Two Sides of the Same Coin

By Philip Wiley

Prologue

 Bomber abruptly awoke in the middle of the night in the wake of his most recent nightmare. He sat there in a cold sweat, panting as the details of this latest terrifying dream faded away. He only remembered flashes: a storm, a fortress, a battle with himself, falling. The rest was a blur. He sat there for what seemed like hours, reassuring himself that this vision was only some outlandish fantasy and not reality. Then in the wee hours of the morning, he finally trusted himself to slide into the world of his subconscious once again. Secret agent Bomber of the S.S.S.E. had been haunted by similar nightmares since the end of his last mission nearly four months ago. Little did he know that halfway around the world inside Mount Fuji, another man was having the same problem.

 Bomber awoke to the sound of his alarm. Groggily he pushed every button on his alarm clock several times. Annoyed that the noise didn’t stop, he shoved the clock off his table. When that still didn’t work, he reached down and ripped the irritating machine’s cord out of the socket. It wasn’t until then that he realized that the sound was coming from his watch. Bomber knew that this could mean one of two things, either he had set his watch alarm by mistake or…

 “AGENT BOMBER WAKE UP AND GET TO HEADQUARTERS RIGHT NOW!” At this shouting Bomber leaped out of bed like a crazed cat and scanned the room for the source of the yelling. He chuckled to himself over his own foolishness as he realized the bellow had also come from his watch. He peered at it, and a very angry face stared daggers at him in return.

 Bomber, unfazed by this look of pure rage, said with a drowsy calmness to his voice, “Whatever it is, Rubber Band, give me ten minutes, and I’ll be there.”

“I might have been willing to do that an hour ago, but since *someone* couldn’t find it in himself to crawl out of bed, you’ll have to be here in the briefing room in five.”

“Whatever you say, boss,” Bomber said the last word sarcastically to show his displeasure at being rudely awoken by someone who had, just four months before, been his co-worker. Sometimes one jealous little part inside Bomber wanted to strangle that man and become the leader of the S.S.S.E. with a small army of highly trained spies to do his bidding… *Stop,* he told himself. *It’s that kind of thinking that drove our last boss to the dark side.* He shoved the thought aside, but it would continue to nag him and make him doubt his own decisions that day. It made him think, *What if…*

Five minutes later, Bomber was at the S.S.S.E.’s headquarters, an ordinary-looking office building in downtown San Francisco. The above-ground floors were actually an ordinary office building. It was these floors and their many windows that gave the building a tin foil-like shine typical of most buildings in the city. The building also had a slight curve to it that gave the building the look of a *u* from a plane. Bomber stepped inside and was drowned by an ocean of employees doing busywork for some company or another. He shoved his way towards the nearest elevator and elbowed his way out of the crowd. Inside the elevator was just as packed as the lobby outside. As Bomber entered, he barely had enough time to press the button to the basement floor before thirty people forced him to the back wall all desperately attempting to get to the floor at which they needed to be. The doors closed and the elevator began traveling downward. When the machine stopped, and the doors opened, Bomber clambered out and gasped for breath; it had been so crowded in there that he could scarcely breathe. As Bomber stood there, another man stumbled out. “Ace? I didn’t know you were in there,” Bomber said surprised.

“I didn’t either,” Ace admitted. “One minute I was in the lobby and the next I was lost in a tidal wave of arms and legs. I guess they dragged me in there.” Ace gestured at the elevator.

At this, Bomber smiled; Ace could always turn his day around for the better. “Come on,” Bomber laughed, “we don’t want to be late for the mission briefing.”

They walked over to a six-foot tall stack of dusty, decaying cardboard boxes. Bomber crouched down and reached into a rat-hole sized opening in the ice-cold cement. His hand searched until it hit an indent the size and shape of a silver dollar. Bomber twisted his arm until his thumb was positioned above it and pressed down. There was a small metallic whirring sound that Bomber knew meant the thumb scanner was doing its job. The whirring stopped, and the boxes slid aside revealing the entrance to the S.S.S.E.’s headquarters.

