



WeeklyHero
Productions

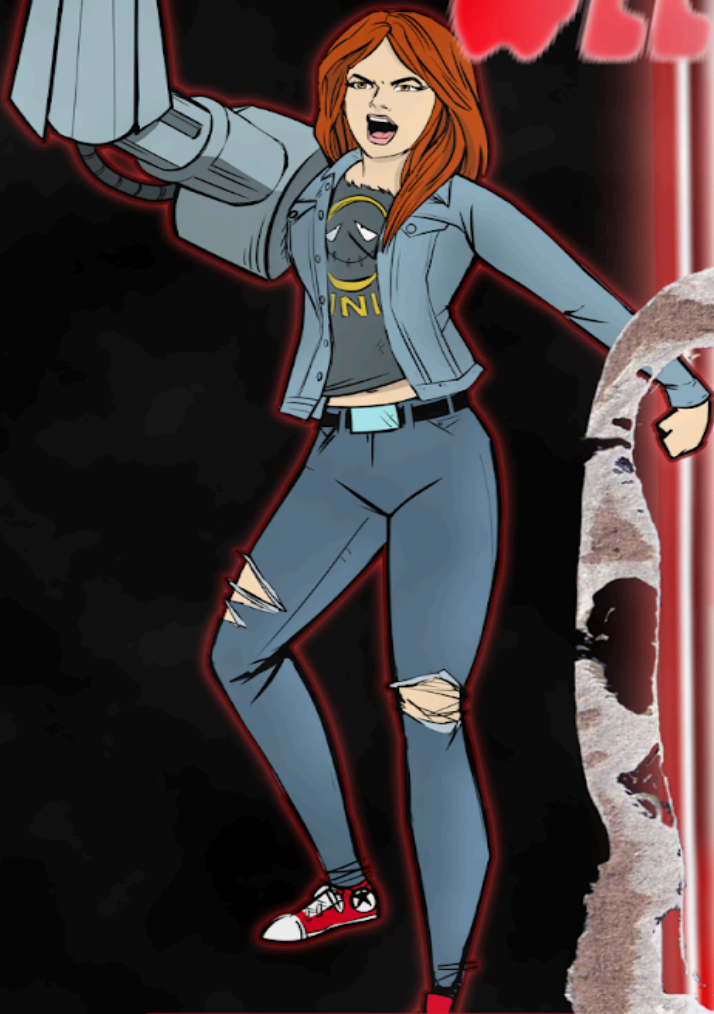
Ages 40 and up

PREQUEL
of a
RETRO
Series

OLD SCHOOL

EVIL

WELCOME HOME



BIGSHOT
WITH
FORCE BOLTER

Shape-Shifting
Short Story by
BRIAN CAVE

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Welcome Home

August 5, 1989



Max

My skin beaded sweat all over, made even worse by having my hands pinned behind my back and unable to move into the path of the weak A/C coming from the dash. I'd regained consciousness a few minutes ago in the back seat of what looked like a Crown Vic or similar sedan, behind the vehicle's backseat divider. The spot on my neck where someone had jabbed the syringe into my skin still stung a bit, even though I knew it would have healed by now. Instead, I had found in my old age that the heat was one thing my body couldn't overcome.

From the summer sun beating down on us, I estimated the time was nearly noon. Whatever they injected me with lasted three hours; it must have been powerful to knock me out for that long.

I flexed against my bindings; military-grade handcuffs. It's been decades since I've worn these, I thought. I doubted I could break through them in my other form, but even if it was strong enough, I knew I couldn't shift now. The sedatives were more powerful than I thought; the wolf inside, my lycanthropic other half, seemed to be down for the count. Though my options for escape were limited, I could at least try to enjoy the ride. "Turn the A/C up a notch, will you?"

The agent turned in his seat to glance at me, the menace unmistakable. "Shut up, Max. This isn't a joyride."

Oh no, this will be a fun trip, I thought. "It's August in Nevada. It has to be at least a hundred degrees outside, and it's worse in here."

"Tell that to the people in Tulsa."

With a smirk, I asked, "And how do you propose I do that, hmm? A Ouija board?"

When I noticed my remark didn't spark a reaction from my driver, I leaned back in my seat. As we drove south of Sparks, Reno's sister city, I looked out at the expanding

neighborhood. Why would the Department be driving me, of all people, out into this area?

As if anticipating my question, the agent told me we were almost there.

"Where's 'there'?"

He gave me another glance, and I spotted a hint of a sneer. "Hidden Brook."

