

# **Mug Shot**

**By Edward Winslow**

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Smashwords Edition

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## Terrorists Destroy Cedar Creek Dam

Tiny Cedar Creek, twenty-five miles outside New Metropolis, was targeted by terrorists yesterday in an attack that authorities are describing as “bizarre” and “baffling”.

“It was a pretty weird choice of target,” Sheriff Ralph Duncan told reporters in a prepared statement this morning. “To be honest, we didn’t even realise it was terrorists until the video showed up on our doorsteps. We’ve watched this thing five times, and we still can’t figure out why they did it,” he added. He went on to suggest that the terrorists had intended to strike at the much larger New Metropolis dam, and that yesterday’s attack was the result of a miscommunication.

The video, which has been released to the media, credits the bombing to an obscure terrorist group calling themselves the American Liberation Army. A masked man claiming to be the group’s leader boasts of their ability to “strike at targets both large and small throughout the country.” “The capitalist oppressors should not feel safe anywhere they go,” he said on the video.

The Cedar Creek Dam was the highlight of an artificial kayaking run. Bill Howard, President of the National River Rafting Association, said that he was “shocked and disgusted” at the terrorists’ choice of target. “This is a great tragedy,” he said. “The Cedar Creek run was of great importance to kayakers in the area. It will be sorely missed.”

The White House held a press conference today to address the attack. “We are treating this attack with the utmost seriousness,” a media liaison told reporters. “We will not stand by and permit terrorists to carry out these attacks on American soil.” He also expressed concern that this attack might spark panic in the economy. “We cannot allow this to happen. Americans must rally around our country’s great industries – particularly our river rafting industry, which has been so sorely damaged by this brutal attack.”

When asked to comment on the White House statement, Bill Howard agreed. “It is really important that people keep going to the rivers and the beaches, and that they keep buying kayaks and canoes,” he said. “These attacks might have a very negative effect on the whole adventure sport sector, and I don’t think that’s something that Americans want to see happen.”

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Tony reached the last page of the newspaper, folded it up into a messy pile, and went back to what he had been doing before he started reading, which was trying not to stare at the receptionist. She was pretty, or at least pretty enough – long blonde hair, perfect figure, two-piece knit suit in a rather garish shade of pink – but that wasn’t why Tony was staring at her. Not staring at her, he reminded himself. I am not staring at her. He recrossed his legs and lifted his eyes to the ceiling, trying valiantly to interest himself in the cornices and the floral centrepiece, but it was no use. His eyes kept creeping back downwards, and even when he wasn’t looking at her, he could feel her sitting there, almost as if she was emitting radioactivity.

He had broken up with Danielle, or rather; Danielle had broken up with him, almost two months ago now. Tony was not successful enough. Not serious enough. Not rich enough, and he didn’t have a family member in government. He had moved out, packing his clothes, his weight set, and his PlayStation into the back of his car, and unpacking them again into his sister’s living room. Since then, the weight set hadn’t seen a moment’s use. The PlayStation, on the other hand, was badly in need of a new controller, and had started to make a funny whimpering noise every time Tony turned it on. Maria had been patient at first, but when Tony started pissing into a Pepsi bottle to save getting up and going to the toilet, she had put her foot down. One week later, here he was, sitting in the receptionist’s office at Marvel Academy and trying not to stare at the Ghost of Girlfriends Past.

Not that the receptionist looked exactly like Danielle. Just similar enough to be creepy, especially when combined with the crisp perfection of her pink suit. Danielle would never have worn pink. And she would never have worn her hair the way this woman did, loose and flowing over her shoulders. Danielle was a French twist woman, pulling her hair tight enough to give herself a mini facelift. And Danielle certainly didn’t smile the way that the receptionist did: a little bit innocent, a little bit plastic.

It was as if some sort of horrible experiment in human cloning had mixed half of Tony's girlfriend's DNA with half of Barbie's.

Tony realised he was staring again, and worse yet, she was looking back at him. She turned that charming, vacant smile on him, and he knew he was going to have to say something.

"Nice weather we're having, isn't it?"

"Lovely," she replied. Her voice sounded enough like Danielle's to make Tony shiver.

Tony returned her smile with a nervous, half-hearted one of his own, and hoped he had satisfied the demands of politeness. But no – she wasn't looking back down at her computer screen. In fact, he could swear that she was about to speak again, when the inner door opened and saved Tony.

"Tony Rossi?" the man asked, and Tony stood up, extending his hand. They shook. "I'm Julius Luchansky, the headmaster. We met at your interview."

Tony looked up at Mr Luchansky, and nearly put his neck out of alignment. The man in the doorway was one of the tallest he had ever seen, with deep black skin and hair just starting to show signs of grey. When he stood, he stooped, and when he sat, he fell into a careful slouch that seemed designed to make him look a foot shorter. The overall effect was of an oak tree trying to pretend it was a geranium, and it made Tony feel very small indeed.

"Nice to see you again, Mister Luchansky."

"Actually," the man corrected him, "it's Doctor Luchansky. I have a PhD in Education." Tony detected a faint smile around the corner of Dr Luchansky's mouth, but he wasn't sure whether he was supposed to be smiling back. "Come in, Tony," Dr Luchansky continued, stepping back to let him in. "Sit down."

Dr Luchansky's office was very much like the receptionist's office, and from what Tony could tell, very much like the rest of the school. Thick carpet, wood panelling on the walls, heavy furniture, and nothing in sight less than eighty years old. He could almost smell the money rising from Dr Luchansky's antique wooden desk, and it made him think of Danielle. She would love it here, he thought.

"Welcome to Marvel Academy," Dr Luchansky was saying. Tony suppressed a smirk as he heard the name. He had found it funny when his sister worked here, and he still found it funny now that he was coming to work here himself.

"Thank you," he said, keeping his face smooth.

"I was pleased when your sister called up to recommend you for this position. She was an excellent employee, and she spoke very highly of you." This was old stuff. They had covered this at the interview, but Tony made polite noises anyway, and Dr Luchansky went on. "You've had a chance to look over your job description and the contract by now. Do you have any questions before you sign it?"

The only question Tony could think of was "What am I doing here?" but he knew the answer to that one already. Maria had wanted it that way, and Tony's sister had an almost supernatural ability to arrange things the way she wanted them. If she wanted him to become a house parent at a school she used to work at, he would become one, like it or not. "I don't think so," he started to say, and then realised he did have a question. "How many kids did you say I'd be responsible for?"

"There are forty-six in our boys' dorm," Dr Luchansky replied. "A hundred and forty-two in the whole school."

"Right." Tony nodded. "And it's just kids over fourteen in my dorm?"

"That's correct. Our younger students are housed in a separate dorm."

Well, at least that was good news. However Tony felt about dealing with teenagers, he would never have accepted a job cleaning up after younger kids. He'd been a camp counsellor every summer during college, and he'd cleaned up enough preteen vomit in that time to last him right through to retirement.

"Well, if you have no other questions, perhaps we can proceed to the signing," Dr Luchansky suggested. Tony nodded agreement, and Dr Luchansky slid a stack of papers across the desk towards him. Tony looked at the top sheet.

"What's this?"

"It's a standard non-disclosure agreement," Dr Luchansky informed him smoothly. "I'll need you to sign it before you can commence your employment with us."

"Why?"

Dr Luchansky coughed. "School policy, Tony. If you wouldn't mind-" He nodded his head at the agreement.

Tony hesitated. Maria hadn't mentioned anything about this. Still, he thought, if she'd signed one of these things, she probably hadn't been allowed to. And he was curious. What could a place like this have to hide? He paused for a moment, pen hovering over the bottom of the page, and then signed his way down the stack.

"Thank you, Tony," Dr Luchansky said, taking most of the stack back from him. "One copy of the contract is yours. And I'll leave you with a copy of the NDA, as well. You may wish to refer to it at some point."

"So, what's the deal with the NDA?" Tony asked, trying to keep his tone light and disinterested. "You got superheroes running around here? Some sort of secret government project or something?"

Dr Luchansky gave him a flat look. Tony couldn't believe it. "You're kidding me," he said. "Superheroes?"

"And a secret government project," Dr Luchansky reminded him.

"You're kidding me," Tony repeated.

"Not at all. Tony, are you familiar with the 2006 Extraordinary Child Act?"

"Not really."

Dr Luchansky folded his hands together and rested them on his desk. "As you probably know, the 'War on Terror' is entering its tenth year. And I'm sure that you'll agree that it has been a resounding failure. In fact, we haven't had a single major victory in over eight years." Tony nodded for him to continue. "Well Tony, losing wars is bad for politicians. Makes them look stupid and incompetent. So our brilliant leaders came up with the Extraordinary Child Act."

"Okay, but what is it?"

Dr Luchansky's face twisted into a faint smirk. "Essentially, it's a piece of legislation offering incentives to parents of extraordinarily gifted children if they come forward and make them known to the government."

"Incentives?"

"I was hoping you'd ask that. This generous scheme offers parents a hundred dollar tax rebate, and a brand new, state-of-the-art, home entertainment system."

"A what?"

"A hundred bucks and a new TV." Dr Luchansky was grinning broadly as he spoke.

"You're kidding me," Tony said, beginning to feel like a broken record.

"Do you know what an American will do for a better TV, Tony?"

"I think I've just found out." Tony sat still for a moment, thinking about it. "So you're telling me that I've just come to work at a school for superkids?"

"Not exactly."

"What do you mean? Not exactly a school, or not exactly superkids?"

"Have you ever met a theatre mother, Tony? Someone completely convinced that their precious little one is the next Mel Gibson, even if said kid can't string two words together? Or a tennis mother?"

Tony shrugged.

"Well," Dr Luchansky went on, "a superhero mother is a hundred times worse. Two hundred times worse, once you factor in the new TV. Our students are here for their own protection."

Tony wasn't sure he was convinced. "Is that really necessary?"

"Yes," Dr Luchansky said shortly, all pleasantness dropped. Tony wanted to ask more questions, but he didn't know where to begin. "The kids we get hold of here are safe, as long as their parents think that they have super powers. Our job is simple – to keep the parents away as much as possible, and when they do show up, to convince them that their children have super powers. That is our primary task. We also have to provide the children with a good education and a happy environment, but their safety comes first. Do you understand?"

Tony tried to think for a minute. "So, none of these kids have super powers?"

Dr Luchansky suddenly became coy. "I didn't say that either, Tony."

"So you do have super kids here?" Tony wasn't sure whether he was excited at the thought, or just confused.

"Just one. Carlos Menendez. And he has ... problems ... with his talents."

“What kind of problems?”

“I’m sure you will find that out in due time. He is one of the children in your dorm.” Dr Luchansky shifted position in his chair, signalling the end of the discussion. “The position you are taking up isn’t an easy one, Tony. Many of the children at Marvel had rather troubled home lives before they came here. A lot of them have difficulty relating well to adults. You will have to be very understanding with them.”

“I’m really not sure I’m qualified to provide care for these children,” Tony said cautiously.

“We don’t expect you to provide psychiatric care for them, if that’s what you are worried about. We have a fully trained staff of counsellors to do that. Your duties have been fully outlined in your job description. No more surprises. It really is an exciting opportunity to work with some very special kids. But if you’re worried about anything, or if you’ve changed your mind now that you have all of the facts, you are free to leave, though you will still be bound by the NDA if you do.”

Tony thought about it. He could leave, he supposed. He could go back to Maria’s and tell her what had happened. She would understand. And then she would find him something else. He’d had enough of that, he decided. And after all, there was a real superkid at this school. This was probably what people meant by ‘the opportunity of a lifetime’.

Dr Luchansky was waiting for Tony to speak. “No,” Tony said. “I want the job.”

“Excellent,” Dr Luchansky said. “You brought your luggage up with you?”

Tony nodded. “I left it in the other office.”

Dr Luchansky stood up, pushing off his desk with both hands. “Then let’s get it, and I’ll show you to your room.”

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Tony’s room, on the top floor of the L-shaped dormitory building, was opposite the boy’s common room, and right next to the stairs. Dr Luchansky pointed this out to him, noting with a significant lift of the eyebrows that there was only one set of stairs in the dorm building. “It will be important for you to be able to keep track of the students’ comings and goings,” he told Tony. “Particularly after lights out,” he added, eyebrows arching to an improbable height. It probably made sense, Tony reflected, though he wasn’t sure it would be the safest design if there were a fire.

The room itself, though a little larger than the student rooms that Dr Luchansky showed him, was otherwise identical to them, right down to the single bed in the far corner. “Of course, you won’t be receiving, ahem, female callers,” Dr Luchansky had said. Of course not, Tony thought. Even if he could tempt a ‘female caller’ into spending the night on the same floor as forty-some adolescent boys, there was no way he could convince her to sleep in the same room as the very stern painting of Abraham Lincoln that stared down at the bed from the far wall. Whatever the painter had been doing, Honest Abe hadn’t been pleased about it. Either that, or he had been forced to pose with a broomstick up his arse.

Spartan furnishings and intimidating paintings aside, the main feature of the room was the view. Tony had an inside room, looking out across the quad at the school building, and then past it to the woods that surrounded the school. Marvel Academy was set almost half a kilometre back from a minor highway, and the trees blocked out both the sight of the cars and the noise from the traffic. Looking out the window, Tony could pretend that he was somewhere he actually wanted to be, and not stranded in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by fake supermen and a creepy plastic doppelganger of his ex.

He bit his lip as he thought about the woman at reception. I wonder whether Maria knew her when she used to work here, he thought. Unlikely, he decided. She wouldn’t have sent me here to get away from Danielle if she knew I was going to be working with her evil twin. Or her good twin. The way Tony’s breakup had gone; he wasn’t sure whether Danielle could actually have an evil twin.

Thinking about Maria made him remember that he had promised to call her, a thought that he found marginally more tempting than unpacking. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and switched it on, but it just sat there, forlornly blinking up at him that there was no reception. Great, Tony thought. What a backwater. With a sigh, he set the phone down on top of the chest of drawers, and went into the hallway to use the payphone.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Maria. It’s me.”

“Tony!” She sounded so pleased to see him. More pleased than usual. Or maybe Tony just hadn’t realised how much he was trying her patience with his most recent bout of couch occupation.

“How are you? Are you at Marvel yet?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“You don’t sound pleased.”

“No, it’s okay. It’s a nice place.”

“It is a nice place, Tony,” Maria said forcefully. Obviously, she really wanted him to like it here. “It’s a nice place, and they are nice people. I was very happy when I worked there.”

“Yeah.”

It sounded like an agreement, but it wasn’t, and Maria knew that. “You’ll like it, once you have a chance to settle in.”

“I guess so. I haven’t really met anyone here yet. Just Dr Luchansky. He says hi, by the way.”

“Oh. Say hello to him from me, won’t you?”

“Sure.”

Maria cleared her throat. “Has Julius-?” She didn’t finish the question, but Tony knew what she was asking.

“He’s told me about the kids, yeah. It was a bit of a surprise. I can’t believe you worked here all this time and you never told me.” Tony thought for a second. “But I guess you’d signed an NDA as well.”

“I had. I’m sorry. I would have told you if I could have.”

“Hey, that’s okay. Really.”

“I just don’t want you to think I was misleading you.”

“I don’t,” Tony assured her. “Don’t worry about it. Hey, at least it’s going to make the job interesting, right?”

“Look, Tony.” Maria sighed. “I know you weren’t keen on taking this job. You probably feel like I forced you into it, or tricked you. It’s just that I was worried about you. You had been on my couch ever since the breakup, and –“

“It’s fine. Forget about it.”

“I just don’t want you to think –“

“I don’t,” Tony said, trying to make his tone firm enough to shut down this line of conversation. “I’m sure this will be for the best. New job, new town, new start. It’s probably what I needed.”

“I’m sure it is,” Maria agreed a little too enthusiastically. “And I know you’re going to like it there once you get out and have a look at the woods. Did I tell you about the river on the edge of the grounds? You could probably kayak that, and there are plenty of hikes in the hills.”

Tony didn’t like this line of conversation. He was sure that Maria didn’t mean anything by it, but it felt like a dig at the way he had let himself fall apart during his stay in the land of the couch-bound depressives. Until the break-up, he had been a fitness instructor at his local gym. These days, he wasn’t even sure he remembered how to do a sit-up. “Funny thing,” he said, trying to move the conversation onto safer ground, “I met the receptionist today while I was waiting to see Dr Luchansky. I was wondering if you remember her?”

“Who, Brandy?”

“I don’t know. About five-six, blonde hair, good figure.”

“That’s Brandy. What about her?”

Tony pressed his lips together. He couldn’t believe that Maria hadn’t thought about this before she sent him off here. “Does she remind you of anyone?”

Silence on the other end of the phone. “Oh,” Maria said eventually. “I’m sorry, Tony. I completely forgot about her.”

An apology from Maria was rare enough that Tony felt vaguely guilty. “It’s okay,” he said. “I guess I probably won’t have much to do with her.”

“No,” Maria replied, but not convincingly.

“Anyway, I’d better go,” Tony said. “I’d like to have a look around before dinner.”

“Okay.” Maria sounded disappointed. “Well, take care of yourself. I’ll be thinking about you.”

“Yeah, you too. I’ll call you in a couple of days; let you know how I’m settling in.”

“That would be great.”

“Okay, take it easy, Maria. Bye.”

Tony hung up the phone with a sigh. So, Maria had known the receptionist. Brandy. And she had sent Tony here anyway. I must really have worn out my welcome this time, he thought. He looked down the hallway distastefully. It was reasonably quiet, but there were students about, going in and out of each other's rooms and casting curious looks up the hallway at Tony. He was not in the mood to deal with them at the moment, he decided. He looked at his watch. Four thirty, and Dr Luchansky had said that dinner was at five thirty. Maybe looking around was a good idea. Somewhere quiet, and away from children. Tony ducked into his room to change out of his good clothes, and then set off down the stairs.

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When you got away from the children, this was actually quite a nice place, Tony decided as he reached the edge of the trees. He looked back across the quad and the broad gravel drive at the school buildings. They were certainly imposing, and not unattractive. If he could avoid the more disgusting elements of working with children, this could even be a nice place. It was probably an overly optimistic assessment, but it made Tony feel better, and as he turned his back on the school and moved further into the woods, he even felt cheerful enough to attempt a little jog.

Bad idea. Very unpleasant. Inside a minute, Tony was puffing like a steam train and sweating like a pig. Fortunately, though, there was nobody there to see him. Walking, Tony decided. That was the way to go, at least for the moment. Jogging could come later, sometime when it wasn't likely to cause him to keel over. Not that keeling over mightn't be desirable. Jogging could always be kept in reserve, an emergency suicide method if everything else failed.

Tony's cheerful train of thought was interrupted by the sound of voices. Young voices, and not far away. Probably students at the school. They seemed to be coming from up ahead, and as Tony got closer, he decided that they probably weren't innocent young things playing Kick the Can.

“Come on, you little faggot. Get up. Get up, I said.”

Tony heard another voice, but this one was much less distinct. Whatever it said, though, must have been very funny, because the next thing he heard was a wash of laughter. The first voice began again.

“Yeah, and what are you going to do about it, huh? You gonna go tell Dr L? I don't think that would be such a good idea, you know.” The voice was sneering and insulting as if it had been born to no other purpose. A teenage boy, then.

Trouble in paradise, and Tony hadn't even been there for half a day. He spotted a break in the trees up ahead, and heard more laughter floating back down the trail towards him. He broke into a run, not certain what he was going to do when he reached the clearing, but knowing he had to do something.

“Hey!” he barked as he passed the last rank of trees. “What the fuck do you think you're doing?”

Everyone froze, looking guiltily over at him. One of them was on the ground, dirty and with an impressive bruise coming up on one cheek. Another stood over him, one foot on the fallen one's chest, holding a branch like a White Hunter posing with his kill. The laughing chorus was made up of three more boys, standing a few feet back from the action.

“I said what the fuck do you think you're doing? Get away from him,” Tony ordered, taking a few more steps into the clearing. Anger and defiance flickered across the boy's red, sweaty face, but eventually, sensing that he couldn't expect much backup from the three behind him, he backed away. Tony pressed his advantage. “Now get out of here. All of you.” The boys looked at one another, then turned and ran, snickering slightly as they went. Belatedly, Tony realised that he probably should have taken their names or something. Never mind, he thought. He would find them when he got back to Marvel.

Tony turned to the boy on the ground. “Are you okay?” he asked, helping him up. “What happened?”

“I'm fine,” the kid replied, dusting himself off. His voice was cold and his manner hostile.

“What happened?” Tony repeated. He should probably get the story from this kid before he confronted the other three about it.

“What do you think happened?” the kid asked. It was obvious that he didn’t want to say anything more about it. He looked at Tony again, his eyes narrow. “Who are you, anyway? What are you doing out here? Don’t you know that this is private property?”

“Tony Rossi. I’m new at Marvel,” Tony said, meeting the kid’s anger with as much calm as he could manage. “And who are you?”

The kid really didn’t want to answer this one. He stood silently; lips clenched, and then muttered, “Carlos Menendez.”

“Carlos Menendez?” Tony couldn’t keep the surprise out of his voice. He opened his mouth to say something else but broke off when he saw the look of shame on the kid’s face.

“The one and only.”

Tony coughed, feeling his face turn red. “Pleased to meet you,” he said, unsuccessfully trying to hide his embarrassment.

“Whatever.”

Tony couldn’t think of anything to say to that. Carlos waited a moment before speaking again. “Can I go now?” he asked impatiently

“Are you okay to walk?”

Tony’s concern only seemed to upset the kid more. “I’m fine, I said. Now can I go?”

“Sure.”

The kid stalked off, limping a little, but with his head held high. Great, Tony thought. What a good start I’m off to. He couldn’t believe how badly he had screwed that up. I’m going to do a great job here, he thought with disgust. He shook his head, and then turned around and began walking slowly back to the school.

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Amanda Wong was late to her meeting again. She arrived nearly fifteen minutes after it was scheduled to start, and then spent another five minutes in the hallway outside the conference room, alternately yelling into her cellphone and scolding her personal assistant. The execs in the conference room listened to her diatribe through the door, occasionally wincing whenever she made a particularly pointed remark. The volume gradually increased as both of her monologues wound to a close, and then, after a moment’s pause, she burst in through the double doors, clacked loudly across to her chair, and sat down.

“Our recent campaign,” she began, glaring about the conference table, “was a disaster. It was a revolting piece of shit. I wouldn’t blow my nose with such a pathetic campaign.”

“Uh, yes, Ms Wong,” Gary Newton, the campaign director, said. “However, our client-“

“I don’t care about our client! I care about the agency! And campaigns like this one are not good for business, do you understand me?”

“Yes, Ms Wong.”

“Good. Now, I think we are all ready to hear your report on the campaign, Gary.” This was standard procedure for Amanda Wong. She felt that people gave a more honest report if they were humiliated before they began.

“Our client, the National River Rafting Association, is very pleased with the outcome of our recent active marketing scheme. River use is up five per cent, attendance at their river rafting courses is up three per cent, and sales of kayaks and canoes are up three per cent nationwide. Higher in areas close to a navigable river.”

“And are you pleased with this result, Gary?” Amanda Wong asked him sweetly.

Gary looked miserable. “Our client-“

“Listen to your report. ‘River use up five per cent.’ ‘Sales of kayaks up three per cent.’ You think this is impressive? It’s shit, Gary. Everybody, what is this campaign?”

The executives stared at the table, faces fixed in horrified expressions. “Shit,” they muttered.

“Exactly. Three per cent is nothing. We could have achieved three per cent using billboards. Using commercials. Gary, do you understand me?”



“Yes.”

“Now, Gary, tell me this. Why the fuck didn’t you blow up Niagara Falls?”

Gary looked shocked. “It’s a national icon!”

Bad decision. Gary’s neighbours began to edge away from him, as if he were a plague victim or an environmentalist.

“Of course it’s a national icon! That’s why you blow it up, you stupid turd-scraping! That’s what people react to – terrorists blowing up national icons! Things they hold dear! Not Semen Creek in South Bumfuck!” Amanda Wong enunciated the words precisely, staring Gary into the far corner of his chair.

Gary muttered something inaudible.

“Did you have something you wanted to say, Gary?”

“Our client requested that we not damage any major rivers, Ms Wong.”

Amanda Wong smiled her very sweetest smile, eyeing Gary up like a plate of kidneys. “Have you been listening to me, Gary?” He nodded. “You have? I’m so pleased. Perhaps, then, you will remember that I said I don’t give a shit what our fucking clients want! They know nothing about advertising, do you understand me? That’s why they come to us, Gary, for vision. So, Gary, what you need to do is provide them with some fucking vision. Now,” she went on, swivelling her gaze around the room, “you. What should Gary have done if his clients didn’t want their precious rivers destroyed?”

The man she had picked on was immaculately groomed and very professional looking, but under her gaze he reverted to a shuffling high school dunce. “I don’t know?”

“Anyone else?” Her voice was dangerous, primed for another explosion, and nobody wanted to provoke it. For a minute, there was silence in the room.

“Blow up their headquarters?” a voice from the far end of the table suggested.

“What did you say?”

“Blow up their headquarters,” the voice repeated, a little stronger now. Heads turned to see who was speaking. It was a colourless little blond man with thick glasses. On anyone else, they would have looked like nerd-chic, but this man appeared to be immune to chic. “Make it a mess. It would keep the rivers untouched, like they wanted, and there would be dead bodies, and heroes. Better photography, as well.” He finished, and the table held its collective breath.

“Excellent,” Amanda Wong agreed. “Exactly right. What’s your name?”

“Wolfgang. Muller, Ms Wong. Wolfgang Muller.”

“Gary, you’re fired. Get out of here.” Amanda Wong spoke with enough disgust and scorn that Gary slunk out without a word. “Wolfgang Muller, I have a job for you. The agency has secured a new client. A very important client. Harry?” She gestured down the table.

“They’re called Edumax. Not a very good name, in my opinion, but—” a look from Amanda Wong cut him off. “Yes. Anyway, their gig is maximum-security schools. Total protection for the students, both from each other and from the outside world. They have a pilot school in Texas, and one in LA. They’re having trouble getting enrolments. People just don’t believe that their kids need that much protection these days. They think an ordinary school is safe enough.”

“Your job, Mr Wolfgang Muller, is to change that perception. I want a shortlist of five target schools within a fortnight. If I find any of them to be suitable, you will be given a team to carry out the campaign.”

“Thank you, Ms Wong.”

“And Muller?”

“Yes?”

“A five per cent increase in enrolments is not acceptable. If I wanted advertising results, I would advertise. Not terrorise. Real results, understand me?”

“I do.”

“Excellent. Meeting adjourned.”

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Wolfgang Muller drifted out of the meeting, only vaguely aware of the looks of pity his colleagues were casting in his direction. Ms Wong had noticed him at last! Nothing else mattered. He had been waiting for this moment for almost three years.

Muller had first set eyes on Ms Wong while he was still in his final year of college. She had been a guest speaker for his guerrilla marketing course. He had been captivated by her beauty from the moment he saw her, and as soon as she had started to speak, he knew that he had to work for her company. From that day onward, he had been a man with a mission. He worked and he studied like never before, finding even the most tedious of classes interesting when he thought of the possibility of one day working for Ms Wong. Almost overnight, his grades jumped by ten per cent, and he kept them there for the rest of the year, eventually graduating second in his class.

Ten minutes after he got his final exam results, he was down at the post office, sending a resume and letter off to Amanda Wong's agency. The next morning, he did the same thing. He sent off nearly two dozen letters and resumes before the agency contacted him to offer him a position. He thought that his first day working at Impact Marketing was the happiest day of his life. Then, a month later, the team he was working on had to give a presentation to Ms Wong. She shouted and cursed at them, and made Muller's supervisor cry, but that day was the new happiest day in his life.

The year before, at Christmas, Muller had come up with a series of 'petty vandalism' campaigns, designed to increase the profile of a private police force in New Jersey. They had been wildly successful, and he had been promoted to supervisor. It had been the happiest day of his life, especially when he realised he would be going to the weekly progress meetings with Ms Wong. Now, every Monday was the happiest day of his life, but this Monday had been the happiest day of them all. God had smiled on him, and Ms Wong had finally noticed him. And not just noticed him, but entrusted him with a valuable assignment. From here, it was just a tiny step to becoming her most favoured employee, her trusted servant. And after that who could say what would happen?

Muller smiled to himself as he floated out of the hallway towards his office. He had been given his chance, and he would make the most of it. He would succeed for Ms Wong, and then she would be his forever.

\*

It was nearly half past five when Tony got back to Marvel. He spent a few minutes wandering up and down the hallway of the boys' dorm, but it was mostly empty. Everyone must already be down at dinner, he realised. He was a little disappointed to think that he wouldn't be able to deal with the bullies immediately, but perhaps it was for the best. This way, he would be able to find out who they were before confronting them again. Satisfied, he went back downstairs to look for the dining room.

Dr Luchansky met him as he reached the ground floor. "I was just coming up to look for you. I realised that I hadn't shown you where the dining room was."

"I figured I'd just be able to follow my nose."

"I wanted to take you down and introduce you around this evening anyway," Dr Luchansky continued.

"Oh. Well, thanks."

Dr Luchansky frowned. "Is something the matter? You look worried. I can promise you that the children won't try to eat you for at least the first week."

Tony chuckled weakly, because it seemed to be expected. "I'm not worried. It's just that I was out walking, and I caught some kids bullying Carlos, and I'd hoped to find them when I got back."

"Bullying Carlos? Who was it?" Dr Luchansky sounded displeased, but Tony noticed that he didn't sound very surprised. He wondered just how often this sort of thing happened at Marvel.

"I don't know who they were. I ran them off before I could get their names." Briefly, Tony described what had happened. Dr Luchansky looked tired as he listened, and sighed heavily when Tony finished talking.

"I know those boys. This isn't the first time they've done something like this to Carlos," he said, confirming Tony's suspicions. "I'm glad you told me about this, Tony. If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to handle it myself."

Tony shrugged. "If you want."

"And if anything like this happens again, I'd appreciate it if you could bring it to my attention as soon as possible."

"Sure." Tony supposed it was tactless to ask, but he couldn't help himself. "About Carlos?"

"Yes?"

"You did say he has super powers, didn't you?"

Dr Luchansky nodded. "He does. He's just having trouble controlling them at the moment. We're hoping that he'll grow out of it, but at the moment, he's a bit clumsy."

"Clumsy?" It was the last thing Tony had expected to hear. It was like hearing that Superman had acne.

"Clumsy," Dr Luchansky repeated. "Carlos has had a growth spurt over the last six months, and he's having trouble co-ordinating himself." Dr Luchansky seemed to be fighting back a smile. "It's probably a good thing that he has a super-strong head, because otherwise he'd put himself in the medical centre at least twice a week. Yesterday, he fell out of a chair and got lodged in the floor." He sighed again, and shook his head. "It's hard not to laugh at some of the things he manages to do, but it is a serious problem. Carlos has always been a little isolated. A lot of the other students resent his super powers. And now that he can't control them properly... Suffice to say that this isn't the first bullying incident we've had involving Carlos. Not by a long shot."

"So what are you going to do about it? Expel the kids?"

"I can't do that, Tony. As I've explained, a lot of these children are here for their own protection. Many of them would simply not be safe if they were released back to their parents and found not to have super powers after all."

"What could their parents do?" Tony scoffed.

Dr Luchansky looked sad. "I hope you never find out, Tony." He stopped walking, indicating a pair of swinging doors. "Here we are. Time to meet the masses."

\*

The dining room was stuffed almost to bursting with tables of chattering children. The noise hit them like a fistful of rocks as they entered the room, making Tony feel rather claustrophobic. Dr Luchansky drew himself up to a formidable height, and spoke louder than Tony would have imagined possible. "All right, everyone, quiet, please." His words were perfectly polite, but they had the desired effect. The entire room grew quiet and still. "I'd like for you all to meet Tony Rossi. Mr Rossi will be taking over from Mr Matherson in the boys' boarding house. I'd like you all to make him feel as welcome as possible. Thank you."

The noise started to build again as Dr Luchansky, slipping back into his usual stoop, led Tony over to the staff table. It was at the back of the room, near the serving table, where the staff could keep an eye on the line of children waiting to serve themselves. Dr Luchansky led Tony to an empty seat, and began the introductions again. "Everybody, this is Tony Rossi. Tony, our on-campus staff. That's Chris to your left," indicating a pleasant looking Asian man. "Chris looks after our children's dorm, and also teaches music part-time. Don't believe anything he reads to you out of a newspaper. Chris subscribes to every tabloid in the country, and a couple of overseas ones for good measure." Chris smiled at them, and Dr Luchansky continued. "Next to him is Abdul, our head counsellor. We have two other counsellors, but they both live off-campus."

"Pleased to meet you, Tony," Abdul said.

"Yeah, nice to meet you, too."

"Next to Abdul is Jessica Stein, our resident doctor. She's on call to our medical centre twenty-four hours a day, and she does an excellent job." Dr Luchansky directed this last remark at Jessica, who acknowledged it, and Tony, with a thin smile, before going back to her conversation. "And last of all, Brandy, who you probably met this afternoon. Brandy does our administration, and she's also the house parent for the girls' dorm."

This was more than Tony had bargained for. Not only was he going to have to work with Danielle's doppelganger, but he was going to have to live with her, as well. Maria was definitely going to hear about this the next time he spoke to her. Tony muttered a word of greeting and looked

away hurriedly, but his eyes kept coming back to her. Fortunately, Brandy was deep in conversation with Jessica, the doctor, and she didn't seem to notice.

"We usually wait for the children to serve themselves before we eat," Dr Luchansky was explaining. "It helps keep the noise levels down in here if they're all eating." Sure enough, the room was getting quieter as the crowd of children around the serving table thinned out. Dr Luchansky stood up then, and the rest of the staff followed him over to the serving table. Tony picked up a plate and moved down the table, filling it up with the soft squishy bread and brown glop on offer. Evidently, institutional food hadn't changed since the last time Tony had worked with kids.

