

# Secret Agent Man

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“Drop in thirty seconds. Make ready.”

The mechanical voice emanates from his helmet's speakers, just like it has every sixty seconds for the last hour.

“Don't worry Skynet, I'm ready,” Agent Briggs grumbles. *“How anyone could 'make ready' when strapped to a plastic glider and shoved into a drone fighter's weapons bay is beyond me.”*

Briggs remembers asking his handlers about the glider. They swore it would handle the shock of being released at over 600 miles per hour at 35,000 feet. Yet every time he asked if this had ever been done successfully they always changed the subject.

He thinks back to the day that started it all.

“Mr. Briggs, Six years ago Doctor Thomas Walken, a renowned chemist and physicist, developed a revolutionary process that would have freed the world from crude-oil based fuel. Since this would have threatened our World Federation monopoly its release was prohibited.”

“Three years ago the doctor, his senior staff, and their families vanish without a trace. A few weeks later they reappeared in the Free Republic of Texas, having defected. As you can imagine this was a terrible blow to my predecessor's career as well as to the World Federation.”

A map of the Republic replaces the Doctor's picture and the image zooms into a high altitude view of a small town in the Panhandle.

“The FRT established a lab in an abandoned oil refinery a few miles outside of Borger. There the Doctor perfected his fuel process which is already beginning to threaten our monopoly.”

The image shifts, zooming in to an area northeast of a small abandoned town next to the refinery.

“Of greater concern is the large underground facility within the high bluff on which his lab sits. According to intelligence reports enough machinery and materiel have been shipped in to create a hardened facility that must extend for several miles.”

“Every agent we have sent in has failed to penetrate the facility. Instead they have been found hundreds of miles from where they disappeared with their memories wiped clean.”

“Mr. Briggs, your mission is to infiltrate Walken's underground complex, learn his plans, and determine how best to stop him. You are authorized to take any action necessary. As usual, if captured or killed the ....”

“... five seconds to drop ... 4 ... 3 ... 2 ... 1 ...”

As the bay doors retract the howling wind assaults his ears. The temperature, already bitterly cold, plummets to unbearable. A sudden feeling of weightlessness accompanies a blast of wind. After a brief wild ride the glider clears the jet's turbulence, allowing stubby wings to extend from the glider's sides.

As the drone turns to parallel the border the glider continues straight, flying over a border fence that would have done the defunct Soviet Union proud. A few minutes later he approaches the town. Only a

few blinking red warning lights reveal the presence of the abandoned oil refinery. He angles the glider so he will fly directly over it and the adjacent ghost town of Phillips. He drops to 1000 feet before leveling off and engaging the autopilot. He releases his harness and pushes off. The glider turns to the west and heads toward a planned rendezvous with the bottom of Lake Meredith. Briggs spreads his arms and legs to allow the rushing wind to fill the webbing of his wingsuit. Angling to the left he glides around the eastern edge of the town and toward the bluff. He flies over a high, double layer security fence and rushes toward the bottom of the bluff. Fifty-five feet from the ground he flares out to dump as much speed as possible. Popping his black nylon parachute he drops to the ground.

Activating his stealth suit he scans the surrounding area for activity. It seems surprisingly empty of security personnel. He carefully walks around the end of the bluff, keeping an eye out for alarms and booby traps. Heavy brush and weeds, dried out from the winter's cold, show that no one has patrolled the area for months. Reaching the other side of the bluff he walks among warehouses hiding under frayed camouflage netting. Each warehouse is empty, with some of them no more than empty shells. He quickly jogs to the entrance of the underground complex.

After carefully pushing open a side door he slips in and hugs the wall. Deactivating his night vision he looks around. Instead of a massive and bustling underground complex he sees a roughly finished cavern maybe half the size of a football field and about twenty feet high.

*"Where is everything and everyone?"* He wonders.

Another pair of fifteen-foot high doors has been installed on the opposite side of the cavern, with a pair of shipping containers on wheels parked in front of them. Several men carry small boxes from half a dozen pallets into one of containers. They step around a man tinkering with a forklift.

*"This doesn't make any sense,"* Briggs wonders. *"No security patrols. Warehouses that have never been used. And nothing but an empty cavern. Where is all the stuff Intel said was here? This room should be full but there's nothing here. They sure screwed the pooch on this one."*

Before Briggs can move the man at the forklift yells. "Hey, Frank. Can you lend a hand? The hydraulics have frozen again!"

Another man, Briggs assumes this must be Frank, loads the other shipping container, on which someone had painted a large yellow '5' and 'organic' immediately below it.

"What did you do?" Frank asks.

"Nuthin'. I guess I ain't got the magic touch like you."

