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Opening extract from

Divine Madness

Written by

Robert Muchamore

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1. GAS

It was half-seven in the morning, but James had already been in the dojo for ninety minutes. Six pairs of kids were spread over the padded floor, wearing sweaty kit and a mass of protective padding.

Exhausted from a brutal twenty-minute sparring session, James bowed to his training partner Gabrielle, before grabbing a plastic bottle off the floor. He tipped back his head, opened his mouth wide and squeezed out a jet of high-energy glucose drink.

As he tried to swallow, a palm slammed into his back and he stumbled forwards, crashing into the springy blue floor with juice dribbling down his chin. Miss Takada ground James' head against the mat, using a sixty-year-old foot with gnarled yellow nails and sandpaper tough skin.

'Wa ru one?' instructor Takada shouted. Her English was awful, but luckily she stuck to pet phrases that James knew by heart.

'Rule one,' James replied awkwardly, as the foot squished his lips out of shape. 'Always be alert; an attack can come from any direction at any time.'

'Be alert, stay alert,' Takada tutted. 'Drink quick, not glaring at ceiling like fool. Get off my floor. You dishonour my floor.'

James dragged himself up, keeping a wary eye on his teacher.

'OK,' Takada shouted, clapping her hands to get the attention of the whole class. 'Final exercise. Speed test, little balls.'

A few of the shattered teenagers mustered enough energy to moan. There were only ten days of CHERUB's six-week advanced combat course left, so everyone knew how to play: six students lined up against the wall at each end of the dojo, Miss Takada would throw out ten mini-soccer balls and the two who didn't make it into the changing room with a ball had to forsake breakfast and run twenty laps around the outside of the dojo. It was a violent game and even wearing protective gear, broken bones weren't out of the question.

Takada reached into a net filled with balls and threw out the first three. Twelve teenagers charged forwards, as they bobbled across the floor.

James sighted one rolling fortuitously towards him, but Gabrielle was faster and bundled him out of the way. As James ploughed into the floor for the hundredth time that morning, Gabrielle ripped the ball out of reach.

She managed three gangly steps, before coming under attack from two boys who'd started from the other end of the room. One hit Gabrielle head first, butting her in the stomach, while the other slid in with a two-footed tackle. Gabrielle groaned in pain as she hit the deck, but managed to hold on to the ball by tucking it under her chest.

The boy who'd butted Gabrielle tried to lever her into an arm lock, but caught a padded elbow in the face for his trouble and crumpled backwards in a heap.

While battle still raged over the first three balls, Miss Takada tossed in two more. James was exhausted, but the prospect of laps around the dojo gave him enough motivation to spring up and take a lunge. This time he judged it right and plucked the ball from between his legs without breaking stride.

James was thrilled to see less than fifteen metres between himself and the archway into the boys' changing room. He leapt over a flying kick, picked up speed and could almost taste a cooked breakfast in the campus dining room. But three paces shy, the dream was shattered by a bulky sixteen-year-old called Mark Fox.

Mark had ham-sized fists and a twenty-centimetre height advantage over James, who got bundled into the padded wall before spinning out and adopting a fighting stance. It didn't seem fair facing off an opponent who was so much bigger, but advanced combat training was meant to be realistic and the real world isn't fair either.

James tried to visualise himself as the plucky underdog, who could come off best like in some kids' movie. But the illusion didn't last. Mark moved ruthlessly, spraying James with flying sweat as he landed a left-right punch combo, followed by a knee in the ribs. James crumpled up as Mark tore the ball from his grasp.

'Later,' Mark grinned, looking smug as he swaggered towards the archway.

The padded blows had only knocked the wind out of

James, but he'd landed awkwardly and bent back some fingers. He stood as soon as he'd caught his breath, but his face was screwed up in pain. Six kids had now made it into the changing rooms; three more were almost there with no opponent in sight. That left James and two girls fighting over the last ball.

Dana Smith currently held it. She was a fifteen-year-old Australian, about the same height as James, muscular for a girl and an excellent athlete and swimmer. Gabrielle O'Brien had just turned fourteen and was the youngest on the course, but she could hold her own and had Dana penned into a corner looking for a way out.

