriends and husbands who like to slap them around a little. I kept about a half dozen for myself, though. For personal use. Like now."

"Cool." Maxwell also hunkered down on the other side of the naked man. "What are you checking him so closely for? Don't tell me you're looking for a wallet?"

"Actually, I was looking for needle marks and there was something else..." Dixie squinted up at the overhead fluorescent lights. "Maybe I need to get my eyes checked out."

"Why?"

Dixie shook her head in confusion. "For a minute there, just before I socked him with the gas, it looked...hell, it sounds crazy saying out loud...but it looked like his skin was turning... green ..."

Milo, who had retreated back behind the safety of his counter when the naked man had started his fit of shaking chimed in with; "It's the lights, Dix. I'm all times seeing stuff outta the corner of my eyes that isn't there."

Ofelia, despite the fact that she had been on the cell phone constantly during the entire time, obviously heard Milo's comments because she loudly gave her opinion; "You's a lyin' nutknocker, Milo! You know good and GOTdamn well that them's be rats runnin' up and down this here store! THAT's exactly why I'm gonna quit workin' in this shit shack and go back to doin' nails and hair!"

"Why don't you stop mindin' my business and go back to wastin' your minutes?"

Dixie motioned for Maxwell to help her pick up the naked man. She had had quite enough of the surrealism of this evening and anyway, it was almost time to call it a night.

"You don't want to call an ambulance?" Maxwell asked.

"Nah. Kindred Spirits is just five blocks east of here. We'll run him over ourselves. Besides, I want to run the digital print reader over his hands. Maybe we'll find out who he is and where he belongs and I can make a call to his people before I go home."

Maxwell and Dixie carried the naked man out to their police car and placed him as comfortably as they could in the back seat and they climbed into the front. She threw a look at the unconscious man in the back seat. He was still out cold. And he was as motionless as if carved out of stone.

"Dixie? Let's go."

"Sure, partner...sure..."

The Vault
Somewhere in the Colorado Rockies

"Well, well, well. Don't we look pretty?"

Ammo and The Dreadknight both turned from looking out the large picture window to face Lt. Colonel Felton Hardbottle as he entered the room. Four

Guardsmen also occupied the room, keeping a close watch on the two criminals. They had been escorted to this room two hours ago where they were given their clothes and fed. In Ammo's case it was a meal of steak and French fries while The Dreadknight could only watch his companion devour the solid food with great gusto while an IV was placed in his arm. It had been years since The Dreadknight had consumed solid food. The silver mask bio-fused to his face prohibited that.

Hardbottle's comment was made in reference to the outfits they wore. As promised, their costumes had been returned to them. Ammo wore black combat boots, zebra striped leather pants and gauntlets that went all the way up to his large biceps and a black leather vest leaving his chest bare. The Dreadknight cut a more colorful figure in his red buccaneer boots with large silver buckles, his cobalt blue steel alloy chain mail bodysuit with a red tunic over that boasting a skull and crossbones design on the chest. A billowing cobalt blue cloak with a snow-white lining and red gloves completed his costume.

“Where our weapons, house nigga?” Ammo snarled. “You promised you'd give us back our weapons, too.”

Hardbottle held up a hand. “Slow your roll, Ammo. First off, I never promised I'd give you back your weapons. I said I'd give Velsing back his equipment and that's all I said I'd do. But don't worry, there's plenty weapons inside the truck for you. But first...”

Before Ammo knew what had happened, Hardbottle had crossed the ten feet separating them in an eye blink. And then Ammo knew nothing except an explosion of pain in his entire body and somehow he was flat on his back on the floor with Hardbottle sitting on his chest, pointing a .45 automatic at his one remaining eye. Hardbottle's grin was one of manic delight. It was a manic delight that was usually locked up somewhere deep inside of him and which he took great pains to keep hidden until he had an opportunity to let it out.

“You listen to me and you listen REAL good, dogshit. You call me sir, Hardbottle or Colonel Hardbottle ‘cause if you call me ‘house nigga’ just ONE more time I will kill you. Do you believe me?”

“Yeah!”

“ I can't hear you!”

“YEAH! I BELIEVE YOU!”

"Make a believer outta me right NOW or I pull this goddamn trigger!"

"I BELIEVE YOU! SO HELP ME, I BELIEVE YOU!"

