

## Villanos fanfic concept: The New Guy

A young man holds a thin briefcase in his hand as he walks up the steps of Black Hat's base. He rings the doorbell.

Inside the building, a hat-butler robot rolls up to the front door and answers it without opening it. "Go away."

The man on the outside does not go away. "Good morning. I am looking for the Black Cat company. Is this the right place?" He speaks in a friendly tone of voice.

The hat-butler robot mishears the man outside, and it assumes that he had meant the Black Hat company. It opens the door and looks at the visitor. He is an ordinary man in his early 30s, somewhat handsome and appearing of a good nature, wearing business-casual clothing and holding a briefcase in his hand. The hat-butler assumes that he is a door-to-door salesman. "Whatever you are selling, we are not buying."

The young man clears up the misunderstanding. "Oh, I am not a salesman. My name is Ricardo Madera. I am the new product designer." He offers his free hand for a shake, which the robot accepts. "They transferred me over from the lab in Albuquerque. Who should I report to?"

The robot has to think for a while to process this unexpected information and produce a suitable response. It decides upon a course of action. "Come this way." The robot turns around and wheels away.

Ricardo politely closes the door behind himself before he follows the robot further into the building. The robot does not notice that Ricardo's briefcase bears the black logo of a smiling housecat, not a hat.

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Doctor Flug stretches his arms and then straightens out the paper bag that always covers his head. He has work to do this morning. "I should visit the lab to see which of my lab experiments are still alive and which have eaten the others." During his first few steps on the way there, he meets his blue pet bear / experiment 505 who is vacuuming the room while wearing a French maid's outfit. "Good morning, 505." 505 smiles at Flug and squeaks a happy response.

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Ricardo crouches in the chemistry section of the lab as he lays down a strip of yellow caution tape on the floor a meter away from a shelf of brightly colored chemicals in glass containers. Ricardo stands up to examine his work, and opens a tape measure to verify its accuracy.

The sliding metal sound of the tape measure attracts Flug's attention to the unknown man in his lab. "Who are you and what are you doing in my lab?" Flug asks angrily.

Ricardo closes the tape measure and waves his hand in a friendly greeting before identifying himself. "I am Ricardo Madera. I was assigned to this location as the new lab assistant, and I am marking off the dangerous areas with caution tape. And you must be Doctor Flug. I was told to report to you."

Flug is annoyed on multiple levels. “I know what is dangerous in my own lab, and I was never told that I was getting an assistant. I have never needed one. I usually build my own if I do.”

Ricardo shrugs and smiles. “Well, the company sent me here, so let me know when you have something for me to do. I suppose the first thing is ‘don’t touch anything if you don’t know what it is’.”

Flug takes a breath to speak when Ricardo offers to work for him, then waits while Ricardo says what he himself had intended to say. “Yes. That. Exactly.”

Ricardo chuckles. “That I can do. I will be familiarizing myself with the area, and later today when you are not too busy. I will be coming to you with a lot of questions. Maybe during lunch if it’s not too much a hassle.”

“It is already a hassle,” Flug complains. “I will spend the whole day worrying that someone I don’t know is going to break or ruin something when I am not looking.”

Ricardo laughs. “I will be extra careful. Like I said, let me know when you have a job for me. Until then I will just look around and see what I might be working with. Maybe I can take inventory.”

Flug sighs. He does not like having a new employee thrust upon him unexpectedly, but he could tolerate someone who is harmless and stays out of his way. “All right, Just don’t touch anything that you are not familiar with. Especially if you are not familiar with it. Actually, don’t touch anything at all. I will... I guess, speak to you during lunch. I will try to think of something for you to do between now and then.”

The distant sound of an approaching vacuum cleaner increases in volume as Flug speaks. The sound is higher-pitched than it should be. Subdued under the noise, Flug can hear a squealed complaint from 505. This grabs his attention. “What is it, 505?” Flug walks toward the exit to find out what is wrong.

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Flug exits the lab to the corridor outside to see that 505 has lost his maid outfit to the vacuum cleaner and is trying to pull it out. Flug walks over to help. “Let me help you with that. First, turn it off.”

505 attempts to turn off the vacuum cleaner with one hand while holding onto his maid outfit with his other hand to keep the vacuum from sucking in the rest of it. He has a difficult time of it since his thick fingers are too big for the switch. Flug arrives to help him. “Let me get that for you.” 505 moves his hand out of the way for Flug to turn off the switch. “You could have also pulled the plug from the wall,” Flug suggests. “You did not need my help for that.”

505 now tries to pull his maid outfit from the vacuum. He takes it slowly and carefully, with Flug’s approval. “Good. You are pulling it carefully so as not to rip it. We probably did, but regardless let us minimize the damage. It will need to be washed and ironed. After that we can see if there is any damage that needs to be repaired.” Flug sees that 505 looks sad as if he has been chastised, or is expecting to be, so Flug gives him some kind words to improve his mood. “You did the best that you could to fix the mistake, and you did not make it worse. You did good.”

505 smiles and squeaks with delight. He finishes extracting his outfit from the vacuum cleaner and looks down at it to examine the creases.

Ricardo walks over to see the unusual blue bear. “This is an impressive specimen. Genetic engineering?” he asks Doctor Flug. Flug nods his head. “May I touch him?” Ricardo asks.

“Ask 505,” Flug says.

Ricardo reaches out a hand toward 505’s shoulder. “505, may I?”

505 looks at the unfamiliar man and then to his creator Flug. Seeing that Flug does not seem concerned, 505 looks back to Ricardo, shrugs, and nods his head in the affirmative. Ricardo runs a hand through 505’s fur. His gentle touch puts a smile on 505’s face.

“The hairs are reinforced for durability and are also soft to the touch,” Ricardo notes. “A rare combination.” He begins rubbing 505’s back with both hands, giving the bear a delightful feeling. 505 nearly melts with the pleasure. “Flexible skin with a thick subcutaneous layer. Strong muscles underneath, like a sumo wrestler. And he is docile with sufficient intelligence for menial labor.”

505 did not understand those last words, so he looks to Flug for an explanation. Flug rephrases it in kinder words. “You are smarter than the average bear.” 505 smiles happily at the praise, and he continues smiling as Ricardo continues massaging him.

Flug notes that this has gone on for longer than necessary. “Are you done examining him? We both have work to do.”

“Ah, I will let you get to it then.” Ricardo releases his hands from a disappointed 505. 505 takes another look at his rumpled-up outfit. With a nod, he squeaks twice to Flug to excuse himself and walks away toward the laundry room.

Ricardo makes another observation. “He tries to speak but he is unable to form the words. Is it the vocal cords or the shape of the mouth?”

“A little of both, but mainly the larynx,” Flug says as he watches 505 depart. He glances down at the vacuum cleaner, and then looks up at Ricardo. “Ricardo, is it? I have a quick job for you.” He gestures toward the vacuum cleaner. “Move this out of the way so that no one trips on it. Just put it by the wall until 505 gets back to finish his cleaning.”

Ricardo picks up the handle of the vacuum. “If he will be gone for a while, I can take care of the work for him.”

“He will not,” Flug says. “He is only putting his clothes in the wash, and are you really willing to waste your time doing something this simple?”

“It may be out of my area,” Ricardo says jokingly with a nod of his head toward the door to the laboratory, “but I am willing to help if the work needs to be done.” Following Flug’s instructions, he moves the vacuum cleaner to the wall so that it is no longer blocking the hallway.

“Leave it for 505,” Flug tells him. “He will get back to it. And I should get back to the lab. I have not even started my work yet.”