"Hi," a voice came from behind him, startling him and nearly making him drop the ladle he was holding. He turned, and there was Brandy, favouring him with the sort of smile he hadn't been able to coax out of Danielle for months.

"Hi," he replied huskily. He wanted to offer her his hand, but they were both full, so he settled for giving her a weak smile and trying not to stare down her top. "I'm Tony."

"I know."

"Right." Tony was aware that he was acting like one of the kids, but he wasn't sure what else to say. "Would you like some of this stuff?" he offered, waving his ladle at the vat of goo before him.

"Oh, no thank you," she replied. "I don't eat unbranded food. On Mondays, I have Heinz soup, Wonderbread, and I Can't Believe It's Not Butter." She said this, not in the soft tone that seemed to be her normal voice, but in a hard, chirpy tone that made her sound like a cross between a robot and a kid in a cereal commercial.

"Do you?" Tony asked uneasily. He wondered whether Danielle had always secretly been this unhinged. "I Can't Believe It's Not Butter, huh?" For some reason, he found himself asking, "So what do you have to drink with all of that?"

This was a stupid question, and Brandy treated it as such. "Coke, of course. Coke adds life."

"What? Coke hasn't added life since the seventies. Wasn't that a little bit before your time?" He didn't know how old she was, but she couldn't be more than thirty.

Brandy almost seemed to be sorry for him. "Some things are timeless, Tony."

By this point, Tony was convinced that this was all some sort of put-on, but then he saw someone coming out of the kitchen door bearing a tray. "Heinz soup," the kitchen guy announced with a smile. "Wonder bread." He gave her the tray. "And I Can't Believe It's Not Butter."

Brandy took the tray from him graciously, like the queen accepting a jewel. "Thank you, Larry."

Tony found all of this to be, quite frankly, creepy, but he had to know. "Is that really Heinz soup? I mean, how do you know?"

Brandy gave him a serious look. "Tony," she said. "I know."

"Oh," he said weakly. "Of course you do."

"Hey, move it along, Brandy. Stop holding up the damned line." It was the school doctor, Jessica, and she was staring angrily at the two of them.

"Sorry, Jessica," Brandy said. Meekly, she took her soup and bread back to the table.

"It was my fault," he told the doctor. "Really. She was just talking to me."

"Right." She stared at him. "You done with that ladle, or were you planning to eat with it?"

Tony was amazed that she was talking to him this way. "No, you can have it," he said as mildly as he could. He dropped it in the vat of goo, sending splatters satisfyingly close to her dress, and took his own plate back to the table. He could feel her glowering at his back, and decided that it would probably be wise to avoid her in the future.

\*

Brian Kirkpatrick, White House media liaison, was most happy when addressing a crowd of reporters on a matter of moral decay. Brian was a respectable family man, and a good Republican. He had the requisite dowdy wife, a degree from a venerable old college, and an unswerving belief in eternal damnation for the sinners of the world. He was just the sort of man that a weak and colourless President needed to put a strong message across to the waiting nation. Brian Kirkpatrick believed in himself the way he believed in the moral decline of the country, and tonight was his night to showcase both of these things.

In a small anteroom behind the conference room, Brian straightened his tie, checked his plastic hairstyle and smiled his best spray-on smile. Something in his teeth. He pulled faces at the mirror for a minute, trying to dislodge it with his tongue. Ah. He had it. A lump of steak from dinner. Good thing he had caught it before he had gone out to address the media, he thought, admiring the half-chewed lump before flicking it discreetly into a floral arrangement. They could be merciless when it came to little things like that. When it came to big things, they were completely indifferent, but they were savage when it came to dissecting the dress and manners of their rightful leaders.

Brian coughed, cleared his throat, and performed one last smile check. Not that he would need to be smiling tonight, he reminded himself. Tonight was not a night for smiling. Tonight was a night for denouncing SIN. Brian always thought of sin in capital letters, fiery red ones ten feet high. But tonight, with his speech, he would cut SIN down. He would smite SIN until it shattered. Pleased with this thought, he performed one final hair check, and then stepped out to face the crowd.

A barrage of flashbulbs greeted his entry into the conference room. Brian smiled, nodded at a few of the VIPs in the front row, and stepped up to the lectern.

“Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, and members of the press. America is on the verge of moral collapse.” At this point, Brian had scripted a pause while the audience gasped. He paused, but the gasps didn’t materialise, and after an awkward moment, he continued. “I tell you that our fair nation is on the verge of moral collapse. Our public institutions – our schools, our hospitals, our armed forces – have been hijacked by the forces of SIN and decay.” There was a buzz in the room now, as everyone turned to their neighbour and whispered something. Brian was pleased. He let the buzz build, and then raised his hands for silence. “I tell you, ladies and gentlemen, our nation is under attack. It is an attack more insidious, more dangerous, and more cowardly than any of the terrorist attacks that we have bravely withstood in recent years. It is an attack from within, a civil war led by the homosexuals, the prostitutes, and the pornographers. It is an assault on our children’s innocence, an attempt to corrupt them, and lead them down the road to SIN and damnation. And the media is guilty.” Another buzz, this one mainly from the back of the room, where the news reporters and camera crews were gathered. Brian smiled inwardly. That’d teach them. If they wanted to play games with the news, he would strike back at them. He reached under the lectern, and pulled out a videotape that one of his aides had placed there earlier.

“I have proof,” he declared, waving the tape above his head. “I have proof. I have documented this descent into iniquity.” One of his aides scurried up to the lectern and relieved him of the tape. “Everything you are about to see was taped off cable TV, and is freely available to children in over ninety per cent of homes. One of the scenes you are about to watch was filmed from a children’s TV channel!”

The audience was muttering, but they sounded more confused than convinced. It was time to move in for the kill. “Pornography is everywhere. Our children cannot avoid it. On the contrary, they are encouraged to drink their fill from this poisoned well. Our children’s TV channels, broadcasting educational material to young minds during the day, become peddlers of smut and filth when the sun goes down. There are five separate hard-core pornography channels on TV today! Five! The President has asked me to speak out against this avalanche of flesh.” This was not strictly speaking true, but Brian felt fine about saying it. He was certain that the President would have wanted him to speak out on this matter if he had only known about it. But the President was such a busy man. Brian simply hadn’t wanted to bother him. “Roll tape!” Brian commanded dramatically. The lights in the hall dimmed, and the wall behind Brian sprung to life. Behind him, twenty feet high, a woman was giving a man oral sex. The audience made outraged noises. “All of these images were taped off a channel that any child with cable TV can access,” Brian announced, as the scene behind him changed.

Afterwards, Brian practically floated away from the lectern. He almost forgot to thank the press and VIPs for coming. The night had been a huge success. A blow had been struck against SIN and evil. He excused his aides, and walked to his dressing room alone, replaying his speech in his mind.

His dressing room, when he got to it, was not empty. “That was quite a show you put on, Mister Kirkpatrick,” Amanda Wong purred from a chair in the corner. She did not get up to greet him. Brian didn’t like that at all.

“I am determined to wipe out filth and corruption wherever I find them,” he declared.

Amanda Wong looked amused. "Of course you are," she said. She leaned forward, reaching into her handbag, and exposing her cleavage to Brian. Foul temptress, he thought, turning his head away. Still, it was his duty to confront SIN. He had to face evil to confront it, didn't he? Brian turned around, and felt a faint pang of disappointment when he saw that Amanda Wong had found what she was looking for.

"Speaking of corruption," Amanda Wong said, coming up from her bag with an envelope in her hand, "here." She tossed the envelope to Brian, who dropped it into a drawer as if it was full of anthrax.

"Not here," he hissed.

"Why not?"

He glared at her in reply, but she responded with a look of amused disdain. "If you have any other information that might prove relevant to our interests, do pass it on. We would be most happy to hear anything you had for us." She looked significantly at the drawer he had dropped the envelope into. "You understand me, of course."

"Of course."

"Excellent," Amanda Wong stood up, and walked to the door. Her wrist brushed his arm as she walked past him.

"Wait." The words were out of his mouth before he had a chance to think. Amanda Wong turned back to him, one eyebrow raised.

"Forgot something, Kirkpatrick?"

Brian hesitated. "No," he said at last.

"Good. There's a list in the envelope with our current projects on it. You will pass on any information you have relating to any of them." Brian nodded, staring fixedly at a point just to the left of her breasts. "Till next time, then," Amanda Wong said.

"Yes," Brian agreed hoarsely.

\*

It was pretty much a fact of life that whenever things were going well, something would come along to screw that up, Tony reflected as he crossed the quad. Things had been going well, or at least well enough, since he came to Marvel. The kids weren't great kids, but aside from being kind of spoiled, they weren't bad kids either. And so far, at least, Tony hadn't been involved in any incidents featuring blood, vomit, or bedwetting. At times, he even found himself enjoying his job, much to his own surprise. After today, though, he was expecting that to change.

Dr Luchansky had cornered him after breakfast, catching him just as he was leaving. "Tony!" he had said, in a voice that was far too genial to mean anything good. "I've got a job for you."

"Okay," Tony had said. It was probably best to show willing, but it was never a good idea to show too much willing.

"We're computerising the students' medical records. It's a big job, and Jessica already has a lot on her plate. Could you head on over there and give her a hand for a couple of hours each morning? It shouldn't take more than a couple of weeks to do all of the records."

"Well," Tony had said, looking for a polite excuse and completely failing to find one. "Sure."

"Excellent. I'll tell her to expect you over there in an hour. You know where the medical centre is, don't you?"

"Yes."

Dr Luchansky had seemed to sense Tony's hesitation, but neither of them said anything about it. He was sure everyone at Marvel knew that Jessica hated him, and it was pretty obvious why she did. The possessive way she hovered over Brandy whenever Tony was around and the poisonous looks she gave him whenever she caught him looking at Brandy weren't exactly subtle hints, after all. Tony had asked Abdul about it, and Abdul had told him that Jessica was like that with all the men on staff, but Tony couldn't help feeling that he was getting more than his fair share of animosity.

If he could stop staring at Brandy every time the two of them met, it would probably make things easier. He knew it, but that didn't make it any easier to actually do it. Tony wasn't sure whether he found her fascinating or frightening, or whether he was just staring because she looked so much like

Danielle, but whatever the reason, he just couldn't help himself. As he trooped across the quad to the medical centre, he resolved to make more of an effort. He was going to have to, he thought, if he wanted to get through the next few weeks in one piece.

The medical centre was behind the main school building, separate from it, but connected by a short covered walkway. It was a low, ugly modern building, everything that the rest of the school was not, which was probably why it was tucked so carefully away back here where nobody could see it. Either that, Tony thought, or the rest of the staff disliked Jessica as much as he did, and wanted to keep her somewhere safely out of the way.

He pushed his way through a pair of glass double doors, and found himself in a waiting area. Ahead of him was a short hallway with doors leading off to either side, and there was another door to his left. There were several plastic chairs in the waiting area, and a reception desk, which was unmanned. A faint disinfectant smell hung in the air. The whole place was really very professional, for a school medical centre.

Tony walked up to the reception desk, and examined it. No sign that it had been recently used and no bell to call anyone. He looked around, coughed loudly, and hoped that someone would hear him. Or that nobody would, so he could get out of here.

No such luck. "Tony," Jessica said, emerging from the door to the left. "Julius told me you had been assigned to me for the next few weeks." She looked at him appraisingly.

Assigned to her? Tony didn't like the sound of that, and decided that he should get a protest in right at the beginning. "Actually, Jessica," he began, but she cut him off.

"Doctor. Doctor Stein, when we are in the medical wing."

"Of course," he agreed with a tight smile, inwardly resolving that he would bite his tongue out before he called her anything of the sort.

"You will be computerising the students' medical records. Computer's over there. The program loads up automatically, and you hit F3 to enter a new record. Any questions?"

"Shouldn't you have a nurse or something to do this?"

Jessica stared at him. "I'm between nurses at the moment," she said shortly.

Big fucking surprise, Tony thought. "I see."

"Was there anything else?"

"No."

"Good. Get started." And she retreated into her office, shutting the door behind her. Tony gave the door the finger, then, with a sigh, sat down at the reception desk and turned on the computer.

His mornings began to take on a tedious routine. Go to the medical centre, trade barbed greetings with the doctor, and then sit down and input medical records until lunchtime. He wasn't sure what Jessica was doing while he was typing. She spent some of her time in the office, but most of the time she was somewhere else in the building. Tony wasn't sure where, or what she was doing there. Nothing, as far as he could tell. No students ever seemed to come to the medical centre, and so he couldn't imagine what she could be doing with her days. Probably taking a nap or something while he did all the work.

After a week and a half, he decided to ask her about it. "So," he said, stopping her in her tracks as she left her office on another of her mysterious errands, "what is it you do when you don't have students to treat?"

It was an innocent question, and Tony had even managed to ask it politely, but she looked at him as if he had just handed her a fresh turd. "I always have students to treat."

"Oh really?" Tony asked, unable to keep the scepticism out of his voice.

"Yes," she said, heading off down the hallway. Tony swivelled his chair out from behind the reception desk and watched her. She was walking up the length of the hallway, past the doors leading to the bedrooms, and heading for the door at the back, marked 'Private'. Tony had always assumed that it was a supply closet or something like that. Jessica paused with her hand on the doorknob, and looked back over her shoulder at him.

"If you're so interested, you can come along, but you'll wish you hadn't," she said. There was a grim sort of amusement in her voice, and a note of challenge that Tony couldn't ignore. He didn't need to be asked twice. Jessica opened the door, motioned for him to hurry up, and stepped inside.

Tony followed. The room on the other side of the door wasn't a supply closet, after all. It wasn't even a proper room. It was a staircase, leading downwards to another door about fifteen feet below.

"Weird," he muttered, unable to think of any logical reason for this strange setup.

"Hurry up," Jessica said, starting down the stairs.

He followed her down the stairs, and through the door at the bottom. It opened into a small room with a bank of lockers on one wall, and yet another door ahead of him. This door, however, was not like the others in the medical ward. It was made of metal, and looked solid enough to withstand a bomb blast.

"What the hell is this?" he asked, taking a step towards the door.

Jessica reached out and caught his arm. "Hey." She swivelled him around and pointed at a sign on the wall. 'Protective Clothing Must Be Worn.' She opened a locker and began pulling things out. After a moment, Tony did the same.

Five minutes later, they were both suited up in thick white coveralls, gloves, and heavy breathing masks. "What's all of this for?" Tony asked. He was starting to feel a little nervous. It was obvious that whoever designed this place hadn't wanted it to be found. What was going on here?

"You'll see in a minute," Jessica replied, opening the door.

The room beyond was one of the strangest things that Tony had seen. It looked like a set for a science fiction movie, full of metal gadgets and dim lighting. It took him a moment of staring to identify the rows of gleaming metal and glass boxes as incredibly high tech beds. And then he took a closer look at the occupants of the beds. He couldn't figure out what they were at all, but if he had been a conspiracy theorist, he would have been convinced that Marvel was conducting secret experiments on aliens.

"What the fuck?" he demanded, his voice muffled by the breathing mask. Jessica said nothing. He couldn't be sure, but he thought she was smiling behind her mask. "What the hell is this? What are these things in the beds?"

Jessica stared at him witheringly. "Students."

Tony's brain couldn't take it in. His eyes flicked around the room, looking from one bed to another. He couldn't believe that these strange, silent, pinkish-grey lumps of flesh were or had ever been human. "Why have you done this to them?" he asked. "This is disgusting."

Jessica turned on him furiously. "I didn't do this to them, Rossi, and don't you dare suggest anything like it. I'm a doctor. I invented all of this life support equipment. I'm the only thing keeping these kids alive."

Surprisingly, Tony found himself believing her. "I'm sorry," he muttered unwillingly. He stared about the room again, horrified. "Who did this to these kids?"

"Their parents."

Tony almost laughed, before he realised that she was serious. "Why?"

Jessica looked disgusted, and as angry as he had ever seen her. "Because they thought that they could do with a new TV."

"You're saying that they did this to give their kids superpowers?" Tony asked. "How?"

"Spider bites, some of them," Jessica said. "Radiation poisoning. Infectious diseases. Exposure to toxic waste. You'd be amazed how easy it is to get hold of toxic waste." Her voice was neutral, detached, almost as if she was commenting on the weather. It made Tony furious.

"And you're just keeping them like this? And that's okay? You could be reported, you know."

This incensed Jessica. Roughly, she pulled Tony out of the room and shut the door behind her. She pulled off her breathing mask to give him the full force of her glare. "I'm keeping these kids alive, Tony. That's my job, and it's my duty. And I would save more kids if I could, but I can't put my equipment out to the public because of the damned NDA we all signed. So you can go ahead and try to report me, but if you breach the NDA to do it, you'll be picking up pieces of your own ass for the next twenty years, you understand?"

For a moment, Tony almost felt sorry for her. He opened his mouth to say something, but she cut him off before he could speak. "I don't want to hear it, Rossi. I don't give a shit about what you think. Until you're a doctor, or a professor of medical ethics, you've got no right to comment. Now take that stuff off and get back to work."



\*

“Hello?”

“Muller. Me.”

“Hello, Ms Wong. It is nice to hear from you again.”

“Yeah, never mind that. Where are you?”

“Maine. I am investigating a school for gifted children.”

“Well, wrap that up. I’ve got another target for you to look at.”

“Yes?”

“New Metropolis. My source in government tells me there’s some sort of school for superkids out there. Marvel Academy. I want you to check it out.”

“I have already looked at several promising schools for the gifted, Ms Wong.”

“I didn’t say gifted, you dumb shit, I said superkids. You know, super strength, x-ray vision, all that crap. Don’t you get comic books wherever the hell you’re from?”

“I am from Dusseldorf, Ms Wong.”

“I don’t give a shit. Go check out that school.”

“Certainly, Ms Wong.”

\*

At five past nine on a Thursday night, Carlos sat in the little weights room next to the school gym, and waited. Tony was late. Tony probably wasn’t going to come. I shouldn’t have bothered coming here at all, Carlos thought. This whole idea is a stupid waste of time.

Tony had stopped him on Monday morning, as he had been leaving the dorm to go down to classes. “Carlos,” he said. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

Carlos had stopped, but unwillingly. Tony was an okay guy, but Carlos really didn’t want to talk to him. Every time Carlos saw him, he was reminded of the time that Tony had come across him in the forest, being beaten up by Mike and his gang. Tony had never brought it up, but Carlos knew it was only a matter of time. Everyone always wanted to talk to him about his powers sooner or later. “What do you want, man?” Carlos asked, trying to make it sound polite.

“Let’s take a walk.” Tony led the way down the stairs in silence, heading out of the building and across the quad. Everyone else was in classes by then, and the quad was empty and quiet.

“I’m going to be late to class,” Carlos said. He didn’t really care, but it was a good excuse.

“That’s okay. You can just tell your teacher that I wanted to talk to you for a second. If there are any problems, they can come and speak to me.”

Great. Carlos could see that there was going to be no avoiding this little talk, so he resolved to get it over with as quickly as possible. “What’s the problem?” he asked.

Tony hesitated before replying, an awkward look on his face. By the time he did speak, Carlos knew exactly what he was going to say. “I was hoping to talk to you about your powers.”

“What about them?” Carlos asked aggressively, still hoping to cut this conversation off before it even started.

No such luck. Tony just paused for a second, and then continued calmly. “Well, I know you’ve been having some problems with them recently, and I was wondering whether you would like some help getting them back under your control.”

“You think you can help me with my powers?” Carlos couldn’t believe this guy. “What the hell do you know about it? You don’t have powers of your own, and I’ll bet you’ve never met anyone else who does.”

“You’re right, I don’t have powers of my own, but that doesn’t mean I can’t help you.” Sure, Carlos thought. He arranged his face into a bored expression, but Tony ignored it and went on talking. “A lot of kids have problems similar to yours, even without powers. You’ve been growing a lot lately, haven’t you?”

The question caught Carlos by surprise, and he answered automatically. “Yeah.”

“And I’ll bet you didn’t have any problems with your powers before you started growing, did you?”

Carlos glowered at him. "No."

"And when you stop growing and get used to your new height, you probably won't have any problems with your powers either. But if you wanted to try to do something about it now, you could."

"Like what?" Carlos asked.

"Anything that makes you use your muscles in a controlled way. Weight training. Rock climbing. Anything like that."

It all sounded like bullshit to Carlos, but Tony seemed so serious about this stupid idea that he felt he had to say something. "I'll think about it."

"That's fine. I'll be in the weight room every night this week between nine and ten. If you want to come along, fine. If you don't, you don't have to. Okay?"

"Okay." They stood silently in the middle of the quad for a moment. "Can I go to class now?"

Tony's face fell, and he sighed. "Sure," he said. "Go ahead."

Carlos hadn't gone to the gym that night, and he hadn't gone on the Tuesday night or the Wednesday night either. He knew that Tony had been going, because he had watched him leave the dorms at five to nine, and seen him come back at five past ten. And he had thought about going along with him each night, but he hadn't. Anyway, he thought, what does this guy know about my powers? Nothing, that's what.

Still, Carlos had felt guilty about it all week. He was pretty sure that Tony was just trying to help, however weird the help might seem. And if he could get control of his powers back, he wouldn't have to spend his lunches and evenings sneaking around trying to avoid Mike and his gang. And what did he really have to lose?

Carlos spent most of Thursday psyching himself up to it, and then at five to nine, he changed into his gym clothes and left the dorm. The gym was empty when he got there, but he was a little early, so that was okay. He sat down against the far wall and waited. And waited. He looked at his watch. Nearly ten past. Tony probably wasn't coming at all. Typical.

He was just about to get up and leave, when the door opened and Tony came in. He looked about him, but he didn't notice Carlos at first. Carlos watched the way his shoulders slumped as he took in the empty room.

"Hey," Carlos said, standing up.

Tony jumped a little, but recovered quickly. "I thought you weren't coming."

"Yeah, well I thought you weren't coming either."

"Sorry. I had to stop in and talk to Dr Luchansky for a minute."

Carlos shrugged. "Well, I'm here. What do I do?" He eyed the weight machines uncertainly, wondering if this whole thing was a bad idea.

"Nothing difficult. Stretches. And then work with light weights. You've already got super strength, so it's not like you need to build up your muscles." Tony smiled.

"I guess not," Carlos agreed.

"Well," Tony said. "Let's get started, then."

\*

It was about ten minutes' drive down a minor country road from Marvel Academy to Carterton, the nearest town. Carterton had begun its life as a minor farming town, and had stayed a minor farming town till about fifteen years ago, when the creeping outer edge of the New Metropolis suburbs reached out and grabbed it. It still felt like a small town, in many ways, but there were signs that all that was changing. All over town, big old wooden houses were being torn down and replaced with clusters of identical red brick townhouses, and on the main street, shops were closing down and being boarded up, only to open three months later as Starbucks franchises.

Tony drove past three identical Starbucks on his way up the main street to the post office. Marvel Academy had a fairly nice new Jeep, and twice a week, Tony drove it into Carterton to clear out the school's oversized PO Box and run errands for the on-campus staff. On the passenger's seat beside him was a big brown sack, which he grabbed on his way out the door.

“Morning, Tony,” the woman behind the counter greeted him. Carterton might be a suburb these days, but the woman at the post office still knew most of the people that went there. Tony kind of like that

“Morning, Geena.” Tony went over to the wall of PO boxes, and unlocked the large one on the bottom row that Marvel rented. As usual, it was stuffed with letters, junk mail, and package slips. Tony went to the counter, and gave the slips to Geena. “Nice day,” he said.

“Just lovely.” She disappeared into a back room to retrieve his packages, and Tony used the time to sort the mail, dropping the letters into the sack and putting the junk mail in a pile to throw away. “Lot of packages for you today, Tony,” Geena remarked as she returned, her chin resting on the top of a precarious stack of boxes.

“Thanks, Geena.” Tony started stuffing his packages into the sack.

“How are the little geniuses today?” Geena asked. Everyone in Carterton thought that Marvel was just another school for the gifted, and Dr Luchansky encouraged everyone to keep it that way.

“About the same. Smart mouthed. Difficult. How are your kids?”

Geena laughed. “About the same. Smart mouthed. Difficult.”

“They must be geniuses, then. You should send them along to Marvel.” Tony gathered up the last of the parcels. “Would you mind throwing this into the recycling for me?” he asked, indicating the pile of junk mail.

“No problem.”

“Thanks,” Tony said again. “Well, see you Thursday.”

“You have a good day, now, Tony.”

“Yeah. You too.”

Shouldering his sack, Santa-style, Tony left the post office. It was a nice day outside, chilly, but fine and sunny. Tony put his sack of mail into the passenger seat of the Jeep and tried to think of an excuse to stay in town a little longer.

“Pardon me,” a voice began from behind him. “Could you direct me to the railway station?” Tony turned around. It was a youngish, blond man with a faint foreign accent.

“It’s three blocks down, and then you turn left on Elder and go up another two blocks,” he said, pointing down the street. “You can’t miss it.”

“Thank you very much,” the man said.

“No problem.” Tony was expecting the man to walk away at this point, but he just stood there, waiting. “Would you like me to take you there?” Tony offered, because it seemed to be what the man was waiting for.

“That would be most helpful, thank you.”

“Hang on a second.” Tony moved the sack of mail into the Jeep’s back seat, and stepped aside. “Hop in.”

They both got into the Jeep, and Tony started the engine. “Tony Rossi,” he said, offering a hand to the man.

“Hermann Golding,” the man returned.

“Pleased to meet you,” Tony said insincerely. Hermann was the kind of person that almost nobody was really pleased to meet. “You here on vacation or something?” he asked.

“On holiday, yes.” Tony waited, but Hermann didn’t seem inclined to say anything else. With an inward shrug, he backed the Jeep out of the space and onto the street.

“What is this ‘Marvel Academy’?” Hermann asked as they drove along.

“What?” Tony frowned at the road in front of him. How did Hermann know about Marvel?

“‘Marvel Academy’. It is on your door.”

“Oh, right.” The school name and crest was on the Jeep’s doors. Tony let out a breath. “It’s where I work. It’s a school.”

“You are a teacher there?”

“No. I look after the kids after school. It’s a boarding school.”

“I see.” Hermann seemed thrilled to hear this, and Tony began to feel uncomfortable again.

“Why? You a teacher?”

“Yes, that is exactly right,” Hermann said, beaming. “I am a teacher of children. I am very curious about how your schools work in America. I wonder if I might be permitted to make a visit?”

“I don’t think so,” Tony said, flicking on the indicator to turn into the train station lot. “We don’t really do visitors.” This was the truth, but he would have said it even if it wasn’t. For some reason, he really didn’t like this Hermann Golding.

“Perhaps I could talk to your head master. I would be most interested in learning the American way of teaching.”

“Dr Luchansky will give you the same answer I did,” Tony said, turning off the engine. “But I’ll give you his number if you’d like.” He reached over Hermann to pop the glove box and grab a pen and paper. He scribbled the school’s number down and handed it over. “Here.”

“Thank you so much. For the ride too.”

“Sure,” Tony said shortly. “Look, I’ve got to be going, so-“

“Of course,” Hermann said, opening the door and getting out. “Thank you again, Tony.” He slammed the door closed, and Tony watched him walking into the train station. On second thoughts, he decided, starting the car again, maybe he would go back to the school after all.

\*

Muller walked into the train station, and waited until he heard the Jeep start up and pull away. He had taken a risk that time, he knew, approaching someone from Marvel in person. And the man, Tony, had seemed suspicious of him. He probably wasn’t really suited to this kind of direct action.

That was an unworthy thought. Muller was ashamed of himself for having it. After all, was God not on his side in this matter? And Ms Wong, was she not relying on him? He could not fail her. But at the same time, he was uncertain of how to proceed.

He had been staking Marvel out for over a week, hiding in the woods near the school gates and posing as a researcher for the Department of Conservation, but so far he hadn’t come up with anything useful. He knew that most of the staff lived off campus, and he had tailed several of them to and from work. He had found out their names and telephone numbers, and had called most of them up on a variety of pretexts. He had pretended to be a government official, a radio presenter for a new ‘Workplace of the Month’ programme, a film student, and half a dozen other things, but nobody was willing to give him a tour of the campus, introduce him to the headmaster, or even walk him past the school gates. They were too well trained for that.

Muller glanced nervously down at his watch. It was almost time for him to call Ms Wong to report in, and he had nothing but bad news to give her. He couldn’t even confirm that Marvel Academy was actually a school for superkids. All he could tell her was that the school was isolated, the staff were unfriendly, and that he had spotted a rare species of woodpecker on yesterday’s stakeout. She would not be pleased. She might even be angry enough to remove him from the assignment. The thought reduced Muller almost to tears, prompting a kind-faced security guard to come up to him and ask him if he was all right.

“I am fine,” he replied, averting his eyes and hurrying back out of the building. All clear. The Jeep was really gone, and not just parked a couple of doors down waiting to catch him out. Muller was not usually this suspicious, but the staff at Marvel were making him nervous. He was convinced that they must be hiding something. They were being far too secretive for people with nothing to hide.

Muller brightened as he considered this. The staff at Marvel must be hiding something. Which meant that they probably did have superkids at the school. He could report this to Ms Wong. She would probably still be angry, but she was always angry. It was one of the reasons why he adored her. At any rate, he was making progress. God had smoothed the way for him once again. Soon, nothing would stand between him and Ms Wong. With a smile, he got out his cellphone to make his report.

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Half an hour later, Tony had completely forgotten about Hermann Golding. He had driven straight back to Marvel from the train station, gone to the office to drop off the mail, and discovered that he was late for a meeting. There was a note for him on Brandy’s desk.

“Tony – meeting re: open day in board room at midday. Please come down ASAP.” The writing was big and loopy, with big circles over the ‘i’s instead of dots. Brandy must have written it, not Dr Luchansky. Leaving the sack of mail next to the reception desk, Tony went down the hall to the boardroom.

The meeting had already begun by the time he arrived, but Dr Luchansky broke off what he was saying as soon as he saw Tony. “Tony,” he said. “Glad you could make it.” His tone was perfectly pleasant, but Tony felt the need to apologise anyway.

“Sorry. Just got back from the mail run.”

“That’s fine. I should have mentioned it to you after breakfast, but I didn’t catch you. Take a seat and I’ll fill you in.”

There was one free seat at the table, and Tony slipped into it, glancing around the table as he did so. It looked like the whole staff was at this meeting. The whole staff except for the PE teacher, he realised after a second look. That made sense. Someone had to be looking after the kids. More curious than ever now, he looked back at Dr Luchansky, who took this as his cue to begin.

“I was just explaining for the other new members of staff what this open day is about, and what we do. In essence, it is an opportunity for the parents of our students to see them during the school year, and to see their powers in action.” Tony must have looked startled. Dr Luchansky smiled as he continued. “You’ve read Harry Potter, of course?” It would have been an embarrassing admission, but Tony didn’t have to make it. “Well, we took a leaf out of their book when we were setting up Marvel. We have a policy forbidding students to exercise their powers except on school property while they are students here. No doubt you can see how this makes life easier for the students.”

That made sense. Tony nodded.

“The parents don’t like it, but they put up with it. Still, they are much happier when they get to see their little darlings in action once a year or so. Happy parents mean safe students, so we put on this little show for them.”

Tony got it. “We fake their powers.”

“Exactly. We fake their powers.” Dr Luchansky nodded to Brandy, who sent a stack of documents around the table. “What’s coming around now is the list of our students and their purported superpowers. Everybody take one and have a look at it.” A fairly intense silence fell over the table, broken only by the occasional flip of a page. Tony looked at his copy of the list. There were nearly a hundred and fifty students in the school, he knew, and looking at the list he realised what a monumental job it was going to be to fake powers for all of them. Some of these kids had three and four superpowers listed. He couldn’t believe that the people at Marvel had gotten away with this so far. He looked around the table at the rest of the staff. A couple of them looked nervous – Jorge Ramirez, who taught the combined fifth and sixth grade, and a skinny redheaded woman that Tony had never been introduced to – but most of them seemed perfectly confident. Jorge met Tony’s eye and grimaced slightly. The three of us must be new, Tony thought.

Dr Luchansky gave everyone about five minutes to look over the list before he spoke again. “I’ll just explain to the new staff how we usually work this.” His eyes glanced over Tony, Jorge, and the redhead, and Tony knew he had been right. “It isn’t as big a job as it looks. Each student only demonstrates one power, and we don’t let students in the middle school exhibit at all. High school students only.” Well, that cut the list down a bit, Tony thought, but it was still going to be a huge job. “Now, if you look at the powers that the students claim, you’ll see that they fall into a couple of major categories. There’s super strength and super speed, control of one or more of the elements, psychic powers, enhanced senses, and rapid healing. For obvious reasons, we don’t demonstrate that last power.” This actually drew a few chuckles from around the table. “We have broken you up into groups, and assigned each group a power and number of students who claim that power. It is up to each group to convincingly display their students’ power on the day.” Dr Luchansky looked around the table. “Please don’t treat this the way your students treat some of their group assignments.” More grins and chuckles. “If your group needs funds or any other resources in order to perform your demonstration, submit a request to Brandy and I will authorise it, within reason. If you need time off to discuss your presentation, you can have it, as long as your classes are covered.” He was deadly serious now. “The open day is in a month, and we cannot afford to have anything go wrong. Each group will get two afternoons with the students they are assigned to rehearse their presentation. The

students know how important this is. They know what their parents are expecting of them. Please don't let yourselves forget."

He stood up. "Brandy has posted the cast list on the bulletin board outside." He said it as if it was a joke, but nobody laughed. "Take a minute to look it over, and maybe arrange a meeting time with your group. If your group is having problems arranging a suitable demonstration, please see me at once. Don't leave it to the last minute." He looked around the table one last time, and then walked out of the room.

The meeting broke up quickly, with the twenty or so staff members all heading out the door at once to get a look at the list on the board. The crowd around the board was thick but fast moving, with most people stopping just long enough to find their name, and then breaking off into little knots and moving down the hall.