"That's real?" Rumors of Hidden Brook had spread through my circle for the last few years, but I didn't believe any of them. The idea that the federal government had put people like me into a place like that felt like it came from some kind of alternate dimension. When he didn't answer, I asked, "Why there? Why not prison?"

"You know the treaties," he said, disdain seeping into every word.

"Of course I do, but I didn't think they applied to a mass murderer."

"They shouldn't, but considering none of you morons ever actually killed anyone before ..." He trailed off, leaving the rest unsaid.

I refused to leave it alone, though. "Holding cities hostage with a bomb or a tornado generator is okay as long as no one dies, right? It's amazing what Uncle Sam turned a blind eye to. Who would have thought all you needed to do to avoid a hefty prison sentence is to wear a costume and use a made-up name?" I exhaled a laugh, which visibly bristled the agent, so I prodded some more. "I take it you don't agree with the treaties, young man."

"It's Agent Chan," he said, irritated that he had to repeat it, probably thinking I had forgotten, which I hadn't. He had introduced himself before pulling the syringe out of his coat. "And no, I do not. I don't like anything about them. You should--" He cut himself off before going into a tirade I was familiar with from his fellow agents.

"Please don't stop on my account," I said with a smile.

Chan remained silent, but switched off the feeble air, sacrificing himself to the heat in an attempt to make me suffer. I admired his dedication. Perhaps I should turn up the heat myself.

"Is there any way you could uncuff me? My chest itches."

"Your chest should be doing a lot more than itch."

I pictured the scar tissue that made up a knot of flesh on the right side of my torso. Two days ago, that had been a bullet wound. A small-caliber bullet had shattered my shoulder blade and punctured my right lung on its way through me at my capture. My other half had worked around the clock to heal it, just like it did for every injury. It provided me with many other abilities in addition to accelerated healing, though the sedative running through my body denied those to me. "Are you disappointed Long's shot didn't kill me?"

"I'm disappointed I don't get to kill you."

"You're welcome to try, though she's sure to be mad to learn some random DDTB agent finished the job she failed to do. After all, I killed the rest of her team." After a pause, I added, "You know, along with all those other people in Tulsa you mentioned."

After a deep breath through his nose, Chan said in a flat voice, "You're not going to get a rise out of me. I know what you're trying to do. I know you think you can outsmart everyone, to manipulate anyone in your way. Well, those days are over, Max." In the rear-view mirror, I could see the smirk on his face.

I seethed at his reaction, straining my wrists against my restraints. I pictured myself rending away the divider between us and wrapping my hands around his throat. I could almost feel my claws breaking through the tips of my fingers and digging into his flesh. Somewhere deep inside me - in my body, my mind, my consciousness - the wolf stirred

awake. Welcome back, old friend, right on time.

Before us, the expansive campus of the Hidden Brook Assisted Living and Retirement Home loomed. I couldn't help but let out a laugh. The world's most notorious criminals and terrorists being held captive in what amounted to a glorified hospice. There wasn't even a fence surrounding the building; thick rosebushes lined the driveway up to the front door, a small loop that culminated with a covered walkway up to large glass doors. Pots of pink blossoms and topiary flamingos tended to by gardeners in overalls, armed with nothing more than hedge-trimmers and pruning shears.

Out front of the building to the side of the entrance, a woman sat on a stone bench reading a skinny novel, somehow looking regal while only wearing a sundress and a straw hat. No one hovered over or harangued her as she flipped through the pages. She even greeted one of the gardeners and received a wave in return. As she smiled up at him, I registered a spark of recognition - something to do with an egg? - but I failed to remember her.

"This is it?" I asked, my previous attempts to get under Chan's skin completely forgotten. "Where's the security?"

Chan didn't answer, only pulled up under the awning and put the car into park. He exited, opened my door, and beckoned me out. After a moment more of looking at the building's shiny entrance, I slid from the seat and stood up. The shock of what I saw in front of me overrode all my senses enough that I didn't even register Chan had removed my handcuffs.

I glanced down at my unbound wrists. "You're kidding, right?"

"Don't do anything stupid, Max," Chan said without an ounce of humor. "This place may look like a legit retirement home, but the Department of Domestic Threats and Balances has spared no expense to keep your type here."

"Automated defenses?" I said, looking around to try to find some disguised turret or hidden armed guards.

"Luxuries," Chan said, apparently able to tell jokes after all.

"Luxuries won't stop me from ripping your throat out," I said through gritted teeth, feeling the wolf's fangs breaking through my gums and filling my mouth.

Chan didn't react at all to my threat, just continued to look at me with the hint of a smile on his face. "Let's head inside," he said with a tilt of his head.

