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Switch.blade: School's Out Summer, 2002  
by Edited by Amy Sterling Casil  
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Anthology of Original Fiction

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- \*Contents\*
- "What's This?" Letter from the Editor
- "Connections," by Matt Horgan
- "Penny Lombard and the Heart Ken Found," by Alan Rodgers
- "Oh-Oh," by Ron Collins and John C. Bodin
- "Hell Week at Grant-Williams High," by Vera Nazarian
- "High-Stakes Test," by James Van Pelt
- "Nord's Gambit," by Tobias Buckell
- "The Universe in the Bottom of A Cereal Box," by Amy Sterling Casil
- "Flunking the Assassin," by Michael A. Arnzen
- "Safe as the Dark," by Lisa Silverthorne
- "Why I Bring A Bag Lunch Now," by Tom Gerencer

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\*What's This?\*

\*By Amy Sterling Casil\*

Look, it's summer, so what do you want?  
66,000 words of fantastic fiction from some of your favorites at Fictionwise!

Switch.Blade is an all-new concept. This is the first written-for-Fictionwise anthology of original fiction. Just like Mario Andretti, all of the writers have been in the driver's seat since the first day we thought this up. We wrote about summertime and that incredible feeling when the last bell rings on the last day of school.

Switch.Blade features award-winning and nominated authors: World Fantasy, Stoker, Nebula, John W. Campbell, Writers of the Future, and Analog AnLab poll winners.

You're going to go to some schools unlike any you've ever seen, but don't worry - that "mystery meat special's" still being served. Even if it just might eat you!

Get some lemonade and brace yourself for the cutting edge...

Switch.blade.

\_School's almost out for Sara in Matt Horgan's "Connections." The virtual world of her junior high school connects with the real world in a way that will make you laugh, smile and touch your heart.\_

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\*Connections\*

\*By Matt Horgan\*

Sara's earbud chirped.

\_Two new messages. \_

She hopped off the transport and started up the concrete steps.

Can't I even get in the building? Play messages.

\_Message one. Source: System Administration, education. Votes for group photo location are due by April twenty. Images are due by April twenty-five.

Message two. Source: Admissions, Camp Warren. Pre-registration for summer sessions closes May one. Returning attendees must pre-register to ensure acceptance.\_

Save messages. Flag deadlines in calendar, begin daily reminders and replicate with homenet.

The doors opened when she reached the top of the stairs and the noise of her fellow seventh and eighth-graders hit her like a blast of air. She skipped down the hall to where Rebekkah wrestled with her locker.

"Have you thought about it?" Sara asked. Rebekkah turned quickly, sending her hair spinning around her head in long, golden spirals. She looked like she belonged in another time what with her long hair and dresses -- one reason Sara had asked Rebekkah first.

"What, that crazy idea you had about going to camp?"

"It's not crazy. Wouldn't you like to do something, rather than just plug into VC and sit all day?"

Rebekkah kicked the locker and the door popped open. "I don't just sit all day. My dad let's me use his VR pod for camp."

"You know what I mean."

"Didn't you have fun at Warren last year?" Rebekkah asked.

Sara and Rebekkah had gone to Warren Virtual Camp for four years. "Only because you were there," Sara said. "But this real camp has horses and pigs. And you get to ride them!"

Rebekkah slammed her locker and turned to Sara. "Really? You get to ride a pig?"

"Will you at least think about it?"

\_Class begins in three minutes. \_

"I hear you, bud."

"That's a bad sign," Rebekkah said. "Talking to your bud is like talking to yourself. It means you're nutso."

They joined the crowd milling toward the classrooms.

"Hi, Sara." Powell Dresden passed them heading in the opposite direction, toward the other hall of classrooms.

"Hi, Powell." Without a bud, his ears stood out cleanly; no one heading toward the classrooms with live teachers had a bud. "Did you ever notice that Powell is always smiling?"

Rebekkah ignored her question. She leaned toward Sara and lowered her voice. "I heard those camps are run by some cult -- the Scouts, or something like that. And I heard they're dangerous. Some lunatic once killed a bunch of kids at one. Besides, the only kids that go to those camps are the ones that can't afford to go to VC. You don't want people to think you're one of them do you? I want to go back to Warren with Chad Brewer. He was pretty nice to me last year."

"That was before he became a pop. Let's talk about it after school," Sara said.

"I don't know. I need to download some worddocs Mom wants me to read over the summer."

"Have your bud do that in the background."

"You have to be kidding. I can't even surf if I do anything in the background. Dad said I might be able to get a newer bud next year, but I don't think we can afford it."

\_Linking with classnet.\_

The class was already full. Sara slipped into her seat and her HUD fired up. Dust floated through the image of Ms. Brimley that hovered over her desk. Sara looked at the forty or so holographic Brimley's shimmering over the desks and wondered how many classes, how many students Ms. Brimley spoke to at the same time.

Rebekkah took her seat behind Chad. "Hi, Chad."

Chad glanced over his shoulder and snorted.

Chad had been one of Sara's best friends two years ago, but then his mom got promoted at Intel and he got new clothes and new friends. Sara's dad worked at Intel, too, but he was still stuck in service. She didn't understand what about the net might need fixing, but he was gone almost every night. He ate breakfast with her each morning, though, and met her at the transport each afternoon.

Ms. Brimley cleared her throat. "It has come to our attention that several students have been setting their buds on autorespond and surfing during class. We will find out who's involved, and their parents will be notified."

Sara scanned the room but no one fidgeted.

Ms. Brimley continued. "Next week is the seventh-grade scavenger hunt, so let's break into teams and begin planning."

Sara groaned. She hated scavenger hunts. They didn't make sense -- scouring the net for wickedly bizarre items and information the teachers found interesting. Her bud recorded the hunt list as it scrolled over Brimley's face, then she had it search the net on 'scavenger hunts' and inspected the results. History? A non-net based scavenger hunt -- now that sounded interesting.

\* \* \* \*

Sara passed the pop table. Alissa and Chad watched her walk by and started laughing.

\_Nine new messages. \_

Nine? Play.

\_Message one. Source: anonymous. Nice outfit, loser. Message two. Source: anonymous. Nice outfit, loser. Message three -- \_

Stop. Delete all.

Sara lifted her lunch tray to cover the crest on her jumpsuit. It was a Wal-Mart store brand, a hand-me-down from her sister. The knees and elbows were shiny and the seams frayed. She continued to the back of the cafeteria and dropped her tray next to Rebekkah's. "What's with the pops?" she asked.

Morgan plunked her tray down next to Sara's. "What's ever up with the pops? They think their poop doesn't stink."

"No, there's something else going on." Sara pointed toward the popular clique with a vegstick. The pops crowded around the table, nearly shoulder-to-shoulder; last year there had only been seven, but Sara counted twelve now. "They look like they're talking, but no one's moving their mouth."

Rebekkah threw a pea at her. "What are you talking about?"

"Look, their buds are gone, too," Sara said.

Rebekkah squinted. "How can you tell from here?"

"I noticed it in class," Sara said. "How'd they even go to class without their earbuds?"

Morgan picked at her lunch. "You dunces, they all got implants. My dad says the implants have an audit...auditory interface that makes the message sound like the person sending it."

Morgan threw an imaginary pea at the pops. "Bunch of rich jerks. Hey, what's going on there?" She pointed to where twenty or twenty-five kids

crowded around a long rectangular table. Several started a drumroll with their fingers.

Powell Dresden formed a goal with his thumbs and index fingers. Brita Donali sat across from him with a wedge of white paper held between the tabletop and one finger. She lined the shot up and kicked the paper football with her right index finger. It tumbled end over end as it sailed across the table and through Powell's upright fingers and the cafeteria erupted with laughter and cheers.

Morgan looked at Rebekkah. "Wasn't Powell in your class last year?" she asked.

"Yeah. He used to sit with us a lot, too. I think he flunked and they had to move him to a different class."

"He didn't flunk!" Sara said. "His dad got laid off and Powell had to get rid of his earbud." Sara looked at the cafeteria, at Powell and his friends and at the pops at the front of the room. "Is it just me, or are there more pops \_and\_ more kids without buds now?"

Morgan threw her hands up as if she was trying to ward Sara off. "You think too much, Sara. You need to relax. I know, what are you guys doing Saturday night? My dad's getting me tickets to the Female Pop Music With Integrated Choreography Awards. You want to go?"

Rebekkah dropped her spork. "No way! I heard they're giving Britney Timberlake a lifetime achievement award."

Sara winked at Morgan and tried to sound nonchalant. "I heard her and Justin are on the outs."

"They're always on the outs," Morgan added. "That's the only reason Justin stays with her -- for the ins and outs."

Rebekkah clicked her tongue. "That's gross. You shouldn't make fun of her, you know. She's really sick; they still don't know that much about silicone poisoning."

"She'll never show up," Sara said. "Now that she had her boobs taken out I hear she's auditioning for a new soap opera."

Rebekkah's eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah. It's called the old and the breastless."

Morgan laughed, but Rebekkah just scowled at her.

"I did hear she's supposed to be there," Morgan said. "And after the show you can download a free powerpoint of her greatest hits."

Sara scowled at her vegstick and dropped it on her tray. "Count me out. There's no way Dad will let me use his VR pod," she said. "And my old helmet is out of the question."

Morgan focused on Rebekkah. "How about it? I bet a lot of cute guys will be there."

"That's lame. Most of them will have digital personas they pulled from the net. But ... okay. Let's meet at the award show chat room, and then surf over from there. What are you going to wear?"

Morgan pulled a PDA from her pocket and punched up a picture. "Wait till you see this," she said. "My mom just bought me this great new digital jumpsuit from DKNY. It's programmed to change color automatically whenever a new viewer hits its frame. Hey, Sara, why don't you link up with us Saturday afternoon? We can collab on our homework and watch vids."

Sara's stomach grumbled. "Can't. My home desk's comlink is down, so I can't connect. I'll have to download my homework to my dad's handheld and firewire it to the desk."

"I thought your dad fixed things like that?"

"At work, yeah, but he doesn't have much time to fix things around the house. Have you guys voted on a background for the class picture?" she asked.

Morgan laughed. "A background? I'm still trying to get a decent image to submit. What about you?"

"Same boat. I was wondering, what do you think about having a real class pic taken?"

"What do you mean by a \_real\_ class pic?" Rebekkah asked.

"You know, the whole class goes someplace cool and we have a digitographer snap an image. Don't you think it'd be neat? We could pick someplace exciting."

"Earth to Sara: We can pick an exciting background, and we don't have to hassle with going there." Morgan said.

"But that'd be the fun part; getting out of here as a class and doing something, traveling somewhere. Don't you ever think about stuff like that?"

Morgan and Rebekkah just looked at her.

"You are so weird," Morgan said.

\* \* \* \*

Sara stood in her bathrobe and looked at her image on the VR plane mounted to her closet door. She instructed her earbud to change the background to the Gates fountain in Seattle and dress her in the latest Jaylo jumpsuit. She'd downloaded the jumpsuit as a free trial, but she'd have to convince her parents to buy it before she could use it. Water cascaded down the gold fountain behind her. She pulled her hair above her head, and the image changed to match.

Her bud surrounded her with the images of her classmates from the previous year. A lot of kids wanted to use the fountain for the class picture, but it was too big and bright. No matter what Sara wore, she looked tiny and washed out, insignificant. She changed the background to the Jack Welch Presidential Library, but that didn't help either.

Dad poked his head into the room. "You're still tinkering with your class picture? When is it due?"

"The twenty-fifth. Dad, when you were a kid, did you get to take real class pictures instead of fake ones?"

"Fake ones?"

"You know, they just make it look like we're all together. Why can't we really go somewhere?"

"We used to do a lot more ourselves than people do today," he said.

"But since this is for you class's home page, maybe it's a good thing you won't have to worry about how it turns out." He started out the door then snapped his fingers and turned back. "Oh, don't forget next weekend is Memorial Day weekend. There's the parade webcast, and--"

"Not the race again?"

"It's not just a race. It's the GE-Indy 500." Dad went into his annual history lesson. "Did you know that people used to go to Indianapolis for the real race? Hundreds of thousands of them drove their own cars or rode buses to get there."

Sara pinched her nose thinking of all the cars and buses, and of herself sitting in a rented VR booth for hours. "I like the race. I just hate those Blockbuster VR booths -- they smell like stale popcorn and sweat." Rebekkah told her to watch where she sat -- some people rented the booths to go on virtual dates. Sara didn't know what that meant, but Rebekkah made it sound dirty. "Can't we get our own booth?"

Her dad chuckled. "As if we could afford that."

"It's not fair. You know, some of the kids got these new implants. Their buds are in their heads now."

Her father's smile disappeared and he squatted down to face her. "Buds ... sometimes I think we'd be better off without them. Listen, honey, there will always be kids with more and better things. You can't let that bother you." He held up an old visor he'd rigged with a jack cord. "Mom's going to the grocery, why don't you go with her?"

It was Friday night. They'd received a shipment from the grocer on Wednesday; their fridge and pantry would place the next order Monday night. "Did they forget to send something?"

"No. Mom's just feeling a little adventurous. She's going to modify one of our shopping filters to browse for something different."

"No thanks. I better finish this image."

\* \* \* \*

"Where's Dad this morning?" Sara asked her mom.

"He decided to sleep in. He has a meeting at work this afternoon, and wanted to be rested up for it."

"On Saturday?"

"He thinks he's up for a promotion. If he gets it, we'll be able to get you some new clothes, so keep your fingers crossed."

Sara threw her plate into the recycler.

"Where's your counter?" her mom asked.

Sara pulled the watch-like device from her pocket. "It hurts my wrist. Why do we have to wear these stupid things anyway?"

"We've been through this before, Sara."

"But why do they have to keep track of everything we eat?"

"It helps keep us healthy. And our insurance would cost more without them. You'll get used to it."

Sara strapped it on and the display activated. She couldn't feel anything, but it would bother her all day knowing it was watching her, planning the type of food she needed to eat.

She grabbed her digipack and headed for the door.

"Where are you off to?"

"My desk is still down, so I thought I'd go to Rebekkah's and link through hers to do my homework."

\* \* \* \*

Sara stepped off the transport as it glided to a stop. She asked a kiosk on the corner and found she was less than a block from the grocery store. She unfolded the scavenger hunt list Brimley had given them. The first two items Sara had circled were "watercress" and "Ginger Coke."

The store was all wide aisles and carts with squeaky wheels. Sara carried a basket and gaped at all the different foods. Her heart beat in her ears and she glanced down at the counter at her wrist, hoping it wouldn't log some type of fault and report back to her parents.

The store was full of people. Women, men and whole families pushed large carts filled with food, or children, talking, laughing and arguing as they moved down the aisles. Sara wove in and out of the traffic, trying to avoid being run over, passing room-sized refrigerators and freezers and more fruits and vegetables than she thought existed.

"What is all this stuff?"

Please clarify query.

That wasn't a query. Mute.

It didn't look like any store she'd been to online, where the virtual shelves were organized into sections she understood like "breakfast" and "dinner" and filled with the products her family typically used. Here Sara eyed shelf after shelf of bright yellow and green boxes declaring "New" and "Improved."

The store had a distinctive smell, too -- a mix of lemon and cold and something she couldn't place -- although the odor was often overshadowed by the stronger scent from whatever aisle she happened to be in.

There were too many people; no way there could be enough clean air for everyone. Sara looked for an exit sign.

"Excuse me." A young woman pushed a shopping cart with two small children strapped into its seats. She sang to them as she navigated past Sara, steering back toward the shelves to make room for a dark-skinned man with white hair over a wrinkled and sagging face. One of the children held out his hand as they passed, his fingers a web of wet and sticky goo. "Ookie?" he asked.

Sara smiled, threw a box in her basket and followed them down the aisle. She stopped behind a man in a white coat stacking fresh boxes on the shelves, hoping he'd stop for a second so she wouldn't have to interrupt him. He had a broad back and the coat was pulled halfway up his hairy forearms. After a few seconds, he looked over his shoulder and gave her a toothy grin.

"Can I help you, little lady?" he asked.

Sara glanced down at her list, though she knew what she wanted, and tried to make the paper stop shaking. "Um, can you tell me where I'd find watercress?"

He smiled and pointed toward the signs suspended from the ceiling. "Aisle 7, herbs and spices, just past the canned vegetables."

The signs told her she was in aisle twenty-three.

"You know," he said. "I need to stretch my legs for a minute anyway. Why don't you follow me and I'll help you get what you need?"

\* \* \* \*

The sun was fully up when she passed a park on her way to the library. The small patch of grass looked inviting. Two men and a woman ran patch cables and tuned instruments on the small stage that had been set up in a corner of the park's open field. All the benches were taken, so Sara followed the example of the growing crowd and dropped to the ground, Indian style. A dog barked in the distance.

A band came on stage and the crowd quieted. Sara looked around, at everyone's ears. A few had buds, but most didn't.

The drummer began playing and Sara felt the vibrations in the air, in her chest. She reached into her bag, pushed the jar of watercress to the side, and removed the box she'd found at the store. Peanut brittle; she'd never heard of it. She removed the counter from her wrist and put it in her pocket.

\* \* \* \*

She used the railing to pull herself up the stone steps. The library towered over the street, making the rest of the neighborhood look like a model. She had to take two steps for each stair, and when she made it to the top, the doors stared at her like giant, rectangular eyes.

The air inside was dry and tickled her nose. She nearly stumbled as she looked at the long rows of shelves that stretched into the distance and toward the ceiling. They looked taller than her house, their addresses marked in black decimal numbers on red placards at the end of each row. She pulled a bound worddoc from a shelf. It was heavy and the cover was rough against her fingers, the corners tattered and bent down. When she fanned the pages she could see dust fly off and disperse into the air.

There were more people here than Sara expected. They sat at long tables or in overstuffed chairs. She listened to them whisper, to the rustling of pages.

A boy -- Sara guessed he was fifteen or sixteen -- pushed a cart through the aisles, periodically pulling a worddoc from the cart and placing it on a shelf. His hair was cut short and she immediately noticed he didn't have a bud.

"Can you help me find something?" she asked.

"Sure. What do you need?"

Sara held out her list. "It's a worddoc about a farm. It was written by a man named Orwell."

The boy pushed the cart to the side and laughed. When Sara pulled the paper back, he stopped laughing. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, it's just when you said worddoc...you've never been here before, have you?"

His smile seemed genuine and her feelings recovered. "What's funny about a worddoc?" she asked.

"We don't have worddocs here, but I can help you find your book."

\* \* \* \*

Sara waited behind her locker door. She'd gone all day Sunday without using her bud, and had even removed it for a couple hours after dinner. She quickly adjusted to the quiet, but her ear itched emptily and she put it back in so she could get to sleep. It would take a while, but she could be patient.

Rebekkah and Morgan rounded the corner, talking and giggling about the awards show. "Where were you all day yesterday?" Morgan asked. "I tried to chat you, but my peoplefinder said you weren't on the net."

Sara handed them each a small bottle.

"What the heck is this?" asked Morgan.

"Ginger Coke -- from the scavenger hunt list."

Morgan looked through the green plastic bottle. "You weren't supposed to order it, doofus," she said. "All you had to do was find it and mark the location."

"I didn't order it. I went and got it myself. I went on a real scavenger hunt to the grocery and ... oh, you guys won't believe this. On the way to the library I stopped at a live concert at a park."

"Why?" Rebekkah asked.

Sara lifted her arms and spun in a circle. "It was so cool. Everyone was singing and dancing."

Rebekkah whistled. "Is that a new outfit?"

Sara's jumpsuit was gray with a bright yellow pinstripe that ran up the legs and down the sleeves. "My dad got a big promotion at work and took me shopping." She lowered her arms and uncovered the Wal-Mart crest. "He said I could get anything I wanted."

Rebekkah and Morgan looked at the crest, then at each other.

Sara held up a sheet of paper. Hand sketches of wood cabins on a shoreline decorated the sheet.

"You've got to be kidding," Rebekkah said. "Camp Crystal Lake? It sounds like a bad horror vid."

Morgan placed her hand on Sara's shoulder. "People are going to make fun of you, Sara. Just like last year when everyone heard you rented a VR booth at Blockbuster for that stupid race."

Sara smiled because Morgan and Rebekkah were the only ones she'd ever told about the race. "I won't have to worry about that this year," she said. "I talked to my dad last night at dinner and he's getting us tickets -- real tickets to see the race in Indianapolis. Doesn't that sound like the most fun ever?"

\* \* \* \*

Copyright, 2002, by Matt Horgan

\_The summer Ken turned twelve, he found a heart. A real heart. In one of the strangest, most affecting stories you'll ever read, Stoker Award-winning author Alan Rodgers tells about "Penny Lombard and the Heart Ken Found." \_

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\*Penny Lombard and the Heart Ken Found\*

\*By Alan Rodgers\*

Ken found the heart the summer he turned twelve.

It was a Thursday, and he was hiking along the side of the two lane highway that ran toward Thonotosassa, going like he went every week to the shop out beyond the outskirts of town. The shop specialized in comic books, and Ken was big on comics. Spent more of his time reading and rereading the things than he'd've wanted to admit -- even to another fan.

He spotted the heart because he had his eye on the grass, searching for returnable soda bottles.

He was looking for soda bottles because the cost of all the comics he liked to buy was onerous, and he hoarded his money all week long to be certain he could cover the cost of the week's haul.

When he found enough of them he had money to go to the place across from the comic shop and get himself a soda and a bag of chips. One of the best things in the world was to sit back on the mowed grass field on the west side of the convenience store with a humongous bottle of soda and a family size bag of Doritos and a tall pile of new comics. Sometimes on Thursdays Ken would sit there reading until it got too dark to read -- and in the summer that was on toward nine o'clock. Reading till that late meant not getting home before ten, and when his mom noticed that he was in trouble. But most weeks she didn't notice, and Ken didn't make a habit of worrying about it.

Anyway, he was walking on the shoulder of the highway when he spotted something red-brown and shiny off to the right, where the grass bent down to become a drainage ditch. His eye was quick enough that he didn't think for a



moment that it might be a soda bottle -- but it wasn't anything he recognized, either. And since he was early enough that the comics probably wouldn't get there before he did if he didn't slow down, he stopped and turned and stooped to see whatever the strange thing was.

And that act changed him forever.

How could he ever be the same after he'd seen that heart? He couldn't. Ken knew that without even giving it a moment's thought.

Surrounded by grass somehow greener than all the other grass everywhere in the ditch, and its color and its texture were like meat you see wrapped in stick-to-itself plastic in the grocery store. Except that there were half-crusty bits of drying blood all over it, especially on the ripped-up ends of those arteries. And that membrane-skin wrapped so tight around the flesh -- but weren't kidneys like that, with membranes? Ken wasn't sure. Kidneys were one of those things he always avoided looking at when he was at the meat counter; they were too gross to want to think about eating.

But the real thing about that heart wasn't the membrane or the crusty scabrous blood or the fact that it looked almost like something at the butcher-counter.

No.

None of that counted for much of anything at all.

What made the heart so strange and special was the fact that it was \_alive.\_

Alive and beating easy and steady as you please; beating exactly the same quiet mesmerizing rhythm Ken always heard when he listened to his own heart.

"Wow," Ken said, sort of mumbling to himself, not really realizing that the word came out of his mouth.

Not far away from the heart at all was a hungry-looking centipede. Ken pictured it crawling up into one of those ragged-looking veins, having itself a royal feast of human heart, and he felt a little sick with himself. He had to get that thing up off the grass, get it away from...

No, he told himself. Wait. What are you supposed to do when you find a human heart lying in the grass?

Now, Ken didn't have the first shred of evidence that the heart was human. He had no word of any anatomical authority; and certainly what he knew of anatomy himself -- was a good deal less than expert. The truth was that he'd spent too much time staring at disproportionately sketched figures in the pages of comics books, and had even less sense of anatomy than most. It's to his credit that he knew about this gap in his knowledge. It reflects less well on him that he didn't let his ignorance stop him from jumping to conclusions.

Which he did: the instant he set eyes on it, Ken was still certain that the throbbing mass in that ditch was a true and honest human heart. And there wasn't a voice in the entire world that could have convinced him otherwise.

He was right, of course. But that's beside the point.

Ken stared at the heart, and he wondered: was a living heart like a dead body, maybe? Ken had seen lots of cop shows, and there were sometimes cops in his superhero comics, too. When you find a dead body you're supposed to call the cops. You shouldn't even touch it, unless you want to somehow accidentally leave evidence so that it looks like you committed a murder that you didn't commit. You call the cops and then you wait there so you can tell them how you found it, or maybe even just anonymously call and tell them where it is.

But the heart wasn't a body, it was just a piece of one. And anyhow, it wasn't dead. And you just can't leave something alive and human in the weeds in the highway drainage ditch for the bugs to eat. Just \_can't.\_

Or could you? Could he? Ken knew that if he picked that thing up, emptied out the bottles in his plastic shopping bag, and dropped it in, he was letting himself in for all sorts of trouble. Serious-type trouble. A heart had to have someone it belonged to, after all, and if it was still alive, maybe the one who'd lost it was alive, too. What if he came back here looking for

it? And what if it wasn't here any more? Well, Ken was tempted to think, then it served him right for leaving his heart out here for the bugs to eat. Of course, that wasn't very charitable, and Ken knew it, and besides, a heart wasn't the sort of thing you could just get by without. Not for long, at least. And even if he could get by without it, what sort of a person could anybody be when they didn't have their heart? They were serious moral questions. To Ken's mind, at least.

And there were other concerns, too, that had nothing to do with right or wrong. Like: there wasn't another boy in his whole class who had an extra heart that wasn't his own. Let alone one that was still alive. Something else, too, that he knew he wasn't old enough to put his finger on yet, but all the same he knew it was there. Something maybe that had to do with girls, except that he knew all about girls from that copy of Playboy he and Tom Waters had found down to the dump on a Saturday afternoon in early spring. Knew about them more directly, too, from the time not even a week ago when Penny Lombard had kissed him in front of the television in her den while her folks and his were upstairs playing bridge.

The centipede wasn't moving real quick, but it was beginning to take an interest in the heart, no question. Waving its little bitty hair-thin antenna-feelers at a big patch of crusty blood; roll-walking on a dozen dozen legs slow circuitous round and inward; easing a slow circle narrowing toward the heart progressively....

A car full of older teenagers drove speeding past Ken, riotous and rude -- the driver holding down his blaring horn as someone in the back seat jeered out the window. The guy in the front passenger seat threw something at him, but it didn't come anywhere close and Ken didn't care what it was as long as it didn't hit him.

It isn't any old heart, Ken told himself. Partly he was rationalizing, because he was afraid, and he knew it. I bet it's like those movies you see stuff about in Fangoria. Plastic guts and arms and things like that. And when they need something to move, they put a little bitty motor inside it.

Before he could give it another moment's thought he reached down, lifted the heart -- for half a breath it felt as though the thing was melting in his hands -- and touched it to his tongue. To prove, once and for all, that it was made of bitter plastic instead of coppery-tasting blood.

When he tasted blood he almost screamed.

The heart was in his hands, and it was still beating -- beating harder, now, and Ken could see thick-gooey clotting blood deep down inside its drying arteries. Drop it, a small voice down inside him said, drop it and run and never look back or it will follow you forever. But he couldn't just drop the heart back down into the dirty grass, any more than he could have stood by and let a dog sun itself out on the highway. He had a responsibility to the thing, because he was alive and it was alive and both of them were there.

And besides. That heart was a pretty cool thing. Sure, it was a gross-out. But it was cool anyway. He held the heart in his left hand, and with his right he emptied his plastic shopping bag of the dozen or so returnable bottles he'd managed to collect. When he was done he set the heart gently down into the bag and wiped his hands against the thighs of his jeans to clean them of the phlegm-sticky blood the heart had got on them.

And then he started off again for the comic-book store.

All the way there he could hear the heart's beat rattle and rattle as it pressed and pulled the crisp plastic sides of the shopping bag.

\* \* \* \*

When he was being honest with himself, Ken was puzzled as to exactly why he was always in such a hurry to get the new comics. Why was he so compulsive about making sure that he didn't miss a single issue of a single title? He didn't know.

But he was that compulsive about it, he really was, and this was

Thursday, and Thursday was when the new comics came in at Out-of-Town Comics -- the shop on the way to Thonotosassa. They got them the better part of a week earlier than anyone else; the manager had them shipped in by air from the printing plant, and he always picked them up from the airport himself. His shop might be a dingy cheap rental in the middle of nowhere, but he didn't spare any expense making sure that he was the first to get the week's comics; the man knew his market well. Ken and his friends didn't care much that they had to walk five miles to get the new comics, and they didn't care at all what the place looked like. But they cared a lot about getting the things.

It wasn't much of a week at Out-of-Town Comics. Larry had already come back from the county airport with the week's comics, but what he'd come back with wasn't anything all that exciting. The new Avengers, and this month's Incredible Hulk; another installment of the badly-rendered Yellowjacket miniseries. Lately Ken had been thinking that the guy who was writing the Hulk and The Avengers ought to do everybody a favor and get himself a real job -- Ken was seriously suspecting that the man just wasn't cut out for writing. Or at least not for writing comics, anyway.

The half-dozen other titles that week were even less exciting than the first three. Ken picked up most of them anyway and paid nervously as the heart made its quiet thud and rattle sounds against its plastic bag.

The bill came to a lot less than his allowance, but he was so nervous that the woman behind the counter might hear the heart that he hardly even noticed the money. He set his comics on the counter and put the two bills down beside them, and for just a moment he thought that he was going to get out of the store without Pam (that was the name of the woman at the counter, Pam) even noticing that he had something alive in his shopping bag.

She seemed pretty distracted, after all; she hadn't even said hello to him when he'd walked into the store. Of course, he hadn't said hi to her, either. But that didn't usually make any difference. Pam was real outgoing. Ken got the impression that she thought it was good for business.

Pam handed him his change, and Ken started to breathe an easy breath. He was just about decided that he was going to get away without her even noticing.

Until she peered over the counter and looked straight down at the bag. Would have looked right into it if Ken hadn't had the top of it bunched up as tight-closed as he could. "What ya got in there, Ken?" she asked him. Her voice wasn't suspicious, or pushy, and she smiled as she spoke. All the same she scared him half out of his wits. "A squirrel, or something? Maybe a hamster or a gerbil? Not good for 'em to travel in a bag like that, you know. Especially when they can't get any air."

"Uh," he said, only it wasn't quite like that, since he throat was so choked up that it was hard to speak. "Yeah. Air. That's a good idea."

He took his money and his comics and left before the conversation could go any farther.

Outside he tucked the paper sack of new comics under his arm, hurried toward the convenience store across the highway. Hurried too much, and forgot to check for traffic -- nearly got himself crushed flat when he stepped out onto the road. A horn blasted at him like a fury, and distracted as he was he didn't see the delivery truck with the bright Mercedes hood ornament until he was already out in front of it. And instead of stepping back and away he ran forward. The damn thing nearly hit him; wind from the truck's passage felt almost as though it were pulling his shirt from his back, and he felt the truck's side-view mirror tug at his hair as it grazed his head.

There wasn't anything coming in the far lane, thank God. If there had been, it would have hit him, since all he could do after the truck's near miss was stand dumbstruck in the middle of the highway for most of thirty seconds.

When he could finally make himself move again he ran the rest of the way to the convenience store.

He didn't have to worry about the heart while he was there. Whatever sound it might make was nothing compared to the sound his own trembling made

in plastic of the bag.

He went to the back of the store where the soda cooler was and got himself a whole liter of Coke. Pulled a super-size bag of Doritos from the chip-rack that faced the cooler. Both of those were larger than he usually got on Thursdays, but most Thursdays he bought so many comics that there wasn't money for that much soda or so big a bag of Doritos.

He all but ran from the chip rack to the counter where the clerk stood, waiting to take his money.

Tim knew that clerk. She'd been working this store for a year and a half now, and she was no one Tim could ever forget. She was important for reasons Ken didn't understand and couldn't tell but felt, and knew. Something about her... and it wasn't just how she was scary and mean and wicked, knurled, old-lady crabfaced the way she was, despite that her hair was brown not grey and her body still looked middle-aged.

And it wasn't just the way he'd never been in this place since she'd started that she hadn't had an unkind word for him.

It was more than that. There was something important about the nasty old lady. Ken didn't like to think about what it might be, because he knew damned well it wasn't the good kind of important. But he knew damn well that it was there.

"What?" she asked as he approached the counter, "No bottles today? You must've known," she said, "You must have known I wasn't taking any more. Well. See if it does you any good, knowing things like that."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Just wait till next time. I won't take 'em, you hear me? I won't take 'em any more. Even if you don't bring any more of those damned bottles I won't let you cash them in."

"Yes, ma'am."

I bet she killed the heart. I bet it was her who cut it live out of a beautiful lady like the virgins who come to people who have visions in Mexico. I bet she cut it out and tossed it on the roadside for centipedes to eat.

"Give me your money," she said, reaching out across the counter, clawlike hand stretching to scratch his eyes out -- no. Just his money. She grabbed it right out of his hand.

Before Ken had caught his breath she'd handed him his change, only it was fifteen cents short. He started to protest -- and then realized that arguing with her could mean he'd never get away from that place....

He took the change. And turned to leave.

"What do you have in that bag of yours?"

And she reached out, snatched his hand by the wrist. And pulled him toward her.

Ken screamed, but that didn't stop her.

The bag was half open.

She raised her hand to cuff him, and Ken ducked, and --

"It's moving! It's moving! You've got something alive in that bag of yours!"

She'd seen it, she'd seen it, she'd seen the heart and now --

"You! You! You've got a rat in there, a vermin, and you've brought it into my store you vile urchin! Out of here, you hear me! You get yourself and that thing out of here this instant -- "

Ken wasn't sure how he did it, but he managed to -- managed to get his wrists free of the haggard woman's clutching bony fingers, and then he was running, running out of the store because he knew his life depended --

-- depended --

Depended on getting away from her right then.

It did!

The woman screeched and screeched after him, but Ken didn't listen.

West of the convenience store was a broad, mowed field that stretched half a mile along the north side of the highway. Ken wasn't sure who owned it, or why they kept it mowed and clear of trees so nice, but for all the noise of

passing traffic it was peaceful, and in a strange way almost quiet. No one ever came walking through that field. It was a place where he could sit in the grass and know that no one was going to come peering over his shoulder asking about what a boy his age was doing reading comic books.

Ken had got sick of trying to answer that question a long time ago.

So he wandered out into the field, found himself a spot where the grass was soft and thick and comfortable, and sat down and opened his soda and his chips. And he began to read.

Reading comics was a special kind of thing for Ken; it absorbed and consumed him, and when he was reading the whole world receded from him for the longest while.

That was an important part of it: Ken wasn't happy about being a boy.

Not that he wanted to be a girl or a frog or a rock or anything else he could think of. But being a boy meant you had to live your life within the confines of somebody else's idea of what a boy ought to do. Go to school, except for summertimes. If you tried to get some work so that you'd have money to spend there were all sorts of rules there trying to stop it. And people who had a mind to tell you how to spend it!

Worst of all, though -- worst of all for Ken was getting pushed around by other kids. Ken was thin, and short for his age, and he wasn't much in a fight and he didn't like getting hurt. Sometimes he wondered if there was a flag on top of his head that advertised he was an easy target for bullies -- he had to worm his way away from them more often than he liked to think about.

Yeah, that was some of what drew him into comics. But sometimes he thought that maybe it wasn't all that much of it. Comics were ... well, he didn't know. Fantastic? That was it, sort of. It was like -- well, on TV, once, on PBS on an afternoon when there'd been no one else in the house, he'd seen a show about Homer, and about the Iliad and the Odyssey. It was hard to tell what the stories themselves were about, but he paid attention real hard, and when he did they were pretty cool stories. But the part that struck home for Ken was when the announcer explained how people didn't read the stories, because back then there hadn't been any printing presses and anyway there hadn't been hardly any writing. Instead of reading the stories they'd heard them told or maybe sung by people who traveled from one town to another and told them for money as they sat around the fire.

Ken had pictured himself sitting by a fire listening to people tell of Cyclopes and monsters and berserk soldiers who grew from seeds you planted in the ground. And he'd said, yeah, I know that, it's just like reading comics.

That was part of it, too.

But the most important part was something -- well, he didn't really understand the connection. But he knew it was there, just like he knew about the heart and the old crone inside the convenience store.

Reading comics had to do with not being ready to think about girls. Maybe because they got you so caught up in story you didn't have to think about the hard parts of life? That was it, probably. And it was the last thing he wanted to admit to someone asking why he read the things. Either they knew, and they didn't intrude by talking about it, or they didn't know, and they went around asking questions aimed like little needles at Ken's heart.

Whatever it was, it didn't happen that afternoon. Ken sat on the mowed field eating Doritos and drinking Coke under the warm sun while the heart beat steady, whisper-crinkling the plastic bag beside him, and never felt the world recede. Partly because it was a crummy week for comics. But not that much. Ken had found himself getting all caught up in lousy comics lots of times before.

All the same.

All the same, he was deep enough in that he didn't notice the cars that came and went in the convenience store parking lot down the way, didn't hear the traffic that sung by out on the highway. Didn't even notice that the light began to dim as the sun got low on the horizon.

Nor did he see or hear Penny Lombard walking toward him, in spite of

the fact that it had only been a week since she'd kissed him, and there'd been times in that week when he'd found it difficult to think about anything else at all.

"Hi, Ken," she said. And gave him a start worse than the truck had given him a couple hours before. He only barely managed to keep from jumping to his feet; as it was his copy of the new Incredible Hulk got all crumpled and ended up in the grass beside Penny's feet.

"Uh," he said. "Scared me."

Penny smiled. It was a pretty sight.

"I shouldn't go sneaking up in front of you, I guess."

Ken could feel his cheeks stinging-burning-hot blushing; it made him feel even stupider than he did already. "But you weren't -- " he started, and realized that he was responding the wrong way to a joke. "It's okay," he said. "I was just sort of caught up in reading, I guess."

Penny stooped, picked up The Incredible Hulk. "Comic books, huh? Are they any good?" She leafed through it for a moment, handed it to Ken.

"Nah." Ken looked at the pile of comics on the grass beside him. "None of these are, anyhow."

Penny Lombard confused Ken probably more than any one other thing in the world, the Heart not excepted. Or anyway she had since last Friday. Up till then she'd just been another girl, and girls were this half-alien species, sometimes just like people, sometimes unfathomable as the bottomless deep. And then, while his folks and hers were upstairs in the living room playing cards and there was nothing for Penny or Ken to do but watch reruns of That's Incredible! on channel 42, she'd crawled over from the far side of the couch and kissed him. Kissed him! Bang! Right out of nowhere, square on the lips with her tongue poking into his mouth all clumsy and soft and Ken not knowing what he was supposed to do, even if he had once read a copy of Playboy and got a boner looking at it. He'd flushed and tried to kiss her back because he guessed that was what he was supposed to do, but he'd been even clumsier than she was at least partly because she'd caught him so unready.

And then she'd pecked him on the nose and smiled coyly and crawled back over to her side of the couch.

And that was all.

Well, maybe there was a little more: all the rest of that night she sat on the other end of that long plush couch watching TV and every now and then glancing over at him like she was bursting with a secret but it wasn't time to tell it yet. And Ken had sat on his end anxious and afraid and enthralled, staring at the screen and not seeing anything at all. At ten o'clock both sets of folks came down into the den, and Ken's mom and dad had collected him and they'd gone home.

