

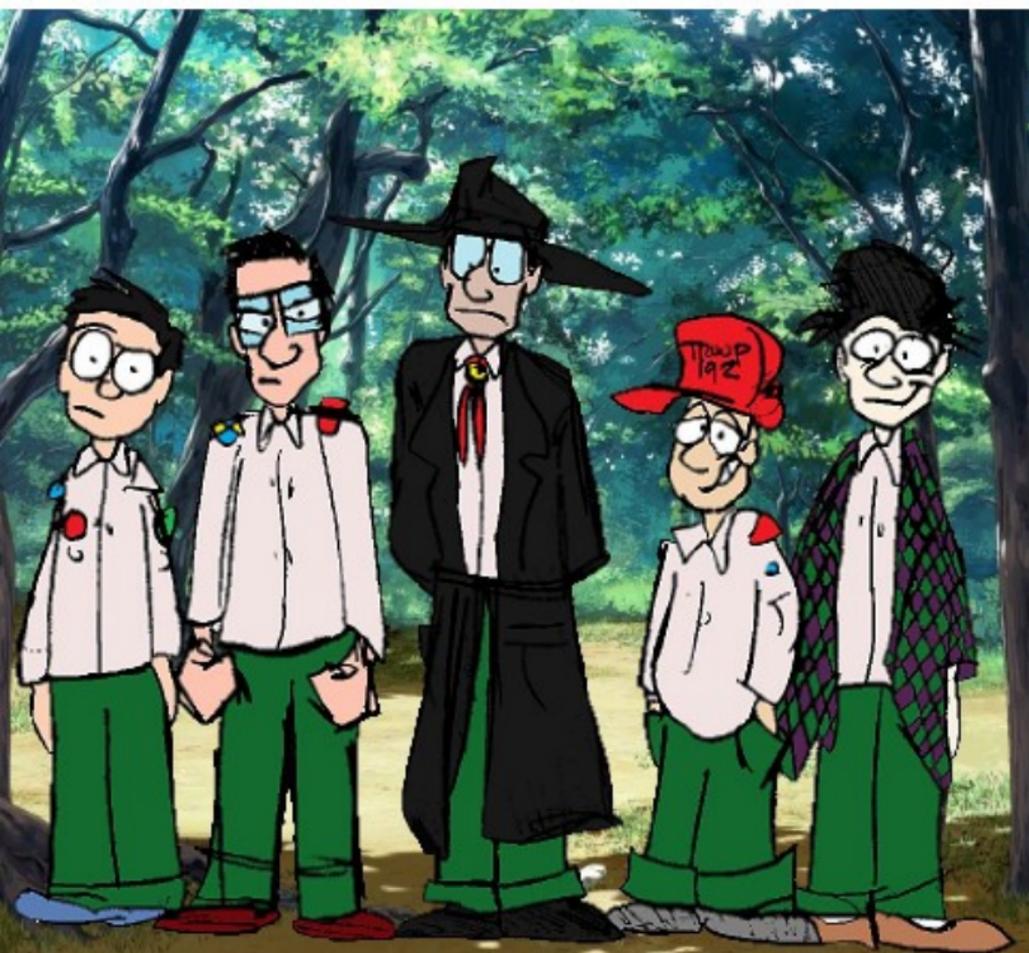
# BOY SCOUTS 1 1/2

created by

**Matthew Atanian**

inspired by Takahashi Rumiko's *Ranma 1/2*

written by Matthew Atanian, Michael D. Quadrozzi, and William Hughes  
with Aaron Abdelmaseh, Nichole Colosimo, and Jessi Pysz  
and Mark "Mr. A" Abert, Jonathan Becker, Jason Bertovich, and Carolyn Ede





# BOY SCOUTS 1



created by

**Matthew Atanian**

inspired by Takahashi Rumiko's *Ranma* ½

written by Matthew Atanian, Michael D Quadrozzi, and William Hughes  
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(Inspired by Takahashi Rumiko's *Ranma ½*)

Written by  
Matthew Atanian,  
Michael D. Quadrozzi,  
and William Hughes

with  
Aaron Abdalmaseh,  
Nicole Colosimo,  
and Jessi Pysz

also featuring  
Mark Abert,  
Jonathan Becker,  
Jason Bertovich,  
and Carolyn Ede

  
John Smith  
Publishing,  
Inkorporated  
West Springfield

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First Paperback edition: September 2015  
PDF edition: September 2015

13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4

# Forward

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Hello, and welcome to this... the brand spanking new PDF edition of the first *Boy Scouts ½* published novel! This PDF edition, while using the hardcover publication of this work as a base, has been lovingly crafted to meet this new format.

This novel is a compilation of short (or shortish) stories that were originally written between 1997 and 2006. It covers “Year One” of *Boy Scouts ½*, taking place in a fictional span of time from the summer of '97 through the summer of '98. Contained within are the original thirty *Boy Scouts ½* stories as well as most of the “Year One” side stories. There are a few exclusions, but I can elaborate on that later. Need to save something for the “Afterword,” I suppose!

A note on the cover images: You may have noticed that there were *two* of them. The second one was the cover of the original hardcover edition of this book. The photo on it was the result of a Google image search for “Jusenkyo.” It isn't quite right, but I guess at the time I felt it would do. The first one, however, was the much better cover from the newer paperback edition of this novel, featuring character artwork by Mike Quadrozzi.

One other note: my stories are quite well known for spelling errors, typos, and grammatical mistakes. (Mind you, some of the grammar issues, particularly in dialogue, may be intentional. But some may be mistakes.) I hope to fix most of them in the process of putting together this compilation, but I am sure some will still slip through. My apologies. But hey, it wouldn't be *Boy Scouts ½* without a few of 'em!

Well, here we go. *Boy Scouts ½*, now in a nice pocket sized book for easy reading on the go. Enjoy!

—Matt

# Dedication

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This book is dedicated to the following people:

Mike, Hughes, Aaron, Nicole (Colosimo, not Porter!), Mark, Becker, Jason-kun, Carolyn, and (even if things didn't end well) Jessi. I may have created this monster and overseen it, but I didn't write every word of it or come up with every idea contained within by myself. Couldn't have done it without you! I've lost touch with most of you, in most cases not intentionally and just through the passage of time, and I do regret that. Thank you all for your contributions.

Also, this book is dedicated to one Ms. Rachel Pike. As of the time of this writing, it's still fairly early on in our relationship... but these past months have been overall the happiest I have been in a long, long time. Thank you for that, and I can only hope it continues for as long as possible. (And I'm putting that in print, so don't go making me have to publish a revised edition of this book, ha ha!)

Finally, to the penguins! Leave me alone, damn it!

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## *Chapter One: The Fateful Dip in the Springs*

by Matthew Atanian

---

As he left the plane, Boy Scout leader Matthew Atanian looked behind him to make sure that his four Scouts were right behind him. "Here we are," he said to them, "back on American Soil."

"I don't know if you'd call the interior of an airport 'soil'," Aaron Abdelmaseh responded. Aaron had won a trip to China for himself, three other Scouts from his Troop, and one Troop Leader through a contest in Boy's Life magazine. He had asked Matt to be the Scout Leader, and his three friends Mike Quadrozzi, Bill Hughes, and Bill Gelinias to be the other three Scouts.

"Where to now?" Mike asked.

"I guess we get our luggage, go through customs, and go home," Matt said.

After a lengthy wait in the customs line, the five emerged from Bradley International Airport. "Now we're on American soil once again," Bill Gelinias commented.

"No," Bill Hughes responded, "this is American pavement."

Matt looked up at the sky as an airplane flew noisily overhead, momentarily eclipsing the sun. "Thank god it's a clear day," he said. "Not a cloud in the sky."

"Definitely glad for that," Aaron said. "If it rained, I'd hate to have to explain... you know... to my parents."

A large blue mini-van pulled up. "Speaking of your parents," Matt said.

The van's passenger side window rolled down, and Mrs. Abdelmaseh stuck her head out of the window. "Hi, Aaron! Have a nice time in China?"

"Um, yeah," Aaron responded as convincingly as he could.

Sandy Quadrozzi, Mike's mom, pulled up in her blue-green car. She greeted Mike similarly to Mrs. Abdelmaseh's greeting to her son.

Soon, everyone's ride had arrived. Before letting the four Scouts go, Matt called them all together where they would not be overheard by the waiting parents.

"Remember," he told them, "not a word about what happened."

"I don't think you'll have to worry about that," Billy Gelinas said. "I'm sure as hell not going to tell anyone."

"Good," Matt said. "Remember, try to avoid cold water at any cost. Good luck to you all, and see you at the meeting Wednesday."

The five of them went their separate ways, yet they were still bound together by both the bonds of friendship and the shared burden of a terrible secret.

A week ago, the five had been enjoying a hike through the Chinese wilderness. Their guide, a thickly accented, slightly heavy built Chinese man in some sort of uniform, was taking them to many majestic spots that few foreigners ever get the chance to see.

This day they were hiking through the area of Mt. Quanjing, a mountain in the Qinghai Province's Bayankala Range.

Around noon, the group reached a strange area filled with countless springs. Each spring had at least one bamboo pole emerging vertically from it, and in the case of some of the larger springs, two or three poles. The mountain filled horizon added to the mysterious field of springs' majestic beauty.

The guide came to a stop and faced the group. "Here, sirs, is legendary 'Training Ground of Accursed Springs,' Jusenkyo. This place very dangerous. Almost nobody use now. Is more than one hundred spring here, and every one have own tragic legend!"

Matt removed his backpack. "We'll break here for lunch."

\* \* \*

Bill Hughes tapped a Swamp and a Forest as he took a bite of his sandwich. He cast a Swamp Mosquito. He then tapped his other Swamp Mosquito, his Marsh Viper, and his two Pit Scorpions. "Billy, I'm attacking you."

"No fair," Billy responded. "Aaron just wiped out all of my potential blockers."

"Why do you think I'm attacking you?" Bill said.

"Sirs," the guide said, "this is very strange card game. What you say it called again?"

"Magic: The Gathering," Aaron responded.

"So how much damage is that?" Billy asked.

"Three damage," Bill responded. "And don't forget that you get five poison counters."

"Thanks, Bill," Billy grumbled.

"Any time. I'm done."

"My turn," Matt said. He drew a card and then considered his hand carefully, already knowing what he would do. He already had a Blanket of Night and a Circle of Protection: White in play, so of course he would put out his Karma. "I'm done," he said.

"Oh, crap," Aaron said, "Matt's got this game in the bank."

"My turn?" Mike asked. The others nodded, so he untapped his cards. As he had eleven mana producing lands in play, he took eleven damage from Karma. However, Mike had a trick up his sleeve that, while it wouldn't get rid of Matt's deadly Blanket of Night – CoP: White – Karma combo, had plenty of bite of its own.

Mike looked at his hand. Two Mountains, two Forests, a Feldon's Cane, a Lhurgoyf, a Jokulhaups, and a Giant Growth. While the Giant Growth, which he just drew, was unimportant for the moment, the rest of the cards in his hand would give everyone else a very nasty surprise.

Mike tapped two Forests, two Mountains, and his Dormant Volcano. Using the six mana this gave him, he pulled the Jokulhaups from his hand and dramatically threw it to the ground. "Hey Matt, remember that trick you showed me at that Klondike Weekend?"

Matt smiled knowingly.

"That's it," Mike said, "everything but Enchantments are out of here."

As if on cue, a strong gust of mountain wind suddenly blew in, picking up all the cards and depositing them into the springs. Immediately, the five players sprang to their feet and went after the cards.

The guard also bolted to his feet and yelled out after the Scouts, "Hey, sirs! Where you going?"

The Scouts continued forward without paying heed to the guard's calls.

"You can't go there! You've not yet heard all of Tragic Story!"

"Split up!" Matt told the Scouts. "We'll each take a spring and get the cards!"

"Quick, before their ruined!" Bill Hughes reminded.

"Please, sirs!" The guard shouted in final warning. "Is very bad to fall in spring!"

Almost in unison, the five dove into separate springs, grabbing after their waterlogged Magic Cards. Immediately upon making contact with the water, their arms started flailing wildly, as some unseen force dragged them under. They all felt an intense tingling sensation all over their bodies as if a great pressure were being exerted on them.

After a moment, the four of them, all but Matt, broke through the surface, one by one, all gasping for air. However, they were not the same as before jumping into the springs.

"Oh, too bad," the guide said. "You all fall in accursed springs. In many many years I am working here as guide, I never see so many fall into springs at one time."

The guide turned to Aaron. "You, sir, fall in *Yaazuniichuan*, Spring of Drowned Duck. There is very tragic legend of duck who drown in spring three thousand year ago. Now, whoever fall in spring take on body of unfortunate duck."

Aaron furiously quacked at the guide as he angrily shook a wing at him.

The guide turned to Mike. "You, sir, fall in *Song-shu-niichuan*, Spring of Drowned Squirrel. There is very tragic

legend of squirrel who drown there one thousand nine hundred year ago. Now, whoever fall in same spring take body of same squirrel."

Mike had managed the shore and had crawled out of the spring. He was shaking the water out of his fur as the guide turned to Billy Gelinias.

"You sir, you fall in *Gou-niichuan*, Spring of Drowned Dog. There is very tragic story – very tragic – of poor dog who drown there two thousand five hundred year ago. Now whoever fall in spring take body of dog."

Billy was paddling towards the shore and howling in despair.

Matt finely came to the surface as the guide turned to Bill Hughes. "You, sir, fall in *Maoniichuan*, Spring of Drowned Cat. There is very tragic legend of cat who drown in spring eighteen hundred year ago. Now, whoever fall in spring take on body of cat."

Bill inquisitively meowed, not sure what was going on.

Matt, meanwhile, was in shock, running his hands over his own body. "Oh, too bad," the guide said to him, "you fall in *Nyanniichuan*, Spring of Drowned Girl. There is very tragic legend, very tragic, of young girl who drown in spring one thousand five hundred year ago. Now whoever fall in that spring take body of young girl!"

Matt grabbed his chest and was surprised to find that he had ample breasts. Horror than gripped him as his hands moved down to his groin.

"You see," the guide said, "now you young girl."

"Oh my god!" Matt exclaimed in inhuman terror. "It's gone!"

It was Tuesday, two days after they had gotten back home. Matt was making calls to the others to see how they were fairing.

"How is everything, Aaron? Are you okay?"

"I had a close call yesterday," Aaron responded. "I was walking home from a friend's yesterday when someone's sprinkler system got me. I flew home and

luckily the bathroom window was open. I got myself some hot water and changed back to normal."

"Oh, good."

"How's everyone else?"

"They're okay, so far. Bill got chased by a neighbourhood dog, but he got away."

"How long do you think we can keep this up, Matt?" Aaron asked. "I mean, it's bound to rain on a camping trip or something. What'll we do then? And on the first winter camping trip, I'm sure that our body heat will melt any snow. You know what that means."

"Yup. Melted snow equals cold water equals you're a duck and I'm a woman."

"So what do we do then? You do a Playboy centrefold and use the proceeds to buy me a nice little pond?"

"It won't come to that. We just need to keep some hot water around. With that, we can easily change back."

"Yes, but we can't let anyone else find out."

"I know, Aaron, I know. I'll think of something."

"I sure hope you will."

"See you tomorrow at the meeting."

Wednesday night, a little before 6:30, Boy Scout Troop 192 gathered at the Church in the Acres on Wilbraham Road in Springfield, Massachusetts. A little after 6:30, the Scoutmaster, Mr. William Pruyne, was making his opening announcements.

"Remember, this is our last meeting before Summer Camp next week, so we will be going over the last minute details..."

From behind Mr. Pruyne, Matt shot Aaron, Mike, and the two Bills a shocked look. They all returned the look and also exchanged it with each other.

Summer Camp!

How could they have forgotten?

Summer Camp meant Swim Tests on Sunday. Swim Tests meant diving into the cold waters of Russell Pond in

front of not only the rest of the Troop, but in front of the Waterfront Staff and quite a few other Troops, too!

Holy Mother of God!

The dreaded Sunday had arrived. The Troop had arrived at Horace A. Moses Scout Reservation for a week of Summer Camp. Currently, the Troop was at the camp's Waterfront, all clad in bathing suits and all clutching towels and uncoloured buddy tags.

"Okay," the waterfront director called out, "Troop 192, you're up. Let's see your Leaders, first."

Jack and Joan McGraw, two of the Troop's other Adult Leaders, were the first to dive in. Matt was glad to let them go first. He'd gladly let anyone go first. He'd politely offer Hitler a nice relaxing dip in the pond before going in himself.

Unfortunately, Hitler was long dead, which while for the most part a good thing, Matt could have used him alive now as it was otherwise his turn to take a swim test. Matt was sweating profusely, which was only partially from the intense heat wave Massachusetts had been experiencing for the last few weeks. Mostly, the sweat was because he was nervous as hell.

He was about to dive into a pond full of water. He would turn into a woman in front of all of these Boy Scouts. And, being a man, Matt's suit didn't exactly cover his chest.

He was going to turn into a topless woman in an environment full of men, most of who were around puberty with the special hormones and urges that brings, and all of whom probably wouldn't realize that despite appearances he was a man. Matt could picture the ensuing riot in his head as hundreds of groping hands reached out for him. He felt as if he would be sick.

Aaron, Billy, Mike, and Bill, all watched Matt and prayed for a miracle.

"Okay," one of the waterfront staff members said, walking up to Matt, "no more stalling! In you go!"

## *Chapter Two: Stormy Weather at Camp Moses*

by Matthew Atanian

---

The waterfront staff member was about to shove Matt in when a distant crack of thunder sounded, closely followed by a louder, closer one. Matt looked up and noticed the storm clouds hanging above his head.

The waterfront director began closing down the waterfront and Matt and the others were saved.

For the moment...

The five of them sat around the picnic table in the centre of Crown Point, the campsite that Troop 192 had been using at Summer Camp for a few years now. It hadn't yet begun to rain but the sky had darkened considerably. Matt didn't need to remind the others to wear raincoats. Like him, they were already in theirs, taking no chances.

"Tonight, I'll sneak down to the waterfront and colour in our buddy tags," Matt told the others, advising them of his plan. "That way we won't have to take our swim tests later. I'd like a volunteer to come with me and watch my back."

"I'll go," Aaron said.

Aaron looked away from the book he was reading and glanced at his watch. It was a few minutes before eleven. He put the book down and began putting on his shoes.

"Almost time?" Mike asked from his cot. Aaron looked up at his tent mate and nodded.

A moment later, a twig snapped outside their tent.

"That you, Matt?" Aaron asked.

"No other," Matt answered. "You decent?"

"Come on in," Mike responded.

Matt pulled up the tent's flap and walked in. Over his uniform he was wearing his trademark black trench coat which fell to his knees and made for excellent night-time concealment. Also, he had traded his Boy Scout hat for the trench coat's matching fedora.

"It's Inspector Gadget!" Mike said, laughing.

"Shut up, squirrel boy," Matt responded.

Aaron pulled on his black leather jacket. Since he didn't have a trench coat (although he someday wanted a dark green one), he had changed from his Boy Scout pants into some dark jeans.

Matt took off his fedora briefly and nervously ran his hand through his dark hair. He flipped his hat back on and said to Aaron, "Ready when you are."

"Let's go," Aaron responded.

The two of them cautiously approached the buddy-board at waterfront where all of the buddy tags were hanging. They almost jumped out of their skins when laughter emanated from one of the nearby tents that housed the youth waterfront staff.

"They're still awake," Aaron said.

"Then we'll do this real quiet like," Matt whispered back. He took out his mini-Maglight. As he turned it on and pointed it at the buddy-board, a drop of water which he assumed was sweat fell upon his hand.

The flashlight's beam made it's way across the various titles on the sections of the buddy-board: Fallen Timbers, Ethan Allen, Pynchon. Finely, Matt found Crown Point.

Matt pulled the red and blue markers from his coat pocket. Then the heavens opened up and disgorged an ocean-full of rain upon them.

"Well, I got'ta get going," Dan said. Dan Wellington was one of the Dynamic Wilderness Challenge instructors,

and was therefore tenting in the Scoutcraft area, but was visiting some friends at waterfront. "Early day tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Dan."

"Night."

Dan backed out of the tent and turned around and saw his friend Matt at the buddy-board. An instant later, he realized it wasn't Matt. Whoever it was was a head too short, had red hair instead of black, and was also, Dan realized after a closer inspection, a woman. Not even a baggy trench coat that fell to her ankles could completely hide her remarkable figure. Dan smiled as he walked toward her, a plan forming in his mind.

Dan stopped as he noticed two odd things. The first was the white duck that was standing atop a rumpled pile of clothing next to the woman. The second was that the woman was tampering with the buddy tags.

"That's the last one," Matt said, putting the tag back on the board. Aaron suddenly started quacking furiously and batting Matt in the leg with his wing.

"What is it?" Matt asked, looking up.

"What do you think you're doing?" Dan angrily asked, briskly walking towards them. He removed from his pockets a Zippo lighter and a can of bug repellent and aimed them at Matt.

"Oh, um, Dan?" Matt stammered.

Dan came to a halt. "Do I know you?"

"Yes. No! Uh, sort of."

Dan lowered the bug spray, and Matt breathed a sigh of relief. Matt had decided long ago that he never wanted to be on Dan's bad side while he had flammable materials.

Aaron quacked. Matt stooped to pick up Aaron's clothes.

"Who are you?" Dan asked.

"Tomorrow, when's your earliest free moment?"

A puzzled look crossed Dan's face.

"When are you done with your courses for tomorrow?"

"Um... After lunch. Why?"

"Meet me out at Cabin III an hour after lunch tomorrow." Matt turned and began walking away. Aaron flew after him. "Come alone."

Dan watched, standing unprotected in the rain, as the mysterious short red haired woman walked away. He remained standing in the rain long after she had disappeared into the woods across the street. *Come alone?* Dan wondered. *Was she making a pass at me?*

He turned and looked at the buddy-board, using the Zippo to see. The area that the woman had been tampering with contained the buddy tags for Crown Point. A familiar name met Dan's eyes: Matthew Atanian.

At lunch the next day, Dan walked up to the empty piece of bench next to Matt at one of Troop 192's tables in the Dining Hall. "Mind if I join you?" he asked.

"Not at all, Dan," Matt said. "Go ahead."

"Hey, Chicken Guy," Billy said, referring to the Chicken named Boo that Dan had brought up to camp the previous summer.

"Hi," Dan said, cheerfully. Dan was usually in good spirits, but even when mad he always seemed possessed with a certain vigour, as if he was constantly high on life. He turned to Matt.

"So, what's up, Dan. Anything interesting happen lately?"

"You could say that." Dan lowered his voice so that only Matt could overhear him. "Last night when I was leaving waterfront, I saw this beautiful woman tampering with the buddy tags for Crown Point. She wore a black trench coat and a black fedora. Do you know anyone staying in Crown Point who wears a trench coat and fedora?"

"Only myself, Dan. And as you can see, I am not a beautiful woman. The only woman staying in Crown Point," Matt said, pointing to the next table over, "is Joan McGraw."

Dan looked. Joan McGraw was a short, dark haired woman who looked somewhat boyish except for her wrinkles. "That is definitely not her," Dan said.

"I'd like to help you on this one, Dan," Matt said, "but I don't know who she is. If you find her and things don't work out, send her my way. You know how desperate I am for a girlfriend."

Dan laughed. "I saw her first."

Matt laughed back, but inside he felt vaguely ill. His mind was made up. He'd have to tell him.

Dan arrived at Cabin III shortly forty-five minutes after lunch had been let out. "You're early," a voice said from within the storage area attached to the cabin.

"Matt," Dan said as his friend emerged from the shadows, "what are you doing here?"

"You were told an hour after lunch," Matt repeated. "You're early."

"You do know her," Dan said. "Where is she?"

Matt picked up a bucket of cold water that was at his feet, lifted it up, and turned it over onto himself.

Now it was Dan's turn to feel vaguely ill, as he recalled the many interesting little thoughts he had had last night about himself and the mysterious short red haired woman. "Matt?" he said.

The woman nodded her head. "Yes, Dan. It's me."

"I think I'm going to be sick."

Billy was getting revenge for the game of Magic they'd played at Jusenkyo. He, Bill, Mike, and Aaron were all sitting in Mike and Aaron's tent, the bunks pushed together and the mattresses removed to make a large gaming table. He tapped all of his creatures and looked over at the creatureless Bill Hughes. "I'm attacking you."

Bill cursed and took the damage.

Billy then tapped all of his lands, putting thirteen mana in his mana pool, and used it to Lava Burst Aaron.

"You're going to pay for that," Aaron said.

"I'm done," Billy said. He turned to Bill. "Your turn."

"I know, I know," Bill said, depressed over the way the game was turning out. He stood. "I'll be right back."

"Where're you going?" Mike asked.

"To the bathroom, if that's all right? Don't look at my cards while I'm gone."

The lone figure trudged though the forest, his backpack weighing heavily on his shoulders. The weight didn't bother him, however, He was strong, and to him it felt like nothing more than a feather or two.

He stopped for a second to tighten his yellow bandanna. By his reckoning, it was almost two in the afternoon. He had walked through the night and through most of today on his long and toilsome journey.

Just where was he, anyway? He thought he was near Kumamoto, or maybe Yatsushiro. Of course, he had been wrong before.

He came into a clearing and in the clearing a group of canvas tents were set up on platforms. A figure was emerging from one of the tents and he decided to ask for directions.

Bill was backing out of his tent to go and find a tree to make friends with when a hand fell upon his shoulder and spun him around. Bill was surprised to see before him a young, dark haired Asian man dressed mostly in yellow, complete with a yellow bandanna tied around his forehead. The young man was also wearing a heavy looking backpack with a bamboo umbrella atop it.

"Uh..." Bill said.

"*Furinkan Koukou wa doko da?!*" the Asian man asked, practically shouting.

"What?" Bill asked.

"*Nani?*" the man asked.

"Can I help you?" Bill asked.

"Um... English?" the man said slowly. "You speak English?"

Bill nodded.

The man tightly gripped both of Bill's shoulders and shouted, "Tell me! Where is Furinkan High School?"

## *Chapter Three: Watergunfight at the Moses Coral*

by Matthew Atanian

---

"Furinkan High School? There's no schools near here," Bill said. "You're in the middle of a Boy Scout camp.

"How far is it to Tokyo?"

"What's your name," Bill asked.

"Ryoga. Hibiki Ryoga. Please, I've got to get to Tokyo."

"You've been travelling by foot?"

Ryoga nodded.

"Um, Ryoga, you're not even on the right continent. You're near the east coast of the United States of America, in Massachusetts. You're no where near Japan."

Ryoga's jaw dropped to the ground as he began to make funny noises. "What do you mean? This isn't even Japan?"

"You honestly didn't know? What, have you got no sense of direction?"

Ryoga turned and walked away, seemingly in a trance. "I'm sorry to have troubled you," he said as he disappeared into the woods.

Bill looked off into the direction Ryoga had disappeared into for a long time before realizing that his bladder was about to explode. He shook his head as he renewed his quest to find a friendly tree.

"So I emerged from the spring to find that I was a woman," Matt said. "Hot water temporarily reverses the effect, but only till the next splash of cold."

"There's this whole training ground in China filled with these cursed springs?" Dan asked.

Matt nodded.

"I have got to get to China!" Dan exclaimed.

"Why the hell would you want to do that?" Matt asked, pulling a large thermos from his backpack.

"I have to see if they have a Spring of Drowned Fire."

Matt was stunned speechless. While trying to comprehend what Dan had just told him, he dumped the hot water in the thermos onto himself. "You have got to be kidding!" he finely said.

"Why?"

"First off, fire can't drown, it would be doused! Second, you think life like this is easy? Think again. It's been hell. This is not an easy secret to keep. I never realized before my little accident in China how many ways there are in every day life to get doused with cold water."

"I take it you didn't mean to be a girl last night."

"The rain caught me and Aaron by surprise."

"Aaron's the duck, right?"

Matt nodded.

"You're going to need a name," Dan said.

"Name?"

"Yeah. You're bound to be spotted eventually by someone else, and if they ask your name, I doubt you'd want to say it's Matt Atanian."

"I didn't even think of that."

"How about Matilda?"

Matt thought it over. "No."

"Martha?"

"No."

"Well, you come up with one then."

Matt thought and thought. He pulled the book he was reading from his backpack and read a bit, hoping it would help him think. It didn't, as he was too busy concentrating on the story. He put the book down and thought some more.

Meanwhile, Dan was bored and had started burning things. Nothing that big, mind you, although he had accidentally almost burned down a tree. As it was, the tree's foliage was noticeably thinner. Finely, Dan said, "Matt, have you thought of anything yet? It's getting dull just standing here."

"I think I've got it," Matt said a moment later.

"Well?"

"I've always hated being called 'Matty' because I thought it sounded too feminine. But now..."

"But now you are too feminine!"

"I don't know if I'd have put it that way."

"What about a last name?"

"That one's still stumping me."

"What's the book you were reading?"

"Just a *Robotech* novel."

"Any female main characters?"

"Lisa Hayes and Lynn-Minmei. Why?"

"Matty Minmei?" Dan suggested.

"I don't relish the thought of naming myself after that selfish, spoiled little brat," Matt responded, "but I think I like the ring of Matty Hayes."

Mike was returning to Crown Point from the Trading Post when it began to rain. As the sky had looked clear up till five minutes ago, he had been caught unprepared and thus was continuing his trip back to the campsite on four legs.

A large foot appeared before him, and he looked up, twitching his little tail nervously.

"Look what we have here," the owner of the foot said, "a little squirrely!"

The owner of the foot, a tall, lanky Life Scout in his late teens who was wearing a rumpled uniform, stooped and picked Mike up before he could run away. He laughed. "Time for my biology lesson."

He pulled out a rusty pocket knife and laughed some more.

Mike chittered in fear, frantically trying to get away. He bit the boy's thumb, drawing a thin line of blood.

The boy screamed. "You shit of a squirrel, you'll pay for that!"

He threw Mike down to the ground hard, stunning him. Before Mike could recover, the boy had knelt down and was preparing to make an incision. Mike was sure that the boy was not in possession of a medical degree, and

got up to run. The boy slammed his hand down on Mike's tail, stopping his escape.

The boy brought the knife down and ran it lightly across Mike's body, not yet breaking the skin. He laughed some more as Mike frantically tried to run. Mike then turned and raked his forepaw across the boy's hand. He yelped in pain, but did not bring his hand up. Instead, he whacked Mike with his other hand, stunning him again.

"Enough playing," the boy said. He brought the knife up high, and swung it swiftly down towards Mike, about to disembowel him.

"What do you think you're doing?" A woman's voice sternly called out.

The boy looked up and saw a beautiful woman with short, red hair. She stormed forward, made a fist, and punched him in the face.

The boy ran, dropping his knife.

Matty stooped down and picked up Mike. "Are you all right?" she asked.

Mike nodded.

"Come on, let's go get you some hot water."

The sky cleared up later that day, and for the next few days the weather remained sunny. Matt had heard that the weather was supposed to stay sunny for the rest of the week. It was only Wednesday, however, and he wouldn't feel safe until he was home again.

He straightened his Order of the Arrow sash as he walked across the parade field towards the Manor House to make a phone call. Wednesday was O.A. day and Matt, as a proud Arrowman, was dressed in full Class A uniform complete with sash. Of course, Matt was always in Class A uniform. Matt looked in disgust at all of the people who wore their sashes over scout T-shirts when they were only to be worn with the Class A's.

Oh well, O.A. day was only one day. He'd get over it.

Matt was too busy thinking evil thoughts about people incorrectly wearing their sashes and so he didn't notice the

group of four Scouts who were engaged in a running watergun fight across the parade field until it was too late.

"Oh great," Matty said as she reached to take off her nametag. After summer camp, she'd have to order one with her new name. She also took off her sash. Women couldn't get into the O.A. until they were twenty-one. While she felt she should pass for twenty-one as she was only a little less than a year away from it, she didn't think she'd be able to pass as a Vigil member of the O.A.. People couldn't get their Vigil until about three years after getting into the O.A., and as it was Allogagan Lodge only had three female Vigils, and she didn't think she'd pass for one of them.

She turned to head for the Dining Hall to get some hot water. She'd prefer to have her male voice before using the phone.

When she turned, Matty noticed that she had been being followed by a tall, lanky boy in a rumpled uniform. His left hand was covered by a black leather glove.

"We meet again," he said.

"Do I know you?" Matty thought he looked familiar, but she'd never been particularly good with faces.

The man held up his gloved hand and pulled off the glove. Revealed on his hand were the scabby injuries he had received from a certain squirrel.

"You were that boy from two days ago who was about to kill Mi... that squirrel!" Matty said.

"And you were the one who punched me."

"What's your point," Matty angrily asked.

"You don't do anything about me and the squirrel, and I won't report you for hitting me."

Youth protection was something the Boy Scouts of America took very seriously, and punching a scout could get an adult leader kicked out for life. Matty didn't stop to think that she had been in the perfect disguise when she had hit him before she agreed to keep quiet. "But don't let me catch you doing anything like that ever again," she added.

"Don't worry," the boy said. "For you, anything."

"What?" Matty said, stunned.

The boy reached behind his back and pulled some flowers from his belt. He handed them to Matty, who was too bewildered to think before taking them. "Where did you get these?" she asked.

"From the flower garden at the Ranger's house."

Matty drew in a shocked breath. When Mrs. Anderson, the Ranger's wife, saw her rose garden, she'd be pissed. Matty threw the flowers down in disgust. "What are you giving them to me for?"

"Just a token of my affection, my sweet."

"Your *what?!* "

"You are in what troop?" the boy asked. He looked at Matty's shoulder and read the troop number. "192? You're in what, Crown Point?"

"Look, you, don't get any funny ideas! I have absolutely no interest in the likes of you!"

"That's what they all say," the boy said, turning to walk away. "Women are just afraid to admit their true feelings."

"Were you born stupid or did someone drop you on your head?" Matty called out after him.

He momentarily stopped his departure as, laughing, he turned to regard Matty. "Don't worry, my goddess, I won't tell anyone of your secret yearning for me. Oh, and the name's Kuntz. Taylor Kuntz."

Matty watched Kuntz walk away, an angry, disgusted look rapidly growing on her face. After he had disappeared into the forest, she threw her head back and regarded the cloudless sky. "You have got to be kidding!" she shouted to any deity who cared to listen.

## *Chapter Four:*

### *For the Love of the Red Haired Woman*

by Matthew Atanian

---

Summer Camp had ended, and Matt was home taking a nice, hot bath. This was a luxury he rarely afforded himself, usually just showering. However, he felt a definite need to unwind after the hellish week he had had up at camp. Especially that squirrel molesting twerp...

Matt opened his eyes and sat up as he thought he felt something move in the water. But that couldn't be. He was the only thing in the tub, and the tub was so small that it barely held him!

Suddenly, the form of Taylor Kuntz rose from the water. Matt recoiled in disgust and shock. "What the hell are you doing in here?" he shouted.

"Matthew Atanian," he said, the hot water dripping off of his bare skin, "I love you!"

"What the hell are you talking about, you pervert!" Matt shouted. "I'm a guy!"

Without warning, the bottom of the tub fell out from beneath them, but instead of falling into the basement, Matt found himself surrounded by an unending sea of blue. Kuntz was no where to be seen. Matt swam up, hoping to break the surface before he ran out of breath.

Finely, his head rose above the water. He was surprised to see open sky overhead, and a voice called out to him, "My sweet, grab hold of this!"

Matt looked, and he saw that somehow he had ended up back at camp. He was floating in Russell Pond, and in front of him was the diving platform at the deeper end of the Swimmer's area of the waterfront. Upon the platform, clad in his rumpled uniform, Kuntz sat and holding a stick out to him. "After I rescue you, we can go catch a movie or somethin'."



"I'm better," Mike said. "Still got a bit of a headache."

"I can't believe some guy was going to gut you, Quad," Aaron said. "How people like that can get into scouts is beyond me."

"You think you have problems," Matt said. "Yesterday was awful for me."

"What happened?" Aaron asked.

"Someone proclaimed their love for me."

"So?" Mike said.

"It was a guy."

"That could be a problem," Aaron said.

As the troops were waiting outside of the dining hall to be let in for breakfast, Matt caught sight of Taylor Kuntz, who was as always clad in his rumpled uniform with his left hand gloved to cover the evidence of his encounter with a certain squirrel. Matt grabbed the scout aside and took him over to the rock pile near the front of the dining hall.

"I know you," Kuntz said. "You're the guy in the Trading Post last summer with the Star Wars music. That shit was annoying as hell. I'm glad they got someone else in there this summer."

"Are you always this pleasant in the morning?"

"So wha'd'ya want, already?"

"The red haired woman. Stay away from her."

"What is she to you? Girlfriend or somethin'?"

The troops had begun filing into the dining hall, but Matt and Kuntz stayed where they were. "I guess you could say she's close to me," Matt said.

"I don't care if she's your fuckin' wife," Kuntz said. "She's going to be mine."

"If I have any say in the matter, she'll never appear before you again," Matt said as he began to walk away.

Kuntz was rooted in place, anger boiling within him. "What the hell are you talking about?" he hollered as Matt disappeared down a dense path in the trees. Kuntz suddenly took chase, catching up with Matt easily. "What

do you mean never appear again?" he shouted as he spun Matt around to face him.

Kuntz's anger quickly disappeared as a stupid grin appeared on his face. "My sweet! It's you!"

*Stupid me*, Matty thought as she considered the bushes and shrubs that closely lined the path she had took, *forgetting that the bushes and stuff would still be covered with dew*. She frowned.

Kuntz hugged her and she slapped him in the face, hard. "Get the hell off of me," she shouted.

"But my love," Kuntz said.

A little black piglet wearing a yellow bandanna came walking down the path. It squealed at them contemptuously to get out of its way. Matty took the opportunity during the momentary distraction to break free of Kuntz's grip and run for the dining hall.

Kuntz gave chase, and Matty ran furiously towards the rear entrance to the dining hall.

She quickly ran up the stairs, noting that Kuntz had gone in through the side entrance, apparently hoping to cut her off. "Scuse me, Kenny," Matty said to one of the chefs, as he scrambled to get out of her way.

"Watch where you're going! You're not supposed to go in there!" Kenny shouted after her.

Matty dashed into the kitchen and straight for the coffee area where she grabbed a pot of hot water and dashed out into the dining hall. She looked left and saw Kuntz standing by the door. She quickly ran to the opposite door.

Kuntz spotted her and gave chase.

Matty ran out of the door and poured the water over herself. He then put his foot out just as Kuntz came flying out of the door, tripping the boy, further rumpling his messy uniform.

Kuntz got up and sloppily swung a fist at Matt, which he dodged easily. "Where did you hide my red haired goddess?" he spat.

"Give it up," Matt said.

"I never will!" Kuntz shouted.

The dining hall door swung open and out stepped Bill, Mike, Billy, and Aaron. "Is this the guy?" Aaron asked.

"What guy?" Bill asked.

"The guy who's 'in love' with Matty, Hughes," Mike responded.

Kuntz growled.

"You have got to be kidding," Billy said.

"Where is she?" Kuntz shouted. He took another swing at Matt, and this time Matt's dodge wasn't completely successful. Matt rubbed his slightly bruised cheek.

Bill and Billy grabbed Kuntz, restraining him. Matt smiled. "I'm bound by Youth Protection Guidelines not to touch you," he told Kuntz. "My friends here, however, are still considered as Youth in Scouts. Calm down and go eat some breakfast before you have no teeth to eat it with."

Matt smiled. Having realized that no one could connect him to the punch Matty had given Kuntz yesterday, and assuming that Kuntz wouldn't report his "goddess" for hitting him, he decided to turn the tables on the boy. "And don't even think of telling anyone about this incident," he told Kuntz, "unless you want anyone to know about you and a little squirrel."

"How did you know about that?" Kuntz shouted.

"That was you?" Mike shouted. He lunged at Kuntz, only to be held back by Aaron.

"No, Mike," Aaron said, "He's not worth it. You don't want to get kicked out of camp for fighting this jerk."

Kuntz shook himself free of the Bills' grip. He looked at Matt for a moment. "I think I will have some breakfast," he said after a moment, "but don't think this is over."

Kuntz turned and walked into the dining hall.

Late that afternoon, Matt was sitting under a tree in the Scoutcraft area reading when Dan Wellington walked up to him.

"Hey Matt, guess what?"

"What's the latest scoop, Dan?" Matt asked in return. Matt often looked upon Dan as a source of news and gossip on what was happening in Scouts, and all Dan asked in return was any information Matt may have heard that wouldn't have reached Dan's ears yet. Most of the miniscule amounts of information Matt had ever provided Dan with concerned the O.A., but Dan would probably be able to get any O.A. info himself in the fall when he took office as Lodge Secretary.

"A group from Bonnie Brae is coming up."

"The Girl Scout camp?"

Dan nodded. "Something's wrong with their waterfront so a group of them's been given permission to come up and use ours. The waterfront's going to be closed for our use during that time, but of course that's not a problem for staff. You can come along, if you'd like."

"What, go ogle at a group of half-my-age preadolescents and their fifty-something haven't-aged-well mother/leaders?"

"Something like that. I don't expect to see much either, but the waterfront staff is making it sound like a big deal."

"Yeah. What is it with them? Mike in my troop was telling me something which made them sound like lechers or something."

"What can you do?" Dan postulated. "Like I said, it'll probably be nothing, but if you want to come..."

While most of the girls and their leaders had lived up to Matt's expectations, a few were actually something to behold. And one of them was something to die for.

Matt and Dan sat at a picnic table near the waterfront staff tents, discretely watching the swimmers under the pretence of playing a game of Magic. The woman who had caught Matt's eye was apparently one of the leaders who, like him, had been a scout in the program and had stayed on as a leader after turning eighteen. She had a slender figure that was quite well proportioned, well tanned skin,

and a face with elegantly sculpted features. Framing her face was a mane of luxuriously flowing red hair that was presently slicked back with water. Her bikini was making Matt feel kind of funny, like when he used to climb the rope in gym class.

She got out of the water and reached for her towel. As she was rubbing herself dry, she happened to glance in Matt's direction. He quickly turned his gaze away from her and put down a card, even though it wasn't his turn. Of course, he hadn't been paying the game much attention. Then again, neither was Dan.

The Girl Scouts had stayed for dinner, as it was past five when they had finished swimming. Most of them were eating at the picnic tables outside of the dining hall, as the Boy Scouts took up most of the room within the building.

Matt had also chosen to eat outside, and was sitting at a table with Dan and the Kitchen Aids. Matt spotted the woman he had seen at the waterfront. "That's her," he said to Jim Anderson, a friend of his on the Kitchen crew.

"The one with the red hair?" Jim asked.

Matt nodded. Just then, he saw her stand up and pick up her tray, headed for one of the trash cans. Matt also stood up, rather quickly, and grabbed his tray. "I'm going to go talk to her!"

"You're living dangerously," Dan commented. Jim wished him luck.

As Matt approached her, he caught the gentle scent of the shampoo she had used when she had showered after swimming. His heart began to pound furiously in his ears and he took a deep breath.

She finished dumping her refuse and turned to face him. Matt flashed her a smile. She frowned.

"Hi," Matt said.

"Aren't you that pervert who was pretending to play cards earlier today?" she asked accusingly.

"Um..." Matt said.

"Look, Mr. Testosterone, I know you haven't seen a woman in almost a week, but lower the hormone levels a bit, okay? If you'll excuse me?"

She walked past him, barely affording him another glance, and returned to her seat. Matt also returned to his seat, a depressed look sitting heavily upon his face.

"Got burned?" Dan asked.

*Chapter Five: El Ocaso*  
*Encimo De Un Más Verano*

by Michael D. Quadrozzi

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On a cold Friday morning of the old-fashioned sort, the sun reluctantly rose over the grounds of the Horace A. Moses Scout Reservation of Russell, Massachusetts. It crept over Coffin Handle Hill and glinted on the dew soaked grass. It continued to creep over the forsaken mire that, by the end of the week, a.k.a. today, the parade field had become. It lighted the paths and warmed the cracked pavement of General Knox Road, and eventually reached the bottom of a hill and the campsites that rested there, where it failed to shed much warmth.

By six o'clock, however, things began to perk up. Bugs started buzzing, birds started singing, and the whole of Creation seemed generally pleased with itself.

All was bliss.

The bliss was shattered by a series of odd noises. First, there was a yell of surprise and alarm, then what might've been a quack, and then a lot of shushing, and then silence.

The source of this auditory barrage was a green canvas tent, of the usual type employed by the camp. This tent was this week being used by Dan Wellington, and he was holding a white duck by the scruff of the neck.

The source of all the shushing was the figure who had just jumped into Dan's tent at this ungodly hour and did not want Dan to use the lighter he was holding close to the duck, which was struggling feebly. Dan recognized the figure as Mike Quadrozzi, one of the senior scouts in his friend Matt's troop. As usual, Mike wore the shabby red baseball cap that bore the much faded and barely readable insignia of Troop 192. Over his uniform he had a dark blue parka, despite the fact that it was summer. Up until now, Dan had thought of Mike as a fairly normal, if

not a little manic, person. But then again, fairly normal people didn't burst into other people's tents at six in the morning blabbering on about waterfowl.

After some pleading from Mike, Dan extinguished the lighter, seeming to come out of a trance as he did so. "Oh, hey, Mike," he said cheerfully. "What the hell are you doing in my tent?" He looked at his catch. "What the hell is this duck doing in my tent?" he shouted.

Mike held up his hands. "Calm down, Dan. I can explain," he began, but couldn't after all and fell silent. He thought for a moment. "Just put the duck down."

Wellington looked down at the creature, then at the lighter, and with a sigh dropped the former to the wooden planks of the tent's floor. It quacked quietly and sat down by Mike's feet.

"Thanks," Mike said. There was an awkward silence. Dan looked as if he expected Mike to say something more, and unbeknownst to him, bits of Mike's mind were arguing with other bits over what that something should be.

Mike was as surprised as anyone to find that the bits of his mind that were arguing were mainly composed of the cast of Monty Python.

Out of the murky depths came the high-pitched and passive voice of Michael Palin, "I think we should tell him."

"Are you insane?" sputtered John Cleese, "He's only just found out about Matt!"

"All the better," remarked Palin. "He'll take it easier."

"Oh, very nice!" Cleese's eyes rolled. "The chap will just love hearing that the whole bloody lot are a bunch of forest animals!"

"Dogs and cats aren't forest animals," said Palin. "And besides, you don't have to phrase it like that. It's more like being honest with him."

"Oh, honest, how nice," said John Cleese in mock praise. "While we're off being all sweet and apologetic, we can make him some bloody *sticky buns!*"

Palin's eyes narrowed. "You're mocking me."

"Oh, piss off."

"Well I'm going to tell him."

Cleese bristled. "Right! Fine, see what I care!"

"I'll do just that," said Palin, turning away with a sniff.

With a mental blast of wind, Mike popped back into Dan's tent and looked around. Wet towels hung from a piece of rope tied across the top of the tent, from pole to pole. It smelled musty, as most of the camp's tents did. The white duck quacked plaintively from its seat on the wooden planks. Mike sighed. "Okay, right. Dan," he glanced up at his fellow scout, "There's something we've got to tell you."

Dan smirked. "We? What, you and the duck?"

Mike smiled back. "Yeah, me and the duck. Come on." He waved for Dan to come after him and turned to leave the tent. Just before pulling back the flap, Mike noticed the large burlap sack under Dan's bunk, and pointed to it. "What's that?" he asked.

Dan finished lacing his boot and looked over at the dusty sack. His face cracked in a wolfish grin. "Oh, nothing much," he said, and followed Mike and the white duck outside into the chill morning air.

The five of them sat in Mike's tent. Dan Wellington, Mike, Hughes, Bill Gelinias and a white duck. A shaft of sunlight sprouted through a gap where the flaps are tied to the tent poles, but other than that it was pretty dark. No one spoke for a minute or two, but everyone yawned. It was just after six o'clock, clearly too early to be having any sort of conversation, never mind a potentially serious one.

Sitting on Aaron's bunk, Dan was visibly confused. "Um, Mike," he began slowly. "What the hell is going on? What do you guys have to tell me?" He looked down at the duck. Something at the back of Dan's mind was nagging at him about the duck. "And what's with the duck?"

The Bills looked at Mike, who briefly removed his red baseball cap to scratch the back of his head. He really wasn't sure how to proceed. "Ah, well Dan--"

He was interrupted as the tent flaps were flung open and Justy Yung stuck his head inside, "Hey, morning

everybody," he said cheerfully. "What's the little meeting about?"

Everyone blinked at the sudden rush of light. Bill Hughes was startled. "Jeez, Justy," he said in a voice a lot of people interpreted as whiny, "What are you doing up?"

Justy's head bobbed up and down with delight. "Making the adults coffee!" he looked around at the assemblage. "Hi, Dan!"

Wellington smiled weakly. "Hi, Justy."

Justy Yung was known the Council over as the biggest ass-kisser the organization had ever seen. His targets were anyone of a higher position than he was. Justy presently held no position at all in Troop 192, so that basically included everyone in the tent. "Anything I can get you guys?" he asked.

Mike started to say no, then stopped. He looked down at the white duck. "Actually, Justy," he began, and Yung's eyes lit up with glee. "Could I just have some hot water?"

"Sure!" Justy said, and skipped away towards the tarp covered kitchen area.

Inside the tent, everyone continued to sit quietly. Dan seemed lost in his own thoughts, and the other scouts looked at Mike knowingly but nervous.

Seconds later, Justy returned with a mug of hot water. "Fresh from the stove," he said, handing it to Mike.

"Thanks," replied Mike. "Now go away."

Justy turned as if fetching another item. "Okay!"

The five of them were alone again, and Hughes put his head in his hands. "God, I hate him," he said.

"You know he's just doing all of this because he thinks he has a shot at SPL next elections," said Bill Gelinas, speaking of the annual event where new junior leaders would be chosen.

"I hope he doesn't," answered Hughes.

"Anyway," Mike said, bringing everyone back to the matter at hand. He held the cup of water. He looked over at Dan Wellington. "Watch this," he said simply. Taking the white duck off of the bunk, he put it down on the wooden

planks and emptied the steaming cup of liquid upon the creature.

Dan gasped as suddenly the creature was not a white duck but Aaron Abdelmaseh.

Abruptly, Dan fell silent. He stared at Aaron, towelling himself off, and the other looked up at him.

"Why so surprised, Dan?" Aaron asked. "You knew about this."

Dan's eyes went wide. That was what had been nagging at him. "Oh yeah!" he said. "I do! Huh." He took out his lighter and began burning off the sticker on the side of the tent that read 'No Open Flames.'

It was Mike's turn to be confused. "You already knew?"

Dan glanced over slowly, as if wondering why Mike was still bothering himself with the subject of people turning into animals. "Yeah. Matt told me after him and Aaron coloured in your buddy tags." he smirked. "I guess I forgot." He examined the smoking ruins of the safety label, pocketed his lighter and lifted the flap. "See ya," he said, and left.

The four of them sat in the tent. Mike was trying to catch up. Hughes plotted Justy's downfall. Bill was silent. Aaron was wet.

A thought struck Mike and he turned to the former duck. "Why were you in Dan's tent, anyway?" he asked.

Aaron shrugged. "Well, I wasn't counting on anyone else being up. I thought I'd get in some early morning flying practice."

The others looked at him questioningly.

"Hey, it's harder than it looks."

"Oh," they all said.

Aaron, covered with a wet towel, eyed his fellow scouts. "Could I maybe get some privacy, here?"

After that, the camp-wide opening ceremony was held, followed by a breakfast of egg and cheese omelettes that left something to be desired, mainly taste. Back at the

campsite, the scouts of Troop 192 went their separate ways, either off to their last merit badge class or racing against time to finish that last requirement. The adults, meanwhile, joined adults from numerous other troops and went off to do whatever it was they did when the youth aren't around and weren't seen again until late afternoon.

It was about this time that Mike, Aaron and Bill found they didn't have much to do. So, looking around to make sure no adults were nearby, they began a leisurely game of Magic on one of Crown Point's many picnic tables.

Mike had just put down his first Mountain when Bill Hughes came charging out from between two tents like a small flannel-coloured tornado, waving a bug net over his head and yelling obscene things at a black and yellow butterfly that remained just out of his reach. After a few seconds of mad dashing about, he disappeared over the next ridge.

Some amused glances were exchanged, and then the game resumed. Mike tapped his new mana source and slapped down a Lightning Bolt. He smiled. "Three points of damage, Bill."

Gelinas grimaced. "Sure. Fine. Whatever."

Mike smiled again, having elicited the desired response. "Lot more where that came from."

It was Aaron's turn now, and he drew a card as someone walked into the campsite.

The three looked over to see Matt Atanian come down the path. They all shouted greeting at their friend, whom they had not seen since last night.

"Hi, Matt!"

Matt's only answer was to meander into camp in a daze.

At last he noticed the others and said airily, "Oh. Ah, hi guys."

"Hey, Matt," said Mike. "What's up?"

Matt thought the question over. "Oh, I was just thinking."

Mike eyed him suspiciously. "All night?"

Matt looked around again, noticing the daylight. "Guess so."

"About what?"

Matt smiled and stared into space. "The Girl Scout leader."

And he floated away over the next ridge.

Mike, Aaron and Bill Gelinias were beginning to wonder what was so special about that ridge that everyone had to go over it for, but left it at that and continued with their card game.

And the last day at camp goes on . . .

When the adults returned to the campsite around four o' clock, Mr. McGraw, Scoutmaster-for-the-week and all around bitter old man, whipped his 'signs-up' and fell the troop in for an important announcement.

"All right, you little pukes!" hollered McGraw. "We have been instructed to come up with a skit and or song for tonight's camp wide closing campfire! Troop 192 will participate, and we will have fun, you hear me? *Fun, dammit!*" Jack McGraw was a military man, and had been in Vietnam, as he never let anyone forget.

After some discussion, it was decided that the troop would perform the 192 original, 'Clappy Song,' and the classic skit, 'Musical Chairs.'

There was an hour and a half yet until dinner, and everyone went their separate ways again.

Bill Hughes deposited his three quarters into the Coca-Cola vending machine, which rested on the porch of Camp Moses' Trading Post. The coins rattled around inside the machine and Hughes punched the button for a root beer. The machine made some buzzing noises, supposedly locating the proper beverage.

From behind him, Mike remarked, "I heard they might've finally fixed this thing."

There was a clang of metal on metal, and a can of Kiwi/Mocha Fruit Juice fell out of the slot.

"Or not," Mike said.

Hughes sighed.

"Hey, did you finish Insect Study?" asked Mike.

"Took me three years," Bill responded, lifting the tab on the can of juice, "But I finally did it." The tab came off with his finger, and he stared at it.

Mike almost smiled, but it was too hot. The temperature had jumped a full thirty degrees in the past two hours, making it one of the more unbearable last days of camp Mike had experienced in a while. And, of course, the mosquitoes were out living it up.

With a determined look on his face, Hughes took out his pocketknife and jabbed at the can, promptly snapping the blade clean off.

"This is one tough can," said Hughes.

"Hey, guys!"

Both Mike and Hughes turned to look as Jon Becker trudged up the hill towards the building. He was a good twelve yards away, but they could still hear his headphones. He never took them off.

Ever.

*How many batteries did he bring with him?* "Hey, Becker, want a soda?" called Mike, taking the can from Hughes.

"Sure!"

Mike tossed it over, and the other caught it like a wet beach ball. Becker examined it for a minute with a careful bespectacled eye. "Hey," he said. "What's wrong with it?"

"Uh, it came that way."

"Oh," answered Becker. "Well, I'll see ya." He trotted past the Trading Post into the road to the tune of 'Norwegian Carpentry Folk Songs' and out of view, prying at the can with his fingernails the whole way.

The two scouts exchanged a glance, and then sat down on the wooden bench.

"I just lost seventy-five cents," muttered Hughes.

"Yes," said Mike, "but you got rid of Becker."

"Point," conceded Hughes.

Just as the calm of an evening coming to a close was settling over the field, a voice shouted from inside the Trading Post, "Are you two gonna buy anything, because I'm closing up soon for dinner and you've been sitting there for like a half hour and if you don't buy anything now, I'll kick your ass!"

As anyone could see, the kid who ran the store was a cunning salesman.

His name was Roy, and he was an irritable bastard.

"I can't argue with that, Roy," said Mike, stepping through the entrance. Half-empty racks of merit badge books and shirts and things lined the wall by the door. The store's merchandise was greatly depleted at the end of the week; in fact the only thing there seemed to be a surplus of was navy blue Official Boy Scout Toothbrush Cases.

"Buy a toothbrush case," snarled Roy as Mike walked up to the counter.

Mike smiled. "Actually, I'm in more of a Slim Jim mood today."

Roy slowly glanced over at the snack shelf. There were three Slim Jims, a hot ball and some Tic-Tacs left.

"They're forty five cents each," he said.

"Give me two."

Roy grimaced. "Why don't you buy all three?"

"I only want two," answered Mike.

The Slim Jims flew through the air and hit Mike square in the forehead.

Roy rang it up on the cash register. "That'll be ninety cents," he spat, holding out a hand.

In it, Mike placed a nice, crisp twenty dollar bill. He smiled.

"You don't by any chance have anything smaller?"

"Seriously, Roy, it's the only money I've got," said Mike.

Nineteen dollars, ten cents flew through the air and hit Mike square in the forehead.

"Thank you, come again."

\* \* \*

"What was that about?" asked Bill Hughes as they walked down the hill, back towards the campsites.

Mike shrugged. "Roy's got a permanent wedgie or something."

Hughes smiled. Mike had a way with words. "I think I liked Matt in the trading post better."

"Yeah."

They trudged on through the muck, their sneakers grinding rotten apples into the mud as they approached the orchard. The sun began its long journey westward across the sky.

Mike took his recently purchased Slim Jims out of his coat and moved them to his pants pocket. When he drew out his hand, he grinned broadly. "Hey, Hughes."

"What?"

Mike opened his hand. "Ninety cents."

The Knox Dining Hall was the heart of the camp. Everything from meetings to retreats to movie nights took place there from time to time, not to mention all the eating that went on. Set down in a grassy clearing by the side of the road, towered over by the forest behind it, the dining hall was a building with character. And today, as the sun sank behind the hills and evening drew ever nearer, crowds of scouts and scouters began forming by the building's three oak planked entrances, waiting for dinner to begin.

The minute hand clicked into place, and bracing themselves, the kitchen staff flung the double doors wide as hundreds of tan and puke green shirted campers stormed into the dining hall. Timidly, they reminded a few of them to kindly remove their hats upon entering.

Troop 192 found their two tables, as did everyone else, and after a short bowing of heads for grace, seats were taken and conversation resumed.

Mike Quadrozzi placed his red baseball cap on the bench next to him and glanced at it forlornly. His head felt naked.

He looked around at the seven others at the table with him. All but one of them was a member of Troop 192. He was their guest tonight, and as the lights overhead flickered off and on, a signal for the waiters to step up and get the food, he spoke.

"So guys," began Mr. Mark Abert, an adult from Troop 180 and the camp archery instructor, "Will you be attending the campfire?" He paused suddenly.

"What's wrong?"

Abert shrugged. "Just thought I heard someone cackle. Oh well."

Mike resumed the conversation. "Troop 192 will be there."

"Good. The campfires are always fun."

Just then, Aaron returned with his tray, burdened with a pitcher of water and a large bowl of sauerkraut. He placed them on the table and went back for the rest.

Mr. Abert cheerfully pored himself a glass of water. This was actually how he went about most things. Cheerfully. On the rare occasions he became angered, he seemed strangely goofy, which is why most everybody liked him and also why he'd been hired to replace the last archery instructor, whom nobody had liked at all.

"Played any Magic lately?" he asked in that funny yet oddly serious way as he filled his glass.

Now, this wasn't an odd question coming from Mr. Abert, for he was one of the very few adults in the council who actually played the game and didn't want it banned, shredded and torched as sort of sin against humanity. Still, at least three of the scouts present were aware of the bizarre consequences their last major game overseas had had. Mike nearly choked on his water. Hughes stiffened in mid-chew of a lump of sauerkraut.

Clearly, Bill Gelinas didn't notice the tension.

"Well," he said. "There was that big Magic game we played with Matt in Chi--" And then he tumbled off the bench as Hughes elbowed him under the table.

"In Chicopee!" hollered Hughes, grinning madly. "Yup, big game in Chicopee last week. Ha ha. Oh look! It appears that Billy dropped his fork!"

"Huh," remarked Abert. "Well, he should get a new one. There's nothing worse than a dirty fork."

"Or a dirty knife," said Mike, who had decided to ignore the others.

"Oh, yes," agreed Mr. Mark Abert.

Aaron returned again with a steaming bowl of a beefy stew substance, heaped with hearty bits of things. He sat down on the bench next to their guest and let out a sigh. The meal had obviously been awkward to carry.

"You're definitely serving yourselves this time," he said.

After Billy climbed back onto the bench, those at the table turned their attention to the food, joining everyone else in the room. Their attention would not be divided between the food and anything else for at least a good fifteen minutes or until something really interesting happened.

As luck would have it, the large double doors at the main entrance swung open and in walked last year's Dining Hall Steward and one of this year's Camping Commissioners, Norm.

A thunderous cheer erupted on all sides as hundreds of diners yelled, "Norm!" at the tall, dark-haired, sunglasses-wearing man.

Acting on the spur of the moment, this year's steward, a dark-skinned young man called Dave, leaped out of the kitchen and took an exaggerated bow to the tune of thunderous booing.

Good-naturedly, Dave went back into the kitchen, leaving Norm to his adoring fans. Roses were thrown, thunderous cheering resumed.

No one liked you if you were steward.

Everyone liked you if you had been steward.

Back out leapt Dave, and the cheering halted. Everybody booed. Luckily, someone had thought to bring

rotten produce, and Dave was chased out of the dining hall by a trio of ornery Secondclassmen.

Norm had business to attend to in the kitchen, and as the clapping died down, people went back to their plates.

All of this, of course, happened at every meal.

Dinner was going well; Hughes asked for the sauerkraut. Mr. Abert obliged. Some chewing went on, and then, from the next table over, a voice said, "What the hell's with this can?"

They all turned to see Derek Provost, Troop 180's resident good-natured pervert, stabbing savagely at a can of Kiwi/Mocha Fruit Juice with his butter knife. He was getting nowhere. "Aw, the heck with it!" he said, and as they watched, Provost attempted to gnaw at the soda can's impenetrable top.

And then, after they rushed Derek to the nurse, his mouth bleeding profusely, conversation resumed and dinner continued.

The beefy stew substance turned out to be surprisingly good, given enough salt, and as scouts and scouters alike were finishing up, stacking gravy smeared plates in piles on their trays and gratefully handing them to the waiters, signs were called by an elderly gentleman in the centre of the hall.

He cleared his throat, encouraging the conversation to die down. After silence had been reached, he stood for a moment more just to show that he could, using his walking stick not so much for balance as for a symbol of authority. He did this a lot, and was entitled to. He was probably the oldest guy in the council, and there are those that remark, only half-jokingly, that he knew Baden-Powell personally.

"Good evening," Harris Tanner said. His voice was somewhere between lilting and gravely. "All in all, I'd say this has been a pretty good week of summer camp, and in a little while, we're going to top it off with our traditional closing campfire." He paused suddenly, cocked an eyebrow. "Did anyone just hear a cackle?" he asked.

Tanner shrugged. "Anyway, you've got a little bit of time before then, so we'll let you off the hook early tonight. Get back to your campsites and practice your skits. Everyone's dismissed!"

Those crowds that hurried to get in now hurried to get out, nearly bowling the old man over. Hats were put back on and benches were moved aside as the satisfied masses left the building.

The Dining Hall was empty, save for a few members of the kitchen staff. There was little noise beyond the resonant hum of the large wall fans near the ceiling as they blew out the hot summer air. And then abruptly, the double doors opened and Matt Atanian floated in. He looked around slowly, his gaze foggy after so much staring into space.

"Aw, no," he said. "I missed it again, didn't I?"

The tent flap was thrown open, and Mike Quadrozzi stuck his head inside.

"We're all set with the skit," he said. "Think you can remember your line?"

Aaron put down the copy of *Chariots of the Gods?* he'd been reading and screwed up his forehead in mock concentration. "Um... oh! Ahem. 'Three days later.'"

Mike smiled. "Could use some work. Try it with feeling!"

Aaron got up off his bunk. "Are we off?"

"We're off."

The two of them walked up the hill to join the rest of Troop 192, flashlights in hand.

The Moses Closing Campfire was about to begin.

The troops began to settle down, although a few of the ruder morons continued to shine their flashlights aimlessly around the amphitheatre. The crowds coming in were tapering off. Everything was almost set. And Dan Wellington stood between the two enormous fire lays

constructed 'on stage.' He wore a huge grin as he silently considered the large burlap sack at his feet.

He had found it when he had been getting some Scoutcraft supplies out of the commissary the week before camp opened. The object within the bag had been heavily weathered and rusted, and Dan had had no idea how such a marvellous device would have come to rest here at Moses. It seemed like fate, like God himself had seen fit to give him a new toy, and Dan had secretly brought it to Cabin III where, over the summer, he had spent a good deal of his free time restoring the object within the bag to its former glory. He had finished just two days ago and had tested it yesterday. It had worked beautifully, like he knew it would.

Wellington put his sings up and waited a moment for the audience to get as quiet as it would get.

"Good evening!" he then shouted, "and welcome to the Horace A. Moses 1997 Summer Camp Week 3 Closing Campfire!"

As the crowd somewhat enthusiastically cheered, Dan turned his back to them and stooped down to get his prize out of the burlap sack. When he turned back to face the audience, he was holding a quite old yet (thanks to Dan's efforts) quite functional World War II vintage flamethrower. The pilot flame shone on Dan's face, making him look seriously demonic.

As he held it facing the audience, the crowd was rightly so slightly nervous. But then Dan turned to the left fire lay and blasted it with an inferno of pure flame. All the while, he was laughing like a mad man, the sweat pouring off his joy-filled face.

Dan turned to the right fire lay and blasted it as he had the first. It was instantly consumed in a ball of liquid fire. Turning back to the crowd, he aimed the flamethrower straight over his head and shot a pillar of flame into the sky as he laughed triumphantly.

The audience began booing.

Dan released the flamethrower's trigger and looked at the crowd, confused. It then dawned on him that it was still

awfully dark in the amphitheatre when there ought to be two huge bonfires going.

Dan slowly looked to his left, and a startled look came upon his face. Slowly, he looked to his right, and was startled once more.

He turned to the audience. "Um, sorry," he said.

The two huge fire lays had been instantly reduced to piles of ash. Dan began to think that maybe he shouldn't have soaked the wood in jet fuel.

A half hour later, after the fire lays had been rebuilt with perfectly ordinary wood and then been lit with a perfectly ordinary match while the kitchen crew held Dan back to prevent him from "helping" in any way, the campfire finally got started.

"—AND IT DID!!" hollered Bill Hughes as he chased Mike off the stage in the closing scene of their skit. The crowd laughed and clapped warmly. A curly-haired man with a guitar was next to perform.

The fire lays were down to embers. The amphitheatre had become dark once more, and the old closing song came to its final verse:

". . . everything to Be Prepared," the crowd sang in unison. It was now silent. No one shone their flashlights, not even the ruder morons. Slowly, each troop rose from their seats and left the clearing.

The week had officially come to an end.

Later that night, back in Crown Point, the five of them sat at the site's tarp-covered kitchen area: Mike, Aaron, Hughes, Bill Gelinas and Matt Atanian, whom they had finally caught up with on the way back from the closing campfire.

The only light came from the one lantern still on by the picnic table. Everyone else had gone to sleep. There was no moon, just an overcast summer sky.

"Good job, everyone," Mike said. "We seem to have escaped disaster today."

"Forgive us if we're not cheering," yawned Hughes.

The crickets sang a few bars.

"I suppose it's time to hit the sack," said Matt.

They all agreed.

And on cue, it began seriously to pour.

All five of them exchanged glances, realizing they probably weren't going anywhere for a while.

"Anyone have an umbrella?"

"No."

Hughes smiled. "Who's up for a game of Magic?"

## *Chapter Six: Enter Troop 42!*

### *Girl Scouts Arrive at the Church in the Acres*

written by Aaron Abdelmaseh

story by Matthew Atanian

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It was a gloomy day, an "I know I ought to get off of my duff and do something, but I just don't want to" type of day. The sky was just the wrong shade of gray, the humidity just a little too low, the wind blowing just a little too east. Today was the time of the year between summer and fall when it was too cold to do anything fun, but too hot not to do anything fun. Generally, it was a boring type of day. It was also the type of day when fates change, and destinies come into focus.

Well, maybe not. But it was a boring day, to be certain.

Matthew K. Atanian (a.k.a. "Matt") wheeled his bike into the Church in the Acres' parking lot. Clad in his red, patch-covered coat, wearing the puke-olive green Boy Scout pants, and capped with his trademarked wide-brim hat, Matt was ready for anything that could possibly happen on this day, the first day of the new Scouting year.

Approaching his father's van (Matt had ridden his bike, as his father had to leave shortly for another meeting), Matt noticed that there were an awful lot of girls present on this gloomy, unfriendly day. Large numbers of women were not an unusual sight at Troop meetings. Indeed, they were expected. Most of the members of the Troop were not old enough to drive, and those who could didn't have licensees. It was expected that one of the parents would provide a ride for the Scout, and usually the mother did it, most likely so she could gossip with her friends. However, while large numbers of grown, motherly women were commonplace, large numbers of girls wearing blue skirts and sashes with white blouses were far from ordinary.

Matt's dad stepped out of the van, and Matt approached him with a questioning gaze. "What are all these girl scouts doing here?" he asked.

His father turned to him with all the regal weight that many years of service as a former lodge advisor gave to a man. He looked Matt in the eye and said, "I told you last night, Matt. They're the Troop of Girl Scouts, Troop 42, which the Church has invited to meet here. They'll meet downstairs, but I have the feeling we'll be working together closely over the next few weeks, maybe for longer." He paused, and then looked at Matt impatiently. "I told you all this last night."

"You never said that," Matt said.

His father started to say something then swallowed it, shaking his head. Instead he said, "Meet me inside soon. We've got to do a pre-opening on patches."

Matt nodded absently, but all of his attention was drawn to one of the leaders.

She had a slender figure that was well proportioned, with nicely tanned skin and a face with elegantly sculpted features. Her eyes burned with a fiery competence and spoke of deep intelligence. Framing her face was a mane of red hair that was presently done up in a bun on which rested her Girl Scout cap. She was wearing a uniform, not a bikini, but Matt had no trouble recognizing her from before.

Matt was standing there, staring blankly in the direction of the field, and didn't realize that Aaron, Bill (a.k.a. "Hughes"), Billy (a.k.a. "Gelines"), and Mike (a.k.a. "Squid" [don't ask]) were approaching. Aaron called to Matt and greeted him in friendly fashion and then saw the terror in Matt's eyes.

He turned to the others, "He isn't taking it well."

Hughes, on the other hand, was far less dramatic. "Hey Matt," he hooted cheerily, "we've got Girl Scouts."

Matt continued to stare blankly at nothing, particularly at the mental image of the woman in his mind. "Oh God," he muttered painfully.

Squid frowned. Then he grinned. "You called?" He frowned again when this did not draw its usual bales of laughter.

Matt's upper lip twitched a bit, but otherwise he continued to stare at nothing.

Gelinas scanned the area for the source of Matt's torment, and Hughes spotted it. "It's the leader."

Squid nodded in recognition as he saw her. "The Madame Man Hater."

Gelinas muttered, "To Hades with the feminists."

For a moment, the group stared at Gelinas; deep, philosophical statements were usually a mist to him. The group's attention quickly returned to Matt as he started to whimper.

Aaron spoke, "Wasn't she the one who called you 'Mr. Testosterone'?"

Matt nodded weakly. "What's *she* doing here?"

"Well, Matt," Aaron said, "I seriously doubt that she single-handedly convinced her troop to pick up and move here just so she could be closer to you."

Matt shrugged weakly (he seemed to be doing a lot of things weakly, suddenly) and turned his attention back to the Girl Scout leader. She was sitting on the stairs with two other Girl Scouts, whose backs were presently turned to the group. Steeling himself, Matt muttered, "Now's just as great a time to do this as any." Then to the group, "Anyone with me?" Suddenly, everyone had things to do. Squid and Gelinas hurried inside, shouting that they had to plan the meeting for tonight. Hughes backed away slowly claiming that he was "allergic to feminists". Aaron, being the only one who stayed behind, was still not going to let Matt rope him into this one.

"Sorry, Matt," he apologized, holding up his hands, "but she scares me more than she scares you. I can stay here and wait for you if you want."

Matt grimaced. *Small consolation*, he thought. Instead, he said, "Thanks. Time to face my demons."

With a weak grin, Matt squared his shoulders, straightened his uniform, tested his breath, and started off toward the girls.

"That is one brave, stupid man," Aaron muttered.

Matt approached the three girls slowly, with a measured pace, and a more-than-normal straightness to his posture. Perhaps she would have forgotten the first time he had laid eyes on her. He sure hadn't, but there was always a chance.

None of the three appeared to notice him on his way over, but the one from camp looked up as he neared them, and muttered something that Matt thought was meant to be derogatory. Her fiery eyes looked him over once, swiftly, widened for a moment in recognition, and then regarded him with a deep-rooted malevolence. One of the two smaller girls noticed, and nudged the other who was still talking in the ribs.

All three were now regarding Matt with heavy, weighing gazes.

The eldest appeared to be contemplating the best way of ridding herself of him, as if he was a parasite she had just found clinging to her leg. One of the girls – who appeared to be twins – was regarding him with a measuring gaze, looking for a weakness to exploit, as if they were opponents in a duel. The third was the least malevolent. She regarded him with a measuring gaze as well, but hers was more friendly, a considerate, searching look, exploring his character.

Matt broke the heavy silence that had descended upon the group. "Uh, hi. I don't know if you remember me or not. I'm Matt. Matt Atanian."

"I remember you, all right. Mr. Testosterone from summer camp. Just my luck we'd meet again." She was very sarcastic in her last sentence.

One of the twins snickered, a grin on her face. The other made a shushing sound, and frowned at her twin.

"I see you do remember me," Matt said disheartedly. "There goes my hope for a fresh start."

The eldest nodded, though whether to herself or to Matt would remain unclear for years to come. "Say, why don't you go away so we can some fresh air?"

One of the twins laughed this time, and the other frowned at her leader.

Matt wasn't a genius, but he sure wasn't stupid. He knew when he was burned, and when he would look like a fool if he pursued further. With a heavy heart, Matt turned around and headed in some random direction, with shoulders slumped and a sad grin on his face.

Aaron decided to observe the confrontation from a safe distance; basically, as far away he could get from the battle zone without appearing to be cowardly or deserting Matt.

He sat down on a log at the opposite end of the parking lot, watching carefully. Matt was slowly approaching the trio, and just as Matt reached them, Jon Becker (a.k.a. "Becker", no relation to local movie critic Sy Becker) stepped in front of Aaron's field of vision. With a stupid smile on his face, a box of Magic cards in one hand, and a Scout Handbook in the other, Becker greeted Aaron.

"Hi there!" he said in an over-loud voice.

"Get out of the way, you stupid—" Aaron began, but then he noticed the headphones on Becker's ears.

"What?" Becker asked in that over-loud voice again.

Aaron sighed, grunted, spit, hissed, cursed, did a little jig, sat down, cursed, twitched, cursed, and finally pushed Becker away. He was just able to catch Matt walking away in a "poor, poor, pitiful me" manner. The trio was consulting with one another, and Aaron could not quite tell what they were saying; hell, they were at least fifty yards away, and their faces were hidden in a huddle.

Aaron watched Matt for a moment, and realized that it hadn't gone well. For a moment he thanked himself for not

having been there, then cursed himself for deserting Matt, and then thanked himself again. He went to rejoin Matt, but didn't advance more than three steps, as Matt had disappeared around a corner.

For a moment Aaron considered searching for Matt, but he decided to walk inside and get ready for the onslaught of mischievous little children that would be attending tonight's meeting. He lost himself in thought, and didn't realize that one of the trio was walking beside him until she tapped him on the shoulder. Aaron's head jerked up from its slouched position, and he took his hand away from his chin, realizing that he had been tugging his stubble again.

He turned his head to face the girl. Nearly as tall as he was, the girl was attractive even in her Girl Scout uniform. Her skin was a pale cream colour, and her large, green eyes were mounted nicely on an attractive, youthful face. Her hair was pale brown and of undeterminable length, as it was tucked underneath her hat. Her full, red lips were turned down slightly, but she did not appear to be pouting; instead it gave her an air of undeterable independence. Her slim, petite figure was highlighted by a snug fitting uniform, but she didn't appear to be flaunting. She carried an air about her, an air of self-assurance, highlighted by the way she held herself and the way she walked.

For a moment Aaron was taken in by her appearance, and then he realized what a fool he must have looked like. He stopped, and turned his entire body to face her. The corners of her mouth turned upward slightly in what might have been a smart grin.

"Hi there!" she said, in an open and warm fashion.

"Uh, hi." Aaron replied hesitantly. *What the hell is she doing?* he wondered, as he often did when attractive women approached *him* openly. Usually, when they did, it was to ask him whether or not this test answer was correct, what the homework for the night was, or to demand that he loan them money – which, while it may have scored points for him with them, he never did. This

left him totally dumbfounded, and it took him another moment to realize what he said.

"Um, hi," he repeated, just to make sure he had said it.

The girl grinned smartly again. She had clearly seen it in his eyes; he was going to have to work on that. "No, I'm not here to squeeze money out of you. My name's Kirstin. Kirstin Porter."

"Um, hi," Aaron repeated. Hell, it had worked so far; Kirstin was still talking to him, she hadn't hit him yet. A famous quote came to mind, one that he based his life on: *The only substitute for good manners is fast reflexes.*

"I see the rumours are true," Kirstin said half to herself.

Aaron frowned at this. So, the attractive girl who was talking to him had heard of him before. Most unusual. He said the only thing he could possibly think of. "I think you have the wrong person."

Kirstin eyed him up and down, then centred her gaze back on his eyes. "Nope, you match the description. And unless that isn't your name tag, you are Aaron Ab-ab-abdolmash."

Aaron didn't bother to correct her pronunciation of his last name; God knew how he tired of it. Besides, here was an attractive, intelligent girl who had heard of him and was actually looking for him; he wouldn't dare risk blowing it.

Suddenly, time froze. Aaron was sucked into a vortex of his own consciousness, and the mind in his head spoke to him with a deep Scottish accent like that of Sean Connery. *Aaron, it said, are you stupid, man? She's just another girl! She has no interest in you, so stop acting like a wool headed lummox and be yourself! Talk to her, damn you! Be you--* and abruptly the voice was silenced as Aaron shut it up. He slid back to himself.

"Oh, I guess I am," he said, trying to recover his lost pride. He grinned at Kirstin, and this time it was a smart grin to rival her own. "Mind if we start over?"

She looked at him with a slightly puzzled, slightly amused smile on her lips. "Sure," she agreed hesitantly.

Aaron walked several steps backward, and Kirstin turned toward him. She walked forward and smiled. "Hi, there!"

Aaron nodded his head slightly in her direction, a dip of the upper torso that barely passed as bow.

Kirstin nodded again, and said, "You must be Aaron Ab-ab— oh, you must be Aaron."

Aaron looked at his nametag and smiled. "Ah, I must be. What can I do you for?"

A chuckle rose from Kirstin, and she said, "Nothing as of this instant, but maybe something soon."

Aaron got the jitters for a moment, and almost got sucked back into that damned nexus of his, but then Kirstin clarified herself. "It depends on whether or not you know Matthew Atanian."

Aaron put two and two together, and instead of getting his usual five, he realized that this was one of the three girls that Matt confronted. He considered his answer for moment, then responded, "I know him, well enough." That should have been enough for her to realize that they were associates, but it would have left room for questions concerning friendship. Aaron was a good friend of Matt, last he checked, but one had to be careful with unspoken questions like that.

Kirstin merely nodded. "Well, in that case, I guess I can ask you this: is he really a jerk?"

The question caught Aaron slightly off guard. "Excuse me?"

"Is Matt a jerk?"

Aaron frowned, and observed the ground at his feet for a moment. "Is Matt a jerk..." he repeated quietly. He looked back at Kirstin. "Nope."

Again, she nodded. "As I thought, Sarah over reacted again."

Aaron put two and two together successfully again. "I take it Sarah is the leader."

"That she is," Kirstin responded. "She's my sister."

Aaron *hmmmed* softly. "I don't see much resemblance."

Kirstin giggled softly. "Not many people do. Be nice, though. She has been slightly, shall we say, irritable since Rodney, her last boyfriend, cheated on her."

"Ah, well, she'll get over it soon enough," Aaron said, hoping to change the topic.

"Not likely," Kirstin said. Her tone was becoming slightly distant, as though she was thinking deeply. "It has been an annoying and violent three months since."

"Ah. So. Who was the other girl with you? I didn't quite see her face clearly."

Kirstin giggled again. "She's my other sister. My *twin* sister."

Aaron absorbed this slowly. "Is she like yourself?"

"Not at all, thankfully," came the hasty response. Aaron gathered that he was on dangerous ground now. Like an idiot, he decided to play it out a bit more, to get a little more information.

"Why thankfully?"

"No reason," Kirstin said. Aaron could picture little flames in her eyes, the way she was speaking.

"Ah. Why do you want to know whether Matt is a jerk or not? Is it important?"

Kirstin smiled. "Not important to me... maybe to a certain irritable sister, but not to me..."

Aaron's eyes widened in understanding.

"Is Matt available?" Kirstin asked.

Again, Aaron considered his words for a moment. "He is, last I heard."

Kirstin absorbed this, and then tapped her lip in thought. "You are friends with Matt, correct?"

Aaron decided to play along. "Perhaps."

"So, you know what kind of a person Matt is, right?"

Aaron nodded.

"And I know what kind of a person Sarah is, right? So, I was thinking . . ."

"But you hardly know either of us!" Aaron blurted out.

"I know, but I think Matt is right for her." Kirstin smiled again. "Call it a sixth sense."

Aaron shook his head slowly, marvelling at her intelligence. "If Sarah finds out, it'll be your head, not mine."

Kirstin giggled. "Of course. But, then again, you don't know her, right? Well, I don't know Matt."

*Plausible deniability*, Aaron realized. God, it was too good. "Thing is, Matt should probably know about this. He's got a certain... attraction to her."

Kirstin looked at Aaron as if to say *duh*, but instead said, "Then it's settled."

"It is."

"By the way," Kirstin asked, "I just met you. You don't know me. So why are you helping me cheer up my sister?"

Aaron considered this for a long second. "Oh, I don't know, honestly. Maybe because it's in Matt's best interests as well? I don't know." He grinned. "Call it a sixth sense."

"Thanks, Aaron." Kirstin smiled warmly, then checked her digital watch. "Oh, crud. The meeting's already started."

Aaron looked around, realizing that he was alone with her in the parking lot. The damnable adult leaders had neglected to remind him to come in. "I guess we should head in."

The two walked to the door, and Aaron held it open for her. As Kirstin passed him and headed toward her meeting room, Aaron grinned, and didn't notice as she slipped a folded piece of paper in his Handbook. Turning, unaware of the paper, Aaron headed upstairs to the meeting.

Later that evening, Gelinas and Squid attempted unsuccessfully to return a semblance of order to the Troop. As always, all but the most senior members of the Troop were acting like the primates that they descended from, and several in particular were being *extremely* annoying. Bill raised his hands with the middle three fingers raised, but it didn't work. Squid raised his voice to

an exponential number of decibels and hollered "**SIGNS UPI!**" but it had no effect.

The adult leaders of the Troop were their usual uncooperative selves – all excluding Matt – and most were hiding in the kitchen at this moment. Those adults who were available were either talking idly among themselves, and those who weren't were talking were shaking their heads in disgust at the complete inability of the Troop's youth leaders to bring order.

Eventually the youth leaders gave up and let nature take its course. The adult leaders would invariably complain about this, and the youth leaders would continue to blame the adults' lack of assistance; however, all the gold in the world would not get the Scouts to fall into order, so it was pointless to stand against them.

Squid and Gelinias, tired and defeated, walked over to where Matt was sitting. Aaron came up the stairs, from a merit badge conference, and walked over to the group. Aaron sat down on the stair next to Squid; Gelinias sat on the table in front of them. Hughes walked over from out of the chaos, and sat down on the table next to Gelinias. The table creaked loudly, and there was a loud snapping sound, which persuaded Gelinias and Hughes to sit down on the stairs with the rest of the group.

Matt was sitting with shoulders slumped, head lowered. His arms were limp and he was generally unresponsive to anyone. Aaron, on the other hand, was wearing an awkward grin on his face, a Han Solo-ish twist to his mouth. He was in good spirits, for some reason that even he was not quite sure of. Squid was noticeable irritable, and Gelinias was idly examining the room. Hughes was thinking about gypsies and griffins, and had a twisted smile on his face.

"So, you gonna tell us what happened with Sarah?" Aaron asked Matt.

The rest of the group looked at Aaron, and Hughes spoke for all of them when he said, "Who's Sarah?"

Aaron nodded to himself, realizing his mistake. "Ah, I apologize. Sarah is the Girl Scout leader."

The group nodded in unison, all except Matt, who whimpered softly.

"Sorry, Matt," Aaron said. "I guess that was a stupid question, huh?"

Matt looked at him sideways. "You could say that."

"Oh, come on," Hughes chided. "It couldn't have gone that bad."

Matt related what had happened in as vivid of detail as he could. He finished, and put his head on the corner of the table in front of him. "It was the stuff nightmares are made of."

"I guess I was wrong," Hughes conceded.

Matt's only response was the soft, steady thud of his forehead against the tabletop.

The meeting ended, and the gang headed outside. The sky had long since gone gray, and heavy clouds had moved in. The air had become slightly more humid, the sun had become cooler, and the barometric pressure had lowered dramatically. No animal life was to be seen outside, and the trees were bundling up as if in preparation for a storm. The strongest sign of foul weather, however, was the assurance given the citizens of Springfield by their weathermen, promising clear and sunny skies.

The quintet waited for their mothers and fathers to arrive, all except Matt, who provided his own transportation. Squid said, "You know what I think?" Before anyone could respond, he continued, "Probably not."

"Why don't we get together and play Magic this weekend?" Gelinis asked. "It could be fun, and we could take our minds off the Girl Scouts."

Hughes, always the volunteer, said cheerfully, "Great idea! When should I be at your house, Bill?"

Gelinis threw up his hands in protest, and Aaron interjected, "Why don't we meet over my house. My dad's

going to be away, and my two little brothers are going to be at their friends' houses. Mom won't mind."

The group agreed. "Then it's settled. Meet me at my house around four on Saturday. Come with your sleeping bags, and bring some videos and anime. Oh yeah, bring lots of Magic cards, too. Enough to play Ironman."

The group gasped in unison. "Just kidding," Aaron laughed.

Slowly the group left as their parents got there. Matt was the only one left, and the sky was even darker now. Then, in a single crash of thunder, the entire sky fell down on him in one large, wet, brick. It wasn't like normal rain that falls gradually; it was literally one large sheet of rain, some three inches thick, that drenched him and everything around him. Nothing came before it, and nothing followed it. The rain just fell in one heavy sheet.

Matty cursed. She hadn't gotten out of there quick enough. As she started away, thankful for the coat she wore, she was frozen in his tracks by a familiar voice.

"Where are you going, Mr. Testosterone?"

Matty turned to see Sarah Porter. Behind her stood her two sisters. *Oh no*, Matty thought. *If she sees me like this, I'm through. I'll just try to play it off.* Matty turned slowly. "Uh, what?"

"Oh, I'm sorry." Sarah looked surprised. "I... I thought you were someone else. Sorry about this."

Matty smiled shyly. "That's OK. If you'll excuse me, I—"

Sarah didn't hear her. "My name's Sarah Porter. You are...?"

Matty hesitated. "Hayes... Matty Hayes."

Sarah smiled. "Nice to meet you, uh, *Matty*."

Kirstin was looking at Matty strangely, and her eyes widened in surprise as she caught sight of something barely visible under Matty's unbuttoned coat.

Matty smiled weakly, and started to say, "Well, if you'll excuse me—"

"You're with the Boy Scouts?"

"Uh, yeah," Matty tried to come up with some excuse to get the out of there. "I *really*—"

"You should join the Girl Scouts. Not that I have anything against the Boy Scouts, but they've got some serious perverts that they need to weed out." Sarah looked Matty over for a moment. "Say, no offense, right, but you look a lot like that Atanian pervert. Are you related?"

That was Matty's cue to tree and split, or something like that. She got on her bike and rode away swiftly. "I'm sorry," she called behind her, "but I need to get home and change!"

Sarah followed Matty's departure, and then sighed. "Strange girl," she muttered, and headed back to her car.

From behind the large wooden platform in the field, a lone figure watched the happenings outside of the church. Although his robes were soaked to the core, the man pulled them tighter around himself.

"So, those are the latest victims of the Jusenkyo curse," he said softly. "The day shall come when I can reveal myself to them safely, but now is not the time or place.

Slowly the man turned and walked away, searching for the edge of a shadow. The small ornamental bell hanging from his rope belt jingled softly, and was the only sound to mark his passage.

## *Chapter Seven: Sleep-Over at the Abdelmaseh Residence*

by Matthew Atanian  
with Aaron Abdelmaseh

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The third house on the right was a two-story cape, with slightly faded red paint and blue shutters. The lawn was slightly deteriorated due to the lack of care. A single, short crab-apple tree decorated the front of the lawn, and the bushes in front of the house had long since been replaced with a budding garden. The fall was setting in, and soon the leaves of the crab-apple tree would present a new challenge: raking. In the recently repaved driveway was a blue '91 Plymouth Voyager. A totally inconspicuous house.

Living there were a pair of aging adults who had just recently gone over the hill. Also in that house were three sons, ranging from a child in elementary school to a high school student. They lived together, were active in the local churches and youth and sporting organizations, and were generally regarded as a good family. The parents lived together, the driveway usually held two vehicles, and the newspaper was always delivered to the driveway or front lawn on weekdays and Saturdays (to the door on Sundays). A totally inconspicuous family.

A totally boring existence.

Aaron was ready to piss-out from sheer boredom. His father was away on a business trip to Detroit (one would think that they had no experienced engineers there...) his brothers were away at their friends houses, and his mother was doing what she did best: grocery shopping. This left Aaron alone in the house with absolutely no one to talk to, bother, or play Magic with. He could use the phone to call someone, but whom? All his friends were either coming to his house later that afternoon or they were out of town.

For a while he had considered going upstairs and playing Quake or surfing the net, but neither held any

appeal right now. He had tried reading, but he had finished the only library book (and thus the only one in the house he hadn't read yet) a week ago. He tried watching TV, but nothing was on. He tried watching his *X-Files* videos, but to no avail. He even thought briefly of going outside, but it was a typical fall day in that it was gloomily overcast, the sun hiding itself from view. It was Saturday, just before noon, the beginning of the weekend, and he had no homework to do, no friends to chat with, and generally nothing to do.

He remembered idly that he was supposed to be working on the Communications merit badge for his Eagle award. He sat down at his desk, shoved the litter of drawings and loose papers off to one side, and opened up his Boy Scout handbook. He leafed through the pages, and a piece of folded paper slipped out of it. The paper was folded in one of the common note-styles, a spin-off of the "Polish football" method.

The note was addressed to "Aaron A." but there was no indication of who sent it. The handwriting was light and smooth, but he didn't recognize it. He knew that his friends who had access to this book all had angular writing, all except Squid, but this wasn't his hand. None of his family wrote notes like this, and this wasn't their hand either. That left either someone from Scouts he didn't know, or one of the Girl Scouts.

Anger washed over him briefly. People were always giving him trouble, asking him to tell someone this or do something else. But then he calmed a bit, and decided to stop staring at the darned letter and open it.

The note was small, and was written hastily in a decidedly female hand. It read:

*Call me: 555-3621*

*Kirstin*

Aaron laughed. He read the note again, turned it over, held it up to a light, did a little jig with it, sniffed it, read it a

third time, and laughed once more. Finally, Aaron decided that it was probably a good idea to call her now.

Before he could think twice about it, he picked up the phone and dialled in the number. It rang three times and then someone picked up.

"Hello?" the female voice on the other end said.

"Uh, hi. Is this Kirstin?" Aaron asked.

"Yep. Who is this?"

"Uh, this is Aaron. I got the note, and I decided I'd call."

"Oh hi! How are you?"

This was followed by several minutes of small talk, and Aaron was able to ease back a little. He reclined himself in a cold metal chair in front of his computer and propped his feet up on the desk.

"So," Kirstin asked, "What took you so long?"

Aaron chuckled. "Oh, sorry about that. You put the note in my Scout book. That's not one of the best places for it. I hardly ever use it for anything."

"Oh. Sorry." Kirstin apologized. "I didn't realize..."

"Oh, not to worry. It was a smart idea; I just never use the book." Aaron grinned to himself. "Next time, just give me the note."

He could feel Kirstin smiling on the other end. "I didn't want to seem *too* blunt."

They both shared a laugh over this. Aaron spoke again. "So, what did you want?"

"Well, I really just wanted to talk to you, but I actually have a reason now."

A knot twisted in Aaron's stomach. This was the part where they told him that he was a—

"I wanted to know why you left in such a hurry on Wednesday. I was looking for you, but you didn't even look my way."

Aaron stammered. *Crap!* This was bad. He couldn't tell her the truth, but he didn't want to lie. So instead he was as honest as he could be without telling the direct truth. "I just, uh, don't like the rain. It's too cold."

Kirstin absorbed this with a speculative *Mmmm*. "What's wrong with the rain?" she pressed.

Aaron was quick to respond, "Nothing, nothing at all. I just don't like getting wet. Especially with my uniform on."

This seemed to work. "I suppose that makes sense," Kirstin responded, not sounding entirely convinced.

Aaron grinned again. "You'll find that not much makes sense about me." And thinking back to the little run-in with the springs in China, Aaron realized suddenly how true that was. He laughed in spite of himself.

Kirstin joined him in laughing. "So," she said, changing the subject. "Have you talked to Matt about Sarah yet?"

"Nah. Not yet. Haven't gotten the chance really."

"Well, try and let him know before Wednesday, ok?"

"Sure, no problem." Aaron hesitated. "Are you really sure we should be doing this to them? I mean--"

"Yes, we should." Kirstin was firm on that one. "Sarah's becoming most unbearable, and I want to do something about it. You said Matt is a decent guy, and I think I can trust you. On this, anyway."

That last remark might have hurt a bit, but her tone was facetious enough to make it humorous. "Alright. I'll tell him as soon as I can."

"Thank you. This is really sweet of you, you know."

Aaron felt his face warm several hundred degrees. "Uh, thanks." He laughed nervously.

Kirstin just laughed. "Ok, I'd better be going now. Lunch to cook, you know."

"When can I talk to you again?" Aaron asked quickly.

"Anytime you want," she said honestly.

Aaron felt his face warm even more. "Uh, thanks, Kirstin." He looked around, searching for something but not knowing what it was. He decided to break this one off quickly. "Sorry, but I've got to run now. Maybe I can call you some time soon?"

"Ok. I look forward to it."

"All right. Talk to you later, Kirstin."

"Bye."

And with that, they hung up.

\* \* \*

Several hours later, Aaron was pleased to welcome his final visitor into his residence. "Matt," he asked, "where's your sleeping bag?"

"I can't stay overnight," Matt simply said. In truth, Matt knew that at times he bent the Boy Scout's youth protection guidelines by spending time with his friends, who were still youth in the eyes of the Boy Scouts. Normally, Matt didn't care, as he knew that he wasn't going to do anything evil and lewd to his friends, and he trusted them not to suddenly get evil and falsely report his doing something lewd. Still, he was only willing to bend the Youth Protection guidelines just so far, and spending the night at Aaron's house was, unfortunately, not an option.

As Aaron led Matt to the cellar where the group would set up camp, Squid and Bill were busy preparing a line-up of videos for them to watch.

Squid looked at the collection. As always, it was decided that the movies *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, *Highlander*, and *Spaceballs* would be shown, though the order was yet to be decided. Also, due to their growing interest in anime and related sources, Matt had visited his extensive library of the genre, and had produced such classics as the *EI-Hazard* OAV, several hundred episodes of anything by Rumiko Takahashi, and some other miscellaneous anime. Squid had produced a copy of several very funny comedians performing their stand-up routines on a tape loaded with Richard Jeni, Dana Carvey, Tim Allen, and an HBO special about the Monty Python cast. Also the group planned to watch such classics as *Down Periscope*, *Groundhog Day*, and *The Hunt for Red October*. As was tradition, they of course had more videos than it was humanly possible for them to watch in one evening.

Selecting the first video was a chore that not everyone could perform with ease, and none of the participants in this party could do it as well as Squid. The man was gifted. He could choose a video that was guaranteed to make you laugh until you cried, cry until you laughed, and generally would get you into the spirit of

things. Selecting *Monty Python* from the massed volumes, Squid slipped it into the VCR, waiting until everyone was settled before pushing play.

Matt, the only one to see Squid's choice, nodded his approval. However, he did ask, "Should we wait to start it until Hughes gets here?"

Aaron, Squid, and Bill looked at each other. Squid shrugged. Gelinas shrugged. Aaron spoke, "He couldn't come. He had an all-flannel gypsies-and-griffins convention today."

Matt nodded in understanding. "Ah," he said. "Well, then, let's get going."

Squid nodded. "Sounds good to me." The group sat down on the sofa against the wall, but Aaron reclined himself in the family Lay-z-boy. "Hope you guys like the selection," Squid said, only half seriously.

He pressed the "play" button on the remote control, and Aaron shut off the lamp beside him, partially darkening the room. The TV screen, while totally black, gave off its trademarked blue lighting, and the room was aglow with the television's eerie luminescence. Aaron adjusted the volume, setting it at twenty-five.

The blackness on the screen dimmed a bit, and the group braced themselves in anticipation. There was a deep, dramatic \*bong\*, and the opening credits to *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* appeared. There was a cheer from Matt, who, realizing he was alone in cheering, promptly shut up. Aaron complimented Squid, "Good choice."

As the movie continued, they broke out their Magic decks and began to play. (Each had seen *the Holy Grail* so many times that they could easily pay it only half their attention and still enjoy it fully.) They split into two teams, Aaron and Bill against Matt and Squid.

Matt played his usual Black-Blue "Zombie" deck, which was a slow starter and best for multi-player games in which he could get through more of the deck. Mike played a Red-White "direct damage" deck, a colour combination he had recently taken a liking to. Bill played a

Black-Green "poison deck," which also contained many annoying creatures with small casting costs. Aaron played with a Blue-White deck that was thicker than most would dare use, full of cards with low casting costs and many interesting card combos. Unlike most players, Aaron could make a very thick deck work.

As the game progressed, Bill began to try to take out Matt, seeing him as more of a treat than Mike. Both Mike and Matt concentrated on Bill, as Aaron had yet to do much offensively. Not that they'd left Aaron alone, mind you.

Aaron had by this time gotten several plains and islands out. He tapped two islands and two plains and chose a card from his hand. He presented it with a flourish and slammed it down on Matt's Royal Assassin. "I'll take that," Aaron said, a mischievous glint in his eye. He concluded his turn by casting a False Demise on the Royal Assassin, so as not to lose it to a cheap shot from Squid.

Squid cursed lightly. Aaron had begun to make his move, he could tell. He'd have to take Aaron out, and *now*. He tapped all his mana and cast a Fireball on Aaron.

The next round passed. Matt, fearing his stolen Assassin, did not dare to attack Aaron. Bill sapping Matt's life and donating another four poison counters to the two he'd already given him. Aaron drew a card and grinned. He placed down a Gerrard's Wisdom and laughed.

"Oh, what with my Library of Leng in play, I have one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight . . . *twelve* cards in my hand. That adds up to *twenty-four* life points." He laughed again. "Never thought it could happen, eh, Squid?"

Just to add a little flare to that round, Aaron attacked Squid, and Squid (having no untapped creatures) was forced to take seven points of damage, thus bringing his life total down to thirteen.

Several more turns passed. Matt was slowly taking more damage (although he now had several Zombies and a Zombie Master in play, so was able to defend himself

moderately well). Billy was taking several points of damage per turn from Squid's Black Vice, and Matt's unblockable Zombie attacks were not helping too much. Aaron's life total was getting whittled away slowly down to fifteen by Squid's direct damage spells, and Squid was losing every creature he cast to Aaron's Counterspells, Abductions, and False Demise / Dark Banish combos.

It took several more rounds, but on round twenty-seven, someone was finally killed.

Matt, having been wound down to four life, now had six poison counters. He looked at his hand, considered his move. Squid leaned over and whispered into Matt's ear.

"Jester's Cap to Aaron. Get rid of that Deflection of his. See about the Counterspells and Power Sinks too, for fun."

"Why?" Matt inquired. "You planning something?"

Squid nodded, and showed Matt his hand. Matt's eyes lit up with joy. He decided definitely to put his Jester's Cap (in play since the early game) to good use. Sacrificing the artefact, Matt searched Aaron's Deck, and removed two Counterspells and a Deflection from the game. He followed by attacking Bill, dealing minor damage.

Aaron's heart sank. He was now virtually defenceless against Squid's direct damage. All it would take was one good Fireball coupled with a Lightning Bolt to put him out of the game.

Bill knew that the grim reaper had Aaron's name, and he also knew that he could not stop Squid. He needed to think for himself now, get Matt out of the way and concentrate on Squid. Bill cast a Feast of the Unicorn on his Pit Viper. Tapping the appropriate amount of mana, he then cast terror on Matt's only untapped creature.

"Heh, heh, I bet you know what comes next," he grinned at Matt. He tapped his Pit Viper. "Take this, Matt. I'm attacking you with my Pit Viper."

*Scratch one opponent*, Bill thought, pleased with himself. To his eternal horror, Mike intervened.

"Not so fast, Bill," Squid tapped several mana, and slapped down a card. "Lightning bolt. I believe that Viper of yours is dead, correct?"

Bill frowned. He almost wept with dismay. Mike was right.

Matt grinned. He almost wept with joy. His butt was saved.

Aaron frowned. He almost panicked. It was his turn and he was nearly dead.

Squid grinned. He almost celebrated. It was Aaron's turn and he was nearly dead.

Aaron went through the standard routine. His turn lasted several minutes, but in the end he could see no way to avoid getting nailed by the Fireball or Lava Burst that was inevitably coming from Squid. Just for kicks, he tapped his Krovikan Sorcerer and discarded an Island that he had left in his hand. He drew a card, not expecting to see much. What he drew almost made him weep, but he managed to keep a poker face that would have done his father proud.

Aaron signalled that he was done, and Squid pondered his next move. He and Matt had set this up, and were ready to kill Aaron and get to Bill. If he played this right, Squid could nail Aaron for the fifteen points of damage he needed to kill him. He untapped, saw that he had no upkeep necessary, drew a card, and considered his next move carefully.

After deciding that it was safe, that Aaron – having used all his Counterspells and Power Sinks – had no way of saving himself, he announced triumphantly, "I am tapping all of my lands and my mine and casting a Fireball for twelve points of damage to... *Aaron*." He slammed the card down in front of Aaron.

Aaron grinned nervously. "Are you sure, Squid? Don't want to take out all my creatures instead?"

Squid was adamant about his choice. "No way. All twelve points to you, leaving you with three life."

Aaron grinned, but without any nervousness this time. "Well, Squid, I hate to do this to you, but I have a nifty little card called... Deflection!"

He tapped the appropriate lands and Deflection.

"All that damage is no longer going to target me. Instead I target..." he grinned and pointed his finger at Matt. "You."

Matt blinked in surprise. He and Mike hadn't realized that Aaron had had another deflection. "Oh, um... well..." Matt said, "I guess I'll... die."

Matt was out of the game.

After that, it would have seemed surprisingly easy work for Bill and Aaron to finish Mike off, but fate was on Mike's side that evening. Bill made an attack that Mike easily blocked, and Aaron had not much of an attack force, and his hand had been depleted of useful cards. On Mike's next turn, he deftly took care of Bill, and Aaron met his fate on Mike's following turn.

At game's end, Bill let fourth the three words he spoke at the end of any game he did not win. "Hey, no fair!"

As Bill demanded a rematch, Squid began to shuffle his deck. Meanwhile, Aaron took Matt aside, where the two could speak privately.

"Hey, Matt? What were you going to do about Sarah Porter?"

Matt stared blindly at Aaron for a moment, surprised. He had not been expecting this.

"I... I don't know. The usual, I guess. Admit defeat, give up, and worship her from afar. Why?"

"Well, I have it on good information that it may be in your best interests, in the long run, to perhaps continue actively perusing her."

Matt blinked. Other than that, he gave no acknowledgement he had heard Aaron.

"Matt?" Aaron asked a few minutes later.

"Did you say what I thought you said?" Matt asked.

"Probably," Aaron responded.

Matt contemplated this, seemingly calm, but actually confused as hell. After a short while, he asked, "What brought this up?"

The doorbell rang. Aaron's mother answered it.

"Let's just say that you'll have some assistance in this matter." Aaron continued.

"Huh?" Matt was more confused as ever.

"Aaron," his mother called out, "there's someone out here to see you." She then announced that she had to go out - she had an appointment with her hairdresser.

Aaron, followed by Matt, went outside and were both surprised to see Kirstin Porter standing there next to (presumably) her bicycle. "Um, sorry to just show up like this. I probably should have called first," she said to Aaron. "I just thought you might need some help."

Aaron was quite surprised. "Kirstin? How did you know where I lived?"

"I got your address out of the phone book, and then found my way on a map."

"Help with what?" Matt asked, correctly suspecting a connection to what Aaron and he had just been discussing.

Kirstin looked at Matt. "I know it may seem hopeless right now, but Sarah needs you."

"Look," Matt said, "I think she's mighty attractive, but I'm beginning to suspect that there's not much of a future for her and I. She's been quite clear on the subject."

Kirstin gave Aaron a look. Aaron turned to Matt. "Matt, how can you give up so easily? You've got an ally in Kirstin here, and I think she could be a great help to you with Sarah."

"I don't know, perhaps Sarah was right, though. Maybe I was just infatuated with her because she was the first woman of interest I'd seen in nearly a week."

"And so what if that was the initial reason for your interest?" Kirstin asked. "You find her attractive, and trust me, she can be quite nice. She just has this unfortunate bitter streak where men are concerned, as she has never

been very successful in that area. I think you could help change all that."

Matt seemed suddenly hopeful. "You think so?"

*Didn't take much convincing, did he?* Aaron thought. A drop of water fell upon his forehead. He looked up, and contemplated the overcast sky for a moment before an alarming realization came upon him.

"Um, Aaron?" Matt asked. He had realized the same thing.

"Would you like to come in for a while?" Aaron asked Kirstin. He pulled at the door.

It was locked.

*Shit!* Aaron thought. His mother must have instinctively locked it on her way out.

Aaron pounded on the door.

It began to rain in earnest.

"Oh, my," Kirstin said as Matt and Aaron became Matty and a duck. "I was right."

"Right?" Matty asked. "About what?"

"I thought you were Matt. I didn't know how it was possible, but... Well, at the meeting Wednesday, I saw a nametag that said, 'Matthew Atanian' peaking from under your coat.

"How *is* this possible?" She turned to the duck. "Aaron?"

Aaron quacked. Matty pounded on the door some more.

Mike finely answered the door. "Sorry," he said, opening it. "Bill and I were into the game, and... Dear God!" The last two words were delivered as simultaneously Mike realized that Kirstin was there and he took a step outside, getting wet.

A moment later, Mike was a squirrel.

Matty looked at Kirstin, who was getting wetter by the moment. "Perhaps you should get inside where it's dry?" she suggested.

Kirstin nodded and went in, followed by Aaron and Mike. Matty took Kirstin's bike and put it in Aaron's backyard, where potential thieves would have a harder

time spotting it, before going in herself. On her way in, she stopped to pick up Aaron and Mike's clothes.

Mike was just coming out of the bathroom, wearing the clothes he had brought to wear in the morning. Aaron waddled in as Mike left, carrying some fresh clothes under one wing.

Matty sat at the table in the kitchen, and accepted a towel that Bill offered. Not having a change of clothes, she made no move towards the bathroom as Aaron opened the door. As Aaron finely emerged from the bathroom, Kirstin repeated a question she had posed not to long ago. "So how is this possible?"

They explained it to her, but as most of the readers already know the explanation and would be bored to hear it again, we will rejoin the story as they finish.

"...and Hughes, who couldn't make it, turns into a cat," Aaron told her.

She sat for a moment as all of this sank in. "I see," she said at last.

Outside it continued to rain, but it was raining less heavily, and probably would stop before to long.

The five of them sat around, feeling awkward, not quite sure what to do.

Matty suddenly popped *El-Hazard* into the VCR.

They watched the first episode of it, and found it quite entertaining. They thought that the character of Jinnai Katsuhiko was particularly interesting for some reason.

Jinnai was the president of Shininome High School, and had gotten to be so by bribing some of the School's clubs to vote for him in exchange for funding. Most of the students, sick of Jinnai's fascist policies, were planning to have him impeached, and their key witness was Mizuhara Makoto, who knew of the bribes. The night before the all-important School Council meeting, Jinnai ambushed Makoto and tried to tie him up until after the meeting. Later, after they had been transported to the magnificent world of *El-Hazard*, Jinnai quickly got himself a place of power at the head of the evil Bugrom army.

"He seems familiar for some reason," Mike commented. "Like someone I know. I just can't quite place it."

"I get that too, for some reason," Bill said.

By the time the first episode was over, the rain had stopped, and it was starting to get dark out. "I should probably be going," Kirstin said, with a touch of sadness in her voice. "I had an interesting time, however."

"I ought to get going, too," Matty said, "before Mrs. Abdelmaseh comes home and wonders who the hell I am."

Everyone said their good-byes to Matty and Kirstin, and then broke out their Magic decks as the second episode of *El-Hazard* began. They stopped playing about two minutes into the game, finding it difficult to play and read subtitles at the same time.

Matty and Kirstin rode their bikes side by side. Kirstin turned to Matty. "Matty?"

"Hmm?"

"About Sarah... You will help with her, won't you? She needs someone in her life."

"I'll do my best, but I can't force her to go out with me."

"I know, Perhaps if she got to know you first?"

"How? She already hates me completely."

"Not completely," Kirstin said. "She hates Matt Atanian. She doesn't hate Matty Hayes."

"What are you suggesting?" Matt looked at Kirstin.

"Become friends with her. Let her get to know you."

Matty stopped her bike. Kirstin did likewise. "Are you sure," Matty asked, "that would be a good idea? I hate to generalize, but I've found that if women get to know you as a friend, they tend not to be able to think of you as anything else. And in this instance, I'd not only be a friend, but a friend of the same gender."

Kirstin shrugged, as if to say, *so what?* "I never said it was a perfect plan, I just said it was a plan. You should

probably try to get to know her better as Matt, too, but she'd be more open with Matty, I think."

The two of them started peddling again, but Matty was lost in thought and didn't say much of anything. After a brief while, they came to a point where their directions of travel diverged.

"I'll consider what you've said," Matty said to Kirstin.

Kirstin warmly smiled. "Good. Sarah needs this." *And so do you*, she thought. "I'll see you later."

Matty waved goodbye as Kirstin rode away.

Many, many hours later (probably around two in the morning, but no one was sure), Aaron, Squid, and Billy sat watching as the crew of the *Red October* was being rescued by the U. S. Navy. Billy started laughing at something one of the characters had said.

It really hadn't been at all funny, but Aaron and Mike joined in the laughter nonetheless.

They had arrived at that state of being where one is so tired that almost anything seemed funny. One could say they were drunk on fatigue.

"So, Squid," Aaron asked, "you're running for Senior Patrol Leader next Wednesday, right?" Mike and Billy found this funny. They laughed.

"Yeah, I'm planning on it," Mike answered. Aaron and Billy found this funny. They laughed.

"You know," Billy said a moment later, "Matty is kind of sexy."

Aaron and Mike looked at Billy. They didn't laugh.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Squid asked. "That's *Matt!!!*"

"That's sick, Bill, just sick," Aaron added.

Unfortunately for Billy Gelinias, the time of night when you find almost anything funny is also the time of night when you don't realize what you're saying half the time. Foolishly, Billy tried to defend his statement.

"No, I didn't mean that I want to go out with her... him, um... just that she..."

"He," Squid corrected.

"It?" Aaron suggested.

Billy continued unabated. "Just that she can be nice to *look at.*"

Mike reiterated Aaron's earlier statement. "That's sick, Bill, just sick."

"Got a nasty taste in my mouth just thinking about it," Aaron commented. He decided to get something to drink. The others followed him upstairs to the kitchen.

Aaron opened the fridge and randomly pulled out a can. He tried to open it, but discovered that the pull-thingy was missing.

He looked at the can. "Where the hell did this come from?" he asked, noticing that it was a can of kiwi/mocha fruit juice.

"Why does that can look familiar?" Mike asked.

"Here," Billy said, handing Aaron a butcher knife.

As Aaron took the knife, he pondered that the can looked as if it had already had a knife taken to it. It also had what appeared to be a bite mark. Other than that, and the missing pull-thingy, the can was completely intact.

*Not for much longer*, Aaron thought. He swiftly stabbed the butcher knife at the can's opening. It bounced off of the metal covering the opening, flew out of Aaron's hand, barely missed his face by a millimetre, and impacted with and firmly stuck into the ceiling.

Mike and Billy found this funny. They laughed.

Aaron grabbed a can opener. (An old hand operated one, as the electric one might wake his mother.) A few minutes later, the can opener was a barely recognizable lump of twisted metal.

The can of kiwi/mocha fruit juice, meanwhile, had barely been scratched.

"That's it," Aaron grumbled over more laughter from the others.

Aaron ran to the door, thrust it open, and hurled the offending can of fruit juice into the darkness. A moment later, they heard a yelp of surprise as it hit someone.

The three of them ran outside in time to see a young, dark haired, Asian man dressed in yellow picking himself up off of the street in front of Aaron's house.

"Oh, shit," Aaron said. "I'm sorry. I didn't know there was anyone out here."