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Flug uses an eyedropper to feed carnivorous plants. The plants stretch out their stems and clamp their jawlike leaves on the droplets. He looks over the plants one last time, returns the eyedropper, and turns around to complain to Ricardo. “Are you going to stand there and look over my shoulder at everything I am doing?”

“Yes,” Ricardo answers straightforwardly. “That is how I learn how to do it, and that it needs to be done.” He tries to relieve Flug’s annoyance by talking shop as they walk to the next station. “So is their food off-the-shelf or a custom mixture?”

“It is custom,” Flug says.

Ricardo smiles. “So just the right mix of nutrients, and a protein supplement because they are carnivorous.”

At the next station, Flug holds a clipboard and pencil as he looks over three beakers of fluid. He turns on the multi-burner underneath them, and the fluids begin to bubble over the small fires. Flug watches them for several seconds, then takes his pencil and makes three quick check marks on the paper in his clipboard.

“All good?” Ricardo asks.

“Yes,” Flug answers as he begins to walk to the next station.

“What would they look like if they were not?” Ricardo asks.

Flug pauses, and returns to the chemicals. He points to the nearest beaker. “If this one turns orange, let me know.” He points to the next beaker. “This one can fail if the heat is too high. It will separate and you will see that the liquid is lighter on the bottom where the heavier fluid sinks.”

Ricardo nods along as he listens to the explanation.

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Midday comes. Doctor Flug and his new assistant Ricardo share lunch at a mostly-clean workbench. Ricardo had brought his sandwich, juice, and an apple in a brown paper bag. Flug has a square chunk of egg casserole on a paper plate.

“I will have to introduce you to the kitchen,” Flug tells Ricardo. “We have robots that cook for us.”

“You built them?” Ricardo asks with interest.

“Mmm-hm.” Flug nods while chewing his food.

“Did you program the recipes too?”

Flug dismisses the silly question. “I gave them a digital copy of the Betty Crocker cookbook. Anything else they can look up on the Internet.”

Ricardo chuckles and smiles. “You know, cooking is like chemistry,” he tells Dr. Flug.

“It is chemistry,” Flug says.

Ricardo chuckles again. “Yes, you mix different things together and hope it does not blow up in your face or burn down the house.”

Flug quickly interrupts him. “Ricardo, you are not to go near the chemistry station unless I allow you to.”

Ricardo takes that as a joke, and continues. “And sometimes you produce a result that advance the state of the art. For example, consider that egg casserole of yours. It looks like you have in there, salt, pepper, and cheddar cheese. That is just the basics, except that the cheese is good stuff from Wisconsin by the smell of it.”

Flug corrects him. “Actually I think this brand comes from Vermont.”

“I think I know that farm,” Ricardo says. “They are my second favorite. It is hard to beat that stuff, but if you are ever in the mood to try a different flavor, consider mixing a plain cheese like Monterey Jack with green herbs like thyme and oregano. A sharp cheddar might conflict with the herbs while a mild cheese allows the flavors of other ingredients to come to the forefront.”

Flug is far from convinced. “It sounds disgusting, actually.”

Ricardo laughs. “Well, everyone’s tastes are different.” He takes another bite of his sandwich.

Flug attempts to make small talk. “Did you do anything special to that sandwich of yours?”

Ricardo wipes his mouth with a napkin, finishes chewing, and swallows his food before responding. “It is raspberry jam on sliced turkey. I tried it as a child and decided that I liked it. I still eat it. It is not that different from cranberry sauce when you think about it. That is a classic.”

Flug attempts to make a joke of his American companion’s choice of meal. “Happy Thanksgiving then, I suppose.”

Ricardo smiles through another mouthful of sandwich. He swallows and takes another bite. Flug has some more of his egg casserole. Ricardo takes a sip of his drink to help swallow, then changes the conversation to another topic. “You know, I have had some ideas about developing a shampoo for 505.”

Flug is skeptical that this is worth mentioning. “A shampoo?” He waits to hear out Ricardo’s idea to see why his new assistant has brought it up.

Ricardo brings forth his ideas. “Yes. Repeated application over the months will act as a delivery vector for whatever we put in it. A combination of titanium molecules and a softening agent will produce a thin and flexible layer of armor over every hair in his fur while maintaining its softness and luster if we do it right. And for the scent, I suggest lavender.”

Flug rejects the idea immediately. “You will not experiment on 505. Especially not on your first day on the job.”

Ricardo chuckles. “Of course. He is your bear. I will leave you with my ideas. You can have a look and see if they are worth using or not.” He moves a clipboard from his side of the table to Flug, and then begins to pick up the garbage from his finished meal. “Which way is the trash can?”

Flug points away. “Over there.”

“Thank you.” Ricardo throws his garbage into his brown bag, sweeps the table with a napkin, empties the crumbs from his hand into the bag, and takes his garbage away.

The always-curious Flug picks up the clipboard and looks at Ricardo’s notes. He is both surprised and impressed. “This guy knows what he is doing. I will have to take a longer look at this later. It is both feasible and it is a good idea.” He puts the clipboard down and thinks quietly for a moment before expressing his thoughts out loud. “So someone in the company assigned me a lab assistant that I had never asked for, but he seems to be alright. He knows the work. I like his attitude. So far I have not seen any problems, so this might work out.”

Elsewhere in the lab, Demencia grins at the carnivorous plants as they reach out and snap at her. Demencia playfully snaps her jaws at them in response.

Ricardo walks up beside her. “Are you two having a nice conversation?” he asks in a joking tone of voice.

Demencia grins and turns her head to speak to him. “I am threatening to eat them! But Flug won’t let me. Wait. Who are you and what are you doing in Flug’s lab?” She points an accusing finger at him. “Are you an intruder?” She turns her head toward Flug. “Flug, do we have an intruder?”

Ricardo introduces himself. “My name is Ricardo Madera. I am the new lab assistant. Today is my first day. And you are the most beautiful young lady in the lab.” He takes Demencia’s hand into his own, raises it to his lips, and kisses her on the fingers.

Demencia blushes and giggles as she withdraws her hand. “I certainly am! Wait. I am the only young lady in the lab. I don’t think we have other girls here unless we have a client and we usually don’t let them in here, or if we are experimenting on a captured superhero girl and I don’t think we do that here either.” Ricardo ends Demencia’s blabbering by placing his hand on her hip, which surprises her. No one has ever touched her like that before. Her mind is divided between wanting to murder him for touching her and wanting him to continue, and the conflicting feelings leave her stunned.

Ricardo steps a little closer to Demencia and smiles at her. “I still have seven minutes on my lunch break, if you want to hang out and get to know each other better.”

While an angry carnivorous plant snaps at the two of them, Demencia makes a decision. “All right.”

Flug watches them from his seat at the workbench. “I think I might see a problem. If Demencia kills and eats this guy, I will have to clean up the mess.” He waits and observes while listening to their giggling flirting.

“So, Miss Demencia, what exactly do you do in the lab?” Ricardo asks Demencia in a subdued tone of voice.

Demencia responds in kind. “Whatever I want, Mister Ricardo Madera.”

“It is nice to have that freedom,” Ricardo tells her.

Demencia giggles. “Mister Ricardo, pay attention to where your hand is going.”

“I think it is going right where you want it,” Ricardo tells her.

Demencia disagrees. “Actually, I want you to put your hand-”

Flug loudly interrupts them. “Lunch time is over! Everyone get back to work. Especially you two!”

Demencia complains. “Aw, but I was not doing any work in the first place.”