And at least a dozen dozen times since then he'd asked himself: what am I supposed to make of that?

He still didn't have an answer.

So now here she was, walking into the middle of the most private thing in his life, on the most confused week of his life, sitting down beside him on the grass where the heart beat steady in its plastic bag between them.

"You're cute," she said. "You know that Ken? You're awful cute."

"Uh," Ken said. It was all that came out when he tried to respond. He swallowed, tried to slow down his brain and think. What was he supposed to say when she said a thing like that? Thank you was the most obvious thing, but it also seemed to beg the question that she wasn't quite asking. Telling her that she was cuter struck him as the sort of paper-thin dorky come-on that he saw on bad TV shows. Changing the subject, he thought, would probably make him a lot more comfortable, but something down low in his gut warned him that running from the whole situation would only give him serious problems in the end.

"Huh," he said. He was blushing all over again, and even worse this time. "You really think so?"

She was smiling in a way that almost made him think she knew what was going on in his head, and that she was enjoying the show. "I most certainly do."

"I think you're pretty neat," he said. And all uncertain and afraid that she'd pull away, he leaned over to kiss her.

And where their first kiss had been awkward and scary, this one was strange and electric and pretty darned wonderful, even though it wasn't a whole lot more than a sloppy-wet peck on the lips.

And she leaned back, almost swooning, he followed her, and --

And then everything went wrong. Her hand reached back to support her as she swooned, and instead of bracing in the grass she leaned on the plastic bag, and her fingers stretched just a little too far and touched the heart, and she felt it moving, and --

And she screamed. Right there, right in the middle of the kiss she screamed, her mouth so wide that Ken kiss-close saw deep down into her throat, and the sound and the sight and the fear of what she'd discovered forced his own heart up into his mouth.

There was no one near enough to hear her scream, except maybe for the crazy lady at the convenience store, and Ken was pretty sure that that woman was too wicked to care about anyone screaming.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "It wouldn't hurt you." Ken didn't know this for sure. He thought maybe it was so because there was nothing he saw when he looked at the heart that made him think of hurtfulness. But he didn't know; he told Penny like he was sure more because he thought something bad would happen if she kept on screaming than because he believed she was safe.

Penny backed away. Her was skin pale, her eyes were wide, her mouth hung half-open as she breathed loudly through it.

"What have you got in there it's something alive I felt it it's going to kill me I know -- "

When she was five feet away she stopped and waited for him to answer.

"It's -- " Ken shook his head. "I'm not sure what it is. I found it along the side of the road. This afternoon." He frowned. "I don't think it's anything bad. You want to see?"

She didn't respond to that at first. She just sat there, panting, looking scared out of her mind. After a while Ken picked up the bag and held it open to show her, and she gasped but still kept staring staring at the heart beating gently in its plastic bag....

Then there was something else on her face -- curiosity, almost. "How did it get in there? You picked it up? Touched it?"

"Uh-huh."

"And it didn't do nothing to you?"

"Not a thing."

A pause -- a long one.

"Really?"

"Really."

She leaned forward, crawled toward him nervously. "Let me see."

Ken bit his lip; he wasn't sure it was right to let her get so close to it. "You'll have to come here," he said. "I don't want to have to take it out of the bag."

Penny nodded; that she understood. And ever-so-carefully she stepped close to him. When she was near enough to touch he lifted the bag by its handle and held it open.

She stared in at it for a moment that seemed to last at least half Ken's life, and then she smiled. Half unsure, half conspiratorial.

"A heart," she said. "I saw one in a book in life science class last year."

"Yep," Ken said. "It's alive."

She moved closer to get a better look. "I bet it isn't," she said. "I bet it's like those skulls you see down at the magic shop -- made out of plastic with the jaws that go clack clack clack clack because there are

batteries inside."

"Huh-uh," Ken said. "It's real. I thought that too and I put my tongue on it and tasted and it tasted just like blood. I never put plastic in my mouth that it tasted like blood."

Penny pulled away just a little; maybe it was just a little bit of a flinch, and not a pulling away at all. "That's gross," she said. And then she was quiet for a long while, just staring at the thing.

The blood on the heart had got a lot crustier and scabbier-looking since the last time Ken had opened the bag to see it.

\_It's drying out.\_

He wondered if that was something he ought to worry over.

"Maybe," Penny said, "maybe it's like a chicken when it gets its head cut off. The way it runs around for a while after it's already dead? Or like my daddy told me -- how sometimes when you go to clean the innards from a fish the heart will still be beating when you take it out. Sometimes even if you already cut off the head! Maybe it's like that -- somebody's heart that just doesn't know he's dead yet."

"It could be," Ken said. "But doesn't that only happen for a few minutes? I found it at least three hours ago."

Penny looked around, almost like she was checking to make sure no one else was watching them. "Then what do you think it is?"

Ken shrugged. "Magic? I don't know."

Penny nodded sagely. "Maybe. I never seen magic before."

"Me neither."

Penny reached into the bag cautiously and touched the heart with her middle finger. She flinched again when she touched it, but she didn't hurry to pull her hand away. "It's warm," she said, "and dirty. We ought to wash it."

Wash a magic beating heart? To Ken's way of thinking there was something fundamentally wrong with the idea. But he didn't say so; it didn't seem politic. He started gathering up his comics, putting them back into their paper sack. "There's a tap out back of the store," he said, "and the creek down to the woods. Probably ought not to use the tap -- the crazy old lady in the store'll hear the water in the pipes and come out after us if we do."

Penny smiled when he mentioned the creek; Ken wasn't quite sure why. "I'll carry it if your hands are full," she said. Ken was tucking the half-finished soda and Doritos into their bag. Between that and the comics and the heart his hands were full, but it wasn't like he couldn't cope. Besides, somewhere in the last few minutes the chips and Coke had lost their appeal, and he was kind of thinking about tossing them in the dumpster anyway.

But if Penny wanted to carry the heart there wasn't any reason he shouldn't let her; it wasn't like he minded sharing. "If you want to," he said, "sure. Go ahead." And stood and heaved the chips and Coke into the dumpster beside the store, a good five yards away. Held out the plastic bag that held the beating heart. "You ready?"

Penny smiled again, that same half-wicked smile. "Sure am."

And she took the bag and they started off across the mowed field, and into the woods behind it.

\* \* \* \*

The creek wasn't as close as Ken remembered. At least half a thick-wooded mile from the highway -- longer than that, by the time they got done weaving through the trees, hiking paths at odd angles to their destination. Which they had to do, since the paths that ran through the woods all led to places besides where they were going.

Penny led most of the way. Not that Ken didn't know where they were going or anything; he knew the way plenty well. But -- well, maybe he wasn't as eager to get there, or maybe Penny liked to be out in front, or maybe Penny just liked to walk faster. Ken wasn't sure.

Whatever the reason; it was almost dark when they got there, and dark in the woods near the highway that led out of town was a darker kind of dark than ordinary night. Night, for Ken, was the back stoop with the curtains



closed and the porch light shut off. When there wasn't any moon. Real darned dark, so you couldn't see the line where your fingernail grew into the back of your finger. But if you tried real hard you could see to walk around if you were careful, because there was a street lamp out front and across the street, and even though it couldn't shine through the house it put a little light in the air.

In the woods so far from any streetlight, with the leaves overhead crowding out the moon, dark meant not any light at all, nothing, not so you could tell where your arm was if your hand wasn't connected to it. It got that way about the time they got to the creek, and Ken thanked God for the fact that they got there; the trees didn't crowd so close that near to the creek, and the moon shone full down on them.

Penny Lombard was a lot more than pretty there by the creek in the moonlight. Beautiful? Yes, Ken thought, she was beautiful, but even as he thought it he knew that part of why he thought it was because he was scared. Scared of the thick-dark-alone-away-so-far-from-everything of where they were. She was beautiful at least a little bit because he felt a powerful scared need for the company of human beings, and she was the only human being for half a mile in any direction. But she was beautiful for her own reasons, too -- the way the moonlight shone across her hair and glinted off her brown eyes jet-black in the dim light. The wondrous silhouette of her nascent breasts against the dark matte of the woods.

She stopped by the edge of the creek, set the bag with the heart on the sandy bank that would have been like a beach if it had been more than six inches wide. Narrower, even, than it usually was -- some days the water here was hardly anything more than a trickle, and even then the stream-bank wasn't something Ken would call a beach. Penny stooped, reached into the bag, and lifted out the heart.

"It's warm," she said. She stared at it, fascinated. "The way a kitten is when you lift it up to cuddle." She turned to Ken and whispered almost as though she were giving him her deepest secret. "But slick," she said. "Sticky-slick and damp."

Ken felt himself flush with embarrassment for no reason he could name. When he blushed he always turned so red that it embarrassed him even more; he was glad that in the moonlight there was no way that even that much of a change in his complexion could show. Or he hoped there was no way it could show, at least. He looked away, at the stream, because it was something else to pay attention to, and it didn't make him feel things that made no sense at all.

"The creek's high," he said. "Plenty of water." And began to get embarrassed all over again, just as inexplicably. The only thing to do, he decided, was to ignore it. It wasn't going to go away.

"It is," she said. She was still holding the heart carefully up to the moonlight, staring at it. Ken could see it beating in her hands. "Come on, you need to help. It's important."

Ken didn't have any idea why it ought to be important for him to help wash the heart. Maybe he could have figured it out if he'd been a little less flustered, but with every moment that passed there seemed to be a little less hope that he'd ever understand what was going on. An hour ago he'd been absolutely certain that finding the heart was the most portentous thing that had ever happened in his life, or ever would happen. Now he was too confused to be sure of anything. Still, it did seem right. If the heart was important, or if it had been important, or if it ought to be important, then he couldn't just leave it to Penny Lombard to wash the thing. He walked the ten paces to the stream-bank where Penny stood, kicked off his shoes. When he was done he reached up and took it from her gently as he could. She didn't hesitate to let him take it from her.

"Why do you think it's alive?" he asked her as he waded out into the stream. "Do you really think it's magic? Or maybe is it something from the laboratory of a crazy scientist? Or what?"

Ken crouched down and lowered the heart into the water. Fat round bubbles of air gurgled up from the veins as he immersed it. The creek was a good twelve inches deep, here, and so clear that even in the moonlight he could see the grainy sand on the bottom. Penny waded in after him. Stooped down beside him. After a moment he could feel her hands down there with his, gently brushing away the dry blood and the scabrousness.

"I don't know why," she said after a long while. "Does it matter?"

Ken shrugged; the gesture made his arm brush against hers. When it did he felt a strange electric chill that had nothing to do with the cool water or the heart. "It's something to wonder," he said. "Don't you think?"

Penny smiled, and shook her head. "Of course it is. But what I meant was that I don't think it really makes any difference why the heart's alive. It's like -- it's like a mystery. Only not like a mystery on TV or at the movies, because at the end there isn't any solution or who-done-it, and if there was it'd take something needful away. You know?"

Ken didn't know. But it sounded right.

Having it sound right didn't take away the first bit of his confusion.

"Because if you knew the why and the how," she said, "it wouldn't be a mystery any more. If it made sense it'd just be another one of those things."

Penny was leaning close, now; her shoulder pressed against his all warm and comfortable and mysterious as the heart. The sensation it gave him was almost as electric as when he'd first brushed against her.

"Huh," he said. "I think we got it clean."

"Yeah." Penny stood up, leaned out to take the plastic bag from the edge of the stream. "Might as well clean this, too," she said. "No sense putting it back into a dirty sack."

"Good idea."

She pressed the bag into the water, turned it inside out, pulled it back and forth through the creek. When she was done she lifted it out and little rivulets of water shed away from the plastic for a long moment. She reached in and pulled the bag right-side-out again. "That's good enough, I think."

Ken lifted the heart from the stream --

And suddenly the thing beat hard, and great jets of water burst from the wide artery on the left, splattered hard across Ken's chest. It surprised him enough that his hands slipped and he almost dropped the heart completely, and for a moment of panic he imagined himself chasing after it as it rolled slowly but unstoppably downstream in the semidark. He froze, and forced himself to be calm and ignore the water jetting and jetting all over him. Made his hands be firm and relaxed, and held on to it in spite of himself.

"Oof," he said. He raised the heart the rest of the way up out of the creek; after a moment it sputtered, running out of water as the jet turned to a spray, and then it wasn't spraying him at all any more.

Penny was laughing uproariously. He felt himself start blushing all over again, but not so bad this time. It only took him a moment to realize that the whole scene really was funny, and then he started laughing himself. Laughing hard enough that he came close to losing his grip on the heart again -- close, but not close enough to worry about. Then he and Penny were both stooped over, winded from laughing so hard and still laughing, and she wrapped her arms around him to keep herself from falling over. Which nearly sent Ken face first into the creek. He held the heart with his right hand and grabbed with his left for the only thing there was to hold on to.

And that was Penny Lombard's waist.

And suddenly neither one of them was laughing any more.

Ken was staring into her eyes as she watched him, and time was something stiff and powdery that pressed hard on top of him and stretched out into forever. Toward the end of an eternity that a clock would have counted as six or seven seconds she smiled again, kind of shy and uneasy.

And then she kissed him, hard and full on the lips. The kiss went on even longer than the moment before it had. Or it seemed to, at least. When it

was done she pulled away and looked at him again; Ken saw the question in her eyes before she even asked it.

When she spoke her voice was afraid for the first time Ken had ever heard. "Do you want to...?" And that was all she asked, no finish to the question at all. Not that one was really necessary. Ken knew what she meant, or thought he did, at least. And everything turned powdery on him again, hard like sand but finer, fine as talc, and his own heart beat so hard and wild that he felt it as a throbbing ache just above his ears.

Yeah, he knew what she meant. He was a boy. How could he not know? But even though he was a boy and boys were supposed to be ready to drop their drawers at the first sound of a sigh, and even though his body was doing things that felt strange and wonderful and desperately magical.

Even though.

Something in the hind part of his skull was screaming No No No No and he knew that. Knew it was right.

The alien heart in his right hand beat as hard and as wild as his own.

"I -- " It isn't right yet, he wanted to say. But the words weren't coming out and anyhow he thought maybe it was the wrong thing to say. But what was he supposed to say? That he was afraid? Later -- years later -- he knew that it was a matter of not trying to rush through his childhood too quickly, but just then he couldn't see anything inside him but a confused swirl of reactions he'd never felt before. And he was afraid of saying anything for fear of hurting Penny or insulting her -- no matter what he felt he knew that he liked her and more than that, and knew that he was drawn to her. He didn't want to push her away.

And finally he said, "Not now. It isn't time." And hoped to God it was right, or right enough.

Maybe it was close to that, at least, because it didn't seem to hurt her or even make her angry. Penny nodded, a little sad, and told him he was right or maybe something like it -- she spoke so soft and so unclearly that Ken couldn't tell for certain what she'd said. She pulled away a little, not dramatically, not trying to make a point, just easing off more comfortable. She glanced down at his chest, and kept looking there.

"Some of it's got on you," she said. "The gross stuff from inside the heart."

Ken looked down and saw a big fat wad of phlegmy-looking blood pasted to his wet shirt. His stomach got a little queasy at the sight of it.

"Probably got there when it sprayed you," she said. She reached up and peeled it away with her finger nails; the stuff stuck to itself well enough that it didn't leave much of a mark on his shirt. Penny rubbed that away with her fingers, stooped, rinsed them in the water of the stream.

"Thanks," he said.

Penny nodded, smiled uncertainly. "We probably ought to go," she said. "It must be getting late."

The moon was high overhead, almost directly above them.

"Yeah. Folks'll be real upset." He looked at the heart, still pulsing wildly in his right hand. "What do you think we should do with it?"

She was looking away -- looking downstream. And as she turned to face him to answer him, Ken saw something in her eyes. Saw it for just that instant before she realized he was looking straight at her. Hurt, he thought it was. Festering hurt, ready to turn....

But then it was gone, evaporated just as quietly as it had appeared. And Ken found himself wondering if he'd seen it at all.

"Take it with us -- take the heart with us. You don't want to leave it, do you?" Penny was looking at him strangely again. Like he'd asked a question that she couldn't begin to guess why he'd ask. "We need to get back. Before it gets even later."

Ken nodded.

Five minutes later they had their shoes on and they were in the woods, heading toward the highway even more slowly than they had before, since it was

much darker now. It took most of forty minutes to get back to the field by the convenience store.

And all that while neither of them said a word.

It was a long while after that before they got to Penny's door, even though there was a little light along the highway and it was a lot easier to see where to put your feet. When they got to the strip of sidewalk that led to her front door, she turned to him and said, "We'll talk soon," but he knew from her voice that she was lying when she said it. Then he watched Penny walk across the lawn, open her front door, and disappear inside. The memory of watching her walk away in the dim street lamp light stayed with him clear as his name for the rest of his life. He never understood why, any more than he understood anything else that happened that night.

Four blocks later he was in the apartment complex where his family lived, opening the front door with his key. He'd expected his parents to be waiting for him, awake and angry. But the apartment was dark, and they didn't even wake when he came in. Ken made his way to the bedroom without turning on the lights; turning them on might disturb them, and that would only mean trouble.

Before he went to sleep Ken took care to set the heart on top of a towel in the back corner of his closet. Where he always put his secret things because his mom never looked there. And all night as he lay sleeping he could feel it beating there not far from him.

In the morning his father had harsh words with him about staying out too late and not calling home to say where he was. But not that harsh.

@BULLET =

There were three more bits to the story, none of which made things any clearer for Ken.

The first was late in the morning, when Ken realized that he'd left his comics by the creek. Before lunch he hiked out to it, to find them. But either they were gone or he couldn't find the spot where he and Penny had been the night before. He searched for most of an hour, but he never did find them, and eventually he gave up looking. He considered trying to replace them, but finally decided not to. Their absence left a gap in his comic-book collection that would have nagged at him a few months before, but that day it just didn't seem all that important.

Another thing was Penny.

She avoided him after that night, barely spoke to him except to say hello when they couldn't help running into each other. Six weeks after Ken found the heart she and her family moved to another town. He never learned whether that had anything to do with him.

About the time that Penny moved, the heart stopped beating. It'd been drying out for quite a while, and the arteries had cracked in places like old leather; maybe Ken should have kept it moister, but he was afraid his mom would see it if he took it to the sink. So the heart died, and when Ken touched it the thing was tough and brittle as last year's shoes.

And that Friday, late at night when everyone else was sleeping, Ken took the heart out to the back yard and buried it near his mother's jasmine.

\* \* \* \*

"Penny Lombard and the Heart Ken Found" originally appeared in New Life for the Dead, copyright 1991, Alan Rodgers

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Ever wonder how Mario Andretti won that Indy 500? Compuserve HOMer Award winner and frequent Analog contributor Ron Collins teams with John C. Bodin to tell exactly how alien agent Joneem A'lonn participated in this tribute to the Brickyard Classic.

-----

\*Oh-oh\*

\*by John C. Bodin and Ron Collins\*

My name is Joneem A'lonn. I'm an undercover agent for the Vice Division on D'Garzi, which happens to be the fifth planet in a system the humans know as

HR 8832, which seems really kind of a stupid name to me, but that's not what I want to talk about today. What I want to tell you about was the time it was my job to stop the Edaligo crooks who were planning to steal billions of universals by fixing the most-wagered-upon event in the established universe.

\* \* \* \*

Indianapolis, Indiana. May 30, 1969. My cover name was Johnny Malone. I ran a hot dog stand stationed smack dab in the middle of the fourth turn Snake Pit.

Despite the fact that it was barely ten o'clock, it was already plenty hot. Today's race would be a tough one. Of more immediate concern, however, was the sunburned male and female humans who stared with glassy eyes at the menu behind me, both obviously having imbibed more than their daily recommended requirement of Southern Comfort. I could almost hear their brain cells screaming as they expired.

"Gimme two dogs with relish and catsup. Hold the mustard," the male said.

"You got it," I said back.

I reached into the steamer and grabbed two hot dogs. "That'll be sixty cents. The condiments are at the end of the counter."

The male gave a skewed grin.

The female blushed and snarfed into the back of her hand. "Far out," she said. "I didn't know they made 'em in mint."

The male leaned in close enough that I could smell the sour mash and Pepsi. "That's groovy, man. But, uh, she's got her period, so I don't think I need a condiment."

"Bummer," I said, pointing. "The catsup and relish ... are at the end of the counter."

While the two went to squirt catsup and dole out relish, I got a better look at the female. She was an attractive sample of the human species -- tall and thin, with straight yellow hair held back with a wilted daisy chain. She wore a tie-dyed tank top knotted at the shoulders. The garment covered an ample pair of mammary glands. To each their own, I suppose, but humans like mammary glands in a way I'm sure I'll never understand. Take, for example, my love of the meaty hot dogs that I'm peddling right now. They're great -- absolutely fantab-u-lous. But I don't wander around with signs telling people to show me their wieners.

I shook my head in wonder as the pair staggered away, hoping my behavior was humanlike enough. I must have done fine, because the people kept coming and the dogs kept flowing. Of course, it could just be that I was in the middle of the Snake Pit, and it wouldn't have mattered if I was a green-tentacled Zanabian.

I pressed the blue button on the atomic scanner and looked out over the grandstand as often as I could.

No sign of Edaligo activity ... yet. But it was early, and we had a tip that something was up. The data said that each of the last three years a driver named Mario Andretti broke down or crashed or, in some unbelievable event, managed to somehow not win the Indy 500. He even lost a wheel after starting on the pole two years ago. Lady luck, the humans said. Rigged game, the D'Garzi Gambling Commission cried.

Not that the humans knew any of this, of course. Their ignorance is an important element of the game because it creates the sense of fair play and integrity that our bookies stake their reputations on. This was Earth, the most entertaining place in the Milky Way, vacation place of the stars, home of the hundred fine arts, hot dogs, and -- of course -- the exalted Frisbee. Nothing so ugly as game fixing could be allowed to pollute this cash flow.

It was personal to me, too. Despite the rumors, I put twenty-five thousand universals on Andretti. Call me a sucker or just call me your run of the mill D'Garzi -- we're all gambling fools -- but Mario is my favorite and I couldn't imagine coming to the Brickyard and not laying at least a year's pay on the line.

I know -- a little extravagant. Let's talk about your problems.

The morning progressed, the Purdue Band played, and the golden girl danced. Sam Hanks kept announcing little tidbits about the upcoming race, and the folks in the Snake Pit kept drinking and dancing and waving their signs. Eventually, the pit crews rolled the cars out into the famous three-across formation. I had just finished serving a foot-long Coney dog when I pushed the blue button again.

There. On the track.

Son-of-a-clack.

I couldn't make out a specific form, but the atomic analyzer gave a low-frequency streak that indicated the presence of Edaligo brain function on the racetrack, somewhere around the first turn -- right at the front of the grid.

Gotcha.

I pressed the red button, and everything around me came to a stop. Nothing changed for the humans, of course, the temporal displacement merely put me in a timestream that moved much more rapidly than theirs.

I checked all the gazes quickly to ensure no one was looking directly at me. Everything seemed far out and groovy and all that, as they say for about everything here.

The blonde female and her old man were heading my way again; the phase shifter had caught them in midstumble. I needed a diversion, and those ties at her tank top gave me the perfect opportunity. I walked over and pulled the strings, leaving her ample mammaries exposed. This would most certainly be enough to attract a crowd, and that would help cover the disappearance of me and my hot dog cart.

I hit the button again, and the temporal displacement shut down. The woman shrieked. Not a soul noticed my dinky hot dog stand wink out of existence.

This is why humans will never be part of the Universal League, by the way. Too easily distracted. Hell, the Wentashian Congress alone can take as much as a quarter million years to prepare a simple colonization mission. Can you imagine the problems a flighty species like humans would create if they were thrown into the universal mix?

Still, they have Walt Disney, so they can't be all bad.

\* \* \* \*

The Edaligo come from Tau Ceti's third rock.

They are tall, lean, and more than a little on the nasty side, especially when they're awake. To be blunt, the Edaligo are a damned ugly species in about every way imaginable. They smell like the Dark One, they take advantage of early intelligent life if you let them, and they ship their nuclear waste into deep space rather than deal with it themselves. They had one of the more active interstellar syndicates in the universe, and though they hadn't stuck their noses into anything big for quite a while, that only meant they were up to something big.

To make matters worse for us Vice guys, the Edaligo are shape shifters with unlimited scale, meaning they can go big as well as small.

Have I mentioned that I hate the bastards?

\* \* \* \*

I made my way toward the grid. The cars were all lined up, the drivers seated.

"Gentlemen, start your engines."

The throaty roar of thirty-three engines came across the field, and I couldn't help but get all goose-pimplly thinking about the front row of A. J. Foyt, Mario, and Bobby Unser.

I glanced at the atomic wave scanner but it was blank. The Edaligo was playing it cagey, now.

Where would he hide?

By the time I made the pit entrance, the cars were rolling away amid a cloud of dust and the sweet smell of exhaust. I searched the crews and found nothing. I scanned the home stretch grandstand. I headed toward the tower and the pylon. Nothing.

The parade and the pace lap finished up. The cars barreled into the straight, and the green flag waved. Cars roared into the turn, Mario ahead of Foyt and Unser. What a thrill. What a thrill. Did I tell you I love my job?

Come on, Mario, I thought, rooting for my favorite as I turned my attention to the Edaligo.

Bruce Walkup was the day's first casualty, dropping out of the race halfway through the first lap due to transmission failure. On the second lap, Billy Vukovich's Mongoose threw a rod. Art Pollard lost a driveline on lap eight, and Ronnie Bucknum burned a piston on seventeen. Jim McElreath's engine burst into flames in lap 25. George Follmer's went two laps later. By the time Gary Bettenhausen lost a cylinder on lap 35, I knew something was up.

I made my way up pit lane. The teams would be pitting soon, and all the guys in the funny fire suits were lining up with their tires and their fuel hoses.

Foyt and Roger McCluskey had both slipped past Mario, and Wally Dallenbach and Lloyd Ruby had joined with that trio to make it a five-car race. But McCluskey ran out of fuel, and while he coasted around, the other cars flooded into the pits under their own power. A.J.'s crew won the day's first pit battle, and Foyt screamed away a little under fifteen seconds ahead of Mario.

I scanned each team as they worked. Nothing. The track, I thought, with a chill. The Edaligo could actually become part of the track if they wanted, choosing just the wrong moment to transform into an unforeseen oil slick. I looked at the tower. That was the only place I could get a clean scan of the entire two-and-a-half-mile circuit. I sighed. I don't like to use the temporal shifter too often because it can attract attention, and attention is one thing D'Garzi Vice doesn't need.

But this was important, so I hit the button and slipped through the crowd to climb up into the tower. Still, I found no sign of the Edaligo anywhere. Strange, I thought, scratching my head and turning to head back downstairs.

My foot caught something small and hard.

I lost my balance and fell to the floor in a jumble. The atomic scanner clattered down the first three steps and burst into a jillion different pieces.

"Dammit!" I said as I rubbed my elbow.

A tiny voice came from behind me. "Oh-oh. So sorry."

I whirled.

It was a creature no more than a meter tall, carrying a gnarled wooden walking stick that, once you untangled all the loops and twists, was certainly bigger than the creature itself. It stared at me with a sense of the wondrous in its shiny black eyes and its gray-skinned expression. Its clothes were tattered and frayed, made of a material as rugged as burlap.

"What the hell?" I said. "Are you some obnoxious lawn ornament, or what?"

The thing jumped onto my chest with a force impossible for its size.

"Wait a minute," I said, struggling vainly to get out from under this thing. "The temporal displacement unit isn't supposed to work on more than a single creature at a time. You shouldn't even be here."

The thing raised an open palm and gave an offhand shrug. "Oh-oh," it said.

The atomic scanner burst into flames from the third stair. Enough was enough. I struggled toward the burning scanner, but couldn't budge an inch with the weight of this thing on my chest. Without that unit I would never find the Edaligo.

"Get yer feet off my person before I remove them for you!"

"Hehehehehe," the thing said, then whacked me upside the head with his gnarled stick.

"Ouch!" I saw stars. "Hey, take it easy, sport. Nobody has to get hurt here, especially me."

The thing squeaked as it giggled and waved the stick above my nose again. "Leave my feetsies alone!"

"Yeah, uh ... groovy. All right?"

It gave a cheesy grin.

I inched my hand toward the disrupter I had clipped to the back of my belt. A second later, I whipped the weapon out and squeezed off a shot that would blow the thing to Delta Pavonis.

The mechanism clicked.

Nothing happened.

"Oh-oh," the lawn ornament said with another shrug. "Lemme see that." He tried to snatch it, but this time I was too quick for him.

I scrutinized him closely. "What are you doing here?"

He pursed his lips and whistled a little too nonchalantly, drawing one heavy toe across my chest. "Oh, nothing." But he glanced over at the scorer's table nonetheless, and my internal warning sirens went off like a Betelgeuse klaxon.

"You were going to mess with the lap recorders, weren't you?"

The lawn ornament's eyes got wide, and he gave a brown-toothed smile.

"Oh-oh!"

I was growing to hate those two syllables.

"Gimme," the thing said, motioning the disrupter with his cane.

"Let me up and I'll let you play with the disrupter." I realized it was a mistake as soon as I said it, but the words were out of my mouth, and besides, I quite honestly didn't think I would ever make it back to the standing position any other way.

"Deal!"

I tossed the disrupter a short distance away, and the little guy leapt off my chest. I took a deep breath, feeling like an Arcturan constrictor had just let go of me.

"What the heck are you?" I said, standing and dusting myself off.

The creature pushed the disrupter's trigger. Every person in the room was suddenly wearing polka dots of assorted colors.

"Hehehehehehehe!" He pushed the button again and a life-size portrait of Tony Hulman went up in flames. "I like it!" the thing nearly cried with glee. "I really like it!"

I wracked my data structure, trying to figure out what this creature might be. Finally, it all started to connect. Cars dropping like flies, the scanner breaking into flames, the disrupter doing ... whatever the heck it was doing.

"You must be a gremlin!"

"Coodle-doodle-doo!" the lawn ornament replied, did a backflip, and pointed the disrupter at me.

I dived out of the line of fire, and a potted plant behind me melted into a liquid pool of something that resembled chicken soup.

"Holy Frembock!" I said, somehow managing to rip the device away from the creature.

It screamed and tried to jump for it, but I held the unit over its head, and it jumped and jumped until it was obvious that approach wasn't getting anywhere. "Leprechaun giver!" it screamed. "Double-crosser!" It whacked me across the shins with its stick.

"Ouch! Damn it, that smarts!" I hopped on one leg, but still managed to keep the weapon out of the thing's lightning-quick hands. "Don't do that again or you'll never see another disrupter as long as you live."

The thing gave an expression of profound sadness.

"You are a gremlin, aren't you?" I replied.

It cowered, and its eyes flicked from corner to corner. "I'll be damned," I said. "An honest-to-goodness gremlin."

Earth's airmen once referred to gremlins as causing persistent trouble with their planes. Earthfolk have blamed these gremlins for all sorts of machine and device failures since then, but D'Garzi scholars had assumed they



were just making these guys up. Humans have never been able to design for flop, after all, and a pack of "gremlins" are a convenient crutch to fall back on during performance review time.

"That would explain the problem with the temporal shifter, too," I said.

The gremlin gave an exaggerated, toothy grin. "Oh-oh?"

I looked at the atomic scanner that lay shattered and scorched on the stairs. I looked at the gremlin. Then back at the scanner again. There was no way the scanner was going to work, and therefore no way I could locate the Edaligo.

"Gimme back my thingie!" the gremlin said, trying to whack me on the shin. "We had a deal."

"I didn't say how long you could keep it."

The gremlin rubbed the hairy wart on his chin. "You got me there okey-dokey."

"But I'll make you another deal," I said, thinking as quickly as I could. I pulled out a standard contract. "This time it will be a little more binding."

"What do you got?" it said, eyeing the disrupter greedily.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"I am -- " It puffed its chest out and raised a fist triumphantly. " -- Fred-a-rico!"

"Well, Fredarico, here's the deal."

A few minutes later it was official, this time signed and sealed and binding in all settled colonies of the Universal League.

I clicked off the temporal phase shifter as we shuffled down the stairs. Above us, the control tower erupted in a roar of confusion as their clothes suddenly sprouted polka dots.

\* \* \* \*

We started at turn 1 and went toward turn 2, then the backstretch and turns 3 and 4. Not surprisingly, nothing much happened except that Fredarico left behind a trail of broken grills and fried transistor radios.

I realized then that none of this was really Fredarico's fault at all. The little guy loved gadgets and gizmos, but they didn't love him. Beyond that, I was willing to bet that my scan would have proven what I was already guessing -- that gremlins' skin bends light, making them nearly invisible to the human eye. "Oh-oh," Fredarico would say, and a cursing drunk would shake his radio or press his earpiece deeper into his ear.

I started to feel sorry for him.

I mean, that kind of a reception has got to be wearing on a little guy after a while.

Still, I hadn't found the Edaligo, and the race was wearing on. We hit the pits just as the leader and crowd favorite Lloyd Ruby was pulled into his pit stall, right in front of us.

"Hop to it, Fredarico," I said, pointing.

Perhaps I forgot to mention this, but, you see, the Edaligo evolved their shape-shifting capability through generations of what human science fiction writers are calling nanotechnology, or bugs. They write enzymatic programs that define a specific shape, and the machines take care of the rest. But even the Edaligo's magical technology didn't stand a chance against Fredarico.

The gremlin jumped over to Ruby's car.

A high-pitched scream came from the rear cowling. The revving engine covered up most of the normal spectrum, but my subsonic aural detector read the unmistakable sound of the Edaligo death scream loud and clear. Fredrico gave one of those openhanded shrugs, and I didn't have to be a lip reader to know what he was saying.

Jackpot, baby.

A puddle of fluid dripped onto the asphalt under Ruby's car, and his engine revs dropped a notch. I realized the Edaligo had morphed into the fuel

pump and had been feeding Ruby's car a little extra oomph. Suddenly it all made sense. Ruby wasn't a long enough shot to raise eyebrows when he won, but he wasn't a bettor's favorite, either. My guess was that a quick check of the records would show a significant amount of Edaligo Universals had been wagered on Ruby.

"Come on back," I said to Fredarico, waving him over to me.

He jumped off the cowl and used the fuel line as a stepping point. A second later he was back over the wall, and Ruby was tearing out of his pit. The sickening sound of burning rubber and ripping metal screeched out.

"Oh-oh," I heard Fredarico say.

I couldn't help but laugh. Ruby's crew had forgotten to remove the fuel hose, and connected end had ripped a massive gash into the side of the car. A river of fuel sluiced over the concrete. Ruby's day was done.

\* \* \* \*

Fredarico and I kicked back and watched the rest of the race together. To make a long story short, Mario Andretti won his first Indy 500.

Per our contract, Fredarico acquired the Edaligo spacecraft as salvage. This turned out to be a first-contact mission after all, and the appearance of such an interesting new species warranted investigation. What better way than to send them to a place where technology ran everything?

Hehehehehehehe, as Fredarico says. Serves the Edaligo bastards right. Me?

Well, I got a big raise. Nothing pleases a commissioner who's up for reelection like scamming an entire crime syndicate. So now I'm a captain. And I learned something important -- Fredarico loved Mario. He had been planning on hopping a ride in Andretti's Brawler/Hawk after he messed with the scoring guys. So just between you and me, I wasn't surprised when Mario didn't do so well in future races. I suppose I could be wrong about the little guy, but all I can say is that I never got that singsong "oh-oh" out of my head, and that alone was enough to keep me betting on Unsers from that point on.

I can also report that my wager paid back at two-to-one. Not a bad gig if you can get it. So with my spare cash and the extra two weeks of vacation I got with the promotion, I could think of only one thing to do.

You got it -- I went to Disneyland.

\* \* \* \*

\_It's "Hell Week at Grant-Williams High" in Vera Nazarian's sick and twisted Finals Week tale. Brother and sister high school students Emily and Jimmy Ross get to face some tough finals. All their teachers are monsters. Real ones! And you can probably guess the Principal's new name ... he's a man of wealth and fame.\_

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\*HELL WEEK AT GRANT-WILLIAMS HIGH\*

\*by Vera Nazarian\*

Emily and Jimmy Ross did not look forward to Monday of Finals week at Grant-Williams High. Emily was a senior and Jimmy a freshman, and Finals week was not called Hell Week for nothing by the terrified students. That's because during Hell Week not only were the exams hellish, but all of the faculty and staff turned into monsters.

Real monsters.

Grant-Williams High School was supposedly situated on top of an old Native American burial ground, or maybe it was just a colonial graveyard, but tradition had it that the school was basically smack dab in the middle of a gateway to Hell.

Real Hell.

"Listen to me carefully, weenie," said Emily to Jimmy on Sunday night. "I am only going to say this once, and for your own frigging good you'd better pay attention. I survived Hell Week at Grant Williams three times already, and I am a pro. So you listen to me, and you do exactly what I say."

"Yeah, right," said Jimmy. "What happens if I don't, crow-face?" Like he was going to believe this bull from his scrawny stuck-up older sister. All

the freshmen got a load of it from the upperclassmen for the duration of the final semester, over and over.

"What happens is, the monsters get your sorry ass, is what," said Emily. "And then you turn into a monster too, and you get to come back and teach here when you're old and grown up."

"No way!" said Jimmy.

"You just wait and see manyana," said Emily.

"Shit. I am telling mom on you, this is sick. Enough is enough. I get to hear this from all the sophomores at school, and now my own crow-face sister. It's bad enough I have to pass Algebra One, and History, and I still haven't read any of this week's final chapters...."

Emily scrunched up her face and said, "You try telling mom and she'll only get mad at you for making things up, or think you are having a weenie stress breakdown. She'll make an appointment with her shrink for you. You want that to happen? You want an hour with Dr. Briefeffe, one on one, in a dimly-lit room with pan-flute and self-affirmations?"

"You're just full of it," said Jimmy, as he slammed the door to his room in Emily's face, and jumped into bed, pulling the covers over his PJs.

"Fine, don't believe me," Emily's bored voice came from the other side of the door. And then, after a long pause, "I left the Supernatural Protection Kit for you on the floor, right here, in the gym bag. Take it with you in the morning, weenie boy, if you know what's good for you. Nite!"

"Go to hell!" said Jimmy, turning off the light.

"Tomorrow, both of us will," she said from the hallway.

Jimmy then heard her bedroom door click shut. Okay, this really was not funny at all.

\* \* \* \*

Emily and Jimmy both woke before the alarm rang, and were downstairs in the bluish pre-dawn light, rummaging through the refrigerator for pop tarts and their lunches.

Emily had a big gym bag, just like the one that Jimmy found on the floor in front of his room. And with a blank look on her face she was stuffing it with Kosher horseradish jars and cloves of garlic, and several small bottles of stuff that looked like herbal supplements and vitamin pill bottles. He could also see some wooden dowels sticking out, a small toolbox with hammer and nails, and what looked like a water pistol. Her lunch went in last, and Jimmy stared at her open-mouthed.

"I was not kidding you," said Emily. "Get your own bag and start packing."

"Shit..." said Jimmy.

Later, just as mom came downstairs yawning, they were both gulping down their orange juice, ready to head out the door.