"That's... that's all right," the man responded, gingerly rubbing his right temple. "Just... could you tell me where I am? How far is it to Tokyo?"

"Tokyo?" Billy asked.

"Japan?" Squid added.

The man nodded.

"You're not even in the right hemisphere," Aaron said.

A look of painful resignation fell upon the man's face. "This wouldn't be..." He paused, as if trying to remember a word. "Massachusetts?" he continued.

The three Boy Scouts nodded in unison.

Ryoga thanked them and pulled his heavy pack back upon his shoulders before staggering off into the night.

Mike, Billy, and Aaron returned inside to the basement, and had a minor argument over whether they should next watch *The Laughing Target* or *Spaceballs*. A short while later, all three of them were impersonating Bill Pulman as, on the screen, he called out, "Barf? Baahrff?"

Meanwhile, Matt was lying alone upon his bed in his darkened bedroom. It had, of course, been quite a while since he quietly entered his house, gotten some hot water before his parents saw him, and retired to bed. In all that time, he hadn't slept a wink.

He could only think about Sarah. What was he going to do? He kept coming to the same conclusion: It wasn't as if he had anything to loose. He'd go for it.

## *Chapter Eight: Election Night at 192*

by Michael D. Quadrozzi

---

At 5:57 on a wet and darkening Wednesday afternoon, Bill Hughes had his head through the sleeve of a plaid flannel jacket and had just fallen down a full flight of stairs.

He didn't know why he was always late to scout meetings. Well, actually he did. It was because every Wednesday before every meeting he waited until the last possible second to get his things together and usually ended up running around frantic until he fell down the stairs and bruised his knee.

Hughes rubbed his bruised knee and looked at his digital watch.

"Crap," he said.

He was upset because he lived in the town of Palmer, Massachusetts. Well, living there wasn't the thing that bothered him. Palmer was a perfectly normal if rather hilly New England town. The thing that bothered him was that it took a good half-hour to get anywhere from Palmer. Especially to Springfield, where Troop 192 held its weekly meetings.

First of all, he would have to get his head through the appropriate opening of his jacket. Struggling on the floor, feet kicking wildly in the air, he managed to get both arms through both sleeves, but now the jacket was inside out over his head.

Hughes sighed. He was quite clearly going to be late again.

Meanwhile, roughly 17 miles away in East Longmeadow, another perfectly normal if not very hilly New England town, Mike Quadrozzi had most of his body out his front door when he suddenly remembered something incredibly important.

"Hat!" he said, turning around mid-step to run back into the house to get his repulsively lived-in baseball style Troop 192 red hat. Returning to the door, he reached around the knob to lock it and just before closing the door behind him he smacked himself in the forehead.

"Book!" he said, remembering something else he had forgotten. He dashed back inside to get his Boy Scout Handbook. On the way back, he continued dashing right into his living room sofa because he'd also forgotten his—

"Binder!" It was on his desk in his room.

After retrieving this last bit of necessary equipment, he convinced himself he had everything he needed and stepped out the door, which he locked and shut behind him. A thought struck him, and he reached into an inner recess of his coat.

"Pen!" he said, holding it up defiantly just to make it clear it was the one thing he hadn't failed to remember to bring. Finally prepared, Mike walked down the few steps to his driveway and his mother's idling car.

Just before he reached the car, the driver's side door was thrown open and his mother yelled, "What do you think you're doing?"

Mike was confused until he looked down and realized that the reason he was cold was that he didn't seem to be wearing any pants.

He was standing in his driveway in his blue and green striped shorts.

In October.

"Well," he said, "I'll be right back."

At that exact moment and just a few miles away in the Springfield suburbs, Troop 192 Senior Patrol Leader Bill Gelinas was having his butt sniffed by a dog.

It was his dog, actually, and although he enjoyed doing many things with it, this was not one of them. This wouldn't normally have happened except for the fact that he was a dog himself at present time.

He hadn't set off to have his behind inspected. It had just happened. He was in his back yard, and was trying to figure out a quick way not to be a dog because he had to get to the scout meeting in a little while, and he knew for a fact that he couldn't show up at the church as a small black German Shepherd.

He had to think.

Hot water. That was the trick. But where did a dog get hot water?

His problem was instantly solved as a pot of hot water with a bunch of carrot pieces in it was emptied over his head and he became his human self. His dog scampered away, shaking off the water.

Bill's mother, who had dumped the water out the window after she'd finished boiling the carrots, stuck her head out the window to look at him, sitting wet and naked and with carrot pieces stuck all over him on the grass.

"I don't want to know, Bill," she said. "Just get dressed for scouts." She had long ago ceased being surprised at any of the bizarre things her son did on a daily basis. In fact, this particular event scored pretty low on the Bizarre-Stint-O-Meter.

Bill blinked and hurried inside his house to get dressed.

In a different section of semi-urban sprawl, Aaron Abdelmaseh was screaming.

It wasn't a high-pitched girly scream of fear or a guttural yelp of pain. It was one of those hellish, red-faced spasms of rage that Aaron had perfected over the years by having two immature younger brothers who were his constant tormentors.

The youngest of the demon spawns was jumping around the Abdelmaseh living room holding the sketch Aaron had been working on yelling fifth grade insults at him.

"Derek," Aaron managed between clenched teeth, "If you give me that back right this instant I promise I'll have a much harder time killing you."

His sibling laughed a high-pitched imp laugh. "No way, fart brain!"

Aaron opened and closed his fists a few times. "Derek—"

His brother began singing to himself.

Aaron picked up a football from the rug and threw a perfect forward pass that caught Derek on the left side of his face, knocking him off the couch onto the floor.

The little person lay on the carpet, looking up at his brother. A number of expressions, among them pain, anger and a sulking "what-did-I-do?" look flicked across his face before he finally settled on an evil delighted grin.

The tears came, and then a yell to end all yells: **"MMOOOOOOOMMMMM!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"**

Aaron's mother rushed into the room. "Aaron, what did you do?" she demanded to know, bending down to her whimpering offspring.

"Oh, come on, now!" Aaron said, "It was his fault! He always does that!"

As usual, his mother took the devil child's side. "I don't want to hear it, mister. It's almost six o'clock! Go get dressed for scouts!"

Smouldering, Aaron stomped off to his room, his brother's grin dancing in his head.

Meanwhile, (did you ever imagine so many things could happen at the same time?) at 257 Sparrow Drive in Springfield, Massachusetts, veteran scout and self-made man on the fringe of disturbing behaviour Matt K. Atanian was sitting peacefully by his television stirring a freshly poured glass of iced tea.

People could scurry about, bombs could explode, civilizations could rise and fall; it didn't matter. As long as there was iced tea and tall glasses, Matt Atanian's world was okay.

And unlike so many other members of Troop 192, he was pretty calm and relaxed. In fact, since he lived no that

far from the Church in the Acres, he still didn't have to even put his shoes on for another fifteen minutes.

Just the right amount of time to enjoy a perfectly chilled glass of iced tea, Matt thought lazily as he watched Hawkeye and Honeycut hit the dirt, hoping to avoid the latest wave of enemy shelling.

He took a sip.

It wasn't quite there, yet. After all, you can't just drink iced tea. You have to savour it, make sure it's perfect. Every piece of mix must be stirred into solution. No remnant of powder could be left.

Nice firm grip, easy strokes, that was the way to achieve beverage Utopia.

Matt took another sip.

Ah, refreshment.

He smiled and let his mind wander.

Somehow, everyone managed to arrive at the Church in the Acres on time that night, even Hughes. In the few minutes they had to mill around before the meeting started the five of them had a pre-emptive chat.

"So guys," Matt was asking, "any interesting things happen lately?"

Mike blinked. "No."

"Not really."

"Nothing out of the ordinary."

Aaron shook his head. "Nope."

They were gathered along with the rest of the troop in the main hall of the church, a large wood-panelled room with a lot of windows and folding metal chairs. Strewn about the room were jackets and handbooks, and people talked amongst themselves in little groups. The meeting wasn't due to start for a few more minutes.

"Hey, anybody know who they are?"

The other four turned to look in the direction Hughes had pointed and spotted two people they didn't recognize as members of the troop.

"Oh, those are the new scouts we're getting today," said Bill Gelinás.

"New scouts?" Mike winced.

From time to time Troop 192 received new recruits, either from the Cub Scout pack or some other area troop. A lot of times there were good kids, people who made friends and stayed with the group, becoming knowledgeable and respected scouts. Then again, there were always snivelling little brats who tormented everyone as much as they possibly could and then left for good after a particularly upsetting episode.

You had to be careful.

"Hey, I wouldn't be so quick to judge," Matt suggested, "all of you were new scouts once."

"Yeah, you're right," Mike conceded with a grin. "Then again, we're obviously gifted."

"We'll just have to wait and see," said Bill. He looked up at the clock. Six thirty-five. "Looks like everybody's here. Let's get started."

He took his place at the front of the crowd and called a sign's up. It took the normal amount of time, too long in other words, for some of the more rambunctious members of the troop to quiet down and find their places in the accepted patrol formation.

Today was a special meeting, as everyone, especially Bill, knew. Tonight was election night, the night when Troop 192 voted on who would become the next Senior Patrol Leader, the next man-in-charge.

It wasn't nearly all it was cracked up to be. Bill Gelinás was counting the seconds until he could hand the silver bars over to someone else. They could take the job.

As the Senior Patrol Leader-for-now dropped his signs and began his last round of announcements, Aaron leaned over to where Mike was standing. "You still running?" he asked.

"You bet."

"I'd say you've got a shot."

Mike feigned remorse. "I don't know, competition's harsh."

They laughed. The two candidates for Senior Patrol Leader were Mike and Justy Yung, the troop's spineless brown-noser.

"It's about time you got the job," Aaron said.

Mike nodded. He'd served as Assistant Senior Patrol Leader now for three years in a row. The benefits of being the second-in-command wore thin after a while.

"Shhh!"

It was from one of the adults in the back of the room. The two of them fell silent, and as Bill went through his final necessary but boring spiel, Mike took the opportunity to look around and see who had showed up for the meeting tonight.

Besides the five of them, there were the other regular members of Troop 192. All faces of people who Mike was convinced would finally get him the position he'd wanted for quite some time. There were about twenty of them in the hall, a pretty good turn out.

A few adult leaders were also in attendance, seated in the back of the room. Some had sons in the troop, some didn't. Most of them were good people. There was Mr. Jack McGraw, the bitter old man from camp, and Mr. Pruyne, the Troop's venerable Scoutmaster.

And there were these two new scouts.

Mike looked them over for a minute. The one on the left was the younger one, a short and scrawny kid with sandy blonde hair and a pair of fiercely thick glasses. He looked barely over the minimum Boy Scout age limit of eleven and also had a frightfully thick book under one arm, whose title Mike couldn't make out from where he stood. To Mike's surprise, his uniform was neat and appeared to already display all the appropriate insignia in all the appropriate places. The boy didn't seem to be talking much, but that was to be expected. No one was overflowing with confidence on their first day with a new group of people.

The other new recruit was taller, standing almost painfully straight. He seemed to be the epitome of discipline until you looked at his face, which held a lazy,

lopsided grin. Mike noticed he held the first class rank. He must have transferred from another troop.

Mike was speculating on the names of the rookies when Bill interrupted his thoughts and began to do the introductions.

"We've got some new scouts here, tonight," Bill was saying, "so let's give a warm welcome to..." He looked down at his notes. "Kenneth Pendrell and... um, sorry. How do you pronounce this?"

Kenneth must have been the scrawny one, because the taller of the two spoke up. "Proctor will be fine, Colonel," he said with a grin and a smart salute.

Kenneth waved timidly to the group, and spoke just above a whisper. "Hi."

"Okay," Bill nodded. He looked over at Mr. Pruyne. "Is that all?"

The Scoutmaster walked over and almost made Bill pee in his pants with joy by announcing the next order of business.

"Well, let's see..." Mike began, thinking his response through. He was standing on the stage in the front of the hall, and the rest of the troop had pulled up chairs. The flags of the country and of 192 flanked him on either side. Jon Becker had asked him what sorts of fun things he would plan if he were elected SPL.

"I'll... make sure the troop goes to all the District Camporees, and events," he said, watching for any reaction as he talked. Public speaking was an acquired skill. "And on more camping trips to neat places and up to Moses..." Nothing. His mind sifted through the mountains of mental debris for anything that could help. "And, um... hey! All of you like that instant soup we get sometimes on campouts, right?"

A few heads nodded.

"All right, then! Instant Raman noodle soup will be the official food of Troop 192!"

"What flavour?" someone asked.

Mike thought. "Um, chicken."

There was unanimous applause, and Mike walked down the steps to take his seat. Aaron elbowed him when he got there. "Nicely done, Squid," he said.

"Thank you."

Mr. Pruyne called for the next contestant. "Hey, Justy, say a few words!"

Justy Yung ascended to the stage, clad in a freshly pressed uniform adorned with numerous patches. No one knew for sure what he was 'Trained' in or how he had become an 'Honorary Recipient for the Coveted Award in the Field of Excellence' or what that even meant, but he evidently had the patches to prove it.

Justy reached the centre of the stage and smiled. "If I am elected Senior Patrol Leader, you will all bow down to me," he said.

"That doesn't sound very fun." It was Becker.

"Of course it does," Justy said, his grin widening, "what could possibly be more fun than calling me Supreme Lord and Master of Troop 192, than answering my every command and whim? You are all nothing but pawns, mere insects to be crushed under the heel of my boot!!" He threw his head back and laughed wildly.

After a minute or so he settled down and wiped the spittle from his lip. "Vote for me," he said, and left the stage.

The troop blinked.

"I like him," said Proctor.

After that, little slips of paper were passed out, and all the twenty-some odd active members of Troop 192 began scribbling down the name of the next Senior Patrol Leader.

Matt Atanian, recognized as an adult by the Boy Scouts of America if not by most of his fellows, was not allowed to cast a vote. He sat and watched the democratic process unfold.

Kenneth Pendrell and Proctor were given ballots, but not really expected to vote, since they were new and didn't really know the candidates that well.

It took about five minutes, and then everyone was done. All voters folded their ballots neatly in half and tossed them into the hat of Scoutmaster Bill Pruyne. After collecting everyone's slip of paper, he and the other adults assembled by the exit.

"Well, we'll go and count these," Mr. Pruyne informed the troop, "and then come right back out and tell you who won the election."

The adults went through the door and left.

The troop began to mill. It would be necessary to start a group activity in a few moments, lest things got out of hand and windows started breaking themselves.

Near the front of the stage, Mike approached Bill Gelinas, who was lying quite nonchalantly across the steps. It was obvious how relieved he was.

"So," Mike began, "you up for a game of Steal-the-Bacon, maybe?" (If you're not familiar with it, Steal-the-Bacon is a nice little game that happens to be a favourite of Troop 192 and can get quite violent, let me tell you.)

Bill looked up. "Sure."

"You want to call the numbers?"

"Nope," Bill sighed, settling back down for a well-deserved rest. "You can do it, now."

Before going forward with the story, it might be necessary to get you the audience familiar with the appearance and general layout of the Church in the Acres, weekly meeting place of Troop 192.

The church is a squat, two-story structure with both the steeple and garish white paint of centuries of New England tradition. It is set back from a major road, across from a garden supplies store and a densely settled residential area. A field of scraggly grass and shrubs sweeps behind it and joins the forest in about a half-mile.

Everyone once in a while, well, Sundays mostly, the bells within the steeple start ringing to some hymn or another, and you can hear them far and wide. You can also hear the traffic as it whizzes by on Wilbraham Road.

The building is typical in all respects.

Within, there is the church proper, with offices and other rooms used by the congregation of the church. Off to the side lies the main hall, where 192 meets. The back door of the hall leads to a staircase and the ground floor, where Sunday School and other such things take place. The rooms down there are small and carpeted and the walls are covered with pegboards and pictures of Jesus made out of construction paper. If you don't go down that staircase, you end up in the church kitchen, a large, yellow room with counters and refrigerators. It is an important room. It's where the troop keeps its food if it has any, and where conversations are held or minor scuffles are ironed out.

It is also where the adults went to count the ballots.

"Number... **SIX!!**" Mike yelled, then held the brim of his red hat and leaped out of the way as two of his fellow scouts rushed towards him at full speed. There were after the little marker board eraser at his feet. It was 'the bacon'.

The object of the game was to grab the bacon before the other person did and either carry it or throw back to your team for a point. Of course, if the other person tagged you, you were out, and they got the point instead.

Teeth had been lost over this.

In the kitchen, the adults were busy deciding the future of the troop.

They sat around the large counter in folding metal chairs, chatting anxiously as the Scoutmaster tallied the votes on a yellow legal pad.

Most of the troop elders were there, including Mr. Pruyne, of course, and Mr. McGraw. Gathered with them

were Mr. Bob Martin, the outspoken and portly spokesman of the group and Mr. Tim Walker, the deceptively slow Midwestern philosopher. His easy-going and cautious air hid a twisted, calculating mind. Also in attendance was Mr. Ted McCarthy, the ill-tempered Troop Committee Chairman.

All eyes were on their colleague as he counted the ballots. The results were almost in.

The huge panels of fluorescent lights that lined the ceiling cast everything in a sterile whiteness. Every piece of metal in the room glinted, and the whole scene took on a surreal look.

"Okay, then," said Mr. Pruyne as he quickly re-checked the number of tally marks he'd scribbled down on the yellow legal pad. "The results are in."

"Yes?"

"And it would appear that the troop has chosen Mike Quadrozzi as their next Senior Patrol Leader."

"What?"

There was much grumbling. "Recount the votes."

Mr. Pruyne held up his yellow legal pad for all in the room to see. "Twenty-four votes for Mike. None for Justy Yung."

The group of middle-aged men was not pleased.

"This cannot be allowed," grumbled Mr. McGraw in his bitter, guttural snap.

Mr. Martin spoke in his wheezy, authoritative voice, sounding a bit like Marlon Brando, "How did this happen?"

Mr. Pruyne smirked. "Would you like another recount?"

"This is a dreadful mistake!" continued Mr. McGraw. "Mike cannot be put in power! Under his care-free authority and guidance the troop would... it just might..." He couldn't say it.

"Prosper?" Mr. Martin offered.

"Yes. We would lose our stranglehold," the elder sputtered, "The youth would begin to take charge, to actually plan the program they are meant to... enjoy."

"We should have seen this coming."

"It might not be that bad," said Mr. Pruyn, "we might be able to suggest things to Mike, to make him—"

Mr. Martin grimaced. "No, he would not listen. Any pursuit to mould him would be fruitless, as it was with the young Atanian."

They nodded.

"What about the others? We could give him an assistant—"

"No, no. That would only make him—"

"But listen to what I'm—"

The troop elders were beginning to quarrel, but it would soon be put to an end. None of them had noticed the other man who had entered the room, and they were startled into silence when he suddenly spoke.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," said Mr. John Hawley, "This is getting us nowhere."

The adults all looked up as their colleague entered the room.

"Oh?" snapped Mr. McGraw. "And what do you suggest?"

Mr. Hawley stood by the door, a slight smile on his face. Slowly, with the quiet dignity the regal post of Council Camping Committee Chairman gave a man, he reached into his pocket to procure a long, thick cigar. He bit of the tip and reached into another pocket for his lighter. With a flick of the wrist he brought forth a flame and began to smoke. Within seconds, the kitchen was filled with the acrid, distinctive smell of cigar smoke.

All of this done, Mr. Hawley deemed it ready for the conversation to resume. "We may be caught unawares," he said, his voice calm and careful, "but we are not nearly powerless." He approached the counter and, pulling up a chair, sat down with the rest of them. "The problem is not what has been done," he resumed, "but what we are going to do to correct it."

He turned to stare coldly at one of the men at the counter. "I suggest we come up with a serious solution, Mr. McGraw. Don't you agree?"

The colour had faded from Mr. McGraw's face. He opened his mouth to speak and found it hard to form words. "Ah, yes. Yes... of course, I do."

"Good," said Mr. Hawley. "So, what are we going to do?"

From the other end of the counter, Mr. Walker tipped up the brim of his ten-gallon hat and gave the group his opinion. "Our friend is correct, gentlemen," he said in a melodious twang, "and I think the solution we need is quite simple. We know that Mike will not listen to us, so what we need is a puppet."

"What do you mean, exactly?" asked Mr. Martin, though he himself had been ready to propose the same thing.

"Well, it appears that dear Michael really didn't win the election," Mr. Walker said. "Justy did."

Mr. Martin smiled. "Yes, the little weasel will jump at the chance."

"And he'll be so wrapped up in it, he won't notice who's really in charge."

The elders were pleased, except for one.

Mr. Pruyne couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Are you suggesting we just disregard the election results completely? Put Justy Yung in charge?"

"Well," Mr. Hawley said, his voice drenched in vile nastiness, not to mention cigar smoke, "that seems to be the general consensus."

"But, I mean—"

The others glared at him. "That doesn't bother you, Mr. Pruyne, does it?"

It was a futile battle. In the world of adult scout leadership, it was survival of the fittest. One could not afford to not be one of the fittest.

"I'm sure it will work," he said.

The group of elders nodded satisfactorily. A crisis had been averted. The future of Troop 192 as they knew it was no longer in danger.

After all, these men were in the business of predicting the future, and the best way to predict the future is to invent it.

Mr. Hawley stood up and tapped cigar ashes on to the floor. "I'm sure you have to inform the kids, gentlemen, so I'll take my leave of you. Good night."

The others looked to Mr. Pruyne.

"Yes," he said, and his voice was low, devoid of the spirit he usually had in full. "I'll tell them."

The game of Steal-the-Bacon was winding down. Most of the scouts were too sore to even think about continuing to play.

That was okay, because Mr. Pruyne came through the door from the kitchen and called a sign's up when he reached the front of the stage. "All right, everybody," he said. "Gather round."

It took the normal amount of time, and then everyone was in formation, ready to receive the news and find out who was going to be SPL.

Off to the side, Mike was especially anxious.

"Oh, would you knock it off!" Aaron told him, "You look like you're gonna explode!"

"I just want to know if I won."

"Of course you did! Who would vote for Justy?"

The Scoutmaster began to speak. "The results are in," he said. "And for the next year, as of now, the Senior Patrol Leader of Troop 192 is..." He closed his eyes. "Justy Yung."

Silence.

Still more silence.

Then Justy threw back his head and laughed.

Mike, Aaron, Matt and the Bills stood, stunned into absolute silence, along with the rest of the troop. The only person who spoke was the new kid, Kenneth Pendrell.

"Is this bad?" he asked.

## *Chapter Nine: Behind the Adult Conspiracy*

by Michael D. Quadrozzi

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Mike, Aaron, Matt Atanian, both of the Bills and, in fact, all of Troop 192 were in shock. That's really the best way to describe it. If a qualified medical doctor had come in with a stethoscope and blood pressure thingy-do and given everyone a full evaluation, he would've concluded in no time at all that most of the scouts in the hall, especially Mike, Aaron, Matt Atanian and both of the Bills, just couldn't believe that Justy Yung had just been elected to the post of Senior Patrol Leader.

All they could do was stare, mouths agape.

Proctor was clapping as Justy took to the stage to accept the position of SPL. Mr. Pruyne, his face an ashen shade of gray, moved silently towards the door to let him pass.

"Bravo, Captain!" Proctor shouted, punctuating his clapping with enthusiastic whistles and cheers. "Speech! Speech!"

Justy stood at the centre of the stage and began to talk. At least, one might call what he did talking if one discounted all the bouts of maniacal laughter and voracious, spittle-frothing claims of absolute victory. He ranted about what a glorious future 192 would have during his reign, and appointed Proctor as his Assistant.

None of it mattered, of course, because to most everyone present his speech was a meaningless blur, a limbo, a fuzzy patch in the film where nothing makes sense. The pure, unanticipated shock of what had just transpired would not wear off until the meeting ended, fifteen minutes later.

The night had grown cold. A bitter wind skirted the shrivelled grasses of the field behind the church as the scouts went home with their respective parents. The

meeting may have been over, but for some, there was still a lot to discuss.

"What are we going to do?" Bill Gelinas asked of his fellows.

"This is a disaster."

The five of them were standing by a section of chain link fence that surrounded the rear of the main building. They hoped that anyone who might care what they were talking about had gone home by now.

"I can't believe it," Mike said, obviously disappointed. "They picked him over me. Who voted for him?"

"Well, heck, I think that we all voted for you, at least," remarked Hughes.

"I would have," said Matt. "It must have just been some new kids who tipped the scale to Justy's favour."

Aaron snorted. "Oh, come on. How many of the younger guys don't know how much of a jerk he is? I mean, he steps all over the new kids. I bet you he didn't even vote for himself, he's so cocky."

"Well, Kenneth and Proctor didn't vote," said Bill Gelinas. "Neither of them picked up a pencil."

There was the blinding flare of headlights, and they turned to watch Jon Becker ride away in his mother's minivan. Mike waved for the group and then turned back to the conversation.

"Okay. Let's say that Justy was voted in because of the Tenderfoot Majority," Hughes was saying. "That still means that..." He did some quick arithmetic, "nine of the others voted for Justy. That doesn't seem very likely."

"No, it doesn't," Matt concurred.

"So what are we saying, here?" Mike's voice dropped. "Are we saying that I might've actually won the election?"

None of them had a chance to answer, because the Girl Scouts of Troop 42 chose that moment to exit the church, having finished their own meeting moments before. A parade of squealing little girls in white blouses and green skirts charged out the door, followed by someone more recognizable.

Kirstin Porter waved. "Hi guys!"

"Hi," said Bill Gelin as she approached their section of chain link fence.

"Gutentag!" said Hughes, who got no response to this and decided that being able to speak one word of German wasn't really that impressive.

Mike noticed that Aaron audibly swallowed. He tipped his dirty red hat. "How you doing, Kirstin?"

"Fine," she said. "Hi, Aaron."

Aaron coughed. "Er, hi."

Kirstin smiled, then arched an eyebrow. "Okay, what's going on?" she asked. "You're acting like someone died or something."

"Well, I suppose you could say that Troop 192 is near death," said Matt.

"Why? What's happened?"

There was silence. It was Hughes who gathered up enough courage to say the words. "Justy Yung is the new Senior Patrol Leader of Troop 192," he said.

Kirstin blinked. "Wow. That sucks."

"We suspect a conspiracy," Mike said.

"And why is that?"

"Well, who would vote for him?"

Kirstin smiled again. "Someone must have. That *is* how it works, isn't it? You vote someone in, and they get the position."

"Yeah, but . . ." Mike floundered.

"It would have to have been the adults," Hughes offered.

"What?"

"The adults in the troop."

"And what do you think they're doing?"

"Well, they must've fixed the election."

Kirstin couldn't believe this. Didn't boys ever think before they spoke? "Why in the world would the adult leaders fix the Senior Patrol Leader election?" she asked them.

"Because they're old," said Hughes.

"And mean," Mike finished the thought.

"It doesn't matter if they're mean," Kirstin said. "They're the leaders! A leader's job is not to ensure his own power or to dominate those who elect him to his position. They prosper by earning respect and by setting an example. Leaders are servants! They act as guides, especially in the Scouting program. Why would the adults conspire to control the troop? To what possible end could such deceit carry them?!"

There was more silence.

"But these guys are really mean," said Mike.

"And old," said Hughes.

Kirstin rolled her eyes. "Whatever." A group of her fellow Girl Scouts from Troop 42 was waving her over to another conversation. She started over in their direction. "I'll see you guys later," she told the five of them, "when you feel like making a little more sense."

They watched her leave, feeling the slightest bit chastised. Then, the conversation resumed.

"She's probably right, you know," said Matt. "This does seem kind of silly. I mean, these guys were in charge of the troop back when I first joined!"

He paused for a moment. "Damn," Matt said to himself, "I'm old."

"Yeah, well, how else do we explain this?" asked Mike.

"Okay, okay," said Hughes, holding up his hands like a spastic football referee. "Let's say that for some reason or another, the whole election was rigged by the adult leaders and that Squid really won instead of Justy. That's what we're saying, here, right?"

The other four nodded.

"One problem," he said.

The other four nodded.

"How do we prove it?"

The other four blinked.

"Ah," said Aaron, scratching his chin. "Proof."

"We can't just make accusations," Hughes continued. "I mean, these are the adults we're talking about."

"What could we possibly use as proof?" Mike asked, semi-rhetorically.

They settled into a troubled silence, and in thinking found themselves looking in the direction of the new kid, Kenneth Pendrell. The young boy was standing off in a corner of the paved lot, intently reading a passage from the lengthy book he held in his hands. Like the rest of them, he was waiting to be picked up. Unfortunately, he also seemed to be being picked on.

"Hey, Dorkweed!" Slim McGraw sneered in a voice like a cat being run over by a snow blower. "You still readin' dat book a' yours?"

Kenneth ignored him, but the bully would not accept the cold shoulder. He snatched the book from the youth's hands.

"How da hell d'ya read dis ting, anyway?" asked one of Troop 192's ruder morons as he flipped through the pages of the book. "Dare ain't no pictures in it!"

"No pictures! Yeah! Heh heh heh!" laughed Homer, Slim's cruel accomplice in this game of infantile harassment.

Between the two of them, they had fewer brains than a jar of mayonnaise.

Slim and Homer proceeded to pass the book back and forth over the head of Kenneth Pendrell, who just stood there looking disheartened and lost.

"I don't know about you guys," Matt said to the others, "but I'd like to put a stop to this."

The five of them made their way to where the one-sided altercation was taking place and approached Slim and Homer in a far corner of the paved lot. The two bullies slowed their game of catch as Mike, Aaron, Matt and the Bills stepped towards them.

"What do you want?" Homer snarled.

"Why don't you cut that out?" Aaron advised.

"Leave the kid alone," said Matt.

Now, it is a well-known fact that the kind of people who enjoy making other people's lives miserable are usually quite confident when they're preparing to pummel

someone in a darkened stretch of parking lot, but become less sure of themselves when they are confronted and outnumbered two to one.

Slim contemplated the situation. "Whatever," he said, and promptly tossed the book up in the air. It landed with a heavy thud as he trudged away.

"Dorks," Homer snarled, and turned to follow the other. The two of them walked away into the night, crossing the street at a speed just slow enough to impede traffic and just fast enough not to get hit.

"They're really quite clever," Aaron said, half turning to address Mike.

"Oh, yes," Mike agreed. "I thought the repetition of a particularly childish insult showed their intelligence and ingenuity quite well."

"Indeed."

Kenneth Pendrell was stooping over to pick up his book, and the five went over to lend a hand. They noticed for the first time that he'd been reading *War and Peace*.

"Don't worry about them," Hughes said to the younger scout, "they're idiots."

"Yeah, we've got a few people like that," Bill Gelinis concurred.

"However," said Mike, "most of us are pretty nice."

Kenneth looked at them all in turn, then pushed his thick spectacles a little farther up his nose. Timidly, so timidly in fact that the others strained to hear him, he spoke just above a whisper: "Um... thanks."

"Hey, no problem," said Aaron.

They all introduced themselves to the new kid, who told them in a voice just as quiet as the one he had used for his first comment that they could call him Kenny.

Headlights flashed across the group, and they turned to see a dark blue minivan pull up alongside them.

"Your ride?" Matt asked.

"Um... yes," Kenny said. He stood in his place a moment more, almost fidgeting. It was as if he'd never come across this situation before. He seemed to be almost searching for the proper way to proceed.

"Bye," he finally said, and made his way to the car.

Mike, Aaron, Matt Atanian and the Bills waved goodbye to the new kid, and turned to walk away. They didn't notice that Kenny Pendrell had stopped a few feet from his car with his hand on the door latch. They couldn't see that he was looking back at them as they departed, a look of curiosity on his face. And something more... perhaps, suspicion?

"Nice kid," Matt said as the five of them walked back over to their spot by the section of chain link fence. The parking lot was almost deserted now, nearly everyone had gone home.

They hadn't forgotten why they were out here. "So, what are we going to do? Mike asked.

The group fell into silence once more, each scout trying to come up with something, anything that they could use to expose the dark adult conspiracy.

Hughes snapped his fingers. "I've got it!" he said.

"Just like that?" Bill Gelinis asked. "Isn't that kind of convenient to the plot?"

The other four shushed him. "What have you got, Hughes?" Aaron asked.

"The ballots!"

"The ballots?"

"Yes, the ballots to the Senior Patrol Leader election!" said Hughes. "There's our proof that Mike really won instead of Justy!"

"But they might've destroyed them already," Aaron pointed out.

"Let's hope they haven't."

"Okay," Mike said. "The ballots are the proof we need. They're probably in the church if they're anywhere. How do we get 'em?"

The five of them didn't get to decide, because at that moment four cars turned down the drive at the Church in the Acres. The vehicles pulled into the back lot and commenced honking irritably.

"Well, I guess that stalls the decision making process for tonight, anyway," Matt said.

"Stay in touch," Mike told the others.

They all bid each other good night, their voices echoing hollowly in the almost suffocating darkness of the night.

Everyone walked to their respective rides and started for home. Mike was the only person left standing in the parking lot. A pair of headlights turning the corner told him he wouldn't have to wait much longer.

He pulled the collar of his coat up against a sudden gust of wind and began walking towards his mother's aqua green car when the door to the church behind him suddenly flew open and the Scoutmaster, Mr. William Pruyne, ran out.

Mike figured he was just running late, and called a brief 'good night' while moving out of the older man's way. To his surprise, Mr. Pruyne stopped right in front of him and clasped his jacket sleeve tightly.

"The proof you need exists," he said, his voice a throaty whisper. "I can help you find it!"

"Um... what?" Mike asked. Could he have heard them talking? Did he know that they knew? Was this some kind of trick?!

No. In the darkness, a beam of moonlight splashed across the Scoutmaster's face, and Mike saw into his eyes. They were wide, deeply lined at the edges. The eyes of a man wracked with terror and guilt.

"Bring the others back to the church tonight," Mr. Pruyne continued. "Ten o'clock. You'll know everything then." He let go of the other's jacket. "Please, be here."

The adult looked around the empty lot once, twice. Then he was gone.

Mike was alone again in the paved lot behind the church. He blinked. Someone honked a car horn, and he remembered that his mother was still waiting. As he walked over to the car in which he would ride home, he thought to himself how utterly strange Boy Scouts had become.

It was just after ten, and four of them were back at the Church in the Acres, standing on the pavement behind the main building.

Mike, Aaron, Hughes and Bill Gelinias looked up at their meeting place, silent now in the dead of night, illuminated only by the light of the moon and the cars racing by on Wilbraham Road.

"So, are we going to do it?" Aaron asked the others.

"We've got to," Mike said, "if we want to know the truth."

The wind howled across the open field and through the naked branches of the trees beyond. It was a dark, cold autumn night.

"I can't believe we're going to do this," said Hughes. He was having second thoughts.

"What choice do we have?" Mike asked him.

"Well, we could not break into the church, for one," he said flatly.

"Don't go wimping out on us, Hughes," Aaron said.

"Hey! Hold on a minute," Bill Gelinias broke in, silencing the brief altercation. "How did we all get here, anyway? Are we seriously asking people to believe that our parents were willing to bring us here at this time of night?"

"Shut up, Bill!" The other three told him.

"And where's Matt?"

"He had to work," Mike said.

Bill was incredulous. "What? He's never worked this late before. Isn't that kind of convenient? I mean, is the store even open at this time of—"

"SHUT UP, BILL!"

"Fine."

Their attention returned to the church, the great white building that lay before them in all its foreboding gloom. The wind gave another huge gust, as if ushering them forward on their task.

"So, what's the plan?" Mike asked the others.

"Well, I think it's safe to say that the front door is probably locked," Aaron said. "So why don't we try the kitchen door up there?" He pointed to an old and seldom used door that sat at the top of an old and seldom used flight of stairs. On the other side of the door would be the kitchen on the second floor, the well-known meeting place of the adults and their destination.

"Okay," said Mike.

They made their way across the lawn towards the staircase and the door. In their minds, the plan was simple. Enter the church by way of the kitchen door, find the ballots if they still existed, and use them as proof of the adults' treachery.

Their plan revealed itself to have a fatal flaw upon closer examination of the wooden staircase. The examination was done by Bill Gelinias, a talented marksman and dutiful scout but by no means an expert on the effects of the elements on manmade timber technology. Indeed, he and the others were quite unprepared for the outcome of his daring experiment.

Case in point, Bill stepped on the first step to have his foot go right through the wooden plank and come out the other side.

"Okay," said Mike.

"Looks like the stairs are a bad idea," said Bill, picking splinters off of the cuff of his jeans.

The four of them thought. Aaron gazed up at the landing where the door stood. The stairs were obviously unsafe, but maybe they could bypass the stairs...

"Hey," he asked the others, "how high do you think this is?"

The other three looked up. "Why?"

Mike couldn't fall asleep.

Not that he was trying. I mean, one of things you really don't want to do when you're dangling approximately twenty feet off the ground with only a bunch of milk crates to break your fall is try to lose consciousness. The

statement was made because Mike was able to fall asleep in almost any other situation imaginable. As soon as a comfortable position was found, be it in an automobile, plane, train, flat bed truck, ocean liner, bulldozer, subway car or an ordinary suburban bedroom, he was down for the count. Snoozing was serious business in the Quadrozzi family.

Still, for the sake of pure curiosity, had he been trying or even remotely comfortable, Mike still would not have been able to fall asleep.

Mike reflected on the fact that he hated it when he thought such weird thoughts and yelled down to his companions on the ground. "Right! Get going!"

The four of them had constructed a crude tower of milk crates on the ground under the landing and were, by way of a human bridge and the use of a few amateur climbing skills, attempting to reach the kitchen door.

This newest plan dictated that one person would climb the crates first, grabbing onto the ledge and getting a firm grip. The tower fell quite a few feet short of the landing, so the others would have to latch onto each other in order to climb upwards.

Mike was the first one up the rickety creation. Getting a good grip on the posts of the railing which were, thank God, surprisingly sturdy, he proceeded to dangle and call for the others to proceed.

Bill Gelinas was the second one up. Carefully, he stepped from crate to crate up the makeshift tower and grabbed Mike's ankles. Mike exhaled sharply as the other stepped off the crates and hung freely in the air.

Now it was Aaron's turn. He was supposed to climb up the two of them and get to the landing where he could help them all up in turn.

"Go, dammit!" Mike called.

Aaron rubbed his hands together anxiously, then ascended towards his fellows. At the top of the pile of milk crates, he proceeded to use his fellows as hand and footholds.

"Careful!"

"Watch it!"

"Sorry."

"Gaw!"

"Oh, shut up."

After a few tense seconds, Aaron was at the top of the landing. Bracing himself against the side of the church for support, he leaned down to help Bill Gelinias up and over the side of the wooden ledge. A few bouts of human staircase later and the two of them were there.

Mike was still dangling.

"Hughes!" he yelled.

Hughes stood on the lawn at the base of the pile of crates. He looked less than confident about the events which were playing themselves out tonight. "I really can't believe we're doing this," he said flatly.

"Come on," Aaron said, "It's not that hard."

"Piece of cake," Bill Gelinias remarked.

"Piece of cake?" Hughes balked. "This is my first premeditated crime, thank you very much!"

"Dammit, hick boy!" Mike yelled, "Get going!"

Hughes finally submitted, and after a few more tense seconds all four of them were standing atop the landing just outside the kitchen door. They took a short break to catch their breath.

"And now, the moment of truth," Aaron said. He tried the knob. It turned in his hand and the kitchen door swung open with an unnecessarily long creak.

A puzzled look crossed Bill Gelinias' face. "Wait a minute," he asked of the others. "Wouldn't it have been a lot easier just to become our animal forms and get up the stairs that way?"

The other three looked at him. "Shut up, Bill!"

"I mean, Aaron could've flown, Hughes and Mike can climb and that would've left us with—"

"SHUT UP, BILL!"

He held up his hands. "Fine, fine!"

"Can we please get this over with, now?" Hughes asked.

They walked through the door into the kitchen, each hoping to find something in the church that might bring the adult conspiracy to light and save their troop.

And they didn't want to get caught.

Mr. William Pruyne, Scoutmaster of Troop 192, pushed the double front doors of the church open and threw a glance around the vast parking lot one more time. Still not seeing the scouts, he decided he would go downstairs and wait for them there.

He turned in the doorway, starting to walk away when he caught something in the corner of his eye. The moonlight had glinted off of something in the parking lot. Squinting in the pitch dark of night, he looked out into the lot, trying to discern the shape of the thing—

Twin headlights flared, and the silent car roared suddenly to life.

Mr. Pruyne's eyes went wide with horror. How could they have known?

With a thunderous squeak on the heavily waxed floor, he turned on his heel and ran back into the building. Maybe if he could get down to the lower floor he could find another exit or—

Another distraction. Something crunched underfoot. In the oppressive silence of the great meeting hall, he bent down to see what he'd stepped on.

The smell of ashes. It was a burned out cigar.

The double doors behind him swung open with a thunderous crash.

In another part of the church, a spark flared. The spark became a small flame and the flame lit the end of a long brown cigar.

Mr. John Hawley ignored the din coming from the hall and examined what he'd come here tonight to find, what he knew others also wanted to find.

In his hands he held the election ballots. A neat stack of white scraps of paper on which were written the names of one young man or the other. Nothing more than that.

How unfortunate, then, that so much trouble had to come from something so insignificant, so paltry. It was almost laughable. Hard to believe such a problem could be caused by nothing more than paper.

But, of course, all problems had their solutions.

The noise from the other room abruptly stopped. Mr. Hawley took the cigar from his mouth and looked at it for a moment. Then, he slowly brought it towards the insignificant pieces of paper.

"All right," Mike said, "I think we should split up."

They were standing in the darkened church kitchen. What little light there was bounced around the room, glinting off of every shiny metal surface.

"Okay," Aaron nodded. "Me and Bill will go downstairs and you two can look around up here."

The Bills nodded. "Sounds good."

"If they're still here, the ballots could be anywhere," Mike reminded the others. "Check all the drawers and the wastebaskets and everything."

They split up. Aaron and Bill Gelinas left the room, making for the stairs. As the sounds of their footsteps faded, Mike and Hughes began searching the kitchen.

Looking through a drawer filled with scissors, scotch tape and those little plastic things fancy restaurants put around dinner napkins, Mike's thoughts were momentarily elsewhere. Mr. Pruyne had told him to be here. He had to be somewhere, and Mike had to find him. He was probably the only person who knew where the ballots were.

"Hey, Hughes?" Mike called across the room.

"Yeah?"

"Keep looking in here, I'll go out into the hall."

"Sure."

Mike pushed open the swinging door that led to the main room of the church. To one side of him lay the stairs down which Aaron and Bill had gone. He could hear the faint rustling of their search on the first floor. In front of him was another door, the one led into the hall. Mike walked through it, emerging into complete and total darkness.

He stood in the doorway a few seconds, letting his eyes adjust. Looking around briefly but seeing next to nothing out of the ordinary in the huge empty room, he started forward.

Mike asked himself what he thought he should do now, and his answer came as he noticed something odd. He'd been making his way towards the front door, away from the door to the kitchen and the stairs. Yet, the sound he had heard before and dismissed as Aaron and Bill's search was getting louder, not softer.

It was coming from outside, through the double doors. In the parking lot.

It wasn't the others. It was a car.

Could this be Mr. Pruyne, waiting for them to arrive? Mike picked up his pace a bit, walking towards the exit at a slow trot. He was almost there when he heard a soft crackle.

He'd stepped on something.

Slowly, he lifted his shoe to see what it had been. Squinting in the darkness, he thought it looked like ashes. Maybe a cigarette butt.

He suddenly had the feeling he should find Mr. Pruyne. Now nearly running, he made for the exit to the parking lot and threw open the double doors.

To Mike's dismay, the lot appeared empty. A cold wind blew a few dead autumn leaves across the pavement, but that was all.

No, it wasn't. Twin points of red light brought his eyes to focus an idling gray town car. There was a man standing next to it. He closed the half open trunk with a hollow thud.

"Well, good evening, Mr. Quadrozzi."

Mike wheeled on the voice. The tall figure of John Hawley stepped out of the shadows towards him.

"What are you doing here?" Mike asked the elder.

"I think you know," Mr. Hawley said. Wisps of cigar smoke encircled him, almost as if he himself were giving off the noxious fumes.

"You're right I know," Mike said, surprising himself with the sudden steadiness in his voice, despite the fact that he was more than a little frightened. "We all know what you've done."

Mr. Hawley frowned. "You know nothing."

He took a few steps forward, and Mike sidestepped in return, keeping a safe distance. The elder now stood in between him and the idling town car.

"I think you may have been expecting someone," Mr. Hawley said.

Mike blinked, a frightening thought coming to him. "Where's Mr. Pruyne?" he asked.

The other's face didn't change, his expression remained set in stone. "He's come and gone," he said.

Mike glanced at the trunk as Mr. Hawley began walking towards the car.

"What, that's it?" Mike called after him. "You're done playing your mind games and now you just leave? Disappear?"

The elder ignored him.

"We deserve to know the truth!"

Mr. Hawley stopped.

Slowly, he turned back to face the youth. If Mike could have seen his eyes he might have retreated into the church. They were cold, yet burned with a smouldering hatred. "You can avoid what you deserve," he said, "if you leave this alone, Mr. Quadrozzi. You've lost."

The man who had closed the trunk held open a door, and Mr. Hawley got inside the long gray town car. Seconds late, with a burst of exhaust and an almost imperceptible rumble, they disappeared into the night.

The doors behind Mike were thrown open, and Aaron, Hughes and Bill Gelinas raced outside.

"We were looking," Aaron said as the three of them walked up to Mike.

"And we heard a car," explained Hughes, "What happened?"

They watched as Mike fell back against the church, slumping to his knees. He was suddenly tired. He looked up at the others and sighed.

"We've lost," he said.

One week later, they were all at the Church in the Acres again. Mike, Aaron, Matt Atanian and the Bills.

Days before, they had told Matt what had happened at the church that night, how they had failed to find evidence of the adult conspiracy. Still, they pledged not to give up hope.

All the scouts of Troop 192 were arriving, some by bike, some getting dropped off by parents eager to have just an hour and a half of peace and quiet.

"Well," Mike was saying, "No point in worrying ourselves sick over it, eh?"

"Don't worry, we'll think of something," Aaron said.

Jon Becker arrived, and they waved as he walked past them towards the church. He was waving his copy of *Boy's Life* at them, which he had received in the mail earlier that day. "Your trip's in here!" he enthusiastically shouted at them, although whether he was shouting to be heard over the distance, or if due to the headphones he was wearing he thought he was talking a normal volume, no one knew.

They were about to join Jon entering the building when they noticed someone was standing behind them, off to the side. The five of them turned.

It was the new kid, Kenny Pendrell.

"Oh, hey, Kenny," Matt said in greeting. "How are you?"

Kenny didn't say anything at first, but then, in that quiet voice of his he asked them, "So have you guys ever heard of a place called *Jusenkyo*?"

## Chapter Ten: Aftermath and New Things

by Matthew Atanian

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It was a week after the night that the group of four boys had tried, and sadly failed, to uncover the plot behind the election of their new Senior Patrol Leader. They were all at the Church in the Acres again. Mike, Aaron, and the Bills. Matt Atanian was with them.

Days before, they had told Matt what had happened at the church that night, how they had failed to find evidence of the adult conspiracy. Still, they pledged not to give up hope.

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"Oh, hey, Kenny," Matt said in greeting. "How are you?"

Kenny didn't say anything at first, but then, in that quiet voice of his he asked them, "So have you guys ever heard of a place called *Jusenkyo*?"

Two minutes later, the five of them had not moved a millimetre from the shocked expressions that had fallen

upon their faces immediately after Kenny had poised his question. "Um, hello?" Kenny asked quietly. He waved his hand before their faces to no response at all. "Hello?" he said again, louder this time, which was still rather quiet.

Finally, it was Mike who responded. "*Ju... Jusenkyo?* What's that?"

Kenny pulled off the backpack he was wearing slung over one shoulder, and pulled from it the same issue of *Boy's Life* that Becker had been waving at them. "There's an article in here that is a travel log of five people who took a trip to China," Kenny explained, "you five." His tone had suddenly become very sure and confident, even approaching a normal person's volume. "The details of your trip are gone into quite well, until things get rather sketchy around six days into a hike taken through the Chinese wilderness, around the time you reached the Bayankala Mountain Range in the Qinghai Province.

"This book," Kenny continued, pulling a rather ancient looking tome from his backpack, "talks about a legendary training ground of..." Kenny flipped the book open, turned to a certain page, and consulted it. The others were startled to see that the worn pages were covered with Chinese writing, which Kenny seemed to be reading with only a little difficulty. "...cursed springs. *Jusenkyo*. 'He who dares train at this place will know not the life of a normal man for the rest of his days. He shall know...' um... 'a life of constant change,' I think it says. It then continues on about the unfortunate who trained there becoming beasts with the souls of men. What does it all mean?"

During the last two paragraphs, Mike had returned to his state of shock. However, Aaron had managed his way out of his. "Why do you have a big old book written in Chinese?"

Kenny's voice regained its usual timidity. "I like to know things," he said simply.

Meanwhile, the rest had managed to shake off their shock, including Mike with his second bout. Matt was looking off in the direction of a car that was pulling into the parking lot. The Porter's car. "Maybe we can show Kenny

the answer to his question," Matt said. "After all, Matty needs to talk with Sarah."

Matty Hayes walked back out of the Church, pausing briefly to toss into the trash the remainder of the paper towels she had dried herself with. She went over to Sarah Porter's car just as the Girl Scout leader was getting out.

Kirstin and Nicole were getting out from the back seat. "Hi, Matty," Kirstin said brightly.

"Hi, Kirstin," Matty responded. As the twins headed into the church, Matty turned to the other Porter sister. "Hi, you're Sarah, right? Matty. Matty Hayes." She offered her hand, and Sarah took it. "We met that night a couple of weeks ago?"

Sarah smiled. "Ah, yes, I remember. You were in a hurry not to get caught in the rain, and I was in a pissy mood, myself. Seems neither of us were at our best, that night."

Matty laughed lightly. "That's for sure. That's why I thought I'd come over and re-introduce myself."

"Good idea. I'd hate for you to think I was such a bitch all the time."

"I could never think that. What had you in such a mood, anyways? If you don't mind my asking."

"Some jerk who's with the Boy Scouts. Matt something or other. Caught the pervert looking at me when he shouldn't have been at your Boy Scout camp, and it seems he's been after me ever since."

"Oh," Matty said, with slight disappointment. "You know, I'd hardly qualify saying hi to you a couple of times as 'after you ever since'."

Sarah looked at Matty. "How do you know about it?"

"Um... Well, Matt and I are kind of close."

"Close?"

"Yeah. Like... um... almost like siblings. Anyways, we often share what's on our minds. I think he likes you."

Sarah's mood was darkening. "Well, you can tell Mr. Testosterone that the feeling's not mutual."

Things were definitely not going the way that Matty had hoped. "Um... you wan'na change the subject? I get the impression you'd rather not talk about what we just were."

The frown disappeared from Sarah face. "You're quite perceptive, Matty Hayes."

"Thanks, I think..."

Meanwhile, Troop 192 had gathered upstairs in Walker Hall. Mike, Aaron, the Bills, and Kenny were the last to assemble, walking out of the Kitchen. "That was... cool," Kenny said in soft excitement.

Justy Yung stepped up onto the small stage in the front of the hall, towering over the rest of the youth as he did so. Proctor stood on the second step up to the stage, below Justy but above everyone else. Both had new Troop Position patched proudly sewn onto their uniforms.

Justy took a deep breath and looked out over the happy chaos of the Troop as it's members socialized before the meeting began. (Of course, to some of the younger members, "socialize" had a rather odd meaning...) He let out the breath, took in another one, and then...

**"ALL RIGHT! THIS IS YOUR OMNIPOTANT YET BENEVOLANT MASTER!!! FALL IN, SIGNS UP, AND SHUT UP!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"**

Proctor looked up at Justy. "Well done, Captain, if I may say so."

"You may," Justy responded. He looked out at the Troop which, stunned, had actually complied. He laughed. He laughed some more.

And a little more.

"Bwa ha HAHAHahaha HAHAHAHAHAHAAAA!"

And, just to try something different, at the end he simply chuckled a bit.

"I thought 'Signs Up' was a call for silence," Bill whispered to Hughes as Justy was into his fourth consecutive minute of chuckling.

Justy immediately stopped and shot Bill a nasty look. "Silence, fool! That does not apply to me! I am the Leader! You are merely my insignificant followers, and it is you who must do as I say!"

And he topped this off by laughing a bit more.

Finely, much to most everyone's relief, he stopped.

"There's been a little change in the Troop," Justy said. "It seems that our former Scoutmaster, Mr. Bill Pruyne, won't be with us any longer."

Mike, Aaron, and the Bills shot each other looks. Hughes raised his hand,

"Yes?" Justy said. "Peon #3, you have a question?"

"Why not?"

"Well, from what I hear, his dog died, he came down with the flu, all of his relatives have come over for an extended visit, he now has to work Wednesday nights, and he's also busy studying lambada. He sends his heartfelt regret that he can't be with us any longer and hopes that there will come a day when he will be able to rejoin us.

"Now. Announcement #2. Your new Scoutmaster, Mr. William Shmuler!"

A tired, middle aged man in a poorly assembled uniform shirt and jeans (not Scout pants!) waved to the group. "Hi. I'm happy to be here. Justy and I have put together some meetings that I think you'll all enjoy. Also, this is my son, Will." He indicated a strange looking small child. "He's joining the Troop."

The younger Will dropped to the floor and had what appeared to be a seizure, complete with frothing mouth, but something made it clear that he was doing this intentionally. Perhaps it was the stupid grin that people having seizures probably wouldn't normally have on their face.

"At least he's Will, and not Bill," Bill said to Hughes. "It's confusing enough with just the two of us."

Justy glanced at Bill harshly. "Peon #7, you will be silent! Now, announcement #3! New patrols! I'm going to

put you all in new patrols, and even name them for you! And you will like it!"

Justy assembled the patrols, and soon the first two were complete. Mike, Aaron, and the Bills were happy with many of the people that they had not been stuck with.

"Let's see..." Justy said. "The last patrol shall be... the Garden Snakes! Harmless little snakes slithering around on your bellies that I can step on if you get in my way!" He laughed a bit, but thankfully, as he wasn't done speaking yet, the laugh was brief.

"The members of this patrol shall be... Mike Quadrozzi, Aaron Abdelmaseh, Bill Gelinias, Bill Hughes, Jon Becker, Matthew Swett, and Will Shmuler! I do believe that's everyone!"

Kenny timidly raised a hand.

Justy didn't notice. He had resumed his laughter.

"Yo, Justy," Aaron said, "You forgot someone!"

Justy continued his laughter unabated.

"Justy! Hello!" Aaron shouted.

He just laughed some more.

Aaron turned to Mike. Mike nodded. Together, they shouted, "Hey, Justy!"

He stopped laughing. He blinked. He frowned. "You will address me as 'Mr. Senior Patrol Leader,' or as 'SPL Yung.' What do you want?"

Mike and Aaron pointed at Kenny, his hand still up in the air.

"Yes? Peon #17? You have a question?"

"You didn't put me in a patrol," Kenny said.

Justy frowned at the boy. "Yes, I did," he lied. "You just didn't pay attention! You're with the... um... Garden Snakes."

"So," Sarah asked, "Why are you with the Boy Scouts?"

"I dun'no," Matty said. "I think I signed up as an Assistant Scoutmaster just to be with friends who were with the troop. Some of the boys... and Matt."

Sarah frowned slightly, but briefly.

"How 'bout you?" Matty quickly said.

"Well, you know, I was a girl in the program, and became a leader to be with my sisters."

"You three seem very close," Matty commented.

"Well," Sarah responded listlessly, "we're all that each other has."

"You've got me," Matty said. A moment later, she realized she had spoken aloud.

Fortunately, Sarah smiled. "I think I'd like that. I don't have any close friends at work, and all of the other leaders in my Troop are forty or fifty years old. It'd be nice to socialize with a woman my own age."

Matty smiled awkwardly. "Um, yeah. It would be..."

The Garden Snake patrol was meeting at a table set up in one corner of the hall. Mike, Aaron, and the Bills were busy mentally sizing up their new patrol.

Jon Becker they were comfortable with. They had known him for some time and knew him to be reliable, if they could ever get him out of the headphones.

Kenny, of course, they were sure off. Something about him made them accept him easily, which didn't often happen when new members joined the troop. Obviously they trusted him, else they wouldn't have shared with him the truth about what had happened in China.

Matthew Swett. They thought he'd be okay. He had been with the troop a few years now, and for most of that time he had just been another of the ones who had run around causing chaos and headaches, but lately he had been changing, channelling his energy away from annoyance and into a healthy eccentric strangeness. In any case, Mike, Aaron, and the Bills had not too long ago begun to accept Matt as a proper member of the Troop rather than one of the annoying ones. As another Matt, Matt Atanian, had said to him not too long ago, "You will be assimilated. Resistance is futile."

Then there was the new kid. Will Shmuler. Judging by his performance earlier, it was clear which category of troop member he fell into. Annoying. Which he was demonstrating quite clearly right now.

His demonstration fell along the lines of trying to shove Mike Quadrozzi's entire handbook up his own nose whilst making a noise that was something of a cross between an elephant and a blue jay.

The others did their best to ignore him, except for Mike who wanted his handbook back. Finely, in frustration, Mike resorted to a move pioneered by the legendary John Cleese in *Faulty Towers*. A move they'd named after its frequent recipient. Mike slapped Will in the back of the head and said sharply, "Manuel!" He then grabbed his handbook back, triumphant.

For now.

Once the commotion was settled, business could begin. "First we should decide on a Patrol Leader," Aaron suggested.

"How 'bout you?" Hughes asked Aaron.

"I had enough of that game back when I was SPL," Aaron responded.

"Bill?" Hughes then suggested.

"Ditto," Bill said.

"I'll do it!" Will said as he stood up, spun around, and made siren noises.

"Okay," Swett said. "All those in favour of Mr. Human Cartoon here, say aye."

Predictably, only Will said, "Aye!" He then made fart noises as he ran around the table backwards.

Kenny opened his mouth as if to speak. He then shut it again, and looked down at the table. This was not unnoticed by Mike, who said, "What is it, Kenny?"

"I liked Mike when he ran for SPL," Kenny said. "What about him?"

Mike smiled. "Hey, someone liked me!"

"Find one person who actually did vote for Justy, and I'll give you twenty bucks," Aaron responded.

"Can we really have Ramen Noodle Soup on all the camping trips?" Kenny asked.

"Yes, Kenny. If it can't be the official food of the whole troop, it will at least be the official food of this patrol."

"I think it's settled then, Squid," Aaron said. "You're out Patrol Leader."

Will stopped the farting noises and began to horribly sing, "Ramen Soup!!" at the top of his lungs.

Matt came up behind Will and grabbed his shoulders, stopping his mad reverse jaunt. "Who the hell is this?"

"Oh, hi, Matt," everyone said, except for Kenny, who called him, "Mr. Atanian," and Will, who said, "Hey, Mr. Nostril Earlobe Verb!"

"That's Will. He's the new Scoutmaster's son, and Justy stuck him in our patrol," Bill explained.

Matt pulled up a chair and tugged at his wet colour a bit. "There's got to be an easier way to go about this," he muttered to himself. To the others, he said, "So what's going on?"

They summed up the situation at present. "Ah," Matt said.

"So now we need an Assistant Patrol Leader," Mike said. "Any takers?"

Around the same time that Becker tugged one of the speakers away from his ear slightly and said, "I'll do it," Matt Swett also volunteered.

"Vote?" Aaron suggested.

"Okay," Mike quipped. Kenny offered some paper from his notebook, and Mike passed out a small piece to each of them. All of the youth at the table placed a vote, except for Mike himself. He collected the ballots in his hat, which was one of the two things he ever took it off for, the other being eating in the dining hall.

"Okay," Mike said, counting the votes. "There's three for Becker, three for Matt Swett, and... one for Mr. Snuffaluffagas?" He looked at Will. "Somehow I don't think Mr. Snuffaluffagas is going to win," he said, tearing up the ballot. "Okay, we'll leave it up to a coin toss, and I differ to our guest Scoutmaster-type person, Matt."

Matt rummaged through his pockets and produced a Susan B. Anthony dollar. "Heads, Matt, tails Becker." He flipped. He looked at the coin.

"Well?" the others prodded.

Matt's mouth twitched, so that he was not quite smiling, but his expression wasn't quite neutral either.

"Well?" the others pleaded.

"Well," Matt said, "you can't go wrong with a Matt."

Swett turned to Becker. "Sorry, guy," he said.

"WHAT?" Becker responded, his headphones back in place. "DID I GET IT?"

"It's kind of odd," Bill suddenly pondered aloud. "Why would Justy have put us all together? Wouldn't he rather divide and conquer?"

"Maybe he's not smart enough for that," Hughes remarked.

"Maybe," Matt responded, not convinced. He tugged at his collar again. "Or maybe he believes in having all of his enemies in one place, and keeping them conveniently out of the way."

An ominous air settled over the table, despite Will's sudden attempts to imitate some kind of half horse - half seagull creature. Finely, the other youth at the table sighed a collective, "Nah..."

But Matt Atanian wasn't convinced...

A week later, ominous thoughts were still on Matt's mind as he made his way home from work. He worked at CVS, a large chain of drug stores that were all over New England and only God and Tom Ryan (the president of CVS) knew where else. Matt didn't concern himself with that. He concerned himself only with the store he worked at.

After being there for so long that it seemed forever, Matt was still on the lowest rung of the latter. He had finely gotten full time benefits, which was something of a plus... but he wasn't planning on staying there forever. Unfortunately for Matt, like most of the rest of his life at

present, while he wanted change he wasn't doing much about it.

He stopped at Burger King on the way home, as he usually did. The man behind the counter handed Matt a cheeseburger, plain with ketchup, before Matt could even say hi. Matt handed him a dollar in return and began his walk home, which usually took about twenty minutes.

Just after he finished his 'burger (he usually finished in front of Liberty Auto Wash and made use of their trash barrels, and today was no exception), one of those sudden rainstorms that appeared without warning whenever the plot demanded it began. Matt silently cursed, thankful that at least that he had finished his 'burger first. A moment later, the water began to seep through the trench coat and fedora that Matt almost always wore, whatever the weather, even in the hottest days of summer and the coldest days of winter. (The only time he usually didn't wear them was whilst in his Scout Uniform, and even then, occasionally.)

Matty continued walking down Boston Road, when she looked up and to her surprise noticed someone familiar walking in front of her. Unsure what to say or do, Matty tried not to be noticed, but that was something difficult to do in a trench coat.

"Matty?" Sarah said. "That you?" Sarah was unprepared for the rain, and was holding the remains of a newspaper over her head. Her hair was wetted down to her scalp, and the T-shirt and jeans she wore were sticking to her skin in rather interesting places.

Matty swallowed. She felt a bit warm. One of the advantages, she pondered, to being a woman is that it's harder for others to tell when you are... ahem... "excited." She was grateful that Sarah's T-shirt wasn't white, or she mightn't be able to remain conscious.

"Um... yeah." Matty responded at last. She tried not to look at Sarah too much, at least not parts of her other than her face.

"I must look awful soaked like this," Sarah continued as she came to a halt beside Matty, who had also stopped walking.

"Not... not really," was all Matty could say. *I must sound like a total idiot!*

"Where you headed?" Sarah asked.

"Home," Matty continued. "It's about fifteen minutes from here."

Sarah smiled. "My place is closer than that," she said. "Come on over and dry off?"

Immediately, Matty's brain was filled with a cacophony of voices shouting, *No! Don't do it! Don't be a fool! It's too dangerous!* and, inexplicably, *Penguin!!!* Matty thought of penguins for a moment before deciding to politely beg off. "Sure, thanks," she said. In her head, a million penguins suddenly attacked her for being so stupid.

Sarah let Matty in before walking in herself. It was a small, run down apartment on a street off a street off Boston Road. As she closed the door behind herself, Sarah glanced at her watch and commented, "Nicole and Kirstin probably aren't home from school yet."

Matty nodded dumbly. Sarah walked over to a closet and took out a couple of towels, handing one to Matty. Matty accepted it and nodded a quiet thank you.

Sarah walked into what Matty correctly guessed was her bedroom and began drying off her hair. Matty stood in the bedroom's doorway, afraid to enter. She took off her hat and, still holding on to it, began drying her hair, too.

"Make yourself at home," Sarah said. "It's not much, but..." She walked over to an answering machine, which was blinking, and pressed the play button. Matty was alarmed to see that, after Sarah had done this, she peeled off her T-shirt, leaving only a bra between... between... well, you know... Um... ahem...

Matty's jaw hung open in astonishment, pleasure, and terror all rolled into one. Miraculously, she managed to

regain her composure, at least externally, before Sarah could notice.

After a couple false starts, Matty spoke. "Oh, drat, look at the time." She cleared her throat. "I... I have to get going..."

Sarah wasn't listening. She was instead listening to a message on the answering machine.

"Hey, Sarah, baby. How 'bout you and me give it another go, huh?" came from the machine in a voice that was dripping with conceit and self-importance. "I'm still willing to take you back, but this offer may not last long..."

The message stopped abruptly, as Sarah had suddenly ripped the machine away from the wall. She didn't damage it, but she did pull the plug from the socket. "That **bastard!!!**" she shouted, seemingly oblivious for a moment that Matty was still in the doorway.

The obliviousness did not last long. She suddenly turned to Matty and grabbed both her arms, a frighteningly cheerful look on her face. "Hey, this Sunday night, let's go out. You and me. A girl's night out. Huh?"

"Um... sure," was all Matty could say.

"Alright, it's a date then," Sarah responded.

Matty began to feel faint, having an almost topless Sarah so close to her. She was desperate for escape. "I really must be going."

"Oh, sure," Sarah said. She hastily scribbled her phone number on a piece of paper and handed it to Matty. "Give me a call, soon."

And with that, Matty was back out in the rain, the phone number in a pocket where the water would have a hard time reaching it.

Matty stood on the steps outside Sarah's apartment. *It's a date...* streamed through her consciousness for a moment. *What have I gotten myself into?!* The penguins returned with reinforcements.

That evening, Matt arrived unceremoniously at the Church in the Acres. Already there was the group of

scouts that had become known of by some of the other Adults as his amoebas, although Matt always protested this name, on the grounds that he thought of them as equals, not as mindless followers. Nor did he consider himself their leader (except in the sense that he was an Assistant Scoutmaster), more he thought of them as partners.

This didn't stop the other Adult Leaders in the Troop from finding humour at their expense.

The "Amoebas" were, of course, most of the members of the Garden Snake Patrol: Aaron Abdelmaseh, Mike Quadrozzi, Billy Gelinias, Bill Hughes, and the newest member of the group, young Kenneth Pendrell; none of whom were single-celled organisms. Also loitering near by was part-time amoeba Jon Becker, who was presently off in his own headphone-supplied world. One of them was missing; Matt Swett was with the Cub Scouts, as he often helped them out a bit before his own meeting began.

The rain had stopped a few hours ago, and the sky had cleared up. The sun was very low in the sky, causing the still-wet grass off in the field to seem to glow slightly. Many of the trees on the outskirts of the field were barren, except for the few brave souls still clinging to their brown, withering leaves. It was a typical late autumn evening.

"Hi, Everybody!" Matt intoned.

"Hi, Matt!" the group intoned.

Kenny looked up from his book, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and added his slightly belated greeting.

Becker continued to be off God-knows-where.

The group was approached by Kirstin Porter, who came to a stop standing beside Aaron. "Hi," she cheerfully said. "How's everything?"

Everyone gave assorted answers to her question, except of course for Becker. Everyone began to wish that he'd take the headphones off or just go away, as in his present state he was being quite distracting.

"So, um," Matt cautiously said, "is your sister here? Not Nicole, the other one."

"Yes," Kirstin answered, "but she's in quite the typical mood, alas. Seems she got a call from her ex-slave master, er, boyfriend."

"So that's who that was," Matt said, thinking aloud.

"Hmm?" Kirstin asked.

"Oh, um," Matt said, "just that she seemed very upset with the answering machine..." he noncommittally replied.

"Were you over at her house or something?" Mike inquired.

Becker shouted, "WHAT?"

The others ignored Becker.

"Um, I guess," Matt replied.

"WHAT?" Becker asked.

Hughes suddenly said something random in German. The others paid him as much attention as they paid Becker.

"And?"

"Well, it looks like she and I are going out Sunday night," Matt said, trailing off in the end as if there was more left unsaid.

"Matt, way to go!" Aaron said, although he thought there was probably a catch.

Kirstin smiled a warm smile. "It's about time she loosened up," she commented.

"What's the catch?" Bill Gelinas asked.

Aaron, Mike, and Kirstin gave Bill a dirty look. "WHAT?" Becker shouted. "Mein Klein Führer!" Hughes randomly commented as Justy walked by, just out of earshot.

Matt finely got around to answering Bill's question. "Well, it's not exactly a romantic date, or anything," he said slowly, prolonging the inevitable. "It's more a sort-of as-friends thing. It's actually sort of..." He coughed suddenly. "A girl's night out."

Mike, Aaron, Kirstin, and the Bills took this in without one bit of shock. They were sort of expecting it. They *would* have been surprised if it was a romantic date.

"WHAT?" Becker yelled.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to Kirstin. She took Matt aside, where the others couldn't hear, and asked Matt one question that put him into complete and total shock.

"What are you going to wear?"

In the distance, Becker shouted, "WHAT?" The one tiny part of Matt's mind that wasn't stunned was filled with a mental image of Becker meeting some certain flightless Antarctic water fowl.

## *Chapter Eleven: Matty's New Wardrobe? Shopping Spree from Hell*

by Matthew Atanian with Carolyn Ede

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Matthew Atanian stood in front of his friend, Carolyn Ede, holding a hose and turning the nozzle that caused cold water to spray from it. He held the hose away from himself, but momentarily that would change.

Carolyn and he shared a very special friendship. Matt had once commented to her that their friendship was like a marriage without sex, and that it was. They had shared good times and bad, better and worse, sickness and health, and would be friends *at least* until death did they part. Matt felt he would be able to share most anything with Carolyn, including a certain after effect of a trip to China not too long ago, something that thus far he had only shared with few other than those who were directly involved.

Matt probably wouldn't even be telling Carolyn, not that he didn't trust her, except that he had an important favour to ask of her, something he could ask of no other living soul on the face of the Earth...

It all started a few days prior...

Matt was going out with Sarah. He was actually going out with Sarah! Well, if one were to be technical, *he* wasn't the one going out with her, which he now found himself reluctantly explaining to his friends. "Well, it's not exactly a romantic date, or anything," he said slowly, prolonging the inevitable. "It's more a sort-of as-friends thing. It's actually sort of..." He coughed suddenly. "A girls night out."

Mike, Aaron, Kirstin, and the Bills took this in without one bit of shock. They were sort of expecting it. They *would* have been surprised if it was a romantic date.

"WHAT?" Becker yelled.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to Kirstin. She took Matt aside, where the others couldn't hear, and asked Matt one question that put him into complete and total shock.

"What are you going to wear?"

In the distance, Becker shouted, "WHAT?"

The Boy Scout meeting proceeded with its usual chaotic turmoil. Justy did his usual routine of barking insane orders and attempting to maintain totalitarian control over the other boys. It was futile.

Inevitably, the meeting drew to a close. Matt said goodnight to everyone and made a hasty exit, saying he had some phone calls to make.

Aaron began to make his way outside, closely followed by Mike, Kenny, and the Bills. Kenny walked with his eyes firmly planted in his book, controlling his speed and direction by listening to the others' footsteps.

"Aaron?" a voice called out, just before he reached the door to go outside.

He stopped, his hand poised over the doorknob. Kenny bumped into him, looked up from his book, and apologized.

Aaron turned to see Kirstin, whose meeting had also just ended, heading towards his group. "Hi, everyone," she said as she joined them.

"Did you want something?" he asked good-naturedly.

"As a matter of fact, yes," Kirstin replied. She pulled from her pocket a deck of cards. Magic cards. She smiled. "Teach me?" she asked.

"S-sure," Aaron responded. Then, "What made you want to learn how to play Magic?"

"Well, you all seem to enjoy it so much," she explained. "After all, you still play it even though you're all cursed in part because of it. I thought it must be a fun game." She frowned. "I fear I can't make much sense of the rulebook, however."

"The rulebook," Mike suddenly decreed, "is not to be understood by normal humans. It's wisdom is wisest used by those who already know how to play."

Everyone looked at Mike as if he'd suddenly grown a third eye. That was an unusually worded comment, even for him.

"In other words," Gelinas said, "learn from people who already know how to play, and just use the rulebook as a reference."

Kirstin nodded. "So *that's* how it works." She smiled again. "So are all of you free Sunday night?"

Aaron blinked. "Sunday... That's the day that Sarah and Matt... and Matty..."

Kirstin did a simultaneous nod, blink, and smile that caused Aaron's heart to skip a beat. He looked to his friends. "Magic at Kirstin's, Sunday night?"

"Sure!" Mike said.

"If we can," Hughes added in an oddly cheerfully pessimistic voice.

"There a problem?" Kirstin asked Hughes.

"Well," he responded, "this wouldn't exactly be a typical get together with the guys."

It always annoyed the others on those rare moments of clarity in which Hughes said something comprehensible and intelligent.

"That's right." Aaron frowned. "Two women present. No supervision." Aaron's sudden frown deepened.

Mike shrugged. "You never know. It could happen."

Kirstin smiled again, oddly confident. "I'm sure it will. You'll all call me and let me know?" She walked over to the door, smiling at Aaron as she passed him. "Aaron has my number."

Kenny suddenly spoke, startling everyone. "I can make it, fore sure," he said.

"Great!" Kirstin said. "One down, four to go. Sunday!" she said, as the door closed behind her.

\* \* \*

Later that night...

"Hello?"

"Hi, Carolyn, it's Matt."

"Oh, hi!"

"Um, I can't talk long. I was just wondering, you busy this Saturday?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Um... think I can come over? I've got something to tell you, and a big favour to ask."

"What is it?"

"I'll tell you Saturday. Don't worry, it's nothing evil."

"If you say so."

"I wish I could talk longer, but I have some other calls to make."

"Okay. What time Saturday?"

"The earlier, the better. Noon-ish okay with you?"

"I can deal with that. It'll be good to see you."

"Same here. We should get together more often. I'll take the bus down. Can you meet me in the Centre of Amherst?"

"Sure."

"Well, I gotta go. See you Saturday."

"Okay. Bye. I love you."

"Love you, too, bye."

Matt hung up the phone, doused himself with cold water, and picked up the phone again. As she dialed a number she read off a slightly damp piece of paper, she stirred her iced tea nervously.

"Hello?"

"Um, hello. Is Sarah there?"

"Who's asking?"

"It's Matty Hayes."

"You want to talk to Sarah?"

"Yes."

"One dollar."

"Nicole?" Matty asked.

"Give me a dollar next time you see me."

In the distance, Matty heard, "Nicole? Who's the phone for?"

"Oh, um, here..."

"Hello?"

"Sarah?"

"Matty? Hi! We on for Sunday?"

"Um, of course."

"Good. What's your address? I can pick you up around five if that's good for you."

"Actually... my house can be hard to find. You know a restaurant called Russell's, right on Boston Road?"

"Of course."

"You can pick me up there."

"Okay! See you Sunday!"

Three days later, Matt walked off of a bus in the centre of Amherst. He immediately saw Carolyn. She was an attractive woman, with shoulder length once-blond hair that had darkened in the years since they had first met. As they embraced, two friends who saw each other not nearly as often as either would like, Matt felt some of the tension that had steadily been building within him since Wednesday drain away.

The two of them had first met in high school, when he was a Senior and she a Sophomore. They both agreed that their friendship was one of the best things that they'd gotten out of the time they spent as Springfield Central High School.

Early on, Matt had had feelings for her other than friendship, but the simple fact was that Carolyn's preferences had one thing in common with his own that would prevent anything happening between them: gender. Matt still had "what if" thoughts once every great once in a while, but quickly buried them for three reasons: 1) It would never happen, 2) He was very content with their friendship, and 3) Sarah. (Albeit, the last reason was only a recent one.)

They travelled to the house Carolyn lived in, catching up a bit on the way. It was a large house, a couple of floors to it, and sat upon a very large piece of land. The back yard

was dominated by cornstalks, all harvested and waiting for winter to come and go so that they might produce their bounty once again. The house itself wasn't pretty, nor was it ugly. If anything, it had a comfortable, "lived in" look to it.

Carolyn was about to step inside, assuming that Matt was following her. He had stopped at the foot of the steps, however. Realizing this, Carolyn stopped and turned.

"Carolyn, remember my saying that I had something to tell you?"

She looked both concerned and curious. "Yes?"

"It'd probably be simpler to show you. Do you have a hose?"

Carolyn nodded and led him to it. Matt stood in front of her, taking hold of the hose and turning the nozzle that caused cold water to spray from it. He held the hose away from himself, but momentarily that would change.

"Remember that trip to China I took with the Boy Scouts?" Matt asked her. She nodded, and he continued. "While there, the five of us visited an ancient Martial Arts training ground, a ground of cursed springs. If you fall into one of these springs, you... change..." As he spoke, he removed his coat and hat and tossed them aside.

Carolyn looked at him, puzzled. Her puzzlement faded away, and a blank expression replaced it, as Matt turned the hose on himself.

The first thing she noticed was that the water seemed to turn Matt's hair from black to red. She then, almost immediately afterwards, noticed that Matt's body seemed to have changed shape... in certain ways...

Matty stood before Carolyn.

"Matt?" Carolyn said a moment later.

"That's me," Matty responded.

"Oh, my," Carolyn simply said. She calmly sat down on a nearby log and stared off into the corn field.

Matty sat beside her. *She's taking this rather calmly*, she thought.

The two of them sat, calmly gazing at the cornstalks. A few birds flew by. In the distance, a crow called out. A slight breeze played with Carolyn's hair.

"Fuck!!" Carolyn bolted to her feet, a more than mild look of surprise on her face. "Matt, you're a *woman!!*"

Matty nodded. "So," she asked, "still no chance for the two of us?"

This seemed to bring Carolyn back down to Earth. Knowing Matty was only joking, she responded, "Well, Matt, I don't know..." She smirked. She had also been joking.

Matty smiled. "Actually, I've assumed the name 'Matty' when I'm female. Matty Hayes."

"So what exactly is going on here?" Carolyn asked. She was definitely over the initial shock, and was asking more for informational purposes than out of confusion.

Matty explained everything to her that she knew about the curse and how it worked. It didn't take long, but by the time they were finished, they were inside and Matty was drying herself off with a towel Carolyn had offered.

"So what was this favour you said you needed?" Carolyn asked after they had sat down.

"Well, there's this woman I like," Matty began.

"Way to go, Matt!" Carolyn said, pleased.

"Yeah, well, she kind of hates me, but she's also sort of becoming friends with 'Matty,'" Matty said. "She doesn't know that Matt and Matty are the same person."

Carolyn nodded, listening as Matty continued.

"Well, she and Matty are going out Sunday night, and, er, I sort of was wondering... well... do you have anything I... I can w... wear...?"

Matty had left her coat and hat at Carolyn's, and through the miracle of public transportation, the two of them made their way to the Holyoke Mall after Carolyn had insisted that Matty should have clothes of her own rather than just borrowing some of hers.

"First, let's go to the lingerie store....this is a date isn't it....wink wink, nudge nudge?"

Matty coughed. "Um... it's more an 'as friends' thing, you know. Anyways, why do I need ladies underwear? It's not as if she's going to see under my clothes..."

"How unlucky. Well, depending on what you wear, you may need a bra, or stockings, or women's undies. I'm not an advocate of that crap, but I would pay me cash money to see you decked out like that!"

Matty was sure her face was probably a rather interesting shade of red, but somehow she found herself persuaded by Carolyn's words. With still a little reluctance, she told Carolyn to lead the way.

Victoria's Secret was pink and plush. It looked to both as though a care bear had wandered in and exploded. It smelled of perfume that only a supermodel would wear for cash or a Home-Ec Teacher would wear in hope of romance.

Matty looked around at all of the frilly and lacy things that were quite alien to her. She looked at Carolyn with a panicked expression. "Help," she peeped.

Carolyn was looking kind of green, frightened, and altogether unhelpful herself. "Here," she mumbled pointing to a chirpy looking saleswoman..."she'll tell us what to do"

Matty looked at the saleswoman, and looked back at Carolyn. "Um, Carolyn...?"

The saleslady, as if on cue walked towards them. The sight was not comforting, she was short, perky looking, and walked with the purposeful swing of someone who knew their way around a pair of panties. "Hello, how may I help you young ladies...perhaps something with a bit of push up 'oomph'?"

Matty reddened again. "I don't need anything fancy... just some girls underwear."

The sales lady looked like she would all of a sudden rather be elsewhere. "Weelllllll...I'm sure you will be able to find your way around without my help.....you're in the right place for *WOMENS* underwear."

As the saleslady walked away in a pretentious huff, Matty again turned to Carolyn. "So, um... what do you think I'd look good in?" She coughed slightly.

"Green. Redheads always look good in green, or black. No pink...Maybe a nice dark blue or cream colour as well. "

After a moment of thought, she added, "Try to stay away from g-string underwear, it is like having your butt flossed. And I will kill you if you go near the polyester".

Minutes later, they were headed toward the posh dressing room with an armload of cotton underthings.

"Hurry up Matty, all this pink is giving me a headache."

Matty nervously went into one of the gaudy stalls, and began to undress. She was somewhat nervous, as this was her first time undressing in a public place as a woman. She had an odd feeling she was being watched, and quickly ducked her head out of the stall. No one could be seen, but she thought she heard the faint sound of a bell.

A moment later, Matty had slipped into a pair of panties and was attempting to get a bra clasped behind her back, with little success. Perhaps she'd be having better luck if her social life had given her more of an opportunity at *undoing* the things, but alas this was not the case. Her fingers fumbled over the clasp for the umpteenth time, still without success. With the nervousness that had been with her throughout this entire venture, she called out, "Um, Carolyn, how do I get this thing closed?"

Carolyn opened the door and clasped the bra, only fumbling for a moment.

"Here Matty, let me show you an easier way to do this," Carolyn said as she demonstrated clasping the bra from the front and turning it around.

Matty thanked her. "So, um... how do I look?"

"You look absolutely stunning."

Matty smiled, despite the embarrassment. Carolyn left, and Matty tried on a few other things before picking out a few assorted items. She put her normal clothes back on, and together she and Carolyn went and paid for them. "Well, I suppose now I need something to wear over these," Matty said, holding up the frilly Victoria Secret's bag.

Carolyn and Matty headed for the nearest directory. Already at the directory stood an Asian man dressed in yellow, who had been staring at the multi-coloured plastic for quite some time.

He continued looking at the sign. He tilted his head at a forty-five degree angle hoping that would clarify things. It didn't. He was beginning to visibly fume in anger. It still told him the same thing it had been telling him for the last fifteen minutes: "YOU ARE HERE --> \*\*"

"Great," he said quietly to himself, "I am here."

He began to grit his teeth and Matty and Carolyn were a little surprised when he started to glow slightly...

Matty and Carolyn backed away a bit, just before the man screamed, "SO WHERE THE HELL AM I NOW?!?!" He followed this ten seconds later with a primal scream, and then he screamed "*SHISHI HOKOUDAN!!!*" There was an explosion.

Matty and Carolyn looked at each other then at the sales clerk whose name tag read "Jason" who was standing in front of the local Electronics Boutique. He just shrugged his shoulders. A second later the melted, charred remains of the mall directory landed behind them. It was their turn to shrug their shoulders and they walked on.

A minute later, the sales clerk who was still standing in front of the store noticed the Asian gentleman in the yellow bandana approaching him. "Ok," he said to himself, "Get into Customer Service mode." He walked up to the young man and said "Hi, is there anything I can help you find today?"

The Asian man in the bandana responded by grabbing the young sales clerk's collar, lifting him off his feet and looking straight into his eyes. "Where is Furinkan High School?"

Matty and Carolyn managed to make their way to Filenes even without the assistance of a directory. They then made their way to the women's department, and

there was a saleswoman there who seemed rather unlike the one from Victoria's Secret. This saleswoman seemed like she'd actually be helpful.

She was Asian as well, but didn't seem like she'd be destroying any mall directories any time soon. She had a smile on her face as she watched the two of them approach. She helped close the distance between herself and the approaching customers, going towards Matty and Carolyn with a bouncy walk.

"Hi, I'm Fenny," she said, pushing up her glasses. "Can I help you?"

"Um," Matty said, "I need some clothes."

"Ah, I can definitely help you then. Can I show you some t-shirts perhaps?"

"Actually," Carolyn stated, "she was more looking for some dresses, I think."

"Sure thing!" Fenny cheerily answered. She led Matty and Carolyn to some racks. "You're in luck, we're having a sale today."

Carolyn looked through the racks a bit and pulled out a green halter style top. "What about this? Might go good with some loose black drawstring pants."

"I suppose," Matty said.

Fenny appeared with pants matching Carolyn's description. "You know," she then said, "with your curves, I might also suggest something that clings a bit. There's this short, black silk number that I've been eyeing myself that would look pretty good on you, I think."

Matty nodded, and Fenny walked off again, and reappeared with the dress she had just described. "I think we have a winner," Carolyn said. "Matty, go try 'em on!"

Matty went into the dressing room and tried on the halter top and pants first. She came back out and looked in the mirror. "What do you think?" she asked.

Carolyn gave her approval, as did Fenny. "Now go try on that dress," Carolyn suggested.

Matty returned to the dressing room, and slipped into the dress. She had to leave her men's underwear off, as it would show under the dress, but she was pretty sure she

wouldn't have the same problem when she was wearing panties. The dress was a bit low cut in the front, but not too immodest, and clung to her body somewhat snugly. The skirt stopped midway between her hips and knees. It was, Matty thought, a rather nice dress.

She left the dressing room, and again modelled for Carolyn and Fenny. "Nice," Carolyn said.

"I suppose I'll take them both," Matty said. She looked at herself in the mirror, wearing the dress, and was alarmed to find that she found the sight of herself was... well, never mind.

She went to a register and Fenny rang up the purchase. "Thank you very much!" she said.

"Can my friend go back into the dressing room and change into the dress?" Carolyn asked.

"What?" Matty responded.

"Of course," Fenny said. "It's all paid for, so you can do what you'd like with it."

They headed back to the dressing room. "But why?" Matty asked.

"Well," Carolyn said, "you should get used to wearing a dress before tomorrow. Besides... I like how you look in it."

They had reached the dressing rooms, and Carolyn handed Matty the Filenes bag, as well as the Victoria's Secret one.

"Oh, okay," Matty said as she returned to the dressing room.

Their next stop was Filenes' shoe department. Matty was worried about walking in high heels, but luckily Carolyn advised against them, saying she hated heels anyway. The guy in the shoe department, John, was kind enough to suggest some black pumps which matched the dress that Matty was wearing, and also went with the halter top / pants combo she had also bought. "I think *these* would look good on you," he said. "Hey baby, those shoes will really set you on fire...after I light it up for ya!"

Matty and Carolyn both gave John a quite funny look, but Matty had to agree that the shoes were good, and so she bought them. As she walked away from the register, John watched her and Carolyn walk away.

"Yes, I've made a sale," John said.

And then he laughed.

It was a laugh that Matty thought sounded familiar, like a certain character from a Pioneer anime series, and also like a laugh of a certain SPL.

Matty walked quickly, pulling Carolyn behind her.

Matty and Carolyn had made their way to the food court, where the two of them decided to get a late lunch. Carolyn went off in search of a salad, somewhere, while Matty got in line at Wendy's. Their 'burgers weren't nearly as good as Burger King's, and their fries left a bit to be desired as well, but no place else had Frostys!

Someone got in line behind Matty, and a moment later, a voice said, "My red haired sweet, it's you!"

Matty turned around, and was startled / horrified / disgusted to see the face of Taylor Kuntz.

Kuntz looked her over appreciatively. Matty held back from vomiting as best as she could.

"My sweet, aren't you pleased to see me?"

"Pleased isn't the word I'd choose," Matty said with contempt. "Look, can't you understand that I don't like you?!"

"I see that you just can't bring yourself to admit your feelings. I'll make myself worthy of the love you feel you can't show!" He held up in his single gloved hand a bag from Waldenbooks. "I'm going to read all of this romance shi... stuff, and then I'll be a man you can respect!"

"Romance stuff?" Matty repeated. She was worried. Very worried.

"Yeah, some dude named Shakes-something. Wrote a lot of plays."

"Look, I don't care if you memorize every one of his love sonnets, I still won't be interested in you!" Matty exclaimed.

"Excuse me, Miss. Is this jerk bothering you?"

Matty turned and was surprised to see Mike Quadrozzi, standing there in a rage that only Taylor Kuntz could bring out in the otherwise consistently cheerful Boy Scout. *Oh, God!* Matty thought. Aaron, Bill Gelinas, and Kenny were also with Mike. *Why is it that everyone had to pick today to go to the bloody mall?!?!*

"I suggest you get out of here, Kuntz," Aaron added. "This isn't camp, so I don't have to worry about holding Squid back. I might even help."

Kuntz backed off, but as he made his hasty retreat, he added, "I'll make myself worthy of you yet, my sweet!"

"God, he makes me sick," Matty commented.

"You okay, Miss?" Mike asked.

"She's kind of hot," Billy whispered to Aaron.

"Hi, Mr. Atanian," Kenny said, looking up from his book slightly.

Mike, Aaron, and Bill face-faulted. "M-m-m-matt?!" Mike stammered.

Billy gagged on something.

"What the hell is that you're wearing?" Aaron added.

Matty had gotten to the counter at last and placed her order. She then turned to the others. "It's not like I enjoy doing this or anything," she told them. "I just needed to look good for Sarah tomorrow."

"Isn't this a bit extreme?" Billy said.

Matty ignored the question, and turned to Kenny. "Incidentally, Kenny, please call me 'Matty' when I'm like this." She lowered her voice a bit. "And just Matt is fine when I'm a guy."

Carolyn came over with her salad just as Matty's order was ready. "Hey, Matty, who're your friends?"

"Some kids from my Troop," Matty said.

Aaron looked at Carolyn with sudden recognition. "Hey, you're Carolyn, aren't you?"

"Yeah, how'd you know?"

"Well, Matt had your picture over the register both years he was the camp Trading Post manager." Aaron explained.

"You did?" Carolyn asked Matty. She sheepishly nodded.

"And he called you every day at camp from the pay phone at the Manor House," Billy added.

"He's always talking about you," Mike contributed.

"Are you, now?" Carolyn asked. "Matty, what are you telling these kids? Corrupting them with strange stories?"

Matty was speechless. Luckily, Mike defended her, saying, "He never said anything bad."

The group made their way towards one of the rare empty tables, and sat down. "So you're all set then for Sunday?" Aaron asked.

"As set as I'll ever be, I think," Matty replied. "So what are you all doing tomorrow?"

"Kirstin actually invited us all over," Aaron said. "Surprisingly, we all got permission to go."

"Isn't that a bit conven..."

"SHUT UP, BILL!"

"We're also hoping that maybe Becker or Swett can make it," Mike added. "Thought it'd be nice to get the whole patrol together."

"Except for Shmuler," Billy said.

"Yes, do want to forget him," Aaron said.

Matty went to take a sip of her beverage, but was surprised to see that where she thought there would be a Sprite in the kind of cup that one normally gets beverages from at a fast food place, there was instead a can. It was a beat up can, but still completely sealed. And it didn't contain Sprite.

"What the hell? Kiwi/Mocha?" Matty said.

"Hey, isn't that the same can...?" Billy asked.

"Yeah," Aaron responded. "How the hell'd it get...?"

Matty tried to pick at the opening. Kiwi / Mocha sounded disgusting... but she was thirsty. She picked at it some more, without success.

"Let me try," Carolyn said, but she, too, had no luck with the can.

"Screw it," Matty said, giving up on the concept of beverages for now. When she got home, she'd just have a double sized glass of iced tea.

They conversed for a while as Matty and Carolyn ate, and then the two of them went their separate ways from the group of boys. They made their way back to Carolyn's house, where Carolyn gave Matty some little tips on makeup (although not a lot, as Carolyn wasn't very big into cosmetics, but neither was Matty) and hair. There wasn't much in the hair department, really, as Matty's hair was on the short side. They then drank a bit from a bottle of sake that the two of them were for some reason working on whenever they got together, despite neither one of them being big alcohol drinkers.

Matty had returned to being Matt (and returned to his regular clothes) before traveling home, and he and Carolyn were back in the centre of Amherst. The bus for Springfield had just pulled up, and Matt and Carolyn embraced before he got aboard.

"Thanks a lot for your help today, Carolyn."

"Any time, Matt. And good luck on your date, tomorrow."

Matt smiled as they hugged again. "Thanks."

With more reluctance than he had then with any of the other things he had done today, he got onto the bus. He looked out of the window at Carolyn as the bus began to pull away.

"Thanks," he said again, although obviously she couldn't hear him at this point. "I'll need it..."

## *Chapter Twelve: A Night of Magic*

by Matthew Atanian

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The highly anticipated Sunday had arrived, and Matt was...

Well, Matt was asleep.

Most people would probably be up and about, but Matt had always liked to sleep in on Sundays. Even this Sunday, the day of his much anticipated sort of first date with Sarah.

He'd be running around like a chicken with its head cut off later, as the time grew nearer, but now it wasn't quite ten in the morning, and he just slept.

Meanwhile, no one was sleeping at the Porter residence. Sarah wasn't even home, having left for work a few hours prior. She'd be home shortly after three, and until then, Kirstin and Nicole had the place to themselves. They were both in the large yet cramped central room of the apartment. The room was divided in two by a large counter. One half was used as a "living room," and the other half served as the kitchen and dining area.

Nicole was sitting on the beat up old sofa in the living room, working out her weekly profits on her lucky abacus. She could have gotten the job done much quicker on an electronic calculator, but she found something oddly satisfying about moving the little beads around.

Kirstin was in the kitchen. She had finished cleaning the breakfast dishes a short while ago, and was currently sighing as she finished an inspection of their presently meagre food supplies.

Nicole looked up and put down the abacus. "Something wrong, sis?"

"Not really," Kirstin responded. "I'm just at a loss at what to cook for tonight."

"Well, sis, don't go to any trouble. It's just you and me, tonight." Nicole paused. "Or is it?"

Kirstin looked up. "What do you mean?"

Nicole joined her sister in the kitchen. "Well, I know you like to keep the place clean, but you went all out yesterday. You've invited someone over, haven't you?"

Kirstin nodded.

"It's that Boy Scout, um, Aaron. Isn't it?"

"It's a group of the Boy Scouts, yes." Kirstin responded.

"Aaron's one of them, though. Come on, sis. You can tell me." She winked at her sister. "You like him, don't you?"

"I like all of them, they're nice people."

"Come off it, sis. That's not what I meant. You *like* everyone. You'd be kind to a mugger as he made off with your purse. Aaron's something more, isn't he." The last was not a question.

Kirstin suddenly looked down, embarrassed. "I... I suppose."

"You wanted to cook something to knock his socks off, didn't you?"

Kirstin nodded.

"Well," Nicole said, "Aaron and Kirstin. He's a nice kid, I suppose. I wonder... maybe I should go for one of them. That Matt guy seems desperate if he's chasing Sarah. After all, she's made it clear she doesn't want anything to do with him."

Kirstin's features suddenly reverted to their usual calm, controlled state. "No. He's four years older than us! Besides, give him and Sarah some time. I think things will work out."

"You're up to something there, aren't you?" Nicole laughed. "Good luck. You'll need it with Sarah's stubbornness, but it may do her some good. I guess I'll settle for one of the others."

Kirstin's response was without malice, and was simply a statement of the truth. "None of them would last a week as your boyfriend. Your tastes are too expensive, and you'd suck their wallets dry faster than they can notice."

Nicole laughed again. "You're always so right about these things." She suddenly switched tracks. "This Matty Hayes is an enigma."

Kirstin blinked. "What?"

"Nothing, nothing. She's a nice girl, but something doesn't quite add up about her. She in on your plans to get Matt and Sarah together?"

"In a way," Kirstin responded.

"Now, now, sis," Nicole chided. "It's not like you to keep secrets. Matty is definitely a mystery, and one I think I'll enjoy solving. But not now. Now, we have to get you supplies for the feast you're cooking for tonight."

Again, Kirstin blinked. "What?"

Nicole took out her wallet, which was full of the bounty of her various enterprises. "We're taking a trip to the grocery store." She took another look at her wallet and added, "In fact, let's take a trip to the mall first."

"Nicole, thank you!"

"And just for you, sis," Nicole continued, "I'll charge no interest the first month, and then only five percent."

Kirstin smiled once again as she and her sister headed for the door. "That's very generous of you, Nicole." And for Nicole, it was.

Matt had the house to himself, which was for the better as he got ready for his "date." Just before getting out of the shower, he turned the water all the way over to cold.

"Aaahhh!" she yelped, taken by surprise even though she knew it was coming.

She stepped out and towelled herself off, then went to her room to get dressed.

She put on lingerie first, and as she pulled on a pair of black nylons, she was thankful that her female form had no unsightly body hair. She took the black dress from her closet and pulled it on, smoothing it out over herself.

She went into the bathroom and combed her hair a bit. It didn't need much, being so short. She then took a tube of lipstick and put a bit on. This was the only makeup she put on, as not only did she not much see the point of cosmetics, but she also didn't trust herself to put them on

without the end result causing her to look like a circus clown.

She looked in the mirror, and began to have that funny feeling that she had gotten at the mall. She shook her head violently. *Stop that*, she thought, *it ain't right*.

She grabbed a coat, a normal green jacket rather than her usual black trench coat, grabbed her hat, and opened the door. "Well," she said, stepping out into the cool autumn air, "here goes nothing."

"Nicole, phone," Sarah said.

Nicole left her room where she'd been trying out some new financial software and took the phone from her older sister. Sarah then grabbed a coat and her purse, and headed for the door. Half way there, she stopped.

She looked over to the kitchen, at Kirstin, who was busy cooking. She then looked around the apartment, apparently noticing for the first time the extra neatness of it.

"Kirstin, what's going on?"

Kirstin looked up from a pot. "Hmm?" she asked. "Oh! Just having a few people over."

"Guys?" Sarah asked, one eyebrow raised suspiciously.

"Well, yeah. But they're just friends."

"Yeah, I trust you," Sarah said. She smiled. "Just don't make me regret it."

"I won't, I won't. Now out with you, and have a good time with Matty."

"You have a good time, too!" Sarah said, as she walked out.

Matty was standing patiently waiting on the sidewalk outside Russell's, polishing off a carton of Nestlé's Quick she'd gotten at the convenience store next door, when a crack of thunder sounded through the sky. *Looks like rain*,

she thought. *Hope she gets here soon, before my new dress gets all soaked!*

Just then, a car pulled up to her. The window rolled down and Sarah popped her head out.

"Hi, Matty. Ready to go?"

Matty smiled. "Sure!"

"Well, then, hop in!"

Matty walked around to the passenger side and got in. Sarah looked her over and said, "You look great! Wish you'd told me you were dressing up, I'd have worn something a bit nicer, myself."

Matty looked at Sarah, in jeans and a button down, red plaid flannel. "Nonsense. You look twice as nice as I do."

"You lie, but thanks anyways. So, where we headed?"

"I was hoping you'd have some ideas."

"Well... you have dinner yet?"

Matty thought, then answered, "No, I haven't. I think I have a place in mind, if it's okay with you. Best restaurant in the area."

"Sounds good to me!"

As Kirstin was finishing setting the table, the doorbell rang. She went over to the door and opened it, revealing Aaron. "Oh, hi," she said.

"Um, hi. Can I, uh... come in?"

"Sure. Sure." She stepped out of the way and Aaron entered. His eyes, in their pitiful effort to look upon anything but Kirstin, noticed the table and the food sitting in the kitchen.

"What's this?" he asked. "I know you said on the phone not to eat because you were cooking a little something, but..."

"Oh, I guess I went a little overboard. I just wanted to cook something nice for you." She looked away from Aaron briefly, and when she looked back she added, "All of you."

"Ah, of course," Aaron responded, having missed Kirstin's hesitation.

"So, what, is this whole party going to be out on the porch?" someone said. Aaron and Kirstin turned to see Mike, Gelinas, and Kenny, newly arrived. It was Bill who had spoken.

The two of them got out of the new arrivals' way, and Mike peaked his head in and said, "Hey, something smells like pasta!"

"I made some Chicken Parmesan," Kirstin said. "I hope you all like it."

Kenny looked up from his book briefly and smiled.

"I hope everyone else gets here soon, before it gets cold," Kirstin added.

"Where are your sisters?" Bill asked.

"Nicole went out for a walk, she should be back momentarily. Sarah already left for her night out with Matty."

Everyone stepped inside. Kirstin got everyone sodas, and then went into the kitchen to make a few last minute preparations. Mike, Bill, and Aaron took out their decks and likewise made last minute preparations. Aaron was especially taking care to go over the deck he had made for Kirstin.

Kenny kept his head in his book, *Everything Normal People Never Wanted to Know About Nuclear Physics, but You Weren't Afraid to Ask*.

The door opened, and Mike, Aaron, and Bill suddenly became acutely aware that it was raining outside. Nicole stepped in, and said to her sister, "I know this sounds cliché, but it followed me home, can I keep it?"

A white haired cat with a messy cap of black hair atop its head followed Nicole in and meowed in greeting.

"It can't be!" Mike said.

"Its got'a be!" Aaron said.

"Meow," said the cat.

"Be right back," Nicole said. She grabbed a towel, went into her room, and closed the door, but not before the cat could follow.

Matt Swett suddenly appeared in the doorway, holding a pile of wet clothes. "Look what I found," he said. "Doesn't this look like something Hughes would wear? Where is Hughes, anyway?"

Mistress of the quick change, Nicole's door opened. Mike, Aaron, and Bill tackled Swett, hiding the clothes as quickly as possible. Nicole had changed into dry clothes and was eyeing the boys with curious suspicion.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Um, nothing," they all answered. They all regained their composure as quickly as possible.

Mike, Aaron, and Bill simultaneously had the same thought. *If she finds out about Hughes, he's a dead man.* Luckily, even though Kirstin knew about the curses, she had either not yet made the connection or had come to the same conclusion as the boys.

The cat, meanwhile, was purring as he rubbed Nicole's bear ankle.

Nicole laughed. "Oh, let's keep him!"

Sarah, holding a coat over her head to keep the rain off, blinked as she looked at their destination.

"This is the best restaurant in the area?" Sarah asked, somewhat sceptically.

She and Matty stood outside a small little box of a building, painted white, with a sign on the front saying, "White Hut." The sign also said, "Est. 1935," and it looked like it had gone relatively unchanged for much of that time.

"Don't worry, this is one of my favourite restaurants," Matty assured her.

Indeed, White Hut seemed like it was packed. A few people were actually standing as they ate. Fortunately, two people finished eating just as Matty and Sarah entered, and the men who were standing as they ate made no motion towards the now vacant chairs.

She smell of frying meat and onions permeated the air, as three busy employees scuttled about the kitchen area. A cooler with soda and other beverages was on the

back wall, and a table for the standing customers was between the cooler and the counter. There was a light sprinkling of wood chips on the floor around the counter, which was presumably to prevent people from slipping.

Sarah sat, somewhat uncertainly. "Where's the menu?" she asked, turning to Matty.

"There isn't one."

"Well... what do I order?"

"Burgers or dogs," Matty answered simply. "Personally, I don't do hot dogs, so I get cheeseburgers."

"Well, I guess I'll just get whatever you get," Sarah said.

"Okay," Matty said. She placed an order for four cheeseburgers with only ketchup, and then went to the counter and got four chocolate milks.

"Here you go," Matty said, handing two of the milks to Sarah.

After dinner they had played their first game, and Kirstin had not done too badly. Of course, she had played her first game with Aaron's guidance.

The big surprise was that Kenny had won the game. He had not only won, he had really kicked butt.

"Are you sure you've never played before?" Gelinias asked once again.

Kenny sheepishly nodded. "I didn't even own any cards," he quietly said, the most he'd said all evening beyond what was necessary for game play, "before Miss Kirstin invited us all over."

"So how did you do so well?" Aaron asked.

Kenny simply held up the instruction book.

"The rulebook," Mike said with a twisted smile, "is not to be understood by normal humans."

"It's not fair," Gelinias said.

Nicole was sitting on the couch from where she had observed the game. She stroked the cat sitting in her lap as she said, "Well played, Kenny."

Aaron and Mike exchanged glances for the millionth time that evening, and then looked over once again at the cat in Nicole's lap. They had to do something.

"Kirstin," Mike said, "I hate to impose, but could I have a cup of tea? A nice, *hot* cup?" He looked over at the cat. "It's too bad Hughes isn't here, he *loves* tea."

The cat lifted its head off of Nicole's leg and stopped it's purring suddenly. It gave Mike a nasty look.

"No imposition at all," Kirstin said.

Mike looked over at a window. "Hmm, looks like the rain stopped." Kirstin handed him his tea. "Thank you... think I'll go get a bit of fresh air."

As Mike opened the back door and went out onto the porch, he discretely grabbed a towel and brought it with him. Just before he closed the door behind himself, the cat leapt from Nicole's lap and followed.

Hughes wrapped the towel around his waste as Mike put the teacup down on the porch railing.

"Bill, what are you doing?" Mike asked.

"I think she likes me," Hughes responded.

"She thinks you're a cat," Mike pointed out.

"She doesn't have to know," Hughes responded.

"She'll kill you if she finds out," Mike said. "And it's not right! I'm going to have to tell her."

"You tell her, you're dead, too. After all, you could have said something earlier."

*Eerp*, Mike thought, *stalemate*. "Hughes," Mike said, deciding to try a different track. "You can't stay here all the time. Your parents would notice you're missing."

"Oh, contraire," Hughes responded. "I live in Palmer."

"What's that have to do with anything?"

"Things are different in what you so lovingly call 'hicktown.' I could go missing for days, and my Dad and Stepmom would never notice."

"What about..."

“School? Palmer schools are just as weird. I usually do better when I’m not there, anyways. One time I was absent, and got an A on a test.”

*He’s got this planned out to a tee,* Mike thought. Once in a while, a neuron would misfire in Hughes’s brain, and he’d actually think of something intelligent. Why did this have to be one of those times?

“Fine, you win,” Mike reluctantly said. “But if she discovers you, I deny I know anything.”

“Fare enough, Mike,” Hughes said as he started towards a rather large puddle. “Don’t worry, she’ll never suspect a thing!”

*That’s what I’m worried about,* Mike thought.

Sarah finished off her second cheeseburger as Matty polished off a third one she’d ordered. “I have to admit,” Sarah said to him, “this place is good.”

“This place is locally famous,” Matty responded. “I’m surprised you haven’t heard about it. I’ve even heard from reliable sources of Kennedy’s eating here. Of course, that was long ago.”

“Well, my sisters and I haven’t lived in the area long, you see,” Sarah responded as Matty paid the bill.

“Ah, well,” Matty said, opening the door for Sarah, “welcome to the area, I suppose.”

“Thanks.”

Sarah stopped half way to the car and looked up at the sky. Matty found her eyes tracing the path of Sarah’s long, slender neck as she said, “Looks like the sky’s clearing up.”

Matty coughed, and looked up as well. “Yeah,” she said. “The stars are starting to come through.”

“The stars are pretty, aren’t they?” Sarah asked.

Despite the rhetorical nature of the question, Matty gazed up as well, and responded, “Yeah, they are.”

\* \* \*

Hughes was purring contentedly in Nicole's lap as she scratched behind his ears. Mike and Aaron looked at Hughes with contempt filled looks on their faces, and Kenny gave Hughes a concerned look.

Swett broke the silence. "How about another game? I think I'm getting the hang of it." He, too, had never played before tonight.

"What the hell?" Mike responded.

Kenny nodded that he, too, was in.

Aaron turned to Kirstin. "How about you?"

"Actually, would you care to join me on the porch for a while?" Kirstin asked.

Aaron's heart leapt out of his ribcage and did a disturbing little dance on the kitchen counter. Well, at least, that's how Aaron felt. "Um, I suppose," he said.

After they were out the door, Nicole stopped scratching the cat's ears and regarded him momentarily. "I think I'll name him Neko-chan," she said.

"That sounds Japanese," Mike said.

"How do you know?" Nicole responded.

"Matt watches a lot of those Japanese cartoons," Gelinias responded.

"Don't let him hear you call them cartoons," Mike warned. "It's *Anime*."

"Whatever," Gelinias shrugged.

Kenny suddenly switched into that more confident demeanour he had when he imparted information. "*Neko* meaning cat, and *chan* being a suffix one gives to denote affection, such as affection for small children." He then resumed his normal slumped, shy posture.

"How does he change like that?" Swett wondered.

"Anyways," Mike asked, "why that name?"

"Your grandmother was Japanese?" Matty responded. She and Sarah were sitting upon a blanket, gazing up at the stars. They had driven around until they had found a large field somewhere, a bit away from the lights of the city.

"Yup. And she raised me and my sisters by herself."

Matty looked over at Sarah and for the first time noticed a slight smoothness around her eyes.

"I sort of see it, I suppose," she said. "But it's odd to see someone with an Asian background who has red hair."

"Oh, only grandma was Asian. Her husband was Irish, and my father's parents, one of them was Irish and the other was English."

Matty dipped her plastic spoon into the tub of Ben & Jerry's Cherry Garcia they had picked up. A moment later, she asked Sarah, "What happened to your parents?"

Sarah was quiet for a while. She dipped her spoon into the ice cream, but then held the spoon close to her mouth without drawing it closer. She remained quiet for a moment, before saying, "They died a few months after Kirstin and Nicole were born. They were hit by a drunk driver coming home from a New Year Eve party."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry," Matty said, feeling guilty for having asked.

"No, that's okay," Sarah responded. She finely brought the spoon into her mouth. "Somehow, it feels good talking to you. After grandma died last year and my sisters and I moved here, I never bothered to make any new friends. I was too busy taking care of my sisters. I'm glad I met you, Matty. You're a true friend."

"Thanks," Matty responded.

"Hey, Matty?" Sarah asked as she looked into the heavens above.

"Yeah?"

"What's with that Matt? Why's he after me so much?"

*I didn't think two attempts at a hello could be considered "after you so much,"* Matty thought. She wisely refrained from voicing that thought, however, and merely replied, "Maybe he sees in you what I do, that you're a kind, caring, and intelligent person. Maybe you're the kind of person he wants to spend his life with."

Sarah had been taking another spoonful of ice cream, and nearly choked. "I don't think so! I've barely said five

words to him, and they've all been telling him off. He's just got his testosterone in a rampage, I think."

"Why don't you just give him a chance?" Matty asked.

Sarah sighed. "Remember that answering machine message?" Sarah asked.

"The one that caused you to rip the machine from the wall?"

Sarah laughed at herself. "That's the one! Well, before you there was one other person I tried getting close to since moving here. Rodney. Everything was fine, at first, and I cared for him. And I thought he cared for me. But then I called his house one time, and a woman answered. I asked for Rodney and she said he was in the shower. Later Rodney tried to tell me that it was his sister, but I know for a fact that he's only got a little brother."

"Ouch."

"And then he had the nerve to tell me that it was all my fault! That he had to seek his... his *pleasure* he called it! His pleasure from someone else because I was always spending too much time with my 'dumb sisters' and not with him!"

"If you pardon my saying so, what an asshole."

"Oh, please feel free to say so."

"What an asshole."

"Yeah. Well, I don't ever want some dumb guy trying to come between me and my sisters like that. They're all I have..."

"Aside from you, Matty. I'm glad you're my friend."

"Yeah," Matty said. She did an ironic little laugh. "Friends..."

Kirstin closed the door behind herself as she led Aaron out to the porch. There was a small bench, and Aaron sat on it. Kirstin sat besides him.

She looked into his eyes.

"Aaron?" she asked.

Aaron swallowed hard. "Y... yes, Kirstin?"

"Aaron... the cat. It's Hughes, isn't it?"

Aaron face-faulted, and backed as far away as he could without falling off of the bench. "How did... how did you know?"

"What, do you think I'm super-oblivious or something? First your friend Matt Swett comes in with Bill's clothes, then this cat arrives with Nicole, and then Mike makes those thinly veiled threats with the hot tea and the cat follows him outside. I'm not stupid, you know."

"I'm sorry... I never meant to imply..."

"I know, I know... still, why don't you or Mike say something?"

"Hughes told Mike that if Nicole found out she'd kill us along with him for not telling her sooner."

"She probably would. I guess it was wise after all not to say something. Still, something must be done, and in a way that gets as few people as possible killed."

Aaron relaxed somewhat, and moved away from the edge of the bench. He didn't notice before it was too late, however, that since it was a small bench this brought him right next to Kirstin.

"Something will have to be done," Kirstin said, "but not right now. It's turned into a lovely evening, hasn't it?"

She leaned back slightly to look into the stars, causing her head to lean against Aaron's shoulder.

Aaron's heart did its disturbing little jig in the lawn behind her apartment, this time. While her attention was drawn by the heavens, he tried to bring his arm up around her shoulder.

He was on his forty-second attempt. This time, his hand was mere millimetres from her shoulder when...

...when the back door swung open and Swett stuck his head out. "You guys coming in sometime tonight?"

Kirstin jumped slightly, startled, bringing her shoulder into contact with Aaron's hand. His hand didn't stay there long, as he jumped ten feet into the air, raised his hands above his head, and shouted, "I didn't do nothing!"

"Oh, sorry for interrupting, guys," Swett said with a snicker. He darted back inside.

Aaron had landed in a standing position and had his hands thrust firmly into his pockets.

Kirstin looked at him, and blushed briefly. "Oh, my," she said. "I suppose we'd better get back inside."

Sarah arrived home not long after the Boy Scouts had left. Well, most of the Boy Scouts...

"Where'd the cat come from?" Sarah asked Nicole.

Nicole scratched behind Neko-chan's ears. She thought he seemed to like that. "I found him out in the rain. He looked so pathetic all soaked, and he followed me home. Can we keep him, please?"

