

## THE MINNESOTA TWINS MEET BIGFOOT

Richie Narvaez

We showed our IDs to the beefy security guard, hoping to get past him and quickly through the crowds we saw flowing into the convention center. The frisking I expected. But one staticky two-way radio call later, and suddenly four other cheesehead goons were escorting us past seven Spider-Persons, fourteen Stormtroopers (some purple, some orange), a Batman in breezers, eleven elves or dwarves or trolls, I wasn't sure, and a giant samurai/robot/can opener before we got to an upper level.

"We're just here to meet our client," I said. "What's this about?"

Cece gave me the *cool it* look and I rolled my eyes.

Ignoring us, the goons escorted us to an office between the concierge and a Caribou Coffee. The door had a small sign that read "Lost & Found."

Inside was a small desk, and behind it was a stout, extremely bald man in a sweater, tie, and jacket. Behind him were stacks and stacks of stuff in bins: scarves, umbrellas, toys, laptops, briefcases, suitcases, phones, many looking brand new.

The stout man looked up from his own phone when we came in. Barely. "Bert Ebersol, head of Security & Safety Solutions for the Minneapolis Convention Center. I hope you don't mind my bringing you up. This is the biggest convention center in the state, and this here QuasarCon is the biggest convention we have all year. We can't be too careful."

"If you say so," I said. I gave Ebersol our card.

"The Reyes Agency?" he said. "You two related?"

"He's my brother," "She's my sister," Cece and I said simultaneously, each nodding at the other.

"Bless your hearts. I've never heard of your agency. Are you new?"

"New to the city. We usually work in St. Cloud," my sister blurted before I could answer. She was probably worried about my being too honest—our agency was only three weeks old. "We have plenty of—"

Ebersol cut her off. "So what's your business here?"

I'd had enough of this. We were going to be late and I hated being late. "Look, our client asked to meet us here. He's working his booth all day and can't leave. He's expecting us. Thirty seconds ago."

Ebersol smiled. He actually picked up to his phone and started scrolling, completely ignoring us. My sister gave me the *good grief* look.

There was an awkward pause.

Ebersol guffawed at something on his phone, then he looked up and said, "Well. Anything security-wise going on here goes through me. I understand I don't need to know exactly what you're being hired for, client privilege, yadda yadda. But if it affects this convention center, then it affects me, and then I do need to know."

Again, Cece spoke before I could. "We understand that, Mr. Ebersol. From what the client told us, the case involves something that did not take place on convention grounds. That's all we can say."

Ebersol shrugged. "Just want to make sure we're on the same page. And if you need help, my men and I are always available. Nothing happens here I don't know about."

On the escalator down to meet our client, I bet my sister Ebersol was looking for a bribe.

As usual, she disagreed. "For crying out loud, he just wanted to show us he was the king of the castle."

"Whatever," I said. "But next time we use my fake ID kit. We could have said we were Hollywood VIPs." She ignored me, but it would totally have worked.

Instead, she said, "Let me take the lead with the client, all right?"

The convention center was noisy and hot and smelled like a locker room at the end of the sad and sweaty sophomore year. My brother Casper and I stood in a booth piled high with toys, collectibles, memorabilia, all too spendy.

"You guys could totally dress as Zan and Jayna!"

"Uff-da! I'd do it," I said honestly. "Not Casper, though."

"Or the creepy twins from *The Shining*," our new client, a Mr. Hoxsey, continued. "If you don't mind the dresses. Wait, so you're both in the same line of work? I guess it's like what they say: you're basically the same person, am I right?"

It was clear to me that Hoxsey had had too many lattes for breakfast. He was red-faced, had a clammy handshake. He wore a black T-shirt he must have owned since he was thirteen, a couple-few decades ago. But a trusted friend of ours had given him a good reference, and our agency was brand new. So we had to indulge him. Or at least try to.

"Casper and I are actually quite different," I said. "For example, he crochets and I like paint-by-numbers."

"Sweet!" Hoxsey said. "I guess."

"So you wanted help in retrieving some valuables, Mr. Hoxsey?"