"Good luck on your AP English final, honey," said mom to Emily. "And Jimmy, hope you finished reading those history chapters. Mr. Levinson's final will be tough, but I know you'll do fine!"

"Thanks, mom..."

"Drive carefully, Emily, okay? I am going to take dad's car, and you can use the pickup today, okay?"

"Okay, mom, thanks."

"Jimmy, why do you have those big bags? Is this some kind of PE equipment? I thought track was all done for the semester?"

"No big deal, mom," Emily said. "Jimbus's just helping me carry some graduation party stuff for the senior class Ditch Day, you know, next Wednesday."

"Ah. Ok, great," mom said. "You be good, both of you, ok?"

"Oh yeah, real good," Jimmy muttered.

And they were off.

As they were pulling into the school parking lot, Emily was giving Jimmy the rundown in a very military tone that he'd gotten used to hearing from her. Only this time it didn't bother him so much, since this big ugly

chunk of ice seemed to have settled in his stomach, and he felt really sick with the cold.

"Just remember this, no place is safe," Emily was saying. "First thing, before homeroom, we all meet near the freshman lockers, just around the corner where the bathrooms are, but not the ones near the principal's office, the other side, ok? You got that? This is serious."

"Who's we?"

"Everyone we know, Michael and Sandeep and my friends. You can round up your friends too, whassisname Theo and Aaron and whoever else. You'll see, pretty much the whole school's gonna be split up in packs, friends with friends. Anyone else that's left, the few loners, will be monster chow before the first recess."

"Uhuh."

"Let me repeat that, no place is safe. Not even the bathrooms, since staff and cleaning people go there, and they are all monsters too. Ok, one small exception, if a woman monster is after you, you can hide in the boy's room, and vice versa. The teachers don't know they are monsters, so in that sense they will still be predictable, they'll still behave more or less like all's normal. Oh yeah, another safe time is if a parent's there with you. Parents cannot see the monsters, so they behave as normal."

"This is way crazy, Em," Jimmy said, scratching the back of his neck where the label of his t-shirt tickled him.

Emily said nothing, but turned with a screech of tires into the closest open parking space near the school entrance, just barely missing hitting a couple of freshman girls, who cried, "Watch it, bitch!"

"Monster chow..." said Emily in a hard voice, and parked the pickup.

They got their backpacks crammed with notebooks and textbooks, and also the two gym bags that Emily continued to call Supernatural Protection Kits, and went up the stairs toward the entrance, waving to people they knew.

Around the corner just near the front entrance, but out of sight of the school security guard, was Charlie Harnets, an obnoxious junior, sitting on the grass with a small blanket unrolled at his feet, covered with weird stuff. There were stacks of thick books that looked like bibles, packages of garlic and trays of dried mushrooms, a small Kosher section and leftover packages of Passover matzos, bundles of heavy metal keychains with dangly crosses and Egyptian ankhs, some peace signs, Wiccan pentagrams, supermarket Mexican votive candles, a couple of medallions with the Star of David, a whole bunch of Tarot card packs, a tray of nails and hardware, and various other incomprehensible objects that had no place at school. There was also a handwritten sign folded like a nameplate that said "Protection Stuff." Charlie was stopping all passerby with a "hey, hey, hey, don't go inside without this, you all will need protection!" drawl.

"No way..." said Jimmy. "What's he dealing now?"

Emily said nothing.

"Yo, check this out!" Charlie was saying to a group of three students. "You are gonna need this before you go around the corner. Don't believe me? Go have a look at the security guard. He's one of them."

One of the girls in tight pink flair-leg jeans and a crop waist top snorted and went around the corner and then immediately came back. Her eyes had grown big, and she started going through her purse for money.

"That's right," Charlie was saying. "You are a smart lady, here, take a cross on a keychain and a garlic clove, it's my basic introductory package. Need more later, you come back, you know where I'll be..."

"Come on," said Emily to Jimmy, "he doesn't have anything we don't already have. He's just trying to save face and make some money this time to make it up for last year when he nearly got bitten by Mrs. Gornzola who was a werewolf."

"You mean the Mrs. Gornzola from the Spanish Language Lab? No..."

"Yes, her," said Emily, as they walked past Charlie, who waved at them but didn't try to sell them anything."

"See, he knows I am a pro," Emily said, tossing back her long reddish brown hair.

They turned the corner, and Jimmy nearly peed his pants. At the front entrance, stood the usual security guard, except that today he had a strange big head, and his face had elongated into a snout, his eyes were red and glowing, and his teeth stuck out like tusks out of the corners of his mouth. He grinned horribly at the student passerby, holding his enormous clawed hands oddly relaxed at his sides, and they all ran past him inside, holding up various talismans and objects of Protection.

"Oh my God, I am not going in there," said Jimmy, his feet nearly giving out under him. "Oh no! God, this is real!"

"Way real. And yes you are," said Emily. "Just do exactly what I do. Come on!"

And she walked with determination right up to the guard, who leered at her. Turning her dead-pan face at him, she whispered: "I am protected by the Force of Truth, the Firewall of Justice, and the Heart of Goodness."

At this the security guard visibly shrank back from Emily, and even his physical appearance seemed to waver for a moment so that Jimmy could see underneath the monstrosity the man's normal balding human head and bull neck. Emily safely entered the school hall. Jimmy was next.

Like an idiot he turned to the guard and said, "I am protected by ... uhm ... the Hearty Goodness and the Firewall of uhm..."

The guard opened his mouth and roared.

"You stupid freak!" cried Emily, as she pushed her brother out of the way of a very real blast of hellfire, and grabbed him by the neck and shoved him inside, while several freshmen and a junior screamed, scattering out of the way.

"I got a stupid freak brother who cannot even repeat a line correctly much less survive Hell Week! Argh!"

In that moment they saw Mike Walsinger, Emily's boyfriend heading their way. Mike was a tall good looking senior with an earring in his ear and a dark goatee, and he had been lounging casually against the wall. Next to him was Sandeep Prashad his best bud, coffee-skinned and dark-haired, originally from India.

"Hey Em," Mike said, finally picking up his own large gym bag from the floor at his feet, after shoving it along for a number of steps. "Hey Jimbus. Everyone's waiting, let's go, time for the usual pep talk and briefing before homeroom."

They headed toward the end of the hall past other hurrying students, all neurotic looking and unusually subdued, and at the lockers was the familiar crowd, mostly Emily's gang of seniors. There was big curvaceous blonde Noreen Elson with her tight top and jeans, and Justin Dway with his carrot top head and freckles, dark and bitchy Margot Dupree, whom Jimmy couldn't stand, and Jennifer Rayney who was chewing gum and picking her nails nervously, and Julia Salinas, and Fernando Costa, both sophomores, and even the Halway triplets where there, Mindy, Marla, and Marilyn, also know as the fabulous junior muffins.

"Hey," said Emily to everyone.

At that point Jimmy saw his best friend Theodore Smith heading their way from the other corner. "Did you see that?" Theo said, panting. "Did you see that thing at the entrance? Holy shit!"

"Welcome to your first Hell Week at Grant-Williams," said Mike with a grin.

"Ok, so," said Emily. "What have we all got here? Supplies inventory? Everyone's got the basics?"

"Yeah," said Justin. "But does anyone know the monster lineup this year? Like, who turned into what?"

"What?" echoed Theo, and poked Jimmy, "Listen man, I don't know what's going on here, I mean -- "

"Shut up, froshie," said Margot. "Listen and you'll learn."

"Ok, here's the deal," Mike said. "I went by the faculty lounge, and I saw some of them. Mr. Johnston is a vampire, and so is Ms. Hebronne and Mrs. Booth. Mr. Engelsman is a big hairy werewolf -- like that's a shock. So is Coach Josephs. Just to let any of you Hell Week virgins know, those two kinds of monsters are the worst. Like, on a salsa scale of Hot, Medium and Mild, these are Hot, get it? Then, there's, Mr. Williman, who looks to be either a Frankenstein monster or a plain generic ghoul of some sort, and I think Mr. Levinson is either a zombie or a mummy, but not sure which -- he looked pretty dead and gone and his skin was peeling like shit -- "

"Mr. Levinson's my history teacher!" said Jimmy.

"Yeah, that's it, lucky you," said Mike, glancing at Jimmy and Theo. "You virgins listen up, this is gonna be hard for you at first."

"Simple, actually," said Noreen. And then she turned to Jimmy and Theo and stuck her hand out with her index finger wagging sideways meaningfully from one to the other. "What you gotta do is stay as quiet and invisible as possible, don't call any attention to yourself, don't volunteer to speak in class, don't breathe, and just sit tight like a cute little froshie bug that you are and do your finals."

"Right," said Jennifer, and popped her gum.

"No, really, this is what you gotta do," said Emily, turning to her freshman brother in determination. "You take a small chunk of garlic clove and use it to draw a line around your desk. Smear it on your hands and neck like deodorant. Garlic seems to work best overall against most of them."

"Jesus, that will stink!" said Theo. "I am not -- "

"Don't swear," said Emily sternly, interrupting him. "This is deadly serious. Now then," she bent down and put her gym bag down, "let's open up and check our inventory. We need religious symbols of all faiths here! Let's make sure we are prepared for all possibilities."

And as they all started to rummage in their bags, the bell rang, signifying homeroom.

\* \* \* \*

Jimmy's homeroom teacher, Ms. Van Durren looked all pretty and normal as usual, wearing a beige suit and cream ruffle blouse. Except that as Jimmy settled in at his desk in the third row he saw that she was hiding a very long iridescent scaly mermaid tail under her desk, but the sharp fins were sticking out and giving her away. "Good morning, everyone," Ms. Van Durren said in her nice sweet normal voice. "Let's begin roll call. Anderson?"

And then she looked around the room smiling.

"Here..." said Jill Anderson in a trembling voice, and sank halfway in her seat, wanting to disappear.

Because when Ms. Van Durren's smile bared her teeth, everyone could see that they were sharp like piranhas.

First period was Jimmy's History Final. Jimmy had caught up with Theo at the doors to the class, and Theo was nearly hysterical. "Listen, man," he was muttering. "Get this, okay, I went to homeroom, and Mr. Wong was a werewolf! His face turned all brown and hairy, he howled and snarled between each name during roll call, and then he got up and put these long jagged-nailed fingers on the blackboard and he just pulled them across, making that badass scratching noise, except it was a thousand times louder and worse -- "

"Chill, man!" whispered Jimmy. "You gotta catch a breath ok, it's ok! Think about history! We've got a final now, think Constitutional Amendments and crap! Think Emancipation Proclamation, and a whole bunch of dates starting with.. uhm ... I think, 1700? Oh shit...."

And then they saw their other buddy, Aaron Weissman, running down the stairs fast from his homeroom on the second floor.

"Yo, dudes, wait up!" he cried, his ever-present headphones swinging around his neck, and the CD player itself stuck in his backpack.

"Hey," said Jimmy.

"Hey, listen," said Aaron. "I dunno what is going on around here, but I

just had homeroom with a harpy!"

"So?" said Theo. "Everyone knows Ms. Radisson is a harpy, and the bitch's got bad breath too."

"No, you just don't get it," said Aaron hurriedly, grabbing onto Theo's arm. "I mean she was a real damn harpy! A bird's body but her own head, and this scaly heavy metal bra thing. And she fucking flew around the room and crapped on our heads!"

"Holy shit..." said Theo.

The bell rang.

They went into first period history class single file, nearly the last ones to enter the room, and slunk into some empty seats toward the back. The whole class was extremely quiet, glued to their desks, and some people were sitting partially under their desks. Up in front, Mr. Levinson was in his usual spot at the teacher's desk, flipping through some notes. His hands -- parts of them that barely showed from beyond the wrist cuffs of his clean white shirt -- were all brown and peeling, and his skin seemed barbecued and then sun-dried like a tomato. Jimmy gulped, seeing that Mr. Levinson had lost all of his blond hair and his skull was looking sort of shrunken.

He also didn't have any eyeballs. In their place there were these pits of nothing, and some flapping brown skin. Or maybe those were oil-soaked and long-dried strips of cotton. He also didn't seem to have any lips, and you could see a bunch of black rotten teeth attached directly to the skull.

Yes, Mr. Levinson was definitely an Egyptian mummy.

"Go-ho-od mo-ho-rning, clas-ss-ss," said a sepulchral voice from beyond the grave. "Whee'll begin-n the final ex-ss-ssam in te-hn minutes-ss..."

"Pass me that garlic, man..." whispered Theo and kicked Jimmy's desk leg.

As Mr. Levinson slowly got up with clumsy jerking movements to hand out the final exam papers, and momentarily turned his back to the class, there was a mad flurry of movement as the freshmen rummaged in their bags and passed around various items of Protection. Garlic cloves were rolled under desks, three boys sprinkled dried herbs on their desktops, and one girl whimpered while smearing herself with something from a little vial.

It was going to be a very long and smelly fifty minutes.

\* \* \* \*

When the bell rang for break, Emily had just come out of AP English, where Mrs. Booth, a tall gaunt vampire with black polish on her long terrible nails, white bloodless skin, and scarlet lips, had given them an essay test. Mrs. Booth hissed when she came by Emily's desk to collect her finished exam papers, because Emily had surrounded herself with crosses, three stars of David, a Baha'i sunburst, a Buddhist prayer wheel, and a Hopi kachina doll. Emily also reeked of garlic, Kosher horseradish, and oil of myrrh.

"Aren't you overdoing it just a little?" whispered Mrs. Booth very quietly, glaring at Emily with her hypnotic evil eyes as she took the exam.

"Yes, Ma'am," said Emily, staring straight ahead of her like a marine, and not meeting the vampire's gaze.

Outside, the sun was bright and the cafeteria snack bar was open and serving. Jimmy, Theo, and Aaron noticed that no one was buying anything, because the food service lady was a big ogre with a huge bulbous potato nose, warts all over, wild gray witch hair, and her dirt-covered skin was peeling right into the food.

"Eeeow," said Aaron, wrinkling his nose. "Anyone want some beef jerky? I got some here in the bag. On second thought I think I am not going to be able to eat anything for about five years. Let me just go barf in a toilet."

"Later, man," said Theo. "Hold it in."

"Right," said Jimmy, "No time, we gotta go meet up with my sister and see what's happening."

They went back to the freshman lockers, and there was Sandeep and Mike, hanging out. Actually, they pretended to be just hanging, but in reality they were sorting the Protection stuff in their gym bags.

"Hey," Sandeep was saying, "I got curry powder here, tons of it. Took it from my mom's store. Got cumin and aniseed and coconut powder."

"Yeah, so?" Mike said.

"Well, you told me to bring some stuff from my culture."

"Right, you moron, but who's ever heard of curry powder being used to ward off evil? What are you gonna do, feed it to them and give them the runs?"

"Like garlic won't, asshole?" said Sandeep, visibly hurt. "Like, what will you do, force-feed them lasagna? If you don't want the curry, just say so. I'll unload it on Charlie Harnets."

"Hey, guys, be nice," said Emily just then, coming their way, loaded with her books and gym bag. She had a haggard look on her face, and her shoulders stooped more than usual.

And then she added, "I have bad news, unfortunately. This year, the principal is Satan himself. I don't know what anyone can do to survive the rest of the week. We've never had Satan manifest here so blatantly before."

"Wow," said Mike. "Seriously bad. On a salsa scale that's gotta be Extra-Hot. Or Extra-Extra. Last year Principal Ferriman was just a zombie. I dunno if all the Protection stuff will hold up against something like that."

"Heh," said Aaron. "You tell us. We're just idiot freshmen, and we all love Hell Week."

\* \* \* \*

"I am going to graduate, I swear to God, I am going to graduate," Emily was muttering to herself as she drove them home after school. "And then I am going to one of those nice Claremont Colleges in California, Pomona or Scripps -- "

"Pomona's mascot is a prairie chicken," Jimmy said.

"It's a Sage Hen! And it happens to be one of the top five highly selective liberal arts colleges in the country -- "

"Yeah, so. The mascot's still a chicken."

"Screw you, weenie. Anyway, just four more days of Hell Week, I am gonna make it -- "

"Yeah, well what about me?" said Jimmy angrily. He was shivering again, the adrenaline rush of the day giving way to a real low. "And you are swearing."

"You can just go piss. And oh yeah? Fuck everything," said Emily. "This is seriously severe shit, and I'll swear if I want to. Got that, weenie boy?"

"You're the pro."

"And you're a sarcastic jerk, you know that?" she snarled. "I got a freak jerk for a brother."

Jimmy sighed. Emily was seriously messed up, he had to admit, and she was obviously freaking.

"Can't we do something? Like, kill them somehow, or exorcise them?" he said after a pause.

"Kill? Are you crazy? Those are our teachers! The poor things have no idea they turn into monsters one week out of a year! You don't want to hurt poor Ms. Herrera, your nice Spanish Two teacher, do you?"

"Of course not, but if she's a spitting mad banshee who wants to rip my hair out and pull down my pants -- "

"James!" exclaimed Emily, staring at him and then braking really hard since they nearly ran into the car ahead of them. "James Allan Ross, I can't believe you would think or say something terrible like that! About killing. Are you insane?"

"Well isn't this whole thing pretty much insane?" he said. "I mean were talking about destroying some monsters here, not our teachers!"

"But they are our teachers!" said Emily, "They can't help this! It's like a curse of some sort, they're just victims of -- "

And then she froze.

"That's it," said Emily, "I know."

"You know what?"

"I know what to do. We're gonna save them all," said Emily.

\* \* \* \*



"This is totally insane," Theo was saying over the phone that night. "Are you guys expecting me to save souls and pass Algebra at the same time? No fucking way! I have to do okay on the final tomorrow, I can't think of this crazy shit ... I got a semester's worth of formulas to memorize overnight!"

"Listen to me," Jimmy said. "I dunno what sis is thinking to do, but I think she knows something we don't. With principal Ferriman being Satan things have gone off the deep end. I just heard that they pulled some sophomore into the faculty lounge after lunch, and there were screams coming from there, like really bad ones! Like he was being skinned alive!"

"Shit, who told you?"

"Marilyn Halway..."

"And you believed the slut? The Triplets just make things up all the time, stupid dipshits -- "

"Hey Jimmy! Please get off the phone and go to bed!" came from the hallway.

"Ok, I gotta go," said Jimmy. "It's my mom, and I have to pretend nothing is wrong. Tomorrow!"

"Ok, later, man..."

\* \* \* \*

Tuesday morning came much too soon. Jimmy got to watch Emily drive mom's Chevy sedan like a maniac as soon as they turned a corner away from their house. When they pulled into the school parking lot and Jimmy scrambled out of the car, Emily gave him her own book bag and the Protection Kit and said she'd meet up with him at the usual place near the lockers.

"Where are you going?" said Jimmy. "What am I supposed to -- "

"Just shut up and move it," she replied. "See you all there in ten minutes." And then she headed with determination toward the other end of the parking lot toward the empty sports field.

Jimmy grunted and started to lug four bags of stuff all by himself to the school building.

Charlie Harnets was in his usual spot around the corner, and his blanket had new merchandize. Next to him was Nick Elby, his crony, sitting with his own stash in a big open toolbox. This morning there was a line of students milling nearby, and the two were dealing in Protection Stuff like there was no tomorrow.

"Hi, Jimmy!" said Marla Halway, breaking away from the line, and he saw the other two of the triplets haggling with Charlie over some charm bracelets and curry powder. "So what do you have for Protection?"

"The usual ... A pack of extra-large Trojans. Some K-Y," he replied, barely holding on to the bags.

The Halway triplet giggled.

"Ooh, you're so bad! No, really, you have a lot of stuff, lemme see, lemme see! Need any help with that?"

"Hands off," said Jimmy. Marla was flirting with him just because he was loaded, or so she thought.

"Fine, be that way, froshie," she pouted, and returned back to her place at the head of the line.

"Yo, this way!" Charlie was saying, holding up Bengali incense sticks. "Nick and I will take care of you..."

Jimmy continued around the corner, right past the leering hellhound guard, and this time rattled off the Protection Line without a glitch. Inside, Aaron and Theo were talking to someone in the hall.

Jimmy's heart sank and bounced around in his stomach like a flat soccer ball.

It was Tiffany Shuelle. Her long straight raven-black hair hung to her waist, and she wore a black vinyl jacket over dark denim jeans. The most beautiful freshman girl in the class, and she didn't even know he existed. Typical.

Aaron saw him and waved. "Hey, Jimmy, over here, wassup."

Tiffany turned around to look. She had lovely pale skin without a

single blemish, and huge deep violet eyes. Her dangly bead earrings connected via delicate chain to three of her piercings and matched the color of her irises.

"Hey," said Jimmy, for lack of better words. He then dumped the four bags down at their feet. And then he added, "Emily's coming soon. Ten minutes."

"So what is going on, man?" said Theo. "Tell me more about this saving their souls shit."

"Not me, that's Emily's department," said Jimmy.

"Uhm, I hope you guys don't mind me hanging with you?" said Tiffany. She was looking directly at Jimmy.

"Oh, sure," he said. "I mean, no prob."

"Good," said Tiffany. "Because I am scared, and I know you guys have some good Protection happening. Everyone says your sister is a pro at this. You see, I had to do detention last night. It was bad. I was in there with Principal Ferriman and Dean Chowsky for an hour after school. They are devils, and the library now has this burning pit thing -- "

"Oh crap..." whispered Theo. "Are you okay?"

Tiffany shuddered. "Yeah, I'm ok, barely." She pulled the top of her shirt down a bit, and they saw around her neck a chain with a large wood and silver crucifix and some Friendship bracelet strings woven in.

"I was wearing this," she said. "And then, I had to sit near the pit, while Ferriman was stirring hot coals. He's all flame-red now, and he's got horns and a tail with this bushy black trident thing."

"Shit."

"Yes, and so, I was sucking this garlic clove and this freshman guy behind me had some Echinacea cough drops, so we popped some, just in case. And then we drew this circle with chalk around us on the floor, and this other girl put some symbols in it when Ferriman was not looking. Anyway, we managed to survive."

"Wow..." said Theo, ogling her. "Amazing you."

They waited another minute or two, while Sandeep and Noreen and Mike showed up, and some others. "Where's Emily?" Mike said worriedly.

Jimmy opened his mouth, at which point the bell rang for homeroom.

\* \* \* \*

Jimmy managed to make it till lunch, and got through his Spanish final. Ms. Herrera spent the exam hour running around the room and between their desks, yowling at everyone's amulets and making horrible screeching noises, while they were doing the multiple choice grammar, the Conditional and Imperative tense. The room smelled of so much garlic and incense and unwashed banshee hair that everyone was sneezing and coughing all the time, and it was exquisite agony.

Finally the bell rang and Jimmy staggered out of there, to meet Theo and Aaron in the hall. Tiffany joined them shortly.

"Anyone seen my sister?" he said.

"Uhm, no," said Aaron. "Should we start to panic now?"

"I thought she was a pro," said Theo.

"Well, she is. But something is up, and she didn't tell me the details of her plan..." said Jimmy. He was beginning to sweat a little from that same cold fear.

In that moment Sandeep showed up, and he was panting hard. "I saw her," he said. "I saw your sister through the window of the secretary's office, in front of the faculty lounge. They got her!"

"What do you mean?" said Jimmy. "They? What -- "

"She was sitting down in the detention chair, waiting. She looked all bloodless white... I didn't see Ferriman. But Mike's there now, he is going to go in there and confront him, and get her out..."

"He's gonna confront Satan?" said Theo. "Oh shit! How's he gonna do that? He's like, agnostic!"

"Atheist," corrected Aaron. "Big deal. And I am Jewish. Like that would

matter? Satan's Satan, and Mike's Mike."

Jimmy was so cold now that he couldn't feel his fingers, and even the fact that Tiffany was standing a foot away looking gorgeous, didn't make any difference.

"I am going there," he said very quietly. "Gonna help Mike, and get Emily out. She's gonna graduate even if I have to kick some red devil ass."

\* \* \* \*

Emily sat in a hard chair in Principal Ferriman's office, trying not to inhale too much brimstone and burning ash.

Across from her was Satan himself, wearing Mr. Ferriman's dark brown suit and a yellow Hawaiian splash pattern tie.

"Now then, Ms. Ross," Satan was saying in a deep soothing voice that managed to make her skin crawl, "I see here that you skipped out on your first period class and were discovered spying on the faculty lounge from the back window. Would you mind explaining yourself, young lady?"

"I don't have to explain anything to you. What have you done with Mr. Ferriman?" said Emily. And she stared unflinchingly at Satan.

"What did you say? What is the meaning of this insolence?"

"I said, what have you done with Principal Ferriman? I demand you release his soul and the souls of all the other teachers and staff of Grant-Williams High right now, and depart back to the Hell you came from!"

A pause of silence.

And then Satan laughed. His laugh made the floor and the masonry underneath shake, and the pictures on the office wall started to slide around. "All right," he said in a booming thunderous voice. "I see how it is, Ms. Ross. So, what am I going to do with you? Eh?"

Emily trembled. "I am protected by the Force of Truth, the Firewall of Justice, and the Heart of Goodness," she said quietly.

Satan started to guffaw. When he was done, he wiped a red-hot flame tear from the corner of his blazing eyes, and he said, "Stop this nonsense right now. Your little rhyme is powerless against me."

And then he rose slowly from his seat, seeming to fill the room with a dark midnight presence, and he neared her, staring in her face across the Principal's desk. "Powerless," he whispered. "And so are you."

Emily found herself inches away from the horrifying face of Satan. She did not blink. "That is absolutely not true," she said. "Actually, you are the one who's powerless against all of us. Only, we just don't know it. We are afraid, and we think that you and your army of monsters can tear us apart and carry us off to Hell, when in fact all you can do is bluff. That's all Satan ever does. Bluff. The Prince of Lies. Because only we can destroy ourselves by letting fear, uncertainty, and confusion stop us from doing the right thing."

As she was speaking, Emily got up from her seat, and she stood up straight. And then she leaned forward, so close to Satan's face that she could have kissed him. "Prince of Darkness, Prince of Lies," she said. "Release the souls of all the teachers and staff, or I promise you one terrible thing. I will flunk all of my remaining finals, and I will not graduate."

"Eh?" said Satan. "What did you say?"

"You heard me," said Emily. "I am going to do the one thing you are afraid of most. I will flunk out, and have to redo most of my senior coursework. As a result I'll stay behind for another semester, and then another, forever and ever, and you will have to deal with me every single damn Hell Week!"

\* \* \* \*

Jimmy ran all the way down the long hall to the doors of the Principal's office just to see Mike arguing with Mrs. Chillins the secretary who had a long witch nose covered with warts, huge pointy ears, and gnarled claws in place of hands. Despite everything she was still wearing her usual peachy-gold nail polish, and the claws made clackety noises on the typewriter as she continued to type as she cackled. "You can't go in there, my pretty," she was saying to Mike. "Take a seat over there, my pumpkin, and wait your turn,

honeybunch, hehehe."

"Listen, witch," Mike said, putting his hands palms down on both sides of her desk. "I am going in there to see what is being done to Emily Ross, and you are not going to stop me!"

"Young man!" exclaimed the witch with a horrible shrieking voice, in a grotesque parody of the real Mrs. Chillins. "What did you just call me? Are you talking back to me? Detention!"

"Mike!" said Jimmy, pulling at Mike's sleeve. "No, wait, don't!" And then he looked at Witch Chillins and said in a quiet polite voice, "Excuse me, but I am James Ross, Emily Ross's brother, and I need to see her right away. There has been a tragedy in the family, and we need to go home immediately...."

"Eh?" said the witch, peeking closer at Jimmy. "Is this true?"

"Yes, Ma'am," said Jimmy. "If you don't believe me, you can call our mom."

"All right, you just stay here sonny, I will be right back."

Saying that, Mrs. Chillins got up from her seat and headed to the back office.

"What's going on?" said Mike nervously.

Behind them, Aaron and Theo were peeking in from the door in the hallway.

In that moment there was a blast of heat and the smell of brimstone, as though the office air conditioning has been suddenly switched to heat, and a powerful fan was turned on. They stared as a chili-pepper red devil dressed in Principal Ferriman's suit sauntered into the front office, followed closely by the witch.

"Where's Emily?" said Jimmy, gulping.

"Ah, the young Mr. Ross, is it?" said Satan. "What can I do for you?"

"Uhm, sir," said Jimmy as politely as possible, trying to ignore the horrific face and the two sharp horns sticking out of Satan's smooth tomato skull. "My sister Emily Ross and I need to be excused. There has been a tragedy in the family. Our ... uhm ... mom is very sick."

"Oh, really?" said Satan, his eyes blazing fireplace-red and focused on Jimmy. "Curious, I was just talking to your sister in my office, about how your mother has been taken ill all of a sudden. In fact, you might want to talk to your sister yourself, because she does not seem to believe me."

And then Satan turned and said loudly, "Ms. Ross, you may come out. Your brother is here with some bad news, I am afraid. It's about your mother."

Jimmy frowned, wanting to bite his lip, but said nothing. In a moment Emily came out of the Principal's office. She looked intensely righteous and pale as a sheet.

"Emily," said Jimmy. "Uhm, mom is sick, we need to go home right now."

"What?" said Emily. "No, not you too! You are lying! And it is all his doing!" And she pointed at Satan Ferriman. And then she started speaking urgently, looking at them all. "Don't listen to him," she was saying, "he is just trying to scare us and make us vulnerable! It is when we are afraid that he has power over us!"

"This is quite enough," said Satan. "Your outrageous behavior, Ms. Ross, has earned you three days of probation and possible expulsion from this school. Now, go home, or more correctly to the hospital, and take care of your poor mother!"

And as he started to turn, the front office phone rang. Mrs. Chillins took the call, and then turned her grotesque witch face at the students. "It's the county hospital," she screeched. "Looks like Mrs. Ross your mother has indeed been taken terribly ill. You two are excused for the rest of the day."

\* \* \* \*

"I just can't believe what's happening!" said Jimmy as they together with Mike ran to the car. "I swear, I just made that whole thing up! I was trying to get you out of there, and now it's real!"

"Yeah, well, that's his way. You shouldn't have lied -- he takes each

lie and turns it back on us, so that it takes on real life," said Emily. As they made it to the parking lot and got in the car, she was trembling. And yet her voice was steady and determined, while her hands took the wheel firmly. Emily started the car and pulled them away from the curb, and Mike leaned forward from the back seat and started to massage her neck.

"Wow, are you tense..." he said, kneading her neck muscles. "I hate to ask, but what exactly happened there in Satan's office?"

Emily continued driving, staring straight ahead. And then she took a big breath. "He and I made a bargain."

"What?" gasped Jimmy and Mike.

"You don't make bargains with Satan! No way!" said Jimmy.

"This one is different," said Emily. "It was more of a threat -- from me. I threatened him, and he knew he was at a loss, so he went into his usual bargaining deal thing. It's what he always does to save his ass."

"You threatened Satan?"

"Yeah." For the first time there was a little smile on Emily's face.

"But how?"

"With truth," she said. "It's the one thing he is afraid of. It is at the same time the most difficult and the most simple thing in the world. Problem is, truth is a personal thing. Each one of us can only discover it for themselves. And in that lies Satan's power. Because what I can tell you about it will mean nothing if you don't figure it out on your own. I already told you the gist, in fact. It's all about fear and knowing that he has no power over us except when we let him."

"Uhm, I think I get it," said Jimmy. "But what's the big deal?"

"That's what I mean," said Emily. "There is no big deal. It's such a simple thing that it's not a big deal at all. That's why it is so hard to believe that it is all it takes to conquer Satan."

"Wait," said Mike. "Now I am confused. What is the secret?"

Emily sighed. "See," she said. "This is what I mean. It is hard to accept. So you continue to look for something more complex, more secret and mysterious in an explanation. When there really is none."

"Em," said Mike gently, "I don't believe in any of this shit in the first place. I don't believe in Satan or God or Truth with a capital T. I think this whole thing is just a mass hallucination we're all having annually, due to finals stress. There's gotta be a scientific explanation."

"I know," she replied also quietly. "I know what your thoughts and feelings are on this subject. But you don't have to believe. Truth just is. That's what I am trying to get into your thick head."

"Look, you two," said Jimmy. "Hate to interrupt a philosophical love spat, but I have never heard of such a mass hallucination. These monsters are damn real. And they've done something to make our mom sick!"

"How do you know?" said Emily. "How do you know she's really sick? I won't believe it until we see mom first."

"And what happens when you do see her, and she is sick?" said Mike. "Would that validate your belief in monsters and Satan, and will he then suddenly have power over you?"

"Oh, God, I don't know," said Emily. "I just don't know."

In ten more minutes they were at the hospital.

Mike managed to get more information on Mrs. Ross's condition, and they all took the elevator to the 7th floor.

At least Mrs. Ross was not in an ICU, but in a regular recovery floor. Mom was in a two-person room, lying in bed watching the suspended TV up near the ceiling. She turned towards them with a weak smile.

"Mom!" exclaimed Emily, running ahead, "What happened? Are you okay? Oh my God! Please tell me you are okay!"

"Hi, guys," said Emily and Jimmy's mom. "Sorry about the scare. I am okay now, but a couple of hours ago I felt this chest pain, and got really faint, and decided to check in. So far the doctors haven't found anything, but there are still some tests to run. I almost feel silly about this whole

probable false alarm thing. Dad should be here soon, by the way. He just stepped out for a moment, he's been here this whole time, got off from work and everything. I've been playing with this remote control bed. Do you know it can go up and down like a recliner -- "

"Oh, mom," Jimmy said. "You really scared us!"

"Aww, sorry, sweetie. Come here, give me a hug, both of you. You too, Mike -- hi, Mike!"

\* \* \* \*

Later that night when they got back home minus mom -- who was supposed to stay one more day for observation -- Emily and Jimmy had a talk with dad.

"Listen, guys, I got this really unpleasant message from school," dad said, "from the principal's office. It sounds like Emily did something, and now you are on probation? Good God, what's going on? It's finals week, and you are supposed to be done in three more days and graduate in a week! You've got three hotshot colleges waiting for your final acceptance of their offers! This is so unlike you, Emily! I didn't want to say anything in front of your mom and upset her, but this is outrageous!"

Emily stared at the floor and picked at a lock of her hair.

"Dad," Jimmy said. "It's uhm, well, it's kind of my fault."

"Jim!" said Emily in reproach, looking at him intently.

Dad turned his wrath on Jimmy. "Ok, so what did you do? This had better be good, do you realize you've compromised your sister's academic standing?"

"Dad, he's lying on my behalf," Emily said. "Enough lies. We mustn't lie, not once, not now."

"Huh?" said Jimmy, frowning. "Then what are we supposed to say?"

Emily smiled. "The truth," she said. "Say only the truth and let things run their course."

"Ok," said Jimmy opening his eyes really wide, scratching the back of his head, and then turned to dad. "Here's the thing, dad. The school is going through Hell week. All the faculty and staff are monsters, the principal is Satan, and we are doing our best to survive it."

Dad sighed. "Why didn't you just say so? Look, I can understand completely how crazy finals can make you. I've been through them myself. Ok, whatever you've done no longer matters. At this point, for mom's sake, for Emily's future, let's just try to smooth it out with the school, okay? I'll write you both a note for the principal, even if he's being a real devil about the whole thing. We'll get you back in school so that you can finish your finals."

As dad was speaking, Emily glanced at Jimmy with a look of minor triumph. And when they went upstairs for the night, she whispered in his ear, "See, the truth worked, in its own weird way."

"Let me get this straight," Jimmy said. "Are you trying to stay out of school and blackmailing Satan that you will not graduate, or are you trying to get back in? Because dad just wrote you a note so that you can go back tomorrow. I am confused! What's going on here?"

"Satan does things backwards," said Emily. "When he wants you to do something, he makes the seeming opposite be the easiest solution. So that you try harder to achieve what you really want, and as a result you grow weak and unfocused from all the effort and supposedly he eventually gets you."

"Ok, crow-face, since when are you such an expert on the true motives of Satan?" said Jimmy. "I am getting tired of all your lecturing on how things work and truth and stuff, Ms. Dalai Lama."

"Because I am the pro," Emily said. "One of these days I'll tell you, weenie. Thanks, by the way, for sticking up for me."

\* \* \* \*

On Wednesday morning they were back in school. Emily took the note to the Principal's office, and Mrs. Chillins took it with a snort and a screech, and scratched her warty witch nose. "All right, off to class with you, cupcake," she wailed. "And behave!"

"Yes, Ma'am," said Emily and walked out, trying to hold her breath,

since all of the office stank of brimstone.

In the hallway near the lockers, most of the gang was assembled. Sandeep and Theo and Fernando were passing around garlic paste, and they all whipped out various Protection amulets when Coach Josephs lurched by in the hall, howling and making hungry wolf-noises.

"So what are we going to do now?" said Sandeep, putting away his silver-bullet water pistol when the Coach had gone. "Is there still, like, a plan? And how is your mom doing by the way?"

"She's ok," said Emily. "Should be back out of the hospital today."

"It was a very freaky coincidence, though," said Jimmy, "that I said that she was sick yesterday, and she really was."

Theo shivered. "That was weird, man. Makes you wonder."

"Satan works with coincidences a lot," said Emily. "They make his threats look good."

"Oh yeah?" said gum-snapping Jennifer. "Interesting point, I never thought about it that way."

"Yeah," said Emily. "That's cause he has no real power, I keep telling you all. He is the Prince of Lies, and he only messes with your mind."

"I hope you're right..." Fernando said. "But then, he must've really messed with the teachers' minds, to turn them into monsters. Can we really do something for them?"

"Well, if we don't, they are doomed to become monsters every Finals Week, and terrorize all these future students..." Emily said. "But we're gonna make the teachers see how things really are. We'll help them lose their monster selves by making them think, by asking them questions until they do --"

"Uhm, guys, we have a big problem!" Tiffany had came up to them interrupting Emily. She had rounded the corner in a hurry and looked terrified. "It looks like all our Protection has stopped working against the monsters. The teachers are starting to attack students!"

Emily stared hard at Tiffany. "Then we have no time to lose. Satan is making his move."

\* \* \* \*

Jimmy and Theo came to their Algebra final, armed with the usual Protection Kits, but with a couple of extras. Theo carried a huge dictionary from the library, and Jimmy had a stack of advanced math and physics books. The plan was to ask so many questions that the teacher had to snap out of being a monster.

Mr. Johnston stood in the shadowed corner, as far away from the sunny windows as possible, and on a scale of living being to inanimate object, resembled a telephone pole. He was wearing an outdated black suit, in some ways very much like Dracula's cape, and his skin had turned deathly white. In the shadowy corner, his eyes stood out, burning like evil beacons.

"It is time ... for the exam," he said with an odd dramatic pause in the middle of the sentence. And then he stepped forward away from the dark corner.

The whole class stared at him, petrified. Mr. Johnston's lips were red, and they dripped with stuff at the corners that looked like ketchup or blood.

"Oh no!" Theo whispered. "He's feasted on someone!"

Apparently vampires do indeed have preternatural hearing.

"Mr. Smith, what did you say?" said Mr. Johnston, turning his hypnotic pale face at Theo. "Will you repeat it and share with the class?"

"Uhm ... nothing." Theo gulped and started to sink in his chair.

