

## The Techni-Crusader #11 - "Seismic Activity"

Written by Steven Bland

Monday morning. Inside a sterile, high-tech boardroom at Steyer Energy Corporation, which was nestled high in a Manhattan skyscraper overlooking Central Park, geologist Dr. Greta Sanders stood before its board members.

"Thank you for the opportunity to present my findings," Greta began as she adjusted the field bag strap on her shoulder before placing a data stick on the conference room table.

The board members remained silent, their gazes as cold as the glass and steel around them.

"My research, spanning five years in the Alaskan geothermal fields, demonstrates a viable, large-scale method for harnessing the Earth's internal heat," she continued, her voice steady despite the sterile atmosphere. "It's cleaner, more efficient, and potentially more profitable than any fossil fuel investment in your current portfolio."

"Dr. Sanders, we appreciate your passion for ... environmental concerns," senior board member Barry Harris said while adjusting his expensive tie. "However, the projected capital for such infrastructure is astronomical, with an uncertain return."

"Uncertain?" Greta challenged, her volume rising slightly. "I've included projections from the Department of Energy's latest modeling. The long-term stability and efficiency are precisely why this is a smart investment, not just an ethical one."

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"The technology is sound in theory, perhaps," another board member interjected, shuffling papers and not meeting her eye. "But we have established relationships with oil and gas partners. Your project simply doesn't align with our current risk assessment models."

Greta felt a surge of anger.

"Your 'risk assessment' ignores the clear direction of the global energy market," she said. "You're not assessing risk, you're protecting obsolete interests. This isn't just a science project, it's the future."

"Be that as it may, we must decline," Barry said with an air of finality, pushing Greta's data stick back toward her.

Greta stared at the man, a profound frustration boiling over. The casual dismissal of her life's work, the sheer short-sightedness.

"You're making a colossal mistake," she declared, her voice sharp with conviction.

Without waiting for another placating word, Greta snatched the data stick, spun on her heel, and stormed out of the conference room, the heavy boardroom door slamming shut behind her, the sound echoing down the silent, luxurious hallway.

Meanwhile, in the hallway at Queens Metropolitan High School, a new student named Brad Bailey was wondering where he was supposed to be.

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"Um, excuse me?" Brad asked a random student who was walking by. "Can you help me figure out where I'm supposed to be?"

The student just ignored him and continued to walk by.

"Can anyone help me?" Brad asked, hoping someone nearby would listen.

Kevin Chase had heard Brad's plea for help and answered it.

"Sure thing," Kevin answered. "What do you need help with?"

"I need to find my way to my first class with Mr. Layton," Brad said.

"No problem," Kevin said. "I'm heading there, myself. Come with me."

"Thanks," Brad said.

Kevin and Brad walked together.

"So, I take it you're new here?" Kevin asked.

"Yeah, I just transferred here," Brad said.

Soon, the boys both reached the door to Mr. Layton's classroom.

"Here we are," Kevin said. "And don't worry, the first day is always the roughest. You'll be fine."

Both entered the classroom.

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At noon, the school cafeteria was crowded during the lunch rush.

A shy freshman named Peter Cranston was navigating the crowded cafeteria with a full tray. He accidentally bumped into another student named Lance Brock.

"Oops," Peter said.

"Hey! Watch where you're going, freak," Lance retorted as he purposefully knocked the tray out of Peter's hands. The food splattered across the floor.

"You shouldn't have done that," Peter said.

"Ooohh! What are you gonna do?" Lance asked. "Go and cry to your mommy?"

Observing from a nearby table, Kevin Chase and Brad Bailey saw the injustice.

That jerk needs to be taught a lesson, Brad thought as he mentally commanded a tiny rock fragment from a potted plant on the ground outside to travel quickly and subtly across the floor. Kevin saw the whole thing happen.

The tiny rock moved into Lance's path. Soon, he tripped over the tiny unseen rock and fell face-first into the spilled food.