"You guys can just call me 'Conan.' It's actually my real name. My father loved R.E.H. Yeah, anyway, my story is this: as you can see, I got valuable stuff for sale here, and every night I lock most of it in my van. But the primo items I take back with me to my hotel room."

"Primo items?" Casper asked.

"You betcha. I got a complete set of Mission Venus FunGo action figures, including the metallic bookworm and the clown-faced Van Johnson."

I pointed at a series of squat plastic figures in plastic packaging, each about fifteen centimeters high. "Those dolls. They're that valuable?"

"No, not those. But that primo set of mine is. Each figure is worth ten thousand. I like to show them off here in this case behind me, which you can see is now empty. They're not really for sale, but it brings customers over."

"Were these figures insured?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure. All insured. My wife hassled me about that and good thing. But that's not the point. It took me years to assemble that set. That set is priceless to me. And I can tell you right now who took them. It was Yadhira Tsuki, Spaceborne Princess, don'tcha know."

"Spell that for me." My brother started to take down the name.

"That's an anime character," I said, stopping him. "You mean someone dressed as her, of course. How did she get into your room?"

"Weh-hell, there was a little after-party after the first day of the con yesterday, and she

was at the bar all the dealers go to. This woman was in full, super-accurate costume.”

“Which doesn’t cover much,” I said.

“Gosh, no, it does not. It’s basically a bikini with wings. But hers were beautifully done, 3D-printed feathers, little claws at the end, fully articulated wings. She even had the lightning bolt antennae. Lit up every time she spoke. She practically flew over to me at the bar and came on pretty strong. Wait, here’s a picture I snapped with her. As soon as she started putting out the vibes, I knew I had to get a picture. No one would believe me if I didn’t.”

The photo showed an even more red-faced Hoxsey with a woman in a multicolored bird-alien-warrior-swimsuit model get-up. A hell of lot of her upper body was showing but most of her face was hidden behind a mask.

I pointed at the ring on Hoxsey’s left hand and said, “Didn’t you say you had a wife?”

“What happens at the con stays at the con, am I right?”

I did the professional thing and resisted rolling my eyes. “So you brought the princess to your room?”

“Yep. *Things* happened.”

“And you showed her your primo collection?” my brother asked, and I dreaded the response.

“In more ways than one!” Hoxsey said. There it was. He snickered to himself, but then stopped when he saw we weren’t laughing with him. “But, um, yeah, when I woke up, she was gone and so was the set.”

“Did you get a look at her without the mask?”

“She insisted on keeping the room dark.”

“Uh huh,” I said.

My brother chimed in. “Isn’t it likely this Tsuki has fled the state by now?”

“Gosh, no, that’s the thing,” Hoxsey said, “and why I’m hiring you two. With that gear she was wearing, she is obvi an A-level cosplayer, and this being the biggest convention of the year in Minnesota, and only the second day out of four—dudes, there’s no way she’s going to miss a chance to show off. She’s still here. I know it.”

A lot of people think that because we were twins, my sister Cece and I were somehow psychic, two brains linked as one. This was nonsense. Not that Cece I weren’t on the same page a lot. Just not always.

Walking through the crowd, I said, “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

And she said, “His lightsabers are way too spendy.”

“What? No, I was thinking that this Yadhira Tsuki could have borrowed or bought the costume just to get to this guy’s toy set.”

“Possible,” she said. “But if she was as tricked out as he said, that takes time and skill, even a little obsession. Cosplayers don’t just put on a costume. This is a serious hobby, even a career for some people.”

Cece suggested we stroll around the convention. “You never know, we might trip over a six-and-a-half-foot-tall woman with wings.”

We waded through the crowd and into another long aisle of booths. The third one we came to was similar to our client’s—collectibles, comics, etc. Standing in the middle of the booth was a chubby man in a black T-shirt and brown leather cowboy hat. He was

having a heated conversation with a tall woman made taller by thick-soled boots and a three-foot-high faux-fire headdress. Over the consistent din of the convention, I could only make out: “Keep calm already and it’ll work out.”

