

BOY SCOUTS 1 1/2

Book II

created by Matthew Atanian

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

**written by Matthew Atanian and Jason Bertovich
with William Hughes and Mark "Mr. A" Abert**



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BOY SCOUTS 1/2

Book II

The *Perspectives* Series

created by Jason Bertovich

based on *Boy Scouts 1/2*

written by Jason Bertovich

and Matthew Atanian

with William Hughes

Kenny's Laboratory

created by Matthew Atanian

based on *Boy Scouts 1/2*

written by Matthew Atanian

with Jason Bertovich

—Also Featuring—

The Troop 180 Chronicles, part II

by Mark "Mr. A" Abert

Anime Deathmatch Boy Scouts 1/2 I, II, & III

by Matthew Atanian

Anime Deathmatch

created by Jason Bertovich



West Springfield

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The *Perspectives* series, created by Jason Bertovich, based on *Boy Scouts* ½ created by Matthew Atanian.

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Forward

And so we come to the second collected volume of *Boy Scouts ½* related works. With this, we delve into the spin-offs!

The first of these is the *Perspectives* series, originally known as *Perspectives from the Food Court* before dropping the majority of that name for being something of an artefact title.

Within this novel you will find the first ten *Perspectives* stories, comprising three separate storylines: Byte I, Byte II, and an aborted Byte III. Yes, that last one was aborted. The man behind *Perspectives*, Jason Bertovich, decided to reboot the series and after the tenth story actually went back and made a completely new version of the first story.

I wish to be clear that despite this reboot, that does not make his original works any less valid or worthy of being read, and thus those original stories are the ones to be found in this book. His reboot, as it is being written, can easily be found on the *Boy Scouts ½* website. And I am sure that someday, alas probably not for at least a few years, once his reboot has reached a sufficient length to warrant it, you will be able to experience it in a collected edition such as this, too. But for now, please enjoy the original *Perspectives*. Jason may feel it has many warts, but I think you will also find there is much to enjoy within those pages.

The other major *Boy Scouts ½* spin-off was Kenny's Laboratory. This spin-off was one of my own creation, although Jason dabbled a bit here as well. My personal feelings on Kenny's Lab are that it started strong, had some promise, but got lost a bit later on and ended up having a rushed ending that could have been handled better. Of course, authors can be their own worst critics, and Jason has told me that he actually quite likes what I

did with Kenny's Lab. So, who knows? I suppose it is up to you, dear reader, to make your own judgement as well.

Finally, in this volume I am collecting the last few bits of "Year One" *Boy Scouts ½* stories that for whatever reason I left out of the first collected edition. First would be the second of Mark Abert's *Troop 180 Chronicles* stories. I left it out of the first book so that that book could be a more complete narrative, as the first *Troop 180 Chronicles* story works well as a standalone piece where as the one presented here ends on a cliff-hanger that, alas, has never been resolved.

The other previous omission would be the three *Boy Scouts ½* related *Anime Deathmatch* stories. *Anime Deathmatch* was a series created by Jason Bertovich which he allowed me to play in by doing what I do best, gratuitous self-insertion!

This is the first official PDF edition of this work. There was a previous PDF version, but it was pretty much just the hardcover edition of this book published as a PDF. This new version, although it is based very much on the newer paperback edition of the book, has had its formatting tweaked better suit this format.

You may have noticed *two* cover images at the start of this book. The first is reproduced from the paperback edition, and the second comes from the original hardcover edition. The hardcover cover is okay, and will always be nostalgic for me. But one of the nice things of the paperback edition was making some new covers incorporating character artwork I hadn't previously had when first publishing this book.

Anyway, enjoy the book!

—Matt

Dedication

This book is dedicated to two people:

The first is Rachel Pike. Yeah, I know, I mentioned her in the last volume's dedication. But that was as a charming young woman who I had been dating for a few months, and who I was very hopeful about continuing a relationship with. Well, this dedication is to the Rachel who has been putting up with me for over three years at this point, and seems to show no signs that she won't continue to do so. Yay! I love you, Rachel.

The second... This dedication I am making on Jason's behalf. I'm hoping to keep the fact that I am working on this second published volume a secret from Jason until the day that a mysterious package arrives at his home and he opens it up to find this book inside, so I cannot ask him his preferences in dedication... but I have a decent idea who someone he might wish to dedicate it to may be. And so on his behalf I make a dedication to his lovely wife Sarah. No, not Sarah Porter! Sarah Bertovich. (Well, Bua, originally.)

But anyway, a few months ago Rachel and I had the opportunity to visit the happy couple at their home. And after finally meeting his wife, I must say, "Well done, my friend." They seem very happy together, and hopefully will continue that way for many years... indeed, the remainder of their lives.

Ah, hell. A third dedication. To Jason, himself. It is always a pleasure collaborating with you, my friend.

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Perspectives

Byte I

Perspectives From
the Food Court
by Jason Bertovich

I: Perspectives From the Food Court

The sun had just peeked over the horizon and was beginning to show it's intrusive rays in the outskirts of Holyoke, a suburb of the city of Springfield, MA. However, in one small apartment, the rays were not at all intrusive. This was mainly because the blinds were closed as to not let any of these offending rays in on this crisp morning. Inside this cramped apartment, amiss in the sea of clothing, CD's, video cassettes, and discarded take-out containers sat a pile of blankets lumped on top of a Japanese sleeping futon sitting on the floor. The blankets twinged slightly and then were still again in its content lump shape. Something was definitely alive in that pile. What it was is unknown.

Now, since the sunlight was not playing any role in being intrusive, something else had to pick up the slack. That something was a cordless phone, which was now loudly ringing under a pile of clothes. An arm slithered out from the lump of blankets and grabbed the television remote and dragged it back under the blanket cave. After a moment, as the ringing continued, the blankets spat out the remote and the arm slithered out again. This time it succeeded in grabbing the offending object and dragging it under the blankets. The ringing stopped.

"Mmph...hewo?" a muffled voice spewed from underneath the lump. A inaudible garbling followed, obviously from the phone.

"Is that um twick qwestun? No, I dun't wanna opo toduh!" the voice garbled. More noise followed from the receiver.

"Wuh? Becus Um Fuking TIRED!!!" the voice shouted from underneath the lump, getting more clear. "Why am I tired? Because I was out partying all night!" More garbling came from the other end this time more frantic. "What do you mean 'why was I out partying all night?!?' It was because I wasn't supposed to work today and it was Friday night and I figured that meant I could sleep in

today!" Still more garble screaming from the other end, this time in full blown panic.

"What do you mean, he's sick!!! This is the sixth time in a month!!!" the voice screamed from under the blankets. More garbled shouting. "OK, I'll open. You'll be in at Two, right? And the part timer comes in at One right? You promise? You PROMISE?!?! Two O'clock or I walk..." The familiar beeping noise of a phone being shut off followed. The lump of blankets spat out the phone. Then it was still again. Three seconds later and the blankets flew off as they were kicked off by the now enraged occupant. "FUCK!!!!"

Outside, the young paperboy heard the loudest expletive he had ever heard in his short life.

The young man who had just seconds ago kicked off the blankets from his futon sat up and brushed his light brown hair out of his face. He rubbed his chin and realized that the scratchy texture of his face had to be remedied. He sat up and grabbed a CD from the pile on the floor, popped it in the Hi-Fi, and walked into the bathroom.

The music blared into the bathroom. The young man was shaving away the previous night's dregs off his face. He then started the shower spigot and turned it to the hottest possible setting that one can achieve without melting one's skin. The music continued to blare into the bathroom. From the floor below someone was banging on the young man's floor and their ceiling with a broom handle. Inside the chamber of boiling water, the young man continued to scrub himself and sing along...

"Give it to me baby (Uh huh, uh huh!)...Give it to me baby (Uh huh, Uh huh!)... Give it to me baby (Uh huh, Uh huh!)...and all the girlies say I'm pretty fly for a white guy." The shower karaoke session turned to head banging. "Unos, Duos, Tres, Quatro, Sinco, Sinco, Ses..." From below the banging continued.

The young man, now wrapped in a towel, wiped the mirror clean of the steam that had accumulated during his

hot shower and looked deep into the mirror. He then let out a disappointed sigh. "Well Jason, here we are again. Covering for some asshole, another week in this town and what do we have to show for it? A crummy apartment, the same dead-end mall job, and another semester at the same small college." He lowered his head and sighed again. He rubbed his weary eyes and proceeded to change into the uniform of mindless automaton.

He slipped on the red polo shirt and the black slacks; he clipped on the name tag that identified that he in fact was the person to annoy with stupid questions. Grabbing his keys off the floor, his wallet off the TV set, and his glasses off the stereo, he was out the door.

As the coup pulled into the still relatively empty Holyoke Mall Parking Lot, Jason pulled into a space up front. He turned off the ignition and looked at his watch. He had a few minutes to spare. He leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes.

In his mind's eye he sat in the cockpit of a B-52 bomber carrying the payload of death. A 30 Megaton Nuclear device. He was currently flying over Holyoke. He waited patiently and at the right moment he pulled the level, humorously labeled "Bombs Away!" The bay doors opened and the bomb dropped, turning the mall into a mushroom cloud.

Jason opened his eyes and smiled. He then rubbed his temples. "OK Jason, get into Work Mode," he said to himself as he stepped out of his car and walked into the Holyoke Mall.

Inside the mall, he unlocked the gate over the Electronics Boutique entrance. Already waiting outside the store were three pasty faced teens. *Why are they here this early?* Jason thought to himself. He thought back a moment and had a horrible realization. Today was the day that the new wrestling game debuted. ECWCWWF EXTREME THUNDROUS ATTITUDE II. *OH SHIT!!! I cannot deal with this today!*

"Yo Salesguy, did the new game come in yet?" the first pasty faced teen asked.

Jason kept his blood pressure in check. "The new game won't be here until the shipment arrives, and that doesn't arrive until One or Two o'clock." He replied calmly.

"No fuckin' way!" the first teen shouted.

"Bull-fucking-shit!" the second added.

"Sonuva-fucking-bitch!" the third added.

Such lovely language, Jason thought to himself. "Well then let us in the store, we wanna look around," the first spewed from his garbage mouth.

"Sorry guys, the store isn't opened for another half-hour," Jason answered.

"No fuckin' way!" the first teen shouted.

"Bull-fucking-shit!" the second added.

"Sonuva-fucking-bitch!" the third added.

Jason sighed and proceeded to unlock the store gate. The three teens walked away. He sighed again, this time because he knew that they would be back. The half-hour flew by and the opening actually went relatively smoothly.

He raised the gate and placed the cardboard standees out and waited for the first person to piss him off today. He didn't have to wait long. The guy walked in and went straight to the counter. "Yo, I want that game!" he gruffed.

"Which game?" Jason asked, adding inside his head, *Out of the fifty million available?*

"The one for the 'Station," he answered.

"As I said, which game?" Jason asked, this time adding in this head *OH, that only narrowed it down to about 25 million... very helpful.*

"You know, the one on TV!" he answered.

"As I said before, WHICH GAME...?" Jason asked again trying to keep his brains from exploding all over the counter from an aneurysm this early in the day. He added inside his head this time, *You asshole! Do you know how many games are advertised on TV?!?!? Am I wearing a sign that says 'hi, I'm a mind-reader?!?!?!'*

"Well, just tell me all the games you have," the guy gruffed.

What the fuck?!?!?! Does he expect me to be a damn directory for him?!?! "Well, sir, our PlayStation section is over there," Jason said pointing to the wall of empty cases, "If you can't find a game over there then we don't have it."

The guy walked over the PlayStation games and mercifully left Jason alone. His peace was short lived however, as he was bombarded with more pasty faced teens all wanting the new wrestling game and each holding up green slips indicating that they had already paid. Jason rubbed his temples and calmly let each know that they would have to wait until the afternoon to purchase their game. Instead of leaving however, they decided to "browse" which meant playing the Nintendo unit, reading the magazines, and basically being a nuisance. Jason closed his eyes and began to fantasize again...

This time all the customers were clad in spandex tights and were posing with strobe-lights and fireworks going off everywhere in the store. Then silence. Suddenly, with the sound of glass shattering, out came Jason clad in a black leather vest and an evil goatee. He then proceeded to beat the living hell out of every customer in the damn store. Standing on the counter with his middle fingers raised high, customers gasped at him, "Why can't we have that game yet?"

"You wanna know why the game isn't here yet? Because the shipment won't be here until One to Two PM and that's the bottom line...CUZ STONE COLD SAID SO!" Then he grabbed a can of beer from out of the air and guzzled it. Then leaping off the counter, he picked up a customer and proceeded to beat down on him again. "OH HEEEEEEEEELLLLLLLLLL YEAH!!!!"

The phone ringing snapped Jason out of his pleasant fantasy. Picking up the phone, he said, "Hello, Electronics Boutique, where you can...um..." Thinking of all the

promotions he can added, "...get the hot new RPG, Final Fantasy VII. Jason speaking, how can I help you?"

It turned out to be the distributor. He listened calmly, then he his eyes bulged. "WHAT!?!?! ARE YOU SERIOUS?!?!" A pause followed and the customers looked on in interest. "So there's nothing you can do?" Another pause. "Monday. OK, if there's nothing else we can do...thank you. Goodbye." Jason hung up the phone and rubbed his temples again.

"This is not good...This is not good...This is not good..." he began to repeat to himself. He then calmed himself and turned his attention to the customers.

"OK, how many of you are here to pick up the new wrestling game?" Every one of them raised their hands. "OK, well unfortunately the game will not be coming in today. The distributor just called and said that three of their planes are having engine troubles, two of their planes are covered in ice, and one is just missing a wing so they can't ship the game today. They promise that the game will be in on Monday."

The sea of bitching hit Jason in the face like a tidal wave. People demanding their game, people demanding their money back, people wanting to be assholes because they can. However they grew bored and soon left and the store was quiet again. Jason looked at his watch and saw that is was 12:30. The store was now relatively empty, except for the sparse browser who was looking over home publishing software. Jason leaned against the entrance and watched the mall life pass by.

He watched as a red head and a semi-blonde walked by. The red head was holding a Victoria's Secret bag. The semi-blonde caught Jason's eye. He crossed his arms and watched them walk by. Then the silence was shattered as he could hear someone scream from a slight distance, "SO WHERE THE HELL AM I NOW!?" This was shortly followed by the same voice screaming, "SHISHI HOKOUDAN!!!", and then a explosion.

The two girls looked in his direction. He shrugged his shoulders. *Like I would know.* A moment later a charred

and melted piece of plastic that slightly looked like the mall directory landed behind the pair. They turned to him, this time they shrugged their shoulders and walked on.

Jason walked back inside the store. He saw then a Asian gentleman clad in yellow walking toward the store. He looked angry. Probably a return. He began to rub his temples again and spoke quietly to himself. "OK, Jason get into customer service mode." He strode up toward the Asian boy and spoke. "Hi, is there anything I can help you find today?"

The Asian lad responded to the query by picking up Jason by the collar and staring him straight in the eyes. "Where is Furinkan High School?!?"

"What?!?" Jason shouted as cowardly as one could when being hoisted by a gentleman obviously much stronger than oneself.

"WHERE IS FURINKAN HIGH SCHOOL?!?!?" he shouted again.

"Furikan High School? Where is that?" Jason asked, confused.

The Asian boy looked Jason in the eye, gritted his teeth, and began to shake Jason very vigorously. "THAT'S WHAT I WANT TO KNOW!!!!" he screamed back. At this point Jason had succumbed to total fear and blindly pointed to his left. The boy dropped him and ran off down the direction he pointed and quickly disappeared.

Jason sat on the floor shaking. At that point the mocha brown colored uniform clad security guard walked by and tipped his hat. Jason narrowed his eyes.

"Hey Officer Mall Guard! Way to go protecting democracy!" Jason shouted.

"Thanks." The mall guard replied and continued walking obviously not understanding the concept of sarcasm.

Jason cupped his face in his palms and was quite ready to openly weep, except at this point a young man also clad in a red polo shirt and black pants walked in the store. His name tag read "Mark."

"Hey Jason, why are you on the floor?"

"Long story. Just leave me be...I'll be off the floor in a moment." He weakly smiled.

"Whatever..." Mark answered and rolled his eyes upward.

Jason slowly rose and went behind the counter. "Only one more hour to go...only one more hour to go..." he began to softly chant to himself. He looked up in surprise at a young man standing at the counter.

"WHAT?" The boy with the headphones shouted.

"Huh?" Jason asked as he looked up at the boy with the headphones.

"WHAT?" headphone boy shouted back.

"Can I help you?" Jason asked.

"WHAT?" headphone boy shouted back.

"I said...can I help you find something today?" Jason asked again.

"WHAT?" headphone boy shouted.

"Forget it...you're beyond help." Jason sighed and walked into the back storeroom. *I'll let Mark handle him...*

"WHAT?" headphone Boy shouted after him.

Amazingly, the rest of the hour went relatively smoothly and Jason threw off the name tag as soon as his boss walked in the store. "Two O'clock, it's Miller Time...later..." Jason said as he bolted for the exit.

"Um...Jason, don't forget to come in early tomorrow so we can have the monthly meeting." The short woman said. Jason stopped cold and sighed. He nodded and trudged out of the store.

Store meeting on Sunday morning...can life get much more annoying? At least this day was over. Jason felt his stomach growl and he realized that it was time for food and stimulating conversation. And Jason knew where he could find both.

Down in the Holyoke Mall food court, three people sat at a small table. The first was Jason. The second was a young lady with the name tag that read "Fenny." The third was another young man with a mass of black hair and a

name tag that read "John." Jason took a sip of his Sprite and then banged his hand on the table. "I hereby call this meeting of the Holyoke Refugees of Employment Hell to some sort of order."

"Here, here!" John applauded.

"Bravo," Fenny added.

"So let us report to what has happened to us since the last..." Jason paused. His attention was diverted by the same red head and the semi-blonde he had seen earlier. The semi-blonde was still the same, but boy did the red head change quite a bit. She was now clad in a tight black dress.

"Hey Jay? You ok?" John asked while waving his hand in front of Jason's face. John pointed John's attention to the pair of women.

"Hmmp! It's amazing what grabs you guys' attention. I bet they don't even bounce," Fenny added indignantly.

"Relax, Fenny, you know that you're the only girl for us." John answered.

"I love you....I would date with you." Jason added melodramatically.

"Have to ham it up don't you? Where did you get that line?" Fenny asked.

"You know what? I don't know...just kinda popped inside my head." Jason shrugged.

"Weird. Anyway, you have to admit Fenny, those girls are attractive... Especially the red head." John added as he sipped his coke.

"I don't know. The semi-blonde seems kinda hot to me." Jason sighed.

"That's good for you, Jason, and very bad for you, John." Fenny smirked as she sipped her mochachino.

"Hmm?" John queried with an arched eyebrow.

"Well, I can't speak for the blonde, but the red head seems a little...um..." She finished her sentence with a tilted hand gesture.

"No way!" Jason smirked.

"My reaction exactly! That girl is not a lesbian!" John shouted.

Fenny just shrugged her shoulders.

"Anyway...how would you know?"

"Call it woman's intuition." Fenny smiled.

"Makes sense to me. Tough break John." Jason chuckled.

"Of course that does mean..." Fenny began.

"Mean what?" Jason queried.

"Well the blonde could be her...er...lover." Fenny smirked again. John did a spit take with his Coke and laughed. Jason hung his head in sorrow.

"Alas, us males have lost two more," Jason moaned. John patted Jason on the shoulders in consolation.

"Have you boys gotten it out of your system yet?" Fenny asked looking at her watch. "I have to back at work in twenty minutes."

"Give a moment to grieve." John sniped back as he and Jason clapped their hands in mock prayer.

"Very cute." Fenny rolled her eyes.

"OK, now we've got the lesbian thing out of our system... Anyway, shall we go over the hell that is our lives?" John asked.

"Me first!" Jason jumped in his seat. "OK, so these girls walked by the store. There was this huge explosion..."

"I heard it too!" John interrupted.

"Yeah, me three. What was it?" Fenny asked.

"Mall directory." Jason answered to the blank expressions of his friends. "Anyway after these girls leave -- this was after the mall directory landed behind them -- this guy walks into the store. Asian Guy, looked real tough, dressed like he was going on jungle safari or something. He goes up to me. I say 'Hi, is there anything I can help ya with today?' He then picks me up by the collar and screams in my face, 'Tell me, where is Furikan High School!'" Jason gestured wildly as he told his story.

"No way," John commented.

"Furikan what?" Fenny asked with her own raised eyebrow.

"That was my reaction. I go, 'Where is Furikan High School?!?!?' and he just looks at me and fumes and screams, 'That's what I WANT TO KNOW!!!!!!' Then the guy drops me and runs off." Jason gestured.

"What about the mall security?" Fenny queried.

"Oh you mean officer mall guard? He didn't do a damn thing!" Jason shouted.

"Figures," John added.

"And you wanna know what the biggest tragedy about this is?" Jason asked his friends out loud. He then sighed "The biggest tragedy is that I'm not even supposed to be here today!"

"Alas, a life of tragedy," John mused.

"Maybe you killed someone in a past life," Fenny reasoned.

"Har, har," Jason fumed. John raised his hand.

"Well, I can't say that I was mugged today. In fact, my day was relatively normal. Hell, I even sold a pair of shoes to our lovely lesbian couple over yonder. But I did have one weird guy today..." John began to flashback. (WARNING! FLASHBACK APPROACHING!!!!)

John adjusted his nametag and looked around the Shoe Dept. He was quite, quite bored to be perfectly honest with everyone. Then a customer appeared. Something seemed odd to John about this lad. Then it struck him. He was clad in a full Boy Scout Uniform. Full Sash of merit badges, medals of service, and a new, crisp patch decreeing him as, "SENIOR PATROL LEADER."

Who the hell wears a boy scout uniform to the mall?!? John thought to himself. The boy pseudo-coughed to garner John's attention. John dared to break the silence "Can I help you?"

"Why yes you can sales-peon! I need a pair of shoes fit for a ruler!" the lad barked.

"OK..." John paused. *Did he just call me 'peon?'* he thought to himself. "Can you be a little more specific?"

"Well they need to look good while I'm stepping over my underlings. They must look perfect when my subjects are kissing my feet... even if they aren't even worthy of doing that! BWA Ha ha ha ha ha ha hA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA Ha ha ha ha HA HA HA HA HA!" The lad broke into a hysterical laughter. "After all, this is only a small step... first a group of Boy Scout peons... then... THE WORLD! BWA HA HA HA HA HA Ha ha ha hh ah ah HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!"

John nodded dumbly at the boy and looked down at his shoes. He was wearing a pair of brown loafers. John looked over the men's shoes and handed him a pair of brown loafers. "I think you'll find these suitable for a ruler of your... stature."

The boy slipped off his shoes and slipped the new ones on. "Hmmm..." He suinted at the shoes as he looked them over in the mirror. "Yes... these are very nice... they reflect my greatness very... um..." he struggled for a synonym, "...nicely." He began to laugh again to fill dead silence.

"Shall I ring them up?" John smirked.

"Yes, you should be adequate at that task sales-peon. Do so immediately!" the lad barked. "In fact, throw these shoes away...I'll wear these out," he shouted holding up his old shoes, still oblivious to the fact that they were exactly the same as his new shoes. The boy began to walk out with a self satisfied grin.

"By the way, kid..." John began.

"You will address me as SPL or LORD GOD YUNG!" the boy barked.

"Whatever. Are you doing some sort of charity drive or something?" John asked, pointing to the uniform.

"Um...no. Why?" The boy asked perplexed by the question.

"Never mind." John replied. (FLASHBACK ENDING... 3... 2... 1... NOW!)

* * *

"What an asshole," Jason answered.

"Yep...but that's OK," John shrugged.

"Why is it OK?" Jason asked, arching his eyebrow.

"Because when I'm ruling the world... he will pay... oh how he will pay... Bwa ha hA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA ha ha hA HA HA HA HA HA!!!" John began to cackle psychotically.

Jason looked over to Fenny who simply rolled her eyes in response. "OK Fenny, your turn," Jason directed toward her as he sipped his Sprite again.

"No complaints." Fenny shrugged.

"LIAR! DECIEVER!" John shouted pointed to Fenny.

"No complaints at all?!?" Jason asked.

"Nope." Fenny smirked.

"And this is because..." Jason began and paused.

"Why would I complain? I've got looks, poise and grace, charm, and to top it off... I bounce! With all that, who could ask for anything more?" Fenny beamed. John face-faulted out of his chair. Jason lowered his head.

"I had to ask." Jason groaned.

Fenny looked at her watch and jumped up. "SHIT! My break's over! I've gotta go!" Fenny shouted as she bolted from the table.

"AUGH! Mine too! Later!" John followed.

"Viva the Revolution!" Jason shouted after John as he made his way from the food court. John paused and turned around to give a salute and then continued on his way.

Jason looked around at the empty table and paused for thought. Yes he wasn't even supposed to be there today. Yes, he was tired. Yes, he was stuck in a dead end job. And yes, he even had to work tomorrow after first a morning meeting . But on the flip side he had good friends in the Springfield area who actually understood him, and he knew that they would be here again tomorrow.

Jason kicked his feet up on the table and took his drink and raised it in the air to nobody. "Here's to tomorrow." Jason took a sip and life continued in Holyoke undaunted.

II: The Least You Could Do

Jason yawned loudly and draped his arms over the counter of the Holyoke Mall Electronics Boutique. He looked up and saw that he was still alone. That surprised him little. After the early morning Sunday meeting, everyone who wasn't working that day fled for the hills. Obviously, Jason and his boss were the only ones who were supposed to work this day. The manager, a short dark-haired woman, was currently in the back storeroom doing what managers do, which was something Jason had no clue about...

He yawned again. He noticed two of people walk in the store. First was a very large gentleman. His attire was torn and tattered and his face was quite ungroomed. He went straight for the Nintendo games and quickly tore through the neatly organized section, unorganizing it in seconds.

The second was quite different. The girl presently had her back to Jason. She looked over the various business software and quickly glanced over the financial packages, then placing them back where she had found them. Jason smiled at her courtesy, but was really curious about her as he had yet to see her face. Though he wasn't certain, he was pretty sure that the pair were not together.

Jason was about to leave the sanctum of behind the counter to greet the two customers when a delivery man wheeled a box into the store and asked Jason to sign for it. Jason arched an eyebrow.

"Um...what's this?" Jason asked the UPS guy.

"Shipment," the UPS guy answered back.

"I can see that. What I mean is why are you delivering today?" Jason asked. "We never get shipments on Sunday."

"Well we're behind a day, so we had to work extra to catch up," the UPS guy replied and again pushed the clipboard in Jason's chest to emphasize that he wanted Jason to sign it so he can leave.

Jason scribble his name. "So does that mean that the game we were supposed to get yesterday is in here?"

"Nope. That will be in tomorrow's shipment," the UPS guy said as he left.

"Figures." Jason sighed. Well, at least he could put off that hell for another day. Jason slashed the tape that sealed the box with a pair of scissors and smiled. He pulled out several videocassettes and laid them out on the counter.

"Yes! I've been dying for us to get these Evangelion tapes," Jason whispered to himself. Jason checked his wallet and smiled again. He set the videos aside so he could purchase them later. He then saw an empty video game box thrown on the counter and looked up. His eyes reluctantly beheld the large, ungroomed gentleman sneering down on him.

"Hey! Why are these damn boxes empty?" he barked.

"Well, we empty all the boxes to prevent people from simply removing the cartridges and stealing them," Jason explained.

"Whatsamatta...you don't trust me?" He sneered at Jason with the contempt one holds for gum at the bottom of one's shoe.

"Well sir, it's simply a preventive measure," Jason explained. Hoping to avoid a confrontation, he began to remove the rest of the videos from the counter.

"Yeah whatever." He sneered as he pointed to the empty game box, indicating that he wanted it. He then saw the videocassettes and sneered at them contemptuously. "What's this?"

"Um...well that's an Anime tape," Jason answered while retrieving the game the man had indicated.

"Ani-what?" he murmured.

"Animation from Japan," Jason answered.

"Oh...you mean those damn porn cartoons." He grimaced.

"Excuse me?" Jason asked.

"Frick'n Japs. Fucking with our kids' heads. We should've wasted em all in WWII!" he barked as he slapped his money on the counter.

There were several things Jason could tolerate, but racial slurs wasn't one of them. Unfortunately, store protocol stated that one should avoid conflict with customers at all cost. He rang up the purchase and handed the game over. "Here you go sir have a nice day..." Then he added under his breath, "*Bakairou...*"

Unfortunately, it wasn't quiet enough and the man heard him. He whipped around. "What the hell did you just say?!!?"

Jason was caught. "Well...um..." Jason stammered.

"He called you a *bakairou*. It means, "Idiot." And judging by your appearance, grammar, and prejudice, I would have to agree 100%."

Jason whipped his head toward the source of the comment. It was the girl.

There she stood. Her skin was a pale cream color, and her large, green eyes were mounted nicely on an attractive, youthful face. Her hair was pale brown and on the short side. Those eyes were more than just attractive. They held a cold, calculating nature. They were very intelligent. Her lips were forming a very tight smirk, proud at her insult to the hulking giant in front of her.

"Why you little bitch!" he shouted and proceeded to throw his open palm in her direction.

Jason immediately leapt over the counter and caught the hand as it bore down on the girl who had yet to even flinch. "I don't think it's proper to strike a young lady," Jason boldly remarked. *Heh heh heh... just like the movies.*

The giant responded by smashing his fist into Jason's nose. Jason spun around and fell face first onto the carpet. A small pool of blood formed from around his now bloodied nose.

"You're right. I much rather punch you asshole!" the giant shouted as he stood over Jason, preparing to beat the living bejuzus out of him.

However, the giant suddenly went very still. His eyes bulged slightly and he grabbed his crotch in agony. He then fell into a fetal position and began to whimper. In his rage he had failed to see the girl behind him who had planted her foot into his genitals. She stood triumphantly over the whimpering beast. Jason had gotten off the floor and clutched his nose to stop the bleeding. He looked down at the fallen beast.

"Yah, thaths righth! Yoo bedda nod twy dat agan!" Jason shouted with his nose clogged full of blood.

"What happened?!?!" shouted someone. Jason and the girl both turned around to see his manager staring down at the fallen customer. She then looked at Jason's bleeding face and gasped. "And what happened to you?!?"

"Wall, yoo see, thisth guh ponchth muh!" Jason garbled.

"Did you provoke him?" the manager asked now with her arms crossed. She gave him a scrutinizing look.

"Wal, yoo see...um...." Jason stammered. He had caused the whole thing. This was the end of his latest career. He slightly sagged his head.

"I saw the whole thing," the girl interrupted.

"Hmm?" the manager queried.

"This guy made a racial slur. I stated my objection and he took a swing at me and the young man here defended me. The guy decided to punch him instead. That's about sums it up." She shrugged.

"Jason, good job. Why don't you get cleaned up and take the rest of the day off? I think you need to clear your head." The manager smiled.

"Thunk yoo." Jason slurred. Jason ran in the back and washed the blood off his face. He stuck several small wads of paper up his nostrils to stop the bleeding which was now down to a slight trickle.

He stepped back out into the still empty store. Apparently, the giant had crawled away in humiliation. The girl was also gone. The manager motioned for Jason to come over before he left to tend his wounds better.

"Good job!" the manager beamed.

"Huh?" Jason arched an eyebrow.

"That girl just purchased the most expensive financial software from us! She said that if employees were willing to take a beating for them then she was going to buy all her software from us. Now Jason, that is customer service! This will look very good on your next performance review!" she chattered.

Jason nodded dumbly and calmly walked out of the store. He touched his tender nose and winced.

"You owe me lunch." A voice came from behind him. He turned to see the girl was following him and holding bag from his store.

"Excuse me?" Jason asked.

"Lunch. Let's go to the food court." She smirked. She grabbed his hand and he dumbly followed...

The pair sat at a small table. She sipped on her drink. She had already eaten a salad, some fries, and some ice cream, all from several different food merchants. She was now sipping a cappuccino and looking across the table at Jason.

"Satisfied yet?" Jason smirked.

"Well, lunch was the least you could do." She smirked back.

"I do wanna thank you. You saved my ass from being fired." Jason smiled.

"Think nothing of it. If you hadn't said something to the jerk, I would have. How dare he say that about anyone!?" the girl said, trying to not grimace.

"I take it that you know Japanese?" he asked.

"How could you tell?" she asked.

"Well, how else could you have known what I had said under my breath," Jason explained.

"Actually, I'm one-quarter Japanese, from my grandmother. I don't really know much of the language, though. Just enough to hold my own. My sisters know the language better. How about you?" she replied.

"Me? Well, I know about twenty words and that's it. Greetings, suffixes, and a few choice insults. That about sums up my knowledge of the Japanese language."

"Ah...I see," she nodded.

"Actually, there's something I wanna know." He paused. "I never got your name."

"It's Nicole. Nicole Porter," she answered as she held her hand out.

Jason grasped it and shook it. "Nice to meet you Nicole Nicole Porter." She grimaced at the worst, most overused joke in existence, but he continued, "I'm Jason. Jason Bertovich." Jason then motioned to the bag. "My boss told me that you bought the most expensive financial software we carried. Picking it up for someone?"

"Actually, it's for me," Nicole replied matter-of-factly.

"Oh?" Jason arched an eyebrow.

"I needed something to help me and my two sisters keep track of our expenses," Nicole answered. "I'm the only one that seems able to keep track of everything, though my older sister is the chief breadwinner."

"You mean it's just the three of you?" Jason asked.

She went silent for a moment. "Our parents died a long time ago. There was our grandmother, but she just passed away." She frowned slightly.

"I'm very sorry," Jason said softly. He realized that he choose the wrong topic. "It must be very sad."

"Life's only sad if you let it be. I don't mean to trouble you with my life story." She had regained the smile.

"That's a very positive attitude," he responded, "and it's no trouble."

"Thanks." Nicole smiled.

Someone tapped Nicole on her shoulder. Jason looked up to see who it was. He then jerked back and blinked. There stood an exact copy of Nicole, except for slightly longer hair.

"Hey, Nicole, I've been looking for you! We've got to get home and get ready for the guys," the Nicole clone said.

Nicole nodded and turned to look at Jason, who had a deer-in-headlights look on his face. "Oh Jason! Let me introduce you to my sister, Kirstin." The clone smiled and nodded politely.

"I've got to go," Nicole continued. "We're having a sort of get together tonight with some of my sisters friends." She pulled out a scrap of paper and scribbled down something. "Here's my number, maybe we can do lunch again."

She got up and the twins walked away from the table. Nicole whispered something in her sister's ear and began to giggle. Kirstin in turn appeared to look embarrassed, and shoved her twin in the shoulder. Soon the pair were out of view.

Jason sat alone at the table. He looked at the phone number and sighed. "I wonder how old she is?" He said to himself out loud. He thought she might be a bit young, but it still never hurt to look... and even if she was a tad young, a date was fine as long as nothing happened afterwards...

A cough interrupted his train of thought. He looked up to see John, his friend from the Filene's shoe department, standing at the table.

"Hey John!" Jason motioned for him to have a seat.

John looked at Jason and arched an eyebrow. "Jason...what happened to your face?"

Jason clutched the scrap of paper slightly. "Something wonderful."

"Something wonderful has appeared to have broken your nose." John replied.

"I got punched in the face." Jason answered.

"And that's something wonderful?!?" John stammered. "Are you a masochist now?"

"John my friend, pull up a chair and I'll tell you all about it." Jason replied. He then proceeded to tell John all about his shortened work day..."

III: The Bouncy Goddess Relief Hot-Line Counselling Service

A cold chill blew across the suburb of Holyoke. Fall was in full swing and the New England weather was famous for it's chilly nights. However the cold was having little effect in some places.

Inside a small apartment in the darkness, Jason, the semi-lonely electronics sales clerk transplant, lay face-up on his sleeping futon which lay on the floor of his apartment. He had kicked the sheets into a large pile and appeared to be physically uncomfortable. Jason was in fact physically sweating from some unknown source of warmth.

He sat up and brushed the hair out of his eyes and grabbed the digital alarm clock from off the floor. It blinked back at him "2:30 AM." He sighed. He was unable to sleep...again.

Once again the late night insomnia made camp in Jason's apartment. Usually, it was because of an important decision or a deadline, but tonight it was for a different reason. It was because of *her*. The girl he had met the previous morning. Jason touched his nose and winced. It was still tender.

Jason laid back down and returned to his nocturnal staring of his fascinating ceiling. Why was this girl, this Nicole Porter, disturbing his sleep so? Maybe, she was something that he had hoped to find ever since he moved to this frozen wasteland. A girl with a sharp mind, beautiful looks, and just a bit of an attitude. He may had just hit the jackpot! He had her phone number! She appeared to actually like him! What was the ^&%\$#ing problem then?!?

Jason sighed again. This is the part that had kept him up. She had everything he could actually want in a girl, but she appeared just slightly out of reach. Here he was, a 20 year old man, and there she was, a girl of no more than 16-17, still in high school no less. Now, Jason wasn't one to put a taboo on age. His own parents had a 5 year age

difference. But while society didn't bat an eye at a 30 year old man dating a 26 year old woman, it tended to frown upon a 20 year old man, or frankly any man over the age of 18, dating a 16 year old girl. To be more exact, the LAW tended to frown upon it.

Jason really wondered why this bothered him. It wasn't like he was planning anything lewd or evil with this girl. He was quite bothered by that kind of attitude in dating. He really wondered if it was the age thing, or if it was something else. Jason was feeling very tired. His head hurt and he was losing sleep over something he wasn't sure he why he was losing sleep over it. He needed to talk to someone.

Jason glanced at the clock again. He had a class in 6 hours. His only class for Mondays, *History of World Cultural Shown Through Literature Which in Turn is Shown Through Film*. A very dry subject. He could probably grab a few winks during the weekly presentation. He began to make plans for what to do afterwards. He wanted to talk to someone about this, and there was only one person he could think of that was qualified to deal with his Neuroses, and he knew where to find her, the Holyoke Mall.

Monday afternoons were notoriously slow. Filene's, a department store inside the Holyoke Mall, was as quiet as a town in a western before the desperadoes arrived. Fenny leaned against her department register and sighed quietly to herself. She brushed her black hair out of her eye and looked for something, anything of interest that needed her attention.

Fenny began to organize the racks of dresses in order of size and color and price and anything else she could classify them by. She was quite bored.

"I wonder how John is doing in the Shoe Department? It has to be a hell of a lot better there than it is here right now," Fenny thought out loud. Her only audience were a pair of Mannequins locked in an eternal pose. Suddenly,

Fenny's mind snapped to attention. *Someone is coming. Hmm...Aha! It's Jason! I was wondering if he would come to me...I should believe my instincts more often...* Fenny gave a smirk at her thought. She sat on the register desk and let her legs swing casually.

She saw Jason enter the department. Jason quickly spotted her and made his approach. She jumped from her seat on the desk and proceeded to bounce toward Jason. "Jason honey!" Fenny shouted jubilantly.

"Fenny!" Jason returned the enthusiasm. "Hey, I was wondering..."

"You want my advice right?" Fenny interrupted.

Jason stepped back a moment. "Well...yeah. How did you...?"

Fenny mentally kicked herself. *Doh! You have to curb this eagerness thing, you're gonna give yourself away! Bakabakabaka!* "I...um...talked to...um...John. Yeah! I talked to John and he said that you had something on your mind." She waited for a reaction.

Jason loosened. "Oh...ok. That makes sense. It was just weird. For a second I thought...maybe...just maybe, you were some sort of psychic."

Fenny mentally breathed a sigh of relief. "Nope. Not a psychic." *Well, technically, I'm not really a psychic.*

"Damn. I was gonna ask for lotto picks." Jason smirked.

Fenny giggled a bit. "Step into my office." She pointed to the register desk. Fenny took a seat and let her legs dangle and swing casually.

Jason stood there and wondered where to start. "Well, you see Fenny. I kinda met this girl. Well, I met her in an unusual way yesterday." Jason started.

"Does that explain the nose?" Fenny asked pointing to his still semi-swollen nasal instrument.

"Well, yeah it does. But, THAT'S a different story and one for the next meeting of the Holyoke Refugees of Employment Hell. Anyway, I met this girl and I'm kinda unsure what to do about it."

"Really? I would have figured that meeting a girl would be an easy situation for you."

"Well, You see, she's kinda...well...she can't be no older than 16 or 17," Jason explained.

"So?" Fenny shrugged her shoulders.

"Well...I'm 20," Jason explained.

"So?" Fenny had a blank look on her face.

"Well...don't you see?" Jason looked at her with a pleading look in his eyes.

"Well, to be quite honest with you, I don't," Fenny answered Matter-of-factly. Fenny's eyes suddenly shifted to the dress rack behind Jason. *Hmm...another presence...Male...lovesick as a dog...I'll give my attention to him in a moment. He doesn't look like he's going anywhere soon.* A slight movement from the rack confirmed it.

Jason paused for a moment to collect his thoughts. "Well, don't you think that she's too young for me?"

Fenny sighed. *Mortal men! How do women put up with them? For that matter, how the hell did civilization get this far if men can't make even simple decisions about love? Oy!* "Jason, I'm gonna ask you a simple question. What do you think of this girl?"

"Well...", Jason paused and collected his thoughts, "I think she's nice."

"Do you enjoy her company?" Fenny interrogated.

"Well... yeah," Jason answered.

"And when you are not in her company do you wish that you were?" Fenny continued the question barrage.

Jason slightly sagged his shoulders. "Well...yeah."

"Congrats Jason! You are experiencing the sensation known as affection, and to a deeper extent... 'Love.' Now comes the tough question! Does the age difference bother you?" Fenny smirked.

"Not... really." Jason shrugged.

"And do you think it bothers her?"

"Probably not," Jason answered.

"Then, is there really a problem?" Fenny asked non-chalantly.

"But won't people talk?" Jason asked concerned.

"What people? Are you suddenly going to prance around town proclaiming that you are dating a girl a couple of years younger than you?" Fenny sighed.

"Well... no. Of course not," Jason said quietly.

"Then why would people talk? People, for the most part tend to mind their own business and they only 'talk' if you give them a reason to." Fenny sighed again. *This boy is hopeless!*

"OK. So, what do I do now?" Jason asked.

"What do you mean 'What do I do now?!?' You stop asking me silly questions and you tell this girl your intentions!" Fenny shouted exasperated.

"But, what if she doesn't feel the same?" Jason asked.

"Well then, she doesn't feel the same. And you know what? You will move on. It's not like the world will end. Keeping it to yourself won't gain you anything! All that does is make you miserable and it makes you keep asking yourself 'what if...?' You can either gain a valuable treasure, or have a treasure slip away, but neither will happen if you continue to stand here and ask the question 'what if...?' Fenny preached. *Don't worry Jas, if the energy I'm feeling is right, and it usually is, then you've got nothing to worry about...*

Jason looked down at his shoes. "You know, I think I knew this all along. I think I just wanted to here it from someone else." Jason lifted his head and smiled slightly.

"Don't be too hard on yourself. You're a man, it's understandable." Fenny smirked.

"Well, I guess I'm gonna go for broke and give her a call." Jason perked up a little.

"You better! I hate to think you talked to me for this long and then wasted my time." Fenny answered in a pseudo-stern voice.

Jason gave a wave and left Fenny's department in the Filene's Department Store. Fenny waited for Jason to be out of sight. She then went to dress rack where she seen the movement. She approached it nonchalantly. *Mustn't*

frighten him away... And in one single motion she pulled the dress rack open. A surprised young man fell through and landed face first on the floor. He stood up just as quickly and turned his head in a surprised manner.

"Care to tell me why you were spying on me?" Fenny asked the boy. She paused to get a better look at him. He was sort of tall and pretty lanky. A rather unremarkable young man, though what stood out about him was the one leather glove-clad hand holding the tome of Shakespeare.

"I wasn't spying on you!" The boy shouted defensively.

"Oh really? Then I guess you find something fascinating about these dresses?" Fenny asked matter-of-factly.

"What?!?" The lanky boy shouted.

"Oh don't worry. I'm totally cool with that sort of thing. If you are into that kind of lifestyle, then who am I to judge? So, do you know what size you wear or is this your first time?" Fenny asked seriously, trying to keep a straight face. *It's so fun to watch'em squirm...*

"No! No! It's not like that!" The boy squirmed shaking his head vehemently.

"So you weren't spying on me...AND...you weren't interested in the dresses. Well, now I'm confused," Fenny said melodramatically. "I guess the only alternative is that you are stalking the young man I was talking to earlier. Oh dear..."

"No! No! NOOOoooooooooooo! It's not like that either!" The boy finally sagged his shoulders in defeat. "OK, maybe I was spying on you. But don't get the wrong idea! That guy seemed to really get a lot out of your advice. I kinda have this problem with the girl I like."

"Oh really?" Fenny asked. She concentrated. *Hmm... pure physical attraction... totally shallow... girl has expressed no interest in him... wait a minute... the girl... there is something really odd about her! I sensed it earlier... hmm... I'll come back to that later. I better deal with the situation at hand.*

"Well I was at camp this summer and I met this really hot red-headed chick. The thing is that she's like totally shy," the boy started.

"Totally shy? Hmm... did she say anything to you?" Fenny asked, already knowing the answer.

"Well... only that she 'has no interest in me whatsoever.' But a lot of chicks tell me that. They are just hiding their true feelings. I got this killer new plan! Chicks love this romantic crap right?"

"Romantic crap? Well, Women do tend to enjoy romance a little," Fenny answered.

"Right, well I heard chicks dig this Will Shakespeare guy, so I'm gonna do the sensitive guy routine and then she'll be mine!" the lanky boy shouted triumphantly, proud of his "plan."

Fenny simply rolled her eyes and realized that this guy was a lost cause. "So you were spying on me..."

"I was *Surveillancing* you," interrupted the boy.

"OK, so you were surveillancing me because you thought I could give you good advice. You still want it?" Fenny asked very seriously.

"Hey, what better way to get a chick by asking another chick." The boy smirked.

Did he just call me a 'chick?' a lesser person would probably incinerate him for that, but he's young and immature, so I'll cut him a break...this time. "It's true that Shakespeare wrote a lot on romance. It's also true that a lot of that material was in the form of tragedy."

"So...what's your point?" The boy asked blankly.

"My point is that some romances are destined for tragedy. I think you might wanna let this one go sport." Fenny replied very serious.

The boy became flustered. "Well...what....what do you know?!?" the boy shouted and stomped off not liking the advice he had sought.

"You'd be surprised by what I know," Fenny said out loud to herself.

"Well, well, well...She wouldn't be our sister if she wasn't meddling in the affairs of mortals," a voice came from behind Fenny.

"Yes, that's our Fenira, always the romantic at heart," another voice added.

Fenny turned around surprised. She then smiled. Where the two mannequins had stood were two women wearing the outfits the mannequins had been wearing.

"Sonyarina! Jordiko! My sisters! What are you doing here?!" Fenny asked surprised.

"Fenira," Jordiko began sternly, "you know it's against the rules to interfere with the lives of Mortals."

"But Jordiko..." Fenny pouted. "It's not interfering, it's *intervening*. These people need my help!"

"Fenira! Rules are rules!" Sonyarina reprimanded.

"Can't you sense it?" Fenny asked.

"Sense what?" Sonyarina asked perplexed.

"The emotional love-energy in this place! It's off the scale!" Fenny explained.

"What energy?" Jordiko asked confused.

"That's because you never spend time around the mortals! Every person in this town, in this world, is emitting a form of energy! I mean, this town alone! Everyone seems to have some deep desire and I can feel them all as clear as day...well, except for this one source of energy that is really kinda foggy and almost seems to change, but that's a mystery I'm personally studying. By studying their energies, I can tell what gender they are and what they desire. It's amazing! So much frustration pent-up inside these people, if I can help relieve a little bit of that frustration, I will!" Fenny explained.

"You know the agency will have your ass on a platter if they found out about this." Sonyarina took a grave tone.

"Will someone tell them?" Fenny asked innocently giving her sister a pair of very big, sad eyes.

"Oh Fenira, whenever you do that..." Sonyarina sighed and rolled her eyes. "OK, you can stay. But please don't mess up these mortals' lives too much. Otherwise, we're all going to have to hear about it."

"You know sis, it wouldn't hurt a goddess like you to hang around the mortals every once in awhile. It might actually be good for you." Fenny smiled.

"Really?" Jordiko asked.

"No thanks sis. I've got enough problems as it is with the central agency. Come sister, we better go before someone sees us." Sonyarina half-smiled.

"Goodbye Fenira! Let us know how things turn out. Be good!" Jordiko added.

"You know I will." Fenny replied with her fingers crossed. She watched her sisters vanish and the mannequins return to their original positions.

"Really, those two have no faith in me whatsoever!" Fenny added outloud.

"WHAT?" a boy with headphones shouted behind her.

"Augh!" Fenny jumped three feet in the air.

"ARE YOU TALKING TO THE MANNEQUINS?" the boy with headphones asked.

"What?" Fenny asked confused.

"WHAT?" the boy with headphones replied.

"What?"

"WHAT?"

"Huh?"

"WHAT?"

"Is there something you need?" Fenny asked politely.

"WHAT?"

Hmmm... desires... desires... odd, it appears that his only desire is to destroy his eardrums... Fenny thought to herself.

Jason felt as if the whole world had been lifted from his shoulders. In fact, he felt as if he might start skipping like a schoolgirl if he felt any better. He quietly hummed a little ditty to himself and he passed the various stores, and in his blind bliss he successfully crashed into someone leaving a store causing both of them to come down in a pile.

Jason shook his head and looked up. He then did a double-take and scooted back a foot. As if the universe had just said, "Screw probability." He had just crashed into Nicole Porter who lay on the floor shaking her head.

"Hey! Watch where the hell you're goi... WHA?!?" Nicole shouted as she then realized who she had just ran into. She really couldn't see what had happened as she was carrying several things and was unable to see directly in front of her.

"Nicole?" was all Jason could dumbly say.

"Well, well, well what a surprise!" Nicole smirked.

"Is it a pleasant one?" Jason asked cautiously, testing the conversational waters.

"Well, personally, I tend to find being knocked to the floor to not be pleasant, but today it's not too bad." Nicole said seriously and then let out a small giggle.

Jason decided that the floor wasn't the best place for a conversation. He stood up and held his hand out to Nicole who accepted it. She stood up and looked at all the bags that scattered to the floor when she fell. She bent down to begin picking the up.

"Here, let me help you with that." Jason kneeled down and grabbed a couple bags.

"Thanks." Nicole replied. Jason noticed for the first time what was on the bags. *Pet Supplies Plus*. Jason looked up and noticed that it was the store that she just in fact walk out of.

"Hmmm... Litter box... food bowls... squeaky toys..." Jason catalogued the purchases. "My sense of deduction has told me that you just got a... hmmm... wait don't tell me... a... a... penguin!"

Nicole tried to keep a straight face. She wasn't succeeding. "Very funny. Do you do open mike nights?"

"Only on Wednesdays. Usually the crowd isn't as violent then," Jason smirked.

The pair had gathered the bags and stood there. "Hey Nicole, um do you need help getting these home?"

"Well, My sister drove me here and we are supposed to meet soon." She noticed Jason's shoulder sag slightly.

"But I wouldn't mind some help in carrying these to our car so I don't have to carry these things for another half an hour."

"Sure!" Jason perked up. *Jason, you just sounded way too enthusiastic.*

The pair started toward the parking lot. Nicole was trying to hide a grin, and she was hoping that it wasn't too obvious. The pair continued to walk.

"Nicole..." Jason began.

"Yeah?" Nicole replied as they passed the food court.

"Can I ask you a question?" Jason asked in a serious tone.

"I don't know? Is there a condition that prevents you from doing that?" Nicole smirked.

"Yeah, I guess it is a silly way of putting it." Jason agreed. "I wanted to know if you would mind telling me how old you are."

"I don't see why I would mind doing that. I'm 16." Nicole answered. She then noticed that Jason hesitated and then continued to walk. "Is there something wrong?"

Jason paused and seemed to collect his thoughts. "I was wondering on how you felt about older guys dating younger women?"

"Hmm...I don't know. Do you know of some 40 year old guy who wants to date me?" Nicole asked innocently.

"Well...no. I kinda meant..." Jason stammered.

"You? Is that a serious question? You're no older than what? 19? 20?" Nicole answered sternly.

"Well...yeah. I'm 20" Jason answered.

"And you call that old? Please! You're not even able to drink! It's not like some 102 year old billionaire marrying some 18 year old super-model." Nicole sighed. *Men... so hopeless.*

Jason breathed a sigh of relief. "So the age thing doesn't bother you?"

"Why would it bother me? There's only one issue that society sees as wrong in that situation. And trust me... if you even *attempted* something like *that*... well, you remember our first meeting?" Nicole's eyes narrowed.

Jason thought back to the hulking giant who Nicole had taken down. He felt a slight twinge in his testicles at the thought of the prospect of her foot kicking him there. "I see. Trust me, I'm not that kind of guy," Jason answered back very honestly.

"That's good for you, because if you were that kind of guy...I'd do something even worse." Nicole answered with a very dark and serious glint in her eyes.

"That is one thing that you won't have to worry about." Jason answered just as seriously.

"Well then," Nicole lightened, "is there anything else you wanted to ask me?" The pair were now in the parking lot. Nicole pointed to her car and the pair began to load things into her trunk.

"Well...yeah." Jason paused and collected his thoughts. "I really enjoy being in your company. I was wondering if we could...maybe be in each others company again...maybe for dinner?"

Nicole thought about it. "Do I get to pick the place?"

"Well... yeah." Jason stammered.

"You got my number. Call me Thursday night and I'll tell you when to pick me up. Friday night's OK for you, right?" Nicole answered.

Jason mentally thought to his work schedule. *Friday... Friday... nope, clear!* "Yeah, Friday's very good for me!" Jason answered excitedly.

"Well, then I guess I'll hear from you on Thursday night. It will give me time to talk things out with my sister." Nicole looked at her watch. "In fact, she's waiting for me in the food court now!" Nicole broke into a sprint. "Talk to you Thursday. Hate to leave so suddenly, but Neko-chan is waiting for me to get home."

"Neko-chan? 'Little Cat?'" That's an awfully strange name for a pet penguin." Jason added.

Nicole laughed very hard letting Jason see her nice smile. She then continued into the mall, leaving Jason standing in the parking lot.

Jason stood there for a moment and collected his thoughts. He had a date. HE... HAD... A... DATE! He

calmly composed himself and straightened himself up...then he leapt in the air and clicked his heels while shouting "whooh hoo!" After his little victory cry, he composed himself again. He decided that he better head home himself.

He walked in the parking lot searching for his car. "Yessir! This is my day! Lucky lucky lucky!..." Jason happily chattered to himself. "Yep, things are finally going my way..." Jason said to himself as he put his key in the car door.

"Well, well, well..." A voice gruffed behind him. Jason stood very still. He recognized that voice. He knew exactly where he had heard it before... Sunday Morning.

Jason turned around slowly. There standing behind him was the same gentlemen who punched him on Sunday. "Er... hi..." Jason stammered.

"I never figger I see you again. Guess it's my lucky day." The brute laughed as he cracked his knuckles. He approached Jason menacingly. "Now, it's payback time."

Jason wasn't one for street fights. He knew he was in a very bad situation. He was outsized, outmuscled, and when a second slobbish brute walked out from behind the first guy, he knew he was outnumbered. "Now, guys... can't we talk this out?"

"Talk it out? I believe you'll have a hard time talking, cause we're gonna break that smart ass mouth of yours." The original brute gruffed.

This ain't good! This is very VERY bad!!! Jason thought in a panicked haze. The pair were both getting closer. *Guess I have no choice. Gonna have to use my 'Special Attack.'* As the first one descended on Jason, Jason dropped to his knees and threw out a fast punch right into the brutes testicles. Jason immediately winced and pulled his hand back sharply. He had heard a distinctive 'snap' which meant he had just broken a finger. Meanwhile the brute hadn't even winced. *What the *&%^*?!? Did this guy put Novocain in his pants?!?*

"You think I'm gonna fall for that again?" The brute smirked as he pulled out a protective cup from his pants.

Jason couldn't believe an idiot like this was smart enough to even think of such an idea. That was the last coherent thought Jason had as the pair came down on him... hard...

"Hey! Buddy! Can you hear me?" A voice said out of a foggy stupor.

Jason groaned. His eyes felt swollen and sticky. He was having serious trouble trying to open them. His face felt like it had the same consistency as saltwater taffy.

"Man, you had a number done on you." The voice came again. Jason tried to reach out to the voice, but a hand stopped him. "I wouldn't recommend moving until someone gets a look at you.

"Wha... huppon'd?" Jason slurred.

"Looks like a pair of guys were beating down on you something harsh. Lucky for you someone saw what was happening and got security. As soon as they say the mall cops come out, they bolted. The cops are gonna be here soon. Called for an ambulance too."

Jason coughed and spit a little blood onto his shirt. Jason felt around his jaw and winced. *If those bastards knocked any of my teeth out, I swear to God, I'm gonna kill the sunuvabitch.* Jason thought to himself.

"Man, you're pretty lucky. Those guys looked like they wanted to kill you." The voice added.

"I um lukk-ee." Jason slurred. Jason then heard the distinctive sirens approach and a few minutes later he felt himself being loaded onto a gurney which was being loaded into the back of an ambulance. "She said 'yes'..." Jason said to no one in particular.

"Who said yes?" A new voice asked. Probably an EMT. Jason felt himself go back into unconsciousness as he was feeling quite tired.

"You think he's gotten any broken ribs?" The one EMT ask the other.

"Dunno. We'll have to be careful with him. Damn, whoever did this to him wasn't screwing around. Hope he can I.D. these two so the cops can get em."

"Yeah. But what I wanna know is why does he keeps smiling like that?" The first EMT said to the second pointing to Jason's bloody lips formed into a broad grin.

"Maybe he knows something we don't?" The second said to his coworker.

Nicole and Sarah exited the mall and entered the parking lot. In the slight distance they heard an ambulance siren. "Hey Nicole, look over there in the distance." Sarah pointed out over several sections over to a crowd that had gathered.

"Hmm... I wonder what's going on," Nicole answered her sister. She began to walk toward the crowd.

The pair joined the mass of people trying to look over each other. A few police officers appeared to be asking questions. "Hey, what happened?" Nicole asked another onlooker.

The onlooker turned and faced Nicole. "Apparently this guy got jumped by two other guys in the lot about 40 minutes ago. They did a real job on him, they just took him away in an ambulance."

"Wow. I wonder if Jason saw anything. I left him in the lot about that long ago," Nicole wondered out loud.

"Did I just hear that we may have a witness?" one police officer asked over the onlooking crowd. The onlooker next to Nicole pointed to her.

The police officer took her to the front and pulled out a notepad. Nicole began by shaking her head. "Well I didn't see anything, but I was in the lot about 40 minutes ago with this guy I met named Jason. He may have seen something. Maybe he was the one who alerted the security guards," Nicole explained. "Maybe he's back inside the mall."

The officer pondered this and called the other officer over. "Hey, we may have a witness in the mall. Go inside

and see if we can get him over the public address system.” He then paused and looked toward Nicole. “What was his full name?”

“Jason Bertovich. He works at the Electronics Boutique in this mall if that helps,” Nicole responded politely.

“You get that?” the first officer asked the second. The second nodded his head and then handed something to the first.

“It’s the victim’s car keys. They were inside the car door. It looks like a college card wallet. Probably a form of ID,” the second explained and walked off to the mall.

The first opened the little wallet like keychain and looked at it’s contents. Nicole was beginning to turn away and return to her sister. “Excuse me miss...” the officer shouted out to Nicole as she turned around to walk back. Nicole came back.

“Is there a problem?” Nicole asked seriously.

“What did you say the possible witness’s name was?” the officer asked very seriously.

“Jason Bertovich.” Nicole answered. “Why?”

“Well... um... He’s definitely a witness.” the officer answered.

“What do you mean?” Nicole asked now confused. How could he have found out this quickly, when the second officer hadn’t even returned yet?

The officer flipped open the ID wallet and let Nicole see it’s insides. Inside were a college ID card and a social security card.

Nicole took a look and gasped slightly. The picture on the ID was Jason’s. “Oh no...”

IV: Table for One, Tea for Four

Early Tuesday Morning...

John sat on the folding chair in the empty white room. He folded his hands and waited for what was to come next. He had been here enough times.

