

THE PROTEUS PLOT

A MUTANTS & MASTERMINDS FREEDOM CITY ADVENTURE

BY STEVE KENSON

A seemingly routine robbery involving the Foundry turns out to have far more serious implications for the heroes when they begin having dreams about becoming super-criminals, dreams which, it turns out, may not be dreams at all!

The Proteus Plot is an adventure for the *Mutants & Masterminds* Superhero RPG. It is intended for a group of four to six power level 10 heroes, although the Gamemaster can scale the adventure to make it suitable for higher or lower level heroes by increasing or decreasing the power levels of the villains as appropriate (generally by approximately the same amount as the heroes). Since the heroes provide some of their own challenge in the adventure, it shouldn't be difficult!

The adventure is set in Freedom City (described in the *Freedom City* campaign sourcebook available from Green Ronin Publishing). Although *Freedom City* is recommended for running this adventure, it is not required. All the necessary material is included here and in the *Mutants & Masterminds* core rulebook.

Text presented in boxes such as this one is for the Gamemaster to read aloud to the players to introduce a particular scene or element of the adventure. Feel free to paraphrase or modify the introductory text as best suits the game you're running.

Players intending to play in this adventure should read no further. The rest of the text is for the *Gamemaster only!*

ADVENTURE SUMMARY

The heroes are summoned to deal with a seemingly routine raid by the Foundry on the ASTRO Labs facility in Freedom City. During the fight, the heroes are hit with a cloud of gas that blinds them for an instant. After the gas clears, the heroes mop up the Foundry force easily enough, earning the gratitude of ASTRO Labs and the city.

Later, the heroes have an unusual dream of breaking into the same ASTRO Labs facility. The dream apparently comes true, quickly leading to the conclusion the heroes are responsible! The authorities have no choice but to try and arrest them. The heroes can either surrender or flee and try to prove their innocence. Either way, they've got a serious problem.

Then the *real* heroes regain consciousness in a Foundry lab, where the robot villain Talos tells them they've become the subjects of a new experiment. Using technology similar to that used in his android creation Argo, the metal mastermind created "protean" duplicates of the heroes, but programmed to carry out crimes for the Foundry and ruin the heroes' reputations in the process!

The real heroes must escape and confront their artificial duplicates in order to restore their good names, and before the doppelgangers can do something even worse than commit a few thefts!

CONVENTION PLAY

The *Proteus Plot* was designed as a convention adventure. If you're running it at a convention or as a demonstration of how to play *Mutants & Masterminds*, you can use the Freedom League heroes from *Freedom City* as ready-made player characters, letting the players choose which heroes they want the play and reserving any other Freedom Leaguers as NPC heroes for the adventure.

Notes are given in various places in the adventure on how to handle specific situations involving the Freedom League heroes in the adventure. If you're just running *Proteus Plot* as part of a regular, ongoing *M&M* series, you can ignore these notes.

SCENE ONE: LOST IN A FOG

It's an otherwise ordinary day in Freedom City when the heroes are alerted to trouble at ASTRO Labs in the North End (see *Freedom City*, page 59, for details). There's a break-in at the lab!

The heroes can become aware of the situation in any number of ways. If they're officially sanctioned—such as members of the Freedom League—the authorities alert them immediately. They can also pick up the emergency on the police frequencies or simply hear an explosion coming from ASTRO Labs. Heroes may know someone working there, or may even do so themselves in their secret identities! Whatever the case, the heroes hear there is trouble and rush off to the rescue.

The trouble at ASTRO Labs comes in the form of several Myrmidon robots that have broken into the lab building and are taking some schematics. When the heroes show up, the robots turn their attention to them. On their initiative, the robots release an impenetrable cloud of fog (actually made up of countless billions of nanotech machines). The heroes are

engulfed in the cloud along with the robots. Ask the players to make Will saving throws for their heroes (DC 20). Anyone failing the save is stunned for one round; anyone succeeding feels a moment of dizziness and disorientation, which quickly passes with no other effect.