"Looks like we'll be working together, Tony," someone said from behind him just as he was finally making his way up to the board. Tony turned to see Abdul, the counsellor, standing in line behind him, pointing at the list. "Don't worry. I've done half a dozen of these things. It's stressful, but not as bad as you think it's going to be."

"I hope you're right." Tony turned to look at the list. He found his own name fairly quickly, halfway down the page, along with Abdul and Brandy's. They had been assigned eight kids who all claimed to have super strength.

"We should find Brandy, set up a time to talk about this," Abdul suggested. They moved away from the board together, looking around for Brandy. She was about twenty feet down the hallway, being talked to very fiercely by Jessica. When she saw the two of them, Brandy gave them a feeble little wave. Jessica turned around to look at them as well, and gave Tony a poisonous look. Tony felt faintly ill. Jessica held the stare for a moment, then turned away again and stormed off down the hall. Great.

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"Theresa," her mother called. "Dinner time."

"Just a minute, Mom," Theresa called back, frowning in annoyance at the way her concentration had been broken. Now I'm going to have to start all over again, she thought. Damn. The last thought was tinged with a hefty dose of guilty pleasure. Theresa's family was about as Southern Baptist as they came, and she wasn't allowed to swear, which meant that of course she swore inside her head at every opportunity.

"Now, Theresa," her mother called, more insistently this time.

"I'm just finishing an essay, Mom. I'll be down in five minutes." Theresa took up her pen and scribbled loudly for a few seconds, and then set it back down again and closed her eyes. She knew that using her Sight at home, where her mother could come into the room and catch her at any moment wasn't really a good idea, but she couldn't help herself. Not with what she had seen this afternoon at lunchtime.

She slowed her breathing down, blanking her mind and sending it out. For a long time, she couldn't see anything, and she thought that maybe she wasn't going to make a connection this evening at all. Maybe I just imagined it this afternoon, she thought, knowing that it wasn't true.

And then she could see again, her Sight coming in translucent and foggy as a cheap B movie effect. She was looking at a boy, about her own age, sitting at a desk and doing homework just like she was supposed to be. He looked perfectly ordinary as he worked, but Theresa knew he wasn't. This afternoon, at lunch, when she had been messing around with her Sight to avoid talking to any of the bitches she went to school with, he had seen this boy running through the woods faster than any normal person could ever hope to run. Until he tripped over his own feet and ran headfirst into a tree.

Theresa had never met another person with superpowers before, but as soon as she saw this boy, she knew she had to meet him. She didn't know who he was or where he lived – yet. But she was a resourceful person, and she didn't intend to let that stop her.

Her Sight had cleared up until it was as sharp as her normal vision, and now she was hearing sounds as well. A sort of muffled chattering, as if it were coming from another room. And then a voice, much clearer.

“Carlos?” The boy looked up. “C’mon, man. The game’s starting.”

He shut his books. “Yeah. I’ll be along in a sec.”

“Well, you better hurry, or you’ll miss the cheerleaders.”

“Theresa!”

Theresa was confused, and her Sight dissolved around her. Oh right, she thought. Mom. She grabbed the pen again, and scribbled out another sentence, finishing it off with an audible flourish.

“Just finished now, Mom. I’m coming down.” Hiding her irritation, she got up and left her room. Carlos, she thought. I am definitely going to be seeing you in person one day soon.

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Brian Kirkpatrick smiled one last time for the cameras, waving, posing, and kissing the malnourished child in his arms. “Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. That’s all for this evening. But remember, the forces of evil and SIN are everywhere. It is up to all of us to expose them, and to punish their wickedness.” He paused for one final photo opportunity, and then escaped down a passageway, palming the child off onto one of his aides as soon as he was out of sight of the cameras.

“Could you turn that over to the police?” he asked. “I’m going up to my dressing room.”

“Actually,” his aide replied, taking the child with a nervous expression, “I think that the chief of police would like to speak to you.”

Brian smiled. “No doubt he wants to congratulate me on my exposure of an incredibly sinful practice. Ask him to wait until tomorrow. We’ll need to have photographers present, in case there’s a citation.”

“I’m not sure that’s what he wants,” his aide said.

“Well, what does he want?”

His aide coughed, looking embarrassed. “I think there’s a little question about whether what you did tonight was strictly legal.”

“Is it illegal to expose criminals? Is it illegal to fight SIN?” Brian was all ready to launch into an angry monologue, but the aide cut in.

“Both of those things are fine. I think it’s the child smuggling that he has a problem with.”

Brian was furious. “I alerted the police as soon as I made the arrangements. I have co-operated with them fully.”

“You did alert them when you had made all the arrangements for the press conference, but I think that there’s still the matter of you paying a child smuggler for a cargo of twenty children. You can see how the police might misunderstand your motives, can’t you?”

“No I cannot, and I am outraged that you would even suggest it. If I did pay a child smuggler, it was only to expose his crime to the world, and if I did receive a cargo of children, I released them to the police as soon as the container was opened. It was all caught on film. I have proof.”

His aide let out another embarrassed cough. “You did turn them over to the police as soon as the container was opened, but the police are having trouble with the fact that you received the container early this morning. They seem to think that you should have handed it over then.”

“But the press conference was scheduled for this evening.”

“I know that, but-“

“I refuse to discuss this any further. Tell the chief of police that he is quite welcome to take this matter up with my lawyer, but that he’ll look like a fool if he does.”

“Certainly,” his aide sighed.

“I’m going up to my dressing room.”

“Very well.”

Brian stormed off down the hallway and up the stairs to his dressing room for the evening – the lunchroom of the disused warehouse where tonight’s press conference had been held. He was furious. Hadn’t the chief of police seen the press conference? Didn’t he know what good publicity this would be for both of them? Short-sighted fool, Brian thought, slamming the door behind him.

“Another excellent show, Kirkpatrick. I think I enjoyed this one most of all.”

“Get out of my chair,” Brian told Amanda Wong through tight lips.

“What’s the matter, Kirkpatrick? Things not going well for you?” Amanda Wong smiled, and Brian said nothing. Her smile dropped away suddenly, and she snarled at him. “Well, they aren’t going well for me, either.”

This almost made Brian feel better. “Is that a fact? What seems to be the problem?”

“The superkids, you stupid shit. What the festering fuck were you thinking when you let that program go ahead?”

“It was before my time, Amanda. I had no control over it.” Brian tried to keep the impatience out of his voice. Women, he thought. They have no understanding of the political process.

Amanda Wong didn’t look the slightest bit mollified. “Well why in hell haven’t you tried to get the damned thing revoked?”

“Revoked?”

“Yes, revoked, you crate of monkey asses! Do you have any idea how bad for business it would be if a superkid showed up and started fighting terrorism? Have you considered that? And what’s bad for my business, Brian, is bad for your business. Get me?”

“Well, I-“

“Do something about it.”

“What?”

“Do something about it. Get the school shut down, the program canned, the law off the books. Or do you want me to do it for you?”

“And how do you suggest I go about that? I’m not sure I have the authority to do something like that.” Brian hated to say it, but it was probably true.

“Authority? I don’t give a shit about that. In fact, I’m going to give you the authority.” Amanda Wong pulled a thick envelope out of her bag and thumped it onto the make-up table. “There. There’s the authority. Use it.”

“I don’t know why you’re so worked up about this program,” Brian muttered. He didn’t know much about it – it was the province of a minor government department with very few opportunities for press coverage – but it didn’t seem like a very important, or a very well-funded, program.

“You don’t know? Well, let me tell you, you two-toned shit-smear. If one superkid shows up and starts fighting terrorism, I’m going to have to tell all my clients to switch to selling superhero merchandising. And I don’t want to have to do that. So get the fuck onto it if you want to see another cent from me again.”

“Okay, calm down. I’ll talk to the President or something. I’ll see what I can do.”

“You had better be able to do something.” Amanda Wong stood up, and walked out of his dressing room. Brian sighed, and looked around for the aspirin. This evening wasn’t turning out the way he had expected.

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On the Thursday afternoon after the staff meeting, Tony and Abdul drove the Jeep into Carterton. They had arranged to meet Brandy at one of Carterton’s three Starbucks to talk about their presentation for the open day. Tony was relieved that they were going to be meeting off campus. In fact, they were probably all relieved. A blind man couldn’t have missed the cold look that Jessica had given Tony when she realised that he was going to be working with Brandy, or the possessive way she had clutched Brandy’s arm when Tony and Abdul had come over to speak to Brandy. The atmosphere in the hall that day had been thick enough to choke on.

It was Abdul, of course, who had suggested that they meet in town. He had even managed to make it sound logical and natural, like something they would be doing anyway, whether Jessica was a nutcase or not. Tony had been grateful to him for that. As they parked the car and got out, he tried to say something about it.

“Good idea, having the meeting in town.” He stopped awkwardly. Abdul was giving him a knowing look, and Tony decided he didn’t want to pursue it further.

They walked up the street together in silence. The two other schools in Carterton had just finished for the day, and the streets were clogged with little knots of kids, talking, laughing, and sucking down giant takeaway coffees. And Starbucks wasn’t the only coffee place to have colonized



the area, either. It seemed like every third building they passed was a cafe. Clearly, Carterton was enough a part of the big city to have reached the terminal stages of coffeemia.

“So, why are we going to Starbucks?” Tony asked eventually. “There must be fifty cafes just on this street.”

“You’ll have to ask Brandy about that.”

“What do you mean?”

They had reached their target Starbucks by this point, but instead of going inside, Abdul stopped on the sidewalk. He took a short glance inside, but looked away too quickly for Tony to tell what he was looking at. “Two reasons. One, Brandy thinks it is part of her patriotic duty.”

“To go to Starbucks?”

Abdul sighed. He seemed unhappy about something. “Do you watch the news?”

“Occasionally, yeah.”

“So you know about the bombings of those Starbucks franchises in Florida?”

Tony frowned. It was ringing a bell, but he couldn’t remember any of the details. “Vaguely.”

“And you know what happens every time there’s a new terrorist attack, don’t you? Some White House flunky hops in front of those blue curtains and makes a moving speech about how we need to keep our country’s treasured institutions strong in the face of this onslaught. How we can’t let these terrorists wreck our proud economy.”

“Yeah,” Tony drawled.

“Well.” Abdul spread his hands, as if to indicate that everything should be obvious. Tony took a minute to think about it.

“I’m really not sure that Starbucks is a treasured national institution.”

“To Brandy it is.”

“It’s a chain of coffee houses!”

“It’s a major American brand.”

Tony shook his head. “That’s wild.” Abdul said nothing, and they stood together in silence for a minute. “So what’s the second reason?”

“The second reason?” It was obvious to Tony that Abdul didn’t really want to answer that. He kept glancing off behind Tony, into the Starbucks.

“You said there were two reasons. What’s the other one?” Abdul still didn’t answer. He just kept flicking his eyes nervously over Tony’s shoulder. “Abdul, if this is important, you should tell me.”

Abdul said nothing, just kept looking through the window behind Tony. Irritated, Tony turned around; hoping to find out what was so interesting. It took him a minute to pick Brandy out of the crowd, but he found her eventually, picking her up as she was walking away from the counter, coffee cup in hand. She was carrying it carefully, but not as if she was afraid to spill it. She was carrying it as if it was some sort of religious artefact. With measured steps she took the cup to a table in the corner and sat down, setting it gently before her. She was focused intently on the cup. Tony doubted she would have seen him if he was standing right in front of her. She was taking deep, slow breaths, fingers twitching towards the cup. There was an expression of intense longing on her face.

“What the hell is going on?” Tony asked, turning to Abdul. “Is this the second reason?” Abdul kept watching the scene in the Starbucks, an almost sad expression on his face. When it became clear he wasn’t going to answer, Tony turned back to the window.

Brandy had closed her hands around the cup, and was bringing it slowly to her lips. Her eyes were closed, and there was an odd sort of smile on her face. She took a deep breath, then a sip. A shiver ran through her body, visible even through the window. She left out a long breath as she swallowed the coffee, her mouth opening slightly as she did. For some reason, the expression on her face was one that Tony found very familiar. Was it something that Danielle had used to do?

“Is she having some kind of seizure? Shouldn’t we help her or something?”

“No, and no.” Abdul’s voice was carefully level.

Suddenly, he knew where Brandy’s expression was familiar from. It was Danielle’s post-orgasmic look. He blushed deeply, and stared off down the street. “I’m not really sure that was something I was meant to see.”

“Perhaps not, but at least now you know not to walk in on her when she’s drinking coffee. Haven’t you wondered why she never drinks the stuff when there are other people around?”

“I guess, but—“ Tony wasn’t sure what to say. “This is pretty creepy, you know. I just watched someone have sex with a cup of coffee.” His voice rose as he spoke. He wondered whether Danielle had been sneaking off to be alone with a hot beverage while they had been together.

Abdul sighed. “Why don’t you just let it be, Tony? We all have our quirks.”

“Not like this. I mean what next. Is she going to fuck a Happy Meal? Give a blowjob to a pair of sneakers?”

“Enough, Tony.” People were starting to stare at them.

“How do you have sex with a cup of coffee, anyway? I mean, what does the coffee get out of it?”

“I said, enough.” Abdul raised his voice and cut Tony off. In a low hiss, Abdul continued.

“You’re going to embarrass Brandy if you keep shouting like this. Is that what you want? She might do a few things that you find odd, but she’s a good person, and she doesn’t deserve to be made a spectacle of.”

Tony took a deep breath, and nodded. “You’re right. I’m sorry. It’s just – forget it. I’m sorry.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. Let’s go.”

\*

Their meeting was long and rather tedious, but reasonably productive. Abdul had been at Marvel for seven years, and he had been working on the super strength demonstration team for five of them. There seemed to be some fairly standard procedures, and he walked Tony through them. It was all carnival trickery, basically. Fake weights, soft metals made to look like steel rods and then bent into pretzels, that sort of thing. It was a long way from having real superheroes, and Tony felt vaguely disappointed by the end of it all.

“What about Carlos?” he said eventually.

“What about Carlos?” Abdul answered.

“Well, he actually has super strength. Why don’t we let him display?”

“He can’t control his super strength. We don’t want an accident, Tony.”

“Actually, he’s getting much better. I think he could do it. And if he lifts something that’s really heavy, maybe the parents would buy the rest of this bullshit a little more.” Tony spoke a little more aggressively than he really intended to. “You know what I mean,” he said by way of apology.

Brandy and Abdul thought about it. “I think it’s a good idea,” Brandy said. Tony tried to acknowledge her without actually looking at her. He had been doing this with limited success throughout the meeting.

“I don’t,” Abdul said firmly. “It’s unnecessary. And it would make the other kids look bad.”

“No it wouldn’t. It’d make the other kids look good. If we got Carlos to lift something or push something or whatever, then we could get parents up from the crowd to try and do it themselves. Prove to them that these kids were actually doing the heavy lifting. That they actually had super powers. Then all we’d have to do would be switch the real thing with something much lighter.”

Brandy looked enthusiastic, but Abdul just grunted. “I’ll think about it,” he said eventually.

Tony opened his mouth and then shut it again. Perhaps Abdul was right. Maybe it would make the other kids look bad. That wouldn’t be good for Carlos, super powers or not. “Okay,” he agreed, resolving not to push the matter any further.

The meeting wound up shortly afterwards. “I’ve got some errands to run before we head back,” Abdul told Tony as the three of them pushed back their chairs. “Can you wait half an hour?”

“No problem.”

“I’d be happy to take you back to school,” Brandy offered, smiling at him. Tony gave her a sick smile in reply. “I drove my own car in.”

“I wouldn’t want to give you any trouble,” Tony hesitated, but she brushed it aside.

“It’s no trouble. Come on,” she said, leading him out of the cafe. Tony muttered a hasty goodbye to Abdul, and followed her out. “My car’s this way,” she announced when they were outside, leading him up the darkening street.

Her car, inevitably it seemed, was a pink New Beetle. The only thing missing from it was the Barbie logo on the side. The effect, as Brandy stood next to it, was a six-year old girl’s favourite

fantasy, that her toys would grow to full size and come to life. “Get in,” Brandy invited, unlocking the doors. Tony cringed a little, but said nothing as he climbed into the passenger seat.

They drove in silence for the first five minutes. Tony wanted to talk to her, but he couldn’t think of any safe questions to ask, and Brandy seemed quite happy to be concentrating on her driving. Eventually, Tony decided that the potential embarrassment of talking would be better than sitting in silence, and so he spoke.

“How long have you been working at Marvel?” he asked. It was a simple enough question, and one that he honestly didn’t know the answer to. He had been getting to know most of the staff in the months he had been at Marvel, but he had never really found a chance to speak to Brandy, despite the fact that they ate together twice a day.

“Three years.”

“You like it there?”

Brandy nodded her head, never taking her eyes off the road. “Everyone is very nice. Especially Dr Luchansky.”

What about Jessica, Tony thought, but he managed to say something a little less inflammatory. “Three years, huh? So you would’ve known my sister Maria. About five four, long black hair, looks a little like me? She taught English at Marvel a couple of years ago.”

Brandy thought for a minute, and then her face bloomed into a smile. “Yes, I know her. She left after my first year. Yes, she was very nice too. She and Dr Luchansky were very fond of each other.”

“Really? I never knew that. Guess that explains how I got the job so easily,” he added in an undertone.

“What is your sister doing these days?”

“Still teaching English. She’s at a school in the city now. She’s doing well. Enjoys her job, seems pretty happy.”

“That’s nice.”

The subject seemed to be exhausted now, but the school buildings, emerging out of the twilight, saved them from finding another. Brandy turned up the driveway and parked in the little staff parking lot. They both sat in the car for a second. Tony was thinking about what he had seen in the Starbucks, and from the look on her face, Brandy had something on her mind, too.

“Would you like me to walk you up to your room?” Tony suggested. It wasn’t much of a stretch. They would both be going in the same direction anyway.

“Sure,” Brandy agreed.

Silence fell between them again as they walked towards the dorms. Tony desperately wanted to ask her about what he had seen, so that he could make sense of it, but he wasn’t sure how to begin. “So, the coffee at Starbucks is really great, isn’t it?” Not the best beginning in the world, but it would have to do.

Brandy didn’t look at him as she answered. “It’s great.”

“Yep. Really great.”

They climbed the stairs together, Tony hoping that she would say something else. “Here’s my room,” she announced when they reached the second floor. Her room was in the same position that his was on the floor above. They stood awkwardly in the hallway, and Tony was about to say good night when she spoke. “Would you like to come in for a second?”

“Sure.”

Brandy unlocked her door and pushed it open. Tony had a brief moment of sensory overload, the feeling that he had just been shown the entrance into Aladdin’s cave, before his eyes focused on something sitting on the bed.

It was Jessica.

“Brandy! Where have you been? I’ve been waiting for you. And what,” she went on, catching sight of Tony, “have you been doing with him, you little tramp?”

“Hey, hang on,” Tony said. “We’ve been at a meeting in town. About the open day. Ask Abdul.”

“I didn’t ask you, I asked Brandy.”

“It’s true,” Brandy confirmed.

“Oh yeah? And just where was this ‘meeting’?”

Tony looked away as Brandy spoke. He was half hoping that she was going to lie about it, but she didn't. "Starbucks."

"Tramp," Jessica said again. Tony could almost understand what she was feeling.

"It's not like that," Brandy protested. "It was just a meeting."

"Sure it was," Jessica snarled. She turned on Tony, standing right in his face. "Listen here, Rossi. You stay away from Brandy, you hear?"

"Hey, we're working together on this open day thing. You don't like it, you talk to Dr L, okay?"

There was nothing sensible she could say in reply to this, and she seemed to know it. If anything, it made her even angrier. "If I hear that you've been taking her into Starbucks, or even just walking her past the place, I swear I'll—"

"Hey," Tony cut her off forcefully. "You're making a scene." He pointed down the hallway at a little group of girls who were quite clearly watching them. Jessica turned to look, and then turned back to him, radiating fury. Tony didn't let her speak. "I don't know what you're thinking, but I can tell you that Brandy and I haven't been doing anything that you need to worry about. I know how to behave around kids. How to set them a good example. See you at the next meeting, Brandy," he said pointedly. Neither of the other two said anything, so he shrugged and went up to his own room.

\*

"Brian Kirkpatrick speaking."

"Kirkpatrick? Wong here. Have you made any progress on the matter we discussed?"

"I'm still working on it. I think I may be able to arrange some sort of review of the legislation."

"I don't want a review. I want confirmation that these people aren't going to be able to interfere with my business. And I'm going to have that confirmation, with or without your co-operation. And let me tell you, Kirkpatrick, it had better not be without."

"You have to give me time here, Amanda. This is the government of the United States that we're talking about. Do you know how slowly things move around here?"

"I don't know, Kirkpatrick, and I don't give a shit. This is business, and it's my business, and it's going to happen the way I want it to, when I want it to. So you make it happen for me, personally. You have until the end of the week."

"I'll see what I can do."

"You will need to do better than that. And Kirkpatrick?"

"Yes?"

"Don't make me call you for a progress report again. I bought your services, and I expect value for money. If I want economy service, I'll go to Wal-Mart. You want to fuck with me, I'd be happy to pay you five bucks an hour instead of what you get now."

"Is that some sort of threat?"

"I don't make threats. I make money."

\*

Dr Luchansky broke the news at dinner. "We've got a problem," he announced to the staff table almost before everyone had returned from serving themselves. Something about the way he said it made the bland food on Tony's plate even less appetising than usual.

It was Abdul who spoke first. "What sort of problem, Julius?"

"It's the Government."

The entire table broke out in a round of whispering. Tony was not immune, adding his own mutter of, "What do those bastards want from us now?" to the general chorus. Various theories formed in his mind, but he was almost shocked by what Dr Luchansky said next.

"They're thinking of closing down the school."

"Why?" several people demanded at once, loudly enough to draw the attention of some of the students. Dr Luchansky waited a minute before replying.

"They don't feel like we're getting results," he said. He sounded tired. Tony must have looked confused, because Dr Luchansky began an explanation. "We take in kids with super powers, Tony,

but after they graduate, they don't have the powers. The line we've been feeding the government is that most kids lose their powers during puberty, but I think that they're getting a little tired of it. Apparently, our leaders have decided that a more ... military ... environment might help them retain their powers into adulthood. They're thinking of shutting us down and transferring all the kids to a new programme run by the Army."

"But that's stupid. These kids don't even have super powers. The Army isn't going to be able to do anything about that." It was obvious, but Tony couldn't help saying it.

"Exactly, which is why we need to keep the school open." Dr Luchansky shook his head. "The worst part is this doesn't even make sense. I usually deal with someone from the Department for Special Projects, but the letter I got today didn't even come from him. It came from someone I've never even heard of, someone who works in the President's office. I don't understand it."

"Well, maybe it's some sort of a fake. A conspiracy." This suggestion, of course, came from Chris.

"I'm afraid not. I called him this afternoon. He's real, and he really works in the White House."

Abdul asked the question they were all thinking. "What are we going to do to stop them?" Coming from him, it almost seemed like a helpful question. Nobody had an answer, though. The staff table was silent, with everyone looking down at their plates to avoid meeting anyone's eye.

"I don't know," Dr Luchansky said flatly.

It was the answer everyone was expecting, but it was still sobering to hear it said out loud. Tony's mind flailed around, looking for something useful to say. Unexpectedly, it hit on something.

"What about Carlos?" he asked for the second time that week. "He's got super powers."

"What about the rest of the kids?" someone said. Tony looked up. It was Jessica. "They don't." She gave him a smugly triumphant look.

It was turning into a face-off, but Abdul spoke before Tony could reply to her. "It's true that Carlos does have powers, Tony, but there's no guarantee that he won't lose them during puberty."

"Yes there is."

Abdul actually managed a faint chuckle, which lightened the mood around the table considerably. "Well, we know that, but we can't prove it to the government. Which puts us in a difficult situation. How long have they given us, Julius?"

"Two months." Dr Luchansky stared determinedly at his plate as he spoke.

"But all we need to do is prove we have some super kids at the school, right? Some of the older kids, kids who are going through puberty. Like Carlos."

"We could invite them to the open day," Brandy suggested.

"What?" Dr Luchansky asked.

Brandy seemed to interpret this as an attack. Judging from the look Jessica was giving her, it seemed sensible. "Well, the open day is happening anyway, so it can't hurt, can it?"

"That's true," Abdul said, "but it still doesn't help us prove that our kids will keep their powers once they leave here."

"Maybe we should just tell them the truth," Dr Luchansky said with a sigh.

"I think that's a bad idea," Abdul said mildly. "Some of the parents would be most unhappy with their children if they turned out not to have super powers." Tony thought of the kids in the toxic ward, and shivered. Looking around the table, he could see everyone else doing the same. Dr Luchansky, in particular, looked disturbed.

"You're right," he said. "However, I don't think that the open day, as it is usually held, would be a good way to convince the government of our students' powers. The parents want to be convinced that they have super children, and so it is easy to convince them. The government will be much more difficult to persuade."

"But it's worth a shot. And there's Carlos," Tony said, trying to make it sound as positive as he could.

"We do have Carlos," Dr Luchansky said, but he hardly seemed to be agreeing with Tony. He stared at a crack on the ceiling for a minute before speaking again. "I will call a meeting tomorrow and tell everyone the situation. On Monday, I will write to the Presidential liaison who contacted us about this, and advise him of what we intend to do. I am open to any reasonable suggestions that might help us with this problem. If any of you can think of a way around this, let me know. In the meantime, I am going to my office." He pushed away his untouched plate, stood up, and left.

The staff table was silent as they watched him leave. Nobody seemed particularly keen on eating. They pushed food around their plates, mostly in silence, until the students had eaten and the meal was over.

\*

Carlos finished the final set of lifts, got up off the weight bench, and began stretching out his arms. "You're coming along pretty well, Carlos," Tony said to him.

"Yeah," Carlos agreed. "I think I am." It had been over a week now since he had last tripped over his own feet trying to run too fast, and he was getting much better at controlling his strength, as well. Mike and his buddies didn't know it, but they were going to have an interesting little surprise waiting for them if they tried anything on him again.

"I'll bet you could lift a car if you wanted to." Tony suggested. "You keep this up, and who knows how strong you'll get."

"More powerful than a locomotive," Carlos said, flexing his biceps. They didn't look particularly impressive, but they had been big enough to accidentally punch a hole in the wall of his room last month when he had been trying to tack up a new poster. Lifting a car would probably be easy.

"That's right," Tony said. Carlos stopped stretching and looked over at him.

"Hey, is everything okay?" he asked. "You seem kind of tense or something."

Tony looked uncomfortable, and he hesitated before replying. "I wanted to ask you a favour, Carlos."

"Sure, man. Whatever you need. Hey, I owe you one, don't I?"

This didn't seem to reassure Tony at all. If anything, he looked more uncomfortable. "Well, maybe you should hear what I'm asking before you agree to anything."

"Okay."

"But you have to promise that you won't tell anyone that I told you this. At least, not for a couple of days."

Carlos wasn't sure whether this was all some sort of big set-up or not, but he was getting pretty impatient. "Well, sure, I guess. What's the big secret?"

"The thing is, the school's in trouble. The government is looking to shut Marvel down and move all of the students to another school. A military school."

Carlos nearly started laughing when he heard this, but the look on Tony's face convinced him that this was serious. "What for?" he asked.

"Well, it seems like they've decided that Marvel doesn't do a very good job of producing super heroes, and they think that maybe the military could do a better job of drilling super powers into you guys."

"But that's stupid," Carlos protested.

Tony smiled wryly. "That's what I said when I heard, too. But I guess that's the government for you."

"But it's impossible. And what are they going to do when they find out that most of the kids don't have super powers at all?"

"I don't know, and I don't want to find out. And neither does anyone else."

For a brief moment, Carlos thought about the military getting hold of Mike and finding out that he didn't have super powers. It was almost a tempting thought. "You said you wanted a favour?" he asked, banishing Mike from his mind.

"That's right." Tony paused for long enough that Carlos was about to prompt him to go on, but eventually he spoke again. "You know that we've got the open day coming up in a couple of weeks, right? And what we normally do is fake up some powers for most of the kids so their parents are happy."

"Yeah. What about it?"

"I was thinking that maybe if we got you up there showing off your real powers, doing things that can't be faked, maybe with a couple of other kids, the government will ease off us a little."

Carlos bent down and fussed with his shoelaces to avoid replying immediately. On the one hand, Tony was asking for his help, and he felt like he should help if he could. But on the other hand, he

had had enough troubles with the other kids when they found out that he really had super powers. He wasn't sure what would happen if the government found out about them, but it probably wouldn't be anything good.

"Carlos?" Tony said when he hadn't replied. "I know that this is asking a lot, and I guess it's probably something that you find scary. I want you to know that nobody's going to make you do anything. It's your choice."

Hearing that didn't make him feel any better. In fact, it almost made him feel worse. "What sort of things did you want me to do?" he asked reluctantly.

"Well, I'm not really sure yet," Tony admitted. "Something that shows off your powers. Something that can't possibly be faked."

"Like lifting a car?" Carlos suggested.

"Yeah. Lifting a car. Stuff like that. What other powers do you have?"

"Well, sometimes I get a feeling when something bad is about to happen, you know? It's kind of dumb, but I can definitely feel it. And there's the healing thing, but you know about that." You saw it the first time you met me, he thought.

"No I don't. What healing thing?"

"Well, I heal really fast. Like in a couple of minutes, for bruises and cuts and things. And bigger things heal in a day or two. Thought you'd noticed, when..." he couldn't finish the sentence.

Tony seemed to get it, though, and he looked away. "Right." He cleared his throat. "Well, I'm not sure that we could really demonstrate that."

"I guess not," Carlos agreed, relieved. That was not something that he wanted to show off in front of an audience. Watch the miracle kid get beat up and live to walk away. That would really make him look good, he thought.

"Any other powers?" Tony was asking. Carlos shook his head. "Okay, well, I'll bet that there are plenty of things you could do with just your super strength and speed. So if you want to think about the sort of things that you might feel comfortable demonstrating, then we can talk about them and take it from there."

"Okay. I'll do that." Carlos still wasn't sure that he liked this idea at all.

"I'd appreciate that, Carlos. But remember, this is totally up to you. If you decide that you don't want to be a part of this demonstration at all, that's fine."

"Yeah, well, I'd like to help, I guess," Carlos muttered. "I don't want Marvel to get shut down, you know."

"I know. Neither do I."

Carlos picked up his towel, and hung it around his neck. "Are we through for tonight?" he asked. He needed to get away and think about this.

"Yeah. We're through for tonight."

"Okay, well, I'll see you up at the dorms in a bit." Tony looked a little hurt by this abruptness, but Carlos figured that he could make it up to him later. Right now, he needed some time to himself. Grabbing his coat off the chair he had hung it on, he left the gym.

\*

At a quarter past ten on the morning of the Marvel Academy open day, Theresa O'Sullivan stepped off the train in Carterton. Her parents thought she was spending the weekend at her aunt's, and going on a church picnic with her Sunday school. Her aunt thought her parents were a little extreme, and had agreed to lie to them if they called to check on her. Her aunt often lied to her parents for her, but usually about minor things. This was the first time that Theresa had taken the opportunity to get on a train and get out of North Carolina, but already she knew that she wanted to do it again.

Theresa had taken the overnight train out of Durham, North Carolina, having been driven to the station by her aunt, who also gave her the money for the fare. She had arrived in New Metropolis two hours ago, and had stopped briefly for breakfast before transferring to the Western Line for the train ride out to Carterton.

The Western Line was an underground line for the first twelve stops. It was the first time that Theresa had been on an underground train. Durham didn't have a subway system, and Theresa's parents had never gone further from the city than Chapel Hill. As far as they were concerned, there was no need to go any further from home, and they certainly weren't going to let their teenaged daughter be corrupted by foreigners and psychos in the big world outside. Looking around the subway train, Theresa had been unimpressed by the foreigners and psychos. She doubted that they could corrupt anyone, even if there was a beer in it for them.

Most of the foreigners and psychos had got off the train in the first few stops. Carterton was one of the last stops on the line, and the train was nearly empty by the time it pulled into the station. Theresa got up rather stiffly from her seat, and walked off the train, stretching as she went. She had slept sitting up on the train the night before, and had just spent over an hour on the Western Line. She stood on the platform as the train pulled away, comparing what she was looking at now to what she had seen over the past several months, and then walked unhesitatingly out of Carterton towards Marvel Academy.

Theresa was a fast walker, and she reached the school gates by eleven o'clock. She didn't stop, or give any indication that she had noticed them at all, but rather walked straight past them and on down the road for another kilometre and a half. Then, checking the road quickly to make sure that there was nobody about, she ducked into the woods and began making her way back to Marvel.

Theresa was happiest in the woods. When she was a child, she had spent long hours in the woods behind her house, mainly hiding from her parents, but also just enjoying, the trees and the squirrels and the blackberry bushes. Especially the blackberry bushes, if the truth be known. And the woods liked her, as well. They always had. The trees would give way before her, letting her in, and then thicken up behind her to keep her parents out. The squirrels, which were so friendly to her, would chitter wildly at her arch-nemesis, mouth-breathing Billy Beecher from down the street, and would pelt him with stones and nuts if he tried to follow her into the woods. Theresa wanted it to be this way, and so it was.

When she was nine, she had tried explaining things to her parents. This had been a very foolish move. They had wrung their hands and worried about their crazy child all week, and on Sunday they had spoken to their preacher. The exorcism was scheduled immediately, and carried out the following week. After that, Theresa had learned to keep quiet about anything that might alarm her parents. So she didn't tell them anything else about the woods, or about the power she had over them, and when she found out about the Sight, she didn't tell them about that either.

Theresa paused in her walking to check on the preparations at Marvel. She closed her eyes and cast around her for the school. It usually took a little while for what she wanted to come up, but she was so close now that it happened nearly instantaneously. She was looking out over the quad and the main driveway. The stage was already set up, and most of the seating was in place. The students were milling around, picking up on the nervous vibes that filled the air and turning them into a localised tornado of excitement and destruction. The guests were beginning to arrive, mostly parents at this hour, but at least one limo full of VIPs. And most importantly, as far as Theresa was concerned, at least, Carlos was there. She picked him up in his room, buttoning up a nice white shirt with shaking fingers, and carefully combing his hair down.