"I don't know if it's a good idea," Kirstin said. "Our grocery budget's a little tight as it is, we can't really afford to get cat food and cat litter..."

Nicole leaned close to her twin and angrily muttered, "After I loaned you that money today, too?" But she realized her sister was right, even if she didn't realize Kirstin had other reasons for her not to keep the cat.

"Well," Nicole said for Sarah to hear, "we all know that I make more than enough on my side ventures to cover the expense of a little ol' cat. I'll pay all of the costs for keeping him."

Sarah shrugged. "Well, if you are willing to take care of him, I guess it's okay."

"Well, now that that's settled, I'm off to bed," Nicole said. "Come on, Neko-chan!"

The cat bound to its feet, meowed contentedly, and followed.

"Nicole!"

Nicole stopped, and turned to her twin. The cat stopped and turned, also. "Hmm?" Nicole said.

"Um... never mind," Kirsten mumbled.

"Whatever," Nicole responded as she disappeared into her room. After the cat had followed, she closed the door.

Kirstin sighed, and started cleaning up in the kitchen.

"So how was your little party?" Sarah asked her.

“Pretty good,” Kirstin responded.

Sarah sat on the couch and began removing her shoes. “That’s nice.”

“And how about you? You have a good time?”

“Yeah, yeah I did,” Sarah responded. “Matty Hayes is a good friend.”

Matt Atanian was lying in his bed. He recalled another night when he was lying in bed like this contemplating Sarah Porter. Kirstin and Aaron had told him that he should peruse her. He told them he would try.

But as he thought about it now, he had been trying for their reasons. Sure, he found her physically attractive, but he didn’t really know her well enough to feel anything else for her.

But now, now he (or rather she) had spent some time with her, had gotten to know her.

Now he found that he really did care about her.

He had been trying for their reasons. Now he’d be trying for his reasons.

## *Special: The Manor House Horror*

by Jonathan Becker

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It was only two weeks ago that Mr. Shmuler had announced a “surprise” sleep over trip to somewhere on the Moses campground. Everyone had agreed to that idea. However the next bit was hard to swallow; that it would be on Halloween weekend.

The major argument would be the loss of the great candy that many of the scouts were hoping for. This did not pose much of a problem to the older scouts since they had almost outgrown trick-or-treating with maybe the exception of Bill Gelinias.

Even though many people protested the date of trip, it stayed on Halloween.

It was a cold (for late October), and through misty clouds hung a silver full moon. All of the scouts arrived on time and the speculation on where they would be camping began. “Well we know it’s in Moses,” stated Aaron.

“Yeah, but the question is where?” inquired Bill Hughes.

“How bout the Aquatics lodge? That place is a little weird,” said Bill Gelinias. The group looked at him as though he was crazy.

“Why do you say that?” said Mike.

“I don’t know, it’s creepy... like with all of those spider webs and snails and stuff,” said Bill. They gave him that look again.

“Anyway, we’ll find out when we get there,” said Aaron.

“Hey, Mr. Shmuler, aren’t you coming?” asked Hughes.

“No, I have work to do,” said Mr. Shmuler. “The McGraws are going instead.” Aaron chuckled to himself

then whispered to Mike, "And who says that Halloween doesn't bring out the weirdoes?"

"It looks like everyone is here, so find someone to ride with and have a nice time," said Mr. Shmuler.

"Hey, where's Matt?" said Bill.

"He told me that he'll meet us up at camp," said Mike. The four had to find rides since their parents had left in a rush claiming they had things to do and errands to run.

"Hey guys! Come on!" yelled Jon Becker from the side of his mother's car. They piled into the white mini-van. Becker had his headphones on despite the fact that the car radio was on. His head bobbed to the music inside his skull.

"Everyone buckled in? Let's go!" called Mrs. Becker from the driver's seat.

The trip to Camp Moses was long and melodious as always. The line of several parent's cars came to a stop in the parking lot beside the trading post. The group was not surprised to see the form of Matt Atanian, in his trench coat, standing, and waiting, already there.

Everyone exited the cars and mobbed towards Mr. McGraw eagerly awaiting the revelation of their "mystery" camping spot.

Mr. McGraw cleared his throat and announced. "We shall be staying, (dramatic pause) in the Manor House." At this everyone gasped, especially the smaller scouts, who had heard that the large building was haunted.

The Manor House was the large, ancient building in the centre of the camp that had been the home of Horace A. Moses before he donated all of his land to Scouts for their camp.

Aaron whispered to Mike, "I wonder how they pulled that one off? I thought no one stayed there."

Mike shrugged. "Maybe the council just doesn't care if our Troop gets asbestos poisoning."

Mr. McGraw walked up to the Manor House's front door and gave a sharp knock. A small man in overalls

appeared and began to converse with the Assistant Scoutmaster.

"I never knew that the Manor House had a caretaker..." pondered Gelinás.

Bill Hughes hushed him as Mr. McGraw walked back over to the scouts.

"Well, lets get everyone in," he said with a pause, "then I'll discuss the rules." At that everyone crammed through the door. Matt looked up. The weatherman had predicted rain later, he thought as he saw large gray clouds roll across the sky.

As soon as the last of the scouts rushed through the door there was a large crack and the sound of thunder rippled through the house. Sheets of rain began to pelt the roof as Mr. McGraw closed the door. Aaron, Matt, Mike, and the two Bills breathed a sigh of relief. Tonight was going to be interesting.

Mike felt someone tap on his shoulder. It was Becker holding up the Ghostbusters II soundtrack. He grinned and turned back to Mr. McGraw.

"First of all, we should feel honoured to be able to use the Manor House," started Mr. McGraw as he put his hands behind his back and began to pace around in a line. "Secondly, we should treat it with care as with any present and not destroy the place! Also, like I said at summer camp, we're going to have fun... got it!?! Now, all you rug rats get your stuff unpacked, OK?"

Almost at once, many of the scouts jumped to a free space on the floor and unrolled their sleeping bags. Aaron, Matt, Mike, and the Bills decided not to get involved with any floor-space battles so they searched in the other rooms.

As they were walking down a hallway, Billy peered into an open door. "Wow, I never noticed this before." The others looked back to see his discovery.

The room was large. It had a fireplace and two antique chairs that sat in the middle of the room, but the most distinguishing feature was the large shelves lining the walls that were filled with books. Large books, small

books; all leather bound. The group's jaws were slack with amazement. The first one to break the silence was Gelinas. "I never knew the Manor House had a library."

"For once I agree with you," said Aaron.

"It's funny, all the years I've been in Scouts, and all the times I've been in the Manor House, and I never noticed it, either," Matt added.

"But, Mike said, "I guess we found a place to stay." They began to cautiously enter the room and set down their sleeping bags when a familiar voice surprised them.

"Hey, guys!" yelled Becker.

"Can we help you?" asked Hughes.

"Do you mind if I could stay with you guys? Everywhere else was taken," said Becker.

"I don't know," said Aaron.

"Come on," pleaded Jon, "I gave you a ride here."

"Alright fine."

"Thanks, you guys are great," said Becker as he let his sleeping bag drop on the floor.

They barely got their bags unrolled when they heard another familiar voice.

"Um, can I stay here tonight?" the voice timidly called out. It was Kenny.

"Sure," said Matt.

They were finely ready when Becker asked, "Any one for a game of Magic?"

"I don't know, I'm a little tired," said Billy.

"Come on, it's only 9:00," said Becker as he yawned unconsciously.

"Hmm, I feel tired too, anyone else?" said Mike. For some reason everyone agreed. They all began to yawn and rub their eyes, even Becker.

"I don't know, maybe it's the air," acknowledged Matt.

They slowly began to crawl in to their sleeping bags and close their eyes... and then the terror begun.

Hughes's Dream:

"Bil-l-l-ly."

*Bill Hughes awoke in a dark room. Suddenly a bright pillar of light enveloped him. He threw his hands in front of his face. He jumped when he thought he heard something to his left move.*

*"Bil-l-l-ly."*

*His whole body began to shake, he heard rustling behind him.*

*"Bil-l-l-ly, we're coming."*

*As he adjusted to the light hundreds of small beady red eyes appeared all around him. His heart began to race. "What do you want?" he gasped.*

*"Bil-l-l-ly, we want you, Bil-l-l-ly."*

*"No, get away!"*

*Then something stepped into the light, it could have been a sheep but its sharp pointed horns and foaming mouth cast it as something else. Suddenly dozens of them charged from every side. Bill started to scream but was cut off as they all overtook him.*

**Mike's Dream:**

*It had been several days now since Agents Scully and Quadrozzi had opened this X-file. Agent "Quad" had a hunch that the answer was hidden somewhere in the old mansion they were in now.*

*Both wielding very powerful flashlights, they stepped over the rubble that cluttered the floor. Suddenly Agent Quadrozzi tripped into Agent Scully landing them both into very, convincing, positions.*

*"Quad" grinned and surprisingly so did Scully. "Quad, I never noticed how handsome you are," said Scully as she combed her fingers through Quadrozzi's hair. Quad felt warm, and obviously so did Scully by observing several beads of sweat forming on her brow.*

*Suddenly Scully's face twisted into a look of sheer terror. Quad looked over to see Scully's hand turn from pink to pale to sickeningly clear. Her eyes rolled back into her head and she fainted. Quad's eyes widened with shock to see that Scully's whole body turn slightly*

*transparent as if to be drained by some invisible vampire. He saw this before, but where?*

*Oh yes, the thought hit him like a ton of bricks. People turned this color just before an alien rips out of them.*

*Almost on cue a large clawed hand slashed through Scully's blouse. Quad started to back up as the rest of the alien emerged for the remains of Scully. Mike quickly turned to run only forgetting the wall behind him, he hit it head on.*

*Just before blacking out Quad could swear he could see Sam Neil sitting in a chair with an evil grin on his face. His haunting words echoed in Quad's head as he slowly closed his eyelids. "Where we're going, we won't need eyes to see."*

*Aaron's Dream:*

*Aaron felt happy.*

*The reason Aaron felt happy was that it was a sunny day, the birds were chirping, and he was having a nice picnic outside with his girlfriend Kirstin Porter... or so it seems.*

*Unbeknownst to Aaron that unwillingly he has stepped into a dimension of light and sound, a dimension that fringes on the very edges of human comprehension. A dimension called the Nightmare Zone. Let us see what happens to Aaron as he aimlessly wanders the Nightmare Zone.*

*"More juice?" asked Kirstin.*

*Aaron obliged by raising his glass.*

*Kirstin slowly began to pour as she said, "I think a relationship should hold no secrets, don't you honey?"*

*Aaron grunted an affirmative as he took a sip of the punch.*

*"Don't you think our relationship should have no secrets?"*

*Aaron looked confused. "What do you mean?"*

*"I mean I don't think that you have been entirely honest with me."*

Aaron wrinkled his brow in befuddlement. "I still don't get what you're saying."

Kirstin inched closer to Aaron. "I'm saying that I believe that I saw you with another girl."

Aaron felt shocked. "I... I would never be with anyone but you."

Kirstin crawled closer and fumbled for something in the picnic basket. "Don't lie to me, you know how I hate people who lie to me... but I have something just in case you are lying."

Lightning flashed in Kirstin's eyes, she quickly brought her hand that was in the basket lancing up into the air. She clutched an exceptionally large butcher knife in it.

"Oh my God, what, what are you doing?!?"

"I'm just making sure I will be the only one!" Her other hand groped for Aaron's jeans.

Aaron scrambled backwards out of her reach. One of his hands startlingly could find only air. Aaron looked behind him only to find a yawning chasm at his back. As Kirstin's knife came ever closer to his, ahem, family jewels, Aaron made a choice. He turned on his stomach and pushed off into the canyon. Kirstin's haunting laughter only echoed his screams.

Billy's Dream:

Bill was enjoying his night alone. He promptly shoved the bag of popcorn he was holding into the microwave. After a number of beeps he hit the start button.

He proceeded into his family room and turned on the TV. He quickly realized the signature shower scene from Psycho. And with a push of a switch, he flipped on his computer. With two clicks of his mouse, he was on-line.

He sighed and was about to return to the movie when an instant message appeared on his screen. He noticed it was from someone he didn't know. It was a very strange question; "Do you like scary movies?"

Bill pondered this for a few seconds then replied, "Who is this?"

*The question remained, "Do you like scary movies?"*

*Bill quickly typed "Yes..."*

*Several seconds later a new message appeared, "What is your favourite?"*

*Bill was undecided. "I don't know?"*

*"How about Psycho?"*

*Bill turned around, the TV was still on, along with Psycho. "Huh? How do you know?"*

*"I know everything."*

*Bill realized this was becoming too weird. He reached for his secret weapon; a punter he had covertly obtained off of a site. Grinning, he typed, "Bye, bye."*

*"I wouldn't do that if I were you." Bill was starting to get goosebumps. "Where? How?"*

*Bill looked out the window. Suddenly the microwave dinged. Bill turned around, then out of no-where, someone in a black costume with a ghost mask jumped through the bay window. He brandished a large cutting knife and knocked Bill to the ground.*

*"Hey, wait a minute. How could you have IMed me if you were outside and how come you're not torn apart by the glass shards?"*

*The ghostly assassin just muttered, "Shut up Bill" and rose his blade. Bill blacked out with still another question forming in his head.*

*Matt's Dream:*

*Matt felt strange. He yawned and started to open his eyes.*

*Whoa, am I dead?*

*Everywhere around him was bright, the only thing he could make out was a short old man with spectacles and a long white robe on. The old man appeared to be saying something, but Matt couldn't make it out.*

*Matt rubbed his temples and looked down. His heart began to race. Oh great, he thought, someone must of splashed me with some cold water.*

*Matty began to regain her senses; her vision started to clear. As she looked around the immediate area she felt like she was going to faint. Who are all these people, and why am I wearing a dress? Her view finally reached her side, which brought about another shock. Standing right next to her with a broad smile on his face was that ever so repulsive Taylor Kuntz.*

*"Finally, awake my dear?" he said.*

*Matty took two steps back. "What do you want?" she sputtered.*

*"Just say I do," said Taylor, still grinning.*

*Matty put 2 and 2 together and got 5. "What..?"*

*"But dear it's our wedding!"*

*Wrong answer! Matty turned and tried to run but it felt like her feet were made of lead, or maybe it was just the high heels. She tripped and fell onto the carpeted floor. Kuntz, in his dishevelled tux had a vice-like grip on her legs.*

*Matty felt weak again but the words of Kuntz echoed in her head, "Say 'I do', say 'I do'..."*

Simultaneously, Bill, Billy, Mike, Aaron, and Matt jerked awake. Sweaty and frightened by their disturbing dreams, they lay there panting. It was first Matt to realize where they were and what had happened. "Uh, did you guys just..."

He didn't even need to finish his sentence, they are shook their heads in an affirmative. Billy started towards the window. "Man, I need some fresh air."

"Bill, no!!!" everyone screamed, but it was too late. Billy threw up the windowsill and in came about 20 gallons of rushing water. It, of course, drenched everyone who was awake.

"*Chikusho,*" Matty cursed as she hastily shut the window. "Great, and the Manor House's hot water isn't working," she added as she gestured towards the four animals around her. "Oh well, I do think the gas is on though, come on."

Just before Matty left she checked on the two remaining scouts. Becker still had his headphones on, but with softer volume, and Kenny looked ok. *That's weird*, Matty thought, *shouldn't the water have had woken them up? Oh well.* The group of animal and one human left the sodden scene.

"This hall way is longer than I remember," Matty said as she tried to find where they were. The group, however, continued on.

Something caught Hughes's eye. He, to his surprise, looked over to see a plump, juicy mouse scamper just out of it's hole back into the darkness the group had just come from. Hughes for some reason always felt the need to act the part when in his animal form, and so he turned around and stalked after it.

He had not gone far when he realized that he could no longer hear his friends. He also had lost the mouse. He was about to turn back when he saw something in the darkness move. It was larger then any mouse he had ever saw, in fact, it was larger then him. Hughes's back began to arch, his fur stood up on end, and a high hiss escaped his mouth. Something plopped on his head, something green. He looked up, fear hit him straight on, the mouse he was just chasing appeared to be stuck to the ceiling in some sort of goo. He looked back in to the darkness in front of him, his ears strained to hear a soft tapping noise, then a rasp breathing noise. That was the last straw. He rocketed back in the opposite direction.

Matty suddenly felt a whoosh of air then something furry on her head. She sighed, "Bill, get off of me!" She started to pull at the cat but he wouldn't let go. "Bill, let go NOW!" The frightened cat finally remembered where he was and sheathed his claws. Matty took the cat off of his previous resting-place and held him in her arms. Hughes couldn't resist the opportunity and started to snuggle against Matty's chest.

"Bill, what the HELL do you think you are doing!?" Matty said as she promptly let the now dazed cat fall to the floor.

Finally they reached the kitchen. Matty started to rummage through the cupboards for the coffee kettle and a few matches. She turned the gas on and lit the burner, then she quietly filled the kettle and set it on the stove.

Suddenly Mike, who was standing watch, chirped a warning. Someone or something was coming down the hall. Hughes, Aaron and Mike hid in some empty cupboards, while Billy and Matty squeezed between the refrigerator and a wall. The terrified scouts curiously peeked out of their hiding spots to get a look at the walking monstrosity.

It wasn't tall but had three green eyes in each socket and yellow skin. It had no hair but only long tubes attached to the side of its head. Its fur was pink with short and long patches all along its body. It shuffled over to the coffee kettle and grabbed for a cup on the counter. It poured some of the lukewarm water in the cup, and placed a small tea packet in the water. And without a sound, shuffled back to the way it came.

The scouts, seeing that the coast was clear, crept out of their hiding places. Matty walked over to the coffee pot and checked the temperature. *Finally*, she thought. She grabbed some towels from the cupboard and threw them to the other scouts. She then dispersed the water amongst them.

When they got back the fire was now lit, and someone was sitting in the chairs. It was Becker and Kenny, both with their heads in a book, and Becker for once sans headphones. Becker glanced over at the towel-wearing scouts and shaking his head, he said, "I don't even want to know." The two Bills, Aaron and Mike started to head for their extra clothes when Becker said, "I couldn't sleep, my batteries went dead, and I just changed them too. I saw the fire going so I thought I should read, seeing how you guys suddenly left."

After the rest of the scouts got changed Becker got up and headed to the bookshelves. He turned and with a small grin held the book he was reading in front of a vacant spot. He let the book go and to everyone's

amazement it didn't drop, only wobbled and then as if sucked by a vacuum it deposited itself in to the empty spot. Becker then began to look for another book. He began to point to different ones. Each time, the chosen book would slide halfway out and then in as he changed his selection. He finally chose a book, which immediately flew to his hand. "Neat, huh?" said Becker as he returned to his seat.

Kenny then said, "Hey, everyone, look, it's doing it again!" And to amazement of the other scouts, still not over the other shock, nearly fainted. The blaze that roared in the fireplace was now changing colours. It slowly shifted from pink to red to orange to green to blue to gray to black and to a bright white and back again.

That was too much, and Billy had to say something. "What? How? Who?" he jabbered.

It, of course, was Kenny who answered. "Why, it is simply ectoplasmic activity, or other words, ghosts."

It was Becker who simply said, "I think they're trying to scare us."

Aaron obviously wasn't pleased when he said, "Well they're not doing too great of a job at it." The fire suddenly stopped changing colours and died down low.

"Great, now look what you did, you insulted them," said Becker. That's when all hell broke loose. Everything in the room started flying much to the displeasure of all the scouts. Books, bags, chairs and scouts alike began to fly on near crash-courses with each other.

Then finally gravity came back with a vengeance. Everything in the room slammed back to the floor. The only ones standing were Becker and Kenny who seemed unfazed. When Mike, the two Bills, Aaron, and Matt got to their feet, they were in for another shock.

Both Becker and Kenny grasped their faces in each hand, and with the technique of one peeling an orange, the two scouts ripped off their faces, revealing hideous green alien-like looks underneath. Suddenly everything turned green and red, both Bills screamed in their falsetto

voices, Aaron fainted, Mike grabbed his chest and started sweating, and... Matt, woke up.

Matt woke up, in his house still sitting where he fell asleep. He had a bowl of empty chocolate wrappers on the table next to him. He groaned, and got up. He nearly knocked over the small, animated witch that was stationed in front of the window. *Ah, Halloween*, he thought. Matt then turned off the front light and made his way to bed.

*Chapter Thirteen: Yes, Virginia, It's a  
Wonderful Life With 192. Though I  
Wouldn't Call It Christmas in Heaven*

by Michael D. Quadrozzi

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**THIRTEEN POINT ONE: WORDS FROM THE SPONSOR**

6:42 p.m., December 23, 2007

A thin layer of snow had fallen that morning, covering the Springfield area with a pristine white blanket an inch and a half thick. It was only the second or third noticeable snowfall since the year's unusually warm winter season had begun. Of course, abnormal weather is considered perfectly normal in New England.

Yet, as the sun began its slow journey back behind the hills and dusk steadily approached, the splotches of yellowish green on the lawn of the Church in the Acres revealed that most of the snow had fallen victim to the heat of the day.

The old Baptist church, weekly meeting place of Troop 192, had been the site of many interesting and even strange occurrences in its time, many of them in connection with the members of the Boy Scout troop. So, on this night, had the building possessed the uniquely human capacity to be surprised, it would not have found it the slightest bit shocking that Mike Quadrozzi, Bill Hughes and Bill Gelinas were busy on its roof.

Well, actually, only two of them were on the roof. Bill Gelinas was standing shakily on the fourth rung from the top of an aluminium extension ladder.

"Almost set over there, Bill?" Mike called from his makeshift seat in the crook of a church gable. His breath was visible as a cloud of mist in the chill winter air.

On his second attempt at a response, Bill answered back, "No! Not yet!" His first attempt had failed because

when his mouth started to move, so did his knees, and so in turn did the entire ladder he was standing on. He was still getting the hang of working twenty some odd feet up.

"Why the hell not?" called Hughes from his own workstation, "we're all done up here!"

"Keep your cows in line, Hickboy," Bill told him, "I've just got a couple more."

Mike nearly fell off of the roof laughing at his friend's sudden wit, and despite the noisy hysterics, Gelinias was able to brandish the staple gun and finish his task. Done, he looked everything over one last time before calling to the others. "All set," he said.

Bill shimmied carefully down the ladder, followed after a moment by Mike and Hughes.

The metal rungs creaked and clanged hollowly in the cold air and, reaching the bottom, the three of them assembled together, the snow crunching under their feet as only snow can. Clad in cold weather gear, they looked like either the picture of winter preparedness or live action versions of the *South Park* cast. Both Mike and Bill Gelinias wore woollen hats, Mike's pulled down low over his unbelievably grubby red Troop 192 baseball cap. Heavy coats, gloves and boots completed the ensembles. Hughes himself, with his wool-lined plaid jacket, beige hiking boots and ugly green hunting hat, complete with ear flaps, could've come directly off the pages of an L.L. Bean catalogue. He might've even harvested the wool from a sheep himself. He did, after all, live in the hill town of Palmer.

Nevertheless, they stood on the church lawn, admiring their work.

"Looks pretty good," Mike said.

"Yep," Hughes agreed.

"Ready to turn 'em on?"

"Go for it."

"Hey, Swett!" Mike called.

Around the corner of the church wall, at the end of one hundred and fifty feet of bright orange extension cord, poked the head of fellow 192 scout Matthew Swett.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"Plug it in!"

At first, Matt didn't seem to understand. From where they stood, the others saw his head waver uncertainly. Then he called, "No way, guys, that would hurt, like, so... Oh, the lights! Right."

His head went back behind the wall, and with a flourish somehow inappropriately small compared to the amount of work vested in its creation, the hundreds of Christmas lights strewn about the roofs and eaves troths of the Church in the Acres burst into colourful illumination.

"Wow," Mike said, "teamwork is pretty cool."

"Squid, the moral philosopher," quipped Hughes.

Bill Gelinas looked around. "Hey guys," he said, "where are our parents' cars?"

"They dropped us off," Mike said.

"I don't rememb..."

"Shut up, Bill!" They advised him.

Swett walked across the lawn to join Mike and the Bills, the light dusting of snow crunching under his own boots with each step. The four of them stood, bathed in reds, greens, blues and blinking whites, and admired the sight.

"Hey, guys," Matt said.

"What?"

He smiled. "This Christmas party's gonna kick ass."

"A Christmas party! Shit!" It was probably the first time those two phrases had ever been paired together. As defamation of both good sentence structure and religious beliefs, the phrase alone wouldn't have stood up to criticism. But, adding insult to injury, the words had been spoken by Mr. Jack McGraw, one of the less eloquent members of the shadowy group known as the Troop Elders.

Just in case no one had heard him the first time, he said it again, louder and with more accentuation on the fourth word.

The adults of 192 had gathered in the church kitchen this night for an emergency meeting. So far, the agenda had not moved past the point of initial shock and outrage at recent events.

"Now, Mr. McGraw," said Mr. Bob Martin in his slightly wheezy voice, "it's not really all that bad."

"Not all that bad?" McGraw spat, gesturing towards the exterior of the church. "They're out there hanging decorative lights as we speak! *Christmas lights!*"

At the other end of the table sat Mr. Tim Walker, the deceptively slow Mid-western philosopher. The heels of his boots were propped up on the counter in front of him. He nonchalantly tipped his ten-gallon hat, adding, "And some of them blink."

Also in attendance was Mr. Ted McCarthy, the soft-spoken Troop Committee Chairman. So far, he had not offered his own advice.

"You hear that? Blinking lights!" Mr. McGraw cried. He was livid, gesticulating wildly. "How could we have let this happen? A Christmas party right under our noses!"

There was the flare of a match, and the four adults at the counter grew quiet as they looked over to their colleague standing in the corner of the room.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Mr. John Hawley said, extinguishing the match between thumb and forefinger. "This is not so big a problem as you make it out to be." He smoked the freshly lit cigar as the group waited for him to continue. When he did so, it was with all the authority that he commanded as Chairman of the Council Camping Committee. "You're not thinking things through properly," he said. "What could come of this?" he asked rhetorically.

He looked around the counter at the others, daring them to speak. His lip twisted into a foul smile. "Let the children have their little party. It's only Christmas."

The others sighed. "Yes, I suppose you are right," said Mr. Martin in an unintentional imitation of Marlon Brando from *The Godfather*. "After all, Justy will be there as an extension of our will, as will the troop's new Scoutmaster."

The others chuckled. "One clueless cog in a vast machine" Mr. Walker said, "utterly convinced of his own importance. We chose him well."

"Yes," Mr. Martin continued. "So there ought to be no problems at all." He paused and sat back in his chair with a grunt, forming his fingers into a steeple. "Though, I think I know what we are all thinking right now." He looked around the room and saw the agreement on the faces of his middle-aged associates. He nodded.

"Then it is agreed."

There was a sufficient period of silence, then:

"BAH!" The Troop Elders sneered in unison, "HUMBUG!"

Aaron Abdelmaseh was in heaven.

Well, not actual Heaven or even a conglomeration of any of the dozens of similar afterlife Utopias envisioned by most of the world's major organized religions. To be there he would have to be dead, and Aaron was not dead. He was at the mall.

The reason he was in heaven was this: He was Christmas shopping. Okay, hold on, there's more to that reason. I mean, Christmas shopping at the mall can seem more like some alternate modes of spending eternity than Heaven sometimes, so just listen. The part of the shopping experience that contributed to Aaron's feeling of bliss was that he was shopping with Kirstin Porter. They were pretty much done with the shopping proper at this point, and now Aaron found himself outside the ladies' changing room in Sears and Roebuck's department store, waiting for Kirstin to come out with some new outfit, after which he would compliment her on it.

He was running out of adjectives.

Of course, any vestiges of impatience or annoyance that existed within him vanished as soon as Kirstin stepped outside the changing room wearing a cute knitted Christmas sweater with reindeer and things on it because

he found himself struggling with basic motor skills every time their eyes happened to meet.

"What do you think of this one?" she asked him.

*Beautiful! Fantastic! You are the most mystifying and radiant creature I have ever had the pleasure to gaze upon and admire, my dear, sweet Kirstin!*

"Great," Aaron said.

She smiled, as if sensing his original thoughts, and Aaron melted into a gooey puddle.

Kirstin re-entered the changing room, and Aaron reflected on the fact that he would find Kirstin enchanting in a clown outfit, or dressed in slacks and a tee shirt. Or heck, she didn't even have to have any clothes on at all... *What? Where the hell did that come from? You know damn well I didn't mean it like that!* Aaron's mind whirled. *Why the hell am I arguing with myself?!*

He gathered himself together. "Hey Kirstin?" he called.

"Yeah?" he heard her call back.

"You're not actually planning on, like, *buying* all of this stuff, right?"

She laughed. "Good Lord, no! It's just fun to try it all on!"

Aaron smiled and settled back in the padded chair by the changing room door, joyfully fascinated by Kirstin Porter.

Matthew K. Atanian was dreaming.

At least, he was pretty sure he was. His mind was muddled. It was like his thoughts were swimming upstream, against the currents of his consciousness. He found it slightly hard to concentrate. Still, he could think clearly enough to fixate on two aspects of his environment that pointed towards the conclusion that he was dreaming.

The first was his present environment itself. It was completely featureless. Matt looked around, taking in everything, and all he saw was inky blackness. Everywhere, just... nothing. He could feel stable ground

beneath his feet, but when he looked down, he looked down into emptiness.

The second strange aspect of this experience was the figure walking toward him out of the darkness. Well, perhaps walking wasn't the right word. Matt couldn't see any clear figure, only a shimmering outline that grew a little bigger and a little more distinct over time, as if it were travelling towards him.

After a few minutes, the figure became the sharp image of a man, an old man, perhaps in his seventies or even eighties. Matt watched, confused and fascinated as the man walked towards him. He was definitely walking now, his footsteps echoed hollowly, as if the blackness they were in was a great empty hall. Looking at the old man, Matt noticed he was dressed impeccably in a dark blue business suit, white shirt and red necktie. The mottling of gray hair on his head was turning white above the ears, but there was the slightest hint that at one point, long ago, it had been a sandy blonde in colour.

After a few more minutes, the man was standing right in front of Matt. He smiled broadly, and held out his hand to shake. "Hello, young man," he said in a soft voice, coupled with a melodious Southern accent, "glad to meet you. I'm former President of the United States Jimmy Carter."

Matt blinked. He'd never met a President before. Yet, since he was dreaming, the event didn't seem quite as important as it probably should have.

Matt took the man's hand and shook it. "Um, it's an honour, sir."

Jimmy Carter chuckled. "Oh, well, don't think much of it, son." He lifted his hands, and Matt was surprised to see that each of them held a tall glass of iced tea. "Would you care for a beverage?"

Matt took one of the glasses. "Oh... thanks," he said. He sipped it, and was surprised again to find that it was very good, perfectly mixed and chilled.

"Well, don't just stand there, son," Jimmy Carter said, "put your feet up. Relax." Matt looked, and now the former

Commander-in-Chief was seated in an old armchair. He looked behind him and was surprised a third, record-setting time to find that he also had a comfortable looking armchair to sit in. He took advantage of it.

"So," Jimmy Carter started in his soft Georgia drawl, "I understand that you yourself are interested in pursuing public office."

Matt was so off balance, what with the dream, the iced tea, the former President and the comfortable arm chair, which he now noticed was light mauve in colour, that he merely nodded. A second later, he actually realized that a question had been asked and said, "What?"

Carter blinked. He seemed suddenly unsure. "Why, son," he started, "aren't you George W. Bush?"

"Um... No."

"Oh. Oh, son, I'm terribly sorry." He laughed softly and held up his hands in apology. "I seem to be in the wrong, here. I believe there's someone else who'd like to speak with you. I'm sorry."

In an instant, he was gone, as if the President, the chairs and the tea had been only piles of sand and had blown away in a sudden gust of wind. Once again, Matt was alone in the empty darkness.

Or so he thought. Someone tapped him on the shoulder, and he spun around. As he did so, the inky blackness snapped smartly into the pristinely frigid landscape of Antarctica. Immense mountains of rock and ice shimmered brightly in the distance. A parade of penguins marched by him, not five feet away, and dove head first off of an icy cliff into the water below.

Matt suddenly came face to face with another old man, who he immediately recognized as Jimmy Stewart.

"Well, howdy, sport!" Jimmy Stewart said, taking both of Matt's hands in his. "How the hell are you?"

Matt was getting bewildered. He had trouble forming words. "Er..."

"Oh, hey, there's no trouble now, sport," Stewart told him in a jumpy, low-pitched, interrupted stutter that sounded more like Dana Carvey's exaggerated

impersonation of Jimmy Stewart than the legendary actor himself. "I don't know what that guy was doing here, anyway, I mean, he's not even dead. Only served one term, too."

Matt found the words he'd been looking for. "Um, what's going on?" he asked.

Jimmy Stewart smiled. "Oh, hey sport, I'm just here to give you some advice! Yeah!"

"Oh," Matt said. "Advice on what?"

"Well, heck, sport, you're having a Christmas party, aren't you? Tomorrow night?"

"The troop Christmas party? Well, I was planning on showing up, yeah, but I'm not really *having* it."

Jimmy Stewart arched his eyebrows. "Well, that's no excuse, sport. You're having it."

"Um, I'm not sure I follow..."

"I'll tell you what you're going to do, sport! You're gonna get involved, I mean, you're gonna have a *Christmas party!* Yeah!" The deceased actor grinned broadly.

Matt noticed that it had begun snowing large, Christmas-type snowflakes, which was odd, because he could remember reading that it was almost always too cold to snow in Antarctica. "What, you think I should call the others and..."

"I think you should do it all, sport!" Stewart threw his hands up into the air in an expansive gesture. As if on his command, two dozen red and white candy canes, each at least thirty feet tall, sprang up all around them. Matt, instead of wondering how they might've gotten below the polar ice cap, found himself with a sudden craving for peppermint.

"This is a rare occasion!" Jimmy Stewart was saying, the volume of his voice escalating. "It's an event! Christmas comes but once a year, sport! Make the most of it!"

And suddenly, Matt woke up.

He was lying in bed, staring at the ceiling. He dimly remembered deciding to take a quick nap after getting home from work.

"Wow," he said to himself, "Jimmy Stewart is sponsoring the troop's party." He felt oddly honoured.

There was a quick knock on the closed door to his room. He rose, walked to his door, pulled it open a crack, and looked out.

"Nice nap?" asked Matt's father, Mr. Heidi Atanian. "It's late. You probably won't get to sleep, now." His footsteps proceeded into the kitchen.

Matt sat up and stretched. After a moment, he smiled.

"This Christmas party's gonna kick ass," he said.

Then he got up and started rifling through the piles of stuff that covered the floor, because he knew he had a copy of *It's a Wonderful Life* somewhere, and he knew he had to watch it.

"Hey, sis!" Nicole Porter called, standing up from where she had knelt by the bed. Under the bed had been the first place she'd looked, and the second time around had yielded the same results.

"What?"

Nicole walked into the kitchen where her older sister sat surrounded by cardboard boxes. Sarah looked up from here seat on the floor. "What is it?" she asked again.

Nicole sighed, obviously more upset over asking for help than the actual problem. "Have you seen Neko-chan around anywhere?"

"No," Sarah answered, "not recently." She smiled. "I would've figured it would be kind of hard to loose a cat in a place this size."

"Well, I can't find him anywhere."

Sarah continued with her work, not looking up. "Didn't you let him out before?"

"Oh... yeah," Nicole said, frowning. She'd let him outside that afternoon. Neko-chan had seemed keen on getting some fresh air. Hadn't she let him back in, though?

Sarah could see the frown forming on her younger sibling's face. "Don't worry. I'm sure he'll turn up tonight, scratching at the door, just like last time."

Nicole sighed again. "Yeah, I bet you're right." She sank down to the floor, taking a seat next to Sarah. "So, what're you doing?"

Sarah looked around the room at the boxes she'd brought up from the basement of their building. "Oh, just unpacking our winter stuff. I figured since there's actually a bit snow on the ground now it's finally time to start bringing it all out."

Nicole smiled, giving the boxes an appreciative glance. Some of them lay opened, spilling their woolly contents on the floor. She decided to change the subject. "So," she began slowly, picking her words with care, "Were you planning on attending the party tomorrow?"

Sarah didn't look up. "And what party would that be?" she asked.

"The Boy Scouts' Christmas party."

Sarah looked up. "Why would I want to do that?"

"Oh, come on," Nicole said, "Aaron and the guys invited us. It'll be fun." She saw that she wasn't impressing her sister. "Besides, what else are you going to be doing tomorrow night?"

"I don't know," Sarah said, pulling the lid open on another box. "Maybe I've got some more shopping to do."

Nicole smirked. "I happen to know that you finished all of your shopping weeks ago."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, really."

Sarah sighed. She threw a glance, briefly, at the ticking clock on the wall. "All right, fine," she said, "I'll go. Maybe Matty Hayes will be there."

"See now, that wasn't so hard, was it?" her sister chided. She got up to leave the room, then a thought struck her. She smiled. "I believe that was a Nicole Porter counselling session, sis. I'll charge you for the hour. You owe me!"

"Just put it on my tab."

\* \* \*

The room was dark. The lights were off and the shades on the windows were down, blocking out any light from outside. It was late, so late that it might have been early.

But Matthew Atanian didn't care. He sat in his room, wide-eyed, staring, bathed in the flickering light of his television. Nothing else moved, there were no other sounds except the voices of the people in the movie and Matt's slow, steady breathing.

For the fifth consecutive time, he heard Jimmy Stewart say to his young daughter, "Yeah. Yeah, that's right. Every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings!" It was the scene at the end, the joyous Christmas scene when everyone in Bedford Falls gets together and has a merry time. And young George Bailey finally knows the worth his life has.

"Yeah. Yeah, that's right," Matt said. He was scribbling furiously on a spiral bound college-ruled notebook.

And then he was staring at a static-filled screen. The movie had ended. It was a wonderful life.

Matt blinked and leaned forward to eject the tape. It popped out of his VCR with an electronic whir. He looked at the display on the VCR. The little green numbers read: 2:37 AM.

He smiled. It was Christmas Eve!

And then, quietly, he opened the door to his room and walked out into the hall. He headed towards the basement, where all the wrapping paper and holiday decorations were kept.

He had work to do.

## ***THIRTEEN POINT TWO: SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT***

10:23 a.m., December 24, 2007

It was the day before Christmas, and the sun rose slowly over the rolling foothills of the Berkshire Mountains of Western Massachusetts. This sun, seemingly incapable of shedding any warmth on a typical winter's day yet remaining stubbornly bright in the sky, rose up and banished the night to the other side of the world. Light streamed across the sky and gleamed off the low-hanging, foreboding clouds. Mustering all its strength as a celestial furnace, the sun prepared to melt any lasting vestige of ice and snow from the ground and leave the inhabitants of Springfield a reminder of winter in the form of ankle deep puddles of frigid water and dirty brown mush by the side of the road.

But all that was unimportant to Mike Quadrozzi, because where he was, it was raining.

It was raining heavily, actually, quite heavily. This sort of rain wasn't due to start for months, yet here he sat, on a comfortable Chesterfield in the middle of a cricket field, huddled under an umbrella as frogs fell from the sky.

"Bloody frogs," Terry Jones snorted, looking up at the darkening sky. "How can we get any writing done with this rot?"

"It's all right," Michael Palin told the other in his high-pitched, passive voice. "It'll pass over."

"Bound to," John Cleese nodded.

They were, all four of them, Mike and the three Pythons, sitting together in a comfortable living room setting, which just happened to be in the middle of a cricket field.

A frog landed on Mike's umbrella with a wet plop, bringing him out of his reverie. "Well," he said, "I suppose we should continue."

"Right," the others agreed.

They were working on the last scenes of the latest Python film, a romping jaunt into the fringes of taste and reality tentatively titled *The Queen Mother's Left Nipple*. It

was the group's first cinematic venture in about fourteen years, and they were all excited how well it was going so far.

"So where we are," Cleese was saying, flipping through his pages of notes as a recently bowled cricket ball careened just millimetres over his head, "Leonardo DiCaprio has just fallen off the Eiffel Tower into a giant bowl of lemon meringue." He looked up. "Right?"

"Yep," the others agreed.

"That was a really great idea," Mike said. "Whose was that, again?"

"Wasn't it Terry's?" Palin offered. "I think it was Terry's. Sounds like Terry."

"I particularly like the part where the little snot goes off the tower," Cleese said. "Do you think that will translate well in the film? It's a rather timeless concept."

"I think so," Mike Quadrozzi offered, "every culture has a Leo. But whose idea was that?"

"Well, I think it was sort of a group thing, really," Jones started, "When we..." But he didn't get any further, because at that point all three of the Britons stood upright in fits of apoplectic rage and savagely ripped their own eyes from the sockets. Blood poured everywhere as they twisted in agony, screaming in terror.

Mike pulled himself away from the scene, gripping the edges of the comfortable Chesterfield and nearly clawing the cushy material to shreds. Through the horrible plumes of gore, he could just barely discern the figure of Sam Neill from *Event Horizon*. "Where we're going," he said in a voice that would've made Clint Eastwood shit his pants, "we won't need eyes to see!"

Thankfully, before the carnage could continue, Sam Neill's right temple exploded, killing him instantly. He fell, and over his lifeless body stepped FBI Special Agent Dana Scully. She lowered her smoking Sig-Sauer p228 and brushed a stray strand of red auburn hair back behind her ear. She blew at the barrel of the gun, stopping the ebb of black smoke.

Then she looked at Mike, and ran towards him, leaping gracelessly over the bodies of all four incredibly talented actors. Mike watched as the movement accentuated the svelte curves of her feminine yet steely physique until the G-woman came to a halt in front of him, breathing heavily.

"Michael," she said between breaths, "Thank God I've found you."

"Um ... why, yes it is," Mike said.

Scully held him at arms length, her hands on his shoulders. Her eyes, twin pools of luminous blue, looked right into his own. Strands of red auburn hair reached out from her brow to affix themselves to her sweaty cheek. "I need you ... to do something for me," she said.

"Okay."

"It's very important."

"Anything."

"I want you," she said in a heavy voice, "to go down to the store and get some milk?"

"What?"

"Could you get a gallon of milk?" his mother asked him, standing over his bed.

"Whaza... gahfscully?" Mike said.

"I mean, you've slept long enough and we've got everyone coming over for dinner tonight and *somebody*," (by this she meant probably her son or in fact anyone in the world besides her,) "used up the rest of the milk last night."

"Whatsa, 'ime?" Mike said, his brain fighting consciousness as best it could. He leaned over in bed to see the time on his alarm clock radio and then gasped in incredible pain that only his fellow males could understand and that we won't go into right now for obvious reasons.

"It's nearly half past ten," Sandra Quadrozzi told her son. "I'd really appreciate it if you got up and did me this one small favour today."

"Ho-kay," Mike said weakly, "Fine." After a few more minutes, he was able to get up out of a foetal position and move slowly towards the bathroom.

Meanwhile, Matt Atanian, whose own dream sequence had had at least a little relevancy to the plot, was still busy in his basement.

He was stooped over a disorganized jumble of wrapping paper, the empty cardboard tubes that are left when you finish a roll of wrapping paper and a mountain of assorted Christmas what-have-yous and knick-knacks.

"Tape," he said softly. "Out of tape. More tape."

And he laughed.

Kenneth E. Pendrell opened the door to his room and walked in, blinking briefly as he entered a shaft of sunlight filtering in through the blinds on the one window. Resettling his glasses on the bridge of his nose, he quietly shuffled past all the accoutrements of a normal young person's room: his bed, a bureau where he kept most of his clothes, and a closet. As he walked past his tidy desk, he took a small remote control out of the top drawer.

The remote was about eight inches long, flat and black, with many small buttons on it of varying sizes and colours.

He pressed one button, turning on his tape player, preset to the big band classic, "Assembly Line." With another press, the short, upright pod in the corner of his room opened silently. Kenny stepped inside, pressed a third button, and rocketed into the subterranean caverns of earth below his home.

Kenny guessed, and guessed correctly, that if any of the other scouts in Troop 192 were to ever see his laboratory (pronounced "luh-BOR-ah-tor-ee") they would be very surprised and almost definitely shocked, perhaps even astounded. Not that Kenny usually cared what other people thought. He'd gotten used to being a shadow, a person easily overlooked and seen through. And yet, it seemed to be different with Mike and Aaron and the

others. They noticed him. For the first time in his memory, he belonged.

The pod slowed to a stop and hit the ground below with a soft thump. Kenny stepped out onto the bare concrete floor and flicked a nearby switch. With a loud hum, the generators kicked on, and enormous amounts of electricity began to power Kenny's lab.

He smiled and readjusted his spectacles on the bridge of his nose.

Sanctuary, Kenny thought.

The room was so big you couldn't even call it a room. It was immense, gigantic, and cavernous. The far wall was indistinct, the ceiling faded away in a cloudy haze. Machines and instruments crowded every open space atop shiny aluminium counters and cabinets filled with scientific journals and essays of all sorts. There were scores of bookshelves, hundreds of test tubes and thousands of multicoloured beakers and flasks. Giant pipettes stood next to voltronic pacificators and double glass refibulators and dozens of other devices that would tongue-tie Dr. Seuss, himself.

Kenny came down here often, to escape the world above. He found solace in this place, his laboratory where he could explore and devise and create. Yet, today he was not here to create. He was looking for something.

Standing by his 54' by 21' poster portraying the complete Periodic Table of the Elements, Kenny surveyed the area closely. Where he could he have left it?

There it was. He walked over to the gravimetric thermo-dynamometer and knelt down to pick up his left rubber winter boot. *I can be so forgetful sometimes*, he thought.

Kenny Pendrell walked back to the squat pneumatic tube, flicked off the lights, stepped inside and returned to the world above.

In the city of Springfield, Massachusetts, which lies roughly in the centre of the western part of the state,

snuggled up against the great blue cut of the Connecticut River, there are many fine institutions, both of learning and of the arts and entertainment, of which the community (population of about 160,000) is most proud. The list includes the many colleges, museums, the vast park system and, perhaps most notably, the Basketball Hall of Fame. However, there is one fine institution that you will not find on this list of places to see. It deserves, but doesn't get, any publicity at all. Indeed, it doesn't even ask for any. Relying on simple word of mouth alone, it has slowly prospered and attracted its own unique clientele. A more quaint and humble store you couldn't hope to find.

The Card and Comic Company lies at the intersection of two main roads in one of the more commercialized sections of the very uncommercialized neighbourhood of Sixteen Acres. It is a comic book store that also sells cards and other collectibles, which explains why it wasn't on the aforementioned list.

Not to say it isn't a respectable place of purveyance. The staff, for the most part, is pleasant and knowledgeable, and the selection of comics, cards and other collectibles is vast and well organized. For years it has been a haven for hobbyists and fans of the graphic novel.

And now, back to the dialogue.

"You're just not listening, Hector," said Ed, "I've already gone into that."

"Well, obviously not very well," Hector retorted.

Ed sighed. He so tired of this debate. "The reason that the faerie nobles couldn't possibly defeat the Amazon priestesses is because the nobles possess the Jewel of Ren-Dac."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, Hector. It's as simple as that."

Hector was elated. He would now prove his friend wrong. "Then I suppose you missed the November issue of Duelscrye Gamer Monthly?"

Ed swallowed. The damned fool had found his weakness. "Actually I had, I meant..."

But Hector cut him off, moving in for the kill. "Then you also missed the article by Robert Wembley in which it is proven decisively that the Jewel of Ren-Dac loses its potency when it leaves the Valley of the Forty Seven Torches of Count Dragoon."

"Well, then," Ed began, "The faerie nobles would have no trouble overpowering the Amazon priestesses, seeing as they so recently lost the Battle of Shundrack's Bayou."

"Indeed," Hector said, taking off his inch-thick glasses to give them a polish.

"Well, that's what I've said all along."

"What?! You..."

"Hey, guys," the man working the counter at the Card and Comic Company interrupted, "would you mind keeping it down? This is a store, not a debate hall." He watched as the two left their place by the window and moved over to the shelves of manga near the back, then settled back in his chair behind the counter to return to his duties as clerk.

The bells over the door jingled loudly, and in from the cold stepped Mike Quadrozzi, a half gallon of 2% milk in his hand. He wiped the dirty brown slush of the heels of his boots and walked over to the immense rack of comic books, along the entire far wall of the store. He'd decided to make a brief side trip on his way home after buying the milk. It wasn't that far out of the way.

Looking over the hundreds of titles, he suddenly realized who the person next to him was. "Hey," he said, "how you doing, Becker?"

Jon Becker didn't answer because he had his headphones on and was nearly oblivious to everything and everyone around him. Mike leaned over slightly and shook him by the shoulder. Becker turned around. "Hey, Squid!" he said very loudly.

"Hey, Becker, how you doing?!!"

"Fine!! I'm here for my weekly Magic fix!!" Becker reached into his pocket and took out a couple of recently purchased packs. They'd already been ripped open. "I need it!!" he shouted, "It's like heroin!!"

"You gonna be at the party tonight?!!!"

"You bet!!!"

"Great!!!" Mike said. "See you tonight!!!"

Becker turned back to the rack of comic books, and Mike left him to walk over to the counter and make his own purchase. He slowly scanned the shelves of products behind the counter before deciding on a couple packs of Mirage. It was a deck he was collecting, trying to make a complete set.

While Mike was thinking, the clerk had walked over to him, paying the lad little attention as his own face was buried in the latest issue of Duelscrye Gamer Monthly. Mike, ready to lay down some cash, called to the man, who raised his head to look at the young customer before saying in a cold, deadly voice, "You!"

Mike's face lit up with recognition. "Roy!" he said. "Hey, long time no see!"

The former Camp Moses Trading Post manager's eyes narrowed to slits. "We don't sell Slim Jims, here."

Mike smiled. "That's okay, Roy, because today I believe I'll be buying three packs of Mirage, if you don't mind."

"I do."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that, Roy."

Three packs of Mirage flew across the counter and hit Mike square in the forehead. Roy held out his hand for payment. "That'll be six dollars and fifty cents," he said.

Mike put down the half gallon of milk and dug in his jeans pocket for the money. As he did so, he looked out the front window and noticed something odd about the store next door.

"Hey! Bruno's Pizza is gone!"

"Yep," Roy said.

"Is anything going to replace Bruno's?"

"Maybe."

"Do you know what?"

"Six dollars and fifty cents, please."

Mike promptly handed Roy six one-dollar bills and fifty cents even. He smiled. "Merry Christmas, Roy," he said.

You'd think it was impossible, but somehow the receipt of Mike's brief transaction flew across the counter and hit him square in the forehead.

Warm water rushed out of the tap, and Matthew Atanian began to wash the papier-mâché off of his hands. Using the bar of soap by the sink, he scrubbed off the bits of it that had dried to his skin and washed them down the drain. Once satisfied that all was clean, he grabbed a dishtowel and began a slow, steady pace around the kitchen.

Humming the tune to *It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year*, Matt tried to think of things that he might've forgotten to do while preparing for the party. Something suddenly occurred to him, a thought so obvious and rudimentary that he mentally slapped himself upside the head for not thinking of it right off the bat.

Matt looked at the digital display on the microwave. It was nearly half past eleven. He didn't have much time.

It would do the reader no justice to describe in detail what happened next, for the facts themselves are hard to reconstruct and therefore irrelevant at best, but suffice it to say that somehow, in one swift motion, Matthew Atanian donned his coat, hat and shoes and catapulted himself out the door.

"Again?" Aaron Abdelmaseh asked, exasperated.

"Uh-huh," Kirstin said.

"We just did it!"

"But I need more."

He sighed. "I'm getting kind of tired."

"Already?"

"It was your idea to go in the long way!"

She looked down at him, pouting. "Please, Aaron?"

"Fine. But this is the last one, right?"

Kirstin smiled. "I promise it won't take long."

"Just back to Pembroke's and that's it?" He asked, looking around at all the other weary last-minute shoppers that were at the mall with them this morning.

She nodded.

"Okay." Aaron hefted the two bags of gifts they'd bought for the party that night and stood up from the bench. "Let's go."

"Come on!" Kirstin called to him, ten steps ahead. She pranced away down the crowded pathway. Aaron eventually had to get up to a light jog to keep up.

Walking briskly along the side of the road, Mike Quadrozzi pulled up the collar of his jacket against the bitter winter wind and switched the half-gallon of milk to his other hand. He didn't mind walking most of the time. Getting out in the fresh air was all part and parcel with being a scout. Yet, most of the time didn't include today. It was bloody cold.

With every step, his boots splashed in murky brown puddles of icy water, the melted remnants of the light snow of the day before. Even though the sun had battered winter's precipitation to dirty cold slop, winter's chilly wind continued to whip at pant legs and sting unprotected faces.

Mike trudged along, thinking quiet thoughts about nothing much at all, mostly oblivious of the traffic whizzing by. Then, snapping him alert, one car raced very close by and sprayed him with a frigid deluge of cold puddle water.

At first, Mike thought nothing of it except unkind comments about the unknown driver of the reckless automobile. But then, mere seconds after he realized that much of the water had soaked his clothes and was running down his back, he was a squirrel.

*Damn*, Mike thought, shaking his whiskers irritably.

Sitting back on his bushy gray tail, he tried to think of what he could possibly do next. Pictures of nuts flashed through his mind and made him hungry in a weird way but offered no further insight.

Another car raced by dangerously close, and Mike scampered out of the way, bracing himself for another icy waterfall. But, instead of a splash of puddle water, he heard the screech of brakes and the opening of a car door.

Mike looked over and realized that the car, an old blue sedan in pretty bad shape, had come to an abrupt halt not twenty feet away. Someone was getting out of the driver's side. He looked up at the tall person, and Mike's tiny black eyes recognized hiking boots, army fatigues and before he knew it Dan Wellington had scooped him, his clothes and his half-gallon of milk up and deposited the bunch in the back seat of his car.

Mike chattered gratefully as Dan got back behind the wheel and returned to the traffic flow. When they were on their way, Dan looked over his shoulder and offered the squirrel a large Styrofoam cup. "Does coffee work?" he asked.

Within minutes, Mike was human and fully clothed once again. "Thanks a lot," he said. "But what made you stop?"

A lopsided grin splashed across Wellington's face. "Well, you know, I see a lot of squirrels, and quite a few of them carry groceries. But the dirty red hat was a dead giveaway."

Mike laughed. "Well, this was a nice coincidence." A thought struck him. "Hey, did Matt tell you about the troop's Christmas party tonight?"

"Yeah, I was planning on stopping by."

"Cool." Mike scanned the back seat of the Wellington-mobile, and noticed for the first time that he was rather packed in amongst the tons of equipment. Besides the gloves and pads, masks and tubes, nozzles, cans and containers of compressed what-have-you, there was a lot of flammable stuff that Dan might not want on him should the police decide to pull him over.

"Jeez," Mike said, "you could start a one man firestorm, and then probably put it out yourself, too."

Dan smiled that same smile again. It was a smile that would've sent thoroughly sane insurance salesmen scampering off into the trees, never to be seen or heard from again. "Well, you know," he quipped, "one should always be prepared."

Matt Atanian sat on his haunches. He recalled reading somewhere that in a situation like this, one should definitely sit on one's haunches. It was a position of preparedness, signifying that you were ready for anything, ready for action.

Matt raised himself up and stood in a normal manner, deciding that whoever had made up that rule about sitting on your haunches had had stronger haunches than his. Exhaling slightly, he brought himself back to the situation at hand, the one that had made him think of sitting on his haunches in the first place.

Looking into the oncoming crowd, little more than a tumultuous wall of moving flesh and clothing now, Matt scarcely took another moment to think before he crouched down again, gathered his limbs tightly round himself and lunged headfirst into the flood of bodies.

Purses hit him in the face, arms battered him. At one point he thought he had hit the ground, but found himself over someone's head. Then he fell, only he seemed to fall up, then sideways, then up again. Someone stepped on his hand and he gave a yelp of pain.

Matt's face smacked the tile floor, and he lay where he had fallen, not daring to move.

After a few minutes, he decided to take his chances. Lifting his head, he watched the crowd move down the mall avenue toward the Sears department store, away from his sprawled form. He was safe.

He spotted his fedora on the ground a few meters away. Someone had stepped on the brim, leaving behind a light brown tread mark. Matt got up shakily, then walked over to his hat and brushed it off, trying to remove the mark as best he could.

He put it back on and said, "Damn."

Matthew Atanian had just experienced a rare phenomenon of our society: the pack of crazed last minute Christmas shoppers. You see, when last we observed life at the mall, it was slow, perhaps even peaceful. Weary gift gatherers looked forward to an afternoon's rest. But that time has passed. Matt had chosen a most unfortunate time to visit the mall, indeed. He had entered the world of the last minute shopper, the desperate, under-nourished, primal creature what stalks the aisles and sifts through the bargain bins, searching in an hysteric frenzy for any kind of gift at all.

Matt noticed something out of the corner of his eye and turned to look. There was a lump on the ground, across the way from him. He walked over to the lump to see if it was all right and noticed that it was a person, sprawled on the ground much the same way he had been, and that he knew her.

"Carolyn?" Matt said, kneeling down. "Are you okay?"

Carolyn Ede opened her eyes lazily and looked up at him. "Whew," she sighed, "what a rush!"

A few minutes later, the two friends were sitting at a table in the food court, or what had been the food court until a few hours previous. From the overturned chairs and tables, the spilt soft drinks and the complete lack of anything of value, they surmised that the mob had already been through this way.

Matt was just taking his chair, having returned from a quick exploration of the food court to see if there was anything left to eat or drink.

"Is that it?" Carolyn asked.

"Yup," Matt said, taking a sip from the bottle of Nestlé's chocolate milk he'd managed to barter from one of the few food vendors who hadn't escaped before the first pillaging. He passed the drink across the table to Carolyn. "Well," he said, "it's a good thing we ran into each other, today."

"Isn't it always?"

"Of course, but now I can ask you something."

Carolyn smiled. "Ah, yes. A riddle. Ask of the ancient sage."

"Well, I'm here doing some last minute shopping. For Sarah, in particular."

"Yes?"

"And, ah..." Matt floundered. He didn't know how to put it, so he just spat it out. "What do women want?"

Of all the responses he might've expected, thunderous laughter was not one of them, but Carolyn did it anyway.

"Wow," she gasped between chuckles, wiping her eyes, "you sure can pick 'em, Matt. Why don't you just go ahead and ask me the Meaning of Life or the square root of negative four?"

Matt blinked.

"Okay, philosophy aside," Carolyn said, "whatever you get Sarah, it's obviously got to be special, right?"

"Yes, but I don't really know how she feels," Matt said. "I know how I feel, but a gift could tip the scale on her side either way."

"A dilemma."

"By definition."

"So you want to get her something that shows how you feel, but doesn't go overboard, and is enough to try and make her think that there might be something between you."

"Any ideas?"

"Sorry. None whatsoever," Carolyn said, and checked her watch. "But, hey, you've got four and a half hours, yet."

Matt smiled. "Thanks."

Bill Gelinas was sitting on the couch in his living room when his mother walked in the room, engaged in her motherly household tasks.

"So, Bill," Pat Gelinas said to her son, "you all set for the party tonight?"

Bill was totally engrossed in his favourite television program. "Yup," he said absently.

"Cool. Is everyone going to be there?"

"Yup," Bill said again. Pikachu said, "Pika?"

Mrs. Gelinis turned to walk back in the kitchen, and that's when Bill sprang the question on her. "Hey, mom," he said. "Why do you always put the vegetable peels in a pot of water and then dump them out window?"

His mother blinked and glanced down at the pot of hot water and carrot peelings she held in her hands. "No reason," she said.

"Neko-chan!" Nicole Porter cried, kneeling down to scoop the cat up off of the front step and into her arms. "I knew you'd be back!"

Neko-chan purred contentedly as Nicole held the cat close to her and scratched its head. She began talking to it in a silly baby voice, which she probably wouldn't have used if she had known that her pet could actually understand her. "We just have to keep a closer eye on you, don't we? Yes, we do!"

Nicole stepped back through the front door. "Come on," she continued to the purring feline, "let's go back inside."

His third shot veered sharply to the left, and as he heard the sound of breaking glass, Matthew Swett decided that today just wasn't the day to be hitting golf balls at the college and started to head back home.

Swett lived, quite conveniently, on Wilbraham Road, just minutes from basically everything in Sixteen Acres and right across the street from the Church where Troop 192 met weekly.

The few golf balls he hadn't hit jumped in his pocket as he crossed the busy street at a quick trot and walked the very short distance to his house. Reaching the back

steps, he stood the battered three wood against the porch railing and stepped inside his house.

Swett looked at the clock on the wall and saw that he still had buckets of time until the Christmas party started, and decided he didn't want to stay inside for the duration. He looked around for his roller blades.

He hadn't been able to skate much this winter, but now that that miserable little bit of snow had melted away he could resume his past time.

A few minutes later, the driver of an elderly El Dorado convertible, on his way home on Wilbraham Road, was surprised when a young man on roller skates zipped across his lane, going backwards, and waved to him cheerily.

The day had been perfect. Fantastic. Almost half a day he'd spent with Kirstin Porter, and it had seemed like minutes. But minutes of bliss, nonetheless.

But now, standing in the living room of his home, Aaron Abdelmaseh felt his face reddening as the flaming anger washed over him.

"Derek," he said softly, "where did it go?"

Aaron's younger brother was hanging from the ceiling fan making monkey noises. "What?"

"You know what!"

"How can I know what if you won't tell me what?"

Aaron's fists clenched and unclenched. "My bag."

"What bag?"

"MY BAG OF STUFF FOR THE PARTY!"

"I hid it."

"YOU KNOW WHAT PARTY, YOU... What?"

"I hid it," Derek repeated, and laughed a high-pitched impish laugh of scornful delight. After a few seconds of laughing, he lost his grip on the ceiling fan and fell to the floor because Aaron had thrown a football at his head.

Aaron watched as the hell spawn sat up slowly from where he lay on the carpeted floor, regarded his older brother coldly, smiled and wailed, "MOOOOMMMMMM!!!!!"

Mrs. Sue Abdelmaseh reacted immediately to her child's cries of distress. She ran into the room, a dishtowel over her shoulder. "Aaron!" she said to her eldest son, "don't you have anything better to do than pick on your little brother?"

Aaron opened his mouth, then thought better of it and closed it again. He turned on his heel and walked away towards his room. He figured he'd start getting ready for the party.

**THIRTEEN POINT THREE: THE PARTY  
(S'BOUT BLOODY TIME, EH?)**

5:37 p.m., December 24, 2007

The Church in the Acres stood, starkly silhouetted against the darkening evening sky, and let the cars speed by on Wilbraham Road. The only lights on in the building were the ones in the main hall, which had been turned on by Matt Swan. He'd gotten there early. In the front yard, much the same as they had been the night before, stood Mike Quadrozzi and Bill Gelinas.

"Okay, Swett!" Mike said, his words accompanied by mist in the chill air. "Turn 'em on!"

"Right!" came the reply, from around the wall.

Bill and Mike stood, waiting.

They waited some more.

"Plug 'em in, man!"

"I did!"

"What?"

"I plugged them in, already!"

Bill and Mike stood on the lawn.

"Oh, come on," Bill shouted at the decorative lights.

"Not now!"

"Shit!" Mike said.

Matt Swett was walking over to the other two. "We got a problem, huh?" he called.

"Shit!" Mike said, louder.

Swett was about ten yards from them, near the front of the church, when he noticed the plug on the ground. He laughed as he re-plugged the orange extension cord into the socket connected to the string of Christmas lights.

The lawn was bathed in reds and greens and blinking whites, as it should have been before. Mike relaxed. Bill let out his held breath.

There was a flare of headlights, and the three of them turned to see who was pulling in the driveway. The blue van pulled to a stop in the parking lot, a short distance

away, and the door opened. Jonathan Becker stepped out, waving.

"See ya later," he said to his mother.

At the steering wheel, Mrs. Becker called, "Hi, boys!" Mike, Bill and Swett waved.

As the van pulled away, Becker joined the group, and that's when the others noticed the horrible difference.

Bill Gelinas screamed.

Matt Swett looked at him.

Mike stared at Becker. "Jon," he said softly, "you're not wearing your headphones!"

Becker grinned. What he said next wasn't a shouted interrogatory phrase, it was, "Nope. I'm giving them up, at least for tonight, anyway."

"Oh. Cool."

A sudden gust of cold wind blew across the parking lot, assaulting the four Boy Scouts standing on the front lawn.

Jonathan Becker began twitching. It started at the corner of his right eye, and then moved slowly to the muscles surrounding his mouth. His body was racked with spasms. His eyes blinked intermittently and his lips drew apart in a grimace. Finally, when it seemed the very soul of the young man would be torn asunder, he screamed at the top of his lungs, "AAUUGH! I CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE!" He threw a hand into an inner recess of his winter coat and took out his headphones, which were apparently already connected to playing music, and fastened them securely around his head, sighing contentedly.

"You're a weak man, Becker," Mike said.

"WHAT?!"

The double front doors of the church hall flew wide open, and Matt Atanian took a few steps outside. "Hey, guys!" he shouted, "You gonna stand in the lawn all night? The lights look great! Come on in!"

\* \* \*

"Well," Matt asked the others as the group entered Walker Hall, "what do you think?"

The first thing Mike Quadrozzi noticed as he looked around the room was the sheer number of Christmas wreaths there were hanging on the walls. The second thing he noticed made him wonder how he could have possibly noticed the wreaths first. He opened his mouth to say something, but Matt Swett beat him to it.

"Those are the two second biggest candy canes I have ever seen."

The ornaments he spoke of stood at the front of the hall, in front of and to each side of the stage, where the flags usually stood. Each red and white striped candy cane was ten feet tall, and appeared to be made out of papier-mâché.

Mike, Bill, Swett and Becker balked.

Matt Atanian beamed proudly. "It was Jimmy's idea," he said. Then a thought seemed to strike him, and he turned to regard Swett. "Second biggest?" he asked.

"Forget about it."

"Well," Mike began, "it looks like you've been busy, Matt."

Atanian shrugged. "Well..."

The double front doors swung wide, interrupting him, and the five turned around to see the top of a large fir tree enter the hall. Well, it almost entered the hall. The double doors were large, but they were hardly designed with large fir trees in mind, and so the plant became wedged about halfway up its length.

"Hello?" a voice from the tree said. "Little help, here?"

"Whoa, weird, Matt," Swett said. "Talking trees! Wacko Christmas party!"

Matt sprang forward. "All right!" he called. "Perfect timing!"

Everyone helped together, and the tree was able to successfully enter the room, suffering only minimal damage and needle loss.

Now that both ends of the tree were inside, the people who had brought the tree were able to enter, as well.

"Hey guys," Mr. Mark Abert said, taking off his gloves and wool hat, "Troop 180 comes bearing gifts!"

The scouts of 192 greeted the adult leader, whom they had not seen since summer camp. Becker said, "WHAT'S WITH THE TREE?!"

"We got your message, Matt," Mr. Abert motioned towards the fir tree, lying on the floor. "I hope this one's big enough!"

Matt was still beaming, but now he did it at the tree. "It's perfect," he said.

"Wow, this is great," Mike said.

From around the tree walked two other members of Troop 180. There was Matt Abert, son of the adult leader. There was also Derek "The Leprechaun" Provost, who wore a black beret that made him look like some sort of short, wiry renegade commando. On crack. "Want us to get the stand?" he asked.

"No, Derek," Mr. Abert said flatly, "I think it looks good right here, don't you?"

Provost raised an eyebrow. "Um... no, not really."

Matt Abert smacked him upside the head, and the two of them walked back outside to retrieve the stand from their vehicle.

"Okay." Matt Atanian struck a thinking pose and said, "Let's move it... near the far wall." He pointed. "Over there."

The group obliged, and with little effort, the tree was moved. That was when Mr. Mark Abert noticed Matt's art projects.

"Wow," he said, "those are the two second biggest candy canes I have ever seen!"

Matt frowned.

Between the eight of them, it didn't take very long to stand the giant Christmas tree up, and as boxes of ornaments and lights were brought in, the rest of Troop 192 began to arrive, as well.

First, of course, as seems always the case, were the crazy little midgets, the younger scouts who have nothing better to do with their time than to run around in circles, ignore you when you tell them to stop, and then blame you when someone gets hurt.

It's best to ignore them, and that's exactly what the older scouts did.

Food and gifts began to compile, which Matt Atanian directed would all be placed on the tables Mike and Bill Gelinias were setting up until the appropriate time.

Sometime later, unfortunately, the McGraws showed up.

"Jesus H. Chrysler!" were the first inexplicable words out of Jack McGraw's mouth as he entered the hall, and he said them because an overly excited midget scout ran across his path, almost making him lose his bitter old man demeanour out of sheer surprise.

The next thing he did was bark at his wife, Mrs. Joan McGraw, who entered close behind him with a crock pot of something or another.

And so began the Troop 192 annual Christmas party.

Justy Yung, Senior Patrol Leader of Troop 192, stood on the top stair of the stage at the front of the great hall and surveyed his kingdom wearing a grin that somehow stretched beyond the mere confines of his face.

"Look at them, Proctor," he said giddily.

His assistant was a step or two below him. "Yes, Captain," Proctor said, and looked at them.

"They're just swirling masses, now. Pouring into my hall, eager to hear my words of wisdom and do my bidding!"

"I think they're here for the party, as well, sir," Proctor said.

"They're here to hear me speak and do my bidding!" Justy said, "They just don't know it, yet!" To validate these statements, he let loose with a bout of maniacal laughter.

"Well done, sir."

"Someone should've told that psycho the party was tomorrow," Bill Gelinas said darkly. He was standing about twenty feet away from the front of the stage, along with Mike Quadrozzi and Aaron Abdelmaseh. Kenny Pendrell had also recently arrived, and was thoroughly engrossed in a tome entitled, *The Complete and Total Guide to Every Iota of Philosophical Thought, Ever: The Unexpurgated Version, Volume 83*.

"Agreed," Mike said, his arms folded.

"Leave it to Justy to turn Christmas into an ego trip," Aaron concurred.

Justy stopped laughing and wiped the spittle from his lips. He searched through his pockets, frowned, searched them again, frowned deeper and then regarded Proctor. "My notes seem to have misplaced themselves. I need them for my Ultra Important Holiday Speech, Proctor." He pointed towards the stairs. "They may be down there! Find them!"

Proctor saluted smartly, turned on his heel and trotted away like a completely loyal and perpetually stupid dog.

"There goes the lackey," Bill said.

"Schmuck," Aaron said.

Mike Quadrozzi smiled. "Hey guys," he began, "follow me. I've got an idea."

It was a good thing that some caretaker of the past had had the foresight to equip the Church in the Acres with an adequate sprinkler system, because Dan Wellington showed up next.

"Hey, everybody!" Dan proclaimed upon entering the hall. Stepping slightly to the side, he regarded the young man who had followed him in and said, "Look what I found!"

As Matt Atanian walked over to act as greeter, he noticed the tall, lanky young man with the thick five o'clock shadow and glasses and said in delighted surprise, "Colin!"

Colin Pekruhn smiled. "Hi, Matt!"

Colin had long been a leader in the Boy Scouts, but, as often times happens, had also come across other interests, as well. He had never completely left Scouts, however, and was currently becoming more active once again, but before this he hadn't been seen for quite some time.

Also, he had an uncanny resemblance to a walrus. Yes, a walrus. You see, Colin Pekruhn wasn't fat, he wasn't hairy, and he didn't have huge tusks protruding from his upper lip. Yet, despite this complete lack of any of the dominant characteristics of the large arctic sea mammal, everyone who knew Colin swore that he just plain looked like a walrus. It was weird.

The three friends stood by the double doors and were soon lost in conversation. They had come up in scouting at about the same time, and together, they formed a demonic trio. Matt was the Hell Scout. Dan was the Pyro. Colin, the Walrus.

Cuckoo ka-chew.

Dan Wellington looked over and saw the giant Christmas tree that the members of Troop 180 were busy festooning with decorations.

"Hey!" he called to them, running over. "Want me to help you light it?"

Mr. William Shmuler, Scoutmaster of Troop 192, showed up promptly in raggedy jeans and a faded sweatshirt about a half of an hour past when he ought to have arrived in order to be unfashionably late. He came with his son Will, who promptly ran off to go do God-Knows-What in the most annoying way possible.

Mr. Shmuler cleared his throat a couple times, shuffled his feet, and then took his dutiful place at the front of the stage and proceeded to do what came to him naturally: absolutely nothing in the most obtrusive and ineffectual manner possible.

Little did he know that that was exactly what he was supposed to be doing.

Matt Swett had brought his stereo from his house, and soon the hall was filled with an assorted variety of Christmas and party music.

Slim McGraw snarled. It appeared as though he had met his match.

Will Shmuler, son of the Scoutmaster and Human Cartoon, stood before him. The two Scouts, easily the most annoying people in Troop 192, if not the world, were standing by the food and beverage table.

Slim had just finished yelling a dizzying array of insults at Will which were designed to enflame those primitive emotions of conflict that are so prevalent in the young. Much to Slim's increasing fury, Will wasn't even flinching. He was busy with his own line of offense, which was to spin around and make bleeping noises.

Spittle flying from his mouth, Slim was down to mere vulgarities. "You stupid cock!" he screamed at Will.

"Cock, heh heh," chuckled Homer, Slim's dim sidekick. He stood a few steps away.

Thankfully, before a confrontation of cosmically annoying proportions could begin, Troop 180 member Derek "The Leprechaun" Provost stepped between the two of them.

"Out of my way, guys," he said, stepping towards the punch bowl, "and watch the language, huh?"

The three little freaks scurried out of the way, intent on going on with the ceremony elsewhere.

Derek Provost took a plastic cup off a stack of plastic cups on the table. He picked up the ladle that was propped up against the inside of the punch bowl and proceeded to fill his glass.

He then dropped the ladle. It fell back into the bowl with a tiny splash. He also dropped his cup.

Derek Provost screamed.

Within the punch bowl, floating innocently in the cold pink fluid amidst frozen chunks of ice, was a can of Kiwi Mocha Fruit Juice.

Derek began to panic. In his fevered mind, he all of a sudden remembered the incident at camp. The pain, the blood, the weeks of therapy to regain the use of his lips. He began sweating profusely, all the while trying to tell himself that it wasn't the same can. It couldn't be the same can. No, no, no, NO!

He looked again, and his eyes widened in stark, unhindered terror as he saw the scratch marks, the broken tab, and the indentations where his teeth had touched the aluminium.

It was the same can.

Derek Provost screamed, turned, and ran.

Meanwhile, Proctor was downstairs, intent upon his errand.

He was standing in the main hallway on the ground floor of the Church in the Acres. He could vaguely hear the sounds of the Cub Scouts as they had their own holiday fun a few doors down the corridor.

Proctor looked around, turning his head from side to side. His uniform was neatly pressed. He smiled stupidly lopsided. His eyes held... nothing. He had but one purpose, one passion and one all-encompassing force that drove him through life: following orders. Only when following orders was he truly content, and now he was able to loose himself in thought as his mind drifted and turned over in its quest for Justy's notes. After all, for Proctor, there was no choice. He was not trying to find these notes. He was going to. He had to. There wasn't anything else.

He turned the corner, walking back down the hall from which he'd come, towards the back of the church and the storage room where Troop 192 kept much of its equipment. Perhaps the Captain had left his notes in there.

As Proctor walked by, three heads looked around the corner and watched his departure. They belonged to Aaron Abdelmaseh, Mike Quadrozzi and Bill Gelinas.

"Ready?" Mike asked the other two.

"Go for it." Bill told him.

The three stepped around the corner and trotted after the ASPL. They could hear him opening the door of the storage room and flicking the lights on.

"Hey, Proctor!" Mike called.

There was a split second of hesitation, and then Proctor walked back into the hallway. "Did you call?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Aaron. "We've got to tell you..."

"I'm looking for the Captain's notes," Proctor said, dismissing them. It was a talent he'd learned from observing Justy.

"But we found them," Mike said.

Proctor stopped in mid-military turn. He looked back at them, one eyebrow raised in suspicion. The others were surprised. They hadn't known he was capable of that specific emotion.

"You did?" he asked.

"Yeah," Mike continued. "They're in that room over there." He pointed to the heavy door across the way. It led to the church's ancient boiler room. "Justy must've left them there while he was thinking so hard about his speech."

Aaron winced. Mike might've gone too far on that one.

But, no. It had worked. The lopsided grin returned to Proctor's face. "Gee, thanks," he said. He walked over to the heavy door and opened it.

He turned back to them. "The lights aren't on," he said.

"I think there's a switch just inside, on the wall," Mike told him.

Proctor leaned into the room, searching the inside wall with his hand. Slowly, he stepped through the doorway. His back foot passed over the heavy wooden frame just as Mike, Aaron and Bill rushed forward and

heaved. Proctor heard the sound of the door close behind him just as he turned to inquire once more about the lights.

Proctor found himself in complete darkness, and pounded on the door. "Hey! Hey, guys!"

There was a click.

"Hey! What happened?"

"Proctor?" It was Mike.

"Yeah! Guys, what happened?"

"The door closed! Can you get out?"

Proctor searched the door's surface for a handle, found it, and turned it frantically. "No! It's locked."

"Okay!" It sounded like Aaron. "We'll try to find the key!"

"All right!" Proctor answered them. He heard their footsteps grow fainter as they walked away down the hall. Proctor backed away from the door. "I'll be right here!" he called.

"That was way too easy," Aaron said as the three of them walked back up the stairs to Walker Hall and the Christmas party.

"But not so easy that it wasn't fun," Mike said.

"Point," Aaron conceded.

Upstairs, the holiday festivities were running smoothly. Almost everyone from Troop 192 had shown up, and the only expected guests that hadn't arrived thus far were the Porters.

As Justy Yung paced the stage, waiting for Proctor to return with his speech notes, Mr. Mark and his son Matt Abert stepped back from the Christmas tree and admired their work.

"Looks good," Matt Abert said.

"Yeah, that's a pretty nice-looking tree," his father replied, scanning the blinking lights and ornaments. "Something's missing though." He looked again, and his

eyes settled on the tree's barren apex. Mr. Abert snapped his fingers. "The top."

"Didn't we have an angel thingy that goes on top?"

"Yeah, I seem to recall an angel thingy, Matt."

Matt Abert scanned the empty boxes around them. "I don't see it anywhere."

"Did we leave it in the car?" Mr. Abert asked, and he turned around to help look, coming face to face with an old man in a dark blue uniform with a cardboard box under each arm.

"Harris Tanner!" Mark Abert exclaimed. "I haven't seen you since camp."

The elder scout leader smiled a wry smile. "I believe this is yours," he said, handing one of the boxes to Mr. Abert.

"Hello, Mr. Tanner," Matt Abert said. He took the box and looked inside it. "Hey, you found our angel."

"I seem to have come across it," Tanner said. He was leaning on his signature walking stick, which he carried not so much for balance as for a symbol of authority.

"Mr. Tanner!" Matt Atanian walked over from across the hall, a plate of red and green-frosted sugar cookies on a plate in his hands. "It's good to see you. What are you doing here?" He held up the plate. "Cookie?"

Harris Tanner declined and indicated his uniform. "I'm here for a meeting," he said.

Atanian looked at the dark blue fabric, the shiny buttons and the distinctive cap. "Civil War Veterans?" he asked jokingly.

Tanner smiled. "Re-enactment group," he said, and his voice was that odd curious pitch, somewhere between lilting and gravely. "I'm not that old."

Matt Abert took a cookie.

Matt Atanian had had one hand behind his back throughout the conversation, and now took it out. He held a red and white costume, immediately recognizable.

"It's Santa time," he said, looking hopeful. "I promised the Cub Scouts."

Matt Abert nudged his father in the stomach. "It's the part you were born to play, dad."

His father gave him a look. "Ha ha," he said. "No thanks, Matt." He checked his digital watch. "We should actually get going in a little while. We've got company coming for dinner."

"Oh," Atanian said.

He smiled and looked at Harris Tanner, who frowned.

"Now, Matt, don't go getting any crazy ideas," the old man said.

The double doors at the front of the hall swung wide, and everyone turned to see last year's dining hall Steward and one of this year's Camping Commissioners, Norm Jacques, enter the building.

"Norm!" everyone called to the tall, dark-haired, sunglasses-wearing man as he walked among them. He waved and continued on his way, towards the door at the back.

Trying to steal some attention for himself, this year's dining hall steward, a bright young chap named Dave, leaped out of the door at the back and took an illustrious bow to thunderous booing from the audience.

Everyone liked you if you had been steward. No one liked you if you were steward.

Dave smiled good-naturedly and walked back into the kitchen. Norm stopped for a brief moment to pick up a red rose that someone had thrown. He smelled it and thanked the crowd heartily before continuing on his way. He obviously had business to attend to in the kitchen.

Dave, acting on impulse, went for a second chance at applause and ran out from the kitchen door. The crowd hissed and leered at him. Luckily, it had been decided early on that the eggnog was a little off, and Dave was chased out the double doors by a group of ornery Secondclassmen brandishing the spoiled holiday beverage.

Norm reached the kitchen door, which was dutifully held open by Kenny Healy and his father, Sare, the Camp Moses cooks. They, too, waved cheerfully, and then left the room, closing the door behind them.

The Porters joined the party soon after, stepping in from the cold night. Kirstin soon made her way towards Aaron and the others, and Nicole, with Neko-chan purring contentedly in her folded arms, flitted from conversation to conversation. Sarah Porter took off her hat and gloves in favor of an appropriate holiday smile, which she wore as if under duress.

"WHAT'S WITH THE CAT?" Becker asked Nicole at a couple hundred decibels.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there aren't many other pets here tonight," Mike said.

"But he's just the life of the party now," Nicole said, and nuzzled Neko-chan, who continued to purr as if purring was about to be made a federal crime, punishable by hanging and a \$5000 fine billed to the estate of the deceased.

Kenny Pendrell spoke without looking up from his book. "It's been suggested by leading minds in the medical field that pets actually lower the blood pressure of their owners considerably."

The others looked at him.

Mike looked at Neko-chan.

Neko-chan looked back, daring him with feline arrogance.

"So, how have all of you guys been, lately," Nicole asked. "How's Matt?"

Mike shrugged. "We're fine," he said. He looked around. "Come to think of it, where did Matt get off to?"

"Merry Christmas."

"Matty!" Sarah Porter exclaimed, visibly brightening. "Merry Christmas! How are you?"

"Can't complain," Matty Hayes replied.

The two friends began talking as they moved slowly around the room, weaving amongst other small groups of people and avoiding young members of Troop 192 as they dashed from here to there.

"You know, it's about time we got together, again." Sarah was saying.

"Yeah," Matty smiled, "I really enjoy our little outings."

"What are you doing for New Year's?"

Matty feigned thought, trying not to get too excited. "Not much," she said.

"Great! Me neither. It's a date!"

They laughed.

Walking alongside Sarah, Matty decided the conversation had gone on long enough, and tactfully began the feature presentation. She cleared her throat, which wasn't so tactful, but since Sarah had no idea what she was about to say or what, if any, kind of ulterior motive she could possibly have, the brief lapse in poise went completely unnoticed.

"So," Matty started, "run into Matt Atanian lately?"

Sarah's brow arched slightly, but she was not suspicious. "Why?"

"Oh, just curious," Matty replied and glanced around the hall. "He's around here somewhere." She leaned towards Sarah conspiratorially. "I think he's looking for you."

This time Sarah definitely darkened. "Oh, great. Just what I need."

Matty swallowed, taking the blow nicely despite the sudden increase of acid content in her stomach. "Don't be so hasty. It might not be a bad thing."

Sarah chuckled. "How could it not be, with that guy? I mean, did you see those candy canes? What's with that?"

"Hey, papier-mâché takes patience."

"Whatever it takes, Matt Atanian has given me nothing but a series of very weird encounters, starting at summer camp."

"He seemed intent on talking to you when I saw him."

"Why Miss Hayes," Sarah said, "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were on his side."

Matty smiled. "Well, you know, it *is* Christmas Eve."

Derek Provost began to salivate. "Oh, wow," he slurred, "Who is *that*?"

"Who?" Mike Quadrozzi asked casually. The two of them were chatting near the back of the hall, along with Moses kitchen help Jim Anderson, who had just arrived at the party.

"That girl over there," Provost said, pointing with a limp hand. His eyes were glazing over.

"The one with the red hair?" Jim asked.

"Yeah, the shorter hair."

Mike Quadrozzi followed Provost's line of sight, expecting another testosterone trip from Troop 180's resident pervert. He sipped his drink casually and glanced at Sarah Porter and Matty Hayes. His throat contracted immediately as his brain caught up with his eyes, making a horrible gurgling sound.

"Um ..." Mike choked.

Provost was grinning. "I like her," he said, "she jiggles."

Mike regained his composure, knowing he had to act fast to deflect the leprechaun. "Hey, I don't think you want to go there, Derek," he said.

"What? Why not?"

Mike motioned with his hand for a private conversation. Derek leaned closer to hear the other's whispered speech. His eyes widened as Mike pointed towards the females and shook his head. The corners of his mouth drew back in a frown.

"Damn," he said after Mike finished, "all the good ones seem to go that way."

\* \* \*

Matty Hayes smiled as she watched Sarah walk away, leaving the room. *At least she's thinking about it*, she thought. *Could've gone worse.*

She turned to go her own way, towards the kitchen and the pot of warm water waiting on the stove, when a loud noise behind her made her look back. The double doors at the front of the hall had been thrown open, and in from the cold had stepped...

"Kuntz!"

Taylor Kuntz wore a leather jacket over his rumpled Boy Scout uniform, obviously the nicest outfit he owned. His hair had been slicked back with far too much gel, and he was holding a small stack of three by five-inch index cards in his ungloved right hand. He glanced quickly around the room of people before his eyes settled unsettlingly on Matty Hayes. He smiled his best smile, which was pretty bad.

As Matty stood, trying to spit out words of any kind and calm her reeling mind, Kuntz pranced over to her like a peacock on amphetamines and kneeled in front of her.

"My red-haired goddess!" he said. "At last I've found you, and on the Eve of Christmas!"

"Wh-wh-what the *hell* are you doing here?!" Matty finally got out.

"I've come to sweep you off your feet, my love, to swoon your heart," Kuntz replied gooily, and consulted his index cards. He cleared his throat, and looked upwards at Matty. "Ahem... Shall I compare thee to some summer's hay? Thou art more lovely and more temperament!"

"WHAT?"

By this time, a crowd had begun forming, a crowd which Mike Quadrozzi and Aaron Abdelmaseh were quickly trying to push their way to the front of.

Kuntz continued to mangle poetry. "Roof winds to shake the darling birds of May, and summer's lice hath all too short a date!"

Finished, he looked up at her. "Now, my red-haired goddess, I shall catch you as you collapse, love-struck, into my arms!"

"What the hell are you doing at our Christmas party you little freak?!" Matty yelled at him.

Kuntz was genuinely surprised. "Come on, collapse! That was Shakespeare! The Bird!"

"That's Bard, you idiot!" Mike Quadrozzi told him. "Now get the hell out of here!"

Aaron Abdelmaseh stepped in, as well. "None of us can quite remember inviting you to the party, Kuntz."

Taylor Kuntz stood up and ran a hand down his rumpled uniform, as if to straighten it. "This crowd has obviously made you uncomfortable, my goddess. You feel you cannot express your true feelings for me."

"Get lost before you lose something, creep," Matty told him.

Kuntz pranced towards the door, but not before throwing Mike and Aaron an evil look. "I'll be back," he said, to the two of them as much to Matty. "I won't keep you waiting, my love!"

The double doors closed behind him.

Mike fumed. "That guy ..."

"Maybe we ought to keep our parties more confidential," Aaron said.

"Go on," the mother said, giving her child a gentle push forward. "It's all right."

The young boy shook his head, no.

"Come on, now," the mother cooed, "it's Santa Claus."

The boy gripped his mother's hand, and she brought her face down to his. "E's not Santa," the child told her as if divulging a secret.

The mother smiled. "Of course it is, Eric," she said. "Now, go on."

The boy shook his head again vehemently. "E's too skinny to be Santa," he told his mother and backed towards her.

The two of them, mother and child, were in one of the large, carpeted rooms on the ground floor of the Church in the Acres, specifically, the one in which the Cub Scouts of

Pack 192 met for their weekly meetings. Across the room from this small altercation sat its subject, Mr. Harris Tanner, who sighed heavily.

It had started off all right. He'd donned the outfit, gotten himself into a reasonably jolly mood and came down here ho-ho-ho-ing it up. It seemed pretty simple, a good bit of service from the elder Boy Scout leader. A few children came up, excited out of their little minds to talk to Santa in person, and told him what they'd like for Christmas and were given a nice red and white candy cane wrapped in red ribbon. All right, good show. Drinks all around.

Some of them, he had found, were even interested in patch trading.

But, every so once in a while, there was a child like this one right here. A child who just plain refused to suspend disbelief and talk to a tall, skinny, ancient-looking Santa Claus with a beard that didn't quite fit his face at all and a voice that sat somewhere between lilting and gravely.

What was the world coming to, anyway?

Harris Tanner checked his watch and sighed again. "Ho, ho, ho," he said.

The double doors were thrown wide open, and everyone braced themselves. However, instead of spotting a greasy-looking wannabe poet or other such monstrosity, the partygoers of 192 saw a young Asian man dressed in yellow. An umbrella poked from the pack on his back. The bandanna he wore around his forehead was also yellow.

The figure slumped on the threshold, obviously worn out from some journey or another. "Akane!" he cried, suddenly full of energy. "I'm here! I made it, I..."

The young man glanced around the room and came to the conclusion that of all the people who were staring back at him, he knew no one.

"Oh," he said darkly. "Sorry." He turned to leave.

"Hey, wait!" Someone called.

The man looked back and faced Kirstin Porter as she walked towards him. "You look tired," she said. "Want some punch?"

The Asian man was utterly surprised. "Um... sure." He smiled. "Thank you."

Proctor sat, leaning against the heavy wooden door of the church's boiler room. He was still waiting for the others to return, but he'd grown a little tired. He was almost asleep, dozing, when he heard the click of the door being unlocked.

He leaped to his feet. "Guys! Is that you?"

No answer.

Proctor tried the door. It opened easily, and he stepped outside.

There was no one there. "Hello?" Proctor called. "Guys? Captain?" He heard nothing in response against the muted noises of the party going on upstairs.

But there was something... what was it? Proctor glanced down the hallway. He realized that there was smell in the air, a familiar odor, foul and full of ash.

It was the faint smell of cigar smoke.

Slowly, the annual Troop 192 Christmas Party was winding to a close, and so came the merriest part of the evening, the present swap.

Everyone who had attended the party had been required to show up with a small gift, which was to be swapped at random in the traditional fashion. Of course, there were always a few gifts that turned out to not be so random at all.

Mike, Aaron and Bill Gelinas were somewhat dismayed to discover that Proctor had somehow escaped their trap, but they were relieved when Mr. Shmuler, in an incredibly rare display of authority, told Justy that it was probably too late to begin his Ultra-Important Holiday Speech. It would have to wait till the next holiday.

"Oh, piffle," Justy Yung said.

"We were all looking forward to it, Captain," Proctor told him, and meant it. "If it's any consolation, Merry Christmas, sir." He handed Justy a small gift-wrapped package in the shape of a stick.

Justy snatched the package and tore it open. "What's this?" he asked, holding the stick in his hand. It was about a foot long, black and had a leather strap at one end.

"It's a sort of baton, Captain..."

"I know what it is!" Justy interrupted, smacking his assistant over the head with his new toy. He admired the object and its potential for dispensing pain and subversion.

"Thank you, Proctor," he said. "How thoughtful."

Proctor rubbed his head. "You're welcome, Captain."

Most of the other gift swapping was not as exciting. Many of the items were simply small doodads or gift certificates to the cinema or a local restaurant. Mike Quadrozzi opened his gift and found a small sign, made of the same material as dry erase boards. Its use completely escaped him, and most likely it had escaped whoever had been desperate enough to bring such a thing as a gift, too. Elsewhere, Kirstin Porter shared a meaningful look with Aaron after receiving a cute knitted Christmas sweater with reindeer and things on it from an anonymous person.

Elsewhere still, Matt Swett turned around after unwrapping the jar of peanut butter he himself had donated to the gift-swap in the first place to come face to face with a man dressed in the distinctive dark brown khakis of the United Parcel Service.

"Good evening," the UPS Guy said.

"Hey, how you doing," Swett replied.

"So where would you like the order?"

"What?"

UPS Guy indicated the cardboard box near his feet. He consulted his clipboard. "Er... a shipment of ECWCWWF EXTREME THUNDEROUS ATTITUDE II. Can you sign for it?"

Matt Swett hardly blinked before he smiled and reached for the man's pen. "Why, of course, my good man."

Matt Atanian sat on the front steps of the Church in the Acres, looking out on the wide church lawn, bathed in the reds, greens, blues and blinking whites of the Christmas lights strewn about the church's roof. Next to him sat Sarah Porter.

"I'm here against my better judgement," she told him, her breath escaping as mist in the cold night air.

"Well, thank you," Matt said.

That sat in silence for a moment. The sky was utterly clear that night, and the stars twinkled overhead.

Matt cleared his throat. "I really just wanted to give you this," he said, and extended a small, neatly gift-wrapped box to Sarah.

"Well, Matt," Sarah said, "I really don't... uh..." She saw that Matt was only watching her intently, and she began unwrapping the present. After removing the red and green wrapping paper, she lifted the small tabs on the box and peered inside.

Of all the reactions Matt had foreseen, the one he actually got was the simplest and yet the best one he could have ever hoped for.

Sarah Porter smiled. "Oh, Matt," she said softly. "This is... perfect. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

And then, as if on cue, one single, tiny snowflake fell from the sky, dancing in the bitter wind before it landed on the church lawn.

"Look, everyone!" A voice called from behind them, "it's snowing!"

In a flood of bodies and hastily donned coats and hats, everyone from the party rushed outside onto the steps. Matt and Sarah's conversation was drowned out as the members of Troop 192 and all their guests joined them to watch the snow begin to fall. Mike, Aaron, Bill Gelinis and all the other members of Troop 192, Kirstin and Nicole Porter, the Aberts and Troop 180, Harris Tanner, the

Moses folks and Matt and Sarah all looked up into the starry evening sky together.

And somewhere up in heaven, Jimmy Stewart smiled.

## *Special: My Preoccupation with Squirrels*

by Michael D. Quadrozzi

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I never used to like squirrels.

I mean, I never disliked them I had never gone out of my way to harm a squirrel, it's just that I had never really paid them any notice before. They were just another little forest creature, a furry thing that jumped around in the trees.

And then Matt had to write *Boy Scouts ½*.

Now they're all I think about.

During school, during dinner, at night! The only image that fills my head is squirrels! I can't eat, I can't sleep! All day long rats with fuzzy tails bound their way around my brain, squeaking and twitching their cute little noses! I only wear grey clothes! I'm getting my room plastered with squirrel wallpaper! I've forced myself onto a strict diet of nuts and tree bark! I look out the window during my free time at the trees and my family and friends ask me what's wrong and I wail, "IT'S THE SQUIRRELS! The SQUIRRELS!"

So now you see what my problem is. The things have infiltrated every part of my life. I can't walk through the woods anymore or I wouldn't come home. They'd find me weeks later, with their dogs and search party, curled up in a crevice with a family of grey squirrels, and they'd shudder and say, "Oh, the poor boy, he thinks he's a squirrel! Dear God, he thinks he's a squirrel!" And they'd ship me off to the looney bin where the doctors with their clipboards and German accents would try to talk to me in my padded cell but I wouldn't listen because I'd be eating my nuts and they'd say, "Why do you eat the nuts?" And I'd say, "Because I'm a squirrel!" And they'd shake their heads and walk out of the room saying, "Oh, what a sad case of Quadrozzi syndrome," because that's what they'd call it! I'd have a disease named after me! "Oh, poor

Tommy, he's got Quadrozzi syndrome." "What's that?"  
"Oh, it's so sad, he thinks he's a squirrel!"

It took me a long time to get enough courage to write this, but now that I have I feel better. I really do. I know that there's hope. It might be too late for me, but it isn't for you! It's not too late for you! Save yourselves and your children! Stay away from the squirrels!

Or they'll control you.

I want some more nuts. Doctor! More nuts!

## Chapter Fourteen: Perry Joins the Troop

by Matthew Atanian

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### Act One: The Kiss

Bill Hughes arrived promptly at 6:41 p.m. for his 6:30 scout meeting. He went up the flight of stairs that led to Walker Hall and was somewhat alarmed to find it empty. He searched through his mind a bit and discovered that he had in fact seen his fellow scouts in the field behind the church, but for some reason this hadn't registered with him at the time and he had instead gone inside.

He slapped his palm to his forehead. "Of course!" he said to himself. "We've got to get the sleds ready for the Klondike Derby."

He turned to walk down the stairs and join his fellow scouts getting the sleds ready for the annual winter event. At least, he tried to walk down the stairs. Instead, he tripped on an untied shoelace and plummeted down the stairwell, giving himself a bruise on the left knee to match the one he'd given himself on his right knee earlier while getting ready for the meeting. He checked his elbow as well, to reassure himself he hadn't torn his favourite flannel jacket.

Hughes sighed.

Why did things like this have to happen to him every Wednesday?

No other day of the week was he plagued by such clumsiness. Was he cursed by some strange mental ailment causing him to become clumsier than Chevy Chase's Jimmy Carter whenever he had to go to a scout meeting? He would swear that on some of the worst Wednesdays, he made enough pratfalls by *himself* to rival all three of the Stooges. No, throw Shemp in there too! He would out-clumsy all four of them together!

And only on Wednesdays.

Why?

Why?!

Eventually he managed to get back outside and meet up with Bill, Aaron, Squid, Kenny, and (Hughes was surprised to see) Matty, all standing a bit away from the rest of the Troop.

"Why are you Matty?" he asked.

"I had to talk to Sarah about something," Matty responded. "I've got some water heating up in the kitchen; I'll change back in a moment."

"Ah," Hughes said. He looked around a bit and caught an unfamiliar face in with the rest of the Troop. It was hard to miss the boy, actually. He seemed to be staring in their direction... no, at Matty... with an intense look of... perhaps it was hatred? Hughes wasn't sure. Whatever it was, he was sure it was unpleasant.

The new boy was about sixteen years old or so, Asian, had black hair pulled back in a single ponytail, and had a look about him that Hughes might have called attractive except that he didn't go for other men. He didn't seem to own a uniform yet, as he was in regular clothes. Also, there was something familiar about this new scout, something Hughes couldn't quite place.

"Hey," Hughes said, "who's the new kid?"

"Oh, that's Perry," Bill Gelinis replied. "Joined last week when you weren't here."

"Perry?" Hughes asked. "Perry doesn't sound like an Asian name."

"Apparently it's short for something, but I didn't catch what," Mike added.

Hughes shook his head slightly as he tried in vain to unravel a thread from the foggy tapestry that was his brain. "He seems familiar for some reason."

"You get that too, huh?" Aaron said.

Hughes looked at the others. "What, you all...?"

Everyone but Kenny nodded.

"It's like I know him from somewhere, but I'm not sure where," Matty said. She glanced in the direction of the church's kitchen. "My water's probably about ready," Matty added. She took her leave of the group and headed inside.

“So what do we know about him?” Hughes asked.

Kenny pulled a small notepad from his pocket and flipped it open. He proceeded to read the small amounts of information their group had been able to ascertain. “Perry moved here from China only recently, and speaks English with a bit of an accent. He doesn’t seem to have any family, and the minor evidence we have suggests he lives alone. He doesn’t seem to like Matty at all, but hasn’t paid any notice to Matt.”

“Something funny’s going on here,” Hughes pondered.

“We figured that out last week,” Bill replied.

Mike looked up from where the five of them had huddled to talk amongst themselves and noted something disturbing.

Hey,” he said, “where’d Perry go?”

The others looked up and blinked simultaneously.

They saw Justy walking around barking orders.

They saw Proctor following Justy like a puppy.

They saw everyone else pretty much ignoring Justy.

But they didn’t see Perry.

He was gone.

“Where’d he go?”

At the Girl Scout meeting, Sarah was working with Kirstin, Nicole, and some of the other girls on requirements for the Artistic Crafts Interest Patch. Sarah was feeling a bit thirsty, and excused herself to go up to the kitchen for a glass of water.

Nicole turned to one of the other girls there, Rebecca Chambers. “So, Becky, about what we were talking about earlier?”

“I don’t know,” Becky responded. “It’s a lot of money.”

“It’s a perfect opportunity! A once in a lifetime investment. I... We can’t loose. Look, I’ll tell you what. I’ll split the profits... say... 80/20?”

“That’s not a lot for me.”

“Hey, I’m the one who’s doing all the work here. You’re just providing the capitol.”

“Still... it is my money. 60/40?”

“70/30?” Nicole countered.

“Well...” Becky said.

“Come on... I know you can do it,” Nicole prompted.

“Oh, okay,” Becky said at last. They shook hands, Nicole’s grip firm and confident, Becky’s grip unsure, as if she was shaking a dead fish instead of another girl’s hand.

“Stick with me,” Nicole promised her new business partner, “and you’ll earn the Dollars and Sense patch four times over!”

With a satisfied smile on her face, Nicole turned back to her twin.

“What was that about?” Kirstin asked.

“Oh, just a little business venture I’ve got going on. We’re thinking of expanding the cookie business by offering a few other items for sale along with them.”

“Expanding the cookie business?!”

“Yeah, well...”

Nicole was interrupted as out in the hall Sarah shouted, “Men!” Kirstin dashed out into the hall in time to see her sister angrily storm outside muttering not quite incoherently.

“What was that all about?” Kirstin wondered, heading for the stairs.

A few minutes prior to all of this, Matty had gone to the Kitchen. She had taken the small pot of water off of the stove and turned the stove off. The water was nowhere near boiling, but Matty thought she still might still let it cool a bit for a moment before using it to turn back into a guy.

She heard a noise and turned to face the doorway. She nearly jumped when she saw Perry standing there, staring at her.

“Smeg, don’t do that!” Matty said. “You nearly gave me a heart attack. Did you need something, Perry?”

“I have come for you.” He began walking towards her.

“Oh, yes? What can I do for you?” He was getting quite close to her. Too close for comfort.

“Um...?” Matty said.

He reached for her face and brought it to his own, and placed his lips upon hers.

*Oh, dear, this is not at all good,* Matty thought. “AAAACCKKKKKK!!!” was what she actually said. Or tried to say, at least. His lips were still over hers and somehow the way he held her chin prevented her backing away.

Hoping that the pot of hot water she held would provide a satisfactory explanation of why Matty was not at all enjoying this, she lifted it over her head and emptied it out, dousing both herself and Perry with its contents. This startled Perry, who much to Matt’s relief finely backed away.

Matt looked at Perry, and was even more surprised then he was when the other had kissed him, for Perry was no longer a man.

He was a woman.

“P... P... P...” Matt spat out. Finely, he managed to form the word he had been having the trouble with. “P... Perfume? W... what are you doing... here?”

The young woman smiled evilly. “Finally I catch you, Matty. I give you the Kiss of Death, and now I kill you.”

“Eerp,” Matt said.

Perfume was placing her hand on Matt’s chest, patting it as if looking for something. She had a confused look on her face.

“Man,” she slowly said a moment later. “Not woman...”

“Um, that’s right,” Matt said. “I’m a guy. Um... why were you a guy?”

Perfume looked at him. He looked at her. She looked at him. Her eyes then looked up at the inside of her own head and she keeled over backwards, landing on the kitchen floor with a soft thump.

She had lost consciousness.

The instant she had hit the floor, Matt had bolted out of the room and started down the stairs. “Damn it, I can’t believe she followed me *here!*”

“Who?” Kirstin asked.

Matt came to a screeching halt half way down the stairs just before colliding with her. She had been on her way up.

"You don't want to go up there," Matt told her.

"Why?" Kirstin asked. "And why did my sister just shout, 'Men!' and storm out of the building muttering about, 'Mr. Testosterone getting some action in the kitchen'? Just when I thought you two might be close to hitting it off..."

"My God, she saw?"

"Saw what? What's going on?"

As they talked, they had made their way outside. Matt saw Sarah, over by her car, who was giving him an evil look that made Perfume seem warm and caring, and Kirstin a disapproving look for being with him.

Matt sighed as Sarah turned away. *So much for progress...* He then caught sight of his fellow Scouts and ran towards them. Kirstin followed.

"We've got to get out of here! Now, hurry!" Matt said.

"What about the... what about the meeting?" Mike asked.

"Never mind that, now! Hurry!"

The others looked at him. "What is it?" Aaron asked.

"*She's* here."

"She'?" Billy said.

"She' who?" Hughes inquired.

"I can't believe she followed us all the way from *China!*"

Mike choked on something. "Not... Not her!"

"It can't be... Perfume?" Aaron asked.

"Is that bad?" Kenny asked.

"Would someone please explain to me," Kirstin asked in a calm and composed manor, "who this Perfume is, and what is going on?"

The others looked at her. Matt sighed. "It all started back when we were all in China..."

\* \* \*

## Act Two: Once Upon a Time in China

The young, redheaded woman and the heavyset, Chinese man continued their hike through China, closely followed by a duck, a cat, a dog, and a squirrel. After the rain had stopped, Matty had considered pausing to prepare some hot water, but their guide had suggested continuing on as there was a village not far ahead and they could get some water there.

Matty continued her trek, tired from the burden of caring not only her stuff, but most of the other's stuff as well. Bill Gelinas was the only one who had anything else, dragging some of it behind himself on a makeshift sled they'd lashed together.

Her tired pace quickened somewhat when she saw the houses ahead.

"Here, sirs," the guide said, producing from nowhere the little flip-chart sign he had that told the names of the places he took people, "we come to rustic village, *Joketsuzoku*."

"Joe-keh-what?" Matty asked.

"Is village of Amazon womans," the guide continued.

They had come into the village now. It was a small village, but had a prosperous look to it. Women were going to and fro, busy with the tasks of the day. A few men were about, as well.

As they were passing one house, Matty spotted a pot of water boiling over a fire in the back yard. *Just what the doctor ordered*, she thought. She walked over to it, followed by the others.

She looked around, but didn't see anyone who she might inquire about the water with. *Well, I hate to just take it, but...*

Matty grabbed some convenient pot holders, lifted the pot from over the fire, and raised it over her head. Just before she poured, however, Aaron began quacking and batting her ankle with his wing.

Matty turned, still holding the pot over her head. She saw a young Chinese woman, who looked to be in her late

teens. She had long hair pulled back in a single ponytail, and features that Matty found to be not at all unappealing, except for one minor detail.

The expression on her face.

She looked pissed.

She began shouting at Matty. Being in Chinese, Matty couldn't understand a word of it. It just sounded like lyrical gibberish to her. Fortunately, the guide was kind enough to translate.

"You there! Woman! What you doing with that water!" she say."

Matty stood there, dumbfounded. "Um... aren't you a little upset over *water*?"

Even though Matty doubted the Chinese girl understood the words, it was clear she seemed to understand the tone they were in. She looked even more pissed.

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry I tried to take your water." Matty went to put the water back over the fire, but somehow slipped and ended up spilling it over the Chinese girl's feet.

"Aaaaaiiiiiiiiiiaaaahhhhhh!!!!!!!" the girl responded. The water had been near boiling.

She looked more pissed then a group of philosophers spending Saturday evening at the pub.

"Um, uh..." Matty stammered.

The girl said something in a calm and quiet voice that seemed disconcerting paired with the enraged expression on her face. She then adopted what was clearly a fighting stance.

"'Woman, I challenge you!' she say," the guide translated.

"Um, uh... hold it! Stop! Cease!" Matty replied. "I'm no Amazon warrior! It wouldn't be a fair fight! How about some other way to settle our differences?"

After the guide translated this for the girl, she smiled slightly. "'What you suggest?' she say," the guide translated after she had replied.

Matty tried to think of some alternative that would give her an even chance, and for some reason she could think of only one thing. She almost felt silly suggesting it, and was sure that her opponent would rather just beat her senseless.

Still, it was worth a shot. She stuck out her hand. "Thumb wrestling?"

Before the guide could even translate this for the girl, she took Matty's hand and raised her thumb up high. Without further ado, the two of them began a series of feints and parries, attempting to lure the other's thumb into a trap. As the minutes dragged on, it seemed clear that they were somewhat evenly matched.

Matty was close to fed up. She's had a tough time of it the last few days. It's not easy suddenly having the ability to change genders... And having to carry most of the gear to boot... The last thing she needed was to be stuck in a stupid thumb wrestling match with an Amazon girl over a pot of water!

She almost hated to do it, but there was no alternative. She waited for the Amazon girl's thumb to be in just the right position, and then...

"Sneak attack!" Matty declared as she brought her index finger into play. She pinned down the girl's thumb with it, and then moved her own thumb in to complete the move.

It was cheep. It was dirty. But it was victory.

The entire village stared at them in stunned silence. Matty noticed for the first time the sizable audience they'd acquired. She almost laughed at the sight of a wrinkled up old woman balanced on some kind of stick, but her attention was diverted as the Amazon girl stepped towards her. She cupped Matty's face in her hands and leaned forward. Matty was surprised when she realized that the girl was about to kiss her...

Just before the girl's lips made contact, the guide grabbed Matty by the wrist and dragged her away. Mike, Aaron, and the Bills quickly followed.

"Run, sirs! Run quickly!" the guide shouted.

"What the hell's going on?" Matty not quite politely inquired.

"That one trying to give you the Kiss of Death! Terrible tragedy if she succeed! Terrible tragedy!"

"Kiss of death?" Kirstin asked. "What is this, a mobster movie?"

Kenny produced the same ancient Chinese book he'd read from when asking about *Jusenkyo* all those months ago. "According to Chinese Amazon Tribal Law," he read, "if a woman warrior is defeated by an outsider, and that outsider is a woman, the warrior must give that woman the 'Kiss of Death' and kill her without delay."

"What happens if the outsider is a man?" Gelinias asked.

"Then she must marry him," Kenny read.

Aaron nudged Matt. "You're all set," he said. "Just get her to know you're really a man!"

"Very funny, Aaron," Matt responded. "For one thing, we don't know if that'll really change anything. For another, I kind of already like someone... you know?"

Perfume stood before her great-grandmother, the leader of their Amazon tribe. Her great-grandmother was a rather unimposing woman; she looked like a shrivelled up monkey with a long mane of white hair who hopped around on a stick.

Perfume knew better, however. Only fools would challenge great-grandmother Cologne, either physically or mentally. Three hundred years as an Amazon warrior had made her a formidable woman.

Cologne had moved to Japan a while back, and was home visiting the tribe on business. *Just my luck*, Perfume thought, *that great-grandmother would be visiting now.*

"You disappoint me, child," the Amazon leader said. "First you challenge someone over a simple pot of water, and then you loose! At thumb wrestling, even! I know

you're not the best warrior in the tribe... in fact, you may be the worst this tribe has seen two thousand years of Amazon history, but surely you could have defeated that woman! She looked like one without a day's training as a warrior!"

Perfume kept her head bowed in shame. There was simply nothing to say. Great-grandmother was right, of course... All of it.

But there was more to come. "And you didn't even manage to deliver the Kiss of Death." Cologne sighed. "This is a dark day for our tribe. You've brought dishonour to us all. There is only two things you can do.

"One is simple. You can leave our tribe and never come back. The other is not so simple, but the right thing seldom is. You must find this woman, give her the Kiss of Death, and carry out what Amazon tribal law demands. Kill her."

Perfume looked up, a determined look in her face. "I will find her, great-grandmother." She would find her. She was determined to become a worthy of her great-grandmother's respect, no matter what it took. She would find the red haired woman, and kill her...

Perfume woke from her dream to find herself still lying on the floor in the church's kitchen. She rose to her feet, went over to the sink, and splashed herself with cold water.

Perry headed for the door, and then for outside. "I have delivered Kiss of Death," he said softly. "Now I must kill you."

### Act Three: Back at Jusenkyo

"So she chased us all over China," Matt explained. "Everywhere we went. We even doubled back on ourselves hoping that would shake her off. No such luck.

When we got on the plane and headed back for the USA, we thought we were finely free of her..."

"I guess we thought wrong," Aaron said.

"Only one thing confuses me," Gelinas said.

"Only one thing?" Hughes asked.

Gelinas ignored the quip from the other Bill. "Why can Perfume turn into a boy?"

Matt, Mike, Aaron, and the Bills, along with Kenny, sat in thought. They sat in thought for a bit longer. Then, they sat in thought for some more. Kirstin had had enough.

Once again, it was up to the female to point out the obvious things that the males had somehow missed.

"You said you doubled back on yourselves in your attempts to loose her, yes?" Kirstin asked.

"Yes," Matt, Mike, Aaron, and the Bills responded, still not sure where she was going with this, even though the only way it could be more obvious was if she held up a huge neon sign saying, "DUH!"

Kirstin sighed. "Tell me," she asked, already quite sure of the answer, "when you doubled back, did you return to that training ground of cursed springs at all?"

"Yes," Matt, Mike, Aaron, and the Bills responded in the very same tone they had just used.

Kirstin again sighed, longer this time. "Well, then, do you think it's at all possible that she might have followed you there?!"

"I suppose it's remotely possible," Mike said.

"It very possible," Perry said.

The others jumped back in surprise, unaware that the Chinese boy... girl... whatever... had joined them.

Perfume walked out of the forest onto a small ledge overlooking a valley full of springs. Judging by the bamboo poles jutting from the springs, it seemed to be some kind of training ground.

*Where are they?* She knew she was a few days behind them, but she was sure they had come this way.

She made her way down into the valley. There was little sign of life, other than a small house off to one side. *Probably the house of whoever guards this training ground*, she thought.

She stopped at the edge of one of the springs as she heard a loud commotion from the sky, and looked up to see a duck flying overhead, quacking for all it was worth. *She had a duck with her*, Perfume thought. *She is here!*

She then heard some shouting from off to the side. It was a foreign language... perhaps English? Perfume knew some English, and tried to work out what was being said.

"That's Aaron's warning signal! Let's get out of here!" was the best she could come up with. As it so happens, she was exactly right. That's what one of the four people she saw out of the corner of her eye who were quickly running in her direction had shouted.

Running in her direction?