The robots try to escape with the stolen schematics and fight the heroes who try to stop them. If the robots are defeated or captured (or it looks like they may be), they self-destruct, leaving little, if any, evidence behind for the heroes and the authorities to examine.

Award the players a hero point for the events of the scene, plus any additional points for GM Fiat or complications.

WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON

What the players don't know is the fog released by the Myrmidions is actually a key component in a teleportation trap set up by the Foundry. When the heroes were engulfed in the mist, they were actually teleported to stasis chambers at a Foundry base, while their proto-matter duplicates were activated and left in their place. The moment of disorientation the heroes feel doesn't come from the gas, but from the fact that they are actually the duplicates, teleported in and newly activated!

From this point on until **Scene Five**, the players are actually playing the duplicates, rather than the real characters, imprisoned by the Foundry. The real heroes return in **Scene Five**, until then, the players run the duplicates as if they were their real characters. Some players may begin to suspect something is amiss very early on. Allow them to speculate and even investigate, but keep in mind the Foundry duplicates are programmed not to be consciously aware of their true nature at this time. So any investigation the bogus heroes undertake is ultimately doomed to failure.

IN MEDIA RES OPTION

If you want to dive right into the action of the adventure, rather than starting with the heroes getting a call for help from ASTRO Labs, begin in the middle of the fight with the Myrmidons when the duplicate heroes "wake up" amidst the cloud of nano-mist, having just been activated and teleported in. Tell the players their heroes are in an unfamiliar lab, surrounded by white mist (that provides partial concealment), and hostile Myrmidon robots. Chalk up any memory-loss of how they came to be at ASTRO Labs to the effects of the mist, with witnesses saying they saw the heroes arrive, even if they don't recall it.

This approach can make the revelation later in the adventure more effective as the heroes realize the reason for their "memory loss" is the fact that they're not the real heroes at all, and their "real" memories effectively begin at that moment in ASTRO Labs.

SCENE TWO: DARK DREAMS

Once the heroes have dealt with the Myrmidon robots, things seem to return to normal in the city for a time. The police take the heroes' statements about the break-in and they have ASTRO Labs' gratitude (which may come in handy later in this adventure or in a future adventure). Tell the players things seem to have settled back into a steady routine, then read the following:

A full night's rest is a pleasant reward after dealing with a crisis, but your sleep is not entirely peaceful. You have the strangest dream about you and your teammates, dressed in your costumes and approaching ASTRO Labs in the dead of night. The schematics the Foundry robots attempted to steal are still inside and you *know* that you have to get them.

Explain to the players that their characters dream about breaking into ASTRO Labs to get the schematics the Myrmidon robots attempted to steal, and run the break-in like an actual encounter, letting the players decide how they want to go about it. Tell them they need to come up with some way to get inside, past the guards and security systems, and take the plans, ideally without getting spotted.

Overcoming the exterior security systems at ASTRO Labs requires a Disable Device check (DC 30) while the security on the lab requires the same check. Getting past the guards unnoticed requires a Stealth check (DC 15) while accessing the necessary computer files takes a Computers check (DC 20). The schematics are stored in a Toughness 15 wall-vault while the walls of the lab are reinforced Toughness 10 material; the doors, however, are only Toughness 8, with security keypads (the aforementioned Disable Device DC).

It should be a fairly simple matter for the heroes to break into the lab and acquire the plans and computer files. The guards on-duty are no real match for them (use the Police Officer archetype on page 228 of *M&M* armed with +5 damage blasters); neither are the security systems. It's no problem if the characters slip-up and alert security, since it plays right into the next scene (if everything goes smoothly, then the characters are simply unaware they've been noticed).

Once the heroes have the materials, they feel drawn to an alleyway in a nearby part of the North End, where a spider-like robot (a Foundry Charibdrone) emerges from a sewer tunnels, takes the stolen goods, and disappears back beneath the streets of the city. Things fade slowly to black and the characters awaken in their own beds the next morning.