The first figure walked into the empty white room. John looked up, but his hands remained folded. The figure was the same height and build as John. He was dressed in a dark blue suit with a red "power tie" His hair was meticulously groomed and his shoes brightly polished. He gave a smirk and looked straight at John.

"You there!" he barked as he sharply pointed to John. "You're in my chair!"

"I was sitting here first. Get another chair," John answered back quietly.

"You dare to address me like that?!?!" the figure shrieked. "How dare you! Do you have any idea who I am?!?!"

"Someone who wants my chair," John answered back quietly.

The figure's eyes began to twitch. His lips formed into a dark smirk. He walked straight up to John and pushed him off the chair. John tumbled to the floor. He simply sat up, folded his legs and sat Indian-style on the floor.

"That's right! Know your place! The floor is all that's good enough for you." The figure began to cackle and then sat on the chair with a self satisfied grin.

John waited in the empty white room. Another figure soon walked in. This one was different from the first. His height and build were still similar to John, but his dress was quite unusual. A white suit, very militaristic in nature, complete with shoulder decorations and a sword by his side. His hair was long and also meticulously groomed. He looked down contemptuously at John contently sitting on the floor.

"Don't you have any pride?" the new person asked.

John pondered this for a moment. He simply shrugged his shoulders.

The stranger sighed. "How do you expect people to respect you when you settle for the floor?" The stranger grabbed John by his collar and hoisted him up. "You should be giving the orders, not following them! Take the chair back!"

John looked at the first person sitting on the chair with his sardonic grin. John straightened himself and prepared to march over, when a new voice stopped him. "Why bother? Even if you take the chair back, someone else will take it." John looked for the source of the commentary. In the darkened corner of the unfurnished white room stood a third person. Height and build similar to John, but he was dressed very plain. Simple navy blue slacks, a white short sleeved dress shirt with the top three buttons open and a turquoise t-shirt underneath. His black hair obscured his face because his head was bowed.

"Eh?" John queried the stranger.

"If you take the chair back, someone stronger will take it from you. And if you take it back again, then someone stronger than that will take it from you again."

"Well, then should I do nothing?" John asked.

"If you do nothing, someone will tell you what to do. And if you refuse, someone else will tell you to do something else."

"So am I damned if I do, Damned if I don't?" John scratched his head.

"Exactly," the third person said. He lifted his head and looked straight at John with a pair of cold dark piercing eyes. John looked straight into his face. It was exactly as the first two, which was exactly like his. They all shared his face. The third one smirked and outstretched his arms and extended his hands toward John. "The solution to your problem is simple. Non-existence. You can't be bothered by decisions if you're not here." He wrapped his hands around John's throat and began to squeeze.

The first jumped from his chair. "Oh no you don't! He's mine!" John felt the hands wrapped tighter and tighter. The first folded the chair and charged the pair.

"I tend to disagree as well. On both points. He's mine!" The second added and drew his sword. He charged the pair as well.

John stood there with a pair hands wrapped around his throat throttling him, while a psychotic was about to bash him with a chair and another was going to run him through. The three converged on him....

John sat up gasping and clutching his chest. His eyes bulged and he frenziedly looked around him.

He was in his apartment. His bedroom to be exact. The sheets of his bed had been kicked into a pile on the floor. John felt a drop of perspiration fall from his forehead. He brought his knees to his chest and wrapped his arms around his knees. He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. *Another night. Another night and the same dream. How many more nights? How many more until they finally succeed and kill me? Who will actually do the job? One? Or all three?*

John opened his eyes and looked to his clock. It blinked back '5:30 AM.' John knew that getting back to sleep would be futile. Besides, he knew that they would be waiting for him.

A light thump on his door drew his heightened awareness. He realized that the paperboy must of dropped on his paper in the hall. John threw on a robe and walked out into the hall. He found his paper sitting next to his door. He grabbed it and reentered his apartment. He walked into his kitchen and threw a kettle on the stove to heat the water he filled the kettle with.

He sat at his small table and unrolled the newspaper. A shrill whistle sounded and he took the kettle from the stove and poured some hot water into a tea cup. He dipped in a teabag and let the leaves turn the hot water into hot tea. He brought the cup back with him to the table

and he sat down to read the paper and try to regain some sense of normalcy.

John looked at the first headline. Something or other about some political scandal or something. John didn't even bother to skim anything that had the word scandal in it. That meant it took him about 8 minutes to read the entire paper.

On the bottom right corner on the front page however, something did catch his eye. The headline read 'Resident Of Holyoke Attacked at Local Shopping Mall' John didn't hear anything about an attack at the mall the day prior. He began to read the article.

"Yesterday afternoon, Jason Bertovich, a resident of the city of Holyoke, was attacked by two assailants. A witness alerted police to the assault and the two suspects fled when mall security personnel were alerted to the incident. The police are currently looking for information regarding a description of two suspects. (Continued on Page B-4)"

John frantically pulled out the Local section of the paper and flipped to the appropriate page. He scanned the page for the continuation of the article.

"Resident Attacked (Cont. from page A-1) While police do not have a description of the two suspects as of this writing, they do have a description of the witness who alerted the authorities to the attack (See Picture) If you have any information regarding this person please contact local authorities. The Victim, Bertovich, was taken to a local medical facility for treatment."

John looked further down for the picture. It was a police composite sketch. John studied it for a moment. It was a women with short red hair. He searched his memory for a moment. Where had he seen that face before? The it hit him. It was one of the maybe-lesbians from Saturday afternoon. He had sold her a pair of shoes. He looked at the caption below the picture: *"Police composite of witness to assault as given by security officer who alerted police."*

John sipped his hot tea. He couldn't believe Jason had been attacked at mall. He hadn't been in this area very long, but John never believed that there could be a brutal crime in these calm parts.

John got up from the table. He had to make sure Jason was ok, he was his friend. One of the few he had in these parts. He walked into the bathroom and turned the water spigot...

A few hours later in the morning in Springfield, a whispered swear crossed Matt Atanian's lips. He was reading the local paper and he continued to stare at the picture on page B-4.

"Terrific. I do a good deed and I get a picture of my female half plastered in the paper."

Matt stirred his ice tea (Ice tea this early in the morn? Why ask why?) and pondered the situation for a moment. He thought back to the day prior and how he/she became entangled in this mess...

Monday Afternoon...

Matt Atanian walked along the shops in the Holyoke mall. He walked past the various clothing, record, and other merchandise stores and walked right into the local Waldenbooks.

Matt made his way to the counter and waited for service. A short woman with glasses noticed him and asked "Is there something I can help you with today?"

Matt scratched behind his head. "Um yeah, I was wondering if you guys got in any Urusei Yatsura mangas in?"

The women looked under the counter for a moment, and then her head popped back into view. "Sorry, no. We should be getting more items from the warehouse later this week."

"Oh, OK. Thanks," Matt replied and turned to leave. As he exited the store however, he was unfortunately

sideswiped by three kids running like bats out of hell, causing him to spin around and stumble blindly. Fortunately, something broke his fall. Unfortunately, it was a mall fountain.

After a moment of clumsy splashing, Matty felt a hundred eyes all focused on her trench-coat clad body. A hand reached out in front of her.

"Do you need a hand out miss?" The hand belonged to a tall, scraggly haired teen. His dark blonde hair extended over his eyes and the stubble was quite evident. Matty took the hand and stepped out of the fountain. She felt her hair and reached back into the fountain for her fedora which was floating on the surface.

"Um...thanks," Matty answered.

"No prob, ya gotta be careful." He smiled at her. Matty began to feel very uncomfortable. The way he was smiling at her reminded her of someone else.

"Hey! Get your hands off her!" another voice shouted from across the mall. Then Matty knew who that smile reminded her of. He was currently exiting Filenes's Department Store very rapidly. Taylor Kuntz.

"Excuse me?" The blonde boy queried.

Taylor didn't give much debate however as he tackled the blonde and the pair both fell into the fountain. Matty blinked a couple times as Taylor began to throw wild punches and splash around with a complete stranger. She then realized that the crowd had no longer placed their attention on her, but rather on the pair now fighting in the fountain. Matty quietly slipped out from the ruckus as mall security came in to break it up.

Matty paced quickly to the nearest exit. She could walk to the nearest bus stop and then get home to get much needed hot water. The major downside of this curse was that not only did you change with cold water, but you became a natural magnet of cold water.

Matty stepped out into the parking lot. For a moment, she thought she had seen someone familiar. *Hey, wasn't that Nicole Porter?* Matty thought to herself. She shrugged her shoulders as it wasn't very important. Then as she

walked through the parking lot to get to the nearest bus stop, something else caught her attention. She overheard someone talking...

"Now, guys...can't we talk this out?" the first voice said nervously.

"Talk it out? I believe you'll have a hard time talking, cause we're gonna break that smart ass mouth of yours," the second, more angry, voice answered.

Matty turned her attention toward the conversation. She saw two large gentlemen pounce on a much smaller man. The first with a very unkempt beard and large hairy arms, while the second with a receding hairline and a very large squashed nose.

Matty realized that she was in no way able to take these guys on, so she did the next best thing. She ran....toward the mall.

Matty flew through the front entrance. Fortunately, there was a security guard near the entrance. Matty ran up to him and grabbed his arm.

"Excuse me miss! Is something wrong?" the security guard asked.

Well duh, why else would I grab you? Matty thought angrily. "You have to come quick, two guys are attacking this other guy in the parking lot!"

"What?!?" the guard shouted. "Quick show me the way!" the guard barked. After that, everything else happened rather quickly. The security called for other guards on the walkie-talkie and Matty managed to slip away from the crowd that had gathered soon after. She made it home and thought that everything had been settled.

Matt realized that he was wrong. This was far from settled. Now he pondered what to do next. He knew that he had to do the right thing, if there was anything Scouts had taught him, it was that. Matt grabbed a glass of cold water and several paper towels and poured the contents over him/her. Drying off with the towels, Matty grabbed her

trench-coat and fedora and was out the door. *Lucky that Mom and Dad leave early, otherwise I would have a tough time explaining this.*

Matty knew where she needed to go. A half hour later, Matty walked into the local police station. She walked up to the clerk and knocked on the glass window.

"Can I help you?"

Matty swallowed. "Yes, I was a witness to a crime yesterday, and I discovered that I was needed for questioning."

The clerk made a quick call...

Late Tuesday Morning...

"Hey kid, you're on next!" someone shouted in a dark stupor.

"Wha...?" Jason opened his eyes and looked around him. This place was not familiar at all, though it reminded him of when he toured the backstage area of a concert. Many people were hustling to attend to various duties.

"Ready to defend the title tonight?" a cute blonde with wire frame glasses smirked. She was dressed in a conservative dress, with matching heels, and her hair was tied up in a neat bun.

"Title?" Jason queried.

"Well, you are the WDF Champion silly...did your last match knock that out of your ears?" The blonde giggled.

Jason felt very confused. WDF? Champion? What the hell was going on here? He turned and found himself facing a mirror. He stepped back in startled surprise.

"Jumpy aren't we? Puh-leeze, it's a simple handicap match, no biggie for a guy like you," the blonde chided.

"Oh right, the handicap match. Yeah, I guess I'm being silly." Jason feigned a smile. *Just play along until you figure out what the hell is going on.* He returned his attention to the mirror and studied himself with detailed interest.

The outfit he had on seemed normal enough. Though he did find it odd. Light blue denim jeans, white dress shirt

with the sleeves rolled up, dark red dress vest, and red tie to complete the ensemble. Wrapped around his waist was a belt with a buckle that would put any southerner to shame. A giant gold plate with a black leather strap, the belt confirmed that he was in fact the "WDF Heavyweight Champion" whatever the hell that meant in the grand scheme of things.

"My what an ego we have. If you're done adoring yourself Narcissus, we have to get ready," the blonde chided again with a bemused smile.

Jason turned his attention from the mirror and nodded in agreement, still not understanding what was going on.

"Three minutes till the main event!" a stagehand shouted from somewhere. The blonde grabbed Jason's hand and dragged him to what seemed to be an entrance of some kind with a curtain door. The blonde began to straighten up her skirt and checked her hair.

"How do I look?" the blonde asked.

"Um...you look...nice." Jason stammered.

"Humph! Pretty open with the compliments aren't we?" the blonde pouted. "Well, keep an eye on the monitor so we can get our cue."

"Monitor?" Jason mumbled out loud.

"Are you sure you're OK? The monitor right there," the blonde said while pointing to a small TV set.

"Um.. yeah, I'm fine. Just a little tired that's all," Jason replied.

"Well, you better shake that off, cuz you need to be on your toes."

"Because I'm the WDF Champion?" Jason asked.

"Damn straight!" The blonde smirked.

Jason turned his attention to the small TV set. It was currently playing a commercial, but it was ending. However the next thing on the screen caught his attention to the fullest.

"Hi there, fight fans! I'm Guy Makihashi!"

"And I'm Toro Watanabe! Welcome to another installment of the WORLD DEATHMATCH FEDERATION'S "MONDAY NIGHT MADNESS!"

"And it sure does look to be one hell of a match tonight," the first man, identified as Makihashi said.

"You bet Guy, as our WDF Champion, The man who has a Ph.D. on Pain and Punishment, the Professor himself, Jason Robertson, will defend his title and his record of an incredible 18 kills in a handicap match tonight!" the second man, identified as Watanabe answered.

Jason took a step back. *DEATHMATCH?!?! WHAT THE FUCK HAVE I GOTTON INTO?!? AND WHO IS THIS "JASON ROBERTSON?!?" AM I SUPPOSED TO BE HIM?!?* Jason thought in a panic-stricken haze.

The TV continued unabated. "So Toro, Who's lined up for Jason in this handicap match?" Guy asked his partner.

"Well, we searched long and hard for two opponents tough enough and mean enough to offer up a challenge to our champion. So tonight we have straight from the hills of the Appalachian mountains, two of the meanest mountain-folk we could find." Toro answered.

"Do we have names?" Guy asked.

"Well actually, they wouldn't give us their names, so we just call them Bob and Bob #2," Toro replied.

"Very original. Well, it's time to bring em out!" Guy said enthusiastically.

"That's the cue, get ready Jay." The blonde grabbed his arm and brought him to the curtain. Jason dared to peek and saw past the curtain, a long ramp which led to a standard size boxing ring. On the opposite side of the ring was another ramp which led to another curtain entrance. In the center of the ring stood a well groomed man in a tuxedo.

"Here you go, can't forget your lucky gloves. Give me your hands," the blonde commanded Jason. He instinctively gave his hands over to her. She fitted and strapped a pair of black fingerless fighting gloves. Jason studied them for a moment and realized that they reeked of a copper smell, just like blood.

Jason, whatever the hell you've gotten yourself into, let's just hope we can live to tell about it. Jason began to sweat nervously.

The man in the center of the ring grabbed a microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to tonight's main event! It is scheduled for to the death, and it is for the WDF Heavyweight championship! Ladies and gentlemen...are you ready?" the man in the center asked.

The crowd roared in approval. *TO THE DEATH?!? OH ^%#\$%^\$%#%#%#!!!!* Jason felt like he was ready to pass out. He did not like the prospect of fighting two angry mountain people, but to the death was even worse.

Meanwhile, the man continued. "I said...are you rrrrrrrready?" The crowd again roared, even louder than before.

"Then ladies and gentlemen...for the thousands in attendance, for the millions watching at home... Ladies and gentlemen, Let's get ready to rumbbbbbbllllllleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!" The crowd exploded into a fury of cheers and shouting while various pyrotechnics exploded. The man in the center continued, "Coming to the ring first, they hail from the deepest part of the Appalachian Mountains, they weigh in at a combined weight of 578 lb. Let's give it up for Bob and...er...Bob #2!!!"

Jason gasped at the two brutes who entered the arena from the other ramp. Jason couldn't make out much detail, but he could tell that they were huge. The blonde excitedly grabbed Jason's hands.

"We're up!" She smiled. Jason didn't feel very obliged to return the smile.

The man in the center turned his attention to his ramp. "And their opponent: He hails from the "School of Hard Knocks" where he earned his Ph.D. in Punishment, he weighs in at 187 lb. And he is accompanied by his manager Miss Manners, he is the current WDF Champion of the World, this is Jason "The Professor" Robertson!"

The blonde grabbed his arm and pulled him with her down the ramp. As he began walking down the ramp he

noticed how the crowd noise grew even louder. He kinda liked it. He couldn't believe it, but he was actually beginning to like the fact that the crowd was cheering for him. Thought the reason why they were cheering for him was slightly disturbing to him. Jason walked down the ramp slowly and when he reach the bottom, he held the ropes for the blonde to enter the ring, she slipped in and he followed.

The pair of brutes were in the corner huddled discussing something. A referee walked up to Jason and pointed to his waist, Jason unfastened the oversize belt and handed it over. The ref held the belt over his head much to the approval of the crowd. The blonde exited the ring and took her place in his corner. Jason breathed deeply.

Finally the two opponents turned from their corner to face him very slowly. Jason took a step back in horror. It was *them!* Those bastards that almost killed him in the parking lot yesterday. Then something in Jason's mind snapped.

"Wait a minute... wasn't I in an ambulance or something a few hours ago? How the hell can I be here if I was brutally attacked yesterday, this doesn't make any sense!" Jason shouted out loud.

A spectator stood up. "Yeah, that means that this entire scene doesn't make any sense at all!" The four men sitting next to him all smacked him in the back of the head.

"SHUT UP BILL!!!!" The four said in unison and returned to their seats.

Jason smiled. He smiled a very EVIL smile. "I get it now. This is just a dream."

The two brutes returned the evil grin. "So what, we can still pummel you here."

"Oh, you could...if it wasn't for the fact that I've studied lucid sleep." Jason smirked back.

The brutes furrowed their brows. "Lucid sleep?"

"To put it in plain terms for idiots like you, it means I can control my dreams..." Jason raised his fist with the index and middle fingers extended. "It means I can do

whatever I want here..." Jason narrowed his eyes and a spark of blue energy sizzled at the ends of his fingers. "LIKE THIS!!!" Jason screamed as he pointed his fingers toward the giants. A flash of blue energy flew from his hand and ignited the pair.

"FUCK!!!" They screamed as they were set ablaze. The melted into a pile of bone and ash. Jason screamed in primal triumph. Then someone tapped him on the shoulder.

Jason turned around defensively, and took another step back. Jason felt his jaw drop as he beheld the new sight. He smiled very broadly. "Nicole!"

And it was Nicole, though she was quite different. She screamed radiance. She wore a flowing white gown and her green eyes sparkled beautifully. A pair of elegant doves wings extended from her back. "You want someone to take you away from here?" She smiled.

"You have no idea." Jason smirked.

She extended her pale hand. Jason gladly accepted it. She began to lift from the ground and Jason rose with her. The pair glided up toward the open sky.

"Hey!" Screamed a man from the crowd. "How can she carry a guy that's almost 200 lb. With only one hand?"

Jason smiled and simply shouted back "SHUT UP BILL!!!"

Jason turned his attention upward at Nicole smiling back at him. Jason suddenly felt very groggy. He could feel his grip loosen from Nicole's hands. Everything began to fade to a very bright light...

The white light faded to a beige light which in turn faded to a blue light. The blue light eventually faded to a face. A face that Jason was quite sure he didn't recognize but was certain that he seen it before. "I see that you finally decided to wake up lazy," the face said. The image began to become a lot clearer. Is was definitely a woman's face. She wore a pair of wire frame glasses and her hair was blonde and tied in a neat bun.

Jason gulped in fear. He thought he stopped dreaming, but obviously this was still a dream otherwise how else could this woman show up again?

Jason went to touch his face and immediately winced in pain. "You might not want to do that, your face is pretty bruised," the blonde chided.

"If I ask where I am, will I regret it?" Jason ventured out the question.

"Well, you're in room 1042 of Baystate Medical Center. Does that fill you with regret?" the blonde asked.

"Well I guess it makes sense with what I last remember," Jason answered. "Who are you?"

"Me? I'm a nurse here. My names is Angela Manors," the blonde answered while adjusting some dials on a machine Jason had no idea what it did, but was sure that it was important.

"Nice to meet you Ms. Manors," Jason pause for a moment after he said that. *Now where have I heard that before?* Jason thought to himself, but he shrugged it off and continued, "Pardon me for not extending a hand but there appears to be tubes and wires coming from it."

"Oh those will be removed pretty soon. And you can just call me Angela," the blonde said with a smile.

"So, how long have I been here?" Jason asked.

"Well, I can tell you that it's 11:30 AM now on Tuesday," Angela replied while continuing to fix things in his little room.

"Tuesday Morning? Shit! I've been unconscious since yesterday afternoon?!?" Jason shouted.

"Well it doesn't surprise me, we put you on a IV of some painkillers and one of the side effects is sleep, so it shouldn't bother you so much," Angela replied reassuringly. With that said, Angela finished up the last of whatever she had been doing. She turned to Jason and gave a last smile and opened the door. "Well It was nice meeting you Jason, but I've got other duties to attend to. A doctor will be in shortly to talk to you. Oh, and before I go, I have some good news."

"Good news?" Jason asked.

"You have visitors. Shall I see them in?" Angela asked.

"By all means," Jason replied eagerly.

Angela walked out the door and a few moments later John walked in. "John!" Jason shouted.

"Jason, what the hell happened? And if you say 'something wonderful' again I'll make sure you stay here longer for psychiatric help."

"All these questions and you don't even bring flowers?" Jason said in a feigned hurt voice. "Um...well...where to start?"

"Start with what put you in the hospital. With..." John picked up his chart, "a mild concussion, three broken ribs, a broken finger and multiple contusions," John finished.

"You're not a doctor but you play one in America's hospitals?" Jason smirked. "Basically, it comes down to the fact that women will lead you to nothing but trouble."

"Women?" John had a perplexed look on his face.

"That was a joke John. Basically, remember how I told you about Sunday?"

John nodded.

"Well, that guy who punched me on Sunday saw me in the parking lot yesterday and decided to grab his friend and beat the hell out of me."

"Ahhhhhhh." John said nodding in understanding. "Still surprises me though. I mean I haven't been living here that long, but I didn't think the locals were that unfriendly."

"Nah, I'm not gonna judge the whole population because of this incident. I'm just gonna chalk it up to some genetically challenged angry mountain people." Jason smiled.

"Genetically challenged?" John asked.

"Inbred." Jason answered.

John nodded in understanding again.

"Though, if I ever see these genetically challenged angry mountain people again, I'm gonna have to kill them," Jason said in a much more serious voice.

"Well, don't stress yourself yet. The police seem to be working on it," John reassured.

"Yeah I know, it still pisses me off though," Jason replied.

"Don't blame ya, but try to chill a little." John looked at his watch. "I have to get to my shift, but are you gonna be discharged today?"

"I hope so," Jason answered.

"Then call me after the mall closes at home, ok?" John asked.

"Sure. Will do, I don't think I'll be running a marathon or anything soon," Jason smirked.

"Cool." John walked to the door and opened it. "Hey Jason, you appear to have a couple more visitors...a couple of female visitors. Should I let them in?" John asked.

"By all means!" Jason eagerly replied.

John gave a final wave and stepped out the door. A few moment later, Nicole Porter and another women walked in. The second women was slightly taller, looked slightly older and had red hair. She carried a small vase of flowers and placed them on the table near the window.

"Hi Nicole! Excuse me for not jumping in joy, but it really hurts to move," Jason said with a sly grin.

"Jason, I'm so sorry for what happened to you, I feel this partly my fault," Nicole said with a really anguished expression.

"Nonsense! This is not your fault in any way possible!" He reached for Nicole's hand. He took her hand into his bandaged one, "This was the fault of two inbred yahoos who feel that violence can solve any situation. They are the only people to blame and no one else, and I believe that fate will find a way to punish them. OK?"

Nicole nodded her head and smiled a little which in turn made Jason smile. She then raised her eyebrows "Oh dear, I forgot to introduce you to my sister Sarah." She gestured toward the other girl who simply nodded. She appeared to be giving Jason a scrutinizing look.

Jason gave a hacking cough. "Nicole, can you do me a favor?"

"Hmmm?" Nicole answered with an arched eyebrow.

"In my jeans pocket over there," he pointed to his clothes hanging over a chair, "there is some change. Can you please get me a ginger ale or a Sprite or something?"

"Sure, it will be my treat." She looked over to Sarah. "Do you want anything?"

Sarah simply shook her head.

"Ok, then I'll be right back. Sarah, can you keep Jason company?"

Sarah nodded. Nicole walked out of the room and the door closed behind her. A few moments later Jason decided to speak. "From the look on your face, I can tell that you wanted to speak to me. Well, we're alone now, do you have something on your mind?"

The red-head narrowed her eyes. "You're very perceptive."

"I pride myself on it. Unfortunately it didn't help keep me out of here," Jason replied.

"So you're the guy my little sister is apparently very keen on," Sarah asked.

"Well, I wouldn't know how 'keen' she is on me, but I did ask her out if that's what you're asking," Jason answered.

"Well, I know you're in college and that you have a job at the mall," Sarah stated.

"Correct on both accounts. You've been doing your research." Jason smirked.

"Not really, it's what my sister told me about you. You do know that I'm my sisters' legal guardian?" Sarah asked.

"She told me that you and her twin were the only family she had, so I assumed as much," Jason answered.

"I want to protect my sister from things and people that can hurt her."

"No doubt you do. I can see that you're very protective of your sisters," Jason replied.

"Then you can understand why I don't want you seeing my sister on a personal basis," Sarah said blankly.

"No, to be frank with you, I don't." Jason answered back.

"She is a 16 year old girl. I don't feel comfortable with her seeing older boys yet. Maybe if you were still in high school... but..."

"If I was still in high school, I'd be a hell of a lot more immature. That's what I really like about your sister. She has a maturity and a mind beyond her age of 16. I really enjoy her company, it's been a rare thing since I've moved here," Jason stated.

"Oh? Is that so?" Sarah asked.

"Can I answer your question with a question?"

Sarah nodded.

"Do you trust your sister?"

"That is a strange question," Sarah replied.

"All I'm saying is this: do you believe that you have enough faith in your sisters' decisions and choices? Do you think that you've installed enough responsibility and moral guidance to let Nicole make her own choices?" Jason asked seriously.

"My grandmother and I raised Nicole with a deep moral foundation," Sarah answered just as seriously.

"Then have faith in Nicole's choice. If she feels safe to be in my company, then you should have the same belief."

"But..." Sarah began.

"I want to tell you something about myself. I was raised a certain way and taught to believe certain things. There are certain attitudes towards dating that I don't believe in. I was honest with your sister when I told her these things and I'm being honest with you. I enjoy her company, and I hope she enjoys mine. I have enough belief in Nicole that if she ever felt uncomfortable with being in my company then she would tell me. She is very outspoken and that is a wonderful thing you've instilled in her. Finally, I am being very honest when I say this, I do not wish to ever hurt your sister in any way." Jason finished and closed his eyes for moment then he reopened them toward Sarah.

Sarah closed her mouth and placed her hand near her chin and appeared to be in heavy thought. A moment later Nicole came back into the room with a couple cans of

ginger ale. She cracked one of the cans open and poured the contents into a plastic tumbler. She handed the cup over to Jason who accepted it with a smile.

"So what have you two been talking about?" Nicole asked.

"Oh this and that," Sarah answered and she then gave Jason a serious look.

"Nothing much, just general chit chat," Jason agreed.

"Oh," Nicole skeptically replied.

There was a knock on the door. A much older woman in a white coat walked in. Her brown framed glasses slid a little ways down her nose, which she adjusted immediately. She had a clipboard in her hand and directed her gaze toward Jason.

"Mr. Bertovich?" The woman asked. Jason nodded. "Hello, I'm Dr. Kim McGregor, but you can call me Dr. Kim if you like. I tended to most of your wounds and came to see how you're feeling."

"Well, I'm a little sore, but otherwise I feel fine I guess. A lot better than yesterday," Jason answered.

"That's good. Well, I can see no reason to keep you here much longer, you should be able to check out by this afternoon," the doctor said warmly.

"That's great! But how long do I have to wear these?" Jason asked indicating to the bandages wrapped around his chest and finger and part of his hand.

"Well those will take a couple weeks to heal completely, so no strenuous activity for the next 3-4 weeks. Keeping the bandages on when you're not bathing will help tremendously. The bruises will start to go down in a couple days. I'll prescribe you some healing salve to help with that and some painkillers to help you with the ribs," the doctor answered.

"Thank you Doctor," Jason said with a grateful smile. "Now, the concussion you suffered is another story. Are you feeling any headaches or dizziness?" the doctor asked in a much more serious voice.

"No, I don't think so," Jason answered.

"That's good, but I want you call if you start to." the doctor replied and handed him several prescription forms and a piece of paper with a number on it. "This is my office phone number, you should be able to reach me during normal hours."

"Thank you again." Jason gave a slight head gesture to indicate a bow.

"Now, onto some more serious business."

"Eh?" Jason asked.

"There is a police officer outside who wish to ask you a few questions about yesterday. Do you feel up to it now?" the doctor asked.

"Sure, no better time than the present," Jason answered with a shrug.

"Fine, then I'll see him in. Be sure to talk to the woman at the front desk before you leave," the doctor reminded.

"No problem. Thank you again Dr. McGregor," Jason replied.

The doctor smiled, then stepped out of the room. A moment later a police officer in uniform walked in. He was a tall young man with had dark hair that was styled meticulously. He wore a leather police jacket with his badge on the outside. He had a small notepad which he flipped open. "Hello. I'm Officer Kelly. I just needed to ask a few questions about yesterday's attack. Shouldn't take very long." He then directed his gaze toward the girls. "Are you family?"

Nicole pointed to her chest. "Us? No, we're just friends."

"Then, I need you to leave the room for a few moments while I talk to Mr. Bertovich," Kelly stated blankly.

"That's fine, we need to be leaving anyway," Sarah replied.

"Goodbye Jason, feel better soon," Nicole added.

"See you Friday?" Jason asked Nicole, but also directed his gaze toward Sarah.

Nicole turned to her sister with a hopeful gaze. Sarah took a moment and after looking at her sister, rolled her eyes upward. She let out a sigh. "You promise to have her home by Midnight, understood?" Sarah told Nicole and Jason.

"You have my word," Jason answered.

Nicole smiled which filled Jason with a warm sensation. "Call me tomorrow...if you feel up to it," Nicole smirked.

"Just try to keep me away from a phone," Jason smirked back. He gave a half wave to Nicole and Sarah. The pair waved back and left the room. Jason let out a relieved sigh. He then directed his full attention to the neglected police officer.

"Sorry about that Officer Kelly," Jason apologized.

"Heh. I was young once too. You can call me Stan if you like," Kelly replied.

"You're not that old Stan. I'd say you're about... um... 29?" Jason guessed.

"Close. 31," Kelly answered.

"Please, I hope they're not calling me old when I'm that age, otherwise it's all downhill then," Jason smirked. "Anyway, you had some questions to ask me?"

"Yes. Fortunately, the witness who alerted mall security to your attack came forward this morning. We have a pretty good description, but we wanted to see if you could add any information that could help in the capture of these two men. First, how do you know these men?" Kelly asked and then clicked his ball-point pen to begin writing on his notepad.

Jason gave the question some thought, then began. "It all started Sunday morning. The first man had come into the store to purchase a videogame..."

"The..." Kelly checked another page of notes, "*Electronics Boutique*. Correct?"

"Yes, that's where I work. Anyway, this man had made a racial slur," Jason continued.

"What was the nature of the slur?" Kelly asked.

"His exact words, if I remember correctly, were, 'Friggin Japs, we should've wasted them all in WWII.'" Jason answered.

"And you took offense at this?" Kelly asked.

"I tend to take offense at all racial slurs. It's the way I was brought up," Jason answered.

"I find that admirable. Please continue," Kelly added then went back to his pad.

"Well, like you said, I took offense. I let my emotions get the better of me and I told him my opinion of him. He then became aggravated. When another customer added her opinion of him, he turned to strike her. I guess I should add that this customer was the shorter girl that was just here," Jason continued.

"OK. The police may want to talk to her then to get her description of this assailant. You have her name and phone number?" Kelly asked.

"Well, her name is Nicole Porter. As for her phone number...um..." Jason paused to think, "Can you please check my right front jeans pocket?" Jason asked the officer.

Kelly got up from the chair he had been sitting in and walked over to the stack of clothes on another chair. He reached in the mentioned pocket and pulled out a scrap of paper. "This?" Kelly asked holding up the scrap.

"Yeah, that's it!" Jason answered. The officer then copied the number off the scrap into his pad and then placed the scrap back into the pocket.

"Please continue, Jason."

"OK. So anyway, this man turned to slap Nicole. I intervened to protect her. He in turn punched me in the face." Jason then pointed to his now re-swollen nose. "Then Nicole...well...she...well, she kicked him in the most sensitive spot on a man's body."

"Ouch." Kelly winced at the thought.

"Exactly. He was down for the count and eventually he scurried away before anything became resolved by security. I thought I had seen the last of him," Jason continued.

"But then, there was yesterday," Kelly added.

"Exactly. I was walking back to my car in the mall parking lot after I had met some friends. As I went to unlock my door, I found out that he was behind me. He indicated that he didn't appreciate what had happened to him on Sunday. Then a friend of his came into view. I tried to talk my way out of the situation, but I don't think I did a good job. Next thing I knew I was being loaded on a gurney and driven here," Jason finished.

"Sounds pretty close to what our witness told us. Now, I just need to ask a few questions about these two men and our business here should be finished. OK?" Kelly asked.

"Shoot." Jason replied.

"OK, just tell me what these guys looked like. Height, weight, if you can estimate, physical description. We'll try to see what matches up with our witness and hopefully we can get a good description," Kelly explained.

"Well, the first guy, the guy who originally punched me on Sunday, I'd say he was...um...well, I'm 5 foot 7 inches tall and I only came up to his neck."

Kelly did some mental math. "OK, I'd say about 6 foot 2 possibly 6 foot 3."

"OK, and he was pretty big. Much bigger than me and I weigh about 190. So maybe about 260-300 lb. And he had a pretty bushy beard. His arms were hairy, but I could see that he had tattoos," Jason continued.

"Can you remember what any of the tattoos were?" Kelly asked.

Jason closed his eyes and tried to focus on what he saw, but it only came out blurry. He shook his head. "Sorry, I didn't get a very good look. I know that some of them were writing, but that's it. What else? Um...oh! His teeth were pretty bad. Very poor condition and his clothes were pretty ratty. Very dusty and dirty, like he'd been doing heavy yard work or construction or something. I really don't know what his eye color is, but he had very dark hair. That's about all I can remember about him."

"OK, That's pretty good. You're pretty observant," Kelly added.

"Really?" Jason asked.

Kelly nodded and indicated for Jason to continue. Jason thought back again and continued. "OK, the second guy I would say he was about the same size and height as his friend. His hair was lighter and he was going bald. His teeth were also pretty bad and he his nosed was kinda...well, it kinda had a squashed look to it. Like he had been punched there quite a few times." Jason paused and his eyebrows lifted slightly. "Shit, I hope my nose doesn't end up like that."

Stan could help but grin, but he composed himself. "Were his clothes similar to the first man's?"

"Yeah! They were also very dirty and slightly ragged. Um...That's all I can think of when it comes to him. I've only met him once and I didn't get a very good look before he started using my ribcage to toughen his hands on. Sorry," Jason finished.

"Well, you've given us a pretty good jump start. Hopefully we can get this description out and we'll be able to bring them in. Then you have to identify them. After that, we take this to trial where you'll have to testify," Kelly explained.

"Sounds good. So I guess it's 'don't call us, we'll call you?'" Jason asked.

"Pretty much. It's all we can really do. I wish we could do more, but rest assured, we are trying our best," Kelly answered.

"It's all I can ask you do. Oh, This witness that got the security to help me, I would like to thank him."

"Actually it's a she. A...um..." Stan checked another page on his notepad, "A Ms. Matty Hayes. I have her phone number if you wish to thank her."

Jason nodded and Kelly scribbled a copy of the number on a fresh sheet of paper, tore it out, folded it and placed it next to his clothes.

"Thanks. Is there anything else you need from me Stan?" Jason asked.

Stan checked his notes and then shook his head. "Looks like we're all finished here, of course there may be new questions in the future, so just be sure to make yourself available."

"No problem." Jason nodded.

"Cool. Well, I'll be off. Take time to heal kid, you don't wanna be too crippled to take girls out now do you?" Kelly smirked, then his eyebrows raised. "Oh, before I forget..." Kelly reached into his pocket and pulled out Jason's keys and set them next to his closed door. "You left these in your car door. We already dusted them for prints and it came out clean, so you can have these back. You might need them for Friday." Stan smirked again.

Jason cracked a smile and waved to Kelly as he opened the door to walk out of the room. Kelly then paused and turned to Jason, "Jason, there's another girl out here to see you. Quite popular with the ladies aren't we?" Kelly smirked.

Jason gave a puzzled look. Then the bouncy goddess herself bounced into the room past the police officer and gave a big wave to Jason. "Hiya street fightin' man!" She grinned.

"FENNY!!!" Jason shouted happily.

Fenny ran over to hug Jason, but he put his hand out to stop her. "Um...You might wanna wait to do that after I heal." Jason said blankly as he pointed to the bandages wrapped around his ribs.

Fenny eeped and semiblushed. "Sorry. After I heard what happened, I had to see if you were OK."

"So many visitors. I feel so loved." Jason grinned.

Fenny then noticed the vase and flowers near the window. "Ah... So who are these other visitors, hmmmm...?"

"Oh...just John and Nicole and Nicole's sister Sarah," Jason answered.

Fenny could hardly contain herself. "And who is this Nicole girl?" Fenny asked already knowing the answer because of the energy Jason emitted whenever he said her name.

"Well...um...remember our talk yesterday?" Jason asked.

"Hmmm...let me think..." Fenny replied, feigning deep thought. "Is this the conversation about you and a certain young lady who you happen to enjoy the company of?"

"Well... Yeah." Jason semiblushed.

"And how did it turn out?" Fenny asked, once again already knowing the answer, but feigning ignorance.

"We're going out Friday night." Jason smiled.

"Way to go Ro-me-o."

Fenny applauded which caused Jason to grin again. "Yep, just call me the crippled Casanova." Jason then stretched his arms out a little. "You know what, I think I want out of here. The scenery is getting dull."

"Well, you've been in a bed or gurney since yesterday, so I'm not surprised," Fenny agreed.

"Hey Fenny, can you do me a favor?" Jason asked.

"Sure." Fenny answered.

"Can you drive me to the mall? My car is still in the lot and I need to get it home," Jason explained.

"No prob. What are friends for?" Fenny beamed.

"Coolness. Well, then I guess I better get dressed." He threw the blankets aside and turned to get out of bed. He then noticed Fenny grinning at his bare legs and his hospital gown. "Um... do you mind, Fenny?"

"Nope, I don't mind at all." Fenny smirked back at him. She then turned toward the door. "I'll be right outside Mr. Bashful."

"Thank you." Jason said as Fenny left the room. He then went and pushed the nurses call button to get some help removing some tubes and wires...

A little while later Jason and Fenny were leaving the hospital and were walking toward the Hospital parking lot, blissfully unaware of the presence that enshrouded them.

Though a pair of high powered binoculars a sinister looking man in a black trench-coat, black fedora and black sunglasses spied on the pair from his perch in a tree from

across the street. (No, It's not Matt people! He doesn't have the look copyrighted you know.) He turned his mouth to the inside of his coat collar.

"Old Mother Hubbard, this is Jack and Jill, repeat, this is Jack and Jill. I've made visual confirmation. It looks like we do have a rogue on our hands. Awaiting further instructions. Over."

A few moments passed and then a noise came into a small ear-piece lodged in the sinister looking man's ear. "Roger, this is Old Mother Hubbard. Continue to keep tabs on the rogue. Begin Operation: Little Bo Peep. When the opportunity arises, approach the rogue. Give her the usual ultimatum. Over."

"Cease and desist or termination from the agency?" The sinister looking man asked while he continued to keep Jason and Fenny in his binoculars.

"No. Cease and desist or termination from existence. The agency is now cracking down on this continued abuse of our Immortal/Mortal involvement directive. We've already reprimanded her 'sisters.' They told us where she was. Do you understand your orders Jack and Jill? Over," the voice continued.

The sinister looking man nodded to himself. "Understood Old Mother Hubbard. This is Jack and Jill signing off." The sinister looking man spoke into his collar while continuing to keep Jason and Fenny in his binocular sights. He watched the pair get into Fenny's station wagon. The sinister looking man smirked. "Oh please Fenira, a station wagon? Where's the 'baby on board bumper sticker?'" He guffawed.

He continued to watch as the pair sped down the bust street toward the mall. As soon as they drove from sight, the sinister looking man adjusted his fedora and in an instant he faded from view and disappeared.

John Hoelscher looked up and down the rows of shoes in the Filenes's shoe department. He looked at his clipboard and then back at the rows of shoes. He looked

back at his clipboard and placed a neat checkmark next to a item on the paper attached to the clipboard. He then returned to looking up and down the rows of shoes. He let out a quiet sigh.

"Man oh man does inventory suck ass..." John spoke to the empty store. He checked his watch. It stared back at him with a digital '4:30 PM.' He sighed again. he worked until close and that was still several hours away. He looked at his clipboard again and counted the number of items he still had to find. He stopped bothering to count after 46 items. He sighed again.

John heard footsteps approach the little aisle he of shoe racks he was in. He turned to see if it was customer needing assistance. "Can I help..." John didn't finish the sentence. He simply stood there and the deafening sound of a clipboard hitting the carpeted floor filled the sudden silence. John took a step back.

"Why yes I do believe you can help me. Can you show me in a size 8½ which looks nice as I crush you underneath my heels?" The figure gave a cackle. It was the man in the blue suit who shared his face from his dream. John took another step back. The figure approached him. John took another step back. He bumped into someone.

John turned around and gave a startled yelp as he saw that it was the second man who shared his face. The man in white. "Pardon me, but I do believe that we have some unfinished business to attend to," the man in white enunciated.

"Back off pretty boy! He's mine! I'm taking this body to the top! Nothing can stop the almighty Lord God Hoelscher!" He cackled again. John was trapped between two figures whom he didn't understand.

"You? You make me scoff. You have no poise or charm. I should be running this body. Don't you agree?" He directed the last comment to John.

John didn't know how to respond to the question.

"Please, what good is this body to anyone? It should be destroyed. Good riddance," a third voice which came

from above John said. John looked up and saw the third man who shared his face. He sat on top of the racks of shoes with his feet dangling. He jumped down and bent over to face John who had bent down and tried to cover his head with his arms. "Don't you agree?"

"I'm the righteous one! Agree with me!" the man in white bellowed.

"No! I'm the one who is right! I order you to agree with me!" the man in the blue suit screamed psychotically.

"You know I'm the one who's right. But what does that matter, you've always been wrong anyway..." the third man in the simple clothes said in a low voice.

John continued to stay in his huddled position. "Please...just..." he started, then he screamed, "JUST LEAVE ME ALONE!!!" John opened his eyes and he was alone in the shoe racks.

Someone rushed to the small aisle. A older man with a Filenes's nametag. "John, are you ok?!? I heard you yelling something..."

John looked at his hands which were perspiring. He felt the drops of perspiration roll down his face. "I'm sorry...I must of...I must of passed out and fell asleep. I haven't been sleeping much lately and my friend is in the hospital, and..." John stammered.

"John, why didn't you say that you were ill? Maybe you should leave early and get some sleep. I can close up. You can finish the inventory tomorrow," the older man said to the still nervously shaking John.

John stood up on quaky legs. "Thanks...I think it's a combination of insomnia and stress is taking it's toll. I think I will go home. Sorry..."

"Nah, don't worry about it. You're a good worker. I don't think you would fake something like this just to leave early. Now you get home and try to rest a little, you hear." The older man patted John on the back.

John nodded and took his nametag off. He walked straight for the exit and from there straight to his car. John started the ignition and decided to drive away from there.

John left the parking lot and paused at the small intersection. Where to go? He knew where the last place he wanted to go was home and to sleep. That is where all his problems were.

On a impulse, John flicked his left turn signal and decided to just drive. Drive and let the road take him away from Holyoke. Maybe then he would find peace.

A few hours later, John found himself on a unfamiliar highway. He saw a few billboards and a few houses, but mostly just empty country. John hadn't bothered to turn the radio on. His heart pounding within his ribcage was the only noise he could hear anyway. He continued to just drive along the unfamiliar road until he felt like he should stop.

From up ahead John saw a small sign lit up. John gave it further study. It was a Starbucks Coffee shop. "Man, those things *ARE* Everywhere." John commented to himself, hoping to not get a reply. On a whim, John pulled in and stopped his car. He stepped out and walked into the small coffee shop.

Inside it was clean and it smelled of various caffeinated beverages. It was also empty of any customers. The only other person there was a young plain faced girl wearing the traditional Starbucks uniform and working the counter. She hardly acknowledged John. She looked as bored as she probably was.

John decided to completely enter and the door finally swung close behind him. He walked up to the counter and looked up at the large menu. He cleared his throat. "Um...excuse me..." John began.

"What do ya need?" The girl asked with disinterest, though John could hardly blame her.

"Do you sell green tea?" John asked.

"Um..." She thought for a moment, turned to look at a few containers.

"Yeah. Yeah we do. Is that what you want?"

"Yes. I'd appreciate a medium green tea, not too hot please," he timidly asked the girl.

She simply took a styrofoam cup and filled it with hot water and added a tea bag that turned the water greenish. She pulled the bag from the cup, threw it into a small wastebasket, placed a lid on the cup, and handed it over to John.

"\$2.50, sir," she said blankly.

John reached into his pocket and pulled out three wrinkled singles. He placed them on the counter. "Keep the change." He took the cup.

"Yay... now I can retire," the girl said unenthusiased.

John took his cup of tea and walked to a small table in the corner. He removed the lid and blew the hot steam that rose from his tea off to help cool it. He took a sip and sighed. It seemed that problems were just a little further away when you had a hot cup of green tea.

John sat at his small table sipping his tea. He closed his eyes for a moment. However when he opened them again John found himself surrounded by his stalkers once again. John could feel a small stream of tea run down his chin, down his neck, and into his shirt because his jaw had dropped slightly at the sight of these nuisances.

Seated to his direct right was the man in the blue suit, to his left was the man in white, and across from him was the man in the simple clothes. Each had their own glass filled with a greenish liquid. The man in the blue suit had a golden chalice encrusted with gems. The man in white had a crystal wine glass, while the man in the simple clothes had a simple plain Japanese tea cup. Each took sips from their respective beverage containers.

"So, you're here too," John began.

"You can't escape us," the man in white said.

"The fact of the matter is..." the man in the blue suit began.

"We never left you," the man in the simple clothes finished.

"We've been with you from the beginning," the man in white added.

"We guide your life," the man in the blue suit agreed.

"You've never made a decision without us," the man in the simple clothes added to the mix.

"May it be about career..." the man in the blue suit began.

"...Or women..." the man in white added.

"...Or anything else. We've been by your side," the man in the simple clothes finished.

"You have?" John asked confused. The three all nodded.

"Now the time has come," the man in white stated.

"Eh?" John asked with an arched eyebrow.

"We can't live like this anymore! It's time to choose!" the man in the blue suit cackled.

"Choose? I don't understand." John scratched his head.

"You've lived with conflicting personalities for too long," the man in the simple clothes stated.

"Now you must choose who will lead your life. Which of us is the leading force in your life!" the man in white said in a serious tone.

"Wha...?" John had a stunned expression on his face.

"Hey! Who says that he's qualified to choose?" The man in the blue suit shouted across the table.

"He's usually wrong anyway," The man in the simple clothes added.

"Hmmm...what do you suggest then?" The man in white asked his companions.

John continued to stare blankly and occasionally blinked. The man in the blue suit slapped his fist into his open palm. "I know!" he shouted triumphantly. The other two gave him a queried look. The man in the blue suit put his fist out over the table. The other two seemed to catch the drift of his idea. John still felt in the dark.

The other two placed their fist out over the table. The man in the blue suit spoke up "One go."

"All or nothing," the man in white agreed.

The man in simple clothes simply nodded.

The three shook their fist three times.

"Jon!" the man in simple clothes stated as he threw is open palm in the center of the table.

"Ken!" the man in white stated as he threw a pair of fingers in a 'v' formation into the center of the table.

"Pon!" the man in the blue suit laughed as he threw his closed fist in the center of the table.

A moment of silence. After a brief pause, all three men shouted triumphantly, "I win!" then they all said simultaneously, "What do you mean 'I win?!?' I won!" another moment of silence enveloped the table.

"My perfect scissors cut your weak paper! I win!" the man in white said to the man in the simple clothes with a grin.

"But my mighty rock crushed your perfect scissors! I win!" the man in the blue suit shouted to the man in white.

"And my weak paper defeats your mighty rock. I win," the man in the simple clothes said before taking a sip of his tea.

John blinked a couple of times. He couldn't believe it. They were playing *Rock, Paper, Scissors* with his life being the wager. He felt very angry. He slammed his fist on the table. "If you think I'm handing my life to any of you bastards, you're in for another thing!" John shouted and he stood from the table. "My life is my own!" John stated.

"Since when?" the man in the simple clothes asked, then took another sip.

"It's always been ours," the man in the blue suit agreed.

"You've never made your own decisions," the man in white concurred.

"Well I'm making one now! I'm leaving you behind!" John shouted as he walked out of the coffee shop.

"Weirdo..." the Starbucks employee commented to herself as she continued to lean on the counter. She had watched John scream at his empty table for the last minute or two, not that she cared much. A moment later she heard a car ignition start and the sound of rubber and gravel spinning as John peeled out from the gravel lot.

The three continued to sit at the table. The man in white looked to the man in blue. "Should we go after him?"

"After we finish our tea," the man in the blue suit stated.

The man in the simple clothes nodded in agreement.

John wiped the sweat from his forehead as he continued to drive blindly in the night. He didn't know where he was going, but one thing he did know. He had to get away from there.

"...Okay, I guess I'll see you at 6:00 Friday? Uh huh...Great...Goodnight, Nicole." Jason pushed the button on his cordless phone. He then pushed it again and dialed another number.

After a few moments he pushed the button again. "Where is he? He told me to call after the mall closed, but that was an hour ago and he's still not home. I guess I'll try to reach him tomorrow," Jason said out loud.

He then pulled a small piece of paper out of his pocket and began to dial the phone again. After a few moments the other side picked up. A masculine voice answered. "Hello?"

"Um, hello. Is...Matty Hayes there?" Jason asked.

The other side was quiet. "How did you get this number?" the voice asked.

"Oh I'm sorry. She doesn't know me, but I was the man attacked in the mall parking lot yesterday. I just wanted to thank her for getting help so quickly and for helping the police," Jason explained.

A sigh of relief was heard through the phone. "Oh...okay. Well, um...she's not home right now. But I'll pass along the message," the voice said.

"Oh...OK. Well, when you do, can you give her this number and have her call me? I really wanted to thank her personally," Jason asked.

"I'll see what I can do," the voice responded.

After Jason gave his phone number to the man, he hung up the phone. Jason stretched a little and decided that he needed some much deserved sleep.

Matt Atanian placed his phone on the cradle. He looked at the note in his hands and folded in and placed it in his pocket. His mother then walked into the kitchen. "Who was on the phone, calling so late?" his mother asked. "Oh...it was a wrong number," Matt answered and then to his room to retire for the evening.

V: The Final Perspective

Act the First:

“The Fantastic Reality about the Goddess Fenira”

The room was dark. Very dark. And cold. It was very, very cold. Fenira shivered slightly. The only small source of light in this cold room was a small shaft focused on the steel folding chair that Fenira was sitting on.

Fenira looked around to her surroundings. From the little light she had, she could make out that the room wasn't furnished and she looked to be the only one there. At least she thought she was the only one there.

Comfortable?

Fenira jerked her head around at the intrusion. “Who said that!?!”

I did.

“Who's ‘I?’” Fenira asked nervously.

I'm the one who's asking you if you're comfortable.

Fenira again looked around. She could not see anyone else in the room with her. “Where are you? Are you here?” Fenira asked growing more nervous of her situation.

In a matter of speaking, yes. I'm sort of here. For all purposes, you can think of me as being here.

Fenira began to dislike this situation even more. Being here was bad enough, but being here with some weird... Fenira stretched for a word to fit her concept... this presence was even worse. “Why am I here?” Fenira asked.

Well, where were you before you were here?

Fenira thought for a moment. “Well, I remember being in another room with John and Jason...” Fenira paused. “John and Jason! Where are they?!?” Fenira shouted.

Your friends are fine.

“But where are they?” Fenira insisted.

Is that really important?

“Yes! I think It's VERY important!” Fenira shouted.

**sigh* They have their own sessions to deal with, as you do here and now. Is that sufficient?*

"Not really." Fenira replied sarcastically.

Needless to say, you'll be reunited with them soon. Your reunion will be quicker if we stop wasting time on pointless matters.

"I don't think it's pointless." Fenira shot back.

Can we please get on with this? I have things to do too, ya know. Now, you were saying something about being with John and Jason?

Fenira glared back at the darkness, but finally realized that her question would not be answered and that she would have to continue on. "I was in a room like this with John and Jason. I remember... something..." Fenira paused and struggled with the thought.

Yes...?

"I remember... I..." Fenira furrowed her brow in concentration. "Jason!" Fenira shouted suddenly.

What about Mr. Bertovich?

"His hands... his hands..." Fenira thought harder. "His hands were...they were...BLOODY! That's it! His hands were covered in blood!" Fenira was then struck with a new thought. "Why would his hands be covered in blood?!?" The darkness was silent. Fenira looked around. "Hey! I asked you a question! Why were Jason's hands covered in blood!"

The darkness was silent. A few moments passed.

Tell me about Mr. Hoelscher.

"Why didn't you answer my question? I want to know!" Fenira shot back.

Tell me about Mr. Hoelscher.

"Oh, so now you want to change the subject?!? Dammit! I want an answer first!" Fenira shouted.

Tell me about Mr. Hoelscher.

Fenira sighed. This was getting her nowhere. She began to calm herself. "John? Well, he was..." Fenira thought back. "John didn't really do much of anything. Neither did Jason for that matter. We just sat there."

Oh...?

"We just sat in a circle. Then..." Fenira thought hard again. "Then...Then I was here. How did I get here?"

And before the three of you were together, how did you get there?

Fenira was struck dumb by her question being answered with another question. "How did I get there? Well I...I...I don't know. I remember Ty and then..." Fenira paused and suddenly choked up. "Oh...God!..." Fenira felt a stream of cold tears running down her face.

Hmmm...I see. Maybe we should start at the beginning. That is the whole purpose of why I brought you here.

"Wha...?" Fenira queried between sniffles.

I said we should start at the beginning. Now, I want you to answer all my questions honestly and we'll be done with this in no time. Understand?

Fenira nodded and hoped that this ordeal would be over and done with. "Okay..."

Ah...excellent. Where to start? I guess I should begin with your name.

"Fenny Lin." Fenira answered. Immediately, pain seared her tear stained face as an invisible hand had seemingly "bitch-slapped" her.

*Now, now. Tsk, tsk. What did I say about answering the questions **honestly**?*

Fenira was struck dumb again. The shock of the hit had stunned her, but not because it hurt terribly, but it had come from an invisible source.

"Fenira." Fenira answered back nervously.

See? That wasn't so hard, now was it? And where do you work?

"Fil..." Fenira caught herself. "Goddess for The Divine Agency."

Oh? And what do you do there?

Fenira was silent. She looked down at her knees and then clenched her hands in each other. A fresh tear rolled down her face. Suddenly, she jerked in pain as she was struck again by the invisible hand.

I don't like doing that. Now, please answer the question.

"I relieve suffering." Fenira answered blankly. She braced herself for another blow.

You relieve suffering? Hmmm...yes, I guess that is a fair description of your occupation. You seem nervous. I told you, you will only be punished if you are not honest. Now, tell me, what do you recall of the events that led you to be here tonight?

"Do I have to?" Fenira asked, but it sounded more like a plea for mercy. Her answer came in the form of another harsh blow to her cheek causing her to fall from her chair. She broke into a fresh weeping spell.

Now, now, this will not do. We can't have you lying here crying. It will ruin your pretty face. Now, please sit back down and tell me about you and Mr. Ty.

Fenira looked up from the floor. "How do you know about Ty?"

Oh, I know many things. Many, many things. But we're not here to talk about me. Besides, I'm oh so dull. It's you I'm more interested in. Now, please tell me about the events of the last couple days. After that, you can join your friends Jason and John. Would you like that?

Fenira nodded shakily and took her seat. She wiped her eyes with her sleeve and looked up to the ceiling for no reason. "It was such a crazy couple of days. The whole universe seemed to have come undone at the seams. I guess it was Thursday that it all began..."

Thursday...

Fenny Lin sat in her apartment reading a book. It was one of those rare days off. She looked over her meager belongings scattered over her place. As a Goddess she could wish for anything she could ever want and live anywhere she ever wanted. However, Fenny felt more content now than she had felt in centuries.

What she had here in this single space apartment, as meager and as little as it was, it was hers. She bought it

with her money that she earned from her department store job. She purchased these things and crammed them in her little living space.

She was covered by an odd sense. She actually, almost, maybe, felt *Mortal*. It was odd. Fenny wasn't sure, but she thought she liked it. She could see how Mortals got some sort of satisfaction out of this meager existence.

Today, for example, was her day off. If she was still hanging at the central office, she would lounge around, like she did every day, and this day would add to nought. But this day was to be savored and enjoyed. She looked back at her book. Poetry by Keats and Blake. Fenny smiled and returned to her book. "And they seemed like such normal lads when I met them oh so long ago... shame about that poor Keats boy..." Fenny mused to herself and delved herself back into the literature.

A moment later, the tranquillity was broken by a phone ringing. Fenny sighed and rolled her eyes. She wiggled her fingers and the phone floated from its place on her coffee table and into her hand. She may have felt mortal, but there were still advantages to being a goddess...

"Hello, The Bouncy One speaking." Fenny spoke into the receiver.

"Um...er....Hi, Fenny." The voice replied.

"Jason honey! How ya been? The big date's tomorrow night right? Got anything special planned?"

"Well....actually...er...no. I haven't given it much thought." Jason answered.

"Well, I heard good things about this new Sushi Bar in Northampton. Supposedly very authentic and they even have the karaoke and everything." Fenny chattered as she looked back down at her book.

"Sushi bar? Actually, that might be perfect! She's part Japanese!" Jason exclaimed excitedly.

"Oh really?" Fenny asked. Of course this was not *really* a coincidence. She knew all along about Jason's new love. But she played dumb.

"This could be cool. Though...um...I've never had sushi before..." Jason answered.

"It's pretty good. Personally, I'm more of a ramen person myself, though. It sounds like you two will have a good time. Glad I could be of some help, Romeo."

"Fenny wait! Don't hang up yet. There wasn't a reason why I called!" Jason interrupted, thinking that Fenny was about to hang up.

"Oh? This wasn't about my famous romance advice?" Fenny asked.

"Fenny," Jason began, much more serious, "have you heard from John these last few days?" Jason asked this with a concerned tone.

"Um...no. I haven't actually." Fenny answered.

"You haven't seen him even at work?" Jason asked.

"No...I can't recall seeing him there, but then again, we work in different departments."

"Damn." Jason moaned silently.

"Whats' wrong?" Fenny asked.

"Well, He said that he wanted to talk to me a couple of days ago. But now I can't find him. I stopped by his apartment, and it looks like no one's been home for a few days. The newspapers have accumulated. I'm very worried. No one seems to know where he is," Jason explained.

"That is weird. Tell you what, I'll keep an ear to the ground. If he comes my way I'll let him know to let you know that's he's fine."

"I guess that's all I can do right now. I'd hate to think that he was in trouble of any kind," Jason agreed.

"Keep in touch and let me know if anything comes up."

"Will do. Wish me luck for tomorrow," Jason requested.

"Knock her socks off. Later," Fenny obliged and then pushed the off button. Fenny put the phone down and looked down at her book. She placed a bookmark in her place, something about a Grecian Urn, and closed it. She

placed the book at the foot of the chair she was relaxing in.

Fenny placed her hands to her temples and concentrated. (Putting her hands to her temples was purely non-effective, but it made her feel better as it was traditional.) She began searching for John through his emotions. She was having trouble pinning him down.

Finally, something faint came to her. Fenny was immediately flooded by a tidal wave of emotion all at once. Pain, Fear, Jealousy, Anger, but something even darker loomed at the center of this tornado...The desire for destruction. Fenny gasped as she broke herself away from the flood. John was far away, wherever he was. He was facing this alone and no one could help him. Help him from *himself*.

