

An extract from 'Charity' for you to read

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We were making our way to our office when there was an almighty explosion, the building shook and there was the tinkle of breaking glass.

For a second we both looked around dazed then spotted Kyra, or perhaps Katya, hovering outside the window. "It's the flour mill next door. We're looped. There'll be about fifty or sixty casualties. We used the cafeteria." She was gone.

We gathered up Melanie. "Cafeteria. Quick. Lots of casualties. Ring the first aid department. All of them here - now."

The cafeteria was the only large space on the ground floor that could be cleared quickly. I got some of the others started on moving tables and chairs. "Do we have lift bumpers?"

"No, Saskia. Got lorry bumpers. For the floor?"

"As many as you can find. Information is about fifty to sixty casualties. Push some tables together and cover them as well in case we need to work on people."

I heard Saskia and Melanie. "Melanie, can you do triage? On the door. Sort the ones we can treat from the ones that need paramedics and ambulances. And we *must* do a head count - that's vital!"

"Yes, Saskia. Anne? Over here. Somebody fetch every first aid kit you can find. Offices, everywhere, except where the machinery is still operating."

I spotted Amanda. "Amanda, ring the hospital. Tell them we're doing triage here. The more we can do here the less strain there'll be on A&E. They can concentrate on the bad ones. We'll need supplies, bandages and stuff - and the odd spare doctor if they've got one. We'll need to clean glass from wounds."

"Yes, Saskia." Amanda ran off.

One of the SuperTwins appeared with the first casualty. I wondered briefly how she knew which room we were using but then remembered, she'd told us. She *was* one of us, but a later version. She'd already done this.

"There're walking wounded coming as well, some in cars, some actually on foot," she said.

"We're ready," said Saskia.

"First three ambulances to the mill, then the rest will divert here. We come and get a couple of them later." She was gone again.

Melanie and Saskia looked at our first patient and pronounced him first for the ambulance, pending further information. I saw Saskia wince slightly. I suspected she'd just relieved the poor man's suffering. She did it many more times throughout the morning and I had to do it myself from time to time. It was the only way, we had no pain relief medication.

Kyra and Katya ferried in more badly injured people. "It's easier to bring them here. The ambulances can't get near anyway. We have paramedics over there but the ambulances will start coming here." I didn't know if that had been me or Saskia. Didn't matter really.

The next couple of hours were almost a blur. People appeared, mostly bloodstained and battered. I found that Saskia had been right, when I needed to know about first aid, I

did. I remember seeing things like Sir James Robinson handing out cups of tea and Melanie with arms red up to her elbows.

A couple of doctors arrived jammed in an ambulance. They brought quite a lot of stuff with them, stuff we didn't have. Treatment went easier after that. Kyra and Katya brought us casualties, we stabilised them and they were settled together in one corner or collected by the ambulance crews. It looked like everybody from the plant was involved, even if they only helped James hand out tea.

Eventually the flood of people reduced to a trickle and finally there seemed to be no more. Saskia and I came together for what seemed like the first time since we started.

"We did do a count, didn't we?"

"Yes. We know exactly how many have passed through. There'll be somebody along in a minute to ask I expect."

There was. A fireman with a white helmet and a clipboard. He was towing another man with the odd bandage but otherwise ok.

"Did you count? Oh, yes you did. Thanks." He turned to the man with the bandages.

"Add their number to yours and see if it matches the number of workers."

"Yes. Yes it does. Thank God."

Our fireman spoke into his radio. "All casualties are accounted for. Rescue teams withdraw. Move the ambulance crews back and get started on the fires."

The two of them disappeared again but were replaced by Kyra and Katya. They were wearing their 'civilian' clothes.

"There's nothing more we can do over there. How'd you do over here. No - that's a silly question. I already know you did ok."

Melanie joined us. "Hoo-wee. I don't want to do that again in a hurry. Who're your friends, Saskia?"

"Er - the twins thing is a bit of a giveaway, Melanie," said Saskia.

"Melanie," I said, "Please meet Kyra and Katya although I believe you've actually met them before."

