

## Face of the Enemy

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/12628) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/12628>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Teen And Up Audiences</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">Gen</a>
Fandoms:	<a href="#">X-Men (comics)</a> , <a href="#">Marvel</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">Abigail Brand/Hank McCoy</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Abigail Brand</a> , <a href="#">Hank McCoy</a> , <a href="#">Grrix</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Angst</a> , <a href="#">Character Study</a>
Language:	English
Collections:	<a href="#">Focus on Female Characters</a>
Stats:	Published: 2009-11-16 Words: 3,598 Chapters: 1/1

# Face of the Enemy

by [Selena](#)

## Summary

Alien mind games. Abigail Brand confronts truths and lies at the end of the Skrull Invasion.

## Notes

**Disclaimer:** Characters and situations owned by Marvel.

**Spoilers:** For *Secret Invasion*, *Astonishing X-Men* up to the end of the *Unstoppable* arc, and *Illuminati*.

**Thanks to:** Likeadeuce, for beta-reading.

**Author's note:** Should be understandable if all you know about *Secret Invasion* is that the Skrulls invaded. And yes, the title is pinched from *Babylon 5*; I couldn't resist.

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The Skrull waiting for her in the NYPD interrogation room which had been temporarily annexed for the purpose was the third, and he looked as numb as she felt. The device Richards had whipped up to prevent more shapeshifting hummed behind the door that closed as soon as she had entered. The Skrull didn't even raise his head, but she recognized him, nonetheless, and for the first time in a while, Abigail Brand felt there might be a point to what she had been ordered to do.

"I told you I believe in insurance, Grrix," she said, and leaned back against the door. There used to be a table and chairs in the room, presumably, but they had been removed. SHIELD's Hellcarrier was gone, just like SWORD's headquarters, the Peak, and Reed Richards had blown up the Baxter Building himself. A New York police station was laughably lacking in security by comparison, but all the high tech had nearly brought them to ruin anyway, so this would have to do for now.

The Skrull she had last seen on her first day in the Peak recognized her as well. He had been a diplomat, then, one of the faces the Skrull used to smile at them between atrocities, as Zarin had put it, Zarin, who hadn't been human but had died with the humans working for SWORD nonetheless. Less than twenty four hours ago. Zarin's body was still drifting through space, along with all the others.

"And I told you," Grrix replied, "that we were watching your meteoric rise with attention, Special Agent Brand." He smiled at her. It was the imitation of a human smile, something not natural to his own body language; Skrulls expressed amusement differently, and she wondered whether he used the gesture to mock her or just because he had played a human being so long he didn't have to think about it anymore. "Or is that just Brand, now? As we both find ourselves earthbound and bereft of a career."

This might be her lucky break, if such a thing still existed. When she had first met him, he hadn't been able to resist taunting her with a cryptic hint about their invasion plans. This was a man interested in playing games, a man basking in what superiority he had left because he could tell himself he had outsmarted her once, and this might be why she could get him to talk.

"Interesting," she said, all too aware her ability to project self-control and inscrutability was severely compromised. She didn't have her glasses, her uniform was dirty and torn, and there were spatters of blood on her face. Brand could have cleaned up; this station's facilities were working. But she knew the prisoners she was about to interrogate would see and smell it that blood on her, and she wanted them to.

It came from the Skrulls she had killed when capturing one of their ships. Space had felt a little less cold after that, but this wasn't about vengeance. This was about buttons to push, and the chance, the very slight chance, that there were still things they could learn from the ruin this day had brought.

"You must know," Grrix said, "that they'll never trust you again. Letting you interrogate us, this might be the last thing they let you do. They'll wonder. You were the only survivor. Their precious space station blows up and everyone dies, except for you. I'd be curious myself if I didn't have the answer already."

"Next you'll tell me I'm really one of your sleeper agents and will turn into a Skrull any minute," she said coldly. "You can do better, Ambassador."

He hummed a bit to himself, and she waited. There would be no distractions. She had drunk some water between interrogations, but she hadn't eaten anything yet. If she did, all the exhaustion would catch up with her, and she couldn't afford that, not yet. If there was one more bomb, one more death waiting, they had to know.

"No, you're not a Skrull. But you recognized me. You recognized me right away. Humans usually don't. They say we look the same to them. But then... you're not quite human. Are you?"

