

# HIGHER EDUCATION

By David Kachel

March 19<sup>th</sup>, 1994

Hudson University, New York City

*“Say NO! to Intolerance. Say NO! to Intolerance.”*

Most spring days, Hudson University is a picturesque institute of learning. Green grass fills the courtyards, which casually separate the Elizabethan structures, Gothic Revival from the ultramodern Clarke-Mullen Science Centre. Trees interspaced along the shaded walkways took the suffocating atmosphere of the city, and replaced it with the floating feeling of being in the Westchester County woods.

Unfortunately for today, this feeling was interrupted by the protests of the Student Council, the Equality Union and assorted other socially-minded young people, who had decided to tackle the controversial appointment of a professor with outspoken racial prejudices.

Professor Ryan Jonsson, a teacher of architecture and civil engineering, had been given tenure and appointed the Head of Faculty, a decision that had ignited tempers across the campus. Especially when it was leaked that there had been two people in the running. And the other was Professor Alberto Esperanza.

So the Grand Courtyard was choked with protestors, waving signs and calling for the Hudson University Administration to be held accountable for their actions.

Not that every student was participating; nursing student Tori Searle was busy getting ready for her final practical placement, which required creating a ridiculously detailed presentation on children’s dental practices, to contribute to the Lexington Children’s Hospital’s Annual Health Expo. The frustration was building, because until two weeks ago, she was headed for Manhattan General. A severe break-in meant they were cutting back on non-essential staff while they updated security.

Hence, the kids. And because her lack of experience in paediatric dentistry made the assignment that much harder, she couldn’t afford to spend time joining what appeared to be one of the biggest protests in campus history.

And as she headed into the Education library for the first time, she couldn’t help but notice that the creepy guy from the Pathophysiology Lecture last week also had the sudden need to enter the library.

\*\*\*

Dave “Deadweight” Trafford cursed his luck as he followed his mark into the library. When he’d heard that he was to shadow a nurse, well, he’d expected something a little different.

Of course, when it was amended to “nursing student” with the disclaimer “potentially explosive metahuman abilities”, he had a feeling he knew who recommended him for the job.

But he had to admit, she was a prime candidate, even if she hadn't revealed any explosive powers. Not many people had the hands-on experience with the more gruesome parts of human anatomy that Dave had, and even he was having trouble following the content of her classes. At least he now knew what the squishy bits he had to sort through were called.

He was almost starting to enjoy himself; no-one had been dismembered in days, weeks even, and he was quite fond of the pizzeria in the Uni Refectory. But if the news from the Department was right, things were about to heat up; and considering Miss Searle was almost at exploding point (literally, apparently) with just the course work, it would be best for him to remove her before everything went to hell.

\*\*\*

Overlooking the Main Courtyard was the office of Dean of Civil Sciences James Rash, and he was not impressed. Nervously watching his posture, as the Dean surveyed the protest below, was the man of the hour: Professor Ryan Jonsson.

"So. All this, because you subscribed to a magazine?" he asked, before turning around to face the Professor.

"Dean Rash, before you--"

"Before I what? No, tell me. Before. I. What? Because I have been racking my brain, and I cannot think of a time when this university has had worse publicity. So why don't you let me know what you think I'm going to do, because I would really like to hear how you thought this was going to turn out."

Professor Jonsson swallowed "Sir, my personal beliefs aside, I have given everything to this job. You won't find a more dedicated man, sir."

"That I know. But really, personal beliefs? I'm sorry, but it surprises me that you think this can be swept aside like that. You see, you're in the awkward position of being a man with the detestable idea that you are better than others because you fit an ethnic label. This isn't about your beliefs, but the fact that you are part of an organisation that actively hates a sizeable percentage of this campus on a completely barbaric principle that we as a society have outgrown."

"Now, hang on a minute" said Professor Jonsson, raising his voice and finding his spine, "I am not some cross-burning, sheet-wearing maniac, and frankly I resent the implications. I just happen to believe that this country, this *society* as you said, has grown soft and complacent. We are so afraid of being called discriminatory that we've slowly turned to the point of offering more to an immigrant who just walked into the country than to the men who were born here and are fighting for a fair go. All I do is try to show people that I will not give them handouts because their skin is darker than mine or yours."

"I assumed you had a similar point of view, when you appointed me over Esperanza. You weren't being detestable or hateful; you ignored his background and gave it to the man who worked harder. *That's* what I am about."

