

THE
ROBUSTA
INCIDENT

JENNIFER FALES

Illustration by Khenaton Rainey

Jennifer Fales

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September 14, 1981

A canary yellow sun beamed its unfortunate spotlight down on seven-year-old Howard Danishefsky, paying special attention to the taut-puffed circle of purplish skin around his left eye, as he limped home. He stopped to kick loose gravel at a fire hydrant, despite the fact that it hadn't done anything to him. A thin trail of red ants scurried away from the shower of dirt and rocks, some scrambling over the pavement, others down the cracks young Howard avoided stepping on like the plague. Life was complicated enough, without adding Mimi's spine to an ever-growing list of worries. She was already going to be so mad over what those darned bullies had done to his Legends of Dance lunchbox. Stupid left-footed fourth graders...what had Astaire and Rogers ever done to them, anyway?

"Hey, little man." The dark-freckled stranger, trimming the hedges outside Howard and Mimi's new apartment, looked concerned. "You alright?"

Howard, versed in Russian stoicism since the wise old age of four, just shrugged and answered, "I'm still walking, what more should I ask for?"

Little man. Howard sighed as he half limped and half marched up the steps, keeping his chin high. Everyone seemed to be calling him that these days. At least when Mimi did it, he was *her* little man. The only one who'd

ever been around, as far as he could tell. He'd asked a million times about his dad: Where was he? Who was he? Why wasn't he there? All he knew was a name and a title: Archibald Danishefsky, astrophysicist (although he added extraordinary in there, when people asked about it). *My father is Archibald, and he is an extraordinary astrophysicist...whom I have not met.*

It took a few minutes to dig the key from his backpack's belly, with only the one good eye left. He finally found it underneath the Living Dead comic book he'd traded his lunch to Billy Decker for. Normally, his mother would've left the front door unlocked for him anyway. He blamed it on the man outside, running his big hands all over Mimi's shrubbery. Strangers were dangerous, people had been telling him that his whole life. He'd always wanted to ask, "compared to what," which was a legitimate question, but Mimi insisted he avoid using phrases that sounded disagreeable. No one liked a child who questioned authority, even when the authority *was* entirely questionable.

"Mimi!" He stepped inside quietly, careful to lock the door behind him before setting down his burden. He took off his shoes and stood up on a ridiculous plaid sofa, worn in all the right places, so he could peer at his goose egg in the mirror on the wall above it. "I'm home!"

"There's my little man." Mimi rounded the corner with one of her secret smiles, the kind willowy Russian

dancers who had led hard lives reserved for very special people. The smile faded into a frown. “Howard, what kind of trouble did you get yourself into?”

He turned to face her, still shy of being face to beautiful face by an inch or so, despite the beat-up furniture under his stinky socks. He shook his head and denied the allegation. “Not me, Mimi...no trouble here. I’m a dancer, not a fighter.”

Mimi pursed artfully painted lips. She cupped a hand beneath his chin, peering thoughtfully at him with green eyes--cat’s eyes that saw through the whole world as if it were nothing. “Bullies, then?”

“Yes, Mimi. Bullies.”

“And what did you do to *them*, my little man?”

“Nothing.” He couldn’t tell if she was pleased or not.

“Did they tell you why?”

“In a roundabout way,” he sighed, sinking into a seated position with a wince. “It was the lunchbox.”

“Cretins,” Mimi growled. “The children of barbarians.”

“Yes,” Howard nodded, glancing over at his backpack on the floor. “Barbarians.”

“Do you have it still?” She already knew the answer.

“Yes.” He really didn’t want to show her, knowing it would break her heart.

“Well then, let’s have a look, my little man.”

Howard slid off the seat, lumbering over to the pack he’d abandoned by the wall. He imagined himself a

bear, post-hibernation, sleepy and slow, as he tried to prolong the inevitable. His hands shook a little as he pulled out the battered metal box with paint peeling off at almost every angle.

Mimi placed an index finger to her lips, one eyebrow raised halfway to her hairline. She tucked a shiny chocolate tendril that had somehow managed to escape the bobby pins trapping its brethren behind one delicately pointed ear. As she took the wreck from his hands, she muttered something. Howard was certain she was cursing, only in Russian, so he couldn't call her on it.

“Well,” she said, “at least *you* fared better.”

Howard nodded, solemnly. “Yes, but I might need a doctor, Mimi.”

Mimi set the object down and winked at him. “I'll get you the nurse who lives down the hall. Not as pretty as me, but you'll like her.”

Howard looked up with a tired smile. “No one in the world's as pretty as you, Mimi.”

Mimi had been right on both counts. The nurse was heavy, with a shock of short gray hair; nowhere near as pretty as his mother, but Howard appreciated her black concert tee and stellar couch-side manner.