Jimmy gulped also, and bravely opened one of the math textbooks, and said, "Mr. Johnston, he was just asking me a question before the test. Maybe you can help, in fact. Would you please explain to us how to factor quadratic polynomials, just one more time?"

The vampire glided noiselessly forward and stopped in front of Jimmy and Theo's desks. "No textbooks..." he said. "And no more explanations. Today is the final, and if you have not studied sufficiently, then you will fail."

Mr. Johnston's gaze stopped on Theo. "Any more questions, Mr. Smith?"

On the other side of Theo, a freshman girl's teeth clattered.

"No, sir..." Theo said, looking at Mr. Johnston.

"Don't look in his eyes!" hissed Jimmy.

Too late. Theo froze.

Luckily the vampire soon moved away, and began passing out the exam papers.

Jimmy kicked Theo's foot. Theo blinked, and then seemed to wake up.

"Garlic..." he whispered. "Need ... garlic..."

An aisle away, Mr. Johnston hissed.

So much for Emily's plan.

Jimmy looked down at his paper and attempted to concentrate on the math problems. About an hour later, when they had turned in the exams and got out of class, he was giving Theo careful looks, making sure his friend was still okay.

"Yeah, okay, stop checking me out like I'm Jennifer Lopez," said Theo. "He only gave me the evil eye, he didn't bite me, remember. So get a grip, already."

In the hallways, students warily rushed about, looking behind and over their shoulders, lurching away from everyone else. Aaron met them at the lockers, looking like he was sick to the stomach. "I can't take this anymore," Aaron said. "Tomorrow I am bringing our family rabbi to class with me."

"Not a bad idea," said Theo. "I should talk to our minister or something. Maybe he can come too."

But Jimmy wasn't listening, because he saw Tiffany. She slowly walked toward them, looking a bit paler than usual but absolutely breathtakingly beautiful. "Hi, Jim," she said. "Want to come with me, please? I am too scared to walk to Social Studies by myself."

"Sure!" said Jimmy, and nearly tripped on his Protection Kit gym bag.

\* \* \* \*

Emily was back in the Principal's office. She was getting used to the smell and heat and the ashes.

"What now, Ms. Ross?" said Satan, as she entered the room, stepping fearlessly past Witch Chillins as though the latter was a doorstop. Satan was seated in the Principal's chair, his red hands folded behind his head in a relaxed careless posture.

"I know what you're doing," said Emily. "I know that Tiffany Shuelle is under your control, has been bitten, and I also know you've got Mike Walsinger. I want you to let them all go right now!"

Satan stretched luxuriously. "It's amazing that you know all this, and yet cannot say anything about it to anyone. What a bummer, eh? I like that word, bummer."

And then he suddenly moved forward, and the room seemed to spin from the blast of heat that came from him, and the burning in his eyes.

"So what are you going to do now, Ms. Ross? Nothing, as usual. Ever since you've been bitten your freshman year, you have been a minor pest, thinking that you can threaten me, thinking that I care who you tell your so-called truth. You've been mine for these last four years, little girl. No wonder you're such a pro."

Emily's lips trembled. Without another word she turned and went running out of the Principal's office.

\* \* \* \*

Jimmy walked next to Tiffany down the hall and up the stairs, doing his best to maintain a manly cool swagger and at the same time act normal. Too bad the other students were too scared and wrapped up in their own concerns to notice who he was with, of all people. Jimmy Ross walking with Tiffany Shuelle!

And then it occurred to Jimmy to wonder why.

Why was Tiffany suddenly hanging out with his crowd, with him, of all people? Sure, his sister was a pro with this supernatural stuff, but why him?

His unvoiced questions were answered soon enough. As they came upstairs



and turned a corner, where it was somewhat dark, Tiffany stopped suddenly. She then turned her face to him and Jimmy saw her eyes.

They were glowing red.

And only a few feet away, behind her, were the teachers. They had gathered en masse on the second floor -- werewolves, vampires, frozen ghouls, unspeakable nameless creatures of the dark, vaguely resembling the human hosts they now occupied. Interspersed in their ranks were students, people Jimmy knew, but now would not recognize, because they were different, transformed. As new students arrived from downstairs to go to class, they were immediately and silently taken, and the unholy ranks grew. Jimmy saw there were dozens of people filling the second floor hallway, a seething oddly silent crowd of frozen figures from Hell.

It took Jimmy all of a second to see all this.

And then he bolted.

Jimmy came down the stairs four at a time, without looking back, hearing Tiffany's suddenly remote cold voice, as though she was on the other end of the continent, speaking through a crackling telephone receiver, breaking up....

\_Jim, wait. Come back to me.\_

Her voice was following, was with him as he ran.

\_Jim ... You must come....\_

"Like Hell I must!" he muttered angrily to himself, running for the lockers where his sister or at least someone from their group usually could be found. Jimmy was one of the best sprinters in track, and his reflexes were lightning-quick, and came on like auto-pilot. It was the only thing that had saved him....

When he got there within seconds, the only person near the lockers was Sandeep.

"Run!" exclaimed Jimmy. "We've gotta get out of here! They are all upstairs, a whole army of them, the teachers, and everyone!"

Sandeep was rummaging through his Protection Kit, and he paused. "Wait, man, slow down," he said. "Are you telling me there are monsters upstairs? Okay, man, like, how many are we talking about? And shouldn't we maybe wait for Emily or -- "

"Like how about all of them, plus or minus a hundred students? No fucking time to wait for anyone now!"

"No way," Sandeep said, picking up his bag and starting to walk then run along with Jimmy. "You're kidding me. This is like in those stupid TV horror movies, right? Oh, man!"

"Yeah, except that unlike those stupid TV idiots who get killed by the monsters, we won't," replied Jimmy, breathing hard.

But at the front hall exit, there was trouble waiting for them. No monster security guard -- instead, Satan himself stood in the middle of the open doorway, silhouetted black against the daylight, and blocking the exit for all the students. At his side was Dean Chowsky in the shape of a great winged devil, his webbed bat-wings the size of flags and fully unfurled behind him. Both stood with folded arms while panicked cornered students ran screaming back and forth along the short hall, with nowhere to go.

"Oh shit..." breathed Sandeep. "Back!"

"Okay," Jimmy said. "Come on!"

They ran back down the hall.

"Want to try the emergency exit near there?"

"No," Jimmy hissed. "They will have that blocked.... The broom closet!"

"Like, do you really think that is a wise option?" began Sandeep as they rounded another corner.

"Like, I don't know! Fuck, right now it's the only option!"

The broom closet on the first floor was usually kept locked by the school janitor, but there was just that off-chance that it may not be. Jimmy took the chance.

The door was unlocked and opened, and Jimmy and Sandeep wedged

themselves into a small musty space filled with old buckets, mops, and spray cans of bathroom cleaner. Sandeep hit his head against the low shelf, then his knee against a utility cart and said "Oww, oww!" while Jimmy whispered for him to shut the fuck up. Then they closed the door and huddled in the dark, panting silently and trembling, perfectly quiet.

At some point one of them farted.

\* \* \* \*

Emily stood in the hallway just outside the Principal's office. Tears were in her eyes, sliding down her cheeks, but she was not sobbing, not yet. Her face was a frozen mask, without any expression, and she could feel her blood flow sluggishly. In it came the stirring power of the dark, growing stronger every day as she fought against it for these last four years with all her strength of will. This week was the hardest, and it was almost impossible to ignore, to quell the faint evil apathy, the encroaching lack of focus.

Clarity receding was the symptom of the dark. And yet, Emily had been oddly able to keep it at bay, almost forgetting it at times, as months went by. Something about her psychological makeup allowed her to resist -- the same strength of will that made her pursue and investigate and discover the force of truth against the powers of Satan.

But Satan had just reminded her of the one thing she could not do, which was warn the others about herself. It was not a weakness, but an unfortunate technicality under which Satan had gotten her to make a promise four years ago, a promise to remain silent about the truth of her own circumstances in exchange for being released from the Hellish obligation at the time of her Graduation.

Because the real deal had been a challenge to Emily not to give in to the forces of the dark. When a transformed math teacher had bitten her as a freshman -- a day that had been seared into her memory -- the natural reaction in her blood was to turn into a monster herself and to make others her secret victims. But Emily knew that if she did not give in, she had a chance. And because in that one way she was different from all the rest, Satan came to her in person and tried to show her the sweetness of the easy road.

"Give in, Emily, since you are mine anyway," he had told her four years ago, standing in a shadowed corner of the school hallway. It was only one of the many places he came to her to convince and slowly torment with repetition, the horrible cold monotony of his relentlessness. But Emily always said "No," and Satan decided to use a different perverse tactic.

"A bargain," he had said. "If you can resist yourself, resist this dark urge until the moment of your graduation, Emily, then I promise to set you free. But only if you never tell anyone about yourself and your struggle. Deal?"

And Emily had naively said, "Okay, deal." Back then, before she knew about the force of truth, she did not know that there were to be no bargains with Satan, since he never played fair. And since she had learned, she also knew that to remain true she had to keep the bargain and play fair herself -- a vicious circle.

But now, things were becoming more and more blurred, choices were falling out of reach.

Emily leaned against the hallway wall, having nowhere to go, knowing that her friends were being bitten and taken even this very moment, one by one, and she could do nothing about it. She thought of her brother Jimmy as the lethargy of depression came to blanket her. She stood and watched Satan come out of the Principal's office, give her a wink, and walk past her down the hall like a Texas millionaire. As he walked, he gathered his faculty and student retinue, and she recognized other students she knew.

Everyone was transformed. What was happening? This was not like the other Hell weeks of the previous years. This was Satan full force.

And Emily felt a soft gentle coldness pull at her, and she slowly followed the dark crowd.

\* \* \* \*

For the tenth time Sandeep hit himself against something in the dark closet and stifled an exclamation. They could hear voices outside, the soft low rumble of the monsters as they moved in the school hallways, the panicking occasional screams of students -- screams that always came to an end abruptly. Jimmy was not sure how long they had been there, but it was probably time for the last period of the day.

"Man, I really have to pee..." whispered Sandeep at some point when there was a lull in the voices in the hall outside.

"Use a bucket..." Jimmy replied.

A moment later he felt a warm stream of liquid down his jeans leg.

"Fuck! You missed..." he whispered and elbowed Sandeep in the dark.

"Fucking shit!"

"Fuck you!"

"Shut the fuck up!"

Then there was a swell of noise in the hall, many footsteps approaching, like it was a school assembly or something, and they froze. They heard Satan himself speaking, and they heard Theo and Mike and the Halway triplets, and Charlie Harnets, and Aaron, and...

Emily.

"Oh, no..." whispered Jimmy.

But Emily sounded different from the others. She was talking back to Satan, it seemed, arguing, and then there was some kind of scuffle, and what sounded like a fight.

"No!" Emily was crying, "Don't touch him! Leave him alone! I won't let you! You have me!"

Jimmy couldn't stand it any longer. With a cry he kicked open the broom closet from the inside, grabbed a mop handle and the utility cart filled with towels, and shoved Sandeep out of his way so that Sandeep tripped and fell back inside the closet in a shower of spray can bottles. And then Jimmy drove the utility cart in front of him like a battering ram, brandishing the wooden mop like a fighting staff, and rammed his way through a crowd of monsters for about twenty feet, until he came to a halt in the middle of the hall.

There was Emily. Satan stood on one side of her, and on the other was Tiffany. Behind them were all the rest of them, all of their friends, but human no longer. Mike had become a dried out lumbering zombie, and Theo was a werewolf.

Except for Emily. She still looked the same, but was even whiter than usual, pale and bloodless, a shadow of herself.

Jimmy stood there, and faced them all. He leaned forward on the cart, raised the mop in his right hand, and leveled a spray can of toilet bowl cleaner at Satan.

And then he said, "Get away from her, you bitch!"

\* \* \* \*

"Excuse me?" said Tiffany, and her eyes flared coal-red in anger.

"Not you," said Jimmy with disgust. "I was talking about this bitch right here, the one who calls himself the Prince of Lies. The one who's trying to make a move on my sister. Nobody makes a move on my sister!"

Satan laughed. And then, laughing, he raised a finger, and out came a river of flame. He pointed it at Jimmy, and suddenly Jimmy was engulfed in a firewall from all sides, as high as the ceiling. The flames burned in a perimeter about an inch from him, from his face....

Emily screamed.

"Pretty, pretty fire..." said Tiffany and smiled, revealing sharp incisors.

"Let him go, please!" cried Emily. "Please!"

Satan raised one coal-black brow, seeming to think for a moment and then drawled, "Hmm, maybe later. Let him keep warm for a bit. If he doesn't move at all, he will be fine. Really, the fire will not touch him. See, I can be a nice guy."

And then Satan turned to look at Jimmy. "Don't move, you hear? Not an

inch."

At that point there was a strange shuffling commotion at one end of the hall, and a super-hairy werewolf monster vaguely recognizable as Mr. Engelsman lumbered past the others to announce that Satan was urgently needed outside.

"Well, isn't that just convveeeenient?" said Satan, winking at Jimmy. "We'll just go outside and take care of it, whatever it is, and in the meantime you'll have your chance to escape the flames. How about that? Deal?"

"No deal!" said Emily. "No, do not bargain with him, Jimmy!"

Jimmy could not have replied even if he wanted to, because to do so would have meant touching the flames with his lips. And so he stood frozen in the prison wall of fire.

The monsters moved out of the hall in a bizarre parody of normal school traffic, and filed outside as though they were having a fire drill -- at least it would have looked that way to anyone observing the school from a distance. Satan led Emily gently but firmly by the hand, and she kept turning around to stare at Jimmy.

When they were all gone, and Jimmy was the only one left in the hall, Sandeep slowly crept out of the broom closet, and seeing Jimmy inside the firewall, said, "Oh, shit...."

Then Sandeep ran back to the closet, grabbed his gym bag Protection Kit and started to quickly go through its contents. From beyond the wall of flames, Jimmy could see that he took out several pouches with Indian Market labels on them. If Jimmy had dared to speak he would have groaned.

\* \* \* \*

Outside the school, on the front lawn, the monsters shuffled about uncomfortably, some of them -- especially vampires -- starting to burn in the sun, but of course not noticing it. Turns out, Mr. Williman, the sophomore English teacher, the one who was the Frankenstein monster, had climbed the big tree near the entrance and was sitting up on the highest branch that would support his weight, near the roof, and roaring incoherently, periodically stopping to beat his chest with his fists.

All of this could have easily been ignored, and indeed the fact that Mr. Williman was up in a tree was not really a point of interest to anyone. Except that Mr. Williman happened to have kidnapped Mrs. Chillins the front office witch, and tied her to a tree branch harmlessly, probably thinking to keep her there as his Bride.

Well, neither the fact that Mr. Williman nor that Mrs. Chillins were both engaged up in the tree would have mattered, again, except that Mrs. Chillins had the misfortune to fall out of the said tree. And she now swung by a combination of neck and waist from a tree branch, screeching and wailing like a couple of banshees, her limbs flailing wildly.

It just wasn't seemly. Not for a school, to have a person hanging from a tree, even if she were a witch and would not be harmed in the process.

What would the parents say as they drove by the Grant-Williams school grounds?

Satan stood there, hands on hips, looking up at the dangling Mrs. Chillins, and he shook his head in reproach.

"Get me down right now!" the witch was screaming. "This is an outrage, not to mention sexual harassment! I am going to thoroughly curse you all and then I am going to sue this institution and the whole school district! I'll have OSHA lawyers breathing down your backs before the week is over!"

"Hooowargh Woohoo-oo-oo!" roared Mr. Williman from the upper tree limb. "WOOOOOOARGH!"

"You just shut your trap, you chauvinist pig asshole!" screeched Mrs. Chillins, glancing up.

"If I may make an observation, Ferriman," said the winged devil Dean of Students in a rational voice, "I think we might want to tell some of the faculty to return inside, particularly the ones that are -- ahem -- on fire. The crowd appears to be frightening the Williman creature. Apparently he thinks they are carrying torches and mean him harm."

"You are right, Chowsky," said Satan. And then he cleared his throat and said in an amplified voice that sounded like he was using a bullhorn. "Everyone, back inside, NOW! And please extinguish yourselves as you enter the building."

"What about me?" Mrs. Chillins screeched, as she flailed her legs and sent one patent leather pump flying to land on the head of a ghoul below, knocking out a rotten looking eyeball.

"In a minute," said Satan. He stared up at the treetop, trying to see Mr. Williman.

At that point Emily, standing next to him, cleared her throat. "Would you like me to climb up there and see if I can help Mrs. Chillins get untangled?"

Satan turned to stare at Emily. For a long moment he said nothing and then his eyes blazed incandescent white. "No, that would not be necessary."

He then snapped his fingers.

The rope broke and Mrs. Chillins suddenly came down with a resounding crash of broken bones and tree branches. She lay splattered on the front lawn for a span of several seconds, then amazingly picked herself up, and sat up, then squealing and grunting got up to shake the grass out of her wild witch hair and business casual outfit. With choice curses she marched past Satan giving him a very evil eye, and headed limping toward the school.

Emily picked up Mrs. Chillins's abandoned shoe, gingerly wiped ghoul eyeball goop against the grass, and then came after her to hand the witch her footwear.

Meanwhile Satan snapped his fingers again and the Williman creature plummeted out of the tree like a smallish whale, making an even bigger splat and actually causing a dent in the lawn. Mr. Williman roared, also scrambled up, hands outstretched in zombie fashion, and stood turning in place like a broken toy. He then gave another roar and lumbered after his Bride.

"Let's head back in," said Satan, grinning at Emily as she returned to him dejectedly. "I can't wait to see how much of a barbecue your little brother made of himself in his attempts to escape the fire while we were out here. He should've had plenty of time for gorgeous second degree burns."

Taking Emily's cold hand once again, Satan headed back inside, with Dean Chowsky trailing after, trying not to drag his huge wings too much on the grass and then pavement.

\* \* \* \*

Jimmy was still motionless and his nose was itching terribly. The flames were weird, because he could breathe freely despite their proximity, and it wasn't all that hot either. He just didn't dare to move, though he wished he could.

Sandeep was the one really killing him by sprinkling handfuls of curry powder and other Indian spices all around the wall of flames, and making the hallway stink -- like a Tandoori restaurant, but not in a nice way.

Soon enough, Satan and the monsters were filing back inside, and Sandeep panicked bigtime. He took one pouch of spice and poured it all over himself, his hair, then opened his mouth wide to sprinkle some red curry pepper inside.

"I am going to immolate myself before any of you come near me!" Sandeep threatened, as he sneezed and coughed, his eyes tearing. "No monster chow here!"

"Well, crispy-fried hellfire," said Satan, pulling Emily forward. "Your brother is annoyingly careful, and his friend here is a complete idiot. Talk to them."

And Satan snapped his fingers again so that the fire wall was gone. Jimmy staggered and stood up straight, then sneezed. "Emily! Are you okay?" he exclaimed, and moved protectively toward his sister.

"Oh, for crying out loud," said Satan. "Go home, all three of you. The last period is over, and you are starting to bore me. I'll let you be as you are one more night, but tomorrow is Thursday -- a very nice day -- and I take you then."

\* \* \* \*

"What the hell does that mean, he'll take us tomorrow?" Jimmy was saying in the car, as the three of them were driving home. They were going to drop Sandeep off at his place since he and no ride -- Mike was now a zombie ghoul.

Emily remained strangely quiet, while Sandeep's teeth were chattering in the back seat. Jimmy felt like he was talking to himself.

"Why did he let us go?" Jimmy kept saying. "I just don't get it." And then he stared at his sister meaningfully. "What did Satan do to you, Emily?"

"I can't talk about anything," she replied.

"Shit. He got you, didn't he?"

Emily said nothing.

"Oh God, no..." Jimmy said. "But you are different somehow, aren't you? How come you didn't turn like all the rest?"

But Emily still said nothing. She was silent as they dropped Sandeep off, then as they got home, and mom was there, back from the hospital, and feeling much better.

"Good night, Jimbus," said Emily last thing that evening, just before they went to bed. "Get some rest, because tomorrow, it gets worse."

\* \* \* \*

Emily was right, it was worse. They pulled into the school parking lot on Thursday to complete dead silence. Yes, there were students attending class and taking finals. But they were all monsters now, all subtly transformed, and moving like automatons. There was no conversation, no giggles or hushed whispers, not even Charlie Harnets dealing in Protection Stuff. Indeed, Charlie was now a gaunt mummy, peeling and walking formally to his homeroom.

Sandeep met them near the entrance, holding a very tightly-packed gym bag, and together they headed inside, hating to split up. "What are we gonna do?" Sandeep was saying over and over.

"First, hush, please, and let me think," said Emily.

"And enough with that curry stuff already," Jimmy said. "You are giving me an allergy."

"That's it!" said Sandeep. "Sneezing! We'll get the monsters to sniff the powder and they will all -- they will -- "

"They will what?"

But Sandeep did not finish because in that moment a very silent and swift vampire appeared just behind him out of nowhere, and sank his teeth into Sandeep's neck.

Sandeep screamed, and so did Jimmy and Emily. And then Jimmy sprung forward to beat the monster off.

Too late.

Sandeep was changing before their eyes.

"You are next," said the vampire to Jimmy. "The last one."

Emily screamed again in reflex, then suddenly moved forward preternaturally fast, to block Jimmy with her own body.

"No," she said. "Not him. You'll have to go through me."

It all happened within a span of two seconds.

The vampire hissed at Emily. But before it could do anything else, he was suddenly lifted off his feet by the scruff of his vampiric cloak by...

...a formerly Sandeep-like Thing.

"Oh my God," Jimmy said, while Emily's eyes grew round.

They both looked up at a giant creature whose head was bumping the school hallway ceiling, and which incidentally continued growing as it held the vampire like a barbie doll.

The Sandeep Creature was blue-skinned with black and bright neon orange highlights, shaped vaguely human with a head of matted hair and something snakelike coiled around its neck. It was covered with layers of silk and sparkling gold-cloth embroidery, and wearing many strings of pearls and jewel stones. In one of its dark blue hands it held a trident.

It looked like something out of Hindu mythology that had gone bad and taken steroids. It also opened its mouth and out came a roar that shook the

building.

The poor vampire hanging limply in the Creature's grip trembled like a leaf.

"Uhm ... Sandeep?" said Jimmy, taking Emily by he shoulders and backing slowly down the hall. "Thanks, man...."

But the Creature roared again, horrible as a flooding River Ganges, and started to move toward them. It was accompanied by the scent of cumin and cardamom, with just a hint of roses.

And fresh blood.

Jimmy and Emily ran.

\* \* \* \*

Satan had just hung up on a phone call when he heard a hearty roar shake the building. A really big roar.

He got up to investigate and happened to glance outside the window, at which point Satan saw an interesting vehicle driving up from the sky, landing on the soft watered turf of the football field. It was cornflower blue, and decorated with garlands of lotus and roses, and ornate designs were etched upon its jeweled wooden surface. Within sat two glorious figures, bright as searchlight projectors, and clad garishly in brilliant colors, one with lapis blue skin, the other with skin the color of deep warm clay.

"Just what we need around here," muttered Satan. "The district superintendent. I bet I know who snitched."

And he motioned to the large winged devil figure of the Dean of students to follow him.

At the front office, Mrs. Chillins sat polishing her peach-tinted nails with a mandrake root, and her beady witch-eyes had a very smug expression.

"It was you, wasn't it?" said Satan. "You called them in here, you senile hag."

"That will be age discrimination in addition to all the other charges," said Mrs. Chillins with a little smile that bared rotten teeth, and putting down her manicure tool started scribbling in her notebook. She then picked up the mandrake root again and meaningfully pulled out a little protruding root piece from its pseudo little man's crotch.

Several moments later the door opened and there was great light, so that Satan had to lift a hand to shield his eyes from the glory, and devil Chowsky backed away, while Mrs. Chillins calmly reached into her desk drawer and put on a pair of sunglasses.

In walked a pair of Hindu Gods, a blue-skinned four-handed Lord Vishnu, and behind him came Lord Brahma himself, with four heads and four hands of radiant beauty.

"Gentlemen," said Satan. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"Good day, Ferriman," said Vishnu in a cool politician businessman voice, putting two of his hands on his hips, and putting the other two firmly on Satan's suit-covered shoulders. "Regretfully we are here on both district and union business. You've been meddling seriously outside your milieu jurisdiction, and this time you've gone too far."

Satan frowned. "What?" he said in a deep hissing voice, and the room started to shake.

"Your minions just summoned Shiva, Lord of Destruction, your approximate Eastern counterpart," said Lord Brahma, stepping forward into the room, while the glow of light increased, and the scent of flowers and soft music came from the distance.

"And that," added Vishnu, "is a serious breach of East-West contract."

\* \* \* \*

Jimmy and Emily watched from the first floor girls bathroom window the incredible blue car touch down from the sky on the football field, then drive up to the front of the school.

"Wow, talk about deus ex machina! Out of the blue, there's a god in the machine!" Jimmy said with excitement.

"No, that's two gods, actually," Emily said, wrinkling her forehead in

an old semblance of her former sisterly disgust.

"Still, does that mean they will now save us and everything? That would be amazingly cool!"

Emily sighed. "I really don't think it's all that easy. At best, they are a distraction. They might buy us time."

And then she looked at Jimmy so that he actually saw her eyes -- at which point he felt a sudden chill run down his spine. His own sister was looking at him with two very strange dark and vacant eyes that did not look quite human.

"What?" said Jimmy, starting to draw back. "Emily? What's wrong? C'mon, please, Emily, what is happening?"

She continued to look at him and said nothing.

"Talk to me, please, crow-face! You are seriously creepy, you know that?"

Emily blinked. Then, whatever it was that had made her eyes look alien went away, and there she was, the same old slightly snotty and serious Emily.

"I can't do it." Emily said.

"Do what?"

"Never mind, you don't want to know."

Jimmy grabbed hold of his sister's upper arm and squeezed tight, pressing his nails into her skin. "Does that hurt?" he said.

"Yes, it does, let go," she replied, trying to pull away.

"Good, then you are probably not undead, since you can still feel pain and stuff. I know that asshole Satan and his bunch did something to you, Em, I know. But I'm just not sure what it is. But I know you are not one of them, not really. You can't be."

Emily's expression did not change as she said very softly, "Are you so very sure?"

"Yeah," said Jimmy, "I am sure. Because I've just figured out what it is that they did to you. But first, to prove my point, you'll have to bite me and turn me into a monster."

"No!" exclaimed Emily. "Never!"

Jimmy grinned, and pulled up the long sleeve of his t-shirt above his elbow.

"Here you go, sis," he said. "Bite me near the wrist, just a scratch will do. Go ahead, I insist. Better you than some smelly teacher ghoul."

\* \* \* \*

"Look, we all know that Shiva and Satan are not directly related at all, not even under a technicality. It's like apples and oranges," Satan was saying to the seated Lord Brahma and Lord Vishnu. The two gods had taken the principal's chair and the nice guest chair, while himself and Dean Chowsky remained standing.

"Check your original paperwork," said Brahma gently in a beatific voice, as he leaned back in Ferriman's chair, and around him a stream of lotus blossoms rained from an invisible source near the ceiling. "Destruction is definitely under your jurisdiction, and it is a function that both of you share."

To prove his point, from somewhere else in the school building came great roars as Shiva was destroying big things very loudly.

"But -- " said Satan, beginning to growl. "But he is so crude! So blunt and elemental! So -- so -- "

Lord Brahma just smiled.

"Would you like us to take him away from here?" said Vishnu meanwhile, stippling his blue fingers. "No one else can."

Satan growled even louder in reply.

"First, you must cease and desist your own local operation," said Brahma, glancing around the room meaningfully. "The moment you restore things, so shall we."

"But -- but I am not done!" roared Satan. "I am this close! Just one more day of Hell Week and -- "



"Cease and desist," repeated the Hindu God.

A pause.

And then Satan lifted his palms upward, and brought them down again.

There was a great wind all around them, and it seemed to have swept in with heat and brimstone, and ran down the corridors of the school. When it receded, in its place was silence. And then, there were the ordinary sounds of student voices coming from the hallways, and the voices of teachers.

Real students and real teachers.

All of them were human.

Dean Chowsky was now a balding middle aged man, and he scratched his forehead in confusion, seeming unable to see Satan or Brahma or Vishnu in the same room with him.

The two Hindu deities smiled, and nodding got up and walked past the Dean of Students and through the walls of the office. In that moment the distant roars of Shiva began to recede.

Satan remained standing, staring darkly in their wake.

\* \* \* \*

Not only was Emily unable to monstrously bite Jimmy, but her teeth were too dull to scratch his skin. She gave up in confusion after a couple of tries, saying, "But I don't understand...."

"He lied to you, is what," her brother said, grinning. "You're not a monster. But he made you completely believe that you had been bitten all these long four years ago, and so you were torturing yourself, hating yourself. And you very nearly fell into his power for real. Remember, you were the one who'd explained this to me in the first place -- that Satan's power is in the lies piled on top of coincidences."

Emily stared at her own fingers, as though amazed they were human and not monster claws. "But I was bitten as a freshman!" she said. "It was so real, like it had happened yesterday. I remember the feeling in my neck, and the scar that would burn like fire during the nights for a whole month, and would not heal, but no one else could see it but me...."

"Frigging illusion in your mind," said Jimmy. "Satan's like this incredible master magician in that sense. He can mess our minds up so badly, he can make us fight with those we love, and he can make us believe anything. But you held out for so long, despite all the weird shit, and in the meantime it was harder and harder for you to see what was real and what was not. You really were close to becoming his."

"What about everyone else?"

"Hell if I know," said Jimmy. "In fact, I think I hear strangely normal school noises from the outside. Who knows what's real any longer, except that none us are under his power unless we allow ourselves to be."

The door to the girls bathroom opened and inside came Mindy Halway, followed by Julia Salinas and some other female students.

"Eeeek!" screamed Mindy, seeing Jimmy.

"Jimbus! What are you doing in the girls bathroom?" exclaimed Julia. "Get out! Emily, you nuts, why did you bring him in here? I need to pee!"

"Ok, I'm so out of here," said Jimmy.

Emily suddenly started to laugh. She was nearly hysterical, but there was something profoundly true and simple about her laughter.

In fact, she hadn't felt this free in all four years of high school.

From the hallway came the voices of Theo and Mike and Sandeep. "You guys are all in there? Jim you freak, get out of the girls bathroom!"

Jimmy complied.

And as Emily continued to giggle insanely, she too came out into the hallway where all her friends were.

"One more day of Hell Week," Mike was saying. "Friday is gonna be easy shit actually. No more finals for me. I am way done! Graduation!"

And he whooped, then put his hands around Emily's neck and tickled her. But Emily stared at her brother.

Jimmy Ross stood near Theo and Aaron and Sandeep, hands in pockets, and

a mischievous smile on his face. He seemed suddenly grown up, she hadn't even noticed it until now, this very moment.

But his eyes flickered, pupilless and peculiar, and there it was, just a hint of low simmering red coals in them, a blast of distant hellfire, receding.

"Don't worry, Em," he said quietly, so that none of the others heard him. "I know what I'm doing. My turn to take him on, for the next three years. Someone's gotta take care of Hell Week at Grant-Williams High. My turn to be a pro."

\* \* \* \*

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\_Hot SF writer, John W. Campbell Jr. Award finalist and Analog AnLab poll favorite James Van Pelt East High lit. teacher Taylor a very "High Stakes Test." Looks like the East High students will score higher than ever now that there are new "foreign students" in their midst.\_

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\*High Stakes Test\*

\*By James Van Pelt\*

Mr. Taylor saw Principal Ruhle round the corner toward his room and was afraid.

"The principal is coming," Taylor hissed to his last class of the day. Norman and Floyd, sitting in the back row, didn't even look up from their arm-wrestling. The headphone twins, a pair of bleach-blonde socialites who'd been suspended the first week of class after getting caught at the Spring Daisy Girl Ask Guy Dance with whiskey flasks strapped in their garter belts, huddled over their CD player, and the rest of the class barely turned a disinterested eye in his direction, their desks clean of notes or textbooks.

"You gonna be in trouble, Mr. T?" said Florence, the only other girl in the room, and his best student by the virtue of a D- on her last test. Dozens of razor slits in her black t-shirt revealed a disturbing amount of skin, and Taylor was pretty sure the message written across the front was obscene, but the letters were so worn, he couldn't tell. Her ears, nose, eyebrows and lower lip were all pierced. Today she'd gone for her more conservative look: no chains connected the jewelry.

Principal Ruhle passed the last classroom before Taylor's.

"Yes," Taylor whispered. What to do? What to do?

Pal strode with the confidence of a leader on a mission, an administrator with attitude.

Taylor fell back against his desk; his fingers brushed a magazine. He looked down. It was the \_Playboy\_ he'd confiscated from Norman at the beginning of the period. In a rush, he grabbed it.

"Class!" he bellowed, holding the magazine so the centerfold neatly accordioned open.

Instantly, the boys straightened, eyes on him. For the first time in the semester, they were all paying attention. He whipped the magazine behind him as Principal Ruhle entered the room.

"That's an interesting answer," said Taylor to the now silent class. "Does anyone else have a theory of what Emily Dickinson meant when she said, 'I heard a fly buzz when I died'?"

Principal Ruhle paused at the doorway in the back of the room. The stunned boys stared at Taylor. The headphone duo didn't look up, but at least they were facing forward. Florence's mouth hung open, her eyes wide in disbelief.

A boy in the back said, "Miss October?"

"Exactly! October is the end of summer, a metaphor for death. Thank you for that insight." Taylor smiled his best welcome to Principal Ruhle. "I see we have a visitor. If you all will write your thoughts about Dickinson's attitude toward death as it is reflected in this poem, I'll step out for a word with the principal."

Shutting the door behind him, Taylor faced Principal Ruhle.

"Impressive, Taylor. But how will their knowledge of Emily Dickinson help us score higher on the state test?" Principal Ruhle patted Taylor on the shoulder. The man's aftershave was overpowering. "If we don't improve, they'll turn us into a charter school. You, me and everyone else will be out of a job, so these kids have to do better."

Taylor backed up a little. Principal Ruhle moved in close when he talked, and Taylor was afraid he'd start sneezing.

"Of course, sir. I'll do the best I can." For every half-step Taylor took, Principal Ruhle followed until he trapped Taylor in a corner of the hall.

"I'm afraid your best won't do. You need help."

Taylor relaxed. Help, at last! The class was huge. No one in it had a passing average, and six of them, when asked to write an essay on the most influential person in their lives, had written about their parole officers. Would it be extra tutors in the room? Would Principal Ruhle split the class with another teacher?

The principal continued, "We can make education better at East High."

"How, sir?" Taylor clutched his lesson plan book to his chest. More money for novels? Longer class periods? Better communication with parents?

Down the hall teachers lectured, basketballs bounced in the gym, a steady drum beat emanated from the band room. Principal Ruhle leaned even closer. "Immigrants, Taylor."

Taylor blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Immigrants. They study harder. I went recruiting. Talked to the business leaders in town. Got them on board. Brought in new workers from eastern Europe. They're tops at high tech, you know. Twenty-three families. Fifteen high school kids for us. I want you to meet your new student, Pachalka Iakovlev."

Taylor blinked again. He'd thought Principal Ruhle was alone in the hall, but a slender boy whose dark hair lay flat across his pale forehead, stood behind him.

"I am pleased to meet you, Professor Taylor. I am hungry to learn," the boy said with a Slavic accent. He put out his hand. His fingernails were long and sharpened to points.

"Umm ... it's just Mr. Taylor." He shook the boy's hand, who raised his gaze, looking directly at Taylor. His eyes were the lightest gray Taylor had ever seen, an almost transparent pastel circle around black pupils.

"Why don't you go in, Pachalka," said the principal. "I need to finish with Mr. Taylor."

The boy bowed slightly before leaving.

"There," said Principal Ruhle, "that's the kind of attitude that will score high on tests. These kids are disciplined. You watch, Taylor; he's going to change that class." He slapped Taylor on the shoulder again. "And for crying out loud, man, lay off Dickinson. The test is in a month. If you're not teaching multiple choice skills or how to respond to the writing prompts, we'll be pouring soft drinks at Burger World in a year. Work on their math."

Principal Ruhle turned and strode away before Taylor said, "But this is American Lit."

Taylor shook his head and returned to the room. Pachalka had taken the only empty desk, directly in front of Taylor's podium, next to Florence. The rest of the class looked silently at the new boy.

"I'm eager to read the American authors," said Pachalka. "I am afraid I have neglected them to this point."

Taylor put his lesson plan book on his desk and turned to the thin volume of Dickinson on the podium. Beside it a class set of sample multiple choice test questions sat accusingly. Principal Ruhle gave the teachers a new stack each day with an encouraging memo. "High stake testing determines our future," read today's note. Dickinson or practice multiple choice tests?

The quiet that decided him. On most days, the volume in this class teetered between a street fight and a heavy metal concert, but not now. Norman

and Floyd had given up their arm wrestling contest to stare at the new boy. The headphone twins pulled their headsets down around their necks as they gave Pachalka an evaluative look. Florence checked her black lipstick in a compact that she'd slipped from her backpack.

"I have a new Dickinson poem today," said Taylor. "It starts like this, 'Success is counted sweetest, By those who ne'er succeed.' What do you think she meant by that?"

For a few minutes, all went well until Floyd punched Norman's beefy bicep.

"Good one," said Norman. He spit on his knuckles and prepared to slug Floyd back. Taylor leaned forward with a "Please settle down" on his lips, but Pachalka turned in his seat and cleared his throat. Norman and Floyd glanced up. Normally that would be all that they would do before returning to whatever physical pursuit that engaged them, but now they froze, Norman with his fist already raised, Floyd with his arm ready to take the punch.

"Professor Taylor is trying to teach," said Pachalka.

Norman's stubble-flecked chin quivered for a moment before he dropped his fist. No one else stirred.

Although the class didn't really discuss the poem, it was the quietist hour he'd ever spent with them. Pachalka took copious notes in beautifully formed cursive hand.

After the class ended, as Taylor gathered his papers for grading, he thought, maybe Principal Ruhle is right! All this group needs is a serious student in their midst to straighten them out.

\* \* \* \*

The scratching in the ceiling started the following week during his planning period. East High had been built in the 1940s with high ceilings. In the 70s, to combat heating bills, the school district installed drop-down ceiling tiles, which left a four-foot gap between the original construction and the new. Occasionally a pigeon would get trapped, and, for days after, classes could hear a fluttering as the doomed bird flicked from space to space, but this was no bird. Taylor sat at his desk, a stack of ungraded papers under his left arm, his red pen midway through a comment on the paper he was grading when the first distinct rasp across the ceiling tile caught his attention. Other than the water stain in the back left corner, the unbroken white expanse was featureless. Another series of short rasps, quite striking in the quiet room, as if something was scoring the surface with an icepick. Then nothing.

After a few minutes, with his pen poised above the unfinished instruction, Taylor rubbed the chills from his arms and resumed grading. To make room for finished papers, he had to push the new stack of state practice exams to the corner of the desk. He didn't look at them. Each one served as a reminder of a failed obligation. "High stake testing determines our future," Principal Ruhle had said.

Taylor waited in the hallway for his last class. Uncharacteristically, Floyd and Norman arrived first, parting the crowd of students like twin ice-breakers. "Good afternoon, gentlemen," said Taylor. Neither acknowledged his presence as they entered the room.