James positioned himself a couple of metres behind Gabrielle. He figured Dana would make a break for it. Hopefully, Gabrielle would take her down and he'd be able to wade in and grab the ball while the girls tangled on the floor.

But Dana showed no sign of moving and Miss Takada was growing impatient. She had a queue of red-shirts outside, waiting for their beginners' Karate class.

'You got one minute, or all three of you run,' Takada said, drumming on the face of her watch.

Gabrielle backed away from the corner, trying to lure Dana out. James was backing up too, as Dana made her move. Gabrielle lashed out, but Dana dropped down and skidded beneath the flying kick on her knees, sweeping away Gabrielle's leg in the process.

James sensed an opportunity to snatch the ball, while Gabrielle was falling and Dana was on her knees. He ploughed into Dana, grappled her around the neck, ripped

the ball out of her hand and clasped it to his chest, ignoring the pain in his fingers.

Dana yelled as she broke out of the choke hold and flipped James on to his back, before straddling his waist. She pinned his shoulders under her knees and batted him across the face. As she did so, James' weakened fingers lost their sweaty grip on the ball. It bounced between his legs and began rolling across the mat.

Gabrielle spotted the ball and dived in. By the time Dana realised that James had let go, Gabrielle was sprinting triumphantly towards the girls' changing room.

James was still pinned to the floor as Miss Takada made a circular motion with her finger. 'OK, you two. Round and round, twenty time. You know the drill.'

As the instructor stepped out to yell at the rowdy group of red-shirts outside, James looked up at Dana with a hint of desperation. Her beefy thigh muscles loomed over him and her entire bodyweight pressed on his shoulders.

'Let us up,' James gasped. 'It's over.'

Dana gave him an evil smile. James didn't know Dana all that well. She was a loner, still a grey shirt after five years of CHERUB missions and notoriously bitter towards younger kids like him who'd achieved better things.

'This is because I'm a navy shirt, isn't it?' James said. 'Well maybe you've been unlucky, or whatever, but you can't blame me for that.'

'It's not that,' Dana grinned.

'C'mon, let me up,' James said, getting angry as he tried to wriggle out. 'Takada's gonna have a right go if she comes back and sees we're not running.'

'She'll be a few minutes helping the little kids get changed. I've got long enough.'

'Long enough for what?'

'You'll see,' Dana said, shuffling forwards so that her bum loomed over James' head.

James heard a rumbling sound from inside Dana's shorts and felt a blast of warm air.

'Oh, Jeeeeeesus,' James whined, screwing up his face.

Dana started laughing as she rolled off and found her feet.

'You're an animal,' James groaned, wafting his hand in front of his face. 'That's putrid. I'll get you back for that.'

He couldn't help seeing the funny side. He liked Dana, even though she was an oddball.

Dana shrugged. 'Don't expect me to lose any sleep.'

James' laughter dried up as he staggered towards the dojo exit, grabbed his trainers and began stripping off his padding. Twenty laps around the dojo takes half an hour when you're knackered, and it was freezing outside.

2. CLYDE

The Echelon security network is the world's most sophisticated electronic surveillance system. It is jointly run by the United States National Security Agency (NSA) and the intelligence services of several friendly nations, including Great Britain and Australia.

Echelon monitors communications, including telephone calls, e-mails and faxes passing via microwave links, communications satellites and fibre optic cables. The system currently scans nine billion private messages and conversations per day.

Every hour, approximately one million messages containing trigger words such as bomb, terrorist, napalm, or phrases such as Help Earth or Al Qaeda are picked out and stored by the system. These suspicious messages are run through logic analysing software that is capable of determining the emotional state of a person from their voice, or the likely context of suspicious words in an e-mail or text message.

Of the million messages stored each hour by Echelon, about 20,000 will be flagged by the computer and read by one of 2,000 monitoring staff on duty at any given time.