As much as I wanted to follow through with my threat, my other half, the wolf inside, gave me a small warning. I heard the whimper in my head: there was more to this place than meets the eye. I couldn't see what it was, but the wolf felt it. Reluctantly, I forced my canines to recede into my skull and followed Chan up the covered walkway into the glass-encased lobby. Inside, a sprawling desk lined the waiting room, serviced by three clerks who busied themselves with papers and folders. One even seemed to be on the phone with a friend, having a conversation about a date she had last night. On the other side of the desk sat numerous comfy chairs and couches, supplied with stacks of magazines and surrounded by potted ferns and orchids. I may not have recalled the woman outside, but I certainly recognized the wrinkled man reclining on one of the couches reading a copy of the Saturday Evening Post. The last time I saw him was in a newspaper fifteen years ago, wearing a suit of armor and brandishing a lightning rod at Houston's police force.

"How is this possible?" I asked. "This is some kind of illusion. It has to be."

"It's real," Chan said before walking up to the desk and speaking to one of the supposed receptionists. He hadn't even bothered to bring me with him, leaving me standing alone in the center of the room. Again, the disregard left me stunned. I twisted around to look at the glass door leading to the site's half-full parking lot less than ten feet away. It would take seconds to crash through the door, shifting to my werewolf form, and I could be gone before Chan could even draw his weapon.

But I stood there, forgetting the wolf's earlier warning. The sheer curiosity about this facility kept my feet still. How could a place like this exist? A prison for the world's worst - genuine villains who took imposing names and put on costumes, some with incredible powers, some with the smarts to know how to use those powers, and the most dangerous few that had both - and they were lounging around all day. Perhaps Chan's joke wasn't a joke at all, and these fools enjoyed the luxurious life. As if on cue, an orderly wearing white scrubs walked into the waiting room from a hallway on the right, approached the older man, and presented him with a glass of iced tea. He set down the magazine, took the drink with a grin and a "Thank you," and proceeded to gulp half it down. She smiled back and disappeared down the hallway, but not before looking my way and giving me a smile of my own. She even winked! What the hell is going on?

Mind control, I thought, suddenly scared that acknowledging it would cause all of this to come crashing down on me. But nothing happened: no screaming anguish in my brain; no guards rushing out with guns drawn.

Chan came back to stand next to me. "What do you think, Max?"

"I ..." What could I say? I couldn't even comprehend this.

"Get used to it," Chan said. "This is your home for the rest of your life. There is no way out of here for you unless you're in a box. The Treaties might have saved you from execution, but this place is no less a prison. A prison where your kind will see that nothing they've ever done will amount to anything."

I wanted to protest, to throw it in his face that the hundreds who died when I blew up the Dog House certainly amounted to something, but the words refused to manifest.

"Follow me," he said, before walking through the waiting room and into the hallway the orderly had appeared from earlier. Along the corridor, which seemed to run the entire length of the facility, I spotted an open cafeteria, another lounge farther down with a television's laugh track blaring from it, and then a number of doors I assumed would be residential rooms. At the very end of the hall was a double door made of glass, just like the entrance. Across the corridor from the lounge sat a bank of phones with comfy chairs, all of them occupied, the talkers appearing to have pleasant conversations. Not one of them had someone watching over, tracking their time, except for another resident who paced around the last one as if waiting his turn.

"Phone calls?" I asked incredulously, before remembering one that I desperately needed to make. My thought was thrown out the window when a door opened just beyond the phones and out walked an older man with his arms over a teenage boy's shoulder. They briefly spoke then embraced before the teenager was walked down the hall to the main entrance by a passing orderly. "Visitors? You've got to be kidding me."

"They've got to earn them. Don't get your hopes up, Max. You couldn't earn that if you had the rest of eternity."

Earn it, I thought, scowling. I still had henchmen running free, my trusted Sergeant Snarl working on the most important of tasks. I needed to know his progress, if he'd found

want I wanted. All I needed was a single call and I would not be denied. I looked around at the people here, the mundanity of this place, and I felt my resolve ebb. *Would I?*

A short squat woman in a pink blouse and an all too tight skirt approached a man wearing a Hawaiian shirt and spoke to him in a formal tone, which caused him to flinch away as if threatened with nuclear annihilation. All she said was, "I wanted to remind you of our appointment." She nodded at his reaction, turned, and trotted down the corridor, giving me a passing glance along with a greeting to Chan.

"How is this possible?" I asked, stepping after him, my usual indignant resistance giving up to morbid curiosity.