Dean Rash steepled his fingers and pressed them to his lips as he processed this, but shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Ryan. The fact remains that the symbol on those signs, the one in the big red circle with 'SAY NO' under it, is the symbol of a radical group with a history of hate crimes. And with that same symbol appearing on your person, well... it violates the university anti-discrimination policies. And with this much attention on us, with this much negativity, I cannot give you the benefit of the doubt and have you return to your old position. I have to be resolute, and dismiss you from the University."

He grabbed a piece of paper from his desk drawer "The paperwork will be on your desk tomorrow morning; in the meantime, I'd suggest using the auxiliary staircase, to avoid the crowds."

Professor Jonsson's body slumped; membership in the White Hand seemed like the coolest thing ever in his youth; he was taking a stand against the declining morals of his country, and he would be one of the men fighting to give jobs back to the American Man, not these greedy immigrants.

But that was twenty years ago, and a perspective has a way of shifting in two decades. Now, he just felt like a fool.

\*\*\*

On the second floor of the Education Library, Dave Trafford was also feeling like a fool. He'd taken his eyes off the girl, and now she was nowhere to be seen.

It was starting in less than ten minutes, he was certain. There was no logical reason to know this; Intelligence put it at any time after 11, but years of extreme violence had given him a sort of unnatural awareness to impending trouble, and right now he felt that trouble was impending indeed.

He turned to walk back down to the first floor, with the intent of covering the exits when something hit him on the back of his head.

Trying to catch himself before he fell, Dave instead slipped on the entirely too smooth surface of the library stairway, and tumbled down to the first floor. A few bones creaked in protest, and his forehead would have an impressive egg, but he'd been through worse.

Tori came running down the stairs, wielding a book bag loaded with the heaviest textbooks she could find, and prepared to hit him again, but he moved too quickly.

Dave curled up into a ball from a prone position, and somersaulted away from her. Without a second's hesitation the somersault put his feet on the ground and he stood up tall, facing her. He caught the book bag on its next swing, and snatched it from her.

The adrenaline surging through her body produced an unexpected result: her brilliant blue eyes flashed with a turquoise light, and the air around them seemed to stop.

"Woahkay, let's take a breath here before we do something we might regret" said Dave, dropping the book bag and holding his hands up.

"My name is Dave Trafford, though I occasionally go by Deadweight. I realise that name's not going to make you trust me any, I'm working on it, but I need you to give me the benefit of the doubt. I'm gonna get my ID out, so you can see I'm one of the good guys."

Tori held her breath, watching as he reached into his pocket for the Department ID.

“Department of Metahuman Affairs. Agent Second Class, Claremont Clearance. I don’t understand.”

“Okay, well, long story short because very soon this campus might become a war zone: you visited a hospital a few months ago with severe migraines, and a friend of a friend noticed your lightshow – superhero name alert – so she called the Department and I was assigned to shadow you and see if you needed training to stop you from exploding someone, or if you had it under control. Things looked good; you keep it reigned in most of the time, and only loose it in life-or-death, so I was going to leave you alone. Then we got word that something big was going down, and I need to get you out of here.”

“What, the protest? That’s not going to become some sort of war zone. They’re political education students, philosophers and some burnouts who seem to think they can ‘legalise it’ at any protest, hardly life or death.”

“No, you don’t understand. The protest isn’t the danger, it’s the people who are coming to protest the protest. The White Hand is coming.”

\*\*\*

The White Hand, a radical white supremacist group known for being short on tolerance, short on patience and short on intellect, they were nonetheless considered amongst the most dangerous domestic terror groups around.

Unlike some of the more established groups, The White Hand is impulsive and reckless. As the profiler who wrote their official FBI case file said: “There is no rhyme or reason to their targets and methods, nor for their organisational structure. All we can say for sure is, they love using excessive force on demographics that they feel don’t fit into the image of the White American.”

What wasn’t said was their twisted idea of loyalty to the cause. When the news of the Hudson University Controversy reached their ears, they paid close attention to it. And with the news that there were protests against Ryan Jonsson, who had been a member of the hand and had a tattoo to prove it, they felt it was their duty to stand up for him.

So as Dave Trafford was trying to explain his actions to Nursing Student Tori Searle, a small group of White Hand militiamen stole the Liberty Tours helicopter and flew it towards the campus.

\*\*\*

*“Say NO! to Intolerance. Say NO! to Intolerance.”*

The picturesque campus of Hudson University was interrupted by the presence of the protest, which surged forwards when someone’s cellular phone pinged with a message from the receptionist of the dean.

