



# The Weekly Man

## Episode 9: Monday – Jack

Jack's face wrinkled as he lifted the sock to his nose to detect anything that didn't smell like sock or foot sweat but it was definitely foot sweat and nothing else—no electronic insects, nanobots, remote controlled motes or other spy devices, although he had to admit the technology was probably so advanced by now that anything they put in his apartment would likely be too small to be seen and wouldn't smell like anything, especially anything as strong as his foot sweat. It would be light years more advanced than the cameras and infrared of Crosby's days, the listening devices and satellite images. He wondered about the dead fly on the top shelf in the bedroom closet. How had it gotten in there? The closet was concealed in the wall so tight that it was impossible to see any telltale cracks to give away its location. But every once in a while he found a piece of clothing that he was sure wasn't his and he wondered why they would leave strange clothing in his closet.

*Insidious bastards.*

He lifted the other sock to his nose.

*Nothing un-sockish.*

It took fifteen minutes to sniff, feel and inspect his way to be fully and safely clothed in a grey sweatshirt with no markings to provide a target, torn blue jeans and ripped Nike running shoes. Maybe the strange clothing had been left by a previous tenant but he'd been here several years now. He would have come across everything they might have left behind. And also, his memory had been playing tricks on him lately; in fact, his memory had always been a tricky thing. Why hadn't he looked into this clothing thing before now? But then, why? And why the hell was he worrying about clothing in his closet? It was time for the next installment of *The Unseen*. His weekly online comic.

*Monday.*

Why did he suddenly have that thought? What the hell was Monday? Were they putting thoughts in his head now, confusing him with random ideas that didn't make sense? Fuck them. His mind was too strong for that shit no matter how much or how hard they tried to mess with it.

He was a hero. A real, genuine hero. Well...a hero in his comic. He was the main character and the feats of courage of his main character were his feats of courage because they came out of this mind. They were his creation and the main character, Panther, who was the leader of The Unseen, was Jack.

He was actually a much better looking hero in the comic than he was in real life. For instance:

Comic: Muscular

Real Life: Skinny

Comic: Standing tall and erect

Real Life: Stooped

Comic: Confidant stride

Real Life: Short, tentative steps

Comic: Steely eyes that look into the soul

Real Life: Darting eyes that rarely made eye contact

There was a lot to be said for spending the greater part of your life online and so little to push you out of the sack into the coarse reality of the real world, which was how he viewed it—a cruel place full of vindictive creatures called people, a world where everyone was fighting for control and the vast majority of the world was losing at a pace that would have the entire human race enslaved by the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

But not in *The Unseen*...not in the treehouse...not as long as Panther, Leopard, Jaguar, Cougar and Bobcat, Lynx and Tiger were there to fight The Tyranny through the powerful medium of example. *The Unseen* was likely one of the most unseen comics on the web but it paid the bills. Another thing he sometimes wondered about, but there was time to wonder about that later. He opened the secret compartment in his closet and removed the collapsible drafting desk, the pens and pencils and inks, the paper and erasers, the rulers and brushes and other equipment. Best to keep such things concealed when your art was a force against The Tyranny.

He pulled the livingroom curtains shut and assembled his drafting desk by the window, snapped on a halogen light and arranged his equipment. This was how he'd done the first *Unseen* comics, with ink and paper, years ago as a kid, up in the treehouse. Much later he'd tried doing it with software and publishing directly to the web but it didn't have the same feel. There was something missing in the flow of lines that failed to recreate the blood and sinew of brushes and pens. After a few months he'd gone back to drawing the strip and scanning it. There was something more human in the process and wasn't that what the comic was all about?

Humanity—about our right to be human beings, free to speak and act and form our own destinies—everything The Tyranny was trying to take away from us.

Crosby would have been proud of him.

He penciled in the panels lightly: six rows, each containing four panels. It was the way he started most strips, though he would wander from the straight lines as the strip progressed, letting one panel spill into another, changing the sizes and shapes of panels, erasing borders and letting images from one panel bleed into the surrounding panels. He had no idea how the strip would look because he had no idea how the story would unfold until he started creating it. Nothing was ever planned in *The Unseen*.