“I will come up with something for you to do,” Flug tells her. “You too, Ricardo. I have been promising all morning-”

A sudden shock interrupts Flug as Black Hat’s teleportation magic grips him. Flug begins bending backwards in an uncomfortable way.

“Is he alright?” a worried Ricardo asks Demencia.

“Mmm-hmm!” Demencia responds wordlessly with a nod of her head.

Flug’s body twists until it crumples into a central point and vanishes.

“Are you sure that he is alright?” Ricardo asks Demencia again.

Demencia is unconcerned. “This happens all the time.”

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Flug talks to himself while he untwists in the middle of Black Hat’s office. “I wonder if I can deduct the cost of a chiropractor as a business expense.”

“You can not,” Black Hat says firmly.

Flug drops to the carpet and prostrates himself. “How might I serve you, my wonderful boss?”

“We have a client,” Black Hat tells him.

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Flug delivers a presentation to 505, Demencia, and Ricardo. “The client is Gerald Moskowski. He represents a gang whose territory has been invaded by a larger rival gang led by Thomas Katz.” The leaders of the two gangs appear on the screen as Flug mentions each of. Gerald is a brown-skinned rat who leads a biker gang of mice and rats, while Thomas is a gray-skinned feline who leads a gang of cats. “Gerald’s gang wants the Katz gang out of their territory, and they would like the Katz’s territory too. If they can get it with Black Hat’s help, they are offering Black Hat a share of revenues for the next two years. It is almost free money.”

Flug continues to the next part of the presentation. “Let me tell you what we know about Mr. Katz and the leaders and most dangerous people in his gang. We may need to take an individualized approach to neutralizing each of them.”

Ricardo speaks up. “Or we could find out where they like to go out to eat, put sedatives in their food, and hand them over to the local police or superheroes. They are all wanted criminals, right?”

“That could work,” Flug admits. “If we could secure access to their favorite restaurant without being caught... that is a good plan.” He returns focus to his prepared presentation. “But let us consider all variables first.”

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Wearing a waiter’s uniform, Ricardo presents a plate of fried fish strips to the table of Thomas Katz and his top lieutenants. “If any of you would like to try a new recipe, this is beer-battered sangria-marinated cod. The fish was flown in fresh from Alaska.” He places the plate on the table. “Let us know what you think of it.”

One of the gangsters takes a sniff. “It smells good.”

“Taste it,” Katz says gruffly.

The gangster takes a fish strip and bites into it. He is stunned. “It is wonderful!”

“Is it?” asks another gangster. He takes a strip and bites into it. “Oh wow, this is good!”

Ricardo smiles. “I will be glad to let the chef know it is a success.”

The first gangster describes it to his boss. “It tastes like a sweet wine, and it is juicy and melts in your mouth!”

Ricardo explains. “That is the quality of the fresh fish and the effect of the marinade.”

Two other gangsters take fish strips, leaving few remaining. Katz reaches in for one of his own. “Hey! Leave one for me!”

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The five sleeping cat-gangsters sit in an alleyway with their backs to a wall. Demencia laughs at them, then turns to Ricardo. “And there was an extra special ingredient in that fish that you gave them, right?”

Ricardo informs her otherwise. “Actually, I drugged their drinks. The marinated fish strips were a distraction, and they were something that I wanted to make.”

Demencia turns and presents the defeated gang to a group of three superheroes. “They are all yours, super-losers! We are going home. It is getting late.” She begins to walk away.

Ricardo recommends staying. “We should wait until the transaction is complete and confirmed, just in case they wake up the moment after we walk around the corner.”

One of the two superheroes speaks to them with suspicion in his voice. “So who are our mysterious benefactors?”

Ricardo answers without hesitation. “Oh, we are Black Cat.”

“I told you the girl was with Black Hat!” one of the superheroes says to another.

The lead superhero asks another question. “And what convinced Black Hat to take down the Thomas Katz gang?”

“Money,” Ricardo says. “Someone wanted the gang taken down and paid us to do it. We cannot say who, or else no one would trust us and we would lose future business. We have to keep our promises. Now do you need help tying them up or can you take it from here?”

The lead superhero suspiciously stares into Ricardo’s eyes and receives a friendly smile in response. He then looks at the defeated gang. “We can take it from here,” he tells Ricardo.

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Dr. Flug presents a folder of papers to Gerald Moskowski, the leader of the mouse gang. “These are profiles of Katz’s second-level lieutenants who are still active. The quickest way to take over is to simply tell them that you are in charge now and to assign them control of the territory that they already cover. Nothing changes for them except that if they need any special favors, they call you. And if they object, you remove them.”

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Flug gives another presentation to 505, Demencia, and Ricardo. “I am glad that we were able to finish that last job so quickly, because we have another one. We have a client who wishes to acquire Lion-Roar’s spear, which is named Gung-Far.” The screen shows a muscular lion-man with a fiery red mane. He wears a light suit of metal armor and wields a spear with a light blue steel tip.

Ricardo speaks up with a question. “Does the client want us to disarm Lion-Roar, or does he only want the spear to have it in his collection? That could change our approach.”

“How is that?” Demencia asks while stretching her arms.

“I do not see how it makes a difference,” Flug says, but he is curious to hear Ricardo’s thoughts that had led him to say that. “What do you have in mind?”

Ricardo explains the beginnings of a plan. “If the client only wants the spear, we can fab a replacement in the lab and trade it with Lion-Roar. We might even improve it and give him a better spear.”

Flug rejects the idea. “That is not how we do things, and I do not think that Lion-Roar will agree to trade away his most treasured property. His grandfather used that spear on his home planet. It is a family heirloom. We will need to use another approach.”

Demencia suggests another approach. “Let’s just steal it.”

Flug responds to her simple-minded recommendation. “That is a straightforward option, but it is easier said than done. We will first study the subject thoroughly. Only then we can determine the best way to approach him.”

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The doorbell rings inside a small suburban home. The door is answered by a yellow-furred lioness wearing a pink dress with a white apron.

Outside, Ricardo stands on the porch holding his briefcase with the front facing forward to display the Black Cat logo. He greets the lioness with a gentle smile. “Good day, Mrs. Blitzer. My name is Ricardo Madera, and I represent the Black Cat company.”

The lioness smiles as she recognizes the brand. “We use some of your products.”

Ricardo raises the briefcase. “If you have the time, would you like to look over some of our newest offerings?”

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Ricardo opens the briefcase on Mrs. Blitzer’s coffee table and introduces her to the contents. He pulls out small travel-size soaps and shampoos and places them on the table. “These are free samples.”

Mrs. Blitzer smiles happily. She looks up at the sound of small feet running into the room and she smiles more broadly at the sight of her two children, a boy and a girl, who have come to see their unfamiliar guest. Their tails wave slowly from side to side as they look over the products in Ricardo’s briefcase. “Are you a salesman?”

“Yes,” Ricardo happily answers. “My name is Ricardo Madera, and you two must be Randall and Linda.”

The two kids smile and nod, while their mother becomes suspicious that a random salesman knows the names of her children. She quickly hides her suspicions behind an imitation of the pleasant smile that she had a moment before.

The attention of the two children is naturally drawn to the junk food. “How much for the Turcookies?” Randall asks while pointing to a small package of four turkey-cookies that are made of mostly meat for a carnivore’s tastes.

“That depends,” Randall says with a smirk. “Have the two of you been doing well in school?”

The two children nod. “Mmm-hmm!” they respond in unison.

Ricardo looks to their mother for confirmation. “So have they?”

Their mother answers proudly. “Linda got straight A’s in the fall.”

Randall defends his failure. “I almost got straight A’s! I had a B+ in literature.”