“It was a group that did this to you?” the woman asked, carefully surveying the swollen skin and what she could see of the eye beneath before handing him an icepack.

Howard nodded.

“Barbarians.” Mimi helped Howard out of his torn pants so the woman could assess the damage to his leg.

“I had one of those myself, two nights ago, in the ER,” the woman smiled to take his mind off the sting of the rubbing alcohol and tweezers digging for gravel. “A titan of a truck driver with bloodied fists and angry words.”

“What did you do?” Howard asked, brown eyes wide beneath their lashes.

“Gave him a shot when no one was looking...a healthy dose of sedative, ensuring he slept through the rest of my shift, and became someone else’s problem in the morning.”

Howard glanced over at Mimi, looking small and bruised in his bloodied shirt and underwear. Mimi shrugged and said, “She had a problem. She solved it... who are we to judge?”

The woman laughed as she finished bandaging Howard’s knee with gentle hands. She said she was glad he and Mimi had moved in next door, and that the treatment was on the house. Then she left.

“Do you think she has more of that sedative?” Howard asked.

“No.” Mimi sat down beside him, wrapping an arm around his small shoulders. “She is a nice enough woman, but our problems don’t belong to her.”

Howard nodded, resting his head in the crook of

Mimi's shoulder. *Our problems.* He let the scents of vanilla and jasmine, her favorite perfume, wash over him. "I want revenge, Mimi."

"Of course you do, he's in your blood," Mimi voice was soothing as she pulled him into her lap. "I knew this day would come, but not so soon."

"Who's in my blood, Mimi? Is it Archibald?"

"Yes, my little man, it's Archibald." She kissed the brown curls at the top of his head. *The boy would always be her greatest treasure.* "It's time I told you all about your father...how I met him, and why he left us to do evil things."

May 5, 2014

1. MONDAY

1.1 Wake up.

Zombies...Jesus Christ on wheat toast, there were zombies everywhere. Howard backed into the cheap fabric of a five-foot by five-foot cage. No need to turn and look, he already knew what it was. No point in asking how it got there, either. *–That stupid, hateful, mandatory cubicle.* He shook his head, hoisting a sluggish chainsaw higher.

A green beret-clad troop of girl scouts, covered in handwritten sticky notes and flanked by two cloudy eyed goats — *goats that looked disturbingly sexy in tall, black stilettos, despite the grandmotherly babushkas knotted at their chins* — boxed him in. Howard's heart stuttered, a side effect of the chemicals it pumped deep into muscle and marrow. *It was either the chemicals or those deviant goats.* But Howard couldn't — *no, he wouldn't* — own up to still having a twisted obsession for that ball-breaker Carpenter and her death-defying footwear.

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A stray shaft of fluorescent sunshine struck a gore-free section of the broad blade, making it sparkle like diamonds on a trophy wife. The reflection damn near blinded Howard as he slammed the weapon down over skin and bone. In a fluke stroke of horrible, brain-dead luck, the brace-faced little cookie-hawker he had been aiming for shifted.

Shit almighty. How could he have let everything get so out of control?

The eleven-year-old monster's sash fell to the ground, along with one twitching arm, multiple squares of yellow paper, and a plethora of badges underneath — *quite the little overachiever, this one*. Unfortunately, the remainder of her body, annoyingly crooked pigtailed included, kept right on coming across the grass as the stuff under Howard's feet morphed into industrial strength olive carpet. Shiny metal-clad teeth snapped and chomped at the air in solidarity with her ravenous, slobbering sisterhood of cookie-thugs.

Howard panicked, struggling for air. His chainsaw quietly turned into a coffee pot — *there was no way he was getting his deposit back from the hardware store now* — and the army of scouts all piled onto him. As they dragged him and what had once been a fairly expensive power tool to the ground, Howard felt a goat bite into his right calf muscle and shake its head vigorously from side to side, in a savage attempt to rip the flesh.

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...At a quarter to five in the morning a combination of the worst Charlie Horse of his life and a shrieking alarm clock saved Howard Danishefsky from the arms of a rabid troop of flesh hungry scouts and two incredibly sexy — *albeit vicious, and babushka wearing* — goats. A stray shaft of light from the streetlamp outside bullied its way through bent vertical blinds and assaulted the one bloodshot eye he cracked open. The odds were always 50/50 that would happen, thanks to his apartment, all 650 sprawling, palatial square feet of it, being on the wrong side of the street. The light compounded one *hell* of a hangover, and there was no one to blame but himself in the aftermath of another shit-hammered all-night bender.

“Not true, my little man. We both know that horrible woman, with her alley cat morals, deserves credit for at least three-quarters of your drinking these days.”

