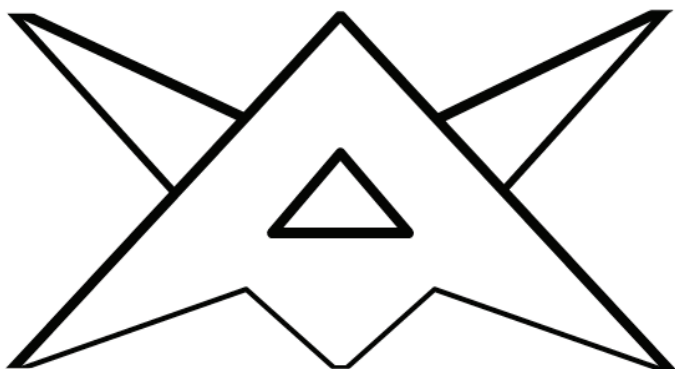


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APPENDIX MAN



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CHAPTER ONE

The Megahero

I WISH I was ready for the day she decided to do something crazy.
'Leon, I want to be a Megahero.'

I stared at my best friend, Daisy Tuck, blankly.

'A what?'

'A *Megahero*, Leon.'

I stared at her blankly again.

'Don't you mean "superhero"?' I asked, but she shook her head.

'No, the world has enough superheroes. That's old and lame and it's been done so many times already. A "Megahero" is something completely new and different.'

'It is?'

'Yep.'

'How?'

'A Megahero is like a superhero, but so awesome and so powerful that they aren't actually "super" – they're "Mega". Get it?'

'No.'

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‘You don’t believe me?’

‘No.’

‘Well, that’s too bad. I’m going to do it anyway.’

I swivelled in my chair, and dumped the magazine I was holding onto the floor.

‘Okay. Um, *why?*’ I asked, carefully.

‘Because, Leon,’ Daisy said, staring off into space, her voice suddenly deeper than usual, ‘let’s face it, the city is stuffed.’

‘It is? Actually I think it’s doing okay-’

‘Today, the people of Melbourne need an icon to look up to. They need a light in the darkest corners of our city. They need to know that when trouble is out, one of their fellow citizens is willing to do everything she can do to prevent it. People need a hero in these hard times, Leon, and so that means it all falls to me.’

In the light of her bedroom lamp, Daisy’s dark brown, slightly curly hair stood out like a clown in a business meeting. She may have been slightly taller than most other seventeen year-old girls at our school, but she certainly wasn’t *the* tallest, nor the biggest, nor the strongest. In fact I could think of three other girls right now who could tie me into a pretzel faster than she could (and who would take great pleasure in doing so).

She wasn’t exactly crime-fighting material.

‘Okay,’ I began. ‘Um, a few questions spring to mind. Firstly, you don’t have any super-powers. How are you going to fight crime?’

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She smiled.

‘The greatest heroes just need to believe in themselves, Leon. That is the greatest power of all.’

‘That’s the greatest *cliché* of all,’ I said. ‘Secondly, there are already people who do this sort of stuff. Fire-fighters, policemen, paramedics; how can *you* help them? How are you going to single-handedly fight all of the crime in the city? Melbourne isn’t even that dangerous. I’m pretty sure it was voted one of the most liveable cities in the world.’

‘I’m not going to fight *all* crime,’ she replied. ‘Just the Megavillains.’

‘Thirdly, how are you going to- Wait, *Megavillains?!*’

She nodded. ‘Yep.’

‘Dee, what are *Megavillains?*’

Now it was her turn to look at *me* blankly. ‘I think that’s pretty obvious, dude. Villains so awesome and so powerful that they’re not actually “super”-’

‘Alright, alright,’ I stopped her. ‘I get it.’

‘*I know* that we have a police force that can do all the dirty work, but they don’t have the ability to stand up and fight *supervillains*, let alone Megavillains.’

Daisy walked over to the bed and slumped onto her back, staring at her poster of Amelia Earhart stuck to the ceiling.