Ricardo chuckles as he considers that these kids' grades are better than his grades were at their age. He picks up the package of Turcookies and offers it to a wide-eyed Randall. "For the two of you, this is a free sample." Randall happily takes the package and begins tearing it open with a claw.

Mrs. Blitzer lectures her son. "Only have one for now, and don't forget to share with your sister." She sees that her daughter has picked up a package of Nip-Nib treats. "Linda, no. Put those down."

A disappointed Linda follows her mother's instructions. "Why? What are these?"

"Those are for grown-ups," her mother tells her.

Presuming that the girl would want a better explanation, Ricardo tells her more. "They are addictive like alcohol or cigarettes. If you start eating them, you will have trouble stopping."

Linda takes a cautious step backwards from the briefcase. Her brother Randall offers her one of the treats that he is holding. "Do you want a Turcookie?"

Still disturbed by the thoughts produced by the last conversation, Linda hesitates before accepting. "Okay."

"Only one for now," their mother reminds them.

Linda happily takes a bite out of the turkey-flavored cookie.

Ricardo introduces the children to the hair care products. "The combs and brushes have bristles of different lengths and materials to suit different customers who have different types of fur." He picks up the two small combs in the front that have many long, thin metal teeth closely placed together. The curved plastic handle has the Black Cat logo at the top. One handle is pink, and the other is light blue. "These are for catching fleas."

"I already have one," says the boy Randall.

Ricardo happily offers him the comb with the blue handle and offers the pink one to his sister. "Now you have two." He then picks up a comb with loosely spaced plastic bristles that are tipped with plastic balls so that the tip does not poke into the skin. "This is for rough, thick hair that can get caught in a brush. It does not look like you will need it." He sets the comb down. "For a short-haired lioness, I would recommend... this one." He picks up one of the brushes and offers it to Linda.

Linda slowly brushes her upper arm with the offered small hairbrush while Ricardo describes the brush's qualities. "The bristles are the right firmness to feel good against the skin, and their diamond pattern is optimal for collecting loose hair." Linda turns over the brush and looks at the yellow hairs that it has collected in the small gaps between rows of bristles. "If you want this one, I will have to charge you."

The smiling Linda looks to her mother who sits on the couch with the price list in her hand. "Mom, can we get it?"

Mrs. Blitzer is reluctant to disappoint her happy daughter, but she is not willing to commit to any purchases yet. "We will have to ask your father when he gets home."

Near the end of his presentation, Ricardo gestures towards the sample bottles of hair condition. “As for these conditioners, I am trying to sell more of these, but I recommend only using them twice a week. Using them every day could actually overdo it and damage your hair. It depends on the person. If you find yourself shedding more hair than usual, stop using it.” He smiles at Linda. “If you take good care of yourself, you could grow up to be as beautiful as your mother.”

Mrs. Blitzer smiles and blushes.

Ricardo makes a similar promise to the boy Randall. “And if you exercise often and are careful with how many treats you eat, you can grow up to be as strong as your father.”

Randall smiles proudly while chewing on the second turkey cookie that his mother had told him not to have.

With the sales presentation over, Ricardo closes his briefcase. He has left several of his products on the table as gifts to the family. “It was nice meeting the three of you.” He speaks to the children. “Now I have some last things to discuss with your mother, to try to make a final sale. Could we have some privacy for a few minutes?”

Mrs. Blitzer’s suspicions return. “I don’t think that will be necessary, and I will have to run any final decisions through my husband, and I have housework to get back to, so why don’t I show you to the door?”

Having been politely expelled, Ricardo carries his briefcase out through the front door. He stops to take a folded paper from his shirt pocket, and he turns around to hand it to Mrs. Blitzer. “This is a message for your husband. Somebody wants to buy something from him. Please make sure that he gets it.”

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The same superhero who had collected the Katz gang in the alleyway is now guiding a group of schoolchildren on a tour of a fire station. “Not everyone has super powers, but anyone can be a hero! All that it takes a good heart, a willingness to help your fellow man, and preparation to be ready when the time for action arrives.”

The firemen show the children around their equipment and the firetruck. The lead superhero looks around the room. He sees a fireman putting blankets at the bottom of the pole for the time when the children will be allowed to slide down it. He sees the other members of his superhero team, and he sees the childrens’ teacher.

Lion-Roar had not been present at that late-night meeting, but he is here. He smiles with embarrassment as two of the girls pet the fur on his muscular arms. “You are soft,” one of the girls says.

Lion-Roar chuckles. “Heh, heh. Thanks.”

“Can I hold Gung-Far?” asks one of the children.

Lion-Roar politely refuses the child. “Sorry, that is a bad idea. It is a real weapon, and you could hurt yourself or someone else by playing around with it.” He thinks of a similar problem, and he looks up and across the room to tell one of the firemen to deal with it. “Did you put away the fire axes?”

“Oh!” the fireman exclaims. He rushes away to do that.

There is an alert from the messenger application on the cell phone in Lion-Roar’s pocket. The children giggle at the familiar sound. Lion-Roar apologizes as he takes it out. “I forgot to turn this off.” He looks at it. “It is from my wife.” The children giggle again. “I should probably take this. Excuse me.”

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Standing in her home’s restroom, Lion-Roar’s wife taps out a message on her phone. She briefly looks at the unfolded note on the counter to confirm the details, then continues tapping the message.

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Lion-Roar reads the messages from his wife.

Someone wants to buy Gung-Far.

They used a Black Cat salesman as a messenger.

He knew our childrens’ names. They know where we live.

They will send someone to meet with you.

Lion-Roar angrily grits his sharp teeth.

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In the dark of night, a steady soft rain patters on the windows of Lion-Roar’s house.

With his left hand, Lion-Roar takes a broad-brimmed hat that is designed with extra space for his ears, and he carefully places it over his head. He holds his spear Gung-Far in his right. “The meeting is tonight,” he informs his wife. She watches him with worried eyes while she eats a snack from a package of Nip-Nibs. Lion-Roar lifts his spear off of the carpet and walks to the closet. He opens the door, revealing two similar spears propped in the corner. He places his third spear in the closet with them, then closes the door.

---

Thunder crashes outside of a late-night diner as the rain intensifies.

The teenage villain who calls himself Ghoul sits in the diner, wearing a hoodie with fish-fins on the sides of the hood. His white hair flops forward over his eyes, He nervously flinches at the crack of the thunder outside. “I’m glad I’m not out in that,” he remarks before calming himself and returning his attention to the fudge-covered ice cream sundae in front of him. He takes a spoonful into his mouth.

His thoughts are interrupted as his eyes catch the movement of the front door opening. He gasps as a superhero walks in from the rain. He turns his head to the rear entrance and sees another superhero entering from that door, cutting off the possibility of escape. He looks forward and gasps again when he sees that the first superhero is already standing by his booth, leaning a hand against the opposite side.

The boy makes excuses for himself, while the second superhero stands next to him. "I am on probation. I haven't committed any crimes. I... I am going to pay for this! They haven't brought the bill yet."

The first superhero speaks. "Are you the contact?"

Ghoul poorly feigns ignorance. "The, uh, what contact for who? I don't know who you guys are. You're not Lion-Roar." The boy sees his mistake and puts his hands over his mouth. Then he sees that mistake and takes a napkin to his mouth to pretend that he was only wiping his lips.

The superhero smiles. He takes a paper from his pocket and offers it to Ghoul.

Ghoul takes the paper. "I guess this is for me?" He opens the folded paper and reads it. He is shocked by what he reads, and lifts his white hair from over his eyes to get a clearer view.