If players are suspicious about the dream, tell them it seems perfectly normal to their characters; they don't know why they're doing what they're doing, but it's just a dream, isn't it? If the players stubbornly refuse to go along with playing out the events of the break-in, don't force matters, just skip over the scene and tell them their characters wake up the next morning after a strange dream where they broke into ASTRO Labs.

Award the players a hero point for the events of the dream. It's a complication, even if they don't know it yet...

SCENE THREE: RUDE AWAKENING

The heroes wake up thinking the events of the previous night nothing more than an unusual dream (since, as duplicates, they're programmed not to question their orders). They might well compare notes over breakfast, at a meeting, or during a morning patrol or the like, discovering they all had an identical dream. Let them play out the scene a bit, their suspicions and concerns growing, then let the other shoe drop.

ASTRO Labs notified the authorities about the break-in and AEGIS immediately assumed control of the case. If the heroes left blatant evidence of their involvement (e.g. they busted through the walls of the labs, scattered the guards, and walked out with the stolen goods), AEGIS has managed to cover things up for the time-being and the media is only reporting that there was a break-in by a person or persons unknown, assuming it was the Foundry trying again. If the heroes were subtler in their theft, then AEGIS has hidden surveillance footage of their involvement, but has kept news of it and the break-in out of the media for the time being. The agency wants to avoid dragging the heroes' reputations through the mud if they can.

Director Harry Powers (*Freedom City*, page 72) personally leads the team of AEGIS agents to confront and possibly arrest the heroes. It includes one MAX armor agent for each hero as well as one uniformed AEGIS agent for each hero. The AEGIS personnel turn up on the doorstep of the heroes' headquarters (if they have a public HQ), or track down the location of any secret headquarters the heroes might have, so long as it is accessible. If the heroes' headquarters is out of AEGIS' reach (like the Freedom League's orbiting satellite, the Lighthouse), the agency invites the heroes to a meeting with the Director at AEGIS headquarters in Freedom City or the agency team shows up the next time the heroes appear in public (keep in mind the heroes have little reason to suspect anyone is after them at this point).

Powers tells the heroes about the break-in, and the details match their dream exactly. He also tells them AEGIS has evidence of the heroes' involvement. The exact nature of the evidence depends on how things went in **Scene Two**. If the heroes made any mistakes whatsoever, Powers now uses them as evidence: security system tampering, video footage, clues left behind at the scene, or eye-witness reports from the guards, for example. If nothing else, you can have Powers tell the players that he suspected the Foundry might try again and arranged with ASTRO Labs to have additional covert surveillance measures installed, which captured them in action.

After presenting the evidence, Powers asks the heroes to explain. Even if they tell him the truth, he says that he has no choice but to ask them to surrender to AEGIS' custody until the matter can be resolved. Until the heroes' names are cleared, they cannot be allowed to go free. They'll be placed in special custody in Blackstone Prison (*Freedom City*, page 75) pending an investigation and, possibly, a trial. The characters can either choose to turn themselves in and go peacefully, or they can try and escape.

If the heroes surrender, go right to **Scene Five** and pick up the action there, where the real heroes show up to confront their doubles. If the heroes choose to make a run for it, perhaps hoping to clear their good names, the AEGIS agents attempt to stop them. Run the confrontation and, if the heroes win and escape, go on to **Scene Four** for what happens next.

SCENE FOUR: HUNTED!

If the heroes choose to fight the AEGIS agents or simply go on the run, they become wanted criminals. Director Powers uses his authority to put out an all-points bulletin to all local law enforcement and even to UNISON (the United Nations International Superhuman Oversight Network), meaning police around the world will be on the lookout for the rogue heroes.

More importantly, word goes out to other heroes in Freedom City, who start looking for their colleagues who have broken the law. This is a great opportunity to involve other heroes from the *Freedom City* sourcebook in the adventure, from members of the Freedom League to the Atom Family or the Next-Gen, who might take it upon themselves to try and apprehend the "rogue" heroes, especially if they considered them role-models or peers in any way. If you don't have access to *Freedom City*, you can use some of the hero archetypes from the *M&M* rulebook as an ad hoc team of heroes who come after the player characters (sample characters Sentinel and Lux are good for this in particular).