This wasn't a state secret, but Brand wasn't in the habit of handing out the information, either. People who worked directly with her at SWORD usually guessed, sooner or later, because they had other aliens as comparisons and were trained to spot non-human body language. The only person she had explicitly told had been Hank McCoy.

"There is one thing I have always wanted to ask a hybrid," Grrix said. The pupils in his eyes did not contract under the bright light. She knew hers did not, either. "How does it feel to be a natural traitor? You must be, no matter whether you choose your mother's race, or your father's. In either case, one loyalty is betrayed." Again, his lips moved in the imitation of a human smile. "And now they'll wonder whether they weren't wrong about the one you chose."

"Better, but not good enough. Your recruitment skills are lousy," Brand returned. "If that's what this is." She knew it wasn't. He assumed this interview was recorded and would be viewed and listened to by what was left of human intelligence, and he wanted revenge on her for freeing Richards and killing the crew, or maybe he just felt petty. One more enemy brought down, even though the battle was lost. In a way, she could respect that. "How about your survival skills?" she continued.

"You won't kill me," he said. "I have information you need."

"You're not the only prisoner, and we already won, so any information you have is just some footnote," she retorted. "Not without use, but not a must, either. You're right, though. I won't kill you. Not even if you beg me to."

She let silence fall between them. It wasn't yet time to elaborate on her threat, and using a prisoner's imagination against them was one of the earliest lessons she had learned. It wasn't much of a silence, though. The vibrations from Richards' machine weren't the only noise interrupting it. At this moment, there were far too many people in this building. By now, civilians trying to find out what happened to people they lost sight of during the invasion would be coming to police stations, and if they found out they were dealing with an impromptu mix-up of various secret services, they would be even more insistent. There was

an incessant swelling and ebbing of voices, shouting, demanding, sobbing. Normally, she would find it irritating beyond belief and yell at some luckless orderly to keep everyone the hell away, but space had been so quiet when she had drifted through it, instant vacuum making the explosion of the Peak utterly soundless. So very, very quiet.

"Tony Stark found the originals," Brand said. "The people you were impersonating. So if you think you can bargain with their lives, think again. Do you have anything else to offer?"

"Yes," he said in a sudden vicious rush. "Tony Stark is the reason why we're here. He and Richards, and that bald cripple, Xavier. Ask them about their visit to our homeworld. Just ask them."

He could be lying, or twisting the truth, for the same reason why he had talked about the unreliability of hybrids before. Trying to taint as many people as he could with suspicion. Or he could be telling the truth. Either way, she had to keep him talking, and since she apparently had finally gotten under his skin, she had to continue provoking him.

"Are you sure it was just them?" Brand asked. "You don't want to throw in Ms. Marvel or Norman Osborn as well? I wouldn't blame you for going after Osborn, you know. He did kill your queen today."

"Are *you* sure Stark found everyone?" Grix returned. "We're not stupid, Agent Brand. We didn't keep them all in the same place."

She tried her best to look skeptical. "If you ask me, it was stupid to keep them alive at all. So forgive me for not taking you for the brightest invaders around."

"We needed the original genetic template for refreshments," the Skrull said matter-of-factly. "For the long term impersonations. But by all means, let's exchange methods. How would *you* have handled it?" He turned his hands towards her, palms wide open, fingers pointing to the ceiling. "After all, you have so much practice... at impersonating a human."

She opened her mouth to say she *was* human and froze. She hadn't said it, but even thinking of saying it was a sloppy beginner's mistake, a sign he had got to her. Several days without sleep weren't an excuse. She had trained for this.

"A pity you can't shapeshift. You'll have to die your hair soon. And wear those glasses, what are they called, contact lenses? Green will be so unfashionable down here. They'll look at you, and they'll all think the same thing, and it won't even be 'hybrid'. Alien. They'll look at you and think you're an alien, and what should happen to all aliens. You'll be in my position very soon, my dear, so consider what you say and do."

"Give me names," Brand said, fighting the urge to kill him. She didn't have a gun on her, but then, she wouldn't need one. She could kill him with her hands, her hands that were still gloved, absurd as that looked given the state her uniform was in. She could feel the energy flowing into them, the utterly inhuman heat, and it took more effort than usual to call it back before it got to the point where the gloves wouldn't have hidden it anymore. "If you have more people stashed somewhere, and more Skrulls around impersonating them, give me their names."