Three young men were running in her direction, along with the accursed red haired woman. They hadn't noticed her.

They were running in her direction. They hadn't noticed her. She was standing right on the edge of one of the springs.

*Uh oh!* was the only thought she had time for before she hit the water. As she fell, images of red hair, plaid flannel, a grubby red hat, and a vacant expression flashed through her mind.

An instant later, she was completely submerged. When she came to the surface again, she immediately noticed something was amiss. Or rather, *he* noticed something amiss. She was a guy.

"Aaaaaiiiiiiiiiiaaaahhhhhh!!!!!" he exclaimed, even louder than when the red haired woman had spilled the water on his, or rather her feet.

Immediately, a heavyset man that he recognized as the red haired woman's guide appeared, holding up a sign saying, "*Nanniichuan.*"

"Oh, how very unfortunate," he said to her. "You seem to have fallen in the spring of drowned man. There is quite

the tragic legend about this spring, concerning a young man who drowned here one thousand, six hundred years ago. Now, whoever has the misfortune to fall into this spring takes upon herself the body of a young man.”

Perfume blinked at him a couple of times, before he said, “Aaaaaiiiiiiiiiiaaaahhhhhh!!!!!!”

“You know,” Gelinas said, “that is a very interesting story, and all, but why have you spent all of this time telling us this when Matt’s right here and you could be killing him?”

Matt shot Bill a dirty look. It was a look so dirty that he didn’t have to say the words. Bill knew to shut up.

“Is very interesting question,” Perry responded. “Here answer. Four others with Matt. Duck, dog, cat, squirrel. Duck distract me, and other three help knock me into spring. Where they? I kill them, too.”

“I think you’re missing a point, here,” Aaron said, suddenly eager to change the subject. “If Matty is really Matt, then you were defeated by a man, and not a woman...”

“Aaron, I don’t think...” Matt started to warn.

Aaron continued. “Doesn’t that mean you have to marry him?”

All eyes turned to Perry. Perry’s eyes narrowed to dangerous little slits. “I no think so,” he said. “When Matt defeat me, Matt was woman. I still kill! I kill others, too! Where they?”

Perry looked them over, slowly watching for any sign they might know something.

Then he noticed it. He noticed Mike’s grubby, red Troop 192 cap. He noticed the plaid flannel jacketed Hughes wore over his uniform. He noticed the vacant expression that oft graced Gelinas’s face.

“Was you!” Perfume exclaimed.

“I thought I bumped into something,” Hughes pondered.

Perry shot a finger at Aaron. "You duck?" he demanded.

"Um, yes," Aaron responded, immediately followed by, "No!" He then finished off with, "D'oh!"

Perry rose menacingly, cracking his knuckles. He took up a fighting pose, and stared into the nervous faces of Mike, Aaron, Matt, and the Bills. "Now you die," he said.

He charged at them, tripped on his shoelace, spun around as he fell, and landed on his back with a dull thud, dazed.

Matt, Mike, Aaron, Hughes, Gelinias, Kenny, and Kirstin stood and walked away.

"Well," Matt said, "this explains why she didn't turn down thumb wrestling..."

"This could get interesting," Mike commented.

Aaron sighed. "This could get ugly."

## Chapter Fifteen: Perilous Perfume

by Matthew Atanian

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Another Wednesday had arrived, and it was again time for a Scout Meeting. This was the last meeting before the annual winter event, the Klondike Derby, which was as usual being held up at Moses Scout Reservation.

Matt made his usual stop at Card and Comic on his way to the Scout Meeting, and was surprised (although not entirely so) to see Mike was there, as well.

Mike bought a couple packs of Mirage. Matt returned the *Tenchi Muyo!* videos he'd rented.

"Hey," Mike asked the guy behind the counter, "what ever happened to Roy?"

"Roy?" he replied. "Oh, he was just seasonal help, and he wasn't working out, anyway, so we had to let him go."

"Oh," Mike said in understanding. Then he and Matt walked outside.

Mike smelled something in the air. He pointed it out to Matt.

"Is that...?" Mike started.

"Pizza?" Matt said, finishing the question.

They both turned to look at the Pizza place next to Card and Comic. It had been closed for a while, but now seemed to be reopened.

Matt pulled out his pocket watch and glanced at it. "Time for a slice before the meeting, I believe," he said.

"I do believe you're right," Mike added.

The two of them headed into the pizza shop. As they entered, the smell of pizza intensified and made their mouth begin to salivate in anticipation. They could hear someone moving about in the kitchen and went up to the counter to wait.

"Nihao!" a familiar voice said as a familiar person exited the kitchen. "Welcome to... Is you!"

"Oh, hi Perfume," Matt said.

“Hi,” Mike added.

Clearly, the two were not particularly worried about being in the same room as a woman who wanted them dead.

“What you two want?” she asked.

“A slice of pepperoni,” Matt said.

“Make mine cheese,” Mike said.

“No pizza now,” she told them. “Closed.”

“Your door was unlocked,” Mike said. “We just want a slice of pizza.”

Perry took out a sharp kitchen knife. “We’re closed. Perfume have to get ready for Scout meeting,” she said.

At the sight of the knife, Matt and Mike became a little less unworried. “Um, fine. Okay,” Mike said as he and Matt made a hasty exit.

Once outside, the two of them turned and looked at the sign over the pizza shop. They noticed that the old sign that said “Bruno’s Pizza” was gone, replaced by one saying, “Perfume’s Pizza.”

“Well,” Mike said, “I guess she’s staying a while.”

“You know, Mike, I think you’re right.”

“This could get interesting,” Mike commented.

Matt sighed. “This could get ugly.”

The meeting progressed much as usual. Becker said, “WHAT!?” Kenny was quiet. Matt Swett said something sarcastic. Matt Atanian gazed longingly at Sarah Porter. Aaron chatted with Kirstin Porter. Will Shmuler was making an annoying little ass of himself. Bill Hughes fell down some stairs. Justy barked at everyone. Everyone except Proctor ignored Justy. Everyone told Bill Gelinias to shut up.

One little detail that was different was that this week Perry had a scout uniform.

At the close of the meeting was one part that most everyone dreaded, the SPL’s announcements and decrees.

"As all of you worthless little worms know," Justy was saying, "we have a new member in our midst, Peon #18, Perry!"

Perry glared at Justy. "Perry is not Peon! Is Amazon warrior!"

"Be quiet!" Justy exclaimed, spittle flying from his mouth. "How dare you be insolent!"

"You tell him, Captain!" Proctor said.

"You be quiet, I'm talking."

"Yes, Captain!"

"And as for you, Peon #18, there's only one place for insolent little worms like you."

Mike, Aaron, the Bills, Becker, and Swett all had a bad feeling they knew what was coming next.

"Yes, you can join the Garden Snake Patrol."

And then Justy treated the troop to some of his trademark maniacal laughter.

It was early Friday afternoon when Dan Wellington arrived at camp. The Klondike Derby was a one-day event, so Dan was quite early. In fact, he was the first to arrive. He knew he wouldn't be alone for long. He was sure that some other staff members would show up early to set up, and some troops were known to rent cabins and make a weekend of it.

He was hiking up the camp's recently ploughed main road, heading towards Cabin II where much of the staff was staying, when he heard a rather loud noise behind him. Perhaps loud was an understatement; it was louder than any explosions Dan had ever caused. However, unlike an explosion, this noise wasn't momentary. It was continuous, and it was getting louder.

He turned, and immediately spotted the source of the noise. It was a car, an older Toyota by the looks of it. It was brown in colour, or maybe burgundy, and a thick plume of black smoke constantly poured out of its tailpipe. It looked to have seen better days. In fact, the only car that Dan had ever seen that was worse off was his own.

The car drew closer and pulled to a stop. The occupant rolled down the window and stuck his head out. "Hi," he said. "Dude, do you know where Cabin II is?"

"Sure," Dan responded. "It's up the road a bit."

"Wanna lift?"

Dan shrugged a half-hearted affirmative. The man got out of the car, and opened the trunk for Dan to deposit his gear. He seemed an average person, perhaps a little built up and a little hairy, but other than that nothing remarkable.

A moment later, they were on their way again. Dan was somewhat surprised by the dice hanging on the mirror. They weren't the fuzzy type. Instead, they looked rather like the dice from the Hellraiser movies.

"I'm Dan, by the way. And you are?"

"I'm Richard Palmer. I solve problems."

Dan arched an eyebrow. "Problems?"

"Yeah. I heard you people were putting on some kind of camp thing, and were short a guy, so I thought I'd come on over and help out."

"Ah." Dan pulled a thermos from his pocket. "Coffee?"

"Hell, yeah," Richard responded.

Dan unscrewed the cap and poured some of the hot, black liquid into it. He handed it to Richard. "How do you take it?" he asked, joking of course, as he had nothing to put in it.

"Lotsa cream, lotsa sugar," he responded regardless. Even without the requested additives, however, he immediately took a sip. He looked at Dan with surprise. "Damn it, Danny, this is some serious gourmet shit. I'd have been satisfied with some freeze dried Taster's Choice, right? And you spring this serious gourmet shit on me!"

Dan just stared back at Richard for a moment, unsure what to say. "So, um," he finely said, "where're you from?" He took a sip from the thermos.

"Colorado. Quite a drive to get all the way here to Moses."

Dan spit out the coffee in shock. "Colorado?"

Richard looked at the coffee that had been sprayed over his dashboard. He turned to Dan. "Why'd you have to do that? You just do not fuck with another man's automobile."

"Are you saying that you drove all the way here from *Colorado* just to help out at our Klondike Derby?" Dan asked, shocked.

"If my answers frighten you, my friend, then you should cease asking scary questions."

Dan was about to reply when he noticed they were near their destination. "Pull up to this building on the left. This is as far as we can go by car. Cabin II's just a short walk further."

Richard parked his car in front of the Training Lodge. It gave off a loud cough as he turned it off. The two unpacked their gear and headed towards the cabin.

There was something about this guy that Dan found somewhat disturbing, and it put him off balance. Dan didn't like to be off balance. "So, uh, Richard. Or do you like Rick?"

"Why do we feel it necessary to yak about bullshit in order to be comfortable?" Richard suddenly asked. "That's when you know you've found somebody really special, when you can just shut the fuck up for a minute and comfortably share silence."

Dan shrugged and they continued their trek through the snow. He regarded Richard, studying his back carefully, trying to discern exactly what he was dealing with here.

Without turning, Richard said, "Don't be looking at me like that, all right? I can feel your look."

They walked the rest of the way to Cabin II in silence.

They got there a few minutes longer, and Dan walked up the few steep steps and opened the door. He threw his gear inside and turned to Richard. Richard had put his gear down on the steep steps and was walking around a clearing by the side of the cabin, seemingly examining the spot.

"Hey," Dan said. "Aren't you going to pick out a bunk?"

"Hell, no. I'm staying in a quince."

"Quince? What's that?"

"It's a shelter made out of snow."

"Snow? Why are you going to do a stupid thing like that when there's a perfectly good cabin right here?"

"Now I'm definitely not going to tell you, because it's been built up too much."

Dan turned away, and walked back into the cabin, closing the door behind himself.

Snow, Dan thought. *The man lives in snow.* He began unpacking, beginning with the essentials. Lighter fluid. Kerosene. Gasoline. *Snow is cold. Not like fire. Fire is hot.* Propane. Strike-anywhere matches. A dozen plastic disposable lighters. *Fire melts snow, so it is stronger than snow. Why would he want to live in snow?* A tank of jet fuel. A small bottle of nitro-glycerine. *But, when snow melts, it turns into water. Water puts out fire!!!*

"Snow is cold and wet. Snow is the opposite of fire," Dan slowly said. "However, this man worships snow! He is unholy." Dan paused briefly, as he regarded the items he had just unpacked. "He must be destroyed."

The members of the Garden Snake Patrol (except for Will Shmuler) along with Matt Atanian had decided to stop for dinner before meeting up with the rest of the Troop at the Church. The restaurant they had chosen was none other than Perfume's Pizza.

She had locked the door and they were her last customers of the day. After all, she was going with them this weekend, although only five of the patrol's seven other present members were aware of this. Rather, only five of them (six, if you included Matt Atanian) knew that she and their new patrol member Perry were one and the same.

The two that didn't know, Matt Swett and Jon Becker, were at least aware of the fact that Perfume wanted to kill Matt, Mike, Aaron, and the Bills. Thus, they were a bit confused as to why they had chosen this particular

restaurant. "I know when I go out for Pizza," Swett had said, "I like *not* to die."

"Not to worry," Matt had assured him.

Perfume brought their pizza over and set it down on the table. It was a large, half pepperoni and half plain cheese. (Mike wasn't a fan of many toppings.)

"This smells good," Aaron commented.

"One thing confuses me," Billy said. "How did you learn to make pizza when you come from a rustic Chinese village? Is pizza really that big in China?"

"SHUT UP BILL!!!" the others all chorused.

"One thing confuse me," Perfume then said. "Why you come here for pizza? You not afraid Perfume might poison it?"

"Not worried at all," Matt said.

"Why you no worried?" Perfume demanded.

Matt nodded to Kenny. Kenny then pulled his backpack from under the table, and extracted from it his now infamous large, ancient Chinese book. He flipped through it, stopping at a specific page from which he read. "It is a further dishonourable for an Amazon warrior to use underhanded means in attempts to kill one who has dishonoured her. An example of such means would be poisoning food one is serving to the target when the target is a guest of the dishonoured one."

Matt brought the first slice up to his mouth, confident that it would be perfectly safe to eat. His teeth came closer and closer together, and he was just about to sample his first bite of the delectable pie when the slice was snatched from his grasp.

Perfume threw the slice back in with the rest of the pizza and ran off into the kitchen carrying it with her. "Perfume cook this one wrong. Bad toppings. Be back soon with good pizza!"

"WHAT?" Becker shouted. "WHERE'D SHE GO WITH OUR PIZZA?"

"Something tells me that she needs to study up on her own laws a bit more," Hughes commented. "Eh, Matt?"

Hughes paused for a response but none was forthcoming. "Matt?" he asked. He turned to Matt with concern, as did the others.

"Hello? Matt?" Aaron asked.

Matt was sitting there, perfectly still, hand still poised before his face as if it was holding a piece of pizza. His mouth was still just slightly ajar, ready to take that first bite.

"I think he's stunned," Mike observed.

An hour or so later, the Garden Snake Patrol arrived at the church. They had arrived at exactly the time that they were supposed to arrive. Predictably, no one else in the Troop had shown up yet.

Two hours later the crickets were chirping up quite a storm. Night had fallen with a vengeance. Being winter, night was not the warmest time of day. Luckily, being Boy Scouts, the Garden Snake Patrol was prepared for this.

Finally, some of the other members of the Troop started arriving, none of them making any acknowledgement or apology for their tardiness. The very last to arrive was Scoutmaster Shmuler and his son Will. The Scoutmaster was as usual dressed in a wrinkled uniform shirt with no insignia on it and a worn old pair of jeans.

"Everyone ready to go camping?" Shmuler asked with stupid enthusiasm.

"Been ready for hours," Swett muttered.

"Really?" Justy said, appearing from nowhere like a bad penny and looming over the Garden Snake Patrol. "Well, then, if you're so ready," he said, waving his stick at them, "why don't you load all of the gear? Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha hAHAHAHAHAhahaha!!!!!"

Justy tucked his stick under his arm and wandered away, still laughing. Proctor said to them, "Well you heard the Captain, get going!" before following Justy away.

The members of the Garden Snake patrol (except Shmuler, who was burrowing into the snow while

exclaiming, "Help! I'm melting!") gave off a collective sigh as they began to load the gear into the trailer. Even Perry sighed.

"Perry kill him, too," Perry muttered, glaring at Justy.

"That one we'd like to help you with," Mike quipped, although unlike Perry he was only joking. Maim, maybe, but never kill.

"So, fearless leader," Hughes asked, "what's the general plan for this weekend?"

"Well," Mike responded, "we get up to camp, hopefully sometime before midnight, and tomorrow we try our best to win the events at the Klondike. I especially have high hopes for the sled race."

"Why?" Aaron asked.

"Oh, that's right, you weren't there," Mike said to Aaron. "Well, Kenny whipped up a little something that might help us, but let's not get into that now." He grabbed a camp stove from Hughes and handed it off to Aaron, who in turn handed it off down the line to the trailer.

Soon they were finished packing and on the road.

It was late when they finely arrived at Moses. Troop 192 was staying in Cabin I, which was a short hike off of the camp's main road.

They had gotten all of their gear unstowed and they had all gotten their bunks set up. There wasn't much left to do after that, and when Matt, Mike, and Aaron found themselves bored, they decided to go for a walk.

It was a cold evening, yet they didn't seem uncomfortable. "Been a while since we've all been up here," Aaron commented.

"Last time was the Fall Ordeal weekend, and before that Summer Camp," Mike remembered.

"Now *that* was an interesting week of camp," Matt remarked.

They heard the crunching sound of footsteps in the snow and looked over towards the parade field. Colin

Pekruhn was approaching, and they slowed down to allow him to catch up.

“Colin, hi,” Matt said.

“Hey. What’s up?” he responded.

“Not much. You up here on staff this weekend?”

“Yeah. Me and Dan are running an event tomorrow.”

“Where is Dan?” Matt asked.

“Good question. Last time I saw him, he was fiddling around with something that looked like silly putty.”

“Knowing Dan it’s probably C-4 or something,” Aaron deadpanned.

“Come on now, I know he’s crazy, but I doubt he’s that crazy,” Matt said.

Off in the distance, they heard a small explosion.

They stood in shock.

They stared at each other for a moment.

They scratched their heads.

“Nah,” they all said in unison. “Couldn’t be...”

Dan sat in a newly formed clearing somewhere near Cabin III. He was covered in soot, and his hair stood on end. He began to chuckle softly as he gathered his things and headed back.

## *Chapter Sixteen: The Sweet Smell of Revenge*

by Matthew Atanian

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Bill Gelinas continued down the maze, gobbling up the little pellets as he went. The maze had no exit, and the only way to get out was to gobble up all the pellets. He had to do it quickly, or else they'd find him...

He heard a noise and turned around. There they were! The ghosts were right on his tail! He hurried onwards, gobbling up pellets as he went, desperate to escape the menace.

He turned a corner. What was that ahead? Salvation!

He rushed forward and gobbled up the coveted "Power Pellet." Now he'd show those ghosts who was boss!

He chased them down, and caught up with the first of them. A moment later, he had gobbled Blinky up. 200 points!

Suddenly, a bunch of cherries appeared in the maze before him. "All right, bonus points!" he exclaimed as he ran towards the fruit...

Bill Hughes, meanwhile, was sitting in a field. He wasn't sitting on the ground, but rather on a comfortable wooden chair with an afghan draped over it. He was sitting at a table with a lacy tablecloth, and a fine china tea set was on the table. Hughes poured himself a cup, and then poured a cup for each of his companions.

There were three of them, Bessy, Matilda, and Gertrude. They sat with him in a field having tea.

"That is really an interesting point Gertrude was making, don't you agree, Bessy?" Hughes asked.

"Oh, yes, quite," Bessy said. She looked at Hughes. "Would you like some milk in your tea?"

"Yes, please," Hughes responded.

Hughes grabbed one of Bessy's teats and pulled on it, depositing some milk in his teacup.

Gertrude, meanwhile, coughed up some cud and chewed on it a bit before swallowing it once more.

Matilda reached for her tea and dropped the fine china cup to the ground, where it shattered. "This would be a lot easier with opposable thumbs," she bemoaned. The others laughed politely...

Mike was sitting in a chair upon the frozen lake at Moses Scout Reservation. He had three companions, Byers, Langly, and Frohike. The four of them were seated around a hole in the ice, and they all had fishing lines dangling into the hole.

Mike sighed, his breath instantly turning into vapour in the cold air. "Not biting much today, are they?"

The four of them forlornly regarded the hole in the ice. They all turned when they heard someone approaching.

It was Scully, and she was carrying a large thermos and three mugs. "I thought I'd bring you guys some hot chocolate," she said. "It's so cold out here, after all."

Frohike smiled as he accepted the first mug and Scully poured the steamy, chocolate flavoured liquid into it. She then repeated this for Byers and Langly.

"Um, don't I get any?" Mike asked.

Scully sauntered over to Mike and whispered into his ear, "Oh, I've got something else in mind to warm you up. Why don't you come back to the cabin with me?"

Mike jumped to his feet faster than... well, it was so fast that there is simply nothing to compare it to. He and Scully walked arm in arm back towards the cabin.

Once there, Scully closed the door and turned to Mike, a mischievous grin on her face. She took off her coat, and Mike was happily startled to see that under it was no shirt., but a ribbon tied into a big bow across her chest.

"I got you a present," Scully said to him. "Why not come over here and unwrap it?"

Aaron grabbed his sword off of the table just as the Kurgan swung his, cutting the table in two. Aaron countered, his blade cutting into the Kurgan's throat. Unfortunately, it was not deep enough.

Gargling in fury, the Kurgan clasped his throat. Warding off Aaron's attack, he began to climb the staircase spiralling up the tower's outer wall.

Aaron and the Kurgan continued their battle, climbing up the stairs.

"You're getting weak, Aaron," the Kurgan rasped.

"I see my cut has improved your voice," Aaron quipped back.

Savage forces were unleashed. Sparks flew from the clanging blades. Outside, thunder cracked overhead. Despite his wound, the Kurgan fought on like a mad dog.

Aaron was beginning to loose ground. The fury of the battle was reducing the stone tower to rubble. All that remained is one wall and the staircase rising to nowhere.

Outmatched, Aaron retreated up the stairs. Unstoppable, the Kurgan followed.

Kirstin, paralyzed with fear, crouched by a wall watching the desperate battle. Aaron and the wounded giant were silhouetted against an electric sky.

Aaron and the Kurgan were hanging in space at the top of the stairs. Aaron could retreat no further. Smiling sadistically, the Kurgan ran him through. Lightning seared the sky.

Gasping, Aaron sagged to his knees, his sword falling three stories to the ground. Below, Kirstin screamed. Aaron tried to rise, but to no avail. The Kurgan grabbed his hair, pulling him close.

"The Highlander. Where is he?" the Kurgan asked, his voice a metallic gargle thanks to Aaron's blade.

"You're too late. I have prepared him for you," Aaron retorted defiantly.

"You waste your time. He is nothing." The Kurgan glanced at Kirstin. "Who is the woman?"

"She's mine."

"Not for much longer."

Aaron spat in the Kurgan's face. The Kurgan went mad, raising his weapon.

"There can be only one!" he exclaimed, as he swung his weapon...

Matty and Sarah were out for a leisurely walk around a park somewhere.

"You know," Matty said to Sarah, "there's something I've kind of, sort of been meaning to tell you about myself," Matty said.

"Hmm?" Sarah responded.

Matty tried to speak, but her voice would suddenly not work. Finely, she said, "Never mind, it's not important."

"If you say so," Sarah responded. "But you know you can tell me anything, right? Friends are supposed to support one another."

*Yeah, Matty thought, but if I tell you this, I'm sure you won't want to be friends much longer...*

A voice from behind them suddenly said, "You should tell her, you know. You're only making things worse by dragging it out."

The two of them turned, and were surprised to see a penguin standing there, sipping a glass of iced tea.

The penguin continued, and Matty recognized the voice as that of the actor David Warner. "She'll find out eventually, and the longer it is before you tell her the more she'll hate you for it."

"What is he talking about?" Sarah asked.

"Nothing! Nothing!" Matty insisted, grabbing Sarah's arm and beginning to walk away. "Don't listen to the talking penguin!"

"If you're not going to tell her," the penguin said, suddenly producing a bucket of hot water, "then I shall have to show her!"

The penguin propelled the bucket's boiling content towards Matty.

“No!” Matty screamed as the water rushed towards her...

“Okay, everybody,” Mr. Shmuler excitedly exclaimed, “it’s morning! Everybody ready for some fun?”

Almost everyone in the troop instantly bolted awake. Aaron and Matt were both extremely relieved. “Thank god it was just a dream,” they said in unison, the former rubbing his neck as he spoke.

The Bills were less relieved, Gelinas in particular. “I had almost beat the high score!” he said.

The least relieved was Mike Quadrozzi. His eyes filled with tears, he looked towards the heavens above. “Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!” he exclaimed in utter torment. “Damn it!” he then muttered under his breath. “Just when it was starting to get *really* interesting!”

Slowly, the members of Troop 192 crawled forth from their sleeping bags and reluctantly accepted the concept of consciousness.

It was cold in the cabin, but Kenny was already adding some wood to the heater and things would soon warm up. Becker and Matt Swett were in charge of breakfast and so, traditionally, they had somehow escaped waking up with everyone else. Aaron set about the difficult task of waking them, and fifteen minutes later they began to cook the morning meal.

The very last to wake up was Justy Yung. After breakfast was finished being cooked, Proctor went and chose the best looking pancakes, loped a wad of butter on each of them, and smothered them in real maple syrup he had personally brought special. The fake stuff that the rest of the Troop used wouldn’t be good enough for Justy, no sir. He brought this, along with a freshly brewed cup of coffee (Proctor had ground the beans himself earlier that morning) to Justy’s bunk and gently nudged the SPL.

“Captain? I have your breakfast.”

“Eh... hunghf... wha?” Justy said. He then bolted upright and out of his sleeping bag, already in uniform.

Somehow, the uniform looked completely fresh despite having been slept in.

"Why thank you, Proctor," Justy said.

Proctor grinned.

Justy took a sip of his coffee and frowned. He brought his baton down on his assistant's head.

"You moron! This coffee is exactly three and a quarter degrees too cold!"

Proctor took the cup from Justy and ran towards the stove. "I'm sorry, Captain! I'll warm it up for you right away!"

Mike watched this all with an attached bemusement as he chewed a piece of pancake. He swallowed, turned to his friends, and commented, "Another typical morning in Troop 192."

Although most of the staff for the event who had stayed overnight had stayed at Cabin II, their breakfast (and other meals) were being had at the Training Lodge. The reason was simple. The T-Lodge had a kitchen, Cabin II didn't.

In the kitchen was the man most likely to be found there at various Council events when a staff was in need of food, and he also prepared food at the various Order of the Arrow events. In fact, with the exception of Summer Camp, whenever food was needed it was Mr. Ron Wilson, Sr. that was most often called upon.

Richard Palmer was next in line for food.

"What can I get for you?" Mr. Wilson asked, smiling the kind of smile that only years in the service of the Council can produce.

"A big plate of blueberry pancakes with maple syrup, eggs over easy, and five sausages," Richard responded.

"Anything to drink with that?"

"To drink," Richard said, "a tall glass of orange juice and a black cup of coffee. After that, I'm going to have a slice of pie."

"Pie for breakfast?" Mr. Wilson asked, surprised.

“Any time of the day is a good time for pie. Blueberry pie to go with the pancakes. And on top, a thin slice of melted cheese...”

Richard was cut off as Mr. Wilson pulled out an ice cream scoop filled with a thick substance that was probably supposed to be oatmeal, plopped it onto a plate, and handed it to him. Mr. Wilson then handed him a small paper cup filled with orange coloured water.

“What’s this?” Richard asked.

“Oatmeal,” Mr. Wilson responded brightly, as if oatmeal could solve all of the wrongs in the world.

“Oatmeal,” Richard repeated as he walked away.

Next in line was Dan Wellington. After receiving his plate, Dan poured some lighter fluid over his lump of cold oatmeal and took a match to it. He smiled. “I like mine flambéed.”

Richard watched Dan and frowned.

Meanwhile, over at Cabin I, Troop 192 was heading out the door. Lagging behind was Perry, who waited until everyone else had left to get something out of his backpack.

It was a sword. Quite an impressive looking one, too. Big blade, slight curve to it. Not the kind of sword that you would want to meet in a dark alley somewhere.

Perry smiled.

Just then, Scoutmaster Will Shmuler walked in. He took one look at this and frowned.

“Perry, you know that it’s against the rules to have a knife with a blade longer than six inches, and also it doesn’t look like that blade folds into the handle.”

“Is not knife,” Perry explained, “is sword!”

“Oh, okay then!” Shmuler grinned stupidly. “No problem. But maybe later we could work on your Totin’ Chip a bit.”

With that, he turned and walked out of the cabin once more.

Perry smiled and concealed the sword on himself in that weird way that immortals in the *Highlander* TV series seem to be able to, and walked after him.

The Klondike began with an opening ceremony no different than any other opening ceremonies (or closing ceremonies, for that matter) when the Council had this sort of thing. Matt missed the good old days of his youth when some effort was made to actually put some variety into these things, and felt sorry for his friends who were still youth who would never know Scouting as it had once been...

Now, the only variety seemed to be some cosmetic differences that were purely to attempt to fool the scouts into thinking that this camporee or that derby was going to be different from the last one, yes it was! Sadly, predictably, it rarely worked.

"Another Klondike Derby, eh?" Aaron said.

"Yup," Mike responded.

"Wow, I can't wait to see what new and exciting events they have planned for us this year!" Swett added, his sarcasm in super-smooth mode.

Kenny just stood there silently, listening. But if the truth were to be told, as this was his first time he was somewhat excited. If the others knew they would envy him greatly.

"Eh, these things are always the same," Hughes said.

"WHAT?!" Becker responded.

"I said, 'Eh, these things are...' Oh, never mind..."

"Well, there's something that doesn't happen at every Klondike," Gelinus said.

"What's that?" Mike asked.

"Oh, just Perry charging at us with a sword."

"Oh, that does sound interesting," Aaron responded.

Someone blinked. It doesn't matter who, suffice to say was that it was only the time it takes someone to blink before it dawned on the group that they were possibly in peril.

“Perry’s charging us with a sword!!!” Aaron said, much less calmly than Gelinas had.

Perry ran towards them, full speed, madly waving the sword at them. “I kill you!” he exclaimed as the distance between them shortened.

Matt, Mike, Aaron, Bill, and Bill all quickly scattered, all going off in different directions. Mike’s luck was not doing so well, as it was he that Perry happened to follow.

“Shit!” Normally Mike disliked using such language, but he felt it justifiable under the circumstances.

He ran on, Perry close behind and quickly lessening the distance between them.

“Shit!”

He quickly pushed branches out of his way as he ran deeper into the woods, away from the path and his friends. Deeper still he went, leaping over snow-covered logs and low branches.

“Shit!”

Perry was still close behind him, waving the sword frantically, cutting a new path through the forest. Where were they, anyways? They’d been running for some time, and were past where Cabin III was, which was pretty far out. Was this part of camp even used much?

“Shit!”

Suddenly, there was a puddle of slush in front of Mike, and he tripped and fell into it. A second later he was a squirrel, but he wasted little time pondering his new status as he continued running deeper into the woods.

Quite a while later he came to a stop in a small clearing, breathing heavily and clutching a forepaw to his chest.

*I think I lost ‘em,* he thought.

Just then, in the woods behind him, a branch snapped.

“Well,” Swett commented, “that was interesting.”

“Certainly invigorating on such a cold morning,” Matt said dryly.

"Well, now that that's over with, I suppose we should hit the first event," Aaron said.

"Hey, Mike," Hughes asked, "where we going first?"

"Where's Mike?" Gelinas asked.

"Eh, he's probably just lost in the woods somewhere," Aaron said.

The others agreed to this.

"Anyway, didn't he give all of the information to Swett?" Hughes asked.

"Hey," Swett said, pulling out the little folder containing the information, "cool!"

Swett led the way to the first event, and everyone followed. Somewhere along the way, a missing member of their patrol joined them. Unfortunately, it wasn't Mike. It was Will. Soon, they had reached their first event. They were happy to see it was being run by Dan and Colin.

"Hey, Dan. Hey, Colin," they all said.

"Hey," they responded.

"So what event is this?" Gelinas asked.

"Let me guess..." Hughes said. "Fire building?"

"Well, that's the event Dan and Colin always do, so what ever could have given you that idea?" Swett asked.

"The object of this event is to build a fire in one of these fire pits," Dan said, "and burn through the string suspended over it. Unfortunately, the guys in charge said all you can use is wood you find here and no more then three matches. I told them it would be more fun to soak the string in nitro glycerine and use sticks of dynamite instead of wood... but those bastards just don't know what fun is. Any questions?"

"What would happen if you ate dynamite and then lit a fart?" Shmuler asked while doing a handstand and holding pacifiers between each of his toes.

Dan ignored the question.

"Okay, begin," Colin said.

The Garden Snake patrol set about their task, as did the other patrols from other troops that were there. A patrol from 180 was there, and was headed up by Derek Provost.

Matt went over to Dan and Colin.

"So how's it going?" he asked.

"Okay," Colin said. "Breakfast sucked, as usual."

"What'd you have, oatmeal again?"

Dan and Colin nodded.

"Doesn't that man know how to cook anything else?"

Matt asked. "Let me guess... Lunch and dinner are...?"

"Oatmeal," Dan said.

"You know," Matt said, "I'm not too excited about what my Troop is making for dinner. You two have money? We can go out."

"Hey, good idea," Colin said.

"Yeah, I got some cash," Dan added.

"Great. Right after closing sound good?"

"Sure. Where we going?" Colin asked.

"How about the Russell Inn?" Dan suggested. The Russell Inn was a rather nice restaurant / bar / pizza place that was not too far from camp.

"Sounds good," Matt added.

They looked over to see how the various groups were doing. The Garden Snakes were in the lead, and the string was actually starting to burn slightly when...

"I can fly!!!" Shmuler exclaimed, throwing himself into the air. He flew up a couple of inches before gravity decided to show him who was boss, and he fell down hard... right over the fire... smothering it completely.

He then proceeded to make snow-angel-making motions where he lay, oblivious to the fact that the snow around where this event was being held had been cleared away.

Meanwhile, Troop 180's fire was going strong... the fire was touching their string... and the string snapped in two!

"All right guys, good work!" Dan said.

"Now is the part Dan likes the least," Colin said. "Put out your fire and clean up the area. There's water in those buckets over there."

Provost took one of the buckets and dumped its contents onto the fire. However, there was no hissing

sound of water hitting fire. Instead, there was a soft thud and a rising plume of black smoke.

When the smoke cleared, Provost saw what had fallen out of the bucket onto the small fire, crushing it and putting it out. It was a can. It was a can of juice. Kiwi/Mocha fruit juice.

Provost screamed and ran off into the woods, not to be heard from for the rest of the weekend.

Mike turned slowly around, fully expecting to see a huge sword a half inch away from his face and rapidly closing. Instead he saw nothing, except the trees behind him.

There it was again – a branch cracking in the forest. There was definitely someone... or something... out there.

Then he saw it. It was a person, who stepped into the small clearing and stopped suddenly upon seeing Mike. Mike couldn't tell who it was under the large coat, but he was sure it wasn't Perry.

The person spoke, and Mike discovered it was a woman. "Hello," she said to him. "Hey, you're a cute squirrel, aren't you?"

Under his fur, Mike blushed. Then he sneezed. He realized he was still wet from having fallen in the slush, and he began shivering.

"Oh, but you're freezing!" She stooped down and gently picked him up. "I'll get you all warmed up," she said soothingly as she headed off deeper into the nether-woods of Moses.

A short time later they arrived at a cosy looking cabin that looked as if constructed by hand. She opened the door and set him down on the table before closing it once more behind her. There was already a fire going, and it was quite warm.

"I'll put some water on," she said, "and we'll get you all warmed up."

She took off her coat, and Mike got a good look at her for the first time. She was no Scully, but if anyone could come close to comparing to the X-Filian Goddess it was this woman.

Her cute face was framed by fluffy blonde hair, and behind a pair of Aviator-style glasses, her deep brown eyes had a smile in them as they looked at him. She was wearing a smart looking outfit, rather like a business woman would wear, although if the rest of her clothes were anything like her coat and gloves (which Mike had gotten a close look at on the journey to the cabin) then while they were exquisitely crafted, they were all hand made.

Everything in the cabin looked to be hand made, now that he thought of it. It was all wonderful work, to be sure. The work of a master. He knew that if he were to ever set out on a voyage aboard the S.S. Minnow, he would want this woman along.

"Burr..." the woman said. She pulled a sweater depicting allegiance to the Green Bay Packers on. "This is the one thing I saved from civilization, you know," she told him. "Couldn't part with my Green Bay sweater,"

"Now then," she added as she set a hand made kettle upon a ingenious stove of her own design. She sat at the masterfully constructed chair before the fine table Mike sat upon.

She took a hand woven towel and proceeded to dry Mike off. As she did so, Mike noticed a stack of drawings on the table... they looked like drawings for a comic book. Inwardly he smiled. *On top of everything else, she's a fellow artist!* he thought. He was somewhat amused to notice the star of her comic was a squirrel.

The kettle began to whistle and she stood again and went to get it. She poured water from it into two china teacups. Each cup had a painting of a squirrel on it. She then opened the cupboard and took out some of the tea she had grown in her garden, and a moment later she dropped a hollow metal ball into each cup. She sat down again and set one cup in front of herself and the other

before Mike. She smiled and also put a few acorns down in front of him.

"It's not often I meet someone new," she said. "I already know most of the squirrels around here, but you I've never met before." She smiled again.

There was a strange sound from her coat, and they both looked over to it.

"Oh, I'd forgotten about that other strange little fellow I found!" she said. As she said this, a small head poked out from under the coat, followed by a small body, and finally a little curly tail.

A little black piglet stood there. It had a yellow bandana tied around its neck.

"Bwee bwee!" the piglet said.

"I'm sorry, did you want some tea, too?" she said. As she rose to prepare another cup she accidentally hit Mike's, spilling the cup's contents right on him.

As the Garden Snake patrol was on their way to yet another mind-numbing event, they were being watched.

*Any minute now...* Perry thought. He watched the hated ones as they travelled down the path... closer and closer... and then they were right there! And then...

And then they kept walking, unhindered, until they turned a corner in the path and disappeared from sight.

"What happen?" Perry demanded. "Why no work?" He got up and walked over to the spot. Nothing happened. He jumped up and down a bit. Still nothing. He knelt down and pounded on the ground. No response at all. He screamed as he jumped up once more, hit the ground, continued downward, and hit the earth beneath him with all of his might.

Suddenly the earth beneath him was there no more, as it fell away.

"Aaaaaiiiiiiiiiiaaaahhhhhh!!!!!!"

He grabbed the edge of the pit and stopped himself from falling further. He looked down at the spikes waiting for him at the pit's bottom.

“Aiah,” he said as he crawled out. “This plan no work. Time for plan two.”

The next event *had* been mind numbing. As they walked away, Hughes was repeatedly slapping himself in the forehead, trying to bring back the feeling to his brain.

“Help!”

“Hey,” Hughes said, “did you guys hear that?”

“WHAT!?!?” Becker responded.

“Help!”

There it was again.

Hughes started off in the direction of the shouting. The rest of the patrol continued on, oblivious to Hughes’ detour.

“Help!” It was definitely a woman’s voice that was calling out. Could it be a damsel in distress?

“Nah,” Hughes said to himself. “That’s too silly.”

Then he saw her. A woman was lying, seemingly tied down to the railroad track.

She saw Hughes. “Help!” she said. “Train coming soon!”

“I’ll save you, miss!” he shouted as he started towards her. *Wait a moment, there’s no trains in the middle of Moses!*

As he continued forward, propelled by inertia, he noticed that the track was only one small section of track that had been recently dragged into place, if the marks in the snow were any indication.

In the next instant, still propelled forward, he noticed who the woman was. Sure he had never seen her in a dress before (certainly not a dress that looked like it would have seemed fashionable in the old west) nor had he seen her in a blonde wig before (and a bad looking wig, at that) but there was no mistaking Perfume.

It was too late to stop, and as he continued forward he stumbled on something hidden in the snow and came to a stop kneeling before her. She rose, not having been

tied down at all, and reached behind her back. Something came flying out in an unbelievable speed and...

Hughes quickly clapped his hands together right above his head.

He looked up.

He was surprised to discover that he had actually caught the blade of Perfume's sword right before it had split his head like a watermelon.

Perfume looked at this as well.

She opened her mouth to comment on it, but found she did not have the words. Not in English, and not even in her native Chinese.

Hughes smiled. He swung his hands back at the wrists, still gripping the sword blade between his palms, and tore the hilt from Perfume's shock-weakened grip. He then swung his hands down again, smiling at the satisfying thud that the sword hilt made when it hit her head.

She fell backwards, unconscious.

Hughes' grin widened.

"That was so cool!" he said.

He dropped the sword and left to catch up with the rest of the patrol.

Mike Quadrozzi sat naked upon the table, covering up certain bits with his hands folded neatly over his lap. "Um, hi," he said.

The woman blushed a bit, but her blushing did not match Mike's. She also had a look of wonder upon her face.

"You were a squirrel..." she said. "Now you are human. You are both squirrel and human."

Mike flashed her a smile, albeit an awkward one. Not that he was often in this type of situation, but he tended to be awkward at most things when sitting nude in front of someone he had just met.

The woman settled back into her chair. "You must be the one foretold by the Prophecy of the Squirrel," she said. "The messiah who will lead the squirrels to true freedom!"

“Um, what?” Mike asked. He didn’t think he had heard her right. However, he had.

“You’re the chosen leader of the squirrel race! The one destined to lead the squirrels to their rightful place as masters of the Earth!”

“I hate to change the subject,” Mike said, “but do you happen to have anything I can wear?”

“Did you have your own clothes?” she asked. “Clothes that you lost when you were transformed?”

*This woman is weird, Mike thought. I like her, but she’s weird. Not that that’s bad...*

“I did, actually,” he responded. “One item in particular is irreplaceable. A hat. Red. A few years old, looks a few hundred. Says ‘Troop 192’ on it. While I’d like the hat back eventually, however, at the moment I’ll settle for anything.”

“Oh, of course!” she said. She got up and brought him a blanket, which he wrapped around himself. She then snapped her fingers... and they appeared.

They came from everywhere. Under the bed. From the closet. From the cupboard. From behind the oven. They dropped down from the ceiling.

They were squirrels.

The woman then spoke to the squirrels. She wasn’t speaking in English, or any other human language for that matter. Mike recognized the sounds well. They were sounds made by squirrels.

Mike couldn’t speak squirrel, actually. Oh, when he was a squirrel he could make sounds like one, but he couldn’t actually speak the squirrel language. He hadn’t even been aware that there was one. But as the woman spoke, the hundreds of squirrels that were in the cabin with them all paid apt attention to her, nodding their cute little heads now and then.

Finely, she opened the door and the squirrels all went out.

“They’ll find your clothes,” she told Mike.

“Um, thanks. I’m Mike, by the way. Mike Quadrozzi.”

The woman smiled again. “My name’s Martha Wadley. I’m honoured to meet you, Sir Mike,” she said as

the last of the squirrels began to make their way through the door.

Over by her coat, the pig squealed.

“Oh, I’d forgotten about you,” Martha said. She laughed. “Wouldn’t it be funny if spilling tea on you would turn you into a human as well?” She looked at Mike. “Think we should try it?”

The pig eagerly nodded its head up and down vigorously, making a squeaking noise with each nod. This went unnoticed by Martha as she laughed and said, “Isn’t that silly? No pig is comparable to the Great Squirrel Messiah!”

The pig sighed and followed the last of the squirrels out just before Martha closed the door. She brought Mike a fresh cup of tea, as well as a chair of his own so he could stop sitting on the table, before she sat down once more herself.

“So how did end up here?” Mike asked. “And what is your connection to squirrels?”

Martha smiled as if about to reveal a secret. “It all started, I suppose, with a simple study project. I was studying Behavioural Biology, and had gone into the field to do a study on squirrels for a paper I was working on. I spent three weeks living with a family of squirrels and studying everything about them. They’re magnificent creatures. Upon my return to,” she laughed, “civilization, I found myself discontent. I had been happier with the squirrels, you see. Squirrels are much better than humans. My psychiatrist, Dr. Murakami, said that it will all pass, but she was wrong. It didn’t pass. With each day, I found myself longing more and more for their company. Until one day, I couldn’t take it any more and I just left everything behind and returned to the forest to live with the squirrels. I’ve been here ever since.”

“I see,” Mike said.

“And now that you have appeared, it cannot be much longer before the time of prophecy will come to pass. The squirrels will rule the Earth, and it is you who will lead them to it!”

“Um, yeah, okay,” Mike said. He really didn’t know what else there was to say.

After lunch, there had been a few more events, and now was the last event before the big sled race on the lake. The guy running this event was unfamiliar to the group from 192, and he introduced himself as Richard Palmer.

“This event is on fire safety,” Richard said. “We have here a fire, and you have to put it out using any means necessary. Then, there will be a quiz on unsafe fire practices.”

“That doesn’t sound very fun,” Bill Gelinis commented.

“Fire is not a fun thing,” Richard responded.

Off in the distance, Dan sat and watched. He smiled that kind of smile that would cause perfectly sane men to throw themselves off of cliffs rather than stay and look at that smile. “He must be destroyed.”

All of the different patrols were gathered at the Waterfront, their sleds positioned at the beginning of the ice covering Russell Pond. Their goal: the Aquatics Lodge on the opposite shore.

“So what is that stuff he’s putting on the sled’s runners?” Aaron asked. Kenny was kneeling down applying something to the bottom of the sled, spraying it on and heavily soaking the runners. “Is that the stuff Mike mentioned yesterday at the Church?”

Hughes nodded.

“Where is Mike, anyways?” Gelinis wondered. When no one else seemed interested, he just shrugged and lost interest himself. Camporees and derbies were funny like that – no one seemed to care when one of their friends went missing, even when there was a homicidal Amazon after them. They all just assumed he had wandered off and would be back later.

"It's all set," Kenny said. He put the spray can away.

"So who rides?" Swett asked. In the sled race, one member of the patrol was required to be a passenger while everyone else pushed.

"Well, Shmuler's the smallest in the patrol, isn't he?" Gelinas noted.

"Yes, but if you recall, he's unavailable at the moment.

In one corner of Cabin 1, Will Shmuler sat tied and gagged.

"Oh yeah," Gelinas responded. "I'd forgotten about that. I guess it'd be Kenny, then."

Kenny smiled.

On the opposite shore she waited for them to come. She would spring her trap as they crossed the finish line.

She would finely have her revenge!

"On your marks!" Danny Mashia, a curly-haired man known for leading popular sing-alongs at Council Campfires shouted.

Kenny braced himself in the sled, as the Garden Snake patrol prepared to push. Likewise, all of the other patrols got ready.

"Get set!"

On the opposite shore, Perfume smiled.

"GO!!!"

Simultaneously all of the patrols began to run forward pushing their sleds. All but the Garden Snake patrol. They had started pushing their sled, but then all fell flat on their faces as the sled seemed to vanish.

They heard a crash from the opposite shore. Looking across, they could just make out a hole in the wall of the Aquatics Lodge.

"Whoops," they said.

Perfume stood in the trees near the opposite shore, her face ready to explode in anger. They had slipped through her grasp once again, it seemed. She had one more chance this weekend, and she was determined not to screw it up!

Kenny had thrown himself out of the sled right before it had crashed into the Aquatics Lodge, and now he stood and turned to inspect the large hole in the side of the cabin. He then walked around to the opposite side of the cabin and inspected the exit hole. Lying on the ground about fifteen feet from the exit hole was the sled. All of the snow around where it had come to rest had melted away, and the sled itself was half buried in the earth.

He walked over to it and found it to be hot to the touch. He looked at the sled, then back at the hole through the cabin.

He took out his little notebook and pencil and began to jot down a few things. He spoke aloud as he did so. "Minor miscalculation in the dilution of the lubricant, but otherwise the experiment was a complete success!"

The squirrels had returned with Mike's clothes, and Mike had gotten dressed. He was warm and dry, and it was time, he felt, to make his way back to his patrol.

"Are you sure you have to go?" Martha asked. "There's so much to do before the Revolution!"

Mike smiled. "Yes, there is," he told her, "but I have other obligations, you see."

She returned the smile. "Of course, I understand. I'll be waiting!"

"We can keep in touch in the mean time. Let me give you my e-mail add... oh, sorry, you wouldn't exactly have a computer out here, huh?"

"Not yet," Martha responded, "but soon. I've got most of the boards all completed, and I was planning to do some more carving on the casing for the monitor later. Another month and I should be done."

"You're amazing, Squirrel Lady," Mike told her. He scribbled something down on a piece of paper. "Be sure to write when you can."

"You'll be the first person I e-mail," she told him.

"Well, good bye!" Mike said.

"Good bye, and good luck!" Martha told him. They hugged like old friends, and then Mike walked out of the door.

It was another typical closing ceremony. Awards were handed out. Provost's Stag Patrol got first place in the fire building competition. The award had to be accepted by his Assistant Patrol Leader, Brian Abert, as Derek was still hiding in the woods somewhere.

"Hey, guys!" someone said, startling the members of the Garden Snake Patrol who were standing there. They turned around.

"Squid!" Aaron said. "Where you been?"

"Oh, here and there," he said, a secretive smile upon his face. He changed the subject. "So, how'd the day go? We pick up any awards?"

"Yeah, twice as many as last year!" Swett said.

"So a grand total of zero then, eh?" Mike responded.

"Well, there's still one to give out," Hughes said.

"We've got a good chance on this one," Gelinias said.

"Oh?" Mike inquired.

Kenny quietly smiled.

"And now, the sled race," Harris Tanner spoke. "Third place: Troop 359, Flaming Popeye Patrol."

A patrol shouted out enthusiastically, "I yam what I yam!" as their patrol leader went and accepted the ribbon.

“Second place: Troop 815, Raging Bullwinkle Patrol!”

Jim Anderson stepped forward to accept the ribbon as his patrol shouted, “Hey, Rocky, I coulda been a contender!”

“First place...” spoke the venerable leader, “with a time of point three nanoseconds, the Garden Snake Patrol of Troop 192!”

“Hey, neat,” Mike said as he stepped forward to receive the ribbon. His patrol shouted out with an enthusiastic nothing at all, because they felt they didn’t need such things to have spirit. Perhaps that’s why they never won the spirit awards.

“And now,” Tanner said, almost as if he had read the previous bit of narration, “the spirit award! This goes to the Summarizing Proust Patrol from Troop 179!”

The Patrol Leader stepped forward to receive the award as his patrol sung out in perfect harmony with, “Proust in his first book wrote about, fa la la... Proust in his first book wrote about, he wrote about...”

And so the Klondike Derby ended.

Matt had changed into something that didn’t quite look like a Scout uniform and met up with Dan and Colin, who had similarly changed. They were just about to hop into Dan’s car, when...

“Hey, mind if I join you? Can’t take another fuckin’ serving of oatmeal, you know?”

There stood Richard Palmer. He had changed out of his uniform as well, and was wearing a cheep black suit with a thin black tie.

The three friends conferred. “I don’t trust this guy,” Dan quietly said.

“I don’t want to seem rude, though,” Colin said.

They looked at Matt. *Why do I get the deciding vote?* “Why not,” he said. “Come along.” Little did Matt know that he would later regret this.

\* \* \*

Dan was driving, Matt and Colin sat in the back. Richard had the passenger seat next to Dan. From the back seat, Colin and Matt would swear that there was a dangerous field of electricity between the two.

Somehow they had gotten into a conversation about where they'd like to travel in their lives, and when Dan had mentioned Amsterdam, it had turned out that Richard had actually lived there for a while.

"You'll dig it, Dan," Richard said. "And you know what the funniest thing about Europe is?"

"What?" Dan asked.

"It's the little differences. A lotta the same shit we got here, they got there, but there they're a little different."

"Like what?" Dan asked.

"Well, in Amsterdam, you can buy beer in a movie theatre. And I don't mean in a paper cup either. They give you a glass of beer, like in a bar. In Paris, you can buy beer at McDonald's. Also, you know what they call a Quarter Pounder with Cheese in Paris?"

"They don't call it a Quarter Pounder with Cheese?"

"No, they got the metric system there, they wouldn't know what the fuck a Quarter Pounder is."

"What'd they call it?"

"Royale with Cheese," Colin supplied. Richard frowned.

"Royale with Cheese," Dan repeated. "What'd they call a Big Mac?"

"Big Mac's a Big Mac, but they call it Le Big Mac," Richard responded.

"McDonald's is evil, anyways," Matt felt it important to add. "I'll take Burger King any day, but I wouldn't touch McDonald's if I had just come out of a desert and had been starving for days." Matt wasn't joking, he actually had a deep psychological hatred of McDonald's food.

"What do they call a Whopper?" Dan asked.

"I dunno, I didn't go into a Burger King."

"Your loss," Matt said.

Richard ignored him. "But you know what they put on french fries in Holland instead of ketchup?"

"Mayonnaise," Colin said.

Richard frowned.

"Damn!" Dan exclaimed.

"I seen 'em do it, Richard insisted, working himself back into the conversation. "And I don't mean a little bit on the side of the plate, they fuckin' drown 'em in it."

"Well, I've dipped my fries in kerosene," Dan said. "Quite tasty. So I guess mayo isn't too weird."

"I'll stick to ketchup," Matt said. "From Burger King."

Richard frowned.

They had arrived at the Russell Inn.

They got out of the car, and Matt was startled to recognize the car they had parked next to. "Hey, Dan, you got a sec?"

"Sure."

The two went off for a moment.

"What is it?" Dan asked once they were away.

"Could you three kind of go on with out me?" Matt asked. "And don't be surprised if you see a familiar red haired woman walk in a few minutes later."

"What's up?"

Matt pointed. "That's her car."

"Her?"

"From camp?"

"Oh, her!" Dan grinned knowingly, and then went to rejoin his Colin and the other person. Together, the three of them went in.

"Matt coming?" Colin asked.

"He just remembered something," Dan said. "He's going to walk back to camp."

"Bit of a walk, especially in this weather."

Dan shrugged, offering no explanation.

"What the hell's going on in here?" Colin then asked, having gotten his first look at the inside of the Russell Inn.

Gone were the usual tables. In their place were booths made up from the cut-out bodies of 50's cars. Posters were all over the walls, mainly posters from 50's A.I.P. movies such as *Rock All Night*, *High School Confidential*, *Attack of the Crab Monster*, and *Machinegun*

*Kelly*. Somehow a large dance floor had been installed, although normally Dan and Colin would have never thought there would be room for one in this establishment. A sign near the dance floor proclaimed, "No Shoes Allowed."

There were quite a few waiters and waitresses this night, and they seemed to be wearing attire appropriate to the 50's. In fact, some of them bore a striking resemblance to certain 50's icons, such as Zorro, James Dean, Donna Reed, Martin and Lewis, and The Philip Morris Midget.

They were shown to a table made from a red 59' Edsil. After studying their menus for a while, a man came over to take their orders. He was dressed as Buddy Holly, and there was a button on his chest that read, "Hi I'm Buddy, pleasing you pleases me."

"Hi, I'm Buddy. What can I get'cha?"

Richard ordered first. "I'll have the... um... Douglas Sirk steak."

"How d'ya want it? Burnt to a crisp or bloody as hell?"

"Bloody as hell. And to drink, a vanilla coke."

"How about you?" Buddy asked Dan.

"I'll have the Durwood Kirby burger, burnt to a crisp, and a five-dollar shake."

"How do you want the shake? Martin and Lewis, or Amos and Andy?"

"Vanilla," Dan said.

"Martin and Lewis, then?" the water asked.

"Yes, vanilla," Dan repeated.

Frustrated, the water turned to Colin. "And you?" he asked.

"The Wolfman Jack Omelette, and... um... Sprite with that."

The water walked away, and Richard said to Dan, "Did you just order a five-dollar shake?"

"Sure did."

"A shake? Milk and ice-cream?"

"Yup."

"It costs five dollars?"

Dan nodded.

"They don't put bourbon in it or anything?"

"If they did, I couldn't order it," Dan reminded Richard, not that Dan had ever let a thing like age stop him in the past if he had ever wanted a drink.

"Just checking," Richard said. He got up. "I'm going to go to the bathroom and powder my nose while you two sit here and chat amongst yourselves."

"We'll do that," Colin said.

"Hey," Matty said, "imagine running into you here!"

Sarah and her sisters looked up. "Oh, hi, Matty! Want to join us? We haven't ordered yet."

Matty smiled. "Sure." She took a seat in the car next to Kirstin and across from Sarah. She looked around. "What the hell happened here?"

"It's 50's nostalgia night," Sarah explained.

"They remodelled the entire interior of the restaurant for one night?" Matty replied, finding the fact quite incredulous.

"Neat, isn't it?" Nicole responded.

"So what are you doing here?" Matty asked.

"There's a camporee at Bonnie Bray this weekend," Sarah explained, "and I thought I'd take the gals out to diner tonight. You?"

"Boy Scout thing up at Moses," Matty responded.

"Ah," Sarah said.

Their waitress came over, and Matty recognized her as Marilyn Monroe. "Hi, I'm Marilyn, and I'll be your... oh, hold on a minute, sugars."

Marilyn ran off for a moment to stand over a square vent in the floor. The sound of a subway car filled the Russell Inn, making everything shake and rattle. An imaginary subway train then blew the skirt of her white dress around her ears as she let out a squeal. With the exception of two tables, the entire restaurant applauded.

Her task completed, the waitress returned. "Now can I take your orders?"

\* \* \*

Richard returned right after Buddy had brought their food to the table. Colin and Dan immediately began to consume their meals. Richard sat there watching them, his own food left untouched.

"Don't you love it when you go to the bathroom and you come back to find your food waiting for you?" Richard commented.

"We're lucky we got it at all," Dan said.

"Buddy Holly doesn't seem to be much of a waiter. We shoulda sat in Marilyn Monroe section," Colin added.

"Which one, there's two Marilyn Monroes," Dan said.

"No there's not," Richard said. He pointed at Marilyn in the white dress, taking an order from a table of four women, two red heads and two younger twins. "That's Marilyn Monroe..." He then pointed at a blonde waitress in a tight sweater and Capri pants, taking an order from a bunch of film geeks.

"...and that's Mamie Van Doren," Colin interrupted. "I don't see Jayne Mansfield, so it must be her night off."

"Pretty smart," Richard said, frowning.

"I have moments," Colin responded.

Dan wrapped his lips around his straw and took a sip of his shake.

"Can I have a sip of that?" Richard asked. "I'd like to know what a five-dollar shake tastes like."

Dan hesitated, then said, "Be my guest." He pulled out the straw and slid the shake over to Richard.

Richard noted this, and commented on the straw removal by saying, "I don't have cooties."

Poker faced, Dan replied, "Yeah, but maybe I do."

"Cooties I can handle," Richard said as he slid in a fresh straw. He took a sip. "Goddamn! That's a pretty fuckin' good milk shake."

"Told ya."

"I don't know if it's worth five dollars, but it's pretty fuckin' good." He slid the shake back to Dan, then eyed Dan's burger. "Mind if I try your burger?"

Normally at this point Dan would in no certain terms have told Richard to go to hell. But these circumstances

were different. Richard was unholy, and Dan had to see just how unholy he was. He gave no response at all, remaining poker faced, waiting to see what Richard would do.

Richard took the burger.

He took a bite of the burger.

He put the burger back down in front of Dan, as he proceeded to slowly chew the piece he had bitten off.

He swallowed.

“Uuummmm, that is a tasty burger. Of course, I prefer bloody as hell, but to each their own. Right, my friend?” He turned to Colin. “Colin, you ever try a Durwood Kurby burger?”

“No.”

Richard grabbed the burger again and offered it to Colin. “You wanna bite, they’re real good.”

Colin looked at Dan, then at Richard. “No,” he said simply.

Richard put the burger down once more in front of Dan. He pointed at Colin’s glass. “What’s in this?”

Startled, Colin failed to respond for a moment. Then he said, “You were here when I ordered it.”

“Well maybe I forgot, motherfucker. What is it?”

“Sprite.”

“Sprite, good, mind if I have some of your tasty beverage to wash this burger down with?”

“Yes, I do mind.”

Richard grabbed the glass and took a sip.

“Uuuuummmm, hits the spot!”

All this time, Richard’s own food continued to sit untouched.

Dan continued to sit there poker-faced. Colin placed his palms on the table and rose from his seat slightly. However, before he could confront Richard, he was interrupted as someone on the dance floor spoke into the microphone.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” Ed Sullivan said, Marilyn Monroe standing next to him, “now is the moment you’ve all been waiting for. The world famous Russell Inn’s twist

contest. Now this is where one lucky couple will win this handsome trophy that Marilyn here is holding.”

Marilyn posed with the trophy, holding it up for all to see.

“Now, who will be our first contestants?”

“I wanna dance,” Richard said.

“I’m not much of a dancer,” Dan responded.

“Don’t look at me,” Colin added.

“I never said I wanted to dance with either of you motherfuckers!” Richard said. He got up and walked over to the table that they had seen Marilyn at earlier. “Would you care to dance?” Richard asked one of the red heads.

“Um, sure,” Sarah responded.

“Sarah, no!” Matty blurted out without thinking.

“Um, are you sure that’s a good idea?” Kirstin added.

Sarah shrugged as she kicked off her shoes. Richard took off his boots. “Right here!” he called out to Ed Sullivan.

“Let’s here it for our first contestants!” Ed responded as Richard and Sarah made their way to the dance floor.

“Now let’s meet our first contestants here this evening,” Ed continued. “Young man, what is your name?”

“Mr. Richard Palmer,” Richard said into the microphone.

“Now how about your lady here?”

Richard deepened his voice for no apparent reason. “Sarah,” he said into the mic.

“Porter,” Sarah added from where she stood.

“Let’s see what you can do,” Ed told them. He turned towards the man at the record player. “Take it away!” he said.

The man at the record player put the needle upon the spinning disc, and “You Never Can Tell” began to play.

Richard and Sarah faced each other for that brief moment before you begin to dance, than they both broke into a devilish twist. Sarah’s version of the twist was that of a sexy cat. Richard was pure Mr. Cool as he got into a hip-swivelling rhythm that would make Mr. Checker proud.

Matty sat with Kirstin and Nicole. Nicole watched with minor interest. Kirstin had a worried look on her face. Matty's face held sadness, and anger barely kept in check.

After dinner, Sarah had brought her sisters back to Bonnie Bray before taking Matty back to Moses, which was where they were headed now.

"You okay?" Sarah asked as they turned into the Boy Scout camp. "You've seemed upset since before we left the restaurant."

"I'm fine," Matty lied.

"No you're not." She had seen right through her. "What is it? Tell me?"

"I just... I just don't think you should have danced with that guy."

"Is that it? Why, did you like him or something?"

"NO! No, that's not it... It's just..." Matty paused. "I thought you weren't interested in seeing any guys at the moment."

"Why, Matty, if you were a guy, I'd think you were jealous!" Sarah laughed.

"That's not it at all," Matty lied. Fortunately for her, this time Sarah didn't notice the deception.

"Well, you're right. I don't want any relationships at the moment. But that was just one dance with a guy I'll never see again, so what's the harm? Besides," she added, glancing at the object in the back seat, "I got a trophy out of it!"

"Yeah..."

"You're still upset, aren't you? Why?"

"Well... I know you don't like to hear about him, but I'm good friends with Matt, and you know how he likes you," Matty said.

Sarah looked at Matty as she parked the car. "You care about him, don't you?"

"I care about all of my friends."

"Look," Sarah said. "How about we don't mention this to him? If he doesn't know about it, it won't upset him."

*A little late for that*, Matty thought ruefully. She forced a smile for Sarah's benefit. "Okay," she said.

They stepped out of the car.

A moment later, Perfume jumped out of nowhere, grabbed Sarah, and ran off into the woods.

"Sarah!" Matty shouted. There was a piece of paper on the ground where Sarah had been standing. Matty picked it up and read it.

"You want woman," the paper said, "you alone follow Perfume."

Dan walked through the quiet night forest. His hands were in his pockets and he held no flashlight, his familiarity with Moses allowed him to navigate quite well once his eyes were adjusted to the darkness. He heard a branch snap behind him. He turned around to face Richard Palmer, standing there with his hands behind his back.

"So there you are," Dan said.

"How you doin'?" Richard asked.

Dan didn't respond.

"Am I trippin', or did I just ask you a question?"

"I'm doing okay," Dan responded at last. He still had the poker face he had put on at dinner.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Richard Palmer."

"Do you know who I work for?"

"No."

"I am an associate of a group of men who like to call themselves The Committee. They are also known by the few others who know of their existence and are still alive to know them by anything as The Elders, but they don't like that name that much."

"So?"

"So, motherfucker, The Committee has deemed you to be a thorn in their plans."

"What plans? Why should I care?"

Richard answered Dan's question by revealing in his hands a Czech M61 submachine gun with a huge silencer on it, which he used to put three holes in a nearby tree.

Dan stood there, hands still in his pockets, his eyes transfixed on the powerful weapon.

"Oh, I'm sorry, did I break your concentration? I didn't mean to do that. Please continue. I believe you had some questions."

Dan stood there, silently.

"Whatsamatter? Oh, you were through anyway. Well, let me answer your last question. Why should you care? Because while you aren't the only thorn in the plans of the Committee, you are a thorn whose death could be easily made to look like an accident. The others, especially your friends in Troop 192, if they were taken care of, they'd become martyrs. We don't want that, now do we?"

"Are you crazy?" Dan asked. "You can't kill me."

"What do I look like?" Richard responded.

Dan became silent once again. Richard took a dangerous step forward.

"What country are you from?" Richard demanded.

"What?" Dan sounded petrified.

"'What' ain't no country I know! Do they speak English in 'What?'"

Dan seemed on the verge of a heart attack. "What?"

"English-motherfucker-can-you-speak-it?"

"Yes."

"Then you understand what I'm sayin'?"

"Yes."

"Now describe what I look like."

Dan's voice was now dripping in fear. "What?"

Richard stepped forward again and placed the silencer hard against Dan's cheek. "Say 'What' again! C'mon, say 'What' again! I dare ya, I double dare ya motherfucker, say 'What' one more goddamn time!"

Dan began to relent, and struggled to answer the question. "You look like... like... a big harry guy..."

"Go on!"

"In a bad... poorly fitting suit..."

“Do I look like a bitch?!”

“What?” Dan asked without thinking. Richard slammed the barrel of the gun down hard on Dan’s shoulder, and then pressed the tip back to Dan’s cheek. Dan screamed with the pain shooting through his shoulder, and he fell to his knees.

“Do I look like a bitch?!”

Agony fighting with terror to fill his face, Dan struggled to say, “No.”

“Then why are you trying to fuck me like a bitch?!”

“What do you expect?” Dan bit back the pain. “You’re here to kill me after all!”

“You’ve got a good point, there, my friend.” Richard backed away a bit, keeping the gun pointed at Dan. “You ever read the bible, Dan?” he asked.

“Not really,” Dan confessed.

“That’s too bad. It’s a good book. There’s this one passage in particular I have memorized, seems appropriate for this situation: Ezekiel 25:17.

“The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he who, in the name of charity and good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness, for he is truly his brother’s keeper and the finder of lost children.” Richard’s voice began to fill with a cold fury, and excitement filled it as he reached the climax. “And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon you.”

Richard began to squeeze the trigger, but something caused him to stop. It was Dan’s face. Gone was the agony. Gone was the confusion. Gone was the pain. The poker face had returned.

Dan pulled his hands from his pockets, where they had remained all this time until now. Something was in one of his hands. It looked like a small switch. He pressed it.

\* \* \*

Matty raced into the woods, heedless of the danger. She had to rescue Sarah! She had to!

There they were! She had caught up to them.

"I get my revenge, Matty!" Perfume exclaimed. She dropped Sarah and pulled out her sword, charging towards Matty.

"Matty!" Sarah called out. "Run!"

"No!" was all Matty had time to respond with before she had to jump back to avoid the swing of Perfume's blade. Matty grabbed a fallen branch upon the ground and swung back. Perfume swung her sword again and the branch Matty held was in two pieces. With another swing, Matty cried out as her sleeve was torn open and a thin red line appeared on her arm.

"Matty!" Sarah exclaimed. "No!"

Matty fell to the ground, dropping her broken stick. Perfume moved in, swinging her sword in for the fatal final blow...

The ground shook beneath them. Perfume lost her footing and fell. Sarah ran by, pulling Matty to her feet, and the two ran off, leaving the Amazon behind.

"What was that... all about?" Sarah asked between heavy breaths as she leaned against her car. "Oh, your arm, are you okay?"

"It's just... it's just a scratch," Matty responded between her own breaths.

"Still... you could have... been killed! What were you thinking?"

"I couldn't lose you," Matty said.

Sarah looked at Matty.

"You saved me," Sarah said. "Thank you." She gave Matty a hug. "I don't know how much I can thank you."

Matty returned the hug. Sarah felt warm against her, especially on this cold winter night.

"I love you," Matty," Sarah said.

Matty's heart skipped a beat.

"You're the best friend I could ever have," Sarah added.

Matty smiled, although she was a bit disappointed. *I should have saved her as Matt*, she thought, although she knew deep down that she'd have never wasted the time to change back to her normal male form when Sarah's life was in danger. "I love you, too," she told Sarah, although she meant it in a slightly different way.

Sarah stepped back. "You going to be okay?"

"Yeah, you?"

"Yeah. Well, I'll see you later." She got into her car.

Matty waved. "Careful driving in the snow," she said.

Sarah laughed. "After what we've just been through, snow doesn't seem that scary. Weird camp you've got here, Matty."

"Good night."

"Good night." Sarah closed the door and drove away.

Sunday morning, Matt was saying good bye to Dan and Colin as Troop 192 packed up to go home.

"What happened to your arm?" Colin asked.

"Nothing," Matt responded. "Just a scratch. What ever happened to that jerk Palmer?"

Dan smiled. "Who?" he asked.

Sunday afternoon, Nicole was sitting in the living room when she heard a scratch at the door. She went and let Neko-chan in.

Neko-chan sneezed as he walked in, and Nicole laughed.

"You silly kitty, you've been out all weekend and you caught a cold!"

Nicole returned to the couch and Neko-chan leapt to her lap. Nicole then went back to her studies.

She had many files on people. Never knew when information on a certain person might help. She hated to think of it as blackmail, rather she thought of it as protecting people from the facts about them.

One of her thickest files was on this guy named Jason that she'd been seeing now and then. Of course, she never used his file against him, but she liked to keep tabs on him. Besides, he seemed to like spending money on her without her persuasion.

She put Jason's file down, and picked up two others. One was labelled, "Matt Atanian." The other was for, "Matty Hayes." Matty's was much thinner than Matt's, but a lot of what was in Matty's bore similarities to things in Matt's.

There was a definite connection between the two, she had suspected it even before the previous fall when Kirstin had admitted that Matty was in on her plans to get Matt and Sarah together. But what was the connection between the two of them?

She placed the two files inside a third file, which she labelled, "Matt / Matty." This would definitely merit more investigation.

The next Wednesday saw an uneventful scout meeting. One member of the Garden Snake patrol was absent, giving five members of Troop 192 hope that perhaps s/he had given up and gone home.

The following week, as the next Scout meeting began, Perry's continuing absence strengthened their hope.

Hughes sneezed, still getting over a cold he'd caught at the Klondike. "Maybe she did go home," he said.

"Any one check if the pizza place is closed again?" Gelinas asked.

"No," everyone responded in turn.

"Well, gee, that would have seemed a simple way to confirm if she was still here or not," Gelinas responded.

"SHUT UP, BILL!" they told him.

Suddenly, the twin doors at the front of Walker Hall burst open. They looked up to see who it was.

It was Perry.

Everyone sighed.

"This has ceased to be interesting," Aaron commented.

## *Special: How to Be a Successful Feline*

by William Hughes

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It is important to understand the basics of felinity to be a successful cat. This short paper will deal with all you need to know, to be a feline. It is useful to note that this paper will not incur the ability to transform, 'morph,' metamorphosise or otherwise physically become a cat. It is up to you to perform that action yourself.

This paper is divided up into four sections, to help you cover cat-ness. The sections are: *Cat Mentality*, *Cat Science*, *Cat Physics*, and *Becoming a Cat*.

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### ***Cat Mentality:***

It is necessary to get into the proper mindset to be a successful cat. First, you must understand one basic law: *Cats Are Lazy*. There are no two ways about it. To be a cat, you must be lazy. Cats do not exercise excessively; they do not work overly hard at anything. To be a cat, you must be lazy.

Furthermore, you must also be intelligent. Cat intelligence is innate, and quite important. It does not do to be a stupid cat. To prove this, take a dog and a cat:

The cat sits around the house, does nearly nothing, and gets fed. The dog, on the other hand, runs around, chasing pointless objects, and completely tiring himself out for a bowl of food. Taking this into account, which animal would you say is the smarter? The dog, who wears himself out every day, or the cat, who sits and gets pampered for her food. The cat, of course.

This leads into the third necessary mentality: *Cats Are Superior*. Again, there are no two ways about it. Cats are, of course, the highest being on this planet, and on many

more. Again, it is possible to give scientific proof for this. Just watch the show “Garfield and Friends.”

To be a successful cat, it is then apparent that you must remember three things about yourself: You are lazy, intelligent and superior. These three simple things feed off of each other, and swirl you into a paragon of felinity. The author is not responsible for any damages caused by following this paper.

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### ***Cat Science:***

Yes, its true, cats are a science all unto themselves. To fully comprehend these complex beings one must learn the following laws of cat-ness:

#### **Law of Cat Inertia**

A cat at rest will tend to remain at rest, unless acted upon by some outside force – such as the opening of cat food, or a nearby scurrying mouse.

#### **Law of Cat Motion**

A cat will move in a straight line, unless there is a really good reason to change direction.

#### **Law of Cat Thermodynamics**

Heat flows from a warmer to a cooler body, except in the case of a cat, in which case all heat flows to the cat.

#### **Law of Cat Stretching**

A cat will stretch to a distance proportional to the length of the nap just taken.

#### **Law of Cat Sleeping**

All cats must sleep with people whenever possible, in a position as uncomfortable for the people involved, and as comfortable as possible for the cat.

**Law of Cat Elongation**

A cat can make her body long enough to reach just about any counter top that has anything remotely interesting on it.

**Law of Cat Obstruction**

A cat must lie on the floor in such a position to obstruct the maximum amount of human foot traffic.

**Law of Cat Acceleration**

A cat will accelerate at a constant rate, until he gets good and ready to stop.

**Law of Dinner Table Attendance**

Cats must attend all meals when anything good is served.

**Law of Rug Configuration**

No rug may remain in its naturally flat state for very long.

**Law of Obedience Resistance**

A cat's resistance varies in proportion to a human's desire for her to do something.

**First Law of Energy Conservation**

Cats know that energy can neither be created nor destroyed and will, therefore, use as little energy as possible.

**Second Law of Energy Conservation**

Cats also know that energy can only be stored by a lot of napping.

**Law of Refrigerator Observation**

If a cat watches a refrigerator long enough, someone will come along and take out something good to eat.

**Law of Electric Blanket Attraction**

Turn on an electric blanket and a cat will jump into bed at the speed of light.

**Law of Random Comfort Seeking**

A cat will always seek, and usually take over, the most comfortable spot in any given room.

**Law of Bag/Box Occupancy**

All bags and boxes in a given room must contain a cat within the earliest possible nanosecond.

**Law of Cat Embarrassment**

A cat's irritation rises in direct proportion to her embarrassment times the amount of human laughter.

**Law of Milk Consumption**

A cat will drink his weight in milk, squared, just to show you he can.

**Law of Furniture Replacement**

A cat's desire to scratch furniture is directly proportional to the cost of the furniture.

**Law of Cat Landing**

A cat will always land in the softest place possible; often the mid-section of an unsuspecting, reclining human.

**Law of Fluid Displacement**

A cat immersed in milk will displace her own volume, minus the amount of milk consumed.

**Law of Cat Disinterest**

A cat's interest level will vary in inverse proportion to the amount of effort a human expends in trying to interest him.

**Law of Pill Rejection**

Any pill given to a cat has the potential energy to reach escape velocity.

And, most importantly:

### **Law of Cat Composition**

A cat is composed of Matter + Anti-Matter + It Doesn't Matter.

Once you know and understand these simple laws, it is now just a matter (or anti-matter) of putting them into effect.

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### ***Cat Physics:***

*(Or, being a physical cat.)*

If you understand correctly the laws outlined above, then the next section, which deals with putting the laws above into effect, will be remarkably easy.

To be a cat, you must understand that all things must revolve around you, the cat. This is because you are a cat. Cat-ness confers a certain measure of perfection upon the cat. The better cat, the more perfection. A perfect cat, therefore, is the same as being a Goddess (There are no Gods, because, to be perfect, you must be female. The closest a male can come is demigoddom). Most of us will never reach that level of perfection, but we can always hope to ever come closer.

To be a paragon of cat-ness, you must remember the three cardinal rules of felinity: Laziness, Superiority and Intelligence. These helpful pointers will help point you in the right direction:

When at all possible, don't do anything. Unless there is a pressing reason to do something, don't do it.

Remember that the only things better than you are those cats who have achieved goddess status. Several demigods may or may not also be ranked above you, as well.

And, most importantly, if you ever make a mistake, hide all evidence, destroy all witnesses and act like there

was never anything to make a mistake on in the first place. This will protect both your intelligence and your superiority.

The author is not to be held responsible for anything or anyone that is a direct or indirect offspring, offshoot, or action or consequence of this paper.

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### ***Becoming a Cat:***

There is a large amount of different ways to become a feline. One of the easiest, of course, is to have perfect karma when you die. You will be reincarnated as a cat.

Of course, most of us cannot achieve such a state of grace, so we must use an alternative.

Such alternatives are: Thaumatergy, Alchemy, Necromancy, Ecomancy, The Black Arts, the Red Arts, the Purple with Yellow Polka Dotted Arts, Metamorphosis, my cousin Fred, or genetic manipulation.

Of course, the easiest way to become a cat is:

### ***Jusenkyo Spring.***

Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoy you new-found cat-hood.

## *Chapter Seventeen: All the World's a Stage...*

by Nicole Colosimo

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It was a dreary Wednesday evening in Western Massachusetts. A cold, bitter March wind raked the landscape, biting through heavily lined coats and tightly wound tacky scarves. As the hour of six o'clock approached, the parking lot of The Church in the Acres was seemingly devoid of any movement. Well, except for the occasional, valiant squirrel scurrying on some top secret mission unbeknownst to the undeserving humans reading this and wasting precious time that could be better spent in washing the dishes or perhaps conquering a small country.

Suddenly, the serenity of the Church in the Acres was shattered as a large brown van arrived, crunching loose gravel beneath its tires. Swishing the side door open, a group of five chattering Girl Scouts, all heavily bundled up, emerged. After retrieving several large bundles from the trunk, they fled from the frigid night air into the warm building that awaited them.

Nearly half an hour later, The Church in the Acres was buzzing with activity as both Boy and Girl Scouts alike filed within to head to their respective meeting areas.

Mike Quadrozzi rushed inside, fleeing a particularly harsh gust of wind. Sighing with relief as the heat started to defrost his body, he congratulated himself on remembering to wear his pants. He glanced up and spotted most of the members of the Garden Snake Patrol and Matt Atanian talking softly in a huddled group.

"Hey guys," Mike greeted, unconsciously adjusting his beaten red hat.

"WHAT?!" Becker replied, obviously gifted with an extensive vocabulary that went well beyond his years. The group winced, placing hands to their aching eardrums.

“Hey Mike,” Matt Atanian said, vehemently shaking his head as he attempted to rid his ears of that blasted ringing.

“I kill you,” Perry stated simply.

“Good evening, Mr. Quadrozzi,” Kenny added quietly, not looking up from his enormous book entitled *The Nichomachean Ethics*.

Bill Gelinias as and Matt Swett said their hellos, only to be interrupted by a very hyperactive Will Shmuler. Will jumped into the middle of their circle and threw his hands skyward.

“By the Power of Greyskull, I HAVE THE POWER!!!” he screeched at the top of his lungs (loud enough to even challenge Jon Becker). Suddenly, the young boy began shaking violently and making random, odd sounds like one might hear when pureeing a slinky in a small blender. The others continued to ignore Will even as he slowly sank to the floor, twitching and sputtering like a dying car.

“Attention, everyone!” Proctor bellowed suddenly, successfully causing everyone in the room to ignore him. “Our Lord God Yung wishes to grace us with some inspirational words.”

True to the nature of Troop 192, havoc continued to be wreaked by some of the younger boys, most of the adult leaders continued in their apathetic roles, and those troop members who actually had a desire to be involved looked on despairingly.

“Incompetent, Proctor!” Justy shrieked, spittle flying from his lips, and whapped Proctor soundly on the head with his baton. “Hear me peons, for I hold your pathetic excuses for existence within my clutches.” His beady eyes were sparkling with a fiendish light and his lip twitched to some unheard rhythm.

“My,” Matt Swett said dryly, “Justy is looking exceedingly maniacal tonight. Must be a special occasion.”

“Tonight I shall delight in further squishing the life force from the Garden Snake Patrol.”

The Garden Snake Patrol (minus the ever-tardy Hughes) sighed in dismay. Well, all except for Becker who couldn't hear Justy anyway and Will Shmuler who was too busy kicking his legs in the air and making high pitched barks.

"The peons of the Garden Snake Patrol shall spend the next several months slaving away on their Theatre Badge in an effort to raise money for my palanquin."

The entire Troop stared at Justy as if he had thrown on a skirt, stuck a banana in his ear, and demanded to be called Jeanette. (Of course, this look wasn't far off from how they usually looked at him, but that's unimportant!)

Matt Atanian's jaw dropped several inches. SPL's just didn't go around assigning Patrols badges to be worked on. And further, never to raise money so that they could buy a bloody contraption to be carried around in.

"Hey guys!" a breathless and delayed Bill Hughes said in greeting. Glancing around, he found a common look of surprise mixed with horror and disbelief on the faces of his friends. "Er, what'd I miss?"

Distractedly, Aaron quickly filled him in.

"H-he can't do that!" Hughes sputtered.

"I think he just did," Matt Atanian said softly. He watched Justy smack Proctor's head with his baton, emphasizing his decision on the fate of the Garden Snake Patrol.

Sarah Porter frowned and rubbed her aching temples. This wasn't going to work.

The Pioneer Valley Girl Scout Council had decided that this was the year in which one lucky troop was to produce and perform a theatrical work in an effort to raise funds for the After School Initiative Program for Scouting. As the Fates would have it, Troop 42 was chosen for its renowned success in past fund raising events. The Council had chosen the classic (and in this author's opinion, highly overrated but unfortunately rather useful) play, Romeo and Juliet.

Now, all she wanted to do was to delicately place a shotgun to her head and pull the trigger.

She groaned, happening to glimpse over at Kirsten and Nicole who were busy working on a patch. Her two younger sisters seemed to sense Sarah's gaze and glanced up, smiling brilliantly. Sarah couldn't help but return a grin. Those two were the most precious things to her on the face of the earth and she was doing this for them. That's why she wouldn't immediately throttle the other Adult Leaders of Troop 42 who thought it best to leave such an "honour" to a younger, more energetic leader.

Returning to the papers strewn before her, Sarah felt stress threatening to smother her once again.

Ironically enough, they had no funds with which to create a fundraiser. From a more optimistic point of view, costumes were not a problem. Troop 42 had quite a few proud parents who were more than willing to create costumes for the play. The bigger issue was the sets. A few yards of cloth were not a problem to donate; a few stacks of timber, a couple hundred nails, about twenty cans of paint, and every other thing they were in need of was an entirely different question.

And then there was the problem of the cast.

In choosing the cast, the Troop had decided to do nominations. It had turned out that Nicole was to play Juliet, Kirsten as the Nurse, Rebecca as Lady Capulet, and it had surprisingly ended there. Sarah frowned again, an expression she seemed to be wearing often these past couple of days. The three girls had been quite willing to take the parts, but no others had volunteered. It was quite obvious that they were terrified of performing on stage before an audience. Which was *extremely* bad. She had seven parts that were in desperate need of being filled.

What was she going to do?

What was he going to do? Matt Atanian thought grimly.

He couldn't just let his friends suffer under Justy's severely neurotic tyranny. Perhaps he could find support with the other Adult Leaders!

After quick mental slap upside the head, Matt returned to reality. Searching for help among the Adult Leaders would leave him with just as much progress as Napoleon had in his notorious flop in conquering Russia.

Matt's thoughts turned grimmer. There was only one thing to do and in a complete disregard for his sanity, he made his decision. He would help the Garden Snake Patrol in any way he could. Even if it meant his utter downfall.

The Porter sisters were brainstorming. Around them, girls worked diligently on patches, oblivious to the stress emanating from the three seated around the table full of papers and books.

"Seven parts left?" Nicole said, tapping her chin with a finger thoughtfully. "Well, I suppose I could call upon some debts to be paid."

"Nicole," Sarah said, fatigue evident in her features, "let's keep things legal."

"Oh." Nicole frowned. "Then that will be a little more difficult."

"Hey," Kirsten smiled, her eyes sparkling. "I have an idea where we can get some people to fill the parts."

Nicole and Sarah looked blankly at her, confusion playing on their faces. Suddenly, the little light bulbs in their heads went off. Nicole smiled, profits and dollar signs dancing through her head. Sarah frowned... fiercely.

"Kirsten," she began.

"Sarah, we don't have anyone else and besides they're all very talented, creative, and reliable!" Kirsten suddenly stood up and looked at her sisters. "I'm going to go ask. Sarah, wipe that scowl off your face and Nicole don't even think of trying to con those guys out of any money while they are doing us a favour!"

Kirsten turned and marched out of the room, leaving her two sisters staring after her in shock.

"Whoa." Sarah blinked. "Was that our sister?"

"She did say, *while*, right?" Nicole demanded, somewhat pleadingly.

The Garden Snake Patrol and Matt Atanian were staring morosely at the floor when Kirsten found them.

"Oh my," Kirsten said, her usually cheerful face plagued with concern. "What happened?"

"We're doomed," Bill Gelinas muttered.

"THIS SUCKS!!" Becker added.

"Life as we have known it has come to a bitter end." Hughes sighed despairingly.

"We've been assigned to work on our Theatre Badge by the SPL in order to raise money for a litter he's been wanting," Mike explained.

"Theatre Badge?!" Kirsten exclaimed excitedly. "That's great!"

"It is?" Aaron asked, confused.

"Guys." Kirsten smiled excitedly. "Our Troop is putting on a play and we need actors. If you help us out, I'm pretty sure we can work something out with the funds."

The melancholy mood lightened and the boys began to return to their normal states, or what could be defined as normal in their cases.

"What play is it?" Kenny asked, peeking up from his book.

"Romeo and Juliet."

"Uh, I don't do tights," Matt Swett announced.

A few busy weeks passed as the Garden Snake Patrol and a core group of girls Troop 42 collaborated on a production of Romeo and Juliet.

Things had...progressed.

As the Fates (and author) would have it, the two available Adult Leaders, Matt and Sarah, were chosen to

be Co-Directors. Many a rehearsal found Sarah muttering quietly to herself. Usually it was something to the effect of someone named, "Mr. Testosterone," and how he was no longer content with simply getting action in the kitchen, but now seemed to be aiming for getting it behind the curtain as well.

Mike's beloved hat had once again proven useful. This time it providing a vessel from which parts, scrawled on small sheets of folded paper, were chosen. It turned out that Aaron was to play the part of Romeo, while Gelinas (the eternal declarer of the obvious) was cast as Benvolio and Mike as Mercutio. Matt Swett's slip of paper had read Friar Lawrence. Perry had picked the part of Tybalt, nearly tearing through the worn fabric of Mike's hat during his attempt to retrieve a paper. After soothing Mike's hysteria and reassuring him that his hat was just fine, Becker had chosen Prince Escalus and Bill Hughes was to be cast as Paris.

Kenny had put his book down and had quietly volunteered to work on the sets. After everyone had gotten over the initial shock that Kenny had put his book down, they happily took him up on the offer. Sarah had introduced him to a small group of Juniors who had previously been working on the sets. After a few moments of whispered conversation in a small huddle, Kenny and the Juniors apparently had devised a plan and exuberantly set to work.

Now, two weeks later on a rainy Tuesday night, the Garden Snake Patrol, having cleared the tables to make room for moving about, were joyfully munching on pizza as they patiently awaited the Girl Scout Troop members for that night's rehearsal at Perfumes Pizza.

"Hey," Bill Gelinas frowned. "Why are we rehearsing here if Perfume wants us dead?"

"Shut-up, Bill!"

The door creaked open, jingling the little bell that hung above. Four Girl Scouts trudged through the door wearing dripping ponchos and similar expressions of extreme annoyance.

“Um, hello,” Matt ventured as Sarah Porter peeled off her poncho and plopped down beside him. Sarah blinked at him. “Right.” Matt nodded and retreated to his pepperoni pizza. Even though the two were Co-Directors, relations between them had progressed no further than an occasional civil comment relating to the play.

“Hey guys,” the ever-cheerful Kirsten greeted. The boys smiled and returned a greeting.

“Right,” Nicole was saying to Rebecca as the two sat down, “stocks in TELREX Inc. are due to shoot up again and then we should be well on our way. I’m thinking that probably next month sometime we should make our move. And if all else fails, I can tap into some of my more lucrative accounts.”

“Okay. I’m counting on you to pull us through,” Rebecca said doubtfully.

“Becky. Becky. Becky. Have I ever led you astray?”

“Well, there was that one time in Brownies that...” Becky began.

“Wasn’t my fault!” Nicole waved her hand dismissively. “Nowhere in their medical forms did it say that those guerrilla troops were allergic to Fruit Loops!”

“Can we get started?” Sarah asked.

Nicole and Rebecca smiled sweetly at her.

“Thank you.”

“I thought maybe we could work on Act II Scene IV,” Matt flipped through his copy, looking for the scene.

Sarah nodded, finding the page. “Well, take it away, Benvolio and Mercutio.”

The two boys hopped up from their seats and moved to the open floor.

“Ahem!” Gelinas loudly cleared his throat while everyone rolled their eyes.

“Where the devil should this Romeo be? – Came he not home to night?” Mike demanded, easily slipping into the part of Mercutio.

“Not to his Father’s; I spoke with this man,” Billy replied quickly, shaking his head dramatically for effect.

"Why, that same pale hard-hearted wench, that Rosaline, torments him so, that he will sure run mad!" Mike grabbed a piece of pizza and took a large, violent bite out of it to reiterate his point.

"Tybalt, the kinsman to old Capulet, hath sent a letter to his father's house," Billy replied, pointing his cup of soda at Mike.

"Uh mhallgemeh, mon mah mihfee," Mike replied, nodding quite seriously.

"What?!" Matt and Sarah asked simultaneously.

Mike turned, still chewing. "Uh mhallgemeh, mon mah mihfee," he repeated.

"Try chewing, swallowing, then speaking," Matt Swett offered in a somewhat sarcastic tone.

Mike did so. "A challenge, on my life."

"Ohhhh." The Co-directors nodded. Matt waved for them to continue.

"Romeo will answer it." Billy sighed.

"Any man, that can write, may answer a letter." Mike sneered.

Suddenly, the door opened letting a gust of wind blow through the room. Mike's hat was swept from his head and onto the floor.

"Hey guys!" Hughes called, sliding inside and closing the door behind him. "Sorry I'm late."

Mike stooped to retrieve his hat and felt a smaller gust of wind above his head followed by the sound of a sharp "twang". Frowning, he glanced to the wall and froze. Still quivering in the wall was a sturdy arrow deeply embedded in the wall. Mike softly whimpered for a moment and then slowly turned his head. Perfume stood behind the counter, holding a large crossbow. The group gaped at her.

"I clean. It slip." Perfume shrugged.

"Mmm, pizza!" Hughes leaned over and grabbed a slice, ravenously tearing into it.

Wednesday night rolled around and once again Boy and Girl Scouts assembled into the Church in the Acres.

Sarah Porter wandered down the hall to the room Kenny and the Juniors had taken over for set construction. She was hoping to finally get a progress report from the secretive group see if they needed any materials.

Sarah reached the door and raised her hand to knock, when from behind the door a loud cranking noise sounded and was followed by the sounds of metal violently scraping against metal. Sarah jerked back, staring at the door with her mouth agape. The scraping continued for a moment and then was quiet.

Sarah slowly approached the door, pushing a lock of hair out of her eyes. Raising her hand once more, she knocked lightly. For a few moments there was silence, then an unintelligible conversation, and then silence once again. Sarah stared in confusion at the door, wondering what in the name of Juliette Gordon Low was going on in there.

The door before her slowly creaked open a fraction of an inch, revealing a green uniformed Girl Scout. Sarah recognized her as Kathryn Hurst, one of the girls who had been in the group since Daisy Girl Scouts. Kathryn smiled.

“Is there something I can do for you Sarah?”

“Um, hi, Kathryn.” Sarah returned the smile, somewhat curious as to why she wouldn’t open the door fully. “Can I come in? I wanted to see how the sets were coming.”

“Just a moment.” Kathryn disappeared and the door shut, leaving a very baffled Sarah in the hall.

Once again, Sarah heard a murmured conversation. After a few soft grunts of what sounded like agreement, the door once again opened and emitted Kathryn’s head.

She smiled. “I’m afraid we can’t let you in, Sarah.”

“W-why not?”

“You’re human and therefore a potential risk.”

“Excuse me?”

“Good night, Sarah!” Kathryn waved and closed the door.

“No! W-wait!” Sarah tried to stop the door with her body, but it had shut already. She stared at it in quiet

shock. *That hadn't just happened, had it?* she thought incredulously. The sounds of metal scraping and banging returned. For a few moments, Sarah stood there watching the door and frowning. She turned, walking slowly away and casting looks over her shoulder at the door.

Matt Atanian blinked dumbly at Sarah. "Could you repeat that?"

"I'm a potential risk." Sarah frowned.

"A what?"

"A potential risk," she repeated, too confused to be exasperated.

"Whoa," Hughes said as he stopped to listen, his arms laden with costumes. "Sounds like a personal problem."

"Bill..." Matt growled.

"Retreat! Retreat!" Hughes squeaked, backing up and fleeing in a random direction.

Sarah sighed and crossed her arms. "It would be nice to know how are sets are coming along."

"Well, I guess it's my turn to try," Matt said. "I'll be back in a bit."

"Right. I'm going to starting Aaron and Perry working on their duel."

Matt stopped dead in his tracks. Duel? Aaron duel with Perry? Something in his head told him that it wasn't a good idea. Knowing Perry, he'd use this chance to try to kill Aaron and from past experiences it would most likely fail, but still Matt couldn't take any chances.

"Um..." Matt turned, trying to hide the panicked look on his face. "Maybe we should work on that later."

"I think it would be best if we didn't wait." Sarah shook her head. "Fight scenes are complicated. We have to make sure Aaron and Perry have it perfect. It has to look natural and be safe. We don't want anyone hurt."

"Well, we don't, but Perry sure wouldn't mind it." Matt muttered.

“What was that?” Sarah asked, looking up from her copy of the play.

“Oh, nothing. I’m going to go and talk to the guys real quick then make a quick run to check on the sets.” Matt smiled nervously and placed a hand on the nape of his neck.

“Okay.” Sarah looked around the room, spotting Perry practicing his lines. “Could you send Aaron over when you’re done?” she called over her shoulder as she headed toward Perry.

Matt didn’t respond. He was already half way across the room toward where Mike, Aaron, and the Bills were practicing their lines.

“Bad news, guys,” he said, joining him.

“Justy’s planning on running for President?” Bill Hughes snickered. The others stared at him in horror. They whipped their heads around, reassuring themselves that their infamous SPL was nowhere to be found.

“Jeez, Bill,” Aaron grumbled, “it’s a good thing he’s not around. Can you imagine what he would have done with an idea like that?”

They all shuddered at the thought.

“Sarah is having Aaron and Perry practice their duel,” Matt said quietly.

“Is she nuts?!” the three boys demanded in unison, while Aaron turned pale and gulped.

“Well, it’s not as if she knows Perry is intent on having us all six feet under! And it’s a major part of the play, we can’t put it off forever.” Matt sighed in dismay, shrugging apologetically at Aaron.

“Would he really try something with all these girls around?” Bill Gelinas asked incredulously.

The group thought back to the Klondike Derby and nodded reluctantly. Perry certainly didn’t have any qualms about charging at them with a sword during the opening ceremony.

“I guess we’re just going to have to watch Perry real close and get him if he tries anything,” Mike responded grimly.

“Good luck. Aaron, keep your guard up. I’ll be back as soon as I can.” Matt turned toward the stairwell and reluctantly walked toward the Set Room, leaving the others to protect Aaron as best they could.

When Aaron and the other Scouts joined Sarah and Perry, she was already giving Perry some pointers on his death scene.

“Try not to make it too showy,” she said.

“I die?” Perry asked, obviously disturbed.

“Yes. It’s preferred if you land with an arm outstretched or something. Makes it look more dramatic.”

“I die??”

“Yes. And if you don’t want to end up injured, I suggest you drop to a knee first and then fall over,” Sarah continued.

“I DIE?!”

“YES! Get over it!” Sarah yelled back.

“I no die! I mighty Amazon warrior!” Perry sniffed haughtily, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Not in this play.” Sarah glared at him. “You’re a pompous noble who bites the dust in Act III Scene I. Besides, Amazons are female warriors. You don’t qualify.”

“Details, details!” Perry answered, throwing his arms up.

Sarah visibly restrained herself from beating Perry to a bloody, twitching pulp. The Scouts winced, pitying their friend Matt and hoping to never feel the wrath of Sarah Porter. Sighing exasperatedly, Sarah turned and noticed the Scouts hovering close by.

“Well,” she said. “Come on. Let’s get to work on the scene.” She handed Aaron and Perry foil wrapped wooded swords and pushed them to the cleared area. “Ok, you two. We need this to be safe, but believable. Think of the Highlander movies.”

Aaron shuddered involuntary and rubbed his neck, recalling his dream during the Klondike Derby. That didn’t seem to be a problem.

“What those?” Perry asked, never having seen those films.

Sarah sighed and told Perry to just follow Aaron’s lead, countering his strikes with his own.

Mike and the Bills watched Perry with wary eyes, waiting for the Amazon to make his move. Perry couldn’t do much with a wooden sword. Then again, in light of all his past attempts, Perry couldn’t do much with a real sword either. But, they couldn’t take any chances.

Aaron grinned inwardly. He wasn’t doing so badly, but Perry’s awkwardness made him not much of an opponent. Recalling some of the less gruesome scenes from his dream, Aaron was provided with some ideas as how to proceed in kicking Perry’s arse. He brought his “sword” down in a vicious slice, aiming for Perry’s neck. The Amazon, true to his nature, parried rather clumsily and stumbled backward.

Unfortunately, Perry stumbled right into a table littered with various implements used in the making of the play’s costumes. For an instant, the table seemed to support his weight, and then the group heard a loud “crack” and the table collapsed. Perry’s weight converted the table into a catapult, flinging scissors, needles, pins, and clothing shears toward Aaron.

Mike and the Bills gasped in horror.

Then time painstakingly slowed to a mere crawl.

Aaron dropped his sword, throwing his arms up to shield his torso and head.

Mike dived for Aaron’s legs, tackling his fellow Scout to the ground and out of the path of the projectiles.

The tools thudded harmlessly against the wall, some wobbling and some cascading to the floor in a sluggish waterfall of sharpened metal.

“GRAB HIM!” Gelinas bellowed, lurching gradually toward Perry who was stumbling to his feet.

“HOLD IT, PERRY!” Hughes yelled.

“WHAT?!” Becker added.

“STOP!” Sarah screamed.

“FIGHT?!” Swett whooped.

“NO FIGHT!” Mike and Aaron shouted.

“SALSA!” Will Shmuler, appearing out of nowhere, sang.

As Hughes and Gelinas were on their way to restrain Perry, somehow a couple of pens and pencils strewn across the floor rolled under their feet. The Bills were pitched forward and slammed against Perry, causing all three to crash to the floor. Mike and Aaron rushed over, intent on putting the fray to a stop. But true to the nature of brawls, the Scout’s good intentions were disregarded and they were sucked in. Will Shmuler threw himself in, barking and growling. Matt Swett was about to scream something sarcastic to Becker when the two were suddenly grabbed by the foot and dragged into the middle.

Whether it was pure clumsiness or fate, what resulted next was something akin to a street riot smashed together with a greased pig catching contest. Body limbs, loose clothing articles (such as Mike’s hat), and furniture were knocked over and flung elsewhere. At one point, Will Shmuler was turned into a human projectile and launched across the room only to be lost within the piles of boxes and clothing scraps.

Sarah’s screams were lost on the writhing mass of bodies. Frustrated, she turned to Nicole and shouted something that was drowned out by the struggles behind her. Apparently, Nicole heard her and ran from the room. Kirsten frowned, wondering where her sister was off to. She didn’t have to wait long for an answer. Nicole returned, laden with a bucket, water sloshing over the rim.

Kirsten’s heart stopped. Water. That was bad.

She whipped her head over to the boys. They were completely unaware of what Sarah, so innocently, intended to do. She grimaced and prayed her twin would forgive her.

“Those guys better appreciate this,” she muttered. Kirsten took a deep breath and threw herself at her sister, tackling the girl to the floor. The bucket of water crashed to the floor, spilling the contents. The sound of splashing water struck a chord of fear in the cursed Scouts and the brawl stopped abruptly.

“Hey.” Nicole grunted. “What was that for?”

“I, was,” Kirsten swallowed, hating herself for what she was about to say, “on my way to help and I must have slipped.” She promised herself she would make it up to Nicole someday.

“What on earth do you think you’re doing?!” Sarah demanded of the Scouts.

“Sorry, Sarah.” Bill Gelinis smiled sheepishly. “I guess we just got too caught up in the moment.”

“Could someone get of my back?” Swett grunted. “I think my ovaries were dislodged.” No one paid Swett any attention.

“Um,” Bill Hughes waved a hand in the air while he grasped for the first excuse that happened upon him. “Trying to play our characters to the fullest extent. You know?”

“We were, uh, practicing a street brawl,” Becker added, checking to make sure his CD player was in working order.

The group blinked at Becker. The normal volume of his comment threw them off.

“Yeah! That’s it,” Mike recovered and declared dramatically, waving his arms emphatically. “We were adding to the parts, pouring the very essence of our souls into these printed words to give these characters life and existence!”

The group blinked at Mike. He could really lay it on thick.

Sarah arched an eyebrow. “Is that how it is?”

“That’s it.” The boys recovered and nodded, mumbling agreements.

“Well,” Sarah placed a hand on her hip and glared at the boys still in a mound of tangled body parts. “That’s going to be rather difficult for you, Mike, since you were just turned into human shish kebab about a page ago. And Bill,” She said, pointing at Hughes and then to Perry. “You’re on his side!”

Bill blinked and smiled nervously at Perry, who was shooting him a look that embodied the term, "if looks could kill".

At this point in time, Matt decided to return from his errand. But he was less than reassured. He was frowning and had a disturbed glint in his eye. Catching sight of the members of the Garden Snake Patrol, he stopped abruptly and his jaw dropped.

"What happened?!"

Sarah turned, brushing a lock of red hair from her face. "We've been working on some scenes. It seems they have street brawling down. Did you check on the sets?"

In the background, groans and grunts could be heard as the Garden Snake Patrol untangled themselves.

"Bill! Let go of my leg!"

"OW! That's attached!!"

"I mighty Amazon Warrior!"

"My ovaries!!"

"WHAT?!"

"Never mind."

Matt shook his head to clear it. "I went to the room. But there was no one there."

"What?" Sarah asked, her eyes widening.

"I found this attached to the door." Matt handed her a small white card folded once.

Sarah took it warily, as if she was afraid it would bite. Slowly opening it, she discovered a small note, the handwriting neat and precise.

*Dear Mr. Atanian and Miss Porter,*

*I'm afraid the Juniors and I have run into some technical difficulties. We have some matters to attend to on the other coast. Our approximate return will be within three weeks.*

*Thank you,  
Kenneth C. Pendrell*

Sarah followed Matt's earlier example, and her jaw dropped.

"Matters to attend to on the other coast?!"

"I'm guessing it was rather urgent." Matt shrugged.

"One problem, Matt." Sarah sighed. "Our opening night is in three weeks."

"Two problems," Matt corrected her. "They took the sets with them." Sarah's lower lip began to tremble.

"PEONS!"

Matt and Sarah both flinched.

Everyone turned to see Justy and the ever-present Proctor standing in the doorway.

"After much deliberation," Justy said, the spittle flying from the SPL's lips and seeming to sizzle when it hit the floor, "I've decided that it would be in my best interest to take this project into my own hands. I cannot allow brainless peons to ruin my plans for world domination. "

"Oh no." Sarah moaned, covering her face with her hands.

Matt sighed in despair and wondered what he had done wrong in another life. It looked like his utter downfall was well on its way.

## *Chapter Eighteen: ...And the Men and Women Merely Players*

by Nicole Colosimo with Matthew Atanian  
*and bits here and there by some guy named  
William Shakespere*

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### **21 Days before Opening Night...**

Huddled around a lacquered table at Perfume's Pizza, the cast and directors of *Romeo and Juliet* sat in gloomy silence. The once steaming pies of delectable pizza now sat cold and untouched. In unison, the group sighed.

"So," Matt Atanian said, breaking the silence. "Not only are we lacking a set crew, but we've no sets. And then there's the cataclysmic problem of one particularly nasty SPL."

"Maybe SPL have nasty accident," Perfume suggested not so vaguely, playing with a rather large butcher's knife. Mike and Aaron, sitting on either side of the Amazon, visibly paled and scooted their chairs slightly further from her.

Sarah frowned. Perfume looked awfully familiar. Then it hit her. That was the girl she caught Matt making out with in the kitchen of The Church in the Acres! *What was she doing here?* Sarah wondered testily. Anger surged throughout her body and she didn't bother to put together the fact that not only was Perfume present at their meeting, but she was also aware of the current problems of the play. Another wave of rage passed over her again when she concluded that Matt and the little strumpet were probably going to get a little action after the meeting.

"Typical male," she growled under her breath.

Matt heard Sarah mutter something unintelligible but decided against asking her to repeat herself. The look on her face was enough to send a sane man screaming.

Nope, better to remain living and intact than to bother Sarah Porter.

“Well.” Nicole cleared her throat. Bill Hughes smiled dreamily at the devious goddess disguised as a Girl Scout beside him. “‘Work’ of that type is quite pricey, but attainable.”

“Nicole!” Kirsten exclaimed in horror.

“Well, it is!” Nicole retorted. “And I do have some friends who have some friends who know these people who ‘worked’ along with these ‘workers’ who have the reputation for being reliable.”

“Networking,” Becky Chambers, having spent most of last month working on her Entrepreneurship Patch, nodded in appreciation. Making contacts with people who knew people who were acquainted with people’s dry cleaners always led to something useful.

Nicole excelled at it.

“Can I help it if I have vision?” Nicole smiled innocently.

“But, I don’t relish the thought of spending the rest of my life behind bars,” Bill Gelinis added, grimacing.

“Well, these types of things usually have a way of not getting back to the source. But, I don’t see any of you coming up with anything else,” Nicole said, placing a hand over her mouth as she yawned delicately.

“Nicole Porter,” Sarah growled. Matt could have sworn there was steam seething from her ears. He sighed wistfully, a smile tugging at his lips. She was beautiful when she was enraged. “You and I are going to have a long talk when we get home.”

Nicole grimaced.

“So, any other plans?” Aaron sighed and then hunched over the table, using his arms as a pillow.

“Why don’t we just get Justy preoccupied with something else? Then, as always, he’ll get obsessed about that thing, thus forgetting the play and us,” Mike offered.

“Will it really work?” Kirsten asked.

“WHAT?!” Becker bellowed suddenly, startling the group and causing Matt Swett to promptly lose his balance and fall backwards onto the tiled floor.

“OOF. My jugular!”

“You okay, Swett?” Matt Atanian blinked.

“Ugh...uh, yeah.” Swett grunted painfully. “I’m... ah, I’m gonna go get some ice.” He stumbled to the drink station and pressed his glass to the lever for ice. Swett frowned as his eye caught a single drink can placed beside the Iced Tea dispenser. He hobbled closer and read the label.

“Kiwi/Mocha Fruit Juice,” he read and cringed. “That’s disgusting.” The can seemed to be covered with dents and... marks from someone’s teeth? The can seemed to bare these as badges of honour. It was regal in a sick sort of way.

Well, in the spirit of furthering the damage of the Kiwi/Mocha Fruit Juice, Swett staggered over to the can and decided that this can needed to be placed some where else, and where better than flung over his shoulder? Snatching the up the Kiwi/Mocha fruit juice, he flipped it in his hand and then lobbed it gracefully over his shoulder and out the window that had been somehow conveniently left open.

A yelp of pain came from outside, and then someone yelled, “RANMA!! THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT!”

The group blinked a few times and then continued on with business.

“Well, what would best distract Justy from the glory of the spotlight?” Mike asked.

“Another spotlight,” Bill Hughes answered deadpan.

Everyone ignored Will Shmuler who had jumped onto the table, banging a pot with a large metal spoon. Perfume yawned and grabbed Will by the collar, dragged him to the supply closet, and locked him in.

“Correct! The only thing that would successfully draw Justy’s attention elsewhere would have to be an equally enticing proposition,” Mike declared, waving around his spoon. Why someone would need a spoon in an Amazonian pizza parlour with a moody, violent proprietor is anyone’s guess. Mike continued to wave his utensil excitedly.

“Hey!” Aaron exclaimed. “What if we invented some random Boy Scout conference someplace and convince Justy that he’s been selected as the Key Speaker! He’d drop the play for sure.”

“Hmm, yes. And we could insure it a little by getting some of Nicole’s ‘friends’ to keep Justy occupied,” Sarah nodded, then looked sternly to her smirking sister. “Nothing violent, mind you. We just want him preoccupied for a decent amount of time.”

“So, where should we send him?” Gelinas asked. “Abu Dhabi?”

“The place where Garfield always sends Neremal?” Aaron asked dubiously.

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. Neremal always makes it back. Do we really want Justy to make it back?” Mike asked, scrunching his nose in distaste.

“Where’s Abu Dhabi?” Swett interjected.

He was answered by silence.

Matt sighed. Right about now, Kenny would peek up from his latest tomb of knowledge and provide them with another brilliant answer. He had to admit it...he missed the adolescent genius.

“Right.” Matt sighed. “Well, why don’t we find out where it is and if it’s far enough away for Justy to be sent?”

“Pluto wouldn’t be far enough,” Hughes grumbled.

“Well, why don’t we get to work.” Sarah nodded. “Nicole, you get in touch with some people who can keep Justy...”

“And Proctor,” Mike added.

“And Proctor, busy. You guys see if you can’t come up with some believable conference someplace and get him hooked. And please, people, practice your lines!”

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## 16 Days before Opening Night...

*“Proctor!”*

Within a blink of an eye, Proctor was beside Justy's side.

"Yes, Captain?" he inquired, dusting an invisible piece of lint off of Justy's eternally taut uniform.

"What are those?!" Justy demanded, pointing to the green pile of spherical vegetables on his dinner plate.

Proctor leaned over and inspected the pile. "Those are peas, Captain."

"OF COURSE THEY ARE, IDIOT!" Justy whapped Proctor upside the head with his baton.

Mrs. Yung smiled adoringly at her son as she washed the dishes. It was so nice to see Justy interacting with kids his own age. Proctor was such a sweet child. Of course, it never crossed her mind why Proctor never went home.

"I *hate* peas, Proctor!" Justy shrieked.

"Yes, Captain."

"Well, don't just stand there! Eat!" Justy commanded.

Proctor, detesting peas himself, dutifully took a spoon from the table and began to shovel peas into his mouth. Anything for his Captain.

"Justy dear," Mrs. Yung cooed, "something came in the mail for you today." She handed him an envelope, which he promptly handed to Proctor. Proctor fumbled with his spoon for a moment, and then withdrew his Industrial sized Swiss Army Knife, complete with a letter opener, a stapler, and a fax machine! In seconds, the envelope was opened and Justy was examining the contents.

A single sheet of Boy Scouts of America letterhead with a formal letter neatly typed on the crisp white sheet.

Justy coolly surveyed the first couple of lines until his beady little eyes caught the word, "congratulations". It seemed the Senior Patrol Leaders of certain troops across the nation had been chosen to participate in a retreat that was being held someplace called Abu Dhabi. For a single moment, common sense grabbed a hold of his brain. Since when did the Boy Scouts of America start holding retreats in foreign countries?

As quickly as it came, the common sense dissipated. Justy Yung had been selected for his wit, brilliance, charm, and diligence! It was glorious!!!

“Proctor! Quick! Pack my bags! We’re off to Abu Dhabi!” Justy leapt to stand on his chair, laughing maniacally and waving his baton about.

“Right Sir. Do you want me to finish these first?” Proctor asked, still chomping on the vile peas.

---

### **14 Days before Opening Night...**

Aaron gulped and looked at the young, blonde girl before him. She was a mirror reflection of Kirsten, but every fibre of her being screamed Nicole Porter.

Nicole was looking at him oddly, noting his nervous behaviour. She smiled knowingly for a moment and then cocked her head to the side.

“Say Aaron,” she said, “about this kiss thing. What do you say we just settle on a peck on the cheek? I don’t think I’d be too comfortable kissing another guy while I’m with Jason, acting or not. Okay?”

Aaron’s eyes lit up. “Okay! I mean, ahem, if you think it’s best,” he stammered.

Nicole smiled and nodded, glancing over to Kirsten who had been watching the exchange with apprehension. She watched her sister sigh in relief as Aaron quickly accepted her proposition.

*That one’s on the house, sis,* she thought and smiled softly.

Suddenly, she shook herself. *I’m becoming soft!* Darting her eyes around the room, she searched for some sort of scheme that would rid her of the warm, fuzzy feeling in her tummy.

Spotting Becker, her mind quickly unfolded a lovely, productive scheme.

“Oh, Bec-ker!” she called in a voice that was almost sickeningly sweet.

---

### **13 Days before Opening Night...**

Matthew Atanian watched the cast of Romeo and Juliet and smiled. Some things were still being worked out, but over all, they were in excellent shape. They had abandoned the use of scripts about a week ago and to his delight, they were doing splendidly. People knew their lines and were quick to fall into character.

Perry hadn't made anymore attempts on the lives of the cursed Scouts, but the boys were still wary of the volatile Amazon. To the surprise of the scouts, Perfume (or Perry) seemed to be enjoying life in the spotlight a little too much.