"Okay." As Frank walks toward the forklift Briggs sneaks up to shipping container '5'. Half a dozen dog carriers wait to be placed into the container. Looking into one of the carriers he sees a large and obviously drugged German Shepard gazing back at him. It whines softly. The rest of the carriers hold a mix of dogs.

One of the men asks Frank, "so, where you headin' to on the other side?"

"Not sure. Wouldn't mind being at the fishery on the coast for a bit. Always wanted to try my hand at deep sea ...." The starting forklift drowns out the rest of the conversation.

Briggs does not have time to process what he just heard. He slips into the container and hides in the back. Once the container arrives at its destination he can contact his handlers. Frank places the

remaining carriers into the container and then closes the doors.

After Frank secures them he says, “Control, Five is ready for transport.”

After a short squeaky trip the container comes to a stop. Without warning a bright sapphire light fills the container. The light hurts Briggs' eyes and he begins to develop a headache. He notices a faint buzzing sound that becomes louder as his headache worsens. He struggles to stay conscious but blacks out, falling against a container and then to the floor.

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Briggs awakes with a start. The world's worse hangover would be a welcome change from the way he feels. Struggling upright he checks his watch. He has been out at most twenty-five minutes. The container doors open, allowing in bright sunlight. A man yells out, “Hey puppies, enjoy your trip?”

Briggs checks his watch again. *“It can't be daylight!”*

Though he feels sick to his stomach he walks to the door hoping to slip by the man.

“What the hell?” the man says, staring at Briggs. Looking down, Briggs notices the rip in his sleeve that allows the man to see what looks like a disembodied arm. He must have torn it when he fell. Briggs steps forward and knocks the man unconscious. He darts out of the container and into the very bright sunlight. The movement makes his head feel like it is about to split.

He staggers a short distance. The bright sunlight and splitting headache make it hard to focus.

*“I landed shortly after midnight. At most two hours have passed. How can there be daylight.”*

He turns to check for pursuers. He freezes as he looks at the open cavern doors. They and the surrounding cliffs look just like what he saw in the surveillance pictures. But the warehouses and the camouflage netting are gone. The security fence and towers surrounding the bottom of the bluff have disappeared as well. *“Where the hell are the ....”* He stares in shock at the bluff across the valley. The rocky outcrop that faintly resembles an elephant is still there but the abandoned refinery has disappeared. His world begins to spin. Unable to raise FedComm on his radio he begins to panic.

*“Something's wrong. I've got to find someplace to hide while I figure this out.”*

He runs a hundred yards before he stumbles, falling to his knees as his stomach heaves. After a few minutes he stands and staggers for another hundred yards. Faint yells come from behind. They must have found the unconscious man. He struggles to run as a distant wail of a siren begins.

*“If I make it to the creek I can hide out until dark.”*

He steadies himself as he barely avoids blacking out. The loud buzzing in his head almost drowns out the 'thwump thwump thwump' of an approaching helicopter. The helicopter rushes past, the down wash almost knocking him over. He realizes that the dust blown up by the helicopter will make his outline visible.

He hears yelling in front of him as men crash through the green bushes. He tries to work his way around them but stumbles over a root. Before he can move someone bumps into him. The man jumps back in surprise.

“Over here! He's wearing a stealth suit!” Briggs pulls out his needler as the man reaches down and

grabs two handfuls of dirt. The man tosses the dirt at Briggs, covering his suit and making him visible. An electric shock strikes Briggs, causing his body to spasm. He struggles to raise his weapon but is hit again. He falls heavily to the ground, unable to move.

As he loses consciousness someone says, "Damn buddy, what the hell's wrong with ya? Ya tryin' to git yourself killed?"

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Briggs opens his eyes. The light beige ceiling, the pictures on the wall, and the comfortable bed make him feel like he is in a hotel instead of a prison. As he assesses his situation he becomes aware of someone standing at the foot of the bed. Raising his head he sees a young, blonde-haired boy standing there, watching him intently.

The young boy smiles.

"Hi," the boy says.

"Uh, hi. Who are you?"

"I'm David. Are you really a spy? My Gran says you are, like James Bond, whoever that is?"

"Who's your, uh, Gran?"

"Doctor Walken. He says you're a spy and he ought to know. Anywho, I'm supposed to let the nurse know when you're awake. Bye."

The boy waves and steps out the door. A nurse enters almost immediately.

"Hi. How do you feel?"

"Okay. I guess."

She shakes her head. "You sure had us worried. Going through the gate unprepared like that, then being on the wrong end of the stunners, we almost lost you.

"How long have I been out?"

"Almost three days. Do you feel up to traveling? Doctor Walken would like to meet you, if you are up to it."