Cece and I looked at each other. We couldn’t be that lucky...

As we walked over, the man in the hat smiled. He also clasped his hand around the wrist of the tall woman. Before we could introduce ourselves, he said, “Anything I can help you with today?”

I took the lead this time. “Yes. How much would a complete set of Mission Venus FunGo action figures go for?”

“Hah! Those are super valuable, ten grand for each figure, at least,” the man said. “Now, if you’re interested in super-valuable items, I’ve got a Diamond Encrusted Barbie, the Mountie G.I. Joe, and a 1954 Superman lunchbox, all in mint condition and right here.”

“So you don’t have that set?”

“Dang. No. Wish I did. But no.”

“Would you be able to procure that set of FunGo figures somewhere?”

The man shook his head. “Sorry. They say they only made three clown-faced Van Johnsons. You want that set you can try to pry it away from Hoxsey over in the next aisle, but I doubt he’ll ever sell it. Now if it’s rare collectibles you want, I have Sylvester Stallone’s compression socks from *The Expendables 3*. Never washed.”

The man handed me a card that said:

*Brent McCoy*

*Darn it, Jim, I'm a Fan, Not a Businessman*

I looked over to see my sister smiling at the spiky-headed woman. “Hi,” Cece said. “Nice Faerie Assassin Witch costume.”

The tiniest smile crept into the corners of the woman’s lips, but her face remained impassive in glittery white face paint

McCoy said, “This is my girlfriend, Luna Rinehart. She’s one of the top cosplayers in the country. If she moves her face too much, she’ll ruin her makeup. No offense.”

We thanked him and went on our way.

Casper and I made the rounds of the con and found four Yadhira Tsukis. Two were children, one was a male with a hairy belly and a churlish attitude, and the last had just arrived that morning and produced an airplane ticket to prove it. We eliminated them as suspects.

Armed with an image of the set as well as the picture of Hoxsey with Tsuki, we visited the Ray J’s American Grill on Central, the bar where Hoxsey said he’d met his outer space assignation.

We found a bartender in white shirt and black pants, smoking on the sidewalk outside. “For cute!” she said when we showed her the picture. “But, no, I don’t recognize the face, not that that’s where my eyes go, if you know what I mean. But she’s no regular. There’s someone inside you may want to ask though.”

“Another bartender?” I said.

“You could. But I’d say try the couple by the jukebox. You’ll see what I mean.”

Over by the neon-lit jukebox against the wall were two patrons dressed head to toe as lizards.

"Oh that'sssss lovely," the first one said. "It could be Ssssandi Piñero. Or Luna Rinehart."

My brother and I resisted giving each other a look.

"Could be Luna, yeah," the other lizard said. "Thissss could also be Sssssuzie Sssseeley."

"It'sssss not a great picture isssss the real issssue. But honestssly there are about only sssseven or eight cosplayers at this level at the con who kinda sssssorta look like this."

The second lizard person said, "Cosssssplayers live for attention, especially thesssse. They won't be hard to find at the con. Bessssidesss there'ssss the massssssquerade."

"Massssssquerade?" my brother said.

I nudged him. "Big cosplay contest at the end of the con."

"Big cash prize, I bet."

"For Pete's sake, not just. It's for glory, for bragging rights."

The lizards were warm-blooded enough to give us names to follow up on. Luna Rinehart topped the list. But she did not return our phone calls and emails. But the other cosplayers were eager to talk and agreed to meet. My brother and I split up—I took ones at the con, and he met some at their hotels.

It was easy to spot Anna Caprica. She was dressed as Taco Belle, the character from *Beauty and the Beast* but with a dress made of lettuce and taco shells. "I prefer doing costume puns," she said. "Yesterday I was Jon Snow White."

No, she had never met Conan Hoxsey. Yes, she knew what FunGo figures were but didn't know they could be so valuable. She'd spent the previous night in her hotel room, sewing the tomatoes, onions, and cheese onto her dress. I believed her. I moved on.

Alana Craig made it clear she would only speak in Klingon, so I didn't get very far with her. One of the warriors standing nearby said to try again the next day, when Alana would be a rhyming demon.