‘Nope, the people need somebody to fight the really bad guys – villains who are so devious and so dangerously evil that they can

crush the human race at any moment!’ she said, forming a tightly-clenched fist.

‘Right ...’ I said, cautiously. ‘Okay, just say that *hypothetically* a Megavillain somehow made their way to Melbourne: how would you stop them? Have you ever been in a fight?’

She furrowed her brow in the way she always did when she was stuck on a thought.

‘I know Taekwondo.’

I snorted. ‘No, you don’t.’

She bolted upright. ‘Sure I do. I used to learn it.’

I snorted again. ‘Yeah right’

‘I totally did. I got a yellow belt with *one* green stripe.’ She sat back on the bed, satisfied.

I stared at her. ‘Isn’t that the third level off the bottom?’

She shrugged.

‘Black belt ... yellow belt ... expert ... rookie ... They’re essentially the same things. Besides,’ she leaned forward and looked me in the eyes, ‘it’s not about how good you are *physically*. It’s all about how determined and how confident you are up here.’ She tapped her head. ‘Fake it ‘til you make it, Leon.’

I rubbed my forehead. This whole conversation was giving me a headache.

‘Fine, then who are you going to fight? Mrs Smart from across the road?’ I asked, sarcastically. ‘Oh, yeah, I hear she’s got a new puppy that might be infected with a zombie virus-’

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Daisy stood up from the bed and went back to her computer, ignoring me. She began typing, scrolling and clicking through a whirlwind of Internet pages, speaking so quickly that I had trouble keeping up.

‘There is one out there,’ she began, ‘who is currently a threat to the entire population of the world. He is clever, he is dangerous, and he has been able to remain out of police custody for a long, *long* time. I’ve been researching him for a while, Leon, trying to find where he is and what he’s doing, but I never get anywhere.’

I rolled my eyes. ‘Gee, I wonder why. So who is that?’

Daisy stopped typing and swivelled again in her chair to face me. For a moment, she stared straight at me as if preparing me for a huge bombshell.

‘Dr Green.’

The room was silent for a good ten seconds until she broke my gaze and returned to the computer, feverishly typing once again.

‘Um, Daisy?’ I began.

‘Hmm?’

‘Who’s Dr Green?’

Daisy’s eyes narrowed.

‘Only the most vile, vicious, wicked, snide, malicious, deceitful, two-faced and brilliant villain the world has ever seen. Or, at least, *not* seen. Here,’ she said, turning the computer screen towards me. ‘Leon Baker, meet Dr Green.’

On the screen was a picture taken from a security camera. It

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showed a figure, his face turned away, lining up at a salad bar. The picture was too blurry to make out fine details. All I could see was that the man had a slender figure, was wearing some sort of long, white coat, and had hair that didn't look entirely flat. On the screen, a green arrow pointed to the mysterious man, and there was text written down the right-hand side of the page:

Name: Dr Aurelius Green, PhD (Environmental Science)

Age: Unknown

Height: Unknown

Favourite Colour: Green (unconfirmed)

I read the notes below it:

Evil scientist.

‘Evil scientist? That’s it?’

‘Well, like I said, nobody knows this guy really exists.’

After I’d finished reading it silently for a second time, I looked at Daisy. She was sitting back in her office chair, her eyes closed.

‘Dee?’

She opened her eyes and looked at me. ‘Hmm?’

‘You don’t seriously believe this, do you?’

She rolled her eyes.

‘Of course I do!’ she said. ‘Ash is one of the world’s most

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influential figures in world media. He gets the information that the governments around the world do not want you to know. He shows us that nobody should be afraid of scum like Dr Green.'

'Hang on, let's back track a bit,' I said, suddenly confused. 'Who's *Ash*?'

'Oh, the author of this website.' She clicked back to the homepage, which was just a plain, black backing with stunning blue text that jumped out at me, making my eyes water. 'I've never met him before, but once I begin to clean up the streets I think he and I will be having a fair number of meetings. I've heard he's a genius when it comes to this sort of stuff.'

