

In League

By Michael J. Allen

Seventeenth Hero Killed this Month--No Hero Safe.

The headline seized Nicolas Farious by the throat before he'd picked the paper off the step. He scanned the first few lines.

"Damn," his brow knit, "This doesn't bode well."

Shaking his head without disturbing a strand of cropped dark hair, Farious approached the store's biometric reader. He put his green eye to the lens, his large, callused hand on the pad, and spit into the DNA reader. The system lit three green lights signifying each test passed.

Foot-thick, glass blast doors swept to either sides. A hyper-reflective shield rolled into the ceiling. Sonic blasters, a laser net, and electro-kinetic cannons powered down, retracting out of sight in the entryway.

He stepped into the store.

A soft voice greeted him. "Welcome to the Nexus, discount shopping for all your super needs. Privacy entrance services now available. Please see a customer liaison for processing."

Farious pushed the headline out of his mind, and strolled across the entryway, determined not to let it disturb his morning routine. He crossed grey marble floor under watchful targeting sensors of silicon javelin launchers, plasma lasers, liquid nitrogen throwers and another dozen assorted armaments.

The voice returned. "The Nexus would like to remind you that membership is a privilege. The Nexus is neutral ground; killing fellow patrons will forfeit your membership."

He walked behind Apollo's Coffee Café bar. One of the machines hummed a moment before pushing a steaming cup from the dispenser.

It chimed, "Large mocha cappuccino frappe, skim no cream, two sugars, with cinnamon and chocolate shavings."

"Thank you," Farious said.

He brought the cup to his mouth, closed his eyes and let flavors scamper around his mouth. An alert chirp interrupted his repose. He glanced toward the entrance to see someone pounding on the outer doors, as if anyone could hear through them.

He glanced down to check his attire. With a derisive snort, he swept cinnamon dust off of his white tuxedo jacket. He verified his dark pants and shiny black shoes immaculate before approaching the entrance.

The woman on the other side of the door wore a tattered and blood-splattered vinyl cheerleading costume. Half of a mask hung from her blond curls.

Farious spoke through the intercom. "My apologies, Miss Pom Pom, but we're not open yet."

Her voice was high and strained over the intercom. "You're Major Farious?"

"Yes."

"You own the Nexus?" Pom Pom asked

"I do."

The woman shrieked. Super-powered sound waves battered the barrier and peeled the building's paint. "You killed Thunder Jock!"

Farious raised a hand to forestall her and gestured toward the door controls. She quieted and he let her inside. "Come inside, Miss. Tell me, what's happened."

She seated herself in a crimson, leather lounge chair.

"Not here, Miss, anonymity is essential for my clientele."

He guided her away from the chairs toward towering, black doors at the lobby's rear. The doors slid apart. They stepped into the trapezoidal room with their entry door on the shorter side and three outsized, oblong capsules on the opposite. Farious pushed back the left sleeve of his jacket

and keyed controls mounted on a forearm computer. The first three pods swept out of the room, replaced by three more. Their doors opened and Farious led her into the one on the right.

Once the pod sped from the entry station, Farious turned to her. "Please, tell me what has happened."

Through shuddering sobs, she described the evening's encounter. "Then, just when we had Vampire Kitty cornered, she pulled out something like a garage door opener and Thunder Jock's jet pack exploded."

"Did she plant one of her Nitro-bats on it?"

Pom Pom gave him a suspicious glower. "I thought you never told others what your customers purchase."

"Vampire Kitty is well known for her Nitro-bats."

"There was no Nitro-bat. Your equipment killed my boyfr-hero."

"I do not like to cast aspirations upon the dead, but from your description the product worked as designed."

"What are you saying? Thunder Jock blew himself up?"

"I suppose user error is always a possibility." Farious rose from his seat in the pod and turned his back to her. "I assure you, Miss Pom Pom, our equipment is of the highest quality. It endures rigorous quality control. Nonetheless, I'll be happy to offer you a warranty replacement on the JP3-m40, and a complimentary suiting by our fitter due to your loss."

She leapt from her chair, grabbed him around the throat and slammed him against the wall. "I don't want your crap, I want your blood."

Farious struggled to speak. "How very heroic."

The color drained from her face. She released her grip and stumbled backward, staring at her hands. She summoned her composure and glared at him. "I won't kill you, but I *will* ruin you."