Soon the rest of the students filed by. Pachalka entered last. Taylor followed, reaching his podium just as the bell rang. He opened his attendance folder, readied his pencil, then looked up. Pachalka stood beside his desk. "Someone has besmirched the surface," he said.

Taylor raised an eyebrow. He couldn't remember the last time he'd heard someone say "besmirched." He leaned over the podium. In thick pencil strokes on Pachalka's desk were the words, "Die gay Nazi," and a huge swastika. Pachalka smiled, a grim turning up of the corners of his mouth that showed no teeth. "I seem to have made an enemy." He ran his finger through the letters, smearing them, then brought his finger to his lips and licked it. Taylor could feel his eyes growing wide. Nothing he'd seen in a classroom before had prepared him for this. Norman and Floyd sat quietly in the back, notebooks open, as if waiting for the lesson to begin. The other students watched the

tiny drama unfold.

His tone was so restrained, so proper, so unkid-like, that Taylor felt a need to apologize, but before he spoke, Pachalka moved between the rows to Floyd's desk, facing him from the side. His expression in profile was unperturbed.

"What?" said Floyd as Pachalka plucked a pencil from the huge student's hand.

Pachalka sniffed the pencil.

"Excuse me," said Taylor, "we can clean your desk." He had a vision of Floyd and Norman pounding the slight student into a greasy smear.

Pachalka handed the pencil back to Floyd. "No need, Professor. This peasant will give me his seat."

Norman's face turned red, and Floyd half rose from his chair. "Like hell I will..."

Pachalka put his hand on Floyd's chest, bent at the waist and whispered into his ear. Floyd dropped as if all his muscles had been severed.

Within a minute, the desks were switched.

Pachalka sat, opened his book and said, "I believe we were discussing Dickinson's views on death, weren't we?"

Which would have been weird enough for the day, but a half hour later, while the class actually listened to Taylor's explanation of "One Dignity Delays for All," the noise began in the ceiling again. It started in the back of the room by the door, a loud scratching, a pause, and more scratching. The students immediately under the sound peered nervously at the ceiling. Then, a heavy scittering as whatever it was scurried to the middle of the room. No sound from the class, not even a breath. It moved a few feet toward the front of the room. Moved again. Stopped.

Taylor cleared his throat. "Must be mice."

Florence said, her voice quivering, "As big as tigers."

No other sounds disturbed the lesson.

When the bell rang, Principal Ruhle, holding a bundle of papers, waited for Taylor in the hall.

"You're still not on Dickinson, are you?"

Taylor flinched. They were still on Dickinson. He had no explanation for why they hadn't gone on. He'd never spent a whole week on one poet before. All he could picture was Pachalka, furiously writing everything he said. Asking good questions. And the rest of the class, too, attentive. Even the headphone twins had put away their CD player. What was going on?

Principal Ruhle continued, "We have three weeks until the tests, and you have a third of the school's underperforming students in this room. If you can get them to at least partial proficiency we'll meet our improvement goal for the year." The principal oozed aftershave. Taylor realized the only way he could smell that heavily of it would be if he reapplied it during the day, maybe between classes.

"I think I'm getting somewhere with them. Pachalka is ... extraordinary." Taylor searched for words. How could he express his nervousness about the boy? Not just the way he'd handled Floyd and Norman, but the intense way he watched Taylor as he moved from point to point, the uneasy feeling Taylor had that Pachalka wasn't happy with worksheets or journal writing or anything other than raw knowledge.

Principal Ruhle's scowl flipped into a smile. "Yes, Pachalka. They're all doing that well. I've been checking. Best thing I've ever done for this school. I don't know if there's a connection, but I haven't had a single student sent to my office since those kids arrived." Pal laughed and clapped Taylor on the shoulder. "I'll have to write a paper on this." His tone grew serious again. "Still, we have tests to worry about. Important tests. If we're not teaching to the test, we won't be teaching at all, so ditch the books and use more of those exercises I've given you."

"But what will their diplomas mean if I abandon the curriculum and just teach to the test?"

Principal Ruhle looked blankly at him for a moment. "They won't earn diplomas without passing the test." He narrowed his eyes. "You're going to be a team player on this, aren't you, Taylor?"

Taylor felt the blood rushing from his face. "Of course, sir! It's just that the test doesn't have anything to do with American literature. I'm supposed to start Mark Twain this week."

"Twain doesn't call the shots, here, Taylor. The state does, and the state says our kids have to pass these exams, so dump Dickinson and Twain and the rest until our scores go up. Here, I brought you some more practice tests." Principal Ruhle handed the papers over, then squinted at his watch. "Has this hallway gotten darker? The janitors have to do more about replacing lights, the surly lot, ignoring my memos. I've got to run. I know you'll do a good job with those kids."

After he left, Taylor realized the hallway was darker. Half the lights were out, and student senate posters covered the windows at the end of the hall.

\* \* \* \*

A week later, Taylor walked toward the school's front doors, his head down, thinking about what to do. On one hand, he loved teaching literature: the names, the personalities, the history. He loved reading out loud that part of Huckleberry Finn where Huck and Jim watched a thunderstorm on the Mississippi at night. He loved it when students said something insightful about Henry David Thoreau or discussed "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." But at the same time, Taylor wanted to please the principal, who, frankly, scared him. It was all about fear. Fear of the principal. Fear of the students (Norman and Floyd with the strength of young arms and love of violence, Florence with her black lipstick and skin piercings; even the headphone twins and their indifference). Fear of failing the system. He feared teaching what he wanted, and he feared teaching what the state told him to teach.

What to do?

He shuffled closer to the school, barely moving now. Students passed him on either side. The warning bell rang. He had five minutes. Lost in thought, he found himself stopped on the edge of the sidewalk, staring at the two-foot wide flower bed that stretched from the parking lot to the doors. All the spring flowers were dead, their petals black-rimmed and limp on the ground. Must have been a freeze last night, he thought.

Principal Ruhle was right. Taylor's classes were better, and not just his last period. Students who had sat in the back row moved into the empty seats closer to the front. Homework assignments came in on time, all of them. The hallways were quieter. Fewer kids running. No shouting. Taylor watched students streaming toward the entrance, and for the first time since Pachalka joined his class, he really looked at the kids. The weather report said the temperature would top seventy degrees today (which meant there was no freeze last night!), but the girls weren't wearing halter tops and tube tops or shorts that reached way too high on their thighs. Nor were the boys sporting tee-shirts or muscles shirts or wild beachwear. No, they dressed warmly. Many wore turtlenecks, and floppy hats that shadowed their faces seemed to have made a comeback. The ones not dressed that way looked haunted and quiet, their books clasped to their chests like shields.

It was as if the dead flowers had awakened him from a long nap. He looked at the walls on the way to his class. Where were the election posters for next year's student officers? Shouldn't they be campaigning by now? And the windows at the end of his hallway weren't the only ones covered; they all were. The last bell rang in the empty hall. He thought, what's happened to the school? Had the building had been stolen, piece by piece, and replaced with a clever but not quite right duplicate. It smelled different, like cold and moldy dirt, like wet animals living under rotted porches.

His footsteps slapped noisily, a hollow, sepulchral echoing, and behind that whispered other sounds. The same kind of scratching he'd first noticed in his room emanated from the tiles overhead. A locker creaked to his right. He

stepped away from it as the door seemed, just for a second, to bulge outward. Ahead of him in the dark stretch of hallway, something large and rodent-like skittered away.

This seemed way beyond a simple note to the janitors.

When last hour started, Taylor opened the American literature text to Mark Twain. His lesson plans said that he should have already covered Walt Whitman and Bret Harte, but he was going to have to skip them. How did he spend so much time on Dickinson? He looked at his collection, all the death poems: from "Because I could not stop for death," to "I felt a funeral in my brain" were marked. He'd covered the obscure ones no one talked about, even "So proud she was to die" and "A train went through a burial gate."

On his desk, a new pile of practice exams seemed to have sprouted. When did those show up? Have I been sleepwalking through the last few days?

The class waited, pens ready. Taylor's hand rested on Twain's picture. The students faced him, eyes locked on his. Floyd and Norman wore turtlenecks. Did they look a little pale? No CD player graced the headphone twins' desk. And when did Florence give up her punk-band concert shirts for a pastel blouse with a fastened top button?

Taylor cleared his throat. "Reluctantly, we must leave Emily Dickinson behind and move on to another author."

Pachalka nodded. "Might I suggest a name, Professor?"

Taylor swallowed hard. Pachalka's eyes nearly glowed beneath his black eyebrows. "We will be doing Mark Twain next. He has been called the Lincoln of our literature, but I'm sure you must have heard of him, even in eastern Europe?"

"Yes, sir. Of course. But I joined the class late. I so longed to study another, an earlier author. I am sure my classmates won't mind."

Most of the students nodded in unison, like marionettes. Taylor nearly fell over, and the skin on his arms erupted into a million goose bumps. Only by hanging onto the podium did he keep himself upright.

"We must do Twain," croaked Taylor. "The state testing is coming, and we'll lose a week of instruction. If we don't do him now, then we'll miss him altogether."

Pachalka frowned. "Class time is too valuable to sacrifice a week to testing, wouldn't you agree, Professor? If we must be here, we should be learning every minute."

"The state wants to know how well we're doing. We can't disappoint Principal Ruhle," Taylor could get no volume behind the sentences. He barely heard his own statement.

"Even now, we're wasting time. If you will just teach, we will listen. We are empty vessels. Fill us." Pachalka's eyes mesmerized him. They seemed to grow larger, and they pulsed, like an ember tossed from a fire.

Taylor's muscles went slack. Numbly he pushed the pages in the literature text book back a few chapters. Then he lectured, his voice distant in his own ears, as if he were facing a classroom a dozen rooms away, while the little bit of him that stayed rational huddled in the dark, hiding from Pachalka's tombstone-gray eyes.

\* \* \* \*

When Taylor went home, he tried not to think about the state exams. He sat at his kitchen table, a pile of books about Edgar Allen Poe on his left, and a slice of warmed pizza on the plate in front of him. He fell into a daydream about "The Cask of Amontillado," Montessoro lining up the next row of bricks, except in his envisioning Taylor was Fortunato, looking from the inside, his hands chained to the walls and the room growing darker, brick by brick. Montessoro became Pachalka, building the wall. The boy's eyes were as bright as the lamp they'd carried with them into the catacombs.

Taylor took a bite from his pizza. It had grown cold.

Late that night, long after traffic on the busy street in front of his building had slowed to an occasional car, long after televisions had flicked off in the other apartments, Taylor woke, or thought he woke, for he wasn't

really sure, to a steady knock at his window. With no surprise, he let Pachalka in, and only in the vaguest of terms did he wonder how the boy made it to the fourth story.

\* \* \* \*

After school the next day, Principal Ruhle entered Taylor's classroom. Taylor pried his grip off the podium. His knuckles popped when he straightened his fingers. Where were the students? How long had he been standing in front of the empty desks?

Principal Ruhle stepped tentatively forward. "Are they gone?" His voice trembled.

Taylor looked around, his head still buzzing and distant, full of Pachalka's words from the night before: "We must learn as if we will live forever."

Taylor said, "I suppose." He rubbed his eyes, then shook his head to clear it.

Principal Ruhle's cheeks were haggard, his hair tousled, and his tie undone.

"Are you all right, sir?"

The principal twirled as if he'd heard a sound, but nothing was behind him. His voice cracked when he said, "They're too damn good."

"Excuse me?" Taylor looked down. His text was open to "The Pit and the Pendulum." He flicked through the pages. Fresh writing marked the margins beside "Annabel Lee" and "The Raven." In insightful comments, the kinds he'd thought about making while teaching these stories before, but he would have never dared utter. The deep psychology. The repressed sexuality. He couldn't remember talking about the stories, but there, in his tiny script was a new notation, "Bring the complete tales for tomorrow."

"I haven't been out of my office in four days." Principal Ruhle shot a glance over his shoulder. "It's worse after hours, you know, and don't even ask me about the night shift janitors."

"Why are you telling me?" Taylor closed his book. The snap of pages startled a twitch out of Principal Ruhle.

"You're one of the few that haven't ... you know ... gone over." He sat in one of the student's tiny desks, and for a second, Taylor thought the man was going to cry. "I want my school back. I want a line of students waiting outside my office with made up excuses for why they were tardy. I want a fight in the hallway or beer bottles in the girls' restroom, or graffiti."

"Why would you want those, sir?" Taylor looked at his reminder for tomorrow and thought about teaching Poe. He blinked, and in the blink he saw Pachalka's eyes and the others, staring, eager, even a bit ravenous. If they really wanted to know about Poe, he could bring in all kinds of material, the lectures he never hoped to give to high school students before.

Principal Ruhle lowered his voice. "No one is preparing the kids for the test. They're not even picking up the practice ones I've left in their boxes. You know what else? I saw the play list for the spring concert. They're opening with 'Ride of the Valkyries' and then 'A Night on Bald Mountain.' What kind of spring concert is that? No 'Easter Parade'? No Aaron Copland? And I won't even tell you what the art classes are doing." He shuddered.

"How can I help?" For the first time in twenty years at East High, Taylor wanted to hug a principal. He really looked like he could use one. He needed to be visited, just as Pachalka had visited him last night. Maybe Taylor would do it himself, after he'd grown more used to the power, after he tapped into the fire-edged focus that shaped his thoughts rushing along just out of reach now, but tomorrow, or the day after, he would be hooked in.

Principal Ruhle glanced toward the stack of practice exams on Taylor's desk, and then he said, as if it were a mantra, an incantation against the dark, "Teach to the test, Taylor. Just teach to the test."

Taylor looked at the ceiling. He sensed the creatures skulking above his head, the rats in the walls, the spiders weaving webs in the corners of the room. They were children too, just as surely as the ones coming to his



class the next day. For the first time in years, Taylor started to think of next year's classes. All those freshmen, ready to learn, to be given a bit of focus, and they wouldn't need a state test to motivate them. Not after a few days with him. No, not by a long shot.

"I don't think so," said Taylor.

Pale faced, the principal rose, the fear of recognition evident in his eyes. "What are you?" he said, backing against a desk.

"I'm not afraid." Taylor opened his text.

Principal Ruhle ran from the room. Lockers banged open. The night janitors had him before he reached the end of the hall. Principal Ruhle screeched once before the sounds became liquid and slippery. Taylor sighed and pushed the practice exams off his desk into the trash can.

No need to pound these high stakes tests into the hearts of his little charges. Tomorrow would be a good teaching day.

\* \* \* \*

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Everybody knows that the very existence of cafeteria food violates the second law of thermodynamics. Yet only Jim's genius friend Nord can unlock the mysteries of Effingdale High, altering the physics of time and space - and the most crucial mystery of all: will Nord, Jim and sadly-chunky Shipley escape ... summer school? \_

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\*Nord's Gambit\*

\*by Tobias S. Buckell\*

First off, I'd like to blame Nord. It's all his fault.

He's the one who actually sat and observed the teachers and came to the conclusion. He's also the one who came up with the plan.

But let me lay a little groundwork. I'm Jim. I have a couple friends, Shipley and Nord. We build model rockets on the weekends, watch movies together, and talk about stuff. Now don't go jumping to conclusions about us because of the rockets thing. I play soccer. Well ... sometimes. Mostly when the coach, Mr. Seitz, lets me on the field. See, we're not total geeks.

Nord certainly isn't a geek. He's just a genius. But the calculating kind. You know, the next Bill Gates. Nothing escapes him. He trades stock on the weekends. He says he's secretly worth half a million already. One day he's going to rule the world, you can just tell. Maybe that's why I'm friends with him: I'm hoping that if I stick next to him for long enough, he'll let me rule Scandanavia. I'm thinking Scandanavia because I read somewhere that the senior girls sometimes go out topless in good weather. How cool is that?

So that's Nord. Shipley. Well, Shipley's a little overweight. Okay, a little bit more than little, but not too much. It sounds like I'm being cruel to mention this, but keep it in mind, it's actually important. I don't remember how Shipley ended up being the third member of our little group. I think it was his collection of movies and action figures. The G.I. Joes aren't so cool anymore, but the movie collection keeps growing.

So those are my friends. And we all go to Effingdale High, a small red brick high school with large glass windows. It's a pretty typical, average, American school building.

Okay, so maybe we are a bunch of geeks, but that doesn't matter here.

What matters is Nord.

\* \* \* \*

It was lunch in early May. The windows had been cranked open and large fans that sounded like airplane engines droned hot air at us.

The rich kids sat with the rich kids, the jocks with the jocks, and so one down the line, each to their own tables, and we huddled off in a corner.

That day Nord sat down and slid a notebook across the scarred plastic table at us. Scribbles and figures scrawled in between, over, and under the blue lines.

"Something is wrong with the school," he said over the din of the

lunchroom.

"You think?" I elbowed Shipley.

"No, moron. Bigger than the usual complaints." Nord looked at the two of us with wide eyes. "I've been watching, and thinking."

He paused dramatically.

I chewed on a hotdog that was too much dog and not enough hot.

"I think our school doesn't follow natural law," Nord said.

I flipped a broken piece of wood around with my fingertip. Nord had spent too much time looking at figures. He'd gone mad, I thought. Best to ignore him and let him babble.

"Prove it," Shipley said.

I groaned. Nord started.

"Remember the day Mr. Maas gave us the science finals? And then he gave them back to us the next day?" We nodded. Nord's voice took on the air of a master detective explaining how he solved a crime to his assistant. "Well we know that Mr. Maas was at the basketball game that night, we were there."

We were there all right. Watching the cheerleaders.

"So that meant," Nord continued, shaking me out of my wistful reverie, "that Mr. Maas would have gotten home at about nine. Take time for dinner. It's ten. He has to leave his house by six the next morning, and catch sleep. Now the tests weren't multiple choice either, yet he graded over a hundred of them in one night!"

"So..." Shipley said, shrugging. "He always does that."

"Exactly. You don't find that amazing?"

Nord looked at the two of us. We shrugged. Nord sighed dramatically.

"Four hundred and eighty minutes of time and one hundred and five tests. That's four and a half minutes a test. Less if he sleeps at some point."

"Nord," I asked. "What the hell are you trying to say?"

Again Nord sighed and looked around. But he wasn't seeing anyone else any better than the two of us.

"It's superhuman. It's pretty much impossible. And it's not the only strange thing I've observed."

It wasn't. There was more. Nord laid it on us like a revelation from the mountain. But instead of stone tablets he had a pair of note-pads.

And the crazy, messed up thing, was that we started to believe Nord as he laid out the list on us. Nord thought that the laws of physics were being violated by the scholastic establishment (that was how he put it), and damnit, he had the proof!

\* \* \* \*

Think about school food, Nord explained to us. It really takes some manipulation of the natural order to create meals that are entirely tasteless. Dirt has flavor. Paper notes you don't want the teacher to read have flavor. Ink from a pen you chewed too long has flavor. Foods have flavor.

But school food does not have flavor.

How can that be?

What mysterious process saps away the flavor that once was Tuesday's ham-n-potatoes? Or takes the most basic unit of the food pyramid, the hamburger, and gives it a texture that even rubber wouldn't admit to?

And that wasn't it.

The serving of school lunch was certainly a repealing of physics as we knew it. It was almost like the reverse of Jesus and the loaves. Three overweight cooks with hair-nets and moles spooned out only tiniest, calculated portions of mashed potatoes from great vats of the stuff. And yet there were never any left over.

Nord even calculated this for us while we sat and watched. One hundred students. Out of a vat that should have served five times that many.

"We have to conclude," Nord said, leaning over his notebook, with the same excited gleam in his eyes that Einstein must have had when picturing the equation  $E=MC^2$ , or Newton when the apple hit him on the head. "That the second

law of thermodynamics has no effect within these walls."

We sat there with our jaws open. I looked down at the hotdog on my tray with the deepest suspicion. And then I began to think.

I thought about my worst classes. You know, those ones where time seems to extend well beyond the actual length of the class? Well Nord submitted that those teachers weren't actually just boring, but were actually creating a dent in the space-time continuum right within the classroom.

That's right. It meant that Mrs. Milton the English teacher was a master of the manipulation of time and space, and that that was how she packed the entire War of the Roses (and more importantly, how that related to the fiction of the time) into a single class period!

In a way, everything that Nord told us was a confirmation of our worst fears, and deepest suspicions about school. Teachers' abilities to show up anywhere on time. The way they could sense something happening behind their backs. It was unnatural.

Nord was putting words to things school kids had instinctively known all along.

But Nord wasn't finished.

"We can use this," he said. "Harness it."

"Woah," Shipley said. "Don't you think others have noticed this? Don't you suppose someone else has tried." And he lowered his voice and looked around. "And failed? Because they're still doing what they're doing. I think."

Nord looked around.

"Maybe I'm the first to figure this out," he whispered. "But imagine what we could do if we could alter the world around us like they do?"

We sat at the table for a while, each of us thinking of different things that merged into the same thing. We looked at each other, eyes shining.

"We could launch a rocket," I said before anyone else could.

"Into space," Nord said.

"We'd have to start small. Then go big. We could launch ourselves into space!"

We leaned back on our chairs with visions of conquering the galaxy and standing on the moon.

"But how?" I asked. "Grading a paper in a minute, or making a class stretch into eternity is hardly a way to get a rocket into space."

Nord smiled.

"This is where we have to consider what we need."

We sat silent.

Nord leaned back in his chair and pointed out the window at the car lot. Miss Chomsky, beige overcoat making her look bulky and red-faced in the almost-summer heat, carried an enormous load of books that threatened to topple over at any instant.

"I've seen her carry heavier, larger loads than football players at their peak," Nord said.

"And she never takes the coat off!" I whispered, the puzzle beginning to click.

Nord smiled again. He looked like a shark when he did that.

\* \* \* \*

It was with a sort of silent complicity that we left our trays and snuck off down the hall to follow Miss Chomsky. We caught her in her room, with the impossible stack of books.

But she eyed us first.

"Shipley, boys, please help me with all these books she said. "They're much too heavy."

Nord elbowed me.

He pointed at the coat hanging on the hatrack in the corner of the room.

Miss Chomsky narrowed her eyes and we rushed to help move books.

Afterwards we huddled in the corridor.

"Okay," I said. "What do we do?"

"We steal the coat," Nord said. "We try and see how powerful it is, or study it."

It sounded like a good idea at the time.

\* \* \* \*

Much later, after I had given it some thought, I didn't think it was such a good idea.

"I don't know about this," I said, daring to contradict Nord. "I mean, we only have a week or so left of school. We could get in trouble."

"Then we do it right after school's out."

"All summer long for things to die down." Shipley was enthusiastic.

"They won't see it coming." Nord smiled at me. Trust me, his smile said. I know what I'm doing.

I wavered.

"Anyway, I've always wanted to see what teachers do when there's no school," Shipley said.

I buckled under.

"Okay. I guess we can't get in as much trouble during summer."

And so, three days after school let out, we ended up at Miss Chomsky's small house in the suburbs of Effingdale. Nord's plan was to break in and steal the coat, he had a case with little picks and skeleton keys, and had read all about lockpicking.

But that plan fell apart when we snuck up to the door. The sounds of laughter and busy conversation leaked around the sills of open windows, and seven or eight cars were parked outside.

Nord tip-toed up to the window and peeked in.

He frowned when he turned back to Shipley and me. Curious I stepped up and looked.

I don't know what I expected to see. Miss Chomsky wearing her skirt and vest, hair tied in a tight bun, already working on next year's assignments. Miss Chomsky looking over her grade-book with a look of tender loss. Or even Miss Chomsky sobbing, not quite sure to do with a summer without teaching.

I'm not sure what we expected, but it wasn't a party. And it definitely wasn't a party where other teachers (and their friends! People we had never seen at the school!) were dressed casually and standing around a punchbowl.

Teachers?

Nord looked at me, and I looked back.

"Doesn't look like we can do it," I said.

But Nord was determined. He bit his lip.

"Just follow me," he said.

He knocked on the door. Shipley and I froze, not sure whether to take off at top speed, hide in the bushes by the garage, or do both somehow.

The door opened. It was Miss Chomsky. Her hair was down, and she wore tight hip-hugging jeans. My mouth dropped.

"Hello," she said.

And Nord worked his magic. He told her she had missed giving him back a paper. Cool as ice, I realized, awed, as he spun some tale about needing it to show his mother how well he did on it.

Miss Chomsky remembered the paper, but thought she'd given it back. She walked back inside to go look for it.

"Quick!" Nord eased through the open door.

"What the hell..." I said.

But Nord was in. Shipley and I stood on either side of the door, looking around in case someone came. Though if someone did, again, we wouldn't have known whether to run or jump in the bushes.

Nord reappeared with a coat.

"Move," he ordered.

And I did. Back across the driveway at top speed, backpack bobbing on my back uncomfortably. I looked back. Shipley hadn't budged.

"Miss Chomsky is hot," he said, as if experiencing a divine message.

"Did you see how..."

"Come on!" Nord yelled.

Shipley shook himself out of it and ran.

At some point we might have heard a shout, but we weren't sure. We hightailed back to Shipley's, the closest house. We holed up in his room, dark, messy, covered in old Sci-Fi movie posters.

We were out of breath, but excited, and scared.

"They might figure this out," Nord said. "We're going to have to do something soon." He opened his backpack, full of instruments that winked back at us.

"We could hide the coat and wait it out," Shipley said.

"No, they would find it," Nord said. "And then we're even worse off."

I swallowed. I saw where this was going.

"We launch a rocket now, then?"

Nord nodded and patted his instruments.

"If we learn something about how it works, then when they take the coat back, we'll still have the knowledge." He tapped his forehead.

I felt like a criminal just after the bank robbery, hiding out, tense, waiting to be busted. Kinda fun at first, but then not so much. My chest was starting to hurt.

"All right. Let's do it," I said.

We left for the large soccer field we usually launched from. Shipley carried the large box with our mid-sized rocket.

\* \* \* \*

Somewhere just past Tannery's backyard and the annoying little Chihuahua that wouldn't shut up, Shipley started wondering aloud. He had a different obsession than Nord.

"You think if we shot an actual rocket into space, that chicks would dig that?" He asked.

"Chicks would dig that." I said, trying to get him to shut up. I was nervous. Worried about getting caught. Sure that this would somehow affect my G.P.A. I would never get into college if this went into the record.

I sighed and kicked at the grass.

"Yeah man, chicks would definitely dig that," Nord said.

"You sure?"

"Hey man, trust me, okay?" Nord spread out his arms. He was always right. Although on this one ... my instincts battled inside of me, but I kept quiet.

"Okay." Shipley added a half skip to his step.

And then there the soccer field was: destiny. Or so Nord claimed.

I looked around expecting police cars to converge on us at any second. I felt sure we were going to pay for this one.

Nord carefully unrolled the coat on the freshly mowed and lined grass near one of the soccer goals. He opened his backpack and set a series of instruments around the coat.

"Okay," he said.

I took a long deep breath, and heard a car. I looked at the end of the field.

"They're coming!" Shipley said.

Sure enough a car had pulled up. Mr. Seitz, one of the gym teachers, spoke into his cell phone. He seemed to slowly get out of the car, like one of those hit-men in a bad mafioso movie.

Another car approached us from the other side of the field. Then another. Shipley cleared his throat and looked around. Now a pair of teachers stood by the benches. On either side of the field. We were boxed in.

"Oh no," I moaned, my knees going weak.

"Do it," Nord ordered. I walked over and unpacked the rocket quickly.

I could feel the presence of teachers moving in around us like a slow net. I fumbled several times, hearing Shipley suck in his breath when I dropped a part.

We all figured that we had to at least test this. For Nord. Just to

try. Because we were going to get in trouble anyway.

I set the finished product carefully on the coat, keeping away from it, my arms quivering.

Then I walked back.

We watched for several seconds, all too aware of the teachers no more than thirty yards away.

"Nothing is happening," I said, my voice breaking.

The rocket sat there like a candle in a holder. And about just as exciting.

"Well damnit," Shipley said. "If I'm getting in trouble I should at least get to do something cool first."

Frustrated, Shipley walked forward and leaned over the coat. His shirt fluttered, and his body wiggled. He kicked his feet furiously and rose into the air over the rocket.

"Hey! Hey guys. Help."

Before anyone could lend him a hand he was twenty feet up and rising. And rising. And by the time I thought to yell 'Holy crap!' Shipley was the size of a G.I. Joe action figure.

Albeit a slightly chubby one.

I looked down at the rocket.

"It must work better over a large surface area." Nord waved his hand over it. "The rocket is too thin."

He leaned back. So did the teachers. Shipley was threatening to become a dot in the air. Nord penciled a quick calculation on the palm of his hand with a pen.

"He will suffocate in five minutes at that rate of climb," he said.

The ring of teachers around us shifted.

"I was afraid this would happen," one of them said.

They were all close enough to get me, but everyone's attention was on Shipley. We all looked around, hoping someone else would have an answer. We couldn't just pull the coat out from under Shipley, or he would plummet back down and die.

Nord pointed at Mr. Seitz. Mr. Seitz wore a sleeve-less shirt with a picture of dumbbells on it.

"I know what you are thinking," Mr. Seitz said. "Muscle is more dense than fat. If we slim Shipley down, then he might slowly return to the ground slowly enough he won't die."

"So do it," Nord said.

Mr. Seitz bit his lip. Then he covered his face with his hands and a groan of anguish. The manacles on his wrist clinked.

"I've tried," he said. "I've used every method I've ever come across to get you kids in shape. Nothing works. Nothing. I don't have that ability."

I looked on, horrified.

It was Mrs. Vishas, the pale, skinny, girl's gym teacher, who stepped forward. She held a stub of chalk between her fingers and waved it at Shipley.

I don't remember what she muttered exactly. It was something along the lines of:

"Achem ... years of running compiled... \*cough\* weightlifting ... protein ... something ... nasty tasting health-food... \*cough\* low sugar ... slimmify!"

The reason I was not paying attention was because I had seen our doom. The principal's car had pulled up. The tinted doors of the black Ford opened, and two men in suits and dark sunglasses stepped out with Principal Leider.

They held detention slips threateningly out in front of them. I fought the impulse to run. It was no use. It was too late.

We waited an hour for Shipley to fall back to earth where he learned that he would suffer the same fate as us: Summer School.

\* \* \* \*

Okay, summer school isn't that bad (if you ignore the others taking remedial).

And the weird thing is, the teachers are pretty laid back over summer here.

And well, we're starting to change a bit. At least Nord is. He's starting to think about becoming a teacher. Mr. Maas has been showing him some really neat tricks, and they're working together on a machine of some sort, I'm not sure what.

Nord thinks that no matter how great he would become, he would be really burned if he didn't learn how to warp space and time himself, and Mr. Maas is showing him a few tricks.

After all, how great is it to influence the minds of the entire next generation? There is no greater power than that. At least Nord says so.

I still think ruling the world would have been cooler, but Nord has all these things figured out.

He even says that if we're smart enough, we can get into the teacher's lounge one day (that's where the door leads to a parallel universe if you're a teacher, not the dingy coffee break-room we saw the one day we snuck inside).

As for Shipley, yeah, he still looks like the cover of Muscles Monthly. The cheerleaders are going goo-goo over him, and he's just bloody insufferable around everyone.

But Nord's working on something to fix that.

I guess being a teacher would be cool. After all, if Nord isn't going to rule the world, I'm definitely not getting Scandinavia. I have my future to think about.

School has started up again, and things are pretty much back to normal. With one exception. Nord's heard this rumor that there is a monster being kept in the janitor's cellar, which looks more like a dungeon anyway.

He's got us pretty convinced something's down there. We're thinking of taking some pick-axes over spring break and checking it out.

Though, I have to admit, I don't think this is a good idea.

Nord says I have to 'trust' him more.

Right. As okay as summer school was, I'm not doing it again next summer.

\* \* \* \*

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\_Shellie Truro was off for the summer, just trying to survive a "family breakfast" with her stinky younger brother Russell. But then she found the prize at the bottom of the cereal box. An Imperium Wormhole Key Ring. What lies on the other side of the wormhole? A malevolent alien who looks just like Plumpy, the fat purple plum guy in Candy Land, the friendly chap beloved of four-year-olds everywhere. And three alien death-hunters who think Shellie's their target ... \_

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\*The Universe in the Bottom of a Cereal Box\*

\*By Amy Sterling Casil\*

"I don't care if you like it," Shellie's Mom said as she slammed two cereal bowls on the kitchen table. "You and your brother are eating breakfast together. Dr. Laura says it's the right thing to do."

Russell Truro looked over at Shellie through the greasy fringe of his rust-red hair and rolled his eyes. Ever since school let out for the summer Mom had one crazy idea after another to bring the three of them together.

"Cut it out, dickwad," Shellie mouthed. Mom's back was turned, so there was no chance that she'd see. As soon as Mom turned back, Shellie smiled sweetly at her.

"See!" Mom cried. "Your sister understands. Isn't that right, Shellie?"

Shellie nodded.

"I hate you, Shellie," Russell growled. Ever since his voice changed, he'd been experimenting with various tones and expressions that Shellie figured he thought were "mature" or "masculine." Fat chance! No matter what he did, he couldn't change the fact that he was a greasy, zitty ninth-grader with a sunken chest.

Shellie didn't even have to say, "Mom heard that."

Eyes wide, Mom whacked Russell's oily scalp and yelled, "Apologize to your sister!" Then she lifted her hand and peered at it, and looked back down at Russell's head.

"Are you using Brylcreem?" Mom asked. "Is that the style now?"

Russell grinned, showing his awful silver teeth.

"He wouldn't know style if he got locked in the bathroom for six days with a stack of GQ's. He doesn't take showers, Mom," Shellie said in a calm, measured tone as she poured herself some orange juice.

"Eat your cereal before you drink the orange juice," Mom said.

"But orange juice tastes bad after cereal," Shellie said.

Mom's expression took care of that attempted resistance. Then she turned back to Russell. "You need to shower daily," she told him.

"But I do!" Russell cried.

This time, Shellie was the one who rolled her eyes. "Once a month," she mouthed.

"Shut up!" he retorted.

"I don't know how I can debate with you," Shellie said in crisp, clipped tones. "Your blinding intellect is just too much, Wussell."

"Shut your trap!" Russell grabbed the cereal box and filled a bowl to the brim.

"You can't put milk in now, Wussell," Shellie said. "It will spill. And I'm not cleaning it up."

At once, Mom turned, the corners of her mouth tight and wrinkled in grief and frustration. "I'm having a Power Bar on the way to work," she said in an agonized voice. "Thank you both once again for spoiling what should have been a lovely family meal."

Mom whirled and stomped toward the garage door before Shellie could say anything. Russell had already started to pour the milk in his cereal. Just as Shellie had predicted, the sugared miniature donuts bubbled over the top of his bowl and landed on the kitchen table with tiny plops.

"You're such a dick," Shellie said as she grabbed the box from him. "Now I have to clean it up."

"Now I have to clean it up," Russell mimicked.

"Wuss-ill," Shellie said. The box felt light - of course he'd wasted nearly all of it. "I was hungry, anus-face. Now there's like enough left for your stupid gerbil."

A quarter-cup of sugary O's spilled into Shellie's bowl, followed by a silver sealed plastic square.

"It's a prize!" Russell cried.

Shellie snatched the bowl from his clutches with blinding speed. "You got all the cereal," she said. "I get the prize."

"Shell-eee!" he whined.

"Russell, I swear to God, you act like you're three, not fifteen," she said.

He looked at her, pouting, as she fished the prize from the bowl and bit one corner.

"You'll break your teeth," he said in the tremulous growl that he thought sounded like Bruce Willis. Shellie had heard him practicing to the Die Hard movies a hundred times.

"It's just thin plastic," she said, and then spit out the torn edge.

Slowly, Shellie tore the packet, making sure Russell saw the full effect. It wasn't that she cared about a cereal prize, of course. It was probably a plastic Scooby Doo hologram, or a Sponge Bob sliding puzzle. Even more likely, it was a cheap molded part to some weird toy that wouldn't be worth anything at all without buying fifty boxes of cereal to try to collect all the different pieces and assemble them.

"What is it?" Russell asked, his eyes greedy and wide.

"None of your business," Shellie said. There was another plastic packet inside the other, and she slit that with the edge of her fingernail.



It was a ring, made of some kind of iridescent plastic. No - it wasn't plastic. It had some weight to it, and it felt cool in the palm of her hand.

"Let me see!" Russell demanded.

"It's just a stupid ring," Shellie said, clamping the ring tight.

"I don't care," Russell said. "Let me see!" He scooted halfway around the table and grasped for her hand.

"Leave me alone, Plaque Creature," she said. She'd gotten way too close a look at Russell's mouth. She and Mom had both long since given up on warning him about what was going to happen when they finally took off his braces.

But Russell did get hold of the packet she'd discarded. He opened it and fished out a tiny booklet.

"There's instructions," he said.

"Like a ring needs instructions?" she asked.

"Ha!" he laughed, as he leafed through the booklet's tiny pages. "It says it's a Wormhole Key Ring."

"It is not a key ring," Shellie said. "It's a regular ring. It's not plastic, either. It's some kind of cheap, shiny metal."

Shellie opened her hand slightly and saw the metal glittering pink, purple and blue-green. It was kind of cool, she thought. It could even look like some kind of friendship ring from Hot Topic, she thought. In any case, it was one cereal prize Russell was never going to get his sweaty fingers on.

"It says it's a Imperium Wormhole Key Ring!" Russell cried. "Let me see it," he pled.

"No," Shellie said simply. "You ate the cereal, I get the prize. And that's -"

She got up from the table and held out her left hand. It was just a kid's ring, but Shellie's fingers were long and slender. She held out her left hand, admiring her nicely-polished dark blue nails, and slipped the ring on her left ring finger. The wedding finger! Ha! Well, some day, Shellie - someday. Maybe Billy would ask - maybe -

"Let me try it," Russell whined.

"When they get Icee makers in Hell, Russell," Shellie said.

Russell frowned. "I wonder what show that's from?" he said. "Imperium Wormhole? I never heard of that."

"If it is a show," Shellie said. "Hard to believe you haven't seen it. Maybe it's from Grungedamn X-9000 or whatever it is that you watch all day and all night."

"Gundam!" he cried.

"Oh, right," Shellie said. "How could I forget?"

"No, they use different stuff," Russell said. "They battle evil forces to save -"

"Russell, you're fifteen. I can't believe you still watch that crap. That's for..."

Shellie began nervously twisting the ring. It was pretty tight on her finger, and it was beginning to itch.

"I have the instructions," he said, holding up the tiny square booklet.

"For a ring?" Shellie asked again, still moving the ring around. If it didn't quit itching, she'd have to take it off. And if it was off her finger, Russell had a much better chance of getting hold of it.

"It says to twist it three times clockwise," Russell said. "Then it will unlock the wormhole."

"Oh, right," Shellie said. "I'm so -"

She twisted the ring again. Which way was clockwise anyway?

That way.

Imagine Russell, his greasy red hair blown back, mouth wide, face the color of new-thrown clay. This was infinitely gnarlier than any Gundam ever imagined.

Shellie became a silver girl, bathed in blinding all-colored light.

Russell watched as half their kitchen disappeared, along with Shellie.