---

Lion-Roar speaks into his phone from a parked car. "Are you following him?"

"Of course," responds the superhero on the other side.

The worst of the storm passes over, and the pouring rain lightens to a drizzle.

Lion-Roar impatiently contacts the other superhero. "Where is he now?"

The superhero responds. "He is waiting at the bus stop on 4th street, two blocks north of the diner."

"Do the buses run this late?" Lion-Roar asks.

The other superhero is not sure. "I believe that there is one last one."

Lion-Roar suggests an alternative. "Why don't you offer him a ride to wherever he is going?"

The superhero fearfully objects. "Because I think that he is a vampire, and I really don't want him in my car."

---

The other of the two superheroes following Ghoul parks his car by the bus stop where the boy is sitting. He steps out into what is now only a light drizzle and turns to speak to the boy. "Where are you going, and do you need a ride?"

"I'm just going home!" the boy says. "And... yeah, sure. You have nothing to arrest me for, right?"

---

Lion-Roar listens to this other superhero's report. "So he says he does not know where the next meeting is or who he is meeting with. They will contact the Dark Phantom who will contact him."

"And do we know who 'they' are?" Lion-Roar asks.

"No," the other superhero answers.

Lion-Roar sighs. “Then I suppose I am done for the day. I am going home.”

---

Doctor Flug, Demencia, and 505 wait in an alleyway in the middle of the day. Flug holds a silver briefcase with the Black Hat logo on the front. Demencia leans against the wall with a look of impatience on her face. 505 observes her, then leans against the opposite wall in a playful mimicry of her posture and attitude.

Demencia questions Flug. “Is it noon yet?”

“It is a little after noon,” Flug says, “but he may be running late.”

Ricardo’s voice speaks to Flug through an earpiece communicator. “There are multiple supers approaching from the south. Three of them.”

Flug is unsure whether he should panic. “They know we’re here! We should call off the deal and get out of here! 505--” he points to the opposite side of the alleyway to suggest securing a path of retreat, but stops when Ricardo sends more information.

“Lion-Roar is one of them.” Ricardo continues.

Flug calms down. “So he is bringing backup in case the deal goes wrong. I can accept that.” He takes a heavy breath to calm himself.

Lion-Roar and two of his hero companions enter the south side of the alleyway and stop. Lion-Roar holds the spear Gung-Far in his hand. One of the heroes warns Lion-Roar in a low voice. “They are Black Hat!”

Lion-Roar is familiar with Black Hat’s name and reputation, but he knows little about the company. “I hear that they are dangerous.”

“They are very dangerous,” the other superhero warns him.

Lion-Roar frowns and thinks. “What would they do if we were to back out of the deal?”

The other superhero also frowns. “Black Hat will not stop until they get what they want, and they always get what they want.”

“Then this might be the best path forward.” Lion-Roar steps forward into the alleyway. “Come with me,” he says to the two other heroes who had stayed behind. They follow him.

Flug is surprised to see Lion-Roar approaching with his family’s spear. “Is he actually doing this?” As Lion-Roar comes near, he holds up the briefcase. “Mr. Lion-Roar. This is twenty million pesos for your spear, as agreed.”

Lion-Roar turns to one of the other heroes accompanying him. “Count it. Make sure it is all there, and make sure that it is not counterfeit.”

The other hero takes the briefcase from Flug, lays it on the ground, opens it, and begins counting.

“It is real money,” Flug declares. “We got it from the bank this morning.”

Lion-Roar offers Flug a piece of paper.

“What is this?” Flug asks. He takes the paper and reads it. “This is the spear Gung-Far that was held by my grandfather...” He looks up from the paper at Lion-Roar. “Are you really going through with this?”

Lion-Roar gives a resigned sigh and a little smile. “Your salesman made a good offer. I made a counteroffer. You agreed to it, so...”

The hero that was counting the money reports. “It is all there, and it is real.”

Lion-Roar offers the spear to the still-surprised Flug. “It is yours.”

Demencia grabs the spear before Flug can. “I got it!” She laughs as she swings the weapon. Flug and the heroes take cautious steps back from her.

“Don’t break it!” Flug warns Demencia. “It needs to be in good condition for the buyer!”

Demencia disagrees. “We could say that it was broken when Lion-Roar gave it to us.”

“I would prefer not to have to do that!” Flug tells her.

Lion-Roar and the two heroes leave with the briefcase of money. When they exit the alleyway, one of the heroes speaks to Lion-Roar. “Why would you sell your spear? It is part of what makes you you.”

Lion-Roar chuckles. “Gung-Far is a set of forty spears made for the royal guards in my grandfather’s time. I have another.”

---

On the Black Hat transport, Flug speaks to his newest assistant. “Ricardo, your plan worked perfectly. I still can not believe that your plan worked, but it did. How were you so sure that it would work? What did you see about Lion-Roar that I did not?”

Ricardo answers with a smile. “I saw that he has a wife and two children.”

“So?” Flug asks.

“So,” Ricardo explains, “I thought that he might want to get out of the dangerous hero business. We could take away his weapon, and our buyer will give him enough money that his family is set for life.”

Flug is impressed. “I would not have thought of that as a motivation.” He speaks to the team. “Now the job is not complete until we deliver the spear to the buyer...”

Demencia interrupts him. “I am taking good care of it!” She hugs the spear close to her body and has her legs wrapped around it.

“I can see that,” Flug says. “Well, as I was saying, let us finish up this job and then we wait for our next one.”

---

The ‘Numbras’ come out at night in Atreno City. They are people afflicted by a disease that makes them burn in the sunlight, so they have adapted to a nocturnal schedule. Many businesses have begun to remain open at night to serve and employ those who cannot live or work during the day.

Some businesses do not. The lights are off inside of an antiques store. Two young Numbras kneel by the front door. One is attempting to pick the lock.

A gruff voice interrupts them. “You criminal Numbras are a blight upon this city.”

The two Numbras stand up and turn around. The one with the lockpicks hides them behind his body, while the other defends his kind. “Hey, hey, just because we are not able to go out in the sunlight, it does not mean we are bad people.”

The gruff voice speaks. “You were going to rob this store. I saw you picking the lock.”

The two criminals casually admit it. “Yeah, we were going to rob the place.” They reel back in fear as the owner of the gruff voice advances toward them.

Their antagonist is hidden in his own shadow from the streetlamps behind him, but they can barely make out the figure of a black-furred tall-eared cat-man wearing a flexible armored vest. The little available light reflects from his white lower fangs as he opens his mouth to speak. “Sunblast may have ruled the day, but I RULE THE NIGHT.”

---

A screen shows a better view of the same superhero as Flug gives another presentation. “Our target is the Night Stalker. This one. There are several heroes and villains with this name.”

“He looks like Anubis,” Ricardo mentions.

Flug chuckles. “Ha ha, yes. The Egyptian god of death. I can see the resemblance. Anyway, this guy has night vision so we will want to target him during the day when we can see him. The drawback of a daylight attack is that he will likely be accompanied other heroes from Atreno City. Several have moved in for a contest to find a replacement for Sunblast. For example..” Flug switches to the next slide which shows a pretty young lady who wears a spiked golden tiara over her straight black hair. “Ray-Ella the Sunlight Knight is one of them.”

Ricardo also gives his opinion on this hero’s appearance. “She looks cute. Does she have a boyfriend?”

Flug is disappointed that this line of thought even came up. “Ricardo, this is supposed to be a serious discussion.”

