

(Every character depicted in the story below is a consenting legal adult over the age of 18)

A/N: Getting a power up and going out~

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Its all about weighing risk versus reward in the end. He *could* shore up his defenses, either by doubling down on hiding himself and his activities or by increasing his physical attributes... but would that help his goals in the long run?

After all, Lucas wasn't just trying to help a few people here and there. Nor was he content with building up enough personal power to carve out a space for himself or anything like that. Rather, Lucas had his eyes set on the greatest goal imaginable... saving the world.

He could never forget that fact. After all, he'd sacrificed all of Earth Aleph to an eldritch being from beyond their universe in exchange for this ability. If he wasn't using it to at least save all of Earth Bet in turn, then could he be anything but a failure?

That's why... things like shoring up his defenses at this point would only be half-measures at best. He needed a proper foundation from which he could grow more powerful. He needed a cheat skill of sorts. It was honestly a pretty common tactic in some of the games he's played. Early on, if you got an opportunity to increase your experience gain, you usually wanted to take it. After all, the sooner you did, the greater the effect it would have over the course of your entire playthrough.

Now obviously this was no video game. But the philosophy remained sound. By picking up an ability to find the right people at the right time to offer deals to, Lucas was effectively cutting out the middleman. No more needing to worry about being ridiculed on PHO. No more sifting through the trolls to find someone who actually had something they wanted from him.

All in all, it felt like the best option to him, so even as he sits on the couch with Sveta pressed into his side, the pair of them watching Alice do her thing... Lucas reaches out and focuses on coalescing his unrealized potential into a proper power.

His desire is obvious here. He wants something that will show him those who are actually interested in what he has to offer. Not just because they have desires, everyone has desires, but because they're willing to give him something in return for those desires.

As the new power slots into place, Lucas' breath hitches and his awareness extends. Its like a new sense has turned on for him beyond the ordinary six. If he expands his attention, he can feel little pinpricks of 'light' off in the distance, signifying the need of those out there who will make deals with him.

Humming thoughtfully, Lucas pulls out his phone and drags up PHO. Sveta shifts at his side, curiously glancing over, but he just shoots her a reassuring smile and continues to pet her hair tendrils. Navigating his phone with just one hand is a little difficult, but he's actually much more dexterous these days, so it's not too hard.

Making his way to the thread where he'd 'met' Alice, Lucas looks at all of the posters again... and grins. His new power works through digital mediums just as much as his original one does. He can actually feel the lack of desire and need from most of the posters. He can tell the vast majority of them not only aren't believing him but also wouldn't go for a deal with him even if they were offered one. They aren't desperate enough.

Ironic considering the world they live in... but it does put things into perspective for Lucas. Earth Bet is dying... but it's a slow death that the vast majority of humans don't understand. To a lot of them, the degradation of society and the decline of civilization are distant problems that they don't even really realize, let alone internalize.

That's why they're not desperate enough. That's why, even though Lucas *knows* this world is doomed without his help, he's not seeing a 'need light' from literally every human being on the planet.

Though... there are a few people in the PHO thread who he can feel have a need of his help and would be willing to make a deal. They shine brightly amidst the dim background provided by all of the others, who in this context could be deemed 'greyed out'.

Its those people that Lucas sends off PMs through his new account to. He shoots them all messages, intending to offer them their heart's desire, knowing they'll almost certainly bite.

Only... before even a single one of them can reach out and respond back, his account gets suspended. Lucas blinks, caught off guard by the abruptness. He navigates to the email he'd set up and finds out he's received a vague ban for 'scam & spam' of all things. And when he checks through offline mode, he finds out his original PHO thread has been deleted.

... What the hell?

"Lucas? Is everything alright?"

Sveta immediately detects his frustration of course, prompting Lucas to huff in response and shake his head.

"PHO banned me. Apparently I was 'scamming' people. Or 'spamming'. One of the two. I'll try to appeal it of course, but ugh... how annoying."

Then again, not as annoying as it could have been Lucas supposed. He's just surprised it took this long. Was it an automated process? Had he gotten some nebulous amount of reports that tipped him over the edge and made some bot take action against him?

Luckily, this was only happening after he'd made his choice and gained a power that ultimately made PHO... no longer critical. Not that it had been all that critical

to begin with. While it HAD led him to Alice, which had in turn allowed him to stop her from going through with her villainy, Lucas was already pretty sure he could have gathered more personal power quicker just by offering deals to homeless people.

That said, he didn't even need to go that far anymore. He could just focus on the brightest 'light' closest to him and head on over at the drop of a hat. In fact...

"How do you feel about going on a little stroll, Sveta? I'm feeling peckish anyways. We can get a bite to eat on our way over to my next... client."

Perking up, Sveta's eyes glitter with interest.

"Sounds good to me!"

So agreeable. So... submissive. Part of Lucas wants to rumble approvingly at how much of a good girl Sveta is for him. Another part of him tamps down on that, even as he rises to his feet and she does the same. Once they make sure they're both presentable, they head out arm and arm.

From a distance, they don't look all that abnormal really. Sveta's tendrils, while definitely not hair upon close inspection, can certainly pass muster from far enough away. Likewise, while Lucas' eyes are undeniable inhuman these days, most people don't even bother making eye contact anymore.

But more than that is his power to go mostly unnoticed and unremarked upon that Lucas is relying on to carry them through their outing. After all, it's not like he intends to hide forever or anything like that.