"Shellie!" he cried. But it was already far too late. Just like it said

in the instruction booklet, Shellie was on her

W O R  
M H O  
H O L E L Y  
S H J I T  
O U R  
N E Y  
\* \* \* \*

Shellie opened her eyes and grabbed her stomach, watching her fingers go right through her skin - her silver skin!

It felt like nothing -- in fact, she felt like nothing, but she was conscious as the world swirled around her, like a cold, sickening mix of different Slurpee flavors in a giant cup. Only the cup was a tube that had no end, and the --

Swirling stopped, and Shellie felt like she was going to throw up, but she didn't. And her body changed back from silver to its normal state, and even her L.E.I. jeans and green striped crop top reappeared.

"I didn't even eat the cereal," she whispered. All she'd had was half a glass of orange juice. How could she feel so sick?

"I fainted," she said, blinking.

Where was Russell? Where was their kitchen? She was supposed to meet the Gruenwald twins at the mall in half an hour. It didn't look like she was going to make it.

Where was her pager? Upstairs on her dresser! She couldn't even -

"Welcome!" cried a booming, almost wet-sounding voice.

Shellie looked around again, blinking. She was having a horrible Willie Wonka dream. High above, she saw a glass ceiling made of octagonal panes. In the distance, a hazy purple form moved slowly out of a stand of weird trees unlike any she'd ever seen. Check - no, she had seen this type of thing before - those were definitely Willy Wonka trees. It seemed like the purple shape was what had said "welcome." Now it was sort of hovering above ground and moving toward her alongside a brown river!

"I'm having a dream about making myself sick," she said to herself.

"I'm having a freaky dream because I passed out from some blood-sugar thing."

"Welcome to the Imperium of Grundy!" the purple thing said. It was a lot closer now. "Welcome, Shellie Truro!"

"I really am going to be sick," Shellie muttered, clutching her abdomen.

"Are you ready to play the game?" the purple thing asked in its damp, resonant voice.

Shellie squinted at it. Now it was halfway down the brown river through another stand of candy-fruit laden trees, crossing a pink patch of "grass," and she could see it closely.

"You look just like that guy in Candy Land!" she cried. It wasn't Willy Wonka, she thought. Willy Wonka wore a three-piece velvet suit and his blond frizzy hair stuck out like he'd electrocuted himself and jammed on his top hat to cover up the problem. Willy Wonka sort of defined "bad hair day" and every time Shellie saw that movie, she felt a little better about her own unruly curls because there was like - no way - that it could ever get that bad. This guy was purple, fat, blobby, mottled and jelly-like - it wasn't even a guy at all.

It looked just like Plumpy, the hideous Candy Land thing. Shellie had babysat enough times that Plumpy's squat, distasteful form was etched into her brain. On the scale of Candy Land characters, Plumpy ranked right above the dreaded Mrs. Nut.

"If I'm going to have a nightmare while I'm passed out, why this?" Shellie wondered aloud.

"Three of our friends have paid to play a game with you, Shellie Truro," the Plumpy-creature said. Shellie realized she was standing on a sort of proscenium, from which shining white stone steps led down into the

Candy-Willy Wonka land. Somehow, she didn't want to go down those steps to get any closer to Plumpy or whatever he was.

But this being a dream, maybe her feet were just going to move anyway, whether she liked it or not.

She looked down at her feet, then back at Plumpy, as he began to heave his bulk up the right stairway, sort of floating a bit, then plopping back down, helping himself along by something that he extruded from his mottled purple midsection and making noises that sounded just like ... she couldn't think about it.

Plumpy's mouth extended from ear to ear, just like their neighbor's boxer. He was panting from the exertion and he kept licking his lips with his bubbly-looking gray-pink tongue.

"Oh, my God," Shellie said.

"Can you run fast, Shellie Truro?" the freak asked.

"I guess so," she said, hardly believing that she was conversing with it - actually talking with Plumpy the Candy Land loser. She turned - there was nothing behind her but a blank wall. Moments earlier, that had been the stove in their kitchen - the refrigerator and the messed-up microwave. Shellie rubbed her eyes. Oh, right - like she was in some kind of blood-sugar coma, and rubbing her eyes was going to help.

"Here are our three friends," the creature said, extending another thing from his midsection between lip-licks, clinging desperately to the frilly metal stair rail with the first extruded appendage.

"They have paid eighty million credits to the Imperium to play this game with you, Shellie Truro," the creature said. "I assured them that this time, we had a healthy, quick and intelligent biped!"

"Biped?" Shellie said. But he had said healthy, quick and intelligent.

Three figures emerged from the nearest group of candy-bearing trees.

"Yes - as a sentient biped, you are ever so much more desirable than a quadruped, octoped, decaped and so-on," Plumpy said.

"Why?" Shellie asked.

"Because your arms are free as you locomote, allowing you far more flexibility and even the possibility of self-defense!" Plumpy said, chuckling.

"Self defense?" Shellie asked.

"Yes," Plumpy said. "You have a head start of -" and Plumpy paused here, "five of your minutes. Our friends here will not start hunting until that time. If you reach the far side of the enclosure and drink from the headwaters of our river," and Plumpy gestured toward the brown stream, "You will be 'home free' and we will return you to your originating dimension through the wormhole."

"What?" Shellie said.

"Time starts now," Plumpy said. A moment later, he licked his lips, his horrible head swiveled all the way around to face the three creatures who'd emerged from the trees, and he made a nodding gesture, crying, "Go!"

Shellie looked at the three creatures. One was definitely a "quadruped" if she remembered her agriculture class correctly. He looked sort of like a piebald horse, but instead of one head, he had two that looked like long snakes with tiny human-like heads at the end of each, and he was holding some type of nasty-looking tube in his right "mouth." There was a hump between his front shoulders. Maybe that was his "brain," she thought. She remembered seeing a show where they talked about some dinosaurs having their real brains between their shoulders, with a walnut-sized ball of nerves in their tiny heads. Two-headed centaur, Shellie thought. How could a dream get this bad just from orange juice?

The second creature was definitely a "biped" and he certainly held a weapon. He had a mouth almost as wide as Plumpy's, and his face was clay-colored and oilier-looking than Russell on an eight-day filth jag. Shellie grimaced; this thing didn't even seem to have eyes. His greasy face was wrinkled like a Shar-Pei dog. Maybe there were eyes somewhere in those

folds. There seemed to be a nose somewhere in it, because he was wrinkling the wrinkles ... snuffling. Mister Disgusting, she named this one.

The third figure seemed out of place. Plumpy the Candy Land refugee, the mangy double-headed centaur, and Mister Disgusting - but this was, well, she was sort of the wrong color to be a person, kind of a yellowish gold, but she seemed like a pretty lady. Shellie wondered how she got around like that without showing things that she should be keeping to herself - like, she just had two strips of fabric going straight up and down, barely covering her boobs. And some kind of biker-type chaps, only they were silvery gold, not black. But she wasn't the Good Witch, a biker babe, or Queen Frostine, the Candy Land heroine. She smiled up at Shellie with pointed National Geographic teeth. A quiver of arrows hung on her back, and a bow nearly as tall as she was slung over her shoulder.

"You can call me Diana," the woman said in a high, clear voice. "And you should run now - you have already used up a quarter of your head start."

Shellie frowned. A quarter? Let's see - that was a minute and 15 seconds - or was it a minute and a half? No, four times that would be six minutes, and Plumpy the lip-licker had said...

Shellie took a deep breath and began to run. She tore past Plumpy, shuddering as she heard his wet, disgusting grunts. He was so fat and so ... diseased-looking.

Shellie ran past the two-headed centaur, who reared on his hind legs and said something in a high-pitched squeal; thank God she couldn't really understand. He was making smacking noises as he held that rod-weapon in his second mouth.

Mister Disgusting made nasty sounds, something like a laugh. And he was still snuffling.

The scariest one, even though she looked the most normal, was that Diana. Shellie didn't stop running, but she did back over her shoulder at the woman. She still had that sharp, pointy smile, and Shellie watched her slowly remove one of those long arrows from the quiver, then unsling the bow with an unhurried gesture.

"She's thinking of you as Plumpy," the woman called back to the vile purple creature on the stairs. "Ha-ha - a perfect name! Greedy, fat, purple and degenerate. Plumpy!"

"My lady, my lady," Plumpy said, his horrid chuckle echoing. Shellie turned away and ran as fast as she could, dodging between the weird candy trees.

Was it candy? It was hard to tell. It didn't smell like candy. The bright-colored "fruit" smelled somehow ... medicinal. Maybe even like rubbing alcohol, or disinfectant.

"Half your time is gone," Plumpy intoned.

Gee, thanks, Shellie thought. Mister Disgusting looked so out of control that he probably wouldn't wait for the time to be up to start after her anyway. What was she supposed to do? It looked like he had a laser cannon like the stupid things on that Gundam show Russell watched as he turned his brain into jello.

Shellie found an especially large tree with a gnarled trunk, and slipped behind it to catch her breath.

The Imperium ... of Grundy? Plumpy the lip-licking freak? Eighty million "credits?" That would be a huge number of arcade games, even at one of the cheating, four- or five-credit a game ripoff places.

Shellie couldn't remember a Grundy in Candy Land. Nothing like that in Willy Wonka, either. This place resembled Wonka's kingdom, but it was a lot bigger. Shellie was already out of breath; she knew she could do a six-minute mile, which meant that she ... suddenly the bubbling brown stream just faded into the distance - like if Shellie ran all day, she'd never get there. Looking up again, she thought that the glass-paned dome would probably cover her entire town.

"This is bad," she whispered.

"One of your minutes left," Plumpy called, although his voice sounded more distant. The proscenium and the stairs looked pretty far away, Shellie thought, peeking back around the tree.

"Please let me wake up," she said. "Please, please let Russell have a clue and call Mom. Call the ambulance. Please let this be some type of -"

"Forty-five of your seconds," Plumpy said.

"Shut up, you big fat perver," Shellie muttered.

She bit her lip and started running again.

"Time's up!" Plumpy cried. "Let the hunt begin!"

"That is so not fair," Shellie said as she dodged between more of the bizarre trees. It couldn't have been forty-five seconds - more like five!

"I never said we would be fair, Shellie Truro!" Plumpy's voice boomed.

"I'm going to kick your big purple ass when I get the chance," Shellie said. "You'll see!"

"I do not have an 'ass,'" Plumpy announced.

Shellie heard the wild cry that issued from the two-headed Centaur's free mouth echoing off the glass panes. And then a bright golden arrow whizzed right past her shoulder.

\* \* \* \*

"I can't even eat candy before I die," Shellie sniffled, looking around at the red and white-striped giant peppermints, the fruit-colored bubble blobs, and all the rest. She'd found another gnarled tree to catch her breath.

On the bright side, the two-headed centaur was slow and clumsy and Shellie could smell and hear Mister Disgusting from far away. So what if he was blasting the freakish candy trees to cinders with that Gundam-cannon?

So what?

Shellie looked at her right forearm. It would never heal right. It didn't hurt, not really. It had hurt at first, but now it stopped. She was in shock. She tried to remember health class. It was a third-degree burn. First degree was like a sunburn. Second degree was the skin layers. Third degree was all the way through the skin. There was no way that black, crusty stuff with weeping red underneath was anything but a third degree burn.

Thanks to Mister Disgusting. Thanks to Plumpy!

Shellie had started to think along the lines of getting that cannon away from Mister Disgusting. Somehow. If she climbed up in one of the trees...

She couldn't tell where that Diana was. That was the one that really scared her. Those arrows. That face - pretty until she smiled. Those sharp teeth.

Maybe the end of the brown river was closer. It was so hard to tell, looking up at that vast ceiling. Once the creeps caught up with her, she'd had to turn all kinds of different ways, and the whole place looked different.

Why hadn't she woken? Russell obviously had left her in a coma on the kitchen floor, going off to watch Gundam until he fell into another immobile stupor. Why had she fought so much with him anyway? Maybe if she'd just been a little nicer, he would have called Mom - done something! No, here she was stuck in this never-ending nightmare because she was in some kind of coma. Maybe she was dying on the kitchen floor, and she didn't even know it.

That was when Shellie started to cry.

A bright golden arrow streaked right toward her face; Shellie ducked, and it struck one of the giant peppermints hanging over her head.

The peppermint exploded in a shower of sparks. Shellie turned, throwing herself into a full somersault, catching a glimpse of Diana striding around a tree not twenty yards away, reaching back for another arrow.

Notching it.

Shellie looked up to see three low-hanging peppermints, each the size of a beach ball.

Peppermints didn't explode. They smelled minty, not weird, like rubbing alcohol or Russell's zit medication. She sniffed again. That wasn't exactly right. They didn't smell like ... the gas station!

Shellie jumped and grabbed one of the peppermints with both hands. Her

burned arm exploded with tearing pain. She hefted the mint, which felt weird and light, kind of like a beach ball, and tossed it toward the golden huntress, just as the bow sang and the arrow flew.

Right through the peppermint! And the whole thing went kaboom! It was like an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie. Or Die Hard.

Maybe Shellie wouldn't get any candy or get home safe, but that woman Diana's hair went up like one of her Mom's gel candles.

Shellie's eyes went wide - Diana turned madly, shrieking; the thin, tissue-like fabric of her sleazy outfit had caught fire.

"Run for the river!" Shellie cried. Well, if it was a dream, big deal, she thought. She really never dreamt violent dreams and she really didn't want to see this woman go up like a Roman candle. Just so long as she left Shellie alone - and Shellie could wake up.

It smelled like the time she put Mom's lighter to one of her fingernail clippings. Only stronger.

"Oh, no!" came Plumpy's voice.

"Run!" Shellie said. "It's right over there!" She stepped forward and pointed around the trees.

Shrieking, Diana the huntress threw down her bow, and arrows scattering, ran for the brown river.

"No! No!" Plumpy said again.

Shellie smelled Mister Disgusting.

The whole tree exploded behind her. All Shellie could do was crouch and try to curl into a tiny ball. The force of the blast sent her rolling in a somersault, and the heat scorched the small of her back.

Not my crop top, she thought. She paid \$25 for that crop top; one whole shift at Hot Topic.

Through slitted eyes, Shellie caught a flash of the golden huntress, flames licking all over her, jumping.

Diana's body arced, graceful and horrible at the same time.

"No!" Plumpy screamed in his echoing, wet voice. What was he doing? Flying overhead like a hot air balloon?

Maybe she could pop him and he'd explode like one of those incendiary peppermints, Shellie thought.

Diana's outstretched arms hit the brown stream. She dove, and flames streaked in all directions, like a hundred fiery snakes slithering through the water.

"Oh, my God," Shellie said.

A blast from Mister Disgusting's cannon showered her with hot dirt and pink blades of grass.

Nothing was going to stop him. Obviously. And where was that two-headed centaur?

A high-pitched squeal told Shellie where he was - to her right. Mister Disgusting was stalking closer and closer on the other side, his nose-fold snuffling, his big, ugly mouth making something like a laugh.

Shellie rolled again, and got her feet underneath her. Just like cheerleading camp, she told herself. Remember, how to get up - she flexed her thighs and she was standing. In a breath, she was running, dodging. Boom! Another peppermint exploded feet from her shoulder.

The centaur seemed to stop, turning around, its clumsy heads battling with each other. Shellie could not believe it, but one of the heads stretched in her direction, while the other whipped the opposite way - the one with the weapon. A tree behind the centaur started to shake, then fell all to pieces, bark first, peppermints last.

"Nasty," Shellie said, turning and running like mad.

Shellie nearly tripped over another fallen peppermint. Gritting her teeth, she planted one foot, and kicked it toward Mister Ugly, who was stumping along after her.

His big mouth cracked open and a high-pitched, desperate cry came out.

"Dang!" Shellie said. He was afraid of it! It slowed him down, long

enough for her to spot another tree that she could reach if she tried hard enough. The flames had swept up and down the brown river as far as she could see, and the heat was terrible. It was some kind of oil river, she thought. Ha-ha, wasn't that funny? Back to when she was a little kid, and thought everything was candy. Everything bright and...

If those peppermints exploded, what did the fruit-colored bubbles do?

She saw a blackish, person-shaped thing in the river, too, just traveling down along the stream.

Oh, no, Shellie thought. But there was no time to feel sad about it.

She reached the tree, and got hold of one of the bright fruit-globes. Something was sloshing inside of it; Shelly was relatively certain that it wasn't juice. She was dimly aware of the deep throbbing burn on her forearm, and she felt pretty sick about the flapping shreds on her back - that was it for the crop top.

Mister Disgusting had done that.

"Eat this, you freak!" Shellie cried. And she dropped the fruit-globe and gave it her best soccer-style kick.

He made the same high-pitched cry, and he tried to dodge - but he was as fast as any fat fourth grader, and the fruit-globe slammed into his mid-section.

Shellie's mouth dropped. The fruit-globe tore through Mister Disgusting like he was jello, leaving a gaping semi-circle behind.

"Oh, my God," she whispered. This time, she really meant it.

Mister Disgusting crumpled, falling to the weird pink grass, his remaining side flopping around horribly.

Inside Shelly's head, a little voice said, "there is no way, under any circumstances, that you could dream this, Shelly Truro. You always hated sci-fi. You never even watched Gundam. You drew moustaches with a grease pencil on that wrinkle-headed Star Trek guy on geeky Freddy's notebook. You don't even know what to call that two-headed horse thing! Centaur! Where'd you get that? You slept through Mrs. Stangbaum's mythology lessons. So how'd ya come up with that Diana name? Sure, maybe this is twisted Willy Wonka Candy Land, but..."

Mister Disgusting was mewling like a hurt kitten.

"Oh, sick," Shellie said, even as she crept toward the fatally-wounded creature.

"I'm - I'm going to take your gun, okay?" she told him. "You won't be needing it any more."

The slick gray flaps on his face parted and Shellie saw two pale, sad-looking blue eyes.

"I'm really sorry," she told him. "I didn't know what that thing would do." Well - you figured it would do something bad, Shellie, she told herself.

One of his hands reached up; she noticed he had only three thick fingers. Like a cartoon. Only not. Each had a square, thick nail almost like a piece of horn. The mewling noises grew faint.

"I am really, really sorry Mister," she said.

Now she'd killed the huntress woman, Diana - made her into a human (no, not human, Shelly reminded herself, even though she seemed like a person) torch, and torched up that brown river. Drink that stuff? What did that sick freak Plumpy think she was? A retard who'd drink Drano thinking it was Kool-Aid?

And she'd killed Mister Disgusting, too. The X-Files creature.

The sad-looking blue eyes glazed over. The mewling stopped. Her hand trembling, Shellie reached over and did what she thought was the right thing. She drew the greasy, clay-colored fold over those sad eyes. It felt sickening, all soft and squishy. But it wasn't oily - more slimy. Same as when you were a little kid. You looked at something and you thought it was one way, and then you touched it and tasted it, and it was something totally different.

Like getting fooled by plastic fruit.

Or fruit-bubbles that were really deadly missiles. Or exploding peppermints. Or an incendiary chocolate river.

"A disaster!" came Plumpy's voice.

Shellie looked over her shoulder, and sure enough, she'd been right. He was up there, hovering overhead like a big, fat purple helicopter. Only he didn't have any blades, nor any motor she could see. It was just him, and he was like a living hot air balloon.

"Disgusting!" she cried. "I can't make up my mind, Plumpy. I can't decide whether to explode you with a peppermint, or cut you in half with a fruit ... projectile." Projectile! Now, that was something for Shellie to remember that word.

"Foolish girl!" Plumpy cried down at her, his voice echoing and bubbling like he was using a megaphone under water.

"I could just blast you," she said. She had Mister Disgusting's laser cannon blaster.

She aimed it at Plumpy.

"You can't do that!" he cried. "I am an officer of the Imperium! You are just a -"

The two-headed centaur came trotting around the nearest trees.

"Oh, rats," Shellie said.

Mister Disgusting's blaster might have looked like some kind of sci-fi gun, but ... there was nothing remotely like a trigger.

A button?

Shellie looked desperately for something - anything - and turned the barrel away from Plumpy toward the centaur.

He pointed his wand at her, while his other head snaked aimlessly around.

"Oh, stop that, she's got the Gnignellian's blaster!" the free head cried, in a girlish, high-pitched voice. Even so, Shellie felt it was male - um, it turned. Yeah, it was male unless things on its planet were really different.

The wand wavered, but didn't turn aside.

Shellie ducked, and the lower remaining half of Mister Disgusting - the Gnignellian, she guessed - wavered the way the tree had, and exploded in horrible wet chunks.

"That's awful!" Shellie cried. "What is that thing? Why can't you use a normal weapon?" She almost laughed - normal? What was normal in this place?

"Kill her! Kill her!" Plumpy cried from above.

"No you don't! You saw what I did to those other two. Do you want to end up like them?" Shellie asked the centaur.

The two heads twisted around each other. The free one faced the other, its big brown eyes blinking. It had eyes kind of like a gentle cow, Shellie thought. It was so weird-looking. The heads didn't seem very securely attached to its big, horselike body. Almost like they were afterthoughts.

And that big camel-type hump probably was its brain right between its shoulders.

"I'll blast your hump!" she cried, aiming Mister Disgusting's blaster straight at the hump.

"Nooooo!" shrieked the free head. The other one waved its wand hysterically.

"You're not a very brave centaur, are you?" she asked.

"Kill her!" Plumpy demanded. "Don't be stupid, Klorm. Go ahead and --

"

"You stop that!" Shellie said, looking fiercely up at the malign purple zeppelin overhead. He'd had such a hard time getting up the stairs - maybe he'd been "gassing himself up," she thought bizarrely.

Shellie's finger touched something rough on the blaster's grip. She pressed, but nothing happened.

"Dang," she said, and rubbed her finger hard along the ridges she felt.

The thing went off, a bright red bolt exploding past Plumpy, streaking



straight toward the glass paned roof.

"Oh, no!" Plumpy cried. The bolt hit the panes and ricocheted off as Shellie tumbled back.

It's like Grandpa's 20-gauge, she thought as she flew back and landed on her butt. Tomorrow she was going to hurt bad, and she'd be wearing long-sleeved shirts for months.

The centaur's heads screamed and writhed as he tried to cover his hump.

The bolt shot down right into the river, setting off a good-sized blast that launched a wall of flame toward Shellie and the centaur.

"Run!" she cried as the fireball came toward them.

She looked over and saw that the creature was actually running beside her, his heads swiveling madly and screaming.

At a certain point, he tripped in the grass, and the wand went flying.

That was that for that, Shellie thought. He would probably just run off and hide, and all she had to do was take Plumpy out. Then she'd be -

"Guards! Guards!" Plumpy cried. "The human prey is on the loose!"

"Oh, shut up," Shellie said as the fireball overtook her.

There went the rest of the back of the crop top.

But, thank goodness, the fireball had lost most of its force, and nearly all its heat. The centaur wasn't so lucky; a brief glance showed him on his front knees, screaming. Why couldn't she just wake up?

Shellie, because it's not a dream.

This place, whatever it is, is real.

A Star-Wars type battalion of armored clones appeared on the proscenium.

"I can't believe this," she said.

Still blinking from the blast, she aimed her weapon back up at Plumpy.

"If you send those creeps down here, I'll have to kill them," she yelled up at him. "I'll kill this two-headed centaur, I'll kill them, and then, you sick freak, I'll blast your big, purple cellulite butt!"

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" Plumpy cried.

"Who do you think you are, grabbing people out of their kitchens?"

"Oh, my!" Plumpy said. "Guards!"

"I mean it," Shellie said. "I'm sorry about those other two, even if they were trying to kill me. What is this place?"

"You're a dangerous, psychotic female!" Plumpy cried.

The centaur's two heads were whimpering.

Shellie looked over to see most of its piebald coat burned away, pink skin showing beneath.

"I'm really sorry," she told it. "That has to hurt a lot."

The two heads nodded in unison. All four big brown eyes were filled with tears.

"Plumpy, that dude isn't any hunter or killer. It's just a big horse with two heads."

"They paid eighty million credits to -"

"I know, blah blah blah to the Imperium of the Blah-de-blah. What's your stake in this, fat boy?" Shellie asked the malevolent floater.

"The Imperium of Grundy provides the best personal entertainment in the galaxy," Plumpy said. "Guards!" he cried once more. The dozens of identical soldiers started marching down the stairs.

"Plumpy, those don't look too scary. I bet I could -"

"Human female, surrender!" Plumpy cried.

"This is too disgusting," Shellie muttered. She braced herself, rubbing the trigger ridges.

Plumpy's vast, amorphous rear vaporized. He whipped around and around in rapidly widening circles, squealing.

"You are a gas bag," Shellie said. "Well, live and learn."

Soon Plumpy's buoyancy was gone, and he plummeted rapidly, landing not far from the crying centaur.

The clone-guards stopped, frozen - Shellie had been right - they were

mindless drones under Plumpy's control.

Fallen Plumpy was a fraction of his former self, deflated and wrinkled on the bizarre pink grass.

"Happy now?" Shellie asked, standing over him with one hand on her hip, and the other holding the blaster's muzzle a few inches from his nasty, quivering face.

Plumpy shook and trembled, and finally said, "No."

"You've got some explaining to do," Shellie said. "What is this place? How did you get me here? Who were those people and why were they paying you money - or credits or whatever - to kill me?"

"Foolish human," Plumpy said in a bubbly voice. "You will never learn -"

"I'll dissect you piece by piece," Shellie said. "I have sharp fingernails and this purple skin of yours is mighty..."

Shellie grabbed a fold of Plumpy's disgusting deflated flesh and tugged. It came away with an awful tearing sound.

Plumpy managed to shriek.

"I must be repaired," he said. "I must be -"

"You won't be anything after I get through with you," Shellie said. "What are you doing kidnapping people at breakfast and starting some kind of alien Death Hunt Three Thousand?"

"Humans ... are ... made for harvesting."

"You are so sick," Shellie said.

"You are a strong human," Plumpy said. Shellie realized that even with his injuries, the alien was trying to smile and lick his lips.

"Why don't you try telling me where I'm at? I know this isn't a dream. This is -"

"You are in an amusement dome of the Imperium of Grundy," Plumpy said. "There is no escape."

"You lied," Shellie said. She looked over at the injured centaur, and felt her eyes narrowing. "You probably lied to him, too, and to the other two. Did they think they were hunting some kind of ... animal ... for fun? Did they even know it was real? That they could be killed?"

"That would be telling," Plumpy said. "If you must know, the Imperium assures all of its customers that they are not hunting full Galactic citizens. Humans are a food-species, barely considered sentient."

"Food species!" Shellie cried.

"Yes," Plumpy laughed, then he choked up something nasty and blackish.

"You're going to die," Shellie said. "That black stuff looks bad."

"My assistants will come and regenerate my body," Plumpy said.

"That's nice for you," Shellie said. "I hope it hurts really bad."

"Humans are violent and brutish, ruled by their primitive emotions," Plumpy said. "It is justifiable that you be used for hunts and other entertainment."

"What's 'other entertainment?'" Shellie asked, although she really didn't want to know.

"Torture, organ removal and replacement, mind control, three-dimensional blood and plasma sculptures ... you really are primitive, aren't you?" Plumpy said.

"Disgusting!" Shellie cried. "Look, before you croak, hadn't you better call someone to help your ... what did you call him ... customer? Or don't you care? Isn't he a full Galactic citizen?"

"Uh, well - yes," Plumpy said. "I suppose -"

Shellie looked over at the centaur, who was now writhing in agony on the pink grass.

"If he dies, do you still get these credits? Doesn't he have some family? What about those other two? Diana and the ugly guy?"

"The huntress is a full-blooded princess of the -" Plumpy's hideous eyes widened. "Human monster!" he cried. "You will suffer all the tortures of the Imperium for what you've done. We must pay -" Then he cut himself short.

Obviously his injuries had weakened his judgment. He was disclosing company secrets. Looking over at the centaur, Shellie knew that he had heard - and understood.

He managed to right himself and one of the two heads spoke.

It sounded like a little girl, and for some reason, Shellie almost laughed. After all that had happened, the giant, probably mortally-wounded horse with two heads had the voice of Mary Kate or Ashley Olson.

Maybe the two heads talking together would be like Mary Kate and Ashley.

"You must reimburse my family twice the bounty that I paid for this travesty," the Mary Kate voice said. "And you must -"

"Enough!" Plumpy cried. "I know, I know."

"How do I get back home?" Shellie asked.

"You cannot," Plumpy said. "You will die if you drink from the stream, as you have probably already surmised. There is no escape at the end of the chamber."

"You are such a butthead," Shellie said, sitting and crossing her legs, resting her chin in her hand, balancing the blaster so it still aimed at Plumpy's deflated head.

"What is butthead?" the Mary Kate voice asked.

"An extremely bad, stupid person," Shellie told it. "I'm really sorry you got hurt, by the way. I'm not naturally a violent person."

"We were told your species was bloody and terrible," the creature said in its little girl voice. "We were told that it was like hunting Gnignellian tooth-worms, or Lorbian fire demons."

"I'm just a teenage girl," Shellie said. "I go to Rockport High, I'm off on summer break, I work part time at Hot Topic, and today I was supposed to go to the mall with my friends."

"What is mall?" the centaur asked.

"A place where people shop, have fun, check out the other teenagers," Shellie said.

"A social gathering hall?" the centaur asked.

Shellie looked glumly at the two heads. Maybe he wasn't going to die. He seemed to have exuded some type of whitish, waxy material over his burns. Maybe he could heal himself. She hoped he wouldn't die anyway. He had seemed the least threatening of the threesome. Almost like he really couldn't hurt anything.

"Kind of like that," she told him.

"You have a ... family?" he asked.

Maybe at the nether end of the galaxy, things still had families, Shellie thought.

"Yeah," she said. "My mom, and my little brother Russell. I'll never see them again, either." How many times had Shellie wished that Russell would just disappear into another dimension? A thousand times - and now Shellie was the one who had, and she was suddenly so tired, and hurt, and she just wanted to cry.

So, she did, while Plumpy made horrible gas noises and the centaur's brown-eyed heads watched, even though it wasn't really a good cry. Shellie was forcing it.

"What is that noise you are making?"

"I'm crying, Centaur," she said.

"What is crying? My name is not Centaur. It's Klorm."

"Pleased to meet you, Klorm," Shellie said, sniffing. "Crying is something we do when we're sad. And when we're happy."

"Oh," Klorm the Centaur said. "I am sad, too. I am very badly hurt."

"I'm sorry," Shellie said again. "Like I said," and she wiped her nose with what was left of her crop top, and that made her even sadder, "I'm not the type of person who likes hurting other people."

"I am a Vrant," Klorm said. "I am not a person."

"Well, I know that. I mean, I didn't know the name for what you - er -

are, but I knew that -"

"What is teenager?" Klorm asked.

"A young person. Not all the way grown up yet."

"Grignr!" both of the Vrant centaur's heads cried in unison.

Shellie looked over at Plumpy - Grignr - what a name! Who'd think something like that up?

"She is lying, Klorm," Grignr said.

"How did you come to bring her here? What sort of contracts was executed? Did she issue a nucleic acid print for -"

"Contract!" Shellie cried. "What are you talking about -"

"Silence, human!" Grignr, formerly Plumpy, said.

Shellie cleared her throat and aimed the blaster back at the crumpled purple form. "I guess you forgot who's got the weapon," she told him.

"Grignr, she is not a fully-grown member of her species! You set a child out in this maze." Klorm hobbled toward the quivering purple mass.

"Humans are notorious for lies. They cannot be -"

One of the two heads swiveled toward Shellie. "You are just a child?" he asked.

Shellie felt her neck stiffening. "I'm seventeen," she said. "I'm almost grown. I mean I work at Hot Topic and I buy my own clothes, and I'm saving up for a car, and -"

"You said you had some type of ... school ... was it? And a mother, and younger sibling?"

Shellie nodded. "Mom's going to miss me so much," she said. "Maybe even Russell will -"

"This is a terrible crime," Klorm's heads said.

"I assure you, everything's in order," Grignr said.

"Do you believe him?" Shellie asked the centaur, who picked up his silver wand in one trembling mouth.

"No," the free head said. "Grignr lies."

"Oh, oh, you do not want to say that," Grignr said. "Surely you do not mean to provoke an ... incident ... between the Vrant and the Imperium. If you persist, Klorm, I shall have to take diplomatic measures!"

"The Vrant will take military measures against this place," the free head said - it almost sounded funny coming in that thin, little girl voice. But the hurt brown eyes were full of anger and menace.

Shellie figured that the centaur meant it - and that he could back it up. What would an armada with giant wands like the small one do to this dome? Shellie didn't want to think about it.

"Klorm, listen," Grignr said. "Please - don't be hasty. I'm sure a refund can be arranged. Just..."

"Shut up," the centaur said. Then the free head nodded toward Shellie. "Climb on my back, dear," it said. "The flesh is not burned there. You must ride on me past the guards. They will not harm me. They have already been imprinted with my genetic signature."

"Guards, destroy them!" Grignr cried, vibrating but only rising a quarter of an inch.

"Do not be concerned," Klorm's free head told Shellie. "He's -- "

"I know," she said. "Formerly full of hot air."

And she climbed on the centaur's back as delicately as she could, and rode past the armored clone guards on the back of the two-headed centaur.

\* \* \* \*

Outside the dome, Shellie blinked against the brilliant light of two suns.

"Oh, my God," she said. Before them lay a vast, flat plain. And at the far side of the plain lay a glittering city with spires that reached halfway up the sky. "This really is an alien planet."

"It is the second planet of the Imperium's main system," Klorm said. "Some save for a lifetime to come here on holiday."

"Holiday?" Shellie asked.

"Yes," Klorm said. "I was on holiday myself. I am a member of the

Oligarchy of Vrant. A junior member, but a member all the same."

"What does that mean?" Shellie asked.

"I am rich," Klorm said. "And powerful."

"Oh," she said.

"You destroyed two others of similar status," Klorm said. "I must credit you for being a great warrior, even if you are only a child of your species."

"Wow," Shellie said. "Like I said, I didn't really want to hurt them. They were just -"

"Trying to kill you," Klorm said. "I know."

"Klorm, why are you helping me?"

"You are just a child!" the head exclaimed. "You should never have been there. How did Grignr deceive you? Did he -"

"It was the cereal box," Shellie said. "I mean, the prize."

"The what?" Klorm asked.

They were slowly making their way across the plain, which was strewn with sharp rocks. Klorm the centaur's feet seemed solidly-hooved and strong. And the waxy white stuff over his burns seemed to have healed him.

"The cereal box. My Mom was making us eat breakfast together - me and Russell - I mean. And we were fighting over the prize in the cereal."

"The prize? Cereal is a type of food?"

Shellie nodded, then realized that the centaur's heads could not see her. She looked back and saw that the weird Willy Wonka land had been contained in a vast dome that gleamed brightly under the two suns' light.

"Yes. It's what ... it's something kids like for breakfast."

"I see," Klorm said. "And this ... prize?"

"Cereal boxes come with prizes," Shellie said. "Usually they're stupid toys for little kids."

"Ah," Klorm said. "Do continue. What was this prize you and your fellow spawn were fighting over?"

"It's still here on my finger," Shellie said, showing Klorm's second head the ring.

He pulled up short and reared back. Shellie nearly fell, struggling to right herself.

"A quantum ring!" he cried. "Aiiiiiii!"

Then he started running in circles.

"It's just a ring," Shellie said, clinging desperately to the centaur's hump.

"You're hurting my nerve endings," he cried.

"I thought that was your brain," she said.

"Yes, yes," Klorm said. "Please -"

"All right," Shellie said. "But calm down!"

"A quantum ring!" Klorm cried again. "Please, do not touch it, I beg you," he said. "It will -"

"Will what?" A mischievous thought came to Shellie, and she reached toward her ring finger.

"No! No! We will be hurled through a wormhole to an unknown dimension. Please, I beg of you -"

"All right," she said. "I promise I won't touch it. So, the ring really did open a wormhole to that place? That's what Russell said. He got the instructions. I got the ring."

"Oh, Great Maker of Vrant," Klorm said. "That gnigging gronting criminal Grignr has torn a hole in the fabric of the universe all for a few gnigging credits."

"What does that mean?" Shellie asked.

"Nothing good," Klorm said, his girlish voice flat and depressed-sounding. "But it will have to be put right before Vrant attacks the Imperium."

"You're going to attack this place?" Shellie asked.

"As soon as I get home, we're coming back with an armada," Klorm said.

"After we figure out how to fix the hole that gronting piece of gnigness made in space and time."

"If you fix the hole, can I get home?" Shellie said.

Klorm cleared one of his throats. It sounded like a kitten spitting up a hairball.

"Get home? Oh, yes! I didn't know about the quantum ring before. Of course you can get home with that."

"Thank God!" Shellie cried.

"Who is that?" Klorm asked. "I'm the one who rescued you. It is I who should be thanked."

"That's right," Shellie said, smiling to herself. She tickled the quickly-regenerating fur atop Klorm's nerve-hump. Both of his heads purred in pleasure, as he carried Shellie toward the shining city.

\* \* \* \*

"Klorm, are you really a prince?" Shellie asked. "I've never met a prince before."

"Well, perhaps," Klorm said. "I am technically a junior oligarch. Of the Oligarchy of Vrant."

"Ah," Shellie said. "That's like a prince though, huh?"

Klorm swiveled his free head and nodded it. "It is a position of privilege and honor."

"In a weird way," Shellie said, "This is kind of exciting."

They had already crossed three quarters of the plain, and the city now loomed almost like a wall of shining glass spires that filled a third of the sky. Shellie couldn't even guess how many people - no, she thought - creatures or aliens - lived there. It made New York look like some little town out in the middle of West Texas.

"How many people - um - well, aliens live there?" she asked Klorm.

"Eight billion," Klorm said. "Citizens. There are about twice that who aren't citizens."

"That's, uh -- " Shellie said. "More than ever lived on the Earth."

"Well, you are from an unenhanced, unimproved segment of the galaxy," Klorm said. "No offense," he added a moment later.

"How many planets are there, Klorm?" she asked.

"No one knows," he said. "But there are twenty-thousand worlds that are part of the civilized Colloquium. Although I must say now that the Imperium will probably be leaving the Colloquium. Morgh and Diana were also very high-placed from their worlds. Their people will also protest and perhaps join us in our assault."

"Wow," Shellie said. "You mean the golden lady - the one that -"

"Yes," Klorm said. "Morgh was the one with the gray skin and -"

"Ugly face," Shellie said. "I was calling him Mister Disgusting." Shellie thought of those sad blue eyes and felt very sorry once more. No matter how mean he was, that ugly creature had been tricked, just like Klorm and the woman. They'd all been tricked.

"That's all right," Klorm said. "I didn't like him much, either. Gnignellians are savage."

"Yeah," Shellie said.

"But even so," Klorm said. "They would not approve of this, and all worlds will protest ripping a hole in time and space just for the purpose of -"

"Klorm!" Shellie cried. "Something's -"

All around them, the ground had begun to boil, almost as if it was a giant pot of oatmeal instead of red rock and sand.

"Gronting gnigg!" Klorm cried, along with several other complex expressions that Shellie really couldn't think how to duplicate.

"What's happening?" she asked.

"The hole!" Klorm cried. Shellie looked back toward the distant glass dome - or, she saw with a terrible sinking feeling - where it had been. It was gone, and there was an awful, swirling black place where it had been.

"So much for Plumpy," she said.