Mimi, aka Mom, began the Cognitus Interruptus routine a lifetime ago — well, it felt like a lifetime — in the days after her funeral. She initially thought she was just popping by to remind Howard to forgive the universe for giving her bone cancer, and the funeral director for ruining her service, but then she realized how screwed up things were in his head, and decided to stick around. These days, when it came to his poor life choices, *especially* Howard’s boss and ex-lover, Melinda Carpenter, Mimi took every opportunity to

throw her own two-and-a-half cents in. Not that he could blame her, especially after their recent discovery that Carpenter and her latest boy-toy, Pate, were dead-set on stealing credit for his work. He just wished Mimi would stop calling him her little man...at seven, the nickname had been fine, past thirty-seven it was demoralizing.

Howard rolled his stubble-lined jaw away from yet another alcohol-scented pillow. Mimi was right about a man and his libido: The damned thing *had* dragged him through a mountain-sized heap of trouble since puberty kicked in. Incredibly bad ideas like proposing to his gold-digging ex-wife, Yvette, had resulted. Not to mention all those evening rounds on the desk...and the carpet...in the elevator...*and* the parking garage, with the beautiful, tight-skirted Melinda Carpenter. In all fairness, she *had* been a contributing factor in his divorce, but it wasn't like Yvette had ever been faithful... and, no doubt about it, Carpenter was just addictive. Given enough time around Melinda, even the brightest and bravest were bound to screw up and fall in love.

"I keep telling you, Howard..." Mimi refused to let him get away with claiming that emotion for Carpenter. *"That isn't love, it's just an unfortunate side-effect of the horn dog genetics you inherited from your father — and trying to be him can only bring more trouble."*

The flat of his palm found, and smacked, the largest plastic button on his screeching alarm clock. Holy

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Mimi, Mother of Howard...*whose morals and sainthood might be a tad overrated*...please don't start calling my father "old Pump and Dump" again. Mimi knew it made him uncomfortable, her talking about his dad that way. Archibald Danishefsky was an astrophysicist, a bona fide genius. Genius wasn't a strong enough word; the man was a math/science/physics god and the patron saint of I.Q.s. However sarcastically spoken, that patron saint comment Mimi had used more than once during his teenage years sounded ten times better than "old Pump and Dump" so he'd hung onto it.

Mimi had explained to him, at the tender age of seven, how she'd met Archibald at a coffee shop near the dance academy where she'd studied in St. Petersburg. After that, Howard begged her to let him start drinking the stuff, but she'd refused, telling him how awful it tasted. Archibald had been charming, and brilliant, and had revealed his visit to Russia had something to do with secret testing on alternative forms of energy. He offered no further explanation on the nature of his work and, several months later, Mimi was a married woman on a plane headed to the States. Love or not, she knew all that she needed — he was employed, and prosperous, and their life together would be comfortable. During Mimi's second trimester, while snooping through Archibald's personal effects for signs of unfaithfulness, she was surprised to discover an application for membership into a group called the Consortium

of Evil. He vanished soon afterward, never to be heard from again.

The Consortium turned out to be painstakingly secretive. Other than a flyer that mysteriously showed up in the mailbox when Howard turned eighteen, and occasional world news that smacked of nefarious grandeur, he had nothing else to go on. Still, Howard had always bet dollars to donuts, if he could just draw this Consortium's attention with something truly spectacular, they would invite him to join. Out of respect for Mimi, who had single-handedly clothed, fed, and raised him, he hadn't bothered with the notion much during her lifetime. But he just *knew*, once inside, he would find the old genetic block he'd been chipped from among their ranks. After all these years, he would finally have a father. It was with that goal in mind that the adult Howard discarded the mantle of a musty post-divorce bargain bin comforter — the one he kept forgetting to take down to the laundry — and let the cold air smack him around a bit.

Thump thump. Thump thump. Thump thump.

The pulse in his left temple beat out a queasy staccato. Not so in love with the agony trailing behind it, Howard snatched a bottle of pain relievers from his scratch-layered nightstand — one of the few things he'd kept in the aftermath of Yvette — in answer. After a brief battle with the childproof cap, victory was claimed, and he tilted the bottle. He squinted one brown eye at the

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two “extra strength” tablets in his palm — *yeah, right* — before rattling another pair out. There was no shame in looking for all the help he could get in putting on a game face for the hours of redundancy ahead.