Theresa let the Sight leave her then, and smiled around at the silent forest. She had been waiting for this day since the first moment she had seen Carlos, and it had finally arrived. Everything was going perfectly. All she had to do was find a way to get him alone, and then she would show him what superpowers were really for. She would knock his socks off, she promised herself. Carlos wasn't going to be able to forget today in a hurry, and he wasn't going to be able to forget her.

\*

Amanda Wong stepped out of the limo and looked around her. She was not pleased with what she saw. She frowned at the old stone buildings of the school, at the stage and the chairs being set up on the lawn, and most of all, at the children running riot through the whole. Amanda Wong did not like children, and she most certainly didn't like these super children.



It had been no great trick to get herself included in the Presidential party that was coming to the school. Brian Kirkpatrick was the head of the party, and Brian Kirkpatrick was firmly in her pocket. She looked over at him. He had stepped out of the limo before her, and was working his way down a line of hand-shakings, a blandly pleasant smile fixed on his face. Her eyes narrowed. He had better damned well close this place after today. It was probably a mistake that they were here in the first place, giving this school a chance to prove itself. But it was an election year, and the President – and by extension Kirkpatrick – couldn't risk offending anyone who might be able to raise some sort of scandal against him. As scared of her as Kirkpatrick was, he was more scared of losing his place in the sun and his fortnightly press conferences. She knew this. She could deal with it. The school would be closing, one way or another.

Out of the corner of her eye, Amanda Wong saw her flunky, Muller, standing amongst a crowd of beaming parents. He was not part of the Presidential party today, but he was taking advantage of the crowds to get in and have a closer look at the school. She was disgusted when she thought that this was the closest Muller had gotten to the school in the weeks that he had been assigned to watch it. For all that he talked big about blowing up national treasures; the man was surprisingly cowardly when it came to arranging a simple scouting mission. He said he was being cautious, and he said he was getting results, but her patience was definitely running out with his methods. He had damned well better get some results today. She was on a deadline.

Amanda Wong almost frowned when she thought about that, but she suppressed it instantly, keeping her expression politely neutral. Edumax were breathing down her neck, and she had another progress meeting with them next week. She would have to give them a target then. One of the schools that Muller had already scouted, she guessed, but she wasn't sure she was happy about it. Now that she knew about these superkids, she wanted them out of the way. As soon as possible.

The reception line moved forward a pace, bringing Amanda Wong face to face with an enormous, stooped man in a slightly shabby suit. She arranged her face into a smile as he extended a hand.

"Welcome to Marvel Academy, Ms -?"

"Wong. Thank you." When she wanted to, Amanda Wong could play gracious with the best of them.

"Julius Luchansky. Headmaster," the man introduced himself. "It's a pleasure to have you here today."

"It's a pleasure to be here, Mr Luchansky."

The man smiled droopily. "If you would like to have a look around the school, our staff would be happy to show you around. Otherwise, there are refreshments out here on the quad, and you can talk to some of our students and their parents. And we will be putting on a demonstration on the stage shortly."

"What sort of demonstration?"

"That would be spoiling the surprise," he replied with another mournful smile, but he seemed nervous. Amanda Wong opened her mouth to ask him about it, but thought better of it.

"Can you tell me anything about the ... special abilities of your students, Mr Luchansky?"

"I would prefer to leave that for the demonstration, Ms Wong." It was polite, but final, though the question did seem to make him more nervous. Very interesting.

"I see. Well, then, I look forward to the demonstration." The smile she offered was thin and insincere. They locked eyes for a moment, and then she moved on.

The rest of the reception line was similarly pointless. More idiot staff members giving out more useless greetings and no information. Amanda Wong set her mind to neutral and moved along the line as quickly as she could, murmuring the standard set of replies. Finally free of the line, she walked to a quiet place on the lawn and took a moment to look about her. Frankly, she was a little disappointed by what she saw. It was professional enough, to be sure, and probably a pleasant environment to raise children in, assuming that was important, but the place felt disappointingly normal. If she hadn't known, Amanda Wong would never have guessed that she was at that moment surrounded by super children. She wasn't sure what she had been expecting. Freaks and mutants? Something out of the X-Files? Maybe. Certainly not this pleasant boring school out in the middle of nowhere, staffed by pleasant boring teachers and attended by noisy, unpleasant, but unquestionably boring children.

Behind her, the speakers on the stage popped loudly as a microphone was turned on. “Ladies and gentlemen, if you would like to take your seats, we will be beginning our demonstration shortly. Thank you.”

Well. This, at least, should be a little interesting. Amanda Wong caught another glimpse of Muller, disappearing round the corner of one of the big old buildings. Hopefully he would take advantage of this distraction to find out something useful. In the meantime, she would watch the demonstration, and hope that something interesting happened.

\*

Carlos’ danger sense was tingling as Brandy made the announcement that the demonstration was about to start, but he hardly noticed it. For one thing, it had been tingling on and off all day, and for another, he was so nervous that he could hardly see. The thought of demonstrating his powers for all of these people made him almost physically sick. There was the fear that something might go wrong, that he might miss one of the lifts and hurt someone, for instance, but there was also the fear that everything might go right. The government was here watching him, and if he got everything right, they would know about it. They would have a record of it somewhere, if he showed off his powers today. He was beginning to understand why real superheroes preferred to keep their identity secret.

Tony came backstage at that point and gave him a smile and a thumbs-up. Carlos smiled weakly in return. “Something wrong, Carlos?” Tony asked, a look of real concern on his face. For a moment, Carlos considered telling him about his danger sense, but he thought better of it. Tony would only worry if he knew, and it wasn’t like there was anything that Tony could do about it. And the danger sense was probably only going off because of all those VIPs in the front row getting ready to shut Marvel down.

“Just nervous, I guess,” was what Carlos actually said.

Tony grinned at him in reply. “Me too,” he admitted. “But don’t worry. You’ll do fine.”

“Yeah,” Carlos muttered, not really listening. Tony moved off to check on the other kids.

Onstage, Dr Luchansky was giving a speech. Something about the ‘unique children we have here at Marvel’. Carlos suppressed a snort. The only thing unique about most of the people here was that their parents were more insane or more desperate than most. He looked over at Frank and Missy, the two other kids who were in his part of the demonstration. They gave him a frozen smile. Carlos realised that they were probably even more nervous than he was. After all, he actually had the powers that he said he did. They had to go out there and fake it. He looked out at the three weight sets that were set up on the stage. I hope this works, he thought, shivering as his danger sense gave an extra tingle.

Dr Luchansky’s speech was drawing to a close. “And now, I would like to present some of our students, to give you a demonstration of their extraordinary talents.”

There was a wave of applause from the audience, and the curtain went up. Frank, Missy and Carlos walked stiffly onto the stage, and Tony took over on the microphone. “What we’d like to demonstrate for you today is the extraordinary strength of these students. But first, so you don’t think we’re cheating, could I have a volunteer from the audience?”

Tony pulled one of the VIPs on stage, and had him try to lift the weights at the middle station. The weights Carlos would be lifting. He carefully steered the VIP away from the fake weights at Frank and Missy’s stations. The VIP tried to look suitably suspicious, but the weights were clearly real. “Would the students like to take their places?” Tony asked. The three of them stepped forward. “Each of these students will be lifting three hundred pounds,” Tony announced, and nodded to them to lift away. Carlos crouched down, took hold of the bar, and lifted cleanly. Out of the corners of his eyes, he could see Frank and Missy doing the same. The audience applauded.

“This is all very impressive, but it’s not what you’d expect out of a real superhero,” Tony said as the three of them stood there holding their weights above their heads. “So, if I could have another volunteer from the audience. You, ma’am,” he said, pointing at a parent in the second row. “Could you please fetch your car and park it here?” He indicated the open area between the stage and the front row of seats, and the parent scuttled off, returning with her car in short order.

“All right, guys, you can put those down,” Tony said to the three of them. Carlos set his bar down gently. Tony addressed the audience again. “Now, a real superhero should be able to lift a car, right? But these three students are just superheroes in training, so we’re going to let all three of them lift it together.” He motioned them forward, and they all trooped off the stage and took up their places around the car. Carlos was in the middle again. His heart was thumping in his chest. He had been practicing this move for ten days, and he hadn’t dropped a car yet, but this would be a really bad time to start. “Take your places,” Tony instructed them. They all crouched down, getting a firm hold on the bottom of the car. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Carlos’ stomach gave a sickening lurch. Just nerves, he told himself. Just nerves. Not danger. There was no danger here today. Missy was looking over at him, a frown on her face. “You okay?” she mouthed. He nodded, taking a deep breath. “All right,” he mumbled to the other two. “Let’s go.” He reset his hands, and then very slowly, straining slightly, he stood up.

The audience erupted. Carlos’ danger sense erupted with it, but he didn’t lose his grip on the car. Missy and Frank were grinning like idiots at the crowd, and Carlos slapped a smile on his face as he scanned the crowd for the source of the danger. It wasn’t the VIPs. It was someone in the very back. But who?

“All right, that’s enough,” Tony said when the applause looked likely to die down. Carlos returned the car to the ground. “Nice work,” Frank said to him when they were hidden behind it. “Really nice.”

“Thanks,” he said, and then they stood up again.

They went up on stage to take a bow, which gave Carlos a better view of the audience. He couldn’t figure it out. It was a relief when the applause stopped, and they were finally allowed to leave the stage to make way for the next act, which was a completely fake display of mind powers led by Mr Lee, the chemistry teacher.

“Great work, you guys,” Tony said when they were all backstage. “Really good work.” He slapped Carlos on the shoulder.

“Yeah, thanks.” Frank and Missy looked ready to spend the rest of the day talking over their triumph, and Carlos was definitely not in the mood. “Hey, Tony, I’m not feeling so great. You mind if I go get some air or something?”

“Everything all right?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine. I just need a moment, okay?”

“Sure,” Tony said. He looked like he wanted to say more, but he stepped aside and let Carlos leave.

Carlos slipped down one of the stage’s back staircases, and began walking slowly away from the stage. He headed for the dorms, but before he got there he changed his mind and began a wide loop that would take him to the edge of the woods behind the audience. Maybe it would give him a better idea of where the threat he had felt lay.

The feeling of danger was much weaker now that he was off the stage, but it hadn’t gone away altogether, and that made him edgy. He looked around him restlessly as he walked, looking for anything that might explain how he had felt earlier, but everything seemed to have gone back to normal. Onstage, the mind power display seemed to be going well. The audience was definitely eating it all up. It was just like Tony had said. Show them something real first, and they’ll believe all the fake you can feed them. If everything kept going this well, Marvel was going to be fine.

He was directly behind the audience now, standing near a huge old tree at the edge of the woods. He looked at the back rows of the audience, but he couldn’t see anything. He couldn’t sense anything, either. Maybe it really had been all his imagination.

“You looking for something, Carlos?”

He turned and found himself looking at a girl of about his own age, with long black hair, climbing down from one of the trees behind him. His danger sense gave a flare, as if it was confirming that she was the one he was looking for.

“Who are you? And how do you know my name?” Carlos demanded, staring at her suspiciously and trying to bring his stomach back in line. He was sure that he had never seen her before in his life, but she was acting like she knew him well.

“That’s none of your business,” she said, tossing her head.

“What are you doing here?”

“That’s none of your business, either.”

“What do you want?” He was expecting the same answer again, but he didn’t get it. Instead, the girl raised an eyebrow and smiled at him.

“Well, Carlos, I hear you have super powers. I just wanted to see them for myself, that’s all.”

“Well, you saw them,” he said shortly.

She looked at him in mock surprise. “Well, I guess I did. Gee, maybe I should just go home now. But Carlos,” she asked sweetly, “don’t you want to see my powers?”

“What -?” was all he managed to get out before he was swept off his feet and into the air. “What the hell?” he shouted. Something had him by the feet, and as he squirmed around, trying to see what it was, it snaked up his body, pinning his arms to his chest. “What the hell is going on? Help!”

His shouts must have reached the audience, because he could hear loud voices, and the sound of seats being pushed around from that direction. “What do you think of my powers, Carlos?” the girl asked.

“Are you crazy?” he demanded. “How are you doing this, anyway?” He swung his head, trying to get a good look at what was happening to the rest of him. He could hardly believe what he saw. The tree he had been standing next to a moment before had snaked out a limb and grabbed him. It was holding him tightly, encasing him in its branches.

The noise behind him was growing, and Carlos was vaguely aware that the show on the stage seemed to have stopped, but most of his attention was on the girl in front of him. “Are you telling me you don’t like it, Carlos? That’s such a shame. And I thought you’d be so pleased to meet me.”

“You’re insane,” he said.

“Am I?” she asked, raising that eyebrow again. The branches that were holding him started thrashing wildly, whipping him around in a way that seemed purposefully designed to make him lose his lunch. She let it go on until he was sure he was as green as the tree, and then abruptly, the shaking stopped. “I think you should apologise for that,” she said. “That’s no way to speak to a lady.”

Carlos couldn’t think of anything to say to that. His mind was hardly working at all. He couldn’t believe that there was someone else with super powers, and that this was the first he had heard of it. This was a pretty weird way to introduce yourself to someone, he thought, even for a girl. He looked at her more carefully as she stood upside-down in front of him, and wondered whether she actually was insane. Kind of cute, but insane.

“Aren’t you going to say something?”

“Where did you get these powers from?”

“That wasn’t what I wanted to hear.” And the shaking started again. Belatedly, Carlos remembered that he had powers of his own. He waited until the shaking stopped, trying to suppress his nausea and clear his head. The girl was speaking again, but Carlos wasn’t listening. He concentrated on flexing his muscles, as hard as he could.

And then suddenly he was free, dropping headfirst onto the ground as the branches that had held him burst around him. His head slammed into the dirt, and his vision dissolved into a field of red stars. He had a brief glimpse of the girl, hurrying back into the woods, and, just before he lost consciousness, he heard the applause and shouts of approval coming from the audience behind him.

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Later, when the guests and parents were leaving, Dr Luchansky and Tony met up in front of the main building. “Congratulations, Tony. Marvel will have no trouble staying open now.”

“I think you should probably thank Carlos for that.”

Dr Luchansky smiled. “I already have. But it was you who helped him to harness the power of his talents. We’re all in your debt.”

Tony shrugged noncommittally. “He would have got there on his own sooner or later.”

“Perhaps,” Dr Luchansky said.

“Have you found out who the girl was?” Tony asked.

“No. She left too quickly. It seems that nobody really got a good look at her except for Carlos. But as far as I can tell, it was none of the students here. Carlos didn’t recognise her, anyway.”

“I wonder if she’ll come forward now. If she’s got powers, she should probably be at Marvel.”

“I certainly hope she comes forward,” was all that Dr Luchansky said.

Tony nodded, and they lapsed into silence, watching the last cars pull away down the drive.

“Anyway, Tony, I just wanted to thank you for your part in today’s activities. You are a real asset to the school.”

“Thanks,” Tony said, flushing slightly. “I should be getting back to the dorms.”

“Of course,” Dr Luchansky said. “I will see you at dinner.”

“Yeah, I’ll see you then,” Tony agreed. He walked across the quad towards the dorm building, but halfway across he changed his mind. Turning back, he decided to stop in at the medical centre and check on Carlos. He had already been by to see him once, but the whole school had been there, and he wanted to have a quiet word with Carlos. There was nothing wrong with him except for a mild concussion, but they were keeping him in overnight to be sure. Probably a good thing, Tony thought. Give the other kids time to settle down a bit before he has to deal with them.

The quad was pretty much empty, and the school building, which Tony cut through on his way to the medical centre, was even emptier. His footsteps sounded very loud as they echoed back through the halls to him. He left the building, walked up the covered walkway, and into the medical centre. It was quiet. Jessica wasn’t in her office, and she wasn’t in the room where Carlos was sleeping. Tony looked in on him, but decided not to wake him. He had had a crazy day, and he probably needed to sleep more than he needed to talk to anyone else right at that moment. Resolving to come back again after dinner, Tony walked quietly out of Carlos’ room.

Jessica arrived as he was leaving the medical centre. “What are you doing here?” she asked suspiciously.

“Looking in on Carlos. What are you doing away from here?” he asked, on the principle that the best defence was a good offence.

Jessica glared at him furiously. “Seeing off some of the guests,” she answered, looking at a point somewhere over his shoulder.

“Aren’t you supposed to be here at all times? Don’t you have responsibilities? Patients to treat?” He knew he was goading her, and he knew it was childish, but he couldn’t resist.

“Just get out of here. You’ll wake Carlos, and he needs his rest.”

That was true enough, and Tony slipped past her and out the door. “I’ll be back after dinner,” he observed just as she was about to shut the door behind him.

“Fine,” she said, shutting the door in what was essentially a controlled slam.

Tony felt like whistling as he walked back towards the dorms. The day had gone better than anyone had expected, and getting under Jessica’s skin was the perfect way to top it off.

## PART II

Amanda Wong didn’t stick around for the end of the open day. She left as soon as the demonstration was over, not even waiting around long enough to find the limo driver and arrange a lift back to town. She stormed out of Marvel, high heels crunching and sliding on the gravel of the walkway, and then started the walk to the nearest town, ungraciously accepting the offer of a lift from an overweight, pastel-leotard-wearing mother of three. Squeezed into the backseat of a station wagon, between a sticky-fingered toddler and a sulky five year old, Amanda Wong concentrated on not accidentally strangling one of her fellow passengers during the short ride into town. By the time she made it back to her offices in New Metropolis, though, she was desperately regretting that decision. A little violence towards a child would have been just the thing she needed to cheer herself up after the debacle at Marvel.

Muller arrived at the offices sometime after dark, coming in person to debrief her rather than just calling in a report. She had requested that he do this, but that was no reason not to shout at him about it. “What are you doing here, Muller?” she began almost before he walked through the door. “You had better have something important to report, because if you’ve come in here to waste my time I’ll have your head exchanged with your balls.”

“I have good news to report, Ms Wong,” the little nerd replied. This almost seemed like bad news to Amanda Wong. On the one hand, she really needed something concrete to hand to the Edumax

people at the next meeting, but on the other hand it meant that she had to listen to Muller rather than just using him as a punching bag.

“What news?” she demanded ungraciously.

“I have made contact with a member of staff who is sympathetic to our cause, Ms Wong. She has agreed to furnish me with information on the students.”

“Is that all you’ve got? And you think that’s good news?”

“Well, Ms Wong, I think that, given time-“

That was the last thing that Amanda Wong wanted to hear. “Time?” she exploded. “We don’t have time. We’ve got a campaign to deliver, and thanks to you, we’re behind schedule. My ass is in the fire here, and if you don’t deliver the goods, your ass is going to be on a rotisserie.”

“Ms Wong, I feel confident that with this new informant, I will be able to neutralise the threat that Marvel Academy poses.”

“Given time, right, Muller? Not good enough.”

“I have also managed to uncover another piece of information that might interest you, Ms Wong.”

“I doubt that very much.” Amanda Wong was beginning to feel better, revived by the sheer power of her own unpleasantness.

“The girl involved in this afternoon’s display at Marvel. The one not on the stage. My contact has informed me that she is not a student there.”

For once the idiot was right. This was an interesting piece of information. “A rogue, huh? Interesting. What else have you got?”

“One of the photographers took a picture of her. I have acquired a copy of this photograph, and have shown it to some of the residents of Carterton.”

“And?”

“The guard at the station recognised her. She arrived by train this morning. I have traced her back to New Metropolis station, and I will continue my efforts to track her down tomorrow.”

He looked pleased with himself as he delivered this report, which made Amanda Wong furious. “Tonight, Muller. By tomorrow, you will have found her.”

“Of course, Ms Wong,” he agreed hastily. “I believe that she must have bought her ticket using her student identity card, and I am attempting to trace that at the moment. I am confident that I will be able to deliver the information you want by tomorrow.”

“And what about the campaign?”

“I am not sure what you mean, Ms Wong.”

“The campaign. The thing that we get paid to do. Remember? Paid? What have you done about it lately, Muller? Anything? Or have you been spending all your time on this Marvel thing?”

He looked uncomfortable, and Amanda Wong smiled for the first time all day. “You have my reports on the three schools I have studied so far. Perhaps one of them would be suitable?”

Amanda Wong had made her decision. “No. I want Marvel.”

“I beg your pardon, Ms Wong?”

“I want Marvel to be the target for this campaign.”

“But the children, with their super powers-“

“I don’t give a shit about the children, or their super powers. Marvel is a danger to our work, and it’s a perfect target for this campaign. It will be high-profile, and it will be tragic. Perfect. So you find a way, and you do it, unless you want to go back to whatever shithole country you came from.”

“I understand, Ms Wong. I will not fail you.”

“You had better not fail me.” Amanda Wong turned her back to him. “The girl, Muller. By tomorrow. And within a week you had better have something on Marvel for me. I don’t have time to waste on this.”

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Theresa sighed when the last bell of the day rang. She wasn’t sure if she felt depressed or relieved. On the bright side, that was one more day of school down, one day closer to graduation and getting the hell out of North Carolina. On the down side, now she got to go home to her mother. Theresa’s family was improbably nuclear, as if some horrible accident in time travel had brought

them forward in time about fifty years. Her mother would never dream of going out to work. For one thing, her father wouldn't hear of it, and for another, there were meatloaves to be made and church groups to attend. As she opened her locker to get her bag, Theresa silently repeated the Teenager's Vow. I swear I will never, ever, ever, turn into my parents.

"What?" Judith asked from behind the next locker door.

Theresa realised she must have been speaking out loud. "Nothing. See you tomorrow."

"Okay. You have a good evening, now." Judith was always like that. Insufferably chipper and cheerful. There was one girl who was turning into her mother almost faster than the speed of puberty.

"Thanks," Theresa said with an insincere smile. She picked up her bag and walked off quickly before the exchange could continue.

Her aunt, at least she was cool. Baptist, but not completely brainwashed. If she had to turn into a member of her family, she could do worse than turn into her Aunt Helen. When Theresa had got back from her trip to Marvel, her aunt hadn't said anything about it. Theresa liked to think that this was because she had no idea what had happened, but she had the sneaking suspicion that Aunt Helen knew more about her life than she was letting on. But she never told tales to Theresa's mother, and she usually didn't even say much to Theresa. When Theresa had got back from Marvel, all Aunt Helen had said was that she hoped she had had a good trip. And then she had taken Theresa out for a burger, something Theresa's mother would never dream of doing.

"Theresa O'Sullivan." She had just emerged from the crush around the school's main gate when the voice stopped her. The speaker was a petite Asian woman in black business clothes. She spoke with an American accent, but not a Southern one. Not from here, Theresa thought, noting with amusement the looks that some of her schoolmates and their mothers were giving the woman.

"Yes?"

"My name is Amanda Wong."

"Pleased to meet you." Theresa said, her politeness reflex kicking in. The woman brushed it aside for the waste of time it was.

"I would like to speak to you. Can I offer you a ride home?" The woman was standing next to a huge white SUV, nearly new, and clearly a rental.

Well, she could be a white slaver. A kidnapper. Probably not a rapist. Probably just some harmless crazy. And it would drive her mother wild to see her coming home with a foreigner, and a well off one, at that. "Sure."

"Excellent." Amanda Wong said, pushing the button to unlock the car doors. They got into the car, and Amanda Wong started it up.

"Turn left at the end, and then take the second right," Theresa said, and the car started moving forward. They negotiated the after school traffic jam in silence, but when they were out on the main road, Amanda Wong spoke.

"I saw your little demonstration at Marvel Academy. Impressive. Very impressive."

Theresa froze. "Stop the car."

Amanda Wong just laughed. "Miss O'Sullivan, I am not from Marvel Academy. I am not from the Government, though I am sure they would be interested in your...talents. I am not a private detective your parents hired to watch over you, or any other paranoid fantasies you might have come up with."

"Fine. So what are you, then?"

"I am someone who wants to help you."

"Of course you are," Theresa said, laying on at least half of her day's sarcasm allowance. And then, tuning back into the road, "Hey, you just missed the turn. Where the hell are we going, anyway?"

Amanda Wong was completely unimpressed. "Do you enjoy living with your parents, Miss O'Sullivan? Are you fond of pot roasts and Sunday school? Because I can take you home now, if you are. Or if you want to play grown-up, you can shut up, be patient, and listen to what I have to offer."

Theresa wanted to make some sort of smart comeback to this, but she couldn't think of anything to say. She struggled with it for a moment, then opted for sullen silence. Amanda Wong gave the road in front of her a brittle smile.

“I work for an advertising agency. Not the kind that does commercials and store giveaways and perverts in animal costumes handing out balloons at the fucking mall. The kind that gets results. And I think that someone of your talents could really help me when it comes to getting results.”

“What sort of results?” Theresa asked.

“We perform direct interventions designed to raise the profile of our client companies. Our work is both demanding and dangerous, and occasionally illegal.” They stopped at a red light, and Amanda Wong shifted in her seat to give Theresa a challenging stare. “We are the number one advertising agency in the country, and we are pioneering the new frontier of advertising. We have a place for you on this frontier. Now you can take it, or you can get out of the car and go have milk and cookies with Mommy.” Amanda Wong arched an eyebrow.

“Are you going to tell me about the job?”

“That isn’t the way we work,” Amanda Wong told her scornfully. “If you are interested, I will fly you back to our corporate headquarters to sign a contract and a non-disclosure agreement. Then I will introduce you to the team and explain the use we have for you. Not before.”

“And my parents?”

Amanda Wong shrugged this question away. “What about them?”

“They’ll report me missing if I don’t show up tonight.”

“You can call them from our corporate headquarters in New Metropolis.” She glanced at her watch, and then back up at the red light. “Now, are you interested, or should I take you back to Mommy?”

It only took Theresa a second to decide. On the one hand, there was her mother, meatloaf, and more church picnics than she could ever possibly want. Or she could go with this woman, who might possibly turn out to be a white slaver after all, but who seemed to be offering her a real opportunity. A serious use for her talents. No question what the right choice was. “Sure. Let’s go.”

“Excellent decision.” The light turned green, and they drove off.

Less than half an hour after agreeing to Amanda Wong’s proposition, Theresa had found herself on a plane flying north. When they had arrived at the airport, she found that Amanda Wong had already booked a ticket for her on the flight to New Metropolis. She hadn’t been sure whether to take offence at this or not, but they were on the plane before she could decide. It had been her first time flying, and Amanda Wong had booked first-class seats for them both.

They had talked very little on the flight up, and most of what they had said was fairly trivial. Theresa had been quite willing to talk, but Amanda Wong had seemed content to wait. She hadn’t even opened up when they got to her corporate headquarters, a tasteful set of rooms in a renovated downtown building. She had simply made Theresa sign a baffling array of contracts and agreements, and then taken her down to the car again (another white SUV of the same model she had rented in Durham) and driven off.

They drove for hours, heading out of the city as quickly as the traffic allowed, and then speeding through the darkened countryside. By the time they finally pulled off the interstate, it was very late, and Theresa was both lost and confused.

She was even more confused when the SUV finally stopped, and Amanda Wong pulled on the handbrake and turned off the engine. They were in a sprawling, barren industrial estate that looked like it had been abandoned twenty years ago at least. The asphalt was cracked, and grass was running wild wherever it could. The trees, originally planted in neat little squares of dirt set among the paving stones, had long since overrun their boundaries and sent roots out to push up the surrounding pavement. Most of the warehouses seemed dilapidated and abandoned, and all of them were covered in graffiti. Theresa began to feel a little scared. She looked at the warehouse that they were parked in front of. Apart from a flicker of light showing under the big rolling doors, there was nothing about it to distinguish it from the rest of the future insurance fires on the street.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“We’re here.” Amanda Wong smiled as she spoke. Theresa got the feeling it was because she liked being deliberately unhelpful.

“Yes, but where is here? We’ve been driving around for hours.”

“And now we’re here. So get out and go inside.”



For a moment, Theresa thought that Amanda Wong was just going to drive her off and leave her stranded here, wherever that was, but she didn't. They both got out of the car and walked towards the warehouse. "It's me," Amanda Wong called as she pulled open the little door set into one of the rolling doors. "Don't do anything stupid."

Theresa wasn't sure what she had been expecting, but she was definitely surprised to discover that the inside of the warehouse was warm, dry and well maintained. The main part of the warehouse was mostly empty, with a couple dozen boxes stacked against the far wall, and more boxes scattered randomly about the floor. There were four doors set into the left wall of the warehouse, presumably leading to offices and smaller storage rooms. In the centre of the warehouse, a table had been set up, and five men were sitting around it, playing cards. They stood up as Amanda Wong entered.

"I would like you to meet the newest member of the team," she said. "This is Miss O'Sullivan. Miss O'Sullivan, let me introduce you. From left to right, Hardy," a short stocky man with a military buzz cut, "Perry," an older man who appeared to be in charge, "Chiang," a muscular, mean looking man, "Thorpe," a tall man with shaggy red hair, "and Young." Theresa had to look at Young twice before she realised that Young was actually female. She blinked, and tried not to stare.

"What the hell are you trying to do?" Hardy demanded. "We didn't sign up for babysitting duty."

Ordinarily, Theresa would have taken offence, but she was tired, disoriented, and a little scared of these five people. Amanda Wong, she had decided, she was more than a little scared of. For the hundredth time, she wondered just what she had let herself in for.

Amanda Wong fixed Hardy with a humourless smile. "Miss O'Sullivan has abilities that I think you will all find useful in future operations," she said.

"Yeah, and I'll bet she needs her hand held every time she uses them."

"I have seen Miss O'Sullivan's abilities, and I can assure you that she is not in the least bit afraid to use them."

Hardy gave Theresa the sort of look that Durham society usually reserved for homeless people and inferior races. "Right."

"I am sure that Miss O'Sullivan would be quite happy to demonstrate her skills for you, if you would like."

Theresa wanted to object. She wanted to run out of the warehouse and never come back. She almost wanted to see her parents again. But she couldn't. The situation was entirely out of her control, and the best she could do was sit back and go with the flow.

"Sure," the older guy, Perry, said. "I think we'd all like to see what the kid can do."

Amanda Wong seemed genuinely pleased. It was clear that this situation was going just the way she wanted it to. Everyone in the warehouse seemed a little nervous as they saw that smile. Perversely, this made Theresa feel a little better.

"Miss O'Sullivan, would you lead the way?" Amanda Wong said, indicating the door they had just come in through. Theresa led the way into the parking lot, trying to calm down and breathe deeply. She had never used her powers in a situation like this before, and she was worried that she wouldn't be able to.

The three men and two women followed her out the door. They stood in a little group in the middle of the parking lot, and waited. "Okay, O'Sullivan," Perry said, "show us what you've got."

Theresa cleared her throat, and flicked her eyes around the lot. The trees on the street seemed to be her best bet. She walked closer to them. "Okay," she muttered.

"Come on, kid," someone said behind her. The woman. "We don't have all night."

"She hasn't got anything," Hardy said scornfully. "This is all just a big waste of our time."

Theresa could hear the pleasure in Amanda Wong's voice when she spoke again. "You are welcome to think that, of course. I wouldn't imagine that an idiot like you would think anything else."

"Well, I do think that," Hardy said, glaring defiantly at Amanda Wong. "This kid is a joke. This whole thing is a joke."

Theresa heard quick footsteps behind her, and felt a hand falling on her shoulder. "Come on, kid," Hardy said. "You got anything, or should I just break your neck so we can go back inside and finish our game?" The hand shifted, moving up to her neck. Theresa gasped as he began choking her. She sent a thought out to the huge trees on either side of her, telling them what she wanted.

Crack! The first blow hit Hardy square in the face, making him let go of her as he staggered back. He barely had time to recover before the second blow hit him, and the third, and the fourth. Theresa was suddenly furious. What did Amanda Wong think she was doing, bringing Theresa to a strange town to be attacked by strange men in the middle of the night? The trees lashed her anger all over Hardy's legs and back. He stood for a few moments, and then he fell. It barely registered on her that he had. All she could think of was how angry she was, and how pleased that she had found someone to take it out on. It was as if she had been waiting all her life for this opportunity to stand in an abandoned car park and beat the shit out of a total stranger.

"Hey!" someone yelled, sharply enough to snap Theresa back to her senses. Reluctantly, she sent another thought to the trees, and the lashing stopped. One of the longest branches reached down, and scooped Hardy back to his feet. His nose looked broken, and he was standing unsteadily, but he was looking at Theresa with something almost like respect.

She looked up at the rest of the group. Amanda Wong was smiling viciously. The other three were standing with their faces caught between stunned and impressed.

"I can see that she might have some useful abilities," Perry said.

"I am pleased that you think so."

"Does this mean that we've got a date for the mission?"

"Not yet. I hope to have final details for you shortly. You will have a few weeks at least, in order to give Miss O'Sullivan any extra training you think she might require. I want her to become a full and productive member of this team."

Perry nodded. "Very well, ma'am." He turned to Theresa, extending a hand to her. "Good to have you on board, O'Sullivan." She took it, and they shook hands.

"I will leave you to get Miss O'Sullivan settled, but I'll be in touch by the end of the week. I expect a positive report on her progress," Amanda Wong said, walking to her SUV and opening the door. She looked over at Hardy. "If you can promise not to bleed on my upholstery, I will give you a lift to the hospital."

\*

On winter evenings, after the kids had eaten and done their homework, there was almost always a movie screening in the auditorium. It kept the kids inside and under control, rather than giving them the time to run around unsupervised in the dark. It seemed like a good idea, but Tony didn't like the way it turned out in practice. The problem was the little kids. Of course, they needed to watch movies as well, which meant that every evening they began with something insufferably family friendly, and then moved onto a decent movie once the little kids were sent to bed. Fortunately for Tony, there were plenty of other staff members available to supervise the kids, and not all of them hated Disney movies as much as he did. He usually went to the gym or went running instead, on the grounds that if he was going to do something painful, he might as well do something painful that was good for him.