"Hank McCoy," he said immediately.

She didn't close her eyes. You never, ever let a Skrull out of sight, not even with some backup to ensure he couldn't shapeshift, especially not on a day where tech had failed on a spectacular level already. But she did fix her eyes on a point on his shoulder and silently counted to ten.

"That's a lie," she said, as expressionless as possible. "Not even a good one. You already tried a McCoy impersonation in the Savage Land, and it was so bad that everyone found out before I ever got there. Bad show, Ambassador."

"But you never found the original," Grizz said, delight burbling in his voice, and she knew she had betrayed herself. "He wasn't among the people Stark discovered, was he?"

"Because you never had him," she said. "Your impersonation was bad because it was based on out of date records, not a living template. Just like your Captain America. Do you claim to have the real Steve Rogers stashed somewhere as well?"

He ignored her attempt at deflection. "Why, not-much-longer-an-agent Brand. One gets the impression you don't want me to testify that Hank McCoy is a Skrull. Whyever could that be?"

"Because lies are useless to us," she said, trying to get control of the conversation back, inwardly cursing in every language she knew. "If you have nothing else..."

"And here I thought it was just a rumour," Grizz said. "Human gossip. I don't pretend to share human proclivities, but it seemed a bit unlikely to me, especially for a woman so desperate to be human and nothing but human. Well. Maybe it's a comfort to you, knowing he's not *really* a walking, talking beast but a member of the foremost civilisation of the galaxy. It should make you feel less unnatural. More human." He regarded her thoughtfully, then he produced an utterly human chuckle. "Why don't you call in someone else, hybrid? I really feel like testifying now. And sharing this cell with my fellow Skrull. Though he probably will get his own cell. Humans are so generous. And his own interrogator, given the whole conflict of interests issue. Do you think Mr. Osborn could spare some time from celebrating the murder of our sovereign? He seems to be the man of the hour. I'm sure he wouldn't mind."

She had lost two hundred and fifty five people today, in an instant, all of which had worked for her. The majority of them hadn't liked her, and she hadn't intended to send birthday cards or fuzzy pats on the shoulder their way, either, but they had been her people, and she had failed to protect them. She had done a bad job of protecting her entire planet, come to that, and it was her planet, by choice as much as by birth. If all of this resulted in her death, well, she had lived with that possibility from the start. But it wouldn't result in *this*. There was no way she would allow...

"You're right," Brand said, meeting Grizz' eyes again. "I'm not human. Not really. I just pretend to be."

For the first time, he looked faintly surprised.

"When I found Reed Richards on your ship," Brand continued, "he was stretched out in every direction and fixed that way, so he couldn't use his ability against you. Now, someone human would have just thought, those Skrull bastards. Me, I wondered if I could do that. If I had to."

The glee started to drain from Grizz' face.

"Humans don't think of shapeshifters the same way they do of Mr. Fantastic," Brand said. "But what you do isn't that different. Not when it comes down to it. So you tell me. Given the same devices in place, how far could I stretch you?"

"They wouldn't let you," Grizz said.

"I told you I won't kill you. Not even if you beg me to."

"They won't let you. You're living on borrowed time. Tomorrow, you're their alien scapegoat, and you know it. And they won't follow your orders today anymore, either."

"Today, I was ordered to interrogate you," Brand said, every word now in Grizz' own language. "Do you really think they care how I do it? After everything you've done to them? Maybe they will kill me tomorrow, but today, they'll cheer me on."

The syllables fell from her mouth, lethal and true, and every click told her how utterly horrified Hank McCoy would be if he could hear her. She turned and raised her hand to enter the combination that would open the cell door. Somewhere in her head, she was pleading with someone, but she didn't know with whom.

"Wait," Grizz said.

She remained very still.

"Hank McCoy isn't a Skrull," Grizz said. "You're right. We never could get his template."

Brand still didn't move.

"But I told you the truth about Stark. He and Xavier and Richards, they came to us, they and Strange, and Namor. They claimed to be the champions of this planet, and told us to stay away. It was a challenge, and we responded."

"Anything else?" she asked, and thought of reasons not to kill him. There weren't many. After all, he could change his story as soon as she was out of the door, for the next interrogator. Now that he knew where her weakness was. If you could generate heat with your hands and knew basic Skrull physiology, it wasn't that difficult, and wouldn't even leave marks, if she was careful, not with all the ones he had already from his capture. But if he died directly after this interrogation, it would make his stories, all his stories, that much more plausible to whoever would take over tomorrow.