Still, grabbing food definitely gets them some wide eyed looks from the workers who they order from. Lucas half-expects phones to come out and record them, but the workers are too nervous to do so and the customers in the establishment can't 'notice' them all that well to begin with.

He and Sveta make it out of there unscathed, just an urban legend to be talked about by the people they'd interacted with. Eating their sandwiches while

walking along is quite enjoyable, giving Lucas a chance to get some fresh air. At the same time though, it's not simply for pleasure. He has his 'eye' on the prize so to speak, able to feel the brightest of his new power's lights up ahead just around the corner.

With no clue what they're really walking into, Lucas has Sveta stop with him so they can finish off their sandwiches. Then, he gives her a slow nod.

"Careful now. This shouldn't be a fight but there's no reason to risk it."

Sveta nods sharply right back, her tendrils bristling a bit while remaining in their thick braid. With her as ready for anything as she'll ever be, Lucas leads the way down the sidewalk, until eventually they turn into an alley. Funny, he'd thought with this new power he wouldn't be relying on homeless people... but maybe he should have known better. That said...

"Hey there."

The slim figure currently halfway into a dumpster stiffens at the sound of his voice before scrambling backwards. It's a young woman, Lucas immediately notices. Curly brown hair adorns her head and dense freckles dart her face and hands.

Her eyes dart between him and Sveta for a long moment, before widening a bit as she finally notices his inhuman gaze and Sveta's inhuman hair. Immediately, her hands go up, presumably in surrender. Then again, you never know... while a normal human being could surrender by raising their hands, a parahuman could be about to douse you in fire or something crazy.

"I-I don't want any trouble... if this is your territory, say the word and I'll g-go..."

Heh, territory. Lucas shakes his head in amusement. Technically he supposes it would be his territory, considering this was where his apartment was. But he had no intentions of starting a gang or anything like that. As far as he was concerned, the entire planet was his 'territory'.

“We’re not here to give you trouble my dear. I’m here to offer you a deal.”

The brunette blinks at that, looking uncertain... but also hopeful. Already, he can feel her desire growing.

“A d-deal? What... what kind of deal?”

The connection forms between them, Lucas’ base power building itself up. She gasps as she feels it, going wide eyed.

“What... what is that?”

Lucas just chuckles.

“Nothing dangerous, you have my word. Rather, it’s how I’m going to help you. What do you want from me, my dear? What do you want most in this whole world?”

His voice drops in tone, deepening and darkening. Her pupils dilate and she shudders a bit before answering him in a stumble.

“I want... I want my powers to go away. I don’t want t-to live like this anymore...”

Lucas’ eyes widen slightly. He hadn’t properly clocked her as a parahuman. That was dangerous. But then again, he probably should have guessed from her immediately mentioning territory. Still... for her to not even want her powers... well, this could very well be the easiest deal he’d made yet.

“I could do that for you, certainly. I could take away your powers.”

Immediate longing appears in the brunette’s eyes... but then she shudders and frowns, refocusing.

“But then... I’d be defenseless. And s-still living on the streets.”

Lucas is quick to pivot, nodding along like that was always where he was going with this. She's right though to be fair, robbing her of her parahuman ability and leaving her destitute would be rather monstrous. Unfair, even.

"You're correct. You need a way to protect yourself... either that, or you need protection. Someone to help you get back on your feet."

Her eyes slide up and down him and then over to Sveta assessingly before she bites her lower lip and speaks.

"Uh... you?"

Hm... that could work. He could feel it through the connection, a proper deal starting to take shape.

"Perhaps. There's room for you in my household, yes. I could take your power, free you from whatever it is that's ailing you... and in exchange, I could offer you at least a year under my protection."

A part of him likes the idea of expanding his retinue. It likes it very much. More than that though, gaining the loyalty of a young woman like this in the same way he'd gained the loyalty of Sveta and Alice... well, that would allow him to expand his options, wouldn't it? He couldn't do everything alone, after all.

"A y-year..."

She murmurs it in a considering tone, not upset by the idea but also clearly not sure what to think. By his side, Sveta bristles a bit... perhaps taking umbrage with the other young woman not immediately jumping at the chance to take him up on his offer.

Lucas reaches out and slides his hand into Sveta's, intertwining their fingers together and giving her hand a squeeze before she can say anything... unwise. It seems to work, because when she finally does speak, she's even toned.

“He’s not lying to you. He was able to help me, after all. Do you recognize the symbol on my face?”

The same tattoo most Case 53s shared, the Omega Symbol. Except... the brunette peers at it for a moment before shaking her head in denial. What, was she living under a rock or something? Sveta huffs.

“It marks me as a Case 53. A monster cape. Before his help, I didn’t even have a proper body. Now look at me.”

Sveta runs her free hand down her form and Lucas watches how the freckled brunette’s eyes follow it. Heh, she’s definitely checked both of them out at this point... and seems to like what she sees.

“My name is Lucas, by the way. And this is Sveta.”

Jolting at the sudden introductions, the brunette blinks before blushing.

“Ah... E-Emily.”

Lucas lets his smile grow as he holds out a hand to her.

“Pleasure to meet you, Emily. What do you say? Do we have a deal?”

Nobody is surprised when Emily only hesitates a moment more before stepping closer with a slow nod. Hook, line, and sinker.

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A/N: Remember to Vote, leave a Like, and let me know what you think!