“It is a serious question,” Ricardo says. “I am not a fighter, but if she is single and interested, I could offer to treat her to a cup of coffee and neutralize her, take her out of the fight that way.”

Flug and Demencia look at Ricardo with disbelief.

Ricardo puts an arm around a surprised Demencia and chats her up. “And, Demencia, if you would like to be treated to a cup of coffee sometime, I could do that.”

Demencia smirks. “Ricardo, are you seriously asking me out right after talking about some other pretty girl that you wanted to ask out?”

Ricardo nods. “Yes. Are you interested?”

Demencia raises her hand to threaten Ricardo with her nails. “Do you want to die?”

Flug intervenes before this gets worse. “Demencia, please do not kill Ricardo. We might need him on the mission, or we might at least find a use for him.”

---

A black-haired woman shopping for clothes is secretly Ray-Ella. It is not a secret to Ricardo who observes her from outside the store. Ray-Ella looks up and notices him staring at her through the front window. Ricardo smiles and nods. Ray-Ella blushes and looks away.

Ray-Ella takes her selection of new clothes to the checkout. She opens her purse to retrieve her credit card, but Ricardo intervenes by offering his own. “I will pay for this.”

“Why? Who are you?” asks a surprised Ray-Ella while the clerk takes Ricardo’s card.

Ricardo introduces himself. “My names is Ricardo...” He puts his arm around a blushing Ray-Ella. “... and you are the most beautiful woman that I have seen in a long time. I would like to treat you to a drink at the nearby cafe, if you would tell me your name.”

Ray-Ella nervously answers with her given name. “Rachel.”

---

Flug meets with Demencia and 505 on a street with light traffic, both vehicular and pedestrian. “We have accounted for most of the known superheroes that were in the area as of last week. Bird Dude is out of town. The Sun Sorceress is flying back to Sweden. The Gerbil Blade is patrolling a different part of the city.” He looks down the street to the cafe where Ricardo and Ray-Ella are sharing drinks outside. “Ray-Ella is in the area, but Ricardo is trying to take her out on a date or something.”

---

Ray-Ella overhears Flug with her super-hearing. Her smile breaks, and she looks across the table at Ricardo with suspicion.

Ricardo notices her change in attitude. “What is wrong, Rachel?”

Ray-Ella is uncertain that she had heard what she thought she did. “I thought that I overheard someone mention our names.”

---

Flug continues. “If he can get her to, uh, take him home, then we should be free to call out the Night Stalker. We have his phone number...” He pulls an electronic device from his pocket. “And we had a

hat-bot watching his house... and it says that he left a half hour ago, so we have no idea where he is. We will have to call him.”

“And what would you want with the Night Stalker?” asks the gruff voice of a large and heavily muscled black cat with tall ears who stands behind Flug. The Night Stalker is wearing jeans and a t-shirt rather than his uniform. He had dressed for a normal day on the town and was not expecting to fight crime.

Flug flinches in surprise at the unexpected voice. He turns around and flinches again. “Uh... we would want his autograph.”

---

“Who are you, Ricardo?” Ray-Ella asks her date. She tilts her head to hear what she can of the conversation down the road.

“I am an admirer—” Ricardo starts, but he stops when Ray-Ella stands up from her seat.

“I have to go!” Ray-Ella exclaims. “... use the restroom,” she adds as she walks away towards the diner entrance.

Ricardo sighs. He waits until the door of the cafe has closed behind her, then calls out on his cell phone. “I have lost Ray-Ella. I think she is going to transform.”

---

“I have bigger problems right now!” Flug says as the Night Stalker lifts him off of his feet. “Demencia! 505!” He can say nothing more before Night Stalker throws him like a javelin, sending him such a long distance that he is out of sight.

505 and Demencia look away in the direction that Flug had gone. “Yes?” Demencia asks, waiting for further instruction from the team leader who is no longer visible.

The Night Stalker steps toward 505 and Demencia. “Are you two going to cause any trouble?” he asks while looking down at them.

505 nods his head in the affirmative, while Demencia responds with a grin. “As much as I can!”

The Night Stalker was not expecting that response. “Puh! That was a rhetorical question, you idiots. You are supposed to say that you are going to be good so that I don’t have to beat you up and take you to jail.”

Demencia refuses. “Well I am not a good girl, and it’s two on one. Get him, 505!” Demencia and 505 aggressively take one step forward before both are immediately laid to the concrete by the Night Stalker’s two fists. Demencia sits up. “Let’s try that again.” She leaps toward the Night Stalker who grabs her and uses her momentum to toss her further down the sidewalk. He then throws a strong kick into the resurgent 505, knocking the bear onto his back. He turns around to smack down an attacking Demencia, She gets right up, so he hits her and kicks her away. 505 attacks again from behind him. He knocks the bear down with an elbow to the face.

Ray-Ella runs into the scene wearing half of her hero outfit. She had carried the mask, tiara, and expanding sword in her purse, and she had been wearing the armored top under her blouse. Her skirt and shoes are the same. She stops at the opposite side of the road from the fight, checking the road to see if it is safe to cross. She does not need to. The Night Stalker has Demencia and 505 defeated, holding each of these struggling villains under one arm.

To Ray-Ella's surprise, Ricardo walks up next to her. He is carrying a to-go coffee cup in each hand and Ray-Ella's bag from the clothing store over his shoulder. He offers one of the cups to Ray-Ella. "Here is your drink. Your top and your purse are in the bag."

Ray-Ella poorly attempts to feign ignorance. "Who are you, handsome citizen?"

"Your date," Ricardo says with a smile.

Ray-Ella looks down, disappointed with herself for being fooled. "You knew it was me from the beginning," she concludes.

"I did," Ricardo admits. "Do you still want your drink?" He raises the cup toward her again.

Ray-Ella sighs. She pushes her thumb against a sun-shaped emblem on her sword's hilt. The emblem glows, and the magic sword retracts to the smaller size of a dagger. She tucks the weapon into the waist of her skirt. Now with both hands free, she takes the coffee and the bag. "Thank you, but I think this is the end of our date," she tells Ricardo.

Ricardo disagrees. "There is no reason to stop now." He looks across the street to where the Night Stalker is holding down the defeated and stacked Demencia and 505 with one foot. "It looks like Night Stalker has things under control, so the two of us can do what we want."

Ray-Ella disagrees with Ricardo's disagreement. "I should stay with Night Stalker until the police come to pick up those people."

Ricardo tries another approach. "How about,, would it impress you enough to continue your date with me, if I were to defeat the Night Stalker?"

Ray-Ella looks at the super-strong Night Stalker, and at her ordinary-looking date. "You cannot defeat the Night Stalker."

"Do you want to watch me try?" Ricardo asks with a smile. He sees Ray-Ella smile, and he takes that as a 'yes'. "Let me first grab his attention." Ricardo looks out across the street to the Night Stalker and calls out to him like one would call a housecat. "Here, kitty kitty kitty!" Ray-Ella laughs out loud.

The Night Stalker is surprised to hear someone address him that way, and he sees that the man beckoning him from across the street is with an ally, Ray-Ella. He looks to see that the road is clear before crossing. "Ray-Ella, who is this guy?" he asks as he walks toward them.

"He is just some guy I met today," Ray-Ella responds. She takes a sip of her drink.

Ricardo gives the approaching Night Stalker a friendly wave with his free hand, then digs that hand into his pants pocket. "I have something that I think you might like." He pulls out his keychain with an

attached laser pointer that he points at the ground in front of the Night Stalker and to his right. "Look at the dot! Look at the dot!" He swirls the dot in a circle.

Ray-Ella laughs louder.