"There might be. But I do want to stay alive. I'll tell you more," he said, and when she finally turned around again, she saw that he had recaptured his vicious cheer, "tomorrow. And tomorrow. And the day after that. Every day a little more. I promise." He touched the place at

his breast where the crystal he wore before his capture had hung. "I swear by the One." His voice sank to a whisper. "He loves you."

Her father would have killed him right then, posthumous plausibility be damned.

"I'm sure," she said in English, and left the room as quickly as she could. Outside, she ignored the cop drafted as her one-day aide who had monitored the conversation and wanted to know why she had switched languages again, when after the first interrogation they had agreed on English only, for the protocol. Instead of answering, she asked him for his cell. It was an old model, nothing fancy. No Stark Tech, which meant it hadn't been compromised when the Skrull virus struck. Then she went to the emergency exit and started to climb the stairs. It took her a while to reach the roof, but the house wasn't big, not for New York, she really needed the air, and she couldn't go out on the street, not with all the people queuing in front of the entrance. When she was sure she had her breath back, she dialed a number in San Francisco.

He answered after the second tone. She had planned on saying something like "I told you I need someone to question my every move, so tell me again why torture is wrong, and murder", because she really wasn't someone for preliminaries and chit chat, and since that was the reason for her call, she shouldn't prevaricate. Maybe a "so you're alive" first, though she had always considered stating the obvious as incredibly stupid. But when she heard his voice, she found herself babbling, to her utter disgust.

"I saw the moon rise over earth today," she said. "It's overrated. When you're in space."

There was silence on the other end.

"I was on a trajectory that gave me twenty two minutes till burning upon entering the atmosphere, though," she said. "Sucks the romance right out of it."

"Abigail," he said, with something of a strained voice. He was the only one who thought of using her first name, and at full length. But then, he would never use a short form for anything if more syllables would do. And yet, he didn't say anything more right now, just her name, which was so unlike him that she was afraid she was talking to some advanced form of voicemail for a moment. Then it occurred to her that he probably had heard about the Peak exploding, that SWORD was gone, and hadn't been told she was alive. She remembered how he had reacted when she took a hit for him at the Breakworld, and how the fact she hadn't been lethally wounded but quite alive had embarrassed him afterwards.

"Tell me about your day, Professor," she said.

"There are other topics of conversation that could come to mind at this point," he replied, which was more like him, and she finally allowed herself to sit down, dirt and pigeon leftovers be damned. She looked at the skyline with its gaps and the dust rising, probably even more in parts of the city she couldn't see from here.

"Maybe," she said. "But I don't want to hear them. Just tell me about your day."

He took her literally and started with sunrise. She had always liked his voice - hell, she had been crazy about his voice, and still was - even when she had thought he was a know-it-all tree hugger-plus-superhero with a really weird dress sense. Now she couldn't make herself interrupt him. She was so tired, and she didn't really need to be told what he thought about torture and murder. It was there in every word, every multisyllable word, and the glasses he didn't really need, not with his eyes, the old-fashioned waistcoats, the appreciation for coffee complete with a list of brand names he could rattle off if you gave him the slightest opening, and the way he had asked her for the names of those soldiers who had gone with them to the the Breakworld and hadn't come back. He was as familiar with the urge to kill as anyone; she had seen that in him, too. He was as familiar with the urge to hurt. But he chose not to, and when she listened to him go on about the disappointing lack of flowers in anyone's hair in San Francisco, knowing that the fights there had been as bloody as everywhere else in the world, knowing he probably had participated in his share of them and was still busy patching up his teammates right now, she could believe it was worth choosing not to do the most expedient, bloody thing as well. Not because he'd want her to; that was her decision to make, not his. Because the kind of world he lived in seemed to be the one she wanted to protect, and she couldn't imagine him living in her kind of world anyway. She wouldn't want him to.

She probably should go downstairs again, return that cell phone, tell the cops she was done. Write a report for whoever would be in a position to read it tomorrow. Try to find a place to sleep, because the one who had been her home ever since she had joined SWORD didn't exist anymore. But instead, she remained on the roof, breathed in the air filled with dust and listened to his voice, transported through one of the remaining satellites and slightly distorted through a bad reception, and she was at peace.

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