In late 2005, an Echelon station in south-east Asia intercepted

an e-mail message between two unknown parties. The e-mail mentioned a possible Help Earth attack in Hong Kong and the involvement of a sixteen-year-old environmental campaigner named Clyde Xu.

Rather than arresting the young suspect, it has been decided to infiltrate Xu's family in the hope that more senior figures within Help Earth can be uncovered.
(Excerpt from a CHERUB mission briefing for Kyle Blueman, Kerry Chang and Bruce Norris.)

Hong Kong, February 2006
Kerry Chang broke into a jog when she spotted Rebecca Xu leaning against a lamppost waiting for her. The two thirteen-year-olds wore school uniform – blue blouse, navy skirt and pullover, white tights – and were mixed up with hundreds of others dressed the same way. Some were heading home alone, some stood in groups gossiping, while others cut precariously into four lanes of snarled up traffic, trying to catch a double-decker bus parked at a stop on the opposite side of the road.

'Good day?' Kerry asked, speaking in Cantonese.

Rebecca shrugged. 'School's school, you know how it goes.'

Kerry knew how she felt. When an undercover mission drags on, the person you're pretending to be starts getting mixed up with who you really are. She'd now been attending Prince of Wales School for six weeks and had settled into a rut.

Rebecca started walking.

'Aren't we waiting for Bruce?' Kerry asked.

'Detention,' Rebecca smiled. 'I thought you knew. Your brother's such an idiot.'

'*Step*brother,' Kerry said. 'No shared genes, thank you very much. What's he gone and done now?'

'Oh, just him and his stupid mates yapping all through maths class. Mr Lee chucked a mental and told them to come back after school.'

Kerry shook her head. 'I wish I was in your class. I've got nobody to talk to all day.'

Rebecca smiled. 'But we'd probably get in trouble for chatting all the time.'

The air-conditioned school was always chilly, but it was sunny out and Kerry got hot as they headed home. She loosened her tie, then pulled her sweater over her head and knotted it around her waist. The fifteen-minute walk took the two girls through a maze of high buildings, cramped streets and elevated walkways choked by fumes from speeding traffic.

Home for both girls was a recently built tower block, twenty storeys high. It had five identical cousins, the last of which was still under construction. Hong Kong's sea air and tropical climate eats buildings, and despite its newness, the balconies stretching skywards already looked tatty.

In most wealthy countries, cramped apartment blocks like these would house the poor, but Hong Kong is one of the most densely populated cities in the world and this accommodation was mostly home to professional types. Rebecca's family was typical: her father was a dentist and her mother part-owned a jeweller's shop in an upscale mall.

The doors parted automatically as the girls passed into a muggy lobby. The security guard gave them a friendly nod from behind his desk.

'Have you got much homework?' Kerry asked, as they waited for the elevator up to the ninth floor, where they both lived.

'A fair bit,' Rebecca said. 'We can do it together . . . Or surf the net, whatever.'

'Cool,' Kerry said. 'But I'm gonna go in my place and lose the uniform first. I'll see you round yours in ten minutes.'

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The front door of the cramped apartment led directly into the kitchen. Kerry yawned as she stepped inside. She dumped her backpack on the floor and skidded her keys across the dining table. Assistant mission controller Chloe Blake leaned through the doorway leading into the living-room.

'Hiya, Kerry. Where's Bruce?'

'Detention.'

'Oh *great*,' Chloe said, looking stressed.

'What's up?'

'Are you doing homework with Rebecca tonight?'

Kerry nodded. 'As soon as I'm changed. Why, what's going on?'

'You'd better look at this.'

Kerry moved through to the living-room. Sixteen-year-old Kyle Blueman – Kerry's other stepbrother for the purposes of this mission – was sitting on the couch dressed in shorts and a T-shirt.

'No school?' Kerry asked.

'Clyde Xu skipped out of our English class this morning,' Kyle explained. 'I followed him down to the harbour, but I had to keep my distance and lost him at a busy crossing. John picked up a couple of mobile calls in the surveillance suite back at the hotel, but they didn't tell us much. All we know is that Clyde met with someone at an Arby's in the business district around lunchtime.'