The Night Stalker glances down and to his right at the red dot on the ground, then stares into Ricardo's eyes. "What are you..." The Night Stalker glances down and to his right. "... trying to..." The Night Stalker glances down and to his right. "do?" The Night Stalker glances down and to his right.

"It is working!" Ray-Ella exclaims delightfully.

Ricardo swirls the laser pointer in faster circles. "It is distracting, isn't it?"

"It is..." The Night Stalker glances down and to his right "... not..." The Night Stalker glances down and to his right. "Hmph. It is distracting. I will admit it." The Night Stalker glances down and to his right again, then tries to keep his focus on Ricardo.

"So you are distracted?" Ricardo asks the Night Stalker.

By focusing his vision on Ricardo's eyes, the Night Stalker manages to keep his face forward. "Yes. I am distracted."

"Good," Ricardo says with a large grin as he returns his keys to his pocket. "Get him."

The recovered 505 and Demencia leap onto the Night Stalker from behind, tackling him to the ground.

The shocked Ray-Ella draws her dagger with her free hand. "I should help." She presses her thumb to the sun symbol, and the dagger expands into its full-length sword. She offers Ricardo the drink in her other hand. "Hold this."

With his free hand, Ricardo reaches his arm around Ray-Ella's waist. "I would rather hold you." He leans forward and kisses the surprised Ray-Ella. "And again." He kisses Ray-Ella a second time, She accepts him, wrapping her arms around him while trying not to stab him or spill her coffee on him. After the second kiss, Ricardo speaks quietly to her. "My car is parked a block away, if you want to continue."

Ray-Ella blushes. She wants more. She begins to wonder if Ricardo had spiked her drink, as her feelings for him are so strong that she would accept it if he had. She definitely wants to be with him more than she wants to help the Night Stalker, so she retracts her sword and smiles at her new boyfriend. "Are all of my things in the bag?" she asks?

"I believe so," Ricardo says.

Ray-Ella gives one last look at Night Stalker fighting Demencia and 505. Having been taken by surprise, the Night Stalker is not doing well. She makes an excuse to go away with the man she likes. "I think the Night Stalker can handle this on his own."

Doctor Flug runs down the sidewalk at the opposite side of the street. His outfit is scuffed and rumpled by a hard landing, He stops and looks across the road to see Ricardo and Ray-Ella walking away from

the fight, hand-in-hand. "He did it," says the surprised Flug. Returning his attention to the mission, Flug draws a tranquilizer gun from inside his lab coat and loads it with a needle. "Now if Demencia and 505 can hold him in place, I can get a tranquilizer dart into this the Night Stalker before any other heroes show up."

---

Black Hat speaks to Flug in his office. "That was excellent work capturing the Night Stalker."

Flug humbly credits his team for the accomplishment. "I only put him to sleep with a tranquilizer dart. I have to give the credit for capturing him to Demencia and 505. And Ricardo distracted him so that they could capture him."

That last name is not familiar to Black Hat, at least not in the context of Flug's team. "Who is Ricardo?"

"The new guy," Flug says. He is surprised that Black Hat does not know. "My new lab assistant. He has been working for us for a week and a half."

"I never assigned you a new lab assistant," Black Hat says.

"Somebody did," Flug says with a shrug of his shoulders. "We are a big company. Somebody else could have done it."

Black Hat is suspicious. "Look into it, Doctor Flug. Find out exactly who hired him and who thinks they have the authority to assign a new employee to your lab without informing me or anyone who would inform me." As Black Hat's suspicions grow, his face distorts and dark energy swirls around him.

Flug decides to escape the from. before Black Hat chooses to take out that anger on someone. "I will do that right away, boss! I am leaving to do that right away!" He turns and jogs toward the door.

---

Flug operates a laptop computer in one of the anterooms where he does not expect the subject of his investigation to discover him. "He had better be in the computer system because he has been working for us for almost two weeks, and I assume that pretty soon he will want to be paid." He stares at the computer screen to read the results.

Search for "Ricardo"  
3 results found. Sorted by Last Name.

Ricardo Almeida  
Urqualponkaricardopobolonu Bob  
Ricardo Vasquez

Flug looks at the results. "Ricardo Madera is not in the payroll system. Or perhaps Ricardo is his middle name or a nick name. He is from America so maybe he is a Richard and he calls himself Ricardo when he is down here. I will search for Madera and see what comes up." Flug types out the next search and presses the Enter key. The computer responds with the results.

Search for "Madera"

1 result found. Sorted by Last Name.

Woodward Madera

Flug thinks over this result. "I know that he is not Woody because I have met him and Ricardo is not him. For one thing, he is not a tree. I could possibly be spelling his name wrong. Maybe he spells Madera differently where he is from, although it is pretty hard to mess up that. Or Ricardo. I do not think that they have alternate spellings. I could ask Ricardo, but that would alert him to the fact that he is under investigation, and it would be embarrassing and somewhat rude."

---

In another room, Doctor Flug speaks to Demencia. "Demencia, we have assigned Ricardo a room in the base because it is cheaper and easier than renting a room in town and a boat to get here and back every day. I would like you to sneak in there in the middle of the night and take his wallet, and--"

Demencia happily agrees before Flug has finished speaking. "All of his money will be mine! And I will eat it!"

"Don't eat his money, Demencia," Flug lectures her. "That will tell him that someone was there."

"Aw." Demencia gives a very weak protest.

Flug continues. "What I want you to do is look through his wallet for any identification, any personal effects that can tell us who he is. Because... I don't think that he is supposed to be here."

---

Demencia nudges open the door to Ricardo's room with her head and crawls inside on all fours. She recalls Flug's instructions. 'And if he wakes up while you are in there...'

'I will put him to sleep, permanently!' Demencia had said.

And Flug had a reasonable objection to that proposal. 'No, no, no, don't do that. Just tell him that you wanted to spend the night with him. He likes flirting with women, so—'

Demencia had refused. 'I only do that with Black Hat!' Yet as she now looks over Ricardo sleeping comfortably in a simple bed, she has second thoughts. "It does look comfortable... No! I have a mission. Now where would his wallet be and what would it look like?" After circling the room and sniffing her nose, she finds it on the nightstand right next to the bed, where she had already seen it but had not taken note of it. While searching, she recalls the rest of the conversation with Flug.

'You do that with Black Hat?' Flug had exclaimed with surprise.

'I would if I could!' Demencia had said.

Demencia takes the wallet and sits on the floor with her back to the wall. She opens it and sees Ricardo's identity card issued by the state of New Mexico. She pulls a credit card from the left side of the wallet and sees an Albuquerque library card behind it. Behind that is a card for a car service station called The Oil Spot.

Demencia returns the cards to the left side of Ricardo's wallet, and she pulls out the first card that is on the right side. It is Ricardo's business card for the Black Cat corporation with the face of a smiling housecat in the center. Demencia quietly begins voicing the name aloud. "Black..." She winces as the sound of the second word goes through her mind and she understands what mistake might have been made. She cackles and has trouble keeping herself from laughing too loud. "That is so stupid if that is what happened."

The next card in Ricardo's wallet catches Demencia's attention. It is a familiar logo ending in E.L.D. She cautiously withdraws this card and sees that it is indeed a card for the superhero network SHIELD. With increasing anger, Demencia withdraws one similar card after another for local superhero groups. The Albuquerque Adventurers. The Justice Division of Delaware. The Superhero League of Hoboken, New Jersey.

Demencia grits her teeth, raging with anger.