*“He’s in the building! He’s in the building! Split up, cover the back door as well!”*

The protest group started chattering and bickering, but soon enough a group split off and raced around to the rear of the building.

One of the protestors, an archaeology student named Michael, noticed the helicopter closing in  
“Hey, is that a news chopper?”

“No, I don’t think so...” said Clerissa, shielding her eyes “Looks like a tour service of some sort.”

“Wow. So we’re a tourist attraction now, that’s just-”

Whatever it was, the group would never know. Because leaping from the helicopter was a shirtless, red haired man with frayed jeans and a blond man surrounded by a softly pulsing golden aura. They landed dramatically, the two hundred foot drop barely slowing them down, and the protestors shrank back from them.

The red haired man, known to law enforcement as the Idunnsoldier, took a second to crack his knuckles before wading into the protestors.

He was rated 6 on a scale that went to 13, meaning he was capable of hoisting a car over his head without his spine liquifying, but couldn’t throw it further than ten feet from him.

But as the poor computer engineering student who got in his way found out, a 6 is more than enough to shatter bone and tear flesh.

His comrade in arms was a man who could surround himself with a flickering aura of superheated air, and whose sadistic streak was as wide as Idunnsoldier’s.

Panic spread fast as the two charged the crowd, and the protesters scrambled to clear the courtyard. By then, three gun toting members of The White Hand were disembarking the helicopter from a more acceptable altitude, and the lead one raised a megaphone to his face.

*“We are the White Hand! We are the Might and the Right! We are here to protect the rights of True Americans, and that starts with fighting for our Brother in Arms: Jonsson! All who stand against him waive the right to live.”*

The crowd was dispersing, but not fast enough. Police were closing in, but the helicopter was a surprise, and their intelligence said nothing about The White Hand having two superhuman with them. Because of that, dozens of people could be killed before S.W.A.T arrived.

To that end, Idunnsoldier was having a ball. He’d maimed anyone he got his hands on, regardless of race or how quick they were to drop protest signs and run. In fact, he was just about to try using one man as a blunt weapon against another. As he wrapped his hand around the first man’s throat and prepared to swing him, he found the oddest thing:

A hand grabbed around his right elbow, trying to stop him from throwing the poor student.

This was unexpected. Idunnsoldier blinked, and thought that whoever was stupid enough to believe they could fight The Idunnsoldier, would have to be quickly be educated in their mistake. He clenched his left fist and punched at the fool, aiming to remove head from shoulders.

As he swung, he looked at his would-be foe, and suddenly hesitated. This young man was something else; he had bared teeth, a face of cold, grey skin and frozen eyes; like the fish in a supermarket.

He was no longer Dave Trafford. He was now Deadweight.

The punch connected, cracking the zombie's jawbone and twisting his head almost 180° around. Deadweight's grip remained strong though, so Idunnsoldier hit him again, in the chest, cracking the sternum.

But he was a child who was abused until he happened to win the cosmic lottery. He could hit hard, he could hit angrily, but he couldn't really fight.

"Ow" intoned Deadweight slowly, without a trace of pain or fear in his voice.

Deadweight pulled hard on Idunnsoldier's arm, and then delivered an uppercut to the red-haired giant's chin. He slammed his back into Idunnsoldier, intertwined his ankles and threw himself forward.

Idunnsoldier was thrown over Deadweight, landing in the soft grass of the courtyard. Before stomping on the back of the villain's head, Deadweight reached up and straightened his own head.

By defeating the Idunnsoldier, Deadweight had both saved a life and attracted the attention of the soldiers.

A shotgun blast caught the hero in the back, throwing him to the ground. Golden Sun took his hands off the shoulders of a dark-skinned student services officer, and saw Deadweight moan, get back on his feet and strike the gunman in the chest with two open palms.

His aura blazed brilliantly, and he charged forward. He'd hoped for some bystanders, some people to dramatically push through and set alight, but by now they were racing through the campus, seeking safe haven, chased by the two remaining gunmen.

So he had to settle for grabbing this cold-skinned do-gooder by the face and watching his features melt away.

But, alas, the Man of Flaming Righteousness was not any better at fighting than his comrade. Deadweight let out an involuntary snarl, and ducked under the grasping arms and threw his whole body into the villain.

The temperature soared, his clothing caught fire and his skin bubbled like wax, but he succeeded again in knocking a White Hand superhuman into the ground. And this time he delivered a series of blows to the face and neck of the villain.