'Any idea who?' Kerry interrupted.

'Not even a name,' Kyle said. 'But after the meeting, Clyde came back here to the Xus' apartment. We've got it on video.'

Chloe flipped up the lid of her laptop, which was connected to a satellite antenna on the balcony. She double clicked, opening up a video file which Kerry leaned in to watch. The fisheye image was from an ultra wide angle camera that Bruce had sneaked into the light fitting above Clyde Xu's bed four weeks earlier.

'When was this recorded?' Kerry asked.

'A couple of hours ago,' Chloe replied.

The screen showed Clyde Xu walking into his tiny bedroom. He sat on his bed, then pulled off his trainers and school shirt, revealing a muscular chest.

'He's *so* fit,' Kerry said.

'Totally,' Kyle grinned. 'Cutest little terrorist I've ever seen.'

Chloe tutted. 'Can you two keep the raging hormones under control and concentrate on what you're watching?'

Clyde Xu pulled a small, cellophane-wrapped package out of his school backpack, then leaned forwards. He opened a chest of drawers and tucked it under a pile of socks.

'Any idea what that is?' Kerry asked.

'Impossible to tell,' Chloe said. 'But you don't go to all that trouble to meet someone and come back with something you could have bought from the Seven Eleven, do you? Can you try and get a look at it, maybe take some photos?'

Kerry looked uncertain. 'Couldn't we wait until tomorrow and go in when the Xus are out at work and school?'

'It would be easier,' Chloe said. 'But that's fifteen or sixteen hours away. Who's to say Clyde won't have passed the package on to someone else by then? Knowing what's in that package now might be the difference between foiling an attack and hundreds of innocent people losing their lives.'

'Well,' Kerry said, shaking her head, 'it's gonna be tricky without Bruce there keeping an eye out. He's *such* a knob, getting himself in trouble on the one day we need him.'

Chloe clicked a few icons on the laptop screen, making the display switch to a live feed from the Xus' apartment. Between them, Kerry and Bruce had managed to place a miniature camera and microphone in every room.

'Well,' Chloe said, as she flipped between the live pictures from six different cameras. 'Rebecca is in her room, Clyde is on the computer in his parents' room and we can rely on Mum and Dad not being home before seven o'clock.'

Kerry nodded. 'You can't get Clyde off that PC once he's online. Rebecca always has to fight with him when she wants to go and play Sims Two.'

'Do you think you'll be safe going into the room without Bruce covering you from outside?'

Kerry shrugged. 'I can probably talk my way out if they

catch me in the room, but if I'm sitting there taking pictures of whatever he's got hidden in that drawer, our cover's totally blown.'

'What do we do if the package turns out to be a bomb?' Kyle asked. 'If it is, Clyde could be planting it at any time. In just a few hours, or something.'

'I doubt it's tonight,' Chloe said. 'Don't forget the second meeting.'

'What meeting?' Kerry asked.

'Something John picked up in one of Clyde's mobile calls,' Chloe explained. 'He's got a meeting tonight at eight o'clock.'

'Where?'

'No idea where or who, Kerry. But groups like Help Earth keep information on potential attacks separate. One person deals with the device, another knows the target and the attacker is only given the whole picture at the last minute. That way, the plan isn't compromised if anyone is caught.'

Kerry nodded. 'So, all these meetings mean the attack has to be coming soon.'

'Almost certainly within the next seventy-two hours,' Chloe said.

'What if Clyde isn't the attacker?' Kyle asked.

'We've had this discussion,' Chloe said, a touch wearily. 'Xu is a sixteen-year-old with no specialist knowledge. His only use to Help Earth is as a lightning rod: an unlikely suspect who can take some of the risks that more senior people don't fancy.'

'Right,' Kerry said. 'I'll hook a two-way radio up under my T-shirt. As soon as I get in Clyde's room I'll fix it in my ear.

You guys watch on the video and speak to me if you see someone coming.'

Chloe gave Kerry a friendly rub on the back. 'You'd better hurry up and get changed before Rebecca starts wondering where you've got to.'