—*It had been a long six months.* Six stinking months ago, he’d blown a gasket with Carpenter, that results-driven, highly organized, femme fatale. She’d pulled him neatly from his lonely shell, then decided to go tickle the ivories of other men once she realized she couldn’t control him. Mimi swore this was not a woman, but a leggy siren, a waterless *rusalka* infecting men with her viral shoe fetish, and then drowning them in a pool of their own misery. Immortal or not, Howard preferred to think of her as more of a ruthless dictator in siren’s clothing, due to that unfortunate incident between them which unexpectedly transformed Melinda into a ten-foot-tall bully, gunning for Howard on the Robusta Corporation’s playground. He would concede he had lost his temper in an epic way, but it should have been excusable. That had happened in private, just once, and only in response to *her* acting so weird and cold, every second of every damned day, since his divorce had been finalized.

He could’ve worked there for many more years, putting up with all the mindless corporate bullshit for the sake of a career and retirement, if not for that woman’s war campaign. Unjustified as it was, Carpenter’s revenge kicked off with a slew of emails volunteering

him for everything under the sun. Occasionally, the heartless Mussolini with the beautiful heart-shaped ass broke her email siege on HowardVille, with square sticky notes. Nothing ruined his day like wandering into a cubicle or lab to find a to-do list, in *Il Duce's* handwriting, dangling, blight-like and parasitic, from the lip of a flat screen monitor. He began to wish fervently that just once, for just one *solitary* instance, Carpenter would go back to telling him what she was *really* thinking. As a matter of fact, she'd pissed him off so much a few months back, he'd responded to one of her emails by telling her so, in decidedly colorful language.

Disappointingly enough, Howard had only heard back from an H.R. lady, one with a 2XL Freudian slip and a thick Long-guy-land accent, on the matter of e-correspondence etiquette. The woman's name was Joy, though her parents could hardly be blamed. *Legend had it that H. R. ladies frequently emerged as wet, rosy-cheeked balls of promise, virtually indistinguishable from other babies, aside from their light chokehold on the umbilical cord.* This harbinger of resources was also not a big fan of his boss, and thus revealed Melinda's devastating plan.

The tight-skirted Carpenter, with her succulent round calves and patented pendulum sway, expressed deep concerns over Howard's ego. When Joy remained unimpressed, *Il Duce* yanked something more impressive out of her bag of tricks: Megalomania. Though the

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quality of Howard's work was fine, she said, his attitude would *never* be "selfless enough." In fact, he was a ticking time bomb. In light of the circumstances, the fact that Howard's ingenious proposal — a filter-less, flavor packed coffee with twice the caffeine and none of the jitters — had won Robusta's U.K.'s first ever Innovation Competition was immaterial. For the sake of the company, a chemist more attuned to Robusta's core values and culture — *for the record, she felt her latest boy-toy, Pate, would make a better public speaker than the stuttering Oswald* — must be flung into the spotlight, and given full credit, before the product went live.

Il Duce's intentions had seemed obvious — practicing Robusta's native language, sharpening all that hot air into a giant, career-chopping axe — and her timetable was closing in on him. She intended to plead her case to decision makers in the U.K.'s proverbial ivory tower, charming them into a majority buy-in, the following week.

At that point, Howard had to face a few things, though he really didn't want to: He was fast approaching forty years old. His mother was dead. He'd ruined his marriage; lost custody of his house and his little girl, and Carpenter was relentless in taking the last thing he had, his career with Robusta, away from him. There was nothing left for him to lose.

—Nothing left to lose, everything to gain.

Carpenter's betrayal had an interesting side effect. The siren's slanderous vocabulary spurred Howard on to his destiny: Megalomania is derived from a combination of two Greek root words, "megalo" meaning large or great and "mania" as in madness or frenzy. *Obviously*, the two roots together indicated a more aggressive and impressive form of passion...and "dangerous" just took it through the roof. *Ooh Wee, check out the new kid on the block, he's a dangerous megalomaniac with the genes to back it, baby.* Determined to prove Melinda *right*, Howard had invited megalomania home with him that very night. —Not only had he let it into his apartment, he'd fallen madly and passionately in love, offering it a "till death do us part" commitment.

Howard yawned his way into a long-limbed stretch, back and shoulders crackling in complaint. One hand rubbed at the perpetual ache in his right rotator cuff — *a lingering memento from that brief stint in collegiate football, something Mimi had goaded him into, and he'd done, to meet a nice girl or two.* He glanced over at the peeling footboard holding up the far end of his bed, across from the bookcase filled to overflowing with horror movie DVDs, plastic-jacketed collectors' edition comics, and dust-kissed textbooks. Above those sat a row of nesting babushka dolls Mimi wouldn't let him throw away. At least one thing had gone right so far that morning. The backpack with his research — *all*

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of it, laptop and the shatterproof bottles of problem-solving serum — was safe.