"I remember. At the trade delegation meeting a couple of years ago."

"You *have* worked out who they are, Melanie?"

"Err..."

"Keep up, Melanie," I laughed. "Meet the SuperTwins."

While Melanie was looking part shocked, part embarrassed, James appeared.

"Hi Kyra, Katya. What's it like over there."

"Hello, Sir James. There's not much left actually. Just a hole in the ground. We managed to get everybody out and everybody's still with us."

"What caused the explosion?"

"Flour dust probably. When it's fine enough it'll explode. That's almost certainly what happened." I said.

But flour isn't explosive," said Melanie.

"It is if the dust is fine enough."

"I have a question," said Saskia. "What the hell are lift bumpers and lorry bumpers?"

"Easy. They're both padded sheets you hang up so that equipment doesn't get scratched. Lift bumpers are hung in lifts so that moving heavy stuff doesn't damage the lift walls. You use them in lorries to protect stuff while you move it. They make good padding for floors to lie people on," I said.

"Bloody good idea anyway," said James.

Melanie had to rush off and deal with something. "Come up to the office," said James. The five of us beat a quiet retreat.

"I have never seen anything quite like that," said James. "The two of you that were here just - took charge. You organised everything and everybody. Nobody milled about in confusion, and that includes me."

"I saw you handing out tea," I said.

"Blame this one," he said pointing at Saskia. "She ran past me, stopped, turned, and said 'tea', just like that. I knew just what she meant. I collected some people who didn't seem to be doing anything and we did - tea."

"I think it's the Magic, the way we can influence people," said Katya, or perhaps Kyra.

"I can't tell you apart," I said. "Which one of us are you?"

"I'm you. Want us to change?"

"Not a good idea. If somebody bursts in without knocking and sees four Saskias..." I said.

"Point taken. Ok, how about this?" Kyra now had white pockets on her black outfit.

"That'll do," said Saskia. "Right James, Kyra is white pockets and Katya - that's me - has black."

James seemed speechless anyway. "Poor James," said Katya. "I think he's just realised there aren't four girls here, just two of us twice."

"Just think of us as four girls, James. It's easier," I said.

He pulled himself together. "This is weird. But about what I'd expect from you two. How are you doing this? Being here twice?"

"We're looped," said Saskia, "In time. How far ahead are we?"

"Not far. As we get out of the car at home tonight."

"Going to be a pretty full day for us then," I said.

"Yeah," said Kyra. "Not going to give you details. You'll follow the script anyway."

James found his voice. "What d'you mean, looped?"

"James, listen carefully. Saskia and I have been here all day dealing with stuff, yes?

When we go home tonight we'll be sent back in time to this morning. As the SuperTwins," I pointed at Kyra and Katya, "we'll do whatever we just did at the mill next door. Then we'll appear here, with you. Shortly, we - that is, they - will be translated back to teatime in the car with hardly a break. We'll have done today twice."

"That's complicated! How do you cope with it? Remembering everything?"

"We don't have to cope with it," said Katya. "When we travel back in time, the past is fixed, we can't change it because it's already been observed. We're following a sort of path that's fixed for us, even though we don't usually know what's coming next.

Whatever we do or say we've already done or said. We call it following the script."

"I could tell the Saskias, the earlier Saskias, exactly what we did today," said Kyra. "But there's no point. They still have to do it whether I tell them or not."

"Think of it like this," I said. "In a few hours of my personal time, I'll be standing over there," I pointed at Kyra, "and I'll say just what she said. Not more or less what she said, but exactly what she said. I won't be able to help myself. But I don't have to remember what she said, I'll just say it."

"And that's supposed to make it easier to understand?" said James, plaintively.

"Don't worry about it James. Just go with the flow," said Kyra.

"We have to go," said Katya. "But before we leave, there's something I've been dying to do." Kyra and Katya changed to be us, Saskias. They were even wearing the same clothes. Katya-Saskia came and gave me a hug and a kiss while Kyra-me went and did the same to Saskia. James looked completely bewildered.