This scene is fairly free form: let the players decide what their characters are going to do. Obviously, the longer they stay out in public, the greater the chance AEGIS and other heroes will be out in force after them. They're likely to go to ground, perhaps using their secret identities (if they have any) or some other sort of disguise so they can regroup and plan their next move. Allow them the opportunity to do so, perhaps providing a brush with local law enforcement (a beat cop asks them some routine questions, for example, or they're asked for identification at a port of exit).

The heroes should be trying to figure out who set them up, and they may very well suspect the Foundry, given the encounter in **Scene One**. If they want to try and run scientific tests, they'll need access to equipment, and odds are their headquarters is being watched (if its location is known to AEGIS or other heroes). Tests don't reveal anything conclusive anyway, although you can hint at some "biological anomalies" or the lingering presence of some nanotechnology to keep the players wondering what's going on.

Once the players have had a chance to catch their breath and take some steps, it's time to have a group of NPC heroes find them and try to take them in. The other heroes might be sympathetic to the situation, and even willing to listen to what the player characters have to say, but they're unbending in demanding the rogue heroes' surrender. If they're really innocent, they say, let the justice system do its job. Running or fighting just makes the heroes look guilty. Again, if the characters surrender, go to **Scene Five**. If not, then the other heroes try to take them by force. If you want to make sure there's a fight, you can have the NPCs skip trying to talk and just jump the heroes as soon as they can, perhaps hoping to take them down quickly before they realize what's happening.

If the heroes win, go to **Scene Five**, where the *real* heroes show up to put things right. If the heroes lose, you can skip **Scene Five** and go right to **Scene Six** where the real heroes escape from Talos' clutches, then to the **Epilogue**, since there's no need for the real heroes to confront their doppelgangers.

SCENE FIVE: THE MIRROR CRACK'D

In this brief scene, the real heroes return to confront their doubles. Read or paraphrase the following to the players, then cut to **Scene Six: Escape From the Foundry**:

Suddenly, there's a crash and you turn towards a group of figures standing in a spreading cloud of dust and debris: they're you! Or at least they *look* exactly like you.

"This ends now, imposters!" one of them says.

Adjust the arrival of the real heroes to suit the situation occurring when this scene comes into play, such as if the duplicates are in AEGIS headquarters, the heroes' headquarters, a hideout somewhere, or having just defeated another team of heroes. Don't give the players much time to think about it, just cut directly to **Scene Six**, where they discover things aren't as they appear.

SCENE SIX: ESCAPE FROM THE FOUNDRY

After the revelation in **Scene Five**, cut to a flashback scene of how the real heroes managed to escape. Read the following to the players:

A short while ago, in a hidden lair deep beneath the streets of Freedom City...

Consciousness returns slowly, then quickly as you realize you're virtually unable to move. Heavy metallic cuffs bind your hands at your sides and hold down your feet, while a tube of clear material arcs mere inches away, encasing your entire body. You're lying on a steep angle, nearly standing upright, and you see your teammates inside similar transparent tubes spaced along the curved wall of the room.

"Awake, and sooner than expected," says a deep, metallic voice, muffled only slightly by the material of the tube. "Don't bother struggling; the containment tubes nullify your powers. I designed them myself."

Turning toward the sound of the voice, you see a massive, nine-foot bronze figure, like a statue of an Ancient Greek warrior come to life, complete with crested helm. Red light burns in his eyes like a banked fire, but his face is as cold and emotionless as an actual statue: Talos, the renegade robot and master of the Foundry!

"Welcome to one of my labs," Talos says. "I would not expect a rescue as, you see, the rest of the world doesn't even know you are here. This device," the bronze giant gestures to a casket-like machine off to the side, "is a protomatter duplication matrix, much like the one that granted my wayward creation Argo with his abilities. It creates an exact duplicate of any being, perfect down to the molecular level."