I hoped my brother was doing better.

Later that afternoon, I met my sister in the lobby of the Holiday Inn Express. Another cosplayer, a something purple and gold, had told me that Luna Rinehart was staying there. Cece said her day had been a bust and would give me a full report later. I asked her to type it up instead of just sending a voice file the way she usually does.

"I'm not going to type it up," she said.

"We need to have everything in writing."

"Fine, I'll get an app to transcribe it."

"I just want our agency to get off on the right foot."

Before the elevator doors opened on the fifth floor, we heard a super-shrill scream. We ran toward it and, through the open door of Luna Rinehart's room, saw what looked like, well, Bigfoot. Well, someone in a ghillie suit with a Bigfoot mask.

"That's different," I said.

It—he?—was trying to wrestle a duffel bag out of Luna's hand.

Cece jumped in, karate-chopped the cryptid's forearms, and he squealed and turned toward the door. But I was in the way.

He barreled toward us like a truckload of fur and knocked me upside down. I went, “Ope!” and on the way down—while hitting my skull against the doorjamb *hard*—I reached out and grabbed for Bigfoot’s foot and yanked. I heard the cryptid yowl and I ended up with a tennis shoe in my hand. I turned to see him limping down the hall.

“Go after him,” my sister yelled.

“Gosh darnit,” I muttered, feeling pain radiate all over. I stumbled after him but couldn’t find him in either stairwell. He was gone. I went back to the room and announced, “So, I got his tennis shoe.”

I heard my sister sigh. She was trying to calm Ms. Rinehart down. Eventually, we got me an ice pack and the whole story.

There’d been a knock on the door and through the peephole Luna had seen this person in a Bigfoot outfit. “No biggie,” she’d thought, thinking it must be a fellow cosplayer, so she opened the door. But he’d pushed in and demanded the FunGo set. She denied having it. Then he started to shake her but she yelled like a “B-movie Scream Queen” (her words) and he turned and that’s when we showed.

My sister asked her if she had been cosplaying at Princess Tsuki the night before, but Ms. Rinehart didn’t want to talk about that. Neither did she want to go to the hospital, but she still had the shakes. So Cece said she’d stay with her for a little while.

On my way back to our office in St. Cloud, I called Hoxsey to give him an update. He was happy to hear we had the set. We agreed that I’d store it in our office safe, and that we’d meet in the morning and I’d hand it over.

“You guys are great,” he said. “I’m going to give you the best darn Yelp review anyone’s ever gotten, you betcha!”

I decided to hang back with Luna Rinehart. My instinct told me she knew more than she realized, and that getting my brother to skedaddle would help her open up. I called the hotel desk and told the concierge I’d give him fifty bucks if he’d run across the road and get a bottle of rum and a liter of pop.

Her room was filled with cosplay paraphernalia and smelled of glue, burned latex, and makeup. I handed her a filled plastic cup.

“This is all very impressive,” I said. “How did you get into this?”

“It’s a long story,” she said. Then she took a sip of the drink. “Oh wow!”

“You’re not from around here. Minnesota, I mean. I hear the accent.” In Spanish, I asked her what town she was from.

“Ha! San Juan!”

“Ha! Our family’s from Arecibo.”

“That’s amazing. My real name is Luisa Ruiz.”

“Nice to meet you, Luisa. When did your family come over?”

“After Hurricane Maria. We really had no choice. We ended in Roseau because they *said* there would be jobs.”

“Roseau?”

“It’s about six hours north of St. Paul. My parents, they were looking for work. It was a weird change, you know. And the kids in town, they called me ‘Pocahontas’ or ‘Wet-back.’ I hated it. I hated them. I had been messing with cosplay back in San Juan. Over here it became everything I was about. With cosplay I get to make my own identity. I

don't gotta be this or that, you know. I can be whoever I want one day to the next."

After another round of drinks, I got her to talk about the Bigfoot in the room.

"He was definitely really tall. That wasn't lifts or stilts. But that was a cheap suit—it smelled. No self-respecting cosplayer would wear that."