Tonight's all ages offering was *The Lion King*, a movie which Tony regarded as being one small step – maybe a half step – away from being a crime against humanity. He made sure that the boys' dorm was empty, and then he changed into a tracksuit and running shoes.

His usual route took him across the quad, around the main building, and then onto one of the loop tracks through the forest. He usually did a couple of loops, jogging for about forty minutes – not long enough to avoid a whole Disney movie, but pretty close once he had added in a long shower and a snack.

Heading past the medical centre, he noticed that there was a light on in Jessica's office. This was not unusual. She claimed that she couldn't be kept away from her patients for a whole evening, but Tony knew that the real reason she stayed away was that she hated kids' movies as much as he did. Of course, the reason he knew this was because he had heard her scolding Brandy for liking them for about half an hour the week before, but still, it was as close as he came to having a bond with Jessica. If only she weren't such a bitch, they might be able to get along. Maybe. As for Brandy, he liked her, but he wasn't sure that he'd ever be comfortable enough around her for them to really be friends. Even if he forgot what Danielle looked like, Brandy would still be weird.

It was a chilly night, but not freezing, and not raining, so the trail was dry. Tony switched his headlamp on, and began jogging. It was a nice evening to be out in. For the next half hour, he just let his mind drift, not thinking about anything apart from avoiding the tree roots that sprawled across the trail in an attempt to trip up unwary joggers.

He finished his first loop quickly, and was about to start on his second when he heard the growling and the beeping of a large truck backing up. It was coming from the direction of the school, which was odd, because all of their usual deliveries came in the mornings. Everyone else was in the auditorium, watching the movie. It wouldn't be fair to disturb them. With a sigh, Tony turned back to the school to deal with this late deliveryman.

At the edge of the woods, he stopped. He could see the truck, and it wasn't where it was supposed to be. Not even close. Deliveries usually came to the side of the main building, but this guy had pulled right round the back of the school and was parked by the side door to the medical centre. He must be lost. A stupid delivery guy as well as a late one, Tony thought, looking for the logo on the truck so he could phone up to complain. There was no logo. The sides of the truck were plain white. Again, odd, and kind of annoying. Tony waited in the shadows at the edge of the woods, ready to yell at the delivery guy when he got back from wherever he was.

He was expecting the guy to come around the main building, or at most through the door to the building, so he almost missed it when it happened. The side door to the medical centre opened up, and something came out. Two people, wheeling something between them. They wheeled it out the door and up a ramp into the back of the truck, and then they went back into the medical centre. Tony was looking in the right direction by then, so he was able to get a good look at their faces as they moved into the light. It was Jessica, and some guy that Tony didn't recognise. Probably the delivery guy. Only he wasn't here to make a delivery, he was here to make a pickup. And late at night, too. Even though he knew it was probably none of his business, Tony wondered what Jessica was hiding. He was pretty sure that he had just come across something strange, but he had no idea what.

He crept closer, his heart beating faster for some reason he couldn't explain. Nobody in sight. He reached the ramp at the back of the truck, and looked inside. It was dark, and empty, except for the thing that Jessica had just loaded onto it. A large shape, and a long one, with things sticking up from it. Something on wheels. One of the life support pods from the toxic ward.

Oh shit.

Tony was inside the truck before he had time to think, disengaging the brake on the pod and pushing it back down the ramp. He didn't know what Jessica was up to, but he knew he didn't like her, and he was pretty sure he didn't like this crazy late night pickup, either. He wheeled the pod round the back of the medical centre and parked it there. What now? He couldn't think. He had no idea. Go get Dr Luchansky? His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of footsteps. Jessica and the delivery guy, coming back. He listened as they came out of the medical centre, pushing another life support pod. Tony could hear the faint squeak of wheels, a squeak that stopped once they saw the empty truck.

"Where's the other one?" The delivery guy. He had an American accent, but he didn't sound local. Tony couldn't quite place it, though. He did sound pissed off, and so did Jessica when she answered.

"I don't know. Did you put the brake on?"

"Of course I put the brake on. Besides, if I hadn't, it could only have rolled into the corridor. Do you see it in the corridor?"

There was an angry silence. Tony almost liked the delivery guy in that second. "Well, it can't have gone far."

"Not unless someone moved it, no."

"What are you suggesting?" There was an edge of fear in Jessica's voice now.

"It's not like the kid could have walked away, is it?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Just what are you trying to pull here, lady?"

"Yeah, Jessica," Tony said, trying to sound casual as he stepped into view, "just what are you trying to pull?"

It was only then, when he had exposed himself, that he realised what a stupid idea this was. The delivery guy could have been armed. There could have been other guys in the truck, just waiting for

him to do something dumb like this. And then he looked at the delivery guy, saw the angry impotent look on his face, and realised he was going to get away with it.

“Look, Tony, just butt out. This is none of your business. I’m moving these kids to the hospital for a procedure.”

“In this truck? At this hour?”

“I’ve said it’s none of your business. This is an urgent matter, and you’re holding things up. Now stop wasting my time.”

The delivery guy was getting edgy. He was glancing about, shifting his weight. Tony was sure that if he moved closer he would be able to see the guy sweating. Jessica sounded confident enough to make him wonder whether this was really all above board, but when he looked at the delivery guy, he was pretty sure it wasn’t.

“Hey, if it’s urgent, I’ll be happy to step aside. Even apologise. Let’s all just go get Dr Luchansky, and he’ll be able to sort this out. He does know, right, Jessica? About this urgent business? Involving his students?”

“Doctor Stein to you, Tony,” Jessica said in a failed attempt to take control of the situation again.

“Sure it is. Shall we go ask Dr L about this little arrangement?” Tony asked patronisingly. Jessica gave him a furious glare.

“Of course,” she agreed with the worst fake smile Tony had ever seen. “Just let me finish loading up these – patients, and we can go.”

“How about we all go, right now?” Tony walked towards them, keeping one eye on the delivery guy. He wasn’t too worried about Jessica, but the delivery guy looked like he could get dangerous.

“What a good idea,” Jessica agreed, with that same insincere smile. “That way, I can be there when you get fired for holding up an important medical procedure.”

“Great. Sounds fun.”

He was right next to them now, and the delivery guy made his move. Taking half a step back, he rushed at Tony, his head lowered to ram him. Tony stepped aside, but not fast enough. The blow knocked him to the ground, and the guy was on him, throwing punches. Tony struggled to get up again, but he was at a disadvantage. The delivery guy weighed at least two hundred pounds, and he was on Tony’s chest.

Behind him, he could hear Jessica rolling the life support pod up into the truck, and then shutting up the back of it. It was getting difficult for him to breathe, let alone defend himself.

“That’s it. Let’s go,” she yelled at the delivery guy.

“What about the rest of them?”

“Fuck the rest of them. Let’s go, now.”

The delivery guy did not look pleased. He paused for a second, giving Tony a chance to get himself loose. With an effort, he forced himself out from under the delivery guy, and then tried to get to his feet. He felt dizzy.

Jessica must have made it to the truck, because the engine roared into life. “Are you coming or what?” she yelled out the window as she shifted into gear. The delivery guy looked indecisive for a second before he ran to the cab and hopped in. Tony was on his feet and walking, but the truck was way ahead of him. It was moving away.

And then it stopped. The reverse lights came on. The truck backed up, heading right for him.

“Shit.” Tony ran aside, stumbling, but keeping his footing. The truck shifted into first again, and looked like it was going to take another shot at him, but he made it to the walkway. The truck kept moving forward, picking up speed. It turned the corner of the main building. Tony heard the gravel crunching as it hit the school driveway and drove away.

\*

It was nearly midnight before the cops finished interviewing Tony and drove him back to the school. The dorms were silent and dark, but Dr Luchansky was waiting for him in the foyer, reading a book. He shut the book as he heard Tony crunching up the gravel path.

“How are you feeling, Tony?” he asked quietly.

“Fine.” Tony sighed. “Tired. Maybe a little angry. But at least I managed to convince the cops that I wasn’t a part of this kidnapping scheme. Or at least, I think I have. It was pretty nasty in there for a while.”

“I don’t believe you had any knowledge of Jessica’s plans, Tony.”

“Thanks.”

“And I’d like to thank you for what you did tonight. Your actions saved at least one other child from kidnapping. Probably more than one.”

Tony sighed again, and sat down on the bottom stair. Dr Luchansky sat beside him. “She still got away with one of the kids, though. I didn’t manage to stop that.”

“I’m sure that she will be caught soon enough.”

Tony wasn’t sure that he believed this, so he changed the subject. “I guess you’ll have to tell the missing kid’s parents.”

Dr Luchansky nodded.

“That’s got to be tough.”

“It certainly won’t be easy, but it must be done.”

The two men stared silently at the far wall.

“It just doesn’t make sense,” Tony burst out. “Why would she do a thing like this?”

“I don’t know why she kidnapped the student, but I’m afraid I do understand why she left. I think she has been intending to do something like this for some time.”

“But why?”

“You saw the life support pods in the,” Dr Luchansky cleared his throat, “special care ward?”

“Yeah?”

“Jessica designed them. And she wanted to market them, but I couldn’t permit her to do so. She tested the pods on our students, you see, and she would have had to make the results of those tests public in order to attract investors to her new company. I couldn’t permit that. She was very angry about it, but there was nothing she could do. She had signed an NDA when she came to work here.”

“And you think that’s why she left?”

Dr Luchansky considered it. “I think that she has been looking for a way to leave Marvel and market her invention for a long time. This way must have seemed like the perfect opportunity to her. It is possible that she had managed to contact a wealthy investor about her project, and she kidnapped the child and stole the pod to prove that her design really worked.”

“But why would she do that? She has to know that the police will be after her now.”

“I’m sure she does, but if she has a wealthy patron, they may be able to set her up somewhere beyond the reach of the authorities.”

“Do you really think that’s possible? That they won’t be able to get Jessica?”

“I don’t know. I hope they catch her, Tony. I hope they do. But I’m afraid they won’t.” Dr Luchansky’s lips tightened, and he stared at the ground.

There was nothing that Tony could say to that. “I guess you’ll need to get a new doctor,” he said eventually.

“Yes. I’ve already placed a call to our old school doctor. He’s retired, but he has agreed to come to the school and fill in until we can find a permanent replacement.”

“That’s handy.”

“Yes. He’ll be coming up sometime tomorrow.”

“Well, if he needs an assistant or anything—”

“Thank you, Tony. I’ll consider that.” Tony could almost hear the subtext: I can’t have you round the medical centre after what happened tonight. What would the parents say?

“Sure,” he agreed shortly. Dr Luchansky gave him a tired look.

“Tony, I trust you. I want you to know that. I’m sorry about all of this.”

“Are you going to want my resignation?”

“No.”

“I don’t think the parents are going to like that.”

“Quite frankly, Tony, I’m hoping not to tell anyone, except for the parents of the missing student. I’d like to keep this whole incident as quiet as possible. I don’t want to cause a panic among the parents.”

Tony nodded. "That's probably a good idea." They lapsed into silence again, and Tony realised just how tired he was. "If that's everything, I might go to bed."

"Abdul's in the boys' dorm at the moment, keeping an eye on them. He'll probably be glad to go to bed himself."

"I'll go and relieve him." Tony stood up slowly and began the climb up the stairs.

"Tony," Dr Luchansky stopped him halfway up the first flight.

"Yeah?"

"There's something else I'd like you to do."

"What?"

"If you could take a couple of minutes tomorrow to talk to Brandy, I'd appreciate it. You know that she and Jessica were," Dr Luchansky averted his eyes slightly, "close. I've broken the news to her, but she isn't taking it well. She seems to be having a hard time accepting that Jessica has really left. Perhaps you could talk to her about it."

"Sure. I'll talk to her tomorrow."

"Any time would be fine. I've given her the day off. I'm giving you the day off too. Sleep in. I'll make sure that there's still breakfast for you when you get up."

"Thanks, Dr L."

Dr Luchansky smiled. "Not a problem. Goodnight, Tony."

"Goodnight."

\*

Amanda Wong was at home checking her email when her cellphone rang. It was late, and she didn't really want to talk to anyone, but she answered it anyway. It could be a client, and Amanda Wong prided herself on being available to deal with clients twenty-four hours a day. It was one of the little touches that set Impact Marketing apart from the competition. Well, that and the bombings.

"Wong."

"Ms Wong, it's Wolfgang Muller. I hope I'm not disturbing you--"

"What do you want, Muller?" She said it dismissively, as if she wasn't really interested, which was, in fact, the truth. She doubted that Muller could have anything to say that would interest her at this hour.

"I would like you to buzz me into your car park, Ms Wong. I have something I think you should see."

"What is it?"

"I think you should see it, Ms Wong."

"Fine." She pressed the button that opened the doors to the underground car park. "I'll be down in a minute, but you'd better not be wasting my time, Muller."

"I can assure you I am not. Thank you, Ms Wong."

Amanda Wong cut the connection. Time for a break anyway, she thought, glancing at her watch. Eleven o'clock. She put on a pair of shoes, and took her private penthouse elevator down to the car park. There was a big white truck parked in the space next to hers, and Muller was waiting next to it, along with two people she didn't recognise.

"All right, Muller, I'm here. Show me what you've got."

"First, Ms Wong, let me introduce Dr Jessica Stein, my informant at Marvel Academy. And this is Jeff Palmer." Muller brought the woman forward, and then flicked his hand at the man almost as an afterthought. Amanda Wong dismissed the man from her mind.

"Informant at Marvel? Then why are you here, and not at Marvel?"

Dr Stein opened her mouth, but Muller answered for her. "Dr Stein participated in a retrieval operation earlier this evening. It did not prove ... expedient ... for her to stay at Marvel."

"You fucked up, huh?"

Muller faltered, but recovered quickly. Amanda Wong wondered what he wasn't telling her. "Not at all, Ms Wong. The retrieval was a complete success."

"And what have you 'retrieved'?" She was interested, but she kept her voice neutral.

Muller gestured to the other man, whose name Amanda Wong had already forgotten, to open up the back of the truck. The man opened the doors, and pulled down a ramp to allow easy unloading. Amanda Wong walked around to the back of the truck and peered in.

“You going to unload, or am I supposed to sit here all night?”

“I don’t think that unloading would be wise at this point,” Muller said, glancing around the empty car park nervously. He gestured to the other man again, who went round to the cab of the truck and came back with a large torch. “After you, Ms Wong.”

Amanda Wong led the way up the ramp and into the back of the truck. It was mostly empty, except for a largish lump of machinery covered in a sheet. She raised her eyebrows, and looked disdainfully at Muller.

“What is this, some sort of joke? Not funny, Muller.”

“Not a joke, Ms Wong. Not a joke at all. Dr Stein, will you remove the cover?”

The doctor stepped up and took hold of the sheet. “I warn you, this isn’t going to be pretty,” she said, and lifted the sheet off in one smooth movement.

Amanda Wong stared at the piece of machinery that was revealed for a moment without having the faintest idea what it was. The central piece was some sort of clear dome, and peering inside, she could see a pinkish lump of meat. The rest of the machine was taken up with screens and tubes and bags of stuff, all feeding into the dome. It looked like some sort of weird, high-tech oven, and she was annoyed that Muller had dragged her down here to look at his new piece of kitchen equipment.

“I give up,” she said eventually. “What is it?”

“This is one of our students,” the doctor replied.

“Sure it is. What’s his superpower, lying still and moaning?”

“Our students don’t all have superpowers, Ms Wong,” the doctor replied unsmilingly. “This student was exposed to toxic waste by his parents in an attempt to give him superpowers. As you can see,” and here she did smile a grim smile, “the attempt was unsuccessful.”

Very interesting, if it was true. Amanda Wong studied the doctor, trying to decide whether she was lying, but got nowhere with the attempt. In annoyance, she turned to Muller. “Why are you wasting my time with this shit?” she asked him.

“Ms Wong, I thought you would be pleased.” He looked crestfallen, as if she had just broken his favourite toy.

“Why would you think that, Muller? What did you expect me to say? ‘Thank you, Muller for bringing me this useless lump of dog food without superpowers for me to look at?’ Muller, do you remember where you work?”

Muller looked sullen. The doctor was looking out the back of the truck and trying to pretend she wasn’t listening. “Yes, Ms Wong.”

“And where is that?”

“Impact Marketing.”

“And what do we do at Impact Marketing?” She didn’t wait for him to reply. “We market, Muller. We market products. Now, is this human turd a product?”

“No, Ms Wong.” Muller’s face was flaming.

“And do you think, Muller, that stealing a crippled kid, without superpowers, and bringing it to me to look at, helps any of us who are working with real products, not human kitty treats, market those products?”

Muller muttered something.

“What was that?”

“I said, I didn’t know it didn’t have super powers.”

“Well, you should have checked that with your source before you went ahead and took it. Take it back.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Take this thing back.”

“I can’t do that, Ms Wong.” Muller stared at the gurney in horror.

“Well, you’re going to have to get rid of it, because I don’t want it.”

Muller sighed. “Very well, Ms Wong.”

“Good. Now, if you’re through wasting my time, I’ve got better things to do.” Amanda Wong turned away from the pod and walked down the ramp of the truck.

“Excuse me, Ms Wong.” It was the doctor.

“What?”

“What about me? I’m on the run because of this stupid plan. Your guy here promised me you’d get me a ticket out of the country once we delivered the kid.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Doctor,” Amanda Wong said coldly, “but you were taken in. My subordinate had no authority to promise that. I suggest you just go back to Marvel.”

“I can’t go back to Marvel! Didn’t you hear me tell you I’m on the damned run?” The doctor was right next to her now, but had stopped short of taking hold of her arm. Amanda Wong stared her in the face until she looked away.

“Doctor, if you want my help getting out of the country, you will need to help me first. Now, that means providing information or services that I would find useful. And what I would find useful right now is either a child or children from Marvel, with super powers, or information that would lead to my getting one.”

“Why do you want a kid with superpowers? Because you know you’re not going to find one at Marvel.”

Amanda Wong tightened her lips. “Doctor, if you won’t help me, I can’t help you.”

“I am helping you.” The doctor seemed annoyed. “You won’t get one at Marvel, because most of the kids there don’t have superpowers.”

“What?” Amanda Wong couldn’t help letting her indifferent facade slip a little when she heard this. She was torn between excitement and annoyance. Annoyance, because she should have been hearing this from Kirkpatrick, considering what she paid him, and excitement, because if this were true, it would be a very interesting opportunity for her to offer the people at Edumax. If it were true.

“Most of the kids there don’t have superpowers. The whole school is a sham, set up to keep parents from doing stuff like that,” the doctor gestured towards the back of the truck, “to their kids.”

Amanda Wong’s eyes narrowed. The doctor seemed quite insistent that she was telling the truth, but that meant nothing. “This is an interesting development, Doctor, and if it proves true, I will be happy to assist in your escape from the country. Of course, you understand that I will have to verify this information first.”

“I understand that.” She didn’t look happy, but she couldn’t complain.

Muller had been standing near them throughout this conversation, and now he stepped forward with an ingratiating expression on his face. “Shall I make efforts to confirm this, Ms Wong?” he offered.

“I don’t think so, Muller. I’ve got a different assignment for you. Escort the doctor to one of our safe houses, and keep an eye on her until we can verify her information. I will have more instructions for you then.”

Muller didn’t look happy, but Amanda Wong didn’t really care. “Yes, Ms Wong.”

“Good. Get on it.” Amanda Wong left them there and began walking towards her elevator. As she stepped in, she remembered something, and she jammed a thumb onto the ‘door open’ button.

“Oh, and Muller?”

“Yes?”

“If I find out that your doctor’s information is false, kill her, okay? You can manage that, can’t you?”

The doctor didn’t look particularly scared when she heard this, but Muller did. He’d probably never fired a gun in his life, except at the rifle range. That was the problem with hiring university graduates, Amanda Wong thought. Too theoretical. No grasp of the practicalities of a situation. She would verify the doctor’s information herself. Amanda Wong almost smiled as she thought about it. Kirkpatrick was going to be in for a very bad time of it, if it turned out he had been hiding anything from her.

Muller struggled to regain his composure. “Of course, Ms Wong,” he said.

“You’d better be able to. This is your last chance, you get me?”

“Yes, Ms Wong.”

“Now get out of here and stop wasting my time.” She let go of the button, and the doors closed, but not quickly enough to shut out a final servile ‘Yes, Ms Wong,’ from Muller.



\*

Brandy wasn't at breakfast the next morning. Tony wasn't planning to be there himself, but he couldn't sleep. He kept waking up, thinking about Jessica, or about the cops, or about the kids in the medical centre. Or about the kid who was no longer in the medical centre. At seven o'clock, he gave up, got dressed and went down to breakfast.

Abdul and Dr Luchansky were already there, sitting around the staff table drinking coffee and talking quietly. "Tony," Dr Luchansky said, looking a little surprised to see him there. "You don't have to be here, you know."

"I know. Couldn't sleep."

Dr Luchansky nodded understandingly. Tony went and got himself a coffee. "Any news from the cops?" he asked as he sat down.

"Nothing yet. I'm sure they'll call as soon as they have anything to tell, though," Dr Luchansky assured him.

"How are you feeling this morning, Tony?" Abdul asked.

"Fine."

"Well, if you need to talk, you know where to find me."

It was a nice offer, but Tony wasn't sure he wanted to talk to Abdul in a professional capacity. "Yeah. Thanks, Abdul," he said, trying to keep his face neutral.

Abdul smiled. "It's okay if you don't want to talk about it, Tony. No pressure."

"Sure," Tony agreed, but not enthusiastically. Abdul nodded and let it drop.

"Morning, Tony," Chris said, pulling up a chair and sitting down. "Hey, nice work last night." He had a newspaper with him, as always, and he set it down on the table in front of him.

"Not good enough, though. She still got away with one of the kids."

"Yeah, that was pretty crazy." Chris shook her head. "Never thought she'd do something like that."

"I think it took all of us by surprise," Abdul agreed.

"How's Brandy this morning?"

"I hope she's still sleeping," Abdul said. "The news that Jessica had left came as a bit of a shock."

"Yeah, but she's better off without that bitch," Chris said. Tony heartily agreed, but didn't say anything. Abdul just shrugged, but Tony got the feeling that he agreed too. "Speaking of which, have you seen the paper this morning? No? Have a look." He unfolded the paper and showed them the headline. 'Supermodel Impregnated by Neighbour's Dog', it screamed up at them, promising 'Pictures Inside' in slightly smaller writing. "Fascinating, huh? Want to see the pictures?"

"No!" Abdul said. "Put that away." Chris shrugged, and folded the paper back up, smiling to himself a little. Tony was grateful to him for the distraction, but Dr Luchansky soon brought things back on track.

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind taking Brandy her breakfast, Tony," he suggested.

Tony couldn't see any way out of it, and besides, it was probably best to get seeing Brandy over with. "Sure. I'll go do that now."

"You could take her the paper," Chris offered, sliding it across the table. "A little light reading to take her mind off things."

"No thanks, Chris. But I'll tell her you offered."

"Any time. I've got a whole stack of back issues if she decides she wants one."

"I'll be sure to let her know," Tony said, escaping from the table and into the kitchen. "Hey, Larry," he greeted the cook. "Here to pick up some breakfast for Brandy."

"Sure, Tony," the cook agreed, disappearing into the cool room. "She okay?" he called out.

"I don't know. Haven't seen her since last night."

"What happened, man? I hear Jessica left her or something."

"You'll have to ask her. Or Dr L."

"C'mon, man. Why the mystery?"

In short, unemotional sentences, Tony told him about the events of the night before. Larry's eyes were very wide by the time he finished talking.

“You’re kidding. No way can you be serious about that.”

“I’m not kidding, Larry.”

Larry shook his head. “I don’t believe it.”

“I know,” Tony said with a short laugh. “I’m not really sure I believe it either, and I was there.”

“So, the cops believe you weren’t involved?”

“I think I managed to convince them. Guess I’ll know about it soon enough if I haven’t.”

“Guess so.” Larry shook his head again, and then handed Tony a tray. “There you go. Cheerios, Minute Maid juice, and Starbucks coffee in Brandy’s special Starbucks mug.” He beamed at the tray. “Just the way Brandy likes it.”

“Thanks, Larry,” Tony said, eying the coffee nervously. He had never witnessed a repeat of the scene in the Starbucks, and he really hoped that wasn’t going to change today.

“That’s okay, man. And hey, you tell Brandy hi for me, won’t you. Tell her I hope she’s doing okay.”

“I’ll do that.”

“She’s better off without that bitch, anyway. Never treated her right.”

Tony smiled into the tray. “Sure. See you later, Larry.”

“Take it easy, man.”

Tony began to feel a little nervous as he climbed the stairs to Brandy’s room. What was he supposed to say to her, anyway? Would she even want to talk to him after what had happened? It would be very easy for her to decide that it was his fault that Jessica had had to leave, and if she did that, things could get ugly. He looked down at the mug of coffee on the tray, and hoped he wouldn’t be wearing it.

Tony hesitated outside the door to Brandy’s room. He couldn’t hear anything from inside. Maybe she was asleep. Maybe he should just leave the tray and come back to talk to her later. Shifting the tray carefully into one hand, he knocked as softly as possible with the other, hoping that she would be asleep and wouldn’t answer.

No such luck. “Yes?” her voice came from inside the room. She sounded tired, but not as if she had been crying.

“It’s Tony. I’ve brought you some breakfast, but if you aren’t hungry, I can come back later.”

“No, that’s fine. Hang on a second.”

He heard muffled footsteps crossing the carpet, and then the door was open. Brandy looked as tired as she had sounded, and her eyes were red. Tony held out the tray to her. “Thanks, Tony,” she said.

“That’s okay.” He stood there for a second, not sure what to do, and then made as if to turn away.

“Don’t go,” she said, stopping him. “You could come in and have breakfast, if you wanted.” She gave him a weak attempt at a smile.

“I’ve already had breakfast,” he said. The smile left Brandy’s face, and he felt like an asshole. “But I could stick around if you’d like some company.”

“That would be nice. Come in.” Brandy pushed the door open further, inviting Tony into her room.

He had only had one glimpse of the inside of her room before, but it was everything that he had remembered. The whole room was packed, floor to ceiling, with stuff. It wasn’t messy, or even cluttered, just very, very full. Tony had to just stand in it for a few minutes, holding the doorframe to keep himself from falling.

“You like it?” Brandy asked, seeming anxious that he should.

“It’s nice,” Tony managed. “It must have taken a lot of work.”

“I’ve been collecting for years,” Brandy confessed. “For as long as I can remember. I’ve got a lot more stuff stored at my parents’ place. This is just the most important stuff.”

Tony blinked around the room. “This stuff here-“ he said, motioning to the far wall, which was almost lost in a sea of pink.

“That’s my Barbie wall. This one here,” indicating the right hand wall, which was mostly green, “is my Starbucks wall, and the wall over the bed is my Nike wall.” She lowered her voice reverently as she said Barbie, Starbucks and Nike, and Tony almost expected her to cross herself. He looked around the room again; amazed at the amount of stuff she had found space for on each wall. She had

posters, stickers and T-shirts layered on like wallpaper. Each wall also had a display shelf holding figurines, mugs, and in the case of the Nike wall, a pair of shoes.

“Hey, those are the same running shoes I have.”

Brandy looked torn between pleasure and shock. “I don’t run in them. I have another pair for running in. Those ones stay on the wall.”

“Okay,” Tony agreed uneasily. The logos were beating at him from all sides, repeated over and over on each item. He began to feel faintly ill. “Do you mind if we open the window?”

“Sure,” Brandy said, pulling the pink Barbie curtains aside and opening it for him. “Are you okay? Why don’t you sit down?”

The bed was a dizzying mix of Barbie sheets and Nike pillowcases. Tony kept his eyes firmly on the view through the window. His mind was replaying the time he had seen Brandy in the Starbucks. “So,” he began, “you must really like Barbie. And Nike.”

“When I look at my Nike wall,” she replied, gazing at it like it was about to morph into the face of the Virgin Mary, “it reminds me of what I have to do with my day. That I have to Just Do It. Barbie is my role model. She is the perfect woman, with the right clothes and the right accessories for every situation. And of course, she is such a good role model for all of the girls here.”

“Of course she is,” Tony agreed.

“I think that if they really try, any woman can be just like Barbie. It’s something to aspire to.”

Tony searched for the right thing to say to that. “Well, Brandy, if that’s what you’ve been aspiring to; I think you have certainly succeeded.”

Brandy beamed at this compliment. “Thank you, Tony. I’m so pleased that you think so.” Tony was surprised to find himself smiling back at her. If you could cut through all the weirdness, she was actually nice, he thought.

“Thank you for bringing me breakfast,” Brandy said, turning her attention to the tray. Her eyes settled on the mug, and Tony looked away. The weirdness was back.

“That’s okay. Oh, and Larry says to say hi. He says he hopes you’re okay.”

“I’m fine,” Brandy said, but it didn’t sound convincing. Tony wanted to say something to comfort her, but he didn’t know what. “Tony?” she asked eventually.

“Yes?”

“Julius told me that when you saw Jessica last night, she was – that she was loading some of the children from the special care ward into a truck.”

Tony stared hard out the window, concentrating on keeping his face expressionless. “That’s right,” he said.

“I see,” Brandy said in a whisper. “Julius told me that you confronted her about what she was doing, and that was when she ran away.”

“That’s pretty much right.”

“Do you think she will be caught?”

“I don’t know.”

“But you hope she will?”

Tony clenched his jaw. “Yes,” he admitted. “I’m sorry, Brandy. I know that-“ he broke off. He wasn’t sure how to finish that sentence.

“That’s okay,” Brandy said. Her voice shook, but she seemed to be beyond crying. “She deserves to be caught if that was what she did. I just wish I knew why she did it. I wish she had told me, so I could have stopped her. I didn’t know she was going to do it. I didn’t know! You believe me, don’t you, Tony? I didn’t know!”

Her voice rose hysterically as she spoke, and Tony tried to calm her. “It’s okay, Brandy. I believe you. Nobody thinks you had anything to do with this.” He wished that there was something more that he could say. Looking at Brandy, it was hard not to feel guilty for running into Jessica when he had. If I hadn’t caught her in the act, she’d still be here, he thought glumly.

“If only I had known,” Brandy said, gripping the coffee cup. Taking up a little spoon from the stray, she added milk to the coffee, and stirred it in. “Sometimes,” she said, staring into the cup, “the coffee stirs me.”

Tony was expecting to feel revulsion, but he was surprised to discover that he just felt sorry for her. “It’s going to be okay, Brandy,” he said, putting an arm around her. He wasn’t sure what to say. There was a lot more going on with Brandy than he had realised. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

\*

“Hello?”

“Kirkpatrick? Amanda Wong.”

“What can I do for you, Amanda?”

“You don’t sound pleased to hear from me, Kirkpatrick. Is that because you know you screwed up with the school?”

“I don’t really want to talk about it right now. This isn’t a good time.”

“Hey, I’m paying the bills here, so you’ll jump when I say so.”

“Look, what do you want? I’ve told you this isn’t a good time.”

“I want to know what you’re going to do to fix your fuck-up at Marvel. I need that place shut down. Now.”

“I can’t do that. You know I can’t. Not after what happened at their demonstration.”

“Well, maybe I would be satisfied if you’d just tell me the truth about that place.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Yes you do. There aren’t any super kids there at all. This is all some sort of cheap trick you’re playing.”

“Amanda, you saw the super kids for yourself at the demonstration. Now will you please stop playing games with me? I’ve got work to do.”

“You’d better remember who’s in charge before you speak to me like that, Kirkpatrick. I want some straight answers from you, and I want them now.”

“You know what, Amanda? I don’t think I like our arrangement anymore. I’m not sure that it’s really profitable for us to continue with it.”

“Are you pulling out on me?”

“Yes, I suppose I am.”

“And do you really think that’s wise?”

“Look, Amanda, I’m sick of this. I don’t need the money, and I don’t need the hassles. I’m through with it.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, but if it’s the way you want it to be...”

“It is.”

“Very well then.”

“Goodbye, Amanda.”

“Nice knowing you, Kirkpatrick.”

\*

Dr Luchansky had taken Tony off all of his duties except for the basic house parenting ones. There was a note about it on his door when he got back from talking to Brandy. He would still have to keep an eye on the kids in the evening, but his days were going to be his own until further notice. It was probably a courtesy, Tony knew, but it drove him crazy almost immediately. He tried it for a day and a half, spending most of the time wandering aimlessly about the grounds and endlessly replaying the encounter with Jessica and the delivery guy, and then decided that he had given it a fair trial and went up to see Dr Luchansky about it.

Brandy was not at her desk when he went up to Dr Luchansky’s office. She hadn’t been there since Jessica had left. She hadn’t left her room since Jessica left, as far as Tony knew. Dr Luchansky and Abdul were taking turns keeping an extra eye on the girls’ dorm.

Tony knocked at Dr Luchansky’s door. “Who is it?”

“It’s Tony. Have you got a minute?”

“Certainly. Come in.”

Tony pushed the door open, and stepped into the office. Dr Luchansky looked up from a pile of paperwork, which he pushed aside when he saw the look on Tony’s face. “Come in and sit down, Tony. What can I do for you?”

"I'd just like something to do," Tony began before he was halfway across the room. "I'm sick of spending all day sitting around trying to figure out if there was any way I could have stopped Jessica from getting away with that kid. I can't do it anymore. I'd rather be doing something useful."

"Have you talked to Abdul about this, Tony?"

"No."

"Maybe you should."

"I think he's got other things to worry about at the moment. Like Brandy, for example."

Dr Luchansky gave Tony a serious look. "Brandy will be fine," he said. "And so will you. You both just need time. Maybe you'd like some time off? You might find that it helps to get away from Marvel for a while."

"No," Tony said firmly. "Thank you," he added. "I think I just need to keep busy at the moment."

"Well, I could use a hand with the typing and filing until Brandy gets back to work. You could help with that, if you really wanted."