The first panel was almost always the same. It showed the Treehouse—a rickety wooden construction lodged into the massive branches of a giant oak. A rope with knots spaced a foot

apart hung from a trap door at the bottom of the house. It was the only way in and it was intended to be a test: only those strong enough to climb the ladder were allowed into the house.

The second panel moved into the house where the seven 'gifted ones' sat crossed-legged in a circle. Panther was the biggest and the strongest and the deadliest, though he'd never actually done anything deadly in any episode of *The Unseen*.

It was their mission to save the world from The Tyranny—the combined forces of all evil in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. There was one stipulation: victory had to be achieved through peaceful means and example. Still, it was generally assumed that Panther would be deadly if ever the need for deadliness arose. Strangely, all seven members looked alike—even the one female member, Bobcat. They had willed themselves to look this way to confuse The Tyranny.

Bobcat's dialogue balloon said, "I think we need to invoke the Fourth Prerogative. Motorcades of The Tyranny have been spotted on the back roads around Knitsburg. They're getting closer."

Bobcat's dialogue flowed into the next panel showing a night scene dominated by a leafless apple tree framing a dirt road where the headlights of several black cars lit up the road ominously, like spotlights searching for something. Jack had no idea what the Fourth Prerogative was. It had just come into his head when he gave Bobcat something to say. This was the way he developed his comic strip. This was the way he lived his life. If you didn't know what you were going to do next, you had the advantage over your enemies. Of course, there were some things he did by design: he rose at the same time every day, went to bed at around the same time, but he was indoors, safe in his flat when he did these things. They would always know where to find him when he was home. There was nothing he could do about that short of going into hiding, but for some reason he'd never been able to do that. Later, he would do a search on Knitsburg and find out if there was an actual place by that name. Then he'd research it for a while for details he could use in the strip.

In the next panel, a close up of Cougar's eyes wide with a few beads of sweat beginning to appear on his face added impact to his dialogue, "The Fourth Prerogative?" Obviously, this was something the Unseen took seriously, something that could only be used as a last resort, something so awful that defeat might actually be a preferable option to using it.

He didn't know where he was going next with the story. *Time to do something else and let my subconscious work out the details.* He trusted his subconscious. He knew that all the stories he would ever tell in *The Unseen* were already playing out deep in the tunnels of his interior mind.

It was time to see if he could make contact with her. He needed to make contact even though they'd never actually met and she was most likely working for the Tyranny and she would probably put a bullet in his head without blinking. But that didn't stop him from loving her.

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*Why are you doing this? Why do you keep playing with death?*

He knew that he should stop contacting her. She was the kind of unknown that he'd been avoiding all his life. Being in love and having a relationship was suicide. It was an Achilles' tendon that gave the Tyranny a target to aim at.

*Jesus, Jack...what're you thinking? There is no Tyranny, except in The Unseen. Get a grip.*

Sometimes his fictional life slipped into his real life and vice versa, although, in both lives dark forces were at work and danger was always just a few breaths away.

He turned on his laptop and opened his mail. A rush of excitement flashed through his abdomen and chest. He loved that feeling when he saw that he had mail from her in the list:

olsen@yehdllh.com. He'd tried tracking down the domain name but had never gotten anywhere. It was like olsen@yehdllh.com didn't exist but there it was, in the list, and it worked. It was there, even though it shouldn't have been. One more reason to suspect her. Only They could do something like this, only They had the power and the resources. He opened it.

Jack...I waited for you. You didn't show up. Again. I know you live a secluded life, and, like you say, sinister forces are out to get you. But I'm not one of them, Jack. I have genuine feelings for you. I believe in you and I believe you. I think about you all the time. Come on, Jack, give me a chance. I promise you won't regret it.

Can we meet tonight? Please? There's a bar on High Street. It's across the street from the big blue church with the condemned signs all around it. Geez, Jack, when do you suppose they'll ever get around to tearing it down? I...