He didn't look at me, instead focusing down the hall where two residents left the cafeteria and strolled towards the lounge. "Because they're tired of running, Max. They're all done. Most of them came to us once the Treaties were signed. They came out of the woodwork, hands held high as soon as they heard they were staying out of prison." His gaze shifted to the United States seal painted on the wall: an eagle holding a lit bundle of dynamite in one taloned foot, and a cartoon ray gun in the other, the official seal of the Department of Domestic Threats and Balances. Chan finally looked at me, contempt clear on his face. "You were one of the few who kept going, and thankfully, the last of them. Now we can shift our efforts from finding you to keeping you here forever."

"They just gave up?" I recognized a few of the people here besides the one in the lobby. I didn't know their names, but I knew their work. Evil schemes by the hundreds, none of them panning out because of so-called heroes, but not for a lack of ambition, resources, or skills. To see them now, relaxing with smiles on their faces? What had happened to them?

"That's exactly what happened, Max. Once Reagan created the DDTB and started hunting down you small-time terrorists, most of them folded. It was one thing to have the police on your backs or whatever heroes felt the need to oppose you, but that was nothing compared to the full force of the United States government. You got away with hiding from Uncle Sam's watchful eye because the Cold War kept us busy, but now? We've got plenty of time and resources to rein in all you so-called *villains*."

Chan gave me a cursory glance and raised his chin to the lounge, where a few people were either playing a game of rummy or watching the television featuring a rerun of Gilligan's Island. "Why don't you go make yourself comfortable? I need to talk to the director here about his new arrival." Without looking back, Chan went the way we came and disappeared through a staff door that didn't even appear to be locked.

As if in a trance, I made my way into the lounge and sat at an empty table. I looked around the room, spotting weaknesses and potential escape routes, but made no move to any of them. Whether it was the wolf's fear of retribution, my damned fascination with this place, or a mix of the two, I could not tell. Whatever the cause, I was powerless to oppose it. I rested my hands on the table's surface, which had a chessboard design printed on it, though there were no pieces in sight. Immediately, I was beset by two residents, already arguing before they even sat down. I glanced at the two of them, recognizing neither, and felt the muscles in the back of my neck instantly seize, constricting up and around my head and threatening to crush my skull.

"I told you it was Max," the one on my right said. His head was bald and shiny, the result of frequent shaving instead of unlucky genes. He had the sneer of someone who liked giving grief instead of taking it. A punk if I've ever seen one, no matter how old he

was. The other was dark-skinned, Native American, if I had to guess by the straight black long hair and patchy facial hair. He seemed to be younger than the first, but probably because he just wasn't as angry. The two faces had a hint of familiarity, but I could not place them.

"Are you Malice?" the darker one said, leaning in.

I glared at him without moving my head from facing dead center.

"Oh yeah, that's Max for sure," the first one said. "Fucking Max Malice!"

"Shut your mouth," I said, turning to him and causing him to flinch.

"It's Silas," he said, as if that meant anything to me. He leaned forward and whispered, "Big Gun."

The purple mohawk and stupid glasses came to me a moment before I recalled the giant cannon that he used to wear on his arm during his uninspired bank robberies. The moment I realized who he was, his friend came back to mind as well.

"And you're Sidewinder?" I asked the other, causing him to look away, as if he hated being called that. In another life, he was a ghostly bank robber known for his haunted pistol. I heard associates say that he was an unwilling participant in the crimes, possessed by the spirit residing in his antique colt. A new twist on the insanity plea that the DDTB didn't seem to believe or care about.

The two clashed with a pair of teenagers with upscaled police-themed gear that called themselves the Ultra City Ultra Twins. I cringed at the memory of that name.

"Phil," the Native American said. "We're not supposed to use our other names here." He looked at Silas when he said it instead of me. "We can't talk about anything we did before we got here."

"But you, man," Silas said with a big smile, "we gotta talk about what you did, blowing up —"

A massive black hand clamped down onto Silas's shoulder so hard he almost flipped out of his seat. "No, we don't," the orderly said, leaning down to him. "Listen to your friend Phil," he hissed close enough to send spittle onto Silas's face, "and shut the fuck up." He stood straight, slapped Silas's back twice, and walked away to harass the resident with the upcoming appointment. "Hats off inside," he said, smacking a fedora from the man's head so fast the resident yelped.

Hunkering down low enough for his chin to almost touch the table, Silas whispered, "Fucking hate this place."

Phil leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms behind his head in the pettiest victory pose I could imagine. "You know Simmons would leave you alone if you quit breaking the rules." He returned to his slouched sitting position and said, "It's really not so bad here, Max. I like it."