His skin sizzled and began falling off in chunks, and his bones began to ache as the marrow cooked. But the aura didn't deaden the force of Deadweight's blows, and when Golden Sun lapsed into unconsciousness, the heat disappeared.

And two more bullets struck Deadweight in the back.

White Hand had had three gunmen. One had tripped and shot himself chasing a Filipino student, the second had had his gun knocked out of his hands by campus security and was fist-fighting him, while the last had taken it upon himself to take down the creepy zombie before being thrown aside by the Idunnsoldier.

"You're *mine!*" he shouted, charging at the wounded Deadweight with murder on his mind.

Deadweight was wearing shreds of his clothing, cracked bones visible between chunks of flesh, and his face was still asymmetrical due to the first punch.

Idunnsoldier had a slightly disjointed nose from being thrown over Deadweight, and was using his powerful legs to move forward at almost 20 miles per hour.

And then, right as he leapt over the broken bodies of his first victims, a bolt of concentrated stellar energy lanced out and exploded on his bare chest.

The light, heat and concussive force worked to blind him, disorient him and send him sprawling, allowing Deadweight time to cross the distance between them.

As Idunnsoldier regained his feet he was struck again by a bolt of energy from nursing student Tori Searle. He fell flat on his back, and was accosted by Deadweight again.

With his arms effectively roasted, the hero used his legs to ensure a takedown. He leapt over the giant's legs and came crashing down with his knees on Idunnsoldier's chest.

Without pausing, he wrapped his knees around Idunnsoldier's throat, squeezed, and rolled so that he was lying on the ground and lifting the red-haired man's head into the air. The pressure was thus increased sixfold, and the villain was having trouble breathing.

Deadweight snarled, teeth bared, and began pummeling his face with shaky punches.

Tori walked up to the two of them; keeping her distance and watching cautiously, as if they could turn on her any second. When Idunnsoldier passed out, she watched as Deadweight loosened his hold and slowly stood.

"Are.. Are you okay?" she asked of him, taking in his appearance. Frankly, it was a wonder he was even standing.

Deadweight turned to face her and snarled, frozen eyes not showing any emotion. His arms rose as if on puppet strings, and he took a step towards her. She screamed and raised her arms, eyes closed in preparation of the burst of light.

But then she heard the laughter. Looking again, she saw colour return to his face, bones snap back into place, and a congealed red-brown substance spreading over his wounds before turning into warm, pink flesh.

"That-" gasped Dave, filling his lungs with air for the first time in twenty minutes, "That was for the book bag."

Tori Searle nodded, eyes wide "Oh-Okay. Um, the police are here."

"Well, they'll be able to round up the thugs and get medical attention for the civilians. Hey, you mind telling them that they'll need the titanium cuffs, with the-"

"I'm- I'm sorry," interrupted Tori, "But what kind of superpower is that?"

“The only known case of Zombification in the Americas. Looks creepy, but so long as I don’t take too much damage or eat raw meat, it’s still me inside and- Oh, for the love of- Spin and shoot, Tori!”

She did so, and despite her lack of training, hit Golden Sun before he got his aura fully up. He was thrown backwards several feet, and didn’t get up.

“Nice shooting! Oh, and before too.”

“Nice shooting? Nice SHOOTING? You just... they just... you-”

“No, YOU. You just helped save lives. See those people over there? They are alive because you took down a rampaging racist and a human glowstick. And you’re clearly not in danger of, like, exploding and stuff, so that means I don’t need to shadow you.”

“So... what now” asked Tori, shadowing him as he walked over to brief the police.

“Well, my skin opened in zombie form, so I have to go into a medical checkup, and get to have a holiday. (God bless sick leave). You, on the other hand have a bigger decision to make.”

At this point, he turned to face her.

“You can go back to being Tori the Student. Live your life and be a nurse. A good one, if I learnt anything in those lectures. Or... you can nurture this gift that all the other nurses don’t have, and follow me to Camp Claremont. It’s basically like summer camp, with superheroes and explosions. Don’t decide now, take time and think it through. But if you ask me, you’d be quite the star there. Now, I need to go; this whole zombie thing comes with a lot of restrictions. And messy health checks, which you don’t want to see.”

He passed her a card, before he turned to the closest policeman and requested that he be taken to a hospital. When she looked at it, she realised it was the card of a popular nightclub on in the Upper East Side.

*Lunar Lander Nightclub, An Out of This World Experience.*

*Jason Jewel: Owner. Operator. Superhero.*

*555-5862-4376*

\*\*\*