"Ok, girls," said Kyra-me. "Get him." All four of us crowded round James trying to hug and kiss him. Eventually he did go with the flow and stood laughing as we all tried to get to him. In the milling around, poor James had no idea which pair of us was which. We knew of course.

"We need to go," said Katya-Saskia. "That was fun though. Must do it again sometime. Ready Saskia?"

"Yeah. See you later, or earlier? Whatever. We're ready, Voice."

The later versions of us simply vanished. James found his voice. "That must drive you insane," he said.

"Not really. We don't usually spend quite so much time together when there's four of us so close in time. We spent quite a long time with ourselves from 2065, but that was different somehow," I said.

"It was quite good fun," said Saskia. "Pity we don't do it more often."

"You can do it as much as you want just so long as you don't involve me. Two of you at once is quite enough thank you," said James.

"Spoilsport."

"We should get Voice to arrange a load of us to pester James."

"Can't do that."

"Why not?"

"James is our friend. Besides he wouldn't look good in one of those jackets with the arms that tie round the back."

"Oh I don't know. He might start a new fashion trend."

"What? Have lots of people wearing straight-jackets?"

"Why not?"

"Restaurants would go out of business. Can't hold a spoon if your arms are tied behind you."

"Be good for slimmers then."

"True. Getting off the subject here."

"Ok. Not going to gang up on James then?"

"Gang of two maybe?"

"Oh I think so. Now?"

"Now."

We attacked from both sides. Just a hug and a quick kiss. No telling who might suddenly come in. James hugged back, chuckling.

"Right, Boss. Business. What do you want us to do about the cafeteria? We pretty well trashed it this morning."

"Don't worry about it. It needed a makeover anyway. Go and see if there's anything the hospital people need, although I think Melanie will have sorted that out already. She was - different - today. Much more - confident."

"Sorry, Boss. That was us. At the forklift accident? We had to dump some confidence into her. Did we overdo it?"

"No. She's fine. Much better than the old Melanie. What does she think?"

"I don't know, James. I'll ask her and let you know," I said.

"Right. We're gone," said Saskia. "See you earlier, James." We left him grinning.

Downstairs in the cafeteria there were only a few people left. Melanie was organising the hospital people. "Saskias. There you are. There's somebody here says she knows you."

"Hi Laura. How're you?" I said.

"A bit better than some of the lot from next door. I hear it was your idea to use this room as a reception centre?"

"Guilty as charged," said Saskia. "How did we do? We'd really like an opinion. We just - did it - at the time."

"You wouldn't believe how much trouble you saved. If we'd had fifty or more injured people descend on us at A&E we'd not have been able to cope. As it was, you and my new friend Melanie here," Melanie grinned, "made it easier for us by treating all the minors while we got on with the majors."

"Glad to help Laura. Speaking of which, do you need any help clearing up?"

"No. We've dragged in a couple of porters and the odd nurse, like me. We'll have it done soon enough. You'll need a bit of time to get the room back to normal."

"The boss, sorry, Sir James, says it needs a makeover so I suppose we win really."

Amanda appeared. "Saskias, there's a man from the local paper here and some people from the TV news. Boss says you're to deal with it. He says you're not to hide behind your modesty, whatever he means by that."

"Thanks, Amanda. Can you make sure Jeff is around to field any questions we can't answer? We'll see you later, Laura. Melanie will sort you out."

Reception seemed to be full of people, several holding cameras. I recognised Archie Spencer. Jeff was there as well. I pulled him to one side.

"Should we take this scrum up to the boardroom out of the way?"

"Good idea, Saskia. You take the newspapers up there, I'll take the telly to the cafeteria to get some pack shots and stuff and we'll swap over in a bit. Ok?"

"Ok. There's still some stuff going on and injured people there."

I turned to the press pack. "Gentlemen. If you don't mind we'll do this in two goes. Jeff here will take the TV people to the cafeteria, scene of most of the drama. If you go now, there'll still be stuff to see. If the newspaper people, hello, Mr. Spencer, want to come upstairs, they can ask away. We'll swap over in a bit."

