

# Quality control

A palpable hit.

**Marissa Lingen**

The video conferencing at the United Nations was finally at a level where they could take supervillains' calls without having to consult with three different secretaries to make the picture appear. This resulted in a far more relaxed atmosphere and a certain degree of goodwill between the ambassadors and those bent on their destruction — and, of course, the destruction of the human race.

Junia Soto was new to the position of secretary-general, so she had no idea that this goodwill existed. She had spent a long day looking at resolutions and was more than a bit annoyed to be interrupted on her way out of the door by a call from someone threatening to end all life on the planet. She was even more piqued that the Security Council seemed to expect her to deal with this rather than passing it off on one of the junior delegates or, better yet, their staffers.

"I had hoped to deal with issues of human rights, health and the environment in my term as secretary-general," she said. "I haven't had any experience with supervillains."

"You must hear him out, Madam Secretary," said the French councillor. "We never dismiss a threat like this lightly."

"Never?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"If they can find our private number, they're worth taking seriously," said the councillor from the United Kingdom. "A good secretary-general is something of a Renaissance man. Er, person."

"All right, all right," she sighed. "But if you want me to take care of this, you must let me take care of this. Keep quiet and don't interfere."

The members of the Security Council were not accustomed to being spoken to in that way, the last secretary-general having been a rather mild-mannered gentleman from a swiftly disappearing island nation, but they exchanged sceptical glances and agreed. Junia flicked on the video conference.

"This is the secretary-general," she said.

A bald man in a lab coat glowered at her

from the screen. "I am Mister Astounding!"

"And what is this call regarding?"

"I told your receptionist that! This is a grave threat to all the peoples of Earth."

"Then you've come to the right place."

His face twisted further into a scowl, and he brandished a box with a large, prominent red button on it at the camera lens.

"Do not mock me, Secretary! I have in my possession a doomsday device of my own creation! I am a very distinguished mad scientist! If you don't give me



12 billion dollars in varied currency equivalents, I will destroy all life on Earth!"

"Mister — Amazing, was it?"

"Astounding!"

"I'm sorry, Mister Astounding. What I need to know is: what kind of testing has your doomsday device undergone?"

He didn't say anything for a moment.

"Mister Astounding, we can't give you funding for an untested project."

"I'm not applying for a grant! I'm threatening you! You and the rest of the human race! Don't think I won't go through with it! Don't test me! You will live only long enough to regret it!"

Junia smiled sympathetically. "I do see that, Mister Astounding, but we need to know how credible a threat we're dealing with. I'm sure you're a professional, but we can't let it out that there was no verification, or we'd have to hand out money to Mediocre Man and his sidekick Could Be Worse

Boy, just because they *said* they could destroy the planet. And then they're sipping drinks on the beach and we don't have the money for hard-working supervillains like yourself. Do you see my concern?"

"It's a doomsday device! I didn't build it with a stun setting! What would that do, piss off every lifeform on the planet? Give them all a mild cold?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Mister Astounding, but you do understand our problem. For all we know, that's all your actual device would do. Or it could destroy only a quarter of life on the planet. We have to be selective."

He sighed. "Yes, I see. I may be a mad scientist, but I'm still a scientist."

"And scientists have to test their theories and prototypes extensively," Junia prompted.

"Of course we do. Without it, I would just be a madman, and not a mad scientist at all."

"Precisely."

"Of course, this really makes me more of a mad engineer..."

"Many distinguished minds have worked in both disciplines."

His shoulders slumped. "Is there anything...?"

"If you could find another planet for testing purposes..."

"And record evidence of the destruction, yes, of course!" he said.

"But not Mars," she said. "Mars is too close. And not Venus. Too many volatiles in the atmosphere."

"An Earth-like planet," he mused. "I'll get back to you."

"Wonderful. We'll be waiting for your call." She flipped the video conferencing off and turned to the Security Council. They stared at her, mouths agape.

She leaned back in her chair and grinned. "And you people were wondering how the human race was going to fund a space programme. How many more of these supervillains are there, I wonder? Money for nanotechnology research just isn't where I'd like it to be." ■

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