"Oh John..." Fenny mentally took a step back, "I never knew what you really had inside. Why didn't I see it before? Was this dark emotion so buried that it hid itself even from me?" Fenny asked aloud. A moment later her question and train of thought were answered and interrupted by a knock on her apartment door.

Fenny walked over to the door and peeked through the peep-hole. Through the tiny hole and saw a average built gentleman wearing black sunglasses, a black trenchcoat, complete with black gloves. He smirked at the door as he stroked his goatee and brushed his gloved hand through his scruffy hair. In his other hand was a black fedora. He looked straight at the peephole and grinned.

Fenny lurched back in shock and let out a small 'eep.' She slowly backed away from the door taking slow steps backward. *How did THEY find me?!? Did my sisters tell them?!? No! They wouldn't betray me like that to send one of THOSE guys after me! I gotta think!* Fenny thought frantically.

Through the door a voice called out. "Fenira..." Fenny let out another 'eep.' The voice continued, "Fenira, would you be so kind as to allow me in? I really must have a word with you."

Fenny began to panic. *I'm gonna have to buy some time!* "Um...There is no Fenira that lives here! Try another apartment!" Fenny shouted back.

Outside in the hall, the stranger shook his head and 'tsk'ed' to himself at the reply. "Fenira, Fenira, Fenira...what am I gonna do with you?" He asked himself.

Inside the apartment Fenny scrambled madly. She knew that all she bought was a minute at most as he was gonna come in whether she let him in or not. She looked over to the kitchen and inspiration struck. She moved her hand toward the kitchen and a cabinet opened and a metal cookie sheet flew across the room into her hands. She smiled evilly. *Come on in, you bastard...I got a surprise for ya!*

A moment later, the stranger complied with her wish as he began to walk *through* the door, or rather, he *phased* himself through as one would walk through air. He looked around the apartment for a moment and then saw Fenny bring down the metal cookie sheet down on his head.

The stranger stumbled back a moment as he dropped his hat and He staggered a moment and looked at Fenny. "What the...?" was all the stranger got out before Fenny brought the cookie sheet down on him again and dented it nicely. His sunglasses fell off and the stranger fell face forward to her hardwood floor.

Fenny dropped the sheet and breathed a sigh of relief. "Sweet dreams demon." Fenny then grabbed his arms and slowly dragged him from the floor to a chair...

An Hour later...

A "Wake up!" followed by a glass of ice cold water brought the stranger out of his nap. He shook his head and water sprayed like a dog shaking himself after a bath. Fenny put the empty glass on the table and then sat down on the edge of the same table and looked straight ahead at the stranger. She finally got a good look at him without his glasses. His eyes were yellow and slit like a cat's. His

mouth also had two small fangs peeking past his lips. Another interesting detail was that under the coat it didn't really look like he was wearing much. He wasn't naked, but he wasn't wearing pants and a shirt per se, but rather it looked like a one piece black leotard that slightly shimmered.

The stranger tried to get his bearings. He looked down and then realized that he was tied to the chair. He smirked. "Please Fenira," he started sarcastically, "couldn't you have thought up something better than simply tying me up? You know that physical objects offer no boundaries to me."

Fenny simply smirked back. "Oh really? Well, I'm not stopping you. Try."

"Eh?"

"I said 'try.' Go ahead. Escape. I can't stop you," Fenny answered.

The stranger relaxed his body. A moment passed and he opened his eyes. He smiled and looked down. Then he frowned. He was still tied. He closed his eyes again and relaxed his body. He opened his eyes and looked down. He frowned even more. Fenny could see that he was beginning to panic.

"I don't think you can, can you?" Fenny asked seriously. "I know all about you demons and your limitations. Yes, it's true that you simply pass through physical objects with so much a thought, *BUT*... it doesn't work when you've worn yourself out, now does it?" Fenira grinned.

The stranger could feel the perspiration form on his brow. She was *right*. He had drained all his energy in phasing through the door, and the two blows to the head earlier didn't help matters much either. "So... now what?" Was all the stranger could think to say.

"Now? Now you tell me why you're here," Fenny answered in a serious tone.

"The Agency sent me," the stranger answered back.

"And why did the Agency find it necessary to send one of its 'search demons' after little old me?" Fenny asked.

The stranger grew a disgusted look on his face. "Oh come off it with the coy routine! You know *damn* well why I was sent!" the stranger angrily answered, "Unlike you, us 'search demons' actually do the job we're supposed to do!" he added.

"Oh! So you wanna invade my place and *then* give me a superior attitude to boot?!?" Fenny shot back angrily.

"Oh! You're one to act all *indignant* about this! Don't forget that if *you* hadn't gone against the rules, I wouldn't even be here! I'm not the one who's in the wrong here Fenira! Don't forget that little fact."

"Oh, I'm *WRONG* am I?!? Excuse me, but why am I suddenly so perverse in the eyes of the agency?!?" Fenny shouted.

"You want the list?!?" The stranger shouted back.

"LIST?!?"

"Well besides the basic crime of interfering with the mortals, there's also the matter of impersonating a love goddess," the stranger stated.

"How dare you! *IMPERSONATING?!?* I'm the best damn love goddess that this beleaguered little world has! Love isn't something that you can have a detached antiseptic approach to! It requires a watchful eye, and a individual that cares," Fenny responded to the charges.

"I agree one hundred percent, except there's one problem."

"What?!?" Fenny shouted.

"*YOU'RE NOT A LOVE GODDESS!!!*" the stranger screamed back with a vicious venom in his voice.

Fenny paused for a moment and then took a deep breath. "*SO WHAT?!?*" she screamed at the top of her lungs.

"So what?!? So what?!? You have the gall to ask *that* question out loud?!?" the stranger shouted incredulously.

"Yes, I have the gall to ask *that* question out loud! Who cares if I wasn't *assigned* to be a love goddess. So

what?!? I'm doing the job now! That's all that should matter now!" Fenny screamed.

The stranger tried to calm himself but felt his control slipping. "Oh! That's all very nice and convenient for *you* isn't it? Yes! Let's have the world revolve about what Fenira wants! That's all very grand!" The stranger shouted with a bitter sarcasm, but he wasn't finished. "Yes, it would be very nice if the universe ran that way, but it don't! While you're off impersonating a love goddess. The job you're supposed to be doing isn't being done!" The stranger noticed that Fenny's eyes shifted for a moment. "Oh! That's right, you forgot about the old job, didn't you? You remember your old job don't you? A God..."

"My old job was to relieve suffering! That's all I did! Nothing wrong with that!" Fenny interrupted defensively.

"Oh! 'to relieve suffering.' Is that the self-delusion that you've made for yourself?!? Such a nice little euphemism for what you used to do!"

"Shut up!" Fenny shouted.

"You can't even face the fact of what you used to do, can you? That's why you've done this! You can't admit that you used to be a..."

"SHUT UP!!!" Fenny screamed placing her hands over her ears. "SHUT UP!!!"

"LOOK AT YOURSELF! YOU ARE AND ALWAYS WILL BE..." the stranger screamed.

"SHUT UP!!!" Fenny screamed desperately.

"...a Goddess of Death," the stranger finished. He then took a breath.

Fenny simply dropped to the floor on her knees and shook her head. A fresh stream of tears was falling down her face. Her dark hair fell in front of her face. A moment later a soft sob was uttered past her lips.

The shouting match was now over. The stranger sighed as he shifted in his chair. Fenny continued to stoop over on the floor. "I didn't like doing that Fenira."

"Just leave me alone. Please." was all Fenny could squeak.

"You know I can't do that. I have to do my job." The stranger responded. "and so do you."

Fenny suddenly got the angry, bitter look back on her face as she looked over at the tied demon. "And what do you know about my job?!? Do you really have any FUCKING idea what my job is like?!? DO YOU?!?" Fenny shouted as she knocked the glass off the table, causing it to fall and smash into shards. Fenny stared at the stranger with a cold harsh look. Her eyes grew gray and hollow as she continued to stare, causing the stranger to shift uncomfortably in his chair.

"You think it's all so easy, don't you?" Fenny asked rhetorically. "They tell you, 'Oh, for the rest of eternity, you do this.' And then you're supposed to go around doing your job with no emotion behind it." Fenny looked up and breathed deeply, "It ain't that simple anymore. I couldn't stand it. Being a Goddess of Death isn't so detached."

"You relieve people's suffering. There's nothing wrong with that. You said it yourself," the stranger spoke out.

"That reasoning only takes you so far. Yes, I relieve suffering. When an old man who clings to life begs to die, I'm a godsend. But what about everything else?!? What about the atrocities of war and plague?!? Every time they happen, I have to be there! I have had to watch millions of normal people and children die in agony! I've been the one they've cursed as an evil being! I couldn't stand it! I can't stand it! I won't stand it!!!" Fenny shouted in a fresh tirade and tears.

"That's why you did it didn't you? It wasn't to be insubordinate. It was to make amends to the universe for your part in life's cycle?"

"A goddess of death only brings pain and suffering wherever she roams. A goddess of love brings about happiness and joy...and yes, even the chance for new life. Is that so wrong?!?" Fenny asked.

The stranger softened for a moment. "No. No, it's not wrong at all. In fact, I actually understand."

"You do?"

"Don't be surprised. We've all have our crosses to bear. Being a goddess and being a demon isn't so different," the stranger answered.

"How?" Fenny queried.

"It's all about following orders with complete detachment. Sometimes, I just can't keep that detachment. I always thought there was something wrong with me. There are some things in this job that make my blood run colder than it already is," the stranger answered.

Fenny wiped the tears from her eyes and looked at the stranger clearly. She saw that he was actually being sincere, or doing a damn fine job faking it. "What kind of things?"

The stranger's eyes shifted. "I don't like talking about it. A lot of my cohorts would love telling you, but I'm not like that..."

Fenny looked hard and gave him a scrutinizing look. "I actually believe you." She motioned her arms and the ropes disappeared. The stranger looked down in disbelief and then stood up to stretch his arms.

"Why?" the stranger asked.

"Even if your eyes are yellow and cat-like, they can't hide emotion. You're being sincere, I feel it," Fenny pointed to her chest, "here."

"Thank you," the stranger replied and then rubbed his head and winced. "Still wish you hadn't hit me so hard."

"Sorry, but I had to cover my bases. Nothing personal," Fenny apologized. Then she turned serious again. "So now where do we stand?"

The stranger turned serious as well. "Well, I was supposed to tell you that you must return to the agency."

"Or what?" Fenny asked cautiously.

"Termination," the stranger stated quietly.

"From the agency?" Fenny queried, feeling a nauseous feeling grow in the pit of her stomach.

"No," the stranger answered giving her a look that told her exactly what she already knew.

Fenny felt the strength give out in her legs again and she shakily took a seat on the chair by the table. She

placed her hand on her forehead. "Fuck," was all she could manage to mumble then she looked at the stranger and mumbled out, "They're really serious aren't they?"

The stranger took the chair on the opposite side of the table and sat down. He looked straight at Fenny and nodded his head then he did something that surprised her. He took her hand into his. "They're very serious."

Fenny deepened the frown on her face. She then waived her arms and a bottle of scotch and two glasses materialized on the table. She took the bottle and poured two half glassed of scotch and took one. "Join me. I need a drink and I don't drink alone."

The stranger complied and took a glass. Fenny held her glass out and toasted, "Here's to being fucked." And then guzzled the amber liquid. The stranger took a sip and put down the glass.

"It doesn't have to be this way," the stranger spoke while looking at Fenny.

Fenny refilled her glass and gulped down another. "Huh?" she mumbled while refilling for a third glass.

"You do have a chance for escape. If you leave here and go away, far away, and if you keep a low profile, the agency may not find you. Of course by low profile, I mean that you couldn't use *any* of your powers," the stranger clarified.

"Yeah right," Fenny shot back nonchalantly. "Like I can suddenly disappear without a trace and the Agency wouldn't find me. What about you?"

"You can disappear, *if* I never found you in the first place." The stranger smirked.

Fenny did a spit-take with her fourth glass of scotch when she heard this. "Excuse me?!?"

"I'll tell them that you left town before I could confront you. I'll volunteer to search for you. After a few months, I'll report that you've disappeared without a trace. You could then lead a 'normal' life. Though you would really have to live like a mortal, no powers whatsoever. No materializing material goods. No scanning emotions. No nothing. The first time you did that, they'd sense you in an instant. Your

guard would always have to be up. You would probably have to change your appearance as well," the stranger answered back in such a dead-seriousness that Fenny could believe his sincerity.

"But why? Why help me escape the Agency? Especially with such a high risk to yourself? If they discovered your deception, then you'd be on their bad list too," Fenny asked, concerned.

The stranger shifted his eyes again and then closed them. He rubbed his eyes and bridge of his nose with his one hand and frowned slightly. He appeared to be thinking hard about something. He then opened his eyes and stared again at Fenny. "I have my own amends with the universe I must make." Then he picked up the glass and gulped down the rest of his first glass. He then grabbed the bottle and poured himself his second and Fenny's fifth. He then sipped it and continued, "Time is short. If this is to work, there can be no delays."

Fenny nodded in agreement and put down her unfinished scotch. She got up from the table and stretched her arms. "Thank you. You're willing to do all this for me and put yourself in such high risk and..." she paused, "I don't even know your name."

"It's Ty." The stranger answered.

"That's an interesting name." Fenny replied.

"Not really. They gave all us demons short names. It's easier for them to remember us then." Ty grinned sardonically. Fenny grinned back.

"Well, Thank you, Ty." Fenny said softly. She then kissed him lightly on the cheek, causing the pale demon to blush slightly.

Now seeing that this was an extremely interesting turn of events and things are finally starting to make a turn for the better, the universe decided that it was time for things to turn for the worse. By 'for the worse,' it means that at that exact moment, the front door of Fenny's apartment collapsed as a large black trench-coat clad man kicked it down. Behind him, four more people walked in. All dressed in black, like Ty, there were four male demons of

various height and weight, and one female demon with long black hair tied in a single pig-tail. Their black designer sunglasses might of concealed their eyes, but Fenny knew that they were demons just like Ty.

Fenny turned angrily to Ty, "You bastard! You were setting me up!!!"

Ty shook his head viciously, "I didn't! I swear!"

The apparent leader, a tall lanky demon with short hair and a thick five o'clock shadow stepped forward. "No, No Fenira. He's actually telling the truth. He didn't even know we were here."

The female demon stepped forward. "You can understand then, why we're so *disappointed* in him. Helping a fugitive is very serious business."

The leader stuck his hand out to shush the female demon. "Enough, Shi!"

"Sorry, Gez," the female demon named Shi said as she did an apologetic bow and stepped back.

"Well, well, well, Ty. I must say that you surprise me. You were willing to betray both the Agency and our honor for a simple goddess. Tsk Tsk," Gez started.

Ty stepped forward, "I didn't do it just for her. I did it because it's time that someone stopped blindly following orders and thought for themselves for a change! Just because she did that, is that any reason to destroy her?!?"

Gez lightly clapped his hands and looked to the others. They followed suit and they too began to quietly clap. "Bravo, Ty. I always thought that you we're an impetuous, stupid fool. However, having heard you speak so eloquently, I realize that I was right."

Ty sneered at the comment as did Fenny. Ty then straightened up and started to speak again. "I may be a fool, but..."

However as he began to speak, Gez turned around, smiled, and interrupted him. "As interesting as it is to listen to you pontificate about the virtues of independent thought, it matters not. You're guilty of attempting to aid a fugitive goddess. That is punishable by non-existence. As for your goddess friend, she doesn't appear to have any

intention of changing her mind." He then looked to his companions. "Kill them both."

As he gave the order, from under their coats they pulls out what looked like semi-automatic nine millimeter handguns with laser-sights attached. Gez turned back to Ty and Fenny. "Goodbye."

Fenny thought that this would be a good moment to speak out and buy some precious time, "Um excuse me? But how can you kill a goddess? I'm immortal. Guns don't work."

Gez smiled. "Oh these are special guns. Issued to us by the agency for when these types of circumstances arise."

Fenny had a bad thought that bothered her. "The Agency gave you weapons for killing an immortal?!?"

"Oh yes their R&D is quite effective in those matters." Gez replied.

"But...but...how? Why?" Fenny stammered while thinking of what reason would the divine agency need weapons.

"Oh, you'd be surprised what kind of technology arises when one immortal being needs to kill another immortal being." Gez kept that same arrogant 'Bond-villain' smile the whole conversation which was starting to really bother Fenny. "Of course, I know exactly what you're doing. You trying to stall us and are praying for some miracle to save you. Very boring Fenira, even for you." He then pointed to the female demon Shi. "Shi, kill her first."

"Gladly," Shi said with a happy grin, like a child asked if they would like another piece of cake. She pointed the gun at Fenny and a red laser dot appeared on her chest.

The world seemed to move in slow motion. Shi began to slowly squeeze the trigger. Ty, even though he thought it was a futile and incredibly stupid thing to do, charged at Fenny and the pair stumbled toward a window. As the shot went off, Ty felt a burning sensation dig it's way into the back of his shoulder and exiting the front barely missing Fenny's face by centimeters. Of course that was a minor

detail as the pair was now crashing through a window of a 7th story apartment and they were speeding toward the alley below.

Ty began to desperately hope that Fenny was preparing herself for the crash because if she wasn't, then this was going to hurt like hell.

Fenny had gotten over the initial shock of both Ty's stupid heroism and their flying out her apartment. She also realized that in a moment she was going to slam into hard pavement with Ty on top of her. She began to concentrate and then looked at Ty. His eyes were closed hard and he was squeezing tightly.

A moment passed and nothing. "Um, Ty?" Fenny spoke. Ty continued to hug tightly and kept his eyes closed. Fenny spoke again. "Um, Ty? You mind letting me go?"

Ty opened his eyes and looked. The pair were now floating a few inches above the pavement. Ty released his grip and slipped the last few inches to the concrete. Fenny corrected herself and looked around.

"You mind telling me when you're going to do something that crazy ahead of time next time?" Fenny asked.

"Sorry. I was kinda running on instincts there." Ty looked up and saw the shattered window. "You've got to get out of here! Quick, teleport away and lay low, I'll delay them!"

Ty began to push Fenny out of the alley. "Hey! I'm not leaving you here like this! If you can't escape a rope, there's no way you can escape them!" Fenny shouted.

"There's no time! I'm tying you down! Get out of here!" Ty shouted back.

"Not without you! Come on!" Fenny shouted as she grabbed Ty's arm and pulled him down the alley. Ty winced in pain as she yanked on his arm. He felt a warm tingling sensation move all across his shoulder and arm.

In the apartment, Gez and Shi both blinked for a moment. After that, they looked at each other, then to their three companions. They all took turns looking at one

another. After that, Gez decided to speak. "Get down there and stop them from getting away!!!!"

The three other demons ran out of the apartment and stomped down the hall and down the steps. Shi and Gez ran to the window, only to see Fenny and Ty exit the alley. Gez punched the wall in frustration and then he and Shi ran out the door like the other three.

Fenny slammed the door of her station wagon. Ty slid over to the passenger seat. Fenny then reached into her pockets and suddenly got a panicked look. She had forgotten her car keys in her apartment! "Oh... Screw it!" Fenny shouted and pointed to the ignition. The car started on its own and Fenny slammed the gas peddle and peeled away from the apartment complex.

A moment later, her back window shattered as shots rang out. Fenny ducked her head in hopes of avoiding the projectiles. In her rearview mirror she saw both Shi and Gez join their three companions. A moment later, she turned the corner and they were out of sight. She hit the gas harder and the car slowly accelerated faster. Fenny turned onto the road that led straight out of town.

At the apartment, Gez stomped his foot down angrily. "Dammit! We let them get away! If the Agency doesn't get them, then they'll settle for my ass!!! FUCK!!!"

"Don't worry, Gez. We'll get them. They can't go forever, they'll have to stop running eventually," Shi consoled.

Gez gave her an incredulous look. But then he looked down at her and saw her smile. He lightened a little. Then he looked over to his cohorts and noticed that they were grinning. "Hey! Do you think that you could be any dumber?!? They're getting away! Get after them Jackasses!" Gez shouted. The other three scrambled and ran back into another alley. Gez looked at Shi. "So hard to get good help these days."

A few miles down the road. Fenny passed the sign that alerted drivers that they were entering Holyoke. Fenny

breathed a small sigh of relief. Though she wasn't out of danger just yet, she had managed to buy herself some precious time. Time that she could use to make a plan and escape. "That was a close one, but it will take them a few minutes to even start to give chase, plus they don't know where we're going, so technically, the advantage is ours."

"Do even we know where we're going?" Ty asked quietly.

"Well...Um...technically...no. BUT...At least we're still alive, and that's the important thing! Right?" Fenny asked Ty. A moment passed and Ty was silent. "Right?" Still silence. "Ty?" Fenny asked and looked over in his direction. "Ty!"

Ty was a shade paler than before and his eyes were starting to roll into the back of his head. He was gripping his shoulder as a yellowish liquid ran over his black hand. Fenny nearly swerved the car off the road before pulling herself together. "Ty! You've been shot!"

Ty giggled and groaned at the comment. "I think I already knew that Fenira, but thanks for informing me."

"This is serious! You're...um...bleeding?" Fenny stammered while Ty nodded at the assessment. "You're bleeding and we can't go into a hospital!"

"Told ya you should of left me behind," Ty reprimanded.

"Don't talk like that! It isn't doing anyone any good! I just need to think, that's all." Fenny reprimanded back. She thought for a moment. Her eyes brightened and then she pointed to her steering wheel and clicker her fingers. The car began to steer itself down the road. Fenny then turned her attention to the back and started rooting around the back seat area. "Aha! I *knew* that this would be useful one day!" Fenny shouted as she pulled from the back a small first aid kit.

Fenny opened the kit and started by pulling out some gauze pads. She then helped Ty take off the coat which she threw in the back seat. Afterwards, she took a pair of pads and placed them over the entrance and exit wounds. Then she taped the pads in place. "Now keep applying

pressure! It may not be much, but it will help stop the bleeding for now!" Fenny instructed. Ty weakly nodded. The car continued to roll down the highway.

As the evening approached and darkness settled, Fenny looked down and groaned. Ty continued to look at the scenery pass as the car went through the wooded highway. Fenny shook him to grab his attention. "Um...Ty? Problem. We're almost out of gas."

"Universe just won't cut us a break, huh?" Ty joked. Fenny gave him a serious look informing him that she wasn't in the mood. "Okay, okay, Let me think." He paused and furrowed his pale brow. "Okay, here's what we do. We're going to take the car off the road down the highway and hide it. Then we'll spend the night in the woods. If we're lucky, we'll be safe and they won't detect us."

Fenny thought for a moment and then pulled the car off the road. She then drove the car deeper into the woods as the darkness increased around them. She stopped the car and turned the engine off. "Okay, Let's get to work!" Fenny stated.

The pair exited the car and began to pile fallen branches and dead leaves over the station wagon so to make it invisible to those looking at it far away. Then she reached in her back seat and pulled a couple of blankets, her first aid kit, and a flashlight from the glove compartment. Ty grabbed his coat. The pair looked at the car again and then set off into the woods as the sun finished setting.

A little while later, the pair found a cave cropping out from the side of a small hill. Fenny flashed her light inside and checked it out. She then motioned for Ty to follow her inside, which he did.

Fenny began by laying down the first blanket and then motioned for Ty to sit by her. Ty crawled over and slumped down on the first blanket. "Take off the coat." Fenny instructed. Ty complied and tossed the coat aside.

Fenny looked him over and assessed the situation. "Okay. Take off your shirt."

Ty looked at Fenny for a moment. "It doesn't come off."

Fenny arched an eyebrow. "Are you telling me, that shiny black get-up is your actual *body*?" Ty nodded at the question.

"It's a type of ethereal thing. The blood, too. It helps us manipulate matter and space." Ty explained.

"That's useful, though pretty damn weird." Fenny replied.

"Well, we all can't be blessed with Goddess powers, some of us have to get by with what we were given." Ty pouted.

Fenny giggled and then motioned for him to come to her. She peeled the old bandages, which were soaked with crusted yellow, and she began to prepare a new dressing. She began by placing fresh pads on the wounds and then by wrapping layer after layer of gauze to keep pressure on the wound.

"How did you learn this?" Ty asked incredulously.

"A long while back, I posed as a WWII army field nurse. Some of it has remained useful," Fenny answered. Ty nodded. Fenny finished the wrapping and Ty moved his arm slowly to test out his range of motion, which wasn't much.

The pair sat there in the cave wrapped in the other blanket, with the flashlight being the only source of light anywhere. As thus the evening crawled with the pair twitching at every twig snapping and rustling of the leaves. Fenny decided to speak as they looked at the partially hidden moon out the entrance of the cave. "Wish I'd brought the scotch."

"As soon as everything cools down, I'll treat you at a bar somewhere." Ty answered.

"And how are you going to pay?" Fenny inquired.

"Somehow. It's a promise." Was all he said in return. Fenny let it go and that and thus nuzzled up against him to

preserve the warmth, for even though he was a demon, he was warm...

The Next Day, Friday...

"Wish we could've taken the car," Fenny whined as she and Ty marched in the woods.

"Yeah, but without the keys we could only start it with magic. If we would've done that, we would've been caught in ten seconds time. Besides, it was out of gas," Ty reasoned and he looked around the forest. "Besides, as long as we're off the main roads, we're safer."

"Yeah, but we have no idea where we are. Or where we're going for that matter," Fenny complained.

"I know where we're going," Ty answered.

"Oh? Is that so?" Fenny asked, disbelieving.

Ty pointed to the small stream to their left. "We are following downstream, right?" Fenny nodded. "Okay, so what do we know about fresh water streams? They inevitably lead to some sort of civilization. We'll follow it for a while and eventually we'll come to a town or something. We'll secure some transportation there and we'll be off again," Ty explained.

"I think you're making it up as you go," Fenny ribbed.

"No doubt. But we're still alive and as long as we're that, we're in good hands," Ty joked back.

And thus the pair marched down the stream in the woods. The day progressed from morning to noon, until dusk. And as night began to fall, Fenny was beginning to wonder if this stream was ever gonna lead to some sort of civilization. She also began to realize that she really took her goddess powers for granted. She looked over at Ty in the darkness and smiled slightly. She had only knew him a day, but she had already begun to trust him unconditionally. She couldn't quite explain it. Darkness grew and soon it was night and the stars came out. Fenny looked up.

"It's very pretty out here. In the city you can't see the stars very well," Fenny said out loud.

"I remember when mortals used to think that the stars were deities," Ty responded.

"I wouldn't mind having my own star," Fenny mused.

"You already are," Ty answered.

"What?"

Ty turned to her as they walked. "Well, you're bright...and warm," Ty answered embarrassed.

Fenny giggled lightly. "Well, I guess there are worse things."

Ty looked up and noticed the crescent in the sky. "I'm more like the moon. Cold and dead."

Fenny looked up. "Oh, I wouldn't say that. The moon outshines all the stars in the sky. It's special in it's own right," Fenny turned to Ty and smiled.

Ty took the thought and processed it. A moment later he nodded in approval. Then he took his arm and wrapped it around Fenny's shoulders.

The pair continued to walk in the woods at night. Fenny felt the warmth from Ty's arm and looked at his face. He was half-smiling and half-frowning. Like he was happy, but also felt guilty about his happiness.

"Ty..." Fenny began.

"Hey!!!" Ty shouted, thus interrupting Fenny. He pointed out a slight light in the distance. A clearing in the direction of the road. Ty started moving toward it. "Come on! Maybe it's a good sign!"

"I hope so," Fenny answered as she picked up her pace. It was a sign. A neon sign to be exact. A Starbuck's Coffee sign to be even more exact. Fenny looked at Ty. Ty looked back. They shrugged their shoulders and walked inside.

The clean establishment was empty of customers. Of course, since there was a lack of customers, there was only one employee. A young plain faced girl wearing the traditional Starbuck's uniform and working the counter. Ty motioned to Fenny that he was going over to a table, and he tried to hide his face and eyes from the counter girl, not that she would pay him much mind.

Fenny looked to the girl and smiled. She barely raised an eyebrow in acknowledgment. "Can I help you?" she asked, bored.

"Yes. Two mochachinos, extra sweet," Fenny answered. Then she glanced at the clock and saw that it was 11:50 at night. They had been in the woods a lot longer than she realized. "Wow, it's late."

"Wow, you can tell time," the girl replied monotonously. "Four bucks even."

Fenny dug out four crumpled bills from her jeans pocket and laid them on the counter. She took her drinks to the corner table where Ty was waiting with his back to the counter.

"Nice girl," Fenny said out loud.

"Well, if you had to work a Friday night in a coffeehouse, wouldn't you be pissed?" Ty asked.

"Point." Fenny replied and took a sip of her coffee. The hot creamy sweet liquid melted in her mouth and she savored it. Especially after the last couple days, she had she deserved this little pampering.

Ty drank his as well, though not as elaborately as Fenny. He watched Fenny take another sip and then close her eyes and savor the flavor. However, in the process she had gotten some cream on her nose which caused Ty to laugh out.

"What?" Fenny queried, wondering what was so funny. "What?!?" she shouted annoyed. Ty continued to laugh and pointed at his nose. Fenny grasped the idea and wiped her nose. After a moment of silence, they both began to laugh.

The tranquillity of the moment was ruined as at that moment, five people walked into the shop and waked to the counter. These five people caused Fenny to drop her coffee to the floor.

No, they didn't physically walk up to Fenny and knock her drink to the ground, but they disturbed her so much that she became paralyzed with fear. Ty, at that point, too dropped his coffee. He grew a concerned look and turned around.

At the counter, the one called Shi spoke, "I can't believe we've been out all day and not a trace of them, they couldn't have gotten far. I mean..." Then she looked over and saw them. She then muttered an expletive and grabbed Gez's arm and turned him around.

Fenny and Ty stood up, not knowing what else to do. The Starbuck's girl mumbled something about all the weirdos that come in on her shift. The five demons all turned their attention to the two fugitives, not believing their incredible luck. They reached inside their coats and pulled out their guns, causing the Starbuck's girl to scream in terror and duck under the counter.

Ty saw them point in their general direction. Ty then shoved Fenny to the ground hard as the hail of gunfire ripped into him like a storm. Bullet after bullet slammed into his body as yellow fluid began to ooze onto the floor. Loud explosions racked inside Fenny's head as she watched Ty convulse and writhe as the shots tore through him. A moment later it was over.

In the silence, Fenny crawled over to the collapsed Ty who lay on the floor oozing his life force everywhere. The other five dropped empty clips onto the stained floor and reached into their pockets for fresh ones.

"Ty! TY!! TYYYYYYYYYYYY!!!!!" Fenny screamed as he continued to jerk on the floor. Fenny rolled him on his back and laid his head in her lap. "Ty! You fool! Why do you always have to play the hero! Didn't you know it was futile?!" Fenny shouted with tears running down her face.

Ty turned his bloody face toward Fenny and began to gasp. "Fenira..." he managed out. "I need to tell you something...before I die..." he choked out.

Fenny tried to shush him but he shook his head and continued to grimace in pain as he continued to speak. "It's...about your...sisters..." he started.

"My sisters?" Fenny asked.

"They we're reprimanded...by the Agency..." Ty continued. "They were questioned... and tortured... until they told where you were. That's... how I found you," Ty explained in agony.

"Don't think about that now! Please hang on to what you have left!" Fenny cried.

"No! I must tell... you everything. They refused to tell us where you were... at first... So... they executed Jordiko..." Ty gasped.

"Jordiko...?!?" Fenny shouted.

"After that...Sonyarina gave in and told us where you were..."

"And then what?!?" Fenny screamed.

"After that...they executed...her too. They shot them both in the back of the head. I was there," Ty confessed.

"You were?!?"

"I saw...everything. And those five were there...too... They shot them. I helped you...because I couldn't live with...what I done." Ty grimaced in agony. Then he took Fenny's hand into his yellow stained one. "Fenira... please... forgive... me..."

Having said that, Ty rolled his eyes into the back of his head and let the breath go out of his body. Fenny fell silent and closed her eyes.

Shi looked around at the sudden silence. "Boy, he sure hung in there didn't he?" She smirked, causing the others to laugh lightly.

"Well Doll, It's time to join your boyfriend," Gez said as he locked his clip in place.

Fenny stood up and stared straight ahead at the quintet. "He wasn't my boyfriend. He was someone who saw my nature and understood who I was. There were once two others who understood me, too. But now they're gone, too. They're all dead. They're all dead. THEY'RE ALL DEAD!!! YOU KILLED THEM!!!" Fenny screamed at the top of her lungs.

Suddenly, the tables and chairs began to quake and rumble by some unknown force. The five demons looked around at the activity. Fenny stood there and stared at them.

"You killed the few people who actually understood me. You killed them without mercy and with no just reason." The rumbling continued and grew slightly more

violent. "Now...you will receive no mercy. No Mercy from the Goddess of DEATH!!!!" Fenny screamed as she slammed her fist down on a pair of tables.

Suddenly all five of the demons flew back from a force that knocked them off their feet and into the counter. They scrambled to get to their feet and watched in awe as something happened to the goddess.

Her skin grew pale. Beyond the normal pale however. This was ashen white. And from her eyes flowed two small streams of black tears that stained her face. Her hair turned even blacker than before. So black that it seemed to absorb light itself. Her clothes shredded themselves and she stood with her ashen pale nude body exposed. A pair of black raven wings extended from her back. A black and silver robe began to wrap itself around her waist and torso and breasts. And in her hands a sterling silver scythe appeared. A cold light radiated from her.

"Angela Morritere." Fenira shouted. "The Angel of Death! The Reaper of lost souls. Now those who show no mercy will receive NO MERCY!!!" She shouted as she approached them.

The five demons looked at each other in frightened haze. They really weren't expecting *this*! They did the only logical thing...They opened fire.

Bullet after bullet simply turned from her and continued their journey as if deflected by an unseen shield. The demons looked that their guns in shock.

"These things are supposed to kill GODS!!! What the fuck?!?" The slightly chubby demon shouted. A moment later he began to convulse and twitch. Fenira stood there and motioned her hand and closed it into a fist. A moment later the demon's neck jerked violently and he collapsed to the floor.

The others looked at each other in horror. Gez continued to back away and Shi stood motionless. Fenira smiled evilly. She waved both her hands in a mirror fashion. The two unnamed demons started moving involuntarily and they faced each other. They each lifted their gun-hands toward each other. Fenira smiled even

more. The two demons placed the barrels of their guns at each others' foreheads.

"Bang," Fenira whispered, and at that instant the two demons literally blew each others' minds. Shi screamed in terror which drew Fenira's attention. Fenira turned toward the quaking female demon. "I'm sorry, am I frightening you? If I remember correctly, you were supposed to be the funny one? Isn't that right?" Fenira asked as she walked up to the paralyzed demon-girl.

Fenira lifted her head up by pushing her finger on her chin. "It's not very funny to laugh about killing someone. Don't you have a heart?" Fenira asked. Shi simply yammered in terror. "Why don't we find out?" Fenira asked coyly. She backed away and raised the scythe high. Shi stood motionless and wepted like a infant. Fenira smiled even more and brought the scythe down. Shi screamed, but her scream was silenced a moment later when the scythe buried itself in her chest.

Then she yanked the tool from the dead demon's body and turned to Gez who had resigned to cowering on the floor. She walked over to him and raised the scythe.

"What are you?!?" Gez shouted.

"Don't you know? I'm now what you wanted me to be. Aren't you glad?" Fenira asked and then brought the scythe down burying it between his eyes. A small stream of yellow began to flow from the wound and ran down his shocked face.

The interview room...

So you then killed them all swiftly and without mercy?

Fenira felt the warm tears run down her face. "Yes," was all she muttered.

And how did that make you feel?

Fenira closed her eyes and the tears that flowed down her face turned black. "It felt good," she said quietly and without emotion.

I see. Well what a most interesting story Fenira. Thank you for your cooperation.

Having 'said' that, Fenira disappeared from the room and only the folding chair and shaft of light remained.

Act the Second:
"Being John Hoelscher"
*"When you're talking to yourself,
And Nobody's home.
You can't fool yourself,
You came into this world alone.
Alone."*
- Guns 'n' Roses 'Estranged'

The room was dark. Very dark. And cold. It was very, very cold. John Hoelscher shivered slightly. The only small source of light in this cold room was a small shaft focused on the steel folding chair that John was sitting on.

John looked around to his surroundings by moving his eyes only. From the little light he had, he could make out that the room wasn't furnished and he looked to be the only one there. At least he thought he was the only one there.

Hello, Mr. Hoelscher.

John barely twitched a muscle. Instead he simply focused his eyes his eyes forward and toward the darkness of the room.

Are you comfortable?

John took the question in but continued to sit there. Then from behind him a voice rang out. "Don't answer that!"

John knew who spoke. He had been listening to him talk for a long time. His arrogant voice, full of self confidence yet suave and compelling. He stepped out of the shadows with his white uniform and long red hair. John had simply begun to refer to him as "Touga-John" because both his physical appearance and vocal distinctiveness were like Touga Kiyrou from the anime series *Revolutionary Girl Utena*.

"That's right! I'll do all the speaking here!" another voice shot out. From the shadows stepped the second familiar figure. His voice was also arrogant and full of self-confidence, but unlike the first it was more focused and maybe even a little psychotic. Dressed in his blue suit with

the matching red 'power tie', John had simply dubbed him "Jinnai-John" because his physical appearance and vocal distinctiveness were similar to Katsuhiko Jinnai from the anime series *El Hazard: The Magnificent World*.

"Quiet, both of you," came the third familiar quiet voice. John closed his eyes again and opened them., When he reopened his eyes, the third figure sat on the floor staring back at him. Almost smug in his navy slacks and white short-sleeved dress shirt with the turquoise t-shirt peeking underneath. John had dubbed him "Shinji-John" because his physical and vocal presence were extremely similar to Shinji Ikari from *Neon Genesis Evangelion*.

John finally decided to move his body and when he did it was to place his face into his hands. "My god, my sub-conscience is even more fucked than I thought," he muttered. He had formed three dysfunctional personalities in his own head and worse than that, he based them off anime's he had watched. This was obviously a classic cry for help.

Well, by judging you're three friends, I would have to agree.

John looked up at hearing the new voice again and decided to give it some attention. "I'm sorry. I've been ignoring you haven't I? So...which side of my personality are you?" John asked the presence.

The presence actually chuckled at hearing this. *I'm not any Mr. Hoelscher. I'm a distinctive being of my own accord.*

"You dare to place HIM in the same category as US!?" Jinnai-John shouted.

Watch it, laughing-boy.

John grinned at the remark, he was beginning to like this "person" even if he couldn't see him. Actually, he was more relieved that this one was simply just a voice. He had had enough of voices becoming real after these last few days.

You're not perturbed by me are you? Fenira...I'm sorry. Fenny was quite upset by me.

"Really? Fenny?" John asked quizzically. He thought back a moment. "I was just with Fenny and Jason wasn't I?" John asked.

That's right. Do you remember how you three came to be together this evening?

John furrowed his brow and concentrated. "You know what? I don't. Is that bad?" John asked. Touga-John rolled his eyes, Jinnai-John groaned, and Shinji-John simply nodded.

No, it's quite alright. Fenira had the same problem. How about before? Do you remember what happened before you were together?

John looked around at the three figures. "I was with them." Really? Where?

"In the White Room," John answered.

What is this 'White Room'?

"The White Room is very similar to this one. There's a chair in the middle. Though...It's much better lit." John looked down, "and it doesn't have hardwood floors. It has tile-work," John answered.

I see. And before you were in the White Room, do you remember where you were?

John thought for a second. "I remember..." John paused and frowned. "I remember..."

Yes?

"I remember the truck coming at me very fast. And then..." John thought back.

Yes?

"Well...I remember the truck. I remember the White Room. That's all I can really recall." John finished.

Interesting. And can you tell me what happened in the White Room?

John thought a moment and seemed to ease himself. "Oh that's easy, I remember exactly what happened in the White Room."

What exactly happened?

John grinned a little, "I died."

Oh?

"Yes. I died in the White Room. Then I was in a room with Fenny and Jason. Then I was here." John suddenly

gave a thoughtful look, "Funny, I didn't imagine the afterlife being like this."

That is most intriguing Mr. Hoelscher. However, aren't you at the least bit disturbed by the fact that you now are dead?

"You would think that , wouldn't you? But to be honest, after the mess that the last few days have been, I finally feel a sense of calm I haven't felt in a long time. Ain't that right guys?" John asked his three selves. Jinnai-John hrumphed in bitterness. Touga-John looked disgusted. Shinji-John cracked a broad smile and nodded his head, like he was in on some great secret.

I see. Why don't you tell me about the last few days.

"Well, these last few days weren't really that interesting," John replied.

Okay, okay. Why don't do start with Friday afternoon? Is that okay?

"Sure, no problem. Though, you'll find it pretty dull." John shrugged.

Humor me.

"Okay. It's your time anyway. I've gotten nothing better to do anyway. Okay... Friday... Friday... Hmmm..." John paused for a moment and collected his thoughts. "Well, I had been on the road since Tuesday night and..."

Friday Afternoon...

A large green metal sign posted by the roadside came into view. It told of various cities and highway exits that were coming up ahead somewhere in the future. John looked at it with relative indifference, or at least he tried to convince himself that it was with indifference. The sign said the following:

Highway 12 - Exit 4: 34 Mi.

US Highway 40 - Exit 3: 57 Mi.

Cincinnati - Exit 2: 86 Mi.

Kettering - Exit 1: 110 Mi.

"You know you're not fooling anyone by acting indifferent," came Shinji-John's voice from the back seat. "We all know that it's not really a coincidence that you're going to Kettering."

"Who says I'm going to Kettering? Maybe I'm waiting 34 miles and then I'll take Highway 12," John shot back.

"Sure. You expect us to believe that? John...We know everything about you. We are inside your head," Touga-John rebutted.

"Then why don't you go back to being inside my head and shut the hell up!" John shouted back. Having one backseat driver was annoying, but having three at one time who were also psychoanalyzing everything he did was downright unbearable.

"How dare you shout at your ruler!" Jinnai-John shouted indignantly.

"If my feet weren't needed on the peddles, I do a lot more than just shout at you," John growled. "I sense hostility," Touga-John mused.

"Gee, I wonder why?" John answered back sarcastically. John thought back to when he finally couldn't outrun them anymore.

After Tuesday's initial shock of seeing the figments of his imagination coming to life and wanting to follow him, he managed to keep ahead of them. He would blindly travel in one direction then suddenly would pull off the highway and then turn around.

He didn't have a destination, he just knew that as long as he was driving *they* couldn't hound him. He was safe with his solitude when he was driving. That was the only piece of mind he had right now.

Unfortunately, that piece of mind wasn't very long lived. For whenever John would stop driving, *they* were waiting for him. Pulling off to refill his gas tank. They would be inside the convenience store. Stopping to eat at a small off the highway diner. They would be at the next table. And they would always comment on his running away to him. John would quickly leave and get back on the road, the highway his only solitude.

And so it went on, until John, finally tired of not being able to stop, pulled over to the side of the road and turned off his engines. He stepped out of the car and sat on the hood of his car and closed his eyes.

A moment later he opened them and saw *them* standing there, almost looking chummy, staring back.

"You didn't keep me waiting." John started.

"No need to. You're finally ready to take us," Touga-John answered. Shinji-John appeared to give a momentary sneer behind Touga-John's back, but quickly became stoic again.

"Maybe," John replied.

"No maybes! You are taking us!" Barked Jinnai-John.

"Where to?" John asked.

"You know where," Shinji-John answered back staring straight into his eyes.

"I'm tired of traveling." John sighed.

"Only a little further to go. If we start now and drive straight, we should make it before Saturday," Touga-John commented while mentally doing some math.

"Oh? Is it that so?" John commented. "Is getting there by Saturday important?"

"No! Of course not!" barked Jinnai-John. "We're wasting time! Let's go!"

John arched an eyebrow. He didn't trust Jinnai-John. In fact he didn't trust any of them, but he couldn't out run them anymore. He was too tired to do that anymore. "Get in," John said. Touga-John and Jinnai-John entered in the back seat.

Shinji-John hesitated for a moment and walked up to John. He began to whisper in his ear. "You're safe until we get there," He said in a quiet harshness.

"Where exactly are we going?" John asked again.

"You know. The scene of your crime," Shinji-John whispered back.

"What crime?" John asked puzzled.

Shinji-John actually looked surprised. "You really don't understand do you? You don't get what's going on

around you, do you?" He quietly sighed. "It doesn't matter, you'll find out when we get there."

"But I still don't know where we're going. Really." John stated.

"Who really knows where they're going?" Shinji-John asked philosophically.

"But how will I get there then?" John insisted.

"Just start driving. You'll take us straight there. Trust me," Shinji-John answered. He then joined the others in the back seat, who appeared to begin interrogating him about the conversation. However, Shinji-John appeared to be playing dumb.

"Trust you? Yeah, like *that* would be a good idea..." John sighed. He shrugged his shoulders and entered the drivers side and started the ignition. He pulled onto the road and started heading south. At that point the three immediately began their nagging.

Now in the late afternoon with the sun beginning to set in the western horizon, John drove with three figments of his imagination. The scenery was whizzing by as John kept a steady foot on the accelerator. A brief silence overcame the car as the exit for Highway 12 came and went and they continued driving.

"Well, guess we're not going that way," Touga-John said with a certain amount of coy smugness.

"Just shut up," John muttered.

"Won't it be nice to see all the old sights again? The high school? Hey! Maybe we can drop in on your parents while we're at it," Touga-John stated with some amusement.

"I rather not," Shinji-John quietly replied.

"Baby," Jinnai-John added.

"Why are we going to Kettering? There's nothing there!" John asked, annoyed.

"Oh really? Nothing? You're parents still live there. Don't you want to see them?" Touga-John asked.

"I thought you said you knew me? Why do you think I live in Massachusetts?" John snapped back.

"Oh please, that excuse worked on all your friends, but not on us," Touga-John smirked.

"I just want to get this over with," Shinji-John said to himself.

"Get what over with?" John asked while trying to keep his attention on the road. "Does this have to do with my 'crime?'"

"Everything has to do with your crime John, didn't you know that?" Shinji-John answered and then went back to staring out the window. The other two gave each other a worried look.

John looked at the three in his rear view mirror. He sighed again. He was being pushed around by his own sub-conscience and he didn't even know why. Worse yet, he was letting them do it to him. Why? That was the big question John's head. Why were they taking him back home? His old home in Kettering, Ohio. Something about a crime he committed. But what crime? He didn't remember committing one.

Then John was struck with a new thought. Why do people usually bring someone back to the scene of a crime? John thought about this for a moment. Then he thought of an answer. To punish them. John thought for a moment and realized that they intended to punish him for some crime he had committed. That was their intention from the beginning.

John felt angry. Not at the three figments of his imagination, but rather at himself for blindly following their orders like a sheep. He began to angrily grit his teeth.

"Oh, I see now. You're pretty damn clever," John sneered.

"Oh? What's this all about?" Touga-John asked.

"I figured it out. The reason why you were pulling me along to come back home." John immediately jerked the wheel to his left and the car jerked violently to the left, straight into the next lane of oncoming traffic.

"What the hell are you doing?!?" Jinnai-John shouted, "I order you to stop!"

"Or what? You'll punish me? Isn't that what this was all about to begin with? Isn't that what the dreams really were? Anyway, what difference does it make? But hell, if I'm going out...I'm dragging you along!" John grinned with a slightly crazed look.

"This is insane John, why would we want to hurt you?" Touga-John asked.

"You're right, I am insane," was John's reply. Touga-John and Jinnai-John looked at each other with very worried expressions. Shinji-John scooted up and spoke behind John's ear with a small smile.

"You finally figured it out?" Shinji-John asked.

"Most of it," John answered back as cars swerved to the left and right to avoid the speeding car going the wrong way.

"It won't make a scrap of difference, ya know?" Shinji-John remarked.

"Oh?" John queried.

"I don't need Kettering to punish you," Shinji-John answered and then leaned back in the back seat.

"What does that mean...?" John asked before noticing the bright high-beams directly in his face as a semi-tractor trailer came closer to John's view. Suddenly, all he saw was light. Almost a pure heavenly light as it were. It certainly didn't seem to belong to a truck.

The White Room...

You could imagine John's surprise then, when the light faded and he found himself where he had always seemed to end up -- The White Room.

John saw the steel folding chair sitting in the center. The soft light reflecting off the whitewash walls and white-tiled floor. "How did I get here?" John asked out loud.

"Where did you expect to go?" Shinji-John asked in the stillness.

John turned to face him. Shinji-John stood there with his arms crossed and with Touga-John and Jinnai-John

standing behind him very still. He started to grin. "You really thought you were gonna escape by killing yourself?"

John gulped. "Yes."

Shinji-John walked straight up to him and bore his stare straight into John. "You're a fool. I told you that you we're going to return to the scene of your crime. Don't think you'll escape that. I won't allow that."

"You won't? What about them?" John asked pointing to the others.

Shinji-John snapped his fingers and the pair disappeared. "Oh them? They're unimportant, but they were useful in bringing you here. Now that they served their purpose, I can finally wash my hands of them." Shinji-John said angrily.

"It was you all along? You were behind this whole thing?" John asked incredulously.

"You're surprised? I told you that I was bringing you back to the scene of your crime," Shinji-John muttered.

"But what crime?!? I don't know what you're talking about!" John shot back defensively.

Shinji-John grew an angry look, but it soon melded into a twisted smile. "Well, that's why we're here aren't we? It's time for your punishment to begin."

Holy Ghost Medical Center...

Dr. Joseph Brown ran down the corridor to the entrance of the emergency room. As he flew past the ER lobby, he noticed the rush and hustle of various members of the ER staff who were attending other duties this Friday night.

Brown, a proud looking African-American man was the current chief resident at Holy Ghost. When word came over to them that a massive collision had occurred near the Highway 12 exit on Interstate 713, he knew that they were in for a long night.

Apparently, someone swerved into oncoming traffic and collided into a tractor-trailer which in turn caused twelve others to collide with various other vehicles before

the chaos had ended. Brown shook his head in disbelief at hearing these reports. Unfortunately, he didn't have time to think too much about them because ambulances were pulling in to bring the first round of injured.

Through the sliding doors, two EMT's wheeled in a gurney, Brown immediately took charge and directed them to follow him. EMT's continued to pump oxygen into the passenger of the gurney. His neck was held still in a orange oversized brace, and blood soaked the gauze that was wrapped places on his body.

"Okay, what we got?" Brown asked while directing the gurney down the corridor into the room.

The first EMT spoke. "Twenty year old male, heavy blood loss, possible neck trauma."

"He has one of those Medi-alert pedants," the second EMT added and pulled it out of his pocket and tossed it lightly to Brown. Brown in turn read the contents on the back then turned to the nurse following him.

"Get me three units of B-negative." Brown ordered. The nurse nodded and ran down the corridor. A second resident, Dr. John Sax, joined him as they wheeled him into the room.

"Ugh! What the hell happened?" Sax commented on seeing the passenger's mangled body.

"He's the kid that collided with the semi." the first EMT commented.

"Crazy bastard. We running a toxicology?" Sax asked Brown.

"Let's just concentrate on saving him first," Brown responded as the four of them hoisted him cautiously from the gurney onto the table, careful to not cause any more damage.

Brown took a good look at John's bloody face and torso and sighed. Then he went about his task...

* * *

The White Room...

"Let's see now, where to begin? Yes, yes! I know! Let's go to when you were 15, shall we?" Shinji-John asked excitedly.

"Wha...? Why?"

"Oh, come now. It's just us two now. Let's not play games. You remember what happened when you were 15 don't you?" Shinji-John asked.

"We moved from Seattle to Kettering." John answered after a brief pause.

"Exactly. You moved from your home in Seattle to Kettering, Ohio. You had to start a brand new school, a brand new life. How did you feel?" Shinji-John asked.

"I felt fine. It was no big deal." John replied.

"Oh really?" Shinji-John began, "Well, let's see for ourselves shall we?" Having said that, Shinji-John waved his arm and the white room began to change. John looked around him and realized that he was now standing in the hallway of his old high school.

The initial shock of being back in Kettering was perturbing, but what was even more perturbing was the fact that John saw himself at 15 walking the halls. John took a step forward but Shinji-John held him back. John continued to watch as the 15 year old version of himself walked down the rows of lockers while looking a scrap of paper. He was dressed in navy slacks with a short sleeve white dress shirt with a turquoise t-shirt peeking underneath.

"So I used to dress like you, big deal." John remarked to the grinning Shinji-John.

15 year old John continued down the rows of lockers. A moment later a small group of students walked by. One paused and looked over to the confused 15 year old John. "Hey, aren't you that new kid?"

"Um...yeah. I'm John," 15 year old John answered timidly.

A short brunette looked 15 year old John up and down. "Who dressed you?" She then began to laugh which

caused the others to laugh and they in turn walked away. A minute later the halls were empty again and 15 year old John punched a locker.

"Remember this?" Shinji-John asked.

"I was new, it had to be expected," John replied defensively.

"Yeah, but it still bugged you, didn't it?" Shinji-John asked.

"Well, maybe I was a little shy," John admitted.

"Shy? You were quiet. Timid. Introverted. And most of all you were alone. Remember how you always used to sit by yourself at lunch? But that all changed didn't it? I remember that day." Shinji-John explained and with a wave of his arm the scenery changed a little and a slightly older version of John appeared there.

He looked about 16 now, and he was still alone. He watched as groups of students walked by him without even giving him a glimpse.

"Still alone. No one even knew who you were and you had been there a full year," Shinji-John mused.

16 year old John walked down the quiet halls alone with his head sadly hung. He then paused and looked up and saw something that changed his life. It was a small poster. 'Student Elections! Register now!' followed by garbage about positions and requirements and what not. 16 year old John just looked up and stared at it for a long while.

"That's where it all began to change wasn't it?" Shinji-John asked.

"That where I came along," Jinnai-John spoke as he reentered the scene.

"What are you talking about?" John asked.

Jinnai-John stepped forward and pointed to 16 year old John. "No one was going to vote for that quiet nobody. No, if you wanted to be known you had to make a splash. That's where I came along. Someone to help you make grandiose promises and who was willing to be cunning and even devious," Jinnai-John explained.

"And it worked didn't it? You won the student election. Sure, you had to compromise your own morals and had to sometimes be a royal jerk, but at least now people knew who you were. It was worth it right?" Shinji-John pontificated.

"Not quite," answered Touga-John as he too reappeared and Jinnai-John disappeared. "Being the student president was fine because people weren't ignoring you anymore. Unfortunately, it didn't help your social skills much."

The scene around them slightly changed again as the halls again aged a little and the decoration changed. Now, 17 year old John, just re-elected president of the student council in a suspicious election, walked down the hall with his head held high. Maybe a little too high.

"Okay, so maybe I let it go to my head a little," John admitted.

"Go to your head? You? Never!" Shinji-John taunted. Meanwhile, 17 Year Old John walked down the hall and bumped into a smaller girl, also 17, whom John looked long at hard before speaking.

"Hi Jen! I'm glad I bumped into you!" 17 Year old John nervously chattered.

The girl looked at John and looked slightly hesitant. "Um...Hi John," she finally said.

"I was wondering...Um..." He began to touch the tips of his fingers together, "Maybe...you would accompany me to the junior prom. As Student council president I can secure us the best table and everything." 17 year old John asked trying to sound impressive, but sounding more scared.

"Gee John," The girl started before shifting her eyes, "I would love too, but you see...I already am going with someone else. Whoa! Look what time it is, I'm late for class! Bye John," the girl yammered and then ran down the hall leaving 17 year old John alone with his head once again hung low.

"Even though they knew who you were, You still didn't have many friends did you?" Shinji-John asked.

"Sure, with all your new power and social standing and you couldn't even talk to a girl without scaring her away. Then I came along and helped you didn't I? I helped you act more socially acceptable. Suddenly you were in all the best cliques and going to all the best parties," Touga-John answered.

"And so what if you had to go around pretending to be something you weren't. You were popular! That's all that really matters," Shinji-John stated and Touga-John disappeared.

"Well, What's wrong with that? At least I wasn't alone all the time!" John shouted back.

Shinji-John held up his finger, "Ah ha! And now we come to what you did! Let's see the crime in action!" Shinji-John stated and waved his arm again. This time the scenery changed again and the hall was mixed with decorations for the new fall semester. 18 year old and three time student council president John walked down the hall with his compliment of followers and 'friends' to either of his sides or directly behind him.

A moment later a slightly younger boy entered the hall looking at a small scrap of paper and then looking over the lockers. The clique stopped for a moment and turned to look at him. Billy, one of John's 'friends' looked him over and spoke. "Hey, aren't you that new kid that transferred from the private academy?" he asked.

"Um yeah. I'm Joe," he responded timidly and then looked over to John. John looked back and felt the junior's stare burn into him. There thr junior stood with his navy slacks and dress shirt and there John stood with his circle of compatriots. John looked back one last time and then turned to his friends.

"Come on guys, we don't have time to waste on him." And then he continued down the hall. A moment later the scene vanished and John was standing in the White Room again.

"Well, I'll be! Did you actually hear the words that came out of your mouth?" Shinji-John asked.

John looked down for a moment and scuffled his feet slightly. "Yes."

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear you." Shinji-John mocked.

"I said YES!" John shouted back.

"And don't you have anything to say in your defense?" Shinji-John asked.

"No," was all John managed.

"It was okay until that point. You see, because even though you had compromised your morals and began to pretend to be something you weren't really, you did it to help yourself, never to hurt others. But then...BUT THEN! You go and do this! Did you forget that you were exactly like that boy?!?" Shinji-John interrogated.

"If I said anything to him, they might have seen through me." John muttered. "No one ever came to me."

"So it was okay to hurt someone else because you had gone through it?" Shinji-John demanded.

"No. It's just..." John stammered.

"It's nothing! You are guilty! Guilty of attempted murder!" Shinji-John shouted.

John stepped back in surprise. "Murder?!? Wait a sec..."

"Yes, murder! You saw what you used to be and you feared that it might come back to harm you! So you decided to kill it by putting down what you used to be! I would say that you most certainly are guilty. You tried to take a quiet lad and slowly you allowed him to become warped and compromised and finally you tried to rid yourself of him! You tried to rid yourself...OF ME!!!" Shinji-John shouted.

"You?!?" John stammered.

"The original John Hoelscher. The quiet lad who sat alone at lunch and was ignored by everyone. At least I was true to myself and I never kidded myself about where I stood. But You had to go and corrupt that innocence. And then! And then, you leave town for Massachusetts! You told all your 'friends' that you didn't get along with your parents, but the truth is that you wanted a clean start so you could forget what you did! You didn't want to admit

that you sold yourself out for a few fleeting moments of fake happiness,” Shinji-John ranted.

Shinji-John started walking toward John, who in turn began to slowly back away. John put his hands out to keep the other away. “Let’s be a little rational about this...”

Shinji-John stared straight into John’s eyes. “The judgment has been made. The punishment will begin.” And he wrapped his hands around John’s throat and began to squeeze.

John felt the pressure on his neck as Shinji-John began to squeeze even harder. “Please... Don’t do this.”

“You expect me to let you live after you would have gladly killed me?” Shinji-John asked and then paused the throttling. He mused this for a moment and then squeezed even harder. John felt the room began to grow darker and the white light was becoming very blurry...

Holy Ghost Medical Center...

“He’s crashing!” Brown shouted to Sax as the monitors all began to flatline on the EKG.

“What the hell just happened?!?” Sax asked in the confusion.

“I don’t know, one minute we’re giving him fresh blood and suddenly he goes into cardiac arrest! Help me here!” Brown shouted as pulled out a set of paddles and started rubbing them together.

“Clear!” Sax shouted and Brown placed the paddles on John’s chest. A brief spasm of the torso and then stillness. The EKG was still flat.

“More!” Brown order and rubbed the paddles again.

“Clear!” Sax shouted and brown again placed the paddles on John’s chest. Again there was a brief spasm and then nothing.

“Again!” Brown shouted and repeated the process, with still no results. “Again, Dammit!” Brown shouted and proceeded to start the process again, but this time Sax stopped him and shook his head.

"He's gone Joe." Sax stated and took the defibrillators out of his hands.

"Dammit!" Brown shouted and he slammed his hand on a nearby instrument table. "Okay. Mark the time of death at..." Brown looked up at the clock, "Friday, 11:59 PM."