"When my Myrmidons surrounded you in nano-mist, the matrix instantly created near-exact copies, while you were transported here. Under my command, your duplicates have replaced you and carry out my plans, while you remain here for my experiments."

"With the help of your duplicates, I will replace the other heroes of Freedom City as well, and soon I will have an army of super-duplicates at my command!

"Once you've completely shaken off the effects of the nano-mist, I can begin my experiments. In the meanwhile, Scylla will watch over you while I check on the progress of your replacements, won't you, my dear?" A wide view screen set above the door comes on to show the smooth, golden-skinned face of a woman with silvery hair, a representation of the Foundry's master control computer looking down on you without a trace of compassion in her eyes.

"Try not to struggle too much," Talos continues. "I wouldn't want my new subjects damaged needlessly." The doors slide open and the clanking, metallic footfalls of the mad robot fade away as they close behind him.

Note that the heroes have three additional hero points each: one for their capture by Talos, one for the trap in which they find themselves, and one for playing their own doubles in the previous scenes. You can add an additional hero point or two for particularly good roleplaying in the earlier scenes as well, if you wish.

The heroes are held in Toughness 10 tubes of plexiglass-like material, bound in Toughness 10 manacles with a continuous Nullify 12 effect that dampens their powers. Any Devices or equipment have been removed and sit on a long laboratory table on the opposite side of the room. At the touch of a button, Talos can also flood any of the tubes with anesthetic gas (Stun effect, DC 22 Fortitude save each round) or send a powerful electrical charge through the manacles (same effect and DC, different descriptor, for those targets immune to the gas). Scylla can also control these systems, but won't use them except as a last resort, since Talos wants the prisoners conscious and in the best possible condition.

Slipping free of the manacles requires an Escape Artist check (DC 30), while overriding the locking mechanisms to open the manacles and the tube requires a Disable Device check (DC 30). It's possible to take 10 or take 20 on either check, provided the character is not being watched. Characters with full use of their powers can probably escape more easily: they can use extra effort to obtain an additional Will saving throw against the Nullify effect (DC 22) and can spend a hero point on the save (as well as to shrug off fatigue from the extra effort).

Efforts to escape while Talos is in the room are largely fruitless unless the heroes can manage to distract both the robot mastermind and Scylla while they make their attempt: this requires a successful Bluff check against both by the distracting character, as well as a successful Stealth check against both by the character making the escape attempt, although both checks don't have to come from the same character.

Things get easier once Talos is out of the room. Then the heroes only need to keep Scylla's attention occupied. She has Notice +17 and Sense Motive +13; if a hero successfully Bluffs her the other heroes can make an escape attempt without being noticed immediately.

FREEDOM LEAGUE ESCAPES

The Freedom League heroes have a number of ways in which they might escape from Talos' trap. The following are some suggestions you can give players if they spend a hero point for inspiration or simply seem stuck for ideas:

- **Captain Thunder:** With his powers, Captain Thunder can tear apart the manacles and the tube easily, but he first needs to make a successful Will save against the Nullify effect as extra effort. A blast from his Electrical Control could also overload the lab's systems, helping to free his teammates.
- **Daedalus:** Although deprived of his armor, Daedalus is still a genius. He has a very good chance of making the Disable Device check to override the systems, but first needs to get his hands free. You may let him make a DC 35 Disable Device check to "pick" the electronic locks on the manacles first (which he can accomplish on a roll of 13 or better with his skill).
- **Dr. Metropolis:** With his powers, Dr. Metropolis could simply pass right through the manacles and the tube! His Animate Objects could likewise help to free the others. With his Will save bonus, he has a good chance (a roll of 12 or better) to overcome the Nullify effect.
- **Johnny Rocket:** Johnny can't do too much without his powers, although he does have a modest Bluff skill (for distracting Scylla, or helping another character do so). With his powers active, he could do Insubstantial 4 as a power stunt, vibrating through the material of the manacles and the tube.
- **Lady Liberty:** Lady Liberty is the most hampered, since imprisonment negates her powers anyway! However, once she's free, she can fairly easily Nullify the imprisoning effects on her teammates.
- **Pseudo:** The alien shape-shifter can easily escape by flowing out of the bindings and tube once his powers are restored. He also has the second best Bluff check bonus on the team, when it comes to distracting Scylla.
- **Raven:** Raven has no powers to lose, although she is without her equipment. Note that she suffers a -4 penalty to Disable Device because of the lack of tools (spending a hero point for the Improvised Tools feat overcomes it). She has the best Bluff check bonus (+14), giving her a good chance of distracting Scylla.