 Bomber, with Ace in tow, entered the silvery, futuristic hallway, and as soon as they were inside, the boxes neatly slid back into place, hiding the entrance entirely. The inside of the S.S.S.E. was the opposite of the room that hid it in every way. While the basement was dark, dusty, and had no technology whatsoever, the room that it hid was well lit, clean, and had gadgets about which not even the U.S. president knew. The room was full of lights, buttons, levers, and switches, and nearly everything had that same silver coated shine of the passage they had used to enter. While the room above was a sea of mankind, this room was nearly empty save for the few trusted elite that were allowed to work here. As Ace and Bomber entered, they were instantly greeted by a metallic voice that had annoyed all employees since Bomber and Ace had been in middle school nearly twenty years ago.

“Why are you late?” it whined. “Your boss Rubber Band has been waiting for you two for nearly fifteen minutes.”

Bomber’s mood soured. “Just ignore it,” Ace advised. “Either that or help me find the plug to that irritating machine.” Once again, Ace had managed to turn Bomber’s mood for the better, and Bomber managed a smile as they entered the briefing room.

Once Bomber and Ace were seated, Rubber Band launched into his briefing speech without hesitation. “This,” Rubber Band flashed several pictures onto the wall, “is Dr. Yin. He is a Japanese scientist that was working on a machine to completely alter a person’s behavior.”

 “Yin has been long allied with the S.S.S.E.,” Rubber Band explained. “He was planning to sell us this device,” Rubber Band said as he projected images of a silvery glove that had several red and blue wires running out of it and into a battery pack. “It could have been used to turn our enemies into our allies, but his machine has disappeared. The prime suspect for this theft is a crime lord known only as the Yang Master. He was obsessed with the work of Dr. Yin, but he wants to reverse the technology, in other words, he wants to make us, our allies, and all organizations like ours into the worst villains in the world.”

“Your mission,” Rubber Band concluded, “is to stop this mad man and retrieve, or, if necessary, destroy the device, in short, your mission is to save the world.”

“When do we leave?” Bomber asked.

“On the next flight,” Rubber Band said, “but first, here are your disguises.”

Bomber and Ace left the room to change, and when they returned, Bomber was in the garb of a wealthy Japanese businessman, a silver streaked pinstriped tuxedo, black dress shoes, and a slight black goatee. Ace was dressed as an elderly Japanese man with a long white mustache and blue silk robe with a white dragon dipping in and out of the folds as if diving through the waves of a great ocean. They also wore masks and gloves that made their skin and eyes match those of Asian men.

“Good,” Rubber Band said, “Now you look the part, but you must also sound the part.” With that remark Rubber Band slid a vial of pills toward the two field agents.

“These pills,” Rubber Band continued, “will enable you to speak in the Japanese tongue for the next day and a half. That will cover the time of your flight and give you about a day to complete your mission without blowing your cover.” Both Ace and Bomber took a pill.

“Take these briefcases of weaponry and begin your mission.” Rubber Band finished. “Oh, and one more thing,” Rubber Band added as Ace and Bomber were leaving, “Dr. Yin is still safe and will be meeting you at the airport in Tokyo to take you to his lab where your investigation will begin. He has also been briefed on your disguises so that he will know whom to take to his lab.”

The agents left the building the same way they entered and hailed a taxi to take them to the San Francisco airport. Once there, they navigated their way through security with only a brief delay. Airport security had tried to arrest Ace for trying to transport several full two-liter water bottles, a lighter, and a tube of toothpaste. After they cleared up this issue, they boarded the plane as Mr. Yung junior and Mr. Yung senior.

Once they were in the air, Bomber clicked open his suitcase and took stock of the gadgets he had at his disposal. There was all of the standard equipment, a grappling hook pen, C-4 bubble gum, and a pair of sunglasses that could do every thing from hacking into computer terminals to alerting you if you were being followed, but it also contained a few experimental gadgets that had labels like *mind control chocolate*, *acid glasses cleaner,* and *mini missiles*. Bomber carefully stored the grappling hook inside the hidden compartment in his left shoe, and slid several of the missiles into the holes in his watch designed for launching projectiles.