The Interview Room...

So you are dead?

John took the question just posed and mulled it around in his head. "Yes."

"Oh most definitely," Jinnai-John agreed.

"I concur," Touga-John added while Shinji-John simply nodded in self satisfaction at his doing.

Then how does that explain them still being here?

"Well..." John began and then paused and looked at the three figures, "if modern beliefs hold up... then I would guess this is... Hell?"

Hell? You think are still being punished?

"That would explain it, wouldn't it?" John answered and then was struck by a new thought. "Does that mean that you're the Devil?"

A moment later John, Shinji-John, Touga-John, and Jinnai-John all vanished and all that was left was the chair and the shaft of light.

Act the Third:
"Crimes of the Heart"

The room was dark. Very dark. And cold. It was very, very cold. Jason Bertovich shivered slightly. The only small source of light in this cold room was a small shaft focused on the steel folding chair that Jason was sitting on.

Jason however had failed to really take any of this in as he was currently rocking himself back and forth over and over. His clothes were stained with bright red blood as were his hands and arms. As he ran his fingers through his hair, the brown hair became stained with the red ooze. He continued to rock himself as if this would reassure him.

Mr. Bertovich?

Jason ignored it and continued to rock slightly and then ran his fingers through his hair again.

Mr. Bertovich, I know you can hear me.

Jason stopped rocking and opened his eyes to focus on the sound of the 'voice.'

That's better. Now, are you comfortable?

"No." Jason answered.

I apologize then, we'll try to hurry this along then.

"No." Jason responded.

No? What do you mean?

"No." Jason muttered and then began to slightly rock himself again.

Mr. Bertovich, this isn't very helpful to anyone.

"No." Jason muttered again while rocking himself.

"No. No. No. NO NO NO NO NO NO NO!!!" Jason began shouting.

What is this all about?

"No, Nicole! Don't do anything! No! Please don't!" Jason shouted out.

Ah...Ms. Porter. Is she involved in this as well?

"Don't hurt her! Please!" Jason screamed out in the darkness.

Was Ms. Porter in danger?

"I'll kill you!!!" Jason screamed in anger and then fell off the chair and put himself in a fetal position. "I didn't mean to..."

Didn't mean to what? Mr. Bertovich, what did you do?

"I never meant to hurt anyone, Nicole. I just...No! Don't touch me!!!" Jason screamed out and closed his eyes in his curled position.

Who did you hurt Mr. Bertovich? Was it Ms. Porter?

"Oh...God! I'm a killer! I'm a killer!" Jason began to weep on the floor and then he finally looked up. "Please...help me..." He pleaded.

I want to, Mr. Bertovich...Jason. But you must help me. Tell me, what exactly happened to you?

"It was supposed to be so wonderful. Why God did this happen?!?" Jason shouted from the floor.

Why don't we start at the beginning?

Friday Evening...

The small cream-colored coupe pulled up along the street. Jason turned the engine off and unfastened his seat-belt. He then paused and adjusted the rearview mirror. He positioned it so he could see himself in it. Then he proceeded to brush the hair back with his hands and to give himself one last look over. He then opened the driver side door and stepped out into the street.

He looked around and examined the apartment numbers on the buildings around him. He found the one he was looking for and began his approach. Jason climbed the steps and then noticed a bicycle parked next to a phone pole. Jason went to the door and knocked.

"I'm coming!" came the voice on the other side, Jason felt his heart jump a little, then the door opened and he felt a little disappointed.

It wasn't Nicole answering the door, it was the other sister, Kirstin. She gave him a warm smile. "She's just finishing getting ready for you, she'll be ready in a moment, come on in!" Kirstin said. Jason had an odd

sense of déjà vu. Her demeanor reminded him incredibly of his mother.

Jason stepped in and followed Kirstin into the apartment. "Can I offer you anything to drink?" she asked.

"No thanks," Jason answered and took in the scenery. It was a rather cozy place in fact. Jason could easily see three people living here comfortably. Kirstin guided him into the living room where Sarah Porter, the older sister, was sitting reading a small leatherbound book. She looked up and sat up immediately. She straightened herself and placed a bookmark in her tome and closed the book. She gave a look to Kirstin who nodded and retreated to the kitchen area where another young man was sitting at the table, which had cards scattered over it.

"Okay, Aaron, you were explaining that certain cards can't be used anymore," she began to the boy.

"Well, you can still use them, but not in tournament play," he answered.

"Well, then why make them?" Kirstin asked confused.

"Well, they weren't banned at first, but people found all these tricks with them and it threw the game out of balance and then..." The boy continued quietly droning about the topic.

Jason turned his attention back to the girl in front of him. Her eyes staring at him running up and down, making Jason very uncomfortable.

"You look nice," she said approvingly. "Most guys don't bother wear ties on dates anymore."

Jason began to feel like he was being judged at a cattle-raising competition. "Well, it goes with the jeans." He replied pointing to the blue denim.

"I want her back home around midnight. Is that clear?" she asked in dead seriousness.

"I'll probably have her back before that. We're mainly going to get a bite to eat and maybe a movie. Nothing special. This is a 'get to know you better' kind of affair." Jason answered. Then he realized that the term 'affair' probably wasn't the best choice of words though, Sarah didn't seem to notice.

"So, how long have you been living in Holyoke?" Sarah asked.

"About nine months. I moved there last winter in time for the Spring semester. I got a job at the mall and basically try to scrape out a living on what I earn and what my parents send along to help out," Jason answered, looking around at the apartment. "Nice place you got here. Two bedroom, bath, kitchen and living room?"

Sarah took in the answer and then the question. "Why yes it is."

"Lucky. I live in a tiny two room hovel. And one of the rooms contains my shower," Jason said as he examined a few pictures hung on the wall.

"That's sounds cramped," Sarah contributed.

"May it ever be so humble, there's no place like home," Jason agreed. "But it's just me, so it's not too bad...if I had a roommate, then it be bad..."

Sarah grinned at the comment and nodded in understanding, thinking that if she and her sisters shared one room and how close they'd probably come to killing each other over normal arguments. "You like living by yourself?" she asked, interested.

"I could do without certain things. Doing my own laundry sucks, plus it's expensive and I can't really boast having a master chef's kitchen, but I get by. It took a little while, but I'm getting used to Holyoke and Massachusetts." Then he grinned and pointed to a bandage on his face, "Now all we need is for Massachusetts to get used to me."

Sarah took the comment in and before she could reply someone interrupted her. "Sarah! I'm ready, is Jason here yet?" Nicole asked as she walked into the room and then stopped and noticed him standing there. "Sarah, why didn't you tell me he was here? Have you been giving him the third degree?" Nicole reprimanded.

"Nah, I just got here and me and her were just discussing living here," Jason spoke up.

Nicole gave her sister a scrutinizing look but then relented and lightened her mood. "So, you ready to go?" she asked Jason.

"Well I am, and you appear to be," Jason stated and then turned to exit the apartment. Before he left the room he turned to Sarah. "Don't worry, I'll be good." He grinned, causing Sarah to crack a small smile. Jason and Nicole turned to exit and bumped into Kirstin and her friend. "Have a good time Nicole!" Kirstin said brightly.

"What about you two? Any plans?" Nicole asked her twin.

"Me and Aaron are going to stay in tonight and watch a couple movies. Sarah and Matty are going out on the town," Kirstin explained.

"Well, you two have fun," Nicole replied.

"You too!" Kirstin beamed. Nicole and Jason turned to exit the door when Jason turned to the pair.

"...and Kirstin, always keep two islands untapped to keep him second-guessing," Jason commented, which caused a grin from the boy and a look of slight confusion from Kirstin.

"You play?" he asked.

"They used to call me 'The Blue and White Thunder of D&L Cards,'" Jason answered.

"We'll have to play sometime," he commented.

"I'll have my cards mailed to me," Jason stated and then closed the door. Nicole turned to him and arched an eyebrow.

"What was that all about?" she asked.

"Just a little card humor. He plays a game I used to play," Jason explained to which Nicole nodded. They then turned to leave the porch and to walk down the steps.

However a noise interrupted them. "Meow?"

Nicole turned and noticed the little white and black cat sitting on the corner of the porch meowing. "Neko-chan!" Nicole shouted and walked over and picked the cat up and hugged him tightly which caused the cat to purr. "You naughty kitty! You've been gone two days and had me worried sick!" she reprimanded.

She put the cat down on the porch which caused the cat to almost appear sorrowful.

"So this is the pet penguin?" Jason asked. Then he paused for thought. "Two days? Isn't that quite a long time to be gone? Most cats tend to only leave home for a few hours or so."

"Neko-chan is always doing this. He runs off and disappears for a period of time and always comes back home, usually drenched for some reason..." Nicole explained.

"Hmmm...that's odd," he mused.

"But he's mine," Nicole said proudly and picked him up again and walked over to Jason. "Neko-chan, meet Jason, my date for tonight."

At that moment, you would swear that the cat actually scowled at hearing the words 'my date.' Jason held out his hand to pet the top of Neko-chan's head. Neko-chan took it as an opportunity to sharpen his claws on his competition and thus swiped his paws out at Jason's hand.

"Ouch!" Jason shouted as he pulled back his hand and arm. On his arm above the bandage line was three small red scratches. "That's smart."

"Neko-chan! What's gotten into you!" she reprimanded the cat, who you would swear was now wearing a smug expression. "That's not the way you act!" The cat began to run his head up against her and purr softly. "Are you okay?" Nicole asked Jason.

"I'm fine, it's just a small scratch. A little aggressive, isn't he?" Jason asked.

"Normally, he's so well behaved," Nicole explained.

"Except for the disappearing spells," Jason added.

"Well...yeah. Why? Do you know what's up with him?" Nicole asked.

Jason took the question and thought about it for a minute. "Well, I used to have a male cat for a long time. He used to be very aggressive and would disappear for long periods of time."

"So?" Nicole queried.

"Well, the reason he disappeared was because he was...um...oh...y'know... 'alleycatting' around town," Jason explained with slight trepidation.

Nicole took it in and a moment later slightly blushed. Neko-chan looked a little confused. "Oh," she said with slight embarrassment. "How did you fix the situation?"

"Well everything was fine after we had him neutered. He wasn't very hostile anymore," Jason explained.

Upon hearing the word 'neutered' however, Neko-chan's eyes slightly bulged in fear and he began to hiss and swipe at Jason again causing him to jump back a little.

"Neko-chan! What's gotten into you?" she asked trying to hold the swiping cat still. She then opened the front door and shoved the cat inside and closed it "Naughty kitty!" she breathed as she closed the door, thus putting Neko-chan back inside.

"Ready to go?" Jason asked.

"Let's do it," Nicole agreed and the pair walked down the steps.

Inside the apartment, Aaron and Kirstin played Magic: The Gathering. Aaron held his hand up and poked from card to card, unsure which to play. On the other side of the table, Kirstin had three cards in her hand...and two islands untapped. "I'll get him for this." He muttered under his breath and then smiled at his opponent, the most beautiful girl in the world. Well, to him, anyway.

Meanwhile, Neko-chan sat on the floor and stared at the closed door. He mewed pathetically. He couldn't believe it. There was *someone else!* He narrowed his eyes. Nicole was *his* first. Neko-chan made a quiet resolution: The new guy must be *destroyed!!!*

Inside the car Nicole and Jason buckled themselves in and Jason started the ignition. "I just wanted to say that you look nice." Jason said and then blushed slightly.

Nicole was dressed in a dark blue sweater with a matching floral print long skirt.

"Thank you," Nicole accepted quietly.

"So what's the plan?" Jason asked.

"Well, you said I could go anywhere and have anything I wanted," Nicole stated happily.

"Well...something like that. So what do you want? What wish can I grant?" Jason said giving a small servant bow.

"What I want...Hmm..." Nicole began giving the question some thought. "I want you to surprise me." She giggled and smiled.

"One surprise coming up," Jason replied as he put the car in drive and the two were off.

A while later, Jason held the door open as Nicole walked through. An attractive blonde girl with her hair tied in a bun, dressed in a kimono walked up to them. "Greetings customer-san! Welcome to the *Rising Sun Sushi Bar*. I'm..." The blonde paused for a moment and looked like she was trying to remember something, "...I'm Anako. Would you like Smoking or Non?"

Nicole looked at Jason and gave him a skeptical look. Jason whispered in her ear, "I'm sure it's just for ambiance."

"I sure hope so." Nicole whispered back.

"Sir? Smoking or Non?" The blonde asked which caught Jason's attention. Jason then got a good look at the hostess. He could swear he'd seen her before...

"Angela?" He asked. The blonde immediately perked up at hearing the name and pointed to herself.

"Do I know you...?" She studied him for a moment. "Wait a sec! Yeah! It was...um...Josh?" The blonde asked.

"Close. It's Jason." He corrected.

"Do you two know each other?" Nicole asked, trying to break into the conversation.

"Oh! Nicole, this is Angela." He pointed to the blonde. "She was a nurse at the hospital when I was attacked." Jason explained. "I never would guess that you would work here too." Nicole simply nodded in understanding.

"Well, unfortunately being a nurse doesn't pay both my rent and tuition. I want to be a doctor someday." Angela explained. "I wish I could talk, but I have to take care of other customers or Mr. Segawa will get upset. Besides, you look to be on a date." Nicole and Jason both slightly blushed and nodded.

"Non-smoking please." Jason asked and Angela or 'Anako' as she was known to the customers showed them to a table set around a large round stage in the center of the restaurant. Jason and Nicole sat down and took the two menus handed to them.

"So, have you ever had Japanese cuisine before?" Nicole asked.

"Honestly? No." Jason answered and then opened the menu.

"Sushi is interesting. You have to get used to it though. I think you'll like the Vinegar sugar rice that makes Sushi." Nicole explained.

"I thought Sushi was raw fish?" Jason asked.

"Actually, Sashimi is raw fish. Sushi are dishes served with sashimi and the vinegar sugar rice." Nicole explained. Jason simply nodded his head. Nicole then took his menu out of his hand and folded it on the table. "Here, I'll order for both of us," she stated simply and began to peruse her own menu. Jason simply put his face on his hand and sighed contently as Nicole had her vision obscured by the menu.

A few moments later Angela walked up and pulled out a small pad. "Are you ready to order?"

Nicole put the menu down and handed both to Angela. "Two orders of ramen and the sushi platter for two, and a pot of green tea," she ordered. Angela nodded and wrote it down.

"Anything else?" Angela inquired.

"That will be fine," Nicole stated.

"Well, while you wait, do you want to look through the song collection book for tonight's Karaoke competition?" Angela asked.

"What kind of karaoke?" Jason asked.

"Well we have both American and Japanese songs in both Japanese or English lyrics," Angela explained. Jason looked at Nicole and she simply shrugged. Jason nodded and a minute later Angela carried over a large tome of music selections. Jason took it and began to flip through it nodding and shaking his head as he went past pages.

Jason then began to nod happily and grin childishly. He took a pen and wrote down the number and the song and placed it in his pocket. Nicole arched an eyebrow. "What did you pick?" she asked.

"Now," he said, holding out his index finger and wagging it, "*that* is a secret." He grinned causing her to gain an even more strange look. Jason then handed the book over to Nicole who also looked through it and quickly made a selection and also wrote it down and stuffed the paper in her pocket.

"I take it, that you won't tell me yours?" Jason asked.

"A little mystery will keep you interested for a long time," she smiled thinking to all the mysteries that she herself were trying to solve or had solved. Currently her most perplexing was the enigma that was her sisters' friend Matty Hayes and how she was connected to Matt Atanian.

"Speaking of mysteries, I still don't know a whole lot about you. I know that you have a cat, two sisters, are part Japanese..." He then paused and smiled, "and are brilliant, gorgeous and kind."

"Well, the equals as much as what I know about you. I know that you work at the Electronics Boutique, live by yourself, have only been living here within a year..." and then she paused and smiled, "and are handsome, decent, and brave."

Jason looked into her eyes. "Flattery will get you everything."

She looked back. "I always get what I want anyway."

Suddenly there was an awkward silence and tension that fell between them. Jason then let out a nervous cough. "Well, who wants to start?"

Nicole loosened up and spoke. "Let's hear more about you."

Jason took a sip of water and thought for a moment. "Well, I originally come from a small backwater town called Smithfield, Pennsylvania located deep in the backwoods of Southwestern PA. My parents raised me and sent me to private school where I was horribly scarred, then I graduated and decided after a few years of school down there that I needed a change of scene. So I picked up and moved north, hoping that it would invigorate me."

Nicole blinked a couple times. "My what an interesting life you've led to be able to sum it up in a paragraph," she replied.

"What can I say, I'm a simple guy. Though, I do have this fascination with Asian culture that has always stuck with me," Jason responded.

"Oh?" Nicole inquired. She then noticed that Jason was sort of staring at her. "Stop picturing me in a formal kimono with geisha make-up," she stated blankly as she sipped her water.

It was Jason's turn to blink. "How did you know?"

"You're a guy." She stated matter-of-factly. Then she took her water and sipped it again. "And no sailor fuku either."

Jason blinked again in surprise as she had been dead-on. *Damn, this girl is amazing!*

Soon Angela brought over a tray and started laying dishes and bowls out on the table. She handed them each a pair of chopsticks and then bowed and turned her attention to other tables. Jason snapped the chopsticks in two pieces and started by going after the ramen.

"You use chopsticks pretty well," noticed Nicole as she held a pink piece of sashimi in between her two sticks, preparing to dip it in a brownish sauce. She then held the sticks up. "Here, open up, this is good."

Jason slurped the noodles already in his mouth and swallowed. Then he opened his mouth and let Nicole feed him the sashimi. He paused to think about what he was eating. It had a slightly slick feel, but a rather nice light

texture and interesting taste. Jason then picked up a piece with his sticks and looked over the dipping sauces.

"Try the red one, it's pretty good," Nicole recommended. Jason did such and put the sashimi in Nicole's mouth. A moment later she frantically grabbed her tea and gulped down a cup and then let out a heavy breath.

"That's a bit spicier than I normally like it," she said. Jason began to giggle at her blushed face, which Nicole soon joining in.

And the meal continued relatively quietly with Nicole and Jason sharing stories over Sashimi and Tempura. Nicole learned about Jason's aspirations while Jason learned the complex history that was the Porter family tree. Since this story is not about the Porter family history, we won't go into that today.

As the meal was approaching its completion, a small Asian man walked up on the stage and pulled out a microphone. Angela walked up on stage with him in her wooden sandals. "Ah, Kobanwa ladies and gentlemen! I'm am Mr. Segawa and welcome to *The Rising Sun's* Friday Night Karaoke contest!" The patrons politely clapped and then he continued. "Anako-san will be going around every table with a sign-up sheet. After we have filled up, then we will start the contest." More polite clapping followed. "And tonight's winner will receive this trophy that Anako-san is holding." Angela held up a large gold cup and the audience clapped enthusiastically. "So good luck to everyone!" Mr. Segawa proclaimed and then walked off the stage. Anako took the clipboard and started walking around the tables. Several minutes later she came up to Jason and Nicole.

"You still entering?" Angela asked.

"Try to keep me away," Jason stated as he looked at the sign-up sheet. Then he frowned slightly. "We got a decent wait," he told Nicole.

Nicole signed her name too and shrugged. "I don't mind. It lets me scout the competition." She smiled.

“Yeah, but that won’t change the fact that I’m winning tonight.” Jason challenged.

“Didn’t I just tell you that I always get what I want?” Nicole challenged back and then stared into his eyes, causing the uneasy tension to return.

And so the competition began. Some singers were okay, some were not. Some were pretty decent singers in either language and some were pretty much tone deaf. Finally Mr. Segawa walked up the stage after a semi-decent rendition of ‘*Maybe I’m Amazed*’ and announced, “Our next competitor is Mr...Jason...Betrovich?” He finished. Jason stood up and walked to the stage and took the microphone.

“It’s Bertovich actually, but everyone calls me Jason or Jay.” Then he took the sheet music from Angela and pointed for the music to begin playing. The stage was quiet and Jason bowed his head for effect.

Then the rock blared across the speakers as five notes blared over and Jason looked up to the crowd who looked on. Jason began to sing...

*Kimi no koto o suki datte
ano uwasa wa hontou sa
sou sa nete mo samete mo
sakeyou to shite mo DAME sonna fuu ni komaranai de*

*Hoka no koi o oidashite kimi no naka e irikomu
sore wa ikenai koto kai
yuugure ga chikazuite kodomo ga kaeru kai
kyoo no dekgoto wa “moeteru ai” seikaku ni tsutaerareru hazu*

*Juukyuu ji no NEWS!
(Juukyuu ji no NEWS aa nagareru)
Onegai, bokutachi no nako o
Ah! (ah!) semanai de shijitsu no KISS o
hi no nai kono machi koi shite kemuri o age you
(hi no nai kono machi koishite)
Ah!(ah!) ABOUT ni ikite wa ikenai
nai mo no nedari?*

The music faded and the crowd applauded loudly. Jason took a bow and then handed the microphone back to Mr. Segawa as he walked back on stage. The Asian man turned to Jason and spoke quietly.

"Pretty good. Is there a young girl here who you were singing about?" He asked with a nudge.

"Maybe," was Jason's wry response and then walked back to his table. Nicole applauded again as he sat down.

"I'm impressed," Nicole said with a smile.

"You're up. Knock em dead," Jason encouraged. Mr. Segawa looked around the stage then continued with the show.

"Our next contestant is Nicole...Porter." Nicole stood and walked to the stage. "Boy she looks cute! I'll bet she'll knock our socks off!" Mr. Segawa joked as Nicole took the Microphone. Nicole bowed lightly at the compliment and took the lyrics sheet from Angela and looked to the crowd. The stage grew quiet and Nicole pointed off the stage to indicate that she wanted the music to start.

Slowly a pop tune came over the speakers with a light gong in the background. Nicole took the microphone with both hands, closed her eyes and began to sing lightly, yet sensuously.

*Iya desu wa dame desu wa
anata to mo arou o-kata ga
BAKEMONO no yuuwaku ni
O-kokoro o midasareru nante*

*Daiji-na shimei o seotta o-kata
watakushi namida o shinonde
anata o kitae-naosu wa*

*Kakugo o nasaimase
ao no MUCHI de gozaimasu
sono tarunda o-kokoro o
chikara komete tataki naoshimasu*

*ikemasen narimasen
ai wa kiyoku tadashii mono
ai shiau futari ni wa
chi no tsunagari ga ichiban desu*

*Jurai no mirai o mamoru tame desu
jaaku-na oni ni chikazukeba
watakushi ga sabakimasu wa*

*gaman o nasaimase
hora mada mada tarimasen
sono mayoi ga kieru made
kono kusari de shibatte agemasu!*

Then she began to sway to the music, innocently, yet seductively. Jason was blown away, her singing voice was so girlish and sweet, but it seemed to hide something. Jason watched her dance to the bridge in the music while she waited for her next part to come up. Then she laughed wickedly and began to sing again...

*hora hora ikemasen
kono itami ni tae nasai
hito muchi goto sakebi nasai
hizamazuite yurushi koinasai*

*mada mada narimasen
oojosama to oyobinasai
sugaritsuite o nakinasai
omoi no mama izimete agemasu*

*hora hora ikemasen
saa itami ni taenasai
sugaritsuite o nainasai
hazamazuite yurushi o koinasai*

Wo ho ho ho!

Oujo-sama to oyobi!

*Oujo-sama to oyobi!!!
Kono!*

Wo ho ho ho!!!

*Kono itami ni taeru no yo!
Wo ho ho ho!!!*

*Taete, taete, ureshinaki o shinasai!
Wo ho ho ho! Wo ho ho ho! Wo ho ho ho!...*

Nicole continued to laugh wickedly as the music faded out and when it did she simply handed the microphone back to the smiling Angela and walked back to her table to the deafening silence.

A moment later a single person began to clap, and then a second followed , then more and more until the whole restaurant was applauding loudly and cheering too. Jason then took the initiative and stood up to clap which more followed and Nicole soon changed what was an ovation into a *standing* ovation!

Mr. Segawa nervously walked up to the stage. He appeared flushed and was physically wiping the sweat off his tan brow. He simply muttered one word into the microphone and then went to sit back down... "*Sugoi...*"

Soon the commotion settled down and Angela brought up the next contestant while Jason looked at Nicole. "So what were you singing about that got Mr. Segawa so...um...interested?" Jason asked.

Nicole closed her eyes and held out her index finger. "Now..." She then broadened her smile, "*that* is a secret!" Jason simply slumped face first on the table.

A few hours later as the evening was approaching midnight, Jason and Nicole stepped out of the restaurant. In Nicole's hands was the 'gold' (actually it was brass) cup trophy. She smiled smugly as Jason held the door for her. The door closed behind and them and Jason jogged to catch up.

"I still say the judge was biased," Jason pouted.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Nicole smirked, "but I also won a free dinner for two, so we can come back sometime and you can 'avenge your honor.'"

"Guess I better start practicing now," Jason remarked then grinned, "Lovely Sakura."

Nicole rolled her eyes and let out a heavy breath. "I *knew* it was a mistake to tell you my middle name!"

"It was a joke," he replied defensively. Then he nodded his head. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay, just call me Nicole, that's all. When people call me Sakura, it makes me feel like I'm a walking cultural exhibit. I'd hate to think that you were dating because of some simple fascination with Asia," she said sadly.

Jason then turned her around and put both his hands on her shoulders, "Don't ever think that! I'm dating you because you are an intelligent, decent, and beautiful woman. I want to date *you*, not your heritage."

Nicole looked up to him and smiled. "Thank you." Then she closed her eyes and waited. Jason felt a hesitation set in, but he began to move his face closer toward hers...

"Awwwww.... Ain't that fucking cute?" came a snide gruff voice which interrupted the ensuing moment of romance. "It's our little smart-ass and his Jap-loving girlfriend." From the darkness of the alley near the lot came the brute who had made the racist comment on Sunday and then almost killed him on Monday.

Jason pushed Nicole to behind him and then stepped forward. "Stay behind me Nicole," he ordered. Then he stepped forward. "I'm surprised to see you in public."

The brute grinned and showed that he lacked quite a few teeth. "Well, I was just telling my friend the same thing. We were out driving and then he points to me and says 'ain't that the car of that prick who made it so we can't go out in the daytimes in the lot of that Jap restaurant?' Then I says, 'Why yes it is. Must be our lucky day.'" He spit a wad of phlegm on the blacktop lot.

"Your friend? But I don't see anyone...?" Jason thought out loud and then frantically turned around to see

the second brute come up from behind Nicole, who let out half a scream before she was muzzled by the brute's hand.

"Nicole!" Jason shouted out. Then he turned to the first brute who was grinning evilly. "Please! Don't hurt her!"

"Hurt her? We wouldn't dream of it," he said while still grinning. The second brute pulled out a hunting knife and held it to her face. Nicole went pale at seeing the blade which reeked of a copper-smell. "That is, if she don't do anything foolish like scream."

Jason felt a heat rush to his temples. He was gritting his teeth and his fist were tightening up into a pair of fist. He could feel his fingernails actually digging into his palms.

"You see! We belief what the bible says about 'eye for an eye' and all that shit. You're little friend here hurt my balls real damn good. So it's only fitting that she make them fell alllllll better," the brute said with a sneer. The second brute holding Nicole ran his free hand down to her skirt waistband and slipped his finger s little under it, causing Nicole to whimper in panic.

You son of a bitch!" Jason shouted. He could feel warm drops of blood run down his hand as his fingernails broke the skin.

The brute lost the grin and pulled out his own hunting knife. "Of course, that will be after we kill you!" Then the brute charge him. The brute stabbed his arm out in hopes of catching him.

At that moment, Jason swerved to his left and the arm flew past him. Jason then grabbed the arm and brought it down against his knee with both his hands. There was a snap and a crunch and then a sudden spray of wetness followed by an inhuman scream of agony.

When Jason rubbed his eyes clear, he saw that he had broken the brutes arm with the self-defense move he learned while kickboxing in high school. It worked so well that the bone had broken the skin and was jutting out at a sickening angle. The knife lay on the ground where the

brute had dropped it. *Thank you Coach Pastuers*, thought Jason.

The brute shook his head in pain but decided to grab the knife with his other hand and swiped again at Jason. Jason ducked the swipe and again, remembering his old self-defense moves, deflected his arm away from him. Unfortunately, that meant that he deflected the knife away from him but toward the brute who a second later succeeded in jabbing it into his own neck. Suddenly there was a gush of hot steaming blood that caught Jason in the chest. The racist then fell back and kicked a few times before going still.

"Billy!" the second brute shouted, throwing Nicole to the blacktop hard, causing her to cry out in pain and grab her shoulder. The brute ran over to his fallen compatriot. "Billy! What he do to you?!?"

Jason didn't hesitate however and while the second brute's guard was down, Jason tackled the brute from behind his knees and thus put him down on the ground. Jason immediately crawled over and rested his knees on the brute's upper arms so he could punch back. Then he raised his closed fist.

Jason screamed out and brought the fist down on the brute's face. There was a 'thud' and a groan. He brought up his other fist and brought it down as hard as he could. Again there was a 'thud' and a groan. Then he did it again and again there was a 'thud.' He continued to do this with all his power and anger behind it. Then suddenly there was no 'thud' followed by his fist. Instead there was a sickly moist 'crunch' followed by another and then another. The brute had stopped kicking and struggling to get free. Jason looked down and saw that he had been holding two rocks in his hands and he had successfully caved in the second man's face until it was no longer recognizable as human. Jason dropped the rocks in disbelief. He didn't remember picking them up. In his anger he must have just... grabbed them without thinking...

Jason stood up from the dead man and looked over to his companion who still had the knife sticking out of his throat. Jason saw Nicole standing there with a horrified look on her face. She held her shoulder gingerly.

"Nicole! Are you alright?!?" Jason asked frantically and he took a step toward her. Nicole quickly took a frightened step back. Jason stopped in his tracks. He looked at her as she shook in terror at his approaching. Jason looked down and saw all the blood that soaked his clothes and hands. Then he looked up to the quivering Nicole and then again stepped toward her and she as quickly took a step back.

"Nicole..." Jason stammered, "I'm not going to hurt you. It's over now." Nicole shook her head in fear and Jason could see the tears roll down her face. "I didn't mean to do it, Nicole. It's just..." He continued to stammer. "I just didn't want them to hurt you. I couldn't...bear the thought of you being hurt."

He took a step back and turned around and studied the carnage around him, "I didn't mean to... kill... them, I just acted out." Then the horrible realization dawned on him and he fell to his knees. "Oh my GOD! I killed them! I killed them! I didn't want to..." Jason cried out.

He buried his head into his hands and began to weep at what he had done. He had not simply killed them, but he had killed them with the savagery of a animal. "I didn't mean to... I didn't mean to..." he began to chant.

Nicole slowly walked up to him and cautiously put her hand on his shoulder. He immediately batted it away and screamed, "DON'T TOUCH ME!!!" which caused Nicole to jerk back in fright. Jason then rolled up into a fetal position and went into a catatonic state. Nicole ran toward the restaurant leaving him with his victims and his guilt.

The Waiting Room...

Well, well, well. You've had quite a night haven't you?

"I didn't mean to do it," Jason said from his curled up position on the floor.

Of course you did.

"Wha...?" Jason muttered. He then sat up and looked into the darkness. "What's that supposed to mean?" Jason inquired wiping the tears from his face.

It was your intention to kill them all along. It was your intention to kill them since Sunday.

"What are you talking about?!?" Jason shouted.

You were always going to kill them. That was the whole intention.

Then from the darkness a figure walked out and looked down at Jason and smirked. Jason rubbed his eyes with this blood-stained hands and shook his head in disbelief . "No... it can't be..." Jason shouted to the figure.

The figure was him, Jason Bertovich, in the flesh standing before himself wearing a smirk.

You did it because I made you do it.

Act the Fourth:
"Perspectives, Reflections, and Conclusions"

*"It's the end of the World as we know it,
It's the end of the World as we know it,
It's the end of the World as we know it,
and I feel fine."*

- REM

Jason stood up in his bloody attire in shock and looked at himself. "You're me."

Phbt! Not even close! I'm not you, the second Jason replied. I'm something far, far greater than being just you. I'm you, I'm John, I'm Fenny, yes, I'm even Angela and the two thugs. I'm all of them. I am the one known as The Author. The second Jason smiled and snapped his fingers. An instant later Fenny and John reappeared.

"What do you mean? 'The Author?!?'" Jason asked confused.

Exactly what I just said. I am the Author. I created this universe and I created you, The Author stated.

"It doesn't make sense," Jason said out loud.

Please! If it made sense, it wouldn't be a very interesting story, now would it? The Author responded.

"I don't believe you." Jason proclaimed.

Would you like a demonstration? Fine... The Author pulled out a pen and a small notepad and scribbled something down. *There...that should suffice.*

Jason looked around the still dark room and then to Fenny and John who still looked confused and frightened by their own ordeals. Jason then balled his fist and slugged John square in the gut. John coughed and doubled over in pain.

"Jason! What the hell do you think you're doing!" Fenny shouted.

"I don't know what came over me," Jason stated blankly as he stared at his own fist in disbelief.

Care to see the proof now? The Author asked. The Author then handed his pen and pad over to Jason who read it over and then gasped.

"What's it say?" John asked holding his stomach. Jason flipped the pad over and showed them.

'Jason looked around the still dark room and then to Fenny and John who still looked confused and frightened by their own ordeals. Jason then balled his fist and slugged John square in the gut. John coughed and doubled over in pain.'

"What the hell?!?" Fenny exclaimed.

You believe me now? Sorry John, but I couldn't very well have him punch Fenny. You understand don't you? The Author asked.

John nodded in understanding, though still hurting from the punch. Fenny looked around in confusion, expecting something else. Jason simply sat down on the chair.

"It's true, isn't it? We're not real. We're simply puppets that you control," Jason asked from his seat with a frown.

Oh, I wouldn't say that you were 'puppets.' Yes, *you did what I wrote you to do, but you do have a life of your own,* The Author explained.

"What do you mean?" John asked then he let go of his side. He looked down, "Hey! It doesn't hurt anymore!"

Well, It's wouldn't be fair to keep you in pain for this conversation, especially after what you three have been through, The Author said with a smile. *Have a seat please, and I'll explain the value of creation.*

Fenny and John took a seat on the floor next to Jason's chair. The three looked at The Author as he put his hands in his pockets.

Okay, who wants to tell me what they know about the 'Holy Trinity?'

Jason raised his hand and then answered, "The Holy Trinity consists of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Three unique beings that make up one divine whole. It's the basis of Christianity."

Right. Now think of writing as another type holy trinity. Except this time you have 'God the Author,' 'God the Character,' and 'God the Reader.' The Author took in the blank expressions and continued, I see that you're confused. Okay, I'll explain further. God the Father is the Creator of the Universe. God the Son is a creation of God the Father to spread his works on the Earth he created. God the Holy Spirit then carries the works and word of both God the Father and God the Son to others. They are all unique, but they are all the same thing. That's the exact way the writer's holy trinity works.

I am God the Author. I created this universe and I created you. You are God the Character or Characters. You spread my works by acting out my prose and dialogue. The person reading this right now is God the Reader. Like the Holy Spirit, he will read of your deeds in my universe and spread it to others. Do you understand?

The trio nodded and then stood up. Then Fenny took the initiative and spoke up, "So, you're saying that everything that has happened was because you wrote it that way and right now, someone is reading about this?"

The Author took in the question, tilted his head from side to side and then spoke, *Well... yeah, for the most part you could say that.*

"What's that supposed to mean?" John asked.

Well, if you want to break that down, then it really will be confusing. It's easier to say that what Fenny just said is essentially right.

"So it was because of you that I'm a cold blooded killer?" Jason asked.

"And that I'm now dead?" John added.

"And everything I've ever cared about has been destroyed including my desire to bring love into the world?" Fenny contributed.

The Author simply nodded and then put his hands into his pockets and then leaned against the wall.

Jason was the first to grow angry and walked over to The Author. "Why?!? Why would you put your own creation through such hell?!? You, of all people, know

what we went through and how much it hurt each of us!" Jason shouted, while Fenny and John nodded in agreement.

The Author looked up and straight into Jason's eyes. *You wanna know why?* Jason nodded. *The answer is simple. "Why not?"*

Jason took this in and examined it for a moment and then grew purple in the face with rage. "What kind of answer is THAT?!?!?!?"

The Author then put up his hands. *Okay, okay, maybe that wasn't the best answer. Okay, let me give you a better one. I wanted to end the story.*

"But why?" John asked.

Why end the story? Because I wanted to go onto other things. Do you realize when I created your universe, it was meant to be a one shot deal to put into words why I hate my job? Unfortunately, then the whole thing snowballed and I found myself devoting more and more time to this world. I have other ambitions. I don't want to spend the rest of my life telling the further adventures of Fenira the Goddess, John the schizophrenic shoe salesman, and Jason the unluckiest bastard on earth. Therefore, for me to finally break free of you all, I had to end the story.

"But that doesn't explain why you put us through all those horrible things." Jason responded.

Well, that was purely aesthetic, The Author stated.

"What's so aesthetic about it?" Fenny asked.

Well, think about it. I had you all end your tale at the eleventh hour at the end of a 7 day cycle. Now that was fitting. If the story had continued onto the next day, then there was so much that could happen. These endings were conclusive. They put a period at the end of the final sentence. People pretty much know that there's no more story to tell. The Author then thought for a second and looked to his three characters. Actually, the story is still going on isn't it? Oh dear, this will not do at all. I must find a way to conclude this section and finish the whole damn thing now.

Jason, Fenny, and John all looked to each other nervously. "Are you saying that we're not completely done yet?" Jason asked.

Well, not this second. But don't worry, I'll end it soon enough. The Author then pulled out his pad and pen and started to scribble down something.

Fenny and John looked desperately to Jason as he should do something. Jason sighed and nodded and then looked to The Author. "Excuse me."

The Author didn't look up from his pad. *Yeah? I'm kinda busy this moment, hold on a few minutes and we'll wrap this up.*

Jason then started to walk over to The Author and spoke up. "So you're righting our ending are you?"

Yeah. Now, please let me finish, The Author answered testily. Jason kept walking toward him however.

"The way I see it, there is one way we can keep the story from ending," Jason stated blankly.

Hmm? The Author looked up from his pad and noticed how close Jason was standing to him. *How's that?*

"Well..." He said and then stared straight into his eyes, "I can kill you, then you can't finish writing the ending." Then Jason placed his hands on The Author's throat.

Wait a sec! Are you sure you know what you're doing!? The Author shouted as he dropped his pen and pad to try to pry Jason's hands from around his neck.

"Actually, you of all people should know what I'm doing. You're the one who made me a cold-blooded killer." Jason blankly stated and then squeezed harder causing The Author's face to turn purple. Jason squeezed harder and then released. The Author slumped down the wall and fell face first on the floor dead.

Fenny and John walked over and examined the body. John felt for a pulse and then shook his head. Fenny put her arms around Jason and he looked up in sorrow for what he had to do.

"Well, Now what?" John asked as he stood up from the The Author's body.

"I don't know. Maybe nothing. But at least we're still here." Jason sighed. Then he turned his attention to the body again. Suddenly, the floor began to tremble and the walls of the room crumbled around them revealing a field around them.

"What's going on?" Fenny asked, frightened.

"Why does everyone assume that I know the answers?" Jason shouted as he looked out over the horizon of green plains. At that moment there was a slight hum. Everyone turned their attention to the body and noticed that it had begun to glow. Suddenly a brilliant dome of light exploded out and expanded. It passed through Jason, Fenny, and John and then continued on extending in all directions.

"What's happening?!?" Jason shouted as Fenny clung harder.

"When we killed The Author we triggered something!" John shouted. Suddenly, he looked around him and his eyes bulged out. "What do you guys want?" He shouted to the air. "You want to take me somewhere? Where?" He continued to talk to the air.

"John, what are you doing?" Jason asked. "There's no one there!"

"Why are you being nice to me now?" John asked Shinji-John, Jinnai-John, and Tougu-John and they walked around him patting him on the shoulder.

"Ty!" Fenny shouted as she let go of Jason and ran to something that was obviously invisible to Jason. "You're alive!"

"Fenny! Now you're doing it! What's going on?!?" Jason cried out.

"I've made my amends. Now we can be together," Ty told Fenny as he embraced her. Fenny hugged him tighter.

"Oh... Ty..." Fenny cried.

"Guys! There's nothing there! What do you see?!?" Jason shouted to his friends.

"Thank you guys." John told his personalities.

“GUYS!!!” Jason screamed. Then suddenly he stepped back in horror as he watched Fenny and John suddenly disintegrated and all that was left were their clothes and two puddles of orange goo.

The Porter residence...

Aaron looked up from his cards and tapped three lands and laid down his card. “Ha!” He smirked.

Kirstin then tapped two islands, laid down a counterspell, and grinned. “Jason was right, that trick does work.”

Aaron groaned and chucked his new card into the graveyard. Suddenly the cards quaked slightly. Then the whole table began to rumble. Then the cabinets and cupboards began to shake. “Earthquake?” Aaron asked.

“In Massachusetts?” Kirstin stated nervously. Then suddenly the apartment began to rip itself at the seams, causing plates, glasses, and cookware to tumble out of the cupboards. “Aaron!” Kirstin shouted as she grabbed onto Aaron.

“Just hold on Kirstin, this will all blow over! Hopefully...” Aaron answered back unsure. Then they looked out the window and saw a wall of light scream toward them...

A moment later the house was quiet as the quaking stopped and the house was silent. Two sets of clothes lay scattered over the table and chairs and puddles of orangish slime oozed over the cards...

“Neko-chan!” Nicole shouted to her pet cat. Neko-chan leapt up and purred as she snuggled him to her bosom. A moment later a puddle of orange slime oozed out from under the door to the porch of the Porter residence....

* * *

Matty and Sarah walked down the street. Suddenly the Earth lurched from underneath them and threw them to the hard concrete.

"Matty!" Sarah shouted as she lost her footing.

"Sarah! Are you okay?" Matty shouted as she stumbled over to her friend. What the devil is going on?!? Since when do WE have earthquakes?

"Matt, I just wanted to tell you how much I love you," Sarah said surreally to Matty, who blinked a couple times.

"Sarah?" Suddenly, both she and Sarah lost their cohesiveness...

"Gillian Anderson?!? What are you doing in my bedroom?!?" A boy in a red baseball cap asked his pillows. "And why are you taking your clothes off?!?!?" Then the boy thought about what he just said. "What am I saying?!? Let me help you!"

The boy jumped onto the bed in the blink of an eye. He also turned into a puddle of orange goo a blink of an eye later...

"My red haired sweet, you've come back!" a tall lanky boy shouted as he embraced his goddess and she planted a wet kiss on his mouth. A moment later, all that was left was a orange puddle with a leather glove and a tome of Shakespeare floating in it...

"Akane! I've found you at last! I'm finally home!" An Asian boy shouted joyfully in the middle of a supermarket before melting along with everyone else there...

Jason looked at the two puddles that used to be his friends. He felt a solitary tear roll down his cheek. Then his ears perked up as he heard a rumbling in the distance. He turned toward the horizon and gasped as he saw a tidal

wave of orange coming his way. "Oh... Shit..." He muttered before being swept away...

Jason struggled to bring himself to surface in the thick soupy liquid. He gasped as he tried to get air. For a moment, he swore he could hear singing...

It all returns to nothing...

It all comes tumbl'n down, tumbl'n down, tumbl'n down!

It all returns to nothing...

I just keep lett'n me down, lett'n me down, lett'n me down!

Was he hearing things? Was there really a gospel choir singing as he was drowning in orange goo? Those were the only questions he managed to ask himself before he was pulled under and lost consciousness...

Jason awoke with a start as he could feel the scratchy sand irritating his face. He sat up and looked around. He was on a small island. He looked out and all he saw was a sea of orange. He sat down and again and placed his head in his hands.

"Now what?" He groaned. A moment later, another groan came and Jason jerked toward the noise.

He quickly scampered toward the noise and saw it was a person lying on the other side of the tiny island. He looked down and gasped. "Nicole?!?"

She lay there, wrapped in gauze and a hospital gown, a bandage over her one eye. She looked up to him. "You sicken me," she stated without any emotion and then turned away from him and stared blankly to the sea.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!..." Jason screamed to the heavens from his little island and then buried his hands in his head to cry...

* * *

Well? What do you think?

Jason lifted his head from his palms and noticed that he was back in the room. With him was The Author, a backwards hat upon his head, who smiled as he sat backwards on the steel chair.

"What the hell just happened?" Jason asked confused.

Oh come on! If anyone would, I knew YOU would appreciate the 'End of Evangelion' ending scenario the most. I thought it was quite entertaining.

Jason stood up and walked up The Author. "You were planning this the whole time?" he asked.

The Author nodded and grinned.

"You're sadistic," Jason said with a sneer.

No, I'm creative. He replied with a smirk.

"You knew that I couldn't hurt you, so you played along and strung along the audience too," Jason confronted.

Well, it built up some nice suspense, didn't it? The Author then stood up. But seriously, I really must end this story. So what do you think? I was thinking of having the whole story be a dream sequence and then have you wake up in bed back in Smithfield, PA and thus give the audience an acceptable cop-out ending.

"Is it even worth fighting it anymore?" Jason asked sheepishly.

Not with me it ain't, The Author replied happily.

"Fine, let's get on with it, make my whole existence a meaningless memory." Jason resigned sadly.

Oh, don't sound so melodramatic about it. You'll still exist, you just won't be updated, The Author chided. Then he pulled out his pen and pad and went to scribble something.

"Wait!" came a voice from the darkness.

Huh? The Author muttered as he lifted his head.

From the darkness Nicole Porter stepped into the light. Jason dropped his head back and let out a sarcastic laugh.

"Oh! I must give you credit! You had to throw one last curveball at me before you finished me." Jason said bitterly.

"Actually, He didn't send me, Jason," Nicole stated.

"Oh really?" he replied. He then turned his attention to The Author. "Do you really expect me to fall for this?"

Hey! I'm as confused as you are. I wasn't planning on writing her again, with the possible exception of a collaborative side-story, The Author defended himself.

"Okay, If you're not from him, then how did you get here?" Jason asked Nicole.

"Well, I'm not really Nicole. Well, at least the Nicole that you know. I'm a representation and emissary to help you," Nicole answered.

You're here to help him? Who sent you? The Author asked.

"I think you already know who. Jason, there is a way that the three of you can go on living your lives." Nicole announced.

"Oh? How?" Jason inquired.

"This guy wasn't telling you the complete truth. It is true that he created the characters that you are today, but he *didn't* create this universe. Someone else did." Nicole explained.

"Who?" Jason asked.

"The *Other* Author. The original author. He created me and my sisters and many others. Now, he can save you," Nicole answered.

Jason arched his eyebrow. "How?" He asked suspiciously.

"You simply allow yourselves to become a part of *our* universe. It is the same as this, but now your actions will be dictated by a new author," Nicole said with a smile.

"And what's so great about being under *someone else's* control?" Jason asked annoyed.

"Well, *He* hasn't tried to kill any of his characters yet, and He's had a stake in this universe a lot longer than him," Nicole said as she pointed to The Author.

He can't do this! This is my story dammit! The Author shouted angrily.

'I disagree.' Came another voice from the darkness. A moment later, out stepped a young man in a black trench-coat and a black fedora.

What? The Author asked the new person.

'I said that I disagreed. Remember Jason...' Then he stopped and looked at Jason. *'I meant him, not you.'* he said, pointing to The Author. *'Remember Jason, I created this universe. I have final decree over all things that happen here. Because of what you've done, you've done massive damage to my established time-line,'* The Other Author chided.

Oh yeah...Sorry, my bad, The Author apologized. *So what are you going to do?* The Author asked.

'I'm going to finish this story and return the universe to some semblance of normality. You can take a rest from this point on,' The Other Author proclaimed.

The Author grinned. *Well, You've got your work cut out for ya, but if you wanna finish it, be my guest. I'm curious to see what you'll come up with.* The Author smiled and then got up from the chair and began to walk away.

Well, Then I'll be going. Good luck to all of you. No hard feelings? The Author asked Jason. Jason simply hrumphed in anger. *I deserved that. Well, later all.*

'Hey Jason!' The Other Author shouted, and The Author stopped. *'We Still on to do that collaborative project?'*

Yeah, E-mail me some time and we'll discuss it again, The Author answered as he walked into the darkness. Soon the light echo of his footsteps stopped.

The Other Author looked to Nicole. *'Thank you for your help. Now, I'll return you to where you belong.'* A moment later, Nicole vanished and it was just Jason and the The Other Author. The Other Author snapped his fingers and instantly John and Fenny appeared.

'Boy, you three have caused me no end of trouble. Now I have to rework all the endings for both timeline

purposes, general acceptability by the readers, and keeping things you've learned in perspective.' The Other Author rubbed his chin and thought hard.

The Other Author sat there for a moment and then pointed to Fenny. *'Okay, Fenny. Now we've got a pickle with you. In order for the ending to be socially acceptable by the reader we can't have the death of your sisters. That'll leave WAY too much emotional baggage on people and you. However, if we change the timeline to not have that happen, the likelihood of you meeting Ty is now jeopardized.'* The Other author rubbed his chin and then sat up. *'Okay! I think I've got it! This won't work out perfect, but it leads to many good possibilities for the future.'* The Other Author pulled out a Laptop computer and began typing. A moment later Fenny disappeared.

Then The Other Author turned to John. *'You're also difficult to rewrite. By finally encountering your guilt about your running away from yourself, it will make you a better person for the future. You learned that you have to accept yourself for who you are and that can be important to the audience. So your ending also won't be perfect, but in the end it will work out. I'll try to go easy on you.'* The Other Author began typing again and then John disappeared leaving just Jason and Him alone.

'Thank God he didn't write you too far into a corner. I have a decent fix for you. the audience will like it, and finally you get a break. How's that sound?' The Other Author asked Jason.

"It sounds great. Though I feel guilty that the others have to suffer," Jason explained.

'Don't worry. It will all work out in the end. Are you ready to go?' The Other Author asked.

"Let's do it," Jason responded confidently. The Other Author began to type furiously and a few moments later, Jason faded away and with him the room. The Other Author looked around, hit enter and then vanished...

* * *

The Divine Agency, Monday Afternoon...

Sonyarina walked around the Goddess lounge and slumped down on the couch next to Jordiko. They had just returned from talking to their 'little sister' Fenira about the dangers of interfering with the mortals, but it didn't do much good.

"I think we're getting old," Jordiko complained.

"Nah. Fenira's always been that way. She can take care of herself," Sonyarina consoled.

Suddenly, a black trench-coat clad man quickly walked into the lounge, dropped an envelope on Jordiko's lap and quickly walked out of the other exit without saying a word.

"Hey! You dropped something!" Jordiko shouted.

"Hey! Look at the envelope. It's addressed to us!" Sonyarina exclaimed. "Open it."

Jordiko did such and pulled out the white sheet of paper and looked it over. She covered her mouth and then let Sonyarina look at it as well, who in turn also gasped.

The letter read:

Sonyarina and Jordiko:

*You don't know who I am but, I know who you are. This concerns your sister Fenira. She is in grave danger and therefor you two are also in grave danger. You must seek her after she arrives home on **THURSDAY AFTERNOON**. That is very important and don't forget that. Then all three of you must go into hiding and take on new identities. This is not a joke. The agency KNOWS about Fenira's activities and are prepared to punish you as well. Hopefully, you will be safe and the Agency will not find you if I can help it. I will try to help you in whatever way I can. After you go into hiding, you must not contact anyone in the Agency or use your powers. If you do so then you are putting yourself in GRAVE danger. Maybe one day we will meet again. Maybe one day I can join you. Tell Fenny, that this is all for her.*

*Signed,
A Friend*

Jordiko and Sonyarina read the letter again and looked at each other. They then calmly nodded and walked out of the room. They had much to do and little time to do it.

Holy Ghost Medical Center, Friday Night...

Joeseeph Brown slammed his fist on the table. He was angry. A young man had just died on his table and he couldn't save him. He turned and looked at the boy. Only twenty years old and in shambles. "Why did you do something like this? You had everything to live for!" Brown shouted to the body.

"Let it go Joe! Let the kid go," Sax said reassuringly.

"WHY DID YOU GO AND DO THIS?!?" he shouted to the heavens and slammed his fist down on the boy's body.

"Joe!" Sax shouted. Brown slammed his fist down again as if it would make him feel better. It didn't and he turned away disgusted at himself.

Now, curiously, an amazing thing happened. Brown's slamming on John's chest had begun pumping blood back into the body. And repeated hits had began a pattern. This was noticed when a tiny blip came to life on the EKG.

"Holy Shit! The kid's alive!" Sax shouted.

"Hot Damn!" Brown shouted in disbelief, but immediately grabbed a fresh pair of gloves. "Let's not lose him a second time!" Brown shouted to Sax who went to work on the boy's chest...

Northhampton, MA, Friday Night...

A late model Chevrolet pick-up truck cruised down the streets of Northhampton. It's occupants, two large gentlemen. One had an ungroomed face and one had a large squashed nose. Both were missing more than a few teeth. Also, both were currently wanted by the law.

"God Dammit Billy! We can't even go out in public!" the one with the nose whined.

"Shut yar damn yap Jim! I'm trying to think," the ungroomed one barked. The car was silent for a moment. Then they drove past a restaurant.

"Hey Billy! Ain't that the car that belongs to that guy who made it so we can't go out in public?" Jim asked.

The ungroomed one turned his head. "Why yes it is. Must be our lucky day." Billy grinned. "Well turn around on the next street and come back. We'll show that sumbitch."

The truck sped along the street. The two occupants were laughing about their plans. So they were quite unhappy to hear police sirens. "Dammit!" Billy shouted and pulled the truck over.

Officer Stan Kelly had been parked at the corner of Round House Plaza. He then saw a pick-up truck fly through a intersection stop sign. He rolled his eyes, pulled out, and activated his sirens. The truck pulled over and Kelly stepped out and walked up to the driver-side window.

"Is there a problem officer?" The ungroomed one asked.

"License and registration, sir." Kelly ordered. The ungroomed man handed them over and Kelly took them back the cruiser and starting entering information. Then he thought about the two men he had just seen. Missing teeth. Squashed nose. Ungroomed. *Now where did I hear that before?* Kelly pulled out his notepad on a hunch and smacked himself in the forehead. *Of course!*

Kelly unsnapped his holster and slowly walked to the car. He handed the license back to the man.

"Is there a problem officer?" The man asked again.

"Well, you ran a stop sign. That's one problem. Also," Kelly lifted his gun into view, "would you mind stepping out of the car please?"

Epilogue

It was mid-December in Holyoke and the ground was covered with a dusting of snow that had fallen since the last thaw. Jason ran out the door of his apartment building, stopped and opened his mailbox, and then continued out.

Dammit! I'm gonna be late! I hope Nicole isn't mad for waiting... he thought to himself while walking down to the lot where his car was parked. They had a lunch date.

As he walked down the sidewalk, he ran into a familiar sight. John Hoelscher.

John was pushing himself up the sidewalk in his wheelchair. Both his legs were still in casts and the lacerations on his face were starting to fade. "Hey John!" Jason shouted as he waved.

"Hey Jay. How's it going?" John asked as he put the brake on his chair.

"No complaints. On my way to a lunch date with Nicole." Jason answered.

"Sounds like you two have a good thing going. Don't screw it up," John remarked quietly.

"I don't plan to. So, how much longer you going to be in the chair?" Jason asked.

"Oh, a while still. The casts will come off soon, but then I have to rehab and everything. The doctor said that it was a miracle that I'm even alive, let alone having a good prognosis to walk again. I'm counting my blessings. Well, I won't keep you," John said quietly as he rolled on up the street.

Jason simply nodded his head and watched him go. Ever since the accident, John had changed. He was a lot quieter than he had been before, but also he seemed to be a lot more relaxed and at peace with himself. He'd never told him what had happened in the accident in Ohio or why he was in Ohio in the first place, but Jason knew that when he was ready to tell someone, John would.

Jason turned and continued down the street. The wind whipped a little and he pulled the zipper on his fleece pull-over tighter. His hair was a little longer and a slight amount of

stubble was growing on his chin. John wasn't the only one changed from this fall in Massachusetts. Jason was actually content for the first time in a long time. He had a new job, working for a small radio station on copy editing. His and Nicole's relationship was blossoming into something really promising and he didn't have to live in fear anymore.

He remembered when he got the call the morning after his first date with Nicole on how they had two suspects for his attack. He came in, and sure enough, it was them.

Jason let out a chuckle when thinking about it. This was the amusing part. They were currently, *both*, serving lengthy sentences. Not only for the attack, but also for all of the *other* crimes they had committed that the police hadn't know about. As soon as they were brought in, they tried to sell each other out and in turn incriminated each other. The trial had to be one of the shortest in history as Jason only came in for one day to testify, along with *all* the other witnesses.

Jason walked up and unlocked his door. He sat in the driver's seat and decided to briefly check his mail. There were a few bills and a few cards. Jason looked at the first postcard. There was no return address or postmark. Jason decided to look it over...

Dear Jason,

I know that you've been worried since I disappeared about two months ago. I'm sorry, but I can't tell you anything about it. I'm currently living with 'family' and we are all fine.

If anyone asks where I am, do NOT tell them anything about this letter. I'm sorry, but if I get more specific then you and everyone else would be in danger. Currently, I am safe. My family and I are happy. Don't worry about me. Maybe one day I'll see you and John again. If not, have a happy and good life. Don't let that girl go. Otherwise, I'll come back there and make you regret it. ^ _ ^

*Your friend, The Bouncy One,
Fenny Lin*

Jason looked it over again. He breathed a sigh of relieve. He had wondered what had happened all those weeks ago. Both Fenny and John had vanished. John came back in a wheelchair and Fenny vanished without a trace. Now, at least he had word from Fenny that she was alive.

Jason checked his watch again and swore. Nicole had probably been waiting at the restaurant now for fifteen minutes wondering where he was. Well, maybe she decided to order for the two of them while she waited. Jason and Nicole had come to frequent the Sushi place Fenny recommended when she took him home from the hospital all those weeks ago.

He decided to look at the other card and then be off. This was a weird postcard. It too, had no return address or postmark, or even a picture. It was simple white card. He flipped it over and read the one sentence message:

Don't you just love happy endings?
- T.O.A.

T.O.A? Jason thought to himself? He didn't know any T.O.A. "Weird." He commented to himself. Then he started the ignition and pulled out of the lot to meet Nicole. Suddenly he had a weird feeling of déjà vu.

Was there some really important meaning behind that card? Jason then shook his head and laughed. "Nah..." Then he continued down the road.

The End

Of Possible Futures: The Tale of Neko-chan and Bertovich

*a minor story type thing
by William Hughes*

The Goddess "sat" amongst the darkness of deep space. "She" was currently waiting outside Sol IV, spying on several of Her less evolved creations. A minor bit of robotic technology rumbled about on the reddish planet, while several of Her other creations, a passive race known as the "Dark Rulers of the Universe," or "BOB" in their own language, carried a large pasteboard drawing of some barren landscape, the idea from which was borrowed from the planet Alpha Centauri VII. The omnipotent non-entity watched for a moment, before moving on to her real target.

She passed Sol IV, and moved closer to the relatively minor sun. She stopped at Sol III, known as Earth to its inhabitants and transmateralized over the patch of Earth known as "Massachusetts."

Below, a young female of the species known as Homo Sapiens (a name which most of the galaxy decided was disgustingly vain, and also quite wrong) was clutching a small white coloured being of the species Felinus Domesticus. Another young male of the Homo Sapiens was talking to the female. The feline looked agitated.

Using Her omniscience, the Goddess determined that the feline was actually a cursed Homo Sapiens, much to its disadvantage. After all, all Deities know that Felines are much more advanced than Humans are. The Goddess strove to find more. She recognized the burning passion of love that was built in both the feline-human and the slightly evolved male simian. Both of them were striving after the love of the young human female that stood before them.

The Goddess decided that, this being such an unusual case, She would predetermine the events that would shape the lives of all three of these young beings.

The Goddess retreated to Sol LXVII; a planet as yet unrecognized by the primitive humans. On this particular planet, there was a large building that housed a number of Elder Deities. This planet was the home of the Sunnyworld Home for Aging Omnipotent Beings. It was famous for housing such honoured beings as Zeus, Thor, Anubis, and Elvis. The Goddess walked down a hall, then turned into a room.