"Sure." He shrugs. "*What do I have to lose.*"

Dixie helps him out of the bed and into the hall. Though quite a few people traverse the hall, no one stands guard and there are no weapons in sight. Dixie escorts him down the hall and out the doors. A middle-aged man with an ex-military look about him sits in a golf cart.

"Hi Ralph, here's our guest."

The man turns, smiles, and reaches out to shake Briggs' hand. Briggs stares at the World Federation penal system bar code tattooed on Ralph's forearm. Ralph notices.

"Ah yeah, I was a guest at the Oakie Hilton, before the secession." Ralph shudders at the memory. "Lots of fond memories, you betcha. Anyway, I'm Ralph. This must be quite a shock for you."

They travel in silence across a gravel-covered plaza. The warm air and the green bushes surrounding the plaza make it seem like a typical spring day.

*“This ain't right,”* a confused Briggs thinks. *“It was definitely the dead of winter when I landed. There's no way I could have been out for only three days. This doesn't make any sense at all.”*

They park in front of a nondescript, six story building. After a short trip upstairs Briggs finds himself standing in the doorway to Doctor Walken's office. The Doctor, looking several years older than his briefing picture, walks toward him, hand outstretched.

Shaking his hand the Doctor says, “Ah, Mr. Bond, a pleasure.”

The Doctor continues. “Oh, I know your name isn't Bond, but I've always wanted to say that. Actually your name isn't important, since you won't be here long.”

Doctor Walken notices Brigg's reaction. “Oh, sorry. I should have said since you'll be heading home shortly. And unlike your associates your memory won't be wiped.” He chuckles. “I bet your masters had quite a shock when their missing agents would magically appeared, unable to remember a thing.”

H walks over to his desk. “I would ask if you have any questions, but I bet you're still trying to make sense of what you've seen, or maybe what you haven't seen? First, there is something I want to show you.”

He presses a few buttons on his desk. A large video screen behind the desk comes on, revealing an image of green, gently rolling hills, with a large dark smudge in the middle.

The Doctor turns and points to the screen. “Any idea what that smudge might be, Mr. Bond?”

Briggs shakes his head.

Giddy with enthusiasm the Doctor makes a few adjustments. The image now shows a mass of large and hairy-looking four footed animals. “It's bison americanus, Mr. Bond. American buffalo. Tens of thousands of them. Roaming free, untouched and unmolested.”

Briggs remembers that most four-legged creatures were slaughtered during the great post-secession famines.

“I know what you are thinking. I must be crazy. No, Mr. Bond, not crazy, ecstatic. When you escaped from the shipping container did you notice anything out of the ordinary?”

Briggs has to think for a moment. “Yeah, everything had disappeared.”

The Doctor smiles and shakes his head. “No, Mr. Bond. They didn't disappear. They are still there. You are the one who disappeared. From Earth. Or more appropriately, old Earth.”

Briggs just stares at him.

“I know, it's too amazing to believe, Mr. Bond. But it's true. You are no longer on the same world where you and your kind have spread pestilence, famine, war, and death.”

He turns to face the monitor. As he turns back to face Briggs his smile disappears.

“When the World Federation,” he almost spits when he says it, “banned my new fuel process I saw the writing on the wall. They had no plans to provide cheap and almost unlimited fuel to the people. I

realized the only way to save humanity was to break away from it, to shuffle off this worldly coil so to speak.”

He pauses for a moment to collect himself. “You see, Mr. Bond, my staff had almost completed work on a promising form of space travel. One that would allow us to reach Mars not in months but in weeks, the neighboring stars in months, not decades. Imagine, Mr. Bond, to the stars and back in a lifetime, without any of those relativistic side effects.”

“Instead of completing our quest for the holy grail of space flight we, through a rather fortuitous screw-up, opened a door to this world. I won't bore you with the physics. Just know that there are multiple physical dimensions besides Earth's. And you're in one. This,” he spreads his arms, “is a twin of old Earth, with just one, beautiful exception.”

Doctor Walken leans over and whispers, “there are no humans. None. We've looked everywhere, Mr. Bond, from the North pole to the South, from East to West. There are no cities, towns, or villages. There aren't even ruins to show that humans ever existed here. We are alone.”

“Imagine, Mr. Bond, a new world, just like our old one, with all of the same resources, untouched by human hands. That which we have destroyed through our ignorance or stupidity is still here. The buffalo, the cedars of Lebanon, even the dodo bird.” He shakes his head. “An ugly bird, but it's still here. We have a chance to start over, to do things the right way, to be the stewards of the world that we should have been.”

Briggs shakes his head. “Yeah, I've heard that before ....”

