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The Summer Kill-Off

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"I think it's..."

The boardroom fell entirely silent.

"...Absolutely wonderful! This should be our lead project. This should be on all the advertisements. I can see it now! Our website's splash screen, the side of a tour bus, the posters in front of every local shop in the nation, and every Barnes & Noble employee with it tagged to their chest. Good job. God, great job."

Mr. Green smiled and shook rough, dry, calloused hands with the dozen old men. Mr. White was next, and when he extended his hand, he beamed. Mr. White's pride made his hair on his head, in his nose, in his ears, translucent. He was proud to have made the right decisions. He was proud to have handpicked Mr. Green.

"You are the future of the industry," Mr. White slowly spoke while clasping Mr. Green's hands, "and I feel safe leaving you the keys to this machine."

When his left hand was finally let go, Mr. Green took a moment to adjust a lapel. As happy as he was that his project had been chosen, he felt the slightest twinge of psychological discomfort. He was 27, and everyone else was over 50. And his suit didn't exactly fit.

After the eleventh pair was shaken, Mr. Green propped his behind up onto the desk behind him. His spine contorted into a nearly unnatural position when he reached blindly into the first drawer and drew out a pen and pad, and his spine readjusted itself as he balanced the pad on his knee to write down what he remembered from the grocery list he had left at home. He knew he could be casual with the president of the company, Mr. Redd — a man both tall and thick, both friendly and distant, both charitable and successful.

"My friend, we could absolutely workshop a thousand ideas for promotion. We could go with an alternate reality game. Pay-to-play through Facebook. You know what, how about I go ahead and approve some tie-in books, as well? Now, this may sound a bit too insane, but how about the Super Bowl? I know, I know it's not our normal avenue, but I think this could work out."

Because of all the adulation, Mr. Green joked that he almost felt the need to bow. Instead he gave courteous nods and attempted to keep composure. He hoped but didn't fully believe.

Mr. Redd chortled.

"Well, I don't mean to overpromise. It's just that this kind of work is why I took the job in the first place. I always thought you did a good job with The Indonesian Orphan Assassins, but this puts you in another league. We'll talk about this with the marketing department later this week, all right? I'll see you tomorrow."

After Mr. Redd left, Mr. Green sat on the desk and stared at the commercial-grade carpet floor until he heard a quiet commotion behind him. Startled, he turned and saw Mr. Redd's secretary.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Green, I was just packing up," Catherine said. Although a young girl no older than 23, she was a veteran at the company. A high school internship led to a full-time salaried position, and she didn't complain about her secretarial position one bit considering Mr. Redd would take her out to lunch every day. Mr. Green immediately remembered the sketch he had made to present to the board. As inconspicuously as possible, he picked the sketch off of the footrest nestled between the desk and the potted plant and placed it behind the grocery list. He was unsure if Catherine would've approved.

"Oh, please, Mr. Green, I've already seen it. In fact, I'm excited about the story. Fantastic Woman really deserves it after what she did to Jeff Jordan. Sure, Hateblood is attractive as far as villains go, but that's not an excuse!" Catherine was only four years younger than Mr. Green. He had only recently left the enthusiast stage, but she was still excited about everything the company produced. He had to focus on business while she made phone calls and checked guests in.

They both went in the elevator.

He let her examine the sketch in greater detail as they made their way to the parking garage. She commented that she liked the attention given to Fantastic Woman's exploded breasts and ruptured spleen. She thought it really justified Jeff Jordan's scream of anguish and the gun placed in his mouth. As cool as it seemed to her, though, she did have higher hopes for next summer's kill-off.

Mr. Green contorted his spine to shut the front door behind him while he carried a carton of milk, a bundle of toilet paper, and an extra-large package of dog food. Instead of dropping one item to have greater motion, he instead placed his elbow under the doorknob and extended it in order to shut the door. On most days, Dana would have rushed to his side and offered an extra arm to drape grocery bags over, but on that day, she was too busy in the nursery, rocking Mr. Green to sleep.

"Hey, sorry, I didn't hear you come in," Dana whispered to her husband. "He's already asleep. And I'm worn out, too."

While Mr. Green and Dana put up their groceries, they told each other about their day. He, quiet and supportive, listened to her stories about her being 15 minutes late to work, her mother still refusing the hospice care the doctor had ordered, and the proportions on her drawing not working out as intended. He felt bad gloating, so he downplayed the success of his workday as much as he could. She still smiled.

When the lights turned off and the two pressed foreheads before falling asleep, Mr. Green heard Dana address him without a term of endearment or formality. She called him York, as his parents did, as he was baptized under. He called her Mrs. Green, as he legally created, as he always desired.

York woke in the dead of night. He turned to his right and saw his wife, breathing and beautiful. She was a fantastic woman, though she wasn't exactly Fantastic Woman. Her ribcage was unexposed to the outside elements. Her eyeballs hadn't been consumed by crows. She was alive, and there was joy to be taken from that fact. She had a rough day and would have hundreds of rougher

days, but he took pleasure in her even existing at all. The mother of his child and the bride of his dreams could be appreciated on her own merits, not as a test subject that served as an experiment for every horrible situation that came to mind.

Fantastic Woman was a childhood hero created in the 1930s. She didn't need her final scene to take place in a curb gutter. York mulled over whether or not to brutally assassinate the fictional person who inspired him. He could've told off his boss in a dramatic scene, hoping to unlearn all he had learned, or he could've make alterations to the work in secret. He could've let it happen and hope the five-percent boost in sales would be worth it.