[Hello,] the room's occupant "said," [Come to visit me again, dear?]

[Hello, Mother,] the Goddess said, [I need your help.]

[Oh? What is it, Dear?]

[There are these three humans, you see...] the Goddess went on to describe the problem.

[No problem at all, Dear. Just do as I direct...] The elder Deity outlined a simple solution.

The Goddess was delighted. [Thank you, Mother!] she said, [I'll come back soon, to tell you how it went.]

[I'll expect you in a decade or two?] the elder Deity said.

[Oh, Mother,] the Goddess said, "giving" the elder a light "kiss." [You know I can't be back that soon. I've got a universe to take care of. Don't worry, I won't be more than a century.]

[Of course, dear,] the Elder said.

The Goddess retreated to Her home out beyond the Galactic Ring. Using arcane gestures, mystical words and a VWR (video world recorder), she came up with several possible futures. Randomly picking one, she viewed it.

It was a comfortably run down little house that Jason had bought for his newly wed wife, Nicole. He carried her over the threshold, and she carried her cat. Neko-chan snuggled against Nicole, glaring every moment or two at Jason. The trio found themselves slowly moving towards the kitchen.

Inside the kitchen, Aaron and Kirsten Abdelmaseh waited, a delicious smelling turkey sitting on the table.

There was a knock, and Jason hurried over to open the door for his sister- and brother-in-law. Matt held Sarah's hand as they stepped over several boxes on the way to the kitchen.

Later, after the dinner was over, the food cleaned up, and the guests sent home, Jason and Nicole spent some time watching TV, as Neko-chan slowly plotted the downfall of the evil human...

The Goddess nodded at this one, and set it aside for further perusal later. She couldn't waste time watching everything; after all, She only had eternity for this project.

Randomly grabbing another future, She popped it into the VWR and "hit" "play."

Darth Bertovich brought his lightsabre to bear on Neko Chanwalker. Nicole Organa stood upon a balcony overlooking the futuristic looking scene.

"Neko," Darth Bertovich hissed, "I am your father."

"No!" Neko Chanwalker yelled, "Old Matt told me you killed my father!"

"Obi-Matt Atanian didn't tell you? I am your father, Neko. Look to the Force, and you will see it is true."

Screaming a rage of terror mixed with a tablespoon of surprise, a cup of anger and a dash of curiosity, Neko Chanwalker swung his lightsabre around, destroying the surrounding starship as he tried to get in a nice clean blow to Darth Bertovich. The Dark Lord of the Mall calmly deflected his blows, then used some unseen, omnipotent force to cause a cup to move itself under a nearby sink and fill up with cold water. Neko gasped, then used his own abilities to grapple with the Darth Bertovich for control of the debilitating glass of water. Neko may not have been all together too terribly bright, but he did understand quite well that turning into a cat would not be helpful.

The battle raged on, while Nicole Organa calmly ran through the Imperial Data Files. On a whim, she looked up Darth Bertovich, and found the following entry:

"Darth Bertovich, Real Name: Jason Chanwalker. Known progeny: Nicole Organa and Neko Chanwalker..."

Nicole decided that that wasn't a particularly intelligent whim, and quickly turned off the computer. Turning in her seat, she waved down a passing rogue by the name of Mike Solo, and ran off with him and his co-pilot, Chewbilly the Wookiee...

The Goddess "ejected" the "tape" from the VWR and calmly destroyed it. Some things were too weird even for Her.

In went the next possibility...

On a field outside of a small church out in the suburbs, Jason Bertovich and William Hughes stood, sabres unsheathed and waiting. Nicole Porter sat on the sidelines, a worried frown on her face.

"This duel is for the right to date and possibly marry the beauty of the West, Nicole Porter," Hughes called across the field.

Jason nodded. "Agreed."

The twain moved closer, brandishing the swords. Jason swung the blade towards Hughes, who gave an expert twist and sent Jason's sword flying off into nothingness.

Hughes frowned, then sighed. Setting the his own sword point first into the ground, he crossed his arms and said to Jason, "Go get it."

Jason gulped and rushed over to pick up his recently air-borne weapon. Hughes pulled his own sword out of the ground and set himself in an En Garde position.

Jason struck again, aiming for Hughes' feet. Hughes leapt over the blade and thrust at Jason's shoulder. Jason threw himself to the side to avoid the blow, bringing his

own sword back in an effort to hamstring Hughes. Hughes parried the blow, then swung inward, causing Jason to jump back or be disemboweled.

The duelists took a quick step backward, then rushed at each other, swords a-swinging. Hughes got in a lucky blow, the sabre digging deep into Jason's ribs. Jason gasped, but managed to thrust his own sword into Hughes' liver.

Both fencers looked down, then up, and spoke their thoughts together. "Oh, shit," they said, before collapsing, to sleep the sleep without dreams.

Nicole gasped, rushed over to the fallen combatants and began to go into hysterics. Reaching down, she grabbed Hughes' dagger, sticking out of a smaller sheath that had twisted around his back.

Crying mightily, she stuck the blade into her heart, and fell in a heap upon Hughes and Jason.

The Goddess looked at this possibility and set it aside. It was actually quite good. Far off in the Old Deities Home, the Muse of Tragedy suddenly felt better than she had in centuries. In fact, she felt almost as well as she had before that nice Shakespeare boy died.

The Goddess pulled out another possibility and stuck it into her VWR. The tape began to roll...

It was blank. There was nothing. The world had ended several years ago, and the matter of Nicole's personal affection was unresolved.

The Goddess set this one aside as well. Armageddon scenarios were always fun. In went the next possibility...

The sun shined brightly down on a small house in the outskirts of a small town in a small district of not so small

Upstate New York. Hughes stepped out of the house, dressed in a loose pair of corduroy jeans and a large flannel shirt. Stretching rather like a feline, Hughes looked sleepily up at the morning sun. Rubbing a hand across what was rapidly becoming a beard, Hughes stepped inside the house.

Inside, a shortish woman sat at a table, reading a book. She smiled up at Hughes, who smiled back...

The Goddess frowned. That wasn't Nicole Porter. And where was Jason Bertovich? Still frowning, the Goddess "hit" a "button" on the "tape machine" searching for the other two entities...

Jason Bertovich was still living in Western Massachusetts, and still working in an Electronic Boutique. The Goddess followed him to his new house, closer to work, and watched as he entered. He sat at the kitchen table, and began to read the newspaper. Within a few minutes, the door opened and-voila! -in walked Nicole... except... That wasn't Nicole, even though she had a remarkable resemblance.

The Goddess frowned again. She "pulled up" a "document" on this new persona, and "read" it.

Julie Heinekens: Born (is being born, will be born) year 48399290 (1979 sol standard). Died (is dying, will die) year 48399364 (2063 sol standard). Possible futures: May marry Jason Bertovich, may marry Frank Canstonza, May become first dictator to rule entire world, may have an unhappy childhood, may die in year 1998, may have children. Predestined Futures: Will marry someone, will enter politics, will be a Scorpio.

The Goddess nodded, then turned back to the "tape" to look for the final persona of the triad, Nicole Porter...

Nicole entered a large house, where she was met by her personal maid, Yvette. She walked into a large counting room, and placed a huge wad of hundred dollar bills on a bench. She turned and called out something, and a small black kitten leapt into her arms. She picked it up, and gave it a huge hug.

The cat was only a year old. She had got it from the local pound when she finally gave up on the search for her old cat Neko-chan who, for some untold reason, her twin-sister Kirsten had accidentally left in upstate New York.

The Goddess nodded to Herself, then placed that particular possibility with the other hopefuls. She "reached down" and grabbed another possibility from the group. She began to view it...

Hughes was leading Nicole through a particularly heavily wooded part of China, looking for the lost tour group. They ran, literally, into a heavysset Chinese man, who looked strangely familiar to Hughes.

"You!" Hughes said suddenly, "You're that guide who led Matt, Aaron, Mike, Billy and I through China all those years ago."

"Oh, sir," The Guide said in his heavy accent. "You fall in *Maoniichuan*, I remember."

"Right," Hughes cut him off, nodding sharply, "But right now, we need to get to the airport, ASAP."

"Yes, sir. You follow this way, yes?"

The Guide walked off, with Hughes and Nicole in his wake. Within moments, they were in a remarkably familiar area.

One that Hughes had hoped he would never see again.

The Training Ground of Accursed Springs.

"What!" Hughes yelped, "Here, again?!"

"Yes, sir! Is quickest way to airport."

Hughes sighed. "So long as we don't go too close to any springs."

"Yes, sir."

The Guide walked off, followed by Nicole and Hughes. Hughes was very careful to keep both himself and Nicole away from any of the springs.

"Oh," Nicole said, "Look at that!" She leaned over one of the springs, pointing at something unseen by either of the males.

"Please, sir," the Guide said to her, "You not know Tragic Story." He looked critically over at Hughes, "Do you?"

"No," Hughes growled. "Nicole, don't fall in the pool..." He was cut off as a tremendous gust of wind forced him back a step, where he floundered into a spring. The Guide held his footing, but Nicole was hit by a loose tree branch and sent flying into the pool she had been examining.

The Guide sighed, then turned to look at Hughes, who had resurfaced as a cat. "Oh, too bad. You, sir, fall in *Maoniichuan*, again. You already know Tragic Story. Of course, no big deal for you. You already cursed by that one."

Hughes meowed angrily as he paddled towards shore.

The Guide turned toward Nicole and said...

There was a sudden knock on the door. The Goddess looked up from Her possibility, then walked over to the incessant tapping. She swung the door open, to greet a middle aged Deity who wore trousers, suspenders and a white pinstripe shirt. She looked down at Herself, dressed in an old chaos tee-shirt. (Hey, what are supreme being gonna make their clothing outta, huh? Cotton?)

"Oh, dear," the Goddess sub-vocalized. "One life-time," she said to the office-God.

She stepped around a corner, and waved Her hands over Herself. Her clothing fuzzed and became an evening dress. She shook Her head and tried again.

After several billion attempts, She found something She liked, the looked at Her watch. Over several dozen Aeons had passed. "Oops," She said, "stepping" back in time.

She beat Herself to the Door. She looked at Herself, and said, "Why don't you go get changed, dear?" She nodded and stepped off to complete the cycle.

"Can I help you?" the Goddess said to the office-God.

"Uh, yes," the Deity said, "I'm the God of Copyright Infringement. I was summoned here by Your wild use of proven copyrights. While My clients are willing to forgive You this time, they were wondering if You could please stop?"

"Oh," the Goddess said, startled, "Oh, I hadn't realized. Quite sorry."

"Oh," the Copyright Infringement God said, "It's no hassle. By the way, You've changed the plots sufficiently to keep Your current possibilities, but please stop Copyright Infringement. I hate My job." With that, the stuffy Deity turned and walked away.

The Goddess sighed, turned back to the pile of possibilities, and set the one she had been looking at aside. She grabbed a new possibility to examine...

Life was good. Jim had a wife, Susan was president, and Gary owned half of the western world's companies. Unfortunately, none of this had anything to do with Nicole, Jason or Hughes.

Hughes was living on a large farm in upstate New York. He had several horses, a few cows, a number of chickens and many other farm essentials. In fact, aside from the electricity and phone wires, Hughes was completely self-sufficient. He lived alone, with nothing to worry about. It was a carefree life, and he liked it.

Jason was recently promoted to President of Electronic Boutique, and moved to their secret headquarters deep in the Amazon Rainforest. He married a nice local girl, learned to speak Portuguese, and was

doing quite well. It was an exciting life, what with computer crashes one minute, and employees getting attacked by alligators the next, and he liked it.

Nicole had created a small business; it made, packaged and sold business books, magazines and software. She also got a degree in law, specializing in what is commonly known as "Out of Court Settlement." It was a fast paced life, and she liked it.

The Goddess considered this possibility. It did create the optimal happiness desired for all parties included, but Nicole's love was still unresolved. It went into the junk pile.

The Goddess pulled another possibility out of her pile.

Jason looked about, a crooked smile on his battle-scarred face. He grinned at his companion, a tough looking black-haired chap with a nasty looking scar down his eye. "Ready, Nek?" Jason said.

"On your mark, Jase," Hughes said, loosening his gun. No one really knew where he had received his nickname, Nek, but just that he had arrived one day, toting a rifle, a sword when bullets didn't work, and an aversion to rainstorms.

That was two years back, just after the War that had destroyed most of America, and the rest of the world. Now, bands like this one roamed the land, taking what they could and fighting off other bands.

Currently, this band --they called themselves the Tigers -- were stationed outside a large military complex. It was rumored that inside a band of rogue marines had taken several hostages, among them the beautiful Nicole Porter and her sisters. How Nek had found this information no one knew, but it was common gossip that the night before he presented the info before the table, he had been conversing with a dog and a duck. No one knew why.

Now, Nek and Jason, complete with their squadron of thirty men, prepared to storm the complex, and take it as their own citadel. Jason raised his arm, and the army tensed...

The Goddess nodded to Herself, she would have to make sure one of them was mortally wounded in the fighting, of course, but that would help to determine the outcome of Nicole's final pledge...

And so the Goddess went on, examining possibilities in which Hughes married Nicole, or Jason married Nicole, or when something disastrous happened to one or two of them. It was a long complicated business, but eventually the Goddess found a possibility that worked. She nodded to Herself, then prepared to put the plan into action. Looking at Her watch, She noticed that the three parties involved were dead by over eight millennia. No problem, the Goddess thought, She could just go back in time a little and...

The universe then had Gib Gnab. The Goddess was suddenly busy with creating a New World, and no longer had anytime left to devote to her previous universe.

Smiling to Herself, she began to recreate worlds.

*The End.
I just love cliff-hangers,
don't you? He he...*

Perspectives

Byte II

Internal Affairs

by Matthew Atanian

VI: A Christmas Perspective

Chapter One: A Fresh Perspective

6:42 p.m., 23 December 1997

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 small patches of grass on the outskirts of the Holyoke Mall's parking lot stood triumphantly uncovered, displaying proof for all to see that the meager snow that had fallen in morning was no match for the warmth that had come with the afternoon.

Now, it was evening. John Hoelscher was at work. It had been his first day back, actually. He didn't know what he was thinking, having volunteered to return to work now, when they would have surely let him stay off until the new year! Normally he'd have thought he must be mad, but he didn't think that of himself anymore.

It was something of an irony, he thought, working in the shoe department while confined to a wheelchair. He smiled. Even being in a wheelchair, he was happy, truly at peace, for the first time in quite a while. He had faced his personal demons – literally faced them – and won. How many people could say that?

He looked off in the direction of the Women's Clothing department, and his smile faded. It wasn't replaced with a frown... but rather with a different kind of smile. A smile of happy memories past, memories of break-times spent in the food court with good friends.

Those days were past, and life goes on. Jason had a new job, no longer at the mall. He still saw Jas often enough, mind you. The two were still pretty close, after all.

But he missed those daily meetings in the food court with Jas and...

He turned away from the Women's department, a look of slight sadness on his face, now.

...and Fenny. Around the same time he had had his trial with his inner demons, Fenny had vanished without a trace. Jas didn't know where she had gone, either, but had assured him that wherever she was, she was safe, and she wished the best for them. Jas had refused to tell John how he knew this, however.

Yes, he certainly missed their daily meetings in the...

"So how's the first day back? I know I don't miss it."

John swiveled his chair at the sound of the voice. "Jas!" he said, the smile returning. "How's it going?"

Jason Bertovich stood there, and beside him stood Nicole Porter. John didn't know what to make of their relationship. They seemed to see each other semi-frequently, but hadn't committed themselves to a formal relationship. Despite this, John hadn't heard of either of them dating other people. Perhaps they were just taking their time for the moment...

"So what brings you here?" John asked.

"Oh, you know, this and that," Jason said. "Nicole and I have a little last minute shopping to do, and so did her sister and her friend..." (That was another pair that John noted a definite lack of a formal relationship, not that he knew them nearly as well as Jas and Nicole.) "...and I figured, as long as I was here, I might take some time out of my precious schedule and see how my buddy's doing on his first day back at the salt mines."

"How magnanimous of you," John said dryly. His smile broadened in spite of himself.

"How are you feeling, John?" Nicole asked.

"Much better, actually. Finely out of those damn casts, and I hope to even be able to give up the chair in a month or two. It'll be a while before I'm fully recovered, though." John glanced at his watch. "You know, just happens to be time for my break," he said.

John banged his hand on the table, and proclaimed, "I hereby call this meeting of the Holyoke Refugees of Employment Hell to some sort of order."

"Here, here!" Jason applauded.

"As the only current member of the H.R.E.H.," John then continued, "I'd like to welcome one of our alumni, and his lovely guest."

Nicole giggled. "So how's your new job, Jason?" John asked.

"Pretty good," Jason responded. "Nice people over at the station, and it was certainly nice to get out of here before the annual December chaos. There's this one lady in particular at the station that I've become pretty good friends with. You should meet her, you'd probably like her. Her name's Lina."

John spat out his Sprite. "You tell me her last name's 'Inverse' and I'll have to have you committed, Jas."

Jason laughed. "No, it's Lina Wells."

"Well, we should get together some time," John said. "Go bowling or something." He laughed. "I doubt they make bowling shoes for this thing, though," he said, giving the chair a little wiggle.

"Hey, I just remembered something," Nicole said.

"Oh, what's that?" Jason asked her.

"The Boy Scout troop is having a Christmas Party tomorrow night. The guys invited me and my sisters, and they said we could bring friends if we wanted. Why don't you two come along, and bring your friend Lina, too?"

"Nicole, my dear," Jason said, "that sounds like a wonderful idea."

Kirstin Porter emerged from the changing room.

"What do you think of this one?" she asked Aaron.

"Great," Aaron said, although he thought his words to be the understatement of the year.

Kirstin smiled in reply and re-entered the changing room.

Aaron stood in silent reflection as he waited for her. After a few moments, a thought occurred to him. 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. His fascination was interrupted, however, when a voice from behind him, very similar to Kirstin's, but also quite different, said, "Why should she plan on buying it? That's what guys are for."

Aaron jumped slightly, startled. He turned. "Ah, um, hi, Nicole. Hey, Jason."

Kirstin re-emerged moments later, clad once more in her own clothes. She smiled at the sight of her sister and her friend. "Well, guys," she said, "I think I've had enough for today. I should get home, anyway."

As usual, Kirstin was concerned with her housework, as if she felt that the Porter residence would fall apart if she was not there to keep things in order. *Of course, Nicole thought, everything probably would fall apart with out her.* "Well, sis, I'm set if the guys are."

Kirstin put away the sweater she had been trying on, and turned back to the others. "Shall we go, then?" she asked.

"Fine by me," Jason responded.

"Actually," Aaron said, suddenly, "I just remembered something. You guys go on, I'll catch up."

"Okay," Kirstin told him, "see you in a moment, then."

As Jason, Nicole, and Kirstin walked out into the parking lot, Nicole grinned and whispered quiet enough so that her twin wouldn't overhear, "Hope you liked that sweater, sis."

Jason Bertovich 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. Jason 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. Jason 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 traveling towards him.

After a few minutes, the figure became the sharp image of a man in peak physical condition, wearing a slightly shiny tuxedo with a thin bow tie. Another figure "walked" besides him, also in a shiny tuxedo and thin bow tie, but he was shorter and, while not out of shape, a bit pudgier.

"Hi, there, folks!" the second man said, his voice that of a trained announcer. "I'm Guy Makihashi!"

"And I'm Toro Watanabe!" the first added. "And this is Jason Bertovich's dream sequence!"

Jason thought these two looked familiar. He remembered them from a weird dream he had once when he had been in the hospital.

"So, um, what's going on here?" Jason asked them.

"You tell me, bud, it's your dream," Guy responded.

"I thought you might be here with some inspirational message or something about the meaning of Christmas," Jason told the pair.

"Inspirational message about Christmas? Us?" Toro said. He laughed slightly. "Well, we could help spread Christmas cheer the good old-fashioned WDF style!"

The two snapped their fingers in unison, and suddenly Jason was standing in one corner of a ring. Guy and Toro were off in the announcer's booth.

"Hi there Fight fans! I'm Guy Makihashi!"

"And I'm Toro Watanabe! Welcome to our annual installment of the WORLD DEATHMATCH FEDETATION'S 'CHRUSHMAS BASH'!"

"And tonight is certainly a special bought, as our WDF Champion once again defends his title against a most surprising opponent!"

The Champ, Jason thought. He smiled. *That'd be me.*

"Ready for the fight, Jas?" a woman said from behind him.

He turned, and there was an attractive blond woman wearing a formal kimono. On her feet were wooden sandals. Her blond hair was done up in a bun, upon which sat a nurse's cap. Jason smiled some more. Of course, he thought. "Hello, Miss Manners," he said.

"The name's Anako," she scolded him. "I thought you weren't supposed to be delirious until after the match."

"Um, yeah..." Jason said, slightly confused.

The ring announcer stepped up to the microphone hanging over the ring, gripped it, and spoke firmly into it. "Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to tonight's main event! It is scheduled for to the death, and it is for the WDF Heavyweight championship! Ladies and gentlemen... are you ready?" the man asked.

The crowd roared in approval, and the man continued. "I said... are you rrrrrrrready?"

The crowd again roared, even louder than before.

"Then ladies and gentlemen...for the thousands in attendance, for the millions watching at home... Ladies and gentlemen, Let's get ready to rumbbbbbbbblllllllleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!" The crowd exploded into a fury of cheers and shouting while various pyrotechnics exploded.

"In the red corner, weighing in at 187 pounds, with his manager Anako, Jason Bertovich!"

A few people in the audience cheered half-heartedly.

"Some introduction for the Champion, huh?" Jason said to Anako. He then looked at his clothing. Sneakers. An old pair of jeans. An El-Hazard T-shirt, without

even another shirt on over it. "And where's my usual getup?"

Anako laughed at the first part of what he'd said. "Pretty sure of yourself, ain't ya?"

Jason feared that there was something vitally important he had failed to grasp, and a moment later he realized what that was. He realized it when his opponent was introduced.

The man in the center turned his attention to his ramp. "And his opponent: he hails from the 'School of Hard Knocks' where he earned his Ph.D. in Punishment, he also weighs in at 187 pounds, and he is accompanied by his manager Miss Manners, he is the current WDF Champion of the World, this is Jason "The Professor" Robertson!"

The crowd went absolutely wild as an exact twin of Jason walked up, followed by an exact twin of Anako. Well, exact except for their style of dress. Jason's doppelganger was wearing light blue denim jeans, a white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, a dark red dress vest, and red tie to complete the ensemble. Wrapped around his waist was a belt with a buckle that would put any southerner to shame. A giant gold plate with a black leather strap confirmed that he was in fact the "WDF Heavyweight Champion." Anako's double wore a conservative dress with matching high-heeled shoes.

"Oh, damn," Jason said. Jason Bertovich, that is, not Jason Robertson.

Simultaneously, Anako and Miss Manners exited the ring and took their respective places in their respective corners. Robertson eyed Jason with a look that seemed hungry for blood.

"This isn't working out at all as I thought it would," Jason said to no one in particular.

"Jason..."

* * *

Jason bolted awake. "Fenny!" he shouted. He looked around.

It was dark. He was in his apartment. It was cramped. It was a mess. It was dark.

He was alone.

"Hello?" he called out.

No one responded.

He settled back down, and tried to return to sleep.

"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 wooly 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 counseling session, sis. I'll charge you for the hour. You owe me!"

"Just put it on my tab."

Jason continued to lay upon his futon staring up at his ceiling. Sleep had it continued to allude him. All he could think about was how he had heard Fenny call out his name, and how he had been sure that it had not been a part of the dream...

Chapter Two: A Completely Different Perspective

10:23 a.m., 24 December 1997

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 Holyoke 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 John Hoelscher, because he was sitting in a folding metal chair in the middle of an empty, windowless room. The only light in the room was in the form of a single shaft of light, coming from an unseen source, that shone down directly upon him.

"Why am I here?" John asked. "Why now? I thought I was done with this!"

Another shaft of light suddenly came on, illuminating a figure facing him, sitting in a similar chair a few feet in front of him. It was Shinji-John.

"Hello, John," Shinji-John said.

"Why have you come back?" John asked, nervously. "I thought you had already had your fun with me!"

"Don't worry, John," Shinji-John told him. "I'm not here to punish you again. You have more than paid for your crime in full."

John tilted his head slightly, confused. "Why are you here?" he asked.

"I'm here because... we miss you, John. We need you to exist. And also because we've been a part of you so long that you'll eventually find that you need us to exist,

too. We can be very useful, you see. I, of course, am the original you. You need me to be true to yourself."

Another shaft of light came into being directly behind and to the left of Shinji-John, illuminating Touga-John, standing there silently. "You need him," Shinji-John continued, "to be comfortable in social situations."

A fourth shaft came on, this one directly behind and to the right of Shinji-John, illuminating a silently standing Jinnai-John. "And you need him when the situation calls for assertiveness, directness, and other such qualities."

"I think I've been getting on fine these past few months without you," John told them.

"Did you ever watch the original *Star Trek* TV series?" Shinji-John asked.

"What? Of course. Why?"

"Do you remember that episode when the transporter split Captain Kirk into two halves? The good Kirk and the evil Kirk?"

"Yes, why?" John asked. Then he realized, "The good Kirk found that he couldn't survive without the evil Kirk. Many of the qualities that made him who he was were in the evil Kirk."

"Exactly," Shinji-John said. "The good Kirk needed the evil Kirk to survive, but he had to temper the qualities of the evil Kirk with those found in the good Kirk."

"So what are you saying?" John asked.

"I'm saying that you need us to survive. You need the qualities found in those two, but you also need me to temper them and help you remain true to yourself, so things don't get out of control like they did in High School."

"No!" John suddenly shouted. "No! I don't need you! I am my own man!"

And with that, he disappeared.

"Where do you think he went?" Touga-John asked.

"I think he woke up," Shinji-John responded. "Have patience, he'll come around eventually. He has to."

"Yes, of course he does!" Jinnai-John decreed as he began a bout of maniacal laughter.

John bolted upright and looked around. He was back in his apartment. He covered his face with his hands for a moment and rubbed at his eyes.

He glanced at his clock. *Shit*, he thought, *must have forgotten to set the alarm*. He had meant to set it for ten, as he had to work at noon, but he was sure that a half-hour's extra sleep wouldn't make him late.

He rolled over and pulled his chair closer to the bed, and then dumped himself into the chair. Off he then went to get ready for the day.

By himself.

He was his own man.

Jason had to work, too. Radio stations didn't exactly close for Christmas. He did have the day off, tomorrow, and he had an early day today... but of course, that just meant more work in less time.

Well, beats the Christmas rush at the ol' EB, he thought, and he was instantly much happier about his current situation.

"Hey, Jason, the boss was wondering if you'd look these over and get them ready for broadcast," a woman said, dropping a not-quite-thin stack of papers on the desk in front of him.

Better than EB, he told himself again. Once again, it worked. It always did. He then looked up at the person who had brought him the work. He didn't have to look up far, however.

She was a petite woman. Even though she was twenty, he could easily mistake her for younger. She had a girlish glow of innocence about her, her eyes seemed to sparkle, and her long, black hair seemed to move with a mind of it's own whenever she made the slightest motion. Whenever he looked at her, Jason thought that, except for her normal looking ears, she'd make the perfect elf.

"Oh, hi, Lina!" he said. "I'm glad I ran into you. I've been invited to a party tonight, and was wondering if you'd like to go."

"A party, eh?" She laughed. "Wouldn't that nice gal of yours get mad if you went off to a party with someone else?"

"Oh, no!" Jason answered, waving his hands defensively. "Nothing like that. She's the one who invited me, and suggested bringing you along. That guy I told you about will probably be there, too."

"Oh, John?" Lina asked. "I'd love to meet him. From what you said, he sounds like a real fun guy."

"He's not any kind of mushroom," Jason responded. He immediately regretted his really bad joke.

Lina, however, laughed. The laugh seemed genuine, too. "That's a good one, Jason! Fun guy... fungi!" She laughed some more, and it had a very nice sound.

Jason smiled. "Well, if you're interested, it's in Springfield, the Church in the Acres, around six o'clock."

"I'll be there!" she said brightly, walking away.

Jason rubbed his eyes. He must have been seeing things. For a moment, he'd have sworn she'd been gliding...

Nicole Porter walked into Card and Comic and looked around. She noticed a couple of familiar people in the store, one of them standing at the counter. He was looking towards her direction, but hadn't noticed her. He instead seemed fixated on the store next door.

"Hey! Bruno's Pizza is gone!" Mike Qaudrozzi said.

"Yep," the man behind the counter responded.

"Is anything going to replace Bruno's?"

"Maybe."

"Do you know what?"

"Six dollars and fifty cents, please," the man responded, sounding irritated.

Mike promptly handed the man six one-dollar bills and fifty cents even. He smiled. "Merry Christmas, Roy," he said.

The clerk responded by flipping the receipt with a mastered precision so that it somehow slapped Mike square in the forehead.

Mike flashed a silly grin in response and turned to leave. That was when he noticed her.

"Hey, Nicole! How's it going?"

"Good, and you?" she responded.

"Well, got myself a Magic fix, and now I have to get home with the milk," he said, picking the gallon container up from where he had put it on the counter whilst he had paid for his purchase. "What brings you here?"

"Picking up a present for someone," she responded.

"I see," Mike said.

"Hey, Mike?" Nicole asked warmly.

"No," Mike said.

"You didn't even know what I was going to ask," Nicole pouted.

Mike grinned, and tipped his hat to her. "I have a pretty good idea. See you at the party tonight?"

"You bet. I invited a couple of friends, is that okay?"

"Yeah, it's fine." Mike opened the door.

"Bye, then," Nicole said.

"Bye!" The door closed behind Mike as he began his trek home.

Nicole turned her attention to the other familiar face in the store, yet another Boy Scout from Troop 192. "Hey, Becker!" she called out to him.

Becker's attention stayed upon the rack of comic books he was intently studying.

She walked up to him. Even when she had closed only half of the distance, she could clearly hear the music coming from his headphones.

She tapped him on the shoulder.

"HI, KIRSTIN!" Becker shouted after turning around.

Nicole frowned. She hated when people did that. "It's Nicole, not Kirstin," she told him.

"WHAT?"

"IT'S NICOLE, NOT..."

The clerk looked up from behind the counter. "Hey, keep it down in here," he demanded.

"WHAT?" Becker said.

Suddenly, the sound coming from the headphones stopped.

Panic gripped Becker's face. He pulled the CD player from his pocket and furiously stabbed at the "play" button. Nothing happened. He shook the player, and this produced the same response.

"Noooooooooooo!" Becker wailed.

Nicole smiled.

"Hey, Becker, you got any money on you?"

Becker paused from his weeping to nod an affirmative.

Nicole's smile widened. She pulled from her pocket a fresh pocket of AA batteries. "Twenty bucks, and they're yours," Nicole told him.

Becker grabbed at the batteries like a drug-addict desperate for another hit. Nicole snatched the batteries away.

"Tisk, tisk. Money first, please."

Becker pulled out his wallet and pulled out a crisp, new twenty dollar bill. Nicole deftly confiscated the bill and pocketed it, all in one swift, graceful motion. She then handed the batteries over into Becker's greedy grasp.

Becker furiously tore into the package and inserted the new batteries into the CD player. A moment later, bliss filled his face as the loud noise once more emanated from his headphones.

Nicole smiled once more, satisfied.

"Pleasure doing business with you," she told him.

"WHAT?"

She turned, her business with Becker done, and went up to the counter to buy what she had come in for. And to pay for it, she used a crisp, new twenty dollar bill.

* * *

"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. This time they were at Eastfield Mall, a much smaller mall, but being in Springfield it was also closer to home.

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.

"Thank you, and Happy Holidays," John said as the proud owner of a new pair of shoes walked off into the Christmas-time mall crowd.

He wheeled away from the register and looked around. Somehow, thankfully, the shoe department wasn't very busy today.

Just when he thought he'd get a bit of time to relax, however, a customer came over.

He was wearing a black trench-coat and fedora, and looked like he'd gotten little sleep.

"Hey, can you help me?" the man asked.

"Sure, what can I do for you?" John responded.

"I need a present for someone," the man said. He scratched his head. "God, I haven't got a clue what to get her!"

"See anything here you like?" John asked, trying to be helpful.

The man looked around. "I suppose everyone needs shoes, right?" He scratched his head some more.

"What size does she wear?" John asked.

The man scratched his head once again. "I don't really know what size Sarah wears. Maybe I could ask Kirstin or Nicole?"

"Porter?" John asked.

The man nodded. "You know them?"

"Well, I know Nicole through my friend Jas."

"Jason Bertovich?" the man asked. John nodded. "Yeah, I met him a couple of times," the man admitted. "Well, I sort of met him... oh, never mind."

"Well," John said, "if you can't think of anything else, how about a gift certificate? Then she can come and pick out anything she'd like."

"No!" the man said forcefully. "Sorry," he then added. "Just... I have to get her something *perfect!*"

With that, the man turned and walked away, seemingly a man on a mission.

"Last minute Christmas shoppers can be so weird," John commented.

"I must be weird or something to have waited until the last minute like this," Jason commented to himself. He deftly maneuvered through the crowd, his time past as a mall employee having given him a superior to normal skill at it.

He passed one poor chap in a black trench-coat and fedora who seemed to be flying any which way the crowd deemed fit to propel him. "Amateur," Jason commented. If he could, he'd stop to help the man, but in this type of situation, stopping could be deadly. Jason said a silent prayer for the man (who seemed to have lost his fedora as he flew up into the air) as he moved on.

Having been distracted by the poor trench-coat clad man's ordeal, Jason accidentally bumped into someone. Jason was alarmed to discover it to be Officer Stan Kelly.

"Hi, Officer. Sorry about that."

"Oh, no problem," the cop replied. "Hey, I remember you. Jason, right?"

"Yup," Jason responded. "What brings you here, today?"

"Mall Security asked us if we could help out a bit. They were a little overwhelmed, today."

Jason laughed. "They're a little overwhelmed by a small crowd of those mall-wandering old ladies."

"Now, we should respect mall security," Stan responded. It was clear he was trying his best not to laugh at Jason's comment. "Even if they are only rent-a-cops, and not the real thing," Stan couldn't help adding.

"Officer Stan, I'm shocked!" Jason said in mock-horror.

Stan shrugged. "So, what brings you here, today? Going to work?"

"Nah," Jason responded. "Already off work. Don't work at the mall, anymore. Got a better job."

"Hey, good for you! So, what does bring you here?"

"Last minute shopping," Jason said. "Need a gift for a special lady."

"The same special lady who was visiting you in the hospital?"

"That's the one," Jason responded. "Any suggestions?"

"Damn it, Jason, I'm a State Trooper, not a love advice line," Stan responded. "Wish I *could* help, but I don't know much about that kind of thing. Sorry."

"Well, I should get going, then," Jason said, "before the vultures get all of the remaining good stuff. Thanks, anyways."

"Good luck, Jason, and Merry Christmas!"

* * *

A few minutes later, Jason found himself passing a store he knew quite well... Electronics Boutique. He glanced in, and wasn't entirely surprised to see all of the shelves were completely empty. Not a sausage remained.

Despite this, there were three people in the store, badgering the poor woman behind the counter.

"Don't you have anything left?" one of the pasty faced teens asked her, pleadingly. "I've just gotta have that new game!"

"Sorry, we're sold out of everything at the moment," she told them.

"No fuckin' way!" the first teen shouted.

"Bull-fucking-shit!" the second added.

"Sonuva-fucking-bitch!" the third added.

Such lovely language, Jason thought to himself.

"You don't have anything in the back room?" one of the teens said.

"No, I'm sorry," the woman said. "You see, when I say we're out of everything, that includes the back room. There is absolutely no merchandise in the store at the moment. I'm even sold out of *Barney Battle Power*."

That was, of course, the worst fighting game ever conceived. Who wanted to play a fighting game where, instead of throwing punches and kicks, all you could do was give your opponent flowers and say, "I love you!"

"No fuckin' way!" the first teen shouted.

"Bull-fucking-shit!" the second added.

"Sonuva-fucking-bitch!" the third added.

They wandered out of the store to find another employee elsewhere in the mall to make miserable.

Jason wandered into the store. "Hey, Evadne," he said, waving to the woman behind the counter.

His former boss smiled upon seeing him. "Jason, hi!" she said. "Good to see you! How's my former best employee? Still can't talk you into coming back?"

"I don't have the word's 'gullible fool' stamped onto my forehead, now, do I?" Jason retorted good-naturedly.

The woman laughed. "Can't say as I blame you. Don't suppose there's any openings at your radio station, is there?"

"Nope, can't say that there are."

"Well, it was worth a shot," she responded. "So, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Christmas shopping. Need something for the last person on my list... and the most special person."

"Must be for Nicole," Evadne responded.

"You guessed it."

"Well, we're all out of financial software. All out of everything, actually."

A random thought occurred to Jason. "Did that game ever come in? ECWCWWF EXTREME THUNDEROUS ATITUDE II?"

"Oh, she into wrestling like you, then?"

"No, not really. Just curious. It always bugged me how that shipment never came, and no one could ever explain why."

Evadne shrugged. "Still not in. Go figure."

"So anyways," Jason asked, switching subjects again, "what exactly do women want?"

Of all the responses Jason could have hoped to get, laughter was not one of them. It was the one he did get, however. "Wow," she gasped between chuckles, wiping her eyes, "you sure can pick 'em, Jason. Why don't you just go ahead and ask me if there's life after death, or to work out pi to the millionth place in my head?"

Jason blinked.

"Okay, philosophy aside," Evadne said, "whatever you get Nicole, it's obviously got to be special, right?"

"That's it, exactly," Jason said. "I want to get her something that will show her how I feel, but something uniquely from me. Something beyond just a material possession."

"A dilemma."

"By definition."

"So you want to get her something that says, Something that says, 'This is for you, because you are special to me.'"

"Any ideas?"

"Sorry. None whatsoever," Evadne said. She checked her watch. "But, hey, you've got four and a half hours, yet."

Jason smiled. "Thanks."

"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."

Lina looked at herself in the mirror and smiled appreciatively. The dress she had decided to wear had been left by the apartment's former occupant, as had most of the possessions in the apartment. However, after she made some alterations to the dress, it fit quite nicely on her smaller frame.

She smiled again. Tonight, at the party, she'd meet John. Things were definitely going according to plan.

John wheeled about his apartment making a few hasty last minute preparations before the van arrived to bring him to the party. On the CD he was listening to as he did this, one song ended and another began.

As the music started, maniacal laughter filled the room. With disgust, John realized what song it was. "The

Conqueror Jinnai." He wheeled over to his CD player and changed the track, hoping that "Little Flower" might calm him back down.

"Going somewhere? A party, perhaps?" a voice called out.

John froze. He'd been hoping that it hadn't been real, that it had only been a dream. He had been hoping that they weren't back. However, he was quite awake now, and he had heard the voice. There was no one else present that he could see, but that voice could only belong to Jinnai-John.

"What's it to you?" John angrily answered.

"We should go with you," the voice responded. "You'll probably need us."

"No! I can do this myself! I don't need you!"

"You seem to fail to understand that we are a part of you. You should be honored to have me as part of you!" The voice broke into laughter much like that that had been coming from the CD player moments before.

"No! I don't need you! I can handle this evening by myself!"

"If you are so certain, then we shall see," a new voice said. It was Shinji-John. "You'll be free of us for the rest of the evening," he assured John, "and tomorrow we'll discuss how you did." He paused. "Are you sure you won't change your mind? We do only want to help."

"Just leave me alone!" John demanded. "Do you hear me? I DON'T NEED YOU!"

Silence was John's only response.

Chapter Three: Party Perspectives

6:07 p.m., 24 December 1997

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 Atanian who'd gotten there early. That had been over half an hour, ago, and inside the church's main hall the party was beginning.

As Jason stepped from his car, he observed a large white van pulling into the church's parking lot. Jason walked over to the van and greeted John as his friend was lowered out of the vehicle and onto the ground.

"Glad you could make it, John," Jason said.

"Yeah, nice to be out for a change." John hadn't gotten out much in the last few months. "Where's Nicole?"

"She's coming with her sisters," Jason told his friend. "I don't think she's here yet. I don't notice Lina's car, either. Shall we go in?"

John hesitated, nervous for some reason. *What are you worried about?* he asked himself. *You've been to parties before! Go on! Have fun!*

"John, you okay?"

"Yeah, let's go."

The two friends made their way up the ramp to the double doors. When they got there, Jason opened them and they went in.

They looked around.

There was already a sizable crowd there, many of them in Boy Scout uniforms. Obviously, many of those affiliated with the Troop must have arrived early.

A bitter looking old man pushed his way past John and Jason, and was then almost run over by a midget-sized Boy Scout who was acting like he had just eaten a pound of sugar. "Jesus H. Chrysler!" the man exclaimed. He then turned to a crock-pot bearing woman beside him, probably his wife, and started barking orders to her.

"Nice crowd," John mused.

"I'm sure they're not all bad," Jason responded. "Nicole speaks fondly of some of... Jesus H. Chrysler!!"

"What is it?" John asked. Jason pointed at what had inspired his sudden outburst. "Wow," John then said upon noticing the papier-mâché constructions at the front of the hall. "Those have got to be the second biggest candy canes I have ever seen."

The two large candy canes towered to either side of the stage, and huge Christmas wreaths lined the walls. Of to one side was a large tree which was still being decorated with festive thingies and doodads.

"Hi, welcome to the party!" a man said, walking over.

Jason had a sudden feeling of *deja vu* upon seeing the man, as if he had met him before in some half-forgotten memory struggling to stay buried. *The Other... the other what?* Jason struggled to remember, but the harder he tried the less he could recall. *Never mind.*

"Hi," Jason said.

"Hey, Jason," the man responded.

"Do I know you?"

The man started to respond, but then hesitated. Finally, he said, "No, actually, but I know Nicole. Name's Matthew Atanian." He turned to John. "Didn't I see you at Filene's earlier?"

John nodded.

"Well, welcome to the party, again. Please enjoy yourself," he said. He then noticed someone else who had just entered.

"Oh, excuse me," Matt said, walking off. A moment later, in delighted surprise, he called out, "Colin!"

John looked to Jason. "Sure are... a lot of people... huh?"

"You okay, John?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Well, okay," Jason said. "You just don't seem yourself. You're usually the life of the party."

"Well... haven't been out in a while, you know? Give me a few minutes, I'll be okay."

"Sure," Jason said. "You need anything, though, you let me know."

John was about to respond when a voice called out, "Hey! Want me to help you light it?"

A tall Boy Scout with longish hair, wearing camouflaged fatigues with his Scout uniform rather than official BSA pants, ran eagerly towards the tree, which was nearly done being decorated. He was hungrily holding a zippo lighter. A moment later, there was a bit of excitement as those who had toiled to decorate the tree then had to extinguish it.

Things seemed to move in slow motion for a split second as Lina Wells joined the party. She walked over to Jason and John, her face full with a warm smile. "Hi, Jason," she said. "This your friend?"

"John Hoelscher, meet Lina Wells," Jason said in introduction.

"Um, hi," John said, timidly.

Lina smiled at him. "You're cute," she said.

John just sat in his wheelchair, unsure what to say in response.

Lina flashed him a smile.

"N... nice to meet you," John said. "Um, hi."

"Nice to meet you, too," Lina responded. "Jason's told me a lot about you."

Jason looked at John with concern.

"I'm sorry," John said, "could you excuse me a moment?" With that, he wheeled away.

Jason turned to Lina. "I'm sorry," he apologized, "John's not usually like that. He's seemed a bit different ever since the accident."

"No need to explain," Lina said. "I'm sure he just needs time to get to know me, then everything will be peachy keen."

"I hope so," Jason responded. "I've been worried about him."

"Well," Lina told him, "you never know what'll happen. If you'll excuse me, Jas, I think I'll get some punch."

Lina disappeared into the crowd.

A moment later, a pair of hands came from behind Jason and closed themselves over his eyes. "Merry Christmas," someone said in a bouncy voice. "Guess who!"

Jason turned around quicker than he could have thought possible. Shock, amazement, and happiness simultaneously crowded his expression.

"Fenny!" he exclaimed.

"None other," she proclaimed.

"God, I've been worried sick about you! Where've you been?"

Fenny smiled. "Didn't I tell you?"

"No, you didn't," Jason told her. "Your cryptic post card said nothing about where you were. Not even a post-mark on it to give any clue where it was mailed from."

"I can't remember exactly what I wrote," Fenny confessed. "What did it say?"

Some logical part of Jason's mind noted something peculiar about this conversation, but his joy at seeing his friend alive and safe made him ignore it and continue. "Just that you were safe with family, and I shouldn't worry about you. You said you'd tell me more, except you didn't want to put me in danger. Fenny, what happened to you?"

"Oh, is John here?" Fenny asked. "I have to see him, too!"

"Um, yeah," Jason responded, confused. "He's off over that way, somewhere."

"Thanks! Bye, Jason-honey!"

Fenny disappeared into the crowd.

"Fenny, wait!"

"Punch?"

Jason turned around. "What?"

Lina held out a glass to him. "Did you want some punch? I thought I'd get you a cup, too. Who was that you

were talking to? Was that the famous Nicole I hope to meet this evening?"

"No, that was..." Jason turned to try and spot her, but she had completely disappeared into the crowd. "Fenny," he listlessly said.

John was sitting by himself in a corner of the hall, watching the party proceed without him. He sighed.

"You there! Crippled peon!"

John looked up as a self-important looking Boy Scout approached him. "Do you mean me?" John asked.

"Do you see any other cripples here? Well, physically crippled, that is! You are all crippled mentally, compared to me!" he decreed. He began to laugh maniacally.

John just sat quietly until the laughter subsided some time later. "Did you... did you want something, sir?" he then asked.

The scout smiled. "Ah," he commented. "Respect, coupled with a healthy dose of fear. I like you."

John waited for the scout to come to his point.

"You haven't seen a speech lying about anywhere, have you?" he asked finely. He held his hands about a foot apart. "About so thick?"

"I'm sorry, I haven't," John admitted.

"Well, then, have you seen my worthless assistant? He is supposed to be looking for it!"

"I'm sorry, I haven't," John repeated. He did wish the boy would leave him alone, but he couldn't work up the courage to tell him so.

"Humph," the boy said. John was immediately disregarded by him, as he stormed off. "Proctor! Where are you with my speech!" he said as he moved away.

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?"

"Our host?" Jason said, walking over. "Haven't seen him for a while."

"Jason!" Nicole exclaimed delightedly. "You made it!"

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world," Jason told her.

"WHAT?" Becker exclaimed.

Neko-chan hissed at Jason. "Hey, you ever get the cat... um... you know..." Jason whispered to Nicole.

"Um... well... I never seem to have the time," Nicole responded. "On those rare occasions when I might have made the time, it seems like he knows what I'm planning and he disappears."

"If you want, I could take him to the vet some time," Jason offered.

Neko-chan's hissing intensified, now accompanied by growling.

Mike smiled. "Want me to take him for a while?" he offered.

Nicole passed the cat over to Mike. "Thanks," she said.

If you were to look at the cat then, you'd almost think he was frowning.

Jason smiled at Nicole. "Would you gentlemen," he said, addressing the others, "mind if I borrowed the lovely Miss Porter for a while?"

"Be our guest," Mike told him.

Jason held out his arm, which Nicole gladly took as they walked off together.

The double doors were thrown wide open, and the partygoers of 192 saw a young Asian man dressed in yellow walk into the hall. 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."

"Hey, John."

"F... Fenny?" John stuttered. "Is it really you?"

"Nah, of course not," Fenny said.

"Don't joke around," John said. He grinned. "Fenny, I can't believe it's you! I've missed you."

"I missed you, too," Fenny told him. "I just had to see you and Jas for Christmas, so I had to come."

"Where've you been?" John asked her.

"You don't know?"

"No, of course not," John told her. "You were already gone when I came back from... from Ohio," he said, "and Jason never said where you were. I got the feeling he didn't know anything."

Fenny smiled. "Hey, John, you know what?"

"What?"

"I met this girl, friend of Jason's. Lina something. I think she likes you."

John blushed. "I doubt it," he told her.

"Oh, come on now," she said. "Would the bouncy one lie about something like that? I think you should definitely get to know her better. What do you say, will you give it a shot? For me?"

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.

"Oh, piffle," Justy Yung said upon the disappointment of realizing his speech would not be delivered to his mass of followers.

"We were all looking forward to it, Captain," Proctor told him. Proctor meant it, although in actuality he had been the only one who had looked forward to 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."

Jason observed this and almost walked over to say something to the UPS Guy, but a tug on his arm convinced him that his attention was needed elsewhere. "Come on," Nicole told him. "I got you something."

Nicole led him out to the front lawn, hoping to get some privacy. A few yards away stood another couple.

She briefly noted with amusement that it was her older sister with Matt Atanian. *I thought she despised him?* she thought. She quickly filed that bit of info away, however, to concentrate on the matters at hand.

She handed a gift wrapped package to Jason. From the size of it, it was clearly a video cassette. He smiled as he tore into the package. He had a good idea what it was... and yes it was!

"The new Evangelion tape! Just what I wanted!" Jason smiled. "Thanks, Nicole!"

"You're welcome," she told him. "So...?"

"Huh? Oh!" Jason fumbled around in his pocket for a moment, and then pulled out a small, simply wrapped package.

"What is it," Nicole said, examining it with a critical eye. "A diamond ring?"

"Not quite," Jason told her, "but I hope you like it, anyways."

She saw that Jason was watching her intently, and she began unwrapping the present. After removing the simple wrapping, she regarded the small object she held in her hand.

Nicole slowly smiled. "Oh, Jason," she said softly. "This is... perfect. Thank you."

She leaned close to him and kissed him softly on the cheek.

Inside, standing next to John, Fenny was looking out of the window at Jason and Nicole. She smiled slightly, and snapped her fingers.

As Nicole pulled her lips away from Jason, a 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!"

The two of them looked, and indeed snow was beginning to come down around them. It looked like they were to have a White Christmas, after all.

Everyone from the party rushed outside onto the church's front lawn. Boy Scouts and the other guests alike laughed and frolicked as the pure white powder floated down from the stars above.

"Fenny, isn't it beautiful?" John asked as he pulled his chair to a halt. When no response was forthcoming, he turned around. "Fenny?" *Funny, she was right there a moment ago*, John pondered.

"Hey, stranger."

John turned again. It was Lina. "Oh, um... hi," he said.

"Mind if I join you to watch the snow fall?" she asked.

"Not at, um... not at all," John told her.

She laughed, her laughter mingling with the falling snow and the joyful shouts and cries of the others to form a sweet cacophony of holiday cheer.

Nicole and Jason approached the pair, as did Aaron Abdelmaseh and Kirstin. Kirstin was snug in her new sweater. Matt Atanian soon joined them as well, as did Sarah, who was not quite as hostile towards Matt as she usually was.

And for the rest of the evening, they truly had a merry time.

VII: A Hoelscher Carol

The Visitor

It was around Eleven o'clock that evening when John wheeled himself in through his door and shut it behind himself with a heavy sigh. He turned the chair around and looked back the way he had come, staring at the now closed door that separated himself from the rest of the world.

Why had he suddenly become so separated?

He dismissed the thought, and went to make himself something to eat. He hadn't really eaten at the Christmas party. He hadn't done much at the party, come to think of it, rather than take up space...

He made himself a can of Chef Boyardee (not gourmet eating, to be sure, but quick, easy, and cheep) and pulled himself up to the table to eat. He had gotten about half way through his ravioli when he thought he heard a strange noise in the distance...

Thump... thump...

Slow, steady...almost like... footsteps?

Shuffle...scrape...

What was that? Metal being dragged?

He quickly wheeled himself to the door and pulled it open. His eyes bulged open and he yelped in startlement when he saw...

...nothing. Not a sausage.

"I must be imagining things," he told himself. He went back to his dinner.

Thump... shuffle... thump... scrape...

He dropped his fork. It clattered upon the table. He turned back to face the door.

Shuffle... thump... scrape... thump...

"Who's there?" John called out. "I'm... um... I'm armed! Don't come in!"

Thump... shuffle... thump... scrape...

It was right at his door!

Suddenly, the air in the room seemed to drop dramatically in temperature. John shivered, and noticed his breath turning into vapor as it escaped from his mouth, which was hanging loosely open in shock. Ambient noises, such as cars passing by on the street outside, slowly faded and vanished into nothingness. The only sounds that could be heard by John were his own breathing and a rhythmic sound he soon realized was his own heartbeat.

Then the noise came again... *Thump... thump... shuffle...scrape...*

Something appeared near the door... No, something was coming *through* the door! John stared, transfixed, unable to look away, as the figure entered the room.

The first thing John noticed about him was that he was blue... it was kind of hard not to notice. He looked very much that shimmering blue that Old Ben Kenobi sported after he had passed on, although this specter was missing the translucency.

He was an old man, to be sure. He looked very tired, very ragged, and very sad. His jaw was held closed by a bandage tied around his head, the knot up on the top. The last thing John noticed about him made John wonder how the blueness had been the first.

He was carrying with him a plethora of heavy chains, some with little boxes attached to them, some with other objects obviously intended to weigh the chains down. The chains were draped over him, not seemingly attached directly to him. It was as if he could leave the chains behind at any time, but didn't have the will to do so.

He stood there, looking sadly at John.

John stood there, looking shocked out of his wits.

"You're not real! Go away!" John shouted a few moments later.

The man reached up and began to untie the knot.

"You're... you're a figment of my imagination, that's it!" John declared. "A piece of processed meat filling gone bad!"

The man pulled the bandage off and tested his jaw, moving it as if for the first time in a century. "Processed

meat filling?" he asked some time later. "What ever are you eating, my lad? I think I preferred being a fragment of underdone potato!"

John blinked.

"Now then..." the man continued. "Do give me a moment... It had been a while since I've done this..." He took a deep breath, or at least the spiritual equivalent, and suddenly loomed over John quite menacingly. John shrank into his wheelchair.

"You will be visited this night by three spirits!" the main exclaimed. "Do you know why?"

John shook his head.

"I'll tell you why! Look at yourself! You're pathetic! You could be so much more." He coughed. "I'm not quite as subtle with this as when I visited good old Ebenezer, am I?" he asked himself.

"Eb... Eben... ezer?" John stammered. "Who are you?"

"Why, my lad, I am Jacob Marley, of course."

"That's preposterous!" John exclaimed. "*A Christmas Carol* was just a book by Charles Dickens!"

"Just a book!" the spirit exclaimed in fury. His voice grew to abnormal volume. "**Just a book!!!** How do you explain my presence here, then? Oh yes, I'm just a piece of processed meat filling gone bad... Well, no matter. Weather you believe I exist or not will not change what will come to pass. You *will* be visited by three spirits. The first at the stroke of Midnight. The next at One o'clock, and the final spirit will come at the hour of Two.

"Pay heed to these spirits. They have important things to tell you. If you do not listen, the coast may be your soul..."

"Um... Mr. Marley?"

"Yes, my lad?"

"What is your connection to all of this? I understand why you visited Scrooge, he was your friend. Why me?"

"Your spirits asked me to lend a hand. They told me they had promised not to visit you for the rest of today, but wanted to give you warning before they did visit you."

"I see," John replied. He had a bad feeling he knew who these spirits were...

"Well, I must be off... I have a lot more eternal suffering to do, you know," Marley said. "These little rests are enjoyable, but I can't get too used to them."

With that, Marley tied his jaw back up and headed out the way he had come...

After he disappeared through the door, the sound of his movement slowly faded, and the sounds of the outside world slowly returned. The temperature gradually rose, and John could no longer see his breath...

He looked at the clock. 11:25.

"Bah," he said. "Humbug." It had to have been his imagination.

He cleaned up his supper mess, washed up, and got into his bed.

But even though he closed his eyes, he never did manage to find sleep...

Suddenly, he opened his eyes. There was nothing there. He was alone. He glanced at the clock.

12:01 a.m.

He sighed in relief. It *had* just been his imagination. *Note to self, no more Chef Boyardee.*

John settled back down to try and get some sleep. He turned over on his side and saw himself.

"Hello."

"AAAAAAGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" John exclaimed. He bolted out of the bed.

The other John also got out of the bed, sitting up and getting to his feet in a leisurely manner. It was Shinji-John.

The Past

John stood by the side of the bed, using a small table for support, looking at himself standing on the other side. Or rather, looking at the being that was a cross between

himself and Shinji Ikari. Or was it more himself then he cared to admit? After all, in the past, this *had* been him.

Shinji-John removed the ear-buds from his ears, turned off his small cassette player, and pocketed it. "Hello," he said. "Sorry if I startled you."

In the past, this had been him... In the past...

"So you're the Ghost of Christmas Past, are you?" John asked as he pulled his wheelchair over. He tried to keep his tone civil, but there was still a slight bit of contempt to it.

"Well," Shinji-John explained, "'ghost' is not quite an accurate term in this case. After all, I am merely a quasi-physical manifestation of a hidden aspect of your inner psyche."

John sat. "Quasi-physical?"

"Technically, I don't physically exist," Shinji-John responded, walking over to John, "but you are so convinced of my existence that..."

Shinji-John poked John lightly in the arm. John jerked back, startled. He *had* felt it!

John looked at Shinji-John in annoyance. Then he was startled once more. What startled him this time was not another poke, but that their surroundings seemed to have changed completely.

"I know this place," he said a moment later. "This is... this is my old home in Seattle!" He grinned. "Of course! Christmas Past! How old will I be here, huh?"

"Ten," Shinji-John told him.

Sure enough, a moment later a bundle of energy flew into the room in the form of a young John Hoelscher, followed by an equally energetic sister five years his junior. The pair were then followed by John's parents, who obviously didn't want to be up this early in the morning, but were happy none the less.

"Well," his mother said, "let's see what Santa brought this year!"

"Santa! Santa!" his sister Jane happily cooed.

His father was opening a trash bag, waiting to fill it up with the soon to be torn and flung wrapping paper.

His sister jumped at her presents first, and he soon followed. She beamed with delight at every doll she opened, and he did likewise with every toy gun or action figure.

The present day John smiled as he watched this, happy memories filling his heart. Yes, it was a typical Christmas as shared by many families... nothing special, really. Still, they had been fun.

"They were fun, weren't they?" Shinji-John asked, echoing his thoughts. "You'd open all of your presents, and then you and Jane would run off and play with them. Later, you'd have a nice big meal together... A typical family Christmas."

John nodded.

"But," Shinji-John said suddenly, "not everything was happy this time of year, was it?"

Without warning, they were standing in a classroom. John recognized it as one of his old schools. They had jumped to a few days prior, it seemed... to his class's Christmas party. All of his old classmates were in a state of jubilation, exchanging gifts and festive snacks.

"You'd grown up with your family, and they were accepting of you," Shinji-John said. "However, you weren't always comfortable around others."

"Nonsense," John protested.

"Oh? Who's that in the corner?"

Shinji-John pointed straight over at ten-year-old John, sitting quietly by himself, his nose in a comic book.

"Good book?" Shinji-John asked.

"Must have been, if it kept me from the party," John stated.

"Was it, now?" Shinji-John prodded.

John thought about it for a moment, and was surprised to discover something. He hadn't thought about this day since... well, probably since when he had originally gone through it. Yet now, he found he could recall everything about it perfectly.

"No, it wasn't," John admitted.

"Then why not join the party?" Shinji-John asked.

John sat silently, not answering. Shinji-John waited patiently, until...

"Well, let's move forward, shall we?"

Suddenly, it was eight years later, and they were in Kettering, Ohio.

John saw himself at eighteen, dressed in a smart looking dark blue suit with a red tie. He was being followed by his posse, and his girlfriend, Jen, was holding his arm in hers. A couple of the members of his posse jumped forward and threw open the double doors to the school's gym, allowing John and Jen to make a grand entrance to the school's Christmas Dance.

"Do you remember this night?" Shinji-John asked.

"Yes," John said. "The school's Christmas party, my senior year."

"What was that on your face?" Shinji-John asked. "Is that a smile? A smile, on your face, in a social situation?"

John looked. Sure enough, the younger him looked happy.

There was music...

There was dancing...

There was gift swapping...

There were festive snacks...

And there was younger John, not sitting in the corner with a comic book...

In fact, he was the center of the party!

And then, as the evening began to draw to a close, the disc jockey began to play some of the slower songs. John held Jen close to him as they moved around the dance floor...

The John who was watching smiled in happy memory... until suddenly he remembered something else. He frowned.

"I can't watch this."

"Why not?" Shinji-John asked.