"That would be great."

"Tony," Dr Luchansky said with a sigh, "I think you should talk to Abdul about this. And I really think you should consider taking some time off. Go visit your sister. Go skiing. Something."

"I'll think about it," Tony said, trying to make it sound like he meant it.

"You do that."

"So, about the typing-?"

Dr Luchansky pushed a stack of papers across the desk. "The end of semester reports will be sent out at the end of the month. You can get started on them, if you'd like. And there's the chess tournament coming up. We need to send permission forms to the parents of the kids on the team. The names are in the files. Everything's on Brandy's computer."

"I'll get started on it," Tony said, picking up the papers.

"Thank you, Tony. I appreciate the help."

"No problem." Tony stood up and walked to the door, but stopped in the middle of the room.

"Something else?"

"It's about Brandy. I went and spoke to her yesterday, and again last night." Tony wasn't sure how to phrase the question. "Have you ever been in her room?" he asked eventually.

"Yes."

"Well," Tony hesitated again. "Has she always been like that? You know, the coffee, and the shoes, and all that stuff."

Dr Luchansky looked away, and for a moment Tony thought he wasn't going to answer. "She has been the way she is for as long as I have known her," he said eventually. "As far as I know, she has always been that way."

Tony coughed. "So, uh... what's the deal there?"

"Tony, if you want to know about Brandy's...fondness for certain...products, I suggest you ask her," Dr Luchansky said, using his principal voice, the one he used for scolding errant students. "We all have our quirks. I hope you don't intend to make Brandy uncomfortable about hers."

"No, of course not. I wouldn't do that." Tony was offended, and he must have looked it, because Dr Luchansky's face softened.

"Of course you wouldn't. I'm sorry. The truth is, Tony, I don't understand Brandy's condition very well. If you're really curious, you could ask Abdul about it. But I find that, since it doesn't affect Brandy's functioning at work, it's best to just put it down to a personal quirk and not draw attention to it. If Brandy wants to talk about it, she will, but otherwise, I think it's best not to pry."

"Right," Tony mumbled. "I'll get on to this stuff."

"I would appreciate that."

\*

Brian Kirkpatrick's latest event was a huge success. Far better than any of his work exposing the evils of pornography. Better even than his daring expose on child smuggling. For some reason, he had nearly had trouble with the police after that one. Brian had been furious. How could they accuse

him of committing a crime when all he had been doing was showing the world the true extent of its SINS?

He had had to lie low while the fallout from that event had died down. Brian hated lying low. He wasn't meant to spend his time dodging the spotlight and muttering "No comment" at the hordes of reporters who followed him everywhere. No, he was meant to embrace the spotlight, and proudly tell the reporters about the SINful lifestyle that they lived. But the President had insisted.

"It's an election year, Brian," he had said when the angry letters to the editor started appearing in the papers. "Some of these people are registered voters, you know. We can't afford to antagonise them."

"Are you saying that I'm fired, sir?"

"No, no, Brian, nothing like that. I'm just asking you to keep a low profile for a little while. Give this whole mess a little while to cool off. That's all I'm asking."

Brian hadn't liked it, but he had done what the President had said. He had waited, quietly and patiently – or at least as patiently as he could – for the public to forget. All too quickly, they did forget. And now it was time to remind them again.

He had learned from his experiences, though. There were no children at tonight's event. The American public wasn't ready to hear that lesson yet. The lesson of the evils of sex, though, that was something that they were ready to hear. And it was something that Brian was happy to tell them about, over and over, until they listened.

Tonight's event was a little bit different from anything he had done in the past. For one thing, he had decided not to make a speech. When he had been planning the event, this was the thing that had worried him the most, but he had heard that a picture was worth a thousand words, and he had given the public a picture that they would not soon forget.

Pyrotechnics going off on stage had drawn the audience's attention to the start of the action. Huge red banners, with 'SIN' written on them in letters fifteen feet high, had unrolled from the ceiling with a snap, and dance music started to pound through the sound system. Five women, dressed in black leather and chained together, had walked onto the stage and kneeled down. They were followed by a man in black leather pants and a black leather mask. The music thumped. The man uncurled a whip. The audience watched in absolute silence as the man beat the five women.

Afterwards, more slave girls circulated through the audience, passing out drinks and offering backrubs to the guests. Brian emerged from the hallway behind the stage, where he had been waiting during the show. He had wanted to be a part of the action at first, but he realised that he didn't have any idea how to whip five women properly. And thinking about it, he worried that he might be tainted by the presence of such SINful women. So he hired a body double to do it and left the audience to draw their own conclusions.

"Interesting show," a blonde woman from one of the networks murmured to him as he mingled through the crowd.

"It was only the beginning," Brian assured her. "I have discovered many more SINful acts in this culture, and I intend to showcase several of them tonight."

"Really?" the woman said. She seemed impressed. "Like what?"

"I don't want to spoil the surprise. Let's just say that you haven't seen anything yet, shall we?"

"Well, I can't wait to see what you've got for us," the woman said. Brian offered her a gracious smile and moved on.

He was tracking down one of the slave girls for a drink when Senator Bowman grabbed his arm. "What in God's name do you think you're doing?" he hissed at Brian.

Brian shook his arm free and replied with dignity. "Charlie, there's a lot of SIN in the world, and it is my duty to expose it. My calling, Charlie."

"Are you insane, Brian? This is an election year. All your years working with the media and you don't know what that means?"

"I know perfectly well what that means."

"Then why are you trying to ruin us? The media are going to have a field day with this one, Brian."

"I do hope that it opens their eyes to the pit of SIN that they live in."

Senator Bowman shook his head. "You're insane, Brian. This is completely insane."

“The President doesn’t think so, Charlie.” Brian felt a hand on his shoulder, and one of his aides whispered in his ear. “Excuse me, Charlie. I have to take care of something.” He pushed his way to the edge of the crowd where he paused for a moment to soak up the buzz of their conversations. He felt like he was really getting through to them tonight. Then he turned his back on them, going through the swinging doors to the backstage area and making his way down the hallway to his dressing room.

The lights were off when he opened the door. “Amanda?” he asked. “What do you want?” He took a step into the room. “I don’t have time for this, Amanda. I am very busy this evening.” Another step. “What’s going on here, anyway?”

The door swung shut behind him and his hands were grabbed from behind. He heard a rattle and a snap and felt cold metal about his wrists. He had time for a short cry before something was stuffed in his mouth, and he was forced into a chair. The lights came on.

“What is this?” he tried to ask the viciously grinning young man at the light switch. “Who are you? Where is Amanda?”

“I can’t understand you, you know,” the man said. “It’s the gag. Makes it very difficult for people to understand what you’re saying.” He had a funny accent. It took Brian a moment to figure out that he was probably English. That or Australian. Brian tried not to associate with foreigners too much.

Brian tried to protest further, but didn’t get anywhere. He struggled a little with the handcuffs, then gave that up as well when he realised that they weren’t going to give. He slumped in his chair, resignation and confusion battling for time in his brain.

“That’s much better,” the young man said with another smile. Brian decided he definitely didn’t like the smile. “I’m sure you’re wondering why Ms Wong isn’t here to speak to you in person.”

Brian thought about trying to speak, but settled for just nodding.

“Well, Brian, the thing is, you’ve made her rather unhappy. And Ms Wong doesn’t really have a lot of time for people who make her unhappy, so she has sent me along instead to have a little talk with you. But she is watching,” the man said, looking into one of the corners of the room. Following his gaze, Brian saw a video camera set up on a tripod. “Say hello for the camera, Brian. Oh, you can’t. Silly me.” He pulled the gag out, warning, “One word I don’t like, and it’s back in.”

“What do you want?”

“Me? Nothing. Just to get paid. But Ms Wong, she’s another matter. She’s really most unhappy about your recent decision to terminate your relationship with her. She urges you to reconsider it.”

“Forget it,” Brian said without thinking. “I’m through with her.”

“Shame,” the man said, stuffing the gag back in Brian’s mouth. He turned away for a minute and opened a large black bag. He pulled out a black cloth, set it over Brian’s dressing table, and began laying out items. A whip. A needle. A knife. Several other things that Brian couldn’t figure out.

“Sorry I couldn’t bring a full set of gear,” the man apologised. He tested the edge of the knife with his thumb. “Short notice, you know. But I can assure you that I am very well trained with the gear that I do have.” He laid the flat of the knife on Brian’s bare neck, and then turned it slowly, bringing the edge into contact with his skin. “Any last words, Brian? But if you want to shout for help, I wouldn’t bother.” Outside, the music was starting up again. Brian realised that nobody was going to be able to hear him. They wouldn’t even know he was back here. They would think that he was on stage. The realisation was enough to make bile rise in his throat.

The man pulled the gag away again. “So, any last words, Brian?”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Ms Wong thinks that this will be a useful object lesson for your successor. Teach him not to take the relationship too lightly. That all?” He held up the gag again.

“Wait, wait, wait! I was too hasty. I’ve changed my mind.”

“Pleased to hear it,” the man said, still holding the gag.

“I’ll do anything she wants.”

“Really?” The man put the gag down, and turned back to his table of gear.

“Yes,” Brian gasped, nearly crying now.

“Well, there is one thing...”

“Anything!”

“Ms Wong has heard that the situation at Marvel isn’t quite what you had represented it to be. She has heard that there aren’t any children there with super powers at all. Know anything about that?”

“That’s not true.” The man turned again, holding something black and lumpy in his hand. “Wait, wait. It isn’t completely true. There’s one kid there with super powers. Maybe two or three. I’m not sure. The President lets them get away with it because he hopes to draw out other super kids once the program takes off.”

“That’s really interesting, Brian. Anything else?”

“No, that’s everything. I swear.”

“Good. Then I think that’s enough from you.” The man shook out the thing he was holding, and forced it over Brian’s head. He couldn’t see, and he realised he couldn’t speak either.

“Like it?” the man asked. “Don’t worry, you can still breathe. There are air holes in the nostrils.”

“What are you going to do to me?” Brian tried to ask.

“Worried, Brian? Well, don’t worry too much. You’re going to put on a great show for everyone. The best show of your life.”

The music outside swelled as the whip bit into Brian’s back for the first time.

\*

“Morning, Chris.”

“Morning, Tony.” Chris looked up from his newspaper, one of the less reputable dailies. He seemed completely oblivious to the controlled chaos around him. “Cold this morning, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Tony sat down and began to drink his coffee. Chris moved closer to him, waving the paper.

“Hey, look at this.”

Tony looked. The headline on the front page was ‘White House Aide in Sex Death Scandal’, and then, inevitably, ‘Pictures Inside’.

“You don’t really believe anything in that paper, do you, Chris?”

Chris smiled. He had this argument with people all the time. “It’s real news. Look, they’ve even got pictures.” He opened the paper to a photo spread. Tony saw a picture of some sort of dressing room, and then a close up on a table with a heavy whip on it before he could push the paper away.

“Hey, stop that. I can’t believe you read this kind of thing around these kids. Someone could get traumatised for life reading this stuff.”

“The kids aren’t paying attention to my paper. It’s breakfast time.” Chris waved a hand around the room. It was true that nobody seemed to be paying the staff table any attention at all, but Chris folded up the paper and rested an elbow on it anyway. “You happy now?”

“Happier.”

“So Dr L was saying that you wanted to take my spot on the chess team trip.” Chris looked over Tony’s shoulder towards the door. “Morning, Brandy,” he said.

“Hi, Chris. Hi, Tony.”

Tony turned around to look at her. It was the first time that she had come down to a meal since Jessica had left Marvel on Monday night. She was wearing a two-piece suit in Barbie pink as if it was some sort of magical armour, but apart from that, she seemed reasonably normal. When she walked past the staff table to pick up her coffee and cereal, Tony glanced down at her shoes. Brand new Nikes. He could almost smell the new-shoe smell from where he was sitting. Still, he thought, if it got her through the day, who was he to mention it?

Chris was still talking. “You can come along to the chess team meeting at lunchtime, if you’d like. You’ll probably want to talk to Gary – have you met Gary? Math teacher? He’s the coach. Tony? You okay?”

“Sorry, Chris. What were you saying?”

“I was saying that you’ll probably want to talk to Gary about the chess team before you go along. You won’t actually have to go to the tournament, just drive the van and help with the chaperoning in the evenings. You know, Tony, you look a little funny.”



Tony rewound the last part of the conversation, trying to figure out what was going on. What was all this about a chess tournament? “This is the first time I’ve heard of any of this.”

“Really? I thought it was your idea.”

Tony shook his head. “How’re you feeling this morning, Brandy?” he asked as she sat down. She was clutching a cup of coffee. Tony didn’t have to look at the logo on the mug to know that it would be Starbucks. Barbie, Nike and Starbucks. Brandy’s Big Three. If consumerism was a religion, Brandy was headed for sainthood.

“Fine, thanks, Tony. How are you?”

“Not bad.” He looked for something else to say that wasn’t a comment on her outfit. “I’ve just found out that I’m going to the tournament with the chess team.”

“So you’ll do it?” Chris asked. “Great! I’ll take you along to the meeting and you can sort it all out with Gary.”

“Sure, Chris,” Tony said. He was looking at Brandy, at the way she held the cup, the way she seemed to huddle inside her pink suit. Every time he saw her these days, he wished that he had never laid eyes on Jessica Stein. “Well, I’d better go check the dorms. Some of the kids have been oversleeping. Can’t have growing boys missing breakfast, huh?” He said it all in a quick monotone, and was standing up before they had a chance to reply.

“All right, Tony. See you later. And don’t forget about the chess team meeting.”

“Sure,” he said, walking away. Maybe Dr L was right, and he really did need a break. Maybe this chess thing would be just what he needed.

“Hey Brandy,” he heard Chris say as he left the room. “Have you seen the papers this morning?”

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Perry cast his eyes across the blueprints of the target spread out across the table, and then looked up at the rest of the group. “I think that’s everything,” he said, “but I’ll run through once more to make sure we haven’t missed anything.” He sifted through the blueprints until he came up with a large aerial photograph of the target. “We will get to the target by van, which our employer will be providing for us next week. The van will be parked in this clearing here,” indicating a spot on the photograph, “which is out of sight of the target. Thorpe, you will be responsible for cutting communications, while Hardy, Young, and I secure the dormitory building. We find Luchansky, and we lock everyone into their rooms. Chiang, you and O’Sullivan will enter the main building, where you will place explosives at,” and now he switched to a blueprint of the main building at Marvel, “the sites marked in red.” Chiang nodded his agreement. “Once you have cut communications, Thorpe, you will proceed to lock down the medical centre, and then join Hardy and Young in watching the dorm building, ensuring that nobody escapes to raise the alarm. We’ll be going in at night, so all the little kiddies should be in bed, but I don’t want to take any chances. And that goes double for you, O’Sullivan. If anyone sees this Menendez kid, they are to alert O’Sullivan immediately, and let her take care of it. We don’t know much about the kid’s powers, so everybody, leave it to the expert.” He gave Theresa a nod and a grin. “Don’t forget, he might be immune to bullets, so don’t go wasting them and alerting him to your presence. I want this operation quiet and clean, understand?” Nods of acknowledgement from around the table. “When all the devices are planted, we rendezvous at the van, Chiang detonates, and we get the hell out of there and pick up our paychecks. Questions?”

Theresa raised a hand. “Why do we need to secure the dorms if we’re going in at night? And why are we locking everyone in their rooms? I don’t understand it.”

“It’s simple, O’Sullivan. If everyone is safely locked in their rooms, nothing can go wrong. If they’re running around the school, we don’t have them under control, and that’s when we have problems. I want a clean operation. I don’t want a bunch of kids getting into the wrong building and blowing themselves up.” He spoke forcefully, and Theresa nodded.

“I guess I’m just having a hard time understanding why we’re doing this at all. Why blow up a school like this? It isn’t like it’s important or anything.”

Perry sighed. “I’ll tell you why. Because we’re getting paid to do it. That’s all we need to know, and that’s all you should want to know. Is that clear, O’Sullivan?”

Theresa looked uncertain, but she nodded slowly anyway. “I guess so.”

“Any more questions?” Nobody said anything. “All right. That’s it, then.”

Hardy turned to Theresa as everyone got up from the table. “C’mon O’Sullivan,” he suggested. “Let’s go outside and work on your target practice some more. Menendez might be bulletproof, but every American should know how to handle a gun, all the same.”

Theresa nodded, and he led her out of the warehouse.

Once the door closed on them, Perry sat back down at the table, motioning for everyone to do the same. “All right,” he said. “Let’s go over the rest of this. Chiang, have you found suitable locations for the bombs in the dormitory building?”

Chiang unrolled another blueprint and added it to the stack. “I’ve marked the locations in red. They’re in similar places to the ones in the main building – the backup power generators, the oil reserves, the boiler.”

“Will it be enough?”

Chiang hesitated before speaking. “It’s going to be the same deal here as in the main building. There won’t be enough explosive to level the building, but once the fuel goes up, the fires should spread pretty quickly and take it out.”

“Before too many of the kids can escape?”

“That’s right. A few of them might get out, but the smoke and the flames should get most of them before they know what’s happening. Especially if they’re sleeping. By the time they wake up and figure out that their doors are locked, it’ll be far too late for them.”

“And the ones that do escape will have to jump,” Thorpe observed. “It’s going to be chaos.”

“Well, Ms Wong did ask for an atrocity,” Perry said, frowning. “I guess we’re going to be able to deliver. Anything else, Chiang? Anyone?”

“If we do spot a kid running loose-?” Young asked.

“Identify them first. What I said before about Menendez wasn’t just for O’Sullivan’s benefit. He’s the wild card here, and I don’t want him getting in there and screwing everything up.”

“And if it isn’t Menendez?”

“Eliminate them. But preferably not where O’Sullivan can see you do it.”

“Are you sure that it’s wise, keeping this part of the plan from her?” Chiang asked. “She’s got to find out sooner or later, so wouldn’t it be better for her to know now? I think she can handle it, you know. She’s not that squeamish. In fact, when she gets used to the idea of killing people, I think she’ll start to enjoy it.”

“I agree with you, but those were the orders. Ms Wong seems to think she’ll be better able to deal with the plans once she’s actually involved. Make it hard for her to back out and she’ll go along.”

“If you’re sure,” Chiang said, but he still sounded dubious.

“Those are the orders,” Perry repeated. “And if there’s nothing anyone wants to add, I’m going to report in.” Nobody said anything, and he got up and went to the phone.

\*

The chess team met in one of the empty classrooms at lunchtime, but if Tony hadn’t known they were there, he would never have guessed. Even though the classrooms weren’t very soundproof, there was no noise at all coming from the chess team’s room.

“Hey, don’t worry,” Chris said, slapping a hand down on his shoulder. “They’re all good kids.”

Tony was not reassured. He wasn’t sure that kids were meant to be good at that age. It seemed unnatural. “Well, let’s go,” he said.

Chris knocked quietly before pushing the classroom door open and ushering Tony in. The kids looked up briefly, and then returned to the contemplation of their chessboards. The teacher in charge came forward to greet them.

“Can we do this outside?” he whispered before they had time to say anything.

“Sure,” Chris agreed in an exaggerated whisper. The other man’s lips twitched in annoyance, but he said nothing about it. Tony got the feeling that this wasn’t the first time Chris had done this.

When they were outside, with the door closed, the man spoke again. He wasn't whispering this time, but he was still talking softly enough that Tony had to strain to hear him. "Now, what can I do for you?"

"This is Tony," Chris said, "He's the house parent for the boys' dorm. Tony, this is Gary. Math teacher, remember?"

"Right. Pleased to meet you." Tony extended a hand, and Gary shook it. He was a small, pot-bellied man, with shockingly white skin. Tony got the impression that he didn't get out very often.

"Pleased to meet you," Gary mumbled back. "What can I do for you, Tony?"

"You didn't get the message?" Chris asked. "I can't come along to the chess tournament next week, so Tony's volunteered to take my place."

"Really? How unfortunate," Gary said, but he seemed immensely pleased by the news. He must really not get along with Chris, Tony thought. "And so you'll be driving us up, will you, Tony?"

"Gary doesn't drive," Chris explained to Tony. "Gets his wife to drop him off in the mornings."

"That's not important," Gary said, making a swatting motion with his hand. "You are able to drive the minibus?"

Tony nodded. "No problem."

"Excellent. We leave on Thursday afternoon, after classes, and we return on Sunday. In the morning if we don't make any of the finals and in the afternoon if we do."

"That's fine."

"We usually stay at a motel near the school. You'll have to help with the chaperoning of the students, but you won't be required to sit in on the tournament if you would rather not." Gary frowned as he spoke. "Are you interested in chess?"

Tony searched for a tactful way to say no. "I haven't played it very much."

"Well, I'm sure our team will be able to teach you a thing or two."

"I'll bet."

"I would offer to introduce you, but I don't want to disturb the games in progress. Two of the students you already know."

Tony thought for a second. "James and Miguel. They're on the team, aren't they?"

Gary looked pleased. "That's right. Five students made the team this year. Maria and Andy in the junior section, and James, Miguel and Glory in the seniors."

"Good kids, Tony, like I've said," Chris added.

"Glory is our star player. I am expecting her to place in at least the top three. Her skill is amazing for such a young player. She's only fourteen, you know."

"A real Bobby Fischer, huh?"

Gary beamed. "It's almost as if she knows what her opponent is going to do before they do. You should watch her play, Tony. I'm sure you will find it very interesting."

"Well, we'd better be going," Chris said. "You need to meet with Tony again before the trip?"

"I don't think so. If there is anything else you need, I can be found in the math department, Tony. Otherwise, I will see you next Thursday, at four o'clock."

"Thursday at four. See you then."

Gary made an attempt at a friendly smile, and then ducked back into the classroom just ahead of Chris' friendly thump on the shoulders. Chris grinned. "Come on, Tony. Let's get back to lunch before the kids eat everything."

\*

Wolfgang Muller hung up the phone and threw himself back onto the motel bed. "That was Ms Wong," he said, his voice slurring slightly. "Your story has been confirmed. You are free to go."

"And my passport and ticket?" Jessica demanded, shifting forward in her uncomfortable chair.

Muller nodded. "On their way. Ms Wong is having them made up as we speak. They will be couriered here when they are finished, as well as a sum of money." He took a large swig of the beer on the nightstand, and turned his attention back to the television.

"How long am I going to have to wait?"

"I don't know," Muller said indifferently. "You would have to ask Ms Wong. But I don't recommend that. She doesn't like to be bothered."

Jessica clenched her jaw, trying hard not to yell at the drunkard on the bed. She would have liked very much to yell at him, and she had already done so several times in the week she had been stuck in this room with him, but it wasn't worth it. It only made Muller break down into tedious floods of tears, wailing in English and German about how he had failed Ms Wong and how he would never forgive himself. Muller was pathetically sweet on that woman, Jessica reflected with disgust.

What the hell, though. She'd had enough of this for one day. "And has she forgiven you yet?" she asked, keeping her voice as mild and neutral as she could.

Bingo. Muller's lip started to quiver, and he clutched his beer more tightly. "No," he bawled. "I will never be forgiven for my failure in this matter. I will never forgive myself for my failure."

At about this point, Jessica stopped listening and went back to watching the television while Muller snivelled on the bed behind her. She had heard it all before; the TV would be more interesting. It was tuned to an oldies channel, and Annie was playing. There was a film that Jessica could relate to. Not to Annie, of course, but to the woman who ran the orphanage. Every word she said about little girls, Jessica agreed with, though she mentally expanded the category to include little boys and little lumps of diseased human flesh. That was one good thing about this whole mess, she thought. At least she wasn't working at Marvel anymore. She just hoped that the 'sum of money' that Muller had mentioned was enough to cover the set-up costs on a new lab. South America, she was thinking. Or Chernobyl. Somewhere near a major chemical spill or nuclear disaster, and somewhere poor, where the families would be only too glad to put their children in her hands.

She had stopped paying attention even to the TV, and was lost in her own thoughts, when she was brought abruptly back to the motel room by a short shower of warm beer against the back of her head.

"That's it!" Muller was saying, gesturing wildly with the beer bottle. Jessica wiped her head and looked at the idiot with undisguised scorn. His eyes were riveted to the television like it was transmitting messages straight from God.

"What are you talking about, Muller?"

"That's it!" he repeated, waving his beer at the TV and narrowly avoiding drenching her with it again. "This. Is. It. This is the perfect plan."

"What?" Jessica looked at the action on the screen again. Annie had just said goodbye to Daddy Warbucks, and was being taken away by her kidnappers.

"This is how I will win my way back into Ms Wong's heart!"

"Back into her heart, Muller? Are you sure that you were ever in her heart?"

"It doesn't matter! Once I have carried out my brilliant plan, she will welcome me back with open arms." He took another pull on his beer, realised it was empty, and opened another one.

"Uh huh. And what is your brilliant plan? You going to get on TV or something?"

Muller looked at her with slightly unfocused scorn. "My plan is much more brilliant than that. It is the most brilliant plan ever devised."

Jessica had another look at the TV. "You're planning to kidnap someone?" she guessed again.

"Exactly!"

Great. Here she was, trapped in a motel room with a crazy lovesick German. Jessica hoped that her new identity was ready soon. "And just who are you planning to kidnap, genius? I think that little orphan Annie is already taken."

"I will kidnap the child from Marvel. The super man. The one you told me about."

"Carlos?"

"Exactly!" Muller said again. He stood up carefully, holding the head of the bed for support. "I will kidnap the boy, and bring him back to Ms Wong. She will admit me back into her favour, and everything will end happily."

"Right. You going to sing a song about it as well?"

"Do not mock me," Muller said, suddenly angry. Jessica thought about it, and decided that it was probably best not to antagonise him further in this state. "I must go now." He began staggering towards the door.

"Muller," she said, stopping him as he was passing her chair. "You can't do this."

"Why not? Because you want my favour all to yourself?"

"What?"

"I have read books, you know. I know about Stockholm Syndrome. You have fallen in love with me, and you are trying to keep me from Ms Wong. Well, it won't work," Muller said, emphasising his point with a deep drink from his bottle. "I will not be stopped." He leered down at her. "But I am sure that I could make a short detour if you really wanted."

"Don't be an asshole," she said sharply. He staggered back. "You're drunk. You won't get two blocks in your state."

"So that's your plan," he slurred, looming over her again. "You want to come with me. Well, I'm afraid that won't be possible. The plan is mine, and the glory will be mine."

"And when you hit another driver, the jail sentence will be yours as well." What an idiot. Jail would be the best place for him. That or a mental institution.

"Good point!" he exclaimed, whirling back towards the telephone and nearly falling over in the process. "That is why I will be taking a cab."

Jessica shook her head. "I'll call one for you," she said dryly. Anything to shut him up while she waited for her papers to arrive.

Muller picked up the phone and dropped it in her lap. "I will be ready in half an hour," he announced, falling back onto the bed.

\*

By the time the last bell rang on Thursday afternoon, Tony had the minibus parked by the door to the dorms, and was loading his bag on board.

"Eager to be going, Tony?" Dr Luchansky asked, walking around the side of the bus to where Tony was waiting by the open boot.

Tony shrugged. "I guess I'm just looking forward to a change of scenery."

"Well, I hope you aren't expecting too much excitement at the tournament. The students take it pretty seriously, you know."

"Yeah. I spoke to Gary the other day."

"He takes the chess tournament pretty seriously as well. But it's not a bad example for the kids."

"Hey, don't worry. I won't try and corrupt the kids into having wild parties or anything." Tony smiled to show he was joking. Dr Luchansky smiled back and handed him a road map.

"You're going to the Riverside Motel. It's circled on the map, and I've included some directions for you as well."

"Thanks," Tony said, glancing at the map.

"Everything else is taken care of. Gary will be able to explain things to you if you have any problems. You'll be returning on Sunday morning if nobody gets into the finals. Otherwise, I'll see you on Sunday afternoon. Good luck with the tournament," he added, addressing the students who were coming out of the dorm building carrying their backpacks.

"Thank you, Dr Luchansky," the older of the two girls said.

Gary hustled around the corner of the minibus, carrying a packed bag of his own. "All right, team, bags into the back of the bus. You've all met Mr Rossi? He will be coming with us on this trip, and I want you to make him welcome, and maybe teach him a thing or two about chess, as well."

The kids smiled at Tony with varying degrees of friendliness as they put their bags into the back of the bus. "Well, I'd better let you go," Dr Luchansky said. "Have fun, everyone."

"We'll be bringing back another trophy this weekend," Gary said.

"I'll make some space in the trophy cabinet," Dr Luchansky replied with a trace of amusement in his eyes.

"All right, team, let's go," Gary said, and the kids followed him onto the bus.

"You'd better be going, Tony."

"Right," Tony agreed, shutting up the back of the minibus. "Oh, one thing?"

"Yes?"

"You're keeping an eye on my dorm this weekend, right?"

"Abdul and I will be doing that, yes."

"It's Joe Harris' birthday on Saturday. Don't forget."

Dr Luchansky smiled. "I can assure you I won't. Have a good trip, Tony."

“Yeah. See you Sunday.” Tony climbed aboard the bus and shut the door.

\*

As night fell on Friday evening, Wolfgang Muller was walking out of Carterton on the road that would take him to Marvel Academy. He walked slowly, putting his feet down with precise care, and wincing and clutching at his head if they hit the ground too hard. He was unshaven, his thick blond stubble making him look slightly blurry around the edges. His eyes were red and puffy, finding even the dim twilight painfully bright. Every so often, he would stop, lean up against a tree, and vomit, bringing up nothing but bile. It was the hangover of a lifetime.

He had passed out in the taxi, of course, almost as soon as he had got in. The driver hadn't minded. He was perfectly used to picking up miserable drunks from cheap motel rooms. He had just kept his eyes on the road, and then, when they reached the nearest major train station, had shaken Muller awake and poured him out of the car. Even helped him to buy a train ticket. Muller had tipped the man generously, or at least, he assumed he had. When he regained consciousness next, he was slumped in the corner of a train station toilet with an empty wallet and a raging headache. Fortunately, his credit cards were still good. He picked up another six-pack, and drank toasts to Ms Wong until his train arrived.

The next little while was a blur in his memory. He was sure he had changed trains at least once in order to get to Carterton, but he had no idea how he had managed it. He had vague recollections of being shouted at by an angry railway guard and thrown off a train to dry out, but he had no idea where or when that had happened. He remembered vomiting at least once, and seemed to remember picking up more beer at several stops along the road. He was pretty sure – and his head ached twice as hard when he thought about it – that at some point he had put a drunken arm about an old woman's shoulders and tearfully poured out the sad tale of his love for Ms Wong. What else had he told her? Had he told her about his brilliant scheme to capture the super child? He couldn't be sure, and anyway, he had no idea who she was or where he had met her, so he simply tried his best to put it out of his mind.

He had awoken most recently that afternoon, on a suburban line headed for Carterton. He was stretched out on a double seat in a nearly empty train compartment, reeking of beer and vomit. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. He was on his way to Carterton and Marvel, guided, presumably, by the guardian angel of lovers and drunkards, and soon he would have the child and Ms Wong would smile favourably upon him again.

Ms Wong! Just thinking about her made his headache recede and his steps lighter. He had failed her, several times, and she had been right to be angry, and to send him from her sight. But soon those days would be over. He would bring her the child, and she would see for herself the power of his love. His love would win her over. It couldn't fail to do so.

Muller slipped his hand into his pocket, checking that the little pistol was still in its place, strapped to his leg. He was almost surprised to find it there, after all the train station security guards he must have been past on his trip. But of course it was just another sign that his mission was right. The gods were smiling, and he, Wolfgang Muller, was the one they had chosen to receive Ms Wong's love. There was no other way to interpret this.

Muller pulled himself up to his fullest height and started walking again. He was invincible. He was a child of destiny. He was very tired. Perhaps he could just lie down here for a few moments and rest. Just for a few moments, and then he would continue on his way to Marvel to carry out his divine mission.

He was unconscious almost before he sat down, right by the side of the road. He was almost invisible, a small dark lump against the black asphalt of the road. It was an uncomfortable bed, but he didn't feel a thing. He didn't even wake fifteen minutes later, when a black van drove over his right arm.

\*

“What was that?”

"I don't know. A pothole or something."

"It didn't feel like a pothole. We drove over it, not into it."

"Then it was a fallen branch. Or some roadkill. Chill out, O'Sullivan. You're way too jumpy."

"Of course I'm jumpy. What do you expect? This is my first time as a terrorist."

"Hey, easy, O'Sullivan. Hardy's right. Save it for the op. You'll need to be sharp then. Don't waste your edge."

"Yeah."

"Okay. This is the turn-off. Get ready."

\*

Dr Luchansky had been in Brandy's room for nearly half an hour, and he was beginning to go into sensory overload. He looked at the night outside the window as much as possible, but he had to look at the rest of the room sometimes to avoid being rude. When the polite, insistent tapping at the door started up, he felt grateful to whoever it was.

"Let me get it," he urged Brandy, who was beginning to get up from her IKEA armchair. "Don't get up."

Brandy sat back down again, thanking him, and he got up and went for the door. He was instinctively looking down to student height when he opened it, and was rather surprised to find himself looking at a black-clad chest. Raising his eyes to the man's face, he was again surprised to find it covered by a black ski-mask.

"Can I help you?" he asked, his eyes noticing too late the gun that the man carried. "I see," he said. "Would you mind telling me what this is about?"

The man in the mask studied him for a second. "Julius Luchansky," he identified him. "You weren't supposed to be here. This'll save us some trouble." He unhooked a walkie-talkie from his belt and spoke into it. "Hardy here. I've got Luchansky." A burst of static answered him. "On the second floor, in someone's bedroom. I guess she's probably staff." Another reply from the walkie-talkie. "Okay, I'll do that."

"What's going on, Julius?" Brandy asked, getting up from her chair and stopping in the middle of the room when she saw the figure in the doorway.

"I don't know," Dr Luchansky replied.