"Noted. And now we have his shoe. Which could be useful, I guess. You want to tell me about taking the figures," I said. "Was that your boyfriend Brent's idea?"

"He's always wanted that stupid set. But, it wasn't his idea."

"Where is he right now?"

"At the convention, of course. He's always stays really late. It's his whole life. The toys and the collectibles. They fill up everything in his house. There's barely room for me, really."

"If you don't mind my saying, I thought your boyfriend was a little handsy with you the other day."

"He was, but not for the reason you probably think. He knew I was freaking about what I'd done the night before, and I would have freaked out more if he hadn't anchored me for that moment when you and your brother came over. Seriously, I know Brent comes off like a jerk. He likes people to think that. But he's not."

"Still, he had you seduce someone to steal their stuff?" I said.

"No! I don't know what you think happened, but that Hoxsey guy was snoring like a chainsaw two minutes after we got in the room from the stuff I put in his drink."

"What stuff?"

"The guy who hired us sent it to us. He said, 'Whatever you do, don't actually have sex with him.'"

"He said that specifically?"

"Yeah."

"Tell me everything he said."

"Yeah, so, some guy called up Brent about a week ago. Said that if we stole the action figures, we'd get a cut of the sale. Brent was so turned on about the idea of messing with Hoxsey—they've been, like, frenemy rivals for years—he barely asked questions. I went along with it because I love Brent, and because I was kind of turned on by the idea of doing it, too, you know, like being a spy."

"Another identity," I said. "Let me guess: You and Brent decided to double-cross this person?"

Luisa/Lucy hung her head. "Yeah. We were supposed to contact her, but Brent and I were talking and we said, 'Screw that' because we realized we had the figures and could sell them and keep all the money for ourselves. What were this person on the phone going to do, you know?"

"But then along comes Bigfoot, so you know these people are serious."

My sister was never going to let me live this down.

I was opening my car door when Bigfoot came up behind me. I could smell him. He slammed my face into the car. My skull was not having a good day.

I woke up when my sister kicked me. Gently, but it was still a kick.

"Bigfoot returned?"

"Holy buckets, he sure did."

“Got the dolls.”

“Suckin’ A.”

“But you made him work for it, gave him a run for his money, a few good licks?”

“Sure did.”

“That’s my big brother—by fifteen minutes!”

“Fifteen more minutes of experience therefore wisdom therefore strength and agility.”

“Let’s go to my dojo one day and spar, so you could show me this strength and agility,” Cece said.

“We don’t have to.”

We decided to grab dinner to talk the case over. I got a Juicy Lucy, and Cece said she wasn’t going to eat but she ended up wolfing down all of my tots.

She told me what Ms. Rinehart had told her.

I said, “So the guy who hired them didn’t want Hoxsey to get the satisfaction of getting satisfied. A jealous lover then? You think Hoxsey’s gay?”

“I asked Luna that. We both agreed definitely not. But it gives me an idea.”

She said we should call the client again. I said I didn’t want to. She said to put him on speaker.

Mr. Hoxsey was understandably surly and disappointed.

Cece, out of nowhere, assured him we’d get the figures.

“Gosh darn, the con ends in two days,” he said. “After that, everyone scatters. I’ll never get my set back, and I’m going to give you the worst Yelp review anyone’s ever gotten, you betcha!”

“Mr. Hoxsey, I know you’re upset,” Cece said. “But we have some ideas.”

I looked at her with my *what gives?* face.

“Tell me, Mr. Hoxsey, who knew you were coming to the con with the FunGos?”

“Everyone! For the past two years, they’ve been my thing.”

“So, literally hundreds of thousands of people know you had them. How many of those people might want be about six and a half feet tall and possibly violent?”

“Most of them.”

“That’s not helpful, Mr. Hoxsey. How about this: what does your wife do for a living?”

“Sonja? She works at a Thrifty White Pharmacy in Milaca.”

I saw where she was going. I said, “Can we ask: where is your wife at the moment? And, just for elimination purposes, how tall is she?”