---

The next day, Ricardo is happily using a remote control to guide a small robot mouse in circles around the workbench when he is interrupted by the angry Flug, Demencia, and 505 who have brought a gang of mean-looking hat-bots to back them up.

505 cracks his knuckles. Demencia taps the palm of her hand with a nail-studded bat, then flinches and shakes her hand. Flug speaks. "Ricardo, we need to talk."

Ricardo turns off the mouse toy, then turns around and sits on a stool. He casually leans a hand on the workbench as he responds. "Sure. What is this about?"

---

The conversation is moved to a dark room where Ricardo sits in a simple wooden chair, illuminated by a single light bulb. Flug begins the interrogation by presenting Ricardo's own SHIELD card. "You will explain what you did for SHIELD."

Ricardo answers straightforwardly. "I was a data analyst, and I did a little bit of work the product lab. They let me go after six months."

Flug presents another card. "And you recently worked for the Albuquerque Adventurers."

Ricardo smiles at the good memories of his time with them. "Yeah, I was dispatch and secretarial support before they let me go and I joined Black Cat."

Flug presents another card. "And what were you doing with the Justice Division of Delaware?"

"Testing products in their lab," Ricardo answers. "I learned a lot there," he says happily.

"Why did you leave?" Flug asks.

Ricardo responds hesitantly. "They... also let me go."

"Why?" Flug asks.

Ricardo dances around the answer. "They decided that I was not a good fit for the team."

"And what happened in New Jersey?" Flug asks.

"Essentially the same thing," Ricardo answers.

Flug begins to notice that he has not gotten a straight answer. "And what, exactly, is that? What did you do to get yourself fired from four different superhero teams?"

Ricardo takes a breath and again fails to answer. "It is, ah..." He glances at Demencia. "... not really appropriate for a lady's ears."

Demencia smiles eagerly and leans forward. "Now I definitely want to know!"

---

Doctor Flug gives his report to Black Hat. "Ricardo Madera was never officially a Black Hat employee. He works for the Black *Cat* company. Somebody gave him the wrong directions and he ended up here by mistake."

Black Hat cannot believe it. "Did he not notice that the building is shaped like a giant hat?"

Flug continues. "Apparently, once he had made the mistake, he stuck with it because no one ever told him not to."

"Get him off the island," Black Hat orders.

"Already done," Flug says. "Also, you should know that he is a former employee of SHIELD and other superhero teams."

"Kill him," Black Hat commands.

Flug nervously continues with some mitigating information. "There is an interesting story about that. It seems that he was expelled from all of those teams because he would have dalliances with the superhero women, and he caused several of them to become pregnant which put them out of action."

Black Hat has difficulty believing it. "What kind of human idiocy is this?"

"A very common kind, apparently," Flug says. "Over the past year, this one man has retired almost a third as many heroes as we have."

Black Hat's jaw hangs open in disbelief before he begins to consider this a potentially useful talent. "Could we perhaps weaponize this idiocy?"

"Perhaps," Flug says. "We have already removed him from the premises, but if we ever have a use for his talents, we know where to find him."

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Two hours earlier, Flug had dropped off Ricardo at the Black Cat laboratory in the nearby city. It is a simple two-story rectangular building with the company name and logo on the outside. From the outside, it looks like any ordinary office park. “This is the place.”

The inside of the building looks like Flug’s lab, but is much more chaotic since there are many more people working on many things at the same time, and most of them are going wrong. Robot mice zoom across the floor, one bumping into the shoe of a passing scientist. A robot cat lifts its forepaw, and then falls over on its side. The bubbling liquid in a beaker explodes while a scientist observes it. A scientist uses a set of small paintbrushes to apply stripes of several different-colored liquids to hanging cat-pelts. When the brush takes off a row of fur, the scientist puts it down and lifts his clipboard to take notes. Another scientist watches a row of cats each from a row of bowls of different cat foods, and notices that none of them are touching the food in one bowl.

Flug speaks to Ricardo. “So this is where you belong.”

A tabby cat runs across the floor, and a scientist shouts. “Sylvia is escaping!”

Flug continues. “And if we catch your company using any of our technology, our lawyer-bots will sue you into the ground, if you’re lucky. That means you personally. You need to know that.”

Ricardo accepts that. “Ah, I suppose the reverse is true, although our companies can make deals and trade technology. I will have our lawyers get in touch with yours.”

Flug says a few last words. “And, honestly, it was nice working for you.” He offers his hand to Ricardo for a shake. “So I guess I will see you off.”

Ricardo shakes Flug’s hand. “It was nice working for you too. You, Demencia, and 505. But isn’t there something that you are forgetting?”

Flug fails to pretend that there is not. “Ha ha, whatever could that be?”

Ricardo smirks. “Two weeks’ pay including bonuses for the special jobs. We talked about this.”

Flug reaches into his pocket. “We were hoping that you would forget to ask.” He pulls out the check and hands it Ricardo. “This is two weeks’ of a lab assistant’s salary, plus your share of the bonus pay for the special jobs.”

Ricardo smiles as he takes the check. His eyes widen in surprise as he sees how much money he is getting.

“Evil can pay very well, you see,” Flug says.

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### Cutscene during the ending credits

A blonde superhero woman wears a blue mask around her eyes, even at home. She holds a baby in her left arm and a check in her right hand. She smiles with delight. “Ricardo, bless you!”

In another place, another superhero woman with a child in her arms has received a check. She happily shows it to two disbelieving superhero men. “Ricardo has paid his child support!”

A second superhero woman-with-child proudly holds her check. “We told you Ricardo was a good man! He only needed to find the money!”

The two male superheroes cannot believe that the women still admire Ricardo.

## Writer's Notes

This is intended to be a 20-minute short. In my writing, the text of an 8x11 page usually accounts for a minute of time when I run it through my head. I aimed to finish the story in 20-22 pages but ran over to 26 plus the ending credits cutscene. So it is long, mainly because the Lion-Roar scenario ran longer than I thought it would. Tom Katz was defeated in two pages, Lion-Roar took seven.

Ricardo Madera was originally Dick Peckerwood, a character intended for X-rated parodies of any media where he would ask the female lead for sex and get it in an amusing way. This was toned down to PG for Ricardo. Ricardo is a handsome and smooth guy who women would like, while Dick is somewhat unattractive so any woman agreeing to sex with him is part of the joke.

I had this concept for years but was never able to develop it into a story until one day I sat down and decided to do it. I simply started writing with few guidelines other than that Ricardo might begin his work in the lab by marking off the hazardous areas, and an outline for the ending. The rest was made up on the spot.

This is one of the few stories that I have written from start to finish without taking any long writer's-block breaks in the middle, so I know that it took five days to write this 26-page, 12,000 word story. My writing pace was a little over five pages or 2,400 words a day.

What could have been? I had intended to show Ricardo working in the lab with cat toys and cat gadgets until Flug and Demencia begin to wonder about his apparent obsession with cats. There was supposed to be some backstory mentioning that Black Cat did experimental work for the CIA, to explain how Ricardo fit into Dr. Flug's laboratory so well. The original outline called for Ricardo to seduce G-Lo and Bonnivet. I dropped these storylines and made new ones centered around new characters.

Ray-Ella's first and middle names are Rachel and Ellen. I forgot what I has chosen to give her for a last name. Her last name will soon be Madera because Ricardo knocked her up on their date, and he will move in with her and marry her.

Lion-Roar's full name is Frederick Blitzer. Blitz means lightning so the name is a reference to Thundercats. The name Frederick simply popped into my head. Now I imagine him teaming up with a bird superhero who drinks super-sauce to gain super-powers, like Fred the Lion and Super Chicken.