 After he felt fully prepared, he relaxed by watching a movie on the screen in the seat in front of him. About halfway through the program, Bomber drifted off into the world of another nightmare. When he awoke in a cold sweat, the plane was descending into Tokyo, Japan.

After the plane landed, and Ace and Bomber had disembarked, they immediately began to scan the faces of the many people waiting for relatives or business partners, searching for Dr. Yin, but in the vast ocean of people moving about in the huge Tokyo Airport it took an hour for them to find each other, and then it was only by coincidence. Ace had gotten hungry, as breakfast had not been served on the plane, so he said, “Hey, look a restaurant, let’s get some food.”

“Is that even a priority right now?” Bomber asked.

“Can you save the world on an empty stomach?” Ace countered.

“Fine,” Bomber said defeated by Ace’s logic. “Lets eat.” They entered the cafe and ordered a traditional Japanese breakfast of rice porridge, miso soup, and, grilled fish.

“I don’t see how we’ll be able to find one man in an airport this big,” Ace said through a mouthful of rice. “Even with the technology we have, we can’t examine every face in here until we get an identity match.”

“True,” Bomber said as he finished off his fish. Halfway through the meal, Bomber looked at the table across from theirs and noticed a familiar face. “Come on, Dad,” Bomber said. “I think I’ve solved our problem.” They stood, paid the bill, and walked towards the man at the other table.

“Hello Mr. Yung and Mr. Yung,” Dr. Yin greeted Ace and Bomber. “I understand you are here to see my lab; please come with me.”

“But our waiter hasn’t even boxed our leftovers,” Ace complained. “I haven’t finished my soup yet.” Dr. Yin ignored Ace and led the pair out of the airport towards a sleek black limo. When they entered, Yin sat in the passenger’s seat while Ace and Bomber sat in the back. Bomber noticed a Plexiglas wall separating the front from the back, like in a taxi, only more high-tech. Bomber was about to lower the Plexiglas window, but then a sickly green mist began to smoke from the car’s air conditioning. It stung his nose and tugged at the air in his lungs. Even though Bomber had just had a full night’s sleep, he became drowsy. As he and Ace blacked out, Bomber heard the taunting voice of the good Dr. Yin, “Good night; sleep tight; hopefully you won’t survive the night.”

Bomber awoke several hours later. His hands and feet were tied, and his head was shoved in a sack. He was trying to move, but found that the ropes on his hands were attached to something heavy enough to prevent any movement other than slight jerking and struggling. Somehow, he managed to readjust himself so that his knees were pressed against his forehead. Then he pinched his knees against the sack and used his legs to pull it off. Now that Bomber could see, he noticed that everything around him was made of black glass-like obsidian including the wall to which his bonds were attached. He also saw that the entire room was bathed in a strange red light that seemed to emanate from below the floor. Then he noticed Ace, also bound.

“Well,” he said jokingly, as if they hadn’t been captured, “it’s about time you woke up.” Ace explained that he’d been awake for the past hour and in that time, he had seen many of the Yang Master’s henchmen about half of which he knew to be Dr. Yin’s assistants. “My best guess,” he concluded, “is that when the Yang Master stole the device, he used it on everyone in Dr. Yin’s lab including the doctor himself.” As Ace finished this sentence, a man walked into the prisoners’ small alcove. He was wearing a half-black, half-white suit and a skin tight, polyester mask decorated with a single large Yin-Yang symbol. On his right hand he wore a high-tech glove that must have been Dr. Yin’s invention.

He noticed Bomber glance at it and then the Yang Master said, “Oh, you like this glove.” He spread his fingers and admired it himself. Then he continued, “This glove is truly an amazing device; it lets the wearer decide what he wants a man to become, and then it forces that image down on its victim. In this way, it has given me many things, but the only thing it can’t give me is the pleasure of finding out a man’s true identity by force.” With that he reached down and tore Ace’s mask from his face. “Ah, so this is what the real Agent Ace of the S.S.S.E. looks like,” said the Yang Master. “Now, lets see your real face Agent Bomber.” Then he reached down and removed Bomber’s mask.