"Nothing for you to worry about, sweetheart," the man said, his tone suggesting a leer. "Nice decor, by the way." Brandy didn't reply, but she couldn't help looking a little pleased. "All right, here's what we're going to do. Dr Luchansky, you are going to come with me and help me lock all of your students into their rooms. You do have your master keys with you?"

Dr Luchansky nodded silently.

"Excellent. When everyone is safely locked away, we can bring you back here and lock you in with this lovely lady, and then my associates and I can go about our business."

"And what is your business exactly?" Dr Luchansky asked.

"I hope you'll understand if I don't tell you that," the man said. His polite tone sounded forced.

"Aren't you worried about our super kids?" Brandy asked. "You don't think you'll be able to lock them up this easily, do you?"

The man in the mask laughed derisively. "You didn't really think that you'd be able to get away with that forever, did you? We know all about your 'super kids'. Bullets aren't going to be bouncing off any of them, so I suggest you both stay quiet and cooperate or we'll see about sending some bullets through them." He raised the gun threateningly.

"I'll cooperate with you," Dr Luchansky said, trying to sound as non-threatening as possible, and hoping that Brandy wouldn't say anything stupid.

"Wise decision, Doctor. Now, are all of the students in their rooms?"

"I'm not sure. At this time of night, they should all be in the building, at least."

"Excellent. Shall we go and say hello to them, then? I am particularly looking forward to meeting a Mister Carlos Menendez."

Dr Luchansky's heart sank. "I see," he said.

“You see, Dr Luchansky, we know all about your institution here. So don’t try anything stupid.” The man sounded almost happy as he spoke, as if he had been waiting all his life to say that to someone. When Dr Luchansky said nothing, the man went on. “We’ve cut your phone lines, but I’m going to have to ask both of you to turn your cellphones over to me. Quickly, now. I will be happy to search you if you don’t want to cooperate.” He gave Brandy a lascivious look.

“I’m sorry, but none of our staff carry cell phones on campus,” Dr Luchansky said.

“You don’t carry cell phones?” The gunman sounded incredulous, and Dr Luchansky didn’t blame him. It was a pretty unlikely claim, but it was true.

“That’s right. We don’t get any reception out here, so we don’t carry them.”

The man considered this for a moment, his eyes narrowed. He looked about the room, and then pounced on the crowded display on the top of Brandy’s dresser. “And just what,” he asked, “are these?” He turned around, triumphantly holding up a cell phone.

“Don’t touch them!” Brandy sounded scandalised, as if the gunman was pissing on a religious artefact rather than dumping a clutch of cell phones on the bed.

“Six phones, lady?” he asked her. And then, addressing Dr Luchansky, “I thought you said your staff don’t carry cell phones. Looks like I’ve just hit the mother lode.” He leaned towards Dr Luchansky menacingly. “So don’t try to fuck with me again.”

“I can assure you that none of those phones will work. Turn one on, if you’d like.”

Brandy gasped out a protest as the terrorist picked up one of the phones. “That’s my Barbie commemorative mobile phone. It’s a collector’s item.”

The man turned the phone on and stared at it for a while before dropping it back onto the bed. “All right,” he said reluctantly. He lifted the gun and pointed it at Dr Luchansky. “I’ve had about enough of this, Doctor. Let’s get moving.”

Dr Luchansky was worried about leaving Brandy by herself, but she didn’t even notice the two of them leave the room. All of her attention was on her cell phone, which she picked up from the bed and cradled in her arms, gently wiping the finger marks off its pristine pink case.

\*

Theresa O’Sullivan moved warily through the basements and utility rooms of Marvel’s main school building, her eyes fixed on Chiang’s backpack. She had been given a gun, of course. They had given it to her before she had been with them three days, and they had even taught her how to use it. At first, when she had been practicing with it outside the warehouse in the evenings, the gun had made her feel tough. Invincible, even. But now, as she followed Chiang through a confusing maze of hot-water pipes and heating ducts, the gun wasn’t doing much for her at all. She felt very small, and if she was going to be honest with herself, pretty scared, too. Going off with Amanda Wong that day had been a mistake, she decided. It had been exciting, but she didn’t think that she was really cut out for terrorism.

The walkie-talkie at her belt crackled into life, making her jump about a foot and nearly fire her gun straight into Chiang’s back. “Chiang, come in.” It was Perry.

Chiang pulled out his own walkie-talkie. “Chiang here. Go ahead.”

“Status report.”

“We’re inside. Making our way to the first site.”

“No sign of trouble?”

“No alarms, no people. An easy run.”

“How’s the mascot?”

Chiang looked back at Theresa and gave her what was probably meant to be a reassuring grin. She didn’t feel remotely reassured. “A little jumpy, I’d say. But no problems so far.”

“Well, stay sharp. I don’t want any screw-ups on this one. A nice easy run, and then we can all collect our money and go home.”

“Understood.”

The walkie-talkies emitted a crack as Perry cut the connection. Chiang returned his to his belt, and jerked his head along the corridor. “Come on. We need to keep moving. We’re nearly at the first site.”



As they continued along the corridor, Theresa thought about what Perry had just said. “Then we can all collect our money and go home.” She missed home sometimes, missed school, even missed her parents on occasion, but she had never thought about going back there. Thinking about it now, it didn’t appeal to her. Even if going off with Amanda Wong had been a mistake, she wasn’t sure that she wanted to go back home to her life and her family. When all of this was over, she was just going to have to find somewhere else to go. Somewhere with no guns, and no Southern Baptists. Which pretty much ruled out the whole world.

“All right, we’re here,” Chiang announced, stopping by the school’s huge, old-fashioned boiler. He took off his backpack and began pulling out tools, detonators, and blocks of plastic explosive. “Hey, what’s up? Danger sense kicked in? You picking something up?”

“I don’t have a danger sense,” Theresa said, managing to put a hint of teenage scorn into her voice.

“Well, whatever the hell you have, are you picking up something? Is that kid around here somewhere?”

Carlos. Theresa had almost forgotten that that was why she was here. “I don’t know.”

“Well fucking check, then.” Chiang said, turning back to his preparations. Theresa took a deep breath, trying to clear her mind a little so her Sight could work better. She was supposed to have done this twice already, but she had forgotten in all the excitement and the fear. She cast her mind out, looking for Carlos, expecting to pick him up quickly now that they were so close together.

“I can’t find him. I don’t know where he is.”

“What?”

“I don’t know where he is,” Theresa repeated.

“Well, try again.”

Theresa struggled to concentrate, trying to ignore the panic that was rising in her. What if he had found a way to be invisible to her Sight? What if he was coming down the hallway right now, heading for them?

It was a long time before she spoke again. “I think I’ve got him.”

“Well, where the fuck is he?” There was a note of panic in Chiang’s voice as well. None of the team liked the idea of a superhero on the other team, however pleased they were with their own mascot.

“I can’t be sure. Somewhere dark. I think he might be sleeping.”

“Might be sleeping?”

“I said I don’t fucking know, okay?” Theresa snapped. “I’ve told you what I saw. I think he’s sleeping. Probably in his room. Maybe in someone else’s room. Good enough for you?”

Chiang glared at her. “I’ll call it into Perry. Maybe he can confirm it for us.” He unhooked his walkie-talkie again. “Perry? Chiang. Have you got a location on the kid yet?”

The answer came back in a burst of static. “Not yet. Medical centre’s already been locked down, and there was no sign of him there. We’re working on the dorms at the moment. Why? Has O’Sullivan picked something up?”

Chiang glanced back at Theresa. “Nothing definite. She thinks he’s sleeping.”

“We’ll let you know when we get him locked in. Until then, just do your job.”

“Understood, Leader.” Chiang flicked his walkie-talkie off with disgust. “And thanks for nothing,” he muttered. He looked up, and caught Theresa with a stern glare. “You keep an eye out, O’Sullivan. I want to know if that kid goes anywhere. Anywhere, okay?”

“I know my job,” Theresa said, ignoring the fact that she had so far failed to perform it.

“Then do it, kid.” And Chiang turned back to his tools.

\*

The first day of the chess tournament had gone well for Marvel. Everyone on the team had won their matches, and they were all through to the next day of competition. Gary was thrilled. All the way back to the motel, he could talk of nothing but the tournament and the trophies that his team would be bringing home. Tony found it amusing at first, but he tired of it rapidly, and as soon as they arrived he excused himself and went up to his room.

He hadn't been up there five minutes before a knock came at his door. Hoping desperately that it wasn't Gary, he got up and answered it.

"Glory!" Tony exclaimed, surprised to see her there. "What can I do for you?" He looked at her a little more closely. Her face was white, and she was trembling. "Are you all right?"

"Can I come in?"

"Sure." He stepped aside so she could pass him. "What's the matter? You don't look well. Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm fine," she said, and then she stopped. The look on her face was set somewhere between stubbornness and panic. Tony wondered what she had done, and how he was going to get it out of her.

"Okay," he said, settling into a chair and motioning for her to do the same. "Why don't you tell me what the problem is, then?"

She hesitated again, her jaw clenched. She really didn't want to say what was going on. Tony waited, and eventually she spoke. "It's Marvel," Glory blurted out, and then her face fell, and Tony was sure that she was going to cry.

"What about Marvel?" he asked, trying to keep the confusion out of his voice. His mind was running through the possibilities, and none of them were good. "Has someone at Marvel done something to you, Glory?" he suggested, hoping it didn't sound as tactless as he thought it did.

No such luck, but the confusion on Glory's face did drive out whatever else she was thinking for a minute. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Nothing, I guess," Tony replied a little lamely. "Look, let's try this again. How about I stop guessing, and you tell me what the problem is?"

"All right," she agreed, reaching up to twist a strand of her hair around her fingers. "There's something going on at Marvel. Tonight. Something bad." She seemed to be forcing the words out.

"Okay," Tony said slowly. "Can you tell me what kind of thing?"

"I'm not exactly sure, but I think it might be terrorists. Men in black. With explosives. I don't really know much else about it. I'm sorry." She mumbled the last words, dropping her eyes.

"That's okay. Do you want me to call the police for you?" Tony asked, his mouth running in automatic. His hand was halfway to the phone when it occurred to him what he had just heard.

"Glory," he said, speaking a little sharply. "How do you know all of this?" Glory looked miserable, but she said nothing. Tony sighed, and made a conscious effort to speak more softly. "Well, you aren't a part of this plot, are you?" She shook her head. "But you know that it's going to happen tonight?" A tiny nod. "Glory, do you have some sort of powers that let you see the future?"

She remained very still for a minute, and then gave another nod. "I didn't want to tell anyone," she almost whispered.

"I understand," Tony said. "I won't tell anyone if you don't want me to."

"Promise?"

"I promise." And then Tony remembered why she had told him in the first place. "But we have to do something to stop the terrorists. Is it alright with you if I call the police?"

"They won't believe you." Her voice was flat and certain.

Tony reminded himself that Glory did have superpowers. If she said that the police wouldn't believe him, it was probably because she knew it. Still, he had to try. He picked up the phone and dialled 911, asking for the police.

"Can I help you, sir?" the operator asked.

Tony hesitated for a minute, trying to figure out what to say. He knew at once that Glory had been right, and that this was a mistake. There was no way that he was going to be able to convince these people that he wasn't a time-wasting crank. "Yeah, I'd like to report a crime," he began.

"Can you give me your location, sir?"

"I'm in a motel outside Harper's Falls. But that doesn't matter. The crime isn't going to happen here."

"Can you tell me where it is going to take place, then, sir?"

"Marvel Academy. Outside Carterton. Tonight sometime." He looked over at Glory, who nodded impatiently.

"I see, sir. And can you give me any more information about the nature of this crime." The operator sounded unconvinced already. There was no way he was going to be able to get her to believe this.

Tony took a deep breath. "I'm not sure exactly, but I think it might be terrorists."

"You think it might be terrorists?"

"That's right," he said.

She snorted. "I see, sir," she drawled. "Well, thank you for the warning. You have been most helpful."

Tony could think of a thousand things that he wanted to scream at her, but he didn't say any of them. He just hung up the phone, a disgusted look on his face. "Okay, so you were right," he said to Glory. He realised he was speaking harshly, almost shouting. "You were right," he tried again, a little more quietly. "What are we going to do about these guys at Marvel?"

Glory gave him another jaw-clenched look. When she did speak, it was so softly that he couldn't understand her.

"I'm sorry?"

"You need to go there."

"I need to go there?" he exploded. "I need to go there! Why?"

Glory just looked at him.

"Wait, don't tell me. You've seen it, haven't you?"

Glory nodded. Tony opened his mouth to speak, but couldn't think of anything PG-rated to say. He glared at her furiously.

"Fine," he muttered. "Why not. You've seen it, so I'm going to do it anyway. Guess we might as well skip the convincing, because I'd say you'd have a hard time doing it."

"I'm sorry, Mr Rossi," Glory said. "I didn't want to tell you, but I had to."

"Sure." They sat in silence for a minute while Tony considered his next move. "Anything else you can tell me about these guys?"

"Not really. I didn't see much. I think there are five or six of them." She stopped speaking, but Tony felt sure she was holding something back.

"If you know anything else, you should tell me," he said.

Glory sighed almost inaudibly. "I think that one of them has super powers too."

"Shit." Tony tried to think, but he couldn't make his mind work. He wasn't sure whether he was angry or terrified, but he did know that he could happily strangle Glory, and to hell with her damned visions of the future. "All right. Do you have any idea what I'm supposed to be doing when I get back to Marvel?"

"Nothing useful."

"And did you see me calling Marvel to warn them before I left here?"

"No."

Tony gritted his teeth. "Fine. You can do that, then. And tell Gary where I've gone. Tell him I'll call him when I'm done." It was bravado, but that didn't matter. In fact, it made him feel a little better. Grabbing his jacket and keys, he walked out of the room.

\*

Dr Luchansky walked ahead of the terrorist through the dorms of his school, stopping at each door to lock the students inside. He didn't speak as he did this, and his captor didn't seem inclined to be chatty either. They did the girls' dorm first, and then went down the stairs to do the younger kids' dorm. As they passed Chris' door, he paused, head half turned towards it, but the terrorist's gun dug sharply into his ribs and moved him along.

"That's been taken care of," the terrorist told him.

"What have you done to him?"

"That's really none of your business. Now keep moving. And keep your voice down. Don't want to wake up any of the kiddies, now, do we?"

Dr Luchansky was furious, but he couldn't see that he had any options other than cooperation. He started walking again, his face stiff. He couldn't stop thinking about what might happen if one of the

children was awake for some reason, or worse yet, walking around. Let them all be asleep, he thought as they walked down the hall. Safely asleep until all this is over.

They made it all of the way through the dorm without incident, locks clicking almost silently on room after room of sleeping children. When they were back in the stairwell, Dr Luchansky let out a deep breath. The gun poked into his ribs again.

"I wouldn't be relaxing just yet. You've still got another floor to go. Up the stairs."

They climbed together up the two flights of stairs to the boys' dorm. The hallway was dimly lit, and appeared to be empty. All the doors leading off it were closed, except for the one closest to them, the door to Tony Rossi's room. The gunman nudged Dr Luchansky towards it, and they went inside.

"Now," he asked, quietly and full of menace. "Perhaps you can tell me where the occupant of this room is."

Dr Luchansky sighed inwardly. "On a field trip."

"Nice try, pal. Didn't I tell you before not to fuck with me? Where is he really?"

"Mr Rossi is taking some of our students to a chess tournament, as I said." Dr Luchansky tried to speak as patiently as he could.

The butt of the gun slammed into his cheek, making him stagger backwards with the force of the impact. The terrorist took advantage of this, walking him back into a wall, and levelling the weapon at his chest. "Now," he said again, "why don't we try this again. Where is the occupant of this room?"

"I've told you. On a field trip," Dr Luchansky repeated, scorn mixing with fear in his voice. "I have the permission forms in my office, if you'd like to see them. Otherwise, you can always shoot me, but that won't make him magically appear."

The other man hesitated for a second, his finger twitching on the trigger, clearly wanting nothing more than to shoot Dr Luchansky and be done with it. Dr Luchansky tried to stand as still as he could, to give nothing away. Eventually, the gun dropped a fraction as the man went for his walkie-talkie.

"Hardy here, Perry. We've got a problem."

This time, Dr Luchansky was able to make out the response amidst the static. "Go ahead."

"One of the staff is missing. Guy called Rossi. Luchansky here says he's on a field trip. Says there are permission forms in his office."

"So?"

"So what do you want me to do?"

"Well, Hardy," the voice came from the walkie-talkie, heavy with impatience, "are all the kids locked down yet?"

"No sir. We're just about to get started on the top floor."

"Well, you do that, and I'll send a man up to guard the stairway. If this Rossi does show up, we'll take him out. Otherwise, he isn't important. What's important is sticking to the plan. So get on with it."

"Yes sir," the man said resentfully.

"Good. Out."

Dr Luchansky was careful not to look at the terrorist's face while he was being scolded over the walkie-talkie. Provoking the man wasn't going to get him anywhere. He waited, looking at a point on the far wall, until the other collected himself enough to give him a vicious nudge with the gun. "All right, Luchansky, let's go. You know how much I'm looking forward to meeting your star student."

Dr Luchansky said nothing, but he was grinding his teeth hard enough to chew rocks. The terrorist noticed, and this seemed to please him. "Move it along, Luchansky," he said.

They walked out of the room and down the corridor, stopping at each door to lock it. Dr Luchansky was careful to keep his face emotionless as they came closer to Carlos' room, hoping the terrorist wouldn't know which one it was. No such luck. As they pulled up in front of Carlos' door, the terrorist turned to him, and Dr Luchansky could practically see the smile under the ski-mask.

"Let's say hello," the man said, raising the gun and pushing open the door.

Inside, the room was dark, with the only light coming in through a gap in the curtains. The gunman shut the door behind them before he turned on the light. "Fuck," he said, swearing quietly but fiercely and slamming the gun into the side of Dr Luchansky's head again. Dr Luchansky

stumbled backwards, and fell onto the bed. As he sprawled on the bed, stunned, he heard the terrorist talking into his walkie-talkie.

“Perry? He’s not here. His room is empty.”

\*

Theresa and Chiang were setting the last of the three little bombs in the basement of the main building when the call from Perry came through. “Chiang, this is Perry. Menendez is on the loose. I repeat: Menendez is on the loose.”

Theresa was overwhelmed by a sick, dizzy feeling, and she leaned against the nearest wall for support as Chiang replied to the call. “Roger that, Perry.”

“Status report?”

“We’re about finished here in the main building. Probably five minutes here, and then we can move on to the secondary target.”

“Well, move as fast as you can. I don’t need to tell you that this kid could be dangerous. I want all of the loads set and ready to go as soon as possible.”

“Understood, Leader. I estimate we’ll need half an hour at the secondary target.”

“You’ve got twenty minutes. Now move it.”

“Roger that.” Chiang ended the call and went back to adjusting the remote detonator on the bomb. Theresa remained slumped against the wall. It was a few minutes before he noticed her standing there.

“What are you doing, kid? We need to get moving, now.”

“Sorry,” she mumbled as another wave of nausea hit. Chiang gave her a look that was almost understanding, and looked quite out of place on his lined, hard face.

“First time jitters? We all get them, O’Sullivan. The important thing is to keep your mind on the job at hand, and not to think about things too much. When something comes up, you deal with it, and until then, you forget about it. Stick with the plan, and keep moving. Okay?”

She drew in a deep breath, and nodded. “Okay.”

“Good.” Chiang straightened up, and began putting his tools back into his bag. “Come on. We need to go back to the van for more gear.”

“What?” she asked, but she was speaking to his back. He was jogging down a narrow access way, and she practically had to run to keep up with him. She trailed him out of the building, around the edge of the quad, and back into the woods, where the van was parked in a clearing just off the road. He took her backpack from her, leapt into the back of the van, and was loading both bags up before she caught her breath enough to ask a question.

“What’s going on?” she asked between huge gasps of air. “More explosive?”

“Secondary target,” Chiang said shortly, as if that explained everything.

She thought back to the conversation she had just listened to over the walkie-talkies. She hadn’t been paying much attention then, but now she realised that it was the first time she had heard anything about another target. “Secondary target? What target? What’s going on here, Chiang? We’ve just wired the whole school building. What other target is there around here?”

Chiang paused in his packing to give her a flat, direct look. “Don’t be stupid, O’Sullivan.”

Theresa thought for a moment, and then she understood. The sick feeling came back stronger than ever. “The dorms. You’re going to blow up the dorms. But there are people in there. You can’t do that.”

“It’s part of the plan. Part of the mission objectives.” Chiang said this as if it explained everything.

“There are people in those dorms. Children. You can’t just go and blow them all up.”

“Cut the crap, O’Sullivan.” Chiang sounded disgusted. “We’re terrorists, not Care Bears. This is what we do. And you know what? You’re a terrorist too. So shut up and get moving.” He threw her backpack at her and walked out of the van.

Theresa stood still for a moment as he walked past her, unable to digest what she had just heard. Her first thought was that she had been set up. Betrayed. It was her own fault, though, she realised,

for going along with Amanda Wong. For the tiniest of seconds, she considered the possibility that her parents might have been right about foreigners.

"I can't let you do this," she said to Chiang, stopping him just as he was leaving the clearing. He turned back and looked at her, his face expressionless.

"Is that a fact?" He didn't seem to be quite looking at her.

She hesitated. "Yes."

"You know, O'Sullivan, I think you're going to have to. You've got bigger things to worry about at the moment."

He was definitely not looking at her. He seemed to be looking past her, past the van, at something in the woods on the far side of the clearing. Unwillingly, she turned around. There was someone there. He took a step forward, and she recognised him. Carlos.

"Looks like you're going to be able to do your job after all, O'Sullivan," Chiang's voice came from behind her. "Do it well, and I'm sure there'll be a permanent place for you in our organisation."

She heard his footsteps running away from the clearing, back towards the school, but she wasn't paying attention to them. Carlos, who had seemed surprised when she had first turned to look at him, was clearly furious by the time Chiang had finished speaking. He was running forward, shouting something she couldn't understand. She barely had time to raise a protective hand before he was on her.

\*

It didn't seem possible, but Muller felt even worse when he woke up than he had when he had fallen asleep. After a moment, he identified the gritty surface he was lying on as the shoulder of a road, and when he realised that, everything started to come back to him, but he couldn't figure out the source of the pain in his right arm. His whole arm burned, as if was being repeatedly dipped in molten lead. He inched his head round slightly to get a better look at it, and instantly put himself at risk of choking on his own vomit. He looked away again hastily, still retching. What had happened to him?

But this was not relevant, he decided after a moment's thought. He was a man, and a man with a mission. This was just a minor setback. A test, perhaps. Yes, exactly! This was a test. His perseverance was being tested. He had only to stand up and keep walking to be assured of victory and the hand of Ms Wong.

Carefully, he got to his feet. His right arm hung uselessly by his side, sending waves of pain into his brain that broke with every tiny movement. He fixed the twin faces of God and Ms Wong in his brain, and all discomfort was forgotten. Slowly, unsteadily, he walked on down the road, making little involuntary whimpering noises with each step.

He couldn't have been far from the long driveway that would take him through the woods to Marvel Academy, but it seemed to take him forever to get there. He felt as if he was walking through jelly, breathing it in and out of his lungs, and feeling it settle on his skin. He was turning into a jelly-man. An invincible jelly-man. "Nobody can withstand the invincible jelly-man," he muttered to himself, and then he giggled.

Slowly, the driveway came into view ahead of him. It was getting closer now, the discreet white sign becoming larger with every step he took. When he reached the sign, he paused for a minute, revelling in the feeling of triumph that swept over him. He was invincible. Nothing could stop him, not even a ruined arm. "Nobody can withstand the jelly man!" he said again, louder this time. He turned the corner and set off down the driveway towards the school, Amanda Wong's face mixing with the face of God in his vision until he couldn't tell which was which.

\*

The gunman recovered quickly from the shock of not finding Carlos where he was expected, taking advantage of Dr Luchansky's dizziness to whip out a roll of duct tape, and mummify his hands and lower arms in it, securing them behind his back. He did it quickly and efficiently, the first professional thing that Dr Luchansky had seen out of this joker all night. He was just opening his

mouth to say so, his earlier resolution about not taunting a terrorist forgotten for the moment, when the man ripped off a final piece of duct tape and slapped it over his mouth. The walkie-talkie gave another insistent crackle, and a voice on the other end demanded a status update.

“He’s not here. I don’t know where he is.”

“Shit. Well, bring Luchansky down here, and keep your eye out for the kid. Remember what we discussed at the briefing.”

“Come on, get up,” the gunman said, dragging Dr Luchansky to his feet. “Time for you to join your friends.” Dr Luchansky walked out the door, finding it hard to keep his balance with a gun in his back and his hands bound. Behind him, the terrorist fumbled with his walkie-talkie. “Bringing him down now.”

“Go ahead,” the answer came.

They walked down the hallway together, Dr Luchansky struggling for balance. He was coming to the conclusion that this was a hopeless situation, and that there was nothing he could do to protect his staff and students. He kept his face emotionless as he thought this, though. He wasn’t going to give anyone the satisfaction of knowing he was losing hope.

There was another guard at the end of the hallway, but they walked straight past him. The terrorist stopped at the head of the stairs and turned back to the guard.

“Seen anything of Menendez yet?”

“Not a damned thing.”

“He’ll turn up.”

“Sure. Whatever.” The gun was returned to Dr Luchansky’s ribs, and he was walked back down the stairs to Brandy’s room. It was a lot more crowded now than it had been when he had left it. Brandy was still there, bound and gagged like he was, and so were Chris and Abdul. The three of them had been stacked untidily on the bed, where they were leaning against each other. Yet another man in a black ski-mask was sitting in one of the IKEA chairs, his gun on the three prisoners, but his attention elsewhere.

The terrorist behind Dr Luchansky addressed the man in the chair. “Here he is.”

“Good. Sit him on the bed with the other three, and then go up and relieve Young. Tell her to get back down and cover the front of the building. You see Rossi, or anyone else not on the team, for that matter, shoot them.”

“Yes sir.” The gun pointed Dr Luchansky over to the bed, and he sat down with the rest of his staff. Resistance at this point was probably useless, he reflected.

“All right. Now get going,” the man in the chair commanded, and the other terrorist left. Dr Luchansky was glad to see the bastard go. “So pleased you could join us, Dr Luchansky. As you can see, we’re all quite cosy here.” Dr Luchansky didn’t even dignify this with a look. “Our operation is proceeding well,” the man assured him. “We’ll be through here and out of your hair before you know it.”

The man went back to what he was doing before – looking out the window, and casting constant glances down at his watch. He seemed impatient, edgy. It made Dr Luchansky uncomfortable just watching him. He looked over at the rest of his staff. Chris had an impressive bruise purpling on the side of his face, but apart from that, they all looked fine. He tried to give them a reassuring look, but the duct tape over his mouth made it hard to be convincing.

The terrorist leader’s fidgeting finally reached breaking point, and he reached for his walkie-talkie. “How are we doing, Chiang?” he demanded.

“Just finishing the first device now.”

“How much longer?”

“Maybe another fifteen minutes, plus however long you want to keep me talking for,” came the reply. The terrorist leader scowled.

“Move it along, damn it. We’re on a schedule here.”

“I’ll be done on schedule. Or I will be if you stop interrupting me.”

The terrorist shifted in his chair. “What about the mascot?”

“Subduing the boy, I imagine.” Carlos, Dr Luchansky thought, and he shifted his head towards the walkie-talkie.

“Are you sure?”

The reply sounded scornful, even over the walkie-talkie. “No, of course I’m not sure. If you’d like, I could go back into the forest and check for you and come back to this later. Stop worrying. She’ll be fine.”

“I hope you’re right, Chiang. I’m going to-“ Whatever he was about to say was drowned out by a loud bang. “What the fuck was that? Was that you, Chiang?”

“Nothing to do with me. It sounded like gunfire.”

The terrorist leader jumped out of his chair and went to the window. He switched his walkie-talkie over to another channel. “Hardy, report. Did you just fire that shot?”

“Negative, Leader.”

The man opened the window and switched channels again, leaning out to peer down at the darkened grounds. What was he hoping to see, Dr Luchansky wondered. Amateurs, he decided, and it was the first hopeful thought he had had all night.

“Come in, Thorpe. Report.” There was no reply. “Shit,” the terrorist muttered, and then he turned to his walkie-talkie again. “Thorpe, report.” He switched channels one more time, his hands visibly shaking. “Come in, Young,” he said. “Thorpe isn’t reporting in. I need you to go round and check on him.” He waited, but there was no reply from the walkie-talkie. “Young, come in. Did you fire that shot?” And then, sounding almost desperate, “What the fuck is going on here?” Still nothing from the walkie-talkie.

And then there was a crazed howling that filled the room. “NOBODY CAN WITHSTAND THE JELLY-MAN!”

\*

Theresa forgot all about her gun and even about her superpowers as Carlos ran at her, and the only thing that stopped the fight from being very short and one-sided was that he seemed to have forgotten about his powers as well. They punched and kicked and gouged, eventually falling to the floor and brawling like a pair of angry toddlers. Carlos was bigger than her, and he kept trying to pin her to the ground, but she wiggled out of the way again and again, sometimes managing to get a quick jab to the ribs in as she did.

She wasn’t sure how long they fought like this, but it probably couldn’t have been more than a couple of minutes. She did know that she was breathing heavily and her arms were getting tired by the time Carlos finally remembered that he had superpowers. His next punch sent her flying backwards just as she was trying to stand up. She sprawled in the dirt, dazed, her hand reaching for the gun that she had only just remembered that she had. Carlos snatched it from her belt before she could reach it, and threw it away into the woods, hard enough that she knew she would never be able to find it.

“Not so big without your gun, are you?” he grunted.

“I wouldn’t bet on that if I were you,” she said, her voice muffled by her ski mask, which had wrapped itself so tightly around her head as they had struggled that it seemed to be trying to crawl down her throat.

Carlos’ eyes widened and then narrowed at the sound of her voice, and he looked at her suspiciously. “Who the hell are you?” he demanded.

“What, you don’t know?” she said, putting on a show of bravery that she didn’t really feel. “That’s pretty stupid of you, Carlos.”

He didn’t rise to the bait. Instead, he gripped the hem of her ski mask and rolled it up over her face. Theresa stared defiantly at him from underneath it.

They were in the middle of the forest, a long way from the lights of the road or the school, but there was enough light from the moon that they could see each other’s faces. Carlos looked almost comically shocked. He stiffened as if he had been shot, sitting up straight and staring down at her. “What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Surprised?” She grinned at him, beginning to enjoy this after all.

“What’s going on here?” he said, but he didn’t seem to be talking to her. He didn’t seem to be talking to anyone.



Belatedly, Theresa remembered her own powers. A thought to the trees that surrounded them sent branches snaking down towards Carlos. He fought them, but his heart didn't seem to be in it, and pretty soon he was hanging in the branches ten feet in the air, trussed like a turkey.

"Looks like I win another round," she said, unable to keep from gloating. He didn't even seem to notice.

"What were you doing at the open day?" he asked. "Were you working for these guys then as well?"

Theresa blushed. "No. I came up on my own that day."

"What for?"

That really wasn't something that she wanted to answer. She sent a branch out to whack him lightly on the head. "None of your business."

"I can't believe that you're with these guys. You've got powers. Aren't you supposed to be a superhero?"

Theresa felt a little ashamed at that, but she pushed it from her mind. Who was he to be talking, anyway? He couldn't even beat her. "Haven't you ever heard of super villains?" she asked sweetly.

"I can't believe you are one of them," Carlos said. "I can't believe that you've joined up with these guys."

"Well, I have."

"I can't believe it," he said again, shaking his head a little. "They're losers, you know," he went on. "I took one of them out on my way down here. Didn't even lift his gun. You've picked the wrong side."

Theresa knew he was right, but she certainly wasn't going to admit it. "You don't think I really believe anything you say, do you, Carlos?" she asked, frowning at him. He didn't seem to be paying her the proper amount of attention. He wasn't even looking at her. He was looking at something behind her. She spun round, just in time to see another man running across the clearing towards her. She ducked out of the way at the last minute and began running, sending frantic thoughts to the trees as she did. Branches lashed at the stranger who was chasing her, but he dodged them, and kept coming. Theresa ran out of the clearing and into the relative safety of the woods, the man hot on her heels. She couldn't figure out why the trees hadn't caught him yet. Did he have super powers as well? The thought filled her with dread.

A thump and a curse behind her told her that the trees had finally managed to trip the stranger up. Super powers or not, he's no match for me, she thought with satisfaction. Once again, she sent branches snaking down towards him, and in a moment, she had her second victim of the night suspended before her.

The man didn't look as scared as she would have liked, though. In fact, he looked quite calm, and faintly disapproving. Theresa definitely didn't like the way he was looking at her.

"What are you going to do now," the man asked. "Kill me?"

That was an interesting question. Keep the kid out of the way, she had been told. Get rid of him. Hardy had said that, and he had smiled viciously when he had. Back at the base, with her gun at her side and a couple of criminals to back her up, she had almost believed that she could kill Carlos. Now that she was here, and alone, and without her gun, she wasn't so sure. She didn't think she could kill Carlos, let alone this stranger.

"You'll find out when I do it," she said, but even she could hear the quiver in her voice.

"I don't think you'll be able to do anything," the man said dismissively.

"Yes I will."

"Sure you will."

They both knew she was lying, but that didn't matter. What mattered at the moment was trying to figure out what she should do next. She could go back to the school and try to find Chiang, but she had no idea where he was likely to be. Besides, she remembered with a start, Chiang was setting bombs in the dorm building. He was going to kill everyone in there, burning them slowly as their generators and fuel reserves went up. She couldn't go back there. The police would be a better bet. But she couldn't go there either. What would she tell them? That she was a super villain wannabe who was going straight? She stood, unable to make a move or even a decision about what move was the right one. The stranger in the trees watched her calmly.

She heard a quiet footstep behind her, and felt strong arms grab her own in an unbreakable grip, and she knew that Carlos had managed to break himself free again. It was lucky for him she hadn't hung him up facedown this time, a small corner of her brain reflected.