He wobbled a tired head from side to side, letting pain from the motion scatter the usual wilted roses and meaningless sunshine up and away, through the nearest air duct. *Up and at 'em, they're playing our song.* After pausing to say good morning and drop pellets in the tank for a balloon-shaped, spiny fish he'd intended to kill, but named Vincent Price instead, he wandered out into the hallway. Once there, he dug for a striped towel in the nearest cabinet, and stumbled for the shower. No more wasting time, unless he wanted to miss the first bus.

Carpeting Mimi called vampiric — *she said the unnaturally dry gray fibers had probably been plush cream shag that died a century ago* — poked the blisters on Howard's soles mercilessly all the way down the hall. He wet a dry mouth with one his best expletives, a creative combination of three words he was exceptionally fond of, one of them having to do with monkeys, another, procreation. Sore feet *and* aching knee joints; there were no surer signs of choosing to hoof it home, rather than forking out cash for a cab. Why would he do that when there were two perfectly good Andrew Jacksons resting face to back in his billfold?

Wait. He knew the answer and, unfortunately, it wasn't just "for the exercise." Nope, he'd engaged in spontaneous fancy footwork in the street. —Please God,

at least let him have maintained enough sense to keep his lips zipped and dancing shoes hidden from the bar clientele. Even minus a drunken audience, untimely public celebration of one's evil genius by boogieing in and out of high beams howling in creepy falsetto about the ultimate victory was stupid. *Oh yeah, genius, completely under the radar with that move.*

“Booze brings you back down to her level, you idiot.” He braced a lightly muscled arm against the shower stall and accepted a blast of scalding water over a wavy brown mop threaded with silver at one temple, and down his back. It was his penance. Bits and pieces of the night before came back to him, including insulting some woman. He couldn't recall a name, or what he'd said, but her Grand Tetons — gigantic sideways silos defying the laws of both gravity and man — had reminded him acutely of his ex-wife. In light of that, whatever he'd said, it was *not* complimentary. The door prize fist-to-the-face with which she'd awarded him further supported that theory. The rough washcloth brushed a sore spot on Howard's cheek, dragging a wince out of him. From day one Mimi had told him and Yvette that Yvette didn't love him...he'd just refused to listen.

His ex-wife had been a broken record, skipping back to the same old stanza over and over again: *Howard-the-jerk*. She'd done it so much it was one of the reasons cited, like some kind of bad joke, in the

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divorce. “But Your Honor, he’s a jerk,” said with a dramatic flourish of dewy eyelashes, won her custody of a house, their shy little genius, Courtney — *whom Yvette insisted on torturing with uniforms, badges, and cookie sales, just to get back at him* — and the three or four friends they *might* have had together. The keys to Howard-the-jerk’s former life were handed over to her on a valet-handled silver platter, and the court congratulated him on becoming the donor of a lifetime of alimony payments to a high-fashion Succubus. After that, he’d snapped up a lease on a lackluster apartment in the hustle of downtown, closer to work and far, *far* away from her emotional blackmail.

With the handle of the divorce-knife perpetually sticking out from his back, and Carpenter’s “destroy Howard” campaign in full swing, life had become crap-tacular. Right up until that one stunning moment of H.R.-driven clarity hit: Howard was suddenly a lonely and “dangerous” man, one whose neighborhood pizza connection’s father-in-law owned a local fish-market that sometimes traded in blowfish. Fate had finally smiled down at him, and handed over enough solitude, poison, and neighborhood rats, to revisit old research — a visionary masterpiece of a paper, inspired by a yellowing book from his college days he’d found in the basement of the university library, and soon after destroyed with spilt beer.

Of course, that paper had been awarded a C by a

myopic, goody two-shoes college professor, who assumed the part about “evil applications” had been some kind of horrible, pot-smoking joke rather than a heartfelt stroke of genius. Howard could think of no better way to justify his research than using the home chemistry set for kids Yvette had mailed back to him unopened. He would use it to plot revenge on the lace-commando-pantied nightmare whose sole purpose in life had become making Howard miserable. And yes, technically Melinda was one of *two* similarly pantied nightmares...but he didn't have to deal with the *other* on a daily basis anymore.

Clean enough to suit his purpose, Howard flexed his biceps briefly in the mirror and stumbled the foot-stabbing gauntlet from shower to bedroom. Once safely there he slapped on white socks, a set of faded cartoon boxers from a top dresser drawer, and performed an arm-raised wiggle into a white cotton undershirt with two-and-a-half armpit holes. The closet door creaked open as he flicked the cracked switch, jolting current into the last filament left in the bulb. Howard peered in, digging through several sets of hangers in search of a dark pair of slacks, a light collared shirt, and a brown leather belt whose white stitches were starting to fray around the edges. —Sure, there were things in his closet Howard could probably toss and replace, but why bother? He was dirt swept *way* under the rug for Carpenter, and Mimi might nag now and again, but that was only

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in his head. Aside from his kiddo, Courtney, there was really only one other living female he cared to impress these days.