Saturday was the loudest, most crowded day of the convention. Our client suggested that my brother and I dress up as Men in Black, in order to blend in. I was into it, Casper not so much. But there we were, in black suits and shades, taking turns wading through the three floors and dozen halls and rooms.

It had turned out that Hoxsey’s wife was only five-four. But she hadn’t been home at eleven p.m. My gut told me she was somehow involved with our sasquatch.

We reasoned that whoever nabbed the dolls would have to come back to the con. We hoped that he was planning to sell the dolls, and there was no better, more immediate place to offload them.

But in the sea of bodies, it was impossible to spot anything besides the odd full-size

Transformer.

To top it all off, the masquerade contest was starting in Hall C. Thousands of people flowed into the room. Inside, it was like George Lucas or Stan Lee or one of those guys had exploded. It was a parade of IPs. There were more than a few Chewbaccas. But no Bigfoot.

“This is hopeless,” I said.

My brother shrugged, ready to give up. “There’s just too many people.”

“I seriously don’t know how we’re going to find them.”

At that moment, Casper and I turned to each other. We were searching in the wrong place.

Simultaneously, we said, “Lost & Found.”

Where was the easiest place to buy and sell in stolen goods in a giant place like this?

That was the real reason Ebersol had pulled us into his office the first day we arrived. It wasn’t so much to show us he was king of the castle. He wanted to make sure we weren’t investigating him.

We were looking around for a spot to stake out the office when we got a lucky break: along came Bigfoot, heading straight for the “Lost & Found.”

It was a distinctive enough costume. But we knew it was him because he was carrying Luna’s duffel bag. And when he started to run as soon as he saw us, he limped.

“See,” I said to Cece. “I did do some damage.”

“Well done!”

We caught him making his way for the stairs. But with his limp and the compact crowds, he saw he had lost.

He collapsed against a wall and sank slowly to the floor. It takes a long time for a giant to sink to the floor.

“I’ve had enough,” he said. He pulled off his mask. Steam heat came out of it.

Cece took a picture of his face. “I’m texting our client.”

A moment later he texted back: *That’s Ted! My neighbor and BFF.*

“Best friend, huh?” I said to Ted. “Have you been having carnal relations with Sonja Hoxsey?”

Ted nodded, his face slick with sweat.

“Hold on,” Cece said. She had opened the duffel. “There’s nothing here. Only newspaper.”

“Aw, cripes!” Ted looked genuinely surprised.

“She set you up,” I said.

“He’s a distraction,” Cece said.

In the car, my brother kept nagging me about Ebersol, that we had to turn him in, let the authorities know about the racket he was running.

“We’re not cops,” I reminded him for the hundredth time since we started this profession. “Besides, we have no proof.”

Casper shook his head. “Ted admitted that he was going there to sell them.”

“But Hoxsey’s wife tricked him.”

“But why? What does she want with the figures?”

“Something Luna said made me think of why. That this con and these fantasy things were her boyfriend’s whole life. I just hope we get there in time.”

Casper turned into the lot of the Metro Inn, where Ted had told us Sonja had been staying. Night had fallen, but we could see light coming from the back of the lot. It was a fire.

When we got out of the car we saw Sonja Hoxsey. We could tell by the bright red hair Ted had described. She sat in a foldout chair in front of a barbecue egg that was burning up something good. At her feet were the boxes the FunGo figures had been in.

When we approached, it was obvious she knew who we were by the way she rolled her eyes.

“So it wasn’t about the insurance?” I said.

“Maybe. At first. See, Conan kept these things on our mantle. Took up more space than our kids’ pictures. At night he’d move them into the bedroom, up to a shelf above our TV. I fell asleep every night looking at these gosh darn things. I ain’t sad to see ‘em go.”

In the cool night, the fire was warming, but my brother and I had to move away from the toxic smoke.

Casper turned to me and said, “We better call Mr. Hoxsey.”

“Yeah, we better,” I said. “Oh hey, I was going to ask, how is the website coming along?”

“Well, I thought we could put a picture of Bigfoot’s shoe on the front page. That’ll bring in lots of traffic.”

“Good idea, yeah, sure. You betcha.”

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