Hardbottle stood up, smiling like a favorite uncle, replacing the .45 in the holster just behind his right hip. Ammo was slowly getting to his feet, helped by The Dreadknight. Blood was flowing freely from Ammo's split lip and nose. Either he had gotten badly out of shape during his incarceration in The Vault or Hardbottle was one hell of a fighter. Ammo hadn't even seen him move and his body was one big throbbing ache. "You can't pull that shit and get away with it," Ammo snarled. "I'm gonna report your black ass! I got witnesses!"

Hardbottle straightened his uniform and replaced his hat on his head. He looked at the four Guardsmen. "Which one of you is in charge?" he demanded.

One Guardsman stepped forward. "Sergeant Bowman, sir!"

"What did you and your detail see, mister?"

"Sir, we saw the prisoner attempt to assault the Lt. Colonel who defended himself with only the force necessary to safeguard his own well-being and subdue the prisoner, SIR!"

Hardbottle grinned at Ammo. "Get the picture? Now let's move. I've filled out all the necessary paperwork and as of right now, both your sorry asses belong to me."

"Where are we going, Colonel?" The Dreadknight asked. Ammo had roughly shaken off his helping hand and was glaring pure molten hatred at Hardbottle.

"First, over to the initial checkpoint where you'll meet the rest of the team and I'll show you what we'll be traveling in. Let's go. And need I remind you of the promise I made to the both of you on our first meeting? I'm not going to put any fancy remote controlled collars on you or inject you with some pinhead explosive that'll go off if you get too far from me. I don't believe in that crap. What I believe in is my ability to kill the both of you dead in nothing flat if you so much as smell like you're going south on me. Now move out."

Serenity Base

In one of the many intelligence gathering rooms located deep underground beneath Serenity Base, there was an entire wing given over to monitoring communications between and among all United States law enforcement and espionage agencies. The Vice-President of The United States had revealed secrets to his colleagues and to Professor Janelle Ban that were never meant to be revealed and indeed, would have branded him a traitor if he were ever found out. It was by utilizing these secrets that Serenity Base kept ahead of the FBI, the CIA, the NSA, The Machine, ICE, ZOWIE, S.H.I.E.L.D. and the police departments of fifty states.

One of those secrets concerned one Robert Bruce Banner aka The Incredible Hulk. Whenever he was positively identified and his location pinpointed, a special alert, designated 'Gamma One' was sent out across the entire intelligence network community and in particular to The United States Army and S.H.I.E.L.D.

Then a message was sent to the local law enforcement agencies of wherever Banner's location happened to be. The message was short and to the point. Under absolutely NO circumstances was any contact to be made with Robert Bruce Banner and especially there was to be NO ACTION AT ALL taken that would frighten him, upset him or God In His Sweet Heaven Forbid, make him angry. He was to be kept under surveillance until such time as The United States Army or S.H.I.E.L.D. arrived.

One of the technicians sitting at his console was reading his monitor with great interest and a slow smile crept across his face. He had a feeling he'd be receiving a huge bonus for the news he was about to impart to his superiors. He reached up and tapped his headset. “Dr. Lana Jefferson.” The headset automatically dialed the number and put him in touch with Dr. Lana Jefferson who was the staff member on duty that evening.

“Dr. Jefferson.”

“This is Cooke, Information Specialist 12. I've intercepted a transmission I'm going to send onto you.”

“What's it about?”

“It's about Dr. Banner. He's right here in Seattle.”

“Are you positive?”

“Absolutely. He was found naked in a Dunkin Donuts by some Seattle police officers. They took him to Kindred Spirits Medical Center. One of the police

officers scanned Banner's prints and sent them to be ID'ed. They came back with the Gamma One Alert attached."

"You've blocked the transmission?"

"So far the only ones who know that Bruce Banner is in Kindred Spirits are ourselves and The Seattle Police Department."

"Excellent. I'll send a team to secure him at once. Good job, Cooke."

"Thank you."

Maxwell looked up from his newspaper as Dixie used her special keycard to enter the secure police wing of Kindred Spirits Medical Center. The only patient occupying the wing was the naked man they'd brought in who was still unconscious. Dixie dashed over, gripped Maxwell painfully by the upper arm and yanked him up and out of his seat.