Everyone in the cafeteria started laughing at Lance.

Brad quickly reshaped the loose food and liquid on the floor to cover the spot where the tiny rock was, making it look like Lance had just slipped on the mess he had created.

Then, Brad quickly reshaped the nearby pile of mud and dirt into a small, sturdy dustpan-like shape.

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Hmm. How did this get here? A puzzled Peter wondered as he picked up the makeshift dustpan.

Humiliated in front of everyone in the cafeteria, Lance stormed out.

There's obviously more to Brad than meets the eye, Kevin thought. But what?

Later, as the final bell rang and students flooded the hallways, Kevin caught up to Brad outside the school's entrance. The hum of the busy New York City afternoon traffic filled the background.

"Hey, Brad," Kevin called up. "Wait up."

"Yeah?" Brad asked as he turned, a little wary.

"I saw what you did in the cafeteria at lunch today," Kevin said, cutting right to the chase, causing Brad to tense up.

"Saw what?" Brad asked.

"I saw that tiny rock fragment traveling quickly and subtly across the floor," Kevin said. "And then moving into Lance's path, tripping him up."

Nervously, Brad looked around

"I guess the jig is up," Brad sighed. "Are you going to report me or something?"

"No. I want to show you something," Kevin answered. "Follow me."

Kevin led Brad to a secluded spot near the building.

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At his mental command, the Zeotronix on Kevin's wrist sheathed him in the streamlined green and silver powered armor of the Techni-Crusader.

Brad stared, stunned into silence.

"You - - You're the Techni-Crusader?" Brad asked.

"Yes. You're not the only one with a secret," the Techni-Crusader answered with a grin spreading across his face from behind his helmet. "This armor is alien tech. It's created by a device called the Zeotronix, which I wear on my wrist. The Zeotronix was created by two alien scientists named Zimbor and Barylen who sent it here to Earth."

At his mental command, the Zeotronix armor unsheathed his body, returning him to his identity of Kevin Chase.

"Alien ... scientists?" Brad murmured, still processing the sight.

"They're my mentors," Kevin explained. "They can help you, too. Give you gear, a name, a purpose."

Kevin paused, letting the weight of the offer hang in the air.

"We need people who can make a difference, Brad," Kevin said. "People like us."

Brad looked at the ground, a whirlwind of emotions - - fear, excitement, disbelief - - crossing his face. He had only ever used his powers to get by, to help in small, unseen ways. The idea of becoming a hero seemed impossible. But seeing Kevin, armored as the Techni-Crusader... it made it real.

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Finally, Brad looked up, a newfound determination in his eyes.

"Okay, I'm in," Brad said. "The world could probably use a few more heroes."

"Awesome," Kevin grinned as he once again commanded the Zeotronix to sheathe him in his green and silvered powered armor.

"Zimbor, Barylen?" The Techni-Crusader said over his helmet's communications system. "I'm here at Queens Memorial High School and I have someone here I'd like for you to meet. Can you use your Omni-Key to open a portal for us so that we can come to your lab?"

A portal opened for the armored superhero and Brad. Once they were through the portal, they were inside Zimbor and Barylen's lab and meeting the Zartronian scientists themselves.

"Zimbor, Barylen, this is Brad Bailey," the Techni-Crusader said. "He has the ability to create and shape earth constructs."

"Hello, Brad," Zimbor said. "I am Zimbor."

"And I am Barylen," Barylen added.

"Nice to meet you, guys," Brad said.

"Can you create a special suit for him?" The superhero asked his alien mentors.

"Of course," Zimbor answered.

Zimbor and Barylen got to work on the designs for Brad's new costume.

In minutes, the Zartronian scientists finalized the designs.

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"The suit parameters are finalized, Brad, factoring in your unique psionic signature and molecular composition," Zimbor stated.

"Cool," Brad said, a grin spreading across his face.

"Barylen, send the fabricator schematics," Zimbor told his colleague.