The Yang Master stopped with a look of shock and surprise in his eyes, and Bomber could tell that a wave of deja vu had washed over him. Then the Yang Master removed his own mask, and the same wave of deja vu swept away Bomber. Their faces were nearly identical. Each had the same stubby squared chin, the same sharp rough nose, the same light brown eyes, and the same rough, weather-beaten faces that looked as if they had lived through several wars. The only differences were their hair and the white eye patch that covered the Yang Master’s left eye. While Bomber had sandy blond hair with a neat, army regulation cut, the Yang Master’s hair was a tangled mess of dark black locks so greasy that it looked like machine oil. As they gawked at each other, the same thought dawned - *Ah, so the dream was real*. As they stared, they both knew that only one of them could leave alive.

“Gah, it doesn’t matter who you are,” said the Yang Master. “No man can resist this glove’s command. Both of you will bend to my will.” “You,” he said as he pointed at Bomber, “will be the first to fall to this machine’s power.”

“Guards take this man to the center of my fortress,” he yelled. “Take him to the spot that is most open to the lava, the sky, and the rocks around us.” Then he said in a voice that was nearly a whisper, “this particular victory demands a proper audience.” With that he left, and two men that Bomber recognized as some of Dr. Yin’s lab assistants entered. They detached his bonds from the obsidian wall and dragged him into an open area where Bomber could feel the heat of the lava below and see the strangely snowy sky. They threw him down onto his knees and arced his head upwards. Hundreds of the Yang Master’s henchmen watched him from above on balconies and from the level ground on which he was trapped. Then the Yang Master approached him. “Behold,” he shouted, “this is how the S.S.S.E. falls!” Cheering erupted around Bomber, and the glove, that terrible machine, was pressed onto his forehead.

As the glove touched Bomber’s forehead, the cold darkness of evil began to close around his heart. It latched onto that sliver of doubt, that shard of vileness that had been stuck in his heart since he had first considered taking over the S.S.S.E. by force for his own gain. The glove made it grow. It became like a black hole that sucked in all of what he knew himself to be. The glove corrupted his very soul and made it black as tar. With the last fragment of consciousness that he knew to be his own, he glanced at Ace, chained to the black obsidian wall of the Yang Master’s volcano fortress, and he knew that he could not leave him there. He had to save Ace and to do that he had to save himself from drowning in the sea of evil that was now his own mind. With this new will, he fought the glove’s control; he willed the small piece of himself that he knew was the real him to expand and overtake these evil thoughts. He thought back to middle school when Ace had nearly drowned and almost froze to death to save the world, he thought about defeating the villain that had been his boss four months ago, he thought about every decent thing that he had ever done in his life, and he found that they greatly out-numbered the bad. This realization destroyed the splinter of doubt that the glove was using to twist his mind, and the evil cleared like the sky after a great storm. He stood, and despite his own bonds, shoved the Yang Master with every ounce of muscle in his body. The Yang Master, shocked and unprepared toppled backwards and fell off the edge of his hideout into the lava below. The glove exploded, and a fog lifted from the minds of all on which it had been used. This victory, however, still left a small army of the late Yang Master’s henchmen.

Bomber snapped the ropes that bound him like they were rubber bands. He ran to Ace and tore off the ropes that bound his friend. Then he aimed his watch at the obsidian floor. He yelled a warning to all of the good men in this unholy place. “Run!” he shouted and then he fired the mini missiles. They shook the fortress of evil to its core, and then it began to crumble. All who had the good sense to run ran, but not Bomber, instead he reached for his shoe. Ace was swept away in the current of fleeing masses. “No,” he shouted desperately as he tried to fight his way towards his friend. Ace was pushed to safety while the ground disappeared beneath Bomber’s feet. The rest of the fort disappeared beneath the hot lava. “No!” Ace shouted again. “No,” he whispered and tears began to drip from his eyes. Then he heard a sharp thunk and glanced up. Embedded in the rock above him was Bomber’s grappling hook. He looked down and watched as his friend ascended to safety, and he smiled.