She went on for about three pages, talking about the church, about her life, about what was going on in the world, about her feelings for him. Sometimes he wondered what they would have to talk about if they ever did meet. They talked about everything under the sun and the moon in their emails. The endings were always the same:

Can we meet?

Vine

Vine. Her name was Vine. Or was it really?

*How do you know anything about someone until you've come face-to-face?  
Through their emails.*

Yes, he knew her better than if he'd been face-to-face with her for a thousand years. She was so real in her words, in the things she wrote to him, the confessions she'd made, the secrets she'd shared. Yes, what a fool he'd been. He needed to meet her. He needed more than just her emails in his life. He wrote back:

I apologize for not showing up. I was on my way, out the door, and fell down the steps. I think I must have been out for...I don't know. And yes, I'll meet you tonight. And I know the bar. Never been in it before but I know where it is. And isn't it strange that the blue church has been there for how many years, condemned and still not torn down? You'd think the parking space would be worth a fortune...

And he went on for several pages, talking about everything in his life, even as little as that was but he had a good imagination.

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Meanwhile – Valerie Vine

“So, Jack, we're going to meet tonight.” Valerie Vine smiled as she read Jack's email. She knew he had the best intentions when he wrote that he would see her tonight but she knew there was no way in the world that he would meet her in real life. He might be there but he would find every reason in the world to avoid meeting. He'd never told her that he suspected her of being with the Tryanny, that notorious world of espionage and evil just below the surface of everyday life but

she knew him probably more than he knew himself and she knew that he'd been at their rendezvous points time and again but found some last minute excuse to mistrust her and believe that she was leading him into a trap. Still, she showed up over and over, never expecting him to show himself but believing that, someday, the circumstances would lead to them meeting. It might be something like accidentally bumping into each other during one of his paranoid escapes from people who weren't really after him.

*Although that might not always be the case.*

There was something less than one hundred percent about Jack. He'd appeared as a blip on the Agency's data scans a few years ago—something to do with his birthdate being out by one day, a discrepancy between two documents in which the birthdates should have matched. It was probably nothing. Discrepancies like that were common and were usually reconciled with a call or two—some civil servant likely entered one wrong number when he or she was busy or hungover. It could have been anything and most likely nothing important.

Valerie came across it when she was assigned to clean up a batch of anomalies like Jack's birthdate. She'd made the standard enquiries, a phone call to the hospital and calls to various government services. There were discrepancies in the birthdate, and they all swore their information was accurate. Accurate communication between government departments was always a hit and miss thing but something strange was noticed by the data scan software and it raised a code that no one had seen before. It had something to do with a pattern. Even the programmers were stumped. They'd never seen anything like it before but were quick to point out that the data scanning software was third generation AI and was capable of coming up with its own error codes on the fly when it was trying to describe an anomaly it had discovered.

*Anomaly.* Valerie loved the word. It described the unknown in a chilling way, like the Starship Enterprise heading into some anomaly in space that everyone knew was going to be anything but good. It had been over a year now since she'd come across the anomaly with Jack and she hadn't progressed much in finding out what it was. That fact alone triggered a healthy dose of suspicion but during her investigation of Jack she'd never come up with anything to suggest that he was any kind of a threat to society or anyone else and was likely more of a threat to himself.

He had a weekly comic and he was paranoid as hell. The strangest thing, though, was that every bit of information she had on him related to Monday. And it was the only day he would contact her. She chalked this off to a number of reasons. Maybe it was the only day of the week that he would have outside contact and spent the rest of his time on his comic strip. Or maybe he was hiding from the Tyranny the rest of the week.

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Back to Jack

Darkness was his friend, his protector, but he was always aware that the darkness could betray him, that it could work just as well for his enemies. It all depended on how well you used it and Jack was a master. He understood the nuances of light. He understood the shades and shadows in the absence of light, the gradual layers where borders crossed and merged. He was confident that, tonight, he'd avoided them, that he'd penetrated their net and they would be frantic in their efforts to locate him. Good luck with that—he was the master of darkness and they would be scrambling through alleys, streets and parks looking in all the wrong places.