"I CAN'T WATCH THIS!" John repeated. "This isn't my happiness. This is a happiness I got because of you three! And in the end, you three only got me *PAIN!!*"

The scene around them suddenly shifted once more. This shift left Shinji-John looking surprised, however... apparently, he had not caused it.

It was now a few months earlier.

John watched himself walk down the hall with his posse to either of his sides or directly behind him. A moment later a slightly younger boy entered the hall looking at a small scrap of paper, and then looking over at the lockers. The clique stopped for a moment and turned to look at him.

Billy, one of John's friends, looked him over and spoke. "Hey, aren't you that new kid that transferred from the private academy?" he asked.

"Um, yeah. I'm Joe," he responded timidly and then looked over to John.

John looked back and felt the junior's stare burn into him. There the junior stood with his navy slacks and dress shirt, and there John stood with his circle of compatriots. John looked back one last time and then turned to his friends.

"Cone on guys, we don't have time to waist on him." He then continued down the hall, soon turning a corner.

Jen walked up to him, a frown on her face. "That was kind of harsh, John," she scolded him.

He laughed at her.

This had been the first time. It had not been the last. And while their relationship would last for a while, it ended shortly after the Christmas they had just witnessed.

"I was a jerk," John said to Shinji-John. "I was a jerk, and I lost her..."

Shinji-John placed a hand comfortingly on John's shoulder.

"I lost her, and I had to get away..." John looked up to see that the scene had changed once more.

"This is...!" John exclaimed.

"The Filene's Christmas Party, one year later," Shinji-John confirmed.

And there was John, a brand new employee at Filene's Most of the employees were socializing with one

another in what was a combination party / clean the store. (After all, the last minute Christmas Eve rush left the store in quite a mess.)

"How's it going, John?" one of his coworkers asked.

"All right, you know? I don't really know that many people yet."

"Eh, give it time."

"Oh, I didn't mean to sound discouraged. In fact, I was thinking of trying to meet that woman from the lady's department."

"Which woman? Tiffie?"

"No."

"Leslie?"

"No, the other one."

"Surely you don't mean..."

John nodded.

"You can't be serious! None of the guys dare to approach her! She's like... like a goddess or something!"

John laughed. He laughed some more. Finally, he laughed a bit. "Well, no one will stop Lord God John!" He grinned.

"You're weird," his coworker said with a grin, "you know that, John?"

John simply nodded an affirmative as he went off in search of his objective.

After a few inquiries, John was told that she had gone for a walk in the mall. John left Filene's to search for her.

The mall seemed kind of eerie, devoid of people. He had hoped that with no one else there she would be easy to find, but he had been wrong. It was a big mall.

Then he heard footsteps. He quickly followed them, turned a corner, and bumped into someone. Literally. They both fell to the ground.

It wasn't her.

In fact, it was a guy.

"Hey, sorry about that," John said. "I wasn't expecting to run into anyone at this time of night, you know?"

The guy nodded.

"Come to think of it, what are you doing here?"

"I got stuck closing, and the store needed quite a bit of cleaning. I work over at the Electronics Boutique."

"Ah. I work at Filene's Name's John. John Hoelscher." He stuck out his hand.

"Jason Bertovich," the man responded, taking John's hand in a firm grip and shaking it.

"Glad to meet you. I'm kind of new to the area, you know? Just moved from Ohio."

"What a coincidence," Jason responded. "I just moved here myself. From Pennsylvania."

"Hey," John thought to ask, "you didn't see a woman pass by this way, did you? Long hair, done in a ponytail? Asian? Bouncy?"

"Someone looking for me?" a third voice interrupted.

John and Jason turned, beheld, and smiled.

Shinji-John turned to his companion. "John, who would you say have been your closest friends for the past few years?"

John didn't have to think before he answered. "Jason and Fenny," he responded.

"And do you think you would have chased after her, if not for certain influences from within yourself?" Shinji-John then asked.

John found he couldn't answer... He turned to face Shinji-John, but he wasn't there...

And he was no longer in the mall...

He was back in his bedroom...

The Present

John looked around his empty room. He glanced at his clock which, sure enough, read, "1:00 AM."

"Who's next?" John called out. "Come on! Where are you?"

Silence was his only response. Then, something caught his attention – a light coming from under the door to the main room of his apartment. Could it be...?

He quickly wheeled his way to the door, pulled it open, and saw...

...that he had just left the light on.

"Baka," he called himself.

He turned off the light, went back to his bedroom, and closed the door.

"Ah, so there you are," a voice said.

John looked up at the sound. It was Touga-John, waiting patiently for him.

"Ah, so there you are," John greeted him in return.

"Well then, are you ready?"

"No," John responded. "But then, I haven't a choice, have I?"

"Not particularly, no," Touga-John admitted. "We are sorry to be putting you through this," he then confided, "but it is for the best, really. Shall we be off, then?"

"Yes, all right."

"This should be somewhat fresh in your memory," Touga-John said as the scene changed around them.

"Sure are... a lot of people... huh?" the other John said.

"You okay, John?" Jason asked him.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Well, okay," Jason said. "You just don't seem yourself. You're usually the life of the party."

"Well... haven't been out in a while, you know? Give me a few minutes, I'll be okay."

"Sure," Jason said. "You need anything, though, you let me know."

Touga-John turned to John. "You *are* usually the life of the party. Do you know what was different tonight?"

"It's what I told Jason," John replied. "Just been a while since I'd been out."

"And what about what happened next?" Touga-John asked. "I don't suppose all of that was because you hadn't been out in a while. You usually have more confidence than that with the ladies."

"I suppose you expect me to believe I get that from you?" John asked with scorn.

"I expect you to believe the truth," Touga-John responded, "and you must discover the truth for yourself."

We are only here to make our case before you pass judgment on what is to be your truth."

"You there! Crippled peon!"

John looked away from Touga-John to observe a self-important looking Boy Scout approaching the John they had come to watch. "Do you mean me?" the other John asked.

"Do you see any other cripples here?" the Boy Scout asked. "Well, physically crippled, that is! You are all crippled mentally, compared to me!" he decreed. He then began to laugh maniacally.

John just sat quietly until the laughter subsided some time later. "Did you... did you want something, sir?" he then asked.

The Scout smiled. "Ah," he commented. "Respect, coupled with a healthy dose of fear. I like you."

John waited for the Scout to come to his point.

"You haven't seen a speech lying about anywhere, have you?" he finally asked. He held his hands about a foot apart. "About so thick?"

"I'm sorry, I haven't," John admitted.

"Well then, have you seen my worthless assistant? He is supposed to be looking for it!"

"I'm sorry, I haven't," John repeated. He did wish the boy would leave him alone, but he couldn't work up the courage to tell him so.

"Humph," the boy said. John was immediately disregarded by him, as he stormed off.

"That was most unpleasant, wasn't it?" Touga-John asked.

John nodded in response.

"Surely you could not have enjoyed watching that?"

"No more than I enjoyed going through it," John admitted.

"You know," Touga-John said, "that young man reminded me of someone..."

"He kind of reminded me of Jinnai," John commented.

"Ah yes, that was it," Touga-John said. "I don't suppose you are familiar with the phrase, 'Fight fire with fire,' are you?"

"You're saying that if I had Jinnai-John with me, I could have stood up for myself, is that it?"

"You said it, I did not. However, I am not inclined to disagree with you, there. And if I had been with you, perhaps you could have had more luck in other areas..."

Suddenly, they were outside of the church. Snow had just started to fall.

"Hey, stranger," Lina Wells said as she approached John.

"Oh, um... hi," he responded.

"Mind if I join you to watch the snow fall?" she asked.

"Not at, um... not at all," John told her.

She laughed, and stood beside his wheelchair. Together, they watched the snow fall, and were soon joined by others. Jason and Nicole. Nicole's sister and their suitors. The eight of them watched the snow fall in silent wonder. Lina kept looking at John from time to time, smiling at him. Every time she did, he couldn't stop himself from looking away from her.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say that lovely woman had an interest in you," Touga-John said. "And what did you do about it?"

John failed to find a response.

"Nothing," Touga-John said for him. "You did nothing. I'm surprised she stuck with you all evening. You gave her as much regard as you might give to a dead fish."

"Perhaps I didn't like her?" John lied.

Touga-John saw right through the lie. "I know better than that, John. You forget that I am a part of you, after all.

"We are all a part of you. Without you, we are nothing. And without us, you are less than you could be. Less than you should be..."

* * *

The Future

"There you are! How long did you expect *me* to wait for you?"

This was followed by a familiar laughter, and John turned his chair. He was no longer outside the Church in the Acres, but back in his bedroom. The sudden changes had stopped startling him, however.

"Somehow, it doesn't surprise me that you're the Ghost of Christmas Future," John told Jinnai-John.

"Future, yes," Jinnai-John said. "Christmas? Not necessarily. Do you really expect me to be constrained by some silly Christmas motif?" He laughed some more. "There's so many interesting things to show you, I'd hate to be limited to Christmas."

Suddenly, John and Jinnai-John were in a hotel room somewhere. John saw Jason there, and two other people as well. One of them John recognized as the man who had been the host at the Boy Scouts' Christmas party. Matt something, wasn't it? He was getting into his trench coat and already had a fedora upon his head.

The other John thought seemed familiar, but he had never met the man. He had longer hair, as well as a bit of facial hair, and was dressed normally.

Jason, on the other hand, was dressed somewhat oddly. He had a white headband on, with some kind of pattern on it – a circle with a smaller circle within it, offset to the upper right corner. The long-sleeved white t-shirt he was wearing had a similar circle on it, larger and red, with the smaller circle being orange. Four small red triangles jutted out from this circle, and a thick green stripe ran down the front of the shirt, broken only by the circle. Midway between his left elbow and shoulder was a pair of safety goggles. Sandals and denim shorts completed the ensemble.

It was obviously a costume of some sort. They must be at an anime convention.

"Well, I'm all set," Jason said. "Trav? Matt?"

The others nodded.

"John?"

John turned his chair to where Jason was looking, and noticed himself for the first time. He was dressed in a dark blue suit, with a white shirt and a red tie. In fact, he was dressed identically to Jinnai-John. Leaning against the wall beside him was a fairly excellent replica of Ifurita's Key, a prop from El-Hazard.

"You guys go ahead, I'll catch up," John told the others.

"Don't be long, John," Jason said. "Cosplay competition's in a little under an hour."

"I know. Don't worry," John told him.

Jason smirked. "This cosplay's going to kick ass, even more than our last one!"

John smiled weakly back as Jason opened the door to leave. Jason, Matt, and Travis filed out of the room, leaving John alone. For some time, John sat silently, eyes closed, as if meditating. Finally, he opened them.

"Ha," he said. It was without feeling, weak. "Ha ha."

He cleared his throat.

"I'll get you, Makoto," he blandly stated.

He tried to look menacing, but ended up looking constipated.

"No," said the John who was watching. "No, that'd not possible!"

"Ha ha, ha ha ha," the other John said, as if drearily reading the words from some distasteful page.

"NO!!!!!!" John exclaimed to himself.

"What's wrong?" Jinnai-John asked with a sneer.

"That's not me," John said. "That can't be..."

Then John and Jinnai-John were backstage somewhere. Jason was there, as well as a few other people, all dressed as various El-Hazard characters.

"Where is he?" a woman dressed as Nanami asked.

"I don't know," Jason responded, looking worried.

"Well, he'd better get here soon," a Fujisawa look-alike warned. "Without a Jinnai, our sketch is ruined."

"He'll be here!" Jason insisted. "Please, John," he added quietly, "be here..."

Then, John and Jinnai-John were in the audience, not far from Travis and Matt.

An amplified voice came from the speakers to either side of the stage as applause died down. "That was *Final Fantasy Follies*," the MC announced. "Next up is *El Hazard: The Y2KJ Bug!*"

Suddenly... no one came out onto the stage. This was followed by nobody, and then not a soul.

Travis turned to Matt. "Where are they?"

Matt shrugged.

A confused murmur overcame the audience, as the stage remained empty.

"Um... There's been a slight change of plans," the MC said. "We're moving on now, with a sketch called, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Iscandar*."

"No," John said.

"What's wrong?" Jinnai-John asked, tauntingly.

"I... I screwed up a cosplay," John whispered.

"So you did." Jinnai-John laughed.

"But... but cosplay is *life!*"

"Yet without us, you couldn't cosplay," Jinnai-John stated.

"NO!!!!!!!!!!" John yelled.

The floor opened up beneath him, and he fell. Deeper and deeper... a seemingly endless pit. No, not endless. There was a ground, rushing to meet him... then it came...

John was sitting in the chair, in the dark room. There was a single shaft of light shining down upon him, coming from some unseen source high above him. Three other shafts came down, illuminating three figures standing before him.

Shinji-John was in the front, the others standing behind and to either side of him.

"Now, you must decide," Shinji-John said. "You can live with us, or without us. If you decide to live without us, we will leave you and never bother you again."

"But... what I saw, is that really the future?"

Shinji-John nodded. "It was real."

"I couldn't cosplay," John said. "And worse, I let down my friends... And last night, the party... was that really me?"

Shinji-John nodded again.

"I..." John swallowed. "I don't want to be that me." He slowly looked over the three versions of himself standing before him. "Even if it means accepting you, I can't be that me."

Shinji-John smiled, and then he and the others disappeared.

They disappeared, but they weren't gone.

John felt them within himself.

Christmas

John woke with a start, and sat up. He looked over at the clock.

7:00 a.m.

"Was it a dream?" he asked himself. He closed his eyes for a moment, and looked within himself.

He felt them.

"No, it wasn't a dream," he told himself.

He rolled slightly to get out of bed, but noticed his wheelchair was across the room. He cursed, got up, walked over to it, and sat.

He blinked.

He scratched his head.

He blinked again.

Slowly, he rose to his feet. Tentatively, he took a step. It was a bit awkward, his legs stiff from disuse... but when it seemed to work fine, he took another.

Then another.

He was walking.

He smiled.

"Thanks, guys," he said. "Merry Christmas."

VIII: Fall From Grace

Christmas Morning

The sun had just peeked over the horizon and was beginning to show its intrusive rays in the outskirts of Holyoke, a suburb of the city of Springfield, MA. However, in one small apartment, the rays were not at all intrusive. This was mainly because the blinds were closed as to not let any of these offending rays in on this crisp morning. Inside this cramped apartment, amiss in the sea of clothing, CD's, videocassettes, and discarded take-out containers sat a pile of blankets lumped on top of a Japanese sleeping futon sitting on the floor. The blankets twinged slightly and then were still again in its content lump shape. Something was definitely alive in that pile. What it was is unknown.

Now, since the sunlight was not playing any role in being intrusive, something else had to pick up the slack. That something was the door, which happened to choose this particular moment to be pounded on. An arm slithered out from the lump of blankets and grabbed the television remote and dragged it back under the blanket cave. After a moment, as the pounding continued, the blankets spat out the remote, which sailed through the air and impacted with the exact center of the door.

The pounding continued, unabated.

Three seconds later and the blankets flew off as they were kicked off by the now enraged occupant.

He glanced at the clock. It wasn't even eight in the morning, and he was sure he didn't have to work today. (After all, it was Christmas.) The last thing he wanted to be before eight in the morning on a day he didn't have to work was *awake*.

"WHAT!!!" Jason Bertovich hollered towards the door.

"Jas," a voice responded, "open up! It's me!"

"John?" Jason flew towards the door and flung it open. "What are you doing here so early?"

"Merry Christmas!" John happily exclaimed.

"John? What's wrong?"

John smiled. "Nothing," he responded. "Everything's right!"

Jason frowned. Despite his friend's assurances, something didn't seem quite kosher.

Suddenly it came to him. If Jason had been an animated character, he'd have had to pick his jaw up from the ground and reattach it properly to his face.

"Where's your wheelchair, John?"

John's smile grew wider, which Jason hadn't thought possible. Suddenly, Jason was treated to a brief moment of John's Trademark "Jinnai" Laughter.

"I don't need it anymore," John then told him.

"What do you mean you don't need it any more?" Jason responded. "I went with you to the doctor just last week! They said, while you were healing nicely, it should be at least a month before you could even begin to walk unaided!"

"Jason, my friend," John said, placing a hand upon Jason's shoulder, "I can't tell you exactly what happened... let us just say that miracles can happen, especially at this time of year."

"How are you going to explain this to people, though?" Jason asked. "Your doctors? People at work? Next thing you know, you're being followed by newspeople and crazy religious nuts... and next week you're on *Hard Copy* and a front page story in *The National Enquirer*!"

John smirked at his friend. "A bit much, don't you think? I don't have to go back to the doctor, and if for any reason I do, I just remind him about doctor / patient confidentiality. Work might be tricky, but after a brief commotion, it'll probably blow over. As for the rest, you're not planning on calling the news teams, are you?"

"What? No, of course not."

John laughed again.

Jason smiled. "That's the John I remember!"

John looked thoughtful for a moment before he responded, "Yes, it is, isn't it?"

"This is Special Agent Linoleum. I repeat, this is Special Agent Linoleum. Come in, Divine Agency. Please respond."

"This is the Divine Agency, acknowledging you, Agent Linoleum. Please report."

"I am having little progress thus far into my investigation. I have made contact with two mortals who knew Fenira, but if they know of her whereabouts they are good at keeping a secret. I even attempted to impersonate Fenira myself, to see if I could gather any information that way, but still had no success. However, the two mortals are still my only lead."

"Continue your investigation, Linoleum. This matter is of the utmost importance to the Agency. We've had *three* Goddesses, and the Search Demon originally assigned to their case, all disappear from us!"

"Well, that's what you get for giving this job to a Search Demon in the first place. Never send a Demon to do a Goddess's work."

"Watch your tongue, Linoleum. This investigation is of the highest priority, and if you fail in this task, you will be cast out from the Agency. Do we make ourselves clear?"

There was a pause.

"Do we make ourselves clear?" the voice repeated.

"Y... yes. Perfectly clear."

"Good. Now don't fail us, Linoleum, or you won't be a Goddess for much longer."

"Is this the album you wanted to see, John?"

"Yeah! The one with your friends from Pennsylvania."

Jason pulled out the indicated album and opened it. John sat beside him and flipped the pages, stopping on one page and pointing to a picture of a man and a woman.

"Who's that?" John asked, pointing at the man.

"That? That's Travis Evans," Jason told him. "And the woman is his girlfriend, Charl-chan. Actually, you'll meet them both in February at that convention we're going to."

John smiled.

"Why the interest in Trav all of the sudden?"

John paused, unsure how to respond, when he was saved by the phone's ringing. Jason went over to it and answered it.

"Hello? Oh, hi! What am I doing tonight? Dinner with Nicole, why? Yeah, she might go for that. John? I don't know. He's here, if you want to ask him. Okay, I'll put him on."

Jason handed the phone to John. "For you," he said.

"Who is it?" John asked him.

Jason smirked. John put the phone to his ear.

"Hello?"

"John, hi! It's Lina!"

"Oh, hi! Look, sorry about last night. I wasn't feeling well, but I'm better now. I was actually hoping I could see you again."

"Brilliant!" Lina responded. "I was thinking I'd just love to see you again, too! Hey, Jason said he's going out with Nicole tonight. If it's all right with her, do you want to make a double date out of it?"

"Why, Miss Wells, that sounds like a most enterprising idea."

Lina laughed, and John couldn't help but be warmed by the sound. "Well then," she said, "I can't wait for tonight! Say by to Jas for me, okay?"

"Sure."

"Well, bye now!"

"Bye."

John placed the phone down.

Jason looked at him.

"So?" Jason prodded.

"So... so where are we all going for dinner?"

Jason hopped into the air and did a happy little pantomime of shooting a basketball. "John shoots! He scores!"

That Night

John got into the car and closed the door behind him.

"My God, John! You're walking!" Nicole exclaimed from shotgun.

"Um, yeah," John simply replied.

From behind the steering wheel, Jason smirked. "Told you you'd have a hard time explaining it to people."

"What happened, John?" Nicole asked.

John grinned. "Let's just say that miracles can happen, and leave it at that?"

Nicole smiled in reply. "Well, for a modest fee, I can let the matter drop.

Jason's smirk widened.

John groaned. "How much?"

"Well..." Nicole began. "I can't clean you out completely if you're going to show this gal a good time tonight... Ten bucks?"

John grinned slightly as he handed over the money. "A small price to pay for peace from your torment," he said. He turned to Jason. "You sure can pick 'em, Jas."

Jason's smirk reached new levels of smirkdom. "I do at that," he said.

"So where's Lina?" John asked.

"She's meeting us there," Jason responded.

"Speaking of which, where is 'there'? Not many places open Christmas night."

Jason looked at Nicole. She looked back. They both had those insufferable smirks, now. "We know one place," Jason said as he began driving.

"A sushi bar?" John asked.

"A sushi *restaurant*," Jason corrected.

"With karaoke!" Nicole added, beaming.

"Okay," John said. "Why not?"

The trio walked into the establishment, which (despite Jason's claims to the contrary) was named the *Rising Sun*

Sushi Bar. Immediately, they were approached by a smiling waitress, a blond Caucasian in traditional Japanese dress.

"Konbawa, customer-san!" she said to Jason with a wink. "And Nicole-san, our number one Karaoke queen!"

"Konbawa, Anako-san," Nicole and Jason chorused.

The woman smiled. "And who is this?"

"This is my good pal John," Jason told her.

"Ah, he must be the one that woman is waiting for," Anako responded. Her smile widened.

"Woman? She's here?" John asked. He felt slightly lightheaded... yet not out of control.

Anako nodded. "She's been speaking very highly of you. Shall I show you to your seats?"

Jason nodded. Anako led them to their table.

And there she was.

Lina Wells.

She sat waiting, a wide smile upon her face. Her hair was streaming down her back, as if no particular effort had been made to style it, yet it looked perfect where it lay. She wore no make-up, but needed none. As John approached her, he felt an air of piece and tranquility settle over him.

"Hello!" she said.

"H... hi," John said in response as he took the seat next to her. Jason and Nicole took the seats across the table.

Anako drifted over with menus and a songbook, the later of which Nicole immediately began flipping through.

John concentrated on his menu... or at least tried to seem as if that's what he was doing. Every once and a while he would glance in Lina's direction. It was odd but, even though she too was looking at her menu, every time he glanced at her, she also seemed to be glancing at him.

She smiled at him.

He found himself returning it.

A while later, Anako returned and collected their orders. After ordering food, she took orders of a different type. "Who's doing karaoke?"

Nicole immediately jumped in. "Count me in!"

Jason likewise agreed and told Anako his selection.

Jason, Nicole, and Anako then looked to John.

"Karaoke? Me?" John asked.

"Why not?" Nicole responded.

John glanced at Lina. She smiled warmly.

"Have you got *The Conqueror Jinnai*?" John asked.

Anako nodded.

"Then count me in, too," John said.

Anako then looked to Lina. "And you?"

"Sounds like fun!" Lina responded. She looked through the book a bit, then pointed at one of the selections. "This one."

"Okay! Karaoke competition is in half an hour!" Anako said as she took her leave.

The four of them sat in silence for a little bit.

"So, did you all have a good Christmas?" Nicole then asked.

Jason and John mumbled unintelligible somethings that seemed to indicate that yes, they did indeed have good Christmases. Lina smiled and nodded enthusiastically.

"So," Lina said, "tell me about yourself, John."

Even having reconciled with his other selves, John found it difficult to keep his composure in the presence of this woman... she seemed almost divine to him! The only other woman he had ever gotten such a feeling from was Fenny... he'd been a mess around her before he'd really gotten to know her.

"Um... w... what did you want to know?" he asked.

"Everything," Lina responded.

"That kind of makes it difficult to find a place to start," John told her.

"Well, tell me who your friends are," she said sweetly.

"Don't really have many," John confessed. "I've got a lot of acquaintance from work who aren't exactly enemies, but we don't really get together outside of work. Other than that, there's Jason and Nicole, and..." John stopped suddenly.

"And?" Lina asked, interested.

"And Fenny," John finished.

Lina smiled. "Tell me about Fenny! I'm always hearing little tidbits about her. She sounded great! But you never talk much about her, and I certainly have never gotten to meet the charming woman!"

Nicole suddenly jumped into the conversation. "I've often wondered about that myself," she said. "I never did get to meet her. She disappeared so suddenly."

"Any ideas where she went?" Lina asked.

"No," Jason said. John concurred.

Their food arrived.

Lina leaned forward in interest. "You've never heard from her since she disappeared?"

"Nope," John said.

Jason sat silent.

"Surely you must have some ideas... Any places she liked to go?"

"She never really had any particular favorite places to go," John said. "She always liked to go someplace different, and always where there were a lot of people. She always seemed to like people."

"Yeah, I remember that about her," Jason said.

"Any way," John suddenly asked, "what about you, Lina? What's your story?"

Lina laughed slightly. "Me? No story," she said.

"Oh, come on," John responded. "I'm sure you must have an interesting life."

Lina shrugged.

"How's your dinner?" she asked John.

"What? Oh, um, good," he responded.

The four of them continued dinner, their conversation flitting from this topic to that, until a small Asian man walked up on the stage and pulled out a microphone. Anako walked up on stage with him in her wooden sandals.

"Ah, Kobanwa ladies and gentlemen! I'm am Mr. Segawa and welcome to *The Rising Sun's* special Christmas Night Karaoke contest!"

The patrons politely clapped and then he continued.

"Anako-san will have gone around to every table with a sign-up sheet, so we should be ready to start the contest."

More polite clapping followed.

"And tonight's winner will receive this trophy that Anako-san is holding."

Anako held up a large gold cup and the audience clapped enthusiastically.

"So good luck to everyone!" Mr. Segawa proclaimed he then continued by announcing the evening's first contestant. "I am pleased to announce a returning favorite of *The Rising Sun*... Miss Nicole Porter!"

After more polite clapping, Nicole took the stage and gave the room a performance of *Little Flower* that Jason found stunning. Of course, Jason may have been a little biased, but the audience's more than polite applause that followed her performance seemed to give credence to his opinion. He didn't have time to reflect on this long, however, as he was up next.

He treated the audience to his best rendition of *Kimi no Carrot Cake*. The audience seemed to approve, although their cheers did not match the ones they gave to Nicole. He didn't blame them, however. How could he expect to best Karaoke-Master Nicole? He smirked.

Other contestants went up and made valiant efforts, and others made futile efforts. Some were rather comical, albeit unintentionally so.

Then it was John's turn. He smiled as he took the stage. Then his expression took on a menacing feel to it. He had to get into character after all.

The music started.

John laughed. And he laughed. And, as evilly as he could, he laughed some more. He began to sing.

Kamiga watashiwo erande tsugeta
"Konoyowo seisu shinno shihaishada" to
Subeteno tamiga machinozomunowa
Eikyufuhenno idainaru teiou

Yaoyano tanano melon noyouni
Fudouno chiiga niau otoko nanosa

Todoroke warekoso
Jinnai Katsuhiko
Chounaikai kara
Daiuchu made
Seifuku koso watashino shimei
Yabouwo chichini Shouriwo hahani
Eikouwo anini ifuwo girino aneni

Fujino gougoume jinjano torii
Itaru tokorode kononawo mirudarou

Orokana tamini majitte itemo
Kono fukakuwo kakusu kotowa tsurai

Ichiban buro kara
Hatsugatsuo made
Gyouzano hayagui
Hanamino basho tori
Seifuku koso watashino shimei!
Bwahahahahhahahahaha...
...HahahahahahHAHAHAHhahahaha...
...HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!!!

The music stopped, and John continued laughing. After about a minute had passed, he came to a stop, looked out at the audience for a moment, and said into the microphone, "Thank you."

The audience roared. As John returned to his seat, his companions stared at him in awe. Nicole, who had only recently seen El-Hazard for the first time (at Jason's urging, but she wouldn't have watched it if she wasn't a bit interested herself), said, "My God, you *were* Jinnai!"

John shrugged. "I have a little inside help, I must admit," he simply said.

Mr. Segawa announced the last, and final contestant. "Finely, for your listening pleasure, I present another first time performer here at *The Rising Sun*... Miss Lina Wells!"

Lina smiled at John. "Well," she said, getting up, "I certainly have a tough act to follow."

She took the stage, warmly smiled a smile that seemed to touch everyone in the room individually, and as the music to *My Heart I Can't Say, Your Heart I Want To Know* began, she started to sing.

Koi ni naranai ne
soba ni iru dake ja.
Nazo o kakete mo
donkanna hito dakara.
Natsu no fuku o kite
haru no umini kita.
Anata no shirt de yasashiku kabatte.

My Heart iidasenai
Please kiss shitette.
Day Dream yume wa fukurami
sora ni takaku kieru.

Onna no ko wa dare datte shiawase ni nareru.
Koi ga hajimareba kagayakidasu.
Tatoe namida nagashite mo anata no sei nara
mune o itamete mo kanashikunai.

Himitsu mochitai na. Tsumi o kanjitai.
Anata no NEWS shittetemo
shiranpuri.
Aki ni tokimiete
fuyu ni nayande mo
daiji n akoi ga minoreba ii yo ne.

Your Heart tashikametai.
Believe fureta yubi o.
True Love hajimete dakara
hoo ga atsuku moeru.

Onna no ko wa koishitara
utsukushikunareru.
Akai kuchibeni mo hitsuyoonai.
Nemurenakute sugoshitemo
yume bakari miteru.
Omou kimochidake afureteiru.

Onna no ko wa dare datte shiawase ni nareru.
Ai ga minagireba muteki ni naru.
Tatoo namida nagashite mo anata no sei nara
mune o itamete mo yasashiku naru.

She stopped singing and the music stopped shortly thereafter. Silence filled the room. Every face was turned towards Lina Wells. Every eye fixed on her. No one dared move, as if fearful of breaking some divine spell. Finally, it was Mr. Segawa who stepped forward.

"I have heard the voice of a Goddess," he said, his voice barely a whisper that still somehow carried throughout the restaurant.

Lina blushed. "Oh, please," she quietly responded. "I can't be that good."

Someone stood up. It was John.

He began to applaud.

Next Jason stood. Then Nicole followed suit. Soon, the entire restaurant was giving her a standing ovation.

Lina burst into her apartment, twirling in little circles holding her trophy before her. "Where shall I put it?" she wondered aloud.

"Well, you'll certainly have plenty of time to make up your mind."

Lina spun around. Her eyes fell on who had spoken and her trophy dropped to the ground.

"Seraphim!" she exclaimed in terror.

"You were supposed to be finding Fenira and her sisters, not winning a Karaoke contest!"

"I... I..."

"You what?" Seraphim responded slowly.

"I tried... but my only leads, the mortals who she was friends with. They know nothing! I've made repeated attempts to discover anything they might know... and Fenira left nothing else behind!"

"You've obviously not tried hard enough."

"Who are *you* to tell me I've not tried hard enough? You are not a god or a goddess! You're just an angel!"

"An angel, who reports directly to and receives orders directly from the head honcho," Seraphim coldly reminded her. "The boss is most displeased."

"Well, tough for the boss! There are simply no more leads to follow!"

"Too bad, Linoleum." Seraphim frowned. "Too bad indeed. You were warned..."

"Warned?" Lina asked, dreading the response.

"Yes. Of the consequences of failure."

Lina balked. "You don't mean...?"

"Cast out," Seraphim responded. The angel smiled slightly. "Cast out, and all your powers revoked."

"But I... I tried everything I could! I... I even probed their minds directly tonight as they were thinking about Fenira! Mind probes are something the boss insists be used only under the direst of circumstances! But there was nothing to probe for! They don't know anything!"

"I don't care. I'm only following orders. Something *you* failed to do."

"But I tried!" Lina pleaded. "Oh, how I tried!"

"It is done," Seraphim said with a snap of the fingers. "Linoleum... or rather, Lina Wells... you are now mortal. Mortal, with no powers of a Goddess."

Lina sank to her knees.

"Is there nothing I can do?"

Seraphim smiled once more. "You can still try to achieve your mission."

"And if I can't? Or if someone else does?"

"Then you stay like this."

"And if I... if I die?"

"If you die while mortal, because you were cast out... Well, I really hate to deliver any further unpleasant news to you this evening, but I'm afraid to say that in such a case, you would certainly not be allowed back up there." Seraphim pointed upwards. "In such a case, we'd have no choice but to... well... send you down there."

"Down... there?"

Seraphim pointed downwards.

Lina fell forward onto her palms, and began to weep.

'Twas the Day After Christmas

"It's the day after Christmas, a day I don't have to work, and I'm at the mall?" John asked with some degree of incredulity. "How did I let you talk me into this?"

Jason shrugged. "It's a place to hang out for a bit, isn't it?"

"I suppose so," John responded.

"So, last night? You and Lina?" Jason smirked. "You two seemed to be getting along pretty well."

"I suppose so," John responded.

"Oh, hey," Jason suddenly interrupted. He pointed to a near by store. "Is that that new cookie place?"

John nodded.

"Oh man, I've heard their cookies are the best! Want one? My treat."

John nodded, and a few minutes later they were continuing their conversation on a near by bench, the proud new owners of a couple of soft, over-sized, delectable, freshly cooked cookies of the chocolate chip verity.

"Hey Jason, you and Nicole. What's up with you two?"

"Huh?" Jason looked confused.

"I mean, are you two in love? Are you just close friends who enjoy each other's company?"

Jason shrugged. "Why do you ask?"

"Well... I..."

If there had been a little light bulb floating over Jason's head, it would have not only lit up, but it would

have exploded. This would have been bad for John and Jason, but as this light bulb is purely a metaphoric one, they were spared having to go to the hospital to have bits of glass removed from them.

"John, you don't think you're in love, do you?"

John took a bite of his cookie. He chewed it in silence.

"You are, aren't you?" Jason prodded.

John sighed. "Man, how is it I go from hopelessly crippled one day to perfectly healthy the next, and having epiphanies in the food court about my love for another person whom I've only just met?"

"Cookie stand is not part of the food court," Jason insisted.

"Of course it is," John rebutted.

"The food court is downstairs, the cookie stand is upstairs. We're not talking quantum physics here."

"The cookie stand counts as an eatery. As a former mall employee, you of all people should know that the eateries are part of the food court."

"Bullshit. Eateries that operate within the square downstairs qualify as food court. Anything outside of said designated square is considered an autonomous unit for mid-mall snacking."

"If you're gonna wax intellectual about the subject... Oh, forget it," John said. "The last thing I need right now is more confusion and inner turmoil. I'll debate this with you later."

Jason took another bite of his cookie. "Whatever. But I still say that the cookie stand is not part of the food court." He looked at his friend. "You should go see her."

"You think?"

Jason nodded.

"Well... she did give me her address." John showed Jason the scribble of paper it was written on.

"Funny, that's the same building Fenny lived in before she... well... you know."

"Is it?" John looked at the address. "Hey, you're right. Wonder why I didn't catch that earlier."

"Perhaps because your brain was otherwise occupied."

"Perhaps," John agreed. He smirked. "The food court can be a perplexing place."

Slowly she gained consciousness. Where was she? On the floor? She uncurled herself from the fetal position she found herself in and slowly tried to stand.

She had more than enough energy for such a simple task, but it still felt as if it drained her. Her strength was gone. Her strength and her power... all that was her.

She made her way towards the bathroom. She didn't walk so much as she dragged her feet along the floor as if they were lead weights. She regarded herself in the mirror.

She looked pretty much the same. At least, she looked the same as she had since she had assumed this mortal form. The only difference was that she could no longer leave it at will.

No... There was another difference. She wiped away the dried tears from around her eyes and looked into them.

There was something different about her eyes... Some intangible difference. How ugly they looked to her now.

She sank to her knees as the tears came anew.

Why couldn't they give me something? she asked. *Anything! Anything to avoid this... this hell! Why couldn't they have known something...? Even something small could have spared me this!*

I'll do anything to get back... ANYTHING! I must find Fenira... and I must make everyone who did this to me PAY!!!

There was a knock at her door.

She barely heard it. It meant nothing to her.

However, whoever it was refused to go away.

Finely, she rose to her unsteady feet and made her way towards the door. She slowly turned the knob and pulled it open.

"Lina, hi! How are... Hey, what's wrong?"

"**YOU!!!**" Lina screamed. "You had a part in doing this to me!" Her mortal form suddenly full of a renewed strength, she pulled John in through the doorway and shut the door behind him.

John was confused. Lina threw him to the floor and, as much as her petite frame would allow, she towered over him.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Um... Lina Wells?"

She laughed. It was a cold laugh. "I suppose I am now. Perhaps the better question would be, do you know who I used to be?"

John stared silently in response.

"I was a goddess. A *goddess!* I lost all that... and you're partially to blame. You're to blame for your own ignorance. You're to blame because you didn't know anything!"

"Know anything? About what?"

Lina continued as if she had not heard John. "All I had was a simple task. It should have been simple for a goddess at least. 'Find Fenira and her sisters,' they tell me. Fine, simple. Finding three AWOL goddesses should be a simple matter for a goddess in the Internal Affairs division. Oh, but Fenira, you did a good job of disappearing. Must have had help, didn't you?"

"Fenira?" John asked. "Fen... Fenny?"

"She disappeared so well that the only lead I could find was you and your pal Jason... But you knew *nothing!*" she spat.

"Fenny's a goddess? You... You're a goddess?"

"*I was a goddess!*" she exclaimed, her voice full of terror and also quite terrifying. She knelt before John, leaning over him, her hands on his shoulders. "You have to pay for what you did to me," she whispered.

"I... I..."

"What is it? Going to beg for your life?"

"I love you," John told her.

Lina gasped. "What did you say?"

John leaned forward and placed his lips upon hers. His kiss was tender, non-threatening, caring.

After he slowly pulled away, Lina remained motionless, not even breathing. After a moment, she slowly let out a long breath.

She sank to the floor beside him. "How could you?" she asked.

"How could I what? Love you?"

She nodded.

"I just do. Isn't that enough?"

"Even though I want to kill you. To kill Jason."

John nodded.

"And the only way I can get my status as a goddess back is to deliver Fenira and her sisters onto the Divine Agency, where they will be severely punished, perhaps even killed?"

John nodded.

The two lay together in silence for a small eternity.

"Do you still want to kill me?" John asked.

"No," Lina admitted.

"And Jason?"

She shook her head.

"What do you want, then?"

"I want... I want to be a goddess again," she admitted.

"What do you plan to do in the mean time?"

"What can I do?" she asked. "I have nothing."

"You have me," John told her.

Lina smiled. She turned towards John and snuggled against him. It felt like a good place to be. "I do have you, don't I?"

John nodded.

"But what if Fenny comes back?" Lina asked. "What then? Whose side will you be on?"

"I don't know," John responded. "Whose will you be on?"

They lay in silence for a long while more.

"John?"

"Yes?"

“Could you... could you keep this to yourself? About me, and about Fenny?”

John nodded and the silence descended once more.

Finally, Lina asked one more question... One she'd been wondering for quite a while.

“What's in the bag?” she asked.

John regarded the small brown paper bag he had been holding when he had arrived. When she threw him to the floor, it too had hit the floor violently, coming to rest just within reach of where he was now. He picked it up.

“Oh this? I got you a...” He reached into the bag and pulled out some crumbs and other broken bits. He laughed. “Well, it *was* a cookie.”

Kenny's Laboratory

written by

Matthew Atanian

except "Hell Comes to Springfield,"

written by Jason Bertovich

Kenny's Laboratory

10 January 1998... Matthew Atanian was vaguely aware of the date. He'd gotten a PlayStation for Christmas, the first console gaming system he'd owned since the old original Nintendo Entertainment System, and that had died long ago. He did have fond memories of one game from that old system, and the fact that one of its sequels was available on the new Sony system was certainly a deciding factor on which of the "New Generation" systems he wanted.

He actually had two games – one was a sports game that Matt Swett had given him at the troop's Christmas party. Swett had insisted he take it, even though not only did Matt not care for sports games, but at the time he didn't even know he owned a PlayStation yet.

The other game was... well...

He'd been engrossed in the game for some time now, eating little, sleeping little, and reluctantly stopping only when he had to go to work. After all, if he didn't keep playing, who else would save the world from the evil ShinRa Corporation? He laughed slightly. ShinRa was only a minor problem at this point, of course. The big problem was Sephiroth. Well, that and which of the two lovely girls vying for his affections would eventually win. Little did Matt know as he headed north in search of one of those girls that their contest for him would soon have a tragic shift in one girl's favour...

"Matt," his mother called out from the kitchen, "you've got mail!"

Matt hit the pause button and cursed softly. He rose from his bed where he'd been sitting and carefully made his way from there to his door. (His room wasn't the most tidy in the world. He did mean to some day get around to doing something about it. Really, he did...)

On the kitchen counter, Matt saw a plain white envelope with his name and address on it, written in the most impressive calligraphy. He picked up the envelope

and turned it over. On neither side was written a return address.

He returned to his room and sat back on his bed. He regarded the frozen image on the television screen with interest. His hand reached for the controller, but paused just short of picking it up. Instead, his hand returned to the envelope as curiosity got the better of him.

He carefully tore open the envelope and extracted from it a small handwritten card, covered with more finely detailed calligraphy. It was an invitation, complete with time, date, and directions. The date was tomorrow, Sunday. It was an invitation to...

Matt stared at it in wonder. Finally, after a significant pause, he put it down and picked up the controller again. After all, as odd as the invitation was, it wasn't until tomorrow.

Matt pulled his bike to a halt in front of a completely average house on a completely average street in a completely average section of Springfield. Already there was Bill Hughes and Mike Quadrozzi, both having been dropped off by their parents a short time ago.

"You got an invite too, huh?" Mike asked.

Matt nodded. "Where are Aaron and Billy?" he asked. "Since you two are here, I'd have thought they'd be here, too."

"Bill had a hockey game today," Hughes said. "You know he wouldn't miss one of those for his own funeral."

"Aaron called me last night," Mike said, "as there was no number on the invite. Said he couldn't make it. Didn't say why." He paused briefly, noticing something in the distance, before adding, "Although if he knew who else was going to be here, I'm sure he'd have made more of an effort."

Matt and Hughes looked in the direction Mike was looking and saw Kirstin Porter approaching on her bicycle. She pulled to a stop next to Matt's bike. "Hi, guys," she said. "Where's Aaron? I thought he'd be here, too."

"Couldn't make it," Hughes told her.

"Oh," Kirstin said, a bit of disappointment apparent in her voice despite her best efforts to mask it. "In any case," she added, "I can't help but wonder why we're all here. It just seems so sudden, and not like him. He's a nice kid, but not very social."

Matt nodded his agreement, as did the others. Just then, the front door opened and out stepped the person who had invited them all together. Kenneth E. Pendrell.

After showing Matt and Kirstin someplace to put their bikes, Kenny invited them all inside. The interior of the house was much like the outside: average. Nice furnishings in all the rooms they'd seen, but something didn't seem quite right. There were no pictures on the walls. No magazines or books upon the coffee table. In fact, the whole place was quite stark, Matt realized. Nothing extra at all. Just tables, chairs, a few appliances here and there... All of it looked brand new. There wasn't a scratch on a single thing. It wasn't the kind of brand new that you get with people who were obsessive about keeping their things nice, either. It was just as if... as if the house had an "un-lived-in" feel to it. Matt shivered slightly.

Kenny had asked them to all wait in the living room and had disappeared into the kitchen. Now he reappeared carrying a tray with drinks on it. He handed one to each of his guests before disappearing again, muttering an apology as he did so.

Matt sipped his drink and was surprised. It was Iced Tea. 4C Iced Tea, perfectly stirred and chilled. He hadn't asked for anything specific, and yet Kenny had brought him his favourite drink. He turned to the others.

"What did you all get to drink?" he asked.

"Schweppes ginger ale," Mike said, also surprised. "Hey, did you know that John Cleese used to be a spokesman for this stuff?" He took another sip.

Hughes looked up from his drink, having taken only one sip. "Hard orange juice. Must be 500 proof." He put the cup down. "As much as I like this, I better not drink any more." He picked it up again and took another sip before putting it down once more. "Well, another sip couldn't hurt."

Kirstin looked up from her traditional Japanese teacup, a pleasant look of surprise on her face. "Oolong tea," she said as she brought the cup to her mouth once more.

All of them had been given their favourite beverages, each without having asked for anything specific. A sudden chill went down their spines.

Just then, Kenny reappeared. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," he said, timidly. "I was hoping that you'd all be able to come, but I understand that Mr. Aaron and Mr. Billy can't make it."

The others nodded.

Kenny continued. "Well, everything's ready, so I can tell you all why I've invited you here."

Kenny looked unsure as if how to continue, unused as he was to dealing with others.

"What is it, Kenny?" Kirstin said in encouragement. "What did you want to tell us?"

"Thank you," Kenny replied. This was not directed at Kirstin, but rather at all of them. It was an answer to Kirstin's question. "Thank you for making me feel like I belong, and not like an outsider."

"No thanks are necessary," Mike replied. "We like having you around."

Kenny looked down for a moment, embarrassed. "No, really," he said. "It means a lot to me. I want... I want to show you something."

Hughes took a sip of his drink.

"What is it?" Matt asked.

"Please follow me," Kenny merely replied.

The others rose and followed. 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 decending, spiraling down, 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.

"I'm sorry," he said. "There is a faster way down, but it only has room for one." He backed slowly towards a door across the hall, which he opened. As he disappeared into the room, he said, "I'll meet you down there."

The door closed. Matt, Mike, Hughes, and Kirstin turned back to regard the still open door, with it's foreboding staircase.

"This is too weird even for me," Hughes said, taking a sip. He turned back towards the room that Kenny had disappeared into and thrust open the door, followed closely by the others. "Hey, Kenny," he began, but he stopped speaking as he looked around the room before him.

A shaft of sunlight was broken up as it passed through the blinds on the window. The sunlight illuminated an average bedroom. Average at first glance. It had a bed, a bureau, a bookcase, a closet, and a tidy desk. The desk summed up the room perfectly: it was tidy. Almost too so.

There were two things odd about the room, other then it's excessive tidiness.

One was the metal panel that was flush with the wooden floor in one corner of the room. It was cool to the touch, and there seemed to be a thin line across the middle of it. It was so tight together and so perfectly flush that it took them a few minutes to realize that the line was

actually a separation where the panel could slide apart rather than just a decorative line lightly etched into it.

The second was Kenny, or rather the lack of him. Seconds prior to their own entry, they had seen Kenny disappear into this very room, but now he was gone. An examination of the window discounted that as a possibility: there were no footprints in the snow outside. That left the panel.

"Where do you think it leads?" Kirstin asked.

"I don't know," Mike said. "But where ever it is, Kenny must have gone there, and he wants us to follow him."

Hughes took a sip.

Matt turned and looked out of the room, towards the hall and the still open doorway on the other side. "Shall we?" he asked.

"So how many stairs do you reckon it's been so far?" Matt asked.

"Oh, I shtopped counting after a quabillion or sho," Hughes responded with an absent grin on his face. He hiccupped.

"Is he okay?" Kirstin whispered to Mike, referring to Hughes. Mike merely shrugged in response.

Matt turned and looked in the direction they had come. They'd been descending for at least an hour.

"I wonder how much farther it is?" Kirstin asked, reading Matt's mind.

"Much farther and we'd be surrounded by liquid hot magma," Mike commented.

"That'd be, like, really, really... what's the word?" Hughes asked. He took a sip.

They continued walking, spiralling slowly down the cold, damp passageway. "I do hope it's not much further," Kirstin said.

"I wonder where we're going?" Matt asked.

"I don't know, but this is just really, really weird," Mike added.

"Hot!" Hughes suddenly shouted, startling everyone. "That'sh the word I wash looking for. Magma ish really, really hot."

"Note to self," Mike said aloud. "When Hughes turns 21, move to another country."

Hughes took a sip and regarded Mike quizzically. "Wash it shomthing I shaid?"

A half hour later they were still descending. Granted their progress was hampered somewhat by Hughes. He had begun walking the entire length of each stair, from the left side to the right side, before he'd walk down to the next stair. That one he'd walk from the right side to the left before descending one stair again. Then, he'd repeat the process, all the while whistling some merry tune he seemed to have made up on the spot. It is also worth note that these were rather wide stairs, so all of this took quite some time.

Still, even with Hughes slowing them down, they had been descending for over an hour and a half now. The air, which had seemed stale to begin with, had gradually gotten more so, approaching something which one might imagine archaeologists in Egypt might have encountered when first setting foot in a newly discovered tomb.

It would be a half hour more until finely, much to everyone's relief, they reached a door.

At least, they assumed it to be a door. The stone passageway they had been descending in came to an abrupt halt and there was a metal panel in the wall in front of them. There was no obvious way apparent to open the panel. Like the one that had been on the floor in Kenny's room, it was cool to the touch.

Mike went forward and lightly knocked his knuckles on the door. The knocking produced no sound at all. Mike frowned, made a fist, and pounded harder. Still no sound. Not even the faint sound you might produce from knocking on a huge solid boulder. It was as if the door absorbed the sound.

"Can one of you say something?" Mike asked.

"Like what?" Kirstin responded.

"Oh good, I didn't go deaf," Mike said.

"I was beginning to wonder the same thing," Matt remarked.

"What a pretty door," Hughes beamed.

Suddenly, with no warning, the panel slid aside. A burst of fresh, cool air came from within, coming upon them with a slight *wooshing* sound. Light poured from within, making it difficult for them to see what was on the other side.

And then came a voice. It was Kenny's to be sure, but it was different. Gone was the usual timidity. Gone was the quietness. Instead, there was confidence. It was a commanding, authoritative voice. Yet one thing that seemed constant was the voice's usual courteousness.

This is what the voice said: "Welcome, my friends. I have been expecting you. Please, come in."

The four of them trepidaciously stepped into the light. Rather, three of them stepped into the light and one stumbled. They were surprised to find the floor beneath themselves moving, and as their eyes adjusted to the bright light they discovered they were on a moving walkway, similar to those found in some of the larger airports.

This discovery didn't keep their attention long. All of them except Hughes stared in shock at their surroundings. Hughes just kept himself amused by grinning at the walkway.

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.

The walkway eventually slowed down and came to a halt before one large bookcase. Kenny looked up from a book he was reading and smiled. He put the book, *The Not At All Brief History of Time for the Non-Layman, Complete and Unabridged Vol. 42 by Prof. Stephen Hawking*, back on the bookcase with the other 149 volumes in the series.

"It's a good book," he told them. "A bit incorrect in a few areas, but they're common misconceptions." Again, his tone of voice was unlike any they'd ever heard from him before. It was normal.

Matt raised his hand, like a child in grade school. "May I ask a question?"

"Sure, Mr. Atanian," Kenny replied.

"What is all of this?"

"This," Kenny said with a proud look on his face, "is my Laboratory!"

Kenny gave them a brief tour of his 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, even Hughes.

It was all 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. It occurred to Matt that the feeling he was having couldn't have been too dissimilar to how Tick and Arthur felt when they had accompanied Sewer Urchin into the world beneath the city streets.

A few hours later, their brief tour was winding down.

"Why show us all this?" Mike asked.

"This is my life," Kenny responded. "Rather, this *was* my life. Now, it is simply a part of my life. Thanks to you, I now have another part: friends."

Hughes smiled as he hiccuped.

"What's this?" Kirstin asked, looking at a small beaker filled with a clear, thick liquid.

"That's a special polish," Kenny responded. "Ever see the film, *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*?"

The others nodded.

"Remember that bit where Chevy Chase was on that sled? Well, this is like that lubricant that he had used on it, only this stuff is stronger. It's still in the testing stages. I shall probably have to dilute it if it were ever to be actually used."

"You know," Mike pondered, "that could come in handy at the Klondike Derby."

Kenny smiled. "I'll see if I can have it ready by then."

"What's that over there?" Kirstin asked, pointing.

"My God!" Matt exclaimed as he looked where Kirstin had indicated. "It's a Stargate!"

Indeed, the large circular construct looked very much like the device from the science fiction film. Kenny smiled once again. "Well, not quite. I styled it's exterior after the Stargate, however. And the field it creates is similar in appearance. I've even styled the user interface to be somewhat like that in the film."

"So what is it?" Mike asked.

"It's a trans-interphasic particle conduit," Kenny proclaimed.

The others just stared at him.

"It creates a wormhole through not only space and time, but reality as well, making it possible to travel to any place or time as long as it is outside our normal plane of existence."

The others just stared at him.

"It's a magic doorway to alternate dimensions."

"Oh!" Mike said. "Kind of like *Sliders*."

"Sort of," Kenny said as he, Matt, Mike, and Kirstin move towards it for a closer look. "More like *Sliders* meets *Doctor Who*."

Matt, the resident Whovian, made the connection. "Ah! So it takes us not only to alternate present day Earths, but alternate any-time any-places!"

"Exactly!"

"Oh, my," Kirstin simply said.

"Can we try it?" Mike asked.

"I'm afraid not," Kenny told him. "It's not ready yet. I haven't perfected the returning mechanism."

He held up one of those multi-use remote controls you get at Radio Shack that can control your TV, VCR, cable, stereo system, garage door, and toaster oven all in one handy unit.

"That's just a regular remote control," Matt noted.

"Hey, it works on *Sliders*. Besides, I've made one or two minor modifications."

"That'sh kinda neat, you know?" Hughes slurred.

The others turned to look at Hughes. He was standing near the control panel. He held up his orange juice and poured the last of it down his throat. He then keeled over unconscious, falling on the control panel and hitting exactly seven of the symbols on it as he did so. Now, as anyone who has seen *Stargate* knows, seven symbols activate the gate. The seven that Hughes had landed on happened to be the exact seven that were already in position on the gate, and thus it opened immediately.

"No!" was all Kenny had time to exclaim as the gate opened up with that really neat watery-like explosion effect. As he, Kirstin, Mike, and Matt had been standing right in front of the gate, they were immediately sucked in.

Meanwhile, Hughes remained blissfully unaware, slumped against the control mechanism and enjoying his nap.

The four of them landed with a thud and were surrounded by darkness. It took them a moment to realize

that this was because they had landed in a small shed. Matt pulled open the door, flooding the shed with sunlight. The air smelled heavily of the sea.

They stepped out into a city with an air of celebration over it. People were moving briskly to and fro as if getting ready for a great event.

Kenny was pushing a few buttons on his remote control. He frowned and gave it a whack.

"When can we go back home?" Mike asked.

"Well," Kenny replied, "the remote needs a little while to warm up, and then I can open the gate again. Only trouble is that I'm not sure if I'll get us home or not.

"Well," Kirstin said, "we may as well look around a bit while we wait."

"Where are we?" Matt asked.

Kenny hit a few more buttons on the remote and it spat out a small slip of paper.

"Alternate Earth," he read, "an island in the South Pacific, sometime around the year 2010, plus or minus a year or so."

Mike breathed in a bit of the heady sea air. "South Pacific, eh?" He began to turn around. "Seems like a nice place. I wonder what island this... holy shit!!"

The others turned to see what had startled Mike.

"Well," Matt said, "I think I know what island this is. It's called Macross Island."

"Oh, my," Kirstin said.

"And that," Matt said, pointing to the colossal spacecraft sitting in the middle of the city, "is the Super Dimensional Fortress."

"I want one," Kenny said with a slight smile on his face.

"Well they only have the one, and I think they'd notice if it went missing," Matt responded.

"Isn't this an anime series?" Mike asked.

Matt nodded. "I wonder if this is *Macross* or *Robotech*?" he asked rhetorically. He then began to take notice of the crowd of people. Most of them were

moving towards a podium upon which stood a tall man in a gray flight suit with longish blond hair.

"Come on," Matt said. "I have a bad feeling about this."

"Today, ladies and gentlemen, you'll see how we've applied human know-how to understanding and harnessing a complex alien technology," the man in the flight suit said to the audience.

Matt looked up, as did the others. A half a dozen large fighter planes peeled away from each other to begin their performance.

"Keep your eyes on planes two and four," the man continued. "Flying at speeds of five hundred miles per hour, only fifty feet above the ground, they will pass within just a few yards of one another. Robotechnology makes such precision flying possible."

Planes two and four rapidly approached one another, but just as they were about to begin their pass they were forced to peel off as another plane of a different design, clearly a civilian plane, came out of nowhere to pass lazily between the two fighters.

The crowd loved it. They began laughing.

The man on stage was clearly not as amused. Matt was amused, but at the same time he was concerned.

"How long until that thing is warmed up?"

Kenny didn't reply. He was still watching the planes, and listening to the conversation between the man on stage and the interloper pilot that was accidentally being broadcast over the PA system. Normally Matt would let the kid enjoy the show, but...

"Kenny?"

"Hmm? What, Mr. Atanian?"

"How long until that thing is warmed up?"

Kenny looked at the remote. "Not long now," he said.

"What is it?" Kirstin asked.

"Well, we probably shouldn't stay here long if we'd like to increase our chances of staying alive."

"Why's that?" Kirstin asked.

It was Mike who responded with a sudden realization. "Isn't this place about to be attacked by aliens or something?"

Matt nodded.

Kenny spoke. "Well, we should be safe if the attack isn't going to begin for at least five minutes. In the meantime, we should go somewhere where we won't attract attention when we leave."

They had made their way to a far section of the exhibition grounds where a few of the new fighter craft were on display. The area was deserted at the moment as most everyone was still watching the air show.

Kenny was examining one of the planes closely. "Very interesting," he was muttering to himself. "Seems like airtight construction. I would imagine that they are spaceworthy. I wonder what these joints under the cockpit are for? Hmm..."

Matt walked over with a smile on his face. "That's where the fuselage swings down to form the legs."

"Legs?" Kenny asked.

"Well, this whole plane transforms into a robot."

"I want one!" Kenny proclaimed.

"Well, they *do* have more than one of these, but you'd probably have a hard time getting it through the gate, wouldn't you?"

"I've got a solution for that," Kenny smiled. He pulled out the remote again and pointed it at the aircraft.

"Kenny, wait, no!" Matt exclaimed.

The others looked at Matt.

"Not this one," Matt said. He pointed to the plane's call number. "This is VT-102. Someone else has to use this one." He pointed to another right next to it. "How about that one?"

Kenny shrugged and pointed the remote at the other plane. He hit the mute button, and a beam shot from the remote and surrounded the plane with blue boxes of light. Then the beam from the remote started moving rapidly

from left to right, starting at the top and working its way down, causing the plane to disappear as it moved across it.

"I think Kenny's seen the movie *Tron*," Mike commented.

"Do you get all of your ideas from movies?" Kirstin asked.

Kenny smiled in reply.

A few minutes later, the remote had finished its task.

"Someone's coming," Kirstin said.

They looked, and saw the blond pilot approaching, accompanied by a shorter, dark haired man in a civilian flight suit.

"Let's go," Mike advised.

They had found a secluded area in an alley, and Kenny began pushing buttons on the remote again.

"This'll get us home, right?" Mike asked.

"I hope so," Kenny replied.

"Oh, my," Kirstin said.

"How much longer?"

Kenny's reply was drowned out when a sudden ear-splitting noise filled the air. The ground shook, there was a bright flash, and the air seemed suddenly hotter.

"What was that?" Mike asked, his hands still over his ears.

"The SDF-1's main gun! We haven't got much time!" Matt responded.

"I'm ready," Kenny said. He pushed the play button on the remote, and there was the watery explosion effect again as the gate opened before them.

"Where's John Rhys-Davies when you need him?" Matt asked. He jumped through.

"My, this is exciting," Kirstin added as she followed.

"Here we go again!" Mike hollered as he, too jumped through.

Kenny was silent as he leaped in.

The gate closed.

They appeared in some kind of command complex. All around was chaos. Everyone seemed to be in some kind of mass hysteria.

"Sempai!" a woman called out. They turned. An attractive Asian woman with short hair was on the ground reaching out towards something they couldn't see. "Sempai!" she called out again.

Suddenly the woman turned into some kind of orangey-yellow liquid and just popped and sloshed onto the floor.

Without even waiting for anyone to shout an obligatory, "Let's get out of here!" Kenny opened the gate again and they leapt through.

This time they appeared in a metallic corridor. The walls were a dull gray in colour, and large bolts held sections of the corridor together.

"Where are we now?" Kirstin asked.

Mike and Matt found their surroundings to be very familiar. "Some kind of ship I think," Mike said.

"I think a space ship. I know this place," Matt said. It was just out of reach in his brain. He grasped at it but it continued to elude him.

"Someone's coming," Kenny said.

They ducked down an adjoining corridor just as two people came from around a corner, the shorter of them pushing a blue metal cart. "It's true you know, though, Rimmer," the one pushing the cart said. "You rank below all four of those service robots." He tapped his temple repeatedly. "Even the one that's gone absolutely mad."