Archie Spencer let us tell it our own way. He just dumped a little recorder on the table and let us talk. He asked the occasional question to prompt us but that was all. He had a photographer who insisted on taking our pictures while we spoke. He seemed to be senior man there so the others just followed his lead.

We'd just finished when Jeff appeared. "Telly people want you in the cafeteria. They've already had a go at Melanie, she said it was your idea so they want you, sorry."

"Jeff, I happen to know that Mr. Spencer here would like a word with Sir James. Can you fix it? I think Sir James should make a statement to the TV as well. What d'you reckon?"

"Yes. He should at least appear. I'll sort it. Go on you two, cafeteria. Now."

The photographers wanted to come with us so we led a little party downstairs.

"*Twin, I can't do this. All these cameras and stuff,*" whispered Saskia.

I put my hand on her arm as we walked. "*Saskia, it's easy, you can do this.*"

There were more pictures and interviews. They wanted to do us separately but I wasn't having that. Two Saskias against the world. The Magic worked. Saskia answered as many questions as I did and appeared just as confident. James appeared part way through. He stood quietly at the back watching us. When I judged we'd had enough I introduced him.

"Gentlemen, this is Sir James Robinson. He was kind enough to turn a blind eye while we made a mess of his cafeteria, and was quite happy to hand out tea to the poor people from next door."

That put James in the spotlight but more importantly got us out of it. While James talked to the cameras, Jeff pulled us aside. "That was brilliant. You managed to get Sir James in front of the media as a kind, thoughtful employer."

"Well he is."

"*You* know that and *I* know that - but now half the country will as well."

The last interview was done, the reporters did their pieces to camera, the hospital staff took away the last patients and all their stuff, and the plant was left to just us employees again.

James gathered us all up. "Jeff, Melanie, Saskias, my office in five minutes. That five minutes is for you to organise the beverage of your choice. None of us got any lunch today."

We collected big mugs of hot chocolate and went up to James' office. He made us sit round his conference table.

"First. I'm pleased as punch at how you all conducted yourselves today. Melanie, you're like a new girl. I hope it's permanent. The stress and strain brought out the real you. Jeff, the PR at the end will have done us no harm at all. Shame it was on the back of all that disaster next door."

"Don't thank me, Boss. PR's all down to your Girl Fridays over there. They pushed me around unmercifully."

"That's why I employed them. They tend not to ask first and have an unconventional way of working but it usually turns out ok. Today is a particularly good example. However, I need to ask this, is there any bad feeling about all the freedom they have, how they ride roughshod over stuff?"

"Not that I know of. I have my ear to the ground as you know. They seem to be universally liked. I plan on telling everybody it's their doing that's getting a new look cafeteria."

"Sneaky. Good idea though."

"Don't we get to say anything, James?" I asked.

"Not until I get to secondly. In the meantime, sit there quietly and look pretty."

I grinned. I could see Saskia with a silly smile as well.

"Speaking of pretty," James continued, "Your opinion of their interviews on the TV?"

"Articulate, well spoken and, as you said, pretty as all hell. We'll take over a good chunk of tonight's local news."

"Excellent. Now we get to secondly. If anybody did wonder why I employed you, today must have given them some idea. You are capable, practical and resourceful, the thing with the lorry bumpers being a case in point. How you know how to do things, and how you get people to do what you say without question, I don't know. I don't suppose you can tell me?"

"We just do what we think is right, James," I said.

"We don't always get it right," said Saskia.

"Enough of this. Jeff, you're already management, I can't promote you. I'm thinking about some kind of bonus. Leave that with me. Melanie, keep an eye on your payslip. The Saskias are a much more difficult case. Close your mouth, Saskia, you're not allowed an opinion at this point. They already have more privileges than just about anybody else and if they wanted money they'd probably just come and ask me - and I'd probably give it to them. What I propose to do is - nothing."

"Boss! You can't do that. They're the ones responsible for the success of today. You can't give me and Melanie a reward without them as well." Jeff ran down.

"Ask their opinion, Jeff. You do it."

"Well? What do you think girls? I don't think it's fair."