At least, that was the theory. Cockiness was the road to doom. He knew they were smart and that they had a sophisticated surveillance apparatus, a network of tentacles that stalked every corner of the darkness. He had to keep going. Staying in one spot for too long was certain doom. He imagined them as a camera set for a very long exposure. Anything that walked across the field of view would be unseen in the final picture because it wouldn't have been still long enough to have created an impression. He was that ghost of light evading their sensors with his continuous movement.

There was the blue church. There was the bar. The Last Drink.

*Stupid name for a bar.*

It was in a section of the city where most of the buildings were run down, condemned or slated by their owners for 'accidental' fires. Maybe it wasn't so stupid after all.

He scanned up and down the street looking for anything or anyone suspicious. The street was deserted. He wondered for a moment where all the people were but thought that, given the neighborhood, they would be safely indoors and not on the dimly lit street between the blue church and The Last Drink.

A cool autumn night breeze swept down the alley concealing Jack. It smelled good, like rotting leaves, but he didn't have time to enjoy the fall ambience. He hunched his shoulders and hurried across the street, eyes darting in every direction for the slightest movement, the turn of a leaf, the hint of a shadow. They were looking for him but if she were one of them they would be waiting for him inside the bar.

If she were one of them.

A rush of panic gripped his stomach and caught his breath for a second. He knew so little about her other than the reams of information in her emails and so much of that was so detailed that she had to be on the level, but they were smart and were more than capable of providing her with a convincing script because, after all, he wasn't there to actually see her writing the emails—they could have been written by anyone, including a team crafting every word and sentence to get into his head and...

*Stop thinking, Jack. She's on the level and she's been patient with you. More than patient. Don't disappoint her again. You love her. She's not one of them. She loves you. She's everything she says she is. A fan of yours. She loves your comic strip. She loves you. She's on the level. She's not with them.*

He pushed open the big oak door of The Last Drink and went inside where the bar's name immediately made sense. First, there was the smell of stale beer, tobacco and something heavy and offensive that he couldn't identify. It was dark. About a dozen people sat in booths along the walls talking quietly or just brooding over their drinks. There was a stage that likely hadn't seen live entertainment in years and was now loaded with cardboard boxes and old furniture.

And there she was. At the back of the bar. Wearing a dark gray jacket over what looked like a red dress. Her long legs stretched under the table and her hands cupped around a glass half full of beer. She was beautiful. She was alone. He looked around the room again. Behind a mahogany bar that was likely worth more as scrap wood than a bar a tall skinny bartender with a goatee looked at him disinterestedly. Jack ignored him. He looked back at her. Was her name really Vine? If so, was it her first name or her last name? He'd read so many of her opinions on so many things and read about so many personal experiences but he had no idea where she worked. Was she a teacher? A lawyer? A store clerk? He didn't know and he'd never asked. If she wanted him to know then she would tell him. Maybe she was involved in some conspiratorial plot to bring down the government or maybe she led a secret life writing bestselling novels under

a pen name. Or maybe she was one of them. Maybe this was a trap. Maybe the bartender wasn't as innocuous as he appeared. Maybe the customers seated in their dark booths stooped over their half empty glasses were getting ready to pounce.

He felt a sickening clump in the pit of his stomach. Sweat shimmered on his forehead. Sweat bunched in uncomfortable patches under his shirt. He felt dizzy. Why? He was sure she was on the level. Not one of them. She was beautiful and he loved her and he was sure she loved him.

A short slender man wearing a baseball cap backwards walked by her booth and winked at her. He was out of there in a flash.

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A Few Minutes Later - Valerie Vine

From the corner her eye, she'd seen him come in, stop just before the bar and look around. She knew that he'd seen her. At first he'd looked relaxed and then suddenly he looked worried, uncertain. Some guy in a baseball cap walked by her table and winked at her. She looked back where Jack had been standing but he wasn't there. The front door was still closing on his exit.

*Well, Valerie, what excuse will he use this time?*