Matt grimaced. Of course, there was little problem of her speech patterns. Perry couldn't seem to grasp proper grammar that existed within the English language. Her recitations were often choppy and dragging. The good thing was that Perry seemed to infuse everything with this utter hatred of Romeo and his pals. Of course, he attributed it to the fact that Perry (or Perfume) wanted to kill them. Well, at least the anger in Perry's voice made up for the halting lines that were seemingly forced from his mouth.

Will Shmuler was still locked in Perfume's supply closet.

Sarah had seen to their publicity. All of Springfield knew of this play and they were hoping for a good turnout. Although he had Sarah and Kirsten's word that everything was ok, Matt had his doubts about allowing Nicole and Becky to handle the admission charges. Last night at practice, Nicole had presented an argument that had almost convinced Matt Swett to sell his spleen! Matt shuddered, making a mental note to never be persuaded to discuss financial matters with Nicole Porter.

Matt returned his attention to the scene that was currently being practiced. It was the scene where the Nurse goes to see Romeo. Aaron and Kirsten were exchanging words rapidly, going through the practiced dialogue with ease. He smiled and rolled his eyes. He wished those two would just admit it to themselves that there was more than friendship going on. Of course, whenever confronted the two would just turn beet red and stammer out denials. It was rather amusing in a way, but more frustrating than anything.

His thoughts turned once more to more pressing matters.

Namely, they had no sets.

Matt frowned worriedly and wondered where the smeg Kenny and the Juniors were. They had disappeared without a trace and had taken the sets for the play with them, leaving a note that assured Matt and Sarah that they'd return before Opening Night. Matt groaned inwardly. He wanted to trust Kenny, but he had to be practical. At a loss for ideas and funds, Sarah had suggested performing the play without the use of sets, unless Kenny and the Juniors somehow miraculously appeared.

Opening night was quickly approaching, and a miracle was all they had time for.

At least they had gotten rid of Justy and Proctor.

---

## 10 Days before Opening Night...

Justy looked around him in disgust.

He was in the middle of a Pakistani bazaar. People donned long white, black, or multicoloured robes swarmed around him. Merchants and customers shouted back and forth, haggling in a foreign tongue. More than once he was shoved aside by a cow or herd of goats, driven by a young boy.

There was dust *everywhere*.

Including on Justy's usually spit spot uniform. The combination of camel and cattle dung, dead fish rotting in the sun, pungent overripe fruits, and other unknown smells was overwhelming. Justy paled, feeling that all too familiar sense of nausea that had become a constant during this trip, creep over him.

Justy's stomach gurgled unhappily and then was suddenly emptied into a nearby alleyway. Vomit joined the cache of stench in the city street.

*"Proctor!"* Justy croaked.

"Yes, Captain!"

Proctor wet his handkerchief with his canteen and washed Justy's face clean of the vomit. While Justy leaned against the mud brick wall, Proctor procured a toothbrush and paste from Justy's pack (which of course he was carrying) and proceeded to squeeze the gel from the tooth and pat it down with his tongue.

"Here you are, Captain."

Justy took the offered item and proceeded to brush his teeth, staring despondently at the crowd milling just beyond the mouth of the alley.

Proctor took a deep breath of air and smiled brightly. "Isn't this exciting, Captain? It's a marvellous day to be at the bazaar!"

Justy stared at Proctor, weak from his battle with his stomach's innards. He feebly raised his baton and batted it against Proctor's head.

"Quiet, idiot," he said weakly.

"Yes, sir."

---

## **8 Days before Opening Night...**

Kenneth E. Pendrell looked up from the large tome he was engrossed in and set his pencil down. With a quick look at his watch for confirmation, the young genius nodded.

Slowly, he closed the book and stacked the papers before him neatly.

He stood up, attracting the attention of the Juniors scattered about the well-lit room.

"It is time we go."

The Juniors nodded and performed the same actions as he had. One by one, they stood and straightened their green uniforms.

Kenny shined his glasses and set them again on his face, pushing them up by the nose-bridge. He looked the group over and nodded, walking slowly from the room.

The Juniors looked at one another, nodded simultaneously, and followed.

---

#### **4 Days before Opening Night...**

The five cursed Scouts smiled at one another, sweaty, tired, and satisfied with their work in transforming the hall into a splendid looking theatre.

The stage consisted of a nicely made raised platform, thick curtains complete with a working pulley system and sand bags, a pretty decent lighting system, a small but workable back stage, and even a couple of dressing rooms.

The seats for the audience were in neat rows that softly curved around their stage.

"Now, if we only had the sets," Aaron mused.

"Kenny will come back," Mike said solemnly. "He's a trustworthy kid."

"We can count on him," Bill Hughes added.

"He will." Matt nodded in agreement, looking at the finished work before them. "Well, you guys," he said looking at his watch. "We'd better get going. Don't forget Dress Rehearsal tomorrow from 3 to 8."

The others groaned but obediently turned to leave the building.

Just as they were leaving the building, a large, black cloud suddenly covered the sun.

And then the heavens opened and it poured down rain.

A red headed girl, a duck, a squirrel, a cat, and a dog stood beneath the pelting raindrops in piles of clothing and felt the all too familiar feeling of frustration settle upon them.

“Come to think of it guys,” Matty said, “it’d be a good idea to keep lots of hot water on hand on Opening Night, just in case.”

---

### **3 Days before Opening Night...**

Justy Yung stood in the middle of a desert, the scorching sun unleashing its savage rays without mercy. His uniform was torn, he was covered with dust and sand, and smelled worse than a pile of manure sunbathing in the middle of a garbage heap. His right hand was clenching and unclenching around the slim baton that had been a gift from Proctor. A slight twitch appeared spasmodically next to his left eye and a large vein was pulsing in his forehead.

Justy was far from happy.

“Uh, Captain?” Proctor called timidly from behind him. “I think we’ve been had, sir.”

If Justy was bad, Proctor was horrendous. He hadn’t bathed well over a week (giving Justy all the spare water), he was dressed in the scraps that hadn’t been used to mend Justy’s uniform, and his skin resembled the colour of a lobster.

Justy calmly turned to Proctor, fixed him with a glare that would put a basilisk to shame, and spoke in an eerily calm manner.

“When I get back to Springfield, their hearts and spleens will be mine. They shall fear the wrath of JUSTY YUNG!” He threw his hands to the sky and let forth a

sputtering, maniacal laughter that was sure to have created a good-sized earthquake somewhere around the southern half of California.

“Uh, sir?”

Laughter.

“Sir?”

More laughter.

“Right sir.” Proctor sighed and sat down to wait out his Captain’s latest break from sanity.

---

## **Opening Night...**

### **5 hours before Curtain Call...**

Matt Atanian walked through the main door to the Church in the Acres and felt his stomach tense. He adjusted his trench coat and pulled at his fedora.

“Great,” he grumbled. “Five hours to go and I’m already nervous.”

“Honestly, Atanian,” Sarah’s voice called to him from behind, “you’ve got to learn some control.” She strode past him.

Matt was about to make a reply when he noticed the unnaturally tight grip she had on her purse. The straps looked like they were about to be torn to bits. He smiled to himself, shaking his head as he followed her in.

Well, at least he wasn’t the only one who was nervous, even if she wouldn’t admit to it.

Matt followed Sarah into the auditorium and then his jaw dropped.

He blinked a couple of times and then rubbed his eyes in disbelief.

It was still there.

On their makeshift stage, was a realistic looking scene of a sixteenth century Italian city square. Shops, stalls, wagons of wares, and other random props dotted the platform, even a working fountain that bubbled with sparkling clear water.

Matt, his jaw slack, stumbled to the stage for a closer inspection. Sarah quickly followed him, her eyes bulging.

The makes of this set had seen to every single detail. The walls of the “shops” and the tiles on the “roofs” had small traces of erosion, flowers and vines dotted the windowsills, and there was a faint chirping sound in the background that was followed up by a slight breeze.

“We tried to make it as realistic as possible, Mr. Atanian,” a quite voice said from behind him. “Is it suitable?”

Matt twirled about to find Kenny and his crew of Juniors standing silently before him. Kenny smiled and pushed his glasses up on his nose. The Juniors nodded toward Matt as one and then in unison smiled at Sarah.

Matt smiled in relief and rushed forward to grasp the young boy’s hand. “It’s better than suitable, Kenny! It’s fantastic!” he said exuberantly, clapping his hand on Kenny’s back. “I’m so glad you’re back!”

“It’s magnificent Kenny!” Sarah said, matching Matt’s excitement. She gave the boy a brief hug and then moved off to greet her Juniors.

The group was momentarily distracted by the arrival of the rest of the cast.

“Would ya’ look at that!”

“Great googely moogely!!”

“WHAT?!”

“Awesome!”

“Hey Kenny!”

“KENNY!” the entire group bellowed, rushing over to welcome the boy and the girls back.

---

### **3 hours before Curtain Call...**

“It’s completely computerized, Mr. Atanian,” Kenny was saying as he patiently explained the workings of the set to Matt and Sarah. “One of the Juniors and myself shall be at the main console while the others stand by to

ensure a smooth precedence of the sets on and off the stage. The computer has been programmed to allow for some minor time delays here and there, otherwise there shall be a steady changing of sets."

"Oh Kenny, this is better than we could have ever hoped for!" Sarah breathed, staring at the console in amazement. "Thank you so much."

"You're quite welcome, Miss Sarah." Kenny smiled and bowed his head modestly. "The Juniors and I are honoured to have worked for you and are looking forward to a spectacular show."

---

### **1 hour before Curtain Call...**

"Well, the lights are on, the refreshments are set out, the cast is getting ready, and the directors are pacing nervously," Bill Hughes said, watching Matt and Sarah muttering to themselves as they strode back and forth at the foot of the stage.

"I think we're set," Aaron nodded.

"All we need now is an audience." Mike sighed.

As if answering Mike's comment, three cars pulled into the parking lot of The Church in the Acres. Several more followed. It seemed like people were intent on getting a good seat for the show.

"Uh, check on that last one Mike," Matt Swett said joining them.

"Well then!" Mike grinned and rubbed his hands together. "Let's get back and finish getting ready!"

---

### **Curtain Call...**

The lights flickered, announcing the beginning of the play.

“Girl Scout Troop 42 and Boy Scout Troop 192 are proud to present Shakespeare’s all time thrilling tragedy, Romeo and Juliet.”

The audience applauded and some of the casts’ names were called out, ceasing when the curtains parted to reveal a small girl, no older than ten.

Matt and Sarah watched in nervous excitement as a Brownie Girl Scout sauntered on stage, the feather in her velvet cap dancing atop her head.

She was quite for a moment, causing Matt and Sarah to wince in the painful silence.

“Two houses!” She strongly called out. She continued her speech, reciting the lines perfectly.

The small girl smiled, a bottom front tooth missing, bowed and swept grandly off the stage.

Matt looked at Sarah.

Sarah looked at Matt.

“So far,” Matt said.

“So good,” Sarah added.

The show went rather smoothly. The cast remembered their lines perfectly, the sets were amazing, and the audience absolutely loved it.

Aaron smiled smugly to himself as he prepared to stroll onstage for the next scene. Nicole was up on the balcony, and Aaron walked onstage and delivered the opening monologue to the scene.

Then Nicole spoke. “Ay me!” she said.

“She speaks,” Aaron said, speaking more to the audience than to his co-star. “O, speak again, bright angel! for thou art As glorious to this night, being o’er my head As is a winged messenger of heaven Unto the white-upturned wondering eyes Of mortals that fall back to gaze on him When he bestrides the lazy-pacing clouds And sails upon the bosom of the air.” As he spoke, he failed to notice movement from just off stage.

“O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo? Deny thy father and refuse thy name; Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, And I'll no longer be a Capulet.”

“Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?”

“Tis but thy name that is my enemy; Thou art thyself, though not a Montague. What's Montague? it is nor hand, nor foot, Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part Belonging to a man. O, be some other name! What's in a name? that which we call a rose By any other name would smell as sweet; So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd, Retain that dear perfection which he owes Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name, And for that name which is no part of thee Take all myself.”

“I take thee at thy word: Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized; Henceforth I never will be Romeo.”

Aaron was startled as someone came out onto the stage shouting, “You no be Romeo, you be dead!”

Aaron turned and was then further startled to see Perry moving towards him, hefting a large pointed stick and as the distance closed between them Aaron could see ‘death’ in the Amazon’s eyes. Aaron gasped in horror.

Nicole, unsure how what was going on, went on with her next line.

“What man art thou that thus bescreen'd in night So stumblest on my counsel?”

Aaron forgot his next line.

Aaron panicked and forgot his line.

But that wasn't what was making his stomach churn with fear.

He gulped and glanced nervously toward the Backstage, in hopes that Matt or Sarah would be watching and ready.

They were watching all right, but they were far from ready.

“Oh no! Not now! Not now! What the hell is Perry doing?!” Matt exclaimed.

“What about the play?” Sarah asked.

“Line, line, line,” Matt chanted, flipping quickly through the script.

“Go back! You missed it!” Sarah hissed.

Suddenly, Bill Gelinas appeared behind Matt and Sarah. “Hey, you two, Aaron and Mike are in a life-or-death situation here, and you’re worried about lines in the play?”

Matt looked at Sarah. Sarah looked at Matt. They both turned to Bill.

“SHUT UP, BILL!!!”

They turned back to the script. Bill wandered away.

“This play book isn’t big enough for the two of us,” Matt muttered under his breath.

Sarah visibly restrained herself from snatching it from Matt and smashing it over his head. Meanwhile, the audience was staring in disbelief as Tybalt appeared on stage and ran towards Romeo.

“Got it!” Matt whooped triumphantly.

This time Sarah did snatch the book away and brushed haughtily past Matt.

“By a name I know not how to tell!” she hissed to Aaron.

Aaron’s face flooded, not with relief, but with horror.

“By a name I know not how to tell thee who I am: My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself, Because it is an enemy to thee; but forgive me for now I must flee, for there is a mad Amazon after me!”

“That’s not the line!” Sarah frowned and flipped through the playbook, engrossed in the pages.

The audience was on the edge of their seats as the play took a most unexpected turn.

Aaron tried to run but Petty caught up to him and blocked his escape. Mike suddenly came onto the stage from the opposite side and tossed Aaron a sword and shield. Aaron smiled gratefully and caught the aforementioned items.

For the second time that day, Aaron gasped in horror. He looked down to his hands in the sort of numb disbelief that accompanies a realization that one’s life is in danger.

He was holding cardboard props while a very angry and violent Amazon with a pike bore down on him. "What is this, *History of the World?*" he exclaimed.

Mike was similarly armed and turned to Perry. "Thy head is as full of quarrels as an egg is full of meat, and yet thy head hath been beaten as addle as an egg for quarrelling: thou hast quarrelled with a man for coughing in the street, because he hath wakened thy dog that hath lain asleep in the sun: didst thou not fall out with a tailor for wearing his new doublet before Easter? with another, for tying his new shoes with old riband? and yet thou wilt tutor me from quarrelling!"

"Romeo find Tybalt apt to that, Romeo give occasion," Perry responded, a smile on his face. He turned to Aaron. "Romeo, hate Tybalt bear thee can afford No better term than this, –art villain. All villains. All *die!*!"

Perry lunged, barely missing Aaron. The audience applauded. Back stage, Matt and Sarah looked at each other, bewilderment on their faces.

"You know," Matt said.

Sarah finished his thought. "I think we could pull this off," she said.

They hastily grabbed some paper and some pencils and set to work.

Back on stage, Aaron and Mike avoided another attack, although Perry managed to take a chunk out of Mike's shield. "I do protest, I never injured thee," Aaron said to the Amazon. "And so, good Capulet, –which name I tender As dearly as my own, –be satisfied."

"Tybalt not satisfied!" Perry hollered. "Tybalt cursed because of Romeo and friends!"

"Romeo, Mercutio, I prey thee be careful!" Nicole shouted in encouragement.

Suddenly Mike saw something flying towards him from off stage. He caught it, and was surprised to see it was a rather sturdy handle taken from one of the Church in the Acre's brooms. He glanced off stage and saw Hughes and Gelinas both offer him thumbs up.

Mike took a step towards Perry. "O calm, dishonourable, vile submission! Alla stoccata arries it away." He held the broom handle out in front of him, trying to hold it like a quarterstaff. He hoped all the times that he had watched *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* would serve him well. "Tybalt, you rat-catcher, will you walk?"

"What have with Tybalt?" Perry responded.

"Good king of cats, nothing but one of your nine lives; that I mean to make bold withal, and as you shall use me hereafter, drybeat the rest of the eight. Will you pluck your sword out of his pitcher by the ears? make haste, lest mine be about your ears ere it be out."

Perry stepped towards Mike. "I for you."

Aaron was concerned. Was Mike crazy? As inept as she... he... may be, Perry was still an Amazon warrior where as Mike was... Mike was Mike. "Gentle Mercutio, put thy rapier up."

Mike paid him no heed. For some reason, being on stage gave him a bravado greater than he might normally possess. He sneered at Perry. "Come, sir, your passado."

A fight immediately began between the two. The audience began cheering as Mike and Perry moved back and fourth, each gaining ground and then loosing it.

Aaron could not help but still be concerned for his friend's safety, and of course for his own, as well. "Gentlemen, for shame, forbear this outrage! Tybalt, Mercutio, the prince expressly hath Forbidden bandying in Verona streets: Hold, Tybalt! good Mercutio!"

Of course, Perry didn't listen, and thus Mike could not afford to listen. The two of them kept beating their weapons together, Mike's broom handle and Perry's pointed stick. Occasionally, Perry tried thrusting the pointed end at Mike, but he continually deflected it away. However, on the seventh or eighth try, the deflection was not entirely successful.

Mike heard a tearing sound and saw a large rip in one of his pant legs. A thin red line was visible on his skin. Filled with adrenaline, he felt nothing.

The audience gasped. "What realistic effects!" someone commented.

"Mercutio!" Aaron and Nicole both called out.

"Ay, ay, a scratch, a scratch," Mike responded.

"Courage, man," Aaron said, "the hurt cannot be much."

Perry, however, smiled. "Time you die," he said. He swung his stick around and hit Mike in the side of the head. Mike fell, and Aaron ran to his side.

He was alive, and while he'd have a hell of a headache and the mother of all bruises, it seemed like he'd be fine. At the moment, however, he was unconscious. Aaron took the broom handle from Mike and gripped it tightly. "This day's black fate on more days doth depend; This but begins the woe, others must end."

He rose and faced Perry. "Alive, in triumph! and Mercutio slain! Away to heaven, respective lenity, And fire-eyed fury be my conduct now! Now, Tybalt, take the villain back again, That late thou gavest me; for Mercutio's soul Is but a little way above our heads, Staying for thine to keep him company: Either thou, or I, or both, must go with him. "

"Wretched boy, consort him here, Shalt with him hence," Perry spat back.

Aaron smiled slightly, his grip on the broom handle tightening. "This shall determine that."

He charged.

Perry brought up the stick to block Aaron's attack, but the broom handle snapped the stick clean in two. Aaron swung again, sweeping Perry's feet out from underneath him. Perry fell hard and Aaron pinned him to the ground.

"Hark!" Aaron said. "Here comes Paris and Benvolio with some rope!"

Off stage, the Bills glanced at each other, confused.

"Hark!" Aaron said again. "The rope!"

The Bills glanced at each other again, and then ran off to find some rope. They returned moments later and helped Aaron tie Perry up.

The audience, who had been enthralled during the fighting, now seemed to be losing interest and starting to wonder why the play seemed to have taken this odd turn. Nicole, determined to get things moving again, hoped Gelinus wouldn't mind if she pinched one of his lines.

"Romeo, away, be gone!" she said. "The citizens are up, and Tybalt slain. Stand not amazed: the prince will doom thee death, If thou art taken: hence, be gone, away!"

Aaron took this cue to help Perry up and drag him off of the stage. "O, I am fortune's fool!" he commented as he went. The Bills tended to Mike, treating him with more care than Aaron showed Perry as they removed him from the stage.

Matt and Sarah looked up at the proceedings and then looked at each other. They nodded. Without even needing to vocalize their thoughts to one another, they knew that now was the time.

"Kenny! Do it!" Matt quietly called out.

From the control booth, Kenny lowered the curtain. Then a series of lasers lowered itself from the ceiling behind the audience and beams shot forth, hitting the curtain and moving rapidly to form a single word: Intermission.

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## **Intermission...**

Matt and Sarah called the cast and crew together back stage. Well, most of the cast and crew. Perry had been put into a utility closet.

"Okay, here's the plan," Matt said. "We think we can salvage the play."

"How?" Aaron asked, miffed. "Thanks to Perry, we jumped straight from Act 2 Scene 2 to Act 3 Scene 1. Bit of a jump."

"Yes, well, Matt and I did some hasty re-writes. I hope Shakespeare won't mind much..."

Matt coughed. "Yes... Well, most of your lines are the same... Some of their placements have been re-arranged." He and Sarah handed out papers to everyone. "These outline the changes."

The cast flipped through the revised script.

"This is quite mad, you know that?" Mike said moments later.

"Mad enough that it may just work," Nicole added.

"It's certainly better than giving up," Kirstin said. "Let's do it."

"Let the show go on!" Aaron decreed.

It was ten minutes before the intermission was to end when Nicole approached Kirstin. "Hey, sis, can I see you in the dressing room for a moment?"

Kirstin followed her sister to the "dressing room," which was one of the smaller meeting rooms on the lower level of the Church's building. "Yes, what is it?" she asked. She then noticed they were not alone.

"Jill? What are you doing here?" Kirstin asked. She could not help but notice that her fellow Girl Scout seemed to be getting into a costume... the same costume, in fact, that Kirstin herself was wearing.

"Hi, Kirstin!" Jill Valentine simply responded.

"Jill owed me a favour," Nicole said, "and something just came up last minute that I have to tend to. I hope you don't mind. But hey, business is business."

Kirstin was confused. "That's as may be, but why is she getting into the costume of the Nurse?"

"We don't have much time," Nicole said, getting out of costume and handing important bits of it to her sibling. "Here, put these on."

"Sis?" Kirstin prodded, wanting an answer.

"I'm sorry, Kirstin," Jill said. "I couldn't learn Juliet on such short notice, and I already knew the Nurse from having read the play in school."

"And I *know* you know Juliet," Nicole said to her sister. "How many times have you read this play? It really is the only solution. You don't mind, do you?"

“Well, I...”

“Thanks!” Nicole said before her sister could say more. She headed out of the door, saying, “I knew I could count on you!”

Kirstin sat motionless, staring at the door, for a personal eternity. After a long while (fortunately Juliet was not required for the next few scenes) she let out a sigh and began preparing for her new roll.

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### The Play Resumes...

The cast assembled backstage just before the end of the intermission. “Okay,” Matt said to them all, “this is where we either succeed or die. And today is not a good day to die.”

“Most inspirational,” Sarah said dryly.

“So, we’re picking up with what was originally Act 3, Scene 3,” Matt continued.

Aaron clapped his hands, getting ready to return to the roll of Romeo. It was then that he noticed something.

“Jill?” he said. “Where’s Kirstin?”

Jill smoothed out the skirt of her Nurse’s costume and grinned. “Something urgent had come up and she had to go home,” she explained. “She said she’d call you later.”

*She went home without even saying good-bye,* Aaron thought. He sighed.

“Places, everyone!” Sarah called out. Aaron shook his head, determined to clear it. The play must go on.

Matt Swett went out onto the stage, which had been dressed as Friar Laurence’s cell. Aaron waited just off stage as the curtain rose to the applause of the audience.

“Romeo, come fourth,” Matt said after the applause had died down, “come forth, thou fearful man: Affliction is enamour’d of thy parts, And thou art wedded to calamity.”

Aaron made his entrance, and the play continued.

Off stage, Matt and Sarah exchanged looks once more, and once more they shared an unspoken thought. *This was going to work!*

The play had progressed smoothly, and the time had come for the final scene of Act 3... The last scene that the two leads had together before the tragedy would begin in earnest.

Kirstin emerged from the dressing room at last, butterflies making quite a ruckus within her abdomen. She made her way towards the stage and spotted Aaron.

"Hey, Nicole," he said to her. "Time for our big scene." He grinned lopsidedly. "Don't worry," he assured her. "On the cheek, like I promised."

"Um, Aaron...?" Kirstin said. "There's something I need to... something you have to..."

"Okay, you two, its show time!" Matt said from behind them, ushering them towards the stage.

There was no more opportunity for Kirstin to say anything. Anything, that is, other than, "Wilt thou be gone? it is not yet near day: It was the nightingale, and not the lark, That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear; Nightly she sings on yon pomegranate-tree: Believe me, love, it was the nightingale."

"It was the lark, the herald of the morn, No nightingale," Aaron responded. "Look, love, what envious streaks Do lace the severing clouds in yonder east: Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops. I must be gone and live, or stay and die."

"Yon light is not day-light, I know it, I: It is some meteor that the sun exhales, To be to thee this night a torch-bearer, And light thee on thy way to Mantua: Therefore stay yet; thou need'st not to be gone."

"Let me be ta'en, let me be put to death; I am content, so thou wilt have it so. I'll say yon grey is not the morning's eye, 'Tis but the pale reflex of Cynthia's brow; Nor that is not the lark, whose notes do beat The vaulty heaven so high above our heads: I have more care to stay than will to go: Come, death, and welcome! Juliet wills it so. How is't, my soul? let's talk; it is not day."

Kirstin turned to Aaron. "It is, it is: hie hence, be gone, away! It is the lark that sings so out of tune, Straining harsh discords and displeasing sharps. Some say the lark makes

sweet division; This doth not so, for she divideth us: Some say the lark and loathed toad change eyes, O, now I would they had changed voices too! Since arm from arm that voice doth us affray, Hunting thee hence with hunt's-up to the day, O, now be gone; more light and light it grows."

"More light and light; more dark and dark our woes!"

Jill walked in, and said to Kirstin, "Madam!"

"Nurse?" Kirstin responded.

"Your lady mother is coming to your chamber: The day is broke; be wary, look about." And with that, Jill made her exit.

Kirstin gazed towards the window, and thus towards the audience. "Then, window, let day in, and let life out." She turned back to Aaron once more.

"Farewell," Aaron said, "farewell! one kiss, and I'll descend."

He leaned towards Kirstin, or rather Nicole as far as he knew, and stopped suddenly.

The audience looked on, not daring to breathe.

Aaron regarded Juliet... Her gaze was cast downward, her hands at her sides... she seemed positively nervous.

And then Aaron knew. Without a doubt, he knew.

Aaron opened his mouth to speak, but it was at that point that Kirstin looked up. She placed a finger to her lips. "Shhhh," she whispered. "The play must go on."

She closed her eyes and leaned forward.

Likewise, Aaron leaned towards her, his eyes closed.

Their lips met. As brief as it may have been in actual time, by their perspectives they lingered for an infinitely long sweet moment. Then, just as softly as they had touched, their lips came apart.

Aaron, smiling, made his way down from the window.

"Art thou gone so? love, lord, ay, husband, friend!" Kirstin called after him. "I must hear from thee every day in the hour, For in a minute there are many days: O, by this count I shall be much in years Ere I again behold my Romeo!"

"Farewell!" Aaron shouted in response. "I will omit no opportunity That may convey my greetings, love, to thee."

“O think'st thou we shall ever meet again?”

“I doubt it not; and all these woes shall serve For sweet discourses in our time to come.”

“O God, I have an ill-divining soul! Methinks I see thee, now thou art below, As one dead in the bottom of a tomb: Either my eyesight fails, or thou look'st pale.”

“And trust me, love, in my eye so do you: Dry sorrow drinks our blood. Adieu, adieu!”

And with that, Aaron departed from the stage.

In the back of the audience, inconspicuously watching the proceedings on the stage, Nicole smiled to herself. “That’s another on the house, sis.”

Of course, everything went down hill from there. Fortunately, it was meant to. Basically a bunch of people died and no one lived happily ever after.

Tragedy at it’s finest.

Nothing went down hill production wise. The play finished perfectly and was met by unanimous acclaim from those who had come to watch it.

Matt and Sarah were hopping with rapture. “We did it! We did it!” they exclaimed together as they fell into a joyful embrace. “We did it! We did it!”

It then occurred to them both what it was that they were currently doing. Sarah shoved Matt away and stormed off in a huff, and Matt found new interest in the floorboards.

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## **The Morning After...**

The next morning, Kirstin began to clear the table and clean the dishes before she and her sister had to leave for school.

“You know,” Nicole said to her, “that was some scene between you and your boyfriend last night.”

“Boyfriend?” Kirstin blinked. “What? Good lord, no, you know we’re just friends.” Kirstin blinked again. “You saw?” she asked. “What happened to this business of yours? Did you set me up?”

Nicole laughed. “Come on now, sis... I saw the way you two kissed. There’s no denying it.”

“Are you finished with your plate?” Kirstin asked.

Nicole sighed. *Well, she thought, you may be able to deny it to Aaron, he may be able to deny it to you, and you may both even be able to deny it to yourselves... but it’s sure as hell clear as day to anyone else!*

A lone figure sat bound and gagged within a storage closet at Perfume’s Pizza. As Will Shmuler continued to sit there, the effects of sensory deprivation began to spawn within his mind new and crazier things for him to do in the future.

A lone figure sat bound and gagged within one of the Church in the Acre’s utility closets, shaking in rage. *That it! Now Perfume really mad! Now you all really, really die!!!*

## *Special: Troop 180 Chronicles*

### *— A Different Viewpoint*

by "Mr. A"

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It was a dark and stormy night... No, actually it wasn't. It was a clean, clear, comfortable evening that found the group of Scouts settling in around the campfire after a busy day of activities at their camp. The fire grew brighter and brighter, mostly due to the efforts of Derek Provost. He continually added wood to the fire, proud of the fact that it was burning so brightly. However, he would never admit that he couldn't get a fire going to save his soul, and that he required the assistance of one of the Troop's younger Scouts to get it started.

"Hey Derek, could you ease up on feeding that fire?" said Mark Abert, Assistant Scoutmaster of Troop 180. "It's beginning to become a pillar of fire of biblical proportions, and I'm concerned about the trees!"

"Okay, Mr. A," Derek said reluctantly. He backed off from the fire, but still kept continually eyeing the woodpile.

As the heat began to subside, the Scouts of Troop 180 gradually moved in closer, and the traditional camaraderie of a campfire began to take form.

"Does anyone want to do skits?" asked Matt Fowler, who was one of the older boys in the Troop who really enjoyed the entire Scouting experience.

"No way, that's ghetto!" exclaimed Pete Greeves.

"Yeah, that's ghetto!" agreed Jim Broder.

Pete and Jim, two of the Troop's primary whiners, had this odd habit of making up their own slang terms. Most of the Troop had learned to just ignore them when they did this.

Most of the three patrols that were present seemed to be content to just relax and enjoy the fire, sitting in small groups and chatting. Despite Fowler's good intentioned

efforts, no one really seemed to want to do any of the traditional campfire activities at that time.

Scoutmaster Lenny Nadeau, affectionately known as "Gitchisaka" due to his Native American heritage, then suggested a late night nature hike. "We could look for the rare luminous Yoza mushroom, which I heard has been spotted growing in this very area!"

At this suggestion, the entire Magpie Patrol immediately volunteered to go with him. Gitchisaka immediately smiled, but inwardly groaned. The Magpies were infamous for being very noisy. Their high-pitched cackling had robbed the adult leaders of many hours of sleep on campouts.

"We'll never get even close to any sort of animal life," he mused. "Good thing mushrooms don't move very quickly."

Slacker Lavoie, another Assistant Scoutmaster, volunteered to accompany Lenny and the boys on their hike, and off they went, leaving Mr. Abert in charge. Matt Abert, his son who was also an Assistant Scoutmaster, contentedly sat with his can of spray cheese and a package of crackers doing his thing: some cheese on a cracker, some cheese in the mouth, some cheese on a cracker, some cheese in the mouth, etc. Across from them sat Pete and Jim, arguing as usual over who knows what. Matt Fowler and Brian Abert busied themselves at the edge of the campfire's light, working on some sort of pioneering project. Derek moved over to where the Aberts were seated.

"So what's new Mr. A?" said Derek. "I've heard the you've been seeing a bit of Matt Atanian and the guys.

"Yes, that's true," said Mr. Abert. "Their troop has asked me for some assistance in setting up a shooting sports campout. I think I'll have to accompany them that weekend. It should be fun!"

"You know, every time I meet up with those guys strange things begin to happen.," muttered Derek.

"Well, Little Buddy," said Mr. Abert, "What do you expect with a leader like Matt Atanian? Things have gotten

rather unusual since they've gotten into that Japanese Anime thing. I think I liked it better when they were into Star Trek and Star Wars. At least that I understood. Oh well, each to his own."

"Hey Anime isn't really all that bad" said Matt Abert between mouthfuls of spray cheese. "It's actually rather good once you get used to it."

"Yeah, I've seen some of it too, and I kind of liked it." said Derek.

"Well, it can cause some *strange* things to happen!" said Mr. Abert, and in a hushed voice he added, "And I can tell you why!"

At this, Pete and Jimmy stopped their bickering, and Brian and Matt Fowler abandoned their project (which wasn't working out anyhow), and came and joined the group. They could tell that they were going to hear something different.

Mr. Abert settled into his "wise old mentor" mode and began to tell the following tale.

*Last summer, Troop 192 sent a small group of their Scouts on a field trip to Japan. It was there that our friends first became acquainted with Japanese cartoons, with Voltron being one of their favourites. While they were touring Japan, they found this little old Antique shop that was run by this little old Japanese man. He was all dressed in black, and smoked a long stemmed pipe. The shop was filled with all sorts of unusual items. Bill Hughes was fascinated by the collection of swords and almost purchased one. Mike Quadrozzi seemed particularly interested in some of the ancient scrolls that he found. Matt Atanian and Aaron Abdelmaseh scrutinized the racks of ancient Japanese clothing looking for who knows what. Bill Gelinias discovered a cage that contained a small furry creature with big ears that kept singing in a very high-pitched voice, much like what Howie Mandel does.*

*Alas, the lads' funds were severely limited, and they could not make any of the purchases they desired.*

*Seemingly moved by pity, the old shopkeeper offered the boys one of the scrolls that Mike was looking at "at a fraction of its value." Not wanting to leave empty handed, they agreed, and left the shop with a rolled-up dusty old parchment.*

"Dad, this story sounds somewhat familiar," broke in Brian, "Have you told this one before?"

"No, I haven't, now please don't interrupt me," said Mr. Abert.

"That's ghetto!" exclaimed Pete.

"Yeah, that's ghetto!" agreed Jim.

Ignoring Pete and Jim, Mr. Abert continued.

*When the guys returned to their campsite, the rest of their group was already sound asleep.*

*"Hey, this is our chance to check out that scroll," said Matt. He carefully began to unroll the ancient sheet of parchment, using the light of the full moon to illuminate it.*

*"I can understand what this says!" exclaimed Mike. He read it aloud, speaking a whole bunch of Japanese words.*

"Just what were the words?" asked Matt Fowler.

"I don't really know," admitted Mr. Abert, and he continued.

*Upon pronouncement of the final word, there was a flash of light! When the guys looked at each other, they could not believe their eyes! They were all changed into something else! Aaron had become a pigeon, Hughes had turned into a cocker spaniel, and Bill Gelinas was now a common alley cat. Mike had turned into a chipmunk, and Matt... well Matt had undergone the strangest transformation of the lot. He had turned into a tall blond super-model!*

\* \* \*

“Oooh!!” Derek had suddenly become very interested. (Troop 180 had nicknamed him “the Walking Hormone” for a variety of reasons. He was reacting in character.) “Tell me more! What did she look like? Did she have...?”

“Shut up, Derek!” said Matt Abert. “Remember, this is still Atanian that we’re talking about!”

“I don’t care!” moaned Derek. “Its just the thought...”

“Hey Fowler!” said Matt Abert. “Can you get a bucket of cold water that we can use on Derek? I think he is overheating again.”

“No!” said Derek. “I promise. I’ll be good! Please, Mr. Abert, go on with your story.”

“Ghetto!” said Pete and Jim simultaneously.

*The five transformed Scouts just looked at each other, not knowing what to do. Since Matt seemed to be the only one left with the ability of speech, it seemed natural that the decision on what to do fall on his shoulders.*

*“Umm... well guys,” Matt said in a breathy voice, “I think that, maybe, we should all go to bed...”*

“YES!!” shouted Derek.

“Shut up, Derek!” said everyone else.

*“And maybe all this will, like, go away by morning”*

*The other four, though clearly in full possession of their human intelligence, but lacking in the ability of speech, cooed, woofed, meowed, and chittered their agreement. Matt opened the tents for them all, and they got in and did their best to settle for the night. Matt got into his own tent (for clearly he couldn’t share a tent with the boys...)*

\* \* \*

"I wouldn't mind..." said Derek. "Shut up Derek!" said everyone else.

*Sure enough, by morning all five were back to normal! They immediately dressed, and gathered outside their tents. Fortunately, the rest of their group had not yet risen. They moved away from the site so they wouldn't be heard.*

*"Wow! Was that a dream, or am I going crazy?" exclaimed Hughes.*

*"Sad to say, I don't think it was a dream." Said Mike as he spit out an acorn shell.*

*"So, what are we going to do? What has happened to us?" asked Bill Gelinas.*

*"As I see it," said Aaron, "we seem to have come under some sort of curse, probably from that little old man in that shop. I suggest that we go back there and ask a few questions!"*

*The others quickly agreed, and after cleaning up their tents (some had a bigger task of this than others), they joined the rest of their travel group for breakfast. After their meal, they left for the town, and headed for the little old Antique shop. But when they arrived, they found no sign of the shop. In its place was an overgrown empty lot!*

"Ugh! That's really ghetto!" said Pete.

"The ghettoiest!" added Jim.

*"But, but, but..." stammered Matt.*

*"I guess this means that we'll have to figure our own way out of this mess." said Mike as he spit out another acorn shell. "I guess we should go back to camp." The rest agreed, and off they went.*

*Luck was with them for a second time, for when they returned to their site; the others had already left for their day's activities.*

*"Let's try to reason this out: why did we all change?" stated Aaron.*

*"It's obviously due to some sort of magic that was locked in that scroll," said Mike. "When I read it, the magic was unleashed."*

*"There's got to be more to it than that," added Hughes. "This all sounds very familiar. Didn't we see an anime just a few days ago that had characters changing? What was its name?"*

*"Transformers," said Matt, who had been quietly pensive up to that moment. "I was thinking about that when Mike read the scroll last night."*

*"Yeah, so was I!" exclaimed Bill Gelinas.*

*"Me too!" said Aaron.*

*"This is spooky, guys!" said Mike. "I was thinking about Transformers just as I was looking at the scroll. And I don't know a word of Japanese, other than kung-fu, jiu-jitsu, and sushi!"*

*"Guys," moaned Hughes. "That cartoon was on my mind too! We're cursed! We're cursed! What will the rest of the guys at Troop 192 say..."*

"Troop 192? I remember them! I had to deliver a package to them at a Christmas party. Man, what a ruckus that package caused. It seemed to be some sort of video game or something. I remember seeing you at that party, Mark." The speaker was Steve Bilodeau, the newest Assistant Scoutmaster of Troop 180. He was arriving late to the campout, as his duties at UPS had kept him overtime. He was still in his UPS uniform.

"Oh, hi Steve!" said Mr. Abert. "Hi Mr. B," said the Scouts. Matt Abert had a mouthful of spray cheese, and mercifully said nothing.

"Your son and the rest of the Magpies are off on a hike with Gitchisaka and Slacker." Said Mr. A "They should be back soon. Your tent is that one over there. You might as well settle in."

"I think I will," said Steve. "I'm beat!"

As Steve headed toward his tent, a loud, high-pitched cackling suddenly erupted from the woods. The Magpies had returned! Several of them held glowing mushrooms in their sweaty little hands. Gitchisaka and Slacker looked rather worn.

“These guys are killing me!” exclaimed Slacker.

Gitchisaka just smiled and quietly said, “Let’s all do our best to try and get these Scouts down for the night. Maybe, if we’re lucky, the rest of us can get a few hours of sleep.”

At the words of their wise old Scoutmaster, the leadership of Troop 180 went to work. Eventually, the Magpies, the Stags, and the Panthers were all in their tents, although many were still chattering. Only a few were still up, quietly talking by the now dying campfire.

“Mr. A,” said Derek, “are you going to be able to finish your story?”

“Well Little Buddy, I was almost done anyway,” said Mr. Abert. “Every full moon, the five of them each changed into their other form, and they had a great many unusual adventures when they returned to America. You can see what I meant when I said that anime can cause some rather *strange* things to happen.”

“Yeah,” continued Derek, “but your story is just a bunch of bullcrap! Nothing like that can ever happen!”

“I know, Derek, I know” said Mr. Abert.

At this point, Gitchisaka joined the two. “I think you ought to consider turning in. We’ve got a lot to do tomorrow.” He rummaged through his pack, and brought out a metallic cylindrical object. “I found this on the hike. What do you make of this?” He held the object out to the light, which revealed it to be an battered but unopened can. Its label read: Kiwi-Mocha Fruit Juice.

Derek’s screams even silenced the Magpies.

"Those Americans... they think they own the world, eh?"

"Yeah... no one takes us seriously, eh? Heck, I was talking to this one American kid, and he thought Canada was the fifty-first state! How depressing is that? Pass me a beer, eh?"

"You know, our plan to destroy America by ruining its economy with Canadian coins doesn't seem to be working, eh? Seems that those stupid American buttheads just don't give a damn, and spend'em anyways. Here you go."

"Thanks. Bacon?"

"Yeah, thanks."

"So what do you suggest, eh?"

"Well, ya know, I think it may just be time to do something other than sit on our butts drinkin' beer, watching hockey, and only getting up to go to the bathroom or occasionally cross the border and unload tons of change, eh?"

"You don't mean..."

"Yes, I do."

"Eh?"

"Eh."

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## *Chapter Nineteen: Northern Exposure*

by Matthew Atanian

based on a story idea by Aaron Abdelmaseh

---

The Scouts of 192 had just enjoyed their third week of peace and quiet. Justy and Proctor had disappeared, and in the mean time, as the highest-ranking Patrol Leader, Mike Quadrozzi had been in charge of the Troop.

It had been bliss.

Well run meetings. Fun activities. Good program.

Aside from most of the Adult Leaders, the Troop had never been happier.

The Troop was presently in formation as Mike addressed them prior to closing this week's meeting.

“Well, guys, it’s been another fun week. This weekend is the Spring Camporee, hope you’re all ready for it! Now, for some words about this weekend, our...” Mike fought back bouts of laughter that threatened to overtake him at the absurdity of what he was about to say. “Our *esteemed* Scoutmaster, Mr. Shmuler.”

Mike then stepped down from his position before the Troop and joined Aaron and the rest of his patrol.

Shmuler, his usual image of efficiency and preparedness, took the place Mike had vacated. “Well, guys, we seem to be having a Camporee this weekend. Should be fun, huh?”

Silence was his response.

“Yeah, well, they’re having some events or something, and we should all do our best to try and see about maybe winning something, because that’s what you should do at these things.”

Crickets.

“Also, it seems that this camporee we might be having some guests up at camp...”

Shmuler was interrupted when the double doors at the front of Walker Hall were thrown open and slammed to the walls with a loud bang. The members of the Troop turned away from Shmuler to see who it was who had entered.

“Doors all thrown open for you, Captain, just like you asked!” said a familiar voice.

Then a figure emerged from the darkness of the doorway.

His skin was red and showed evidence in some areas of recent blistering. He reeked of filth, and his clothing was a thread bare, patched together jumble that at one time, seemingly decades ago, might have been a Boy Scout uniform.

He was followed by a crouched creature that it took the Troop a moment to realize was even human. This second figure was much worse off, his skin still heavily blistered and covered with a not very thin layer of dirt and grime. This second figure, the one who had spoken, was

also sparsely clothed. He wore little more than a loin cloth, his clothing seemingly sacrificed to patch up the tattered garment that the other wore.

The first figure, the Troop then realized with dread, was Justy Yung.

“You!” he spat. He fixed his gaze on the Garden Snake Patrol. “This was somehow your doing, wasn’t it? **ABU DHABI!!!??**”

“Hey, hi, Justy.” Mike said.

“Don’t you, ‘Hi, Justy,’ me!” Justy frothed. He then hacked and coughed in a way that sounded vaguely reminiscent of maniacal laughter. “I’ll get you for this, Garden Snake Patrol. Oh yes, I will get you for this.”

Justy then collapsed upon the floor.

“Welcome back, Justy!” Shmuler brightly said. “Okay, as I was saying, the camporee this weekend will have special guests. Joining us will be...”

“Can you believe this?”

The rest of the Garden Snake Patrol nodded their agreement at Aaron’s disbelief. (Well, most of the rest of the patrol... Someone had “accidentally” forgotten to tell Will Shmuler that they were having an emergency patrol meeting to discuss his father’s announcement the previous evening, as well as general discussion on the camporee.) They sat around their regular table at Perfume’s Pizza – actually a few tables pushed together – accompanied by the patrol’s frequent guests Matt Atanian and Kirstin Porter.

“I mean, not that I’m complaining about it or anything,” Aaron continued, “but I just never thought that those uptight Council Execs would actually hold a joint spring camporee with the local Girl Scout council!”

“WHAT!?” Becker obligatorily shouted.

“Rare enough that we even have a Council-wide camporee,” Mike noted. “Usually the Council just lets the districts handle their own camporees.”

Matt suddenly went into one of those reveries that showed that despite all of his best efforts, he was getting old. "I remember back when I was a kid, Council Camporees were a more common occurrence... and back then, they could actually throw together fun and original programs and events at the Camporees." He sighed. "Oh, those were the days... you youngsters don't know what you're missing..."

"Yo, guy," Swett said sharply. "You're like, only 20."

Matt seemed to snap out of it. "Well... um... I'll be 21 soon..."

"You know," Gelinas said, "this does seem rather strange... Not only is the Council running a camporee... but it's doing it together with the local Girl Scouts? Girl Scouts up at Moses? I find it hard to believe that things like that could happen in real life."

"Happened last year at Summer Camp," Hughes reminded Bill.

"Yeah, it bugged me back then, too. These things wouldn't happen!"

Everyone but Bill shared a look with everyone else but Bill, before they all, in unison, took a deep breath, paused, and at the top of their lungs shouted, "SHUT UP, BILL!!"

"Pizza ready," Perry said, joining them as he placed the delectable pies upon the table. "How meeting go?"

"Well," Mike said, "we just told Bill to shut up. What's next on the agenda, Kenny?"

Kenny consulted the agenda. "Item 1: Express disbelief at Girl Scout involvement. Item 2: Tell Bill to shut up. Item 3: Continue discussing the camporee."

"Right!" Mike said decisively. "So... um... any discussion?"

Becker took off his headphones, nearly giving everyone a heart attack. "Hey, guys," he said, "what if instead of just assuming that we're all around great guys and feeling we have no need to prove it to anyone else, how about we actually have a try at proving it and go win some events?"

Matt spit out his Iced Tea in shock.

"You mean... *don't* just wander around the camporee slouching about under the pretext of going to the events, and actually try to win the events instead?" Aaron stammered.

"Camporees have events?" Swett asked.

Mike pondered this for a moment. "You know... that might be an interesting idea. We'll form a subcommittee to look into event winning. Who would like to chair it?"

Kenny raised his hand.

"Right. Looks like the hero of the Klondike Derby will once again lead the Garden Snakes to victory," Mike declared. "Next order of business, we'll need a skit for the campfire Saturday night."

"Perry throw you all in fire?" Perry suggested.

"Um... no. No, I don't think that would go over well," Mike said. "Any other ideas?"

"I've got an idea!" Swett declared.

"Not your 'gray-area' skit, is it?" Matt asked.

The "gray-area" skit was a skit Swett had come up with that was funny as hell, but was likely to if ever preformed get them all tossed out of Scouts, and probably arrested as well.

"No, this is an even better idea! Remember that skit that we were going to do at the Fall Camporee, but my stupid father wouldn't let us?"

"You mean," Mike asked, "*Matt Gets Wet*?"

"That's the one!"

"*Matt Gets Wet*?" Kirstin asked. "What was that?"

Mike proceeded to tell her.

At the previous fall's camporee Matt Swett had come up with the skit idea, *Matt Gets Wet*. It was a rather simple idea, but one that would have been destined to be a classic. Matt Swett would have gotten up in front of everyone, and then he would have had a bucket of water thrown at him. And that would have been the entirety of the skit. Simple, but destined to be a classic... except Swett's father had intervened and told his son he couldn't do it.

Unfortunately, by this time Mike had already told the people in charge of the campfire that their skit was going to be *Matt Gets Wet*. So what happened was this.

The MC had gotten up and announced the skit *Matt Gets Wet*. There were then massive cheers from the audience, and a very loud, "YES!!" from the distinctive voice of Mark Abert. (From this response, it quickly became clear that the audience had assumed that the Matt in question was not Swett, but the more widely known and somewhat good-naturedly infamous Atanian.)

Mike then walked out on stage, flanked by Swett and Aaron on one side and the Bills on the other.

"We were going to perform for you," Mike had told them in his best Pythonesque voice, "*Matt Gets Wet*. However, on the way to the campfire tonight, we were contacted by Matt's lawyers and were informed that under nooooooo! circumstances would Matt be getting wet. We apologize for any inconvenience, and would now like to present to you the Troop 192 classic, *The Clappy Song*."

The five of them had then proceeded to perform *The Clappy Song*.

Despite the lack of any getting Matt wet, Mark Abert had loved it.

"So what about it?" Aaron asked Swett.

"Well, my dad's not going to this camporee," Swett responded. "I can get wet all I want."

"Yeah," Becker, still uncharacteristically headphoneless, added, "but does anyone really care about you? They all thought it was going to be Matt getting wet."

"Um... I'd rather not get wet," Matt felt it prudent to add.

"Well," Mike said, "we obviously can't get Matt wet."

"Why?" Becker and Swett both asked. They both thought it odd that Mike would agree with Matt so readily. Of course, they didn't know about a certain curse.

"We just can't!" Mike, Aaron, Hughes, Gelinas, Kirstin, and even Perry responded. Kenny quietly added, "That would be bad."

"Okay, okay..." Becker said as if that had been explanation enough.

Matt had a sudden thought. "You know... maybe there's a way we can play off of people's expectations, and still use Swett, instead..."

"Sis, have you seen my flashlight?" Nicole shouted from her bedroom.

"It's in the drawer, Nicole!" Kirstin replied as she finished ironing her Girl Scout uniform.

"Hey, thanks." Nicole said, immersing from the bedroom carrying her freshly packed pack. "This will be fun, huh?"

"Yes, I can't wait!"

"Of course you can't," Nicole said with a smirk. "A whole weekend near Aaron?"

Kirstin blinked. "I don't know what you mean," she claimed.

"Of course not..."

"Well," Sarah said as she came out from her room, carrying her own pack, "I don't see what the big deal is. Why can't we have our own camporee like usual? Have to get together with the stupid Boy Scouts up at their camp... I can just sense trouble coming from all of this."

"It might be nice to get a change of scenery, Sarah," Kirstin said. "We only saw a bit of it, but that Boy Scout camp seemed rather a pleasant place when we all visited it to go swimming last summer."

Nicole grinned fiendishly. "Ah yes, last summer... That was when you first met Matt, wasn't it?"

A low growl came from deep within Sarah's soul. "Yes," she said coldly, "one of my fondest memories of that summer. Mr. Testosterone."

"Sarah, he's really not all that bad. He's really a very sweet man who seems to care for you a lot, even despite

all the reasons you give him to feel otherwise,” Kirstin said.

“Besides,” Nicole added brightly, “it’s not often you find a man who knows and freely admits the superiority of the female gender. You know how hard it is to find a pre-whipped guy? Think of all the trouble it’d save!”

Sarah hoisted her pack upon her shoulders and headed towards the door. “What is it with you?” she asked as she headed out. “Always trying to put me and Atanian together? Maybe I don’t want to be with anyone right now!”

The door slammed shut leaving the twins to glance quietly at each other.

“Oh my,” Kirstin solemnly commented as she gathered up her uniform to go and change.

Then Nicole was alone as Kirstin closed the door to the room they shared. Nicole flopped down onto the couch and picked up her abacus, flicking the occasional bead randomly around. Neko-chan pounced onto her lap and made himself comfortable.

“Oh, Sarah... sometimes there’s a difference between what you want, and what you need.”

“Ah, Moses.”

Troop 192 had arrived. They had not been the first, but they were far from the last. This was fortunate, as it allowed them prime pickings on where to set up camp.

Usually for camporees such as this, the troops would all be given pre-designated camping areas on the parade field. However, for this camporee the parade field was saved for the visiting Girl Scout troops, and the Boy Scout troops were asked to find their own camping arrangements anywhere off in the semi-distant Woronoco section of camp. Obviously, someone wanted to keep the Boy Scouts’ and the Girl Scouts’ sleeping arrangements separated from each other... and in the process had failed to properly arrange the Boy Scouts’ arrangements.

Troop 192 was lucky they'd gotten there early while there was plenty of prime space. It would be a madhouse later.

Actually, they were fortunate enough to be able to get an area that had always been a particular favourite for the members of the Garden Snake Patrol. There was a brook that ran deep into the depths of camp, and near the Aquatics Lodge it split itself into two parts, forming an island, coming back together into one brook shortly before emptying into Russell Pond.

"Ah, Moses," Mike repeated, taking in another deep breath as he surveyed the island.

"All right, peons!" Justy spat, shattering Mike's peace, "Get those tents set up! NOW!"

The Garden Snakes sighed. They had already been setting up their tents. They didn't need Justy to tell them that. They continued about their task.

"Think Justy's still pissed about the Abu Dhabi thing?" Aaron asked.

"Could be," Hughes responded. "Or it could be that he's just an ass."

"Very good point, my friend."

"Almost done, Captain!" Proctor said, bumbling to set up his and Justy's a-frame tent single handedly. It was a job that, to be done properly, really needed two people.

The only other person setting up a tent by himself was Matt Atanian. Of course, his was a dome. It was his own tent, not one of the troop's, that he'd had since he was a Cub Scout and he could actually set it up faster by himself than he probably could if he had help getting in the way. Since the previous summer, having a tent to himself had definitely had some extra benefits.

Mike and Bill were setting up their tent, and next to them was Hughes and Aaron. Next up were Kenny and Becker, and then a tent of three...

"What the hell did I do to deserve this?" Swett asked.

He looked forlornly at the short straw that he held before going off to help Perry and Shmuler set up the tent that they would all share.

Mike looked around a bit and sighed.

“Ah, Moses.”

Some time later Troop 180 arrived.

“Dear God!” Mark Abert said. His son Matt could only agree.

“Any ideas where we’re going to set up camp?” Provost asked.

“How about the middle of the lake?” Brian Abert sarcastically commented.

All around was chaos. There were a few troops that seemed to have arrived early enough to become entrenched and secure their positions. Mark was pleased (in a slightly jealous sort of way) to note that Troop 192 was one of them.

Elsewhere, various battles took place.

In the middle of one prime location, two Scoutmasters were in the middle of a heated fencing match with their staves, neither one willing to give up ground. Alice Richards of Troop 41, an accomplished fencer, was quickly gaining the upper hand.

In another spot, two troops faced each other like two armies out of an era prior to World War I. The Senior Patrol Leaders for each troop stood at the head of each army, holding their staves in the air.

“Charge!” they both exclaimed, lowering their staves in simultaneous, swift motions. A brutal battle then ensued.

“You know, Brian,” Mark said, “I think your idea might not have been a bad one.”

Nicole poked her nose out of her sleeping bag. Something smelled good.

“Good morning, sleepy,” Sarah said.

Nicole emerged further from her sleeping bag. “Mforningh,” she mumbled. She shook her head a bit in an

attempt to rid herself of any impulse to return to slumber land. "Where's Kirstin?" she asked.

"She's got breakfast duty."

Nicole sniffed the air. "Ah, that's what smells so good." She then emerged fully from her sleeping bag and began to dress. "Looking forward to today?" she asked her sister.

"I suppose," Sarah answered. "Is a nice camp... in it's own way."

"Maybe you'll see Matty this weekend," Nicole said.

Sarah smiled. "Yes, maybe."

"Maybe you'll see Matt, too."

Metaphoric storm clouds filled the tent, and metaphoric lightning flashed, illuminating a hateful expression on Sarah's face. Metaphoric thunder then sounded out, metaphorically deafening all within the tent.

"Um... never mind," Nicole said. She decided to change the subject, and fast. "I wonder how Neko-chan's doing home all by himself this weekend?"

Hughes poked his nose out of his sleeping bag. Something smelled good.

"Morning, Hughes," Aaron said.

Hughes emerged further from his sleeping bag. "Mforningh," he mumbled. He shook his head a bit in an attempt to rid himself of any impulse to return to slumber land. "Who's got breakfast duty?"

"Perry."

Hughes sniffed the air. "Ah, that's what smells so good. I hope it will be safe to eat."

"Perry doesn't worry me so much. Look at all the times he's tried to kill us so far."

"Yeah, I suppose."

Hughes threw on his uniform and pulled on his red plaid flannel jacket. Aaron unzipped the tent and the two emerged into the sunlight.

It was a crisp, cool spring morning. It was still cold enough that their breath could be seen, but not cold to the

point that they were uncomfortable. All around was the peaceful sound of various troops readying for the day, quite a contrast to the previous evening's chaos.

"Morning guys," Matt said, walking over.

"Hey, Matt," Aaron and Hughes said.

Perry was in their patrol's kitchen, whipping up breakfast. He may have been a horrid excuse for an Amazon warrior, but he sure could cook. Bill Gelinias was assisting him.

Kenny was sitting quietly, looking over a notebook filled with various calculations concerning the day's upcoming events. Swett was lounging around in a chair, looking relaxed, sipping a cup of hot chocolate and reading a Superman comic book. Becker was sitting against a tree, listening to some music. Shmuler was repeatedly climbing a tree and throwing himself out of it.

"Where's Mike?" Matt asked. Aaron and Hughes looked around. Finally, the three of them approached the tent Mike was staying in. Aaron knelt down and put an ear against the side of the tent.

"Mmmrfh... (snore) ...Yes, Special Agent... mmmrmf... (snore, snore)..."

Aaron stood. "He's still asleep."

Matt grinned. "I hear by authorize you to use your patrol's special method."

Aaron and Hughes both walked to one side of the tent and gripped it. Aaron looked to Hughes. Hughes nodded.

"MIKE! WAKE UP!" they both shouted as they violently shook the tent.

Inside, Mike bolted upright into a sitting position. "I swear, officer, that cantaloupe was like that when I got here!" he said defensively. He then looked around a bit, realizing where he was. He noticed the Aaron shaped shadow on one side of his tent, and the Hughes shaped one on the other. "I'm up! I'm up! Geeze!" he shouted. The tent's shaking subsided.

Fifteen minutes later, Mike emerged in his uniform.

"Morning, Mike," Aaron, Hughes, and Matt said.

“Ha ha, guys,” Mike dryly responded. He looked past them as something caught his eye. “What’s that?” he asked.

The others turned to follow his gaze. A bit of Russell Pond was visible through the trees on one side of their island. Something odd was floating out on the lake. The four of them walked out to the edge of the island to get a better look.

A bit of the way out on the lake was a floating campsite. Somehow, a troop had managed to get the docks used for the waterfront during Summer Camp out of storage and lash them together to form a large floating platform. Makeshift anchors kept it floating in place, and a small fleet of rowboats was tied up on the platform’s edges.

“Let it never be said that Troop 180 is not resourceful,” Matt said.

“Breakfast ready! You come get!” Perry shouted out.

Troop 180 was running a bit late... after all, they had woken up a bit late... after all, they had gone to sleep a bit late... after all, they had been up a bit late constructing their artificial island.

Mark went up to the troop’s Scoutmaster, a chap by the name of Lenny Nadeau. “Hey, Gitchisaka,” Mark said, “mind if I make a suggestion?”

“What is it?” Nadeau asked.

“I’d hate to see the entire troop be late for the opening ceremony. What if Matt and I stay behind and finish cleaning up after breakfast?”

“You sure? Don’t want you two to miss anything.”

“We’ll be fine.”

“I’ll help, Dad,” Brian said, having overheard.

“Me, too, Mr. A,” Provost added. “Then it’ll go faster, and you won’t miss as much.”

Mark smiled. “Thanks, guys.”

Nadeau got the troop into their rowboats, leaving one for Provost and the Aberts. "Troop 180... prepare to launch," he commanded.

They untied their rowboats.

"Troop 180... LAUNCH!"

The troop rowed away, making for shore.

"Well, guys," Mark said with his usual good cheer. "Let's get this over with."

The various Boy Scout troops and Girl Scout troops slowly gathered into formation before the flagpoles on the Parade Field.

Kirstin looked over at one of the approaching Boy Scout troops. "Oh, there's 192!" she said brightly.

"So it is," Sarah noted.

"Funny, I don't see the Garden Snake Patrol," Kristen then added.

"Justy probably made them stay behind and clean up after everything," Nicole hypothesized.

"This stinks," Gelinas commented. "I can see cleaning up after our patrol, but why do we have to clean up after everyone else, too?"

"Maybe Justy's still pissed about Abu Dhabi," Mike suggested.

"Or maybe he's just an ass," Swett suggested.

"Think maybe both," Perry fumed. "Perry definitely kill him, too."

Matt shrugged as he dried off a dish. "One thing's for sure, Justy definitely has it out for you guys." He pointed to the messiest dish, one that could only have been the result of special effort. It had been Justy's.

"Why'd you stay, Matt?" Hughes asked. "You could have gone to the opening."

"Hey, I stick with the Garden Snakes," Matt responded.

"Thank you, Mr. Atanian," Kenny said.

“Well,” Mike said, “let’s get this over with. We were going to actually try and win some events, after all.”

“Only one more patrol to go,” Aaron said. “Two, if you count Justy’s dish.”

Swett looked over at the mess that Justy had left. “Dude, Justy’s dish is worth two patrols by itself.”

Opening had gone smoothly. The Garden Snakes and the group from 180 hadn’t missed much, it was a rather typical opening. Some high mucky-mucks had stood up and said some pseudo-inspirational words, and then some flags had been raised. The flags that had been raised were a bit different than usual, however. On one side of the American flag was the flag of the Pioneer Valley Boy Scout council, but on the other was the flag for the Girl Scout council.

“That concludes the opening ceremony,” a high mucky-muck said. “Now go and have an enjoyable...”

The high mucky-muck was interrupted when a large force of gun-wielding people ran out from the woods onto the parade field. They all wore green and black camouflaged clothing with a red maple leaf pattern scattered randomly about the ensemble. They quickly took up positions surrounding the Boy Scouts and the Girl Scouts, and trained their guns on them.

One of them, seemingly a leader of some sort, walked up to the flagpoles and took aim at the American flag with his pistol. He shot twice, cutting the flag down with his bullets. Two of his compatriots then came forward and rose a Canadian flag in its place.

The man turned to address the Scout troops. “We here are the Canadian People’s Army, eh?” he said. “And you are our prisoners.”

“Oh my,” Kirstin said.

"How many times do I have to say I'm sorry, Colin?"

"Try thirty or forty more, and maybe we'll come close."

"Look, I didn't mean to make us late for the opening."

"No, you just decided to light Cabin Three on fire, and I foolishly had to help you put it out before it burned down."

"I did not light Cabin Three on fire. Cabin Three just happened to be too close to the fire that I did light."

"Same difference. Now we're late for opening. Really nice thing for staff, being late for opening."

"Sorry, Colin."

"What was that noise?"

"Me saying 'sorry'?"

"No, listen... there it is again."

"Sounds like... gunfire?"

"Don't be silly, Derek. It's probably just thunder or something."

"Without a single cloud in the sky, eh, Brian?"

"Shh... I think Derek's right. Listen... coming from the parade field... Dad, do you know anything about guns being used in the opening ceremony?"

"Can't say as I do, Matt."

"Seems to be quiet now... I wonder what's going on?"

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## *Chapter Twenty: Due South*

by Matthew Atanian

based on a story idea by Aaron Abdelmaseh

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"This stinks," Gelinas commented. "I can see cleaning up after our patrol, but why do we have to clean up after everyone else, too?"

"Maybe Justy's still pissed about Abu Dhabi," Mike suggested.

"Or maybe he's just an ass," Swett suggested.

"Think maybe both," Perry fumed. "Perry definitely kill him, too."

Matt shrugged as he dried off a dish. "One thing's for sure, Justy definitely has it out for you guys." He pointed to the messiest dish, one that could only have been the result of special effort. It had been Justy's.

"Why'd you stay, Matt?" Hughes asked. "You could have gone to the opening."

"Hey, I stick with the Garden Snakes," Matt responded.

"Thank you, Mr. Atanian," Kenny said.

"Well," Mike said, "let's get this over with. We were going to actually try and win some events, after all."

"Only one more patrol to go," Aaron said. "Two, if you count Justy's dish."

Swett looked over at the mess that Justy had left. "Dude, Justy's dish is worth two patrols by itself."

Off in the distance, a sound vaguely reminiscent of thunder was heard.

Hughes looked skyward, concerned. "Funny... I don't see any clouds. It's supposed to be a dry weekend, right?"

"That's what the weather report said," Gelinis responded. "Dry as a bone."

"Until the campfire tonight," Swett said, grinning. "Then, *Matt Gets Wet!*"

Perry scratched his head. "Maybe is heat lightning," Perry suggested.

Kenny shook his head. "The current atmospheric conditions do not suggest that explanation, either," he quietly rebutted.

"Ah, well, let's finish up," Mike said. "We don't want to miss too much of the camporee."

They finished cleaning up the last patrol's dishes, and then buried Justy's dish under his tent.

"Garden Snake Patrol, ready to go?" Mike asked.

The others mumbled assorted semi-affirmative responses.

The Garden Snakes were on their way, leaving behind only Shmuler who was unconscious at the base of a tree.

A very short time into their walk, they passed close by the Aquatics Lodge, just in time to see a rowboat land on the shore.

"Hi, guys," Mark Abert cheerfully said in greeting.

"Hi, Mark," Matt said. He and Matt Abert then greeted each other by simultaneously saying, "Hi, Matt," in a way that sounded as if this hadn't been the first, second, or even eighty-ninth occurrence of such a greeting.

"Clean up duty?" Provost asked.

"You guessed it." Mike said.

"Us, too," Brian chimed in.

"Hey, did you guys hear that noise earlier?" Matt Abert asked.

"What noise?" Aaron asked.

"Do you mean that thunder?" Hughes asked.

"Sounded more like gunshots to us," Provost insisted.

"Gunfire? That's ridiculous," Gelinas said. "This is Moses. There's no gunfire at Moses."

"Except for the Rifle Range," Brian said.

"Ah, yes... the, er, rifle range. But other than that..."

"And the Shotgun Range," Aaron mentioned.

"Um, yes, well... Ahem... *other* than the Rifle Range and the Shotgun Range, both of which are only used during Summer Camp I remind you, there's absolutely, positively, *no* gunfire at Moses. And," Gelinas reminded everyone, "this is Moses."

"Are you finished, Bill?" Mike asked.

"Um... yes," Gelinas said.

"Sounded like it came from the Parade Field," Mark said. "Perhaps we should be on our way, and we'll find out what it was."

"Jolly good idea," Matt said, and they were off.

When they got to the road, they met Dan and Colin. There followed another entire discussion as to the nature of the noise, and more admonishing from Gelinas as to the lack of gunfire at Moses and that they were, indeed, at Moses, just in case anyone had any doubt.

They didn't.

Therefore, everyone decided that it might just possibly be a good idea if they were to say, "SHUT UP, BILL!!!" and so they did.

"So why weren't you two at opening?" Aaron asked. "You're staff, aren't you?"

"Well, I kind of had a bit of a..." Dan began.

"Don't ask," Colin curtly interrupted.

"Help!" a girl called out in the distance.

Hughes glanced at Perry, just to make sure that the Amazon hadn't left their group.

"Hey," he then said, "did you guys hear that?"

"WHAT!?!?" Becker responded.

"Help!"

There it was again.

"Was not Perry," Perry said, as if reading Hughes's mind.

Matt listened carefully. "It's coming from ahead," he said.

The group picked up their pace and turned a slight bend in the road. They saw a lone Girl Scout running towards them. It was Sherry Birkin, a girl from Troop 42. She came to a stop as she met them, catching her breath as she tried to speak to them.

"Canadians... guns... cap... captured everyone... hostages..."

"What?" someone other than Becker said.

Sherry paused and took a few deep breaths.

"Canadians came in and captured everyone. They're being held hostage. They have guns."

"Canadians with guns are holding everyone hostage?" Swett asked, an eyebrow raised in a quizzical expression.

"Dear God! We have to rescue them!" Matt proclaimed.

"Um... why?" Gelinias asked.

"He's right," Mark said. "We can't just sit here. We have to do something."

"They have Kirstin!" Aaron exclaimed. Kenny nodded emphatically.

"And Sarah!" Matt said.

“And Nicole!” Hughes said.

“Hello?” Gelinas said. “Is anyone listening to me?”

“What about mom and Michelle?” Brian asked, referring to the female members of the Abert clan.

“And everyone in 180?” Provost asked.

“And everyone in 192!” Mike exclaimed.

“Guys? Hello? Reality check?” Gelinas continued to no effect.

“And everyone else!” Colin said.

“Yeah!” Dan said. “We have to do something!”

“Taking hostage is no honourable,” Perry said. “Perry want help stop Canadians.”

“GUYS!!!!!!” Gelinas shouted at the top of his lungs.

Mike turned to him. “Did you have something you’d like to add to the discussion, Bill?” he asked.

“Are you guys *insane!*? These are *terrorists*. With *guns*. We’re just a group of *Boy Scouts*. We can’t stop them! We should get someone who can!”

“Let me see if I understand you. You’re suggesting that it might not be a good idea going up against a group of armed terrorists with hostages using nothing but our wits and whatever we have at hand, which is quite dangerous, futile, and possibly fatal, and instead you think we should sneak off camp and alert the authorities so they can come in with proper training and equipment for such a situation and handle it properly?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I think.” Gelinas turned to the two non-Swett Matts and Mark, hoping for some support for his reasonable idea from the adult leaders present.

“Hmm... I don’t know...” Mark said. “I really think it would be best to handle this ourselves. The Boy Scouts have been getting a lot of negative press lately, and they don’t need any more of it.” Matt Abert nodded in agreement.

“Is that really the best excuse you can come up with?” Bill asked in sheer disbelief.

“Sounds pretty reasonable to me,” Matt Atanian said. Everyone else nodded and murmured agreement.

“Pretty reasonable?!” Bill shouted. He was well beyond the point of reason. “Reasonable? Is that really the best you can come up with? They are terrorists! We are Boy Scouts! THESE THINGS DON’T HAPPEN IN REAL LIFE!”

“SHUT UP, BILL!!!!” everyone else said so loudly that it echoed throughout the heavens and was heard as far away as Reykjavík.

Sarah moved nervously along as the lot of them were marched towards the Dining Hall.

“What’s going to happen to us?” Kirstin asked.

“I don’t know,” Sarah told her sister. “Just stay calm and do what they say, for now.”

“Eh, shut yer yaps and move along,” one of the armed men said to Sarah as he took a swig of Molson.

“So what’s your angle?” Nicole asked the man. “What do you want to get out of this?”

“What d’ya mean, eh?”

“Why take us hostage?”

“Well, you see, we want people to take Canada seriously, and not as a big joke. They sure will after this, eh?”

“Oh, come on, is that *all* you want?” Nicole responded. “I mean, there is an enormous potential for profit in a situation such as this. For a small percentage, I could...”

“Nicole Sakura Porter!” Sarah said harshly.

“Um... never mind.”

“Well, Doug, that’s the last of ‘em, eh.”

“Good work, Bob. We’ll show those Americans, now. So what’s our status, eh?”

“Well, we got most as many into the Dining Hall as we could, eh, and we’ve got another bunch under guard in the Training Lodge. They’re still, eh, pretty tight, so we’re

working on securing the Duplex. Also, we can hold some in the Nunes Building.”

“Very good, Bob.” Doug smiled. “I knew I could trust my brother, eh?”

Bob grabbed a Molson and popped it open. “We Mackenzie have to stick together.” He passed the beer to Doug and grabbed one for himself.

Doug took a swig and turned to one of the others present. “How’d it go at the Ranger’s house, Cecelia?”

“They were still asleep,” the woman responded, “so we rolled in a canister of sleeping gas to make sure they stayed that way and, eh, also to get the dogs out of the way. We secured the house, tied him and his wife up, and I recovered a few rifles that we can use. The Ranger’s sons were not at home, apparently they are attending this camporee so we have them as hostages.”

“This day just keeps getting brighter and brighter, eh?” Doug said. Bob tossed Cecelia a Molson as Doug took yet another swig from his. “And the front gate... is it secure, Flambé?”

“Oui,” Flambé responded. “La porte est bloquée. ‘Porc Américain ne viendra pas du fait la voie, je peut vous assurer!’”

“So, what’s the plan?” Provost asked, turning towards Mark and the two Matts whose last names began with “A.”

“Well,” Matt Abert, pausing from his favourite snack of spray cheese in a can, said, “Scouting is supposed to be a youth run organization.”

“Yes, definitely,” Mark Abert agreed.

“Mike’s the Patrol Leader,” Matt Atanian said. “What do you say, Mike?”

Mike laughed lightly. “Figures, the one time I wouldn’t mind passing this off to someone else, I get three of the only adult leaders who believe in that principle of Scouting that says it is ‘youth run.’ Normally, I can’t run things without seventeen adults springing from the woodwork and insisting on doing things their way.”

“Really?” Mark said. “How do you do things in 192?”

“You don’t want to know,” Mike said. He then stood in contemplation for a moment before announcing, “Actually, I do have an idea, but it is something I must take care of on my own.”

“What is it, Mike?” Aaron asked.

“Well... it’s something I can’t really talk about. I promised someone, you see. I think it could be a great help, though, so I have to go. Swett, you’re the Assistant Patrol Leader, so I leave the rest up to you.”

Mike waved an excited good bye and disappeared into the woods.

Swett stood there, a slight look of shock on his face.

“You know,” Gelinias said, “seems Mike found a way to pass it off to someone else, after all.”

Brian returned from having brought Sherry to hide out at the floating campsite. “What’s going on, guys?” he asked.

Swett stood there, a slight look of shock on his face.

“So... um... well...” Swett stammered.

“May I make a suggestion?” Kenny quietly asked.

“Sure, what is it, Kenny?”

“Well... before we take any action, it may be best just to find out as much information about the terrorists as we can. How many there are, what their capabilities are, where they are, where the hostages are, et cetera.”

“And how do you suggest we go about this information gathering?” Swett asked.

Aaron and the Bills all looked at each other and smiled. “Leave that to us,” Aaron said.

Flambé marched back and forth across the main gate of the camp, a flame-thrower slung over his shoulder. As he marched, he sung jubilantly to himself.

“Alouette, gentille Alouette, Alouette, je te plumerai. Je te plumerai la tete, Je te plumerai la tete, Et la tete, et la tete, Alouette...”

“Quack.”

Flambé turned and saw a duck looking at him.  
Flambé looked at the duck.  
“Alouette?”

“What’s that commotion outside?” Nicole asked.

“I don’t know,” Sarah responded, concerned for her sister’s safety. “Come on, now, don’t get yourself into any more trouble for now.”

Kirstin glanced out of the window and saw their guards shooing away a very familiar looking dog.

“Meow.”

“Heh heh, here kitty,” Bob said. “Cootchy cootchy coo!”

Bob walked up the ramp of the Nunes building and opened the door. He walked in, followed by the kitty.

“Hey, Doug, how everything going, eh?”

“All’s well, Bob. What’s with the cat?”

“Well, it just sort of followed me. I figured no harm. Eh?”

“Eh.”

“So, everyone secure in this building?”

“Yeah. We’ve got some, eh, some hostages downstairs, and this here upstairs seems like a good place for an operations centre.”

A shout from the floor below suddenly interrupted the brothers. “I demand to see whoever is in charge at once!”

“What’s going on down there, eh?” Doug shouted down.

“I’m sorry, sir, but, eh, one of the hostages is causing a bit of ruckus.”

“Bring ‘im up,” Doug ordered.

One of the terrorists ascended the stairs, leading two Boy Scouts up by gunpoint.

“You peon!” one of the Boy Scouts shouted to the terrorist. “How dare you treat me like this! Don’t you have

any idea who I am?!" he demanded to know, spittle flying with nearly every word he shouted.

"You look like a hostage to me, eh." Doug said.

Justy turned sharply to look at Doug. "Are you the one in charge here?"

Doug nodded. "And who would you be, eh?"

"Proctor!" Justy said sharply.

"Yes, Captain?"

Justy whapped Proctor sharply with his baton.

"Oh! Yes, Captain!" Proctor took a step forward. "I present to you, his Royal Highness, Senior Patrol Leader of Troop 192 and future leader of the known world, his majesty, Lord God Yung." He turned to Justy. "How was that, Captain? I was practicing in front of a mirror and everything."

"It will do," Justy said, stepping past Proctor and brushing him aside. He looked to Doug. "And who am I speaking with?"

"I am Doug Mackenzie, leader and co-founder of the Canadian People's Army. This is my brother, Bob, the other co-founder."

"How do you do, eh?" Bob asked, tossing Justy and Proctor each a Molson.

"I do quite fine," Justy said, snatching Proctor's Molson.

"Now, Mr. Yung," Doug asked. "What can we do for you, eh?"

"I'm glad you asked, Mr. Mackenzie. I have a little proposition for you."

"What kind of proposition, eh?"

"One that could be mutually beneficial to both of us. An alliance between you... and me."

Justy cracked open his Molson and downed it all in one great swig. He then did the same with Proctor's. Then he laughed, and he kept on laughing, until he stopped just long enough to prepare to laugh some more. Then... he hiccupped.

\* \* \*

Aaron and the Bills returned and each gave a detailed report. Kenny jotted everything down in his notebook and quickly prepared a summary of the results.

"It seems that they are holding the majority of the hostages at the Dining Hall, the Training Lodge, and the Duplex," Kenny said, "along with a small group at the Nunes Building, which is also their base of operations. They also have a guard at the main gate, and a guard at the Ranger's house, where Mr. and Mrs. Anderson have been gassed into unconsciousness and tied up."

"Right," Dan said, "the path is clear."

"Is it?" Gelinas asked.

"Yes. We must first destabilize the enemy and then wipe them out in a massive strike."

"Seems reasonable to me."

"What if," Matt said, "we split up into teams? Some of us will break off and distract the smaller groups at places other than the Nunes Building. Meanwhile, another group of us will stay and make preparations for the final assault, which I suggest should be aimed at Nunes Building, via the Parade Field."

"Excellent plan."

"The goal of the smaller groups should be to try and free as many of the hostages as we can," Aaron suggested, "so they're not endangered by the final assault."

"I think this is an excellent plan," Swett said. "We should do this!" He looked around a bit. "Um... so... I'll lead the group that stays behind and prepares for the final assault. Who else is with me?"

Kenny raised a hand. "I might have some ideas," he quietly mentioned.

Mark smiled. "I think we can help with that," he said.

"I need to do some work on the Pioneering Merit Badge," Brain added. "This could be as good a time as any."

"The rest of us should be two person teams," Matt suggested.

"Perry go with Matt," Perry said.

Matt immediately got a rather worried expression.

"Promise no try to kill," Perry said.

"Thank god," Matt responded.

"Until this over, that is," Perry added.

Matt smiled weakly.

Dan and Colin glanced at each other. They were an obvious team.

"What do you say, Bill?" Aaron asked.

"I still think this is a stupid idea," Gelinas said, "but if there's no talking you out of it, I may as well go along."

"How about you and me, Becker?" Hughes asked.

"WHAT!?!?"

"Guess that leaves us, right?" Provost asked Matt Abert.

"A-yup," Matt responded.

"Well, then, shall we get started?" Matt Swett asked.

Everyone nodded.

"Colin, we need to stop by Cabin Three," Dan said.

"What now?" Colin asked, slightly worried.

"Don't worry, I just need to pick up some equipment."

"Good luck, everyone," Mark said as the various groups dispersed.

Cecelia and another rather nice looking female terrorist were pacing back and fourth before the Duplex, rifles slung over their shoulders.

There was a rustling from the trees. Cecelia stopped and looked, her rifle pointed. Likewise did the other terrorist.

The rustling stopped.

The two terrorists crept slowly towards the trees, trying to discern the cause of the disturbance.

"PRETTY LADIES!!!" Provost bellowed as he catapulted himself from the forest and latched himself securely onto Cecelia's chest.

Cecelia screamed and shivered in horror.

"Mon Dieu! Get it off of me! Get it off!"

"What is it?" her companion asked, terrified.

Provost leapt from Cecelia and latched onto the other terrorist, a broad and happy grin on his face. "Pretty ladies!" he repeated.

The other terrorist yelped and tried to brush Provost off, but his grip was more secure than Fort Knox.

Suddenly and without warning, Provost let go, laughed delightedly, and scampered back off into the forest. "I'm the Leprechaun," he announced in a rather silly voice as he disappeared into the trees. "You'll never catch me!"

"After him!" Cecelia declared as she took off chasing the unseen Provost. Her companion followed.

They dashed off down a path, their pursuit made possible by the noise of snapping twigs and rustling of branches as Provost ran.

Cecelia raised her rifle and pointed it in the direction of the noise. She tried to steady her aim as best as she could without stopping her pursuit. She began to pull the trigger when...

"Naughty spawn, face my mighty Squeeze Cheese of Justice!"

Matt Abert rose from the underbrush, a can of spray cheese gripped in each hand. Deftly he immediately aimed at the faces of each terrorist and fired.

Kenny sighed.

"What's wrong, Kenny?" Mark asked.

"This would be so much easier with access to my stuff at home," he responded.

"We've got plenty of stuff here!" Mark enthusiastically told Kenny. "We have rope, we have wood, what more do you need?"

"Some knots and lashings and we can put together anything," Brian assured Kenny.

"Hmm... I would still feel better with access to my own equipment... but yes!" Kenny suddenly seemed excited and began sketching furiously in his notebook. "This could work!"

Two terrorists were sitting on the front steps of the Training Lodge, drinking Molsons. They dropped the cans of beer and rose quickly to their feet when they heard voices coming from around the side of the building.

"Are you sure this will work?"

"Matty trust Perfume. Will work."

"Why'd you bring these things with you on a Boy Scout camping trip, anyway?"

"Never know when need."

"I can't believe you talked me into this."

The two terrorists turned the corner, their guns pointed forward.

"Who goes there, eh!?" one of them demanded.

Then the two of them saw who went there, and they stopped dead in their tracks.

They gawked at what they saw, which was two women, a red head and an Asian, both wearing rather nice, short cut Chinese dresses.

"Um... what are you doing here, eh?" one of the terrorists asked.

The red head smiled sweetly. "Your boss sent us over. He said you two big guys were doing such a good job that you deserved a reward."

"But... um... Doug already sent over a case of Molson."

"You do extra special job," the Asian woman said, stepping forward and draping her arm over one of the men's shoulder, "you get extra special reward."

"And we're it," the red head added, draping her arm over the other man's shoulder.

"Gosh... well, eh?" one of them said.

The women smiled.

They then swiftly conked the two men's heads together, and they dropped to the ground, unconscious.

"Gosh," the two women said.

"Well," Matty added.

"Eh?" Perfume concluded.

Mark finished sawing off the last large round slab and began to bore a hole through the centre. Brian and Matt Swett finished lashing together the main platform, while Kenny inspected various odds and ends.

"It's all coming together nicely," Mark commented as he consulted Kenny's sketched plans.

Kenny nodded. Then he frowned. "Oh no," he quietly said.

"What is it, Kenny?" Mark asked.

"The main arm will need to be somewhat pliable, so we'll need live wood."

"Well, normally it's not good to cut a living tree, but in this case it can't be helped, Kenny," Mark responded.

"Yo," Swett shouted from where he was, "I'm ready to start on the turret."

"Be right there!" Kenny responded. He looked at Mark, and Mark nodded. He picked up the saw again and went off in search of the necessary wood.

Dan and Colin crept quietly towards the main gate.

"Looks like there's only one here," Colin said. "I'll dash across the road, and we'll sneak up behind the trees on either side. When you hear my signal, we'll simultaneously rush out and take him by surprise."

"No," Dan said, "look."

Colin looked. "Uh oh," he said, seeing the terrorist's armament.

"You stay here." Dan grinned. "This one's mine alone."

Dan rose from his hiding place and strode purposefully towards Flambé, his flame-thrower slung over his shoulder as he walked. Flambé saw him and smiled.

"Mon ami, il semble que vous êtes venus pour me défier," Flambé said. "Heureusement, car vous semblez être l'un Américain qui est un digne opposant, je reçois."

Flambé and Dan stood only a few feet apart and saluted. They then each simultaneously pivoted 180° and began to pace. They each counted off with each step.

“Un, deux, trois,” Flambé said.

“Four, five, six,” Dan said.

“Sept...”

“Eight...”

“Neuf ...”

“Ten!”

They turned and aimed their flame-throwers, but Dan was faster. He pulled the trigger and flames engulfed his opponent.

“Well, Kenny, construction is about complete,” Mark said. “Matt and Brian can finish up the rest. Have you given any thought to an armament?”

“Well...” Kenny was quieter than usual. Mark had to kneel down in order to hear him properly. “I do have an idea, but I’m not sure if it’s ethically sound.”

“Ethically sound?” Mark asked.

“Well, Mr. Abert, it may... it may constitute biological warfare. Oh, if only I had access to my equipment at home! I could come up with a safe alternative!”

“Biological warfare!? Kenny, what is it?”

Kenny told him.

Mark was shocked into silence for a moment, but in the end he told Kenny that he didn’t see much of a choice. They had no other options.

Hughes crept quietly towards the Anderson house. “There’s only one guard here... I’ll sneak around that way, and you slip up and...”

“Wait,” Becker said, gripping Hughes’s arm to prevent his advance. “I have a better idea.”

Becker stepped out from the trees and boldly walked up to the terrorist.

“You! Stop, eh!”

Becker extended his arm. In his hand were his headphones. The ear pads were turned outwards, aimed at the terrorist.

“What are you doing, eh?”

Becker smiled very slightly. “Heh.”

“Answer me!” the terrorist insisted.

Becker hit “play.”

Both the terrorist and Hughes screamed and fell to their knees, clutching their ears as they were assaulted by Bulgarian Opera at a decibel level of epic proportions.

“No! Make it stop! Make the pain go away!” the terrorist cried.

Then, as if in response to the man’s plea, Becker’s batteries died.

The terrorist rose, smiled, and pointed his gun at the Boy Scouts.

“I think the appropriate remark at this point would be,” Hughes suggested, “Oh, Shit.”

The terrorist began to squeeze the trigger.

The ground shook slightly. A deep growl was heard from within the Ranger’s house, quietly at first but quickly rising in volume until it even approached the level of Becker’s CD player.

The terrorist turned in... well... in terror to look at the house he was guarding.

“You don’t think...” Hughes began.

“We woke the Ranger?” Becker finished.

“I think the appropriate remark at this point would be,” Hughes suggested, “Oh, Shit.”

“Let’s get the hell out here!” Becker exclaimed.

Becker and Hughes ran off, leaving the poor terrorist behind to face the wrath of Gary Anderson.

Mark and Kenny regarded the large number of canteens before them on the ground. “That should do it, they’re all loaded. We just need some way to detonate them on impact,” Kenny said.

“Did I hear the word ‘detonate’?” Dan asked as he and Colin approached.

“Detonate what?” Colin asked.

“Well... these canteens,” Mark said.

“What’s in them?” Dan asked.

Kenny quietly told them.

“My God! Can we do that?” Colin asked.

“Do we have a choice?” Mark responded.

“That’s a bit extreme, even for my tastes,” Dan said. “But... if it’s the only option...” He plopped his backpack down before the canteens and sat beside it. He unzipped it and began to rummage inside. “Detonate on impact... No problem... a small charge, wire up the casing and make it pressure sensitive... not too sensitive so that the launch doesn’t set it off...”

“You know,” Mark commented observing this, “he really worries me sometimes.”

“I am just glad he’s on our side,” Colin responded, “for which I am eternally grateful every day.”

“I know what you mean. It’s hazardous enough knowing him while on the same side.” Mark bowed his head. “I’m starting to feel really bad for these poor terrorists.”

“Well... we have to do what we have to do.”

“That we do, Colin. That we do.”

Matt Abert and Derek stopped by the Trading Post to get something to drink.

“Driving off terrorists sure works up a thirst,” Matt said. He squeezed the last of his cheese down his throat and deposited three quarters into the Coca-Cola vending machine. The coins rattled around inside the machine and Matt punched the button for a root beer. The machine made some buzzing noises, supposedly locating the proper beverage.

From behind him, Derek remarked, “I heard they might’ve finally fixed this thing.”

There was a clang of metal on metal, and a heavily beat up can of Kiwi/Mocha Fruit Juice fell out of the slot.

"Or not," Matt said.

Derek saw this, screamed in inhuman horror, and ran away.

"Derek! Wait!" Matt ran off after him.

As this occurred, a terrorist dashed across the Parade Field in fear for his life. In pursuit on horseback was Gary Anderson. Following Gary was one of his dogs, Bosco.

"Get back here!" Gary demanded. "Bosco needs a snack!"

"Cecelia, come in, eh?" Doug shook his walkie-talkie a bit and tried again. "Cecelia, you there, eh?"

"I'm not getting any response from the Training Lodge or the Ranger's house, either, Doug," Bob said.

"It's the Garden Snake Patrol, it must be," Justy said spitefully. "They're always out to foil me at whatever I do."

"Garden Snake Patrol? Who's that then, eh?" Doug asked.

"My life long rivals, a patrol from my troop who will stop at nothing to see my plans for world domination thwarted!"

"Captain, don't you think that sounds a bit..."

"Shut up, Proctor!"

"Yes, Captain."

"This explains why the Garden Snakes weren't at opening... They must have known that you were going to be staging this takeover of the Camporee, and they would have also known that you would ally yourselves with my greatness..."

"Remember, Canada is the capitol when you take over the world, eh?" Doug asked.

"Yes, yes, of course," Justy responded.

"Are you sure the Garden Snakes didn't just miss opening because you made them stay behind and do all of the..."

"Shut up, Proctor!"

"Yes, Captain."

"So, Mr. Yung," Doug asked, "if you know these Garden Snakes, then how would you suggest we stop them, eh?"

"I'm glad you asked. I know just what to do."

And so Justy laughed.

Matty and Perfume were on their way back to meet up with Kenny and Mark's group when they found something rather disturbing.

They found Taylor Kuntz.

"My red haired Goddess! It is the beast! And fair Juliet's such fun!"

"Good god, do you never give up?"

"Thank goodness you're safe! I shall keep you so from these vile Canadians!"

"Who this?" Perfume asked.

"The bane of my existence," Matty told her. She turned to Kuntz. "Why aren't you a hostage?"

"I escaped, fighting off ten or twenty of them as I did so!"

"You sure you didn't just run away at the first sight of trouble?" Matty said.

"No!" Kuntz insisted rather weakly. "No, I am sure it was I escaped, fighting off twenty or thirty of them single handedly as I did so! Cry hammock, and let sleeping dogs of war lie!"

"If you say so."

"So what say you, fair Juliet? Shall I protect you from harm? We can go oft into yonder woods and yea, hence enjoy some private timest togetherest!"

"Kuntz, how many times must I say that I am not interested?"

"You don't have another guy, do you?"

"Of course not," Matty responded without thinking. "Why would I have a guy?"

"That's right, I'm all the man you need!" Kuntz grabbed Matty's arm and began to try and drag her off. Matty slapped his arm away.

"Don't you understand that 'no' means no?" Matty shouted.

"Oh, come on!" Kuntz rebuffed. "You simply cannot show your true feelings for me!"

"My true...?" For some reason, a scene towards the beginning of *The Empire Strikes Back* drifted through Matty's mind. Unfortunately, there was only one person other than Kuntz present... but Matty supposed she'd have to do.

Desperate times call for desperate measures.

Matty grabbed Perfume and kissed her full on the lips.

Kuntz did a very good impression of Edvard Munch's famous painting, *The Scream*.

Perfume, meanwhile, was quite surprised.

"Muh... muh... muh..." Kuntz muttered incoherently.

Perfume continued to be quite surprised.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING, MY GODDESS!?!?" Kuntz asked in a rather uncalm manor.

Perfume remained in a quite surprised state.

Kuntz backed away, making funny noises. Finely, he turned and ran, saying as he went, "When sorrows come, they come not apple pies but in half gallons!"

As Matty pulled away from Perfume at last, Perfume looked at Matty with a quite surprised expression.

"Um... thanks for being 'Luke'," Matty said.

Perfume sighed languidly. "Not know Matty feel so for Perfume," she whispered.

Matty gulped. "No! It's not like that."

"What it like, then? Was not Kiss of Death, was it?"

"No, I don't want to kill you, Perfume."

"Is only one other kind of kiss for Amazon warrior. Matty propose to Perfume?"

"WHAT!?" Matty exclaimed.

"Perfume not know what to say... Would like better as Matt, but if Matty into such things..."

“Perfume, I don’t want to marry you! I was just trying to get rid of that guy! I can’t stand him!”

“Matty no want to marry Perfume?”

“No... I love Sarah. Um... sorry?”

“Matty just toying with Perfume’s heart?” There was a dangerous pause before the Amazon shouted, “Perfume kill Matty!”

Perfume took an aggressive stance and Matty backed away slightly. “Woah, hold on. I thought we had a truce until this was all over. Remember? Stop the Canadians?”

Perfume snapped her fingers and backed down, disappointed. “Kill you later.”

“You were going to anyways, weren’t you?”

Perfume nodded.

“So has anything really changed?”

Perfume shrugged.

Matty shrugged. “Oh well, let’s go stop the Canadians, then.”

“So, you see, you could make a mint by making outrageous demands and offering the release of a single hostage as each demand is met. Sure, you probably won’t get half of the demands... but that’s why you make more than what you actually need.”

“I see... I see...” The terrorist was excitedly taking notes.

“Nicole?” Kirstin asked. “Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

“And you know what is an excellent way to make sure that you get your demands?”

“What’s that, eh?”

“Show the negotiators that you can be reasonable.”

“And how do you do that, eh?”

“You release *female* hostages first.”

“Like you?” the terrorist asked.

Nicole looked at herself and gave off a rather convincing performance of surprise. “Huh... what d’ya know! I wasn’t even thinking about that!”

“Nicole!” Sarah shouted from where she was sitting.  
“What did I tell you?”

“Um... not to cause any more trouble for now?”

“So get your butt back over here and sit down!”

Nicole sighed and, followed by Kirstin, returned to sitting with Sarah.

A moment later, they were approached by the terrorists.

Hughes and Becker were headed back to meet up with everyone else when someone tapped Becker lightly on the shoulder. Becker, and thus Hughes, quickly turned, alarmed, expecting to find they had been discovered by the terrorists.

They had not.

“Excuse me, can you tell me how to get to Tokyo?”

“This is it. The Dining Hall. They’re keeping a majority of the hostages here.”

“I still think we should get the proper authora...”

“Bill?” Aaron said in warning.

“Okay, okay...”

“Look... what’s that?”

“What?”

“There! Two of the guards are leaving... looks like they have some hostages with them, but I can’t see who it is.”

“You don’t think they’re gonna... gonna...?”

“I doubt it. What’s the point? Probably just moving them somewhere else. Works out good for us. Less guards to take out.”

“I suppose so.”

“Got the water?”

“Right here.”

The next moment, one of the remaining guards was attacked by the dog he’d shooed away earlier as the other one was set upon by a most foul fowl.

\* \* \*

“Eh? Now I can’t reach the Dining Hall, Doug.”

“Call anyone you can reach back here to Nunes, Bob. Looks like showdown time, eh?”

“That it does, gentlemen.” Justy laughed. “And I can’t wait to play our ace in the hole.”

“Eh? Now I can’t reach the Dining Hall, Doug.”

“Call anyone you can reach back here to Nunes, Bob. Looks like showdown time, eh?”

“That it does, gentlemen. And I can’t wait to play our ace in the hole.”

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## *Chapter Twenty-One: Picket Fences*

by Matthew Atanian

based on a story idea by Aaron Abdelmaseh

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Matt and Perry, both male once again and both back in their Boy Scout uniforms, entered the clearing where Kenny’s team had been hard at work.

“What the hell is that?” Matt asked, upon seeing a large wooden construction that had no small resemblance to a tank.

“Mr. Atanian, Mr. Perry, welcome back!” Kenny said, walking over. “What do you think?” he asked, his voice uncharacteristically filled with something that seemed close to pride.

“Nice tank,” Matt said.

“Well, it’s more a high mobile catapult platform than a tank,” Kenny responded.

“Ah, of course.”

Mark Abert walked over, followed by Matt Swett. “Impressive, isn’t it?” Mark asked. “Your Kenny is a genius with Pioneering projects, I must say.”

“Yeah,” Brian shouted from where he was doing some last minute lashing on one of the treads. “I’ve done enough on this thing to finish what I needed on my Pioneering Merit Badge twice over!”

“Well,” Kenny said in an unobtrusive voice, “I couldn’t have done anything without the help of all of you.”

Aaron and Gelinas approached. “Hey, cool tank,” Gelinas commented.

“So how did things go at the Dining Hall?” Swett asked.

"Mission complete," Aaron reported. "All of the hostages that were being held there have been released, and all are making their way over to 180's floating campsite."

"Good, good," Swett responded. "And any terrorists that we've already captured?"

"We talked to Mr. Anderson," Hughes said, "and he agreed to watch them for us. They're over at the Dining Hall."

"Gooder still," Swett responded.

Matt turned to Aaron. "Um..."

"What is it?"

"Any... any news on Troop 42?"

Aaron frowned. "They were in the Dining Hall... except for the Porters. Seems that just before we attacked, they were moved to the Nunes Building."

"But why?" Matt responded.

Swett cursed. "Bet it's that punk, Justy. Hughes did report that he was helping the Canadians."

"Why involve Nicole and the others, though?" Hughes asked as he and Becker entered the clearing. "That doesn't make sense!"

"Of course it does," Swett responded. "He always thinks, for some reason, that it is our personal mission in life to thwart every little evil thing he does!"

"Granted, he's usually right," Becker said, "but that's only because every little evil thing he does seems to be to make our lives miserable!" He turned to Mark. "The troop your wife and daughter is with is all safe, though."

Mark had up until now been fighting to maintain an external air of calm and hope. Now, at last, it took no effort at all to seem as if that was what he felt, as those were indeed at last his true feelings.

"So, is everyone back?" Matt Atanian asked.

"We're still waiting on Derek and Matt Abert," Matt Swett informed him, "and Mike, wherever he went."

"Ah, yes," Matt responded. "Mike."

Colin came jogging over. "Dan's about ready rigging the, er, special ammunition."

“Ammunition?” Matt asked him.

“For the catapult.”

“What is it?”

“Um... it’s better if you don’t know.”

“I think the catapult needs a name,” Hughes said.  
“Anyone know any famous catapults?”

“Famous catapults?” Aaron responded. “Is there such a thing?”

“The only catapults I know of are the ones inside the French castle,” Matt Atanian said.

“French castle?” Gelinias asked.

“Holy Grail,” Matt responded.

“Be kind of ironic going up against Canadians with something named *the French Castle*, huh?” Becker said.

“I like irony,” Swett said. “*The French Castle* it is!”

Matt Abert walked into the clearing, trying in vain to squeeze one last morsel of cheese from the empty can he held. Derek Provost was with him.

“Well,” Swett said, “except for Mike, we all seem to be here. So, let’s see where we’re at. Like, all the hostages aside from those at Nunes have been freed and are hiding out on 180 Island. All enemy forces outside of those who are at Nunes are likewise neutralized. So, everything comes down to one great big final assault at the Nunes. And for that, we have Kenny’s thing-a-ma-bob.”

“If I may explain,” Kenny said, “this high mobile catapult platform will be able to exit the woods and advance on the Nunes Building close enough for us to be able to fire our ammunition with a great degree of accuracy upon any targets. The platform itself is powered by a group sitting inside the protected body, where their pedalling will produce the necessary... oh... oh, dear...”

“What is it, Kenny?” Becker asked.

“The power system... I miscalculated! I forgot to take into account the weight of the people who would be inside! There’s no way that the people would be able to provide enough energy to move an object with the combined weight of the platform *and* themselves!”

Perry and Swett glanced at each other. "You thinking what Perry thinking?" Perry asked.

"You bet your ass I am," Swett responded.

"Hey, wake up," Aaron said as he shook the unconscious form lying under a tree in Troop 192's campsite.

The unconscious form raised a hand to shoo Aaron away.

Aaron persisted, raising his voice. "*Hey! Wake up, NOW!!*"

"Mmrrph..." the unconscious form said, as it fought becoming a conscious form. It was a struggle the form was quickly losing. It blinked, half asleep. "I'll take Richard Simmons for the block," it said.

Aaron shook the form once more and its eyes abruptly opened. "Are you awake, now?" Aaron asked.

"Are you awake, now?" Will Shmuler responded.

"Stop that, this is serious!" Aaron demanded.

"Stop that, this is serious!" Shmuler shouted back. He hopped to his feet and began to jog in little circles around Aaron.

"Would you cut that out? We need you for something!" Aaron said.

"Would you cut that out, we need you for... Hold on, you actually need me for something?"

"Yes, we do. Canadian terrorists have taken over the camp, and after tenting with you, Swett and Perry suggested that you are quite possibly the only human on the face of the Earth who has within him enough raw energy to propel the machine we built to stop them."

"Cool!" Shmuler responded. "Let's go, Captain Ron!"

All possible preparations, checks, double checks, and last minute ultra-final triple checks were completed. Everyone was in their proper positions, and was just waiting for the order to attack.

Inside the high mobile catapult platform were Derek Provost, Brian Abert, Hughes, Becker, Gelinas, Aaron, Swett, and most importantly Will Shmuler, all ready to pedal their hearts out. Atop the platform, the catapult was being manned by Colin, Dan, and Kenny, with Mark Abert assisting with the reloading. Beside them were a rather good-sized pile of Scout canteens, each tightly sealed with their mystery contents inside.

Standing behind the platform, Perry held his sword, ready for melee combat. Matt Atanian and Matt Abert joined him. Abert was armed with two fresh bottles of squeeze cheese, and Atanian held a Scout stave as if it was a quarterstaff.

"Perry," Matt said, "I know I shouldn't be *too* worried, but could you try to strike with the back or sides of your blade?"

"No kill terrorists?" Perry asked, confused.

"I'd rather we only incapacitate them, if we can."

"They try kill us," Perry reminded him.

"I know they will, but we're not like them. Anyway, I've got no combat training, I'll be lucky to make it five seconds, in my opinion."

"Then why you fight?" Perry asked.

"They have Sarah," Matt simply responded.

A hatch on the top of the platform opened and Matt Swett climbed out from within. "If everyone's ready, um, like, I'll be ordering the attack in a few seconds. But before I do, I was thinking that in the movies and stuff this is usually where there are wise words of inspiration from some wise old figure. I was wondering if maybe you'd like to say anything, Matt."

Matt Atanian blinked in surprise. He hated public speaking. "Um... that's okay."

"Go on, Matt," Matt Abert encouraged, chuckling. "You're the wise old figure."

"I think that Mark is much more qualified," Matt insisted.

"This group is mostly your troop," Mark said. "The honour is yours."

Matt swallowed. He really did hate public speaking. "Well, um, we're about to go and fight for our camp. These naughty people have come in here with their guns and their bacon and their Molson, and they have tried to take away our freedom, and they have *succeeded* in taking away the freedom of those close to us.

"Everyone has an El Guapo they have to fight some time in their lives. For some, their El Guapo might be illiteracy. For others, their El Guapo might be intolerance. For us, our El Guapo is a bunch of Canadians with very big guns. And just like the Three Amigos succeeded in defeating their El Guapo, who happened to be the real El Guapo, we too shall defeat our own personal El Guapo.

"For today is the day we draw the line – right here, and no further! Today is the day we fight back! Today is the day we take a stand for our freedom and the freedom of those we love! Today is the day that we stand up for what we believe in! Today... Today is our Independence Day! They may take our camp, but they will never take... *our FREEDOM!!!*"

Everyone broke out into spontaneous cheers, invigorated and ready to fight despite the stupidity of the rather cliché speech Matt had just delivered to them.

"All right!" Swett said, after the commotion had died down. "I know when I go to camp, I like not to die, so let's give 'em hell!"

Bob was looking out of the window on the upper floor of the Nunes Building when he could have sworn that he saw the trees on the opposite side of the Parade Field moving.

"What in the name of Mario Lemieux is that, eh?" he exclaimed.

"What is it, eh?" Doug asked, coming over.

"Mon Dieu!" another one of the terrorists exclaimed.

Justy rose from where he sat, knocking over the slightly less than small pile of empty Molson cans at his feet, and in a stupor made his way over to the windows as

well. He was only able to make it by virtue of the fact that Proctor appeared from nowhere and held him up as he walked.

"Isht's thoshe Garden Shnakes, I tell you," Justy said, hiccupping slightly as Proctor discretely placed a cup of black coffee into his hands. "Ishts gotta be!"

Suddenly, much to the shock of all of the terrorists, *the French Castle* burst forth from within the woods on the opposite side of the Parade Field and rapidly made its way towards the Nunes Building.

"Oh, boy," Bob said.

"Get every man you can out there and stop that thing, eh!" Doug commanded.

"Here they come," Mark said.

"Turn the turret two degrees to the left and pull the catapult arm down for a shot at eighty three percent of maximum power," Kenny commanded.

Colin and Dan followed Kenny's instructions. Mark gingerly handed one of the canteens to Colin, who then placed it in the catapult.

"Fire!" Kenny said, feeling a bit like Horatio Hornblower.

Dan pulled the line, releasing the potential energy contained within the long arm of the catapult. It swung upwards with furious force, and the canteen was propelled with great speed towards the mass of Canadians gathering outside of the Nunes Building. The canteen landed on the ground just in front of the terrorists and exploded, letting loose a green cloud of steam or smoke that quickly enveloped them.

The Canadians coughed and gagged, all clutching their throats and falling to the ground, withering in absolute agony.

Matt, who had been running along side *the French Castle*, stopped dead in his tracks. He hollered up to the catapult crew, "What the hell is in those canteens?"

"Well," Kenny answered him, "it was the only thing I could think of to completely incapacitate the terrorists without causing them permanent harm." Kenny turned to give instructions for readying the next shot.

"And what would that thing be?" Matt insisted, as he rushed to keep up with *the French Castle*.

"Well... we sort of... are you sure you want to know?" Colin asked.

"Yes, I'm sure!"

"Fire!" Kenny said, and another canteen took out another group of enemy forces.

"Well," Dan told Matt, "we took the canteens to the latrines and Port-a-Potties, and..."

Matt was shocked. "You didn't?"

Dan nodded. "Yeah, we did. We dipped the canteens into 'em."

"That's... that's horrible!"

"All's fair in love in war," Dan responded.

"Fire!" Kenny commanded.

"This is bad, eh?" Doug noted as he looked out of the window at the battle.

"Yes, it is," Justy responded, finishing his eleventh cup of coffee. Proctor tried to give him another, and Justy shoed him away. "There's no need to worry however, we still have our trump card."

*The French Castle* came to a stop as they got close enough to the Canadians for melee combat. Fortunately, most of them had been rendered unconscious, and most of the rest of them had dropped their guns while holding their noses.

Also fortunately, while the stench was still horrid, the air had at least cleared enough that the Moses defenders would not find it intolerable.

Matt, his concern for Sarah giving him a courage he would have never even suspected he possessed, charged

forward with a holler and swung his stave at one of the Canadians. The Canadian blocked the swing with the back end of his rifle, but Matt brought the other end of his stave around and swept the Canadian's legs out from underneath him.

Perry was chasing a small group of the terrorists around, swinging his sword madly. He never came close to making contact with any of the Canadians, but eventually he ran them ragged and they gave up and crumpled to the ground in a heap.

Matt Abert charged the closest terrorist and let him have it with both barrels of processed cheese product.

Will Shmuler climbed out from within *the French Castle* and jumped down onto the head of one of the terrorists. "How are you gentlemen!?" he shouted as the terrorist fell to the ground, thrown off balance from having a Shmuler latched onto him. "Someone set us up the bomb," Will said as he stood upon the chest of the terrorist. He dropped to his knees, knocking the wind out of the terrorist, and bellowed, "All your base are belong to us!"

The others came out from *the French Castle*, only Kenny and Mark staying behind, and joined in the combat.

Terrorists were falling, left and right. All was going almost too easily.

"Hold it right there, eh?"

The Moses defenders turned to see Doug Mackenzie, tightly holding Sarah Porter with one arm, while with his other he held a gun to her head. Just behind and to either side of him, Bob and Justy each similarly held one of the twins captive. Just behind Justy stood Proctor. He waved to the Moses defenders. "Hey, how's it going, guys?" he asked in a friendly voice.

"Shut up, Proctor!" Justy spat.

"Surrender now, and face the judgement of the Canadian People's Army, eh!" Doug demanded.

"Let Sarah and the others go!" Matt shouted.

"Yeah, like that's going to happen!" Justy sneered. "Face it, Garden Snakes, I have won!"

Doug pressed the gun against Sarah's temple. She winced.

Matt frowned and dropped his staff. The other defenders likewise dropped whatever weapons they were using.

By this time, many of the terrorists that had been rendered unconscious had begun to come around. They picked up their guns and formed a circle around the Moses defenders.

"If anyone could even come remotely close to having been a worthy adversary to me, it would have been you," Justy said. "Happily, the time has come to say good bye to all of you."

Justy then began to laugh like he had never laughed before. It was an ear splitting laugh, the likes of which had never been heard before and were unlikely to ever be heard again in the annals of maniacal laughter.

His laugh was interrupted when a voice called out, "Hey, am I late for all of the fun?"

Everyone turned. It was Mike. Beside him stood a well-dressed woman with fluffy blonde hair, her deep brown eyes framed by a pair of Aviator-style glasses.

The woman took a breath, paused, and then shouted at the top of her lungs, "*I LIKE SQUIRRELS!!!*"

There was a great rustling from within the surrounding forest. The running of thousands of tiny little feet. The twitching of thousands of cute little noses. The swishing of thousands of fluffy little tails. The rustling came to a sudden stop, and the terrorists and defenders alike gasped in shock, as they became aware of thousands of unblinking, beady little eyes staring at them.

One edge of the woman's mouth curled upwards in the slightest of smiles.

"*GET 'EM, BOYS!*" she commanded.

A hurricane of squirrels came fourth from within the forest and descended upon the terrorists, leaving the Moses defenders untouched. The terrorists ran, screaming, as little grey or brown bundles of fury latched onto them and refused to let go.

The only four of the enemy to remain untouched were Bob, Doug, and Justy, who were too close to hostages for the squirrels to take any chances, and Proctor, who the squirrels did not see as a threat.

"Look, Captain, aren't they cute?" Proctor asked. He dug into his pocket and produced a packet of nuts, and he tossed them one at a time to some of the closer squirrels.

"Girls," Sarah said, "remember when I said not to cause any trouble for now?"

Nicole and Kirstin nodded.

"It's officially later!" Sarah said, delivering a swift elbow to Doug. Nicole and Kirstin did likewise, Kirstin adding a brief, "I'm terribly sorry," to Justy as she did so.

The Porters ran towards *the French Castle* as the squirrels descended upon their former captors.

"Kirstin, you're safe!" Aaron shouted. Kenny smiled at her from his position atop the platform.

"Um, hey, Nicole," Hughes said. "Glad you're okay."

Nicole blinked. "Oh, thanks."

Matt walked over to Sarah. "Hi," he said. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I was a little worried for a while, but I'm fine now."

"I'm... I'm glad," Matt said.

"Well, you needn't have worried. It's nice you went to this whole rescue effort and such, but I'm sure we'd have gotten out okay without your help." Sarah turned away from Matt.

"Sister, that wasn't very nice," Kirstin observed to herself from where she stood.

Suddenly, from beneath the massive ball of squirrel in which he had been enveloped, Doug Mackenzie pulled himself free and charged directly at Sarah Porter, his gun extended towards her.

Sarah turned in shock, barely able to comprehend what she saw coming towards her.

Doug let loose with a scream of absolute rage as his finger tightened over the trigger.

With a swiftness he had never before achieved in his life, Matt came up beside Doug and brought his stave

down upon Doug's hand. He yelled in pain as he dropped his gun to the ground. Matt swung his staff back up, connecting with Doug's chin and knocking him unconscious.

The squirrels began to make their way back into the forest.

Mike came over and joined everyone else; the woman who had been with him had vanished along with the squirrels.

Sarah stood facing Matt, and Matt facing Sarah. She stared at him, still trying to absorb what had just transpired, unable to make any move except for the occasional blink.

Finely, she spoke. "You... you saved me," she said.

Matt was also in something of a state of shock, unable to believe the competency of his own actions. "I could never do otherwise," he simply answered.

Mike surveyed the surroundings. Most of the defenders were unhurt, and those that were had only minor injuries, almost nothing a Band-Aid wouldn't fix. "Well, glad that's over!" Mike said.

"Who was that woman?" Gelinas asked him.

"She?" Mike responded. "She is a story for another time. Let's get these terrorists someplace secure and get on with our Camporee!"

When Matt had been unsure what to do about the terrorists, Nicole said she'd take care of the problem free of charge. She made a phone call, and an hour or so later a large police bus pulled into camp.

"Someone need a pick-up?" a good-natured state trooper said as he exited the bus. The nametag on his uniform read, "Kelly."

"Hey, Officer Stan!" Nicole called out.

"Miss Porter, it's good to see you again," the officer replied. "Jason said you needed a favour, so here I am."

Nicole nodded to Matt. "Well, you see," Matt then said, stepping forward, "we had a problem with some Canadian terrorists..."

"Was it Bob and Doug?" Stan asked, looking slightly annoyed.

"You know them?"

"Know them? They're always pulling silly stunts like this, those goofy Canucks."

"Well, we don't really know what to do with them, and we don't want any bad publicity for the Council," Matt said.