"Let Tony down," Carlos ordered her, squeezing her arms a little tighter as he spoke. His grip was starting to hurt.

"Gently, Carlos," the man in the tree said.

"Are you okay?" Carlos asked him, and then he addressed her, giving her a rough shake. "Let him down from there."

She could just as easily have strung him up again, but unless she was willing to kill him, he would only break free again, Theresa realised. And she didn't want to kill anyone. She didn't even want to string Carlos up again. She made the trees holding Tony let him go and set him down gently.

"Now," Tony said when he was standing on the ground again, "why don't you tell us what this is all about."

"There are terrorists or something at Marvel, Tony. There's something crazy going on," Carlos said before she could speak.

"I know that."

Theresa could feel his puzzlement even without seeing his face. "What are you doing back here, anyway?" Carlos asked.

"That's not important. I'll tell you later," Tony said impatiently. "What I want to know now is what this young lady can tell us."

Carlos wasn't finished with his revelations yet. "She's the girl from the open day. The one who strung me up."

"I'd figured that," the man said, and Theresa chimed in with, "My name is Theresa."

Carlos didn't even seem to hear. "We can't trust her. She's with the terrorists."

Theresa was thoroughly fed up with Carlos now. Didn't he know that there was something serious going on here? "They're going to blow up the school," she said flatly, hoping to get his attention. "Both buildings. And everyone's locked inside."

"Are you sure?" Tony asked her. She nodded, mutely. It was a relief to be telling someone, to be doing something about it. "All right, Carlos, let her go."

"She might be lying, Tony. We can't trust her."

"We're going to have to. If she isn't lying, then everyone in the school could be in danger. And I believe her."

"Then what are we going to do?"

Tony grimaced a little. It was clear that he hadn't figured this part out yet. "I don't suppose you know where the bombs are?" he asked her.

"The ones in the main building, yes. Not the ones in the dorms." Theresa was pleased that someone was finally paying attention to the things which were important.

"All right, Carlos, you take her and get the bombs out of the school. Main building first, since she knows where they are, and then try to find the bombs in the dorms. I'll go and see if I can get anyone out of there, in case you can't find them."

"What about the girl?"

"Take her with you," Tony said impatiently. "I'm sure you can keep her under control as long as you stay away from trees. Besides, I think she's telling the truth." He looked at Theresa. "Anything else you want to tell us?"

"There's a room on the second floor of the dorms. A staff room, I think. That's where Perry is based."

"Perry's the leader of this gang?"

She nodded.

"How many others are there?"

"Four."

"Okay," Tony said. "Questions, Carlos?"

"No, but I don't trust her. I don't like any of this."

Tony gave him a sympathetic look. "I know. But we have to do this. I've tried the cops already, and they won't be coming to help us."

"Damn."

Tony smiled. "Hey, cheer up. This is your chance to be a superhero. You should be pleased."  
"Sure," Carlos muttered. Theresa felt herself being lifted off the ground and into the classic 'damsel in distress' carry. "Good luck, Tony,"  
"You too, Carlos."

Taking a firm grip on her, Carlos started running. The world around them blurred as they left the woods and streaked towards the school.

\*

Muller knew as soon as he saw the black, masked figure emerge from one of the school buildings and move out onto the lawn that something strange was going on. Schools didn't hire men in ski-masks to watch over their grounds at night. At least, Marvel didn't. He knew this, because Jessica had told him so, and he believed her. This was not a security guard. It wasn't some sort of Halloween costume. This was a terrorist.

Muller stopped about a hundred feet from the figure, and dropped carefully to the ground, trying to suppress his moan as he moved his arm. The man with the gun wasn't looking at him. He was looking up at the windows of the school building in front of him, walking a slow beat back and forth in front of it. Muller was invisible, and unsuspected. Now he had to think. What were these people doing here?

The answer was obvious. Ms Wong had sent them. She wasn't going to wait around for Muller to bring her the super child. She never waited for anyone to bring her the things she wanted. And Muller had failed her already. She had employed these people to replace him. They had taken Muller's place in her heart. And if they succeeded, who knew how high they might rise in her favour. Especially the leader.

Muller bared his teeth in a grimace of pure rage. This must not be allowed to happen. These people could not be allowed to succeed. He, Wolfgang Muller, was meant to capture the child, bring it to Ms Wong, and be admitted into her favour again. Not these impostors. They would not be allowed to interfere with his brilliant plan. He would punish them for daring to try.

He stood up suddenly, barking with pain as his arm flopped wildly at his side. With his left hand, he drew his gun, sighting along his arm at the figure in front of him. The other man was turning as he heard Muller's shout. He was lifting his gun. It was too late for him. Muller squeezed the trigger once, and the man fell.

The shot was deafening, echoing loudly across the wide lawn. It seemed to Muller as if the whole world must have heard it. Ms Wong must certainly have heard it, wherever she was. Now she would know that he was serious in his devotion to her. She would see that he was willing to kill for her. In fact, he decided, he would insist on killing for her. He had never done it before, just shot at targets at the rifle range, but it was so easy. And he was sure that it would delight her. Ms Wong was the sort of woman who would appreciate that sort of gesture.

Muller dropped into a half crouch and scuttled across the ground towards the body. The terrorist had fallen onto his side. Muller rolled him onto his face with his foot, and pulled off his ski mask. A woman. Unexpected, but unimportant. Ms Wong could find another woman to serve her, if she still needed one when he had returned.

He stripped the body of its gun and spare ammo clips, and was about to move on when he heard a crackle from the walkie-talkie at her belt. Holstering his gun, he picked it up.

It spoke. "Come in, Young. Thorpe isn't reporting in. I need you to go round and check on him."

He giggled, staring blindly into the darkness. The voice spoke again. "Young, come in. Did you fire that shot?"

The leader of these terrorists. And he sounded scared. The man was unworthy to serve Ms Wong. Muller would show him. "What the fuck is going on here?" the voice demanded.

Muller giggled again as he listened. And then he had an idea. Flicking the talk button, he screamed his challenge. "NOBODY CAN WITHSTAND THE JELLY-MAN!"

"Who the fuck is this?"

"YOU ARE NOT FIT TO SERVE MS WONG!" Muller howled. "Come down here and I will kill you," he added, in an almost conversational tone.

“You’ve made a bad mistake,” the voice said, but Muller could hear his fear even over the static on the line. “I’ve got twenty guys here. You won’t get out of here alive, buddy.”

Muller dismissed this for the lie it was. “No you don’t. And whoever you have got, they will fall at the hands of THE JELLY-MAN!” His voice rose to a shriek. His head was pounding, and his vision was dim. Or was that just the night? He couldn’t be sure. “I WILL KILL YOU ALL!” he announced, not even bothering to speak into the walkie-talkie. He knew that the other man could hear him, wherever he was. And soon he would die. At a slow jog, Muller headed for the nearest entrance to the building in front of him.

\*

“How much longer, Chiang?”

“About a minute less than the last time you asked. Why? What’s going on up there?”

“Nothing. Never mind.”

“Nothing?”

“We’ve got a situation, but I’m dealing with it.”

“This wouldn’t have anything to do with that gunshot, would it?”

“I said I’m dealing with it. Get back to what you were doing.”

“I’d be happy to, if you’d let me.”

“Hardy, report.”

“Nothing to report.”

“All right, I want you to start patrolling your floor. And when you’re done, I want you to patrol this floor. I’ll take the lower two.”

“What about the hostages?”

“What about them? They’re tied up, and I’ll lock them in. They aren’t going anywhere.”

“Do you want to tell me what I’m looking for?”

“No. Now move.”

\*

Tony took a careful route towards the school, circling around through the woods and coming at the dorm building from the side. He knew that the terrorists didn’t have many men, but they did have guns, and Tony didn’t really feel like staring down the barrel of a gun. The dorm building, when he came to it, was dark and silent, and looked peaceful. Tony shivered a little when he thought of the students all locked in their rooms. He hoped they were all still asleep.

He crept up to the side of the building and started moving around it, looking for another way in. He was pretty sure that, whatever else the terrorists had done, they had put a man on the main entrance. Although maybe they hadn’t, since they were so few in number. Still, Tony didn’t want to risk it. It’s not cowardly, it’s sensible; I’m no good to anyone dead, he thought.

Nothing around the side of the dorms seemed to offer him an entrance. Carefully, Tony stuck his head round the corner, checking out the quad. There was nobody there. He looked again, making sure. There was a lump of something lying on the lawn about fifty feet from him. It wasn’t moving, and looking at it more carefully, Tony was sure that it was a body. He swallowed hard. This was real. Suddenly, he didn’t feel so confident anymore. I wish Glory had gone and told someone else about her stupid vision, he thought. Why couldn’t she have told Gary? The thought of the pasty, bespectacled math teacher creeping around the school and avoiding terrorists almost made him laugh out loud. He supposed that he was almost as ridiculous a choice, but it made him feel slightly better.

The lawn remained empty, and he eased around the corner, trying not to think about Carlos and the girl. He had sent them into danger. Sure, the girl had been with the terrorists, and Carlos had been at the school all night, but it was hardly a responsible thing to do. I’m going to lose my job if anyone hears about this, Tony thought. Of course, he reflected, that’s always assuming that anyone gets out of here alive.

Thinking like this wasn’t helping. He looked up at the dorm building, hoping that something would present itself soon, or otherwise he would have to try the main entrance. And then, there it

was. An open window on the second floor. Brandy's window. Tony could hardly believe it. What kind of terrorists were these, he wondered. Wasn't that meant to be their base of operations? Well, at least they wouldn't be expecting someone to enter by the window. If they were careless, it was good for him, he reminded himself.

The large, uneven stones of the dorm building were a perfect climbing surface. Tony had often been tempted to try it out, but not under these conditions. The faint light cast shadows onto the wall, making it hard to judge handholds, and the stones felt slippery under his suddenly sweaty hands. Tony had done a bit of rock-climbing a couple of years back, but this wasn't the way he had imagined getting back into it. But it was either this or the entrance. It was worth a shot, he decided, rubbing his hands on his pants to dry them off, and starting up the wall.

He felt terribly exposed as he inched his way upwards. Every sound made him start, bringing him precariously close to losing his grip on the wall altogether. His fingers were aching before he had climbed ten feet, and his heart was pumping so hard he thought he was going to faint. He wanted to look behind him to see if anyone was there, but he made himself keep moving upwards, thinking about anything rather than the body on the lawn. What if it wasn't a body? What if it was a sniper? What if there was a sniper waiting in the window above him? Tony looked up at the window, getting closer now. It looked empty, but could he be sure that it was? Too late now.

The window was only five feet above him now. His fingers felt like they were going to cramp shut. Four feet, now. Three. Were those footsteps he could hear inside the room? Two feet. One. It was too late to back out now. His hand grasped the windowsill, and he dragged himself up and in to a room mercifully empty of terrorists. He looked around him. Brandy's amazing collection of knickknacks looked strange and menacing in the dim light. His eyes travelled across the room and fell on the bed, and the awkward heap of bound people sitting on it. He squinted, trying to make out who they were.

"Dr L?" he whispered, identifying the largest of the figures. Once he had managed that, the other three became clear. Brandy, Chris and Abdul. The terrorists had got them all. "Are you all right?" he asked, and then realised it was a stupid question. "Hang on. I'll get you loose."

Their wrists and ankles were bound with duct tape, and the ripping noise it made when he pulled it off felt like it was the loudest noise he had ever heard. Everyone in the building must be able to hear this, he thought, working a little faster. In the space of a few minutes, they were all untied. "Are you guys all right?" he repeated.

"We're fine, Tony," Dr Luchansky replied. "Nothing to worry about. But we have to get the children out."

"We need to hurry," Tony agreed. "They're planting bombs in the basement. Have you got your keys?"

Dr Luchansky shook his head. "They took mine away from me."

"Mine too," Chris said.

"I've got mine," Brandy said, lifting them off a shelf where they had been lurking amidst a legion of Barbies.

"Okay, let's split up," Tony suggested. "And someone should go call the cops."

"Brandy, you and Chris do that," Dr Luchansky suggested.

"No, you need to go as well," Tony told him. "They'll be less likely to think it's a joke if you go." Dr Luchansky hesitated, and then agreed, and Brandy turned her keys over to Abdul. "The guy out the front is down, so you should have a clear run to the car park."

Dr Luchansky nodded. "We heard about that."

"Okay," Tony said. "Let's go."

They cracked open the door and looked down the hallway. It was empty. Time to go.

\*

Carlos couldn't use his super speed in the narrow, twisting, obstacle filled corridors of the school's basement, so once they were inside, he put Theresa down and let her lead him to the bombs. Neither of them knew anything about defusing bombs, but fortunately, that wasn't necessary. The terrorists hadn't expected anyone to be around to tamper with their explosives, so it was easy to just

pick up the whole bomb and carry it out of the school and into the woods. They would still detonate, of course, but at least they wouldn't do so much damage back there.

Carlos ran the bombs out into the woods one by one, trying not to think too much about what he was doing. Oh sure, it was very heroic, but he wasn't sure that he was really ready to be a dead hero if someone's trigger finger got itchy. He knew that he healed fast, but no amount of fast healing would help him if one of these things went off while he was holding it. The best he could hope for was that they would scoop him up into something nice when they found all his bits.

This isn't helping, he told himself sternly as he deposited the third bomb in the woods and accelerated back towards the school. This is no way for a superhero to be thinking. He tried to distract himself by thinking about designs for a costume, possibly involving some sort of cool gadget belt, but his mind kept straying towards Theresa. Why hadn't her family sent her to Marvel? Why did she keep showing up there and confronting him? Whose side was she on, anyway? And did she know how good she looked in black combat gear?

Theresa had climbed up out of the basement and was waiting for him in the foyer when he got back. "That's the last of them, in this building, at least," she said.

"All right. What about the ones in the dorms?"

She frowned, a tiny furrow between her eyes that Carlos thought made her look better than ever. "I don't know," she said. "I guess they're in the basement, but I don't know how many there are going to be, or where."

"I thought you were one of these guys."

"They didn't tell me about this part of the plan," she admitted. "I thought we were just going to blow up the main building. I only found out about the rest of it tonight."

"Well, why didn't you do something? You were just going to let them blow everyone up?" He knew it was no way to get on her good side, but he couldn't help himself.

"I was going to do something about it, but you showed up and stopped me," she snapped back. Carlos wasn't sure what to say about that. Now that he thought about it, he had heard voices in the woods before he came across her.

"Sorry," he said eventually.

Theresa sighed. "It's okay. Let's just find the rest of these bombs."

"Yeah." He put his arms around her and lifted her up again, feeling a little self-conscious about it this time. She didn't seem to notice, though.

"Let's go," she said, and Carlos started running, accelerating to super speed without a hitch and carrying the two of them across the quad and into the dorms in an instant. The door to the basement was ajar. He shouldered it open and started down the stairs.

"Chiang has a torch with him so he can work on the bombs," Theresa whispered. "If we look for the light, we can find him."

"What if he's already set the bombs?" Carlos asked.

"I guess we'll worry about that after we find him," she replied.

"Okay," he agreed. He reached the bottom of the stairs, and peered around him. The generator room was probably the best place to start, he decided. He would try to find that first. He picked a direction and started walking.

"Carlos?"

"Yes?"

"You can put me down now."

"Oh." He blushed. "Sorry." He put her down and they continued together. "I figured we'd try the generator room first. He's probably putting bombs in the same places in both buildings."

"Good idea," she agreed. "Do you know where it is?"

"No. I figured we'd just keep going until we found it."

Even in the darkness, he could tell that she wasn't pleased. "Carlos, there are bombs in this building. We don't know when they're going to go off. Are you sure that wandering around is really such a good idea?"

"Do you have a better one?" he asked. No reply. "Okay, so let's keep going."

They kept walking through the darkness, with no idea where they were going. Time seemed to stretch out as they walked, and Carlos began to feel confused. He wondered how long had they been

down here, and whether Chiang was still down there too. He knew that if they couldn't find Chiang, there was almost no chance of finding the bombs in time.

He almost ran into Theresa when she stopped walking to peer off down a side corridor. Then he realised that he could see. There was a dim glow coming from somewhere off to that side.

"I think we've found him," she whispered.

\*

As they were leaving Brandy's room, Abdul stopped, picking something up off a shelf. "Hey Brandy," he asked in a hoarse whisper. "Can I borrow this?"

"Sure," Brandy said. Tony peered at what Abdul was holding. It looked like a commemorative Nike hockey stick. Good idea.

"You got another one of those things around here, Brandy?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Sorry, Tony. It was a limited edition."

Still, now that he thought about it, Tony was sure that he wanted a weapon of some sort. It probably wouldn't do any good against a man with a gun, but that wasn't the point. He looked about the room, trying to find anything that would do the job.

Brandy picked something off the Starbucks shelf and held it out to him. "How about this?" she suggested. It was a huge commemorative mug, bigger than Tony's head. The pride of her collection. Tony fought hard to stifle a laugh. "It's the best I can do," Brandy apologised.

Better than nothing, he decided. He took the mug. It was heavier than it looked. "All right," he said, trying to make it feel like a weapon. "Thanks, Brandy," he said.

They crept out of the room. Dr Luchansky and Chris were waiting in the hallway. "What are you doing, Tony?" Dr Luchansky asked. Tony could hear the smile in his voice.

"Never mind. Let's just go." Tony turned to Abdul. "How do you want to do this?"

"How about I take care of the littlest kids, and you get everyone else loose?" Abdul suggested.

It was a good idea. Abdul was certainly going to be better than Tony at getting the little kids out quietly and without panicking. The older kids would be easier for him to manage. "Okay," he agreed, turning up the hallway as the other four made for the stairs.

Commemorative mug in one hand, keys in the other, he made his way up the hallway, unlocking doors. He had decided not to wake anyone up yet. The most important thing was that they were all able to get out. If he could get to the fire alarm, waking everyone up and getting them out wouldn't be hard. The first thing to make sure of was that they were all able to get out of their rooms. Into a building with at least three terrorists running loose. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, Tony thought. It was the best one he had, though. The kids were going to have to get out through a building with at least three terrorists running loose whatever Tony did. Maybe if there were enough of them running around, most of them would actually get out. It was a horrible thought, but Tony knew it was the truth.

He was halfway up the hallway now, and coming up to the corner. His heart beat faster as he came closer to it. He was sure he could hear something, but was it footsteps, or was it his imagination? Tony couldn't even be sure if it was on this floor. Maybe it was Abdul he was hearing, as he made his way along the floor below.

Carefully, Tony unlocked another door, the click sounding almost inaudibly in the lock. There it was again. He had definitely heard a sound that time. He was sure of it. It had to be footsteps. Tony flattened himself against the wall, ears almost aching as they strained to listen.

A loud crackling noise from around the corner nearly made him wet his pants. It sounded closer than he would have believed possible, almost as if it was right next to him. "Report, Hardy. Have you found him yet?"

"Nothing yet," came the quiet reply. "Are you sure he's out there?"

"I'm fucking positive. Didn't you hear that shot? I tell you, he got Young."

This was interesting, but Tony didn't think it was a good idea for him to hang around listening to it. Turning back to the door he had just opened, he eased it open and slipped inside.

The conversation was still going on out in the hallway, but it was muffled enough that he couldn't make it out through the door. Tony gripped the giant mug more tightly, feeling the skin stretch across

his knuckles. He knew he was going to have to do something. For the hundredth time, he wished he had been the one to pick up the hockey stick.

The hallway fell silent again, the walkie-talkie making a faint click as it turned off. Tony put his ear to the door and waited. He couldn't hear anything. Maybe the terrorist was waiting for him. Maybe he had already walked by. Maybe he was standing outside the door, waiting for Tony to come out. Tony shivered involuntarily as he thought this, shaking himself like a wet cat.

And then he heard something. Footsteps. They were getting louder. The terrorist was on the move again. If Tony gripped the handle of the mug any tighter, it was sure to shatter in his hand. The footsteps kept coming, still getting louder. A quiet cough. The terrorist was right outside the door.

And then they kept moving. Now was his chance. Tony knew this at some sort of instinctive level. He didn't even consider staying quietly in the room. Afterwards, he wasn't even sure if he had been thinking at all. Tony opened the door, mug held high. The gunman was hardly five feet down the hall from him. He didn't have a chance to react as Tony brought the giant Starbucks mug squarely down on his head. The gunman crumpled to the floor.

He lifted the mug again, and brought it down again, bashing the gunman with it over and over. His arms were tired and his knees were weak when he finally stopped to have a look at the gunman. His nose was smashed, and there was blood all over his face. He wasn't moving. He wasn't even breathing. He was dead, the raised Starbucks logo on the mug stamped into his face in five places. It was a shame he couldn't get this guy stuffed and mounted, a detached part of Tony's brain thought. Brandy would love this. The ultimate collectible.

Gingerly, Tony reached down to relieve him of his gun, trying not to touch the man he had just killed. Blood was pouring off the guy's face now, and pooling up on the floor. The police were going to have a field day with this one, Tony thought, tucking the gun into a pocket and hoping he didn't accidentally shoot himself with it.

He had a moment's debate about whether to leave the mug or bring it with him, but he knew that there were still terrorists out there, and he wasn't going to trust himself with the gun. The chances of him taking out two terrorists with the same mug were pretty slim, but it was a much better bet than the gun. He picked it up, mentally thanking Brandy for her obsession with all things Starbucks, and continued down the hallway, unlocking doors.

\*

Carlos stood in the basement hallway, shifting his weight uncertainly from one foot to the other. "Come on," Theresa whispered. "Do something."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know. You're the superhero here, remember?"

"He's got a gun," Carlos pointed out.

"Aren't you immune to bullets or something?"

Carlos considered the possibility for a second. "I don't know. I don't think so. And I really don't think that this is the way to find out."

Theresa didn't seem impressed. "Great. So what now?"

"I don't know. Why don't you distract him? You're supposed to be on his side."

"And then what?"

He had no idea, but she was obviously not going to accept that for an answer. "I'll think of something."

"Okay, well you'd better," she said, walking down the little corridor towards the light.

Carlos couldn't believe that this was the plan they were going with. For one thing, he had no idea what the plan was. He hoped Theresa had a better handle on the plan than he did, but for some reason he doubted it. Half-listening to her conversation with Chiang, he tried to figure out what he was supposed to be doing.

"I got the kid," Theresa was saying.

"Yeah? And what did you do with him?"

"Knocked him out and left him hanging in some trees back in the woods."



Chiang didn't sound pleased with this at all. "And what about when he comes around? Don't you think he'll be able to break out of your little trap without even breaking a sweat?" This guy wasn't stupid, Carlos thought.

Theresa took it calmly. "Relax. He'll be out for the rest of the night. You think I don't know how to do my job?"

Chiang just grunted, but at least he dropped that line of questioning. Carlos felt faintly relieved. "And so you decided to come here and find me?" Chiang asked, and Carlos tensed up again.

"Well, you didn't exactly give me instructions on what I was supposed to be doing. Maybe if you'd gone over the plan properly, I would have known." Carlos couldn't believe that Theresa was speaking so aggressively to a terrorist with a gun. She had more balls than he did, he thought, hoping that they wouldn't get her into trouble.

"I'm nearly through here," Chiang was telling her. "Why don't you go back to the van and wait." It was an order.

Of course, Theresa chose not to interpret it that way. "You sure you don't need a hand here?" she asked. He heard a thumping, and then Chiang swore.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Chiang demanded. "Don't mess with that, you idiot, unless you want to blow us up along with everybody else." Carlos decided that this was his cue. "Stupid fucking kid," Chiang was saying. Another thump, this one more of a slap, and Theresa cried out.

She was in trouble. This was a stupid plan after all. Carlos started running down the narrow hallway towards her, accelerating up to full speed without even thinking about it.

"What the fuck?" Chiang demanded. Carlos could see him now. He was standing over Theresa. She was lying on the floor, a red welt already showing on her face. Carlos was suddenly furious. His vision blurred as he ran faster and faster.

And suddenly he was flying through the air, his foot having caught on something. He hurtled down the hallway, completely out of control. This was not going well, he thought, just as he slammed into something and came to an abrupt stop.

Theresa scrambled to her feet. "All right," he could hear her say. "I'll get the detonators, and we can get out of here."

"What?"

"Good plan," she said. "Now let's go."

Carlos shook his head groggily, trying to figure out what she was talking about. He sat up, and then realised what he had hit. He had slammed into Chiang at full speed, catching the man in the chest and sending the two of them into a wall. The wall had cracked where Chiang had hit it, making a little cavity for the unconscious man.

Theresa was standing in front of him now, detonators grasped triumphantly in one hand. She offered the hand to him. He took it, and she pulled him up.

"Are you all right?" she asked, her voice soft and her face concerned.

"I'm fine," he said automatically.

"Are you sure?" She let go of his hand and reached up to check the top of his head. It blossomed into pain as she touched it.

"Fine," he gasped. "Now let's go."

He grabbed her hand again and ran back up the hallway.

\*

Muller had been walking around in the dorm building for a long time, looking for somebody to kill, but he hadn't found anyone yet. He was getting bored, and he was getting tired. His head was swimming, and the pain from his arm was moving up and out to encompass his whole body. He leaned up against a wall, taking a rest.

And then, like a vision, there he was. A doorway opened down the hall, and a man came through it, gun first. He looked frightened. Muller knew it had to be the man he was looking for.

He must have made a sound, because the man snapped around, already firing. Firing prematurely, because the bullet missed Muller by a mile and gave him time to drop awkwardly into a crouch. His useless arm hit the floor, and he howled with the pain.

“Who the fuck are you?” the other man demanded of him.

Stupid. This was not an important question at the moment. Why was Ms Wong wasting her time with fools like this? Muller lifted his weapon in reply. He fired just as the other man did.

This time he was not so lucky. His aim was low, hitting the idiot in the stomach and making him double over. And worse, the usurper’s bullet actually connected with Muller, hitting him in the right shoulder. He collapsed, screaming, onto his ruined arm, firing off another two shots as he did. He hadn’t even bothered to aim, but no answering shots came, and when the pain cleared enough for him to think again, he saw that the other man was nothing more than a crumpled, unmoving heap.

God was with him. This was another sign. He dragged himself upright and began moving towards the man he had just killed. A shot to the throat, as well as the shot to his stomach. Blood had splashed right across the hallway.

Muller pulled off the dead man’s ski-mask and studied his face. He was older, with grey hair and a grim look to his mouth. And now he was dead. Muller smiled. Nobody could stand between him and Ms Wong now. He would go and find her immediately. She shouldn’t be made to wait. She should hear the news at once, that Muller was going to be her faithful servant from now on, and that he would kill anyone who tried to come between them. And anyone else that she might like killed. She would be so pleased, he thought.

He took the man’s gun, and gave the body a quick pat down with his good hand. There was nothing very interesting on the body, but when he opened the man’s backpack, Muller was thrilled to discover a large combat knife in the main compartment. How wonderful! Another sign. Ms Wong deserved a gift from him, and he knew just the thing to give her. Unsheathing the knife, he set to work.

\*

By the time the emergency services arrived, it was all over. Tony and Abdul had unlocked all of the kids’ doors, Tony had hit the fire alarm, and everyone had left the building safely. Carlos and Theresa had got out as well, and they had brought the detonators with them. There was nothing for the police to do except collect two live terrorists and three bodies, disarm the bombs, and start on the long process of interview and paperwork.

Dr Luchansky found Carlos and Theresa sitting by one of the ambulances. Carlos was being looked over by one of the paramedics, but the man finished and moved on to the next case as Dr Luchansky came up.

“Are you okay?” he asked them both.

“We’re fine,” Carlos replied. “Nothing serious.”

“Good.” Dr Luchansky turned to Theresa. “I’ve spoken to the police. They’re going to want to interview you, but they say it’s very unlikely that you’ll be charged with anything, particularly once the woman who hired you-?”

“Amanda Wong,” Theresa said.

“Right. Once she has been arrested. You helped stop a major crime this evening, and the police will be taking that into account.” Theresa just nodded, but her relief was evident. Dr Luchansky continued. “The police have also contacted your parents. They’re on their way up. They’ll meet you at the station.

Theresa’s face fell. “I see.”

“You will have to go back to school as usual, but I will be writing to your parents. If they agree, there’s a place for you at Marvel.”

“They won’t agree,” Theresa sighed. “They don’t even believe that I have any super powers.”

Dr Luchansky put a hand on her shoulder. “I know it has been hard for you, but I think that you’ll find that things are different now. And if your parents don’t respond to my letter, they may respond to the letter from the President.”

“What?”

“Super heroes are very important to the war on terrorism,” Dr Luchansky said with a hint of a smile. “The President takes our programme very seriously. I’m sure that he can persuade your parents.”

Theresa didn’t look quite convinced. “I hope you’re right.”

“So do I. The police will be over to speak to you and to take you to the station shortly. I’ll hope to see you again soon.” Dr Luchansky gave her a brief smile, and moved on to check on some more of his students.

“I guess it’d look pretty bad if I ran away again,” Theresa said to Carlos.

“I guess it would,” he agreed. He slipped his hand into hers, and they sat together silently. “I hope your parents let you come to Marvel.”

“Me too.”

“But if they don’t, I’ll write to you. And maybe we can get together over the summer or something.”

Theresa gave his hand a squeeze. “I’d like that.”

\*

Amanda Wong woke up in a foul mood. She had been up until two in the morning the night before waiting for a report on the Marvel job, but she hadn’t heard anything. She tried to contact Perry, both at the base and on the pre-paid cellphone that was the emergency backup number, but he wasn’t answering. And there was nothing on the news, either. She was furious. Didn’t he know that this was business, that there was money at stake here? She had arranged a meeting with the people at Edumax that morning to discuss the results of the project and arrange payment, but she had nothing to tell them. Perry was making her look like a fool. Edumax had put up with enough delays in this campaign already, and they were running out of patience. As she rode down to the parking lot in her private elevator, she vowed that Perry would regret screwing her over like this. Blowing up stupid creeks was all that that piece of shit was good for. Anything else was beyond him.

He would have to be punished in some way, she decided. She didn’t want anyone thinking that they could screw her around and get away with it. She was planning an attack on an Edumax facility for next week, one that would be designed to fail, to prove to the media what excellent security Edumax really had. All she needed was someone to take the fall, and Perry had just put his hand up for the job.

She opened the door of her SUV, climbed in, and slammed it shut behind her. She had already started the engine and was reversing out of her space when she realised that she wasn’t alone in the car.

With a loud thunk, the power locking locked all the doors. “Hello, Ms Wong. Did you sleep well last night?”

“Muller. What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” He was a mess. Blood caked the right side of his shirt, and his right arm was lying limply at his side. His hair was a mess and his eyes were wild. His left arm, though, was perfectly steady, and it was holding a gun to her head. “How the hell did you get in here?”

“God let me in, Ms Wong,” he replied, and then he laughed a crazy laugh. For the first time all year, Amanda Wong felt afraid.

“What do you want?”

“I am very sad, Ms Wong. You have made me very sad. I thought that I was the one chosen to serve you, but then I found that you had hired some fools to serve you instead.”

Oh great. “Well, I’m sorry about that, Muller,” she said, stalling for time. What the hell was this guy’s first name, anyway? Klaus? Adolf?

“You know that nobody will serve you as faithfully and as well as I will, don’t you, Ms Wong?”

Was this what this was all about? Amanda Wong’s patience snapped. “What have you done, you festering pile of horseshit? My reputation is riding on this fucking campaign. If you’ve screwed it up for me, my clients will have my head.”

He smiled at her. One side of his face wasn't working properly, and the effect was hideous. "Not to worry, Ms Wong. I have anticipated this eventuality, and brought you a gift. As a token of my undying love for you."

"How nice of you." Great. What the hell did he mean by that?

"It's in the back seat. You will have to get it yourself, because I am a little bit indisposed at present." He flopped his useless arm at her, and moaned. Amanda Wong reached into the back seat without looking. Her fingers closed on a carrier bag, and she pulled it around the seat and into her lap. "Go ahead," Muller told her. "Open it."

The carrier bag seemed to be leaking something into her lap. A crimson stain spread across her white suit pants. She definitely didn't want to know what was in the bag, but a little extra pressure from the gun at her head persuaded her. She opened the bag. Perry's head frowned up at her from her lap. She gasped, and pushed it away from her, towards Muller.

"Do you not like it?" he asked.

"What did you do?" Somewhere at the back of her mind, a part of her was thinking, so that's why he didn't call in last night. She wondered how badly the Marvel job had gone.

"I will never let anyone have your head if I can provide another in exchange, Ms Wong. It is just one of the many ways in which I hope to serve you."

"Okay, Muller. Well, maybe you could serve me by getting this gun out of my head." A trace of her usual command tone crept into her voice, and she bit her lip. That was the way to get herself killed.

"I am afraid that I can't do that, Ms Wong. I can best serve you right now by taking you to a safer place. You cannot stay here." The gun pushed a little harder into her temple. "Drive, please."

Amanda Wong had no choice. She shifted the car into first and drove out of the parking lot.

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"Hey Brandy?"

"Yes, Tony."

"I'm sorry about what I did to your mug. The cops have impounded it as evidence, but I'll get you another one, if you'd like."

"I'm afraid you can't. They were a limited edition."

"Oh. Well, I'm really sorry."

"That's okay. Chris sold our story to one of the papers, and my mug made it on to the front page. It's a kind of immortality, Tony, and I think that the mug would have wanted it that way."

"I guess. Well, as long as you're not too upset about it."

"Not at all, Tony. I think that this experience has taught you a valuable lesson. Whoever you are, and whatever situation you're in, you can always come through it safely if you have the right merchandise on your side. And that if you support the products that made our nation great, they will come back and support you too, however you need them to. They will even kill for you."

"I guess it might have taught me that."

"I'd like you to have this Limited Edition 50th Anniversary Barbie, Tony. I've had her since I was ten, and she's always been there for me. Now, she'll be there for you, too."

"And she'll kill for me?"

"Absolutely."

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