Barylen complied, and a small, sleek device on a nearby table whirred to life, projecting a beam of light. Inside the beam, a swirling mass of energy began to coalesce, taking the form of a sleek, form-fitting suit and mask designed in earth tones of deep brown, forest green, and slate gray, featuring subtle stone-like textures.

Brad, standing in the center of the beam, watched, transfixed.

"Is that...?" Brad asked.

"It is," Barylen said. "Try it on."

As the suit solidified, it magnetically wrapped itself around Brad's body. The material adjusted instantly to his physique. He raised a hand, feeling the textured fabric.

"It feels like a second skin," Brad marveled, a slight tremor in his voice. "Light, yet durable."

He clenched his fists, testing the mobility.

"How do the powers work?" He asked.

"The suit is primarily a stabilizer and communication device," Barylen explained. "It channels your inherent geo-kinesis, allowing for more precise control and minimizing the mental strain. The gauntlets and chest piece will also allow communication with Kevin while in the field."

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Brad looked at himself in a nearby full-length mirror. The sleek, functional design combined with the natural colors gave him a look that was both grounded and futuristic. He couldn't help but feel a surge of power and purpose.

"So, Brad," Techni-Crusader said. "Have you decided on a name for yourself?"

"Yeah," Brad answered with a smile. "You can call me - - EARTHSHAPER!"

That night, in the cavernous, dimly lit basement laboratory of her brownstone, Greta worked in a feverish, vengeful trance. Blueprints for a specialized titanium-alloy suit covered an entire wall, equations scrawled in her sharp, precise handwriting. The air hummed with the power of high-voltage testing equipment.

They want control, they want power, she thought, tightening a heavy-duty bolt on a reinforced gauntlet. The metallic clink echoed in the vast space.

They dismissed me because they couldn't see the power beneath their feet. Well, I'll show them.

She slid the gauntlet onto her arm, the internal mechanisms whirring to life, a low, consistent thrumming sound filling the room. It felt like an extension of her own will, an anchor to the earth itself. The chest plate followed, interlocking with the gauntlets and greaves she had already donned. She donned a visored helmet and looked at herself in a reflective steel panel, a silhouette of determination.

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"They think they control this city," she murmured, a manic glint in her eyes. The suit glowed with faint, pulsing orange lines as she channeled a test current through its circuits.

"But the Earth is in control. And the Earth," she paused, flexing her fingers, feeling a low tremor building beneath the floorboards, "answers to me now."

She reached out with her mind, focusing on the tectonic plates far beneath the city's foundations, channeling the energy into her new armor. The lights in the lab flickered violently, an ominous hum rising to a crescendo.

"Tomorrow," she vowed. "They will learn that my research was not a request, but a warning."

Deep beneath Manhattan, near a significant geological fault line, was Dr. Greta Sanders. Her armored suit pulsed with energy as she channeled and amplified tectonic forces. Above ground, the first tremors hit. Windows shattered, the ground buckled, and citizens panicked. The city's infrastructure began to groan under the strain. Dr. Sanders was focused, driven by a belief that resetting the city to its natural state was necessary, ignoring the human cost.

The hum of high school life at Queens Metropolitan High School, in Forest Hills, Queens was abruptly shattered. The algebra teacher was droning on about parabolas when a deep, resonant *thud* reverberated through the concrete floors. It wasn't the rattling of a passing subway train or the distant roar of a jet from JFK; it was something vast, something foundational.

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In the back row, Brad felt it first, not just the tremor, but a prickling sensation under his skin - - the instinctive call of the earth. The fluorescent lights above flickered wildly. Desks began to slide an inch across the linoleum floor.

Beside him, Kevin who was taking notes, looked up sharply as his pencil rolled off his desk. The building moaned. Dust dislodged from the ceiling vents.

"This isn't normal," Brad said, his voice low and tight. The windows facing the street showed parked cars bouncing on their suspensions.

"You're right," Kevin replied.