"Not for long, maitie," the other replied. "Up, up, up. That's where I'm going."

Both spoke with British accents.

"Not until you pass your Engineer's exam. And you won't do that because you'll just go in there and flunk again." He took out a cigarette.

"Lister, last time I only failed by the narrowest of narrow margins."

"You what? You walked in there, wrote 'I am a fish,' four hundred times, did a funny little dance and fainted." He went to light the cigarette but paused as his companion replied.

"That's a total lie," the one called Rimmer lied.

"No it's not, Peterson told me," the one called Lister said as he lit up.

"No it's not, Peterson told me," Rimmer repeated mockingly.

"Lister, if you must know, what I did was I wrote a discourse on porous circuits which was simply too... radical, too... unconventional, too mold-breaking for the examiners to accept."

"Yeah, you said you were a fish." He took a puff from his cigarette.

"Is that a cigarette you're smoking, Lister?"

Lister regarded the cigarette in his hand. "No, it's a chicken."

"Right. You're on report." Rimmer firmly gripped his clipboard, ready to write up the other man's offence. "Two times in as many minutes, Lister, I don't know."

Lister took another puff, unconcerned. As another man approached, Lister inserted the cigarette in his ear to free up his hands for a moment.

"Rimmer, Lister," the new arrival said in greeting.

"Yessir!" Rimmer responded, immediately dropping his clipboard to the ground and beginning an overly intricate salute.

"Yo, Toddhunter, get down!" Lister exclaimed, grabbing the cart with both hands and stomping his feet a couple of times.

The new arrival gave them both a curious look and said, "Indeed."

Mike, Matt, Kenny, and Kirstin took this opportunity to quietly slip away.

Mike and Matt looked at each other with a silly grin on their faces.

"Red Dwarf," they both said.

Kirstin looked at Mike and Matt. Kenny was busy examining his remote.

"Red Dwarf?" Kirstin asked.

"It's a British sci-fi sitcom. We've landed in the beginning of the pilot episode," Mike responded.

"Well, at least we have a little time here," Matt responded. "Rimmer's exam isn't until tomorrow, and the crew isn't wiped out until probably a day or so after the exam."

"We seem to be landing in places where there is a lot of 'wiping out,'" Kirstin noted.

"Odd, that, innit?" Matt responded. He turned to the young genius. "Well, Kenny, we have a little more time to hang around here, but how long until we can leave?"

Kenny frowned. "We can't."

"What?" Kirstin, Mike, and Matt chorused.

"We're stuck here. Since we didn't wait for the remote to warm up after our last landing, I killed the battery when I opened the gate."

"So what does this mean?" Kirstin asked.

"So this is it, we're going to die," Mike deadpanned.

"There's no way to recharge the battery?" Kirstin asked.

"Well, we could expose the remote to a blast of Cadmium 2 radiation, but unfortunately you don't come across such things very often."

"That's what wipes out the crew," Matt said.

"Then we can recharge the remote!" Kirstin exclaimed.

"Well, the remote will be recharged, but we'll be piles of little white dust on the floor," Mike said.

"And the remote will be too radioactive to safely handle for about three million years," Kenny added.

"Could we go into stasis like Lister?" Mike asked.

"No, only one spare booth," Matt responded. "And it must still be empty, because in *Stasis Leak* Lister and Rimmer are arguing about who they're going to put into it."

"*Stasis Leak*?" Kirstin asked.

"It's this episode where they find a stasis leak they can walk through to travel back in time to before the accident," Matt responded.

"Then why can't we use that to travel to the future?" Mike asked.

"That's a good idea!" Matt responded.

"Um... are you sure it's okay to go in here?" Kirstin asked.

"We have to," Matt responded. "That's where the leak is."

Kirstin looked up at the sign that said, "Men's Showers."

"Um... well, okay," she said.

Fortunately the room was unoccupied at the present.

Matt led the way to the appropriate stall and threw open the curtain. "Over here!" he said. He walked in and pushed his hand towards the wall expecting to pass his hand right through it. "Ouch," he said, as his hand whacked against the wall.

"I think we have a bit of a problem," Mike quipped.

Kenny stepped forward and removed from his pocket what looked like it had once been a toy Star Trek Tricorder. The others guessed, correctly, that he had modified it so that it was no longer a toy.

"There is some kind of leak here," he said, "but it is inaccessible from this side unless you came from the other side in the first place. Good thing, too. If we went through we'd probably be aged three million years."

"Oh yeah, I'd forgotten about that last part," Matt said. The others gave him a look.

"Is there anything you can do?" Mike asked Kenny.

Kenny removed from his other pocket a small metal object. Matt looked at it closely. "Isn't that the oscillation overthruster from *Buckaroo Banzai*?" he asked.

"Huh?" Mike asked.

"Nothing," Matt said. "Just another thing Kenny designed to look like something from a movie."

Kenny pondered the device momentarily and pocketed it again. "I need to make a few alterations that'll take a few days, but when I'm done we'll be able to safely pass through."

Examination of the Engine Room revealed the best place to put the remote where it could remain undetected was behind one of the drive plates. Unfortunately, the area behind the drive plates was inaccessible to people of normal size. However...

Matt finished tying a string around the remote and handed the string to Mike. Mike took the string in his clawed, furry little hand and chittered as he ran off.

Frank Toddhunter thought he was seeing things. Had he just seen a squirrel come out from behind one of the drive plates and scurry off?

He bent down and took a close look at the drive plate, still not believing what he had seen. He soon found a new thing to not believe had seen however.

"Mr. Rimmer!" he called out.

"Yessir?" came the quick response from Rimmer, standing off to one side of the room trying to figure out how to repair the squeaky noise the door was making. He immediately went into his overly intricate salute again.

"Weren't you supposed to repair this drive plate yesterday?"

"Yessir! I did sir. Good job, isn't it? Best I've ever done."

"You call this repaired? My gran could do a better job without her glasses."

Rimmer frowned. "With respect sir, your grandmother..."

"Rimmer, spare me the smartarsed reply. Report to the Captain, immediately."

"Yessir." After Toddhunter had turned away, Rimmer made a rather rude gesture before departing as ordered.

Mike ran back in, frantically.

"Did you get it planted, Mike?" Matt asked.

Mike chittered at them excitedly.

"Mike," Matt said, "I can't speak squirrel."

Mike pulled out a small dry-erase sign and a marker. He wrote on the sign, "Big Trouble!"

"What is it, Mike?" Kirstin asked.

Mike began to write something else, but Matt stopped him by pouring hot water over him. They all turned away from Mike as he rapidly got dressed and explained the trouble.

"Rimmer just got told to report to the captain for poorly repairing a drive plate."

"Damn! We've got to go, now!" Matt exclaimed.

They ran from their hiding place and high tailed it to the men's shower. Unfortunately, the shower they needed was occupied. However, they had no time to wait and little time for apologies as they threw open the shower curtain.

"Oh, my," Kirstin said.

The man looked familiar to Matt. The last time Matt had seen the man had been on TV, but he had been standing in the same shower at the time. Without looking down, Matt smiled and said, "Don't worry, it's personality that counts."

The man wandered away worried about all of the strange encounters he seemed to have in showers. He wouldn't have long to worry about such things, unfortunately. In a few moments he would be hit in the face by a nuclear wind, and that would give him something a bit more important to worry about.

The four of them ran into the shower, and two of them were shocked to find that the man had been taking a cold shower. Matty and Squirrel-Mike didn't worry about this long, however.

There was a distant thunderous noise as the floor beneath them shook. "Hurry up, Kenny!" Matty exclaimed as Kirstin hastily picked up Mike's clothes.

Kenny pulled out the overthruster and pushed a button on it. The wall before them began glowing pink. They jumped through.

The next instant, the now empty shower was blasted by radiation.

They stepped out into a dimly lit corridor deep in the bowels of the ship. "Look for something that says 'Xpress Lift,'" Matty said.

"Is that it over there?" Kirstin asked?"

Matt nodded. They got in the lift, and some hours later they arrived in the area of the ship they needed to be in.

They began to make their way to the Engine Room. Half way there, they heard a noise behind them. It was a sort of howly-screachy noise from someone fast approaching.

Alarmed, they turned to see an immaculately dressed black man behind them.

"Hey, who are you monkeys!" he asked them. When he spoke, they noticed his pointed teeth.

"Hi, Cat," Matty responded.

"How do you know who I am?" he asked.

"Well, you *are* the best looking thing in the Universe," Matty responded, figuring that the quickest way out of this would be to play up to Cat's ego.

"Well you got me there," Cat responded. He pointed. "What's that?!"

Kirstin looked where Cat had pointed. "That's a squirrel," she said.

"Why do I get the urge to chase it?" Cat asked, smiling.

"I wouldn't. Squirrels are ferocious creatures that could tear you in half in a heartbeat."

Mike chittered angrily and waved one clawed paw around for effect.

"Hey, thanks, bud. I owe you one!" Cat looked at them suspiciously. "Wait a minute..."

Mike stopped waving the paw, worried that Cat had seen through their ruse.

"You two wouldn't be women, would you?" Cat asked.

"Um... yes..." Kirstin responded.

Cat made that howly-screachy noise again. "Don't move!" he exclaimed. "I'll be back!" He ran off down the corridor.

"I think we should leave," Matty said after Cat was gone.

"What was that?" Kirstin asked.

Kenny looked up from his Tricorder, which he had been using all this time. "It appears that that is what evolution has done to the common cat in three million years time."

"Where did he go?" Kirstin asked.

"Probably to take a couple of baths and to change from his third-best suit to his best-best suit, or something," Matty said, and then she repeated, "I think we should leave."

"Why?" Kirstin asked.

"Well... let's just say that I for one don't want to have kittens," Matty responded.

Kirstin blushed and said, "I think we should leave."

Mike found the remote where he had left it, and Kenny announced that it was functioning normally.

"I wonder where we'll end up now?" Kirstin asked.

"I'm betting anywhere but home," Matty responded.

Mike chittered his agreement.

Kenny activated the gate and they all leapt through, and a moment later they reappeared in Kenny's Laboratory.

"We did it!" Kirstin exclaimed, excited. "We're home!"

Hughes stirred and slowly rose from where he had been slumped unconscious for the past few days. He rubbed his head gingerly. "I miss anything exciting?" he asked.

Enter the Becker

Jon Becker was walking down the road minding his own business, listening to a new CD he'd gotten for Christmas. It was a PlayStation game he'd gotten from Matt Swett. What he was listening to would sound to most people like that annoying loud screech that you get when you put any kind of computer CD into an audio CD player... but to Becker it sounded like sweet, sweet music.

Cars careened wildly by honking their horns madly as they swerved like mad to avoid hitting the young man. Becker, who was still walking down the road (Did we mention that he was walking down the road, and *not* down the side of the road?) noticed none of this. His eyes were closed so that he could concentrate on his music without visual distraction.

He felt a whoosh of a fast moving object going closely by him and he opened his eyes to see what it was. His next words were not at all polite, and were in fact of a type that would be most offensive to sensitive readers, as he noticed a car heading right for him.

He leapt out of the way, most annoyed when his sudden movement caused his player to skip, and came to a halt near a rather ordinary looking house. A flash of movement in the house's doorway caught his attention, but when he looked he saw nothing there.

He then noticed two bicycles down the road riding away, and was somewhat surprised to recognize the riders as Kirstin Porter and Matt Atanian. He was about to call out to them, but they turned a corner and disappeared.

He looked back at the house.

It was perfectly average looking in every respect, except that the yard seemed a little too neat... but still something about it intrigued him.

Kenny smiled as he recalled the day's events thus far. It had been a rather interesting one. Most productive.

The device had worked as well as could be expected, and with some minor adjustments the remote control would be able to function flawlessly. No more random jumps.

The only thing he still needed to work on was a better power source. After all, they had almost been killed when they were stuck on the Red Dwarf. What could he possibly do to prevent that?

He had an idea. He took out the remote and pressed a button. A few minutes later, the Macross Valkyrie had reformed before him. As soon as it had solidified, he was inside it, examining its power source.

"This is perfect!" he exclaimed. If he'd been a lesser person, he'd be drooling with delight. "A few modifications to this design and I can integrate it into the remote's existing configuration with little difficulty! Now, where did I put that hydrospanner?"

"Is this it?"

"Yes, thank you...WHAT!?" Kenny spun around in alarm, surprised to not be alone.

Jon Becker stood there, looking somewhat forlornly at the headphones grasped in one hand. The magnetic field present in the Laboratory of course renders ordinary portable audio equipment non-functional.

"Mr. Becker," Kenny said, confused. "May I ask how you got in here?" There was no malice in the question, just concern. After all, Kenny had thought his Laboratory impenetrable to unauthorized persons.

"The door was open."

"It was?"

"It was."

"Now you mean the front door, of course. But how did you open the door to the stairway?"

"It was open."

"It was?"

"It was."

This is not supposed to be someplace you can just walk into... Kenny brooded. *Oh well, as long as he's here...*

"Welcome," he said, "to my Laboratory!"

"Yeah," Becker said, semi-impressed. "Nice place."

Nice place? Kenny thought. *The most advanced scientific Laboratory on the planet, full of wonders that most people couldn't even begin to fathom, and he says "nice place"?*

Kenny smiled thinly.

"So what do you think?" Kenny asked.

"Cool. Hey, a Robotech plane! Can I have one?"

"No."

"How 'bout that Stargate?"

"No."

"What about that over there? What's that?"

Kenny smiled as he looked at the shape under the large sheet. "Ah, that is something I'd been working on for some time. It's actually near completion. I was going to do some tests on it later today."

The two walked towards it as Kenny spoke. Kenny pushed a button on a nearby panel and the sheet rose up to reveal...

"Isn't that an Edsel?" Becker asked.

Indeed, it was a 1958 Edsel Pacer 2-door convertible, banana yellow in colour, the chrome on it shining like new.

"It is more than just an Edsel. It is... *a time machine!*"

"You made a time machine out of an Edsel?"

"Yeah, well," Kenny mumbled, "I originally wanted to use a Delorian, but then I heard someone had already used that idea."

Becker noticed something odd on the back of the car, where the trunk would normally be. "What's that?" he asked. "Some kind of weird fusion device that you can put even normal garbage in and get an unlimited supply of power?"

"No," Kenny said. "That is a blender. I thought it'd look cool there."

"Oh..." Becker said.

Kenny had an idea. "You know," he said, "The test would go a lot better if I had a human subject."

Most people would probably refuse. Who in their right mind would want to be a human guinea pig in a crazy time-travel experiment in a completely untested machine? Fortunately for Kenny, like most of the rest of Troop 192, Jon Becker was not in the right mind.

"Sure!" he said with a stupid little grin on his face.

"Excellent," Kenny responded, tapping his fingers together, in an unintentional but perfect imitation of Montgomery Burns. A thought then occurred to him. "Um... do you know how to drive?"

Becker smiled an innocent smile as he climbed in and buckled his seatbelt. "Of course not," he answered.

Kenny despairingly rested his forehead in the palm of his hand for a moment. "Hold on, I'll be right back." He walked off, only to reappear a moment later with a syringe. It was not a terribly small one. In fact, it looked like one you might use on a horse.

"Um... what are you going to do with that?" Becker asked.

Kenny pulled a pair of headphones out of a pocket and tossed them into the car. Becker's eyes lit up like the star on the top of a Christmas tree as he lunged after them. His back was turned to Kenny when he felt a sharp pain in his spine.

"God damn it!" Becker exclaimed.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Becker," Kenny said.

"You'd better be sorry!" Becker held up the headphones that a moment ago had been in flight. "These aren't connected to anything! That's a dirty trick! Oh, and by the way, did you just happen to stab me in the back with a rather large syringe?"

"Um, yes," Kenny said.

"May I ask what for?"

"What does it mean when there's a double yellow line in the middle of the road, one side solid and the other broken?"

"The cars on the side with the broken line can pass if it is safe to do so."

"Which peddle is the gas?"

"That one," Becker said, pointing.

"True or false: if you are sliding on the road you should immediately hit your brakes."

"False. Hey, I know how to drive!"

"Yes," Kenny said, smiling. "You do." He leaned into the car. "I think for our first trip we should try something small. Say, back five hours? You flick this switch," Kenny flicked the indicated switch, "to activate the temporal circuits. When the temporal circuits are activated, propelling the car to speeds equal to or in excess of forty-two miles per hour will activate the temporal warp. The warp itself should seem instantaneous to you, and you'll be a five hours in the past. Take this."

Becker took what looked like a walkie-talkie from Kenny. "What good will this do?"

"This is a trans-temporal communications device. We can keep in contact with this. Any other questions?"

Becker looked around the lab, which was immense but rather cluttered. "How am I supposed to get up to 42mph in here?"

Kenny walked over to a control console and pushed a button. The Edsel began to rotate, apparently on a turntable flush with the floor. The car came to a stop facing a wall. With the push of another button by Kenny, a large section of the wall raised up to reveal a long, paved track.

"Ah," Becker said.

"Ready?" Kenny asked.

"Ready," Becker responded, pulling the door shut.

Becker's foot hit the gas peddle, and the car sped off down the track. The speedometer rose quickly, passing 40, and then 41, and then...

There was a bright flash and Becker hit the brakes. He looked around.

"Huh," he said, getting out of the car, "nothing's changed."

He turned around, looking back the way he'd come.

The large section of wall was down over the far end of the track where he'd first entered.

"That's odd," Becker said. "He must have closed it for some reason after I went through."

He made his way back to the wall, concerned how he was going to get through. He was relieved to see a small door in the wall when he got there which he made use of.

He re-entered the lab and found there was no one there. "Kenny!?" he shouted. "Where'd you go?"

He heard a noise. It was coming from the direction of that Stargate he'd seen earlier. He walked over to it and was surprised to see Bill Hughes slumped unconscious over a control panel.

"What the... Hughes?" Becker responded. His fellow Scout reeked of an odd smell... like orange juice and alcohol. Hughes made no response to Becker's inquiries.

Suddenly the Stargate burst to life. The vortex opened on it and Becker dove for cover, hiding behind a large sheet covering something car shaped.

When the vortex was fully formed, three figures leapt from it. The first through was Kirstin Porter, followed closely by Matty Hayes and Kenny. Becker noticed a squirrel in Matty's hands and some clothes (including a dirty red Troop 192 hat) that Kirstin carried.

"We did it!" Kirstin exclaimed, excited. "We're home!"

Hughes stirred and slowly rose from where he had been slumped unconscious. He rubbed his head gingerly. "I miss anything exciting?" he asked.

The squirrel chattered something and held up his small dry-erase sign. On it was written, "Go back to sleep, Hick Boy."

Hughes obliged.

A half hour later, Matty had disappeared but now Matt was there, Mike had seemingly arrived with him, and Hughes had returned to being sober.

"Thank you for coming, all of you," Kenny told them in the still quiet but more confident voice he used in his Laboratory.

"Aagh, do you have to yell so loud?" Hughes asked, clutching his throbbing head.

"Oh, come on," Matt said to Hughes, dragging him along.

"And don't worry," Kirstin called out as they left, "we won't tell anyone about this. Your secret is safe."

A few minutes later a voice came through Becker's walkie-talkie. "Mr. Becker, are you there? Did you live through the time-transfer?"

Becker spoke through the walkie-talkie. "Time transfer? I'm right where I started. I didn't go anywhere. And how did you do that?" Becker asked. He was looking over at Kenny as he spoke. "How do you talk through this thing to me when I don't see your lips moving, and you don't even have your walkie-talkie?"

"That's not me you're looking at. That's me a few hours ago. Of course you didn't go anywhere, you went *anywhen*."

Becker regarded the sheet covered object he was hiding behind. He peaked under the sheet and discovered a 1958 Edsel Pacer 2-door convertible under it.

He scratched his head.

"Oh," he said. "I get it."

Deep in his underground lair, the genius sat. He was looking at his chronometric disturbance indicator. It was still fluctuating a bit. A little over a half hour ago, it had gone off the scale.

He turned around and regarded the invention he had been working on. To the average person, it would appear to be simply a 1976 Ford Pinto. But to him... it was a masterpiece. Or at least, it would be if he could ever get the one crucial circuit in the temporal flux generator to function properly...

"Blast eet," he exclaimed, his voice in an indeterminate and probably fake accent. "Zomeone haz beeten me to it! But at lazt, I may have foound myself a worthy opponent!"

* * *

"So I shouldn't try to talk to you?"

"No, for Sagan's sake!" Kenny said over the walkie-talkie. "Do you want to cause a temporal paradox?"

"Is that bad?"

"Well, best case scenario, the past me gets very confused."

"That's not so bad."

"Worst case is the end of Everything."

"The end of headphones?"

"Are headphones part of Everything?"

"Um... yes?"

"Then yes."

"That's bad. So... um, what do you want me to do?"

"Well, look around a bit if you wish, but make sure you come back before the past you from the present leaves to become the present you in the past, or he'll crash into your present car with his past car and you'll both be history."

Becker cocked an eyebrow and stared off into space for a moment trying to decipher what Kenny had told him. Finally he gave up. "Damn, this time travel is confusing."

Becker put the walkie-talkie in his pocket and slipped past Kenny unseen. He made his way to the staircase and walked up it, a few hours later coming to the heavily locked door at the top. Fortunately, on this side of the door there was a rather large button that said, "Push to unlock."

He pushed it and after five minutes the sound of locks undoing themselves came to a stop.

He walked through through the door, made his way to the door leading outside, and walked through that one as well. He blinked as he looked up at the sky.

There was a beeping in his pocket. He took out the walkie-talkie. "Um, hello?"

"Mr. Becker, where are you?" Kenny said into the walkie-talkie. He looked up at the time-elapsed display on the wall. "You should probably be starting back soon."

"I'm standing just outside the house," Becker's voice responded. "I just had to look outside and see if anything was different."

For crying out loud, Kenny thought, he's only a few hours in the past. What's he expecting, a biplane to fly overhead with one of the Wright Brothers waving hello? Or perhaps the Hindenburg to float by and explode for his delight? "I really think you should get back here. If I'm right, your past self should be arriving at my house any minute."

Becker looked down the street and saw Matt Atanian and Kirstin Porter riding away on their bicycles. He looked down the street in the other direction and saw himself just avoid getting hit by Mrs. Quadrozzi's car.

"I think I'll come back now," he told Kenny as he dashed inside.

"Good," Kenny responded. "And make sure you close the door to my laboratory behind you."

Becker looked behind himself at the door in question, left slightly ajar as he made his mad flight down the stairs. "Um... it's closed," he lied.

A few hours later, mad out of breath, Becker burst into the Laboratory and ran across to the door leading to the track. Luckily, Kenny didn't notice him as he was intent on the futuristic fighter craft reforming before his eyes.

Becker ran down the track and hopped into the car. After a quick three point turn, he was facing back in the direction of the lab.

"Here goes nothing," he said, jamming his foot down on the gas.

There was a blinding flash of light as the Edsel reappeared and came to a halt perfectly positioned on the turntable where it had started.

Kenny smiled. "It took a human through time and returned him alive," he said. "It works!"

Becker opened the door and stepped out, tossing the walkie-talkie to Kenny.

"That was fun," Becker said. "You ever think of putting a CD player in this thing, though?"

Kenny was about to answer, but was interrupted by a beeping sound coming urgently from a console marked, "World Super-Genius Hotline."

"That's odd, who'd be calling at this hour?" Kenny wondered aloud. He walked towards the console, followed by Becker, and pushed a large red button upon it.

A large screen on the wall lit up with an image. It was a computer generated image that looked like something of a cross between Albert Einstein and Max Hedroom.

A voice came from the speaker, and the image's lips moved in sync with it.

"Whoo are yew to have maztered the zeekrets of tyme traveel?" the voice asked. "I know it waz yew, I tracked ze temporal imizionz bach to yeur lokation! WHOO ARE YEW!!!"

"Um... my name is Kenneth E. Pendrell," Kenny said. "And you?"

"Ah. Zo Kenneeth Ee. Peendreall iz ze name of mye arrch nemeeziz!"

"Your what?" Becker asked.

"Myee arrrch nemeezizess!!!" the voice said, attempting to speak clearer but actually making it more difficult to understand.

"Come again?" Becker asked.

"My arch nemesis!" the voice exclaimed suddenly.

"Oh," Becker said.

"But I don't need an arch nemesis," Kenny said. "I'm doing quite well without one."

"Vell zat ees too bad, yew zilley perzon! Yew are ze onlee wan I kan fiend zat even aprochez mye brilyanz!"

Kenny sighed. "Well, Mr. Arch Nemesis, sir, can I at least know your name?"

The voice laughed slightly, a disturbing laugh. "Vy, ovcourse! Mye naime is... Profezer Snarfinkle!"

Kenny and Becker looked at each other, dumbfounded.

The voice began to laugh once again.

Hell Comes to Springfield

Deep inside of the cavernous recesses of the most advanced scientific research facility the world never knew about, things were afoot. Strange and wondrous things that would dazzle, amaze, confound, delight, confuse, and occasionally even enlighten.

Sitting on four concrete blocks was a partially disassembled Porsche 911 Turbo. Laying below the blocks was a rather large tarp with scattered parts laying on top. Most were unnecessary now as this car could now do what was thought only possible in dreams: It ran on ordinary tap water. Even more impossible: It got 320 miles to the gallon.

Elsewhere, resting under a dusty sheet sat the long fabled, but never believed possible perpetual motion machine. Elsewhere still rested other things never known to exist and which, any one of them, would turn the world on it's head. Cold Fusion light bulbs. A device that could change the molecular structure of Coca-Cola and turn it into Pepsi. A video monitor with a live 24-hour feed of the city of Atlantis. These were only a handful of the things that Kenneth Pendrell had brought forth from his mind.

And they were all now sitting alone in disuse and neglect. They no longer occupied Pendrell's attention. They were trifling things that could not equal 1/100th the importance of what he was currently focused with.

Which was an apple.

An ordinary apple.

Less than ordinary, in fact. It was smallish and was slightly bruised and had two ugly brown spots. If you saw this in the produce aisle, you would likely push it aside and pick a better one to put in you produce bag.

But this apple, this ugly apple, was currently more important to Kenny than even his beloved 'Stargate' Transdimensional Conduit. Though, truth be told, the conduit was like a faithful dog. No matter what new

fangled contraption Kenny would create, his love would inevitable return to the Stargate.

Kenny took the ugly apple and brought it over from his workbench to a designated testing area. Suddenly, his ears were assaulted by the sound of a cat being hit with a brick while being drowned. Kenny glanced up and guessed right. Mr. Becker, his new "lab assistant," had arrived, 12 minutes and 56.13 seconds late, as predicted.

"Hey Kenny," Becker greeted, "Sorry I'm late. I had..."

"To stop at the convenience store to pick up new batteries for your portable compact disc player," Kenny finished the sentence for him.

"Yeah," Becker said impressed. Then his tone turned suspicious. "How did you know that?"

"Calculating the average battery life of your compact disc player, added to the distance to make a detour to the nearest convenience store, adjusting for average store traffic at this time of day, making for an average of two customers ahead of you in line, plus time for digging out enough loose change to pay for said batteries, then time to open package with your teeth, replacing batteries in the player, adds up to an average delay time of twelve minutes and fifty-six point thirteen seconds," Kenny explained.

"But, to calculate that so exactly, that's just impossible," Becker reasoned rolling his eyes upward as he tried to add up the math himself.

"Not really. Science is all about observation. If you observe the same thing over and over again with the same result, you have what we can call a pattern."

"What's that mean?" Becker asked.

"It means that you always stop to buy batteries on your way to the lab every Monday and Thursday, like clockwork."

"Oh," Becker said sheepishly.

"Anyway, that's not important. You're here now, and I need you for a vital experiment," Kenny said, almost giddily. Well giddy for Kenny.

"Really?" Becker said excitedly, then stopped dead in his tracks and eyed Kenny even more suspiciously than before. "Wait a second, this doesn't involve any sort of large syringe does it?"

"What? Heavens no! See this apple?" Kenny said holding the apple in his hands out to Becker.

"Yeah?"

"I want you to take a bite of it," Kenny said confidently.

"And while I'm doing that, you inject me with a large syringe?" Becker asked.

Kenny rolled his eyes in frustration and then pulled out the pockets of lab coat and pants and held both his arms out. "There are no syringes involved, whatsoever. Now, will you please take a bite of this?"

Becker took the apple and eyed it. "So you used the syringe on the apple and now whatever was in the apple will be in me?"

"Mr. Becker, I know I will one day have to genetically re-grow your shattered eardrums, but I know you're not deaf now, so please listen carefully: Never, in the course of this experiment, has there been, nor will there ever be, any involvement, even in the slightest, of syringes, or other pointed objects," Kenny said with a slightly annoyed tone.

"This is an ordinary apple?"

"Yes."

"No syringes?"

"Yes."

"Yes there will be syringes?" Becker asked, now confused.

"No. Yes, as in 'Yes, there will be NO syringes involved.' Okay?"

Kenny explained with an annoyed sigh.

"Cool," Becker said. He then looked over the apple again for a place to bite in. He avoided the bruise and the two bad spots and finally settled on a target. Polishing it briefly on his shirt, he then raised it to his mouth, shifted his eyes nervously to Kenny one last time, who responded

by taking a step back and holding his hands out to show no weapons, then bit in.

Becker chewed the bite of apple a couple times, then swallowed. He then looked at Kenny and wondered what would happen next.

"Well, how was it?" Kenny asked.

"The apple?" Becker asked, confused.

"Yes."

Becker mulled it over and hazarded a reply, "Not bad, I suppose. At least, as far as apples go."

Kenny smiled and nodded. "But not the best you ever had?"

Becker arched an eyebrow, confused at this line of questioning. He decided to play along with this and see where Kenny was going, whom he suspected was light years down the road in the conversation from where he stood. "No, not really. Probably would rate it a four. Edible, but not delicious."

"Good. That's the reaction was hoping for. Can you please hand me the apple back?" Kenny asked holding his palm out. Becker complied and Kenny immediately turned toward the designated testing area. He rested the apple on top of a metal pedestal. Pointed directly at pedestal was a rather stereotypical ray, which was attached to a robot arm and comprised of a large antennae in which several concaved discs lined the shaft in ranks of descending sizes until reaching the knobbed tip, out of which, presumably, shot the stereotypical beam.

Kenny went to the work bench and took a small remote-control device and started fiddling with it. He then looked to Becker, "You may want to shield your eyes." As Kenny said this, he flipped down a set of detachable black lenses over his normal glasses. Becker covered his eyes with his hands and Kenny hit a button.

There was a blinding bolt of energy and in a flash, the ugly apple was gone.

In its place was something amazing.

Another apple.

But unlike the ugly apple, this one was anything but. First off, it was bigger, nearly double in size the original and it was perfectly symmetrical in shape. It's skin was a bright, almost firetruck-red, and it actually glistened in the fluorescent lights of the laboratory. In essence, if there could ever be a supermodel of apples, this was it. This was, as Kenny would likely have said, the Kirstin Porter of apples; perfect in every way.

Kenny looked at it and his eyes beamed with excitement. Becker stood there, like he usually did after some sort of beam was fired in the lab, and blinked dumbly a few times. Kenny hurriedly walked over and examined the now beautiful example of produce.

He turned it around a few times, looking for any flaws or imperfections, knowing in his heart that he would find none. So far, it appears, his experiment was a success. But then, perfection is sometimes only skin deep. He needed to measure it against the original.

He then looked to Becker, put his hand with the apple out to Becker and smiled. "Mr. Becker, care for another bite?"

Becker took the apple and eyed Kenny suspiciously. "Still no syringes, right?"

"Yes."

"And this is still an ordinary apple?"

Kenny smiled ever so slightly. "If my calculations are correct, no. This will definitely not be an ordinary apple."

Becker shrugged, took a bite, and chewed it. Suddenly, his eyes lit up in pleasant delight. It was like the entire collective positive energies of Wenatchee, Washington, the apple growing capital of the world, was concentrated into one perfect specimen of deliciousness. This was not so much an apple as it was looking into the face of God and finding him offering you free apple pie. Becker closed his eyes in ecstasy and Kenny could see a solitary tear of joy roll down his cheek.

That was all Kenny needed to see. The experiment was a complete success.

Becker opened his eyes and turned from his reverie to Kenny, "Why did you waste my time with that other piece of crap? If you wanted to see how I would react to eating your perfect apple, you should have just given it to me in the first place." Then Becker frowned and eyed the apple. "Hey, what did happen to that other crappy apple?"

Kenny smiled again. "You're eating it now, Mr. Becker."

"Wha...? That can't be. I took a bite out it. Plus, believe me, there is no way I could confuse those two in the taste department," Becker contradicted. Kenny continued to smile, waiting to prove Becker wrong, again.

Becker shifted nervously and took another bite of his treasured apple and was not shocked to find that the second bite was better than the first. He swallowed and then eyed Kenny and finally asked what he knew Kenny was waiting for him to ask so he could go off on a long explanation. "What exactly is that beam?"

"Glad you asked, Mr. Becker. I would like to introduce you to the IKP Perfection Extractor."

Kenny walked over and Becker followed. Kenny then looked at Becker and spoke, "Posit: two acorns fall from the same parent tree. One grows into a mighty oak. The other grows into a sickly sapling and then dies. Why?"

"Um... bad gardening technique?"

"Maybe, but say they each received the same attention and the same result happened?"

"Dunno," Becker said with a shrug, "Bad roll of the dice maybe? Life is random, isn't it?"

"Ah, now you're thinking like a scientist. Now stick with me. Despite the end results, both acorns started with the same potential. They were cut from the same cloth, as they say. So, despite the outcome, they both had a chance to be the same magnificent oak," Kenny said holding his finger up to make his point.

"Okay. So what?"

"So, the same goes for this apple, or two fish spawn, or two children. It all comes down to potential."

"Potential?"

"Yep, inside that ugly apple was the blueprint of what a perfect apple could be. All I did was bring all that potential out and this created the peak of what an apple could be," Kenny explained.

"Okay, that's great, but other than making better snacks, what good is it?" Becker asked, not grasping what Kenny was obviously seeing.

"It doesn't just work on food, It works on anything living. It can bring out that inner perfection. Imagine the applications!" Kenny said, now with full-blown excitement.

"Such as?" Becker asked, still not fully grasping it.

"Well, let's just say we applied it to Humans. Imagine what this would do to the criminal justice system."

"Huh?"

"Imagine it, Mr. Becker. No more need for prisons. We could take the most dangerous criminally insane people and with an application of this beam transform them into upstanding citizens."

Becker shifted nervously, "That sounds kinda Big Brother-ish to me."

Kenny noticed the nervous tone and decided to temper his own enthusiasm. "Well, maybe not yet, and certainly not until it has been extensively tested. But it could be an application."

"Okay, say we can do that. Here's a question, can we reverse the process? I mean, permanent changes are, well, permanent."

Kenny grasped what Becker was throwing out there. "I see what you mean. Yes, to totally change a person and not have an option to change them back would be disconcerting. It shouldn't be hard though. It's just a simple reversing of the polarity of the beam."

Kenny then took Becker's apple, though not before Becker took one last bite and was overjoyed to see that the third bite rivalled the second for best bite of an apple ever. Kenny placed the apple on the pedestal and then opened a panel on the beam's housing. After tinkering with it with a small tool set, he closed the panel and stepped out of the beam's path. He then pulled

out the control box and flipped his dark lenses down. Becker once again shielded his eyes.

Kenny pushed a button and the beam roared to life. This time something was off and Kenny knew something was wrong. He got an indication of this when the lights in the lab started to blow out like popcorn kernels. Suddenly, there was a blood red flash and then darkness.

Becker lifted his hands from his eyes and screamed, "I'm blind! My God, I've gone blind!!"

"The power grid has blown. You're fine, Mr. Becker."

"Oh," Becker said sheepishly. "How long till the lights come back on?"

"If the emergency grid was spared, then about a minute. If not, then not until I fix the generator," Kenny answered in the darkness. A minute passed and no lights came on.

"Guess you blew both grids. Nice trick. You and an apple are a very dangerous thing, Kenny."

"A minor setback. Otherwise, the experiment was a total success."

"Blackout aside," Becker agreed. Silence enveloped the two and Becker decided to break it. "Kenny, what do we do now?"

"Hold on," Kenny said. Becker could tell that Kenny had moved to a new location from the distance of his voice. "I keep a flashlight in my workbench drawer. We'll use it to see out way to the exit and then we'll come back tomorrow with more flashlights and start on repairs."

Becker could hear Kenny rooting through his drawers and then the familiar click of a MagLite button. Becker blinked a few times as the beam managed to hit him square in the eyes. Kenny waved the beam aside and looked for the secondary entrance. He looked past Becker's shoulders and found it.

Something, however, was off. He couldn't quite place it, but he was sure that something was wrong with the lab. But the darkness and excitement of his success were clouding just was it was. He decided to file it away for later and to get him and Becker back to light before his

batteries ran dead. Because the elevator was shut down by the power failure, he knew it was at least a couple hours worth of steps ahead of him to get back to his room. Kenny sighed and waived Mr. Becker over with the light.

"Hey Kenny, do you feel ok?" Becker asked cautiously.

"What is wrong, Mr. Becker?" Kenny asked back.

Becker shrugged. "I dunno. I feel kinda... off. Like there's something wrong but I can't place my finger on it. Like the air is funny or something."

"Do you feel physically ill?"

"No. Not really. Maybe. Are you sure there was nothing wrong with that apple you gave me?"

Kenny nervously shifted. He didn't want to admit it, but Becker was describing exactly how he himself felt. Kenny was now sure that he had to get back to his room so he could start making plans to repair the lab immediately. "I hope not. We should try to make good time to get back to the top. Let's pick up the pace, agreed?"

"Yeah, okay," Becker said and the pair began to double their pace on the ascent up the winding stone stairwell.

About an hour and a half later, Kenny and Becker stumbled through the door. Becker took two steps and promptly fell on his face and groaned. Kenny shared the sentiment.

"Mr. Becker, remind me later to install a default mechanism, so if the power grids blow, all outside exits unlock. Especially the wind tunnel," Kenny groaned, supporting himself against the wall. It was an unnecessary statement as this experience was enough to ensure that he would retain this thought in his long term memory.

"Water..." was all Becker could managed to reply with.

Kenny stumbled over to the collapsed Becker and helped him up so they could jointly stumble toward the kitchen.

Maybe it was the exhaustion from the climb, or his own thirst, but that uneasy feeling was coming back. That uneasy feeling turned to mild despair when he entered his kitchen.

"Hey, what happened here?" Becker asked.

"Good question," Kenny answered with a surprised tone. The kitchen was an absolute sty. It looked like a pack of bears tore through it and then left. The cupboards were mostly open and there were empty boxes and containers everywhere. The sink was overloaded with dishes in such a manner that if he dared put a single spoon on top of the pile, he risked a distasteful avalanche. On the kitchen table was an ashtray overflowing with grimy ashes and cigarette butts.

Kenny was struck dumb. Did someone break in and trash his kitchen? Kenny dared to hope the fridge was at least safe from whatever hit his kitchen. He slowly opened and was literally assaulted by the most foul odour of spoiled milk, rotten eggs, mould, and bad lunchmeat. Inside, something that was blue, furry, and that kind of resembled a gelatine mold opened its eyes and said, "Momma!"

Kenny slammed the door and felt bile rising up in his gullet and choked it back. Kenny was always seeking new life and new civilizations. But he had to draw the line on the ones that had formed in his refrigerator.

"What in the name of Schrödinger's Cat is going on here?" Kenny asked aloud.

"Did someone fire the cleaning lady or something? The living room looks like a biker gang just had a piñata party and the piñatas were all the... uh, well... everything." Becker said from another room. Kenny turned from the kitchen and ran excitedly to where Becker was. He didn't know why he hurried. It was just as Becker has described. His living room was trashed.

"But the house is hermetically sealed, and only authorized people should have access to it," Kenny whispered as he surveyed the wreckage that was once his living room. "Who would do such a thing?"

Kenny then looked to Becker and Becker looked back. Both bolted for Kenny's room. Kenny reached the door first and threw it open. He stopped dead in his tracks.

Someone had stolen his room.

What they replaced it with was an insult to intellect everywhere. First off, it was filthy. Sty wouldn't be adequate enough to describe it. Heck, even "toxic waste dump" didn't seem to really grasp the look of this place.

Next, someone had replaced all his beloved posters and paintings. Einstein had been replaced with some tramp humping a motorcycle. His periodic table had been removed in favour for some heavy metal band named "Satan's Port-a-Potty." His bookshelves were in similar condition. Scientific journals and science magazines were replaced with *Fangoria* and *Metal Edge* and inside those were hidden issues of *Penthouse* and *Hustler*. Kenny tore through the shelves in hopes of finding something, anything that was his.

"Check out the movie collection!" Becker said from across the room. Kenny turned around in despair.

"I take it that my collection of the History Channel's *Modern Marvels* is no longer occupying my shelf," Kenny asked sadly.

"Not unless there was an episode called *Revenge of the Splat Gore Monster!* Hey, there's another one called *Die Screaming with Sharp Things in your Eyes, Mother...* Um...ampersand pound sign dollar sign asterisk percentile exclamation point exclamation point..."

"I get the point, Mr. Becker," Kenny interrupted.

Becker shrugged and tossed the video on the large pile of moving clothing. Whether it was moving because there was something living under it, or because the clothes themselves were alive, Kenny didn't have the heart to find out.

"What's going on here, Kenny?"

"Splatter movies. Pornographic magazines. Everything that stifles the mind and can be called low or base. It's like a living tribute to insulting my intelligence," Kenny stated coldly.

"Just how long were we down there? What the hell happened?" Becker asked with a confused tone.

"We were only down there a few hours, even adding the walk up the steps. There was no way that all of this could've happened in that period of time," Kenny reasoned, taking the edge out of his voice.

"Maybe that beam sent us to the future? Maybe this some post-apocalyptic nightmare future," Becker hypothesized.

While it warmed Kenny's heart a little to see Becker taking a logical approach to this situation, Kenny still knew he had to set him straight. "There was nothing even remotely chrono-related or even dimensional-related with that beam. No, we are definitely in the same time and place."

"Then what?" Becker asked.

"I don't know." Of all the words in the English language, those were the words Kenny hated to say out loud most. Worse still, they sounded like the scariest ones he knew as well.

Becker looked around and moved toward the door. "Let's get out of here. I think we'll think clearer with some fresh air."

"Agreed," Kenny said. "Oh, and Mr. Becker?"

"Yes?"

"Leave the magazine."

Becker dropped the copy of *Hustler* and he and Kenny made their way through the trashed house and out the front door.

If shock was a word that could've described the look on Kenny and Becker's face when they saw his kitchen and bedroom, then the word for their expression when they saw the outside world had to be a touch stronger. Possibly the only candidate, rude as it sounded, was "F&#%#ING STUNNED."

Yes, Kenny and Becker were F&#%#ING STUNNED at what they were seeing.

"I guess it goes without saying that I don't need to say that I have a bad feeling about this," Becker said quietly.

"I am no longer ready to outright discount your nightmare future theory, Mr. Becker," Kenny said just as quietly.

Kenny and Becker stood in the middle what might have been, at one time, a pleasant suburb. Now it looked more like a ghetto. The houses were all in various states of disrepair and some were boarded up, others had bars on the windows. Graffiti littered the area and the lawns were either overgrown or dead, or, in some cases, overgrown with dead grass. The road was cracked and full of so many potholes, one could've confused it with a Bosnian mine field.

The sky was overcast and it looked positively sullen. The dark atmosphere suited the darkness of this place. Sirens echoed in the distance from several directions and Kenny and Becker could see billows of smoke from several places. Gunshots rang out somewhere close by and Kenny and Becker instinctively looked around nervously.

"I don't think it's safe to stand around here," Becker said, stating the obvious.

"I think we should try and find the others. Maybe they know what happened," Kenny reasoned.

"Yeah, Matt and the guys can fill us in on what's going on here. Presuming they're still around," Becker added.

"I said I wasn't discounting your future theory. I didn't say that was what happened," Kenny corrected.

"I know. I just hope they're okay, future or no," Becker said, annoyed.

"Agreed. We should head for the Church in the Acres. If something really bad happened, that would be where Mr. Atanian would assemble the others."

"Yeah, Matt would want to set up a place to help people who were hurt or needed protection. Let's go,"

Becker said excitedly and started toward the direction with Kenny following.

A short while later, the pair approached the second home of their Scout troop. It didn't look promising. From even a distance, it looked like a mess and Kenny was sure it looked like some of the windows were boarded up as well.

As the pair entered the lot, Kenny heard a low hum. That hum got louder and was no longer a hum after a few moments but rather a high pitched screechy whine that could only belong to a Japanese street motorcycle.

Which is was exactly what zoomed by the pair before screeching to a stop, u-turning, and then growling to a stop behind the pair. Kenny and Becker slowly turned around, with their backs now to the dilapidated church. There were a pair of people riding on the black Kawasaki and neither wore helmets so it didn't Kenny long to recognize them and to then be shocked yet again.

The man in the front wore heavy boots and black leather pants along with a black jacket adorned with studs and chains. His face was unshaven and his hair was scraggly and even though he wore a pair of sunglasses, Kenny was sure recognized him from the recent Christmas party as one Jason Bertovich.

The person behind him was even more shocking. His female companion wore thigh-high black leather hobnailed high-heeled boots, and a black G-string accompanying a black bustier. Her hair was cropped short and dyed raven black and her lips were crimson red. Prominently tattooed on her left shoulder in red gothic font was the word "BITCH." Sarah Porter would have most certainly had a conniption, possibly a seizure, if she was here right now and she saw this.

"Mr. Bertovich?" Kenny asked meekly.

"Nicole?!!" Becker said not so meekly.

Jason slid his glasses down his nose and looked at the pair with a sneer, "Hey Nicky, aren't these a pair of those scouts giving your girls a hard time?"

Nicole grinned evilly. "Yep."

"Good," Jason said with a grin as he pulled a handgun from his jacket and pointed it at Kenny and Becker from across his body. Kenny and Becker tensed up in surprise and terror.

"Listen meat, you're hired muscle first. No killing unless I say so," Nicole said sternly, slapping Jason in the back of the head.

Kenny and Becker let out a small sigh of only mild relief.

Nicole then reached to her right side and pulled out an Uzi 9mm submachine gun and aimed it at the pair. "That's my fun," she said with a sly smile and fired.

Becker and Kenny knew to instinctively dive out of the way. Luckily they dove to opposite sides. The bullets splintered the wall behind them and both scrambled to their feet to take off running. "Take that side of the building and find a way in, Kenny! I'll do the same! They can't chase us both!" Becker shouted as he rounded the corner, ducking his head as more masonry and wood disintegrated around him from the Uzi's spread.

Kenny scrambled his short legs for all he was worth and the ground exploded at his feet from Jason's handgun. Kenny rounded the corner and hoped that Mr. Becker made it safely as he could hear Nicole cackle as she fired another volley.

Alone in the parking lot, Jason looked to Nicole who stopped firing. "Which one do we waste first?"

Nicole smiled seductively. "Forget them, I got a better idea." She then dismounted and climbed in front of him and straddled his waist.

"God I love it when you do that kind of stuff, you slut," Jason said with a smirk.

"You're only adequate as a hired gun, but as a piece of meat, you're worth my money," Nicole said, licking her lips.

"Just shut up already, bitch," Jason said grabbing the back of her hair and kissed her forcibly on the mouth. She responded by digging her long fingernails into the back of his neck with her left hand, while her right hand fired the Uzi into

the air. Jason revved up the cycle and the pair sped away in that position.

Becker heard the Uzi fire again and the engine revving and figured that meant Nicole wanted to finish him off. Becker thought this was not how he wanted to go out so he decided that it was imperative to make his way inside. On the side of the building, a board that looked to have been used to board up one of the windows was lying on the ground. Becker found an unprotected window and proceeded to smash the glass out. Glancing back to make sure he was not in anyone's crosshairs, he ran the board across the edges to windowsill in hopes of avoiding any major lacerations and then proceeded to hoist himself up and through the window.

Becker swore lightly as broken glass still managed to cut and scrape his hands and arms, and he swore even louder when his momentum caused him to land on his head.

Picking himself up gently, he could barely make out anything in the darkness of the room. He assumed it was one of the meeting halls, but he wasn't positive. It looked abandoned now and the air was musty. He didn't care what Kenny said, he still thought his theory had more merit than anything Kenny had suggested so far.

Wait a minute... oh shit, Kenny! Becker suddenly panicked. That was right, he left Kenny out there with those two nut jobs. He hoped he made it inside safe. He didn't just want to call out to him, because that might alert the before mentioned nut jobs as to where they could find him and then, presumably, shoot him.

"Kenny," Becker hissed. He then took a few steps forward and tried again.

"Kenny?" Becker hissed again.

"Looking for someone?" A husky voice asked from the darkness.

Becker stopped dead in his tracks and slowly turned around as the source of the voice was from his back. He could hear the sound of a match scraping along the matchbook cover and an eerie yellow glow welcomed his

eyes as the orange flame moved toward a lantern hanging from the ceiling.

The lantern came to life and the room filled with a sickly yellow half-light. Becker took a step forward to see who his company was. The person... he... she... was still partially in the shadows. From what Becker could see, this... figure was certainly making a fashion statement.

It started with the combination of combat boots and black fishnet stockings and continued onward to the interesting choice of cut-off jeans that gave Daisy Duke a run for her money. Next was the blue bustier that seems to not fit quite right underneath the white leather jacket that appeared to be two sizes too small and the blood red feather boa wrapped like a scarf.

The figure stepped out into the light and Becker gasped. He was almost positive he had just seen the scariest thing he would ever witness in his entire life. The person wearing this psycho-sexual combat gear of the disturbed was none other than his Assistant Scoutmaster, Matt Atanian.

Becker took a stunned step back and could feel the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. From the darkness he could hear a growling, followed by a sinister hissing, a creepy chittering, and a positively demonic... quacking?!

A small, feral looking, squirrel ran into the light and up Matt's leg. It came to a rest on his shoulder and frothed at the mouth slightly. This was followed by mangy dog that snarled and bore his teeth to Becker and a scrawny cat that yowled at Becker while giving him the evil eye. Finally, a half-moulted duck waddled in and, while Becker would never have believe it, actually flipped him off with its wing.

Matt looked at his menagerie and grinned. Becker noticed that he had something coiled in his right hand. Was it some rope? Matt saw where Becker's gaze had fallen and smiled again. "Something caught your eye?"

"Matt?" Becker asked, not knowing what else to say.

Matt uncoiled the item and Becker realized that it was a long leather bullwhip. Becker had a bad feeling that Matt

wasn't about to proclaim his love of Indiana Jones. The whip unfurled to the floor and with a snap of his wrist, Becker's cheek was in excruciating agony.

Becker grabbed the side of his face in pain. The whip had actually broken the skin and a small amount of blood began to ooze from the gash on his cheek. Matt gave a haughty laugh.

"I'm going to lash you to within an inch of your life. I'm going to do things," Matt paused and sucked in a breath which he seemed to relish, "Terrible, terrible things to you." Matt cracked the whip again and Becker felt a sharp pain in his right arm. Matt continued, "and only after I have left you wishing for the Devil to come and end your miserable life, then..."

"Then what?" Becker asked, not liking what he might hear.

"Then I will have you," Matt oozed with a look of coyness mixed with psychosis.

"Wh... wh... why?!" Becker stammered, wondering what could have made his friend into this sick, perverted fiend.

"Because, I'm not a very nice person," Matt said coldly and then began to laugh at Becker's terror. The menagerie joined in, which was even more disturbing.

"Well then, let's get started, shall we?" Matt asked cruelly, raising the whip again for another lashing. Suddenly, the lantern went out and there was the sound of clattering metal and shattering glass.

Becker felt something, no someone, grab his hand and then pulled him along. Becker found himself stumbling in the dark down what he thought was a corridor. Suddenly, he found himself colliding with a large door which gave way and he and the mystery person stumbled out into the back of the Church in the Acres. Becker rubbed his eyes and saw that it was Kenny who was reaching out to help him up. Becker accepted the hand and Kenny began to drag him again.

"Kenny, you're ok! What about the lunatics with the guns?"

"If you would rather stay in there with that lot, you're more than welcome. I've decided to try experimenting with running in this direction," Kenny said between short breaths.

Becker weighed the options for about the time it took for him to open the shrink wrap on a new CD (two-tenths of a second, mind you) and nodded as he and Kenny made for the backstreets of Springfield.

After frantically ducking through yards and zigzagging through alleyways, Becker and Kenny took a moment to catch their breathes. They came to rest behind what appeared to be the abandoned, burnt out remains of Perfume's Pizza. Kenny looked around nervously and then finally gathered his breath and slumped down by a foul smelling dumpster. Becker joined him and the pair sat there for a moment in silence.

"Fuck!! What the hell is going on here?! I know that was certainly not a future version of Matt or Nicole! What is wrong with them?! It's like we're or hell or something," Becker said frantically to himself.

Kenny looked skyward and sighed. "No, it's still Springfield, though I 'm not sure that Hell would be much worse."

"Kenny?"

Kenny sighed. "I'm afraid that that this is my fault, Mr. Becker. This is all my fault," he said tiredly.

"Wha...? Do you know what's happening? Tell me damn it!" Becker shouted angrily.

"It all comes down to potential, Mr. Becker," Kenny sighed.

Becker frowned. His world had been stolen, he had been shot at, and just recently had harm of a perverted natured threatened upon his fragile person. He didn't want to play Kenny's game of 'ask me, I'm oh so smart.' "Damn it, Kenny, will you quit with the riddles and questions for once! I know you know more than I ever will! Just save the lecture and tell me what the hell is going on god damn it!"

Kenny jerked back with a slightly hurt expression. He nodded and pushed his glasses up his the bridge of his nose. "My apologies. What I meant was this goes back to my original experiment."

"The apple?" Becker asked. Kenny nodded. "What does the apple have to do all this?"

"Remember how I said that in that ugly apple was the blueprint for what a perfect apple could be? The same applies to the opposite. Inside that ugly apple was a blueprint for an apple so foul, it seemed unlikely to have even made it off the tree. Rancid, rotted, and thoroughly inedible," Kenny explained.

"Okay, so how does that bring us to us cowering behind what used to be that Chinese chick's pizza place, hiding from people who used to be our friends but are now determined kill, maim, or worse, molest us?"

"Remember how you asked if the perfection extraction could be reversed? I told you it would be a simple reversing of the beam's polarity," Kenny continued.

"So when you reversed the beam...?"

"I got careless, Mr. Becker. I was too excited about the success of the experiment. I didn't think that I could do anything wrong. I messed up, Mr. Becker. I messed up in the most horrible way," Kenny confessed.

"What exactly happened?" Becker asked, not sure if he would understand it even if Kenny did explain it to him.

"The perfection extractor was set to maximum levels of extraction. That was my first mistake, but I wanted to prove total success and making something only partially better seemed pointless. My second mistake was not paying attention to the reversal. I just tuned all the settings to the exact opposite of what they were. I not only reversed the polarity of the beam, but also the field," Kenny said.

"So, instead of just targeting the apple..." Becker started, kind of grasping the direction Kenny was heading.

"The beam tried to target everything. That's what caused the massive power drain and my power grid to blow out. The beam tried to compensate for the

tremendous task by using more power and thus my grid was pushed to beyond maximum. Worse still, the beam was still set on maximum extraction, but in reverse polarity."

"Which means?" Becker asked.

"Which means that all those people out there are still our friends. It's just that the worse aspects of their personalities have been pushed to the outside and are magnified. In essence, they have become the living embodiments of the devil that rests on their shoulders," Kenny said as he banged the back of his head against the dumpster.

"Wait, wait, wait. Now I'm really confused. Are you saying that inside Matt Atanian, there lives a cross-dressing sadomasochist who secretly desires to train feral ducks and squirrels?"

"Mr. Becker, What we just witnessed was the very worst possible Matt Atanian that could possibly exist. A Matt Atanian that could be the product of corrupted genes, terrible upbringing, and any number of intangible factors."

"Those would have to be one hell of an incredible set of intangibles to create *that*," Becker said exasperated, still unaware of Matt's or the others' curses and what kind of thing that did to their sense of self. Kenny could only imagine what kind of daily stress that had caused the others.

"Indeed, but still, inside you, Mr. Becker could very well be a person who would push his own grandmother in front of a bus for a new Discman," Kenny rationalized. "No offense."

"Depends. 40 second skip protection or G-skip?" Becker said wryly.

"That's not funny, Mr. Becker," Kenny said coldly.

Becker nodded apologetically. "Sorry. Okay, I see your point. But still, that explains the people, what about everything else? Why is the town like this?"

"I would be lying if I said I knew completely, but I would have to assume that the beam works on inorganic material as well. Considering that the beam had very basic

A.I. with a link up to my main database, it most likely made a distinction of what was "good" and what was "bad" and made adjustments to the environment, thus a great piece of literature becomes a trashy dime store novel, a high performance sports cars becomes a battered wreck, etc," Kenny hypothesized.

"I think I understand. It all comes down to potential. A piece of paper could either hold the most brilliant poem or a worthless doodle. It all depends on what you choose to use it for," Becker said, pleased that he managed to make up his own analogy. Then he frowned again and scrunched up his brow in confusion. "One last question. Why are we unaffected?"

Kenny stopped lightly banging his head off the dumpster in self pity and arched an eyebrow. "If I had to hypothesize, then I say that we escaped being affected because we were at the epicentre of the effect. As the targeting field spread outward, we were encased in a pocket bubble of normality. In essence, we were safe from the hurricane because we were in the eye of the storm."

"We should try to get out of town. Get to outside the effect and, I dunno, get some science stuff and then you could fix it. You *can* fix it right?" Becker asked.

Kenny closed his eyes again and sighed. "Mr. Becker, the beam's affect continued outward until it lost power. From that point, it would still continue outward but at a weaker and weaker rate until it dissipated," Kenny said as he banged his head lightly again.

"So you're saying that not just Springfield was affected?"

"A lot more than Springfield was affected. My power grid was run by three independent cold fusion reactors with a standard U-232 Nuclear reactor acting as an emergency back-up. They were supposed to be an almost unlimited supplied of power. We managed to blow both out. The more power, the greater the spread of the affect."

"How much more? Like the whole state?"

"Most likely, the beam didn't start to dissipate until it started reaching past our solar system," Kenny answered.

Becker's face fell into utter despair. This was bad. This was very bad. This was turning into a three change of underwear type day. Becker looked at the slumped Kenny and began to feel a wave of hopelessness. "So you're saying that the entire world is like this nightmarish hell? Is there no one we could turn to help us?"

Kenny opened his eyes and then sadly shook his head. "You saw what it did to Mr. Atanian and Ms. Porter. Everyone we know is mostly likely like them, or even worse. I mean, you would have to be the living embodiment of a saint or Buddha to..." Kenny started then slowly trailed off.

"To what? What were you going to say?" Becker asked.

"It's a long shot, but maybe there is one person who might be able to act as an ally in this whole mess," Kenny said, his face brightening a little. He then stood up and nodded for Becker to do the same.

"Where are we going?" Becker asked. Kenny didn't answer. He was too busy hoping that this one person was beyond the beam's affect. It was that person who inspired the perfection extractor in the first place. Kenny had invented it because he was to unseal the *Inner Kirstin Porter* in everything because she had shown Kenny that a person could be just that... Perfect.

After a short run, Kenny and Becker found themselves lurking around a familiar apartment complex. Kenny and Becker hid around the corner checking to see if the coast was clear of any "Friends," or worse "Enemies," waiting to make a surprise visit.

"Are you sure this is a good idea, Kenny? I mean what if Sarah is there? You already saw what this beam did to Nicole, and she *LIKES* us. Sarah might not grant us the niceties of speaking to us before she kills us," Becker hissed under his breath.

Kenny shook his head. "I'm willing to take the risk. You can stay out here, however, if you feel it's safer."

Becker mulled this and then the familiar sound of gunfire rang out in the far distance. Becker gulped nervously. "Okay, I'm for it. But if I die, you're gonna have a really angry lab assistant waiting for you in heaven."

Becker decided to skip the metaphysical debate and instead to begin slinking toward the second story apartment. They made it up the stairs with no incidents, but now was the big test. With sweat forming on his brow, Kenny nervously licked his lips and then lightly rapped on the door.