I looked at Saskia then said, "For myself, happiness and a knowledge that other people appreciate what you do is worth much more than material rewards. We can't really be promoted, we have no actual position in Sir James company. Money is only money. Your comments say it all, Jeff. I'm happy," I looked at Saskia nodding, "We're happy. Thank you, Sir James."

"You see, Jeff? That's about what I expected."

Later I asked Saskia, "Are you happy with the outcome, Twin?"

"Course I am. We don't need money or position or power. I'm happy. QED."

"Well you'd better be happy with doing today all over again, we're just about home. Voice?"

"I will translate you to a position above your building just before the explosion. You will return to this time and place."

We were in the air above the plant. Changing to the SuperTwins in our little costumes, we looked around for the flour mill. As we watched a huge explosion and fireball took the roof off the main section of the building. The outer walls fell outwards, that was probably what had caused - what was going to cause - the most casualties.

"Saskia, go tell our earlier selves what to do here. I'll go and see what we need to do there."

Saskia flew down to the plant window where she'd find us waiting. I rushed over to the mill. There were a few people wandering about dazed, the majority were probably buried in the rubble. I began to dig, my bare hands were going to be better than a shovel anyway. Within a minute or so Saskia joined me at a different part of the pile.

"Got one. He's a bit dented here and there but he's alive."

"Take him over to the plant." She flew off carrying the first casualty.

I tried to rally the dazed people. "Walk over to the Robinson plant. The cafeteria. There're medics there. Take cars to get the ones who can't walk there."

I found that using super hearing and x-ray vision helped to pinpoint the exact location of buried people. I began to methodically dig people out. Saskia set up a shuttle service to the plant, I dug them out, she moved them.

Ambulances began to appear. "Send the other crews to the Robinson plant," I told one of them. "They've got a reception centre and triage set up in the cafeteria over there. We'll ship them over."

One by one I dug people out. I hit a couple that couldn't be moved. "Saskia, bring back an ambulance on your next trip. This one's serious."

Saskia simply picked up an ambulance and flew back with it. Much quicker, even though it worried the crew a bit. While they worked on the one I'd just uncovered, I went and dug somewhere else. We had to do the trick of flying in an ambulance again later. After some time, I couldn't hear or see anybody else. Saskia and I quartered the rubble pile using super vision. There were no more buried people. We collared a fireman. "I think that's it. We can't see any more. If you do a count, you can probably start clearing up."

Our fireman collected another man who'd obviously been over to the plant and come back. He was bandaged here and there. They disappeared in a car with a blue light on top.

After a few minutes I heard a radio somewhere say, "All casualties are accounted for. Rescue teams withdraw. Move the ambulance crews back and get started on the fires." That was our cue to appear in the cafeteria. We appeared in our black tops and pants. "There's nothing more we can do over there. How'd you do over here. No - that's a silly question. I already know you did ok." I said.

Melanie joined us. "Hoo-wee. I don't want to do that again in a hurry. Who're your friends, Saskia?"

"Er - the twins thing is a bit of a giveaway, Melanie," said Saskia Hunt.

"Melanie," Saskia Chandler said, "Please meet Kyra and Katya although I believe you've actually met them before."

"I remember. At the trade delegation meeting a couple of years ago."

"You *have* worked out who they are, Melanie?"

"Err..."

"Keep up, Melanie," Saskia Hunt laughed. "Meet the SuperTwins."

While Melanie was looking part shocked, part embarrassed, James appeared.

"Hi Kyra, Katya. What's it like over there."

"Hello, Sir James. There's not much left actually. Just a hole in the ground. We managed to get everybody out and everybody's still with us."

"What caused the explosion?"

"Flour dust probably. When it's fine enough it'll explode. That's almost certainly what happened," said Saskia Chandler.

"But flour isn't explosive," said Melanie.

"It is if the dust is fine enough."

"I have a question," said Saskia Hunt. "What the hell are lift bumpers and lorry bumpers?"

"Easy. They're both padded sheets you hang up so that equipment doesn't get scratched. Lift bumpers are hung in lifts so that moving heavy stuff doesn't damage the lift walls. You use them in lorries to protect stuff while you move it. They make good padding for floors to lie people on," Saskia Chandler said.