"God- damn, Dixie! What-"

Dixie said nothing until she had hauled him all the way over by the door and then she motioned for him to keep his voice down. Her eyes were wide and frightened. "I just got word on who that guy is! He's Bruce Banner!"

The newspaper fell from Maxwell's hand and his face had gone a pale gray color. "Banner...that guy who turns into...into...into.."

Dixie finished it for him. "... The Hulk. Yeah. It's him. I just got the confirmation from HQ."

"I'm outta here." Maxwell started out the door but Dixie grabbed him and yanked him back inside the room.

"Where do you think you're goin, partner? "

"Dixie, You're okay an' all, but that guy there can turn into The Hulk at any moment and kill us all! Ain't enough pension in the world worth that!"

"Listen to me! He's asleep, he's still under the knockout gas I hit him with, remember! I'll get one of the nurses to give him something to keep him out a

couple of hours longer....all we gotta do is just hang in until HQ gets hold of The Army and they send troops to pick him up!"

Maxwell looked from Dixie's strained face to the sleeping man on the bed and then back to Dixie. "Yeah...yeah...I guess you're right...he is sleepin'...you SURE they're sending somebody?"

Dixie relaxed her hold on her partner. "HQ said that there was some special alert send out whenever this Banner guy was sighted. The Army will be here to take custody of him. But that won't be our worry. HQ will send down a S.W.A.T. team to stand guard over him. Another few minutes and we're outta here."

"Yeah...yeah...okay, sure...wow...The Hulk...who'd have thought..."

"Yeah."

Dixie and Maxwell slowly walked over to the bed where the sleeping man lay. A white sheet and a thick blue blanket covered him and his chest rose and fell slowly. His face occasionally twitched as if he were experiencing a bad dream, which was probably the case. The two police officers kept their hands on the butts of their gun as they carefully did a visual check of their prisoner.

"Hard to believe," Maxwell muttered.

"What?"

"I was watching somethin' about The Hulk 'bout six, seven months ago on either The Discovery Channel, The Learning Channel...one'a them educational channels...anyway, they said that The Hulk was a founding member of The Avengers. Hard to believe, seeing him lyin' there like that."

"That's because he isn't The Hulk now, man. He's Banner. Banner turns into The Hulk when he gets mad."

"We oughta back up to the door, then. Wouldn't wanna wake him up. He might be one'a them people who gets pissed when he's woke up when he doesn't wanna be woke up."

"Good idea."

Hardbottle indicated the woman and the man standing by a huge, oversized 18-wheeler than looked to be twice as long and twice as wide as a conventional 18-wheeler. “That's Annabel St. Cyr and Bullet. They're two more members of our team. There's a sixth and he's the one I want to talk about.” Hardbottle looked at Ammo and The Dreadknight. “Either of you heard of The Human Torch?”

“Sure,” Ammo said. “Android created by Professor Phineas T. Horton in 1939. Served as a member of The Invaders and The All-Winners Squad in World War II. He disappeared back in '55 but about four, five years ago he reappeared. Hung out with The Fantastic Four for a while then joined The Avengers. That the Torch you mean?”

The others were looking at Ammo with something like stunned amazement.

“What? What the problem is? Just ‘cause I'm black means I don't read or somethin'?”

“It's not that. It's just that when you say ‘Human Torch’ most people think of Johnny Storm, that's all.”

“I ain't most people.”

Hardbottle snorted and returned to the subject at hand. “The Torch is on our team. Not because I want him but he pulled some strings and I've got no choice but to work with him. But that doesn't mean I trust him with everything. Now, I'm guessing you and funny face don't have any love for the spandex set so I'm fairly certain I can trust you not to go running off at the mouth around him. Clear?”

“Where is The Torch?”

“He said he was going to stop in at The West Coast Avengers compound and see if they had any leads on The Hulk's whereabouts and then he would catch up to us.”

“What's his beef with The Hulk, Hardbottle?” Ammo wanted to know.

“He tangled with The Hulk in the desert a few days ago and got the piss walloped outta him. He'll tell you that he's doing this to make the world safe for bunnies and kitties but the truth of the matter is he's royally pissed that he got his ass whipped so easy and he wants a rematch.”

Ammo was running his eye up and down Annabel's splendid body. She wore a one-piece black bodysuit with red boots and a waist length red leather jacket. She was smoking a thin black cigar that gave off a pungent, yet sweet odor. "You got another one'a those, baby? How 'bout sparin' a brother a smoke?"