Daisy adjusted her seat and bent over the computer keyboard.

'In fact, I think it is time we sent him a message,' she mused. She grinned. 'It might give him something to look forward to.'

'Wait, you're seriously going to message him saying that you are going to become a super-

'Mega-'

'*Megahero*?'

'No,' she replied, rolling her eyes as if I had said the most stupid thing on the planet. 'I'm going to message Ash and tell him that help is on the way. We want to be discreet, Leon. Duh.'

And that was it. Daisy turned her attention to the computer. It was as if I was no longer in the room.

Ever since I had first moved to Australia, Daisy Tuck had been my best friend. It had been over ten years since we first met, and

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still we hung out almost every day after school. She was a quirky, enthusiastic girl who'd seemed to come up with a brand new crazy idea almost every time that I saw her. Some of them she planned for months, feeding me snippets and clues of what she was thinking, while some of them she came up with on the spot, totally out of the blue. Some of them worked, most of them didn't. But whatever the plan was, we always had a bunch of fun trying to pull them off, even if sometimes I wasn't as prepared to give it a shot as she was.

I could still remember that day all those years ago.

I had just arrived at my new school, a seven year-old kid so worried nobody in my new class would want to be friends with me that I had already planned what sudden illness I would fake to get out of there. As I walked into the classroom I saw the kids already sitting at their desks, drawing and painting while the teacher talked with a student. The moment she saw me she clapped and the entire class froze, staring at me, thinking I was an intruder. It was a few weeks into the term already, so everybody clearly had their groups of friends.

Except for me.

'Hello dear, is your name Leon?' the teacher had beamed. She stood up from her desk and came over to me. She had the only friendly face that I could see in the whole room. She had crouched down to my level and said, 'My name is Mrs Hughes. How are you? Are you okay?'

Too scared to say anything, I just nodded.

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‘Are you a bit nervous?’ the teacher had asked, an obvious frown forming on her face.

I nodded again and put my finger in my nose. It seemed safest there.

‘That’s okay, Leon, everybody here is really nice and wants to be your friend.’

Mrs Hughes stood at that point and turned to the silent classroom.

‘Everybody, we have a new friend starting with us today. His name is Leon. He has just moved with his family back from Hong Kong and is joining our class! Now, on the count of three, I want you all to say “Good Morning, Leon”. Ready? One, two, three—’

The class mumbled ‘Good Morning, Leon’. I felt a little better now that they knew my name.

‘Okay, now it’s time to find Leon somebody to sit next to,’ Mrs Hughes had said to the class. ‘Does anybody want to sit next to Leon?’

There was silence in the room. I still had my finger in my nose, unsure of what else to do with it. The kids sat there awkwardly, trying not to look too conspicuous.

‘Anybody?’ Mrs Hughes had asked, still smiling as if there was nothing to worry about. The kids were silent once more. Some had even gone back to their crayon drawings. Then, when I had decided I would be alone forever, all of a sudden there was a high-pitched voice from the very back of the classroom.

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‘I will sit next to him.’

A lanky kid with way too many bobby pins in her hair stood up and put her hand in the air. I saw a free seat next to her in the very last line of desks.

Mrs Hughes smiled and turned to me.

‘There we go, how about you go down and sit next to Daisy?’

‘Okay,’ I said. I took my finger out of my nose and, feeling way more popular now, walked down the aisle to the desk. I sat down at the empty seat next to the kid.

‘Hi. My name’s Daisy,’ said the kid.

‘Hi,’ I replied.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Leon.’

‘What’s your favourite animal?’

‘Umm ... A tiger.’

‘Mine’s a lion. Do you want a red crayon or a blue crayon?’

‘Umm ... A red one.’

‘I’ve got the red one, so why don’t you have the blue one?’

‘Okay,’ I said, and she gave me the blue crayon.

I can’t remember what we drew that day. I can’t even remember what happened for the rest of the class. All I remember was that after that day, I always sat in the chair in the back of the class next to my new friend Daisy. And since that day, all those years ago, not much had really changed.