Howard knew next to nothing about the dark-haired beauty at Rosenblum's. Not that surprising, since all they saw of each other were stolen glimpses between muffins and pies in the bakery window every morning. Despite Mimi's frustrating daily argument that his priorities were *not* keeping him warm at night, he figured it was for the best not to meet the woman just yet. Were he to go in and introduce himself, regardless of what he learned, he'd still be forced to put her in second place. Pursuing a nefarious destiny required fanatical dedication. The bulk of his time must be spent cultivating just one thing, something powerful enough to catapult him into the hallowed halls of the Consortium of Evil. Love didn't have that kind of power, but Archibald's gift to him, a wicked nature fueled by the Danishefsky intellect, most certainly did.

"No more dancing with pretty women, no more time for love and romance...nothing but horror movies and destiny," Mimi grumbled. "The boy I raised to dream is dead, I tell you, killed by his own ambitions."

"Yes, I know...as a door nail. Kaput. Such a tragedy," Howard humored her, pausing to consider a slice of stale Sicilian style pizza on his way out. Two feet from a small Bunsen burner and a microscope that smelled slightly of fish oil, the cardboard box with its cartoon

caricature of a jovial chef practically yelled “come and get it” from the kitchen counter. The Korean guy that saved up to buy the place — and felt more of an affinity for Italian cooking than his exacting father-in-law at the local Asian fish-market — had explained his position on the image quite eloquently to Howard late one evening. The thought of tearing people away from their beloved stereotypes depressed the living shit out of him. It was shameful Howard had been too drunk to refrigerate the box and its contents for the past three nights, because that man had the heart and the bravado of an Italian Master Chef.

The apartment door required the usual dose of elbow grease, and an added handful of expletives. Carefully jiggling his Robusta keychain away from the scratch laden cylinder, Howard approximated the odds on how much longer before the tumbler snapped off the lower half of that stupid nickel-plated key. A vision of him curled up on the welcome mat, drunk and snoring, next to a box of late night Korean-Sicilian pizza, with a key remnant clutched in one paw, leapt to mind.

—*Just a few more days.* He would call someone to fix the door *after* he wreaked his revenge. With the reality of vengeance hovering just over the horizon, he had to admit, he was still amazed H.Q. had actually received his proposal in the first place. Carpenter could have intercepted it, put the brakes on things earlier. Why wait

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for Howard to succeed, when she and her pretty boy could have stolen his idea from the beginning?

His shoes tippy-tapped at an angle, carrying away the question as he raced down the steps. It was the same scuffed echo they'd made every weekday morning since moving into the damned place. —*Rush and bustle, bustle and rush, down the stairwell and into the street, to the rhythm of downtown.* If there were anything a man single-handedly raised by a neurotic world-class dancer could appreciate better than most, it would sure as shit have to be rhythm.

1.2 Commute

It was a four-digit access code Howard knew better than his social security number — because it was five less digits to recall when he came staggering home, depressed about his life and three sheets to the wind. He opened the door at the front of the brownstone.

The electronic lock and a smattering of security cameras, minus two that had recently vanished, were a testament to the flawed character of the neighborhood. A faded stain marked the apartment building's threshold, an eyesore every tenant faced whether coming or going. It was another perfect example of the flawed neighborhood. A shit-ton of blood — seriously, somebody had opened up an artery or three there, and just let those babies bleed until the lights went out. It

had been spilled at some unknown point in the brownstone's history. It was a glaring detail, impossible to miss, and yet no one *ever* talked about it. Not a single tenant asked whose blood it was or why it happened right there, at the doorstep. It was almost like he was the only one seeing it. Maybe they just didn't care. Or maybe they figured, like Howard, they could be equally dangerous, given the right set of circumstances.

As he set off for the bus, a neighbor in a sequined top — What *was his name again, Mary or Manny, or something?* — yoo-hooed loudly from the opposite side of the street. Just a few months back, that muscle-bound transvestite, whom Mimi insisted was simply an ogre with the flair for women's clothing, had saved him from a mugging. Howard waved and shouted a compliment on the new hair color. Two thumbs up for the veiny vigilante in the snazzy auburn wig.

The bus stop was a few blocks away — a bit of a walk, but it could have been worse. Proximity was the primary reason Howard had picked the lousy, crumbling brownstone to begin with, that and the scent of fresh bread from the Rosenblum Bakery. His stomach grumbled in protest every time he marched by. He glanced down at an obnoxiously expensive watch, a rare gift from the wife in the days before she became an ex.

“Go in,” Mimi coaxed him. “One hello isn't going to ruin your plans.”