"I can't -" Klorm said. He was swaying back and forth. Shellie looked down in horror to see that the very sand and rocks were being sucked from underneath them, and a terrible howling wind had begun. Sand was pitting her face, and Klorm was struggling onward, but -

"Klorm!" she cried.

"I can't make it much farther," Klorm said.

"I can tell," she said. "That's a - like a black hole, isn't it?"

"It's a wormhole in the process of enlarging itself," Klorm said.

"There's nothing we can do. I mean, if we could get to a decent lab, look at how they calibrated that quantum ring - but this is just -"

Klorm fell flat on his belly, his heads writhing. Shelly nearly flew off, but somehow kept hold of his hump. He cried in pain, and she grabbed the nearest neck.

"Can't - breathe -" he said.

"I'm sure," she whispered. She could feel the whole surface of the planet being sucked away, and a horrible, draining cold unlike anything she'd ever felt before.

"I'm going to do what I did the first time," she told Klorm.

"No!" he cried. "You don't know what will happen. I mean, it could trigger a meeting of matter and anti-matter and we could destroy this whole quadrant. That ring is -"

"Russell said twist it three times clockwise. And I was just playing with it, and I guess that's what I did."

"Shellie, do not!" Klorm cried.

Shellie's exposed back felt like it was freezing into ice chunks, and the world was spinning. Sand was etching deep grooves into her face. Surely they had only seconds before they joined the former Plumpy and his dome-kingdom in whatever that wormhole was leading to -

Only trouble was, Shellie simply could not remember which way was clockwise, and which way was -

She just twisted the ring, three times, as fast as she could.

\* \* \* \*

Russell screamed like a girl.

"Omigod! Omigod! Omigod!"

"Just don't pee your pants," Shellie snapped, as soon as her mouth turned from silver to normal flesh and she could move.

Klorm's heads shuddered and slipped from liquid silver to their former piebald, white-wax coated selves. The dark, soft brown eyes blinked around at Shellie's kitchen, taking in the spilled cereal and milk, the discarded prize wrappers, and the tiny square instruction book.

"You must be the stable-mate to Shellie," he said.

"A talking two-headed horse that sounds like Mary Kate and Ashley Olson!" Russell shrieked.

So then of course he peed his pants.

"Are you a two-headed camel?" Russell asked.

"You did pee your pants," Shellie said in a disgusted tone. "You are so embarrassing, Russell."

Russell looked down, then back up at Shellie and Klorm. His knees were actually knocking together. She almost felt sorry for him.

"This is Klorm," Shellie said. "He's an alien prince and he rescued me."

"Omigod, omigod, omigod," Russell said. "I have to call Mom. Shellie, look at your arm! Your face is all dirty! And you're shirt's just like hanging -- "

So finally he'd noticed that something had happened to her. "Don't you dare," Shellie snapped. "I've just gone through more adventure than in seventy-five Gundam shows, and you're going to clean up that cereal mess and listen to what Klorm and I have to say."

Russell's metal-filled mouth worked silently as he gaped at Klorm, and

finally, he said, "Okay, sis."

"The sponge is by the sink, Russell," Shellie said watching him grope around the kitchen. "You'd know that if you didn't expect me and Mom to wait on you like you were a cripple."

"What is cripple?" Klorm asked.

"A person who's - uh - who has some kind of birth defect. Who isn't physically able to take care of himself," Shellie told Klorm.

"Ah," Klorm said. "I forget all the misfortunes that happen on unimproved worlds."

He looked toward Russell. "He appears to have voided some type of offensive fluid. Is this common among younger stable-mates? Sometimes it happens on Vrant. Only with the very young, though."

"He peed his pants," Shellie told him. "I guess that could be called voiding offensive fluid."

"Shut up, Shellie! You're the one who brought an alien freak back home."

"Russell," Shellie snapped, "I'm going to say this once. Klorm isn't an alien freak. He's my friend, and he saved my life."

"And your stable-mate also spared my life," Klorm said. "She is very mature and caring for a young creature from an unimproved, primitive planet."

"Thank you," Shellie said, stroking Klorm's hump. Again, he purred.

"Oh, Jesus," Russell said, finally finding the sponge.

"Who is Jesus?" Klorm asked.

"We never got to God earlier," Shellie told Klorm. "I'll tell you about both on the way to the mall."

"The social gathering place you spoke of?" Klorm asked. "Shellie, we must work to get me back to Vrant. I feel that the Imperium's second planet is gone by now, and perhaps their whole system, but the quantum ring appears to work somewhat. If I can find a scientific or research center on this planet, perhaps we can configure the ring to return me to my home planet."

"There's the instruction booklet right there," Shellie said.

"That's mine!" Russell cried, putting his hand over the tiny square.

"Russell!"

"Fair's fair," he said. "You got the ring, and I get the instructions."

"Russell, will you wake up?" Shellie said. "This is a real alien. It's not a presto-chango robot warrior or a cartoon. And he deserves to get home, same way as I did."

"Yes, young stable-mate. I would like to return to my fields and palaces."

"Palaces?" Shellie asked.

Klorm's heads nodded. "I have seven," he said.

"Wow," she said. "Wait until my friends hear this!"

"It's not real," Russell said. "Maybe I'll just throw the instructions down the disposal."

"Russell, I'm going to kill you," Shellie said.

"She means it," Klorm said. "I've seen her with my own four eyes."

"Oh, my God," Russell said. The instructions were between his fingers.

"Russell, Klorm has a weapon that will melt down every Gundam you have. He can vaporize the T.V. He can vaporize the entire house!"

This was not precisely true, as both Klorm and Shellie had lost their weapons back on the long-gone plain when the wormhole had started pulling them in.

"The younger should respect the elder," Klorm said.

"What do you know?" Russell said. "I should just -" and he started toward the sink, holding out the booklet.

"Russell Truro!" Shellie cried, leaping off Klorm's back and grabbing Russell's arm before he got two steps from the table.

She grabbed the booklet and it tore neatly in half.

"Oh, Russell," she said.

"That is all right," Klorm said. "I am sure we can put the halves back



together."

Russell shouted in despair as one of Klorm's heads snaked over and snatched the remaining half from his fingers.

"You are not clean," Klorm said in a disapproving tone as his other head sniffed and its nose wrinkled.

"Maybe he'll listen to you," Shellie said. "He sure won't listen to me or Mom."

"I took a shower Tuesday," Russell said.

"Oh, my God," Shellie said. "\_Which\_ Tuesday?"

Klorm took the other half of the booklet in his second mouth and did something so quickly that Shellie couldn't make out exactly what happened. Moments later, the booklet was whole again. Klorm extended his head, and she took it from his mouth.

"Now, let's see," she said, flipping the tiny pages. It looked just like a game handbook, just like any little piece of junk that came in a cereal box.

"Imperium Wormhole Key Ring," she read. But it was impossible to decipher the pictured instructions. Obviously dyslexic alien creatures had drawn them. "Turn three times clockwise," she continued.

"What is clockwise?" Klorm asked.

"A clock is something we use to tell time," Shellie said.

"You are so stupid, Shellie," Russell whined.

"You know what?" Shellie asked her brother. "When I was trapped in that alien death match, I was actually crying because I thought I'd never get home to see Mom again. Or you, Russell."

"Alien death match?" he asked.

"Yes, the Imperium criminal Grignr tricked her into using this quantum ring, which was placed illegally in your food container, mimicking the children's prizes you were obviously accustomed to fighting over," Klorm said. "And he tricked me and two other hunters who have now joined their maker into thinking she was a dangerous, wild and vicious creature deserving of being hunted down and killed."

"Huh?" Russell said. "What's he talking about?"

"Grignr was an evil alien who looked just like Plumpy in Candy Land. He's dead now," Shellie said.

Russell blinked uncomprehendingly, looking between Shellie and Klorm.

"That's a clock," Shellie said, pointing out the green daisy-shaped kitchen clock to Klorm.

"Ah," Klorm said. "I had almost forgotten that such devices were part of primitive, unimproved cultures' iconography."

"Klorm," Shellie said. "I love you, but could you be a little less denigrating of Earth? It is my home, after all."

Klorm nodded both heads. "I am sorry, Shellie," he said. "If you are confused about the instructions, perhaps you should closely observe the movement of the longer time-measuring element of that device."

"The second hand?" Shellie asked.

"What else could it be, dimbo!" Russell cried.

"Shut up!" Shellie cried. But she watched the second hand as it moved around the clock.

"But I twist the ring clockwise as it faces me, or as the ring faces outward?" she wondered aloud.

"Perhaps we should reflect on this for a time," Klorm said. "You are the one who used the ring before, not me," he added.

Shellie nodded. "You could give me a ride down to the mall," she said. "I can think about it on the way. There's a really big clock there, too."

"That clock's been broken for three years, Shellie," Russell said.

"You can come too if you want," Shellie said, giving Russell the look that meant "shut up and shut up now."

"But -" Russell said, looking down at his pants.

"You can change and take a shower," Shellie said. "We'll wait. That is

- if you want to go."

Klorm and Shellie waited. For some reason, Shellie didn't care how she looked. After a moment, Klorm leaned down and cleaned the spilled cereal and milk from the table with both of his mouths.

"Delicious!" he cried. "If you see that ... clock ... will it assist you?"

Shellie nodded. "I think so," she said.

"And then we can use the instructions and you may transport me home to Vrant? I will show you my castles, one by one."

"That sounds incredible," Shellie said, climbing once more on Klorm's back and scratching his hump.

Russell started to climb on too, but Shellie got him to back off with a single glance.

"He's been hurt," she said. "He can't carry both of use."

"He sounds like a little girl," Russell said. "How do you know he's a he?"

"Girls know, Wuss-ill," she said as they left the house and started down the sidewalk.

"Wait until Karin and Katrina get a look at you," Shellie said.

"These are other stable-mates?" Klorm asked.

"They're her girlfriends," Russell said as he walked glumly behind.

"They're really stupid twins with hardly a brain between them."

"Two? One brain?" Klorm asked.

"Don't get any ideas," Shellie said. "You're my Vrant prince." But she was smiling.

As they rounded the corner from Maple to Main street, the postal carrier came by in her little jeep. And swerved all the way over the curb and into the corner house's mailbox.

And that was when Shellie knew for sure it had been no dream.

"Russell," she said, leaning over Klorm's broad, piebald back. "Don't pee your pants. Okay?"

"Shut up," he told her.

"Is this better than Gundam or what?" she chortled. "I don't even like those type of shows!"

"What is Gundam?" Klorm asked.

"Don't get him started -" Shellie said.

But it was another fifteen blocks to the mall. And Klorm was a curious creature.

As they got to the mall, Russell reached up and took Shellie's hand to help her down.

"I'm glad you're home," he said.

At first, she was so surprised she couldn't speak. "Me, too," she said at last.

"You gonna tell Mom?" Russell asked. "I mean, the kitchen is still a mess and -"

"Are you nuts?" she said. "What am I supposed to say to her?" Russell was the most aggravating lower form of life known to man. But now she'd seen a lot of life never known to man, and there were a lot worse things. Shellie thought about that. And for some reason, that was when she really started crying.

\* \* \* \*

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Illiteracy: a worldwide tragedy. They say a mind is a terrible thing to waste, and George Pickett, student killer, is about to discover just how vital those basic reading and writing skills are in Mike Arnzen's "Flunking the Assassin." George has everything it takes to be a top-notch killer ... except a clue!\_

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\*Flunking the Assassin\*

\*By Michael A. Arnzen\*

George Pickett knew he was in trouble the second he stepped into the principal's office and saw the black body bag on the floor. At first he thought it was laid out for him to climb into and prepare to die. But when he sat down in the folding chair that Principal Conte's gorgeous secretary thankfully herded him to, he saw the black plastic sheet was puffed around the shape of a body. When the secretary pivoted on her heel and said, "Dr. Conte will join you shortly," the bag crackled on the floor and he heard spilling fluids hitting plastic, like heavy rain on an umbrella's skin. George figured the body must have been a student's very recent project, still draining in its death sack. If he'd learned anything from post-mortem anatomy class, it was that the body was a leaky gas bag after it gave up its hold on life -- as well as its bladder.

Alone in the room with the body, George took out an apple he had brought for the principal and placed it on his desk. His friend Tommy had told him that Conte was a sucker for anything that made the assassin school feel like a regular one. That explained, too, why all the rooms had old-fashioned blackboards instead of digital screens and uncomfortable right-handed desks instead of plush office chairs at computer terminals.

He scanned the principal's wall, admiring the man's character. Since The Compound was a former holding prison, the walls of the every classroom and office in the complex were made of flat gray concrete, but Conte decorated his office to make it appear not only formal, but also somewhat inviting. Degrees in Political Science and History from Ivy League colleges were arranged in fine frames below a larger certificate from some governmental organization that George assumed was the Department of Defense or the CIA. There were medals of warfare plunked into a black velvet display box, hanging formally on the wall beside a nicely framed silhouette target with a perfect grouping of three holes where its forehead would have been. On another wall -- the one over the drizzling body bag -- portraits of famous presidents were arranged in a respectful manner: Lincoln, Kennedy, some others he only vaguely recognized from his Classics class. All of them successful hits. George could tell that Principal Conte knew the business and more: he obviously loved his job and respected the work of others. He was an old school assassin, a classicist, a scholar-practitioner in every sense.

On the wall behind George's head, bullet holes chipped into the concrete.

Conte entered the room with little fanfare and George squirmed in his chair. He was a little afraid of the man, whose fine business suit, gold watch, and perfectly slick comb-over didn't hide the fact that he was as large and assertive as a professional wrestler. It also didn't help matters that Conte was rumored to have a body count of 122 to his name. George wasn't sure how many of those were politicians or insurgents, and how many were just poor students like himself.

Conte made his way around his large desk and sat down, refusing to make eye contact, pouring over some files and papers on his table instead. George spotted his name typed on the tab of a manila folder. Conte licked his fingers and turned pages, hemming and hawing and breathing noisily through his large nostrils for an excruciating three minutes before he finally broke the silence. "I assume you know why you're here, Pickett?"

"No, sir."

He looked up from his paperwork, eyebrow arched. His nose flared with exasperation as he sighed air through the large nostrils. "Not a clue?"

The chair underneath George's butt was getting hot and uncomfortable. He scanned the principal's diplomas, as if looking for the reason there. "I mean, I know I haven't been getting A's on all my tests or anything, but it's not like I skip classes or..."

"Not getting A's? It's more like you haven't been getting D's, let alone B's and C's, Mr. Pickett." Conte's face remained fixed in the same confrontational position, as if his head were a chiseled bust sticking out from a business suit. "You're flunking. And that's why you're here."

George tried to swallow but a knot of frustration seemed stuck in his larynx and he actually shook his head to try to force it down. He knew Conte was watching this occur, and thus his face flushed with bloody embarrassment as his renegade throat almost choked off his oxygen.

Conte must have understood this, because he finally broke his stare and leaned back in his chair as though permitting the boy to finally get some air. His voice warmed up. "Now I know you've been working very hard, George. Your teachers all tell me that you actually try to succeed. Indeed, one of them told me that they think you are trying too hard. It's as though your over-eagerness to excel often gets in the way of your success." He paused. "That and your difficulties reading and writing. At first I thought your upbringing in the public schools was to blame. But now I suspect you might have a learning disability ... which is something we're unable to repair at The Compound."

George found that if he politely coughed, he could clear his airway of anxiety and so he did so and tried to speak, chewing on a loogie. "Yes sir, I do have some trouble reading and spelling. But I..." he swallowed the phlegm and then coughed it back up. "I do try hard and I want to be the best killer this school has ever seen."

Conte's cheeks pulled up into a smile that couldn't hide his patronizing voice: "Yes, yes. I understand and I appreciate your drive and commitment to the art of murder very much. But your language skills remain a serious problem." Conte licked his fingers and scanned the file before him. "Last year you misunderstood the poison label and only gave your term project a modicum of brain damage instead of total brain death. Maiming is unacceptable, you know that, right?"

He looked up with his eyes alone, his face still directed at the paperwork. He didn't wait for George's answer to dive his eyes back into the file again. "The year before that, you even misread a dossier and took out the wrong person!" Conte slapped the desktop. Hard. "I'm sorry, Pickett, but an illiterate assassin is a dangerous one, not only to himself but also to society. We perform a service here. We stop problems from getting worse. Putting people like you out on the job only worsens things. We can't afford to make mistakes. We could have stopped the Columbine massacre weeks before it ever took place, for example, but one of our operatives misread an e-mail message and didn't do his job on time. If only he was better at reading, he wouldn't have ended up with his brains splattered in the library and his weapon in those raving mad students' hands!"

Conte's shoulders slumped. George could tell he felt responsible for that whole killing spree, which his operative had tried to prevent.

"Besides," he added, "Your reputation would just embarrass The Compound."

George made a very shy cough. "I think I'm getting better and better at it, though, Dr. Conte, I really am. You should have seen my term project this year. A real winner. I'm sure I'll pull my grades up with this one."

Conte's eyebrow leapt up again. "You mean your assignment..." he looked down into Pickett's file. "Um, Mr. Riggle? The serial rapist?"

"Oh you've heard about my work! Yes, I took him out in two hacks."

"I ... wait." He grimaced. "Hacks?"

"Yeah!" George grinned, misunderstanding Conte's expression. "I aborted him. I put a lot of thought into this one, sir. This year I decided to make the abortion saw my signature weapon, and I use...."

"Abortion saw? What on earth?"

"Yeah, the abortion saw. Never heard of it?"

"No."

"That surprises me! Let me show you." George eagerly dug into his duffle bag, pushing aside an anatomy textbook he'd never opened and uncovering his weapon of choice. He withdrew something resembling a giant's pocketknife: a hard plastic shell the size of his forearm housed a long blade whose dulled pull edge peeked out from the top. Excited that his weapon was making an

impression on the principal, George made a move to open it. But he knew to be very, very careful.

"Give me that blade, son." Conte held his arm down across the table, palm up. Baring his wrist like that proved to George that the principal was not afraid of him at all. Otherwise, he might have tried to get away. George obeyed, handing over the saw.

"Pickett, you are an idiot. This," Conte said, opening up the long handled saw and inspecting its chunky-toothed edge, "is called a tree saw, Pickett. And you didn't do a very good job of cleaning it up, either. There's too much meat still caught in its teeth." He flicked some of it out with a finger and sniffed it.

"Tree saw? The sign at the hardware store said it was for abortionists!"

Conte looked him in the eye. "Arborists. It's an arborist's knife."

George scrunched his nose in perplexity.

"Never mind. That's all the proof I need of your illiteracy. I'll be keeping this." Conte sat up and peered down over the edge of his desk. "And be so kind as to give me your duffel. Gina should have known better than to let you in here armed."

"Yes, sir." George handed over his bag, feeling guilty for getting the secretary in trouble. "She did pat me down, if that makes any difference."

Conte confirmed this with a quick exchange over his intercom. Then he told Gina he wanted to speak with her later. The irked principal then closed his eyes and sighed.

"As I was saying, sir, you should have seen my work with that abor ... tree saw on my target. I made Mr. Riggle wriggle all right. Just like a worm on a hook. And he sure looked like a worm, wriggling around on the carpet after I sawed all his limbs off. I mean his real limbs, of course, not his trees. One of them was real hard to do. Had to twist it around like six times to pull out its grizzle, and, well, anyway..."

Conte held up a hand. "Please, please."

George clamped up. He wondered how many voiceboxes those big palms had squeezed silent.

"I know quite a bit about your project already, Pickett." Conte's hands fell to one side together, as though ushering George's attention -- short as it was -- to the body bag on the floor. "Mr. Riggle is right here beside us."

The bag moved, subtly, as it had when he'd sat down. Only this time, George instinctively pushed back in his chair, realizing that the shape under the plastic wasn't quite dead.

"He's not..."

"No," Conte said, cocking his head to one side. "And he must be suffering terribly because of your botched attempt."

"But he was out cold when I cut off his..."

Conte motioned silence with his hands again. "Poetic justice can only get in the way of a good clean kill sometimes, Pickett. In fact, history is riddled with botched jobs because the assassin got clever instead of careful. Haven't you learned anything during your many residencies here?"

George was speechless. The bag made another crackling sound. His victim seemed to be getting more and more agitated.

Conte cited The Compound's familiar mantra from so many physical training exercises and classroom briefings: "'Kill. Cover up. Get away clean.' It's not too difficult to pull off once you have the basic skills, son." Conte sighed. "But you got creative. And that meant you got sloppy."

"Don't some people deserve to suffer?"

He crossed his arms menacingly. "You don't get to make such judgments. And you have to earn the right, Pickett, to be creative. You've got to follow orders and do what you're told, otherwise no one will trust you, let alone hire you if you decide to go free agent some day. It's an old cliché in many professions: 'You've got to play by the rules long before you're allowed to break them.'" Conte shook his head. "I know you mean well, but I'm afraid

you're just too creative, too much of a loose cannon. You've got grandiose ideas, kid, and worse than that, you lack the talent to perform even the basics adequately." He steepled his fingers over the bridge of his nose. "You've made far too many mistakes already. You're virtually illiterate." He shook his head and then looked George dead in the eye. "I'm afraid we're going to have to terminate you."

George couldn't believe this was happening. And so quickly. He knew what Conte meant by 'terminate.' "But..."

"No options remain, I'm afraid. It's already decided." Conte pulled out a desk drawer, licked his fingertips, and began paging through manila tabs. When he found what he was looking for, he withdrew a file and flopped it open on his desk in one swooping move. Then he tongued his fingers again as he riffled the forms it contained, searching for the proper piece of paper. "Here it is," he finally said, rolling his saliva shiny fingers as though forming a spitball and then pulling a sheet out from the stack. "The expulsion contract."

George's chin dropped down, heavy with defeat. He stared at the cracks in the concrete floor as Conte's pen made all sorts of scribbling noises. He wondered what sort of termination he was facing. Conte was rumored to have killed 122 men and George was going to be 123, that much was certain. The question was: how would he die? After all, Conte himself had "earned the right" to be creative, in his own words. And the implications of this were infinite.

He looked up and into his large face. Begging for mercy. That was his only option. "Please Dr. Conte! Don't hurt me!"

The principal cocked his eyebrow and licked his lips. "Son, you've hurt yourself far more than I ever could. It will all be over soon enough."

George couldn't hold back his terror. He put his face in his hands and bawled.

Distantly, he heard Conte buzz his secretary who entered the room and handed him a handkerchief for his tears.

She gently placed her hand on his shoulder. "No, dear. For your eyes."

It was a blindfold. He looked up at Conte, who was loading the opened hasp of a revolver. Conte caught George's disbelieving eye and blinked back, catlike, nodding in assent. George knew what he had to do. He put the blindfold on. It was hot and wet with his own tears. He sought comfort in the darkness and tried to conjure all the memories he could before....

The gunfire jolted him and his yelp seemed louder in his ears than the explosion of the barrel. It echoed off the concrete until he realized: he was not hit.

Still: heat spread between his legs. He next discovered that living bodies are also leaky gas bags that easily give up their hold on their bladder, just like the recently departed.

"See how simple a gun is? Mr. Riggle is now a stain on my floor that Gina will simply have to clean up before she leaves today. Nothing more."

George shifted in his seat. "No, sir, I can't see."

"Ah, yes, the blindfold. Good boy." George could tell that Conte's large body was very close to him now. "Put out your hand."

George didn't move.

"Come now," Conte tapped the hot barrel of his gun against George's temple. "Do as I tell you. Put it out, palm up." Sickly, Conte seemed to be stifling laughter. "Don't make me tell you again." He chuckled to himself.

George, whose soiled shorts were getting very uncomfortable, obeyed, not getting the joke.

"Here." He felt something like a baseball being placed in his hand. "I want you to balance that on your head."

George followed orders, trying to get the thing to stay in place. This required stiffening his neck, which meant concentrating, which meant the baseball thing kept rolling around on his head. Then he felt the stem of the object and realized what was happening.

"I get it now. You're going to pull a William Tell number on me."

"I'd say it's more of a William S. Burroughs number, but, yes, I see you have learned a thing or two from your classes after all. I'm going to have some target practice with that apple you put on my desk earlier. And you better hope I give you an applesauce shampoo."

"But sir!"

"Shut up and balance that damned thing while I get properly positioned."

He knew that with all of Conte's sniper experience, he had a good chance of surviving this terrifying act of target practice. He strained to keep his neck muscles flexed. He figured that if Conte missed, the tension would somehow help him die more quickly.

"Good boy. Now, hold on..." His voice sounded distant, further than behind his desk. As though he were speaking to someone in another room. "Ready?"

"No sir. Yes sir." George felt the tears mopping the fabric around his eye sockets. "Just please make it quick, sir."

He heard Conte whistle a line from the William Tell Overture in response. Then there was the sound of him burrowing around in his wooden desk drawer for something.

"Did you think," Conte soon asked, his voice still sounding distant, "that I would have actually eaten that stupid apple you gave me? Obviously you would try to poison me with it. I've been teaching assassins for far too long to fall for that one."

"But..."

"Hold still, boy." The metallic click of the pistol cocking its hammer distinctly echoed off the concrete walls. "You don't want to go moving around when I'm aiming with a mirror for an over-the-shoulder shot over here."

George began uncontrollably shuddering. The apple fell down onto his lap.

Conte was up and into his face in a heartbeat: "Didn't I ask you to hold still, dammit? Can't you do anything right, Pickett? I almost blew your head off. Now pick it up and put it back on your head. Hold it in place there, like a football kicker, if you have to. I don't care."

George did as told. He held it for a while. But then he let it go, not wanting to lose a hand in the process.

He thought Conte had backed away to take aim, but his breath was suddenly hot on his ear, whispering maniacally. "You are going to learn a lesson about creativity, Pickett. What do you want me to do right now? Shoot the apple and not shoot you, correct?"

George blinked and whispered yes.

Conte pressed the pistol into the soft underbelly of George's chin. "But what if I were like you and got creative and clever and decided I wanted to try to shoot the apple through your head this way instead?" He pressed the tip of the gun up so that the gunsight felt like it was cutting into his lower jaw. Then he pulled it away and placed the gun beside George's left eye. "Or what if I wanted to try to ricochet the bullet inside your skull and hit the apple that way? See how creativity can work against you, Pickett? Understand now?"

George said he did. He swore to never think up anything on his own ever again.

Conte withdrew, his heat trailing behind him. George heard him pick up the mirror and breathe heavily through his nose. He waited for his end to come, praying that Conte wasn't getting any more bright ideas as he tried his over-the-shoulder shot.

The pistol popped and something dropped. It took George a moment to sort through the ringing in his ears and the trickle of juice down his temple to realize it was a chunk of apple and not his skullcap.

Conte laughed. Then he told George to remove his blindfold.

"Perfectly cored it," he said to himself, returning to his seat.

George saw yellow gunk on his arm and couldn't help but think of brains. His legs were soaked with urine. His face damp with tears. He felt humiliated, but happy to be alive. "Thank you, sir," he finally said, because it was all he knew to say. "Thank you so much."

Conte turned dead serious. "I spared you just now, boy. But you're still expelled and I never want to see your illiterate face near this place again."

George couldn't believe what he was hearing. He had heard that all students who were expelled from The Compound became targets for the following classes, or worse. "But I thought people who flunked out..."

"I know what you think. And if it weren't for a waiver that your parents signed when you came here -- something, unfortunately, we have to offer any new recruit under 21 years of age -- then you'd be zipped right up inside that bag with your buddy Mr. Riggle right now. But instead I have to let you go. It's government policy, dammit. But before I let you leave us, I want you to get one more thing straight. It's a lesson you better learn because if you don't, you're a corpse. Are you still paying attention, Pickett?"

George looked up and nodded.

"The Compound won't ever spare you again if you ever decided to turn on us, in any way. So don't you think about saying one word to the media. And don't even dream of trying to get revenge. Your assassin days are hereby over."

George understood. He'd taken the life of a former flunky himself -- the mix-up with the poison label that led to brain damage. He learned a lot about poisons in detention afterward. And Conte had punished him by making him the "voluntary" test subject in a Torture and Confession class. George knew full well how far The Compound could go.

Satisfied, Conte buzzed his secretary on his intercom again. His voice was tired. "Okay, Gina, you can send in the parents now." He looked exhausted as he sat hunched over his desk, waiting for their arrival.

When his mother and father entered the room, George ran into his mother's arms. He looked over at his father in passing. His father's brow was knotted with either concern or shame or worry. Maybe he saw the body bag on the floor or the splattered apple guts on the wall. Or maybe, George thought, it was just the horrible smell of the place.

"He's all yours now, Mr. and Mrs. Pickett." Conte licked his fingertips, then tore a carbon off the expulsion forms he'd filled out and signed. "This is your copy, and..." he engaged in more officious spit-licking and paper-riffling, "...here's a copy of the waiver you signed back when you enrolled your son in our Compound."

His father nodded and took hold of the forms. "Are you sure there's nothing else he can do to prove his academic talents or abilities? No remedial program or..."

"I'm sorry Mr. Pickett," Conte said, clasping his hands as if in prayer. "But your son simply can't read and write. We've tried everything we could. My hands are tied."

His father nodded solemnly. George didn't care about any of this anymore. "Can we please go now?" he pleaded with Conte.

"Of course. Oh, and Mr. Pickett."

His father turned around. "Yes?"

"You might be needing this." Conte handed him the pistol. "See Gina about ammunition and sanctioned burial places for family-designed hits." He looked up and made one last bit of eye contact with George before turning back to other matters on his desk. "Don't get creative."

But before they were out the door, Conte slumped to the floor, sprawling beside the body bag.

His father ran over and checked his pulse. Gina was on the phone to the medic in no time, but Conte was dead by the time the nurses got there.

George couldn't believe it. But when he retrieved his duffle bag, he



recalled the poison he'd routinely rubbed into his saw blade. The stuff Conte must have contacted when he picked the meat out of the blade. He hadn't understood why Mr. Riggle hadn't died from the poison, but then again, Mr. Riggle hadn't licked it over and over like Conte had whenever he worked with paper.

"Not bad," his father said, rubbing his hair as they made their way to the car. "Not bad at all, my son!"

His mother clutched him. "I knew this boy was as smart as he is handsome. Pah! Who says you have to be a good at readin' and writin' to be any good at assassinin'? Our boy don't need no diploma."

His father handed him Conte's gun. "You earned the right," he said, wiping away a tear of pride. "It's all yours, son."

George uncontrollably grinned. "Thanks, Mom. And Dad." He held his mother's hand tightly with a free hand. "We're gonna be well taken care of. 'Cuz I've got me some grandigrose plans," he said, borrowing and bastardizing Conte's words, not knowing what they meant. But he knew that they made him sound smart enough to have planned anything at all to begin with. "Gran-dee-gross, I say." His smile was as toothy and long as the poisonous blade on his saw.

\* \* \* \*

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\_Coby Barnes and his friends shot up McKinley High just like Harris and Klebold at Columbine. To Coby, it was all a game - a vicious game of revenge on the kids who teased and mocked him. Now, Coby and his friends find out just what kind of game they were really playing in Lisa Silverthorne's unforgettable story, "Safe as the Dark."\_

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\*Safe as the Dark\*

\*By Lisa Silverthorne\*

Scalding light hung at the edge of his vision. Coby Barnes blinked and the world careened toward him from the dark behind his eyes. For a moment, he didn't feel his arms, didn't feel his legs, or even the self-inflicted gunshot wound to his head.

His chest heaved with breath and it startled him. He remembered the shotgun blast and taking his last breath. Warm, sticky blood clung to the side of his face. He tried to feel his hands, wondering if he still clutched the shotgun, but couldn't. Gasping, he opened his eyes. He looked past the grim faces hovering over him and realized he was still at the school. But this hadn't been part of the game. Five body bags -- his former classmates -- slipped past as they laid him on a gurney. Then it hit him. He was still alive.

He glanced to his side and saw the other two boys who'd come inside with him. A bloodied sheet covered Rick's body, the red blotch widening. Rick's stiff, bloody hand clutched the sawed off shotgun that lay beside him. Rick looked like the dead guys in his Target Assault game. Or one of those FirstLook clips on the net where they showed crime scenes live and unedited. Rick would have liked that. Turner lay beside Rick, an IV in his arm.

"We got them before they could get us, Coby," said Turner, grinning. "Said they hated us, that we didn't belong in McKinley High. Now, who doesn't belong here." A deep laugh rattled through Turner's chest, but it died on his lips.

A police officer roughly carted Turner toward the speck of light at the end of the dark hallway.

Another body bag slipped past. Across from him, a woman hugged the wall and sobbed. Footsteps ticked down the hallway. The cloying scent of stale blood mixed with soured sweat and sulfur. In the distance, a voice wailed. Policemen corded off hallways and led huddles of people out of the school.

Coby hadn't expected to survive the assault. Turner had planned it for months, how they'd die at the end and all. They'd practiced and everything. This wasn't supposed to happen. The rage swelled in his chest, making his

fists ache to hit something.

A pale police officer snapped a handcuff around Coby's wrist and attached the other end to the gurney. Maybe now people wouldn't mess with him? Maybe now they'd see that he wouldn't take their insults?

A paramedic in light blue scrubs leaned over him, a gold nameplate pinned to his white lab coat: Plexus Juvenile Correctional Facility. The man wore gold-rimmed glasses and looked about thirty.

"Coby Barnes," spoke the police officer beside him. "You are charged in the shooting deaths of six McKinley High School students." The police officer mumbled off a list of his rights. "You are remanded to the Plexus Juvenile Correctional Facility where you will remain until your trial date is set."

Something pressed into the crook of his arm and things got fuzzy.

A sheet was thrown across him as the gurney lurched forward and squeaked toward the speck of light.

\* \* \* \*

Coby regained consciousness in a police van en-route to the Plexus Juvenile Correctional Facility along with his buddies, Turner and Rick. He had no idea how much time had passed, but the wound on his head had been stitched up and no longer hurt. Turner sat beside him, smug as he fingered his dirty blond goatee. His stringy blond hair, two shades lighter than his goatee, hung in his eyes, but in those eyes, Coby saw that familiar "we showed those bastards" look. Rick sat on the other side of Turner, grinning, his curly black hair smashed against his head. He was tall and looked twenty pounds underweight.

"It was just like Target Assault, wasn't it, Coby?" Turner said, grinning at him from across the dim-lit van.

Coby nodded. "Yeah, Turner. It was just like you said."

"Remember, in the game, when our squad's in the caverns. You and me and Rick gunning for our targets."

"I always get killed there," Rick said with a sigh. "I never could get through there without dying."

Turner's gaze centered on Coby. "Remember, Coby? Just you and me in the cavern, watching each other's backs and fragging anything that moved. We made a good team, you and me."

"Yeah, we made a good team," said Coby with a smile. Then he gazed down at the chains and it all felt confused somehow. He sighed, trying to separate the cavern's deathmatch with the school shooting, but they overlapped in his head. Turner kept talking, describing other parts of Target Assault. Coby settled back in the van and listened. It took his mind off where they were headed.

Coby had expected an isolated complex somewhere, but the van drove north toward Chicago. As they approached the south side with its abandoned factories and tall, crumbling brick buildings, Coby got nervous. The decaying buildings covered miles of abandoned city blocks, sidewalks cracked and windows smashed. The smell of burnt rubber and sewage hung in the air, making Coby gag. In his government studies class, Coby remembered some ozone or air pollution act where the government closed a bunch of factories, leaving big sections of city blocks empty.

The van turned a corner and stopped in front of a massive, steel gate. One of the officers leaned out the van window and slid an access card through a reader near the gate. The street vibrated as the gate hummed open and the van slipped inside.

Coby, Turner, and Rick, shackled in wrist and ankle chains, were herded out of the van and into a small room. One of the officers typed in some codes on a recessed panel on the wall. The wall slid open, revealing a long hallway. Coby's chains clacked down the long hallway, lights snapping on every few feet. His breath quickened and he glanced over at Turner. The sneer had slid from his face.

"You know anything about this place, Coby?" Turner demanded.

Coby shook his head. "I never heard of it."

Turner always had to be in charge. He always had an opinion, too and a

reason for doing anything. Coby, Turner, and Rick had played Target Assault over the net for years, so he was used to Turner's style. They'd always hung around together, smoking on the school's loading dock behind the cafeteria. That's where all the outsiders hung out, the only place in school where they could be themselves and not be ridiculed. He'd met Turner and Rick there. Shortly after, they started playing Target Assault.

In their senior year, Turner wanted to make things special. That's when he came up with the school version of the game. They'd play the kamikaze deathmatch and pay those snobby little bastards back for treating them like scum.

"This place looks like the opening screen for kamikaze deathmatch," Turner said, laughing.

It did look like that opening screen. Coby could almost feel the joystick action as his Target Assault character surged around corners, rifle raised, ready to take down anything that moved. He remembered yesterday afternoon in the school when they'd gone in with rifles. Turner had gotten them from his uncle's den. How different that rifle felt in his hands than a joystick.

At the end of the hallway was another gate. Coby peered through it, seeing the overcast sky and the crumbling buildings. This didn't make any sense. Why had they come through a gate that led nowhere?

On the right-hand side of the gate was another door. A man in a gray suit, crisp white shirt, and pale yellow tie stepped out of an office. He wore a gold name badge that Coby couldn't read, but the title 'Warden' was in thick black letters. Stocky and balding, he reeked of too much after-shave and his suit smelled of money.

"Good morning, gentlemen," said the man as he moved toward the gate. He motioned toward the three officers who removed Coby's ankle and wrist chains. Next, they removed Turner's chains then Rick's. "You'll go into the Block."

"The Block? What the hell's the block?" Turner demanded.

The man seemed unconcerned with Turner's objection. "It's a new facility for violent Juvenile offenders."

"Hey, I know my rights and you can't do this!" shouted Turner. "I got a right to a trial and an attorney!"

The warden stepped closer. "You three gave up your rights when you open fired on your classmates. Your families think you died in the school attack."

"But you can't do this!" Turner shouted, rushing toward the warden.

One of the officers jerked Turner back by the hair as the Warden slid an access card through a reader on the wall. The massive gate slid open into the city block.

Yellow grid lines pulsed across the sky and around the buildings. It made the hairs on Coby's arm bristle. They pulsed like a flare and then faded into the overcast sky as the gate behind them closed. Turner bolted across the broken sidewalk and lunged headlong, but a flash of sparks threw him several feet backward. He slammed into the pavement, dazed, for a moment, but then he rose from the ground.

"What the hell is this place?" Turner demanded, squinting at the burned out buildings. "Help me up."

Coby and Rick rushed to help him to his feet.

"Are they just going to leave us in here forever?" Rick demanded.

Coby stared at the layout. A single city block with half a dozen, red-brick buildings on each side of one lonely street that stretched into the hazy distance. The street ended abruptly at a brick wall. The whup, whup of a fan echoed through the quiet street. He couldn't see where the fan noise was coming from, but he heard it in the quiet. The street's pavement was old and broken, potholes and grass pushing up through the weakening surface. Sidewalks lined both sides of the street. A crumpled Budweiser can lay in the gutter beside a shattered, amber bottle and wet paper sack. The smell of old asphalt and garbage hung in the air.

On the edge of his vision, Coby saw movement. He jerked his head

around, catching a glimpse of orange fade into the nearest brick building to his left. A sick feeling hung in the pit of his stomach. They weren't alone in here.