"Tell you what, as a favour for Nicole here, I'll be happy to bus them all back up to Canada, no questions asked, no reports filed, nothing."

"Thanks, Officer Kelly," Matt said.

"Please, call me Stan," the trooper replied.

"Okay, Stan," Matt said. He told the officer where the terrorists were, and Officer Stan Kelly went to go round them up.

Matt turned to Nicole.

Nicole grinned and shrugged. "Hey," she said, "I've got a lot of people who owe me favours."

Since by the time normalcy (or at least some semblance there of) was restored it was late in the afternoon, there wasn't really time to hold any of the Camporee's events.

"And we were really going to try this time, too," Matt Swett lamented.

Therefore, the next important occurrence (aside from dinner) to take place was that evening's campfire.

Currently, Brian Abert was standing before the assembled troops, illuminated by the twin roaring fires to either side of him. He was regaling the audience with tales of some of the sounds one might hear in the woods at night.

"Other times you might hear an owl," Brian said, continuing the skit.

On cue, a member of Troop 180 who was hidden in the woods made a sound that, with the audience's willing suspension of disbelief, made a passable impression of an owl. "Whooo! Whooo!"

"Or perhaps a black grizzly bear!"

"Grrrrrrwww!" exclaimed another hidden member of 180.

"And this sound," Brian said, "is the sound of Troop 180 at camp!"

Various cries and moans came out from the woods. "It's cold!" "It's raining!" "I wan' a go home!" "I want my mommy!"

The audience laughed.

"Thank you," Brian said in conclusion as he stepped down.

"That was, *Night Sounds* by Troop 180," Danny Mashia, MC for the campfire that evening, said. "Next up is Troop 192 with *Matt Gets Wet, part 2.*"

Huge applause broke out as Mike walked up onto the stage, looking somewhat forlorn. "Hi, everybody," he said, waving. "As those who were with us at the Fall Camporee might remember, we were hoping then to present the skit, *Matt Gets Wet*. However, at that time, Matt's lawyers had told us that under nooooooo! circumstances would Matt be getting wet. Since then, we have been in constant negotiations with the lawyers, and we had been certain that we would have positive results for you this evening, and we would be able, at last, to get Matt wet."

Mike paused and took a breath. The audience silently hung on in eager participation.

"Unfortunately, the negotiations fell through at the eleventh hour, and we were informed on the way to the campfire this evening that Matt has gone as far as to get a restraining order against water, and it is no longer allowed within one hundred and fifty feet of him. So without further adieu, I present to you once more the Troop 192 classic, *The Clappy Song*.

"This is *the Clappy Song*, clap, clap, clap," Mike sang, clapping each time he said, "clap."

The audience moaned in disgust. It had been funny at Summer Camp, and it had even been funny as a proxy for Matt getting wet at the Fall Camporee, but this was certainly stretching things a bit. The audience wanted to see Matt get wet, and was accepting no substitutes.

"This is *the Clappy Song*, clap, clap, clap," Mike continued.

Someone stood up in the audience. "What the hell is this?" he shouted. It was Colin. "I came here tonight to see Matt get wet!"

Another person stood. "I paid good money to see Matt get wet," Dan said, "and I damn well better see Matt get wet!"

This seemed to spark something in the audience, and they began to actively boo and hiss Mike as he valiantly tried to continue *the Clappy Song*.

Suddenly, Matt Atanian stood from his seat in the audience and made his way up to stand beside Mike. He made various "quiet down" gestures and made remarks along the lines of, "What's all this, then?" until the audience settled down.

There was another moment of silent anticipation before Matt spoke.

"I think it is quite sad," Matt declared in a loud, clear voice, "that all of you get some sort of cheep thrill at the thought of seeing me get wet, and under no circumstances will I resort to such silly, puerile, and juvenile stunts merely for your enjoyment!"

The boos and hisses after Matt said this were quite pronounced.

"Matt gets wet!" Colin and Dan began chanting. "Matt gets wet!"

The rest of the audience picked up the chant until it began echoing across the hills and mountains of Russell, Massachusetts.

Matt made more various "quiet down" gestures, and once silence had returned he spoke once more.

"Is it really that important to you to see me get wet?" Matt asked.

The audience shouted quite a very big, “**YES!!!**”

“Well... I suppose if it's that important...” Matt paused. “Of course, I need some time to properly prepare. So be here, Summer Camp week 3, and I, Matt, will get wet!”

The audience burst out in applause as Matt returned to his seat and turned things back over to Mike.

“And, to hold you over until then,” Mike said, “I present to you Troop 192's very own Matt Swett!”

Matt Swett joined Mike up on stage, followed by Aaron and Becker, who were carrying a large cooler of water. Matt took off his shirt, and Aaron and Becker immediately emptied the contents of the cooler over him.

There followed a standing ovation.

The next morning the Camporee's awards ceremony was held, presided over by the venerable Harris Tanner.

“Yes, well, it seems as if because of mitigating circumstances we were unable to hold our events at this Camporee,” he said in his lilting yet gravely voice. “However, we do still have some awards.”

Mr. Tanner coughed slightly as he looked at the ribbons he held in his hands. “First, a special award to two of the Camporee staff members, for services above and beyond, Colin Pekruhn and Dan Wellington.”

Colin and Dan stepped forward and accepted the award. Mr. Tanner shook their hands with his surprisingly strong grip as they did so. Colin and Dan were about to return to their place with the rest of the staff when Mr. Tanner indicated they should stay where they were.

“Next up are the Spirit awards. Even though we didn't have events, certain groups and individuals showed great spirit with their actions this weekend. Unlike most Camporees, where only one Spirit award is presented, we have decided at this Camporee to present three. First off, in third place, the Porter sisters from Girl Scout Troop 42.”

Sarah and Kirstin both blinked in surprise. Nicole, however, smiled confidently and stepped forward. Her

sisters momentarily there after followed. They accepted their award, and went to stand beside Colin and Dan.

"Second place," Tanner decreed, "from Boy Scout Troop 180, Derek Provost, Brian Abert, Mr. Matthew Abert, and Mr. Mark Abert."

The four of them trotted up, accepted their award, and joined Dan, Colin, and the Porters.

"And finely, first place in the Spirit award... From Boy Scout Troop 192..."

Justy's posture suddenly became even more erect then it normally was and he lifted one foot off of the ground.

"...the Garden Snake Patrol, consisting of Mike Quadrozzi, Matthew Swett, Aaron Abdelmaseh, Jonathan Becker, William Gelinas, William Hughes, Kenneth Pendrell, Perry, and William Shmuler; along with Mr. Matthew Atanian."

Justy planted his foot back down as if taking a step forward before it registered on his brain what had just been said. "What!?" he demanded. "Them? *They* get the Spirit award after they foiled my perfect plan? *Them!*?"

"Don't worry, Captain," Proctor consoled, "maybe you'll get it at the next Fall Camporee."

"Hey... We won something?" Mike blinked. "At a Camporee?"

Matt Swett likewise was in a bit of a state of shock. "Did we just get the Spirit award?"

"WHAT!?" Becker exclaimed.

"Oh, come on," Gelinas said, "like we'd ever win the Spirit award. This is so unrealis..."

"SHUT UP, BILL!!!"

"Cock-a-doodal-doo!" Shmuler inexplicably exclaimed.

"I think we did win," Hughes then said.

"Fascinating," noted Kenny.

"So what we standing here talking for?" Perry asked.

"Let's go and get it!" Aaron added.

The Garden Snakes, along with Matt Atanian, accepted their award and joined the others. Then Mr. Tanner spoke once more. "These individuals who have

been awarded today have preformed a great service for this camp, and for Scouting. I believe we all owe them our gratitude.”

Applause, more heartfelt and enthusiastic than those that could ever be produced by promises of getting Matt wet, came forth from everyone gathered there as Harris Tanner once again shook all of their hands.

Mr. Tanner turned to face everyone once more. “That concludes the awards presentation, and thus the 1998 Pioneer Valley Council Spring Camporee. I wish you all Godspeed and a safe trip home.”

Hiding just out of sight around the corner of the Trading Post, the old Chinese man observed the proceedings intently.

“Ah, they do indeed have much spirit,” he said.

He turned away and began to walk off, the small bell hanging from his belt jingling ever so slightly with each step.

He sighed. “Soon, I fear, will come the time to put that spirit to the test.”

## *Special: Girls' Night Out, Guys' Night In*

by Jason "BoneparteOzaki" Bertovich

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The sun fell behind the mountains in the far distance. The sun had started setting later in the day. The air was getting much warmer and soon summer would be here in a few short months. It was Spring, April to be exact, and it was looking to be a gorgeous evening.

Nicole smiled to herself as she watched the last rays of sun sneak away. She was looking forward to Spring. She was looking forward to enjoying the warm weather with Jason. The pair had been seeing each other for almost half a year now, but now she had an opportunity to share some nice weather with him. She sighed contently as the stars began to become visible.

"Nicole?" a voice called to her. Nicole broke out of her reverie and looked at the source. It was her twin sister Kirstin standing at the entrance of the restaurant while Nicole stood in the parking lot looking at the sun set. "Are you coming inside?"

"Yeah, I'm coming," Nicole said as she began walking toward her sister. Kirstin walked inside and Nicole followed.

As the pair stepped inside Nicole spied the other duo that made up their small party. Her older sister, Sarah and her friend the red headed Matty Hayes. They stood by a small sign that said, "Please wait to be seated."

"Interesting décor," Kirstin remarked, pointing to the large round stage in the center of the restaurant, along with the folded fans and paper screens decorating the walls.

"Well, Nicole has been raving about this place for the last five months. I figured it was time we all get to see it," Sarah said to no one in particular.

"How's the food?" Matty nervously inquired.

"Well, me and Jay seem to enjoy it," Nicole answered.

"Jay?" Kirstin asked.

Nicole then noticed the stares from both Kirstin and Sarah. "What?"

"Pet name?" Sarah asked.

"What? No, of course not. He just likes to be called Jay. He says that Jason is such a common name for men of his generation," Nicole said defensively.

Suddenly, a young woman in a floral kimono and wooden sandals came over to them. Her hair was blonde and it was set in a nice bun. She bowed to them and began to speak. "Kobanwa, Customers, welcome to the *Rising Sun Sushi Bar...*" Then she looked over to Nicole and broke into a wide smile, "Nicole-san!"

"Hi Angela!" Nicole greeted the Waitress/Nurse/Student who had waited on her and Jason on a number of occasions. Nicole had first met her when Jason had first brought Nicole here last fall. Of course back then they hadn't officially been "dating," in fact, Nicole had only gave Jason a brief kiss on the cheek and that wasn't until Christmas. It was while on this 'date' Nicole learned that Angela was also a nurse at Baystate Medical Centre and had met Jason before, Jason having been badly attacked by an assailant that Nicole and Jason had encountered before.

Nicole took a pause to reflect. It was interesting. What would of happened if that man never made that racist comment that both Jason and Nicole took offense to? Things would probably be a lot different now.

So in a nutshell, Nicole had made some interesting acquaintances because of her fate chance of meeting Jason. Nicole then noticed that, during her train of thought, Angela had started to give her a stern look.

"Nicole-san!" Angela reprimanded. Nicole then understood.

"Gomen! I meant Anako-san," Nicole said with a grin. A Moment later the pair both began to giggle lightly.

Matty looked confused and whispered to Kirstin, "Is there a private joke here I'm missing?"

Angela broke the laughter and looked toward the red head. "I'm sorry. It's just something Nicole is familiar with.

The owner, Mr. Segawa, insists that all the waitresses take Japanese names. He says it helps keep the atmosphere. He's a little eccentric, but he's really a nice man. So would you gals like Smoking or Non?"

"Non, please," Nicole answered.

Angela led the quartet to a table that was near the stage. "So, Where's Jason tonight?"

"It's just me and my sisters tonight. A girls' night out. He's out with some of his 'Guys,'" Nicole answered as she took her seat in the booth with Kirstin sitting next to her.

Angela nodded in understanding. "So Nicole, are you gonna defend your title tonight? There's this new girl who's been pretty good these last couple weeks."

"Title?" Matty asked.

"Our little Nicole is quite the vocalist. She's won their weekly karaoke competition four times in the last five months," Kirstin explained, remembering the four small brass cups that littered their nightstand.

"I don't know," Nicole hesitated.

"Well, she's here tonight. She won last week. Looks like she trying to go for the repeat," Angela told Nicole.

"Hmmm... Well..." Nicole grinned slightly. "Maybe me and my sisters can whip something up."

"Great! I'll get the song book and I'll be back to take your drink orders!" Angela smiled and went off to fetch the hefty tome.

Matty looked to Kirstin who was sitting across from her. "Should I be worried?"

Kirstin took one look at her sister's grin and nodded. "Yes."

Meanwhile, in Aaron Abdelmaseh's basement, Jason Bertovich looked around the table at the other four people staring back at him and at each other.

Of the four, the only one Jason knew reasonably well enough to hold a real conversation with was Aaron and that was because they were both dating one out of the pair of twins. Aaron dating the mild mannered Kirstin, while

Jason had been seeing the sharp-witted, calculating Nicole.

Jason paused to correct his thinking. Only he and Nicole were *officially* dating and that had only been made official after they had been seeing each other for a few months. Aaron and Kirstin on the other hand... Well they... they stumbled and twisted themselves in emotional pretzels whenever anyone made mention of the word "relationship." They were "just friends." So of course, everyone knew that they dating... It seemed that the only ones who didn't know were Kirstin and Aaron.

Jason looked to the other three. He could only vaguely remember meeting these people before, and that had been at the Boy Scout's Christmas Party Nicole had invited him to attend.

The first was the short and young boy with the thick glasses. He had told him his name was Kenneth Pendrell. The others had told him they called him Kenny. Next to him at the table was a thick tome. On the spine Jason glanced at the title: *Schrödinger's Cat kicked Pavlov's Dog's Ass! or Why Quantum Physics is more interesting to study than Psychology.*

At the next seat over, another younger boy sat with his eyes closed and his fingers joyfully tapping the table. On his head was a pair of earphones and coming from it was a sound that Jason would swear sounded like someone hitting a cat in a sack with a sledgehammer. Aaron had told him that his name was "Becker." Which made more sense than what the boy had told him. When Jason had asked him his name he said is was, "WHAT?!?"

At the last seat over Jason realized that this boy was unknown. He hadn't recalled meeting him at the party, but for some reason he looked or *seemed* familiar. Jason was almost positive that the pair had never met. He simply gave his name as, "Hughes."

Jason dared to break the silence. "Well gentlemen, how are we this evening?"

The others responded with various shrugs and, "Okay's," except for Becker, who shouted, "WHAT?!?"

Aaron calmly got up from his seat and walked over to Becker. He then grabbed the headphones and took them right off his head. Then he calmly walked over to a cabinet and calmly threw them in. He then took his seat again. "That's better."

Becker was beginning to look physically ill. He was slightly shivering. Kenny grew slightly interested and almost excited. He pulled out a small notepad and started scribbling notes.

"He might blow, Aaron," Hughes stated in amusement.

"Withdrawal," Aaron agreed.

"Is he gonna be OK?" Jason asked, a little worried.

"He's a sound addict," Aaron explained.

"Oh. Well, maybe this will help." Jason then pulled out a leather case and unzipped it. Inside was page after page of CD's. "What's your pleasure? We've got classical, dance, hard rock, pop... It's all here and it's all Japanese." Jason beamed.

"Quite an impressive collection of Anime CD's Mr. Bertovich," Kenny contributed. "Well, since we're here to play a fantasy game, maybe something along the lines of that motif."

"Ah!" Jason then slipped out a CD from a pouch and handed it to Aaron who put it in the stereo. "Vision of Escaflowne OST Volume 1. Oh, and Kenny?"

"Yes Mr. Bertovich?" Kenny asked.

"I'm not a Scoutmaster or a teacher or anything. I'm just some guy. You can call me Jay." Then Jason slightly slapped his palm down on the small plastic case in front of him. "Gentlemen, shall we?"

The others nodded and reached in their bags or under the table. Aaron, Hughes and Becker pulled out long cardboard boxes. Kenny reached into his pocket and pulled out a pre-packaged starter deck. He opened it and started shuffling.

Jason slid the plastic lid off the plastic case. This is what he had asked his family to send. He had gotten rid of his entire collection before he left, but these remained.

The only things he kept from his Magic: The Gathering collection. Four Decks. Two Type 1's, a Type 1.5, and a single fun theme deck. His Magic four. The "Four Decks of the Apocalypse." These little men would soon feel their fury unleashed.

Jason pulled out the first one. It was a simple mono-black deck he had named The "Anyone, including the family chimp, can win with this deck" Deck. Jason began to shuffle as the other four had done.

They each slammed their deck on the table and began to draw cards.

About 15 minutes later, Jason had picked off Kenny pretty easily, though not much of a challenge as Kenny's deck was pre-constructed and not made to play against as actual strategy. Aaron had pummelled Becker and was currently focusing on Hughes, which was fine with Jason as he needed time replenish his spent hand.

Jason then looked over to Kenny reading his book quietly as the soft symphony played on. "Good book?"

Kenny lifted his eyes over the edge of the book and arched an eyebrow. "Actually, yes."

"So what's your take on the Cat? Do you believe it was both alive *and* dead at the same time? Do you believe in infinite universes with infinite possibilities?" Jason inquired. Meanwhile Hughes groaned lightly as Aaron snickered.

"You understand this?" Kenny asked excitedly.

"A little. I'm no Quantum Physicist, but I do know a little something on a lot of subjects. I just found the concept of Alternate Universes with infinite possibilities fascinating," Jason explained.

"Oh definitely!" Kenny said enthused. "In fact! I've..." Kenny immediately stopped himself before he said something he couldn't take back.

"You've what?" Jason inquired, noticing that Kenny looked like he was going to say something but he had stopped.

“Well...I’ve...I’ve been doing a lot of reading on the subject and I hope to one day be the first person to prove the theory true,” Kenny recovered.

“You’re a pretty smart kid, aren’t you? No doubt. Just promise me this. If you do, be sure to look me up. There’s a few universes I wouldn’t mind visiting.” Jason grinned.

Aaron broke in by saying. “Yes! You’re dead Hughes!” Hughes groaned again and threw his hand down on the table. Aaron then looked to Jason. “You’re turn. After that, you’re dead too!” Aaron laughed pointing to his menacing army while Jason’s creatures had died earlier.

Jason continued to look in Kenny’s direction while he drew his card. Then he tapped all his lands, then sacked a few to make even more mana with his Lakes of the Dead, then he played two dark rituals for even *more* black mana. Finally he took this giant butt-load of black mana and slapped the last card in his hand on the table. “Correction. I would die next turn. Unfortunately, I planned to kill you this turn. My Game.” Then he returned to his previous train of thought, “So Kenny, what’s your opinion on the Einstein, Rosen, Polanski bridge?”

The others all gathered around Aaron as Jason and Kenny continued their confusing conversation. Jason has successfully cast a drain life for 25 points of damage against Aaron and 25 points of life for himself. Everyone was pretty amazed how Jason had done this without even looking at the table. “He’s good,” Becker commented.

Jason then put all his cards back in his deck and pulled out another deck form the plastic case. “New game, gentlemen. Care to make it *interesting*?”

The other four looked at each other, even Kenny. “Interesting?”

“No way! Nuh uh!” Matty said vehemently shaking her head.

“Come on Matty! Please! We need a fourth girl!” Sarah pleaded as Nicole continued flipping between two pages in the book.

"It's only a small part, Matty," Nicole added.

Matty continued to shake her head. Yes, she had worn the dress. Yes, she had even bought it herself. But there was no way she was going to go up in front of a crowd of people and giggle and sing. Especially in a language she didn't speak. She still had to cling to some ideals.

Kirstin bent over the table and whispered to Matty, "Please Matt. It will make Sarah happy."

Matty looked at Kirstin and then to Sarah who was looking at the book with Nicole. Finally she sagged her shoulders. "Okay..."

Sarah turned to her. "Really? Great!"

"Of course, you three do know that I don't speak Japanese," Matty responded.

"You can read Romanji, right?" Nicole asked.

"I guess," Matty answered.

"There you go. So are we doing it Nicole?" Sarah asked.

"I think we shall," she said as she wrote down the song number.

Kirstin then leaned over the table and whispered to Matty, "Thanks Matt."

"You owe me," Matty whispered back. At that moment Angela returned with beverages and a pot of green tea.

"So you gals ready to order?"

"Are you serious?" Aaron asked

"You've got to be kidding!" Becker added.

"Most unusual," Kenny added.

"Ditto," Hughes mumbled.

"Oh come on guys. Are you seriously telling me you never played for money?" Jason asked exasperated.

"How the hell do you play Magic for *cash?!?*" Becker demanded.

"Oh it's easy!" Jason smiled.

"I don't know Jay. I mean, unlike you, most of us don't have steady employment that produces a cash flow," Aaron contributed.

"Oh! That! Jeez, I'm not talking massive cash here guys. Strictly penny ante!" Jason explained. "The most you might lose would be maybe five bucks. At most! Surely you guys can afford *that!*"

The other four looked at each other nervously and then eventually shrugged. Then Becker took the initiative. "First explain the rules."

Jason then reached into his bag and pulled out a large box and opened it. Inside were red, white and blue poker chips. "Okay guys, it's like this. It's standard Magic rules. Nothing changed. The whites are pennies, the reds are nickels and the blues are dimes. At the beginning of the game everyone puts in a dime. So at least someone will win fifty cents. Got 'em so far?"

The others nodded. Jason continued. "Now. Every time you lose a life point or are forced to discard a card, you put a penny in the pot. Every time you lose a creature, a land or another permanent such as an artefact or enchantment, you put a nickel in the pot. Finally if you are killed, you put a dime in the pot. Last one living keeps the accumulated cash. Usually enough to maybe buy a booster pack. Okay?" Jason finished.

Aaron and Becker looked generally interested and were already thinking of buying more cards with tonight's winnings. Hughes looked bored and Kenny looked a little worried. However they all nodded and agreed. Jason then grew a Cheshire Cat-like grin that would be most disheartening if you happened to be a bird or mouse.

Everyone then fished into their pockets and handed Jason a five dollar bill. Jason fished one out as well, and tossed all of the money into the chip box. Jason then began to partition the chips. He gave everyone 200 whites, 30 reds and 15 blues. They began to shuffle their decks again. Jason reached into his deck case again and slipped out one of the stacks of cardboard enveloped in plastic slipcases. Jason had been dying to play this again.

*'Blue and White Thunder'... heh. It's been too long....*  
*Bwa ha Ha*  
*ha ha ha HA HA HA HA HA HAH!!!* Jason mentally said to himself as he shuffled his pride and joy. His greatest deck of all time. It had a fair share of decisive and close victories. It had its share of horrible defeats. And while it had never won him a professional tournament, it had reduced more than one "master" to frustration and aggravation. Jason loved this deck.

Jason then noticed Kenny was shuffling the pre-constructed starter deck again. "Hey Kenny."

"Yes, Mr. Bertovich?" Kenny looked up from his book and shuffling.

"Is that all the cards you have?"

"Well, I really don't play. I only bought this so I could play when they got together," Kenny explained.

"Hmmm. Kenny come over here," Jason said to the small pre-teen. Kenny got up from his spot and walked over to Jason's seat. Jason then pulled out another deck from the plastic case and handed it over to Kenny. Kenny held the plastic enveloped cardboard cards in his palm.

"Mr. Bertovich?" Kenny inquired.

"Kenny, this is 'Earn'em and Burn'em.' This deck has probably won me more games than any other deck. It's very simple, but very devastating. You have to play aggressive, understand?" Jason explained.

"But why are you letting me use your deck?" Kenny asked.

"I wanted to even up the playing field a little. Now, since this is multi-player, you want to pace yourself. Otherwise you'll get pummelled in a late game. Think you can figure it out?" Jason answered.

"I think I can. Thank you, Mr. Bertovich," Kenny responded.

"Didn't I say to call me Jas?" Jason responded. Then he laughed. "I bet you were the only one to understand the rulebook after only one reading." Jason grinned.

"The rulebook," Aaron blurted, "is not to be understood by normal humans."

“Well, if I see any normal people around here, I’ll be sure to tell them.” Jason smirked.

Kenny went back to his seat and studied the cards in the deck. He began to smile. Jason was right. It was mind boggling simple, but incredibly versatile and powerful. Kenny was surprised that Jason wasn’t using it himself. Kenny shuffled. Then a bad thought entered his head. If Jason wasn’t using this deck...

“OK men. Ante up!” Jason stated as he tossed a blue chip into the centre of the table.

Kenny tossed his chip in and drew his cards. That meant the deck he was using must be *incredible*...

Matty worked the chopsticks with a relative amount of difficulty. For some reason, grasping a piece of cooked beef between two wooden twigs was proving to be more of a challenge than she had first expected. Matty looked at her steak. It was pretty lucky she had managed to stop Nicole before she had ordered four sushi platters... Heck, even the steak was a stretch for Matty’s picky eating habits.

“Here, let me help you.” Sarah said. Then she took Matty’s hand into her own and positioned the sticks the right way. Kirstin looked over and actually noticed Matty swallow nervously.

Kirstin then looked to her sister next to her. Nicole was busy eating from her ramen bowl. “So Nicole, how’s your love life?” The comment drew a stare from Sarah and a surprised look from Nicole. However that look of surprise turned to a sly grin.

“I don’t know. How’s yours?” Nicole responded, causing Kirstin to drop the piece of sashimi from between her chopsticks. “Why, what do you mean sister? Aaron and I are just friends.”

Nicole smirked at that comment and even Matty had to grin.

Sarah simply rolled her eyes upward and sighed. “My little sisters...”

Kirstin saw an opportunity. "Well, older sister, do we sense jealousy?" Sarah almost choked on her soda, while Nicole simply nodded in agreement. "I do know that there are certain young men seeking your affections." Kirstin then threw a look over to Matty who decided now was an opportune time to examine her steak closer.

"You mean that Matt guy?!? You've got to be joking!" Sarah bemoaned. Matty felt her lips curling into a frown and tried to control it.

"Well, you seemed to enjoy his little token of appreciation," Nicole commented.

"That was Christmas! That's different! Then it seemed that he might actually be human!" Sarah countered.

"Well, It's definitely an improvement." Kirstin remarked.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sarah demanded.

"Nothing. Just that six months ago if a guy would've tried to give you a present you would've given him a black eye," Kirstin answered and then took a sip of her tea.

"I think she's going soft on him," Nicole smirked.

Sarah wanted to scream out at hearing that, but decided against doing it in a crowded restaurant. Instead she decided to redirect the conversation. "So Matty! How about you? I haven't seen you with any members of the opposite sex lately. Is there a Romeo in your life?"

At hearing her name called Matty actually jumped in surprised and then even more surprised by the question. "Um...well..." Matty actually thought for a moment. The closest thing she'd had to a date was Kuntz's incessant and annoying wooing. "No," she quietly replied. Then she looked over to Kirstin, who at this moment decided that her platter needed a closer examination.

"Really? Wow that's a surprise." Sarah said disappointedly.

"Huh?" Matty inquired.

"I mean, not a single one of those pubescent Boy Scouts you hang around with have tried to hit on you? I'm surprised that Atanian hasn't given up on me and gone after you." Sarah answered.

Matty was beginning to feel a little ill. "What?! No, of course not! They're just some guys I've known for years."

"You might think that Matty. But remember, now they've got those hormones working which is preventing any real brain function. Just don't be surprised if one of them 'accidentally' bumps into you on a hike," Sarah deadpanned. Nicole nodded in agreement.

Matty really didn't like where this conversation was going. So she decided to take the initiative. "Wow! The food is really great!"

"Y-yeah! It's terrific!" Kirstin added trying to help Matty out.

Sarah then turned to Matty with her chopsticks. "Are you sure you don't want to try a piece of sashimi?"

Matty gulped. "Um...no thanks. I'm allergic to seafood," she yammered. Of course, this was lie. Truth be known, Matt was one of the pickiest eaters he knew. On that list was seafood. Served raw and it moved to the top of the list. Matty considered it a lucky blessing that the restaurant also served Japanese steak. Cooked on a hot metal table while the chef chopped and cut. True, it would cost her six bucks more than if she had ordered the sushi, but considering the alternative, it was six bucks well spent.

"Oh." Sarah blinked. She then shrugged and ate the piece of fish herself.

Meanwhile Nicole mentally filed away the factoid in the back of her mind for later use. *Matty Hayes is allergic to seafood.*

A moment later, A small Asian man took the round stage and tapped the Microphone. "Kobanwa Ladies and Gentlemen!"

"Kobanwa!" The crowd of regulars responded loudly.

"And welcome to the *Rising Sun's* Weekly Karaoke contest!"

*Why does that kid keep giving me those dirty looks?* Jason thought to himself as he caught the Hughes kid sneering at him from behind his cards for the thirtieth time

that evening. Jason looked to his hand again and picked from card to card.

In the centre of the table was a rather large mountain of poker chips that had accumulated during the course of the match. In fact, this was probably the largest pot Jason had ever been involved in. Of course, he had never tried this with a group larger than three players.

Becker was the first eliminated, when Kenny haplessly beat him with two large creatures by the fourth turn. Kenny almost took a morbid glee in eliminating Becker, which surprised everyone who knew Kenny's quiet nature.

Aaron and Kenny were currently squaring off, while Hughes looked content to wait and see what everyone's tactics were. Jason noticed that Hughes was quietly scraping his fingernails along the edge of the table. It reminded him of his old pet cat who had passed on a few years prior at the ripe age of sixteen. Jason then thought that it was a good thing that this Hughes kid *didn't* have claws otherwise there would've been a nice sized groove in Aaron's table.

As for Jason, he was simply leaning back and enjoying his handiwork. He had laid down his lock on the game. He had the Howling Mine and the Island Sanctuary on the table. Which meant only creatures with flying and islandwalk could attack him. Of course anytime someone tried to cast such a creature, Jason was rather quick with a counterspell. So his opponents were reduced to trying to toast him with direct damage. Unfortunately, Jason also had the annoying strategy to cast a Gerrald's Wisdom with a hand full of cards for an average of sixteen to twenty to four life points.

It was becoming apparent that killing Jason was damn unlikely. So they went to work on killing each other first. Jason simply leaned back and enjoyed the show. Currently, he was quietly rooting for Kenny.

"So Aaron," Jason started.

"Hmmm?" Aaron looked away from the game to see what Jason wanted.

“How goes your tutelage of your student?” Jason grinned, making a comment about how Aaron was teaching Kirstin to play Magic.

Aaron slightly groaned. “Don’t even start Jay! After what you taught her, I’m surprised I haven’t killed you yet!”

“What’s the deal?” Hughes asked eager to learn any dirt about Bertovich.

“Well, he gave her some tips on playing blue and white. Now she likes the concept so much that she’s literally made a deck that is exactly like her!” Aaron bemoaned.

“Exactly like her?” Kenny asked interested. He almost seemed a little wistful at hearing the name of Kirstin.

“Yeah, she has all these cards like ‘Pacifism’ and ‘Peacekeeper.’ And she’s loaded all these counterspells and everything. She won’t let anything violent happen during a game. No attacks. No targeting. No nothing. But here’s the kicker! Somehow she managed for Nicole to get her a good price on a *Divine Intervention* card!” At hearing that, Both Jason and Hughes whistled with respect. “So now all our games always end in a *tie!*”

“She says she likes it that way. That way there’s no losers so no one has to feel bad.” Aaron explained.

“That’s pretty admirable,” Kenny contributed.

“But it’s not much fun. It’s almost as bad as...” He looked over to Jason who was still sitting behind his cardboard fortress. “It’s almost as bad as playing against you!”

“Such harsh words. Shame Shame. For that you shall be punished.” Jason then played a card to steal all of Aaron’s creatures so that he could beat Aaron senseless with them...

“Now Ladies and Gentlemen, Let’s give a big had to last week’s winner. Ms. Julie Heinekins!” Mr. Segawa proclaimed as a small brunette took the stage. Matty was actually surprised. This girl bore a strike resemblance to

Nicole and Kirstin. The petite girl coughed a little and then signaled for the music to start.

At that moment, a guitar's hard chords filled the room. It was then Matty realized that she knew this song. This was *Priss!* Julie took the mike in her hand and began to belt out the lyrics.

[Did you know?] arashi no HAIUE!  
[Did you dream?] hashiri-tsuzuketa  
[Did you lie?] togireta yume no yukue sagashite  
[Did you know?] nigai maboroshi  
[Did you dream?] subete no uso wo  
[Did you lie?] senaka de hajiki-tobashite  
[No, no, no, my heart]  
Big City kodoku-na Heart to Heart  
minna ai no mayoigo  
Big City namida wa Day by Day  
nemuranai omoi wo yusaburu dake  
[I want your love]  
kon'ya wa HURRICANE  
anata ni HURRICANE  
tsutaetai no Loving You... [Loving You]  
kon'ya wa HURRICANE  
kanjite HURRICANE  
sugao no mama Touch!  
Give me touch!  
[Did you know?] kotoba no DAATSU  
[Did you dream?] nageau dake ja  
[Did you lie?] mune no itami wa wakari-aenai  
[Did you know?] oshiete hoshii  
[Did you dream?] nani ga anata no  
[Did you lie?] hitomi wo kumoraseru no ka  
[Sin-, Sin-, Singe, your heart]  
Big City chigireta Heart to Heart  
yoru ni odori-tsukarete  
Big City utsuro-na Day By Day  
sasayaka-na nukumori machi-kogareta  
[I want your love]  
kon'ya wa HURRICANE

anata ni HURICANE  
tsutaetai no Loving You... [Loving You]  
kon'ya wa HURICANE  
mou ichido HURICANE  
dakishimetai Touch! Burning Touch!  
(Guitar Bridge)  
Big City kodoku-na Heart to Heart  
minna ai no mayoigo  
Big City namida wa Day by Day  
nemuranai omoi wo yusaburu dake  
kon'ya wa HURICANE  
anata ni HURICANE  
tsutaetai no Loving You... [Loving You]  
kon'ya wa HURICANE  
kanjite HURICANE  
sugao no mama Touch!  
Give me touch!  
kon'ya wa HURRICANE  
anata ni HURRICANE  
tsutaetai no Loving You... [Loving You]  
kon'ya wa HURRICANE  
mou ichido HURRICANE  
dakishimetai Touch! Burning Touch!  
Give me Touch! Burning Touch!

The music finished and the crowd gave her a standing ovation. Even Matty had to applaud her effort. If she had closed her eyes, she could've sworn that it was Priss herself. True, Priss was a fictional character, but you get the idea. They definitely had a tough act to follow.

Mr. Segawa then came back up the stage and applauded again. "That was Julie Heinekins! Now, next up is another talented young lady! You might remember her, as she is a four time winner of our karaoke contest! Let's give a hand for Nicole Porter!" However at that moment Nicole whispered something into Mr. Segawa's ear and he spoke into the microphone again. "I'm sorry Ladies and Gentlemen. Nicole Porter will not be performing tonight..." The crowd immediately sounded confused. "...alone.

Tonight she will be singing with her sisters! So lets give a round of applause to the *Four Porters!*"

The crowd began to applaud loudly as Nicole took the stage. Matty gave her a confused look. Nicole simply winked back. Anako set up three additional microphone stands and handed everyone their lyric sheets. Nicole spoke into her mike.

"Hello everyone! I'm Nicole and these are my sisters. Kirstin, Sarah, and Matty! I hope you enjoy the show!" Nicole then signalled for the music to start.

The soft sweet beat pops blared in and the rhythmic dance beat flowed. Nicole waited for her cue and began to sing...

(Nicole)

Koi o shitara Kokoro wa sufure mitai ni Fukurande itte  
Kogechau no? Masaka Honto ni, honto ni, honto?  
Amai koi ni ochiru hi o yume ni mite  
Doko de dare to deau no ka  
Hayaku shiritai wa Mou matenai no!  
Kisu o shitara Atama ga torotoro ni natte Tokedashichau no?  
Odokashite... Masaka Honto ni, honto ni, honto?  
Demo ne, watashi Koibito ga dekita nara  
Asa mo yoru mo kansatsu shichau wa  
Motomoto ga Mania dakara  
Hachimitsu sufure ni natte Fuwafuwa to  
Juwajuwa kogete yukitai LOVE MANIA!  
Koi shika shiranai hito ni Naritakute  
Inochigake no koi o shimashou  
Barairo no sora Doushiyou?  
Watashi hamarisou!

Kirstin then stepped forward and began to sing. Matty began to feel even more nervous as she knew that soon it would be her turn.

(Kirstin)

Akogareteru otoko no ko no fotogurafu  
Atsume sugi yo Me o samashite

Motto koi wa Kakehiki to ka Kuuru ni yaranakya  
Junjou nante Atsukurushikute Otoko no ko wa  
Nigechau no yo

(Nicole)

Zaisan to ka Matabaki to ka kankei nai Ashita yoake ni  
Inseki ga ochite Mechamecha ni nattemo  
Hadaka hitotsu Sore ga koi no michi da wa  
Tatoe hitori Chikyuu ni nokottemo  
Koibito o Mamori nuku wa  
Tokidoki koibito tachi o chekku shite  
Deeto o kansatsu suru no LOVE MANIA!  
Te to te ga fureta dake demo Tokete yuku  
Koi no pawaa Subarashii wa  
Dakara watashi mo sorosoro  
Chanto taiken shinakya

Sarah then stepped forward and signaled Matty to be ready for her cue. Matty had a couple solo lines and then a small duet with Sarah.

(Sarah)

otoko nante azarashidawa jimi sugite  
onna no ko to koi ga shitai...

(Matty)

docchi ni shiyou docchi ni shiyou dare o kudoki mashou

(Sarah and Matty)

muri yari kiss shichaeba kitto  
onna no kotte OK kamo ne!

Matty stepped back and breathed a heavy sigh of relief. Not only did she manage to not to screw up, she actually sounded pretty damn good.

(Nicole)

Amai, amai Koi ni ochitai keredo

Doko de dare to ochiru no ka na  
Hayaku sagasanakya Mou matenai no

Matty took another deep breath as she stepped forward to her microphone along with the three Porter sisters for the big finale...

(All Four)

Hachimitsu sufure no you ni Fuwafuwa to  
Juwajuwa kogete yukitai LOVE MANIA!  
Koi shika shiranai hito ni naritakute  
Inochigake no koi o shimashou  
Barairo no kibun Doushiyou  
Minna LOVE MANIA!!  
Love is love is love is love  
Kanari love mania  
Love is love is love is love  
Kyou mo love mania  
Love is love is love is love  
Zutto love mania  
Love is love is love is love  
Koi no love maniaaaaaaaaaa!!!

The music then faded and Matty felt as if her knees were about to cave in. She had just stood in front of a large audience for about seven minutes and now the crowd was silent...

That silence lasted about a second as the crowd stood up to give their second standing ovation of the evening. Nicole brought the other three forward and they did a group bow in appreciation.

And thus it was down to two. Jason faced off against Kenny Pendrell. The Small Genius vs. The Old Man. The other three watched in anticipation to see who would take the very large pile of chips that looked to be worth about six bucks. (This gives you an idea how long this first game had been going on.)

Jason still stood behind his impenetrable wall. He also had about ten cards left in his deck. However he was down to three life. His main saving grace was his four-card hand and all his untapped lands.

Kenny on the other hand had just drawn his last card. This meant that if he didn't win this turn, he would lose next turn because he had no cards to draw. The other three stood behind him and look at his hand. Kenny had two cards in his hand. A lightning bolt and a Hammer of Bogardan. Kenny immediately cast the lightning bolt and Jason immediately countered it.

"Dude, you might as well quit." Becker consoled.

"Why?" Kenny asked.

Hughes piped in with his two cents, "Because the arrogant bastard is impossible to hurt. You know he's guaranteed to have a counterspell in his hand. Why bother?"

"Well, what if it's a bluff to make someone quit so he wins by forfeit?" Kenny reasoned.

"What kind of idiot uses that kind of strategy?!?" Hughes shouted at the small boy. "You're only trying to delude yourself! You've got about as much chance of winning as Becker does winning the Mr. Silence award!"

Kenny defiantly tapped his remaining lands and laid the damage spell down. All four of them look across the table at Jason. Jason looked at his three cards and then to the table. Then to his cards again. Finally, he folded his hand and laid it face down on the table and extended his hand to Kenny.

"Pot's yours. Good Game."

Kenny took Jason's hand with a surprised look on his face. Then he started pushing the chips to his part of the table. Jason then looked to Aaron. "Hey Aaron, where's your bathroom?"

"Upstairs, first door on the left." Aaron replied.

"Thanks." Jason then got up from the table and walked up the steps in search of the bathroom. After a moment, Kenny followed suit and also went upstairs.

"Augh! I can't take it!" Becker shouted and ran to the drawer to get his headphones. In one swift motion he had plugged them in and put them on his head.

Meanwhile, Aaron and Hughes started cleaning up their sections of the table and began to shuffle new decks.

"Care to tell me what the attitude's all about?" Aaron asked Hughes as he looked through his card box.

"What attitude?" Hughes replied defensively.

"You're not good very good at being discreet, Hughes. Everyone saw the dirty looks you were giving Bertovich." Aaron countered.

"So what if I was! Are you going to defend *him*?!" Hughes asked angrily.

"What's your problem?! Why are you so pissed off at Jason?" Aaron demanded.

Hughes gave him a scowl. "Bertovich. Humph! Twenty-year-olds shouldn't be dating sixteen-year-old girls. It's just...wrong!"

"Excuse me?!? And what business is it of yours?" Aaron countered.

"Nicole's too good for him! He's just a deviant!" Hughes shouted.

"Oh! And some guy who lives with her under the deception of being her *pet* is any better?!?" Aaron slapped his palm on the table.

"Screw you, Abdelmaseh! He's an asshole! Plain and simple!" Hughes slapped his hand on the table too and caused a small breeze to waft across the table. This breeze flipped the face down cards that were Jason's hand.

"Huh?" Aaron mumbled as he took a closer look at the three cards.

"What's got your sudden interest?" Hughes asked still fuming.

"Look," Aaron answered, pointing to the three cards that had made up Jason's hand. It was three counterspells.

"Wait a minute! If he had three counterspells, why didn't he use them?" Hughes asked, scratching his head.

"It's pretty obvious," Aaron remarked and flipped the cards back over.

"Are you saying that he let Kenny win? Why would he do that?" Hughes asked.

"Maybe you should ask Nicole," Aaron said and then began to build a new deck leaving Hughes standing there in silence.

Upstairs, Jason stepped out of the Abdelmaseh bathroom and into the hallway. There, Kenny stood waiting for him to finish.

"What's up Kenny? Did you need to use the bathroom too?" Jason asked.

"Mr. Bertovich, why did you let me win?" Kenny asked quietly.

Jason stopped walking and turned back and looked at the pre-teen looking at him. "How did you know?"

"Well, I'm pretty good with math. I calculated that there was a 99.99998% chance that you were holding at least one counterspell in your hand. You were guaranteed to win. So why did you forfeit?" Kenny asked, wanting an answer.

"It's for those reason's I did it," Jason replied.

"I don't understand," Kenny rebutted.

"You knew that you had no chance to win. You had everyone telling you that you had no chance to win. But still you played on. You refused to quit. I admired that," Jason answered. He smiled.

"Because I refused to give up?"

"Kenny, when I was growing up, I was a lot like you. I was a pretty smart kid and I liked to read thick books and had strange hopes and dreams. I didn't have a lot of friends and lot of people didn't like me," Jason started to explain.

"What did you do?" Kenny asked.

"Well, a lot of times, I gave in," Jason said with a frown. "I was a very sad person and I was very angry at the world. You refuse to quit. I really admire you for that. I

sense that you have a lot of talents that are waiting to be unleashed on this world. Just don't give up." Jason then turned away and walked down the steps to the first floor. "You coming?"

Kenny blinked for a moment and followed. Neither spoke as they went down into the basement again.

In the basement, the other three shuffled cards and replaced ones they wanted to change. Becker blissfully shuffled and destroyed his eardrums at the same time. Hughes looked at Jason and then to Aaron but said nothing. Kenny took his seat.

Jason sat down and took a new deck. "OK guys, ready for the next round? I'll play my goofy deck now. How many of you have ever been killed by Falcons?" The other four looked at each other worriedly and began to sideboard.

Jason smiled and started to think to himself. *Not a bad evening. I wonder how Nicole's went...*

In the backseat of Sarah's car, Nicole and Kirstin lightly slept. Sarah pulled up to the corner and Matty stepped out.

"Are you sure you don't want me to drive you up to your house?" Sarah asked for the thirtieth time since she had met Matty Hayes.

"It's okay. It's only a block's walk." In reality it was a five-block walk, but this way Sarah wouldn't begin to get suspicious. "You get on home."

"Okay. Good night, Matty." Sarah smiled.

"Good night Sarah. Thank you for including me tonight. I really had a good time," Matty said with no regrets.

"Yeah, so did we," Sarah agreed and looked at the back seat. In Nicole's arm was a small brass cup. Taped to it was a Polaroid picture of the four of them holding the trophy with Mr. Segawa.

As Sarah pulled away, Nicole awoke, but still kept her eyes closed. She mentally yawned. She didn't realize how long a day it really had been. *Not a bad evening. I wonder how Jason's went.* Nicole smiled and went back to sleep.

## *Chapter Twenty-Two: Where No Man Has Gone Before*

by Jessi Pysz and Matthew Atanian

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Justy Yung glared down at his dinner plate and raised one eyebrow.

“Proctor!!!!”

With almost inhuman speed, Proctor appeared at his side.

“Yes, my Captain?”

Justy pointed at the offending vegetation upon his plate with his baton. Proctor glanced nervously at the small green veggies.

“What,” Justy asked, “are *these*?!”

Miniature trees of vitamins lay steaming on Mrs. Yung’s good china.

“It’s broccoli, Captain.”

“Aren’t you going to *eat* these vegetables like you’re supposed to?” Justy’s voice was surprisingly calm, only a twinge of the madness behind it coming through.

Proctor stood at attention, trembling with inner conflict. Under normal circumstances, he would have devoured the disgusting broccoli for his captain without a second thought. But he’d made a promise and no matter how much he hated to disobey his captain, there were some people he just couldn’t go against.

Justy’s patience ran out, although it was surprising it had lasted this long. He swung the baton and thwacked Proctor over the head. Proctor broke down and grovelled at Justy’s feet.

“I’m sorry, my Captain!!!! I was making your dinner and your mother mentioned that she was worried that you were looking a bit peeked and made me make the foul vegetables you see before you. She had me promise that you would eat every bite! I can’t go against a mother! I’m sorry sir, but I can’t! Please forgive me!!!!!”

The door to the Yung's house opened to the rainy spring evening. A moment later, Proctor sailed out through the archway, courtesy of Justy's foot. He landed on the front lawn, somersaulted a few feet and came to a dazed rest in the grass. His teddy bear, Simon, flew out the door and bounced off his head. Justy stuck his head out and gave Proctor a hateful glare.

"*PEON!!*" He screamed and slammed the door.

Proctor sat, hardly believing his ears. Had his captain just called him the p-word? The word Justy called everyone else but him?

Proctor held his teddy bear and stood up. As he walked away, he was thankful for the rain that hid the tears on his face.

Holyoke Mall. A wonder of modern commerce. Or, at least, the greatest wonder of it to grace Western Massachusetts. There are better malls, to be sure, but you'd be hard pressed to find one within easy driving distance of Springfield.

And so it is here that we find Sarah Porter, in the company of one Matty Hayes, in the middle of one of their frequent outings.

"You do shop for the strangest things," Sarah said as they left Best Buy. "I mean, video games, movie soundtracks, or tapes with those Japanese Cartoons."

"Anime," Matty reflexively corrected.

"Whatever," Sarah said. "Let's go to Filene's. They have a good sale going on."

"Um... okay," Matty said, hesitantly.

Sarah took Matty by the arm. "Let's go, then!"

They continued to talk as they made their way towards the department store. "You know, Matty, I've got this weekend off from work, and both the girls are going to be home, too. It's been a while since we've all had a chance to spend some time together."

"That should be nice," Matty responded. "I know how much the mean to you."

Sarah paused. "Well... it would mean a lot to me if you could be there to."

Matty blinked.

"You busy this weekend?" Sarah asked.

"I'd hate to intrude..."

"Nonsense!" Sarah insisted. "Matty, you're practically family to me as it is. You're the only friend I've got, you know."

"Well, you could make more friends easily enough," Matty said.

"I don't have the time."

"What about Matt?" Matty asked.

Sarah gave her the look. The, "Can we please not bring him up?" look.

Matty frowned. "All men are not assholes, you know."

"I've never seen you out with any guys," Sarah pointed out.

"We're not talking about me!" Matty said. "Look, Sarah, just because you got burned by this Rodney guy doesn't mean that..."

Sarah stopped dead. Matty almost bumped into her.

"Oh my God," Sarah muttered.

"What is it?" Matty asked.

"Speak of the devil, or at least a close equivalent!" Sarah pointed.

Matty's gaze followed Sarah's finger. Her eyes rested upon a tall, lanky boy in rumpled dark clothing, wearing a greasy looking leather coat, with his left hand covered by a black leather glove.

Matty's brain froze for an instant, and then felt like it was going to crack.

"Oh my God," Matty muttered.

"It's Rodney's little brother," Sarah said with contempt.

"Kuntz," Matty said with the same contempt.

Matty and Sarah looked at one another. "You know him?" they both asked.

They both nodded. By then it was too late. He was upon them.

“Hey, Sarah, you’re looking as sexy as ever,” Taylor Kuntz said in an offhanded manner. He then turned to Matty, obviously the main reason he had approached the pair. “My red haired goddess! I have come to rescue you!”

“I don’t need rescuing, thank you very much,” Matty said venomously.

“But you have a sickness that clouds your heart!” Kuntz insisted.

“A sickness?” Matty did not know what Kuntz was talking about. Then she thought back to the Spring Camporee, and how she had gotten rid of Kuntz then. “Look, you runt, it is *not* a sickness, it is an alternative lifestyle!”

“You are just confused, my darling goddess! You need the touch of a real man to set your heart on the proper course!”

“Oh? Well, then, why don’t you go find me a real man then? In the mean time, piss off!” Matty exclaimed.

“I can do no such thing!” Kuntz insisted. “I am on a mission from God to be your one true love!”

Kuntz started to reach for Matty. Matty shot Sarah a look which clearly said, “Help me!” And then Sarah did the absolute last thing Matty ever expected she’d do.

Sarah grabbed Matty and kissed her.

This had rather the same effect on Kuntz that it had had the last time, in that he froze, looked really shocked, and ran off weeping.

Sarah released Matty, who was rather shocked and (to be honest) was also rather enjoying herself.

“Well, that should kill two birds with one kiss,” Sarah said. Matty noticed that Sarah was almost fuming. “Maybe word of this will get back to Rodney, and he’ll stop calling me!”

Matty blinked, trying to clear her head. She sunk onto a nearby bench. “Um... calling... right.” She wished all of the penguins would leave her alone.

Sarah blinked, too. "So how do you know that jerk?" she asked.

Matty sighed. "From Boy Scouts," she said, her voice almost dreamy in tone.

"Small world, isn't it?" Sarah asked. She blinked. "Isn't it?" She blinked again. "Matty?" she said, a little more forcefully.

Matty snapped out of it. "Huh? Oh yes, small world."

Sarah arched an eyebrow and looked at Matty suspiciously. Come to think of it, she couldn't remember Matty ever mentioning any old boyfriends... "Why did Taylor think you were gay?" Sarah asked.

"Well..." Matty swallowed hard. She was afraid of this. "I'll... I'll tell you later..."

Sarah eyed Matty for a moment. "Promise?"

Matty held up her hand and made the Scout Sign. "Scout's honour. And you know I can't break a promise like that."

Sarah seemed to accept that and changed the subject. "Well, are you coming? I said I want to check out that sale at Filene's."

Matty bolted up, relieved to have put off (hopefully indefinitely) a rather touchy conversation. "Of course, I'm coming!"

"And are you on for this weekend?"

"You bet!"

Mike was just explaining to Justy why no one from the Garden Snake Patrol would volunteer to prepare meals for him for the next month when Matt arrived at the meeting and took a seat at the table the Garden Snakes occupied.

"What's up?" Matt asked as Justy stormed off in search of victims from one of the other patrols.

"Oh, Justy's just up to his usual idiocy," Mike said. "How about with you?"

Matt opened his mouth to answer. Aaron put up a hand to silence him. "Let me guess, planning another get together with Sarah?"

Matt nodded. "How'd you know?" he asked.

"Because," Aaron told him, "you look so damn pleased with yourself."

Kenny looked up from his book, interest in the conversation obvious on his young face. "WHAT!?" Becker randomly shouted. Shmuler wasn't paying attention, as he was busy trying to guess (in a rather loud voice) the number of molecules in Leonard Nemoy's butt.

"As Matt or Matty?" Mike asked.

Matt opened his mouth to answer. Hughes put up a hand to silence him. "Let me guess, Matty?"

Matt nodded. "How'd you know?" he asked.

"Because," Hughes told him, "you don't have the balls to ask her out as Matt."

Matt frowned.

"Half the time, that could be taken literally," Bill Gelinas thought it'd be fun to add.

"Shut up, Bill," Matt muttered.

"Why you no tell her you and Matty is same person?" Perry asked. "Is not honourable."

Matt shrugged. "Well, you know, sometimes you let a little..."

"Or big," Hughes offered.

"Or big, thank you, white lie slip out towards the start of a relationship... and then as time passes, as much as you might want to clear the air, it becomes harder and harder to say, 'Oh, by the by, guess what?'" Matt turned to Hughes. "Oh, and you're one to talk, 'Neko-chan.'"

Hughes blinked at Matt with his best, "What did I do?" look.

Hughes was saved as Swett walked over, followed by Kirstin Porter. He waved nonchalantly as he took a seat. Kirstin, pausing to glance warmly at Aaron, stood beside Matt and asked if she could sit down.

Matt nodded and she took a seat. "What can I do for you?" he asked her.

"Well," she said, "I know you have a, um, rather refined pallet," she ventured.

“You mean, I’m the pickiest damn eater on the face of the planet?” Matt asked her.

She nodded, relieved that the ice had been broken, and continued. “Well, I was wondering what I should cook this weekend.”

“Actually, I was hoping I could cook dinner, as sort of a thank you to all of you for the hospitality.”

“If you’d like,” Kirstin said. “That would be nice.”

Meanwhile, the entire Garden Snake Patrol (with the exception of Becker, who was watching them but couldn’t hear a word and Shmuler, who was still loudly making his calculations) was eavesdropping intently on the conversation.

“Any side dishes you want, though, feel free to contribute,” Matt said.

Kirstin nodded and smiled. “Of course, to properly plan side dishes, one must know the main course.”

“Well,” replied Matt, “I thought I might prepare for you my mother’s lasagna recipe. Hope you like a lot of cheese.”

“Sounds splendid,” Kirstin said. “Now, any particular snacks you might like? Or perhaps beverages?”

“I can bring some beverages, and as for snacks, I don’t want to impose too much.”

“No imposition at all. I insist.”

“Well, maybe things like pretzels, Smartfood, or Doritos. I like the regular ol’ fashioned Nacho Cheese ones.”

Kirstin smiled. “Nicole’s partial to Cool Ranch, but I can splurge a bit. Now, how about breakfast?”

At the mention of this bit of information, the listening members of the patrol all exchanged glances with one another. Swett mouthed the word, “Breakfast?”

“Oh, please, I don’t want to...”

“It really is no trouble. I insist.”

“I love French Toast. I even have a supply of real maple syrup I can bring, if you wish.”

“Oh, that would be lovely!”

Matt and Kirstin talked for a small while longer, and then Kirstin got up and left.

Matt turned to the others. He noticed they were all staring at him.

"What in the hell was that about?" Swett asked.

"Oh dear," Matt said. He turned to Kenny.

Kenny pulled out a pair of sunglasses, said, "Sure thing, Mr. Atanian," got up, and asked Swett to follow him. The others all looked away from where Kenny had lead Swett just as a bright blue flash went off. They all looked back to see Kenny take off the sunglasses, and Swett stagger away looking somewhat disoriented. Kenny made his way back to the table and sat down once more.

"Will he be okay?" Aaron asked, watching Swett.

Kenny slipped a metal cylinder roughly the size of a large cigar back into his pocket. "I think so, I have most of the kinks in the design all worked out."

"Now, where were we?" Gelinis asked.

"I know," Mike said. He turned to Matt. "What in the hell was that about?" he asked.

"Well, I'm not so much going out with Sarah, as much as I am... well..."

"Holy shit," Hughes said. "I remember Nicole saying something a few days ago about a slumber party."

The patrol (those, at least, who had been paying attention) turned to Matt. "Slumber Party?" they asked in unison.

Matt laughed nervously.

Saturday had arrived quickly... and then time ground to a screeching halt. Matt woke up early. Too early. And he couldn't get back to sleep.

A few hours later, he rolled out of bed, grabbed a duffel bag, and threw a change of clothes into it. Then he realized the t-shirt he had packed was one Sarah had seen him in. He pulled it back out and spent a while looking for another clean shirt. He found a nice one and packed it.

Then he realized he had packed men's underwear, and switched them for a nice pair of panties.

Now... what else should one bring to a girls' sleepover?

Bra! He hastily threw one in.

Now... how to kill eight or nine hours?

Ah, yes, Matt thought. *I was trying to find a vaccine for Sherry.* Matt turned on his PlayStation and grabbed the controller.

After a while, Matt started to have the feeling that he was forgetting something.

He shrugged, and kept playing.

An hour later he bolted to his feet, pulling the controller from its socket as he did so. He ran out of his room, grabbed his coat, and bolted out of the door.

Meanwhile, Kirsten had also awoken early. She did some cleaning around the house and then started to think about provisions. She assembled her own meagre funds, along with a donation from Nicole, and the extensive grocery list and went to raid the local Big-Y.

"Let's see," she mumbled to herself. "Salsa, check. Doritos, Cool Ranch and Nacho, check. Salad greens and dressings, check. I still need to get Italian Bread."

As she headed for the bakery, she noticed a familiar fedora and trench coat clad man standing at the deli counter.

"Hello, Matt," she said. "I didn't expect to see you until later."

"Oh, Hello, Kirsten. Just picking up stuff for the lasagna."

Kirsten took a peek into his basket.

"Um, Matt, just how much cheese is going into dinner tonight?"

Matt looked at the two half-pound packages of deli cheese, the container of Parmesan, and the large package of mozzarella.

"Oh, not much more than this." He took the package the woman behind the counter offered to him.

Kirsten's eyes grew a size. "There's more?"

Matt blinked. "Something wrong?"

"No, nothing. Uhm... I think I should go get some more greens. I'll see you tonight."

Matt covered the lasagna dish with some aluminium foil, went into the bathroom, stripped down, and doused himself. Then she went into her room and got dressed for the party. She considered her little black dress, and then thought that might be a bit too formal... just slightly... for a sleepover. So she grabbed a Moses t-shirt and a pair of pants.

She got dressed, grabbed her coat, grabbed her bags, and started for the door, glad that her parents had gone out for the evening.

At his house, Bill Gelinas looked up from whatever he was doing. He blinked for a moment, and then for no reason he could fathom he felt compelled to say, "So they're not home to see their 'son' going out. Isn't that a little bit *convenient*?"

"Shut up, Bill!" Matty shouted. Then she got confused. Why had she just shouted that? Ah, well... She was in a rather lightheaded state of mind. After all, she was about to go where no man had gone before.

"Wish me luck," she said to the penguins. And then she was on her way.

"They're here, sis." Nicole called from the kitchen.

"Hello, Matty," Kirsten said. "Let me take your bag."

"Oh, um, thank you, Kirsten." Matty balanced her lasagna in one hand as Kirsten took her backpack. "Um, where can I put this?" She asked, indicating the large lasagna dish.

Sarah pointed to the small kitchenette across the room where Nicole was piling salsa and sour cream onto her Doritos.

“You can put that in the fridge until the oven preheats.”

Matty made her way through the small, yet crowded, living room, stepping over sleeping bags and dodging TV trays loaded with bowls of chips and popcorn. She managed to find a space for the lasagna in the fridge, and was about to close the door when Nicole turned around and crashed into her. Nicole’s plate of Cool Ranch Doritos, chipotle salsa and sour cream spilled all over Matty’s shirt.

“Oh, jeeze! Matty, I’m sorry! I didn’t see you!” Nicole grabbed a length of paper towels and started wiping up the red and white mess.

Kirsten and Sarah trotted over to assist. Matty blushed and tried to clean the spill off her shirt.

“Oh, Matty, let me take care of that,” Kirsten said. “If you don’t rinse that out, the stain will set and ruin it.”

“Please,” Matty began. “I don’t want to be a both— “

“Nonsense,” she stated. “I can get any stain out of clothes. Just give me your shirt and I’ll go bring it to the laundry room downstairs. It’ll be ready by morning.”

Matty blushed again.

“I appreciate that, Kirsten, but... I only have my shirt for tomorrow to wear...”

Sarah raised an eyebrow. “Then what were you going to sleep in?”

Matty shrugged. “In my clothes. I usually do that when I stay over someplace.”

“No jammies?” Nicole asked.

“Umm... not really... Normally, I sleep in a T-shirt or something...” Matty began to wonder if she would ever stop blushing.

Sarah snapped her fingers. “I know. Matty, you go into the bathroom and get out of that shirt. I’ll go get you one of my old night shirts for you.”

Matty’s heart leapt into her throat and took up residence. “No, really, Sarah, you don’t—“

However, it was too late, Sarah was already halfway down the hallway. Kirsten put her hand on Matty's shoulder and led her toward the bathroom.

Kirsten opened the door and told Matty to hand her the stained shirt. Matty waited in the bathroom for Sarah to bring her a replacement. She noticed the three, well-worn towels hanging on the wall. One pink, one pastel green, and one white. Matching face cloths lay beside the sink, and three toothbrushes sat in a holder like bristly flowers in a vase. Matty caught her reflection in the slightly cracked mirror and wondered if anyone else had seen how her throat pounded with her pulse.

A knock on the door.

The penguins went crazy.

"Matty, you decent?"

Sarah's voice.

"Y-yes, it's alright."

Matty hoped her voice didn't sound as strange as it did in her head.

The door opened a crack and Sarah held out an oversized blue T-shirt. "Here you go, Matty."

Matty took the shirt and put it on. It went nearly down to her knees, and had a black kitten in a basket printed on the front. She smiled and realized that the shirt smelled like Sarah.

"Thank you, Sarah," Matty said.

The evening progressed rather uneventfully. Matty's lasagna was well received, although Kirsten took only a small piece and doubled up on her salad portion. Upon questioning Matty about why she didn't take any salad and then learning of her abhorrence of all things vegetative, Nicole delighted in teasing Matty with a piece of lettuce on the end of her fork until Sarah put an end to the debacle.

The four females had just finished their second movie (Romy and Michelle's High School Reunion) when the subject of fashion and its effect on women came up in conversation.

“Why on earth did you two get that movie”, Sarah asked her sisters. “Mira Sorvino and Lisa Kudrow almost ruined their careers with that materialistic, anti-feminist crap.”

“Lighten up, sis”, Nicole countered from her seated position on the floor. “At least there was Janeane Garofalo to add a touch of cynicism to an otherwise Valley-Girl chick-flick.”

“Is it just me,” Matty said, “Or did those two look like Barbie doll rejects?”

“Well, I can tell you this, Matty-chan,” Nicole said, “my Barbies never looked like extras in and a bad 80’s movie... even though, technically, it was the 80’s...”

Sarah chuckled. “No, Nicole, your Barbie’s didn’t look that bad... No, they ended up at the bottom of the toy box, naked, decapitated and missing their legs.”

Nicole smiled evilly. “Ah yes, now I remember. I had quite a torso heap down there.”

Kirsten smiled wistfully. “Remember how we used to play dress-up with Obaachan? Sarah would dress up in mom’s old clothes, Nicole would wear daddy’s clothes, and I’d wear Obaachan’s old kimonos.”

The Porter sisters paused and shared a moment. Matty felt a little left out. Having been born a male, she had never really known how much fun it could be to play dress up like one of the girls. Of course there was that one time....

“You know,” Matty said. “I never played dress-up as a... a little girl. In fact, I didn’t until a few years ago...”

“You never played dress-up before?” Nicole asked, mentally filing that tidbit away.

“Well, not really... But, a few years ago, I was visiting a friend of mine on her birthday while her husband was at work. We were sitting around, bored, until somehow, and I don’t remember who’s idea it was, somehow we got the idea into our heads to make each other up. So, she used her considerable make-up skills on me, and I used my less-then-considerable lack of skills to... well... she ended

up looking like a twisted cross between a whore and a circus clown, I fear.”

Matty reflected that this story was probably was funnier when she told it as a guy, and Kirstin certainly seemed to be enjoying the story. Nicole and Sarah seemed to be enjoying it as well despite their handicap, so she continued. “And somehow, we then decided to try on some of her dresses. So there we were, sitting on her couch, each wearing one of her dresses.” She paused briefly before delivering the first half of the punch line. “And then her husband came home.”

Sarah frowned out of reflex.

Kirsten was suppressing a giggle. “What happened when he came home?”

Matty smiled. “Well, he took one look at the two of us, and next thing you know he went and tried one on, too!”

Kirsten and Nicole burst out laughing and even Sarah chuckled.

Then a strange thing happened. As one, the three sisters slowed their laughing and turned to look at Matty. Matty’s mental penguins sent up a warning flare.

Sarah looked at her with an amused smile.

Kirsten made a thoughtful expression.

Nicole grinned broadly.

If Matty had been an anime character, she would have had a large sweat drop appear near her head.

“Umm... help?” she meekly called out to the Universe in general.

The Porters pounced.

“Why did I let you talk me into this?!” Matty wailed.

“Talking had nothing to do with it,” Nicole said, loading film into her camera. “Now stop blushing, I want to be able to tell the difference between your face and your hair.”

Without quite knowing how it happened, Matty found herself wearing one of Sarah’s few dresses. It was a pale yellow sundress with halter-style straps, and a hemline that ended just above her knees. Although Matty was

slightly more top-heavy than Sarah, the dress wasn't too un-modest and actually looked quite flattering.

*Wow*, Kirsten thought. *Matt looks really pretty in that*. She realized what thought had just gone through her head, and she vigorously shook it in an effort to clear the thought from it.

"You look really pretty in that colour, Matty," Sarah commented.

Matty tried hard not to blush.

"Oh, thanks, sis", Nicole chided. "Now she's as red as ever. I don't think I'll ever get this shot to turn out."

*Thank God for small favours*, Matty thought.

"Hang on, I've got an idea". Sarah dashed into her room and emerged a few moments later holding a matching straw hat.

The penguins smacked the inside of Matty's head, shouting "BAKA!"

Matty reluctantly posed for the pictures, after making Nicole swear on her mother's name that the photos wouldn't be used for blackmail. At least the hat brim hid her face...

"Tilt your head up a little bit more, Matty." Nicole instructed. "You've got a mark of something on your chin, hon."

Matty wiped her chin with the back of her hand.

"No, it's still there. Is that a scar or something?"

"Hmm? Oh, yeah. I suppose it is."

Kirsten blinked and looked closer at the inch-long scar that ran just under the left side of Matty's chin.

"How'd you get that, Matty?" She asked.

"Knife fight when I was five," Matty casually (and unconvincingly) lied. "Now, can we get on with this?"

Pictures were taken, Pyjamas were donned, movies were viewed, and good times were had by all. Time passed, as it has a tendency to do unless one is travelling at the speed of light, and soon it was the wee hours of the morning, or very late at night, depending on your point of

view. They were in the middle of watching *Chasing Amy*, or rather, the movie was serving as background noise while they dozed, when Sarah remembered something she had asked Matty earlier in the week.

"Hey, Matty," she began.

"Yes," came the somewhat sleepy reply.

"You promised you were going to answer my question."

*Oh, bother,* crossed Matty's mind in a much more frantic manor than those words would usually seem to indicate.

"Why did Taylor think you were gay?"

Nicole and Kirsten, who until that moment had been dozing on the floor, jerked up.

*Matty likes girls?* Nicole thought. *Interesting.... Must file that away....*

*Oh, my...* Kirsten thought. *I hope Sarah doesn't suddenly become homophobic....*

Matty cleared her throat. Inside her head, the penguins were strangely quiet.

"Well.... He saw me kissing another girl. But," she hurriedly added, "it was like what you did, I kissed the girl to get him to leave me alone. Sadly, I think it's backfired as he now thinks it's his job to 'set me straight', so to speak." She breathed a sigh of relief. *That was easier than I thought.*

Sarah seemed to think about this. Then she looked right into Matty's eyes.

"Are you gay?"

"Does it really matter, Sarah?" Kirsten asked.

"Yeah, sis. I thought you'd evolved beyond homophobia." Nicole smiled at Matty. "Don't worry, Matty. Even if you are gay, Kirsten and I don't care. I think as long as you're not physically male, there's a good chance that Sarah won't totally despise you either."

Sarah ignored her younger sibling. She adopted her patented 'No more games' voice. "Answer me, Matty. Are you attracted to guys or girls?"

Matty swallowed with a dry throat. She'd been dreading this. The penguins formed a living battering ram and charged into the speech centre of her brain.

"I-I like girls..."

Sarah blinked.

Matty blushed and nibbled her nails.

Nicole leaned forward, interested in this turn of events.

Kirsten waited for the other shoe to drop.

Sarah closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"Matty... What, exactly are your feelings towards me?"

Matty blanched. Her stomach was churning with nervousness.

"Well... I do love you, Sarah. At first, I had a bit of a crush on you, but as we've become better friends and I've gotten to know you ... now it's more of a "really close friends" kind of love." *Another little white lie to add to my list*, Matty thought.

Sarah seemed unreadable.

"I love you too, Matty, but only as a friend. Can you respect that and understand that I can never love you 'like that'?"

"Of course. I'd kind of figured that out a while ago. Um.... Are you ok with everything?"

Sarah nodded. "As much as I can be. I have nothing against alternative relationships, I just don't care to be in them myself."

Matty nodded in understanding. Then she tentatively spoke.

"So... are we still friends?"

This time, Sarah smiled and gave Matty's shoulder a squeeze.

"Of course. You're my best friend, Matty, nothing can change that."

Matty breathed a sigh of relief and smiled back. So did Kirsten. Nicole grinned.

So, Matty," she asked." What's it like to sleep with a girl?"

Sarah and Kirsten looked at Nicole in horror.

“NICOLE!!” They both gaped.

Nicole looked at them innocently. “What?! It’s a legitimate question! Are lesbian relationships as fraught with tension and disaster as straight ones?”

Matty felt a bit uncomfortable, but decided that if soul bearing was the norm at girl’s sleepovers, she’d best get over it.

“Well, I’ve never actually been with a girl...” She shrugged. “Just because I like women doesn’t mean that I have much luck with them. Even the best of relationships, what few there have been, always seemed to fizzle after three months.”

The Porters all looked at Matty with sympathy.

“Oh, don’t make a deal out of it,” Matty insisted. “I’m used to it.”

“Well,” Nicole said, “Maybe you could get Matt Atanian to set you up with the many women who don’t want to go out with him!”

Matty frowned.

“Nicole!” Kirstin exclaimed.

Nicole demurred. “Sorry,” she said, “I didn’t mean to sound like a heartless bitch.”

“Language, Nicole”, Sarah said.

“Sorry, sis. But you’ve got to admit, if the way you treat him is any indication, that Matt probably doesn’t have much luck with the ladies.”

Matty sighed heavily.

Sarah grunted noncommittally.

“Sorry, Sarah,” Nicole mumbled. “I didn’t mean to bring him up.”

Kirsten seemed to think for a moment.

“Come to think of it, Sarah, did you ever thank Matt?”

Sarah’s eyes flared.

“Why in the world would I thank that pervert?! For ogling me at every available opportunity?”

“Well,” Kirsten said. “I know that if someone saved *my* life, I’d thank them. I mean, it’s the very least one could do.”

“Saved her life?” Matty asked.

Simultaneously, Sarah said, "Saved my life?" She then went on to ask, "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, you know, when we were being held captive by the Canadians?"

"Ah," Sarah said, her voice flat. "That."

"She does have a point, Sarah," Nicole added. "No offense, but maybe you should swallow your pride long enough to thank him."

Sarah was near fuming.

"Sarah, Matt isn't a pervert," Kirsten said, coming to his defence. "Despite what you think, he's actually a decent human being who, in spite of being male, has realized that women are in the ones who are in charge. He's never been anything less than courteous to me and Nicole, and he also thinks quite highly of you. Now, answer me truthfully; has Matt ever *once* made any sort of rude comment, gesture, or shown any honest to goodness signs of being a pervert?"

Sarah's mouth hung open, the combination of unbridled rage, shock, and a little bit of guilt, inhibiting her ability to speak. Kirsten picked up her sleeping bag and headed off to her room.

"Sis, I'm not asking you to go out with him. All I'm asking is that you at least thank the person who saved your life. Now, if you'll all excuse me, I'm going to get some sleep so I won't be snoring while making breakfast."

Matty blinked.

Nicole smiled. "I always knew that girl had backbone in there somewhere."

There followed an awkward transitional period, during which both Nicole and Sarah decided to take a tip from their sister and go to sleep. They bade Matty goodnight and went off to their respective rooms.

Matty was left alone on the ancient couch.

Emphasis on *ancient*.

She tried for a very long time to get comfortable.

Emphasis on *tried*.

After about an hour of tossing, turning, pillow fluffing, cushion pounding, sleeping bag scrunching, and general uncomfortable-ness, she decided that she had indeed found the world's most uncomfortable couch. Hell, she'd had an easier time camping one time when she had to sleep in a tent pitched over protruding roots and large rocks!

Just as she was about to give up and resign herself to a sleepless night, she shifted her position once more and promptly fell to the floor with a crash. "Ouch," she quietly said. She got back up and sat upon the couch.

A moment later she heard a door open. She turned and saw Sarah, who must have heard the crash, poke her head out of her bedroom door.

"Matty," Sarah whispered. "Can't you sleep?"

Matty shook her head.

"I should have warned you about our couch. It's older than I am and is fine for sitting, but it's nearly impossible to sleep on. Why don't you sleep with me?"

Matty's head exploded.

Well, ok, it didn't really explode, but that was the mental image she experienced. Her mouth would have dropped down to the basement if the penguins hadn't quickly regained control and wired it shut.

Sarah held the door open as Matty glided in, lost in a mental fog. She had only seen Sarah's room from the outside once, so she was understandably nervous to not only be in her room, but about to sleep *with* Sarah, *in* her bed.

"You got enough blankets?"

"Mmm hmm..."

"Night, Matty."

"Night, Sarah."

*It's a good thing I 'm a woman right now,* Matty thought as she drifted off to sleep.

It was dark, and Matty couldn't see. Although it was too dark to see her surroundings Matty was sure that they

were unfamiliar. There was something quite uneasy about wherever this place was.

She felt cold. It took her a moment to realize she was naked. She would have been embarrassed, being nude in an unfamiliar place, except the sense of dread and strong sensation of impending doom were more than ample to dispel any modesty.

She became aware that she was standing with her arms raised above her head. She would have liked to have lowered her arms, but that seemed to be rather difficult to accomplish with the manacles binding her wrists together, attached above her head to the cold metal bar she could feel running down the length of her back. Her ankles were also manacled and held in place.

Behind her, a door opened and closed. It let in a bit of light, and for an instant she could make out the cold grey walls and a spartan, empty desk sitting a few meters in front of her.

Some dim lights came on in the room. Well, normally Matty would consider them dim, but so used to the dark was she that she could not help but squint. She heard some footsteps slowly coming towards her from behind. Then, a moment after the footsteps ceased, she heard a voice.

There was something familiar about it. Dark, yet elegant, it spoke with a British accent. It was damn familiar to her, but she couldn't quite place it. This is what it said:

"Pathetic. That's what you are. Quite pathetic."

The speaker walked forward and Matty got her first look at him. She didn't quite know what to make of him.

He was slightly above average height. He was bald; his skin was grey and slightly clammy. His neck was quite wide and corded. He had a spoon-shaped recess on his forehead. He had a beak, his arms were flippers, and his feet were flat and wide. And he was wearing a Cardassian military uniform.

He was a cross between a Cardassian and a penguin.

Matty did not know if she should laugh or scream. She opted to do neither.

The man walked to the desk, looked at a file, and then casually returned his attention to Matty.

He walked forward, stopping directly between Matty and the desk. He looked at Matty for a moment, his expression unreadable. He pulled out a small remote control device, and with it he activated a bank of four spotlights on the wall behind the desk. They were in a horizontal row, two of them on either side of the man's head, all of them shining directly into Matty's face.

"How many lights are there?" the man asked.

"W-what?" Matty asked, confused.

The man's voice was calm. "How many lights are there?" he repeated.

"There are... there are four lights."

"There are five," the man corrected. He casually depressed a switch on the remote he was holding, and a jolt of electricity ran through the metal bar against Matty's back. She could feel it in her spine, and in her wrists and ankles. The electricity shot through her. She yelped.

"Look at you," he said. "Pathetic. You let her continue to think you are a woman. You accept an invitation into her bed. Do you think she would feel safe sharing her bed with you if she knew who you really were? How many lights are there?"

"Four..." Matty whimpered.

"There are five lights," the man said. The electricity came again. It seemed to last longer this time.

"She trusts you. You lie to her. You deceive her. You are unworthy of her." The man turned, walked to his desk, and picked up from behind it a kettle of water. Steam rose from the kettle as he carried it over to Matty. "How would she feel if she knew that she was sharing her bed with this?" He thrust the kettle towards Matty, letting loose its contents of scalding hot water. Matt clenched his teeth as the pain seared into him.

"A man, not a woman. Not her dear friend Matty, who she trusts as much as she trusts anyone. Just a dirty, filthy man. A man she hates. How would she feel if she knew

*this* was who she shared her bed with? Hurt? Betrayed? How many lights are there?"

The pain from the burning hot water made it difficult, but somehow Matt managed to say, "THERE... ARE... FOUR... LIGHTS!"

The man sighed. The electricity came again. It was worse this time, the water being an excellent conductor. Matt thought he heard someone screaming. *Poor devil*, he thought. *He must be in agony, going on like that.* It took Matt a minute to realize it was him.

Matty's eyelids shot open. Her heart was pounding in her chest and it took her a minute to recognize her surroundings as Sarah's bedroom. She could vaguely see a digital clock across the room from where she lay. She squinted to try and focus on the numbers, a difficult task without her glasses.

It was early. Still much too early to get up. The sun wouldn't be quite up yet.

As Matty's heart rate began to return to some semblance of normalcy, she became aware of something warm against her back... Something warm, and quite comfortable. It took her a moment to realize what it was, and when she did her heart rate shot back up again.

Sarah was snuggled up against her back, and she had an arm draped over Matty's side.

Matty froze. She was terrified, overjoyed, excited and umm... yeah... all at once.

*Oh, please don't wake up and think the wrong thing, oh please, oh please oh—*

Sarah shifted and mumbled in her sleep, cuddling closer to Matty's back.

*Oh, shit....*

"Mmmmm..." Sarah mumbled. "...Bear..." She hugged Matty again.

*'Bear?'* Matty thought. *'Bear?'* *She thinks I'm her teddy bear... Thank you, God!*

Matty drifted off into a light sleep, content with the knowledge that she wouldn't be killed before she awoke.

Kirsten emerged from her room and was the first to notice that Matty was not on the couch. A fleeting thought crossed her mind and then she quickly dismissed it. As quietly as she could, she set about making French toast for breakfast.

Nicole was the next to emerge from slumber, looking a little worse for wear. Kirsten looked at her twin in a puzzled manner.

"Rough night?" She asked.

Nicole growled under her breath. "...Too damn much cheese..."

Kirsten handed Nicole an apple. Nicole noticed a lack of occupancy on the couch and cocked an eye towards her older sister's room. Kirsten shrugged and went back to beating the eggs. The gears in Nicole's head began turning.

Kirsten had just turned on the stove and was waiting for the griddle to heat when she remembered what day it was. She turned to ask Nicole to get the paper, but witnessed her sister dashing into the bathroom instead. The half eaten apple rolled along the floor and stopped at her feet. Kirsten sighed and went to pick up the paper herself.

She opened the door and looked down to see a small, muddy, shivering figure on their doorstep. He was curled into the foetal position, holding a battered-looking teddy bear in his arms. It took Kirsten a moment to recognize who it was, and when she did, she was shocked.

"PROCTOR!?"

## *Chapter Twenty-Three: The Devil in the Dark*

by Matthew Atanian

based on story ideas by Matthew Atanian and Jessi Pysz

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The doors to Walker Hall did not swing open with a mighty bang. Rather, they opened slightly, creaking as they did so.

Justy did not proudly stride through them, making himself the centre of attention, a spectacle in his immaculate uniform, with his stride firm and steady and his face confident and fierce! Rather, he slithered through the narrow opening almost unnoticed. His uniform was rumpled and seemed unwashed. He had a tired look on his face. He slouched as he walked. His hair was mussed up. He looked thin and pale. His face was slightly dirty. And he unintentionally helped out a new scout when Slim McGraw, who was in the process of torturing the lad, passed out when he caught a whiff of Justy's breath.

It is said that Justy was almost unnoticed as he was, in fact, noticed by two persons. The first was the new scout, a chunky young lad by the name of Gamble, who only noticed this briefly as he, too, soon passed out. The second will be revealed momentarily.

"Awfully quiet tonight, isn't it?" Aaron asked, ignoring the noise caused by Will Shmuler. It was indeed quiet apart from Shmuler, and the Garden Snake Patrol had become quite adept at tuning the most annoying of their brethren out.

"Yeah," answered Hughes. "We're usually ignoring Justy by this time. Shouldn't he be barking orders about bowing down to him or something about now?"

"WHAT?" Becker shouted. The other members of the Garden Snake Patrol had become quite adept at ignoring this, too.

"Where could he be?" Kenny inquired.

Bill Gelinis looked at his watch. "It's 6:35. Five past. That's not like him to be late. Usually he's either early, setting up whatever stupid plot he has this particular week into motion, or he is exactly on time to make a grand entrance. But late?"

"Maybe he died," Swett deadpanned. He laughed at his self perceived humour, but stopped when no one joined him. "I suppose we couldn't have been that lucky."

"Hey, guys!" Mike said. He had noticed something slithering through the doorway. "Look!"

"Who's that? New guy?"

"No... It's..."

"Justy!" they all said together, shock in their collective voices. He didn't look over to them at their outburst. Indeed, he seemed to take no notice of them at all.

He quietly made his way up to the front of the hall, took his normal place on the steps there, and stood facing the troop. He held up his hand and formed the Scout Sign. He seemed to be waiting for the troop to come to order. Yet he didn't bark any commands. He didn't make any demands of obedience. He just stood there. Quietly. Waiting.

The rest of the troop had still taken no notice of him, and thus made no move to assemble. The Garden Snakes had no idea how to react. They were confused, to be sure. But there was something else. Something creeping into their hearts that they couldn't yet identify. Something about Justy's current condition was filling them with... what was it? Cold? Darkness? Dread?

Was it... fear?

It was Gelinias, with his talent for stating the obvious, who ended the silence that had settled over the table at which the Garden Snake Patrol was seated. He did not shatter the silence with a loud proclamation of the unbelievably of this or that, but rather he chipped away at the silence with a quietly posed question: "Where's Proctor?"

It was slightly cold out for a late spring day as Sarah Porter's car pulled into the parking lot of the Church in the Acres. It was still quite bright out, but the sun was not quite as high as it could have been and the brightness would not be lasting for much more than an hour.

There were a few youths frolicking around in the field. One of them, a young girl scout, was almost all of the way out to the fence separating the Church's field from the Western New England College campus that lay beyond. As she parked the car, Sarah took note of this so that she could then go and rein the girl in.

A couple of the youth closer to where Sarah was parking stopped mid-frolic and looked at her car in astonishment. One of them screamed in alarm. Another of them began to laugh.

Proctor untied the ropes holding him securely to the roof, leapt down from the car, and opened Kirstin's door.

"Really, you could have ridden inside with us," Kirstin said. "You must have been terribly uncomfortable up there. You could even have gotten hurt!"

Proctor shook his head. "I wouldn't think of it, Mistress. Riding inside the vehicle is a privilege I am unworthy of."

Nicole grinned as she got out of the opposite side of the car. "You should ditch Aaron and go for this one, sis," she said. "I've never seen a male so completely and utterly whipped."

Kirstin blushed and turned towards her twin sibling. "Nicole, Aaron and I are just friends, really!" she said with the usual hint of over-protestation in her voice that she herself was unaware of. She turned back to Proctor. "And Proctor, you really are very sweet, but you're much too submissive."

Proctor shook his head. "I live only to serve you, Mistress."

Sarah now got out of the car, a very tired look on her face. "How long is he going to be doing this?" she asked. "Even if he is so spineless as to be no threat at all, I really don't like having a man around the house." She leaned in close to Kirstin and dropped her voice to a whisper. "Besides, he's kind of creepy."

"Yeah, this is a bit different then when Neko-chan followed me home," Nicole added.

*Not quite as different as one might think*, Kirstin thought with a touch of regret at the secret that circumstances forced her to keep from her twin. Aloud she said, "Well, I can't just throw him out to the streets, and he has no place else to go."

Sarah turned to Proctor. "Aren't your parents worried about you?"

Proctor blinked, incomprehension on his face. "Parents," he said slowly, as if trying out an unfamiliar word. "Oh, do you mean like a mother and a father? I'm too lowly to have those."

Sarah raised a disbelieving eyebrow. "Well, where did you leave before you forced yourself upon us?"

Proctor gasped. He turned to Kirstin. "Have I been an inconvenience, Mistress?"

"Oh, of course not!" Kirstin lied. She then shot her sisters a look before either one could contradict her. "We're just concerned that whoever you lived with before you came to be with us may be worried about you."

Proctor's eyes teared up a little, and he sniffled slightly. "The... the Captain? I... I failed him."

"Captain?" Sarah asked.

"I failed him, and was tossed out like the refuse I am!" Proctor wailed. "I don't deserve the kindness you've shown me, Mistress!"

Kirstin tried to comfort Proctor. Nicole shrugged. Sarah sighed.

Mike blinked. "He's usually right on Justy's tail. Maybe he's sick or something.

"You kidding?" Aaron asked. "Proctor could be on his death bead, and Justy would still order him to do his bidding.

"And he would gladly do it," Hughes added.

"Maybe... maybe something happened," Mike said.

"Think Justy killed him?" Swett postulated.

"Justy wouldn't go that far," Aaron said. "At least, I don't think he would."

They looked up at Justy, still holding his Scout Sign in the air, still unheeded or unnoticed by most of the rest of the troop.

"Still, something must have happened," Gelinias said.

Matthew Atanian chose that moment to walk over. "Hey, guys," he said.

"Hi, Matt," they all responded. (Well, most of them. As usual, Becker's greeting was more along the lines of, "HI, MATT!!" and Shmuler just shouted a few random but faintly disturbing syllables.)

"What's going on?" Matt asked, concerned over the tension he could feel amongst the group.

"Something's up with Justy," Mike said, "and Proctor seems to be missing."

"Ah," Matt said. "That."

Suddenly, all eyes were on Matt, Shmuler's literally. He knew something about what was going on, and they wanted to know what. Even Becker removed his headphones, interested in what was about to be revealed.

"Well," Matt began, shoving Shmuler away, "it happened at the sleep-over..."

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"PROCTOR!?"

"Hold on," Gelinus interrupted, "if you're not even in the room here, how could you have known all of that?"

"I can't, obviously," Matt told him.

"Well?" Gelinus prodded.

"Well I needed to re-cap slightly, you see. Set the scene."

"Recap what?"

Matt gave Gelinus a look of doom. Gelinus immediately closed his mouth. Matt didn't even have to say it.

There was a brief pause around the table. Finely, "Okay," said Matt, "where was I?"

Sarah began to stir which, since her arm was still draped over Matty, had the effect of waking her.

The first thing Matty did was to blush. The second thing she did was to thank Zarquan that she was a woman at the moment. Otherwise – what, with it being morning and all, and waking up next to a beautiful woman she was madly in love with – she'd have some explaining to do.

Sarah stretched, thus removing her arm from Matty. Matty took this opportunity to scoot away from Sarah.

Sarah smiled. "Good morning," she said pleasantly.

Matty rolled over to face Sarah. Sarah blinked when she saw how red Matty's face was. "H hello," Matty responded.

"Have a good night?"

Matty nodded.

Sarah looked into Matty's eyes. Something didn't seem quite right. "What is it?" she asked. She answered her own question before Matty even had a chance to. "You're uncomfortable."

Matty shifted nervously.

"Why?" Sarah asked, even as realization came to her. "What you said last night, about having *had* a crush. Was that the whole truth?"

"Not... not exactly," Matty whispered, barely able to voice the words.

Sarah's next words were not a question. "You are in love with me."

Matty nodded slightly, and softly said, "I'm sorry."

"Oh, God, Matty, I should have never asked you to sleep with me."

"I swear," Matty exclaimed, "I didn't try anything!"

"No, Matty, I..." Sarah looked Matty in the eyes. "Look, if I thought you were the sort of person who would have done such a thing, you wouldn't be in my house, never mind my bed. But... Matty, I'm the one who should be sorry. I didn't think about your feelings. Sleeping next to me must have been uncomfortable."

Matty shrugged. "It's okay."

"No, it's not," Sarah said firmly. Then her voice softened once more. "You know I can't ever love you back in the same way," she said.

Matty nodded. "I know. I'm used to it. It isn't the first time. I was once in love with a girl named Carolyn, but she was rather partial to gi... guys."

"It can't be easy being around me."

"For a while, it wasn't always easy being around Carolyn. But even if I couldn't have her like that, I knew she was a special person who I wanted to have in my life. In time, it became easier, and now I wouldn't trade her friendship for anything.

"Even if I can never have *you* like that, Sarah, I still want you to be a part of my life." Matty smiled. It was a sad, yet genuine smile.

Sarah smiled back. God, she was beautiful, even first thing in the morning. "I can never love you like that, Matty Hayes," she said, "but I do love you." Then she said, "So, if you're so much in love with me, why are you always trying to hook me up with Atanian?"

Matty blinked. She'd gotten so wrapped up in the moment that she had forgotten about the double life she led. "Well, um... I care about him like a brother, you know. He and I are a lot alike. Sometimes... sometimes it's almost as if he and I are the same

person. I suppose it only makes sense that if I were to fall in love with you, he would too. So I suppose I'm rooting for him. Slim as it is, he's got a better chance with you than I ever will. Guess I'm hoping to live vicariously." Matty laughed nervously. "Although I would never force you into anything."

Sarah stretched. "That makes sense, I suppose," she said. "Tell you what. I'm not promising anything, but maybe I'll think about being a little nicer to him." She sighed. "I suppose between you and Kirstin, he does have a few good references."

A few moments passed in which the few of them just laid in bed. The sleep still clearing from their minds as a few birds sang outside Sarah's window.

"So," Matty asked, "who is Bear?"

Sarah blinked. "Bear?"

"When you were sleeping, you said, 'Bear,' and you..." Matty trailed off.

"I don't talk in my sleep," Sarah said.

Matty just looked at her.

"Well I don't!" Sarah protested. "I mean, come on!" Sarah paused. After a moment, it was her turn to blush. "Wait, did I...?" She looked at Matty. "I didn't glomp you or anything, did I?"

Matty shrugged, avoiding the question by asking once more, "So who is Bear?"

Sarah swung her upper body over the edge of the bed so that only her legs were visible to Matty. Matty tried not to be too distracted by this sight as she heard Sarah rummaging underneath the bed. "Where the heck did I put...? Eureka!"

She swung back onto the bed clutching to her breast a large plush toy. It did not look like a bear. It was large, oval shaped and dark grey in colour with a large lighter patch for the tummy. It had two large round white eyes with small black dots in the middle of them. Between the eyes was a squished looking nose. And under that, flanked by three whiskers on either side, was a great big huge toothy grin of the sort that in any other context would convey a look of, "I'm going for your jugular now. Have a nice day," but on this toy somehow just added to an overall cuteness.

"My grandmother gave this to me when I was eleven. You'd probably think at eleven I'd be too old for such things, but for a long time this thing never left my side. I know it isn't really a bear, but that's what Kirstin called it when she saw it, and the name kind of stuck. I can't even remember what it is really called. Something beginning with a 'T', I think."

"Totoro," Matty said.

Sarah grinned a grin to rival the plush's. "You know it?" she asked.

Matty was about to answer when they were interrupted by a surprised shout from the other room. "PROCTOR!?"

Gelinas was very confused. "Why the hell did you tell us all of that, Matt?" he asked.

"All of what?" Matt responded.

"That personal stuff between you and Sarah. Why is that our business, and what does it have to do with Proctor?"

"You feeling okay, Bill?" Hughes asked. "Matt hasn't even started talking yet."

"Yeah, I was about to start right now," Matt confirmed.

"Then what," Gelinas asked, slowly and deliberately, "have we been listening too for the last ten minutes?"

"What ten minutes?" Aaron asked.

"The last ten minutes!" Gelinas exploded. He looked to Kenny, expecting some reason to come from him, at least.

"There was no ten minutes just now, Mr. Gelinas," Kenny quietly informed him.

"But... but... Then what the hell was all of that?"

Mike sighed. "If it will make you happy, it was just exposition for those reading this, okay?"

"This? What 'this'?" Gelinas put a hand to his temple, a pained expression on his face. "What readers?"

"Shut up, Bill!" the others all commanded as one.

"Now, shall I begin?" Matt asked.

Sarah and Matty burst into the room. "What's going on" Sarah asked.

Nicole eyed the pair exiting the bedroom. "I could ask you two the same question," she said, a sly grin on her face.

Sarah and Matty both reddened. "It's not like that," Sarah insisted. "Anyway, what is going on out here?"

Nicole stepped aside, and behind her Sarah and Matty could see Kirstin. And with Kirstin was...

"Proctor?" Matty asked.

Sarah looked to Matty. "You know him?"

"He's a kid in the Boy Scout troop." Proctor looked only slightly less ragged than he had upon his return from Abu Dhabi. "But what is he doing here?"

Proctor was unconscious, and Kirstin was tending to him. He groaned and began muttering under his breath. The others strained to hear. "Captain... no... I'm sorry..." He moaned a bit louder. "Please, don't abandon me!"

"And so, it seems that Justy kicked Proctor out, and he just wandered around until he somehow ended up on the Porter's doorstep. Kirstin cleaned him up, cooked us all French Toast, and saved some for Proctor for when he gained consciousness. He refused to eat it, though, saying he was not worthy. So as I left, Kirstin was making him some plain toast while Sarah was heating up some left over lasagna for lunch. Last I heard when talking to Sarah on the phone, Proctor has pledged his undying service to Kirstin!"

"Oh, my," Aaron said.

Matt, Mike, Aaron, Hughes, and Gelinias sat around contemplating all of this as Kenny led Becker and Swett off into one corner of the hall.

"Well, I suppose we should do something about getting the meeting going," Matt said. "Justy is being surprisingly ineffectual tonight. And not in the usual way."

"Maybe I should take charge of things?"

There was a bright flash from off in the distance.

"If nothing else, you should probably fall the patrol in," Matt suggested. "Maybe the other patrols will notice and do the same."

Kenny, Swett, and Becker came back over and took their seats.

Mike stood. "Well," he said, "let's fall in."

The Garden Snake Patrol rose and started towards the front of the hall. Mike led the way and stood at the head of the hall, just off to the side of Justy. He took a deep breath and was about to shout, "Troop, fall in!" when something within Justy finally stirred.

"What are you doing?" he said to Mike. His voice was quiet, and sent a shiver down Mike's spine.

"Um, calling the troop to order?" Mike suggested.

"The troop." There was a dangerous pause as Justy contemplated this. Something began to smoulder in his eyes. "My troop," he said at last. His voice was still quiet rather than the tyrannically loud tones he typically used. "You dare presume to wield authority over *my* troop?"

Mike shrugged. "Someone had to."

That was the wrong answer. Justy's eyes burst into an inferno. Disturbingly, his voice still remained somewhat quiet, a

sharp contrast to the yelling and shouting that they were all used to. "Go back to your patrol, peon."

Mike was about to protest, but thought better of it. Instead, for once in his life he just did as Justy commanded and returned to his place amongst the Garden Snakes.

A further moment passed as Justy just stood there, everyone in the troop standing at rapt attention awaiting his next move. Well, almost everyone. A flicker of movement caught Justy's eye.

"You there!" Justy called out to the new kid, who had been eating from a large box of candy. "Come up here!"

The kid did so, with a visible measure of reluctance.

"What are you eating?" Justy asked of him.

The kid showed him. It was a large box of Junior Mints.

"I require minty fresh breath," Justy said. "Give those to me."

"Sure, here you go," the kid said, holding out the candy.

Justy reached for the box. At the last second, the kid snatched the box away and laughed.

"Screw you, you smelly rice picking hippy!" he said to Justy. "These are my Junior Mints! You get your own god damned candy!"

The rest of the troop watched this in astonishment, sure that Justy was about to go off on the kid. They would never have guessed what was about to happen next.

Justy smiled.

"You show promise, young man. Tell me, do you crave power?"

"Abso-fricken-lutely."

"I am in need of a new Assistant Senior Patrol Leader. The position could be yours..." Justy paused dramatically, "if you give me those Junior Mints."

"Hmm... Tempting." The kid was making a convincing go of sounding as if he was in a business negotiation. "Tell me, exactly how powerful would this make me?"

"Second in the troop only to me," Justy informed him.

"Oh, well then, let me think about it," the kid said. His face twisted into some sort of mockery of concentration, his eyes screwed tightly shut, as he weighed his options.

"Junior Mints, or penultimate power. Hmm... Junior Mints, or penultimate power." He opened his eyes and looked at Justy. "Oh man, you're breaking my balls here, Justy, you're breaking my balls!"

"That is the only offer I will give you. Take it or leave it."

"I don't know. These Junior Mints really mean a lot to me." The kid seemed to think about it for another moment. "Still... Penultimate power... I think I shall accept your offer."

Justy smiled as he accepted the Junior Mints. "Very good," he said.

"Yeah, well, I figured what the hell," the kid said. He pulled something out of his pocket. "It wasn't like I didn't have another box."

Justy continued to be a source of surprise to the troop as at this point he began to laugh.

"This could be bad," Hughes commented.

"What, Justy teaming up with someone who seems just as awful as he is?" Gelinas responded.

"And without a whipping boy, who knows what will happen when things don't go his way," Aaron added.

"Yup," Hughes repeated, "this could be bad."

"What's this new kid's name?" Swett asked.

"Gamble," Mike informed him. "Eric Gamble."

At that particular moment, Eric Gamble was rounding up a group of his fellow Tenderfoot scouts and commanding them to fetch a bucket of water with which to clean Justy. When one of them questioned why he should do this, Gamble wacked him on the head and said, "Hey! You will respect my authority!"

"Perry no like Gamble."

"For once, my Amazon friend," Matt Atanian said as he joined the Garden Snakes where they were standing, "we are in agreement."

Aaron nodded. "Indeed. Given the choice between Proctor and Gamble, I know which one I would prefer."

The members of the Garden Snake Patrol all nodded their heads. Then, collectively, they all said. "We have to get Proctor back!"

## *Chapter Twenty-Four: The Cage*

by Matthew Atanian

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Kirstin awoke bright and early, as was her custom, to prepare breakfast for herself and her sisters. Also, since there was still a little bit to go before school was out for the summer, to make lunches for herself and Nicole.

This was her custom. However, after the better part of a week she was still not used to the fact that someone else was doing this for her.

Remembrance of this fact came to her just as she was about to open the door from her bedroom. Sure enough, when she did so she was greeted with the sight of Proctor in the kitchen. He was already wide awake, groomed, and dressed smartly in a Boy Scout uniform. (She had noticed on the first morning that the sleeve showed signs that a patch had recently been removed from it, but Proctor seemed not to have wanted to comment on that.) Lunches were made and waiting in neatly folded brown paper bags upon the kitchen counter, and he already had a good start on breakfast.

"Good morning, mistress Kirstin," he said upon noticing her entrance.

"Proctor," she said in to him, "I really wish you wouldn't go to all of this trouble."

"It's no trouble at all," he said to her.

"Still, it isn't necessary," she told him.

"But why, mistress?" he invariably asked at this point. This conversation had become practically routine over the last few mornings.

"Because you don't need to do all of this," Kirstin always replied. "Besides, I like doing this stuff myself."

"But if I didn't do this for you, how am I to serve you?" He then went back to work, and he would have nothing of it if Kirstin tried to help him or — god forbid — take over.

There was just no dissuading him. The most she had been able to accomplish along those lines was after the first time he had cooked, convincing him that they were on a budget as far as food was concerned and that it was not appropriate to cook a grand feast for every meal.

Still, Kirstin wished she could get him to stop. She really did like doing the cooking herself. There was also the fact, although

one would never get her to admit it, that she was perhaps a little concerned (some might say jealous) that Proctor might just be a better cook than her.

Justy awoke later than he was accustomed to. Where the hell was Proctor? Oh, yes. Proctor was gone. And good riddens.

So where the hell was Gamble?

"Gamble!" Justy bellowed.

Something stirred at the foot of the bed. Justy looked over the edge to see someone in a sleeping bag. The form was much too small to be that of the robustly framed Gamble.

"Who are you?" Justy bellowed.

A sleepy head poked itself out of the bag. As Justy suspected, it certainly was not Gamble. Justy did recognize the lad, however. It was... oh... what was his name?

"Peon #235," Justy said after a moment.

The small Tenderfoot scout was blinking the sleep from his eyes as he looked up at Justy.

"What are you doing here?"

"Well, Mr. Lord God Yung, sir," the lad, whose name was Joey, responded in his youthful voice, "Mr. Gamble said he was going to work with us on the Citizenship in the Community merit badge. And to earn it, we had to provide service to the two most important people in the community."

"The *two* most important?" Justy asked.

He had intended the question to be rhetorical, but the youth responded regardless. "Mr. Gamble, sir."

"I see," Justy slowly said. He wasn't quite sure what to make of this situation, but decided to deal with it as best as he could for the moment, until he could speak to Gamble.

"I should have been woken up almost an hour ago!" Justy snapped. "I am going to bathe now. Normally, I would have you draw the bath for me, but I shall suffer doing it for myself today. However, I expect to find my best uniform laid out for me when I am finished, and I expect breakfast to then be waiting on the table for me after I dress. Is this clear?"

The kid got out of his sleeping bag. He seemed enthusiastic about his duties, but still he didn't move as quickly as Justy would have liked.

"Well, snap to it!" Justy demanded.

"Yes, sir!" Joey responded as he went to his tasks.

No, still not quite as quick and enthusiastic as Justy would have preferred. Still, it was certainly more quick and enthusiastic

then the youth would have been if he had known that noting he was doing covered any requirements of the Citizenship in the Community merit badge, or any other merit badge for that matter. And Justy knew that, as much a bunch of fools as they all were (especially that Atanian) none of the adult leaders would be foolish enough to sign off any requirements for the lad. So all he was doing was for naught.

Not that Justy was about to tell any of this to the poor kid. Indeed, as annoyed as he was with the situation he found himself in this morning, these thoughts were enough to ensure a good hearty laugh for Justy as he made his way to the bath.

That afternoon, Matt came home to find the answering machine blinking at him. He pushed the button, and the machine began playing its messages back. The first message was for his father from Harris Tanner. The second message was from an annoying telemarketer. The third was the most astonishing thing Matthew Atanian had ever herd.

"Huh," Matt said. He went and kicked off his sneakers, made a quick visit to the bathroom for reasons that shall not be elaborated upon here, and then headed to the kitchen to make a snack for himself.

He did all of this because his brain was quite simply not yet ready to process the contents of the aforementioned answering machine message, and thus all thoughts of it had been pushed from his conscious mind.

As Matt was spreading marshmallow Fluff onto a piece of bread, his brain decided to take a chance and see if he could handle it yet.

One of the penguins pushed a bit of knowledge back into the conscious parts of his brain. Matt stopped, butter knife paused in mid-swipe, and blinked for a moment.

Then he was gone, the bread left suspended a few inches above the countertop. It descended, doing a mid-air flip that was made doubly amazing when one considered the very short distance it had to travel, and landed on the counter sticky side down.

By the time the bread had accomplished all of this, Matt was already pressing the button on the answering machine once again. He fast forwarded through inquiries about what time to leave for the trade-o-ree this weekend. He fast forwarded though the offer of a free VCR if he was but willing to sit through a five hour seminar about an amazing real estate deal he could simply

not afford to miss. He stopped at the third message, and listened to it again. This is what it said:

"This is Sarah Porter calling for Matthew Atanian. There are a few matters I wish to discuss with you. Come to my place tonight. I should be home any time after five o'clock. If you don't already know how to get here, you can get directions from Matty Hayes."

Matt stood completely still after the message stopped playing. It always took the penguins a few moments to get the jumper cables hooked up to his hypothalamus, what with their lack of opposable thumbs, and all. Then one of the penguins hopped into their car and turned the key in the ignition.

When nothing immediately happened, the penguin turned off the car and waited a moment before then trying again.

Matt blinked, shook his head a bit, and looked over at the clock. It was only about a quarter 'till four. Plenty of time for a snack before he went. He headed back for the kitchen to finish making his sandwich.

Not long after, the Atanian house was filled with a shout of, "Oh, bloody hell!"

An hour later, Matt stood before the dwelling of the Porter sisters. Nervously, he knocked upon the door. He heard from within a female shout of, "I can get it!" Whoever it was who had said this was unsuccessful as when the door was opened a second later, it was Proctor who stood on the other side.

"You are expected," he said. He stood aside, and announced, "Mr. Matthew Atanian to see Mistress Sarah."

"Thank you, Proctor," Sarah said. "That will be all."

"Do you require any refreshment for you or your guest?" Proctor asked Sarah.

Sarah frowned, a look Matt was only all too familiar with. "That will be all," she repeated.

Proctor bowed, and left the room. Since the only other options would be the bathroom or one of the bedrooms, Proctor left the room by going to stand just outside the front door while Sarah conducted her business with her visitor.

"Have a seat," Sarah said. She was sitting in the couch. Next to her was Nicole, seemingly reading the Wall Street Journal, but looking up from it as he entered the room. Kirstin was in the kitchen, taking the opportunity while Proctor was outside to make some snacks for everyone.

Matt took off his hat and sat in the blue comfy chair opposite the couch. As he did so, Nicole, the excellent judge of human nature she is, noted that while he certainly seemed uncomfortable with the situation (and who wouldn't, with her sister!) he did not seem uncomfortable with his surroundings. He wasn't looking around, taking everything in, as she would expect of someone when they first visited a new place.

Kirstin brought over a bowl of pretzels (left over from the previous weekend's slumber party) and a fresh pitcher of lemonade. Nicole helped herself. Matt would have liked to, but didn't think it prudent to make a move until Sarah had done so first. Sarah, for her part, just sat there.

Matt wanted to say something, but seeing as he didn't even quite know why he was there he certainly didn't know what he should say. He was still trying to think of something to say when Sarah at last saved him the trouble.

"I want him out of my house."

For a moment, Matt feared she was talking about him, and that whatever she had asked him over for, upon seeing him she decided it was no longer worth it. Then he realized that she was, in fact, talking to him. Cautiously optimistic, he asked, "Proctor?"

Sarah nodded. "He's in your troop. You must have an address for him."

"Odd you should ask that," Matt said. "I already checked into that, and the only address the troop has on file for him is the same as Justy's."

"Justy?" Sarah asked.

"Their Senior Patrol Leader," Nicole offered. "A stupid little bugger who craves power, but has no idea what power really is."

Sarah shrugged. "Whatever. Send Proctor there. I want him out of my house."

"It was Justy who threw him out onto the street," Kirstin mentioned.

"And he won't take Proctor back unless he wants to," Matt added. "And he doesn't change his mind easily. That would be admitting he wasn't infallible."

"You know how that can be, don't you, sis?" Nicole asked.

Sarah was not amused.

"Still," Matt said, "I could be said to represent a group of people in whose best interests it would be to see the return of Proctor to Justy's side."

"Fine," Sarah said. "So what do we do?"

"A very good question," Matt responded. "I really don't have any idea there. I suppose, though, that the first thing to do would be to get the two of them together in the same place."

"No. Oh, no. I am not putting up with him for another week."

"You don't have to. The troop's meeting tomorrow at the church to go on a camping trip. Could you bring him there around five?"

Sarah nodded. "I suppose I can deal with him for one more day." She then lapsed into silence.

Matt blinked. Were they finished? Sarah looked as if she had more to say, but he couldn't be sure. After some time passed, he finally asked her, "Was there anything else?"

"Hmm? What?" Sarah had been lost in thought. "No," she then said. "That's all. You can go."

"Okay," Matt said. He rose, putting his hat back on as he did so. "Until tomorrow, then?"

"Yes, tomorrow," Sarah confirmed.

Matt said goodbye to the twins. When she looked up from her newspaper to respond in kind, Nicole saw something on Matt's chin that she had never noticed before.

Then he was gone.

Proctor re-entered shortly thereafter. He noticed the snacks upon the table, and asked if he should clean them up.

"Not yet!" Nicole responded, returning from her room where she had gone to fetch a file folder. "I'm still working on them."

Kirstin came over from the kitchen and sat on the couch beside her older sister. Nicole, meanwhile, had relocated to the comfy blue chair and was pouring herself a lemonade as she looked over some notes.

"I thought you were going to thank him," Kirstin said.

Sarah got herself a lemonade and sipped from it. "I said I'd think about it,"

"You invited him over, and then you were very rude to him, sister."

"I wasn't rude," Sarah insisted.

"Yes you were. Just as you always are to him."

Sarah sat in silence for a bit more, staring at the glass of lemonade in her hands. Then she asked, "Am I always like that with him?"

Kirstin nodded.

Sarah sighed. "I'll try harder next time, okay?"

Kirstin hugged Sarah. "Okay! Now, come on, we have to get going."

"What?" Kirstin was pulling Sarah to her feet. "Where?"

"To the mall. We have to get a present. No arguing now!"  
Sarah had little choice but to comply.

Friday, the twelfth of June had arrived, and shortly before five o'clock in the afternoon at the Church in the Acres in Wilbraham, Massachusetts, the members of Troop 192 were busy packing their gear into various vehicles for their trip to D.A.R. state forest, where they would be spending the weekend.

Or so they thought.

Mike Quadrozzi and Matt Atanian were organizing things. Justy had not arrived yet and, with the exception of Matt, all of the adults were up in the Church's kitchen enjoying a nice cup of coffee.

"Hey, Matt?" Swett was approaching. "Are we bringing the patrol boxes?"

"Hmm, we'll probably only need one for this trip." Matt turned to Mike. "Which one was it that was missing the least stuff?"

"Box C."

"Ah, yes." He turned back to Swett. "Why don't I give you a hand getting it into Mr. Hawley's trailer?"

"Eh! What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Gamble had arrived. "What do you mean?" Mike asked him.

"Why are you giving orders in my troop? You *will* respect my authority!"

"What authority? Swett asked him.

"My authority as ASPL!"

"I'm an Assistant Scoutmaster," Matt pointed out. "You don't have authority over me."

"Nor me," Mike said. "As a Patrol Leader, I report directly to the Senior Patrol Leader. The Assistant Senior Patrol Leader is only responsible for overseeing the non-leadership positions such as the troop's Historian, Quartermaster, or Scribe." Not the complete truth, Mike supposed, since in Justy's absence Gamble *did* have the SPL's authority, but what Gamble didn't know wouldn't hurt them.

Gamble looked hopefully at Swett.

Matt Swett just shrugged. "I'm too cool for you," he simply said.

"That's weak." Gamble walked away from Matt, Mike, and Swett in search of someone he could boss around. "That's totally weak."

"GAMBLE!"

Justy had arrived and was approaching his assistant.

Gamble met him half-way. "Ah, hello, Justy! Fine day we're having. What can I do for you?"

"You can explain," Justy said, "this." He pointed to the small person standing to his side. It was a small, recently crossed over lad who hadn't even earned his Scout badge yet.

"Is he not doing a good job?" Gamble turned to the kid. "Hey! What did I tell you? You need to do everything Justy says if you ever want to see your Scout badge!"

"I find this unacceptable," Justy said. "Yesterday I had Peon #235, and today I have Peon #291!"

"So you liked Joey better? Well, with the rotation I have scheduled, he should be back with you in about a week."

"Rotation?"

"I know, it sucks monkey balls, doesn't it? But if we kept one kid for too long or too often, the parents are bound to object."

"What about you?" Justy asked.

"Justy, my friend, I'm in the same boat. New servant every day. It will take a while to break them all in! Tell you what. If Todd gave you a hard time today, I'll make sure I get him in the next rotation so that I can whip him into shape for you."

"I think," Justy said, "that you have failed to understand your position."

"Oh, and how so, Justy?"

"First of all, you do not call me Justy. I am at the very least to be called Mr. Yung or 'sir.' More appropriately, however, I am to be called Lord God Yung."

"Weak..."

"Secondly, you do not get a servant."

"Oh, no way! That is not cool."

"Third, I am to have only one servant: you."

"Oh... oh, that is so weak, that..."

"You are to leave your parents immediately and come live with me, where you will tend to my every whim and need."

"Wait, hold on a second. This isn't some kind of NAMBLA thing, is it?" Gamble asked.

"No," Justy assured him. "I do not know this NAMBLA of which you speak."

"Oh, man. That is such a relief. There was this one time..."

"SILENCE!" Justy commanded.

Gamble did not heed him. "What about my power?" he whined. "You promised me penultimate power!"

"And you shall receive it... as my servant."

"Weak."

"For it is I who am the most powerful one."

“So weak...”

“And as my servant, only I shall be allowed to command you.”

“‘Greedo shooting first’ weak,” Gamble finished.

“Do you understand your position now?” Justy asked.

“Bet your ass I do!” Gamble hollered. “It’s back home with a big bowl of Cheezy Poofs! Screw you guys, I’m going home!”

And with that Gamble left, never to return, leaving Justy all alone once more. He stood by himself, pressure slowly building up within his psyche just looking for an outlet.