Without looking at him, Annabel replied coldly, "My name is not baby. You are not my brother. And if you want to smoke, support your own habit."

"Bitch."

Annabel looked over her shoulder and gave him the sweetest of smiles. "Do you really need this one, Felton?"

"For the duration of this mission, yes. Once the job's done I don't care what you do with him. Now come take a look at our War Wagon." Hardbottle led the team around to the rear of the massive truck and pointed a remote control at the door, which smoothly rolled upwards revealing that the inside was a rolling fortress. There was a living area complete with foldout bunk beds, a small kitchen, shower and toilet facilities. Weapons lockers and cases of ammunition were stacked neatly. More weapons were racked on the walls and there was even a small workshop area. "I got this thing on loan from S.H.I.E.L.D. There's also a complete satellite communications set up and if anybody gets bored, we get over 500 channels although I don't think any of you will have much time for watching TV. Ammo, I want you to familiarize yourself with every piece of ordinance in this wagon, you hear me? Dreadknight, your equipment is in the cases marked with your symbol."

"Where is my Hellhorse?" Dreadknight demanded. He was referring to a mutated bat-winged black horse that was his means of transportation.

"Ah. See, there was some problem with that. Turns out that a couple of research groups tried to gain legal custody of your Hellhorse for the purposes of studying it. There was some talk about dissecting the horse and some powerful animal rights group got into the fight and they...well, they've got your horse now."

"Do you know where they keep my Hellhorse?" The Dreadknight's muffled voice was conveying more emotion than Hardbottle had ever heard before. "I want my horse."

"As it turns out, this group has its headquarters in San Francisco where we're heading now. I'll give you the address and let you pay a call on them. I'm sure that between you and Agent Bullet they can be persuaded to return your property to you."

“Could you not just simply order them to return my Hellhorse?”

Hardbottle chuckled as he removed a metal flask of vodka from a pocket and unscrewed the top. “You ever try talking to these animal rights people? They can step right over a starving man in the street or look the other way when a woman is being beaten to death by her drunken husband but let somebody even look the wrong way at a mangy alley cat and they go ballistic. Nah...the best way to get your horsie back is to put foot in their ass and I'm sure you can do that. Especially if Bullet is with you. Take him and you won't have any problem.” Hardbottle took a deep long swig from his flask. “And now, boys and girl if you'll all climb aboard, we'll finally get this mission underway.”

Dixie Mendoza was relieved when she heard the sound of a keycard being slid through the computerized lock of the secure wing. She and Maxwell were sitting as far away as they could get from the still sleeping form of Bruce Banner. Dixie had changed her mind about ordering a nurse to give him a shot of something to keep him knocked out longer. She was afraid that the sudden sting of the needle in his arm might awaken him and provoke the change into The Hulk.

The door swung open and Dixie rose from her chair, smiling gratefully. “I'm sure glad you-” then she stopped. These weren't S.W.A.T. officers coming through the door. True, they were dressed all in black and carried automatic weapons but there any similarity ended. There was no identifying badges or patches of any sort on their gear. Dixie brought her gun out of its holster but it was far too late. Silenced bullets punched through her bulletproof vest as is it didn't even exist. She was thrown against a wall from the impact and slid to the floor, leaving a broad crimson smear on the wall. Maxwell died just as quickly. So shocked and surprised was he that he didn't even get to clear his sidearm from the holster.

The black clad men said nothing. A gurney was quickly wheeled in and Bruce Banner transferred from his bed to the gurney. He was securely strapped to it and wheeled out of the room, leaving the two dead police officers. The four black clad men quickly moved down the hallway, past the bodies of hospital workers they had ruthlessly slain. They were not concerned about the security cameras. A sophisticated jamming device was in operation and the only thing that would show up on the digital recorders would be static.

They went down in an elevator and placed the gurney inside a large black van. Once they were safely inside and the vehicle speeding away, the leader used a cell phone.

“The operation was a success. Six dead and Banner is ours. Estimated arrival time at Serenity Base, forty minutes.”

The voice on the other end was a purr of pure pleasure. “Outstanding. I'm on my way right now. Place Dr. Banner in my laboratory. There is much he and I need to discuss.”

“It'll be done just as you say, Professor Ban.”