

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

A/N: Defusing a ticking time bomb...

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Lucas watches the Asian woman carefully... while also doing his best not to show how tense he is. This whole situation is... not what he expected for his second ever deal if he was being honest, but at the same time it wasn't like he was going to balk in the face of danger.

Making the thread on PHO while Sveta was under his desk sucking his cock, Lucas had honestly been riding high on life... until, of course, the internet trolls had immediately come crawling out of the woodworks. He'd expected some amount of disbelief of course, but he probably should have known it would be worse than even his initial expectations.

Absolutely no one was taking him seriously. Initially there wasn't even anyone willing to engage with him as a joke or a thought experiment, which was kind of a problem for him given his powers required at least some interest, even feigned, for a connection to form.

As the hours had gone by, it had been frustrating to the point that Lucas had begun to question his own decision making. Maybe he was better off going out and finding homeless people to offer deals to instead. At least they were likely to be desperate enough that they wouldn't laugh in his face over it.

But before he could decide that was a better option, he finally got his first bite. And what a fucking bite it was. From the moment that this woman had offered him even the slightest bit of interest, Lucas had felt a connection forming between them... and that connection had laid more of her bare to his senses than she probably would have ever wanted.

For instance, he didn't know her name... but he did know her anger. Her rage. Her fury. In her eyes, it was all so very righteous... but now that he was standing

here in the woman's dorm room, very deliberately NOT looking at the stack of bombs she'd made with her Tinker Ability after the first time he'd laid eyes on them... Lucas knows its not righteous at all.

This woman in front of him is a villain in the making. She's quite literally one or two days away from blowing up the very university they're currently at. And all because of bad grades from what Lucas can tell from her desires. She wants to be seen as the genius she believes she is... and because she felt sidelined and maligned, she's triggered with the power to build explosives out of practically nothing.

So yes, the situation is a lot more fraught than Lucas would have preferred his second deal to be. All he can do is stare her down and hope that she'll take the bait, because otherwise... he's going to have to stop her another way and that could result in all of them being blown sky high.

"I want... I want to be loved rather than feared. But it's not even possible... is it? People are stupid. There's no way everyone will ever acknowledge me the way I deserve to be acknowledged."

Lucas smiles, even as he feels the connection between them growing. Her desire to make a deal has never been stronger... he's getting through to her. Now to stick the landing.

"You're right. The human population certainly isn't monolithic in nature. There will always be contrarians. But... fuck them."

The Asian woman jolts, her eyes widening slightly. Lucas lets a conspiratory grin spread across his face.

"Who cares what the idiots think? It's about the rest of them, about putting yourself in the mind of the common man and making it incapable for him to do anything but praise you and your genius... right? That's what I'm offering you. When we're done, nobody *worthwhile* will be able to say that you're anything but amazing."

He holds out his hand then in offering to her, leaving the ball in her court. For a long moment, she hesitates... before reaching out and grabbing his hand.

“A-Alright. Deal!”

Too easy. That’s what runs through his head as he makes a deal with a woman who he still doesn’t even know the name of. This was much too easy... hell, they hadn’t even discussed a price for this deal. Of course, that was by design on Lucas’ part. He could feel the potential prices for what she wanted, but he could also feel that he didn’t necessarily need her to be informed of them beforehand... he just needed her consent, one way or the other.

That was a little ridiculous wasn’t it? In the end though, Lucas just chalks it up to where his own power comes from. It’s obvious the eldritch entity that he’d contracted with has a very... generalized understanding of humans and dealmaking, right? Frankly, he’d gotten lucky with how good of a deal he’d managed to make.

Still, one thing is for certain... he’s not going to leave this woman in the same mind state she was already in. That’s going to be part of the cost of the deal. Smooth over the edges, make her less fighty... oh, what’s this? Lucas almost furrows his brow as he looks inward at what’s coming from the connection between them and sees something... interesting.

Something else was influencing the woman before he even came along. Something he only sees now that he’s trying to add his own influence. Her power... her own power was agitating her in the direction she’d been heading. It was like someone had installed a button labeled ‘conflict’ inside of her right next to her Tinker Ability and then pressed it down so hard it was permanently stuck ‘on’.

That wouldn’t do. If she was constantly driven towards conflict, she would inevitably wind up using her bombs to hurt people. And sure, maybe she could be turned towards a life of heroism, but even then explosives were a rather indiscriminate form of weapon. Best not.

Luckily, it's actually quite easy to remove that big pressed down conflict button from her. In fact, he can make it part of *her* side of the deal since its technically him helping her, which seems like even more bullshit.

Once that conflict drive is gone, Lucas further smooths out the rougher edges of the mad woman's psyche, especially the part that wants to bomb her university because a Professor gave her a bad grade. Basically... he gives her a damn conscience.

Then, for good measure, he alters her power so that she can only make bombs with beneficial effects. That does require him to take away from her, so he makes that a part of his side of the deal, of course. Lucas considers it more than worth it though to keep her from being able to do any damage, intentional or otherwise.

To close things out though, he gives her a bit more in return. More intelligence to be able to develop even better products, and a bit more power too, enhancing her Tinker Ability so that anything she wants to create requires less materials AND less build time than it did before.

When he's finally done, Lucas feels the deal lock into place between them as well as the now-familiar rush of power that comes from having made a deal with someone else. He lets out a shuddering breath and then lets go of her hand, watching as she comes out of it as well on her end, blinking rapidly.