Everyone else continued getting gear ready for the trip. Mr. Shmuler arrived then, late as usual. His son immediately ran off and started trying to tunnel under the church with his nose. “Hello there, children!” Mr. Shmuler said as he made his way into the building to join the other adults in caffeinated bliss.

“TROOP!” Justy snapped a few minutes later. “You will fall in, upstairs in Walker Hall, now!”

Off where they were standing, Mike looked at Matt. “Better see what he wants,” Matt told him. “We were almost done here, so I can finish up while I wait for the Porters, and then I’ll join you upstairs.”

Mike nodded. “Okay, thanks.”

“Oh, and Mike?”

“Yes?”

“Good luck,” Matt told him. “I think you’ll need it.”

“It’s almost time to leave,” Sarah said to Kirstin. “Where’s Proctor?”

Kirstin frowned. “I was just about to ask you the same thing.”

The front door opened. The sisters turned, thinking it was Proctor, but it was only Nicole coming home.

“Sister?” Kirstin asked, shock in her voice.

“Hello to you, too,” Nicole responded.

“Your hair!”

Nicole grinned. “Yeah, I thought I might go for a change. Especially since you were talking about letting yours grow out. I thought I’d go in the opposite direction.”

Sarah shrugged. “Don’t think you took it a little *too* far, though?”

Aside from a few shoulder-length strands coming down in front of her ears, there was not a hair on Nicole’s head that was longer than two inches.

"You don't like it?" Nicole asked. "I thought it'd be nice and cool for the summer."

"Well," Sarah said, "it's your head."

Nicole nodded. "That it is. So what do you think, Kirstin?"

"It looks... nice." Kirstin took a long, hard look at her sister. "It will just take some getting used to," she concluded.

"Tell me about it," Nicole said. "I'm used to looking at you as if I was looking into a mirror."

Kirstin nodded. "Oh!" she then said, suddenly remembering something. "While you were out, the mail arrived."

"Did I get something?"

Kirstin handed Nicole a thick envelope. "I got one, too," she said, "but I've been waiting until you came home so we could open them together."

"Yes, but later!" Sarah interrupted. "We should get going!"

"Oh, can I come with?" Nicole asked. "Where is Proctor, anyway?"

The three sisters searched. It was Kirstin who found him, sitting alone in the small back yard and holding his teddy bear.

"Proctor? What's wrong?"

He immediately got to his feet, dropping the teddy bear as he wiped at his face. "Can I do something for you, Mistress Kirstin?"

"No, Proctor, thank you."

Hesitantly, Proctor sat back down. Kirstin joined him.

"I am a bother to you, Mistress, am I not?"

Kirstin began to protest this, but stopped herself. She took a deep breath and admitted that in fact he was.

"You are so kind to me, Mistress Kirstin. I, who am so undeserving of such kindness. I who am a bother to you." He stood once more. "I will leave now."

Kirstin stood and took his hand. He looked away from her, unable to meet her gaze.

"Yes, Proctor, you *have* been a bother," Kirstin told him. "But a kinder, more noble bother I could not expect to meet. You should be rewarded. What would you ask of me? What do you want?"

A fresh tear rolled slowly down Proctor's cheek. "All I have ever wanted," he said, "is someone to serve. Someone who truly needs me."

"Proctor?"

"Yes, Mistress?"

“Stop calling me Mistress.”

“But... Then what shall I call you?”

Kirstin gently took Proctor’s chin in her hand and turned his face so that she could look into his eyes. “Call me friend,” she told him.

Proctor couldn’t have been more stunned if Kirstin had asked him to stop breathing. “But Mistress!” he began to protest.

“Proctor!” Kirstin said warningly.

Proctor demurred slightly. “Okay... Kirstin,” he said.

“Good!” Kirstin said brightly. She picked up his teddy bear and dusted it off slightly. “Now come on, we’re late.”

“For what?” Proctor asked.

“Well, I cannot promise what will happen, but my sisters and I are going to try and reunite you with someone.”

“With the Captain?”

Kirstin nodded.

Proctor practically leapt with joy. “Oh, thank you, Mistress! I mean...” He smiled. “Kirstin.”

Kirstin smiled back. She offered the bear to him. “Now take Simon, and let us be on our way.”

The car of Sarah Porter arrived at the Church in the Acres. She exited the car, as did her sisters, as did Proctor. He had finally agreed to ride inside of the car.

The only person outside the church when they arrived was Matthew Atanian. He was just closing and locking the door to the church’s equipment storage area when they pulled in. The only other sign of life was some noise and the smell of coffee coming through the door at the top of the stairs up the outside of the storage area that lead up to the kitchen.

Matt saw them as they exited the car and he walked over to them. “Hey!” he said in greeting. “How’s it...” He paused. “Nicole?”

Nicole grinned. “Like it?”

“It’s... nice,” he said. While it certainly didn’t make her unattractive, since he enjoyed living he didn’t think it prudent to mention that he really did prefer long hair.

“Hello, Proctor,” Matt then said. “We’ve missed you these last few weeks.”

“You did?” Proctor was genuinely surprised.

“More then you will ever know.”

“But... I thought you were the Captain’s enemies!”

Matt smiled at this. "Proctor, just because Justy sees my friends and I as enemies, that does not mean I see him as such."

"But you are always thwarting him!"

Matt stopped a moment to consider how best to proceed. Finally he said, "Tell me, Proctor. What would Moriarty be without Holmes? What would Kahn be without Kirk? What would The Master be without The Doctor?"

"Who?" Proctor asked, not having recognized the final pair.

Matt ignored him and continued. "To be truly great," he explained, "one must have an adversary to struggle against. We are just doing our part to see to Justy's greatness."

Proctor's eyes brightened. "I had no idea!" he said in awe. "You guys do so much for the Captain! You are all great in your own rights, too."

"Thank you... I think," Matt said. Then he continued. "So you see, Proctor, just because we are usually on opposite sides, that does not mean that we aren't your friends. So on this occasion, the Garden Snakes and I want to help you out. It is only natural that you should be back at Justy's side, after all."

"Oh, thank you, sir!"

"And if we should ever find ourselves on opposing sides in the future," Matt added, "I hope you will understand."

"Understand?" Proctor asked. "Why, sir, it will be an honour!"

Matt led the way into the church, using the door by the playground. He held the door open for everyone else and as Nicole, the last through, passed him she commented, "Well played."

As the door closed behind Matt, the door from the kitchen opened up and down the long staircase from the kitchen came all of the other adults. They saw the parking lot empty, and assumed that all of the kids were sitting in the cars, ready to go.

As each of them got into their car and saw that it was in fact empty, they each in turn thought to themselves that the kids must have all packed into the other cars. And so each of them drove away, and the error was not discovered until they all arrived at the state forest.

At that point dusk was approaching. They all shrugged. Mr. Hawley lit up a cigar as Mr. Martin set up one of the camp stoves and Mr. McGraw unpacked the coffee.

There followed one of the best weekends of their lives.

Our story is not concerned with them, however. It is concerned with the rest of Troop 192, who are about to have a weekend to which none of them would dare attach the adjective "best."

Indeed, Matt was feeling far from his best when he got to the top of the stairs leading to Walker Hall and found the doors were locked. "That's odd," he said.

His far from best feeling was compounded when he turned around and walked into the kitchen to ask if anyone knew what was going on, only to find the kitchen was empty. The only sign of recent occupation was a small pile of Styrofoam cups lying in the trash bin.

Matt's feeling of foreboding reached a peak when he then looked out of the kitchen's window onto the parking lot below. The only car present was that belonging to Sarah Porter.

He turned to the Porters and Proctor. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

To truly understand the horror that was unfolding, however, one would have to go back to when Matt was still down in the parking lot and the rest of the troop was, at Justy's orders, assembling in Walker Hall.

The members of the Garden Snake Patrol, along with the rest of Troop 192's youth, assembled in Walker Hall as per Justy's instructions.

"What's going on?" Bill Gelinis pondered.

"WHAT?" Becker responded.

Billy sighed. "I said, what's going... Oh, never mind."

Aaron shrugged. "Justy's sure got something big up his ass this time, that's for sure."

"And we're just walking right into whatever he's scheming?" Hughes pointed out.

"What other choice do we have?" Mike asked. "We'll probably only be up here for a few minutes, anyway. The adults will probably want to be leaving soon."

"Who ever thought we'd be counting on *them* to save us?" Aaron asked.

Justy walked in then. He closed the door behind himself and was fiddling with the knob when an audible "click" resounded through the hall.

"Did he just lock us in?" Mike asked.

There was a glint of light as Justy slipped something into his pocket.

"I think," Aaron said, "he did."

"Where he get key?" Perry asked.

"Does this mean we're not going camping?" Kenny asked.

"Nah," Mike insisted. "The adults will be ready to leave soon, and we'll get out of here then."

"Perry no think so," the Amazonian patrol member said. He pointed to the windows on the side of the hall, through which they could see a fleet of cars making their way out of the parking lot.

"Oh, crud!" Gelinias exclaimed. "Leaving without us? That is so unrealistic!"

For once, the other members of the patrol could not find any way to disagree with Billy's outburst. Yet they could also not ignore the evidence of their eyes.

"Are we trapped here the entire weekend, locked in the hall with Justy?" Aaron asked.

"Looks like it," Mike responded.

"Locked in the hall by Justy... What could he be planning?" Hughes pondered.

"Maybe he's going to gas us all," Swett suggested.

"That's not funny," Hughes responded. "Besides which," he reasoned, "he can't do that if he's locked in the room with us."

"You credit Justy with having intelligence," Hughes pointed out.

"I think he has enough, at least, to not kill himself."

While they had been talking, Justy had assigned Slim and Homer each to guard the front and side exits respectively. Not that any one of the scouts could have gotten out through those doors without the key, but that didn't stop Justy from being precautionous. Slim and Homer took to their assignment with an uncharacteristic lack of spazzing.

Justy had tried with less such luck to assign Will Shmuler to guard the door at the rear of the stage. Shmuler's response had been to do cartwheels around Justy while chanting, "You're not Mike! I like Ike!"

It was a strange showing of loyalty, but it was a showing of loyalty nonetheless. Shmuler had been displaying this since the spring camporee, when they had included him in their plans to re-take Camp Moses.

He was still an annoying idiot, but he was *their* annoying idiot. For the first time, the other members of the Garden Snake Patrol really appreciated that fact.

Justy had found someone else to guard the door and then spent a short while walking around the hall and glaring at everyone, individually, one at a time. He lingered a little longer on each member of the Garden Snake Patrol as he did so.

Half way through his inspection, he was called over by Homer who wanted to tell him that someone was trying to come in

through the side door. By the time Justy had gotten over to him, the rattling of the doorknob had stopped. Justy told Homer to let him know if it happened again, and then resumed his inspection.

"That had to be Matt," Hughes theorized.

"Mr. Atanian would not abandon us," Kenny said firmly.

"And the Porters are supposed to be coming up with Kenny," Aaron reminded them.

Justy had finished his inspection and grabbed one of the folding chairs. He carried it up to the stage, sat upon it, and rested his baton across his lap.

Mike had had enough. He went up to the stage, looked Justy in the eyes, and asked of him, "How long do you intend to keep this up?"

Justy looked down at Mike with contempt. "Keep what up?"

"How long do you intend to keep us here?"

"For as long as it takes," Justy responded, as if that was explanation enough.

It wasn't. "As long as it takes for what?" Mike asked.

"For as long as it takes," Justy said, "for every member of this troop to swear fealty to Lord God Yung and vow to do His command for the rest of their days." His eyes narrowed. "And until this happens, none of you shall ever leave this place."

He then spent a good half hour giving off the most ear-splitting laugh he could.

## *Chapter Twenty-Five: The Conscience of the King*

by Matthew Atanian

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Sarah had left, accompanied by Kirstin, to go to her Troop Leader's house to get a copy of the church's keys. This left Matt and Nicole behind to keep an eye on Proctor.

And Nicole was not about to waste the opportunity.

They were in one of the larger rooms in the church's lower level. Proctor was just sitting in one corner of the room, contentedly awaiting the return of Sarah and Kirstin so that he could be reunited with his master.

Matt, meanwhile, was sitting at the table with a notebook and a pencil, and was taking advantage of the free time to try and get some work done on *Neon Genesis Boy Scouts*, a rather gratuitous self insertion fan-fic he had come up with in which a fictionalized version of himself worked for the Massachusetts branch of NERV, and certain members of Troop 192 were possible Eva pilots.

Nicole came to sit beside him. "How's it going?" she asked him.

"Hmm?" He looked up. "Oh, fine," he answered. "You?"

"I'm bored," she told him. "Wanna talk?"

"Sure." Matt put down his pencil. "About what?"

"I dunno," Nicole said, shrugging. Then, nonchalantly she asked, "Say, what are those little patches above your left breast pocket? The ones with the little knots?"

"The knots?" Matt pointed to them one by one. "The purple one is for a religious award. Although to be honest, I only ever got the Cub Scout one. Speaking of which, this one," his finger moved to the middle one, "is for the Arrow of Light, the highest award you can earn in Cub Scouts. Finally, this last one shows that I earned the rank of Eagle."

"Was that pretty hard?" Nicole asked. "I'm working on my Gold Award now, and that one can be pretty tough sometimes."

"It wasn't easy," Matt said. "Of course, the things that mean a lot rarely are."

"Like winning my sister's heart?" Nicole asked.

Matt had to smile at that. "Bingo," he said. Then he continued. "Mind you, I procrastinated quite a bit on it, too. I had everything I needed for Eagle *except* the service project for about two years."

"Two years?"

"Yup. In fact, by the time I finally got around to doing it, I had to earn another merit badge because they had gone and made Family Life required for Eagle."

Nicole giggled. "Procrastination doesn't pay off, does it?"

"No," Matt admitted. "Heck, since I put it off so long, I only had time to earn two palms before I turned eighteen."

"Palms?"

"Every five merit badges past the minimum required for Eagle earns you a palm. Bronze, then gold, then silver. I kind of regret that I was never able to get that last palm."

"Still," Matt said, "I'd rather have done it my way – take my time and have fun as I go rather than plough my way through the requirements as quick as I can and then have nothing left to do. I've heard of one or two kids getting their Eagle when they were thirteen. Thirteen! What's left for them after that other than losing interest in the program and dropping out?"

Nicole listened to all of this sympathetically, and then as innocently as she could she slipped out the question, "What's that on your chin? Where did you get that scar?"

"Knife fight when I was five," Matt automatically responded.

"Yeah, right," Nicole responded.

"Okay, I'll admit it, I was six," Matt joked. The knife-fight story was Matt's standard answer when asked about his scar, always said in a non-serious manor. Of course, it was only half true. The age half, at least. Well, Matt couldn't really remember to be sure, but he was pretty sure it had happened around that age.

As for *what* it was that had happened... Well, while it was something that could have happened to anyone, Matt had always been a bit embarrassed about it, hence the knife story.

"So how long is Sarah going to be?" Matt asked.

"I'm not sure," Nicole told him. "Mrs. Waversack lives a good hour or so away."

Matt looked at his watch. "Hmm... She left about a half hour ago... Well, that still gives us at least an hour and a half until she gets back. Are you two getting hungry?"

"Are you buying?" Nicole asked.

*D'oh!* Matt hadn't been planning to, but he didn't see a way out of it now. "Sure. Burger King okay? It's not too far of a walk."

"Sounds good to me," Nicole responded.

Matt grabbed his red wool jacket and his campaign hat.

"For something called a 'uniform,'" Nicole commented, "which, by its name, would imply some... well... uniformity, yours is pretty distinct."

"Thanks," Matt said. "Coming, Proctor?"

Proctor looked over at Matt and Nicole. "Oh, no thank you, sir. I am quite fine over here."

Matt was sure Proctor had to be hungry. Besides which, he felt reluctant to leave the youth behind by himself. The thought did occur to him then, though, that Proctor very likely didn't have any money of his own.

Well, what the hell. He was already paying for Nicole. "I insist you come, Proctor. In fact, it shall be my treat."

"Oh, sir!" Proctor exclaimed. "I am not worthy! Thank you!"

Matt placed his hat upon his head. Combined with the jacket, it almost made him look like a Canadian Mountie.

"Well," he said, "let's go!"

Justy showed no inclination to do anything other than not let anyone leave, and so quite quickly most of the kids started having fun. The younger kids were running around as aimlessly as usual, while Luke Walker and the other patrol of older scouts ("The Cockroaches," thanks to Justy's eloquent naming) attempted to organize them into a game of Steal the Bacon.

The Garden Snake Patrol, however, had set up a table and except for Shmuler (who they had let go play) they were seated around it. Becker was contentedly listening to music as everyone else attempted to discuss the current situation.

"How long do you think he can keep this up?" Aaron asked.

"How long does he intend to," Mike asked, "or how long can he realistically?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I think ideally, or at least according to Justy's ideals, he intends to keep us here indefinitely until we have all succumbed to his will."

"I'm so scarred," Swett commented with his patented sarcasm.

"You should be," Hughes responded. "Consider this. Do we have any food? Toiletries? Changes of clothes?"

Swett's face dropped. "I hadn't thought of that."

Hughes nodded. "Justy is counting on being able to outlast us all. And given his fanatical belief in his own righteousness, if he had infinite time he might just be able to."

"But there is one thing Justy has forgotten to take into account," Mike said.

"That there are more of us than there are of him?" Swett suggested.

Mike shook his head. "Unless absolutely necessary, I'd rather not use violence against a fellow Scout, not even Justy."

"Then what?" Gelinas asked. "Just sit here?"

"Of course not," Aaron chimed in. "The first duty of any prisoner is to escape, after all. We can try to find another way out."

"And if worse comes to worse," Mike said, "we can certainly last until Sunday."

"What happens Sunday?" Swett asked.

"Putting aside the fact that if none of us go home Sunday, or families will get mighty suspicious," Mike said, "you are forgetting something very basic about this building."

"What's that?"

"It is a church," Kenny quietly offered.

"Exactly!" Mike said.

"So if she weighs the same as a church..." Swett said slowly, "she's made of brick!"

"Quiet, you," Gelinas said. He turned to Mike. "I see where you're going. On Sunday, the church people will discover us and set us free."

"Still," Aaron pointed out, "unless we find another way out, that gives us two nights under Justy's care. If nothing else, we're going to be pretty ripe by Sunday."

The rest of the patrol muttered in agreement.

"That Justy pisses me off," Hughes said.

"Indeed. I can't wait 'till he has Proctor back to take his aggressions out on," Aaron said.

"Then things like this wouldn't happen," Swett said.

"Yeah," Billy added. "If nothing else, if Justy had gotten an idea like this into his head, we could have counted on Proctor to point out the fatal flaws in the plan. Then Justy could have just bopped him on the head and gotten on with something else."

Hughes suddenly spoke out. "Um, guys... Just a thought. Do you worry at all that getting them back together might not be the best thing in the world for Proctor? Justy is kind of awful to him."

"Yeah, but Proctor likes it," Aaron assured his friend.

"That's not healthy for him."

Aaron shrugged. "Who ever said Proctor was healthy?"

Hughes sighed. "I can't really argue with that one."

"I never realized before," Swett said, "how useful Proctor was in tempering Justy's insanity."

"Yes," Mike agreed. "Justy is more dangerous than we thought. Fortunately, he is dangerous but stupid."

The other all nodded in agreement.

"Just think how bad it would be," Gelinas then chimed in, "if Justy ever teamed up with someone with some intelligence." He pointed. "Like Perry, here."

Perry blinked. "What you say?"

The others glared at Billy, trying to shut him up.

"And need I mention Kuntz?" Billy continued.

"No," Mike insisted, "you needn't."

"What?" Gelinas asked innocently. "I'm just saying, hypothetically here. Could you imagine what you would get if one combined Justy's fanatical insanity and Kuntz's brute strength and channelled them through Perry's intelligence?"

"That's sick, Bill, just sick," Hughes commented.

"Defies rational comprehension," Kenny quietly added.

"I'm just saying, 'What if?' Guys?"

"SHUT UP, BILL!"

Ryoga was walking down the street, concerned. What concerned him was a growing suspicion that, once again, he wasn't even in Japan. What, with all the drivers in the cars that were passing him by being on the wrong side of their cars, and driving down the wrong side of the road. Not to mention all of the businesses that he had walked past with the signs over them written in English.

He definitely wasn't in Japan. So where was he?

He spotted a group of people walking down the opposite side of the road, headed towards a large building that looked like some sort of church. There were three of them. The two males were both wearing some kind of uniform. The female was drinking from a take-out beverage container. Ryoga decided to ask them where he was.

He hurried across the street to try and catch them before they got to the building. When he got to the other side of the road, however, something made him pause and look at the building. There was something familiar about it, nagging the back of his mind incessantly.

Then for a moment, in his mind's eye, the building was covered in snow and many little lights. And he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he had been here before.

He was in Massachusetts again.

He sighed, and sat down by the side of the road. The trio he had been following he allowed to continue on their way unmolested. What was the point?

He was thirsty. He slipped off his backpack and rummaged around inside of it, looking for something to drink. His hand came across a small, cylindrical object that felt like an aluminium can. He pulled it out and looked at it. Where had this come from? It, too, seemed familiar to him. He was too tired to dwell on it, however. Besides which, the can looked like it had been through a lot, and so he judged that whatever was in it was probably revolting. He rummaged through his backpack some more until he found his canteen, from which he took a sip.

Now, which direction was Japan in?

Sarah returned without having had any luck. "Mrs. Waversack wasn't home," she explained.

"You couldn't have waited for her?" Nicole asked.

"It wouldn't have done any good," Kirstin said. "One of her neighbours said she had gone on vacation to Florida."

"Will I ever see the Captain again?" Proctor asked.

"Of course you will," Kirstin assured him.

Just then, Mike Quadrozzi walked in. "Hey, guys!" he said.

"Mike!" Matt said. "How did you escape?"

"I did that thing I can do, and climbed out of the window," he responded.

"Ah," Matt said, understanding.

Mike and Matt then exchanged information on what had happened up until this point.

"And so," Mike finished, "we have a plan to get the keys back, but I don't know how we're going to get Justy to accept Proctor back."

"Actually, we had an idea about that during dinner," Nicole commented.

"Ms. Sarah?" Proctor asked. "Can you drive me to the grocery store?"

Sarah blinked. "Um, okay."

"Excellent. I'll go report back to the others, and then come back and let you know that things are all set," Mike said.

Getting back in through the bathroom window wasn't as easy as leaving had been for Mike, as he had forgotten to take one thing into account. It was easy to throw his clothes out of a second floor window so that he could put them back on after he changed into a person again. It was a bit harder to throw them back *into* a second floor window.

And so, he was stuck with the time consuming task of making multiple trips, each time carrying one article of clothing up with him. Some of his heavier clothes, such as his pants, had proven difficult. His shoes, meanwhile, had proven impossible. In the end, he abandoned them. Once finished, he changed back into a human, got dressed, and knocked on the door to let the guard on the other side know he was ready to rejoin the rest of the prisoner population.

Mike walked back into the hall, shoeless, through the door on the rear of the stage. From the door he was guarding, Homer called out, "Who takes three hours to go to the bathroom before bed, Quadrozzi?"

"Nonsense," Mike shouted back. "I had much to do! So much..." He went over to the Garden Snakes table and spoke to them for a few moments.

"Everything's ready on Matt's end. If we're all set, I just have to report back to Matt and then we're good to go."

"What took you so long?" Aaron asked. "We were getting worried."

Mike told them how it had taken him some time to get his clothes back up.

"Um... Why didn't you just tie your clothes up to a string and pull them up?" Hughes asked.

"And where am I going to find a piece of string just lying around Walker Hall?"

Hughes pulled a lengthy piece of string out of his pocket. "Be prepared, and all that," he said.

Mike snatched the string from Hughes, an annoyed look on his face. Then he called out, "Lord God Yung, sir?" (Justy was always less suspicious when you called him this.) "I have a *mighty need* to use the bathroom once again."

"Oh, very well. But be quick about it, this time!"

Mike reported back, and then returned to the hall to implement the plan. The boys were going to go to sleep, except one member of the patrol, in shifts, who was going to stay awake until Justy and his new minions were asleep, at which point they were going to try and steal the keys. After that, it would be up to the Porters, Matt, and Proctor.

This meant, alas, that for the time being the Porters, Matt, and Proctor had quite a bit of waiting.

Matt was sitting on one of the great logs that bordered the rear parking lot, looking out at the sky over the field behind the church.

Someone came to sit beside him. Matt was a bit startled when he saw it was Sarah. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Moon gazing," Matt responded.

"Moon gazing?" Sarah asked, incredulous. "But it's overcast!"

This was true. There were dark clouds in the sky. Rain had not been forecast, however, so Matt felt safe.

"True," Matt said. "But have you ever watched the sky on a night like this? It is a full moon, you know. And when the moon... Wait!" He pointed up at the sky. "Look there! It's happening now."

Sarah looked up at the sky. The edge of one of the clouds was glowing slightly. The glow grew, until the sky at the edge of the cloud appeared to be aflame with a white light. Sarah gasped. "It's beautiful!" she said.

"Yes, it is," Matt responded.

Sarah looked at Matt. "This feels like the time Matty and I went stargazing," she said.

"All we need is some Cherry Garcia," Matt responded.

Sarah smiled. "She told you about that?"

Matt paused for a moment as a penguin whacked him. "Yeah," he said, recovering quickly.

Sarah leaned back and looked up at the moon, large and full in the sky. Matt looked with her.

"I may have misjudged you," Sarah said quietly.

"W... what?" Matt asked.

"Nothing," Sarah said. "Anyways... um... thank you."

"For what?"

"For saving my life last spring."

"You're welcome," Matt said.

Sarah glanced at her watch. "Hey, it's after midnight."

"Well, it will probably be a while before the boys can proceed."

"Yes," Sarah said, "but that's not what I meant."

Matt looked at her.

"It's still a day early, but I suppose it is close enough." Sarah reached into her pocket and pulled out a small, wrapped package. "Happy Birthday."

"How did you know it was my birthday?" Matt asked.

"Nicole told Kirstin. Kirstin told me."

"How did Nicole know?"

"That girl knows everything."

Matt took the package cautiously. "Sarah, you didn't need to get me anything."

"Yes, I did. After all, I never returned the favour from when you got me that Christmas present."

"Is that the only reason you got me a present?"

"Maybe," Sarah said. "Maybe not."

"Well," Matt said, "thanks."

He pulled open the wrapping paper and looked at what was inside. Then he looked back at Sarah.

"Do you like it?" Sarah asked.

"Yes," he told her, "I do."

"Don't get your hopes up or anything," Sarah said. "This doesn't make us engaged or anything. But... Maybe we can talk one of these days."

Matt smiled. "Well, it is a start," he said.

It was about three in the morning and Kenny was the one on watch when Justy finally couldn't stay awake any longer. As for the guards by the doors, they had fallen asleep lying in front of their charges hours ago.

"Mr. Quadrozzi, Mr. Hughes, Mr. Abdelmaseh," he quietly said, shaking each of them in turn.

"Well, shall we do this?" Mike said.

The others nodded.

They quietly walked forward, stepping around the bodies of scouts who were sleeping wherever they fell. They reached an impasse shortly before the stage, though, when a large pile of Tenderfoot Scouts blocked their path.

"What do we do now?" Aaron answered.

Hughes was looking around. Finally something caught his eye. Luke was sleeping near where they stood, and he was wearing a canteen on his belt.

"Bingo!" Hughes whispered. He grabbed the canteen and poured half of the contents upon Aaron. Aaron quacked in surprise, and the others shushed him hurriedly. They looked over at Justy, who stirred slightly but didn't awaken.

"What are you doing?" Mike asked.

"Just go open the window," Hughes answered. He dumped the rest of the water on himself.

Mike shrugged and went to do as instructed.

Hughes took a few steps back to get a running start, and then he dashed forward and leapt into the air. He sailed over the

pile of Tenderfoots and landed on all four feet on the opposite side of them. Aaron flew over the pile and joined him.

Hughes cautiously approached Justy. The keys were in his hand, which was hanging down the side of the chair he was sitting upon. Hughes reached forward, bit onto the keys, and tugged.

Justy's grip was firm, but Hughes was determined. He tugged and tugged, and finally the keys came free in his mouth. He turned and tossed them into the air, where Aaron caught them in his bill. He then flew out of the narrow opening in the window Mike was standing beside.

Matt was awakened by the sound of a wing beating against the window. He got up and went outside, where he was met by Aaron. The duck dropped the keys at Matt's feet.

"Great!" Matt said. "Hey, do you need hot water?"

"Quack."

"For how many people?"

"Quack, quack."

"Two?"

"Quack."

"Right."

After a trip to the kitchen, Matt followed Aaron around to the open window. (Fortunately, the upper floor was also on ground level on all sides but the rear of the building.) Aaron flew through it, and then Matt reached through and handed two cups of hot water to Mike on the other side.

Mission accomplished, Matt went back to sleep. The next step in the plan wasn't necessary until morning.

Morning did come soon, and things in Walker Hall were not as jubilant as they had been the evening before.

The scouts were hungry. The younger ones, obnoxiously so.

And the first thing that Justy noticed upon awakening was that the keys were missing.

"GARDEN SNAKES!" he hollered.

The Garden Snakes looked up at Justy.

"Yes?" Mike asked.

"Where are they?" Justy spat.

"Where are what?"

"You know what!"

"I'm hungry," one Tenderfoot whined.

"I've got to pee," whined another.

Justy stepped forward with his baton raised. "YOU WILL RETURN WHAT WAS STOLEN FROM ME!"

Just then, there was a noise from the door. The sound of keys rattling.

The door opened.

All of the younger scouts stormed out.

And in walked...

"Proctor!" Justy exclaimed.

"Captain, sir! I have returned."

"How did you get those keys?" Justy spat.

"I found them."

"Found them?"

Proctor approached Justy. "I have a present for you, Captain."

This gave Justy a pause. "Present? What present?"

From behind his back, Proctor produced a plate of broccoli.

"What," Justy said, "is that for?"

"It is for you," Proctor said.

Justy fumed. "And you expect me to eat that?!"

Proctor smiled. "Of course not, sir!" He took out a fork, and dug in. And Proctor consumed every revolting piece of vegetation upon the plate.

Justy snarled. "You think everything is forgiven?"

"Of course not, Captain. I just know that I live only to serve you."

Justy shrugged. "Fine. Whatever. Give me a hand securing the hall. This troop *will* submit to my will!"

"What are you doing, sir?"

Justy told him.

"But sir, won't the parents come looking for their kids tomorrow? And what about the church?"

Justy whacked Proctor upon the head. "Don't contradict my plan!" He shouted. "Now let us go. We have to get home. I'm overdue for a manicure."

"Oh, sir! I can use my new emery boards!"

"Just make sure you get it right, this time."

"Yes, my Captain!"

Phone calls were made, parents came to get their children, and everyone got home safe where they bathed and were fed.

The Porters had also arrived home, and after they had gotten freshened up Kirstin cooked a lunch for everyone and they sat together to eat.

A few hours later, Nicole went to her bedroom and pulled out the file folder marked, "Matt / Matty."

She took out a piece of paper and jotted some notes upon it. Then she looked at the paper with a curious expression on her face.

The page was titled, "Commonalities."

Below that was a list. Amongst the things on the list were, "Both have similar speech patterns. Both have same scar on chin. 'Knife fight when I was five.' Both wear the same uniform, with same idiosyncrasies. Same insignia on uniform, including awards Matty could not have earned. Both love anime. Both love Sarah."

On another page were additional notes. "Matty's home address is unknown. Very little known about Matty's history before last year. Despite both of them claiming to be very close friends, both have never been seen in the same place at the same time."

Kirstin came into the bedroom, a large open envelope in her hand. They had opened their mail after lunch.

"Isn't this exciting?" Kirstin asked.

"What?" Nicole looked up from the file. "Oh, yes," she said, not entirely convincingly.

Kirstin didn't seem to notice however. "Don't forget we have to respond by the end of the month."

Nicole nodded.

"You should call Jason," Kirstin recommended.

"Oh? You tell Aaron yet?"

Kirstin blushed. "I don't know what you mean," she said. She noticed the file and decided to change the subject. "What is that you're looking at?"

"Just some research I've been working on the last few months. Been collecting some very good data this last week or so."

"What is it about?"

"You'll sleep better not knowing," Nicole joked.

"Yes, fine, whatever," Kirstin said, a laugh in her voice. "I'll leave you to it then," she said as she headed out into the living room.

Nicole flopped onto her back and stared at the ceiling above her bed, trying to clear her mind of certain things. She turned to the file as a welcome distraction.

"'When you have eliminated the impossible,'" Nicole said to herself, "'whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.' But what if the only explanation is the impossible? Is *that* then the truth?"

She looked at the file a bit more.

"Matty is definitely a woman," she said. "And Matt is definitely a man. Yet can they somehow be one and the same person?"

There was an alarmed sounding meow from the floor. She sat up and looked down to see Neko-chan looking up at her.

"You're right, kitty," she said, picking him up. She laughed. "I'm being silly. Of course that can't be true!"

Proctor was blowing the nail-dust off of the emery boards before he put them away when the door bell rang.

"Just a moment!" Proctor called out, heading towards the door.

"PROCTOR!" Justy yelled from the bathroom where he was enjoying a relaxing foot soak. "Answer the door!"

"Yes, my captain!" Proctor responded, well on his way already to doing so. As a matter of fact, it was just as he finished saying that that he opened the door.

"Captain!" Proctor then called out. "Someone to see you, sir!"

Proctor heard the sound of annoyed grumbling, but within a few moments Justy joined him at the door.

Justy smiled. "Ah, Peon #18, do come in..."

The next Wednesday, Matt was getting ready for scouts when the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Is Matthew there?"

"Sarah!?"

"Ah, hello," she said. "I was wondering... I don't want you to think of this as a date or anything, but the girls and I were going to get a bite to eat at that pizza place near the church before our meeting tonight..."

"Perfume's?"

"That's the one. And, well, I was sort of wondering if you wanted to join us."

"I'd love to," Matt said.

"Okay. See you there then. Good bye."

"Bye, Sarah."

Matt smiled broadly and grabbed his red wool jacket. Upon the lapel was a pin that had not been there before. It was heart shaped, and inside of it was a picture of a character from an anime series called *Urusei Yatsura*, Lum.

Matt looked at the pin a moment before pulling the coat on, and he smiled. He buttoned up the coat, straightened the pin, placed his hat upon his head, and walked out of the door.

## *Special: Conversations with a Squirrel* *A Day in the Life of Me*

by Michael D. Quadrozzi

---

It was ten minutes to ten in the morning. The kitchen would stop serving breakfast before long and begin preparing for the midday meal. At this time of the day, as the sun slid through the large, double-paned wire mesh windows, a mere dozen or so people were still to be found in the hospital cafeteria. Many of them were just finishing eating, others had struck up conversations with other patients, if they were allowed to, and still others simply sat alone, content to chatter away with themselves for hours on end.

Yes, life as an institutionalized individual at the Happy Happy Institute for the Not-At-All Terribly Well did have its moments of calm serenity, brief and isolated as they might be. There would be plenty of time later for fits and seizures and schizophrenic double talk. Right now, it was time for a cup of coffee or a newspaper.

Mike Quadrozzi liked to call these morning oases 'Squirrel Time.' No one quite knew why, except him, and he didn't feel like sharing. Right now, he felt like finishing his game of chess. He played a game of chess every morning at nine o'clock with another patient of the hospital.

This morning, he wasn't having an easy time of it. The first reason for this was that his opponent was very good. The other reason was that Dr. Witherspoon was pestering him again.

"Yes, all right, Mr. Quadrozzi," the doctor was saying, "I'll just sit right here and wait for you to finish your match, but I really must speak with you."

"Thank you," Mike said, hoping that Witherspoon was done talking. He tugged at the collar of his hospital smock (they still made him wear the damn things, even though he'd been there for months) and informed his opponent that it was his turn to move.

"Frankly, I believe it's important that we speak."

"You're doing enough for both of us."

"Pardon?"

"Nothing." Mike regarded the black and white checkered board. His army was getting blocked in and he'd already lost both knights and a bishop. He didn't like the way the game was progressing at all. On the upside, he thought he knew exactly

what his opponent was planning. He had little time left to mount a counteroffensive. It was time for an experiment.

Tentatively, Mike placed a thumb and forefinger on his remaining bishop, looking casually over the table at his opponent as he did so. The other didn't flinch, not a bit. Mike tried a few other pieces in the same manner. His opponent had an absolute poker face, damn him. He gave up on the tactic, it was a stupid trick anyway.

Opting for a simple pawn, Mike said, "Your move."

"Yes, Mr. Quadrozzi," Witherspoon was talking again in his clipped British, "There's something I've rather been meaning to speak with you about."

"Oh?"

"Yes, it's quite--"

"Checkmate," Mike's opponent informed him. The man sat back in his chair, wringing his hands through his unkempt long hair. "*Bon jeu*," he said.

"Yes," Mike said, looking the board over. His king was indeed mated. He knocked him over with a finger flick. "I'm in awe, General, your skill is unparalleled. It's just as you did at Austerlitz." He looked up and offered his opponent a hand. "You've definitely secured yourself an important position when the time comes."

The man got up to leave and shook Mike's hand, obviously pleased. "*Au revoir*," he said.

"*Au revoir*."

Mike glanced at Dr. Witherspoon. "He's a swell guy."

The doctor blinked. "Yes. Now, I trust you won't mind talking, Mr. Quadrozzi?"

"Not at all, have a seat."

Dr. Ian Witherspoon occupied the seat recently vacated by Mike's opponent. His hands were folded neatly in front of him. His unlit pipe was askew, casually clenched in his jaws. From time to time he would fiddle with it or use it as a sort of visual aid to accent a particular point.

"Now, Mr. Quadrozzi, first things first--"

"Would you like a nut?"

"What?"

"Nut?" Mike held out the small ceramic bowl of mixed nuts – pecans, cashews, peanuts, brazils, filberts, almonds. "They're quite good, and an excellent source of protein." He took one himself. "I like the cashews, especially."

"No, thank you."

"Sure?"

"Yes, I've just eaten."

"I hope it wasn't here."

"Pardon?"

"It didn't look very good today. Powdered eggs, again. Why can't they get the real kind? They can't be that much more expensive."

"Mr. Quadrozzi, please," the doctor said.

"Please what?"

"Please follow my train of thought."

"Where's it going?"

Dr. Witherspoon folded his fingers into a steeple and rested his chin. "Now, I'd like to know what you mean when you talk about 'the time.'"

"The time?"

"The time. It's been showing up more frequently in your speech patterns lately."

"I'm sorry, doctor, that was a little too psychiatric for my tastes."

"What's 'the time,' Mr. Quadrozzi?"

"Well, it's coming up," Mike said simply.

"Soon?"

"I don't know. I expect not."

"Why?"

"Well, it'll take some planning, is all."

"What will?"

"The initial invasion."

Dr. Witherspoon gestured with his pipe. "Ah, now you see, Mr. Quadrozzi, it's that sort of talk that worries us sometimes. Now, what do you mean by that?"

Mike didn't answer. He was looking outside at the fenced-in hospital courtyard. There was a sizable grove of ancient oak trees on the grounds, home to dozens of squirrels.

The doctor followed his gaze. "Ah," he said, "I see."

"Do you?"

"Yes, now, what brought these . . . plans of yours about?"

Mike thought for a moment. "Well, I've run into a number of people who seem willing to help. Not to mention them."

"Them?"

Mike pointed out the window.

"Ah, yes, of course. Now, who else do you mean?"

"Mean what?"

"Who else have you run into?"

"Well, the General seems genuinely interested," Mike said, "and I've been corresponding online with a nice young woman in Idaho."

"Idaho?"

"Idaho. She also likes squirrels very much."

"I see," Dr. Witherspoon said thoughtfully, fiddling with his pipe. In his other hand he held a pen. He clicked it and wrote in his little spiral notepad, *Monitor all e-mail correspondence.*

"Yes, communicating with others is very important, Mr. Quadrozzi," the doctor said.

"I think so."

"Good."

"And how is Mr. Teagle, doctor?"

Witherspoon looked up. "Pardon?"

"S. Gordon Teagle," Mike repeated, "my attorney."

The doctor coughed. "Well, yes, you see Mr. Teagle is kind of in five-point restraints right now. It seems he got a little excited last time the two of you spoke."

"Oh my."

"Yes."

"He always was a little excitable."

"Why do you suppose that is?"

"Is what?"

"Why do you suppose Mr. Teagle is so excitable?"

"Well, he worked in the family business for a good many years, as legal advisor."

"Ah."

"Yes, he had a little bit of a nervous breakdown."

"Little?"

"Very big."

Witherspoon nodded. "Yes, that's what we psychiatrists call it."

"And you'd know."

"Yes. Now, Mr. Quadrozzi, about these plans of yours. You say they're a long way off?"

Mike nodded absentmindedly. He wasn't that interested in the conversation anymore. "Yes, I don't see how we could get started anytime soon."

"Ah, good, well that's what I wanted to hear, Mr. Quadrozzi. You know, we've only got yours and ours and everybody else's safety in mind, you understand."

"Uh huh. Can I go now?"

Dr. Witherspoon got up. "Yes, I don't see why not."

"I've got some reading I'd like to do," Mike said.

"Of course."

"Schematics and things."

"Yes. Do you feel all right, Mr. Quadrozzi, or—?"

Mike smiled. "No, no. I've had my happy shots for today. I'm fine," he said, and his smile broke into a wide grin, "perfectly happy."

## *Chapter Twenty-Six: Ultimate Team-Up? Trouble For the Jusenkyo Scouts!*

by Matthew Atanian

---

"Ah, Moses," Mike Quadrozzi commented as he walked down the path to the Crown Point campsite, dragging his foot locker behind himself towards the green canvas tent that would be his home for the next week.

"You be quiet," Billy Gelinas said, bearing his own trunk as he followed Mike down the dim, shadowed path.

Mike paused, set his own trunk down, took a deep breath of the fresh forest air, and then turned to his companion. "What?" he asked.

"You say, 'Ah, Moses,' and the next thing you know we're all under armed assault in one of the most unrealistic scenarios one could possibly conceive."

Mike sighed, grabbed his trunk, and continued on. Billy was caught by surprise, and had to rush a moment to keep up. When he had caught up to Mike, aside from being breathless from running for a moment dragging his footlocker, Billy gave Mike a look that convinced the hat-clad scout that his friend was far from satisfied that the week that was ahead of them would be a benign one.

Again, Mike sighed. "Unrealistic, you say?" When Billy nodded, Mike continued. "More unrealistic than falling into cursed springs? Or how about Scoutmasters mysteriously disappearing, never to be heard from again? More unrealistic, perhaps, than shipping our SPL off to a Middle Eastern country just to get him out of our hair for a bit?"

Billy Gelinas's response was a simple one. "Shut up, Squid."

Mike shrugged his shoulders and took another deep breath. He then paused in the path once more, sniffing at the air for a moment with a look of concern upon his face.

"What is it?" Gelinas asked cautiously.

"Nothing, I just..." Mike turned to his colleague. "Do you smell smoke?"

"Oh, no you don't," Gelinas warned.

"No I don't, what?" Mike innocently asked as he continued down the path once more.

Gelinas had not been taken by surprise this time, and began walking again when Mike had. "This is how it all starts, I know it," he bemoaned. "You smell smoke, and then the next thing you know, this will lead to some bizarre and complex plot for our patrol to get itself sucked into. Probably we'll have Matt Atanian involved as well, and perhaps also some guest appearances by members of Troop 180, or Dan and Colin.

"Kenny will do something smart, Perry will try and kill us, Swett will be sarcastic, and Shmuler will be annoying."

"Will didn't come to camp, remember?" Mike reminded Billy. "He and his dad are on that trip to Albuquerque he won."

"Oh yeah," Gelinas responded.

"Well, there goes your grand theory," Mike told him.

"That's sure annoying," Billy sighed. A moment passed. "Ah ha! That's annoying!" He grinned triumphantly. "Shmuler is annoying!"

Mike rolled his eyes.

Billy, meanwhile, continued with renewed vigour. "For some reason, the Porters will show up. Matt will swoon over Sarah, and he will also have to resist the advances of Taylor Kuntz. Meanwhile, the rest of us are stuck dealing with whatever Justy is up to. Because mark my words, he will be up to something.

"There will be kiwi/mocha fruit juice. There will be that strange lost Japanese guy. There will be Jim Anderson asking something about someone with red hair. There will be laughs and hyjinx galore and somehow everything will all work out in the end, and we'll all live happily ever after." Billy paused for a moment and then added, "At least, until our next zany adventure."

"Oh, Billy," Mike said, "you shouldn't be such a pessimist."

"You can't tell me," Gelinas said, exasperated, "that you honestly haven't noticed a pattern since last summer?"

"Can't say as I have, my friend."

"Then you must be blind," Gelinas said to Mike. "You just wait and see, though. It will all happen just as I have said."

"No it won't," Mike said firmly.

"You sound so sure of yourself," Billy said.

"And you don't?" Mike pointed out.

"But I have reason to," Billy insisted. Now he paused, and Mike stopped beside him on the path. "Care to make a bet?" Billy asked. "Because I am positive that all of that stuff will happen."

"All of it?"

Billy nodded. "All of it," he confirmed.

Mike seemed to think about this for a moment. "Nah," he then said, "I don't want your money."

"You just don't want to lose," Billy insisted.

"I wouldn't lose," Mike said. He looked Billy in the eyes. "Fine," he said. "You're that sure you'll win? You're on. I still don't want your money, though. But I will bet my hat on it."

"What?" Billy was stunned. "Your hat?"

Mike smirked.

"Hey, no fair! I don't have any trademarked items of clothing to bet!"

To this, Mike simply shrugged. Then he said, "It doesn't have to be clothing. I just don't want your money. What else of value do you have?"

Bill Gelinas thought of this for a moment before announcing, "I will bet you all of my Magic cards."

Mike nearly fell to the ground upon hearing this, but he quickly regained his footing. "You're that sure you'll win, are you?"

"And you're sure enough to risk your hat?"

"Yes," Mike told him. "Fine, you're on."

"Good."

"Indeed."

Gelinas smiled knowingly. "Any minute now," he said, "all hell will break loose."

"Sure, whatever."

"Any minute..."

"The smoke smell is probably just someone's campfire," Mike rationalized, starting towards Crown Point once again.

"Any minute..." Billy continued in a sing-song voice.

Mike sighed. "Will you come on?" he asked. "We have to get out trunks dropped off and go back for more gear."

Billy grabbed his footlocker and followed.

"By the way," he asked Mike as he caught up once more, "any idea how we're getting out of swim tests this year?"

Mike shrugged, "I'm sure something will come up."

"Your confidence underwhelms me."

"Shut up, Bill."

Jim McGraw, acting Scoutmaster of Troop 192 for the week of summer camp, exited the Nunes Building. He was followed by his Senior Patrol Leader, Justy Yung. Together, the pair made their way over to the Manor House where the rest of troop 192 was waiting.

Mr. McGraw and Justy found them scattered about the Manor House lawn, some sitting and some standing, each member of the troop holding a copy of their medical form as the

troop waited for their turn to check in with the nurse. Many of them also held towels and were wearing bathing suits rather than pants. After this, their next stop was traditionally the waterfront for swim tests.

The boys were clustered in small groups, most of them chatting with one another about their plans for the week ahead. A few of them were catching up with friends who were either in different troops or on camp staff.

Upon arriving, Mr. McGraw and Justy split up. The former joined most of the rest of the adults, standing off to one side with the adults of other troops and talking quietly amongst themselves. The later sought out one of the members of the Garden Snake patrol who went by the name of Perry.

"According to the board in the Nunes Building," Justy told him, "Troop 86 is in Ticonderoga."

Perry smiled.

Justy laughed.

Mark Abert happened to be walking by on his way to check something over at the Archery range. He stopped for a moment. "Hello, Justy."

Justy stopped laughing. "Oh, hello... you." He couldn't remember Mr. Abert's name.

Mark didn't notice. "Cheerful as always, I see," he said, smiling.

"Yes," Justy said. "Things shall go as planned this time!"

"Glad to hear that," Mark responded. "Will I be seeing you at archery?"

"Yes," Justy announced. "A man of my importance must not forget to keep his basic skills sharpened." He began to laugh some more.

"I like your spirit, Justy!" Mark said. He then spotted Matt Atanian. "Ah, if you'll excuse me," he said to Justy.

Matt Atanian was, as was almost always the case while in his uniform, wearing his red wool jacket. Between that and the trench coat he used for civilian wear, Mark often questioned his friend's sanity in the summer time. He made no comment on this as he approached Matt, however, choosing instead a long running joke between the two of them: teasing Matt upon his choice of reading material, a hefty, leather bound book, another long running joke between the two.

"Hi, Matt. I see you've got your bible."

Matt looked up from his copy of *The More Than Complete Hitchhiker's Guide*, by Douglas Adams. "It's not a bible," Matt informed him.

"It's *your* bible," Mark replied. When Matt seemed unwilling to press the subject further, Mark changed the subject. "I'm looking forward to Friday night's campfire," he said.

"Campfire?" Matt asked. An unusual number of people had been making such comments to Matt since he had arrived at Moses, but he could not fathom why. Something was nagging him at the back of his mind, but he couldn't put a finger on exactly what it was. Ah, well, it probably wasn't important. Matt was sure it would come to him in time. "Yes, I'm looking forward to it, too," he replied at last. "It should be a good one."

"Indeed, it shall be the stuff of legends," Mark replied, confusing Matt even more.

Matt was distracted at that point, however, when a helicopter flew low overhead. There was some sort of basket beneath it when caught Matt's eye. It soon disappeared behind the trees in the direction of Russell Pond.

Matt turned back to Mark and was about to ask if he knew anything about it, but before he could Mark said to him, "Well, I must be on my way. I'll see you later, though. At dinner?"

Matt nodded, and Mark continued on his way to the archery range in the parade field.

Shrugging to himself, Matt made his way over to a shady spot under a tree that was already occupied by Matt Swett and Luke Walker. Matt nodded to them, leaned against the tree, and returned to his book.

Swett and Luke meanwhile resumed the conversation they had been having.

"Come on, come with me tomorrow morning," Swett was imploring.

"No way, you're crazy," Luke responded. "Get someone from your own patrol."

"I tried," Swett admitted. "They all said I was crazy."

"Well you are," Luke told him. "I mean, that's way too early in the morning. I'll still be sleeping."

"But you love swimming," Swett reminded him.

"Yes, which is why I am going for the Mile Swim this year. But you see, the water is nice and warm then. I won't have to freeze my balls off. It's too cold."

"Ah, so that's why they call it the Polar Bear Swim! I always wondered that," Swett responded dryly. "Come on, I can't do it without a buddy."

"There is no way," Luke responded. "Not even if hell froze over. Which it probably would if it ever went for a swim at six in the morning."

"I wouldn't worry about it anyway," a voice interrupted. Dan Wellington was walking by, accompanied by Colin Pekruhn. It was the later who had spoken.

Billy Gelinas pulled out a small note pad at this point, which he had also done when Mark Abert appeared, and he jotted something down in it. He smiled, looked over at Mike Quadrozzi (who wasn't paying him any attention, in any case) and put the note pad back in his pocket.

Dan and Colin, meanwhile, approached Matt, who greeted them warmly.

"Hey, Dan. Hey, Colin."

"Hey, Matt," Colin responded.

"Did you hear?" Dan asked with no preamble. He was grinning with a happy madness.

"Hear what?" Matt asked.

From this response, it was quite easy for Dan and Colin to deduce that Matt had not, in fact, heard. "About the fire!" Dan told him with a glint in his eyes.

Matt sighed. "What is it with everyone and Friday night's campfire?"

"Not the campfire," Colin said, "the forest fire."

This had Matt's full attention. He closed his book and looked suspiciously at Dan.

"I know what you're thinking," Dan said, "and you can stop. It wasn't me. Not," he added, "that I can't enjoy it."

"Yeah," Matt said. "You are an insane pyromaniac, but I suppose you're too good at it to let it get out of control like that."

Colin made a coughing sound that sounded vaguely like, "Cabin III." The others ignored him.

"A forest fire, eh?" Matt continued. "How far away is it?"

"A few miles out from camp," Dan told him. "And it is burning away from Moses, so there should be no danger to us if things keep up as they are. Still, Mrs. Balogna..."

"She's the new camp director," Colin interjected when Matt failed to recognize the name.

"Anyways, she's driving the staff crazy with emergency evacuation drills, just in case."

"Keeping you busy, then?" Matt asked.

"A little more than usual," Colin responded. "Most of the burden's on the waterfront staff. Makes sense, since they don't have anything else to do."

"Why is that?"

"Well you see," Dan said, "I know this will come as horrible news to you and your friends, but they have this special army

helicopter coming in and taking water from the lake to drop on the fire. With that going on, we're not allowed to use the lake ourselves."

"Oh my god, that's great!" Matt exclaimed. When this drew an odd look from Colin, he added, "...ly disappointing. Yes, greatly disappointing. I had been looking forward to a nice dip."

"Oh, you'll still get yours," Colin said with light-hearted menace as he and Dan started walking away.

"Yeah," Dan said, "let us know if you need any help with Friday night."

"Wait!" Matt called after them. "What are you talking about?" But it was too late, as Colin and Dan were out of ear shot.

Mat stood there with a blank look on his face as his friends disappeared into the distance. And then, as if a penguin had fallen from the sky and bounced off of his head, he was hit with a sudden remembrance that left him filled with a cold dread.

All this time since the spring camporee, and rather than get ready and find some way to make it happen, he had instead forgotten about it. And now he had less than a week to figure out what he was going to do.

For this Friday night at the campfire, in front of a large group of people (some of whom were coming up special just for this event), Matt Gets Wet.

Later that afternoon, once Troop 192 was finished checking in and settling into their campsite, and after news of the waterfront situation had been broken to a (mostly) disappointed troop, Aaron and Billy Gelinas were making their way to the Trading Post.

Billy needed some supplies for one of his merit badges. Aaron just wanted a snack.

"I hope what's-his-name isn't there again this year," Aaron said.

"Who, Roy?"

Aaron nodded.

"Mike is wondering the same thing," Billy said. "I asked him if he wanted to come with us, and he said maybe he'd come by later, and asked me to let him know who was running it. I think Mike wants to stay away if it is Roy again."

"Well," Aaron said, "he was an irritable bastard."

As they approached, they passed two people leaving the Trading Post. One was Jim Anderson, son of the camp ranger and a member of the kitchen crew. The other was a member of Jim's troop, a lad by the name of Jesse Lashway.

"Man, I loved that episode," Jesse was saying. "Any excuse for tribbles is a good one. Which one was it that had a bomb in it?"

Jim shrugged. "The one with the red hair?" he guessed.

"I thought that was the one that Dax dropped on Kirk's head," Jesse countered.

The two continued on their way, and Aaron's attention returned to Billy.

"What are you doing?" Aaron asked.

"Taking notes," Billy responded.

"What sort of notes?" Aaron inquired.

"Proving a theory," was all Billy would say, aside from adding, "Mike is going down."

"Okay," Aaron said in a tone of voice that indicated that he regretted having asked in the first place.

The two made their way up the ramp onto the porch of the Trading Post. They stopped for a moment and looked at the soda machine.

"What do you think?" Aaron asked.

"Nothing good has ever come from this soda machine, and I think no good ever will," Billy answered most dramatically.

"Well... here goes nothing," Aaron said, pulling from his wallet a single dollar bill. Billy braced himself as his friend inserted it into the slot on the machine.

A number of usual things proceeded to happen.

First, the machine accepted the bill on the initial attempt, without it even having been a crisp and new bill. Indeed, it was a rather wrinkled specimen of U.S. currency.

Second, when Aaron depressed the button marked, "Coke!" there immediately followed the sound of a can dropping down for him. This was almost as amazing as the sound that came right after that, the sound of a coin dropping into the change return slot. It was with a small sense of wonder that Aaron reached inside of it and retrieved a shiny new quarter.

Here now, however, came the ultimate moment of truth. Billy tensed as Aaron bent down to retrieve his beverage. As Aaron's hand disappeared into the opening at the bottom of the ominous machine, Billy could bear the suspense no longer and he screwed his eyes shut.

Billy waited for the scream of horror, but it did not come. He tentatively opened one eye, and then the other. "Well, I'll be damned," he said.

Aaron was holding a perfectly ordinary, nicely chilled, 12 ounce can of Coca-Cola. "I guess they finally fixed this thing," he said.

"I guess so," Billy responded in amazement.  
The pair made their way inside the Trading Post.  
There was no sign of Roy.  
There were, however, penguins.

Not the living variety, nor the mental apparitions that plagued Matthew Atanian's brain. Rather, these penguins were of the stuffed animal sort, and they were most numerous. They took up a good deal of whatever shelf space within the Trading Post was not otherwise occupied by merchandise. Also present was a stuffed wolf, a stuffed Tigger, and one toy that was not plush, but rather rubber: a chicken. But most of the toys present were stuffed Antarctic, flightless fowl.

A plethora of plush penguins.

One in particular caught the eye. It was resting atop the cash register, where Matt Atanian once upon a time had kept a small photograph of his dear friend Carolyn. This particular penguin was a plush hand puppet, and had the careworn look of a toy treasured since childhood. The white parts of it had long ago faded to a light gray, and although the toy had been propped up as well as it could be it still flopped into itself slightly in a way that gave it a charm that no mint condition toy could hope to achieve.

The next thing Aaron and Billy noticed made them wonder how the penguins could have been the first. Standing behind the counter was an attractive woman with a warm smile, bright eyes, and slightly wavy hair of a colour somewhere between golden blond and light brown that fell to midway down her back.

"Hi," she said in greeting to them.

"Hello," Billy responded.

"Roy's not working here this year?" Aaron asked.

The woman shook her head. "Nope, just me," she told them.  
"I'm Amanda. What can I do for you two today?"

Billy purchased the supplies he needed, the two of them thanked the new Trading Post manager, and then they left to go and find the others and tell them the interesting news.

From behind a tree in the parade field, Roy watched them go. Then he continued to watch the Trading Post and the usurper within. Something would most definitely have to be done about this.

Ticonderoga was much like any other campsite at Moses. Indeed, first year campers were known on occasion to wander into the wrong site and not realize it until they noticed all of the unfamiliar people.

Justy and Perry knew exactly where they were going, however. Well, they had a general idea at least, in that the object of their search would most likely be in Ticonderoga. So that is where the two of them, followed by Proctor, travelled.

Perry paused on the outer edge of the campsite, intending to ask permission to enter as was proper etiquette. He did not get the chance, though, as Justy strode past him right into the site without as much as a by-your-leave.

"Present me to Taylor Kuntz," Justy demanded of the first person he came across.

The young scout Justy had accosted was startled into compliance. He scampered off and returned a few minutes later followed by an older kid with hair that looked like a rejected style from a bad 50's greaser movie. This look was reinforced by the black leather jacket, worn over his rumpled Boy Scout uniform, which matched the single leather glove on his left hand.

He looked Justy, Perry, and Proctor over, scowling as he did so. "What do you want?" he asked them gruffly.

"It is not a matter of what we want," Justy said. "It is a matter of what you want."

Kuntz raised an eyebrow. "What's that?"

"You want red-haired one," Perry responded.

"My Goddess?" Kuntz asked, his voice brightening momentarily. Then it darkened again as he asked, "What do you have to do with her?"

Perry looked to Justy, hoping the SPL would play his part correctly. He would rather be doing this himself, but he still didn't fully trust himself with his English language skills, and he didn't wish to take any chances of not getting his point across correctly with someone of Kuntz's limited brain power.

"We know she has rejected you on multiple occasions," Justy said to Perry's delight, "and we know why."

They had Kuntz's complete attention. "Tell me."

"She does want to be with you," Justy continued, surprising Perry with how well he was sticking to the script, "but she is held back by certain members of our troop. The Garden Snake patrol (of which my friend Perry here is the sole virtuous member) along with one of the Assistant Scoutmasters, a deviant by the name of Matthew Atanian, have tricked the woman you love into a foul arrangement. She is bound to their will, and they force her into unwholesome pairings with other females to satisfy their sick fantasies."

"I knew it!" Kuntz exclaimed, eating up every word of the preposterous scenario Perry had tailored to suit Kuntz's bizarre world image.

"However," Justy said, "she has spoken to Perry here, who as I said is the one virtuous person amongst that dastardly group. She spoke of her desire to be free, and to be with you."

"As it should be," Kuntz said, nodding his head. "But what is your stake in all of this?"

"We each have our reasons to want to see the Garden Snakes destroyed," Justy said. "Why not combine our efforts? Not that any of us would be incapable of defeating them on our own, especially you," he added in a final stroke of Kuntz's ego. "But then one or more of us would be deprived of the honour to be gained in this venture. We did not wish to do that to you, just as we are sure that a person as great as you would not wish to do that to us."

As Kuntz considered all of this, Perry looked at Justy, impressed. Not only had he played his roll perfectly (impressive in a good way), but he had completely failed to notice that the points at the end in regards to honour were the very same ones that Perry had used towards him (impressive in a sad way.)

"Okay," Kuntz said at last, "what do you have in mind?"

They spoke at length, after which Kuntz agreed to aid them. Much time had passed when Justy, Perry, and Proctor made their departure to return to Crown Point.

Perry smiled. "My plan..." he began.

"My plan!" Justy interrupted.

"*The plan,*" Perry continued with hardly a pause, "goes good. Perry think we can begin next step tomorrow."

"Yes, we shall!" Justy said as a preamble to a vicious bought of laughter.

On the advice of Aaron and Billy, Mike and Hughes decided to go check out the Trading Post. There was, as had been reported, someone who was not at all Roy behind the counter. This not Roy person had her back to them when they had entered, so Mike called out, "Excuse me, Miss?"

The woman swivelled to face them. Most inexplicably she asked of them, "What do you mean, 'Miss'?"

This caused Mike pause for a moment. Unless this person had something very unusual in common with Matt, he was quite sure she was a she. Then, with delight, a thought occurred to him that he decided to put to a test.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I have a cold."

Hughes was looking back and forth between the two of them as if they were flipping insane.

"Never mind that!" Mike continued. "I wish to register a complaint about this parrot," (Hughes was startled when Mike pointed at him,) "that I purchased from this very boutique not half an hour ago!"

To Mike's delight, the Trading Post manager took one look at Hughes and said, "Oh yes, sir. The Norwegian Plaid? What's wrong with it?"

Mike told her, and they argued back and fourth for a while before Mike was finally able to convince her that Hughes (who, incidentally, felt very much alive and not at all avian) was, in fact, dead.

Amanda offered to replace him, and she looked under the counter for a bit. "I'm sorry, squire," she then announced, "we're fresh out of parrots."

"I see, I see," Mike said in exasperation.

"I have got a Slim Jim," she offered, holding one up.

"Pray, does it talk?"

She looked at it. She looked at Mike. "Yeah," she said.

"Right! I'll have that then."

She handed it to him. He tried giving her a quarter in return, but she returned it and told him that the banter had been payment enough.

So Mike tipped his hat to her. "Be seeing you," he said to her as he exited the Trading Post. He was followed by Hughes, who said to him, "You're weird, d'you know that?"

Mike was about to respond when, from out of nowhere, a small, unfolded piece of paper flew through the air at him. Despite its complete lack of aerodynamics it somehow managed to hit him squarely on the forehead. Mike snatched it out of the air as it was falling from his head towards the ground and he looked at it.

"What is it?" Hughes asked.

"I don't know." Mike showed it to him. It was blank.

From behind his tree, Roy growled softly to himself.

Dinner on Sunday was an outdoor affair. There was a large fire pit in front of the dining hall, constructed from cinder blocks. Atop this sat metal grating that supported the sizzling hamburgers over the flames. The picky eater that he was, Matthew Atanian customarily brought two slices of American cheese with him to

summer camp. He gave them to chef Kenny Healy, who was only too happy to place them on two of the cooking meat patties.

After getting his burgers and a cup of water, Matt joined most of the rest of the Garden Snake Patrol who were all sitting at one of the picnic tables.

"Well, Bill," Mike was saying to Gelinas, "no zany plots yet."

"It's still Sunday," Gelinas responded. "This is still all just set-up. You just wait and see, something will develop in the next couple of days."

"What," Matt interrupted, "are you two talking about?"

"We've been trying to figure out the same thing," Hughes told him.

"Nothing important," Mike and Gelinas said in unison.

"Why is Perry sitting over with Justy and Proctor?" Matt then asked.

"We've been trying to figure out that one, too," Aaron told him.

Matt shrugged and turned to Kenny. "Looking forward to your first year of Summer Camp?" he asked the young scout.

Kenny looked up from his book. He nodded and said, "Yes, Mr. Atanian."

Matt smiled at Kenny. The young boy had grown since he had first come to them in the fall, and not just physically. His eye then caught something past Kenny. His smile turned to a frown as he noticed Taylor Kuntz sitting at a far picnic table and staring intently in their direction.

The others noticed Matt's gaze and followed it. They too saw Kuntz and frowned.

"WHAT?" Becker called out to him accusingly.

Kuntz got up and stormed away.

The Garden Snake patrol returned to conversation amongst themselves.

Soon, ice cream was served. The merit badge sign ups then took place and all of the youth scampered about to try and get into the ones they wanted, mostly with success.

The sky began to dim, and evening was upon them. With it came the Sunday night campfire as performed by the camp staff. It was, for the most part, unremarkable. The skits and songs seemed really tame this year. The only two pieces of entertainment came in the form of a funny sit by Mark Abert, Colin, and Dan, and – an unusual event for a Moses campfire – a brief jazz dance performance by the Trading Post manager.

Without much ado, the campfire came to an end. The assembled troops made their ways back to their campsites. Once

192 was back in Crown Point, Jack McGraw had a word with the kids before sending them to bed.

"All right, listen up!" he said gruffly. "Tomorrow morning at the Scoutmasters' meeting, the camp director is going to want to know what you want to do for Friday night's campfire. So what is it!?"

"Clappy song!" someone suggested.

"Lumberjack song!" came another voice.

"Wait!" Matt Swett spoke out. "Weren't we going to...?" His voice trailed off as he turned to look at Matt Atanian.

"That's right!"

"Oh, yeah!"

"Matt Gets Wet, part III!"

Matt, Mike, Aaron, and the Bills were joined by Swett, Becker, and Kenny for a brief patrol meeting before retiring for the evening. "Matt Gets Wet," Mike asked of his patrol mates, "are we actually going through with it?"

"Why wouldn't we?" Swett asked.

"Not much choice," Hughes said.

Everyone looked at Matt.

"So," Mike then said, "what's the twist at the end going to be this time?"

"Indeed," Aaron said. "There's no way Matt can actually get wet."

"Why couldn't he?" Swett asked.

"Not sure we have much in the way of a choice there, either," Hughes added.

"Yeah, after the Spring Camporee," Gelinias said, "I think if we try another bait and switch routine, we'll get lynched.

Everyone nodded. Matt frowned.

"I am open to ideas," Matt commented.

Kenny coughed lightly. All eyes turned to him. "I may have a solution," he softly said.

Kenny led them to a door in the hallway. The door was covered by locks. Regular locks, deadbolts, padlocks, combination locks, even a key-card lock and another that required a thumbprint. Slowly, methodically, Kenny undid each of them.

He opened the door and the smell of stale air came from the other side. They peered inside the doorway and saw a stone staircase descending, spiralling down, and lit by naked light bulbs

that seemed to stretch into infinity. Even with the light bulbs, the stairs eventually disappeared into distant darkness.

They turned to regard Kenny, the prickly feeling that they all felt on the back of their necks erupting into new heights of prickliness. Kenny assured them it was safe, and so Hughes, Gelinias, Mike, and Aaron all walked in.

As they made their way down the staircase, the corridor slowly seemed to get tighter, the walls closer and the ceiling lower. "Uh, Kenny, there's some mistake here," Aaron suggested.

"I don't like this, Kenny," Hughes added. "I don't like it at all!"

It was clear that some sort of forced perspective was at work in the corridor. As they went down, they approached a door that from the start seemed normal, but was actually only about large enough to stick a foot through. "What is this, Kenny? Some kind of fun house?" Mike asked.

"Why, Mr. Quadrozzi," Kenny asked, "having fun?"

"I've had enough," Gelinias protested. "I'm not going in there. Come on, guys, we're getting out of here."

"Oh, you can't get out backwards," Kenny said. "You've got'ta go forwards to go back. Better press on."

"I doubt if any of us will get out of here alive," Gelinias pessimistically commented.

Kenny looked at him, bemused. "Oh, Mr. Gelinias. You should never, never doubt what nobody is sure about."

Aaron pointed at the pint sized portal before them. "You're not squeezing me through that tiny door."

"You're off your bleeding nut, Kenny," Gelinias said. "Except maybe Mike as a squirrel, no one can get through there."

"My dear patrol mates," Kenny said, not heeding their objections, "you are now about to enter the nerve centre of the entire laboratory. Inside this room, all of my dreams become realities. And some of my realities become dreams."

"Let us in, already!" Hughes exclaimed.

"Now, don't get overexcited! Don't lose your head, Mr. Hughes! We wouldn't want anyone to lose that! Yet. Now, the combination... This is a musical lock."

Kenny bent down and opened a small panel above the door, revealing a small keyboard. His fingers danced across it, playing the opening to Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro."

Gelinias nodded his head knowingly. "Rachmaninoff," he said.

Kenny ignored him. "Gentlemen," he said, pushing the entire wall ahead of them so that it opened before them, "my laboratory..." When he spoke the word, he added extreme

emphasis to the “bor” part, dragging out the vowel and rolling the “r” in a very profound manor.

He showed them spatial metaphasic vertion shells, ambient cosmic plasma bursts, duodynamic anaphasic streams, and osmotic energy cores. They were all in awe it was so overwhelming. There was so much technology they couldn’t even begin to grasp, and the room was so immense that it felt not like being normal sized people in a huge space, but rather like they themselves had been shrunk. The vast poster on one wall of the Periodic Table of Elements did nothing to help correct the misconception.

There was even a river flowing through the room. A dirty looking orange river with an orange waterfall streaming down into it from heights unseen.

“What a disgusting, dirty river,” Aaron said.

“It’s industrial waste, that,” Mike added. “You’ve ruined your watershed, Kenny. It’s polluted.”

“It’s orange juice,” Kenny responded.

Hughes gasped. “That’s orange juice?!?”

As they approached it, they indeed began to detect a citrus smell, as well as something else that they could not immediately identify.

Kenny nodded. “Ten thousand gallons an hour. All part of an experiment in fermentation. And look at my waterfall. That’s the most important thing. It’s mixing my orange juice. You know, no other *laboratory* in the world mixes its orange juice by waterfall.” He leaned in close to Gelinias and added as if in confidence, “But it’s the only way if you want to get the pulp just right.”

Hughes took a deep breath, paying close attention to the mixture of citrus and something else. “Wait a minute... I know that smell...”

“Did you say fermentation?” Mike asked.

“Oh my god, it is!” Hughes exclaimed. “A five hundred proof orange juice river!”

“What possible purpose does that serve?” Gelinias asked Kenny.

“I’m a trifle deaf in this ear, Mr. Gelinias,” Kenny responded. “Speak a little louder next time.”

Hughes was running towards the bank of the river. “Where are you going?” Mike asked him.

“Just going in for a quick swim,” Hughes responded.

“Don’t worry, he can’t drink it all,” Aaron said.

“Are you sure?” Mike responded. He watched as Hughes began drinking from the river. “Hey, Hughes, save some room for later.”

Kenny was most concerned. "Oh, uh, Mr. Hughes, please, don't do that. My orange juice must never be touched by human hands." He started to walk towards Hughes, who just continued to drink. "Plea—don't do that! Don't do that; you're contaminating my entire river. Please, I beg you, Mr. Hughes! You'll ruin my experiment!"

Kenny tried to reach for Hughes to pull him away. Hughes, in trying to evade Kenny's grasp, promptly fell into the river. He hiccupped.

"Man overboard!" Mike shouted

Kenny was aghast. "My orange juice! My most potent orange juice!"

Hughes hiccupped.

"Don't just stand there," Aaron said, "do something!"

Kenny stood there ponderously for a moment. Then he deadpanned, "Help. Police. Murder."

Hughes seemed to make a tentative swim for the shore, but then quickly disappeared beneath the orange surface.

"What—what's happening to him?" Mike asked.

"It looks like he's drowning," Aaron responded.

"Dive in!" Gelinias insisted. "Save him!"

"Oh, it's too late," Kenny lamented.

Gelinias looked at him. "Too late?"

Kenny nodded. "Oh, he's had it now; the suction's got him. Watch the pipe." He pointed to a large clear cylinder rising out of one point of the river. Sure enough, within a few moments a large object went up the pipe and got stuck at its midpoint, blocking the orange liquid behind it. It was Hughes, grinning and hiccupping.

"He's stuck in the pipe there, isn't he, Kenny?" Mike asked.

"He's blocking all the orange juice," Gelinias commented.

"Thank you, Captain Obvious," Aaron said. "Well, what happens now, Kenny?"

"Oh, the pressure'll get him out. Terrific pressure is building up behind the blockage."

The others watched in suspense as the pipe began to shake. Then Hughes shot up through it as if he had been fired from a cannon.

As the others watched this, they became aware of a small group of people entering the room from either side. Or rather, a group of small people.

They were identically dressed in some sort of overalls, and had an unusual complexion that matched the colour of the river. Their hair, even more oddly, was green in colour and their eyebrows in contrast were a striking white.

They began to sing.

"Oompa, Loompa, doom-pa-dee-do, I have a perfect puzzle for you. Oompa, Loompa, doom-pa-dee-dee, if you are wise, you'll listen to me.

"What do you get when you guzzle down booze? Drinking as much as an elderly flooze. What had you thunk getting terribly drunk? Now you have a breath like a skunk!

"I don't like the smell of it!

"Oompa, Loompa, doom-pa-dee-da, If you're not greedy, you will go far. You will live in happiness too, like the Oompa Loompa doom-pa-dee-do!"

Mike was surrounded by nuts. All sorts of nuts. And acorns. He searched through the pile he was sitting on until he found one particularly large and shiny looking specimen, which he then proceeded to nibble at.

Off to one side of the room was a pile of discarded shells.

Every once in a while, the hatch in the roof of the cylindrical room he was sitting in would be opened up, and more nuts would be poured in. The delivery person would be different each time, but it was always someone he recognized. There was Agent Pendrell, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, and the delectable Agent Scully. Mike was most amused at the sight of a self-propelled wheelbarrow of nuts which was being followed around by a floating urn featuring a pasted on likeness of Graham Chapman's face.

After a few hours, he began to become concerned as the level of nuts continued to rise, slowly burying him. Here came Dave Foley with another load, which buried him up to his waste.

"Hey!" he shouted up to Dave. "How about giving it a rest?"

"I'll ask," the Kid in the Hall responded. He then shouted to someone Mike couldn't see, "Is that enough nuts? The guy in here wants us to stop."

"I'm sorry, Dave, we can't do that," was the response.

Dave looked down at Mike and shrugged. "They said no," he told Mike before walking away.

"Who?" Mike called after him. Dave didn't respond, but his question was answered a moment later as a group of small, oddly coloured people appeared around the hatch, each with a wheelbarrow that they poised over the held edge as they began to sing.

"Oompa Loompa doom-pa-dee doo," they all sang. "I've got another puzzle for you. Oompa Loompa doom-pa-dah dee, if you are wise you will listen to me.

"Nut eating's fine when it's once in a while, it fills you with protein and brightens your smile. But it's repulsive, revolting, and wrong, eating and eating all day long!"

"The way that a squirrel does!" One of them soloed.

"But I am a squirrel!" Mike protested.

"Don't touch that squirrel's nuts!" one of the small beings responded.

As if that was some sort of cue, in unison they all dumped their wheelbarrows out, completely burying Mike under the nuts and acorns. As they did this, they finished their song.

"Oompa Loompa doom-pa-dee dah, given good manners you will go far. You will live in happiness too, like the Oompa Loompa doom-pa-dee do!"

Aaron searched his room frantically trying to find the present he had bought for Kirstin. Where the hell had he put it? He was supposed to have left ten minutes ago to meet up with her. At this rate, he was going to be seriously late.

And he had really been looking forward to giving her the very expensive box of gourmet chocolates he had purchased for her.

He heard his brother call out to him from the doorway. "What're you doing?"

Aaron turned. "Derek, have you seen..." His voice trailed off as he noticed the brown stains around Derek's mouth and on his fingers.

Derek burped.

Aaron lunged for his brother, his hands wrapping around the smaller Abdelmaseh's throat. This just wasn't bloody fair! Derek was always doing things like this, always ruining things for Aaron. And he always got away with it, too! But not this time. Aaron would see to that. Oh, yes, he would. He squeezed his hands tighter.

"Aaron, what do you think you are doing?" His mother's voice.

"Stop that this instant!" His father's voice.

Aaron slowly released his grip. Derek pulled away from him, gasping for breath.

"But... but he ate the chocolates I had bought for Kirstin," Aaron pleaded.

"No I didn't," Derek insisted. As he said that, he kicked away a rather fancy and quite empty box that had been at his feet, hiding it from his parents' view.

"Derek said he didn't," his father said.

"But... but..." Aaron stammered.

"We believe him," his mother said.

"What about that chocolate on his face?" Aaron asked.

"What chocolate?" his father responded.

Aaron pointed accusingly at his younger brother. "Look!"

"I don't see anything," his father said.

Derek was, in fact, as clean as a whistle. "I don't know what you're talking about," his mother said, hastily putting away a now-dirty handkerchief.

"This is such bullshit!" Aaron said.

"What did you say?" his father asked.

"Honestly, such language," his mother added.

Derek smirked.

"You, mister, are grounded for all of eternity," his father said. He closed Aaron into his room and locked the door.

Aaron stood there, dumbfounded. Suddenly and without warning, a group of small people appeared from under his bed and sang a song.

"Oompa Loompa doom-pa-dee doo, I've got another puzzle for you. Oompa Loompa doom-pa-dah dee, if you are wise you will listen to me.

Who do you blame when your brother's a brat, pampered and spoiled like a Siamese cat? Blaming the kids is a lion of shame. You know exactly who's to blame:

"Your mother and your father!"

Oompa Loompa doom-pa-dee dah, if you're not spoiled then you will go far. You will live in happiness too, like the Oompa Loompa doom-pa-dee do!"

Billy Gelinas sniffled a bit. His long, orange, cylindrical snout did always give him a bit of a trouble being a bit runny. He put that out of his mind as he surveyed the task before him.

He stood atop a pyramid made from cubes. The cubes, however, were just not a good colour. Well, he would have to do something about that.

He hopped down, and the cube he landed upon changed from red to blue. He hopped down again and the next cube did the same thing.

He smiled. This would be a piece of cake.

Or so he thought. Suddenly he spotted that Coily, his serpentine nemesis, was right behind him. If he could just lure Coily to the edge of the pyramid, perhaps he could get the snake to go over the edge. But he would have to time things just right.

And so Billy jumped, from one cube to another, closer to the edge and the bottomless abyss beyond.

He got to the end of the road and risked a look behind himself. He was startled when he saw Coily was a lot closer than he had expected, practically right on top of him. With a yelp, Billy fell backwards and plummeted endlessly to his doom.

As he fell, he was joined in his decent by a group of small, oddly coloured persons. They joined hands, forming a circle around him, and began to sing.

"Oompa Loompa doom-pa-dee doo, I've got another puzzle for you. Oompa Loompa doom-pa-dah dee, if you are wise you'll listen to me.

"What do you get playing video games? A very stiff thumb and an IQ that's tame. Why don't you try simply reading a book? Or could you just not bear to look?"

"You'll get no..." one soloed.

"You'll get no..." soloed another.

"You'll get no..."

"You'll get no..."

"You'll get no long FMV's!" they all sang together.

"Oompa Loompa doom-pa-dee dah, if you're not greedy you will go far. You will live in happiness too, like the Oompa Oompa Loompa doom-pa-dee do!"

The four Jusenkyo cursed members of the Garden Snake patrol sat up sharply from their cots, sweat upon their brows as they breathed heavily, trying to calm themselves.

Meanwhile, Matthew Atanian had an undisturbed night of sleep and awoke the next morning nice and refreshed.

And somewhere in the Bahamas, enjoying a nice vacation away from tormenting the Assistant Scoutmaster, a small group of penguins sat in comfortable beach chairs, drinking fish daiquiris.

## *Chapter Twenty-Seven: A Deep Resonance*

by William Hughes

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They, the five of them, decided not to mention their dreams to the others. Of course, Matt, not having had any particular dreams to worry about, didn't really reach the decision in the same sort of way. It was sort of an internal conflict that went like this:

"What a boringly, penguin-free night we had. Perhaps we should mention it to the others. No, on second thought, it was boring. And penguin free. How often does that happen? May as well keep this to ourselves, then, wot." This was, of course, all thought very fast in an accent not unlike that of an aging RAF officer.

It was with some trepidation that led the three, Mike, Aaron and Billy, to gather around a table early the next morning and discuss their plans for the week. They were joined shortly after by Kenny, then Matt Swett. They compared their merit badge classes and suggested times to hang out and play Magic and such things that Boy Scouts like those frequently discussed in the early hours before dawn and even more importantly, before breakfast.

There were just getting around to the important business of when they ought to head out for breakfast when they were interrupted by the final portion of their number — Matt. He was, as usually, wearing his scout uniform, fedora and coat, a particular Lum attached to his lapel.

"Well," he said, grinning broadly.

And that is how their day began.

Oh, it was a pretty uneventful day, as far as summer camp went. The forest fire continued to burn, but it was far enough away that it didn't seriously threaten any of the activities beyond the waterfront. The boys went off to their merit badges, Matt hung out with his friends on staff. In the trading post, Amanda drove a random tenderfoot insane by refusing to sell him one of the official

Boy Scout toothpick holders because, according to she, he wasn't old enough to buy shot glasses.

Outside the trading post, a dark shadow, a thing of vile evil, of terrible countenance and horrid purpose lurked.

Roy. The true master of irritable bastardy. Among certain circles, he was known as Roy.

He glared as he peeked in the window. "How dare she," he growled. Well, he'd show her. Oh, he would show her.

Roy looked around cautiously, rubbing his hands. "Phase one," he muttered to himself, pulling out a roll of quarters.

Inside the trading post, Amanda was happily ignorant of Roy's dark plan. She was, in fact, explaining to Mike and Luke Walker that, no, sadly, she didn't have any cheese, despite this obviously being a cheese shop, and that she had been deliberately wasting their time.

"What a senseless waste of life," Mike said sadly, shaking his head. Amanda and Luke giggled. Amanda bowed them out of the store and the two scouts left in much higher spirits than they entered — which is rather saying something.

Roy missed their exit, mostly because he was busy talking on the pay phone outside the Manor House.

"Yes. She's absolutely terrible. Yes. Yes. She refuses to sell things to the scouts because of their age. Including food, yes. Yes, ma'am. Well, I'm just trying to raise awareness about this usurp... uh... threat to your children's welfare. They're starving in the streets! What? Er, yes, there's no streets. Well, one... It was a metaphor, lady."

Mike grabbed Luke's arm and pulled him behind a tree before Roy could spot them.

"He's trying to get rid of Amanda," Mike said, peering around the tree. Roy was just hanging up, an evil grin on his evil face. He muttered something about 'phase one complete'.

"What was that about?" Luke asked, peering over Mike's shoulder.

"I think he's calling up parents and trying to convince them that Amanda's starving their kids."

"We have to tell her!"

"No," Mike replied grimly, pushing Luke back into their hiding spot. "We can solve this ourselves without bothering her. C'mon, man, after all she did for us, we have to pay her back!"

"But all she did was play along with some Monty Python skits..."

"Exactly! The ultimate gift! Once more into the breach, dear friends!"

"Well, alright, but shouldn't we tell her?"

"No. Roy will be scoping out this place constantly. If we want to keep our new trading post pal, we must keep this a secret."

Luke looked unhappy, but he nodded anyway.

Meanwhile, Justy, Kuntz and Perry were putting the final touches on Perry's plan, although the former pair were having slight issues with the latter's poor grasp of English.

"At that time, you," Perry pointed at Kuntz, "lure Garden Steak patrol to three hamster." He then pointed at Justy. "You will be in charge prepare hamster for Steaks."

"Three hamsters?" Kuntz asked, confused – so confused, in fact, he forgot the carefully rehearsed quotation he had been preparing. It was, he was fairly sure, something about a wedding dinner – something about funeral meats.

Justy wasn't really intelligent enough to wonder about the hamsters. His mind was on another detail. "It's Garden Snake, you imbecile!"

Perry blinked in confusion. "Snake? Ah, Perry wonder why scout store man give strange look when Perry go to buy patrol patch."

Kuntz peered at the delicious image of a half pound, medium well done, juicy, Angus steak, neatly sewn onto Perry's sleeve. "Yeah, I was gonna ask about that..."

Perry sighed. He knew then that working with those two idiots was going to take more than he had thought. Also, he would need to buy a new patrol insignia.

The rest of the day went as most days at summer camp went. There were merit badges and bad food, friendship, camaraderie, fun at the trading post and even a couple of illicit games of Magic: The Gathering.

There were not, however, any unholy rites dedicated to Elder Gods (Cthulhu does not, in fact, ftagn) nor did any Girl Scouts show up – not that this was in any way unusual. There was, however, one very important thing that was not happening – or, more properly, was not going to happen.

There would be no, under any circumstances, "Matt Gets Wet III."

"She said no," Matt was telling the Garden Snake Patrol – which was currently down three of its members: Perry and Will Shmuler.

"Who's she?" Aaron asked – he had come into the conversation late.

"The new camp director," Mike replied. "Ann Balogna."

"Why not?"

Swett stepped in, "She said it was hazing."

"I'm going to talk to her," Mike said definitively. "Reason with her, make her see the unusually wet light." He left the others to continue arguing and started heading off towards the Nunes building.

Billy caught up with him just as he was passing the latrines.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked.

"To try and get our skit performed at the campfire."

"Not to burst your little bubble, but our skit involves getting Matt soaking wet, both with our water and with whatever water other scout troops happen to bring along with the express purpose of trying to get him to squeal like a stuck pig."

"And?"

"And what happens when Matt gets wet?"

"He'll need to engage the services of a Laundromat?"

"No, you doof, he turns into a woman. In front of an entire camp full of Boy Scouts, do you understand?"

Mike shrugged. "Kenny said he had it under control."

"No, Kenny said he thought he might be able to do something about it. And besides, isn't it easier to just not have to do the skit in the first place? None of us wanted to do it, remember?"

Mike was just on the verge of telling Billy to shut up when a tall Asian man, complete with bandana, burst from the bushes in front of them.

"*Furinkan kokou wa do... N-nanda? Massachusetts da yo? Demo... Demo... Massachusetts hoko ni...*" He broke off, sitting down heavily and pulling out a map which he examined at length.

Billy turned and gave Mike a triumphant grin, pulling out a notebook and crossing off something on a list. Mike shook his head and then, carefully stepping past the lost, bandana toting man, vanished into the woods.

Sometime later, Mike found himself and the camp director standing outside of the Nunes building, relatively out of range of anyone trying to eavesdrop. He was trying to argue some sense into her.

"It's hazing."

"But, Mrs. Balogna, how can it be hazing? He agreed to do it!"

"It's hazing."

"He's an adult leader, not a kid!"

"It's hazing."

"He's been with the program for almost as long as I've been alive!"

"It's hazing."

"He was one of the people who came up with the idea!"

"It's hazing."

Mike sighed. It was like arguing with a brick. A particularly obstinate, ugly and lead-filled brick, at that.

"Well, look, what *can* we do? The Clappy Song?"

"The Clappy Song is Unwholesome." Mike could hear the capital U.

"Er, fine. What about the Exploding Toilet sketch?"

"Anything even alluding to biological functions are Grey Areas."

"The Song that Never Ends?"

"Too long."

"J.C. Penny skit?"

"Boy Scouts may not be seen in public in their underwear."

"Damn."

"No swearing."

This continued on for quite a while, so much that Mike was very nearly late to dinner. This was unfortunate, as they were serving his absolute favourite of dinners.

That does not, however, concern this story. What does is how four scouts, three from Troop 192 and one from Troop 86, were also late for dinner. Not that most people noticed, of course, as these were not especially well liked scouts, but a few scouts noted their absence as the meal grew on and finally ended.

Three of those four were, in fact, currently sitting in the woods roughly equidistant between Crown Point and Ticonderoga, around a rough fire — the real reason they were far away from others: having an unauthorised fire is a major no-no at Moses.

Justy, Perry and Kuntz sat huddled together, the fourth scout a few feet back, holding a small wooden box of some sort.

"My plan has come together beautifully," Justy crooned, rubbing his hands together in a bad imitation of a specific, yellow-skinned, Matt Groening villain. "Excellent."

"What in box?" Perry asked, peering suspiciously at the fourth scout, his face shrouded in darkness, like a jack-in-the-box, just waiting to be wound until it pops out and terrifies some poor kid.

Justy waved his hand imperiously. "It is the key to our success!"

Kuntz shook his head. "Look, all that is well and good, but when do I get to do something?"

"It all very simple," Perry said, rubbing between his eyes. Constant exposure to Kuntz and Justy had given the cursed scout a dull but aching constant headache in the portion of the brain normally used to deal with small children, bad pets and idiots. "You lure scouts to Three Hamster." He pointed at Kuntz. "Justy and Perry..."

"That's Lord God Yung," Justy proclaimed haughtily.

"Yes, yes, whatever," Perry said, gritting his teeth. He made a mental note to visit the nurse's office and pick up whatever it is that Americans used to relieve headaches. "We will wait near Three Hamster and... take care of Garden Snake patrol." He gave a very nasty grin, echoed by his co-conspirators. Justy took it a step forward, throwing his head back and cackling maniacally.

And meanwhile, the quiet scout with the wooden box just stood there, listening and absorbing and, most important of all, keeping very, very good care of the small box.

It didn't take long for the four scouts to creep back into their sites. Justy vanished into his tent, while Perry snuck over to the Garden Snakes — currently watching Aaron get creamed by Matt's 'I have a full time job and can use it to get access to an entire bleeding box of Ice Age cards' deck — and pretended to be interested.

And the mysterious last scout, cradling his box close to his chest, snuck around the camp, always staying in shadows, whispering quiet things to the box.

**For those keeping track,  
Billy predicted the following:**

~~Bizarre and complex plot~~

~~Matt Atanian Involved~~

~~Guest Appearance by Colin and Dan and/or Troop 180~~

~~Kenny will do something smart~~

~~Shmuler will be annoying~~

~~Swett will be sarcastic~~

~~Perry will try to kill them~~

~~The Porters will show up~~

~~Matt will swoon over Sarah~~

~~Matty will resist the advances of Kuntz~~

~~Justy will be Up To Something~~

~~Kiwi/Mocha Fruit Juice~~

~~Ryoga will show up~~

~~Jim Anderson will ask "the one with the red hair"~~

~~Everything will work out in the end.~~

## *Chapter Twenty-Eight: The Hamster Dance*

by Matthew Atanian

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Mike and Luke were on their way to their first merit badge class of the morning when they overheard something that caught their attention. A small group of younger scouts from another troop were huddled together in a group, almost whispered words passing to and fro between them and the two lads from 192 caught the occasional word that passed between them.

“...puts poison in all the candy...”

“...and jumps kids and takes all their money...”

“...are all afraid to go anywhere near the Trading Post...”

Mike and Luke stopped and turned to each other. Then they approached the group of younger scouts.

“What’s all this, then?” Mike asked.

The young group of scouts parted, and Mike saw the oldest of the bunch (who was still a squirt to Mike) was holding a piece of paper. It was slightly tattered, and looked as if it had been pinned up somewhere and then pulled down.

Mike grabbed the piece of paper and looked at it. He turned to the kids, an unnaturally cold look in his face. “Where did you get this?” he demanded of them.

“They... they were tacked up all over the Trading Post,” one of them muttered.

Mike took off in a run towards the parade field.

“What?” Luke called, doing his best to follow. “What is it?”

“What time does the Trading Post open?” Mike asked.

With a bit of effort, Luke had caught up. “In about fifteen minutes, I think.”

“We must hurry,” Mike said, “and hope that Amanda isn’t there yet.”

“For the love of god, why?” Luke insisted.

Mike thrust the paper he had confiscated into Luke's hands. Luke looked at it.

Atop the piece of paper, in large and alarming letters, was written, "Threat to Camp Exposed!" Below that was a crude drawing of Amanda. And below that was a list of atrocities she was alleged to be committing in her position of the Trading Post Manager.

"Come on," Mike shouted to Luke even as he began to run faster. Luke struggled on after him in an effort to keep up. "We have to get these all down before Amanda can see them!"

Billy Gelinas and Aaron Abdelmaseh were also on their way to their first merit badge class. They had not been far behind Mike and Luke, and in fact they had witnessed the preceding events.

"Hold on," Billy said. "Mike's like, this tall," Billy knelt down and held his hand about an inch above the ground. "And Luke's like, this tall." Billy held his hand up as high as he could, and he also leapt into the air for emphasis. "How come Luke has to struggle so hard to keep up with him?"

"Obviously," Aaron said, "Mike has passion for secretly protecting the honour of the fair Trading Post Manager, while Luke is just... well... he's Luke."

"What are you saying?" Billy said.

"Well, I suppose Luke is being Sancho Panza to Mike's Don Quixote."

Billy gave Aaron one of the "death looks" he had been becoming quite adept at recently, usually in conversation with Mike. Alas, Mike was otherwise occupied at the moment, so Aaron was forced to substitute. "I still don't get it, though. Luke never struck me as the kind of guy who would go along with something like that. Never one for the zany, madcap adventures. I suppose that's why he wasn't made a member of the Garden Snake Patrol."

Aaron choked on something. "Are you saying," he said after regaining his breath, "that you are the sort who does go in for zany and madcap?"

"I don't know," Gelinas said. "That's been bugging me recently. I think perhaps I may be some sort of comic relief."

"What *are* you talking about?" Aaron asked. "And what does this have to do with Luke?"

"Hmm?" Billy had obviously let his mind wander into aspects of greater multidimensional importance. "Oh, nothing. Where was I? Ah yes, Luke. Well, wouldn't he just be the sort to go let one of the adults on staff know what is going on, or something?"

Aaron gave Billy a most stern look as he decreed, "Shut up, Bill."

It had been a hot day, with the cicadas filling the air with a constant yet comforting buzzing. It had cooled only a little as evening had come, yet the old man lying on the futon did not suffer any discomfort. At this stage in his life he usually felt nothing but fatigue and he knew that it would not be long before he would rest forever.

He stirred as he thought he heard a noise. He opened his eyes and waited a moment, hoping they would focus.

"Here, my old friend," a voice said. The Japanese was flawless, although it had a slight accent to it. Chinese, perhaps? Even before he put on the glasses that were being offered to him, he knew who it was.

He had been waiting.

"I was hoping to see you once more before the end," he said.

"It gladdens me to be able to give you this opportunity to repay your debt to me before it is too late," came the response. "You received my letter, then?"

"I did. I have made the arrangements with the school, and for housing."

"Housing? That is an unexpected bonus, my old friend."

The old man coughed slightly. His visitor poured him a glass of water from the pitcher atop the squat bedside table, and he sipped gladly from it. "It was no trouble. I do

own a boarding house. And while it will undoubtedly soon be passing into my daughter's ownership, she has agreed to my wishes on this matter."

"You have more than repaid your debt to me, my old friend. I find I now wish I could do something more for you."

"Your visit has brought me comfort. At this stage, I could not want for more."

"Then it saddens me I cannot stay longer. I have to attend to things abroad very soon, and fear I must now take my leave of you."

The old man smiled. "Very well. It was good to see you once more."

"Indeed. Good bye, my old friend."

The old man closed his eyes once more. "Good bye," he said.

There was a slight jingling of bells, and then the sound of the *fusuma* sliding gently shut, and the old man was alone once more.

The Trading Post opened without incident. One of the first customers was Matthew Atanian, who took the time to admire the stuffed penguins and to chat with Amanda, reminiscing about his own days as the Trading Post Manager.

While he was eating his Silver Mint Bar (he had regaled Amanda with the tale of how he himself had added those to the Trading Post's menu) Perry walked in. "You have patrol patches?" he asked.

"A small selection," Amanda responded. "Which one are you looking for?"

"Garden Snake," Perry answered.

"Um, there's no such patch," came the response.

Matt spoke up. "I believe your patrol uses the Rattlesnake patrol medallion," he said to the Amazon.

"Ah, I do have some of those," Amanda said. She bent below the counter to get one.

“What do you need a new one for, anyways?” Matt asked.

“Perry mishear when first assigned to patrol,” Perry said. “Get wrong patch.”

“Oh? I never noticed. What did you get?”

“Garden steak,” Perry said. He turned so that Matt could see his sleeve, and the patch bearing the image of a nicely cooked sirloin.

“Where the hell did you get that?” Matt asked.

Perry shrugged. “Internet.”

After lunch, the Garden Snakes were having a patrol meeting. Shmuler was absent, for reasons of Albuquerque. Perry hadn't been invited to the meeting. The boys were sure that someone else was missing, however, so Mike took attendance.

“I'm here,” he said. “Billy?”

“Here,” Gelinias responded.

He pointed to each person as he continued. “Kenny. Aaron. Swett. Becker.” Each person made an affirmative noise as his name was called. “I still think we're missing someone,” Mike said.

“Did you get Bill?” Aaron asked.

“He did me first,” Gelinias offered.

“Oh, yes.”

“Now, our first order of business,” Mike said. “What are we going to do about Roy?”

“What?” Becker asked.

“Roy is trying to destroy Amanda!” Mike announced for the benefit of those who didn't know.

“I don't think we can do much other than try and foil him as he goes.”

“Speaking of foiling,” Gelinias said, “What's Justy up to?”

Everyone commented that he didn't seem to be up to much of anything.

“But he *must* be!” Gelinias insisted. “He *must*!”

“Moving back to reality...” Mike said.

(“Just you wait,” Gelinas commented.)

“...what’s the plan for the campfire?” concluded Mike.

As if on cue, Luke Walker came running over. “Guys! I’ve been looking for you!”

“What is it?” Mike asked him.

“I just informed my own patrol, and I knew you’d want to know as soon as possible, too.”

“What is it?” Swett asked.

“Mr. McGraw just got back from another meeting with Mrs. Balogna,” Luke said. “It’s too horrible to put into words...”

The collected members of the Garden Snake Patrol sighed in unison. “You’d better try to put it into words,” Aaron suggested, “or what will happen to *you* will be too horrible to put into words.”

“Our troop has been assigned a song for the campfire,” Luke said.

“Oh?” Mike said brightly. “So she changed her mind on the Clappy Song, then?”

“You’re right,” Swett quipped. “That is too horrible to put into words.”

Gelinas grinned at Swett, pulled out his notebook and scratched something off.

“No, you don’t understand! It’s worse than that!”

Now the Garden Snake Patrol gasped in unison. “Worse than the Clappy Song?” Becker exclaimed, pulling himself momentarily free from his headphones. “How is that possible?”

“Kumbyah.”

There was a deadly silence for a moment, the only sound being the Sri Lankan rap music emanating from Becker’s headphones and a helicopter flying overhead. Backer slipped his headphones back on.

“You cannot be serious!” Aaron finally said. “There is no way I am standing up in front of the entire camp and singing that song.”

“If we do, we’ll be lynched,” Swett felt compelled to add. “Everybody who is anybody is looking forward to ‘Matt Gets Wet.’ It’s an event of epic proportions. There

are people who aren't even at camp this week who are coming up Friday night just to see it! Heck, even some girl scouts are planning to come up to see the conclusion after seeing part two at the spring camporee!"

"Ha!" Gelinás shouted triumphantly, catching everyone's attention as he turned to Mike. "The Porters will be up here!"

"I don't know about that," Aaron interrupted. "I know Nicole especially was keen to come and see it, but since their up at their own camp this week they weren't sure they could get away."

"We'll see," Gelinás said, still inexplicably addressing Mike. "We'll see."

"That's not important right now," Mike assured everyone, dismissing Gelinás as he did so. "I just have to have faith that we will find a way around this."

"And will we find a way around the other fatal flaw in the implementation of this skit?" Aaron asked.

Mike turned to Kenny as he answered Aaron's question. "As I said, have faith."

Aaron shrugged and was about to say more when everyone was startled by a sudden scream from Becker. Becker ripped his headphones from his head and threw them away. He blinked a bit and looked around as if taking in his surroundings.

"You okay, Becker?" Swett asked.

Becker turned to him. "How do you know my name?" he asked.

"What are you on about?" Aaron asked. "Your name's always been Becker."

"Oh... Becker," he said, emphasising the last syllable of the name. "Got it." There was a pause, and then he added, "Oh boy."

Proctor was walking across the parade field carrying a box. The box was cardboard, largish, and had air holes poked into it. He spoke cute nothings into it as he walked.

“Proctor!” a voice shouted out to him. He looked up from the box and saw his lord and master standing at the opposite side of the field.

“Yes, my captain!” Proctor replied as he hurried to Justy’s side.

“You are clear on what is to be done?” Justy asked of him.

“Well, we have to lure the Garden Snake patrol to the three hamsters, but I am a bit unclear on what happens after that.”

“Never you mind that, you idiot. You just do your part, and make sure nothing happens to that box until the time has come.”

“Yes, my captain!” Proctor repeated. Justy dismissed him and walked off.

Proctor continued on his way across the field until he came to the large multi-trunked tree that was not far from the Trading Post. He sat against it, lifted the lid of the box ever so slightly, and scritchd the box’s contents contentedly.

Luke Walker, meanwhile, was just coming out of the Trading Post where he had run into Dan who had seemed unusually cheerful even for himself.

“What’s up?” Luke had asked him.

“It’s getting a bit closer,” was Dan’s response. “Not to worry, still not enough to pose any danger to us. But still, it is exciting just knowing it’s out there.”

Luke had been confused. “What are you going on about?” he had asked.

“The *fire!*” Dan exclaimed.

“You’re weird,” Luke had told him.

Now walking away from the Trading Post, Luke waved to Proctor as he passed him and then spotted Mike and Matt Atanian in the distance.

“You have got to be kidding,” Mike was saying. “That was an awful movie.”

“Look,” Matt responded, “I’m not saying that it was on the level of Citizen Kane or anything, but it was an enjoyable two hours. Bruce Willis saves the world. True, he doesn’t sing while he does so, so it doesn’t have the whole Hudson Hawk thing going for it, but Bruce Willis usually doesn’t disappoint. And it had Steve Buscemi in it. You can almost never go wrong with him.”

“Oh yeah?” Mike responded. “Tell me again what you thought of Fargo.”

“Worst four dollars I ever spent.”

“Oh? I thought Fargo was an excellent piece of cinema,” Mike rebutted. “Besides... it had Steve Buscemi in it.” He grinned.

“I said, ‘almost,’” Matt protested. “Hey, Luke.”

“Hi, Luke,” Mike said.

“Hi, guys. How’s it going?”

“Fine. Just coming from the Trading Post?” Mike asked.

“Yup. Nothing of importance to report,” Luke responded.

“Good. Maintain vigilance,” Mike commanded.

Luke shrugged. “Will do,” he said as he walked off.

“‘Maintain vigilance’?” Matt asked a moment later.

“We must protect the Trading Post,” Mike simply responded.

“Ah, of course,” Matt said. After a moment’s thought he added, “I approve. Incidentally,” he asked, “what’s up with Becker?”

“What do you mean?” Mike asked.

“He’s not wearing his headphones, and I could have sworn I caught him talking to himself quite heatedly.”

“My guess is that the decibels finally snapped something in his head.”

“Ah, of course.”

“I do hope you’ll consider what I have told you. This whole situation has me feeling quite... irritable.”

"Yes," Mrs. Balogna responded. "I can see that, Roy. Thank you for bringing this situation to my attention."

The camp director dismissed Roy from her presence and settled down at her desk. A few minutes later, there was another knock at her door.

"Oh, it's you," she said upon looking up and seeing Mike Quadrozzi.

"Yes, I just wished to talk to you some more about our skit for Friday night."

"Kumbyah?" Mrs. Balogna said sternly.

"No, the other one."

"There *is* no other skit. Only Kumbyah."

"This here," Mike continued unheeded, "is a signed petition from a majority of the campers up here this week, including many camp staff members, as well as some of the camp commissioners, and the chief scout executive of the Pioneer Valley Council, all requesting to see the skit *Matt Gets Wet, part 3.*" Mike handed over a stack of papers.

"It's hazing," Mrs. Balogna said.

"Did you hear the part where I said the petition was signed by the chief council exec?" Mike asked.

"It's not appropriate in scouting."

"This," Mike handed her a book, "is a biography of Lord Baden-Powell, which if you look at the highlighted sections, it details at least three different examples of similar incidents that occurred with boys he was leading, and the positive results that came from said experiences."

"Times change. It's hazing."

"Well, this," Mike handed over another paper, "is a signed waiver from the chief executive of the Boy Scouts of America stating that he approves of *Matt Gets Wet* and wishes us the best of luck in performing what he calls, 'one of the most original and exciting new campfire skit ideas I have heard about in many years; two thumbs up.'"

Matt looked to Mike. "How did you...?" he began to ask.

Mrs. Balogna cut him off. "It's hazing."

"This," Mike pointed to Matt, "is the alleged subject of said alleged hazing, here to tell you that he does not feel at all put out by this skit idea, and that he is in fact one of the planners of it. Since hazing is defined as," Mike pulled out a dictionary and read from it, "An initiation or behaviour that involves humiliation, harassment or abuse,' and Matt here has been in the program for a number of years (and hence cannot now be initiated) and did help come up with this idea himself (and unless one is a masochist, which cannot be true of Matt if he follows the Scout Oath and Law as I know he does, one cannot humiliate, harass, or abuse oneself) I submit to you that there is *nothing* in this skit that can come even close to the very definition of the word 'hazing'!"

Mike took a few deep breaths as Mrs. Balogna stared at him for a moment, her eyes smouldering with a cold fire.

Mrs. Balogna took the dictionary from Mike. She read from it. She took a long few moments to skim through the petition. She looked over the letter from the chief scout executive of the whole of the Boy Scouts of America. She looked with great interest at the biography of the founder of the entire Scouting movement in the first place.

She looked up to Mike and Matt at long last. She inhaled, opened her mouth, and repeated two words as if she was a broken record. "It's hazing."

Not long afterwards, Matt and Mike were walking away from the Nunes building. "That could have gone better," Matt commented.

"I am *not* doing Kumbyah," Mike said. "No way."

"What choice do we have?" Matt asked.

Mike was silent for a moment as they walked. "Hey, Matt, were you ever planning on being on camp staff again?"

"I hadn't ruled out the possibility completely, but I have no immediate plans. Why?"

"Well, it wasn't on my list of things to do," Mike responded. "And that, I think, gives us all the choice in the world."

Matt was walking across the parade field when he noticed something very odd in the direction of the archery range. He walked over to investigate and found a large crowd of scouts blocking his view. He tried to work his way through to see what was happening. At long last, the crowd parted before him. Revealed to his gaze was... a panda.

The panda was just sitting there while a gaggle of small Tenderfoot Scouts leapt excitedly in front of him, shouting, "Panda! Panda!" The panda, for its part, was just sitting there. Occasionally it reached into a large bucket full of popcorn and consumed some of the contents.

"Whaa?" Matt asked, for the moment unable to articulate his thoughts. He was aided by a passing member of Troop 180 by the name of Graziani who asked, "What's with the panda?"

Matt looked back at the panda, who was inexplicably now holding up a sign. It was a simple wooden sign, a square of wood nailed to a plank which the panda was holding. On it was painted the words, "I know your secret."

"Whaa?" Matt asked.

The panda lowered the sign and held up another. "I, too, have been to China," it said.

Matt looked around, concerned. Fortunately, the only other people around were the aforementioned Tenderfoots who were still chanting excitedly and not paying much attention to the signs the object of their adulation were holding up. "Who are you?" Matt then asked of the Panda.

A new sign. "It's me, Mark."

"Gaaah!" Matt sat up in his sleeping bag in shock. He took a few breaths to calm himself down. "Well," he said after a moment, "at least there were no penguins."

It was still a bit early, but he got up and got dressed. A few other members of the troop were already up and

about. Swett was clad in his bathing suit and dripping wet, headed towards his tent.

"Where the heck are you coming from?" Matt asked him.

"Polar Bear swim," Swett responded.

"But... No lake..."

"Who said anything about the lake?" Swett asked, disappearing into his tent.

Matt shook his head and continued on. He paused by another tent when he heard a voice coming from inside.

"But do you know what I'm doing here yet, Al?" There was a pause. "Well, I'm sure it isn't to save this kid from deafness, so get back to Ziggy and figure it out!"

Matt was pretty sure there was no one named Al in Troop 192. "You okay in there, Becker?" he asked.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine," was the reply. A moment later the tent's flap was pushed open. Becker emerged, dressed in his full uniform, but still without his headphones. Matt observed that there was no one else in the tent.

"Okay," Matt said, "moving on." He saw most of the rest of the Garden Snakes assembled by one of the picnic tables. Perry wasn't there. He was spending an unusual amount of time with Justy this week. Of course Swett wasn't there as he was changing. Becker was just coming up behind him. For a moment, Matt was sure someone else was missing but he couldn't quite place who.

"What have you got there, Kenny?" The Garden Snake's most youthful member seemed to be fiddling with something that seemed vaguely reminiscent of an original GameBoy.

"I don't know, Mr. Atanian," Kenny said. "I've been getting some very strange readings since yesterday, almost like there was a quantum shift in the flow of time, but that can't be possible."

"Right," Matt said. He sat down and took a deep breath of the morning air. "Ah, Moses."

\* \* \*

Later that morning Justy was pacing back and fourth inside his tent. Proctor sat on his cot (mattressless, so that Justy could have extra padding) cooing into a box. "Will you stop that?" Justy spat. "What exactly are we supposed to be doing with them, anyways?"

"Well, Captain," Proctor responded, "Perry said to wait for his signal, and lure the Garden Snakes to them." Proctor held up the box.

"Three hamsters?" Justy asked.

Proctor nodded happily.

"*Three hamsters!?*"

Without warning Perry burst into the tent. "Today at two. Three hamster."

Mike was worried. It was quiet. Too quiet.

"It's quiet," he told Luke. "Too quiet."

"Maybe Roy gave up?"

"Yeah, and maybe a simian will take flight from my rectal cavity."

"You're weird."

"Thank you. I practice"

"Look, there he is," Luke said, pointing.

Roy was headed towards the Trading Post. He had a determined look on his face and was carrying what appeared to be a can of gasoline.

Meanwhile, from the direction of the dining hall came Aaron, Gelinias, Matt Atanian, and Becker. Becker had been staying close to Matt pretty much all day, making excuses when they questioned why.

And in yet another meanwhile, Proctor was approaching from the direction of the Nunes building.

Mike didn't notice the meanwhiles, as he was intent upon Roy. "Is that what I think it is?"

Luke shrugged. They approached Roy, unnoticed.

"What are you doing?" Mike asked him when they were close enough.

"You two again?" Roy spat. "Somehow you foiled my latest plan to get that witch out of the trading post!"

Luke turned to Mike. "I take it back. You're not weird, he is." Then of Roy he asked, "Um... maybe parents aren't stupid enough to believe that there is a crazy woman working at camp poisoning the candy?"

"Ah, the obvious. Gelinas would be proud," Mike commented.

Gelinas, now within earshot, complained with, "I heard that!"

"If I can't have the trading post," Roy said menacingly, "no one will!"

Mike suddenly grabbed Luke and threw him at Roy.

"Gaaah!" Luke exclaimed.

"Gaaah!" Roy agreed.

Luke impacted, sending the gas can flying.

Fortunately it was still closed, as it flew right at Proctor and being doused with gasoline was not on his list of things to do that day.

Unfortunately for Proctor, however, the gas can knocked the box he was carrying out of his hands. The box fell to the ground and burst open, and three little bundles of fur jumped out and ran off in the direction of the Training Lodge.

"My hamsters!" Proctor exclaimed. "Sirs," he implored of everyone present, "please catch them! I need to take care of them!"

"Oh, yeah," Gelinas huffed, "way to move the plot forward."

"What are you going on about?" Mike asked him. "Come on, Proctor needs our help!" He ran off, shouting to Luke to take care of Roy.

Matt, Aaron, and Gelinas followed.

Becker started to follow as well, leaving Luke behind with the irritable bastard. "You think this is it, Al?" Luke heard Becker ask a tree as he was passing it.

Luke shrugged. "That is one weird patrol." He grabbed the gasoline can from where it had fallen, grabbed Roy, and headed off towards the Nunes building. On his way there, he shouted to the heavens above, "*Everybody's weird!*"

**For those keeping track,  
Billy predicted the following:**

~~Bizarre and complex plot~~

~~Matt Atanian involved~~

~~Guest appearance by Colin and Dan and/or Troop 180~~

~~Kenny will do something smart~~

~~Shmuler will be annoying~~

~~Swett will be sarcastic~~

~~Perry will try to kill them~~

~~The Porters will show up~~

~~Matt will swoon over Sarah~~

~~Matty will resist the advances of Kuntz~~

~~Justy will be Up To Something~~

~~Kiwi/Mocha Fruit Juice~~

~~Ryoga will show up~~

~~Jim Anderson will ask "the one with the red hair"~~

~~Everything will work out in the end.~~

## *Chapter Twenty-Nine: Un Tramonto sul un'altra Estate*

by William Hughes

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Hughes knew he was in trouble. He hadn't eaten or drunk in the past six days. He was beginning to have hallucinations. At first they were perfectly normal hallucinations – colours, sounds, the Dark Lord of the Nether Realms offering tea and crumpets, but this was really the last straw.

Hughes was, in his hallucination, sitting in a room aboard a massive space ship. That, in and of itself, was not too terribly weird to Hughes' mind.

It was the big metal H on his forehead that really got him. That wasn't the only thing weird about his new appearance, he had noted when he had first woken up. His ears were more pointed, and his canines were elongated, like a cat's. On top of that, he was wearing a loud, pink suit with black tie, something that would have done Rick James proud. It did not look good on Hughes.

It was the H, though, that really got him. He kept poking it, tugging on it, trying to get rid of it, but to no avail. After some time, he sighed, sat down, and gave up.