- **Siren:** Short of a power stunt of some sort, Siren's only real means of escape is breaking out with her Strength once her powers are restored, since her Super-Strength gives her a fair chance.
- **Star Knight:** Deprived of her armor, Star Knight has few options for escape. If you prefer not to hinder her player quite so much, leave her armor in place, but have the manacles Nullify it like the other heroes' powers.

Let the players get as creative as they want in coming up with their escape attempt, and allow them to talk amongst themselves to come up with their plan, given the heroes' long experience in working together.

When the heroes escape, Scylla alerts Talos and a skittering group of Charibdrones (one per hero) emerges from the walls of the room to restrain them. The characters shouldn't have much difficulty plowing through them, but a group of Myrmidon robots (again, equal in number to the heroes) waits on the other side of the lab's Toughness 11 door.

The robots' primary job is to keep the heroes busy so Talos can escape. The robot mastermind doesn't intend to take on an entire team at once, so he orders Scylla to set the lab to self-destruct and leaves via a teleportal platform (Teleport 10) for one of the Foundry's other facilities, scrambling the location in the teleportal's computer when he disappears.

The heroes need to overcome the robots and reach the teleportal in time to escape themselves before an energy pulse that burns out electronics and living nervous systems alike destroys the lab and everyone in it. Use the tension of the energy buildup to lend urgency to the fight as the heroes get to the portal. A Knowledge (technology) check (DC 20) is required to operate it.

SCENE SEVEN: DOUBLE TROUBLE

This is it, the climatic confrontation scene. Essentially, approach **Scene Five** from the "opposite angle," with the real heroes arriving to confront their doubles just as they did before the flashback, picking up the action where it left off.

Talos programmed a fail-safe in the duplicates so they would attack the real heroes if they managed to escape, and that's exactly what happens: when the heroes show up, the doppelgangers attack and it's a fight to the finish! Here are some things to consider when running the fight:

- Clever fighters on both sides may take advantage of the fact that the doubles are practically indistinguishable from the originals; a successful Bluff check, for example, might cause a foe to attack a teammate, mistaking him or her for a someone on the other team.
- Characters who make impassioned pleas to the duplicates to shake off Talos' influence, appealing to their sense of heroism, should get to make Diplomacy checks (Charisma for unskilled use) against the hostile duplicates. Any duplicate moved to friendly stops fighting, while any moved to helpful actually aids the heroes!
- While the player characters know the capabilities and weaknesses of their doppelgangers, the reverse is also true. Still, the heroes should have a greater store of hero points, so try to avoid using GM Fiat too much for the benefit of the duplicates at this point.

An unconscious or dying duplicate dissolves back into formless proto-matter, and the same happens to the remaining doubles when the fight is over: another fail-safe mechanism to ensure they couldn't get out of Talos' control.

EPILOGUE

Once the heroes' doubles are defeated, it's a simple matter for them to clear their names and get back into the good graces of AEGIS and the other authorities. An examination at ASTRO Labs shows the heroes are none the worse for wear for their ordeal, although the doctor mentions that it might be impossible to tell the Foundry's duplicates from real people, so who is to say for certain that the heroes are *really* the genuine article? Just something for the players to think about...



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