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She might be right. Not today, though...today, Howard's life was dictated by the tyranny of minutes. This sucked exponentially, because a fat slice of sugar-sparkled coffee cake or a gooey cheese Danish from the beauty behind the counter might have absorbed the leftover alcohol in his system before he limped back into Carpenter's lair.

"Morning, Howard."

Howard bypassed an unattended cooler on the sidewalk with a shake of his head — *that damned thing could have held anything from baboon hearts to a bomb* — and he took his place beside the salt and pepper haired grandmother. He nodded, responding in kind with a "Good morning, Beatrice" as he settled beside the woman. That simple act, three words spoken, was something he looked forward to each morning. —Mimi had been jealous at first, until he'd gently reminded her that his relationship with the woman was by no means intimate, and she probably couldn't make a decent Borscht or Solyanka to save her life.

The ride to Robusta was a familiar roundabout route, through one-way streets, manhole covers, and angry traffic. Howard leaned back in a fire engine red seat, absorbing the chill of cold plastic as he shut his eyes against harsh fluorescent lights. Conveniently enough, this also shut out a wild-eyed homeless guy slouching corpse-like across the aisle. The quiet rumbling of the laughs and talkers lulled him for a few

blissful seconds, before the scent of ammonia-laced urine — a sign that poor bastard’s liver or kidneys, probably both, were shot — wandered over, clinging to Howard’s neck like a needy child. He tried ignoring it, but Mimi’s voice surfaced in his head, warning him to pay attention.

“That will be you some day, if you don’t watch it with the drinking. Is that what you want, Howard — to be a bum glued to a bus seat, wasted and basting in the stench of your own self-destruction?”

Howard quietly envisioned the aftermath of his death, letting his mind slip away with Carpenter dialing up his platinum-haired ex-wife from her desk, her firm ass planted in a painstakingly calibrated chair. If she rang Yvette on a Tuesday or Thursday, post two-hour long evening Pilates sessions, her ergo-knobs and the levers would be dialed down a smidge. OCD and level of flexibility aside, he knew one other thing for certain about Melinda Carpenter: She *would* call the money-grubbing Succubus to chew her out for not revealing, same-day, that Howard’s proverbial bucket had been kicked. — *What was wrong with her? Didn’t Succubae know death skewed the numbers?*

For a rough twenty minutes or so, the motion of the 90 bus rocked Howard in and out of fitful napping. By the time he opened his eyes, the homeless guy and his foul bouquet of self-destruction had evaporated. *Finally.* It was safe to break open his backpack and dig

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out his best and most constant corporeal companion, the laptop. His formula and findings on the hard drive were the crucial — *and invisible* — part of the project he'd been working so hard on. Paranoia or, as his *other* childhood hero, Dr. Doom called it, “man’s best friend,” compelled him to routinely verify that the encrypted data was still there. Before tucking the laptop safely away for his stop, Howard pulled up the image of the flyer he'd scanned and saved. He carefully read through the first paragraph, although he'd memorized it decades ago, at eighteen:

The Consortium of Evil Guidelines for Membership

Established in 1900 and now an association of over 1 million members in some 24,000 autonomous tribes worldwide, the Consortium of Evil is one of the world’s oldest and largest disservice organizations. The goal for a tribe’s membership is an up-to-date and progressive representation of the evil community’s business, vocational, and personal interests. Members of the Consortium are part of a diverse group of chieftains and ringleaders, working to address various local and international disservice needs and to promote discontent, misunderstandings and anarchy worldwide. From time to time, we accept new members to inject our rings and tribes with the venom of fresh

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evil, innovative malevolence, and ever-important enthusiasm. As pioneers in research and weaponry, we consider our members – along with their research and weaponry - to be among our most valuable assets. They are the force that allows The Consortium to carry out its nefarious efforts and achieve its ultimate missions of power and conquest.

Howard tossed his thanks to the driver and stepped out onto the pavement. He adjusted the nylon straps on his backpack — that utilitarian blue pack and an undying love of horror films were bonds that still tied him to the Howard of grade school days. Then he headed off toward that glass-walled castle of commerce down the block. Given another hour and a half, the entire Robusta campus would be packed full and buzzing with human meat, but Howard was still one of the first to cross the threshold every morning. He *always* was, and that fast-approaching building — *Carpenter's castle* — drooled for him like a two-headed pagan god over a virgin sacrifice. In Howard's estimation, the only thing missing most days was a bold neon sign above the door that read: Abandon all hope, Danishefsky.

“Every dog has his day, Carpenter...and soon *this* dog will be lifting its leg to pee in your face!” *Ugh*. Howard patted the side of his pack, not even trying to ignore how freaking awkward that had sounded. There'd been no one around but him to hear it, anyway.