The Doctor interrupts him. “I know, I know. Every totalitarian government for the last century-and-a-half always starts off saying they have all the answers. Unlike the ruling idiots I left behind, Mr. Bond, I recognize that humans are a peculiar species, the only one that seems to take pleasure in causing pain and suffering when there is no need to. Sure, I'm smarter than most people, Mr. Bond. But I'm not arrogant enough to believe that I am superior to them, that somehow I have the right to determine how everyone else should live.”

“While your superiors were busy watching our little site in Phillips we were busy establishing our presence here. Our underground facility on Old Earth was nothing more than a way station.” He laughs. “Your people were so focused on that site that they ignored the other gate locations in the Federation. We have been able to move a nice cross section of the populace, some of the best and brightest, through the gates. Each one was more than happy to get out from under the thumb of the omnipresent Federation. Your government would freak out if they knew what we had moved through our gates: tons of food, tools, and machinery. We are now completely independent. Our various communities are doing so well that we have to keep telling our couples 'only two, only two' to avoid growing too fast.”

“Now that we are done, all of our gates, except the one you passed through, have been disassembled and the parts destroyed.”

The Doctor pauses.

“Why am I telling you this? I want you to go back and tell your overseers what we've done. Maybe they'll rethink what they are doing to each other and to themselves. One can only hope, for the sake of those we've left behind.”

The Doctor pushes a button on his desk. The office door opens and four well-armed security men enter.

“I wish I could let you stay, Mr. Bond. No doubt you have admirable qualities. However, given for whom you work and the destruction you have probably wrought under their direction I doubt it would be a wise decision.”

He waves the men over. “They'll escort you back to the gate. We'll see that you are better prepared for your return trip. Once you are out of the cavern we are going to destroy it, crushing what little remains so that you and your kind will have nothing to study.”

His face takes on a serious expression.

“We don't think anyone will be able to duplicate what we did. However, we will be watching and monitoring to make sure no one tries. This world is a rich target to the thugs and crooks who lead your government. We will do anything, and I mean anything, to prevent your world from intruding on ours. I hope I make myself clear.”

“I do wish you and yours luck Mr. Bond. For if things continue as they are in YOUR world, then God help you.”

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Briggs opens his eyes to see Frank standing there. He tries to move but find himself paralyzed.

“Hey, secret agent man,” Frank says. “Welcome back.”

As Frank unbuckles the agent he continues. “Sorry buddy, but there's been a slight change in plans. Oh, don't worry, the paralysis isn't permanent. The Doctor, well, he's been busy with the new world and hasn't been paying much attention to the old one. I guess your World Fed buddies must have missed you, 'cause early this morning they landed a heavily armed mechanized battalion at Amarillo International. Texas air cavalry has been fighting a delaying action on the other side of Fritch until a unit from Sheppard can land at the Borger airstrip. I think this place is about to be the center of World War Three-and-a-Half if things continue unchecked.”

“Since some of your buddies set up an observation post across the valley we're going to take you to the other side and leave you. While they're busy dealing with you we'll come back and head through the gate. Then we'll blow it to smithereens. Right after that about four tons of well-placed explosives will collapse the cavern. With nothing for the Feds to find we hope the situation will deescalate.”

Unable to speak or move Briggs feels himself being carried out into the bright sun. The men carefully lay him in the back seat of the car. As the two men get in the front the one in the passenger seat turns and says, “hold on. Ha, that's funny because you can't move.”

The car drives along a rough road for fifteen minutes. They stop and the men get out.

“Good luck to you, Sir,” the driver says.

Briggs hears a vehicle drive away. He lies there. Even in the middle of winter the Texas sun beats down on the car, warming it and causing sweat to begin running off his body. After a few minutes he hears someone approaching. He attempts to call out but instead loses consciousness.

“Briggs, can you hear me?”

The voice of his handler causes Briggs to wake with a start. Sitting up he asks his apparently stressed out handler, “how long have I been out?”

“About twenty hours. What happened? The underground facility was destroyed when the bluff collapsed. You must have found something.”

“I don't, uh...” He pauses.

His handler interrupts. “Damn. They drugged you too? Great, just great. This has been a total cluster .... With Walken's lab destroyed they couldn't find anything to justify our little excursion. We've been bending over backwards apologizing, but you can bet they'll take full advantage of this fiasco. Are you sure there's nothing you can tell us?”

Briggs thinks back to Doctor Walken and his hopes for the future. And he thinks back to all of the things he has done as an agent for the World Federation, the misery he has caused, all in the name of maintaining this 'perfect' world order.

“I'm sorry, sir, but I can't remember a thing.”