"Bloody good idea anyway," said James.

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"I have never seen anything quite like that," said James. "The two of you that were here just - took charge. You organised everything and everybody. Nobody milled about in confusion, and that includes me."

"I saw you handing out tea," said Saskia Chandler.

"Blame this one," he said pointing at Saskia Hunt. "She ran past me, stopped, turned, and said 'tea', just like that. I knew just what she meant. I collected some people who didn't seem to be doing anything and we did - tea."

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"I can't tell you apart," Saskia Chandler said. "Which one of us are you?"

"I'm you. Want us to change?" I said.

"Not a good idea. If somebody bursts in without knocking and sees four Saskias..." said Saskia Chandler.

"Point taken. Ok, how about this?" I now had white pockets on my black outfit.

"That'll do," said Saskia Hunt. "Right, James, Kyra is white pockets and Katya - that's me - has black."

James seemed speechless anyway. "Poor James," said Saskia. "I think he's just realised there aren't four girls here, just two of us twice."

"Just think of us as four girls, James. It's easier," Saskia Chandler said.

He pulled himself together. "This is weird. But about what I'd expect from you two. How are you doing this? Being here twice?"

"We're looped," said Saskia Hunt, "in time. How far ahead are we?"

"Not far. As we get out of the car at home tonight."

"Going to be a pretty full day for us then," Saskia Chandler said.

"Yeah," I said. "Not going to give you details. You'll follow the script anyway."

James found his voice. "What d'you mean, looped?"

Saskia Chandler tried to explain, "James, listen carefully. Saskia and I have been here all day dealing with stuff, yes? When we go home tonight we'll be sent back in time to this morning. As the SuperTwins," She pointed at Saskia and me, "we'll do whatever we just did at the mill next door. Then we'll appear here, with you. Shortly, we - that is, they - will be translated back to teatime in the car with hardly a break. We'll have done today twice."

"That's complicated! How do you cope with it? Remembering everything?"

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"And that's supposed to make it easier to understand?" said James, plaintively.

"Don't worry about it, James. Just go with the flow," I said.

"We have to go," said Saskia. "But before we leave, there's something I've been dying to do." Saskia and I changed to be Saskias. We made sure we were even wearing the same clothes. Saskia went and gave Saskia Chandler a hug and a kiss while I went and did the same to Saskia Hunt. James looked completely bewildered.

"Ok girls," I said. "Get him." All four of us crowded round James trying to hug and kiss him. Eventually he did go with the flow and stood laughing as we all tried to get to him.

In the milling around, poor James had no idea which pair of us was which. We knew of course.

"We need to go," said Saskia. "That was fun though. Must do it again sometime. Ready, Saskia?"

"Yeah. See you later, or earlier? Whatever. We're ready Voice."

As usual, there was no sense of motion or anything but we were now sitting in the car on the drive outside the house.

"Twin, that was odd," I said.

"How so? Seemed ok to me."

"Couple of things. Voice would probably whinge about paradoxes. How did we know about the cafeteria?"

"I told the earlier versions."

"But who told you?"

"I knew about it from earlier, when I was Saskia not Katya."

"So you knew about it because Katya told you and Katya knew about it because she'd already done it."

"What are you getting at?"

"Look, call the earlier version Saskia and the later version Katya. Now, Katya told Saskia to use the cafeteria. Katya knew to tell Saskia because Saskia had already done it. That meant Katya knew about it to tell Saskia. It goes round and round. Nobody actually decided to use the cafeteria. You just told yourself."

"Hm. See what you mean. You said a couple of things? What's the other one?"

"Who decided we should change to be four Saskias instead of two Saskias and two SuperTwins? There were no whispers, we'd all four have heard them. How did we know to both do it together?"

"We did it because we saw ourselves do it. It's another round and round isn't it."

"It's called a circular argument. Whatever. The world didn't end. Voice hasn't chipped in so it can't be important. Let's not worry about it. You and I are on the telly tonight."