

other storm. April 30, 2021 saw one in ten adults metamorphose into huge and terrifying shapes that we now call orks and trolls. You can imagine what that was like: if UGE was scary, only producing those cute dwarf and elf babies, then Goblinization was like something out of everyone's nightmares. Many governments overreacted, either thinking that it was a contagion or simply acting from fear and hate: metahumans and their families were sometimes rounded up into the camps that had once held Native Americans, or (in the case of the Japanese) sent off to a hellish island in the Philippines called Yomi. As you might expect based on similar imprisonments in the past, humane treatment of inmates was not a priority there.

This brouhaha didn't really calm down until the next wave of VITAS struck in 2022. When it hit human and metahuman alike, most authorities finally realized that this Goblinization was likely not a real contagion but something more akin to UGE. Still, VITAS had killed another 10 percent of the world's population before it was all over—no one was safe. In 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court granted metahumans equal protection under the law. Not that it made a difference to the scum who founded the Humanis Policlub—an organization that's still going strong—the same year...

LONE STAR

Remember that mess in Texas with United Oil, and its ties to the founding of Lone Star? In the late teens, Lone Star Security Services appeared in Corpus Christi as a private law enforcement agency. Corpus Christi, Texas, became the first city to contract full-service, citywide law enforcement to a private agency. That same year, the Seattle Metroplex was officially founded; the governor was then-Mayor Charles C. Lindstrom.

Where this comes together for you Seattleites is: the Seattle Police Department went on strike in 2025. Bad move for them, because the governor declared the strike illegal, fired them all, and then hired Lone Star to do the policing. They've spread like cockroaches across North America ever since.

TECH, REDUX

The remote-vote system went into effect for the 2024 Presidential election. Though then-President Jarman won a landslide re-election, his opponents called "fraud." No one paid attention; everybody just wanted a bit of peace and quiet, thank you—yours truly counted among them.

The biggest technological leap, however, came between 2026 and 2029. Sony Cybersystems, Fuchi Industrial Electronics, and RCA-Unisys all came up with prototype cyberterminals, meant to interface with the world wide data network via the central nervous system. That's right, kiddies—first generation neuron hook-up to the information grids. These things were huge, needing isolation tanks, multi-contact-point jacks, multiple hook-ups for the operator, and so on. Only the military and corporate intelligence super-hackers got to play with these, and the first ones to use them went crazy; their brains couldn't handle it. But millions of dollars, lots of training, and a few years of refinement later made it so much safer that the CIA, NSA, and IRS decided to pool their resources and create a "cybercommando" hacker team codenamed Echo Mirage. Anyone with brains could see what sort of uses this team would

be put to. Thankfully, they never got a chance ... but the trade-off wasn't a bargain by any means.

THE CRASH OF '29

On February 8, 2029, the nastiest computer virus ever hit computer systems around the world. They toppled and crashed, the virus wiping out data and sometimes even burning out the hardware. Since many governments, services, and corporations depended heavily on the worldwide network grids for data access, storage, connectivity, and more, the vast majority of them were on the verge of collapse—a veritable infocalypse.

Echo Mirage

Given a presidential order to combat the Crash Virus, Echo Mirage swung into action. Unfortunately, most of the team members were unsuited to combat the virus, being too linear-thinking and inflexible to fight back effectively, and it showed in psychological casualties. The powers that be had to recruit new blood.

The new team, spearheaded by Major David Gavilan (USAF), was composed of thirty-two men and women from various backgrounds who shared at least one trait in common: an ability to think outside of the box. Mavericks, data-miners, hackers, they were each brilliant in one way or another, and some of the best we had to offer. In August of 2029, they waded in, ready to carve up some code. Still, eighteen minutes after they engaged the virus in cybercombat, four of them were dead from lethal biofeedback. Though Echo Mirage easily handled everything else they encountered, the virus proved difficult to eradicate, continuing to kill many team members.

On the other side of the virtual wall, the logs were continually analyzed to see how to improve the programs and hardware used in the fight. In the course of this study, we all got to see how the virus generated the deadly biofeedback as well as how the members of Echo Mirage were able to slip in and out of any targeted system (which alarmed many who'd previously thought their systems safe from intrusion). I can't tell you how much of that knowledge was used after the Crash Virus was wiped out—you've seen some of it yourselves in the form of Black IC. But I can tell you that, thanks to that knowledge, much of the hardware was reduced to desk size and no longer required sensory deprivation tanks. By late 2031, Echo Mirage managed to wipe out the last of the known vestiges of the virus.

Most of the surviving members of Echo Mirage disappeared afterward into the private sector, taking much of their knowledge with them. Only a few known team members ever resurfaced; nobody knows where the rest are today. I know that some think I might have been a part of all that—I only wish I had been, because they were among the finest people I have ever known.

DIVIDED WE STAND, UNITED WE FALL

Many governments had destabilized thanks to the Crash, and they put themselves to rights in its wake with varying degrees of complexity and violence in the decade that followed. Among those most affected were the Americas, Russia, and Europe.