"I... o-oh... I was... I didn't..."

Of course, it's a little worrying when her initial reaction is to start to immediately break down. Her eyes water, her lower lip wobbles, and she looks like she's about to crash out. Which admittedly, is a fair response to suddenly having a conscience that reliably informs you your plans to bomb your university were downright evil.

Before she can fully break, Lucas steps forward and gives her a hug, wrapping his arms around her. She almost immediately melts into him in return, her body starting to shake as she sobs.

“It’s alright... you’re alright now. There, there.”

As he consoles the Asian woman, Lucas shares a glance with Sveta, who admittedly looks a little bewildered by everything. To be fair, she didn’t have the intuitive knowledge that his power gave him while he was making a deal. However, she clearly trusts him to have a handle on things, because when they make eye contact she gives him a simple nod, making it clear she has his back no matter what.

Finally, his second ‘customer’ recovers enough to pull back. Lucas immediately lets her go, offering her a smile.

“You’re feeling better now, aren’t you?”

Wiping her eyes, she nods.

“Y-Yes, I’m... ah, I haven’t even told you my name, have I? I’m Alice. I can’t believe I was going to... thank you. Thank you for stopping me.”

Lucas nods slowly, taking in Alice’s visage for a moment before deciding he can alleviate some of her current guilt.

“It wasn’t *entirely* your fault, just to be clear.”

When Alice gives him a curious look, he shrugs.

“Your power had an active conflict component to it. It was effectively always going to push you to use your abilities for fighting in some way. I removed that bit as part of our deal.”

Alice takes that in for a moment before her eyes widen.

“Wait, was it just mine... or is it everyone?! Is that why Parahumans are all so drawn to wearing costumes and fighting in the streets?! Is that why nobody ever actually uses their powers for anything but conflict?!”

Lucas blinks. And processes. And opens his mouth before closing it for a moment. Finally, he lets out a slightly strained chuckle.

“You... might be on to something there. I don’t know for sure, but there’s certainly plenty of signs pointing in that direction, aren’t there?”

Alice nods enthusiastically, looking excited for a moment... but then her eyes fall upon the bombs she’s already created and her excitement vanishes in an instant.

“I need... I need to dismantle those. Immediately. They’re much too dangerous... god, what was I thinking?”

Of course, she doesn’t immediately go over and begin doing so, even if the way her hands twitch in that direction make it clear that she wants to. Instead, she looks between him and Sveta for a moment.

“I... I owe you a debt for stopping me, for helping me. What do I even call you?”

Lucas feels a sensation fill his chest as she says those words. Technically they’d already made a deal. But now she’s outright saying she feels she owes him more... and his power likes that. He feels an urge to push for total dominion over her, to accept her under into his service just like he did Sveta... but Lucas holds back, refraining from giving in to that urge. Instead, he focuses on the question.

He would never have given his name to the previous Alice. The one with megalomaniacal tendencies amplified by her power’s conflict drive. But this Alice... she was a different woman altogether, almost. A better woman. With that in mind, Lucas felt safe just telling her who he was.

“I’m Lucas... this is Sveta. Don’t spread that around of course, but honestly I haven’t come up with a moniker yet. Dealmaker feels a little... overdone, doesn’t it?”

Alice tilts her head to the side, slowly nodding.

“It’s a little on the nose, yes. Maybe something with a bit more subtlety to it? Still... it’s been my pleasure meeting you Lucas... Sveta.”

She gives a nod to Sveta, who returns it a little warily. Alice looks between them both again, seeming to study them more intently for some reason before blushing lightly and biting her lower lip.

“I-I suppose we’re done now... you’ve gotten what you wanted from me, haven’t you?”

Lucas furrows his brow at that, frowning and shaking his head.

“Don’t think of it that way, Alice. And I’d be more than happy to stay in touch and continue to help you if that’s what you prefer.”

He wouldn’t subjugate or dominate her like the little voice in the back of his head was telling him to do but guiding her and making sure she made the right choices going forward... that just seemed like good business practices.

Alice lights up, looking like Christmas has come early.

“Yes! I mean... yes, I would prefer that. Please help me... I know I’m a genius and all, but now that... now that I see what I was about to do, I don’t know where to go next. I don’t know if I trust myself to make the right decisions...”

Well, when she put it that way...

“Then I’d be glad to help you make the right decisions, Alice. Your power can be used to help so many people... we just need to workshop some ideas for it. Though... maybe after you dismantle your previous creations?”

Alice’s eyes widen at the reminder and she nods before hurrying over to her workbench. Lucas and Sveta watch as she gets to work... her hands moving faster and with far more surety than they did before, all because of the

enhancement he gave her. What had taken her days to create takes mere minutes to take apart and any future creations will take hours at most.

Soon enough, the would-be bomber has fully dismantled her stockpile, leaving a whole bunch of components arrayed in neat, orderly piles in front of her. Then, she turns to him with wide, hopeful eyes.

“Where... where should I start?”

Something in his chest purrs a bit in satisfaction as she asks him that. Lucas though... has to admit that he’s not quite sure. Then again, thinking about it for a second... he can definitely come up with some ideas. He’s spent a LONG time considering how shitty of a place Earth Bet is, after all.

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