"Of course you do, because you're a pussy," Silas said, and I couldn't help but agree with the assessment.

"Fighting again?" came a voice from behind Silas, causing him to flinch once more.

I looked up and finally found a face I didn't have to struggle to recognize. "Professor Rex." I stood up and offered my hand.

He lowered his gaze to look at my palm and stuck out his own apprehensively. "Tim. Tim Redix. Do I know you?"

My hand faltered, but he took it and gave it a brisk shake, nonetheless. I hated to admit it, but my confidence took a hit. Professor Rex was one of the few villains I

considered a contemporary. An unrivaled scientific mind, devoted whole-heartedly to returning dinosaurs to the living world. No insane thirst for power, no rule-the-world ambition. And no paltry bank robberies on his resume like the dolts sitting to my sides. My mind started racing with possibilities, breaking free from the shackles on them since arriving here. If I could escape – when I do escape – Tim’s brain would be more powerful than any weapon.

“It’s Max fucking Malice,” Silas said. “You know, he blew up—”

Before he could finish his sentence, I slammed my fist down on his hand.

Silas jerked his hand back and rubbed it in his other palm. “Fuck, man, that hurt!”

Tim sat down in the fourth chair at the table, directly across from me, placing a folded newspaper with an unfinished crossword in front of him and a nub of a pencil on top of it. “If you want to survive here without injuries like the one you just gave Silas, I suggest you follow Phil’s example.”

Not you, too, I thought. The idea that this genius had kowtowed to the Department enough that he spent his days doing crossword puzzles instead of genetic experiments would have broken my heart if I still had one. Instead, the fervent need to escape sunk again into my subconscious, and I slumped down into my chair. My eyes wandered past him to the bank of phones, two women blathering, one the left phone, the other on the right, but the middle sat open. If I could make one call, get some good news about Snarl’s mission to find *my legacy*, I could break the hold this place had on my mind, giving me a chance to formulate an escape.

Before I could stand up, a ruckus arose across the lounge. The man who had been wearing the hat earlier was standing up and screaming into the orderly Simmons’s face.

Finally, someone showing their true nature, I thought, before shock took it over.

As he yelled, the resident grew taller and his skin hardened, turning black and reflective. Into Onyx. Seeing him change, it recalled in my mind a ruthless businessman that ran an illegal campaign to bulldoze the Olympic National Forest. Onyx Corp, run by the money-grubbing Jet Onyx. I assumed the name was something he made up to sound more stylish, but the changes in his body proved it an appropriate moniker.

The orderly tried punching Onyx, but recoiled his hand as it glanced off the smooth stone. Undeterred, Simmons leaped upon the resident, wrapping both arms around his neck and spinning around to hang off his back. Two more orderlies dashed into the room and engaged Onyx, grabbing his arms and trying to hold him down.

I looked around the room at the other residents, who just watched the fight with no sense of awe, as if it was a common occurrence. I turned to the men around me, who all gazed down towards the table, ignoring the squabble. “What are you doing?” I implored. “It’s our chance to get out of here!” I stood up, bringing the wolf to the surface, feeling my body start to shift when a hand fell onto my forearm. I turned to Phil, who just shook his head at me.

“Watch,” he said, tilting his head towards the hallway.

From the door Chan had disappeared into earlier, a stream of white energy shot out with a tremendous shrill. He stepped out, holding a rifle in his hands like none I’d seen before. Light bulbs along the barrel lit up one by one and when the last in the row had lit, another stream of energy fired. The first one had missed Onyx, punching a hole in the wall above him, but the second made contact. Onyx’s side shattered, exposing normal skin underneath and sending shards of black stone to pelt the other residents.

I watched in stunned horror, but the other residents had already returned their attention back to their books or the television.

Simmons punched into the open hole on Onyx's side, hitting bare flesh and knocking him to the floor. Chan tossed a small device to him, still aiming his weapon with his other hand. Simmons pressed a button on the device, and a small prong popped out, which he jabbed into Onyx's bare skin. An electric shock jerked Onyx's body, causing the rest of his stone to crack and fall away in a shower of shiny pebbles. The three orderlies immediately hefted Onyx's prone but breathing body up and carried him down a second hallway labeled *Medical*, with Chan following once he'd made a visual sweep of the lounge.

"They have something like that for everyone here, Max," Tim said. "Whatever power or ability you were about to activate, I guarantee they have a counter."

"It's not worth it," Phil said, leaning back again with his arms crossed behind his head. "Just accept that this is it."

Silas nodded, face down. "This is it," he parroted with the enthusiasm of a man in the electric chair.

The hell it is. "I have a call to make."