From a second story window, bullets pounded the dry patch of grass. Rick's body lurched, the dull whump of the impacts driving him backward until he collapsed onto the sidewalk. He tried to scream, but it gurgled in his throat.

"Yeah! Got a new one!" shouted an excited voice from a second floor window.

Coby and Turner ran toward the nearest building on their right, throwing themselves in the doorway as bullets ripped across the brick facade.

The building was dark, broken furniture and dust littering the floor as they plunged inside. It smelled musty. A room off to the left opened into a bay window and a stone fireplace. Straight ahead, a rickety staircase led to a second floor.

Coby ran into the room on the left and crouched in one of the bay windows. His chest heaved. This wasn't cool. He glanced at Turner who knelt beside him. He hadn't expected the excited look on Turner's face or the rifles on the floor of the building.

"It's pay back time," Turner said, grinning. "Like in the deathmatch cavern."

Turner ran to the doorway and waved an arm. When a shot zinged through the doorway, Turner fired the rifle. A scream came from the second floor, a flash of orange tumbling through the window. Coby glanced out the window. Across the street, a young man in orange lay face down in the reddening grass.

Grinning, Turner hefted the rifle onto his shoulder. "This is like playing Target Assault, man. Come on, Coby -- you and me. Grab a rifle." He let out a whoop and ran out into the street, firing off shots. Coby snatched one of the rifles and followed. To him, this wasn't at all like Target Assault.

\* \* \* \*

All through the day, gun fire echoed through the street and behind the buildings. Coby spent hours scoping out shooters, Turner leading the way. Toward the end of the day, Coby felt tired and returned to the building where they'd found the rifles. As it was getting dark, Turner showed up with two orange-suited prisoners. They walked slowly, hands on top of their heads.

"Coby!" Turner shouted, shoving his two prisoners into the building. "Check this out."

Coby slipped out from behind a pile of broken crates and scowled at Turner. He didn't say anything though. Turner always knew what he was doing.

"This is so much better than Target Assault," he said with a laugh and poked one of his prisoners in the back, a thin, chestnut-haired young man who looked gaunt and tired. "Better than McKinley High, too." He nudged his other orange-suited prisoner, taller, stockier with dark hair. He had another rifle in his hand and tossed it to Coby who caught it. "How many of us are in here?"

"In the Block?" The taller one shrugged. "Depends on who's shooting and the time of day."

Turner kicked him and he fell to his knees. "What do you mean by that?"

"Every twelve hours, there's a blackout because they reset the security grid. It's pitch black in here for five hours. That's all I know. That's when the medbots come in and treat anybody who's hurt and bring in the food."

Coby realized he hadn't even thought about Rick who lay dead near the gate. All of this just seemed so unreal. Like watching the school kids fall in the hallways as Turner shot them. All of it seemed so unreal. He gripped the beaten up rifle.

"What happens to people who die in here?" Coby asked.

"Sometimes, the medbots can revive them," said the gaunt teenager, his bangs hanging in his eyes. "They carry off the bodies when they fall. Sometimes, after the blackouts, they're brought back."

He hoped Rick would be okay tomorrow, not sure why that suddenly

mattered? It hadn't in the school. Not even when he put the shotgun to his own head. "How long until the next blackout?" Coby asked.

Turner glared at him. "Hey, I ask the questions. You're my second, remember?"

Coby nodded at him. He'd always played captain to Turner's major. Rick had always been first lieutenant and Coby wondered if Turner had even thought about Rick. Turner poked at the taller teenager. "So, when's the next blackout?"

"It's been several hours," he answered in a stiff voice. "It'll probably be soon, I guess. I don't know."

Grinning, Turner let the rifle rest against his right shoulder. "If you, two take me to your ammo stash, I'll let you live. With Rick dead, I've got openings."

The two teenagers nodded. "Okay. We haven't hooked up with any of the outfits," said the one with the bangs.

"Move out then. Come on, Coby. Watch my back."

With hands on their heads, the two teenagers led them up the stairs of the building and to a room at the top of the stairs. The harsh light from a bare bulb shadowed an open crate of shotgun shells. Turner dipped his fingers into the shells and grabbed handfuls, shoving them in his pockets. Coby filled his pockets, too. Shots rang out in the street again and they clamored downstairs to wait for the first blackout.

\* \* \* \*

The world seemed to go away entirely when the blackout arrived, enveloping the Block in a soupy darkness. All the buildings went dark and silent. Footsteps skittered across the pavement outside, a shrill, frightened whisper fading. Coby huddled beside one of the broken bay windows, clutching the rifle to his chest. Movement scraped the floor behind him.

"Turner?"

No answer. Something smacked against the floor.

"Turner!"

Somebody else was in the room with him and Turner. The gang across the street! He had to get out of here.

Panicked, Coby lurched up from the floor and out the broken bay window. He hit the grass with a thud. Terror gripped him and he was barely able to breathe. He rolled against the building, the brick rough against his cheek as he gazed across the street. But the blackness was too thick.

Something slammed against the building. Rifle fire, he quickly realized. Scrambling to his feet, his arm aching, Coby ran toward the street. Above the echoes of his footfalls rose the distant whup, whup sound of a fan. Blue-white flashes pulsed through the darkness as he made his way toward the fan.

Soon the dull sounds of rifle fire fell away. He ran harder until he reached a massive fan embedded in a brick wall. It was four feet tall and spun slowly behind a screen. The blades whispered softly in the darkness, the blue-white flashes like cameras. He peered into the screen. Through the fan, he saw a park. Floodlights swelled, catching the bronze image of a little girl holding a foal. The statue stood in the middle of a fountain and the movement of the fan seemed to almost animate the girl.

Far down the street, shouts erupted. More shots fired. A scream. Footsteps pounded. He gasped for air as he pressed his back to the brick wall, desperate to hide himself from the gun fire. Were they coming for him? He raised the rifle to his shoulder. Pain sliced through his arm. Only then did he realize that he'd been shot.

Part of the brick wall shifted and something small and cylindrical rolled out. He jumped, shuffling back, but something cold touched his aching arm. A bandage pressed against the ache and Coby realized it was a medbot tending his arm. Whatever it was soothed the pain, making Coby a little groggy.

As he watched the spark of rifle fire down the street, he felt angry at

the shooters. Didn't they ever stop? This didn't feel much like a game anymore. He leaned his head against the brick wall, the fleeting images of the girl and her foal and the gentle whup, whup of the fan making the dark feel safe.

\* \* \* \*

In five hours, the blackout ended. Slowly, the darkness lightened to a dull gray. Coby awoke to find bread, cheese, and water in a basket at his feet. He devoured the food and drank the water, leaving the empty containers beside the wall. His arm was stiff, but the sharp ache where the bullet had grazed his flesh was gone. He raced across the street as gunfire shattered the silence. All around him, the yellowish glow of the security grid flared to life and then faded to gray. He ducked behind trashcans and around buildings until he reached the first building nearest the gate, the one he and Turner had claimed.

When he shoved through the half-open door, Turner grabbed him and threw him to the ground. A rifle barrel pressed into his cheek.

"Don't shoot, it's me, Coby!"

Turner sighed and pulled back his rifle. Coby scrambled to his feet. Turner's orange scrubs were blood-spattered and torn. He walked with a limp, but otherwise seemed fine.

"Where were you?" Turner asked. "I thought you'd turned into a weenie and ran."

Coby sighed and ran his hand through his dark hair. "When the blackout hit, someone fired at the window. I jumped out and just started running until I lost the shooter."

Turner rolled his eyes and motioned him into the big room. Four other prisoners loaded rifles. They gave him a cursory look and returned to loading the rifles.

"What's going on?"

"There's a gang of prisoners across the street who tried to kill us last night, so we're going to surprise them."

"Surprise them?" Coby squawked.

"They said we don't belong here, so they're trying to kill us off. Bastards think they run the place, so we're going to get them before they get us."

That conversation sounded too familiar. So many times over a pack of Merits, Turner had raged about how the kids at McKinley hated them, wanted them to die. That they didn't belong in the school. So many times, Turner said they should get the bastards first. That's what got him and Turner in this place.

"Hey, Coby! Remember that one move we used to do in the cavern sequence? The one where one of us flushed out the monsters and the other one mowed 'em down as they came out? Remember, you and me?"

"Yeah, I remember." He had never realized how much Turner droned on about games before. Coby glanced around again, hoping to see Rick among the other orange suits. "Did Rick come back this morning?"

Turner looked at him like he was an idiot. "Who the hell cares, man! I'm talking about a cool deathmatch here. Us and them." A wary look spread across Turner's face. "You're in, aren't you?"

Coby nodded. What choice did he have? "Yeah, I'm in."

\* \* \* \*

For days, Turner plotted ways to attack the building across the street. No matter how they approached the building, the moment they slipped inside, the shoot out turned into a stalemate. And every time, the other orange-suits retreated to the second floor and shot through holes in the ceiling, forcing Turner to call a retreat.

Whenever the blackouts came, Coby slipped away. He felt safer by the fan. Calmer. Through the fan, he studied the bronze statue of the girl loving her foal, cradling it so tightly. Like it was her child.

Reminded him of his sister's farm and the little tan calf he used to

show in 4-H Club. The little calf had followed him around the fence, through mud puddles, always hurrying to keep up. Coby liked how the little guy followed him around, like he was something special. By the end of the summer, the calf had grown a lot and done well at the state fair. Then, just before school started, he visited his sister. When he went out to the pasture, only a few red and white cows grazed. The little tan calf was gone. They'd sold him to market, his sister had said. Coby never went back after that.

His chest tightened and he stared at the girl and the foal. How would she have felt if someone had sold it to market or shot it to death? He felt sick as he laid his head against his rifle and slept.

\* \* \* \*

Coby lost track of the days and how many blackouts there had been. And how many times Turner led them across the street to attack the other group of prisoners. Turner relished every moment he held that rifle. Shooting it excited him. Coby dragged his rifle behind him, letting the rifle butt scuff against the pavement. The others shined their weapons until they gleamed, but Coby shoved his into a corner, only picking it up when Turner gave the signal to attack.

And this day was no different than the last one. Another gray, lifeless morning began as they charged across the street in a line. Bullets streaked past, catching the young man beside Coby. The young man clutched his side and doubled over. Coby grabbed his arm and pulled him out of the way, behind a green trash bin that stood near the building.

The young man's eyes were glazed as he continued to fire at the building.

"What are you doing? Stay down!" Coby shouted. "You want to get yourself killed?"

The young man looked through him and then reloaded his rifle.

Coby slumped against the trash bin, those words hitting him hard. He thought about the high school and the body bags now. It had been a game to him, to all of them. He shuddered. A good time.

The young man jumped up and shot at the building again. Then he fell to his knees as a hail of bullets pounded into the trash bin. Coby covered his ears, the dull impacts reminding him of the kids that Turner had shot. He shivered. He'd have followed Turner anywhere. He talked so big about how they all hated him. Coby, Rick, all of them outcasts. Just like the guys in this building. Who'd be next after them?

Turner cackled and fired wildly at the windows.

Above them, windows rained bullets. Coby glared at Turner. He was tired of following.

"Let's get out of here!" Coby shouted, grabbing the young man's arm beside him. "Back across the street! Now!"

He hauled the young man to his feet and across the street. The others followed.

"Damn you, Coby -- stop! Stop!"

Coby ignored Turner's enraged shouts as he led the others back into the building.

"That was cool!" one of them said, grinning as he waved the rifle around.

Turner barreled through the doorway and lunged at Coby, striking him in the chest. "Why'd you call a retreat? Damn you, I'm leading this outfit!"

Coby slammed him against the wall. "This isn't a game!" he shouted and pounded the wall with his fist. "Six people are dead because of us! Don't you get that?" He let Turner go and turned away.

"But they made our lives miserable. They deserved to die. Like these guys. It's the same thing."

He turned. "For what? Calling us names?" He bit his lip and stared up at the torn rafters above him. "We'd have graduated in a few months -- and we'd have never seen them again. We wouldn't be here now." Coby turned to the others. "You don't have to keep shooting at those guys across the street. You

don't have to shoot at all."

A cold look spread across Turner's face. "You trying to take over, Coby?"

"Not me, man." he said. "I don't want any part of this anymore."

He moved past Turner toward the door.

"You're just like them," said Turner.

Coby kept walking. That's what tore at him most. He was just like them.

In six hours, the security grid went dark, resetting itself. Coby stashed himself underneath some rusted machinery and slept for a few hours. He awoke to darkness and slipped through the thick blackness toward the fan. For a long time, he huddled against the wall and stared at the statue through fan slats. Seeing the girl cradling her foal made his eyes fill with tears. He hadn't cried for a very long time.

Could he get through here before everything came online again? Coby let the rifle fall against the wall as he pried at the screen, but something poked him in the back.

"Trying to escape, Coby?" Turner asked.

Coby turned, unable to see Turner. He was a faint presence in the darkness.

"What do you want, Turner?"

"You remember that one deathmatch, Coby, you and me against a whole platoon of guys," said Turner in a slow voice. He sounded strange. "The one in the cavern."

"Yeah, I remember," Coby said, an edge in his voice.

"You remember how we finished off the computer guys, but then it was you and me left in that cavern."

The hair on Coby's neck bristled. He nodded. "We played that one a few weeks ago."

The flash of yellow flickered around him, the security grid shuddering to life. The blackout was over.

He and Turner stared into each other's eyes now. "It was you and me. In the school. And like now. Remember?"

Coby nodded. He'd actually laughed as they'd roamed McKinley's halls, looking for people to shoot -- like it had been a computer game. How had he reduced everything to that? He stared into Turner's eyes again.

"Yeah, you and me," said Coby, his chest aching at the realization. "We killed six people." And how many had they killed here? Would it all go on forever?

Turner grinned. "Well, now, it's only me, Coby."

The barrel of Turner's rifle leveled at Coby and he fired, the blast exploding into Coby's chest.

Coby slammed against the pavement. Above him, the fan spun up, the blades obscuring the statue of the girl cradling her foal. Animating her for a brief moment and then blurring her into a bronze haze.

His breathing turned shallow as the dark sky lightened. It wasn't a game. At last, he'd finally gotten it.

\* \* \* \*

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\_ Today's lunch might be "cheesy walnut pepper," but the students at Emerpathy School are in for a beeger surprise than how such a thing could possibly exist, much less be eaten. They are in a sheep. A beeg sheep. And if they don't do something soon, according to the peeper (pepper?) the sheep will leave. OF COURSE THE SEISMIC LUNCH LADY IS AN ALIEN! What else can be expected from the one and only Tom Gerencer...\_

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\*Why I Bring a Bag Lunch Now\*

\*By Tom Gerencer\*

They were serving cheesy walnut peppers again, which in my experience is never a good way to start a Thursday afternoon. I tried to get Jinx -- the



school bully and a guy with nothing you could really call a neck -- to steal my lunch money after second period, but he was having none of it.

"Keep it," he said, after I'd walked by him for the third time, jingling the contents of my pockets in what I had hoped was an enticing way. "I can last 'til I get home."

I wished I could've said the same. Mrs. Hamshaw caught me trying to sneak out the back door of the cafeteria, and she shooed me back in line.

"You eat your lunch," she said, "or you'll waste away to nothing."

Now, I found that hard to swallow, coming from a woman who probably caused calibration problems in seismological equipment several states away. But sometimes you're the dirt, and sometimes you're the model X-500 Eletrolux Deluxe, and there was no denying which end of that equation I fit into.

I stood in line behind Marty Ruckerman, a little dripping of a kid resembling an extra from a Unicef commercial. He gripped his orange plastic tray as if he thought he'd float away without its extra weight. I couldn't help but notice he was trembling.

"Cheesy walnut peppers," he whimpered. "They're serving cheesy walnut peppers. It's the second time this week."

"Get a grip," I hissed back. "You want Old Lady Plukrenge to give you seconds?"

At the mention of the possibility of extra peppers, I swear to God his hair stood up. With good reason, too. We could see Old Lady Plukrenge even now, through the window in the concrete wall, her plastic hairnet glinting in the light from the fluorescents, her brow-ridge proving evolution, her flowered smock suggesting hospitals and mental institutions.

"Good God, look at the way her lower lip sticks out," whined Marty, while Plukrenge slopped another ladleful of something grey and unidentifiable on some poor unsuspecting second-grader's plate.

"And that moustache," I commiserated. "You know, Brendan Scully said she strains soup through it when she eats."

That got a shudder out of both of us. I thought for certain Ruckerman would try to bolt and run.

"Be strong," I said, while wishing I could take that same advice myself. "One way or another, it'll all be over in forty minutes."

Small consolation. We both knew those forty minutes would last three hours, at least. It was a well-known law of lunchroom temporal dilation here at Emerpathy Middle School.

\* \* \* \*

Minutes later, having braved the dreaded ladle, me and Marty Ruckerman sat down.

"Are they bad?" he said.

"Can't you see them?"

"No. I've got my eyes closed."

"Oh," I said. "Me, too."

I could see that one of us was going to have to have some guts, and I was pretty sure that it would not be Ruckerman. That's why I said, "On three, we look."

"Okay," said Marty, but he didn't sound excited.

I counted, looked, and had to bite my tongue to keep myself from screaming. If the thing there on my plate had ever been a pepper, then someone had removed the evidence. It was purple, for one thing, and not like the ones they grow that way on purpose, but the deathly purple of a month-old corpse. Also, it was bloated out like anything, and there was something spilling out its top that I was praying only looked like some kid's brains.

"It's bad, isn't it," said Marty.

"You didn't look?"

"I didn't dare."

"Nevermind," I said. "Let's just say I couldn't find my appetite right now with both hands and a GPS. We've got to ditch these things. And fast."

Marty made a little whining sound. "How?" he said. "We'll never get

them in the trash with Hamshaw here. She's got eyes in the back of her head."

I shivered. It was only an expression, but we both knew anything could happen here at Emerpathy Middle, and the times it didn't were more not than often. But we couldn't sit there whimpering, which was why I said, "Okay. How 'bout we stick them underneath the tabletop? Like gum?"

"And that'll work?"

"I have no idea," I said. "But at this point, anything is worth a try."

I took one last look at Hamshaw -- she was over by the Coke machine, wagging her finger at a kid who'd turned a brilliant shade of green -- and I reached out and grabbed the pepper on my tray.

\* \* \* \*

What happened next is something I will not forget. Not if I live to be a zillion, which, after everything I've been through, I'm not ruling out.

Just as my fingers closed around the pepper, a little tiny voice said, "Ow! Jou hurteeng me!"

I looked at Marty. His eyes were almost falling out.

"Please, tell me that was you," I said, but Marty shook his head.

Then, slowly, and with all the terror from a hundred-thousand nightmares about showing up at recess in your underwear, we both turned to the pepper on my tray.

Through tiny, twisted pepper-lips, it said, "Don' steeck me to the table, keeds. Jou gonna squeesh my head."

"It's talking," Marty squeaked.

"Jou right, I talking, mang. But don't tell nobody, or I gonna get een trouble."

"Your pepper is talking," Marty said again, in case I hadn't got that far.

"I not a pepper," said the pepper. "I am a preesoner of war. But I juse the deesguise-o-matic, and eet makes me look like thees. So I hescape. And someseeng else? Jou school ees not a school. Eet ees a sheep."

"A sheep?" I said.

"A space-sheep," said the pepper.

"How's it doing that?" said Marty.

"I study, een the language lab. But I make the meestake, and I learn espaneesh first. Jou understands me good?"

We nodded.

"Then leesten: Jou school ees go to outer space. Today. Real soon. With jou eenside eet eef jou don't do someseeng fast."

"Cool," said me and Marty, harmonizing.

"Jou theenk ees cool? Jou want to be stuck een the feefths grade for ten-thousands jears? I deedn't theenk so. So jou got to get us out of here. But sneaky-like, because the beeg fat lady? She's an alien."

"Mrs. Hamshaw?"

This made sense. It all made sense. My entire horrifying grammar-school experience was coming into painful focus.

"Our school's a spaceship," I said. "Our teachers are all aliens. \_That's\_ why Mrs. Vinnaccio smells like plastic. It's why Mr. Bayers can't say 'diphthong' without spitting. And it explains that weird strip of hair thing Mr. Drake combs across his head."

"No, no, those guys ees juman being," said the pepper. "They jus' getteeng old. But they mind-controlled, so jou got to get us out of here, hokay?"

I'd say I thought about it all of half a second, maybe. And I will tell you: I don't usually take advice from lunchroom vegetables, but greater forces were at work here. That much was obvious, even to a kid.

"Let's go," I said, but Marty looked at me as if I'd grown a second head, and it was learning fractions.

"You're going to listen to a \_pepper\_?"

"Beats eating it," I said, and Marty couldn't argue. But we were going to need some help. Two kids like us would never get past Mrs. Hamshaw on our

own. Not even in a lunchtime as stretched out as the ones at Emerpathy Middle School.

What we needed was a girl. Now, normally, it's against my policy to get too close to those, but this was an emergency.

"Kenzie Wertmiller," I said to Marty.

"She's over by the windows, sitting by herself."

"That's good," I said. "You ready?"

"Yeah. But what about my pepper?"

"Ees just a pepper," said the pepper on my tray. "But I wouldn't eat it, mang. That theeng look like it make jou seeck."

\* \* \* \*

Kenzie Wertmiller was a short kid, with glasses that eclipsed her face. She had hair the color of mashed squash, and the only way anyone would ever call her cute was if there was money in it. And that includes her mom. I tried looking nervous when we sat beside her, in the hopes that Mrs. Hamshaw would think I had a case of puppy-love. But Kenzie saw right through it.

"Get out of here," she said.

"Just wait a second."

"No. You called me plane-crash-face in gym. I mean it. You get out of here or you'll be sorry. I'm a paisely belt."

Marty made a face. "A what?"

"A paisely belt. It's like a black belt? Only better."

"There's no such thing," said Marty.

"You'll find out, fat mouth."

For such a little kid, she sure could argue. But we didn't have time for this. I noticed she hadn't touched her pepper, so I said, "You going to want that?"

She looked doubtful. "I guess I should. There's people starving in Cambodia."

Well, I'd heard that line a hundred times, at least, and I didn't buy it. I mean, there were people with headaches in New Jersey. Was I supposed to take an aspirin? Luckily for all of us, my pepper chose that moment to speak up.

"Thees ain't no time to play aroun'," it said. "Scary, scary theengs ees goeeng on."

I thought she'd scream. She didn't, though. Girls can be all right -- sometimes. For instance, she just sat there with her eyes getting wider while the pepper told her why we had to leave the school, and she didn't say a word when I explained my plan.

\* \* \* \*

Now, Mrs. Hamshaw would never let an ordinary kid go to the bathroom during lunch. But Kenzie Wertmiller was far from ordinary, and someday, she will win an Oscar. What I'm saying is, last time I saw anybody bawl like that was when I put a bunch of frog's eggs down my little brother's shorts. My parents grounded me.

It worked on Hamshaw, too. The bawling, I mean, not the frog's eggs, although I would've tried them if I'd had a couple handy. Anyway, Hamshaw took Kenzie by the hand and led her out, and in minutes, we all met up again in the rotunda, near the front doors, with the pepper riding in my hands.

"I crawled out through the service hatch," said Kenzie. "Hamshaw thinks I'm in the bathroom."

The pepper squirmed. "Tha's good, keed. We go now, eh?"

We were on the verge of walking out, and I was feeling pretty good about it, when Kenzie had an attack of conscience.

"What about the other kids?" she said. "Like Brendan Scully. Timmy Howe. Joe Donnelly."

Marty raised his hand. "For the record? I never really liked Joe Donnelly," he said.

Kenzie's jaw, at that point, reminded me about a book I used to have on steamshovels. "Are you telling me that, knowing everything you know, you're

just going to leave them here?"

She had a point. I'm not saying it stacked up against an eternity in fifth grade, but it was something.

"Oh, sure, the other keeds," the pepper said. "We gonna call the cops. They gets rescued. Hokay? Come on. Vamos!"

But Kenzie didn't budge. "The cops? What are we gonna say? Our lunch told us the school's in danger?"

She had another point. This one was bigger, and the pepper couldn't argue with it.

"I don't know," it said. "We talk about eet outside, hokay?"

"Come on," said Marty. "Let's get out of here."

I know, I know. I should have gone. I almost did, too, but the thing was, although I didn't like all the kids at school, like for example, Jimmy Cress, who poured Za-Rex in my roller skates, or Trisha Foss, who stuck her tongue inside my mouth that time, I didn't want them kidnapped into outer space, either. With a few notable exceptions. What if it was me? How would my parents feel? I mean after the initial joy wore off? I shook my head.

"I can't," I said. "I'm sorry. You go, Marty. Take the pepper with you."

I was surprised, almost, when Marty said, "Oh, great. Like I'm supposed to go alone? No way. I'll get captured in the parking lot, or something. I know it."

So we were staying. All of us. Not bright, maybe, but it felt right. Until the pepper started freaking out, that is.

\* \* \* \*

"Jou keeding, right? I mean, jou keedeeng."

"We're gonna save the school," I said.

The pepper laughed. "Jeah? How jou ees gonna get past General K'Chazzpak?"

"General Ka-who?" said Marty.

"Chazzpak. He try to take over the juniverse, but he crash the sheep here twenty jears ago."

"The sheep?" said Kenzie.

"He means, 'ship,'" I said.

"He's a genius," said the pepper. "He juse the mind-control to make the people here forgets the crash. He makes the sheep look like a school."

Kenzie squinted. "It really sounds like he said, 'sheep.'"

"When the sheep crash, the computer break. Ever seence, jou keeds ees do the calculations. For to feex eet."

Marty looked like the guy on the Heimlich-Maneuver posters in the lunch room. "I knew my homework was too hard," he said.

"Hard? How many keeds jou theenk ees doing quantum tenth-deemension reconciliations? Ees the cheesy walnut peppers. They got the mind-enhanceeng drug what make jou ten time smarter than jou was. And another theeng. They stretch the time out, so they get more out of jou."

This explained a lot.

"So we'll stop studying," I said, but the pepper didn't like it.

"There ees only one more computation for to be doeeng. They get that een a surpriseengs test they gonna geeve jou after lunch, and then the sheep take off."

"We'll flunk," I said. "On purpose."

"Jou theenk the other keeds ees gonna flunk? I telleeng you, we stuck here. We gonna go to war. And we ees gonna die."

The pepper started sobbing. It was pathetic, really, sitting there in the rotunda, listening to the blubberings of a depressive vegetable. I would almost rather do anything else at all, except possibly for certain tasks involving yard work or a toilet brush.

Thank God for Kenzie. She came up with the idea.

"What if we could change the tests?" she said. "Then the answers would be wrong."

The pepper's breathing hitched. "Jou know where they ees?"

She nodded. "One time, after school, I heard Mrs. Finnellini say they kept them in the library."

\* \* \* \*

We were walking down the hallway to the library, and I was feeling pretty hopeful about our chances for success when a familiar voice spoke up behind us, changing that.

"I changed my mind about the lunch money, punk," it said. "I'd like it. Now."

We turned around, and there stood Jinx. His real name was Henry Robb, but he'd punch you if you ever called him that. For that matter, he'd punch you if you called him Jinx, or if it rained, or if it didn't rain, or Mars went into retrograde. At twelve years old, he had full facial hair, and although he wasn't what you'd call a smart guy, unless your arm was being twisted (which usually it was if you were standing close enough to him) he made up for his lack of brainpower by beating people bloody. He came walking toward me now, cracking his knuckles in a way that made me think of ice packs and methiolate.

"Who ees thees guy?" the pepper said, "and what happen to hees neck?"

Now, if we'd had brains, we would have run off screaming, but as for me, I thought Jinx would crumble at the prospect of a talking lunch, and I think the others thought so, too. What we'd forgotten was, Jinx was not like other kids.

"Hey, cool!" he said, and he snatched the pepper from my hands.

"You give that back," I said.

"Jeah, give me back!" the pepper said, but Jinx pushed me away. Telling him to do something was like beating up a pit-bull with a chicken.

"Hang on a second. This thing's awesome!"

"Give it back," said Kenzie. "I'm a paisely belt."

"Yeah, Good. Watch this," said Jinx. "You kids are gonna learn something."

I didn't doubt him that, whatever he was planning, we would find it eductaional, but I had a feeling we weren't going to like it. I was right, too. He reached into his back pocket, and pulled out a firecracker. He shoved it in the pepper's mouth, and then held up a lighter.

"This is going to be cool," he said.

And that was the first time I saw a paisely belt in action. Kenzie may be small, but she's got feet of lightning. She kicked one of them up between Jinx's knees, connecting in a way that Jackie Chan would have admired. Jinx collapsed like my Dad that time I swapped his Hershey bar for Ex-Lax, and me and Marty turned to look at Kenzie.

"I told you, you'd find out," she said.

\* \* \* \*

We explained everything while Jinx recovered. He insisted he come with us, "for protection," but for myself I wasn't sure if that was ours, or his. You wouldn't think he'd want anything to do with Kenzie after an attack like that, but he had hardly finished his recovery when he started offering to bring her books home after school. Anyway, we voted that we couldn't leave him wandering the halls with aliens around, and so he came along.

\* \* \* \*

The Library at Emerpathy Middle School has never been my favorite place, just like my mom has never been a Pakistani carnival employee. For one thing, it smells in there. Like the dust of all the books on government and agriculture ever printed. And for another, the time goes even slower once you step inside. It's like being in church, or at my aunt's house, only magnified.

"It's quiet," Marty whispered. "Too quiet." Then he added, "No, on second thought, it's just quiet enough. If it was any noisier, I wouldn't like it."

"Going somewhere, children?"

I almost screamed, for the second time that day. I turned, and there he

was. 'Bad Hair' Day. The scourge of any kid who ever owned a library card. He was eight feet tall, and pear-shaped, with the worst haircut in history. He was quick with a 'shh' and he could spot a gum-chewer at 500 yards in the pitch black through a brick wall. Most of all, he hated letting kids inside his library. I think he was afraid they'd read something.

"Mr. Day," I said. "We were-"

"Doing research," said Kenzie, stepping forward. "We're doing a report."

Day smiled. "Oh, really? For whose class?"

"Mr. Fuller's," Kenzie said. "It's on ... dolphins."

"That's wonderful," said Day. "However, we don't allow food in here." He nodded toward my pepper. "And secondly, the library is closed for lunch. You'll have to come back during a free period, or after school. Tomorrow would be best. As for now, I'm sure Mrs. Hamshaw must be worried..."

A free period? We were sunk. We'd never make it. And we couldn't let him take us back to Hamshaw.

That's when Jinx said, "You leave this to me."

Now, everybody knew that Mr. Day liked golf. He always talked about how great he was, and he kept a trophy on his desk. It had a little silver statue of a golfer on the top. He told everyone he'd won it in a tournament in college, though we were pretty sure he got it in a yard sale, and had his name put on it later. I only mention it now because this was the same trophy Jinx ran to and grabbed.

"Hey, 'Bad Hair!'" he shouted. "You want this?"

You'd think the world was ending, or at least that part of it that held the library.

"GIVE THAT BACK!" Day tried to grab him, but Jinx dodged and made it to the hallway. He turned back, hooted once, and ran.

"You kids stay here," Day growled at us, and with that, he lumbered off in boiling-mad pursuit.

Marty, meanwhile, shrugged at me and Kenzie and the pepper.

"You heard the man," he said. "We stay."

\* \* \* \*

It didn't take us long to find the tests. The pepper thought if we changed one question on each one, the school would not be able to take off. That took a while, but time was something there was not a shortage of at Emerpathy, especially not during lunch. We changed the tests, put them away, and left the library. It went like clockwork. Marty even started whistling. He stopped, though, when Mrs. Hamshaw came around the corner, with Mr. Day behind her, dragging Jinx along by his right ear.

\* \* \* \*

Now, anyone who's never met Assistant Principal Gosling doesn't know their luck. The man is short and hunched and has a face that shows no evidence it wasn't hit repeatedly with a waffle iron. Emerpathy legend says, when he was born his first word was 'detention,' and it's been his favorite ever since. And on top of that, we'd soon find out he was an alien.

His office was a bare, cold place that sapped the hope from any kid who entered there. No cheery pictures brightened up the walls, no ornaments adorned the furniture. Unless, that is, you'd count the cheesy walnut pepper. It sat in a heavy plastic jar atop his desk.

"I sorry, keeds," it said. "We try."

In one corner of the room stood 'Bad Hair' Day, and in another, Mrs. Hamshaw smiled at us as fakely as she ever had. Next to her, Old Lady Plukrenge stared off into space, still carrying her ladle, her moustache twitching. Drool trickled from the corner of her mouth. And although her lips stayed shut, a voice came from the upper one. A voice that turned my guts to water.

"You children think you almost won, no doubt," it said. "Well you were never even close. Your friend, it seems, is not the only one with access to

the disguise-o-matic."

"That moustache," Marty whimpered. "It's General K'Chazzpak!"

"Clever child," the moustache said. "And a few minutes ago, I was a copy of The Guide to Modern Sweetcorn Cultivation in the library. Oh, I know you changed the tests. Don't worry. We can fix that. Now, Officer Gosling. Show them what they've won."

Gosling nodded. "Yes, General," he said. He reached up to his neck, as if to scratch it, but then he grabbed his hair instead, and lifted. Underneath, his bald skull gleamed.

"This thing," he said, waving a hand at the pepper, "may have escaped today, because we were so busy with our preparations, but we will never be so lax again. And you may rest assured that this ship will leave on schedule."

"After twenty years of waiting!" the moustache said triumphantly.

"The final data await processing," said Gosling. He pulled off one of his ears with a wet sucking sound and set it on his desk. "The other students ate their peppers. Even now they are digesting. Boosting their intelligence."

He removed his other ear, and then his nose, which he gave to Mr. Day.

"In sixth period, your classmates will take their 'tests,' and after that, the school will rise up from this stinking pit you call a planet."

He took off his lips. His cheeks. He put these in the 'in' box on his desk, and then popped out his eyes. They jiggled.

"You're coming with us," he said, his bare teeth shining in his naked skull. "And you're going to behave yourselves, and do your computations. And when we are out there, locked in interstellar war, no disguises will be necessary. And this is what you will obey."

He took his teeth and tongue out, and he set them on his desk. A thing slithered from the hole where they had been. It was fat and green and sluglike, and it slid up on his bony scalp and wobbled, looking down at us with eyes on stalks. It screeched.

Marty snuffled. Kenzie's breath went in and out in little wheezes. Jinx sobbed openly, and something small and warm and wet ran down my cheek.

And that is when Marty Ruckerman surprised us all.

"You can't take all of us," he said.

On average, Marty didn't talk like that, especially to adults. It shocked me even more when he jumped forward, grabbed the jar that held the pepper, and hurled it at the window. And believe me when I tell you, I had never seen a throw like that. Not in all my years of gym class.

Mrs. Hamshaw acted fast. She slapped a button on the desk, and a black shield slid across the window. But too late. The jar had smashed through. It fell outside, into the bushes.

"AFTER HIM!" the moustache shouted. "HE MUST NOT GET AWAY!!!"

A mad scramble for the door came next. Gosling put himself together hastily, and Day kept us four kids at bay while the faculty and staff ran out. "You'll pay for that, Ruckerman," he growled.

He slammed the door. We heard it lock, and we were left alone there in the office.

\* \* \* \*

I won't say I had a lot of hope. They weren't guarding us, but realistically, what could four kids do, locked inside an office? And what was one cheesy walnut pepper against a bunch of aliens and mind-controlled adults, even if it was bilingual?

"This isn't as bad as it seems," I said, although to tell the truth, I thought it might be worse. "My mom says it's always darkest just before the dawn."

"Your mom's never been awake at midnight," said Kenzie. "Just before dawn, it gets grey."

She was right, I knew. It wasn't until Jinx grinned at me that I realized we might still come out on top.

"The intercom," he said, with reverence.

I turned, and there, on Gosling's desktop, stood the chrome-pedestaled, white-buttoned microphone of the school-wide intercom. The one Gosling used for all his diabolical announcements.

"We can tell everyone," I said. "About Day! And Mrs. Hamshaw, and the moustache, and the pepper!"

"Are you crazy?" Kenzie said. "You think they'll just believe us? Would you?"

I thought about that. She was right. Again. I was really getting sick of that.

"Well what else can we do?" I said. "We've got to tell them something."

Now it was Marty's turn to grin.

"Oh, we'll tell them something," he said, holding up the teeth and tongue that Gosling had forgotten. "But I don't think they're gonna like it."

\* \* \* \*

It took us a few minutes to get the hang of Gosling's mouth. You had to speak into one end of it, and anything you said came out the other end, in Gosling's voice. From there, we only had to aim it at the intercom. Jinx, meanwhile, shoved pennies in the door jamb to keep unwanted visitors away.

"This is Assistant Principal Gosling speaking," said Ruckerman, in Gosling's voice. "I want to assure you that we've fixed the problem with the cheesy walnut peppers. You see, we had a little trouble with the sewage pipes, and a small amount of septic juice got in the oven."

"It was just a little bit," I added, taking my turn at Gosling's mouth. "Nothing that could hurt you."

"And a teeny bit of barf," said Kenzie, "And a little beetle guts."

"And cigarette butts," said Marty. "And the washcloth Mrs. Finnellini uses on her legs."

We all looked at each other, and we nodded.

"But everything should be okay," I said. "If you think you're feeling sick, it's probably your imagination."

\* \* \* \*

Emerpathy Middle School did not take off. Not then, anyway. It really couldn't, what with all the intelligence-booster drug being mopped up by the custodians later on that night. And everybody would have flunked their 'tests,' except they weren't around to take them. A bunch of kids ran off and told their parents about the food scare, and the board of health showed up, accompanied by six or seven news vans, and when we were discovered locked in the assistant principal's office with a couple human body parts, and when it turned out half the faculty and staff mysteriously disappeared, and the other half showed up delirious, the school was shut down pending state investigations.

The four of us went back there two days later -- me, Marty, Jinx, and Kenzie Wertmiller -- and we ducked the yellow tape. We saw the pepper through the windows in the cafeteria, with about a hundred other gruesome looking lunches, sitting on a hundred orange plastic trays.

I knocked on the window. Two plates of chicken casserole and some dried-out pizza slices opened it.

"We going," said the pepper. "All of us preesoners of war ees takeeng off."

"Cool," said Marty. "Can we come?"

"No. Jou planet need jou. And anyway, we do the calculateeng now. Mos' of us ees smart enough. An' eet take us longer, but so what? We go a leetle slower. We got no war to fight."

"Well, it was great knowin' you," I said.

"Me too," said Jinx. "Sorry about the firecracker."

"Will you leave soon?" said Kenzie.

"Tonight," the pepper said. "We make it look like ees a beeg hexplosion type of theeng."

"Cool," said Jinx.



"Maybe they buil' jou a real school. But jou watch out for Gosling and the General. Jou ain't hear the las' of them, or of the beeg fat lady."

"Mrs. Hamshaw," I said. "She's got eyes in the back of her head."

"Mang, jou ain't keeding."

"But we've got us," said Kenzie.

"Right," said Jinx.

"And Kenzie's feet," said Marty.

"Ees good. I theenk jou be hokay. Jus' be careful what jou eat."

"Thanks for the advice," I told the pepper (and the other culinary refugees) "but from now on, I bring a bag lunch."

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