"EVERYONE, GET UNDER YOUR DESKS," the algebra teacher told his students in a panicked scream, but Kevin and Brad were already moving. They slipped out the back door of the classroom amidst the chaos, merging with the stampede of students flooding the halls.

They ducked into a rarely used janitor's closet near the gymnasium. Kevin mentally commanded the Zeotronix on his wrist to again sheathe him in his green and silver powered bio-armor, while Brad used the small, sleek device Barylen had given him to project the beam of light. Inside the beam, the young man's superhero suit formed and, upon solidifying, magnetically wrapped itself around his body. The Techni-Crusader and Earthshaper were ready.

The Heads-Up Display inside the Techni-Crusader's helmet immediately flooded his vision with diagnostic data.

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"My sensors are picking up major seismic activity," the Zeotronix-armored superhero said.

"The epicenter... is Manhattan, the heart of the city."

Earthshaper nodded.

"That's too far for a natural quake to feel this strong here in Queens," he said. "Something caused this."

The superheroes burst from the closet, ready for action. The school grounds were a scene of controlled panic. The Techni-Crusader activated his armor's flight system, hovering a few feet off the ground in the courtyard to get a better view over the main building.

The skyline of Manhattan in the distance was obscured by rising plumes of dust and smoke. The scale of the disaster was becoming apparent.

The Techni-Crusader landed near Earthshaper.

"Okay. The first order of business is immediate investigation of the epicenter," the armored superhero told his ally. "You ready?"

"As I'll ever be," Earthshaper answered. "People are in trouble. So, let's go!"

The Techni-Crusader picked up his superhero ally and rocketed skyward with him, leaving the relative safety of Queens Metropolitan High School behind to race toward the heart of the crisis in Manhattan.

The Techni-Crusader and Earthshaper arrived at the source.

"It's coming from below the city," Earthshaper said. "So that's where I'm going."

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"And I'll assess the damage and see if there are any civilians that need rescuing," Techni-Crusader said as he dropped off his ally.

Feeling the earth's pain and the unnatural manipulation of its energy, Earthshaper instinctively dove below ground to confront the source of the disturbance.

"What you're doing ends now," he shouted over the roar of collapsing infrastructure, his hands already glowing with the familiar earthen energy that usually mended, but today, would fight.

"You think you can stop me? Think again," Dr. Sanders scoffed as she responded by tearing a massive concrete slab from a foundation and hurtling it his way. The new superhero raised a protective earthen wall, the slab shattering against it.

The new superhero pushed forward, dodging a volley of twisted steel girders.

"Stop this! Think of the people," he pleaded, landing on a stable rock construct he'd quickly shaped beneath his feet.

"The people?" Dr. Sanders shrieked back, her voice amplified by her helmet's comm system, echoing through the cavernous underground. "People like the board members of the Steyer Energy Corporation who dismissed my research into harnessing geothermal energy, a cleaner, more efficient, and, potentially, a more profitable alternative to fossil fuels, which they foolishly cling to? They ignored me, now they will hear me!"

"Revenge isn't the answer," Earthshaper argued, shaping a large boulder and sending it rolling towards her, hoping to pin her in place without causing her serious injury.

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Dr. Sanders simply raised a hand, and a fissure opened beneath the boulder, swallowing it whole.

"It is to me," she argued. "I will show them, and this city, the power they scoffed at and dismissed. The raw, natural power of the earth itself!"

"And I am its mistress," she added.

"You're insane," the new superhero countered, creating large, binding tendrils of compacted earth to snake around her legs.

The armored geologist blasted the earthen tendrils apart with a powerful seismic pulse, the force sending Earthshaper stumbling.

"I am power incarnate!" She screamed, her suit glowing a vibrant, unstable orange.

"And I will show you, and this city, just how powerful I am," she screamed over the roar of collapsing rock, her voice amplified by her helmet's external speakers. The air thrummed with raw, escalating seismic energy as the city above began to groan under the strain.