A moment later, he was startled from his self pity and the mechanical mouse he had found and was playing with, by a loud scream from out in the hall.

"Aow!" the scream went. More of a yowl, really, Hughes decided. He stood up and looked out into the hall.

A man, a tall man, wearing a zebra-striped zoot-suit and sporting the best pompadour Hughes had ever seen, was walking--no, not walking--*strutting* down the hall.

"Hey, buddy!" the man said, grinning widely at Hughes. He had teeth just like the ones the Boy Scout had woken up with. "Glad to see you finally awake! Aow! It worked!"

"That... that suit..." Hughes said, staring at the other in some strange mix of horror and adulation. "It's... terrifying... it's... the worst suit I've ever seen. It's... making me talk... like Bill Shatner... But... on you it... looks... right." He looked up at the man. "You must teach me your secrets! Your hair, tell me! How did you get it so perfect?"

Matt hadn't meant to be Matty. To be fair, she had never meant to fall into an ancient accursed Spring in the middle of China and gain the ability to turn into a girl at all.

To be fair, Matty supposed that it would be a great party trick, if she ever went to parties.

However, Matty didn't go to parties and, if she did, he probably wouldn't find a good time to demonstrate that particular little party trick anyway.

She noted, with some distaste, that she was still Matty.

She had become separated from the other scouts while chasing Proctor's hamsters, and somehow wound up in the forest near Cabin Three. Then she had tripped and found herself rolling down a small bank into the Boulder Brook. And to top it all off, something was now wriggling her pocket. She reached in and pulled out, among other things, a small, fuzzy hamster, tan and white, pigging out on the remains of her final Snickers bar.

Matty picked herself up and squeezed out her hat, sighing quietly to herself. She looked up and stretched and then began towards Cabin Three, figuring that she would just sneak back to camp, get herself some hot water, and change back.

She turned toward the nature trail, intending on taking it back to Hill Road. Matty was a good boy scout, and she knew better than to wander blindly through the woods towards Cabin Three, even if it would be a shorter walk and she knew that she could probably get there without any problems.

"My goddess!"

Matty closed her eyes. She knew that voice anywhere.

"I knew you would come to me!"

"Dammit, Kuntz!" Matty yelled, turning around to face the crazy scout. "Stop following me!"

"But, I'm not following you," Kuntz protested, still smiling crazily. "You have come to me! Let me serenade you!" He cleared his throat, pulled out a crumpled piece of paper from his crumpled scout uniform, vainly attempted to unrumple the paper, and began to read, badly: "Geek of the spring, and poison of the year, the one dot shadows in your beauty snow! The other as your booty dots appear; And you in every blessed shape we know. In all external grits you have some snot, But you like buns, buns you, for you're so hot!" He looked up from the paper. "I changed it a little, you know, made it better for you."

"You what?"

"Now, give me a kiss, hotlips!"

Billy and Aaron were lost. They had been chasing the damn hamster for almost an hour now, and they were nowhere near close to finding it.

"Hey, let's try up there," Aaron said, pointing up a small embankment, "I read somewhere that hamsters are natural climbers and like to live on higher ground, like eagles."

"Like eagles," Billy repeated, giving Aaron the death stare.

"Quit looking at me like that," Aaron said, pulling himself up and further into the woods. "Besides, I think I can see tracks."

"You've found hamster tracks? Come on, that's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard..."

"I didn't say hamster tracks."

\* \* \*

Mike was by himself. He knew that Cabin Three lay somewhere close at hand — he *knew* that he was in the general area.

Of course, he was also totally lost. As a boy scout, and a good boy scout at that, Mike knew that he was going in circles. There was a rock that he secretly suspected was following him. He glared darkly at the rock.

The rock had the perfect poker face. To Mike, it looked cold as stone, like it was carved from rock. He couldn't read the damn thing at all.

Mike sighed and sat on the rock.

"Alright," he said, after a time. "Where is everyone?"

Something near his feet chittered and squeaked at him, and he tilted his head down to peer into the thick grass. A tiny, greyish-brown hamster scampered out and tried to climb up his pant leg. Mike reached down and picked up the rodent in his hands, lifting it up to the sky. "I call you... Muad'Dib!"

The hamster chirped in reply and began to nibble on one of Mike's fingers.

Mike started to scold the small rodent, when suddenly a loud scream rent the air. He leapt up, stuffing Muad'Dib into a pocket as he rushed off towards the yelling.

Hughes examined himself in the mirror. He wouldn't have thought it — and neither did the human, the hologram or the computer, although the cat and the toaster were on his side — but the pink tie *did* match with the gaudy, tiger-striped suit. It really brought everything together.

The hologram was going to have a fit.

He frowned a little bit, and reached for the large, felt hat the other feline had given him. He put it on and examined himself in the mirror.

"No," he said, "No, the feather really is just way too much."

\* \* \*

"See, I told you Cabin Three was here," Aaron said, pointing proudly at the slightly fire damaged cabin. Billy glared at him.

He opened his mouth to say something, then blinked and moved closer to the cabin, peering in the window. "Hey, is there someone in there?"

"What?" Aaron asked, stepping up next to Billy. "My god, there is! Two of them, see?"

Inside of the cabin, two people were tied, deep inside of the shadows. They struggled, every now and again, but were basically still.

"Come on, Bill, we've got to rescue them!"

"What? No, wait a minute! Damn it, Aaron, we're Boy Scouts, not rescuers! We need to get an adult out here."

"Shut up, Bill," Aaron replied, absentmindedly, "And tell me how to get this window open."

Billy turned and was about to level Aaron with a scathing remark — a single statement so unbelievably, incredibly sarcastic that the very earth would tremble, poets would later compose entire epics based upon only the first three words of the remark! — but was cut off before the first syllable was formed by a piercing scream. Matt and Aaron took one look at each other before turning and running towards the noise.

Matty had nowhere to run. Kuntz was almost upon her. She could count the pores in his greasy face. She whimpered softly, her back pressed up against a large tree as she cast about for some way out. Anything, anything at all!

"Hey, Kuntz!" Matty and the greasy boy scout both turned to see Mike, he rolled down the hill, grabbed something off the ground as he spun to his feet, using the leverage from the roll to toss the heavy object.

Kuntz grunted as something containing an extended amount of mass collided forcefully with the back of his head, knocking him unconscious.

"Oh, thank god," Matty said, rubbing her face.

“Matt!” Aaron called, sliding down the embankment towards them, “Are you okay?” Billy yelled as he leapt over the

“Fine,” Matty replied, stepping over the prone Kuntz. She reached down and picked up the heavy object that had dented Kuntz’ thick skull. “Uh, Mike? Where’d you get this?”

Mike blinked and peered. “Kiwi-Mocha Fruit Juice? I thought that was a rock.”

Aaron opened his mouth to say something but was cut short as Billy cackled, whipping out a tiny notebook and jotted something down. He grinned darkly at Mike. “Soon, soon,” he said, and then cackled again.

“What’s with Bill?” Matty asked.

“He’s going insane,” Mike replied, shrugging a bit.

“Did we find all the hamsters?” Aaron asked, quickly changing the subject.

“I’ve got one,” Matty replied, fishing it out of her pocket. It was wearing the remains of the Snickers wrapper as a hat.

“I give you,” Mike said, holding up the hamster, “Muad’Dib! The Sleeper has awakened!” And, indeed, the sleeping hamster uncurled and wriggled his whiskers, wondering, in his tiny hamster brain, what all the yelling was about.

“You’re weird,” Billy said. Matty and Aaron nodded their agreement.

“Thank you. I practice.”

Hughes had it down now. He and the other feline were strutting down the hall, marking things as theirs. To keep things simple, Hughes took the left side, and the other took the right side. The larger cat kept sneaking over to mark things Hughes had already marked as his, but Hughes had his number.

He kept sneaking to the other side to do the exact same thing.

\* \* \*

"Okay," Matt, no longer Matty, said, crossing his arms. "You say there's two people tied up inside of Cabin Three."

"Yup," Aaron responded.

"And you say that we have to go rescue them," Mike continued, frowning softly.

"Or go get an adult," Billy muttered.

"Matt is an adult, you crouton," Aaron responded. Billy was momentarily stunned. No one had ever called him a crouton before.

"Alright, look," Matt said, adjusting his hat before turning and looking towards Cabin Three. "We'll go, check it out, and see if we can help, and if it's too dangerous, we can just send someone back to get help."

"They fall for it!" Perry said, chuckling darkly to himself. Soon, soon, all would be complete. He pulled out a bright red cloth and waved it furiously. Moments later, a similar cloth fluttered in the woods across from him.

And then there was loud cackling.

"Um, was that giant crane there before?" Billy asked, pointing up at the construction equipment parked behind the cabin. "Also, does anyone else hear cackling?"

"I don't know. I don't think you can see it from anywhere else," Aaron replied, ducking around the sides of Cabin Three to check. "No, it's completely invisible except from right here."

"That's just weird," Mike said, poking the crane. "I wonder what it's for?"

The scouts were silent for a long moment, startled out of it only by a familiar voice.

"Aha!" the voice said, in a thick Chinese accent and bad grammar, "Perry get you now! I... *Aiya, nar? Tamen shi nar ma?*"

"Perry?" Aaron called. Billy hit in him the shoulder.

"Don't call him, you... you... you duck!"

Perry dashed around the cabin and growled at the scouts.

"Hi, Perry," Mike waved. "Where'd you get the crane?"

"Internet." Perry shook his head and growled again, pointing his finger at them. "You think you foil my plan! I will still win! Now, Kuntz!"

There was a long silence. Aaron cleared his throat.

"Uh, Perry?" Mike said.

"You quiet!" Perry shouted. "Kuntz! Now!"

"Perry?" Matt said, as kindly as he could. "Kuntz is in the forest, unconscious due to kiwi-mocha fruit juice wounds."

"Kiwi mocha... fruit juice..." Perry said, staring in disbelief. He shook his head and growled. "It no matter!" He leapt forward, aiming for the crane.

There was a sudden click and Perry stopped and stared down. He sighed. "*Cao wo*," he said, very softly, to himself. There was another click, and then a net snapped up, trapping Perry inside. The crane rumbled to life and began to hoist the net upwards, then turned and began to rumble off in the direction of the waterfront.

"We've got to go after him," Aaron said, starting to run off.

"But he's trying to kill us!" Billy protested. He squeaked as Mike grabbed one of his arms and Matt the other.

"We've got to save him!" Matt said, and hauled Billy away, running after the runaway crane.

The crane was careening out of control through the forest, tearing a wild hole through the trees as it headed towards the not-too distant lake. Perry remarked quietly to himself that it really ought to have been the Jusenkyo scouts trapped in this net, about to be drowned in the unused waterfront.

Well, Perry remarked silently to himself, at least it would be an interesting death.

\* \* \*

"Perry and the crane went this way," Aaron said, kneeling in the dirt and gently prodding some tracks.

"How clearly astute of you," Billy replied, looking up at the wide swath of destroyed forest.

Matt shook his head. "Are we gaining on him, I can't tell?"

"No," Billy said looking down the ruined path the crane had caused.

"We'll never catch up to him at this rate," Matt said. He pointed to the left. "This way, I know a short-cut."

"It's going in a straight line, straight towards the lake," Billy complained, "How can there be any short-cuts?"

"Shut up, Bill!"

"Are you sure this is going to work, Sir?" Proctor asked as he finished applying the last of the mud and sticks.

"Shut up," Justy replied irritably as he examined his hench-scout's handiwork. "This is your fault for losing the damn hamsters in the first place."

"Yes, Sir," Proctor said, quietly, letting his face hang. He stood back from his masterpiece. "Finished, Captain."

"It will do."

"Where are we?" Mike asked.

"Almost there," was Matt's only response, but he didn't sound too confident.

They burst through the woods and suddenly found themselves in a clearing, empty except for a gigantic, gray, metal ring standing upright, smack dead in the middle. All the scouts, Matt included, stopped and stared for a good long time.

"Is this what you were aiming for?" Mike asked, his voice hushed in reverence.

Matt shrugged. "I thought I'd seen Kenny up this way a day or so ago, thought he might be able to help us. But I don't see him here."

"Is that what I think that is?" Aaron said. Indicating the circular structure.

"No," Mike replied, shaking his head. "It only looks like one."

"It's really a magic doorway to alternate dimensions," Matt added. "I'm just surprised to see it here."

"Mr. Atanian?"

Everyone turned. Kenny had just come up behind them, lugging a large bundle of wires.

"Kenny?" Matt blinked, responding in exactly the same tone of disbelief as their young super-genius friend.

"Should you be working on a merit badge, Kenny?" Aaron noted.

"I am," Kenny replied. "The 'Advanced Theoretical Quantum Astrophysics' Badge." He held up the merit badge book—it featured Stephen Hawking staring out at them from the cover.

"I didn't know that was a badge," Billy said, suspiciously.

"I had to get special permission," Kenny confessed, "to do it at Summer Camp." He shrugged a little bit. "Oh, and this one doesn't go to alternate dimensions," He added. "I've been doing some work on theories involving instantaneous travel within this plane of existence, and just decided to use the same motif."

"So it is what I thought it was," Aaron said, glaring at Mike.

"I guess," Mike shrugged.

"I'm having some difficulty," Kenny said with a sigh. "I've only managed to have success over short distances.

Mike grinned suddenly. "Can we ask a favor, Kenny?"

"Alright, now what?" Justy asked, crossing his arms.

"We lure the Garden Snake patrol to the three hamsters, sir." Proctor frowned. "Do you hear something, Captain? Like thunder?"

"And once they're at the hamsters?"

"Uh, Perry said he and Kuntz would take it from there, Captain."

“Good. Good. How will we know when he's in position?”

“He's supposed to signal us with a red flag, Sir, then we do the same with our own. It should be right... uh... where did it go? Sir, did you see our red flag?”

“Fantastic,” Justy said, letting out the faintest of cackles. “Now what?”

“N-now, Sir? Uh, we wait for the Garden Snake Patrol.”

“Excellent.”

There was a bright light and a sudden splash-like noise.

“Uh, Captain? Did you just see a huge flash of like, like a... gack!” The reason for Proctor's gack was this: as he was turning to see what the light was, someone stuffed a hamster into his mouth. This was quite a problem for Proctor for, as he struggled valiantly to spit the living gag out, the hamster, scared out of its tiny little mind, kept trying to squirm further in.

“Mwahahahahaha!” Justy cackled, paying not the least bit of attention to, well, anything. “Proctor, my slave, go now and lure the Garden Snakes! Lure them so that they may be crushed once and for all!”

“Lure us where, now?”

“To the three hamsters, of course. Haven't you been paying attention?” Justy grunted and shook his head. “Where Peon #18 will kill those miserable Garden Snakes! Do you hear a rumbling noise, Proctor? Like Thunder?” Justy turned and found him face to face with the majority of the Garden Snake patrol, Proctor leaning against a tree as he frantically tried to stop the hamster from climbing down his throat.

“Hi, Justy,” Aaron said.

“You!” Justy cried, pulling out his baton and swinging it as hard as he could. He hit Billy just above his ear.

“Ow,” Billy replied, rubbing his head and glaring at Justy.

“Oh, sorry,” Justy said, “Batteries must be dead, one moment.”

“Batteries?” Mike asked, looking up at Matt, who shrugged.

Justy fiddled with the baton for a moment, finally managing to pop the bottom off, where two triple A batteries popped out. He pulled them out and slide two new ones in, swishing the baton about. “Ah, there we go. Proctor got it for me for my birthday. Here we go!” He smacked Billy again, and there was a loud zap and an arc of blue lightning.

“Ow!” Billy said again. Justy leaned back and cackled loudly for a few minutes, as the rumbling got louder and louder.

“And now!” Justy declared, pointing his electric baton at the Garden Snake patrol. “Peon #18! Now!”

There was no response.

“Uh, Justy?” Mike said.

“Shut up!” Justy barked, angrily. “Perry! Now!”

“Justy?” Matt said, as kindly as he could, “Perry is in the forest, trapped in a runaway crane headed straight for the lake.”

“Oh,” Justy replied, blinking a little bit. He shrugged. “Then I shall destroy you myself!” He raised his baton and began to cackle again.

“Aow!” something called from the trees, leaping forward. Everyone, Justy included, turned to look.

“What is that?” Aaron asked, shielding his eyes.

“It’s a bird!”

“It’s a... tiger?” Billy blinked, rubbing his eyes. “It’s a... tiger wearing a bright pink tie with a red scarf on its arms?”

The tiger yowled again before landing on Justy’s head. The SPL grunted softly as he was knocked unconscious, the tiger flipping gracefully backwards and landing on its back feet.

And then it adjusted its tie.

“It’s... Hughes?” Matt said, incredulously.

“In the flesh,” Hughes said, grinning widely. He began to strut artfully.

“What the hell are you wearing?” Aaron asked, staring in horror at the tiger-striped suit, oddly complimented by

the bright pink tie, "And why does it look far less horrible than it should?"

"Where have you been?" Billy demanded, looking around suspiciously, "And why do you have a beard?"

Hughes reached up and pulled the beard off, tossing it away. "It's fake," he said, still ginning like a Cheshire cat. "And I've been on Walkabout, journeying through the untamed wilderness until I met myself and gained a greater understanding of my subconscious." He pulled out a spray-bottle and sprayed a nearby tree. "Mine."

"So," Matt said, poking the fake beard with the tip of his boot. "Did you meet yourself?"

"Yup," Hughes replied. "And I learned something. I'm an asshole." The other scouts shrugged at each other. Hughes grinned and then let out a soft ooh as he spotted three giant hamsters, made from mud and sticks. "Dinner!" he cried. "Better stalk 'em. Here," He pulled something out of his pocket and tossed it carelessly to Aaron, "I was keeping that for later, but I guess you can have it." Hughes slipped behind a tree and began to creep up on the fake hamsters, making no noise.

"Hey," Aaron said, looking at the slightly rumped hamster in his hands. "We've got all three now." He passed it to Proctor, who finally managed to spit the shivering, now very damp rodent in his mouth out. He smiled brightly and hugged the two hamsters close to his chest.

"Here," Mike said, passing Proctor the third and final hamster. "His name is Muad'Dib."

"What does that mean?"

"It is the mouse shadow on the second moon," Mike replied, cryptically.

"Hey," Billy said, "That rumbling's getting louder. Think it's Perry?"

"Probably," Matt replied. "Kenny! Now!"

There was no response.

"Uh oh," Matt muttered to himself. "Kenny! We need it, now!"

The crane, Perry still dangling from the net, barrelled into view.

There was a tense moment and then, suddenly, a massive robot dropped from above, firing its rocket jets at the last moment to prevent a crash landing. The robot, short and squat, took the full brunt of the crane, sliding back a few feet as it tried to stop the crane from moving.

"Sorry I'm late," Kenny said, walking up behind the scouts, a massive joystick in his hands. "I don't think my mech can hold the crane back for long, though."

"On it," Aaron said, dashing between the robot's legs and climbing up into the crane body. He began to fiddle with the levers.

"What did you have that for?" Mike asked Kenny about the mech.

"Oh, you know, to help with gate construction," Kenny explained.

Aaron's fiddling apparently had some success as the crane halted in its forward motion. Perry, no longer in immediately danger, pointed down at the three mud-hamsters, just as Hughes leapt from cover for one of them. "What that?" he demanded.

It was Proctor who answered. "Those are the three hamsters you wanted us to lure the Garden Snake Patrol to."

"What? Perry want Garden Snakes lured to three hamster!" Perry yelled, pointing back towards Cabin Three.

"Those are three hamsters," Proctor replied, looking confused. Perry blinked and pulled out his Chinese – English, English – Chinese pocket dictionary, and opened to the proper page, which read thus:

*cang*: cabin

*cangshu*: hamster

"Oh," Perry said. He growled and peered down at Proctor again. "Why you signal back, if Garden Snakes not in position?"

"Signal back? We've been here this entire time," Proctor protested. "I lost my red flag somewhere in the forest."

"You mean this?" Hughes asked, waving the red scarf tied to his arm. "I found it, back there, and saw someone else waving one. I just wanted to fit in, man."

"But... Perry hear cackling!" the Chinese boy scout protested.

"Me," Hughes said, raising his hand. "It seemed like the right thing to do. I mean, I had just found this awesome lunch." He pointed at one of the hamsters. "It seemed right to let it know who was gonna eat it."

"Hughes," Mike said, "no eating the hamsters."

Aaron finally managed to carefully lower the Perry-filled net to the ground and turn off the crane's engine. "That," he said, as he hopped out of the crane, "Is my final requirement for the Farm Mechanics merit badge."

"How?" Billy asked.

"Explain how power is produced or transferred in: a diesel engine and a hydraulic system." Aaron said, with some satisfaction. He pointed at the crane. "Thirty seconds with that thing, and I finally get how it all works."

Perry, in the meanwhile, had pulled himself free of the net. He stared at the Garden Snakes for a long moment, before he turned and stormed off into the wilderness.

"Alright," Matt said, shrugging a little bit. "Everyone accounted for? All hamsters are here? Good. Let's go home."

Crown Point was busy getting ready for the campfire, only a few short hours away. Aaron was trying to get Hughes to get rid of the very loud, zebra-striped suit he was wearing. "We're supposed to be getting into class A's."

"Are you saying that this suit is anything less?" Hughes demanded.

Aaron could only sigh.

Becker appeared from the woods, having gotten separated from the rest of the Garden Snakes during the initial hamster chase and only now having found his way back. He was talking animatedly to himself, seemingly

quite annoyed. He was interrupted by Swett who immediately started telling him his idea for a joke he wanted to tell at the campfire. Like everyone else Swett had tried to convince, Becker told him it was a bad idea.

"How's your list going?" Mike asked Billy, who was crouched behind one of the picnic tables, near Matt's tent.

"Well, only two more things left to cross off."

"Oh?" Billy nodded in response. Mike scratched his head.

There was a scream and a thud from Matt's tent.

"One more thing to cross off," Billy said. They opened the flap to Matt's tent, and found him, unconscious on the floor, a massive cardboard cut-out of Sarah holding a butcher knife propped up in the corner. "Matt will swoon over Sarah'," Billy repeated, pulling out the notebook and crossing that entry off.

"Where the hell did you get a giant cut-out of Sarah with a knife?"

Billy just smiled and pointed out the door. "Come on, we need to get ready for the campfire."

**For those keeping track,  
Billy predicted the following:**

~~Bizarre and complex plot~~

~~Matt Atanian Involved~~

~~Guest Appearance by Colin and Dan and/or Troop 180~~

~~Kenny will do something smart~~

~~Shmuler will be annoying~~

~~Swett will be sarcastic~~

~~Perry will try to kill them~~

~~The Porters will show up~~

~~Matt will swoon over Sarah~~

~~Matty will resist the advances of Kuntz~~

~~Justy will be Up To Something~~

~~Kiwi/Mocha Fruit Juice~~

~~Ryoga will show up~~

~~Jim Anderson will ask "the one with the red hair"~~

~~Everything will work out in the end.~~

## *Chapter Thirty: For Whom the Bell Tolls*

by Matthew Atanian

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Someone yawned.

This was not typical of a campfire at the Horace A. Moses Scout Reservation. Usually they were boisterous or enthralling. This one, however, seemed boring and sleep-inducing. This was something of a pity, as it had had the promise of being one of the most memorable fires in many a year.

It had had this promise since a certain skit performed at the Spring Camporee. A skit that many people who were not even otherwise up at camp that week had come up this evening especially to see the sequel of.

These people were quite disappointed, however, when they discovered that *Matt Gets Wet, part 3* was not on the evening's program. In fact, nothing fun was on the program.

JC Penny's skit? Removal of clothing. Gone.

Toilet paper skit? Possible reference to biological activities. Gone.

The Cat Came Back? Reference to horrific deaths. Gone.

The Song That Never Ends? Against the Geneva Convention. Gone.

In an effort to get rid of any of the so-called "grey areas" of anything that might be the least bit offensive, Camp Director Ann Balogna had purged the campfire of all joy.

Troop 86 had finished their assigned skit, "Accountancy." And no, it didn't feature the shanty. It was just a group of Boy Scouts pretending to be accountants. One of them had discovered an error in another's work. They cooperated to fix it. They lived happily ever after. The end. Next skit.

Skit after skit like that for a good half hour now.

"That woman must die," Hughes muttered.

"Maybe you can slay her with your newfound fashion sense," Gelinias commented.

"Laugh all you want Bill, you know I look good."

"You look like a pimp. All you need is a big floppy hat."

"Shut up, Bill."

Matt was a bit worried. They hadn't seen Kenny since they had returned from the incident up at Cabin III.

"You sure you're up to this?" Mike asked as if he could read Matt's mind. "I mean, it won't be as good, but the Clappy Song would still be a minor form of rebellion."

"I have faith in Kenny," Matt insisted, trying to convince himself.

"Thank you, Mr. Atanian," Kenny quietly said.

"You're... woah, where did you come from?" Matt asked.

"My TARDIS," Kenny said.

"What?"

"I was joking. I came from Crown Point. You didn't notice my approach as I was quiet and you were in conversation with Mr. Quadrozzi."

"You? A joke?" Swett said, leaning over. "Congratulations, Kenny!"

Kenny, embarrassed, ignored Swett and sat next to Matt and Mike.

"So," Matt asked, "what's the plan?"

"Well," Kenny said, "my first plan wasn't working, as it would have taken too long to have the pills ready. I've still got them synthesizing in my Laboratory for future use should you need them, but they won't be ready for some months. Then I started thinking of something more along the lines of some sort of sonic wave."

"Sonic wave?" Mike asked.

Kenny held up a device. "This will emit a sound wave outside of the range of human hearing that might heat up the water and thus make it have no effect on you when you are in your natural form."

"That won't have any effect on, say, people?" Gelinias asked. "You know, with our bodies made up mostly of water? Like putting a puppy in a microwave?"

"Shut up, Bill," Mike said.

"Yeah," Aaron said. "That's sick, Bill, just sick."

"It is nothing like microwave technology," Kenny assured them.

"Hold on, I think we're missing something important," Matt said. He turned to Kenny. "Did you say, '*might* heat up the water'?"

"Indeed. I am sorry, I didn't get a chance to test it properly as I was rather in a rush to finish it. It might heat it up, or it might just alter its molecular structure, transmutating it into a cold, wet goo."

"But still cold and wet?"

"Indeed."

Then the evening's MC stood between the twin fires blazing upon the stage and announced Kumbyah.

Mike stood. He approached the stage. Once upon it, he turned to face the audience.

He smiled.

He waved.

"Mike, you rock!" someone called out from the audience.

"Hello, everyone!" he called out. "As you may all be aware, we were originally planning to perform the skit *Matt Gets Wet, part 3*."

From her seat in the front row, Mrs. Balogna was frantically trying to get Mike's attention without being too obvious to the audience, and she was making various "shushing" gestures. Mike looked her in the eye and winked.

"Unfortunately," he continued, "Matt's lawyers were unwilling to budge on a few key issues, and it was looking like we might have had to perform the song Kumbyah for you, instead."

The audience booed like there was no tomorrow. "Matt Gets Wet rocks!" someone called out from the audience.

"However," Mike continued, "I have successfully captured Matt's lawyer, Hugh Louis Dewey of the law offices of Dewey, Cheetham, & Howe."

Luke and Aaron came out of the woods carrying between them Justy, still unconscious and bound with rope. From her seat, Mrs. Balogna was positively bug eyed in silent fury.

"Now I have always been a great fan of Shakespeare," Mike announced. "And I decided that the best way to resolve this legal matter would be to take a bit of advice from the bard." From his pocket Mike pulled a fake (but realistic looking) gun, pointed it at Justy's head, and pulled the trigger. There was a loud bang and a large cloud of smoke filled the stage. The audience yelled Mrs. Balogna shouted, "Stop this at once!"

The smoke quickly cleared, and Justy had vanished. Now obviously, Luke and Aaron had just tossed him back into the trees. However, it was quite the convincing theatrical effect.

"Now, do you people want to see Matt get wet?" Mike shouted out. "If you do, let me get a 'Heck yeah!'"

"Heck yeah!" Everyone hollered. Many people began pulling out various things ranging from cups of water to canteens to water guns to a couple of people who had somehow smuggled in a fire hose.

Matt looked at Kenny. Kenny flicked a switch and gave him a thumbs up. Matt shrugged.

"Get up here, Matt!" Mike shouted.

"Matt! Matt! Matt!" the audience began chanting.

Matt gingerly approached the stage and then turned to face the audience. He waved. "Hi, everybody," he said.

"Hi, Matt!" everyone shouted so loud that even the echo seemed deafening.

"Matt rocks!" someone shouted out.

"Well," Matt said. "I guess this is it."

Matt had come to the campfire in his very best uniform. Now, however, he unbuttoned his red wool jacket, carefully folded it up, and placed it into the arms of the waiting Bill Gelinas. He then removed his campaign hat and placed it atop his coat. Gelinas walked to the back of the amphitheatre with them to keep them safe.

Matt then looked out at the audience, straightened his neckerchief and pulled up it's slide. He took a breath.

"I am Matthew Atanian, Eagle Scout, Assistant Scoutmaster of Troop 192, Vigil Honor member of Allogagan Lodge #83 in the Order of the Arrow. And now... Now I get wet!"

There were massive cheers from the audience and Mrs. Balogna fainted with shock.

And then... then the water came.

"Nooooooooooooooooooooo!"

Something besides the water flew at Matt and got there first, knocking him back. Back behind the fires and down the small hill beyond them. He tumbled down and out of the reach of the wetness, and afterwards, he lay there panting in surprise.

Up in the amphitheatre, the crowd, too, was surprised. They all stared at the soaked scout sitting crouched down on the centre of the stage.

"How did I get here?" Becker turned to face everyone. In a confused voice he asked, "Why am I drippings with goo?"

There was a deadly silence. Then someone in the audience shouted out, "Cleveland rocks!"

"The Aristocrats!" Swett ended with a flourish.

The small fire that had been built back at Crown Point continued to crackle as it burned, illuminating the stunned looks on the faces of Matt, Mike, Hughes, Aaron, Gelinas, and Kenny as they all starred at Swett with glazed over expressions on their faces.

Becker was there, too. He had not heard a word that Swett had said, however. Since returning from the Camp Fire he had rediscovered the joy of headphones that he had apparently abandoned a few days earlier.

Crickets chirped and Swett looked at his fellows, anticipating a response.

"I don't get it," Kenny finally said.

"I am so glad," Mike said, "that we didn't let you tell that so-called joke in front of the entire camp."

"Yeah, I suppose your idea was better," Swett conceded. "But I'm saving this puppy for the next camporee."

"The hell you are!" Aaron insisted. "Go to bed, Swett."

Swett yawned. "Good idea," he said.

The constant background noise from Becker's headphones ceased suddenly. With an annoyed grunt, Becker thwacked his walkman. It had no effect. "Damn batteries."

"What, no more?" Hughes asked. Although his garish mode of dress had not changed, his attitude had calmed down somewhat and he was acting more normal. Well, normal may have been the wrong word to describe him in the best of times, but at least he was no longer trying to eat small rodents, and had only brought out a small spray bottle containing everyone-else-didn't-want-to-know-what once since returning to Crown Point.

"Oh, no, there's more in my tent. Suppose I'll head off to bed, too."

Becker and Swett headed off to their respective tents. Moments later those who remained could faintly hear the music coming from Becker's.

Gelinas leaned towards Mike. "I'll have your hat then," he quietly said.

"You what?"

"Your hat. I'll have it."

"How do you figure?"

Gelinas handed his small notebook over to Mike. Inside, Mike found a list. Every item on it was gleefully crossed out.

"Huh..." Mike read over it. "Doesn't look good for me, now does it?"

"No, I can't say that it does."

"What's this one here?" Mike asked. "Can't make out the writing underneath the crossing out."

Gelinas looked over and read. "The Porters will show up," he said.

"But they didn't."

"Yes they did."

"No. They didn't."

"Yes. They were at the camp fire for *Matt Gets Wet*.  
Weren't they?"

"No. They were not."

"No?" Gelinas whimpered.

"No," Mike said firmly.

The fire continued to burn. Aaron added a stick to it.

"You'll have the cards in the morning," Gelinas  
muttered.

There was the snap of a twig then, and they all turned to see who approached. They were mildly surprised to see Perfume standing there, having taken her natural form but still clad in a boy scout uniform.

"Hello, Perfume," Mike said. "Come to join the fire?"  
He motioned to a piece of log.

Perfume moved towards it and slowly, almost reluctantly, sat. She looked in turn at each of the others. She then spoke, her voice barely above a whisper. "Why you save Perfume?" she asked.

"Because," Mike said, "you're a Garden Snake."

"You're a member of our patrol," Hughes added.

"You're one of us," Aaron said.

"And we look out for each other," Kenny said.

"Even if *you're* always trying to kill *us*," Gelinas  
finished.

The others looked at Gelinas with death in their eyes. Perfume, however, just laughed softly. "Shut up, Bill," she then said.

"There you go!" Gelinas said. "That's the spirit."

Perfume looked at Matt. "What of you?" she asked.

Matt shrugged. "They're my friends," he said of the others sitting there. "I suppose that makes you my friend, too. Like it or not."

"Like or not," Perfume repeated.

Aaron added another stick to the fire.

"You all save Perfume," the Amazon said.

Matt shrugged. "A life for a life?" he asked.

Perfume thought about this for a moment. Then she said, "Life for life. Perfume no kill you all anymore."

"Welcome to the patrol," Mike told her.

This caused the faintest of smiles to grace the Amazon's face.

"Well," Matt said. "It's been a hell of a year."

"Hell of a year," everyone agreed.

"Cursed springs," Mike said.

"Crazy Amazons," Hughes said.

"Kiss of death," Perfume said.

"Porters," Matt said.

"Porters," Aaron agreed.

"Joining the troop," Kenny said. "Making new friends."

"Rigged elections," Mike said.

"What ever did happen to Mr. Pruyne?" Gelinias asked.

"Shut up, Bill."

"Shopping at Victoria's Secret!" Matt said.

"Sweet Scully dreams," Mike said.

"The second biggest candy canes ever," Hughes said.

"I still want to know where any of you saw bigger!"

Matt said with a frown.

"Mr. Tanner as Santa Clause!" Mike said.

"The Klondike," Gelinias said.

"The winning sled," Kenny said with a smile.

"That psycho Palmer," Matt shuddered. "Whatever happened to him?"

"Romeo and Juliet," Aaron said.

"Abu Dabi," Mike grinned.

"Where exactly did you go with the Juniors?" Gelinias asked Kenny.

"A story for another time," Kenny responded.

"Stage combat," Perfume said.

"There is a difference between 'stage combat' and the real thing, you know," Mike muttered.

Perfume just grinned at him.

"Canadian terrorists!" Aaron announced.

"Great team-up with 180," Matt said.

"And Dan and Colin," Hughes added.

“And that squirrel chick,” Gelinas said with a look at Mike.

“She, too, is a story for another time,” Mike replied.

“And a great team up with Perfume,” Matt added.

“Been one hell of a year,” they all chorused.

Aaron stopped adding fuel to the fire. The assembled scouts sat in silent fellowship, watching the flames together until they died down into embers. Then they watched the embers for a while. Then one of them softly began singing. The others soon joined in.

“Softly falls the light of day, as our campfire fades away. Silently each scout should ask, ‘Have I done my daily task? Have I kept my honour bright? Can I guiltless sleep tonight? Have I done and have I dared everything to be prepared?’”

And then in silence, they rose one by one, and silently made their separate ways to their tents, until only Matthew Atanian was left behind. He grabbed a bucket of water, poured it over the cooling embers to make sure they were completely out, and then went to sleep as well.

The next morning went by in a blur of breakfast and closing ceremonies and then everyone packed their stuff into their parent’s cars and headed back to civilization with its real toilets and working hot showers.

By a coincidence that even Gelinas chose not to comment on, he, Hughes, Mike, and Aaron were the last youth of Troop 192 waiting for their parents to arrive. Matt Atanian, too, was waiting for his father (he supposed he should get his driver’s license one of these days) and was waiting with his friends in Crown Point.

A few of the other adult leaders had stayed (what with that whole two-deep leadership thing) but they were currently down at the road watching for cars. Matt heard one of them shout up to them. Mrs. Abdelmaseh had arrived in her large blue mini-van.

Aaron went to go grab his stuff. The others moved in to lend a hand. It was then that, with murderous intent, an old Chinese man leapt from the forest and attacked them.

*The End... ?*

The man screamed as he woke up. Where the hell was he? He tried to catch his breath as he looked out of the window to get his bearings. He seemed to be lying in a bed in some sort of cabin, and could see a lush green field outside. He was wearing his usual attire. Red coat. Blue shirt. Yellow tie. Light blue jeans.

His memory was still fuzzy. "This is..."

He could hear footsteps approaching. He did not look to see who it was, and continued gazing out of the window. He imagined his afro may need some fluffing up if he had just awoken. "I'm so glad you're awake," a woman said. "I'm just a mountain girl. My name is Kumikumi. Here's some warm soup."

He paid no attention to her words. He had not even bothered to look over at her yet. His expression became somewhat glazed as he struggled to remember what had happened to him. "'Continue', is it?" he said to himself. He was unsure why he would say that, but it seemed to have some importance, as if in his confused state his mind was open to things he should not yet understand.

Then he remembered. He had gone to rescue her, and had failed her. He had failed her in every possible way. He would never again look into her deep eyes, or caress her long golden hair, or hear her sweet, manly voice. She had died in his arms.

"Tetsuko..." he whispered.

The mountain girl was still standing there. "Come now, your soup will get cold," she said.

He began to turn around.

"Yeah, thank..."

He saw her and what she was holding.

With a sudden, horrified, sharp intake of breath, he was off like a flash, screaming and running into the mountains. She was hot on his tail, still holding the bowl, yelling, "Wait! The soup!"

And so Nabeshin ran from Kumikumi, the woman who would someday be his bride. The woman whom he would raise a daughter with, and share something of a happy life

with, until he and his wife would meet their early and tragic demise.

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## *Epilogue*

by Matthew Atanian

---

Matthew Atanian lay peacefully in his bed. Now, he could rest.

The great work was done. The story was told. The last sentence was written. The last disclaimer followed it. The website had had its final update.

*Boy Scouts ½* was complete.

It had taken him nine long years. He had had the help of many people. There had been many successes and failures along the way. There had been long stretches between stories, when the characters would run around his head and scream at him, telling him, "You're not done with us yet! When are you going to finish our story!" Fans, too, had demanded more. (Fans! Never thought he would have those!)

There were personal losses along the way, too.

Mike... he still missed working with Mike. He had been a great writing partner. He hadn't spoken much to Mike, lately. Hopefully someday they would talk on a semi-regular basis, again. There was nothing really stopping them.

Aaron... Well, Aaron's departure hurt when it happened, but if one was to be honest, Matt didn't dwell much on it these days. These days, he felt much closer to the character of Aaron than he did to his memories of the actual person. Not that he wished Aaron ill, or would turn him away if he ever showed up out of the blue wanting to chat. But it wasn't as if he felt the void he still sometimes felt at the thought of Mike.

And Nikki... He had never met her in person, but he had loved her. And for a time, he had thought she loved him. Perhaps she did. He didn't like to think otherwise,

couldn't think it possible of her. They had met because of *Boy Scouts ½*. They had shared some fun times (albeit online or on the phone.) She had even helped in the writing of a story. But it would seem it had not been meant to last. He still thought of her now and then. Mind you, not in an, "I wish we were still together, my life is incomplete with out her!" kind of way. Far from it. More a kind of, "I wonder how she's doing," kind of way. He had tried talking to her once or twice since they split up, but alas it always seemed awkward as such things tend to be. Still, he did wish her well.

But for the losses, there were also great gains.

He did have the fans. Never thought he would have those. Still kind of shocked him any time he thought of that. He was sure he didn't have as many as he once had. (The effects of a two year gap between stories!) But he did have a few loyal hangers-on, and a few new ones seemed to pop up every once in a while. But the fans were not his greatest gains, to be sure.

Hughes had come in and helped fill the void created by Mike's loss to the writing team. It had been hell sometimes to get him to finish, but such things were old hat to Matt. (Well, maybe not *really* hell... But Matt supposed he could be a tad impatient sometimes with contributing writers.) He had been a welcome addition to the team.

Probably his greatest gain that could be directly attributable to *Boy Scouts ½* was the friendship he shared with Jason Bertovich. Jason was a good man, and had helped introduce Matt to the wonderful world of Anime conventions. He also helped expand the *Boy Scouts ½ Universe* with his own additions – some prosperous (such as the Perspectives series) and some... well... less so (such as the ill-fated Outlast.) Matt hadn't really talked to Jason as much in recent years, which he regretted. They still shared the occasional IM. He would definitely have to IM the ol' smeghead one of these days. He'd always regard Jason as a friend.

Although not directly attributable to *Boy Scouts ½*, his greatest gain in these past nine years had been shown his website before they had met. And, his meeting her, while not really attributable to BS½, was indirectly attributable to his being in the Boy Scouts. He was friends, of course, with the son of the camp ranger, Jim “The one with the red hair?” Anderson. Through Jim he had met Jen. Matt had once bet Jen dinner that he’d probably be single for the rest of his life. That was one bet he was glad to lose when Jen had introduced him to Jessi.

And... well... in her own way, Jessi had become a part of *Boy Scouts ½*. She had done some artwork inspired by the series. And she even wrote a story. Well... wrote it after much procrastination to the point where she put Mike’s deadline-defying exploits to shame, and finally after a rather expensive bribe (something she had wanted very much, and he had been wanting to buy for her anyway, but adding the condition of, “Finish the story and you get it!” certainly helped to expedite things) she presented the story to him with the exclamation of, “**Never again!**”

Never again... These words drifted through his mind as he lost consciousness. *Boy Scouts ½* was complete. A great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He was at peace at last. Never again...

Matthew K. Atanian was dreaming.

At least, he was pretty sure he was. His mind was muddled. It was like his thoughts were swimming upstream, against the currents of his consciousness. He found it slightly hard to concentrate. Still, he could think clearly enough to fixate on two aspects of his environment that pointed towards the conclusion that he was dreaming.

The first was his present environment itself. It was completely featureless. Matt looked around, taking in everything, and all he saw was inky blackness. Everywhere, just... nothing. He could feel stable ground

beneath his feet, but when he looked down, he looked down into emptiness.

The second strange aspect of this experience was the figure walking toward him out of the darkness. Well, perhaps walking wasn't the right word. Matt couldn't see any clear figure, only a shimmering outline that grew a little bigger and a little more distinct over time, as if it were travelling towards him.

"You know," Matt said to himself as he watched the figure approach, "This seems an awful lot like something Mike would have written." He looked at the figure a moment more. "If that is Jimmy Carter again, I'm going to kill him for encouraging G.W. to run."

But it wasn't Jimmy Carter. Or Jimmy Stewart. Or Guy Makihashi and Toro Watanabe.

It was a different Watanabe, though.

Matt stared open-mouthed and agog as he recognized the red sport coat over the blue shirt and the yellow tie. And, of course, the afro. 'Tis not often you see a Japanese man with a huge afro.

"Nabeshin?" he asked.

"How's it going?" came the reply.

"What are you doing here?" Matt asked.

"I'm here to give you a message as the Patron Saint of Self-Insertion. (And I don't mean anything naughty by that.)"

Matt blinked. "The what?"

"After I died, I was installed as a saint," Nabeshin said.

"You're not dead," Matt insisted. "I'm sure I'd have herd on AnimeOnDVD.com if you were!"

"Oh, the real me isn't dead," Nabeshin said. "I'm the character me. You know, like how you are the real you, and in *Boy Scouts* ½ there is the character you."

Matt nodded, doing his best to follow along. "When you died in episode one of *Puni Puni Poemy*?" he asked.

Nabeshin nodded.

"My condolences on your death. I was sad when I heard about it. Still have to see *Puni Puni Poemy*, though."

“Hope you enjoy it. I poured my heart and soul into it.”

“If half of what I heard about it making *Excel Saga* look tame is true, then I am sure it will.” Matt paused. “So, what is this message?”

“You’re very important to us up there,” Nabeshin said. “Your soul shines out across the heavens and burns brightly in the night.”

“Important? Why?”

“For god’s sake, man, I am the Patron Saint of Self-Insertion.”

“Makes sense, I suppose. I mean, here I am, I just wrote some stupid stories with myself as a main character. Buy you... you directed a major anime and fragrantly inserted yourself into the storyline. In fact, it could be argued that you totally usurped the main story since it was you and Pedro who defeated the main villain in the anime version.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, my friend. You are the true King on Earth of Self-Insertion. No one else comes close, except perhaps your pal Jason. But aside from his work with you, he tends to shy away from too much of the ol’ S. I. You rule, man! You write nothing but Self-Insertion.”

“There must be others who do that.”

“Yes, there are! But you... you make it good! And you also try to make it accessible to the masses, rather than some inside joke that only you and a few friends would get.”

“Oh, I’ve told a few of those, I’m sure,” Matt’s modesty forced him to say.

“True, but you never let them overshadow the story too much. You are, indeed, the S. I. King.”

“So... what do you want?”

“A long time ago, I received a message. I don’t know from where it came, and at the time I knew not what it meant. But now... now I know what it meant. And I know for who it is intended.”

Nabeshin grabbed Matt by the shoulders and looked him squarely in the eyes. “It was intended for you,” he said.

“M... me?”

“And the message was... ‘Continue.’”

“Continue?”

“Yes!” Nabeshin bellowed powerfully. “Continue!”

Nabeshin flew up into the air. He extended his arms towards Matt, and yellow electricity shot forth from his fingertips. The electricity enveloped Matt. “I will give you the power!” Nabeshin continued. “The power to **continue!**”

Matt screamed as he woke up. Where the hell was he? He tried to catch his breath as he looked up at the poster on the ceiling.

It was morning. He blinked as his eyes adjusted to the light. Ah, yes. He was in his bedroom.

That was some dream! Well, to hell with it. *Boy Scouts* ½ was done. Now he could rest.

He got up, carefully so as not to wake Jessi, and walked out to the bathroom to get a glass of water from the sink. He looked up at the mirror and gazed at his reflection. It took him a minute or two to comprehend what he was seeing, and when he did he dropped the little paper cup he was holding and spilled the water on himself.

(Of course, this being the real Matt, no transformation took place.)

He gazed at the mirror for a long time. “‘Continue’, is it?” he said at last.

And continue he would. But first... first he would have to go and get a haircut.

# Afterword

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Hey, there! Well, what a nice definitive ending with no loose ends, eh? What's that, you say? Why the hell didn't it end with Matt putting out the fire? What was that with them getting attacked by someone jumping out of the woods, then it just ending? Why would you do that to us? WHY, MATT? WHY?

Well, don't forget... this novel was created by putting together what was originally a series of short stories available online, and of course while this was the end of what I like to call, "Year One," it does lead into the sequel series, year two, "*Boy Scouts ½ in Japan*." As of this writing, that series isn't very far along yet... but if you do wish to read more and if it isn't yet, say, 2020 and I finally wrote enough to put "in Japan" into a novel of its own, then you can check it out online at <http://BoyScouts1-2.tripod.com>.

There are a few other things you can check out there as well. There are two spin-offs. (I may self-publish these, too, at some point. But no promises. Let us see how this one turns out, first!) There are also a few "Year One" stories that I didn't include here.

Three of these are the *Boy Scouts ½ Anime Deathmatch* stories. These were based on a series my friend Jason-kun used to write. Think *Celebrity Deathmatch*, but with anime characters. The *Boy Scouts ½* ones featured *Boy Scouts ½* characters fighting to the death with various anime characters... and were decidedly not part of the canon. They were just fun little what-ifs. I do like them, but didn't think they'd quite fit in with the narrative of this collected volume.

Also not included was a second "Troop 180 Chronicles" story from Mark "Mr. A" Abert. This second one, unlike the first one which stood well on its own, ended on a cliff hanger which has never been resolved. I thought that would make it not fit well into the novel, but of

course it is up on the website so do enjoy it there if you wish!

Man, it was weird looking over the epilogue as I put together this collection. It does go on a bit about the relationship I was in at the time which, while I shan't go into detail about the specifics here, is now in the past. It is especially weird since I have moved on and am quite happily in a new relationship. (You may have gotten a hint about this back in the dedication.) I did wonder briefly about leaving the epilogue out or – even more drastic – updating it to remove or replace certain things... but you know what, that's who I was at the time and the epilogue is a product of that time. I'm not going to replace guns with walkie talkies, here. (I'm looking at you, Spielberg!)

Anyway, I could go on forever here. There is tons of stuff I could say about the stories themselves, and I think it would be great to hear a bit from some of the other contributing writers, too. And I do have such words available! The stories, as separate items, all did have authors' notes attached to them. After a brief legal disclaimer, I will present all of the notes for you for your edification should you wish to read them. Enjoy!

### **Additional Note from the Second Edition:**

Hello! Matt here! If you try to go to the URL suggested in the Afterword, you may find that there is no *Boy Scouts ½* website there! Since the original publication of this novel, alas that website vanished into the ether. (And they say that when you put something out on the web, it is forever! Ha!)

Fear not! A new website has been built, however, for all of your *Boy Scouts ½* needs! If you'd like to find the new website, it is located here:

**<http://BS1-2.weebly.com>**

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# Authors Notes and Disclaimers

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As has been mentioned, this novel was originally published online as a continuing series of short stories. Each story was followed by some notes and disclaimers. These started out fairly brief and to the point (just disclaiming the elements that may have been borrowed from other sources) but eventually grew to include ample notes on the stories themselves, as well. For the sake of completeness, and because once we get past the dry earlier ones there may actually be some interesting stuff within, these notes will now be presented here.

## ***The Fateful Dip in the Springs***

The "Training Ground of Accursed Springs," Jusenkyo, and the Chinese Guide are from the *Ranma ½* stories by Rumiko Takahashi and are used without permission.

Most members of Troop 192 are based on real people who in real life are members of Boy Scout Troop 192. Locations used in this story (with the exception of Jusenkyo) are not fictitious.

Special thanks to Kelly Dedeo for being kind enough to provide me with the names for the Spring of Drowned Squirrel and Spring of Drowned Dog.

This story was written without the consent of the Boy Scouts of America.

## ***Stormy Weather at Camp Moses***

Certain aspects of this series are inspired by Rumiko Takahashi's *Ranma ½*. The character at the end inquiring

as to the whereabouts of a certain high school was used without permission.

Members of Troop 192 are based on real people, as was Mister Pyro himself, Dan Wellington. (Dan, I'm sorry for putting your character in the position of lusting after the mysterious woman you found at the buddy-board who turned out to be the character based on me. Believe me, I don't like the thought of you lusting after me any more than you do.)

This story was written without the consent of the Boy Scouts of America, and in fact if National ever found out about these stories, they'd probably ask for my registration card.

### ***Watergunfight at the Moses Coral***

Certain aspects of this series are inspired by Rumiko Takahashi's *Ranma ½*. The character of Hibiki Ryoga is used without permission.

Robotech is used without permission.

All named characters in this story with the exception of Taylor Kuntz are based on real persons. Horace A. Moses Scout Reservation is based on an actual location.

This story was written without the consent of the Boy Scouts of America, and in fact if National ever found out about these stories, they'd probably send someone to rip my toenails off with a big rusty pair of pliers.

### ***For The Love of the Red Haired Woman***

Certain aspects of this series are inspired by Rumiko Takahashi's *Ranma ½*. A certain widdle piggy is used without permission. Ranma fans should recognize the nightmare in the beginning as an obvious rip-off, too.

All characters except for Taylor Kuntz and the Girl Scout Leader of Matt's dreams are based on real people. Horace A. Moses Scout Reservation is based on an actual location.

Note: After rereading part 3 to myself, something occurred to me that I'd like to make clear. The name Kuntz is pronounced "Koontz", not "Cunts". Just wanted to make that clear to prevent and wide scale protests from feminist groups or fanatical southern Baptist groups.

This story was written without the consent of the Boy Scouts of America, and in fact if they ever found out about these stories, they'd probably send a letter bomb to my house.

This story is brought to you by the letters "J," "S," and the number "42."

### ***El Ocaso Encimo De Un Más Verano***

#### Disclaimer

Certain aspects of this series are inspired by Rumiko Takahashi's *Ranma ½*.

Most characters are based on real people. Horace A. Moses Scout Reservation is based on an actual location.

This story was written without the consent of the Boy Scouts of America, and if they knew of its existence, they'd drop an atomic bomb on the Church in the Acres on Troop 192's meeting night.

P.S. The authors have nothing against Derek "the Leprechaun" Provost, nor do they want to see him harmed in any way, especially by a can of Kiwi/Mocha Fruit Juice. But hey, it was a funny bit.

#### Notes from Matt

Greetings and salutations! Or, as I say in Scouts, "Hi, Everybody!"

I had always intended *Boy Scouts ½* to be an ensemble series, but I noticed after writing the first four that the series was focusing too heavily on the character based on myself. Thus, I requested of Mike Quadrozzi that he should write part 5, and after ten decades of waiting, he has finely delivered it to me. I couldn't be happier with the

results. Part 6 is coming up soon, which is based on a story line I wrote, but is actually written by that Aaron chap and features some very funny bits, none of which involve sheep in any way.

Derek Provost is mentioned as a pervert. A good-natured one, but a pervert non the less. Just to clear up any misconceptions friends of his may have (and I think I may consider myself amongst his friends), this is a bit of an exaggeration that all started one time we were watching *Macross II*, and when one of the female characters stopped quickly and turned, he begged for a rewind and slow-motion, so that he might better watch the "jiggle."

Further note: Mike has just informed me that he made a mistake in the title of this story. Apparently, it should have been *El Oscaso **Sobre** Un Más Verano* instead of *El Oscaso **Encimo** De Un Más Verano*. Unfortunately for Mike, as this story has been online for some months now, it's far too late to go mucking about with the title, and he shall have to live with his heinous error until the day he dies.

### ***Enter Troop 42! Girl Scouts Arrive at the Church in the Acres***

This story is inspired by the *Ranma ½* series created by Rumiko Takahashi.

Most of the characters, except for some of the characters, are based on real people, living, dead, or otherwise. Most of their personalities are kept intact, but on some occasions they are altered to suit my purposes better. If you don't like it, deal with it. You'll get no sympathy out of me.

Regarding Troop behaviour, let's clear something up, shall we? The youth leaders of the Troop, namely the heroes of the story, are not at fault here. The members of the Troop, especially the younger members, are an extremely fickle lot and have very short attention spans. If you knew the members, you would wonder why half of

them even bothered to sign up. Those who honestly care are the ones who attend the events, and those who don't attend or anything are in the Troop just for the right to say that they were a Boy Scout on their resume, or joined so their parents would leave them alone. It has been long agreed by the leaders of the Troop that the Troop would be much better off if it booted everyone out and started from scratch. This has not yet happened, but could happen in the future.

Also, the total lack of assistance from the adult leaders – again excluding Matt and one or two select others – doesn't aide those of us in charge at all.

This story, as with all the others in this series, was written without the consent of the Boy Scouts of America, the characters, or any mOOse used in the story. If the Boy Scouts of America found out about these stories, they'd probably do unholy things to me, and I'd probably walk bow-legged for several weeks, if I walked again at all.

**BACK-STORY:** This one deserves a little back-story... Matt wrote this story, and it was pretty good. Not one of his best, but better than some. Anyway, after reading it, I couldn't believe how horribly my character was portrayed. In Matt's version, Aaron is a smooth talking, witty, and generally swift player. He deals with Kirstin quite nicely, and doesn't trip at all.

In real life, that would never happen. Granted, in real life I wouldn't turn into a duck either, but that's beside the point. In the immortal words of King Arthur, "It's the principle of the thing." I had to rewrite it.

What you have (hopefully) just read was the final version of my edit. I took all my scenes and redid them. While I was at it, I redid most of the rest of the story, but I kept the basic underlying plot the same.

That's why the story is credited to Matt but authorship belongs to me. I would enjoy any feedback you'd like to send me. Send it to me at [cptaaron@geocities.com](mailto:cptaaron@geocities.com)\* and I'll reply ASAP.

Anyway, that's all for now. Hope you enjoyed!

Editor's Note: "Ironman," if I recall correctly, is a variation of the Magic: The Gathering card game in which cards are physically destroyed when they leave play. Hence, everyone's horror at the thought of playing it!

\* Note: No longer a valid e-mail address.

### ***Sleep-Over at the Abdelmaseh Residence***

Disclaimer (Legal Mumbo Jumbo)

*Boy Scouts ½* is inspired by Rumiko Takahashi's *Ranma ½*. The character of Ryoga is borrowed from *Ranma ½*. Many, but not all, characters are based on real persons. This story was written without the consent of the Boy Scouts of America, and if they ever found out about these stories, I'd be singing soprano for the rest of my life.

#### Author's Notes

This story, and the next two, were originally to be written by Aaron Abdelmaseh. Sadly, Aaron has died. Well, not really, but it seems that way sometimes. He has devoted so much of his time to other projects that he has virtually disappeared for the moment. Also, he expressed the feeling that he was having difficulty writing for this series.

I found this hard to believe. He's an excellent writer, and his part 6 is one of the best of this series thus far. However, he wished to leave the *Boy Scouts ½* writing team, and I granted his request. He turned over what he had written for part 7, which was the beginning through most of the Magic game. I took what he had written, edited it a bit, and completed the story. Part 7 was not something I had been planning to have to do myself, so I fear the results may be a bit substandard, but we must continue forward.

## ***Election Night at 192***

Again, no publisher babble and I hope you've enjoyed my contribution to *Boy Scouts ½*. I understand this particular story was long awaited, and I must apologize. I do promise, though, that future episodes will be delivered promptly, or at least on time.

Many of the characters that appear in this story, especially the adults, are in fact real people. For my sake, I hope they never read this.

Thanks. Goodnight, everybody.

-Michael D. Quadrozzi

## ***Behind the Adult Conspiracy***

### Disclaimer

Well, that's it. Now I leave the plot hanging for Matt to pick up in the next instalment. I know that this part of the *Boy Scouts ½* saga was long in the making. I only hope that that made it all the more interesting to read. Actually, I'm just being polite. Matt threatened to feed my testicles to a rampaging horde of Zulu tribesmen if I procrastinated any longer. Believe me, that can be painful.

As you might've guessed (and I hope you did), many aspects of this story were inspired by that show of shows, *The X-Files*. Please, don't tell Ten Thirteen Productions. They'd pump me full of black goo like that UN babe. You know the one.

So, no publisher babble again. And as always, I look forward to my next contribution.

Thanks. Goodnight, everybody.

-Michael D. Quadrozzi

## Notes from Matt

Damn you, Mike. Had to go for that *X-Files*, unresolved ending, didn't you! For god sakes, you've left Bill Pruyne's very life in my hands! How could you do this! Well, guess I'll just have to put some thought into *part 10*...

### ***Aftermath and New Things***

The training ground of cursed springs, *Jusenkyo*, as well as the curses received there, are from *Ranma ½* created by Rumiko Takahashi, and are used without permission.

Most members of Troop 192 are based on real persons. Fortunately, others are not so based.

This story was written without the consent of the Boy Scouts of America, and if they ever found out about it they'd abduct me in the dead of the night and give me an anal probe!

This story marks an end of sorts. It's the end of the beginning. The majority of the characters are introduced, the situations are developed, and the conflicts are in place. Now, if I may be so bold as to say so, the fun can really begin...

### ***Matty's New Wardrobe? Shopping Spree from Hell***

As always, the *Jusenkyo* curses are used without permission from *Ranma ½*, as is the character of Ryoga. Thanks to Jason "BonparteOzaki" Bertovich for some suggestions regarding the Ryoga scene in this instalment of *Boy Scouts ½*.

Jason isn't the only member of a mailing list I belong to who got a cameo appearance in this one. The other two are John "Jinnai" Hoelscher, and the bouncy one herself, Fenny Lin!

As usual, the use of the Boy Scouts in this story was without the consent of the Boy Scouts of America. If they

found out about these stories, they'd probably force me to listen to Rap music... or worse! Country! Oh, the horror! Arrrrggghhh!!!!!!!

Lastly, this story wouldn't have been possible without the contribution of my friend Carolyn Ede. Thank you, Carolyn. Thanks to Montana, too. (The girl, not the state.)

### ***A Night of Magic***

As always, the Jusenkyo curses are used without permission from *Ranma ½*.

And as usual, the use of the Boy Scouts in this story was without the consent of the Boy Scouts of America. If they found out about these stories, they'd turn me into a girl without a Jusenkyo curse!

Many (but not all) members of Troop 192 are based on real persons. Some of these persons are exaggerated for humorous effect.

White Hut is a real restaurant, and in fact one of my favourites. If anyone of you fine people out there are ever in the area, it's on Memorial Drive in West Springfield. And the Kennedy story is true. I'm not sure which Kennedy, I doubt it was John F. or Robert, although it could have been...

### ***Yes, Virginia, It's a Wonderful Life with 192, Though I Wouldn't Call It Christmas in Heaven***

#### Disclaimer

Okay. I know that nothing I could ever possibly say in this disclaimer could ever make up for the fact that this story is something like two or three months late. I also know that no excuse could possibly be good enough to appease the anger and sense of betrayal all of you loyal readers must feel.

Of course, I could be wrong. Try these on for size: I had a lot of homework to do. I was abducted by aliens. My car broke down on the way to Matt's. I had to do my Eagle

Project. I was kidnapped by French Revolutionaries and told I was the only living heir to the throne of Belgium. I had to serve a three-month jail sentence for violating the restraining order put upon me by the lawyers of Gillian Anderson. My computer isn't Y2K compliant, heck it's not even Y1K compliant, and it blew up just before I could finish the story. My dog was run over by a cement truck. I overslept. Did I mention that just before my dog was run over by a cement truck that he ate the first draft of Part 13?

So, here's the only excuse I can give you, the only reason behind my incredible tardiness and the only other comfort I can give you besides the hope that the quality of this story will make up for everything:

It's all Matt's fault.

#### Matt's Notes

Oh, it's all my fault, is it? How is it all my fault? And how is it that I could write three complete stories (14, 15, and ADM2) and get a start on another in the time it takes you to write one? Granted, it's a long one... but... **NO EXCUSES!!!**

Only two or three months late? How Mike likes to delude himself! This story should have been out in the middle of the summer... It's so bloody late that, *topically* speaking, it's almost on time!!!

Oh, well. I forgive you... This was a hell of a story and quite worth the wait.

Now the usual... *Jusenkyo* curses and the character of Ryoga are borrowed without permission from Rumiko Takahashi's *Ranma ½*. Also, this story is written without the endorsement of the Boy Scouts of America, and if national ever found out about it, they'd make Mike's dreams come true... including the bit where he wakes up to find his mum...

At first I was appalled to see that little yellow demon Pikachu in *Boy Scouts ½* story. But then I realized that it is probably the best anime that Bill Gelinis would ever

watch. I pity him, and pray for the death of that little piss coloured turd some day soon.

And lastly, some people are based on real persons, some people are based on exaggerated representations of real persons, and some people are just plain fictional. It's up to you to guess which is which.

P.S. Disclaimer

Just in case you're interested, the poem that Kuntz was mangling is Sonnet #18 by William Shakespeare. It's very nice.

That's it. It's over. Piss off.

### ***My Preoccupation With Squirrels***

This space intentionally left blank. (In other words, this story didn't have any notes. But I put this here just so you knew that and didn't think I left something out. Enjoy the rest of the notes!)

### ***Perry Joins the Troop***

As usual, certain members of Troop 192 are based on real persons. Other members, as well as all of the Girl Scouts, are completely fictitious.

Some may note the inconsistency in the flashbacks to China, where the name "Matty" and the female pronoun "she" are used, when neither of these were used for female Matt until part 3. The reason for this inconsistency was because I thought it would be more confusing overall if in the flashback I reverted to calling her Matt and using the male pronoun. Also, if anyone wonders why the Jusenkyo guide speaks so eloquently to Perfume, it's simply because they are communicating in Chinese, which they of course know much better than English, as Chinese is their native language.

Special thanks to members of the Abert Clan for information concerning Girl Scouting.

The Jusenkyo curses are inspired by Rumiko Takahashi's *Ranma ½*. The characters of the Jusenkyo guide and Cologne, and the locations of Jusenkyo and Joketsuzoku are also from *Ranma ½*.

This story was written without the consent of the Boy Scouts of America, and in fact, if they were to find out about it, they'd probably make aliens come down and give me an anal probe, implanting an explosive device up there, setting it to go off next time I felt I had to go to the bathroom. All those offended by that last sentence, please write to:

Complaints  
Building 17F  
West Charlzburg  
Essex, England 4F2 Z1B

Thank you.

### ***Perilous Perfume***

Once again, *Jusenkyo* curses are borrowed without permission from *Ranma ½*. Also, this story is not at all endorsed by the Boy Scouts of America, and if they ever found out about these stories they'd yell at me for keeping this bad "If they ever found out about these stories" joke going for as long as I have.

Also, as per usual, some members of Troop 192 are based on real persons, some of those are exaggerated for humorous effect, and some of 'em are just completely fictitious, anyway, so get off my back!!!

Lastly, the character of Richard Palmer is based off of the real life Richard Palmer, winner of the *Boy Scouts ½* Website First Anniversary Contest.

### ***The Sweet Smell of Revenge***

Richard Palmer is based on a real person, the winner of the *Boy Scouts ½* Website's first anniversary contest.

Of course, as I finish this story, it is shortly after the website's second anniversary. He he.

Martha Wadley is also based on a real person. She came to my attention through Mike, who told me about this woman he had met through e-mail after she had read some *Boy Scouts* ½ stories. Apparently, she is as obsessed with squirrels as Mike is. In fact, they are in truth plotting the squirrel revolution discussed in this story (and the recent Quadrozzi written side-story *Conversations with a Squirrel: A Day in the Life of Me*). One day walking to work a month or so ago, I just had the sudden idea of Mike getting lost in the woods and meeting her... and that idea became incorporated into this story.

Unfortunately, adding it to this story did considerably complicate this story. In part 15, I had set two almost completely independent plots in motion, and here I added a third. I knew as I began this that it would be considerably longer than most of the other stories in the series, which is odd as it comes after one of the shortest in a while. In fact, aside from the Christmas special, this story is the longest in the series so far! (This does not include part IV of the spin-off series *Perspectives from the Food Court*, which is probably between this one and the Christmas one for length, and Jason plans to go for the absolute longest of them all with *Perspectives V*, he tells me.)

Now for the usual disclaimer stuff.

It should be mentioned that many moments from this story were written looking at a copy of a script for the film *Pulp Fiction*, by Quentin Tarantino. Also, one small segment was adapted from the script for *Highlander*.

*The X-Files* was created by Chris Carter. Characters appear here without permission.

I'm sure someone owns the rights to Pac-Man, and it isn't me, so that was used without permission.

Certain members of Troop 192 and other troops are based on real persons, some are fictitious, and some may be based on real persons but we'll deny it! This story is not endorsed by, nor does it reflect the views or opinions of, the Boy Scouts of America.

*Jusenkyo* curses and the character of Ryoga (P-Chan) come from *Ranma ½* and are used without permission.

Have a nice day.

### ***How to Be a Successful Feline***

(See notes on "My Preoccupation With Squirrels)

### ***All the World's a Stage...***

#### Author's Notes

After School Initiative Program – This is an actual program we have down here in Georgia. I borrowed it and pray that The Northwest Georgia Girl Scout Council doesn't mind. MERCY! Have mercy!!

TELRX Inc. – I have no earthly idea if a company by this name exists, I just made it up. If there is one out there... get over it. It's just a story and there's only a minor reference. ::mutters:: Losers.

Juliette Gordon Low – This is the illustrious founder of the Girl Scouts of America. I mean no disrespect to this remarkable woman or her descendants.

Daisy Girl Scouts – The earliest and youngest level of Girl Scouting. Ages range from 5-6. It is followed by Brownies (6 - 8), Juniors (8 - 11), Cadets (11 - 14), Seniors (14 - 17), and finely Adult Girl Scouts (17 and above).

Well, that's it. Part 17 is done. I truly hope you like it. If not, blame it on a couple of creative teens in Welly World, a NinjaCat teamed with a Guru named Ru, 9 long years (!!!), a woman eating locker, breakfast foods protecting the universe, Al and Blarney, Super Leia & Super Elora, MINE, and a place called Afrigonia where Jungle Baboon Kings steal the panties of High Priestesses and mighty Amazon Queens punt them high into the atmosphere.

## Matt's Notes and Disclaimers

I cannot express to you how overjoyed I am with Part 17. It was originally to have been written by William Hughes. Unfortunately, for reasons of his own, he had to relinquish his position as this story's author.

What was I going to do? I was busy with matters, and so was Mike.

It was shortly before all of this that I had the pleasure of meeting a lovely woman by the name of Nicole Colosimo. You may recognise the name, as it appears earlier in this story, right after the word, "by."

Nickie came to my attention, as she was a zealous fan of *Boy Scouts* ½. We began chatting, and discovered many mutual interests, hopes, and dreams. Before I knew it, I was falling in love. Even before I knew I loved her, however, I felt somewhere deep inside of myself that I wanted this woman to write for me!

And so, when part 17 opened up, I asked Nickie-chan to make the transition from mere fan, over to the other side of the game. Over to the side of the writer. I was most happy when she agreed. And now that I have a complete story in my hands, I am most pleased to see that my confidence in her was not unfounded, and I eagerly look forward to her next story... Especially as I'm wondering what the hell Kenny and the Juniors are up to!

Now for the usual blah stuff... *Jusenkyo* curses are from Rumiko Takahashi's *Ranma* ½ and are used without permission. Also, this story was written without the knowledge or consent of either the Boy Scouts of America or the Girl Scouts of America, and is not intended to reflect the values, morals, or views of either organization.

Thank you, and have a nice day.

## **...And the Men and Women Merely Players**

### Notes from Nickie

Well, I apologize for taking so blasted long to finish this part. I had a terrible case of writer's block. And dear Matt was good enough to finish it up for me. Bravo! Anyway, I do hope you liked it. Happy reading & now it's time to bug Mike for the next part. ::grins evilly::

### Matt's Notes and Disclaimer

Well, here's part 18. I hope you all enjoyed it.

Well, as I hope is obvious, some text in this story comes from the play *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare. Also, some story elements may be inspired by Rumiko Takahashi's *Ranma ½*. Lastly, this story was written without the consent of, and is not endorsed in any way by, the Boy Scouts of America.

Have a nice day.

## **Troop 180 Chronicles – A Different Viewpoint**

### Author's Notes

This is the result of a conversation between Matt Atanian and myself, which ended with an open invitation from Matt to me to try my hand at writing a story. Several months passed, and several ideas came and went (not to mention the usual excuses of schoolwork, Scouting activities, and family obligations) and Matt finally threw down the gauntlet, so to speak, on a recent Message Board post. Well, since I **did** have some free time this week, it **would** be a good time to actually clear my head of some of the ideas that were swimming around in it. And so I did it. This story is not quite the one that Matt and I discussed several months ago. I hope that it is good enough to make it.

Most of the characters herein are based on real people. The “story within the story” is loosely based on the first instalment of the *Boy Scouts ½* series, by Matt Atanian. The old man in the Antique shop was borrowed from the movie “Gremlins”. I guess Matt will handle the rest of the disclaimer thing.

### Matt's Notes and Disclaimers

This is the result of a conversation between Mark Abert and myself, which... oh, he already covered this bit, did he? Well, never mind, then.

Excellent story, all around. It's amusing to think that, even though Matt, Mike, Aaron, and the Bills do try to keep their curses a secret, enough of the truth may have leaked out to cause Mr. Abert to tell this story to his Troop that he believes to be fiction but is disturbingly close to the truth.

And yes, apparently there *really* is a leader in Troop 180 who is a UPS delivery guy... He just keeps popping up everywhere, doesn't he? My god, he's almost like a human equivalent of a certain beverage!

It's funny that he should mention *Transformers*... Shortly before I read this, I had just finished watching a movie I had bought previously that evening... something I had almost bought many times, but kept telling myself not to be silly... I finely gave in, bought it, and had just watched it, reliving childhood memories as I did so... It was *Transformers: The Movie*.

In the most technical sense of the word, *Transformers* is not anime, however. (That is, in the most technical sense of the domestic meaning of the word. In Japan, *anything* animated is anime, whether it be *Ranma ½*, *The Simpsons*, or the latest Disney flick...) However, this misconception is not at all a mistake in the story. After all, if Mark Abert the author would be under this misconception, then so should Mark Abert the character.

*Transformers* did have some ties to anime, however... A lot of the *Transformers* were based off of pre-existing Japanese toys that Hasbro got the domestic licence to,

and just chucked them all into *Transformers*. Thus, *Transformers* could be said to be a rather entertaining marketing ploy to sell these toys. One of them, the Transformer Autobot named Jetfire, was in fact a *Macross* Valkyrie, which is the reason that the domestic *Robotech* toy line never had a transforming Veratech Fighter.

Also, although it originated in the U.S., *Transformers* did become hugely popular in Japan. (The voice of Starscream in the Japanese dub of *Transformers* was done by the same actor who played Kuno in *Ranma ½*.) So popular in fact that even after it had lost popularity here, additional seasons of *Transformers* were produced strictly for the Japanese.

Wow... that was a huge tangent about one tiny little point in the story, wasn't it? Well, enough on that...

Very good story, wasn't it? In fact, much as this one was the result of an open invitation, I have already issued a further invitation to Mark (and Matt Abert, if he is so inclined) to do more on the exploits of 180 if they wish...

Now that I think of it, I don't know what the Aberts may have in mind, but I think that Mark, Matt, Provost, and some other key 180 folk hosting this Shooting Sports campout for 192 has some interesting story potential... Hey, Abert Folk! What do you think? (Guess we'll find out if or when they write it!)

To close off this edition of Matt's Notes, I recently came into possession of a wonderful book called, *The Deeper Meaning of Liff: A Dictionary of Things That There Aren't Any Words For Yet*. I was amused to see two of the words it defined, and thought that they might be pertinent to this story.

**Abert** (vb.): To change a baby's name at the last possible moment.

**Ludlow** (n): A wad of newspaper, folded table-napkin or lump of cardboard put under a wobbly table or chair to make it stand up straight. It is perhaps not widely known that air-ace Sir Douglas Bader used to get about on an enormous pair of ludlows before he had his artificial legs fitted.

## **Northern Exposure**

### Matt's Various End-of-Story Ramblings

Hi, everybody!

Well, first off you may be surprised to see a story by me. After all, it had been previously announced that Mike would write the next one. Well, I had hoped very much for that to be the case, but various circumstances led to my writing the next one, instead. (With Mike's blessing, of course.) He is still hard at work writing, but his stories will now be 21 and 22, rather than 19 and 20.

I'd like to thank Mike for input with various bits here and there, especially the scene involving Justy's return. He and I had discussed the idea as something to include in his story, but obviously when my story became 19 rather than his, it had to be included here.

I'd also like to thank Aaron. He had pitched the idea of a terrorist take-over back when he was still a member of the *BS½* writing staff. In fact, he and I had talked about the possibility of him briefly returning to the team to write it himself. However, due to the fact that he has become unfamiliar with the happenings of the *BS½ Universe* since his departure and would need quite the refresher, along with the fact that I had quite a few ideas for this story myself, along with the fact that (aside from an occasional time here and then when he seems to reappear) I always seem to have a difficult time keeping in touch with Aaron, I decided to go ahead and write it myself. I hope he doesn't mind terribly, and I hope if he ever reads this, he enjoys the results.

Alice Richards is a real Scoutmaster. She's the leader of the small yet formidable Troop 41. She's a rather nice lady who actually does fence.

Well, onto the legal crapola. *Boy Scouts ½* is inspired by Rumiko Takahashi's *Ranma ½*, and this is done without permission. Also, this story is not endorsed in any way by either the Boy Scouts of America or the Girl Scouts of America.

Well, that's all for now, I suppose. See you in the next instalment of *Boy Scouts ½!*

### ***Due South***

Hi, everybody!

Well, first off you may notice that this is not the end of this story line. This is despite previous plans that this would only be a two-parter.

Well... I seem to have a habit when writing to set up a lot in the first half, meaning I have quite a lot to resolve in the second half. An extreme example can be seen in the rather short part 15, followed by the lengthy part 16. Rather than have a enormous part 20 (it's already slightly longer than most stories, although not longer than 16), and keeping you waiting even longer to read it, I decided it might be a good idea just to leave things off here and conclude it in a third part.

Second... I have nothing against Canadians. In fact, I am part French Canadian myself, from my mother's side. (I'm also Polish on my mother's side, as well as Icelandic and Armenian on my father's side, just in case anyone was wondering.) Now, I don't claim to be a comic genius the likes of Mel Brooks... but if he can make fun of Jews, I can make fun of Canadians. (I've noticed in Comedy that if you are to make fun of an ethnic group, the best way to go about it is to make fun of all groups equally or make fun of a group which you personally are a part of. Anything else just seems like bigotry, which isn't nice.)

It occurred to me as I wrote this story that the first episode of the Sci-Fi Channel's series *The Invisible Man* featured a few Canadian terrorists... but I assure you it is purely coincidence. While I wrote this after seeing the show, I had the idea before seeing the show.

Why Canadian terrorists? Well, when Aaron originally came up with this idea, he had thought of using a more traditional group of terrorists. However, I quickly noted that such a thing would be out of place in a comedy series. Either the story would have to be written as a serious one

(which was probably Aaron's intent, although I am only guessing) or the story would have been nothing more than a piece of tripe filled with derogatory middle-eastern stereotypes. Now, a serious story of that type would have been out of place within *Boy Scouts ½*, and I certainly did not want to have a story that would reinforce negative stereotypes against middle-eastern folk. (There are quite a lot of nice ones, I assure you. Just as in any society, the not nice ones are a minority.) Therefore, I had to find a group that would be *funny* as terrorists. Hence, Canadians.

Thanks to Danny Mashia's book, *My Favourite Campfire Songs* for the lyrics to *Alouette*. Other French translation was done with the aid of AltaVista's Babel Fish program. (So if it's inaccurate, blame them!)

*Jusenkyo* curses and the character of Ryoga are borrowed from Rumiko Takahashi's *Ranma ½*. (Derek's cry of "Pretty ladies!" is also reminiscent of the *Ranma ½* character Happosai, but it fits Derek's character quite well.) Also, this story is not endorsed in any way by either the Boy Scouts of America or the Girl Scouts of America.

Bob and Doug Mackenzie are named after the SCTV characters played by Rick Moranis and Dave Thomas. (They are not the same characters, however, they only happen to be two other fanatical Canadians by those names.)

Educational notes: Norwegian artist Edvard Munch (1863-1944) is most famous for his representation of human suffering and loneliness in *The Scream* (1893). The distorted figure's scream dominates the canvas in oscillating curves and heavy lines. The extreme slant of the perspective, the bold outlines, and the harsh colours contribute to a mood of anxiety and anguish. Munch was not associated with a specific group of artists, but he can be classified under Proto-Expressionism because he so directly influenced the advent of expressionism. Munch's work generated much controversy in his time, and many artists followed his expressive style despite the risk of

rejection from public exhibitions. So now you know, and knowing is half the battle.

See you next time!

### ***Picket Fences***

Hello, once again, all of you wonderful *BS½* readers!

It's been a while since the last story, but some of this delay is attributable to the fact that Geocities turned evil on me and my website vanished completely. So here we are at my new home at Tripod. *Boy Scouts ½* is online. All is right with the world.

Something much more sad than *BS½*'s temporary disappearance from the internet occurred since the last story. On 11 May 2001, the human race lost one of its best. Thus, I would like to dedicate this story to the memory of Mr. Douglas Adams. I encourage anyone reading this who has not had the privilege to acquaint him or herself with Mr. Adams's work to march yourself down to the nearest bookstore at the earliest opportunity and discover something wonderful. Douglas Adams shall indeed be missed.

Now, onto some actual notes concerning this story!

First the usual. This story is not endorsed by, or meant to reflect upon the values of, either the Boy Scouts of America or the Girl Scouts of America. Also, certain elements (most notably the Jusenkyo curses) are from *Ranma ½*, by Rumiko Takahashi, and are used without permission.

An interesting note about this story. It is the first *Boy Scouts ½* story to be mostly written while actually on a Boy Scout camping trip! Aside from some minor additions and edits, everything up through the line, "She is a story for another time. Let's get these terrorists someplace secure and get on with our Camporee!" was written at the 2001 Section NE-1B Conclave, at which I spent some time working on (and Mike was in charge of) publications. Of course, this meant Mike had his computer with him, so

Saturday night (or rather, quite early Sunday morning) I hopped onto Mike's computer and did some writing.

I must confess, as long as I was on Mike's computer, I took a peak at a certain file containing the long fabled story, *Mysterious Origins*. The bugger has six pages done, and they are really quite good! Enough is enough, Mike! Write the bloody thing! (Of course, you need to write parts 22 and 23, first! Main series comes before side stories!)

Picket Fences... what does that have to do with anything? Well, nothing really. But I couldn't think of any other television shows with Canadian sounding titles (such as Northern Exposure or Due South). There were two show titles that, while not sounding Canadian-themed, seemed in my mind to be grouped together with the shows whose titles were previously used. This grouping is completely arbitrary on my mind's part, and has nothing at all to do with the shows in question. (In fact, I have never watched any of them.) I have no idea how they all got stuck together in my mind, but stuck together they are. And when it came time to pick a title, Picket Fences won over Twin Peaks.

Matt Gets Wet. I should have talked a bit about this during part 19's notes, but now is as good a time as any. This trilogy of skits is based on reality. During one Fall Camporee, the events described in part 19 actually took place. Matt Swett wanted to get wet, his father forbade it, and Mike covered with the Clappy Song. The following Spring Camporee, we followed it up with a skit very much like the one presented in this story, even down to Colin and Dan being planted in the audience to stir up trouble. (The only major difference between real life and fiction here is, of course, my concern over getting wet in real life was just due to the fact that I thought it would be unpleasant, but in the story I obviously have much better and less vane concerns.)

I suppose it is only fair to give credit where it is due. (That is, of course, one of the main purposes of these post-story notes.) Matt Gets Wet part 1 was very much the brain child of Mike and Matt Swett, both of whom were

also instrumental with the development of Matt Gets Wet part 2, along with Dan and Colin, who improvised all of their lines and went even farther than they did in this story. (My memory couldn't recall every detail, sadly. I do vividly recall one of them complaining about having paid good money to see me wet, however... ^\_^) I suppose I also had some input with part 2, as well...

One thing I definitely remember about part 2, or at least it's aftermath, was how many people were looking forward to part 3, and how they would take every opportunity to tell me so in as evil a tone as they could muster. So what will happen in the world of fiction with Matt Gets Wet part 3? Well, you'll just have to wait until the Summer Camp story line to find out!

### ***Girls' Night Out, Guys' Night In***

#### Author's Notes Part One (Pre-Story Notes)

##### *On the topic of Side Stories...*

A Side Story is roughly defined as a *short story that is derived from a previous story but usually no effect on the primary story's events or plot. Events are self-contained and usually will not be referenced to in the main story.*

When I first started writing in Matt-kun's *Boy Scouts ½ Universe* I intended to write a side story. That story was *Perspectives from the Food Court*. However, that story soon took a life of its own and later spawned six additional chapters (with an eighth on the way from Matt himself.) It was no longer considered a side story because it has now worked its way into the *Boy Scouts ½* mythos and characters and events from it are mentioned in the main series. Now *Perspectives* is considered a *spin-off*.

However, I've decided to try again and attempt to write an original side story. However, before I begin, I will make the following promises.

1. This is a one shot story featuring Characters from all three series in the *Boy Scouts ½ Universe*.

2. The events are self-contained and will probably not be mentioned to in any of the main series.
3. This story will not be required reading in order to understand any of the other series.
4. No sequels or additional chapters will be added to this story later on.

There. Now with that out of the way, I now present the latest vision from the mind of BoneparteOzaki...

### Author's Notes Part Two (Post-Story Notes)

Well, OK, that's it. It's finished. Hope you enjoyed it. Just a few things to go over for your convenience...

Original Characters from the *Boy Scouts* ½ series not based on real people were created by Matt Atanian. Those include The Porter Sisters and Kenny Pendrell, and any others I'm missing.

Angela Manors/Anako, & Mr. Segawa were created by Jason Bertovich.

Julie Heinekins was created by Bill Hughes. She was only mentioned for a paragraph in the Perspectives Side-story *Of Possible Futures -- The Tale of Neko-chan and Bertovich*. I liked the name.

The song Heinkekins was singing was "There's a Hurricane Tonight!" from the original *Bubblegum Crisis* OVA series. I'm a sucker for the classics.

The song the Porters were singing was "Love Mania!" from *El Hazard: The Alternative World*. (For those wondering, it is the song that is briefly sung at the end of the series in the last episode. The version her was the full length version.)

This is actually the second edition of the story as the first version seemed to have many things that Matt-kun had problems with. Hopefully, this new version fixed things.

I'm sure Matt had plenty to say here. So I'll let him get to it...

## Matt's Notes

Over all, this was a good story and I enjoyed it immensely. There is still one slight thing that, unfortunately, bothers me...

Jason letting Kenny win.

I'm not saying that Jason-kun wouldn't do that, I'm saying he wouldn't have to.

He wouldn't even have to loan Kenny one of his decks.

Kenny may be socially awkward, but under that hides a mind far exceeds that of a normal human. His genius allowed him to fully comprehend the game mechanics, after all, after only reading the rulebook. (My mediocre skills at the game, just to give you a comparison, only came about after a summer of intense tutelage at the hand of the Aberts.) Kenny's mind is capable of such tactical genius that he would be able to play against anyone. Pit Kenny against a master player of the game using any deck they wish. And Kenny would win at the game using only any random starter deck!

Of course, there is a rationalization we could use to explain this. Perhaps Kenny wasn't playing to his full abilities for the same reasons that young Clark Kent wasn't on the *Smallville* Football Team... He was simply hiding his abilities.

I was quite amused to see the song that Nicole's new rival was singing! I had just re-watched the first episode of *Bubblegum Crisis* shortly before I read this story. Also, I quite liked the concept of the Kirstin deck.

In closing, even if it did provide me with a bit of a headache. I know that any re-writes Jason did, he'd rather not have done, and in fact I would have been happy to have left the story alone, except Jason didn't wish the story to be non-canonical. Thanks, Jason-kun, for the wonderful story! I'm glad we were able to work everything out in the end.

## **Where No Man Has Gone Before**

### Jessi's Notes

Never again..... Never the smegging hell again!

I've apologized for my procrastination too many times on the long-lost *BS*½ Message Board (Rest in Peace), and I'm sure no one wants to hear my reiterate. But I swear, I will never, ever, EVER volunteer to write another story.... I will help Matt-chan with a scene or two, I may even add a side story at some point, and of course, as soon as this bloody story gets online, I can play with my new Tablet. Matt actually had to resort to bribery to get me to finish damn thing.

Matt-chan, I love you, I adore you, you are the most important thing in the world to me... but I never want to do this again....

### Matt's Notes and Disclaimers

Well, here it is. Over two years in the making. Over a year and a half in Jessi's making. And here it is.

*Boy Scouts* ½ is back on the air! (Or web, as the case may be.)

We're baaaaaack!

First, the disclaimers. *Boy Scouts* ½ takes it's inspiration from Takahashi Rumiko's *Ranma* ½. Also, Matty's dream sequence takes inspiration from *Star Trek: The Next Generation's Chain of Command, Part II*. (Odd coincidence that that episode happened to be on earlier tonight, while I was over Jessi's house and she was finishing the story up. Since I actually hadn't seen it in years, and had been working from memory when I wrote the scene for this story, it was interesting to compare the two.)

And just to scare you all... the story Matty related about going over to a friend's house to keep her company on her birthday is true. Jessi has asked to never see the photos from that day. ^\_^

Now... more rambling on my part.

Jessi indeed is the new record holder for most difficult person to collaborate with. Man oh man, I thought Mike was the world leader in procrastination. She makes Mike seem speedier than the bloody Road Runner!

And, of course, it was a lot easier pestering Mike back in the day. Don't get me wrong, I wasn't out to make Mike hate me or anything, but it a lot easier bugging the hell out of someone when you don't have to worry about certain things. Little things like, "I love her, and only want her to be happy," or, "If I piss her off, she won't let me (CENSORED BY THE COMMITTEE FOR THE REMOVAL OF T.M.I.)"

So for months, I would pester Jessi, treading that fine line between trying to motivate her and not getting killed. Finally, I resorted to a rather hefty bribe. (Mind you, I was wanting to get her a tablet eventually anyway, but adding conditions to her getting it which included a little thing like, "Finish the story and you can have the tablet!" never hurt.)

And still, I had the tablet in my possession for at least a month before the story was finished!

Never again is right, my love! I want to get these stories rolling!

And on that note, it is worth mentioning that things are indeed rolling. Already bits of 23 are written, and I shall do my best to get 23 out to you as soon as possible. Hughes is already working on 24. And Jason is having thoughts about *Perspectives XI* running through his noggin.

We. Are. Back.

Thanks to all of you who had the Goddess like patience to sit it out these last few years waiting for a new story. I'm sure not all of you made it. Heck, maybe I'm only talking to myself, here! (I certainly hope not...) And to any new comers, welcome! Enjoy!

Well, 'tis late, and I'm starting to ramble more than usual... So, until next story!

## ***The Devil in the Dark***

Hello! Long time no see.

Sorry about the delay of... oh... another few years that passed between the most recent story and this one. I am confident that this is about to change, and that things really will get moving again.

I make no promises, however! No loud declarations of, "*Boy Scouts* ½ is back!"

I think when I did that last time, I may have jinxed myself to a massive bout of writers block, combined with life suddenly going into a very busy period.

Well, I'm not letting that happen again! So I shall *not* proclaim, "We're baaaaaack!"

(But hopefully, we are! Woo hoo!)

Ahem... Where was I? Ah yes, the usual stuff. *Boy Scouts* ½ is inspired by Takahashi Rumiko's series *Ranma* ½. All this is done without permission. Bad me.

Also, this story does not reflect the values of the Boy Scouts of America, blah, blah, blah... Bad me.

Also... The end of this story is being typed while I'm at work. Bad, bad me.

Eh, it's the end of the night, just waiting for *Star Wars* to end so I can go clean out that theatre and shut down the projection booth. (Since the last story was written, I switched jobs and now work in a movie theatre.)

I was messing around on the computer that is used as a cash register in the concession stand, and discovered (a) a program I could type in and (b) that I could access the internet on the thing, and thus mail what I have typed to myself.

So here I am, abusing the work computer. I almost feel like part of corporate America!

First time I've used a Mac for any length of time. Interesting machines. Alas, as evil as Bill Gates is, I think I am far too used to PCs to switch myself. Oh well.

I've let this tangent go on far too long. So here these notes end, and hopefully (but no jinxing promises!) I'll see you again soon. Bye, now!

## The Cage

Well, this was supposed to conclude the current story line, and the next one would bring us into the Summer Camp story line...

But it didn't! So you'll have to wait for the next story for that. I just kept writing for this story, and finally decided, "That's it. I want to get something online, and this is a good breaking point, so I'm going to cut it here and continue it in the next story!"

Of course, that's what I did *last* time, too. There was originally only supposed to be *one* more story to bring to conclusion the stories begun in part 22, and now there shall be *three*. Three is the number of stories, and the number of the stories shall be three. There shall not be four, nor shall there be two, excepting that thou then proceed to three.

Five is right out!

Hmm... So where were we? Ah, yes. I'm sure I need not mention where the character of Eric Gamble draws his inspiration, but for the two people out there who might not get it, he is based on the *South Park* character of Eric Cartman, given a last name change to facilitate the bad joke in the last story.

Now, I may be mistaken (I don't feel like going back and double checking right this second) but I don't think I actually used any of the curses this time around... Unless you stop and consider that Perfume is obviously in her cursed form throughout. So just to be safe, I will mention that certain story elements are inspired by Takahashi Rumiko's *Ranma ½*.

Also, this story is not endorsed by nor meant to reflect the values of the Boy Scouts of America.

Well, I suppose that's it for now. Hopefully I'll be back soon. (Heck, I'm already off and running with the writing of the next one!) So long until then!

## ***The Conscience of the King***

Finished this story a bit over a week ago, but didn't get around to getting it online right away. But since I leave for vacation in a few days, I figured I better get it online now before I can't do it for *another* week.

I also thought I'd take a few moments to re-write these notes before putting this story online, as the first version of them was written at four in the morning and I was bloody tired. Of course, except for Jessi, Mark Abert, and anyone to whom Mark has shown the copy of the story I gave him, no one will know the difference anyway.

First off, something very sad has happened. And thus, I give this story a dedication: To Jimmy Doohan (1920 – 2005), who beamed up to the final frontier yesterday. He shall be missed.

Now, where was I? Oh, yes. Part 25.

Finally, the story line that took almost two years to get told is complete! I don't know if, over all, it is the best story line ever... Heck, part of me wishes that parts 19 – 21 weren't so good, as I don't know if I can ever top them. But I am happy for the chance to give some additional character development to the Porter sisters, which is long overdue.

Proctor got some nice additional development, as well. Except for the fact that he truly enjoys what he does, one could almost feel sorry for him now. Ah, well.

Yes, I am an anal retentive bastard. I double checked when a certain date was in 1998, and it fell on a Sunday. Story-wise, I suppose it would have been better if it had been on Saturday, but I think things worked just as well when on Saturday (just after midnight) Sarah said, "It's still a day early, but I suppose it is close enough."

And yes, I did double check (or pester roommates to double check for me) and that weekend was, indeed, a full moon. I wasn't *completely* anal about things, though. I didn't check to confirm if it was somewhat cloudy in Springfield on that night in 1998, or where exactly in the night sky the moon would be (i.e., if it would be over the

field behind the church, instead of, for example, over the front of the church). I suppose I can allow myself *some* degree of artistic licence.

As for the pin that Sarah gave to Matt: That is a pin that I actually own, and I do wear it on my red wool scout jacket. It wasn't a gift, however. I bought it for myself. (I think I came across it on eBay.) It is one of two anime related things I have incorporated into my Scout uniform. (The second may appear later in *Boy Scouts ½*, so I shan't spoil the surprise here.)

And now for the essentials: Jusenkyo curses and the character of Ryoga are from Takahashi Rumiko's *Ranma ½*, used without permission. Also, this story is not endorsed by or meant to reflect the values of the Boy Scouts of America.

Well, that's all for now! Hope to see you again soon, up at the lovely Horace A. Moses Scout Reservation, with part 26! (Perhaps I'll bring some paper on vacation with me.)

### ***Conversations with a Squirrel***

#### Matt's After Story Happy Shot Induced Jibberings

Poor Mike. Poor, poor Mike. I received this story in a plain manila envelope shoved under my door. It was written on construction paper, in crayon, each letter a different colour. Every other paragraph was written backwards. Needless to say that most people would have had a hard time deciphering it. Luckily, I'm as crazy as Mike, and they just haven't caught me yet.

However, it is good to have hope that someday Mike's plans may come to fruition. When they do, I will take up arms and join the Squirrely revolution. *Viva la Squirrels!*

## ***Ultimate Team Up? Trouble for the Jusenkyo Scouts!***

Well, here we are again. Sorry for the bit of a delay. (Although, given some of the past delays, this one must seem like a blink of the eye!) I did have most of this one finished for quite a while, but fell off a bit when it came to finishing up the last few dream sequences.

Ah, yes... The dream sequences.

Well, *BS½* is no stranger to dream sequences, and it had been a little while since I'd done some, so I thought it was due. And while on vacation this summer, I found the soundtrack to *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (the superior film version, in my opinion, which is not to say that I disliked the new one) and for some reason got the Oompa Loompa songs stuck in my head and wanted somehow to apply them to the boys.

Maybe it has nothing to do with the rest of the story, and maybe it is a needless tangent... But hey, I write these bloody things for my enjoyment. Hopefully others will like them too, but that is a secondary concern.

Another thing that might seem superfluous is the lengths to which the new Trading Post Manager was detailed. Unless the reader is missing some brain cells, it is pretty apparent that this is a new character based on a real life person. In this case, it is Amanda Taylor, the best friend and distant cousin of my fiancée, Jessi.

Why include my love's best friend (and a rather good friend of mine since meeting her) rather than my love herself? Is this some twisted indication that something is going on behind Jessi's back? Of course not! Get your mind out of the gutter!

Rather, not including Jessi is *protecting* our relationship. Okay, logically, after four years it probably wouldn't put our relationship in any danger, yet I still have a superstition against including a romantic interest in a piece of fiction I am writing. Last two times I did it (once way back in a previous series of stories I had written, and once in the case of Nicole Colosimo who got a cameo in

Kenny's Laboratory) the woman in question soon after expressed a desire not to pursue or continue a relationship.

Meanwhile, a long time ago in a scout camp not very far away, the last time I went up to summer camp at Moses as a member of Troop 192 (which was 1998, incidentally) there was a female Trading Post manager who 192 got on quite well with. I had intended to include her as a character, and have a story line involving 192 having to protect her against Roy.

Only problem... It has been about seven years and I can't for the life of me remember her name. Solution? Keep the idea but substitute in Amanda.

Another inclusion is Jesse Lashway, who won a contest about ten million years ago to have a cameo appearance in a *BS* $\frac{1}{2}$  story. I had planned to include such a cameo in the summer camp story line, and here it is. I figured I had better include it in part I wrote rather than leave it to Hughes in the next part. For reasons that are not the reader's business, Lashway's character would most likely suffer a horrid death should his fate have been left up to Hughes.

Now the usual stuff. Jusenkyo curses and such are taken from Takahashi Rumiko's *Ranma*  $\frac{1}{2}$ , used without permission. This story is not meant to reflect the values of, nor is it endorsed by, the Boy Scouts of America. Oompa Loompa songs: original lyrics by Anthony Newley, adapted for use in *BS* $\frac{1}{2}$  by yours truly.

Well, I think that's everything. Hopefully we'll be back soon with part 27, by Hughes. See you then!

## ***A Deep Resonance***

### Author's Notes

The title for this story is from the rather famous Japanese Haiku by the poet Basho. The original is:

*Furuike ya, kawazu tobikomu, mizu no oto.*

Breaking the silence of an ancient pond, a frog jumped into water — a deep resonance.

Okay, I admit this is fairly short, but I'm sorta short on time. I'm writing, no lie, three other things that demand my attention, so this will have to be. I promise I'll take my time on the next one. Well, not *the* next one, but you know what I mean. Or else.

Grrrr.

Arrivederci;  
Hughes

### Matt's Notes and Disclaimers

Great, Hughes, just great. You were supposed to make things easy for me by setting the plot into motion. You set it in motion, all right... But in a vague and mysterious way meaning that *I* still have to put some thought into what happens next.

You bastard

Well, I suppose that that does, in part, hearken back to what my original intent for this story line was.

Way back in the day, when Mike was still alive, I had been planning to do this "we-each-write-every-other-one" story line with him, thinking it could be interesting seeing what happens when one of us ends the story in a cliffhanger.

With Mike's untimely passing, I offered Hughes the position he had vacated.

Hughes, you are a bastard.

Here's hoping I can come up with a cliffhanger to pay you back with.

The random Cthulhu reference caught me a bit off guard, as I am sure it will catch some other readers who didn't visit the website within a specific period of time off guard, too. I considered removing it, as I usually like to avoid inside jokes. But I decided in the end to leave it in. After all, it is an inside joke in which the "inside" is this

website. Those who don't get it undoubtedly missed the "fake part 27" that Hughes wrote and asked me to put up for a week or so before the real one (i.e., what you hopefully just read) was ready. Anyone who missed the fake one can find it following this story's notes.

Now the usual. Jusenkya curses and the character of Ryoga are from *Ranma ½* by Takahashi Rumiko, used without permission.

This story is not endorsed by or meant to reflect the values of the Boy Scouts of America.

And lastly, Mike isn't really dead. It was a metaphor.

### **Bonus: Fake Part 27: *The End of Boy Scouts ½***

The sky over Moses grew dark, black as tar, the day shifting to night.

"What... what is this?" Aaron asked, staring up as the sun was blotted out. Streaks of light flashed through the sky, like daggers through the night.

"It is the end times!" Billy cried, diving for cover. But, alas, it was too late. At the waterfront, sunken R'lyeh rose, it's hideous, inhuman geometry driving the swimming staff insane instantly.

Great Cthulhu rose from the ancient burial grounds on Coffinhandle Hill and strode down the mountains in Moses. Where he touched the ground, boy scouts screamed and went mad. Some He chose as worshipers, others He devoured to satiate his insatiable hunger.

Billy was consumed by Great Cthulhu as he tried to escape the ravaging hordes of mindless Scouts. Aaron grew to prominence as a powerful cult leader. Hughes and Mike vanished under mysterious circumstances, never to be seen again.

As for Matt...

Matt woke up some hours later, alone in his tent. He stepped outside into the wreckage of Moses, peered at the lifeless trail left by the slithering of Great Cthulhu.

Matt yawned.

He looked about some more.

Matt then shrugged and turned to go towards the Dining Lodge. Around it, cultists screamed Great Cthulhu's praises to the heavens.

"Ia! Ia! Cthulhu fhtagn!" they screamed. Matt stopped one, asked a few questions, and then nodded as he got his answers in the ancient, insane language of the Deep Ones. He moved on inside.

Inside the Dining Lodge, everything was absolutely normal. Scouts sat around, having breakfast, chatting animatedly with each other. Occasionally the previous Kitchen Steward would come out and everyone would cheer.

Everyone liked you if you had been steward.

Occasionally, the current Kitchen Steward would come out and everyone would sacrifice him to Great Cthulhu.

No one liked you if you were steward.

Matt thoroughly enjoyed himself and ate muchly of the great offering of earl grey tea and peanut butter spread upon toast.

Meanwhile, somewhere in Nome, Alaska, a car was parked in an empty parking lot. There was much thumping and horrid noises coming from the trunk of the car.

And the trunk popped open, and Mr. Pruyne leapt out and said, "Hey! I'm free, finally!"

And then everyone turned to orange goo.

### **Author's Notes for Fake Part 27**

Okay, this story isn't so nice of me. :P BUT! Matt kept bothering me to write something, so here's the temporary (and thoroughly non-canon) part 27 to tide you folks over until I finish the actual part 27, which will include no Cthulhu or orange goo at all.

I promise.

## ***The Hamster Dance***

Hello, Matt here. Finally done with part 28. First a couple of belated notes.

Not that I admit that the character of Mrs. Balogna is based on a real person, but if she was, then Mark Abert pointed out to me that in actuality she was the Program Director and not the Camp Director. Now, there is one of two possibilities to explain this discrepancy.

First, in an effort to simplify things for the readers and not have too many new minor characters to add to the already extensive cast list, I decided to combine the two positions (Program Director and Camp Director) into one character. Kind of like when the lawyer and the PR guy in Jurassic Park the book were combined into one character (the lawyer) for the film version. So I am just as great as Spielberg. Hooray me.

Second. I made a mistake, she should have been the Program Director. But it wasn't an important mistake and didn't affect the story at all, so I left well enough alone.

The second is more likely true, but I shall go with the first. Hooray me.

Second, Mark recalled the name of the lady who was in reality the Trading Post manager. (I mentioned in my notes last time around that I had forgotten her name.) He told me, and I wanted to make mention of it here. But I kind of forgot again. I'm sure he'll let me know. (I think it was Paula something.)

Now... On for notes concerning this story. Well, Summer Camp continues. Only one more to go of actual story, and then one past that to wrap things up, and we shall have reached the end! Who would have thought this day would ever come? After about eight and a half years, *Boy Scouts ½* is almost at an end! (Or is it? Mwa ha ha ha ha...)

Now the usual. *Boy Scouts ½* is inspired by Rumiko Takahashi's *Ranma ½*. Also, *Boy Scouts ½* is not meant to reflect the values of the Pioneer Valley Council or the Boy Scouts of America. Although I would hope that should

he ever read it, which would be impressive what with him being dead and all, Lord Baden-Powell would only have positive results from the experience.

As far as what's up with Becker, for the benefit of the dim witted, the exceptionally slow, or people who never watched TV, I shan't say exactly what it is so as not to spoil it. I shall just credit a Mr. Donald P. Bellisario.

Thank you, and good night.

### ***Un Tramonto sul un'altra Estate***

#### Author's Notes

The Bard's sonnet that Kuntz makes 'better' is Sonnet 53, and goes something like this:

What is your substance, whereof are you made,  
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?  
Since every one hath, every one, one shade,  
And you but one, can every shadow lend.  
Describe Adonis, and the counterfeit  
Is poorly imitated after you;  
On Helen's Cheek all art of beauty set,  
And you in Grecian tires are painted new:  
\* Speak of the spring, and foison of the year,  
The one doth shadow of your beauty show,  
The other as your bounty doth appear;  
And you in every blessed shape we know.  
In all external grace you have some part,  
But you like none, none you, for constant heart.

The \* marks the part that Kuntz begins to, er, for lack of a better word, quote. Not all of the misquoting is due to changes Kuntz made, mind. Much of it is just him being, among other things, an idiot. He has, in fact, only changed the final line.

A foison is a harvest or bounty.

'Advanced Theoretical Quantum Astrophysics' is not a real merit badge. Farm Mechanics is, as is the requirement that Aaron quotes.

Alright, now that that's out of the way, the actual author's notes. I'm going to write them, this time, before I tell Matt that I've finished. I keep passing these to him and he posts them before I've finished writing the author's notes. Grr.

Okay! I suppose this has taken a fair amount of time to write (nothing on Mike or Jessi, though). To everyone who pestered Matt to pester me, I have this to say:

I would have finished earlier if people hadn't been pestering me. Grr.

I took some liberties with some of the characters in this, as people will no doubt notice. I hope I didn't move them too far from where Matt envisioned them. I know I played with the normal Justy-Proctor relationship, and made it something closer to the dynamics between, say, Zapp Branigan and Kif in Futurama. It just turned out funnier that way.

I'm gonna say, this is probably the last writing I'm gonna do for the *Boy Scouts* ½ series. I've got too much on my plate and I'm gonna start Grad School in the fall, so I'm gonna see my time fall apart really damn fast. I'll still remain active in the community and I'll still help produce the *BS*½ Magic fan-expansions, but no more full out stories, not for a good long time.

Not that there's much left to the series.

It's up to Matt, now. He's already started on Part 30.

Lister, Rimmer, the Cat, Holly and the Toaster are all copyright to the British Broadcasting Company.

Muad'Dib belongs to Frank Herbert and, the version I used, David Lynch. Fear is the mind-killer.

The original idea for Jusenkyo and the cursed springs is the brainchild of one miss Takahashi Rumiko. May she forgive the travesty that Matt has wrought.

This story is not in any way endorsed or affiliated (or even acknowledged) by the Boy Scouts of America National Council. May they forgive me for coming up with

the 'Advanced Theoretical Quantum Astrophysics' merit badge.

For those wondering, the badge has the Stargate around the edge, with Amanda Tapping's head in the middle. There's an alternate version that has Carl Sagan's head, instead.

Matt *is* the Kwisatz Haderach!

### ***For Whom the Bell Tolls***

Well, here we are. Almost a decade since this was started, and it has finally come to an end. Well, there's a bit of an epilogue coming up, but then that's it.

Put a fork in it, *Boy Scouts* ½ is done!

Jusenkyo curses are from Rumiko Takahashi's *Ranma* ½, used without permission.

This story is not endorsed by or meant to reflect the values of the Boy Scouts of America.

I will not confirm or deny whether or not the character of Ann Balogna is based on a real person... But I will say that there was once a Program Director up at Moses who would not allow *Mat Gets Wet, part 3* to take place. Sadly, in reality she won. But as Uhura said in *Star Trek III*, "This isn't reality. This is fantasy." Nice to know that somewhere, the good guys can come out on top.

(Although I imagine that if we had pulled this off in reality, there wouldn't have been a concern over my being cursed, and I wouldn't have needed a last minute save from Becket... er, Becker.)

Ah, yes. Another disclaimer: The character of Dr. Sam Beckett is from the show *Quantum Leap*, created by Donald P. Bellisario. I thought it would be interesting to see things completely from the point of view of everyone who *wasn't* a leaper.

Well, I shall stop here and let you get on to the epilogue. Talk to you again soon.

## Epilogue

I have been sitting on this story for about two and a half years. Yup. First wrote this epilogue in 2003! It held up pretty well. Had to make a few minor changes. Added a paragraph about Hughes's involvement, removed a reference to Jessi being at college with Jim Anderson, added a bit about not waking Jessi, changed reference of *Boy Scouts ½* having taken seven years to *nine years*. Little things like that.

Not much to disclaim here, other than Nabishin. The opening bit (complete with a random, "Continue, is it?" is taken directly from an episode of *Excel Saga*. This is an anime series that was directed by Watanabe Shinichi based on a manga by Koshi Rikudo.

There was no character of Nabeshin in the manga, but director **Watanabe Shinichi** inserted him most prominently into the anime version, voicing the character himself.

And you know, after all this time, I still need to watch Puni Puni Poemy. Jessi begged me to get it so we could watch it. I didn't want to have to re-write that bit of the story. She said I could leave the story as it is, and that none of the readers would know the difference. But I have my integrity! I suppose I should get it now.

Thank you to everyone who has enjoyed *Boy Scouts ½* over the years. For those who have stuck through it even over the occasional long hiatus, thanks for your patience. For those who are newer to *Boy Scouts ½*, welcome aboard and I hope you enjoyed it. I did write this thing (or have others write bits for me) mainly for my own enjoyment, but I will admit that it always felt good when others enjoyed it.

And so now we have come to the end. But it is only the end of the beginning. For although I shall probably take a bit of time off (and by a bit, I assure you I do not mean a few years!), I shall continue!

So soon I shall return to you all with the first episode of...  
*Boy Scouts ½ in Japan!*

## **Boy Scouts ½: The Novel**

Well, that's all, folks. *Boy Scouts ½* in it's entirety. Well, except for the Anime Deathmatches. And the second Troop 180 Chronicles. But I already told you you could find those on the website. Also there would be the two spin-off series, *Perspectives* and *Kenny's Laboratory*. And the sequel series, *Boy Scouts ½ in Japan*. Maybe those will be in book form someday, but for now enjoy them online!

One more thing I will include here. It seems fitting to put it at the end of this book, as it is an ending theme... One of the end theme songs from *Ranma ½*, re-written to have *Boy Scouts ½* related lyrics.

Before I get to that, though... Thanks for reading! You better not have paid money for it! Or stole it! Oh, and say hello, Rachel:

"Hufiuhuf."

She just mashed her hand vaguely upon the keyboard. Isn't she wonderful, folks?

### **Lambada Boy Scouts**

*(Sung to the tune of "Lambada Ranma")*

[Aaron, Mike, Gelinas & Hughes] Welcome to Springfield's  
Boy Scout Troop

[Kirstin & Nicole] One Ninety-Two!

[Aaron, Mike, Gelinas & Hughes] Five of us fell into cursed  
springs

[Kirstin & Nicole] What will they do?

[Mike] It's certainly tragic

[Matt] Splash us and we're in panic

[Matty] We take on alternate forms from which chaos then  
ensues

[Aaron, Mike, Gelinas & Hughes] At Boy Scout Troop One  
Ninety-Two!

Matthew: "I'm going to go talk to her!"

Sarah: "Look, Mr. Testosterone, lower the hormone levels  
a bit, okay?"

Aaron: "Sorry, Matt, but she scares me more than she scares you."

"Just put the duck down!" – Quadrozzi

Hughes: "I am not a hick, damnit!"

Kirstin: "As I thought, dear Sarah overreacted again."

Nicole: "A once in a lifetime investment!"

"Hey, no fair!" – Gelinas

Kuntz: "Just a token of my affection."

Justy: "You will address me as SPL or Lord God Yung!"

Proctor: "Well done, Captain, if I may say so."

"Now I kill you!" – Perfume

[Aaron, Mike, Gelinas & Hughes] Welcome to Springfield's Boy Scout Troop

[Kirstin & Nicole] One Ninety-Two!

[Aaron, Mike, Gelinas & Hughes] Five of us fell into cursed springs

[Kirstin & Nicole] What will they do?

[Mike] It's certainly tragic

[Matt] Splash us and we're in panic

[Matty] We take on alternate forms from which chaos then ensues

[Aaron, Mike, Gelinas & Hughes] At Boy Scout Troop One Ninety-Two!

[Guide] Here, sirs, we come to legendary Training Ground of Accursed Springs, *Jusenkyo*

This place very dangerous. Almost nobody use now

Hey, sirs, where you going?

You can't go there! You've not heard all of Tragic Story!

Oh, too bad, you fall in *Nyaaniichuan*

There is very tragic legend

Of young girl who drown in spring one thousand five hundred year ago

Now whoever fall in spring

Take body of young girl

You see? Now you young girl

Jason: "I wasn't even supposed to be here today!"

Nicole: "You owe me lunch."

Hoelscher: "My life is my own!"

"And to top it all off, I bounce!" – Fenny

Hawley: "Gentlemen, this is getting us nowhere."

Kenny: "Have you guys ever heard of a place called Jusenkyo?"

Ryoga: "*Furinkan kokou wa doko da?*"

"Ho, ho, ho." – Tanner

Provost: "What the hell's with this can?"

Wellington: "He is unholy. He must be destroyed."

Perry: "Perry not peon! Is Amazon warrior!"

"It's gone!" – Matty

[Matt] I just wish, Sarah, you'd find a place for me in your heart

[Aaron, Mike, Gelinas & Hughes] Welcome to Springfield's  
Boy Scout Troop

[Kirstin & Nicole] One Ninety-Two!

[Aaron, Mike, Gelinas & Hughes] Five of us fell into cursed  
springs

[Kirstin & Nicole] What will they do?

[Mike] It's certainly tragic

[Matt] Splash us and we're in panic

[Matty] We take on alternate forms from which chaos then  
ensues

[Aaron, Mike, Gelinas & Hughes] At Boy Scout Troop One  
Ninety-Two!

[Matt] "I wish you'd give me a chance."

[Aaron, Mike, Gelinas & Hughes] At Boy Scout Troop One  
Ninety-Two!

[Sarah] "Just go away!"

[Aaron, Mike, Gelinas & Hughes] At Boy Scout Troop One  
Ninety-Two!