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— *Probably took that one a bit too far...just testing out the waters, really.* He was going to need a decent catch phrase soon. Preferably something a little less “would you mind calling me Uncle Huggie Pants while I put on this shiny suit with the zipper-mask and dance around like a ballerina” creepy for starters.

“Ballet,” Mimi reminded him, “is an art form. It deserves respect, not a zipper mask.”

Never mind. There was still time to work on his phrasing. *That* wasn’t the most important part today, not by a long shot. The important part was there would be no more counting each step, every crack in the pavement and manicured bush, leading up to Robusta’s door. He could finally walk without counting again. Howard could walk with purpose and feeling, because he walked with the confidence of a mastermind on the cusp of full-blown, glorious, movie formula revenge. It was a revenge that would serve as his trump card, winning him an in-road to the Consortium of Evil, and his father.

1.3 Robusta: Morning

The security guard, whose name had been shortened to “Phil” on his uniform, spared a sympathetic glance as he badged Howard in at the door. “Rough night, huh, Howie?”

“Rough is an understatement.” He mustered an

awkward smile in return. Every freckle-faced, stick-fisted childhood bully on the playground had once called him “Howie.” Right up until he’d figured out what made them tick.

“Surveillance room’s quiet in the afternoons.” The look on the doorman’s face translated to an intimate knowledge of hangovers. “Let me know if you need a place to nap.”

Howard nodded and tucked his Robusta I.D. in a right front pocket. How bad did he look? The well-dressed bag of young bones behind the reception desk answered the question for him. Ten seconds flat, and little Annie Rexia’s deer-in-headlights face switched from howdy to horror. *Terrific*. He’d be in a Carpenter’s office listening to another meaningless lecture on the importance of image — “*It’s not just you, Howard, you’re representing Robusta with that face.*” — before 10:00 a.m.

Howard dove into the lobby restroom, splashing frigid water right into “that face” to bolster his courage enough for a quick glance in the mirror. *Oh, come on*. It wasn’t that bad. Bruised on one cheek, sure, but nowhere near as awful as the receptionist made it out to be. A fast finger-comb through his curls and a few sips of water from the faucet would help; worst-case scenario, it might take several bottles of water for re-hydration, but he’d look and feel fine in an hour or two.

“*You should stop drinking,*” Mimi told him.

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Bypassing the steps, and Mimi's comment, he headed for the first floor elevator. Carpenter and her fellow executives would be visiting Machine Zero that morning, setting the first marker on the roadmap to glory. He wanted to say something. Hell, he wanted to run through the building with his middle fingers extended like loaded howitzers, telling them all how he felt, but he ought to play nice and be humble — *fine, pretend to be humble* — instead. Carpenter was sharp. Signs of stress might make an easy culprit for what was coming, but it was still better to keep suspicions to a minimum this early in. Looking closely enough, anyone with half an I.Q. might worry about what was happening *inside* of Howard's head, rather than what kind of hell it looked like from the outside.

Howard muttered, "Although half an I.Q.'s a dangerous assumption these days." He pressed a drastically raised metal button — one with a large, backlit "braille-for-idiots" number three stamped in its surface. Even Mimi couldn't disagree with him on *that* one.

He hummed quietly to himself along the way, a random tune from some Robusta jingle that was better than the music in the elevator. A few seconds before the ride ended, the sweet scent of tropical flowers over a contradictory bass note of ammonia flooded his nostrils. He searched the walls and the ceiling for one of those auto-squirt air freshener cartridges, one with some kind of horrible malfunction, but couldn't find it.

The scent dissipated and the doors slid open. On the opposite side, a tranquil, people-free view waited, with centralized cubicles and track lights hanging from the ceiling. Alternating rows of lights had been left on over the course of weekend, inadvertently making a handful of cheap desks look auspicious in the spotlight. —*There it was, corporate Darwinism hard at work: Take away the people and the fixtures teach themselves to brown-nose over the weekend.*

The variance in light gave once uniform olive fibers a rebellious patchwork-effect, ranging in shades from artichoke to army green. Interesting, but he still hated it. He spared a glance for the dark, carpet-free hallway on the far side of the floor, the one that dead-ended into his own private sanctuary. Howard truly loved that lab... *and he'd earned it.* Despite Melinda's machinations, and how hard she was working to take it all away from him, his genius *had* won him sole rights to the space again. And golden-boy Pate had been packed up and shuffled downstairs, to assume Howard's place in the two-man lab, beside the sweaty, stammering Oswald. —*B-b-better you than m-m-me, Little Johnnie G-g-gigolo.*

This time, he'd staked his claim. First day in, he sent a request to have the hallway de-carpeted and re-tiled... to Thurgood Walton in H.Q., the man who sent out the original blast email to Robusta and all its affiliates, announcing Howard as the Innovation Competition