The Techni-Crusader arrived, having found an access point. The environment had become a three-way battleground.

"You're accelerating the collapse, Dr. Sanders," the Techni-Crusader yelled, his words cutting through the dust cloud as he landed with a heavy thud. "Hundreds of people are still trapped up there!"

The armored superhero's new ally created a reinforced earth wall, which immediately began to crack under the intensifying pressure.

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"Her readings are off the charts," Earthshaper strained, the veins on his forehead bulging as he fought to maintain his shield. "She's pushing her suit's limits!"

A maniacal laugh echoed from Dr. Sanders.

"You think you can stop me? I'm a force of nature," She said. "This city, this corporation... they dismissed my genius! Now they will *feel* the power they so foolishly underestimated!"

"Revenge isn't worth mass murder," the Techni-Crusader shot back, his pulse bolts charging to full power. "Stand down, and we can mitigate the damage, prevent further loss of life!"

Dr. Sanders, eyes glowing red through her visor, only intensified the energy surge.

"Mitigate? I want them to *feel* it," she exclaimed. "I want them to know the true devastating power of the earth! Maximum output, all systems!"

The ground trembled beneath Manhattan as Dr. Sanders unleashed seismic fury, her armored suit glowing with raw earth-energy.

The concrete groaned, a sound deeper than any subway rumble as Dr. Sanders stomped her boots cracking bedrock miles below Times Square. The seismic pulses radiating from her suit were less tremors and more violent *shoves*, each one a declaration of vengeance against the corporation that scorned her. Her helmet's visor glowed an angry crimson, mirroring the unstable energy she channeled.

"The energy output is spiking," the Techni-Crusader's voice crackled in her ear, his voice calm despite the cascading data on his HUD.

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"You're overdrawing the local tectonic potential, Dr. Sanders," the armored superhero warned.

"You risk a catastrophic resonance cascade."

"Let them feel the earth's *true* power, Techni-Crusader," the geologist snarled, throwing her arms wide as another massive shockwave rippled outward, shaking buildings above. "They built their empire on our backs, now they'll crumble with it!"

"She's not just attacking infrastructure," Earthshaper warned, his voice like grinding granite.

"She's trying to crack the continent!"

The new superhero focused, hands pressed against a subterranean wall of shale.

"I'm deploying dampeners," he said. "Telling the bedrock to *absorb* her fury!"

"Negative, Earthshaper," Techni-Crusader said as his HUD screamed red alerts. "She's overloading the feedback capacitors in her primary regulation matrix! She's going critical!"

The Zeotronix-armored superhero saw it – a single vulnerable conduit glowing dangerously bright on her back.

"Targeting it now," Techni-Crusader said.

"Stop me," Dr. Sanders cried, suddenly realizing the danger, but it was too late.

With a near-silent hum, the Techni-Crusader fired a focused high-intensity laser beam from his helmet's forehead-mounted projector. It struck the conduit with surgical precision.

"ZZZZZZ-KRAK!"

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Dr. Sanders cried out, her suit spasming. The energy she gathered turned inward, creating a vicious feedback loop that shorted her systems. She staggered, clutching her helmet as raw power surged through her, momentarily stunning her, the violent tremor beneath Manhattan abruptly silenced, leaving only the echoing silence of near-disaster.

"Okay, deep breaths," the Techni-Crusader said. "That was a little too close for comfort"

"Tell me about it," Earthshaper said. "I thought the whole place was coming down. Nice shot with that laser, by the way. Right on the glowing bit."

"Thanks. You holding the ground together was the real clutch move though." the armored superhero said. "My hands are still shaking a little."

"Mine too. We make a good team," Earthshaper said. "So, uh, is she okay?"

"Looks like it. Just knocked out. Rescue should be here any minute," Techni-Crusader said.

"Want to see if we can find some snacks while we wait?"

"Sounds good to me," Earthshaper said with a smile.

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