Both tensed up when they heard the sound of a dead-bolt unlocking. Becker closed his eyes and prayed to God, Jesus, Buddha, Mohammad, Vishnu, and to be safe, the Brazilian Voodoo Man. Kenny simply hoped that his theory was correct.

The door opened and Kirstin Porter greeted them with a warm smile. "Kenny, Becker, hi! What a nice surprise. Won't you come in? Oh, please wipe your feet and take your shoes off first, I was doing a bit of straightening up.

Kenny sighed in relief. Becker blinked dumbly. He was relieved, but he still felt ill at ease. Kenny complied with Kirstin and removed his shoes, while Becker did the same and then the pair walked in.

"Please forgive the mess, I've really got to get this place in shape. You must think I'm a terrible housekeeper," Kirstin said from the kitchen while reaching for a teapot in the top cupboard. "Oolong tea okay? It'll only take a few minutes."

Becker felt a chill running up his spine. Kirstin seemed about right, but there was still something wrong with this picture. Maybe it was the way her place was reminding him way too much of his grandmother's. There was plastic on all the furniture and the place had the cold feel of a museum. Antiseptic. Sterile.

If this was messy, then most hospitals would be considered pigsties in comparison.

Kenny was making his own observations and Becker noticed that his once happy expression was becoming more and more grim. Kirstin returned with a tray of tea and

some Danish biscuits and sat them on the living room coffee table. Becker noticed that Kirstin had semi-dark circles under her eyes and she looked exhausted. Kenny frowned slightly more.

Kirstin handed a cup and saucer to Becker who graciously accepted it and then one to Kenny. Becker saw the cookies and decided that if this was hell, who knew when he would see sweet treats like these again. He grabbed a few and sat them on the saucer. He then sat the saucer on the table and sipped his tea. He then put the teacup down, but instead of back on the saucer, he set it on the table.

Kenny noticed that when Becker did this Kirstin's expression grew into a panicked one, but she tried to hide it. Kenny frowned more. She nervously glanced at the saucerless teacup and then glanced at Becker who was biting into the pretzel-shaped sugar cookie, snapping it in his maw with crumbs flaking off the edges and onto the table and carpet.

Kirstin looked queasy as she watched this. Kenny was hoping he was wrong, but he knew that he wasn't. "The tea is very good. Thank you."

"Huh? Oh yes. Thank you," Kirstin said, distracted by the teacup and the cookies that Becker continued to bite into. Becker picked up the teacup and took another sip. He then placed the teacup back on the table, but not before accidentally splashing a little tea over the cup's edge and onto the table.

Kenny saw that Kirstin's leg was twitching nervously. She nervously sipped her tea, her eyes lasered in on Becker's little mess. Becker took a spoon from the tray and took a spoonful of sugar from a dish and brought it to his teacup. Granules of cane sugar falling from the spoon onto the table as he dumped the sugar into his cup.

Kirstin let out a squeak and tried to contain it. Becker noticed this and looked at Kirstin worriedly. "Is there something wrong?"

Kenny held up his hand to Becker to signal for him to not go there. He then looked at Kirstin softly and sighed.

"It's alright Ms. Porter. I know you are trying. Please forgive us for intruding. We'll leave you now."

Kenny stood up and signalled for Becker to follow. Kenny made his way to the door and looked back to Kirstin who was already stacking everything on the tray and clearing everything off the table. Kenny spoke, with purpose, "I'm very sorry, Kirstin. I promise you, I'll fix this." He then walked out to get his shoes.

Becker turned around. "Thanks for the tea," He said politely, but Kirstin didn't hear him. She had already pulled a rag from her back pocket and was busy polishing the coffee table. She then reached to one of her buckets and pulled out a mini-vacuum which she proceeded to furiously attack the few crumbs that Becker had let escape from his jaws.

Becker arched a confused eyebrow and felt himself being pulled through the doorway by his shoulder. He looked to Kenny with an exasperated look.

"Why did you say we had to leave? Plastic on the furniture aside, compared to the others, she was positively delightful," Becker asked.

Kenny frowned. "She's not herself right now."

"Who is?" Becker stated matter-of-factly.

"You don't understand. We were hurting her. Our presence was physically making her ill."

"Whooza-jigga-wha? Come again?" Becker asked, his head half-cocked like a confused dog.

Kenny slipped on his shoes and sighed, "Ms. Porter has always carried a quiet pride and dignity about her domestic skills. But when pride gets twisted, it becomes obsession. If we would have stayed, she would've had either a nervous breakdown trying not to clean up after us, or worse. She's having a hard enough time right now, we don't need to make it worse."

"Really?" Becker asked.

"Sadly, yes," Kenny said. He was feeling ill too. Not only had his ideal that there was nothing imperfect about Kirstin been shattered, but he had done something terrible to her and forced her to live a nightmarish existence where

her obsession would eventually drive her mad. He could not let that happen. "Come Mr. Becker, we're going."

"Okay, but where are we going now?" Becker asked.

"We're going to fix this," Kenny said with a resolved voice.

"Great! Um... How?"

Kenny stopped cold and sagged his shoulders. "Good question."

"And the answer?" Becker asked.

"Still working on it," Kenny said then turned around with a weak smile.

Becker felt his mood lighten for the first time in hours. Kenny might have been feeling the effects of the stress this situation was causing them both, but that smile, weak as it may be, was the same one he gave when he was positive he was going to succeed. Becker smiled in return to encourage him.

"Let's get out of here and work it out before Sarah gets home and decides to mount our heads as trophies or something."

As darkness came over the town, Becker and Kenny found themselves hiding once again in the back alleyways. Climbing up a fire escape, the pair sat next to a massive air conditioner vent on the roof of a four story apartment complex.

Keeping a nervous eye on the surroundings, Becker frowned at hearing the quiet, sullen rumble of thunder. "You know, with as much that has gone wrong today, you would think at least the weather would cut us a break."

Kenny shrugged. "Just another consistency of the universe I've noticed. In this hellish one, or the one we know."

"Murphy's Law in action?" Becker asked.

"Second extension."

Becker sighed and rested his head next to the vent. Kenny sat crossed-legged and appeared to be meditating. Becker figured it be best to leave him to it, because if anyone was going to figure out a way to fix this, it was Kenny.

That didn't mean he was going to let Kenny off the hook for this particular "error" if they did get through this relatively unscathed. Becker thought back to his first encounter with Kenny and his Laboratory. In fact, so far, in the short time Becker had been the pseudo-official lab assistant, he had made one observation of his own. Kenny sometimes took risks that didn't need to be taken. From what he had been told, Kenny had almost got himself nuked the first time he used the Stargate. And what was Kenny thinking putting a lunatic like Becker in a time machine?

Becker started chuckling. He was beginning to sound a little like Kenny now. Maybe the little twerp was starting to rub off on him. More likely, it was symptoms of headphone withdrawal. Becker was now giggling harder now. All this rational thought was cracking him up like gangbusters.

Kenny opened an eye and peered at the chuckling Becker. "Something you wish to share?"

"Just trying to figure out what the hell you saw in me to think it was a good idea to put me behind the wheel of a time machine, that you yourself said could cause the end of the universe," Becker explained between giggles.

"You think I take too many risks?"

Becker blinked a few times. "Um... well, maybe. Don't get me wrong, I mean most of the time, they pay off, but..."

"Sometimes, we get this," Kenny said waving his hand outward. "No need to apologize for speaking your mind. Actually it's that trait that saved you from having your memory erased by my neuralizer the first time you trespassed in my lab."

"Come again?" Becker asked, surprised.

"I could have easily built an android to be my lab assistant, but who wants a soulless lackey? The simple truth is that you tell me when I screw up. You give me something to strive for. If anything, I work harder these days to avoid some smart aleck comment from you," Kenny said with his own sheepish grin.

Becker blinked dumbly and then opened his mouth. Nothing came out. He closed it and mulled this over. He wasn't sure, but he thought that Kenny just made a crack at his expense. He wasn't entirely sure if he was pissed off at or actually proud of the little four-eyes.

Kenny saw this reaction and started to chuckle and Becker couldn't help but join in. Soon the pair were grabbing their sides from laughing so hard. Eventually, the laughter subsided and Becker wiped a tear from his eye. "I think we needed that."

"Yes, I think you are right. Anyway, to answer your previous question about the risks I take. I admit that sometimes, the potential for disaster seems to outweigh the possible perceived good, but if anything, I have learned one thing."

Becker eyed Kenny suspiciously wondering if he was going to make another crack at his expense. "What is that?"

"Fortune favors the bold," Kenny said with a proud stare.

Becker had to admit, the conviction in Kenny's voice was quite impressive and he could see the logic behind that philosophy, but still, Becker was not about to let this opportunity pass without getting Kenny back for his previous crack. "Fortune cookie?"

Kenny didn't miss a beat, "*Star Trek*."

Becker waved his hands in defeat. He knew that today was not the day to try and one-up Kenny. "Well, as far as boldness goes, putting a guy like me inside a time machine is pretty damn bold. I mean, one wrong left turn in time and dolphins run the world and we're in humantariums," Becker said grinning stupidly.

"Mr. Becker, could I just ask... When you were testing my time machine, you never did anything with a sports almanac, did you?"

Becker denied that he had.

"Just checking one last possibility that this could be something other than my fault," Kenny explained. "Too much to hope for, I suppose."

Becker furrowed his brow and his eyes suddenly bulged. For Becker it was as if insight was a Brooklyn pimp and he had backhanded Becker across the brain.

Kenny noticed the ambivalent look on Becker's face and decided to ask what was on his mind, "Something wrong?"

Becker suddenly smiled and slapped himself on the forehead. "Holy shit! Kenny!! We can fix this!! We got a time machine!!! A Friggin' time machine!!! We can stop this from ever happening!!" Becker shouted triumphantly at Kenny with a grin that had to be at least a mile wide, partly because he could escape this hell, and partly because he was the one who thought of it.

Which is why he was confused when Kenny did not smile back. Kenny sadly shook his head. "Good idea, but I already eliminated it as an option."

"Huh?"

"Even if we could travel back in time to stop an event in which we were directly involved and NOT cause a temporal paradox that would destroy the universe, the time machine still wouldn't be a feasible solution."

"Why not?" Becker asked exasperated.

"Because, most likely, the time machine is currently a rusted bucket of scrap sitting in the trashed remained of my lab."

"Wha...?"

"Remember how I told you that we were in a pocket of normality? If I had to guess, I would say that pocket was no more than fifteen, maybe twenty feet in diameter. Everything outside of it was affected by the beam, including most of my lab, which includes the Stargate and the time machine," Kenny explained.

Becker slammed his fist on the roof. Kenny, as usual, was light years down the road from where he was standing. "Okay, so you're saying that all your scientific equipment is probably all junked and useless, right?"

"Precisely."

"Okay, so what do we have to work with?"

Kenny mulled this over. "My workbench, some tools, the testing area, and the extractor itself. Those in themselves would be more than enough to fix the entire mess, save for the most important thing that we don't have and that I'm wracking my brain to figure out how we get."

"What's that?"

"Power. More than all of Earth's combined nuclear, coal, wind, solar, hydroelectric, and geothermic energy sources could possibly produce, *if* they were running at one hundred percent efficiency, which given the current state of everything, is very doubtful," Kenny said bitterly.

"Can't you fix the power grid?" Becker asked, hoping for positive news but expecting more bad.

"Of course, I can fix it. If I had the right parts and equipment. A power grid run from three cold-fusion power cells is a pretty sophisticated piece of equipment. You really can't get parts to repair one at your local RadioShack. Plus, since the power grid was also affected by the negativity effect of the extractor, it'll be in even worse shape than if it had just blown normally."

"Ah, cripes! This just takes the cake, you know that?!" Becker said, angrily standing up and kicking the ventilation ducts. "Man, this sucks! We have a grid, but it's broken and we have a working beam, but it needs power. If only we could use the damn beam, then the grid would be fixed, but we would need the grid to be fixed already to power the beam to fix the grid. Grrrrrr, I hate walking around in frustrating circles like this!!" Becker shouted while pacing.

Kenny stared at him. He stared and grinned. That smile returned. That cocky, self-assured, nothing-is-gonna-stop-me grin that Becker had, on occasion, really wanted to wipe off Kenny's face. This was mainly because Kenny mostly used it when he was about to make Becker feel stupid.

"Mr. Becker, please repeat what you just said," Kenny asked.

"What? About using the beam to fix the grid that would have to already be fixed in order to use it to fix the grid?"

It was now Kenny's turn to slap himself on the forehead and give a hearty laugh. "Mr. Becker, you're a genius! That's absolutely brilliant! I can't believe I didn't see it sooner. You're quite something, Mr. Becker."

"I am? It is? Saw what? What exactly am I, again? Am I walking in circles, or have we all just gone nuts?"

"You are. It is. The solution to our problems. And no, you're more pacing than walking in circles," Kenny answered and then stood up and made his way toward the stairwell back down to the ground. "Come, Mr. Becker. It's time to be bold." Kenny then started down the stairwell, leaving Mr. Becker alone on the roof.

"Will someone explain to me what the hell just happened?" Becker asked no one and then hurried after Kenny.

A short while later, after sneaking through the darkness and avoiding everything and everyone, the pair came to the small strip mall. It was closed down for the evening and locked up tight. Everything was gated up and the windows were all fenced. It looked like the local shopkeepers weren't taking too many chances with the local populace.

Kenny and Becker made their way to the back to where all the employee entrances and trash dumpsters were. Kenny looked at the doors and saw the one he wanted. It read "RadioShack."

"Um, Kenny. I think it's closed and I don't think they'll open it just for us," Becker said, looking around.

"Mr. Becker, what I'm about to do just about compromises every ethic I have as a scientist," Kenny said and then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a familiar looking red Scout knife. Kenny flipped out what should have been the blade, but in its place was instead a rather small thin stub.

"Um, what are you going to do?"

Kenny pushed the Scout emblem. There suddenly was a soft "Vawoom" and then there was a familiar green glow that Becker could recognize in his sleep. A small, three inch blade of green light was emitting from Kenny's knife.

Kenny looked at the locked door and stabbed the sabre blade into the door and started to cut around the knob. After a minute, the door swung open and Becker whistled, impressed.

"Obi-Wan has taught you well, young Pendrell."

Kenny shrugged off the comment and walked inside. Kenny looked to his left and saw a lighted keypad that was flashing. Kenny took the blade and stabbed the pad and it stopped flashing and went still.

"Now what do we do?" Becker asked.

"Now, we go shopping. Mr. Becker, I need you to go three stores down. I believe it's a sporting goods shop. Use this," Kenny said, handing the glowing blade to Becker, "and use it like I did here. Security should all be set up pretty much the same. Secure us a couple bikes and some book bags. I've got my list in here. Move quickly, I prefer to not be here if my anti-security measures didn't take."

Becker blinked dumbly. Kenny wasn't messing around. Becker looked at the glowing blade and nodded and made his way out.

Kenny looked at the darkness and saw the racks of wire, batteries, and other assorted electronics and he then grinned like a Cheshire cat. He slapped his hands together and then started grabbing things from pegs and dumping them in a big pile on the floor.

Ten minutes later, Becker ran in and tossed the bags on the floor next to the pile and smiled. "Figured you might not be a ten-speed guy, so I got you a kickass mountain bike."

Kenny nodded absently as he dug through his pile. He tossed Becker a roll of duct tape, a large packet of D batteries and a pair of heavy duty MagLites. "Great. Can you secure these to the bikes? It'll be a lot easier if we're

not riding blind.” Becker nodded and ran back out as Kenny proceeded to stuff the bags full of everything he could. He then slung them over his shoulders and grabbed a couple of larger boxes.

Kenny grunted as he walked through the back exit. Becker finished taping the second flashlight to the bikes’ handlebars and guessed that the two large boxes he carried were probably heavy.

Kenny walked over and smiled when he saw that the bikes Becker picked has a rear rack for hiking packs. He placed one of the boxes on the rack and with another roll of duct tape, he secured it. Becker grabbed the second box and did the same. Becker then grabbed one of the bags and put it on his back. Kenny readjusted his and mounted the bike. After checking the gears and brakes, he nodded and he and Becker started pedalling away with their ill-gotten, but very necessary, booty.

The pair rode through the slummish streets and made their way back to Kenny’s house. They slowed to a stop and took cover behind some dead shrubbery. Outside the house was parked twelve large Harley Davidsons, and from within Kenny’s house was abuzz with loud heavy metal and raucous crashing sounds.

“Now we know why it looked like a biker gang just had a piñata party in the living room. What you reckon, wait till they go to sleep?” Becker asked.

“No.”

“No?” Becker asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Ever ride down stairs?”

“Yeah, why?” Becker asked, now eying Kenny suspiciously, not liking where he was going with this.

“See you at the bottom then,” Kenny said as he clicked on the light and started peddling toward the house. A moment later, he crashed through the front door and, through the commotion, Becker could hear another door being kicked down.

“Aw, hell’s bells,” Becker muttered, then with a heavy sigh, he too clicked the light, remounted his bike and begged his butt’s forgiveness for the bumpy torture he was

about to put it through. He then sped toward the house and charged into it like a bat out of hell, past a group of angry looking, very grungy bikers and biker chicks who were apparently squatting in Kenny's house. He dove his bike right into the stairwell. Gravity took over and Becker clung for dear life and began to pray to Rah, Yahweh, St. Christopher, Uzume, Odin, Zeus, and even Yoda that he live through this.

Becker didn't find God waiting for him at the end of his nightmarish twenty-three minute jaunt down the spiral stairway, instead he found Kenny frantically dismantling the rear tire from his own bike. Kenny had set up several battery powered lanterns in a semi circle and Becker could see that Kenny's calculations were right. Beyond a small circle that contained the workbench and testing area, everything else was trashed. Becker has no clue how Kenny was going to fix this, but apparently he himself was the genius who came up with the solution.

If only he knew was it was.

"So, um, Kenny. Yeah, about this great idea I had. Just to remind me of how much of a genius I am, care to share it with me?"

"We are going to use the extractor to fix the power grid," Kenny said matter-of-factly.

"Um... I thought we needed the grid to power the beam?"

"No, we need the grid to power the beam enough to fix the whole area affected by the negativity effect. The beam itself uses any power source. The more power, the more widespread the beam can be," Kenny explained.

"So, we're not going to fix the world?" Becker asked scratching his head.

"Oh, we most certainly are. We are just taking the scenic route as it were," Kenny said as he started unspooling heavy gauge electrical wire. He then snipped some with his small multi-tool and tossed it to Becker. "I need fifteen more lengths of this gauge wire like the one I gave you. Please strip each end at about two inches in.

After you finish that, start removing the back wheel from your bike. The tool box is over by the one set of lanterns."

Becker blinked dumbly and then nodded. He went over to the toolbox and pulled out a pair of pliers and ratchet. He then sat down and started unspooling.

Kenny, meanwhile, had torn into one the boxes, pulled out a folded sheet of paper, and quickly scanned it. He then reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a mechanical pencil. He started jotting notes on the paper, frowning, then scrawling something else, and then smiling.

Becker finished his task and looked to Kenny, who had now removed the beam from the swing arm it had been mounted to in the testing area. Kenny sat it down and opened the housing. He poked around and Becker heard a slight popping noise as Kenny carefully slipped out what appeared to be a memory card or cartridge of some sort.

"What's that?"

"The last memory of the world as we knew it. Stored on this flash memory device is a cache snapshot of the world before the beam changed it. Sort of a fail-safe. When the beam tried to exceed its targeting range, the A.I. took a picture of everything how it was. I intended for it to be used as a study tool to compare whatever I changed with the extractor and the original item."

"Why are you taking it out?"

"Because, Mr. Becker, we're going to use the beam to fix the power grid first. This is only temp memory so after every use, it is written over. Can't have that, so I'm going to replace this with some makeshift temporary memory so we can fix the grid. Are you finished with the wire?" Kenny asked.

"Um, yeah. What you want me to do now?" Becker asked.

"Walk to the south wall and in about fifty or so feet you'll see a large winch. Take a lantern with you. That winch will open up my bookcases to give access to the power grid generators."

"You mean those huge, Library-of-Congress-size shelves? Those open up?" Becker asked exasperated.

"Yes. Normally, I could have them opened up with a push of a button, but alas, with no power, well, you know. Anyway, that should take you a couple hours to open those enough. That will give me time to set up our temporary power station."

Becker sighed and grabbed a lantern. "You seriously owe me big time for this, Kenny. I'm talking extra-cheese, triple toppings big," Becker grumbled as he set off into the darkness.

As Kenny worked, he could hear the slow, tired creaking of his bookcases being forced open. A slow creak was usually followed by a low-volume cursing afterward. Meanwhile he was focused on making connections between the extractor's inside and the new mini-grid he was making. Converting the voltage and ampage output was nuisance enough, and now Mr. Becker was most definitely not going to like his part in the next phase.

Becker decided to make his reappearance known by walking up while groaning slightly as he gripped his shoulders and Kenny looked over to the one wall. Becker had opened it enough for them to get a nice clear shot at the primary generator. If this worked out like he had planned, the backup wouldn't be needed.

"Kenny, we almost ready? I need a nap and a Gatorade like you can't believe!"

"Almost. We're ready to initiate phase one. Please take your place on the first bike," Kenny said pointing to the pair of bikes fixed in place facing the generator.

"You have got to be kidding me!"

"Beg your pardon?" Kenny asked.

"You expect me to power the beam-thingy by pedalling, don't you? I just spent the last two hours opening your damn oversized shelves!" Becker complained.

"Yes, but your legs should be well rested. Besides, I'll be helping on that end of things. Anyway, we'll both need

to hold the beam steady," Kenny explained trying to keep a positive tone.

"That payment just increased to extra-large, quadruple supreme... plus desert," Becker grumbled as he mounted the bike.

Kenny mounted his and balanced the extractor on the handlebars. He looked to the voltage meter duct-taped to his cross bar and nodded to Becker. The pair began pedalling. The meter jumped slightly. Kenny began to pump harder and Becker did likewise.

The meter slowly increased.

"Kenny, when the hell do you shoot that damn thing?" Becker asked panting.

"When we get enough power stored. We're almost there," Kenny said as he reached into his coat pocket with his left hand and pulled out the extractor's remote. Kenny eyed the meter and as it approached the red mark. Once the meter indicated the time was ripe, he pushed the button.

Becker forgot about the flash and jerked his head back. Kenny remembered it as he pushed the button and was able to close his eyes in time. Lucky for him, he was reduced to just seeing big white spots. To Becker, everything looked like it was encased in a white fog.

Becker blinked some and then some more in hopes of clearing up his sore retinas. Kenny blinked too, but figured it would clear itself up in a few minutes.

"And I want it delivered too!" Becker grumbled between blinks.

"Your eyes will be fine. If not, when the lab is restored, I will grow you a new set," Kenny said half-interested. He was more focused on what was beyond the partially opened shelves.

It looked like his power generator, but then again, it looked much, MUCH more impressive. Kenny was so impressed that he let out a shrill whistle to compliment this piece of technology.

"Did it work?" Becker asked, still blinking.

"Indeed it did. Better than I could have hoped. If I had to make a guess, this unit might very run at more than four-hundred percent efficiency if compared to my current unit," Kenny said in awe.

"Will it be enough?"

"Oh yes. Now we initiate phase two. Let's get our home back, shall we?"

"It's about time!" Becker agreed.

Kenny walked over to the bikes and started disconnecting the wires from the emitter. He then lugged it over to the generator. Kenny then gathered his tool and some necessary components to connect the emitter directly to the new power core.

Kenny jury-rigged his extractor in short order and then reached into his pocket and pulled out the original memory storage chip. Kenny turned it over in his fingers and then looked to Becker.

"You know, we could very well see what would happen if we simply set the extractor to maximum on the positive scale. After seeing this hell, aren't you even a little bit curious as to what kind of utopia we could turn the world into? I mean, we still have the stored memory of our original world," Kenny asked Becker, mulling the decision over.

Becker sighed. "Kenny, the road to Hell is paved with good intentions. If this experience has taught us anything, it is that."

"You're not curious?"

"Not in the slightest. The only utopia I wanna see is my old town and my old room and my old bed and my old pizza shop where you're gonna be treating me for the next year," Becker said tiredly.

"I guess, for you, an imperfect world is your perfect world," Kenny mused.

"It may be imperfect, but it's home and that's perfect enough for me. Let's stop with the philosophy and get back there, okay?" Becker asked with a relieved voice.

Kenny slipped the memory chip into the extractor's house and then made some adjustments. Kenny looked to

Becker. "Extractor's targeting set outward, recall mode initiated, please cover your eyes."

Kenny then pushed the button and suddenly the extractor shook violently, there was a bluish flash of light and then the extractor went still. Kenny opened his eyes and immediately realized that there was more light than before. The overhead lights were working again and the lanterns were gone.

In fact, as Kenny looked around, he realized that the lab was exactly as it were before he initiated the last test. The recall function had worked as it was intended to. It was as if the hours spent in the bad-potential universe had never happened.

Becker opened his eyes and blinked some more. Then he breathed a sigh of relief. Then suddenly he snapped his fingers and ran over to the miniature refrigerator that Kenny kept near his workbench. Becker opened it, ignored the various containers with their biohazard labels and pulled out a perfectly chilled bottle of grape Gatorade...or at least it was some fruit the colour of purple. Becker didn't care. He popped the top and started chugging. Draining the bottle, he sighed contently. "An average universe never tasted so good."

Becker then tossed the empty bottle in a nearby trashcan, grabbed his jacket, and headed for the door. Becker gave a half-wave to Kenny. "I'm sure you want to run some sort of post-beam-thingy analysis or something. I'm going home to make sure everything is back to normal. Meet you at Perfume's in say three hours? Remember, you're treating," Becker said with a laugh as he entered the express lift to Kenny's room. The doors closed and Kenny was left alone.

Kenny looked at the extractor, now sitting on the floor. The victim of hasty jury-rigging and excessive use. For a moment. He thought of destroying it, but then he relented. It still had applications, juts right now may not be the best time to explore them.

Besides, he had been wanting to run some new experiments of the dimensional gate anyway. Tomorrow

seemed like a good time to start those. Yes, tomorrow, he and Mr. Becker would return to safer fair like tinkering with interdimensional physics. He had some ideas concerning the Stargate and the Edsel.

Kenny lifted the extractor and lugged it to a cleared off metal table in a disused section of his lab. He then removed the memory chips and set them down next to it. He then pulled out a dusty sheet from under the table and covered the extractor.

Just another experiment that had his undivided attention for a brief time, but now another memory and another lesson learned.

Just like all the other items found under the many dusty sheets in that place of wonders known as Kenny's Laboratory.

Perspectives from the Magnificent World

Kenny turned around when he heard the sound of the door leading to the stairway open and then close again.

"Hello, Mr. Becker," he said. "A pleasure to see you again." It wasn't a total lie, to be sure. It was nice to have some company in the Laboratory. Still, Kenny wished it were someone a little less... distracting.

"Hi, Kenny," Becker responded. "I brought a friend. That okay?"

"What? A friend?"

From behind Becker, a small child stepped sideways into view. His skin was deathly pale as a ghost, his eyes were red, and his neatly combed thin hair was pure white. He was actually somewhat smaller than Kenny, and appeared even meeker than the young genius did when he was in the outside world.

"Mr. Becker, this is not a museum, this is my private, secret Laboratory," Kenny said, pushing up his thick glasses.

"Woowww!" the young albino boy said in pure, unadulterated awe. "This place is... cool! What is all of this neat stuff!"

This kid has had the most normal reaction of any of the privileged few who have been allowed access to my Laboratory, Kenny thought. "So where did you two meet?" he asked Becker.

"I was walking down the street, and he kind of just followed me."

"I see. So," he said to the young boy, "what's your name."

"Len," the kid timidly responded. "Len Nakrifs."

"Kind of a strange name," Becker responded.

"Mister," the kid said to Kenny, "you are my hero! I wish I could be as cool as you!"

Kenny's brain told him that there was something very wrong about all of this, but unfortunately a rare thing happened. His pride kicked in and told his brain to shut the

hell up. "I guess he could stay for a bit," Kenny said. "Now, Mr. Becker, I believe we were going to conduct a small experiment today on the recalibrated Gate System."

Kenny walked over to the Stargate, followed by Becker. Len tailed behind them, keeping a more than respectable distance from the young genius and his assistant.

"We're opening a small gate today," Kenny explained. "No more than a nanometer in diameter, just large enough to get a scan through to the other side. Any time you're ready, Mr. Becker."

Becker walked up to the control panel and began to operate it. The gate began spinning wildly. A lock came down from the gate's perimeter and latched onto one of the symbols on it, stopping that symbol yet letting the others remain in motion.

"Chevron one is holding," Becker said, "and locked in place."

Becker continued through the sequence as Kenny got his scanning equipment ready. Finally, Becker made the announcement: "Chevron seven is locked in place."

At first, nothing happened. Becker and Kenny stared at the gate, expecting a watery explosion effect to be visible. Even if the gate itself was only a nanometer wide, the visual effect should still fill the gate's diameter.

They waited. Still nothing.

Finally, the gate began shaking violently. Kenny ran over to the control panel and pushed Becker aside. "My god, no!" he exclaimed as he looked at the controls.

"What is it?" Becker asked.

"The gate! Instead of folding in on itself and creating a smaller opening, it's expanded to create a larger opening! It's spreading to the outside!"

"Is this bad?" Becker asked.

"Not if you don't move! Then you don't have to worry about accidentally walking through it! In another minute or so, it should expand enough where it loses cohesion and dissipates."

"How wide will it be then?" Becker asked.

"It should reach outside of the house a bit, but if we don't move we'll be fine," Kenny said, stressing the not moving bit once again.

There was a strange sound, and then silence. The gate stopped shaking and was still once more.

Kenny looked at Becker. "You're still here. I'm still here. Len?"

"Yes?" Len responded, barely even a whisper. The boy was standing right where he had been before the experiment had begun.

"That wasn't my fault, was it?" Becker asked.

"No, I don't know why it went crazy like that, but it was nothing you could have done."

Kenny looked back at the control console and noticed a blinking red light. "Oh no," he said. He stabbed at a few buttons with his fingers. "Oh no, no!"

"What is it?" Becker asked.

"That strange noise before the gate shut down! Two people were walking by outside and they were... they were..."

"Sucked in? We have to help them!"

"We can't. I can't even locate where they went, yet. As impossible as it may be for them, we'll may just have to hope they find some way back on they're own."

Jason Bertovich slowly gained consciousness.

"Where am I?" he asked. Actually, as there seemed to be no one else about, it would be more accurate to say he was wondering this aloud. Also, as no one else seemed to be about, it seemed to be up to him to answer his own question.

Well, first thing's first. He thought back to the last thing he could remember.

He'd been taking a walk with Nicole...

"Nicole!" Jason shouted.

No one answered. He looked around a bit. He was in a clearing in an exotic looking forest, and he seemed to be

alone. No Nicole. He had to find her, there was no doubt about that, but first he had to find himself.

He'd been taking a walk with Nicole. She had mentioned something about how oddly neat one house they were passing was, and the next thing he knew they had both been sucked into something... into something...

They'd been sucked into Something. Capitols were often the best way to deal with that which you couldn't understand.

Now he was here. But where was here?

It did seem very familiar.

He picked a direction and began walking. There didn't seem to be much else to do under the circumstances.

After some time, he came to the edge of the forest. What he saw when he cleared the trees refused to register on his mind at first. When it did at last do so, his mind rejected it and told his eyes to have another look. His eyes obliged, which for some inexplicable reason gave his jaw leave to completely relax itself and hang open.

A brief while later, his brain thought it might be nice for his vocal cords to have a bit of fun.

"That's... that's impossible!"

What his eyes were seeing and relaying to his brain was this: A magnificent city that would not have looked out of place in India.

It had huge, majestic looking towers rising from it, cylindrical in shape, topped off with that kind of round, organic shaped top that comes to a point. You know, like on the Taj Mahal. (This author is sure that that particular architectural structure has a specific name, but alas, he is not an expert in architecture.) Surrounding the towers throughout the city were many lower, simpler buildings that were hustling and bustling with the mid-day activities. The part closest to where Jason was standing (although it was still a bit of a walk away, and he could barely make this out from the distance he was) looked very much like some kind of ancient bazaar.

"That's impossible!" Jason repeated. "That can't be the city of Roshtaria," he said to himself. "If it was... then

that would mean... that would mean that I was in the magnificent world of El-Hazard!"

Nicole went through a similar ordeal upon awakening, although she at least wasn't alone. When she gained consciousness, there was another woman leaning over her, a look of concern on the stranger's face.

"Hey, are you all right?" she asked Nicole. At least, that's what Nicole's brain translated it as. Her Japanese was very rusty. *Very* rusty. Still, she felt confident enough in her abilities to hazard a reply.

"I think so," Nicole responded in the same language. "Where are we?"

"In the forest, on the way to the city," the stranger responded.

"What city?" Nicole asked, speaking slowly as she tried to remember the words. "I'm sorry, my Japanese is not the best. Do you know English?"

"Hey, are you from Earth?" the stranger asked, suddenly excited.

"That's a silly question, isn't it?" Nicole responded. "Who isn't from Earth?"

"You really don't know, do you?" the woman asked. She didn't wait for a response. "I don't blame you. It was a bit of a shock for me, as well. How did you get here?"

"Um... where is here?" Nicole slowly asked. This time, the slowness of her speech was brought about more from trepidation regarding the answer rather than difficulty even asking the question.

"Here?" The woman smiled. "This is El-Hazard!"

"El-Hazard?"

"Yeah, it's a whole other world! Weird, isn't it? I got here when Ifurita brought Makoto-chan here. Me, Fujisawa-sensei, and my stupid brother were brought along for the ride. What's your story?"

"My story... I don't know... I was walking with Jason, and then I was here."

"Hey, can you wait tables?"

"What?"

"Can you wait tables? You're new to this world, you know? You need someplace to stay. I have a restaurant, and we're actually looking for a waitress."

Suddenly, another part of Nicole's brain kicked in. "Good pay? How are the tips? Is there room for advancement in the company? Ever think of starting a franchise?"

The woman smiled. "That's an interesting idea!"

"I've got the footage from the external video system," Kenny said as he furiously typed commands into the console he sat at. "At least we can see who it was who was sucked into the vortex."

Becker stepped forward and looked at the screen with a determination. Len just kept back, quietly staying out of the way.

An image came onto the screen. Two people walking down the street. The image was a bit fuzzy...

"Computer, freeze image," Kenny said. "Zoom and augment."

The image zoomed in on the faces of the people and began to focus.

"That's Kirstin!" Becker exclaimed.

Kenny looked up, alarmed. A moment later, he felt a guilty sense of relief. Guilty, as he knew he would never wish this on Nicole... but at least it wasn't... "It's not Kirstin," he said.

"It's not?" Becker asked.

"No, it's Nicole."

"How do you know? Do you have some exotic device for differentiating between identical twins from a still photo?"

"No," Kenny said. Kenny had never told anyone, and probably never would, but he held a certain fondness for Kirstin, and would know her anywhere. "I just know. It's not Kirstin."

"Who's the guy?" Becker asked. "He looks familiar."

"Well, he was at the troop's Christmas party. That's Jason Bertovich, a... a friend of Nicole's."

Becker frowned. "Is there anything we can do? We can't just lose Nicole."

Kenny stared at the frozen image for a moment. "Well..." he said at last, "perhaps we can stop the event from ever having happened..."

"What do you mean?" Becker asked.

"Well, I'd normally be against altering the past, but in this case, I think we can make an exception."

"You mean...?"

"Yes!" Kenny rose dramatically. "To the Edsil!"

Jason walked haggardly through the streets of Roshtaria. This was something he hadn't expected... a language barrier. He'd never had any problem understanding the people of El-Hazard before. Of course, in the past, the citizens of Roshtaria had had their voices replaced with English speaking actors... Either that, or little words floated beneath them...

But now, he was here for real. Real life doesn't have subtitles.

And while finding Nicole was still his highest priority, another was rapidly making itself felt...

He and Nicole had been on their way to get lunch somewhere... And he hadn't eaten all day.

He was hungry.

Very hungry...

"Food..." he wailed.

Unfortunately, no one understood him.

"Welcome to Nanami's. I'm Nicole. What can I get for you today, sir?"

"I'll have one deluxe Nanami Special with soy sauce," the customer said as he took a seat at his table. "Oh, by the way, there's some guy collapsed outside your door."

"Okay, that will be one deluxe Nanami Special with soy sauce, and one guy collapsed outside the door." Nicole turned to take the order to the kitchen.

Half way there, she stopped.

She turned.

"A guy collapsed outside the door!"

She ran outside to see if she could be of any help, and stopped, startled, when she saw who it was.

"JASON!!"

Becker sat himself in the seat of the Edsil as Kenny opened up the doorway covering the acceleration track.

"Activate the temporal circuits," Kenny instructed, "and set the timer to bring you back about five hours."

"Right!" Becker responded. "Activating the... um... activating the... the... Kenny? The temporal circuits don't seem to want to activate."

"What?" Kenny ducked into the car and pulled open a panel. He frowned. "There's a reason it won't activate," he said darkly. "The one crucial circuit that makes time travel possible... it's missing..."

Jason awoke to the feeling of cool air blowing over him. He opened his eyes, and saw that this was because he was lying in a bed that was next to a window. Nicole sat in a chair looming over him, and smiled upon seeing Jason move. He smiled at her. "I had the craziest dream," he said to her.

"Oh?" Nicole said with a smile.

"Yeah, I was in EI..." Jason broke off as he saw someone standing behind Nicole. "Nanami-chan!?" he then exclaimed, startled. He then shook his head, and said, "Gomen... Nanami-san."

Nanami let loose with something in Japanese that Nicole, upon seeing Jason's confused look, was more than happy to translate. "She wants to know how you know who she is," Nicole said. "And I'd like to know what's

with this 'chan' business." Nicole then smiled at him, and it was a smile that made him uneasy.

"Um... what 'chan' business?"

Her smile remained steady.

"Oh, *that* 'chan' business! Well, I'm just used to thinking of her that way... but to me she's never been more than a character in *El-Hazard*. Nicole, somehow we've ended up in an anime series!"

"How the heck did that happen?" Nicole asked.

Jason scratched his head. "You've got me." He sat in thought for a moment, and then a smile slowly began to form on his face. It continued to grow, and grow, and grow... until at last Jason was smiling like a kid with the key to the candy shop.

"This is great! I can meet Makoto! And Fujisawa-sensei!" his grin widened even more. "And Jinnai, and Queen Diva!" Somehow, the grin widened more still. If it widened much more, Jason would need a larger face to keep it on. "And Shayla-Shayla!"

Nicole turned to Nanami. "Shayla-Shayla?" she asked.

Nanami responded with something that didn't sound very complementary.

Nicole turned back to Jason and soundly whapped him on the head.

"What do you mean it's gone!" Becker exclaimed. "Flux capacitors don't just disappear!"

"Actually, flux capacitors are quite unstable, and do disappear quite frequently, which is why I did not use one in the construction of this time machine," Kenny said. "Instead, I used an approach similar to that hypothesized by Professor Acheson of MIT, who wrote in his 1996 paper entitled, 'Quantum Theory and the Possibility of...'"

"Kenny!"

"What? Oh, sorry, Mr. Becker."

"So what happened to the flux... the whatever the hell it is?"

"The temporal circuit? It's... It's been stolen."

"Stolen? Who by?"

"That is a very good question," Kenny said. He tilted his head slightly. "Computer, identify all persons who have been in the lab within the past twenty-four hours?"

"Working," a pleasant female voice, which Becker was surprised to recognize as being very similar to Kirstin Porter's, said. "The lab has been accessed by Kenneth E. Pendrell, Jonathan Becker, and one unauthorized person identified on audio records as Len Nakrifs."

"Len?" Kenny called out.

"That's odd, he was here just a moment ago," Becker said.

"Computer," Kenny said, "search all databases for any record of a Len Nakrifs. Include all birth records for the United States from eight to twelve years ago."

"Working... .. No match found."

"Expand by five years in either direction."

"Working... .. No match found."

The main screen lit up, and on it in large, red blinking letters were the words, "Len Nakrifs: No Match Found."

Kenny sat in his chair and frowned at the screen.

Jason frowned as he sat in the chair. The evening had gone so horribly!

Nicole had persuaded Nanami to take her and Jason into the palace to meet Fujisawa and Makoto. Jason and Fujisawa seemed to develop an immediate rapport, which led to Jason's being heavily intoxicated a half hour later when Miz Mishtal, the woman who loved Fujisawa, showed up for a visit.

Miz had been no happier with Fujisawa's state of inebriation than Nicole had been with Jason's.

Miz had, unfortunately, been accompanied by fellow priestess Shayla-Shayla who Jason, drunk as all hell, had thrown himself on.

The evening ended not much longer after that.

"Really," Nicole said, applying some ointment to Jason's wounds, "I can't take you anywhere, can I?" She deliberately poked at one of the burns, causing Jason to wince in pain. "Baka," she whispered, just loud enough for him to hear.

All the times he dreamed of getting to meet his favorite El-Hazard characters... never once did he imagine it would go like this...

"I'm sorry," Jason moaned to Nicole for the hundredth time that evening. "I'm so, so sorry..."

Becker had searched the lab thoroughly, and produced no sign of Len. "I don't get it, where'd he go?"

Kenny didn't respond. It was hours later, and he was still staring at the screen.

"Kenny, I'm sorry. I feel like this was all my fault."

Kenny kept staring at the screen.

"Kenny...?" Becker walked over and tapped the young genius on the shoulder.

"I'm such a fool!" he exclaimed suddenly.

Becker leapt back, startled, as Kenny rose suddenly to his feet.

"That name!" Kenny said, pointing at the screen. "Computer, rearrange the letters in the name Len Nakrifs until you find a match within records. Specifically search the Laboratory's communications database."

"Working... .."

Kenny, along with Becker, looked at the screen as the letters in the name Len Nakrifs danced around, trying out every combination until...

"Match found," the computer said.

Kenny stared silently at the screen. Becker's eyes popped out in astonishment as they scanned the single word written upon the screen in large, red glowing letters.

"Snarfinkle."

A moment later, the silence that had descended upon the lab was broken by the urgent beeping of the World Super-Genius Hotline.

Professor Snarfinkle

Kenny answered the World Super-Genius Hotline, and the image that was a cross between Einstein and Max Hedroom once again appeared on the Laboratory's main screen.

"Kenneeth Ee. Peendreall!" the image said in a voice that was oozing with contempt.

"Professor Snarfinkle," Kenny politely responded. "I'd like to say it's good to see you again, but it is not you I see. Do we really need this computer-generated façade? After all, I have seen what you look like."

The Einstein / Hedroom image began to dissolve. In its place, another image formed.

In the background was a complex that looked very much like a dark version of Kenny's own Laboratory. In the foreground was a small albino boy, his thin hair jutting out in every imaginable direction, giving his head almost a "Koosh-ball" appearance. He wore a long, double-breasted white lab coat with an ominous red smear across the front.

"Len?" Becker asked, astounded.

"There is no Len," Kenny told his companion. "It was Snarfinkle all along."

Kenny thought back to when "Len" had first come into the Laboratory, and how foolish he had been not to question the boy's presence. *Pride cometh before a fall*, he thought grimly.

"Rieght yew arre, Kenneeth Peendreall!" Snarfinkle snarled.

"What can I do for you, Professor?" Kenny asked.

"Yew ken geet reedy to meeet yeur deztrection!" Snarfinkle responded. With that, the screen went blank.

The young genius sat in his underground layer, contemplating what must be done.

His infiltration of enemy territory was a complete success. Not only was he now able to complete his time machine, but he also had some interesting new leads that would give him access to interdimensional travel, as well! (He'd had quite a good look at the Stargate's internal specifications when he had been committing his little act of sabotage.)

Now that he had taken what he needed from his enemy, his arch nemesis, he had no further use for him. Of course, he couldn't simply go and kill him. Oh, no. What good would that be? Too easy, too simple, too clear-cut. He needed something that would tax his mind.

And thus, a plan began to form.

The best way to destroy Kenny would be to dominate the world.

Why? Why not. World domination might be a fun little challenge. And besides, he knew Kenny would try to stop him. And when he did...

"Engelbert! Are you down there again?" a woman called out from the top of the stairs, interrupting his train of thought.

"Yes, mom!"

"Honestly, down in the basement all day! You really should go outside and play on a nice day like today!"

"I'm just planning to take over the world to destroy my arch nemesis."

"Of course, dear. Have you seen the ketchup?"

Snarfinkle looked at the smear on his lab coat. He thought it would look menacing. "I'm using it," he called out.

"Of course, dear. Put it back in the fridge when you're done, okay? And in the future, please don't take food in the basement without asking."

"Yes, mom!"

"That's my good boy. Have fun down there!"

Soon after, he heard the sound of the door closing. He was alone with his thoughts once again.

How to take over the world?

He would need help.

Oh, he could do it on his own, sure. Nothing was impossible to him. But where would be the challenge in that? He needed minions to move around like pawns on a global chessboard.

Where would they come from?

"Ov course!" he exclaimed as the idea hit him. He knew exactly where to get them.

Everywhere but here.

He smiled as he picked up the stolen temporal circuit and the rough drawing of the Stargate's inner workings. He walked over to his Pinto and began to work.

"Boot," he said to himself as he continued his tinkering, "Aie wiel stiel need zoomone weeth weech to beegin mye wourk." He frowned. "Whoo?"

Justy Yung stood before the assembled members of Troop 192, spittle flying from his mouth and his baton waving wildly.

"Peons, all of you! You exist simply to service me! Why can you not see this? Why do you not do as your kind, benevolent, and loving God demands?"

"You tell 'em, Captain!" Proctor, Justy's obedient and loyal Assistant Senior Patrol Leader said in enthusiastic encouragement.

This latest tirade on the part of Justy Yung had begun when the members of Troop 192 refused to bow down and prey to him. Why wouldn't they? Was it an unreasonable request on his part? He was, after all, a God to them. They loved him and worshiped him. They must. How could they not?

So why wouldn't they openly show him their love and worship? This was the one thing Justy couldn't figure out. Perhaps they were just afraid that it wouldn't be enough, and he would punish them for their failing?

"Troop dismissed!" Justy said a second or three later.

The little robotic housefly that had been recording the entire meeting flew out as the Troop disbanded.

The next morning, Proctor woke at exactly 5:45 a.m. as he did every morning. He stood quietly so as not to wake his master. He quietly made his bed (if you could call it a bed – it was really just a crumpled sheet and a flattened cardboard box that was lying at the foot of Justy's bed) and went to heat up some water for his master's tea.

He then went back into Justy's room and laid out Justy's clothes for today. He thought his master might want to try out his new one, today. Proctor pondered this as he quietly went through the closet full of neat and freshly pressed, and all quite identical, Boy Scout uniforms.

There was not another thing in the whole closet.

At exactly 6:00, Proctor woke Justy and handed him his tea. "Good morning, Captain!" he said brightly.

"Oh, hello, you," Justy responded as he took a sip.

Proctor pulled off Justy's covers, revealing Justy in his favourite pyjamas, the pair that Proctor had hand-embroidered the word "God" over the breast pocket of. Justy sat up, finished his tea, and went into the bathroom.

Proctor followed him in and brushed his teeth for him. Then Proctor retreated to the kitchen to prepare breakfast as Justy showered and got dressed.

A half an hour later, Justy sat down to his breakfast of fresh Belgian waffles with a scoop of butter, powdered sugar, and grade A Vermont maple syrup. On the side was fresh bacon cooked to perfection, a tall glass of freshly squeezed orange juice (no pulp) and a tall cold glass of fresh milk. Once he was sure that everything was all right with his master, Proctor sat down to his cold bowl of oatmeal and a glass of water.

No sooner had Proctor been just about to take his first bite when the doorbell rang.

"Get that, would you?" Justy said dismissively.

"Yes, Captain!" Proctor said brightly.

A moment later, Proctor returned. "It's for you, Captain," he said.

Justy turned. "Who is it?" he demanded. Or, at least, he began to demand. He stopped half way through his demand when he saw who (or rather, what) had come to see him.

Proctor had been followed in by a television.

It was a simple television, a great big one from perhaps the mid 70's. The kind with great big knobs to turn rather than simple little buttons you could push. Its antenna was fully extended, forming a gigantic "V". It was able to follow Proctor in by virtue of the fact that it seemed mounted upon a motorized cart with a tread on either side.

There was an image upon the television's screen. It was that of a young albino boy with a hairstyle that made him look as if he had just licked an electrical socket. Oddly enough, Justy thought the image seemed to be looking at him.

"Proctor, what is this?" Justy demanded.

"Looks like a television, Captain."

"I know that, you nincompoop!" Justy hollered. "I mean, what is it..."

"Pleeze aelouw mee to eentrodoze myezelf," the image said. "Aye aim Profezer Snarfinkle!"

"Proctor, get this thing out of here," Justy said with his well-practiced dismissiveness. "I'm trying to eat breakfast."

"Aind a loovely breekfazd eet eez, Joosty Yoong!" the image said.

Justy jumped slightly. He'd had no idea that the image would be able to hear him. He turned back to regard it once more.

"Just what would you like?" he asked.

"Aye vood liek... yew!"

With that, a small piece of paper was ejected from a slot beneath the television. Proctor caught it as it fell, grabbing it half way to the ground.

The television turned and let itself out.

Justy snatched the paper from Proctor's grasp, oblivious to his loyal retainer's slight gasp as he received a nasty paper cut. Justy looked at the paper.

On it was written only an address and a time.

"Proctor?"

Proctor pulled his bleeding finger from his mouth.
"Yes, Captain?"

"Clear my schedule for this afternoon, would you?"

"Yes, Captain!"

"Oh, hello!" said the woman who opened the door after Proctor had knocked. "You must be the friends that Engelbert is expecting!"

"Right this way, Captain!" Proctor declared. Justy walked through the doorway with a slightly pompous flourish.

Justy couldn't help but feel that the woman who had opened the door bore a striking resemblance to Donna Reed. In fact, it occurred to him as he looked around the kitchen that the whole thing looked like something out of a 50's sitcom.

"Engelbert's down playing in the basement again," the woman said. They walked across the kitchen as she continued. "You know how he is, playing his pretend science games. The school councilor says we should encourage him, but I do wish that he's go play outside once and a while." She smiled. "It's nice to finely meet some friends of his, he never invites people over. Maybe you could get him to go outside?"

Justy nodded absentmindedly as the woman opened a door. "Here you go! Right down here. Maybe later you three can come up for some cake and ice cream?"

Justy peered down the dark staircase.

"Mrs. Reed, can I have your autograph?" Proctor asked, awestruck.

The woman smiled. "My, you must have me confused with someone else!"

"Proctor, come on!" Justy clamored.

"Yes, Captain!" Proctor gleefully yelled as the two started down the staircase.

"You boys have fun!" the woman said as she closed the door behind them.

Where they had expected to find a basement, they instead found something that... well, the closest semblance Proctor's mind could come up with was a sinister version of the Batcave.

There were huge stalactites and stalagmites jutting vehemently from the ceiling and the floor. Great contraptions of various types were strewn about in a seemingly random (but actually quite calculated) manor. On one wall was a huge poster, so big you could probably wrap a small elephant in it. On the poster was a rather unflattering photo of Albert Einstein.

There were great expanses of countertop, covered in vials and beakers and Bunsen Burners. Various things bubbled and boiled and frothed. There were gigantic computer banks, drive-in theatre screen sized monitors... and a chair.

On the chair sat a boy. A young albino boy, rather frail looking, his thin white hair seeming to be sticking from his head in every imaginable direction.

"Velkum!" the boy said. "Thaank yew fer akseeptink mye zummonz!"

Something within Justy suddenly snapped. Why had he come here, anyway? Of course, Justy wasn't aware of the slight subliminal message that had been flashing across the screen of the television that had visited him earlier.

"No one summons me!" he exclaimed.

"Then eet pleeezez mee to bee ze fierst."

Justy was stunned. The boy seemed to not be impressed by his greatness. "What do you want with me?" he asked.

"Zimple. Aye waant yew to gahtheir an aarmy frum akroz tyme aind zpace... aind yewze zis aarmy to konkore ze worrld!"

For a moment, Justy remained silent.

Proctor blinked.

Justy chuckled softly.

Proctor smiled.

Justy's chuckle strengthened, and blossomed into a laugh.

A great big booming laugh.

Justy had treated (or, as they saw it, tortured) the scouts of 192 with some quite intricate laughs in the past... but they had nothing on this one.

This laugh lasted for hours.

Justy sat himself down in the driver's seat of the Pinto and buckled the seatbelt.

"How did he say this thing worked again?" Proctor asked, taking the passenger seat.

"Idiot!" Justy exclaimed. "It was all quite simple! Weren't you paying attention! You simply..." He paused. He frowned.

"Um... Well... Idiot!" Justy exclaimed again. "You should have paid attention! I demand you tell me how to work it, just to prove that you know!"

"Hmm... You know, don't you Captain?"

"Of course I know!" Justy exclaimed. Anyone but Proctor would have easily noticed that he sounded rather defensive.

"Oh, that's good. At least one of us knows. I think you just set the controls for where you want to go, and speed off to forty-two miles per hour."

"Of course! Of course, that's it! I knew that all along!"

Proctor smiled with admiration.

"Well, Proctor?"

Proctor blinked. "Yes, Captain?"

"Set the controls!"

"Oh! Yes, Captain! Er... where did you want to go?"

"What do you mean, where?"

"Well, we can go anywhere, can't we? He did say that this car could travel to any point in time or space, in this dimension or any other alternate one. So where do you want to go?"

"I don't care, you idiot! Just take us anywhere!"

"Right-o!" Proctor quipped as he pushed a few buttons on the control panel. "She's all set!"

Justy turned the ignition key, starting the engine.

"Um... Captain?"

"What is it now, Proctor?!"

"You do know... um... how to drive, don't you?"

"Of course I know how to drive, you fool!"

Justy slammed his foot on the gas.

A minute later, they were inspecting the damage to the car's rear end, which had collided with the far wall.

A half hour later, they were on their way again. By some miracle, this time Justy got it right.

"What in the name of Sir Isaac Newton?" Kenny exclaimed.

"What is it?" Becker asked, He too, heard the alarm coming from the main console.

Kenny rolled out from under the Edsel. Becker wiped the dirt from his hands and followed the young genius.

As he sat before the console, Kenny frowned. "My sensors have picked up a disturbance," Kenny told Becker. "Snarfinkle must have completed his time machine... except... no!"

"What is it?" Becker once again said.

"Snarfinkle's time machine! It somehow is capable of not only time travel, but can function like my Stargate, as well! It can go anywhere!"

"We have to go after him! Stop him, somehow!" Becker said.

Kenny rested his forehead in the palm of his hand, deep in thought. Becker was right, of course. Whatever Snarfinkle was up to, it couldn't be good. Somehow,

he'd have to redesign the Edsel to include the functions of the Stargate... but it would be a most difficult feat, unless...

"Yes!"

"What is it?"

"Back to the Edsel, Mr. Becker!" Kenny said. His voice bordered on bold. "We have work to do!"

Adventures in Time and Space

"That should just about do it," Kenny said as he rolled out from underneath the Edsel. He glanced over at Becker's tired, soiled features and reflected that he probably was in much a similar condition at the moment. Of course, the two of them had been working almost nonstop, aside from a brief nap and a quick meal, for about forty-two hours.

"Will it really work?" Becker asked.

"It has to," Kenny replied. "We've no time to fiddle around with test runs first."

The computer's voice suddenly called out. "There is a visitor at the front door," it said.

"Visual on main screen," Kenny replied, hastily getting to his feet and walking towards the monitor.

The computer complied, and an image filled the main screen. Kenny gasped slightly when he saw who it was. He turned to Becker.

"Wait here," he said.

Becker nodded.

Kenny had ridden his lift up to his room, hastily neatened himself, and changed into fresh clothes as quickly as he could, and then went to answer the doorbell, which was ringing once again.

He opened the door.

"Oh, hello," Kirstin said. "I hope I'm not disturbing you. I had almost given up hope that you were here."

"Please," Kenny said quietly, "come in."

"Thank you," she responded, crossing the threshold.

"Can I... can I get you anything? A cup of tea?"

"No, thank you," Kirstin responded.

"Was there something... um..." Kenny looked up briefly. "Was there something I could do for you?"

Kirstin took a seat, a somber look upon her face. "I was worried when you weren't at the meeting this week," she said.

"Oh?"

"Yes... and there's someone else missing, too... I'm... I don't know what to do."

Kenny opened his mouth slightly, and then paused as if gathering courage. "Miss Kirstin? It's my fault..."

"What is?"

"Miss Nicole. It's my fault she's missing."

Kirstin looked stunned. "How...?"

"There's... there's a boy out there, a misguided boy of a similar intellect to my own. He for some reason sees me as his archrival. My... my pride let him infiltrate my Laboratory, and when he was there, he sabotaged some of my equipment... the Stargate... When I next activated it, it went haywire, and absorbed two people who were passing by outside my house... Miss Nicole and her friend Mr. Bertovich."

Kenny looked up again briefly and met Kirstin's gaze. "I'm... I'm sorry I failed you," he told her.

Kirstin did the last thing Kenny suspected. She smiled at him. "Oh, Kenny, it's not your fault. It's that other boy's fault."

Kenny smiled slightly.

"So... do you know where they are?"

"I'm afraid I don't... but I do know that wherever they are they got there safe."

Kirstin seemed as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. "I'm sure that they're doing fine. Nicole has always been a survivor."

"I don't know if I'll be able to, but I will try and find them," Kenny assured her.

"I know you will. I have faith in you. Poor Sarah, though... she's going to keep worrying. She thinks that Nicole and Jason ran off together... or worse! That Jason... well, I dare not repeat it." She glanced at her digital watch. "Oh my, I'd better get going, actually. Sarah

gets home from work soon, and lately she's been... well..." Kirstin trailed off.

Kenny escorted her to the door.

"Good bye, Kenny," she said. "I wish you good fortune in your endeavors against this misguided young boy."

"Good bye, Miss Kirstin," Kenny responded. "I shall try to live up to your faith in me."

Kirstin smiled once more. "I know you will," she said as she closed the door behind her.

Kenny rushed back into the Laboratory, walking past the skeletal remains of the Macross Valkyrie, past the disassembled carcass of the Stargate, and right up to the covered Edsel. "Mr. Becker!" he called out.

Becker popped up from the opposite side of the Edsel. "Yes?"

"Are you ready to go?"

"Whenever you are!" he chirped. (While Kenny had been upstairs, Becker had made use of the Laboratory's facilities to make himself presentable, as well.)

Kenny walked over to a near by console and pressed a button, raising the sheet from the Edsel.

It seemed larger then it had been before, it's shape subtly altered here and there. In the skin of the car were what appeared to be seams, the purposes of which were not immediately apparent. On the back of the car were two protrusions that looked familiar to Becker but he couldn't quite place them. Also, the car's colour had also been changed. It was now white with black and yellow trimming. On each of the front doors, an emblem had been painted. It was a red circle, and within the circle was a silver-gray kite shape, the edges of the kite curved inwards.

"Wow," Becker said.

"Ready, Mr. Becker?" Kenny asked once again, opening the driver's side door and motioning for Becker to enter.

"I'm driving?" Becker asked.

Kenny nodded. "I don't know how," he reminded his assistant.

"But you've made so many modifications..." Becker insisted.

"Don't worry," Kenny insisted. "I shall be right with you in the passenger side seat."

"Um, okay," Becker said, getting in. Kenny went around and sat in shotgun.

"So, um..." Becker said as the two of them buckled up, "now what?"

Kenny pressed a button on the dash causing a large door to open up on one wall, a different door than the one Becker had previously driven through. "Where does that lead?" Becker asked.

"Outside," Kenny responded.

"Okay," Becker said. "Here we go!"

The tunnel rose at a sharp incline and extended for about two kilometers before finely ending in a portal that was disguised as an abandoned mine. A small dirt road extended from this, and that continued on for another kilometer before it reached a paved road.

It was a simple, unmarked, two lane, flat stretch of pavement that continued in either direction for quite a ways. Other than an occasional large, old looking house or an even more occasional side road branching off, there was little to be seen.

"Where are we?" Becker asked.

"Somewhere between Springfield and Amherst," Kenny responded.

"Now what? Activate the travel circuits and hit forty-two mph?"

"Not quite," Kenny responded. "Let's try something else, first. Start down the road and pick up speed as much as you can. When you're at about sixty, pull the lever marked 'F'."

Kenny pointed to a section of the dash on which there were four small levers. They were marked, from left to

right, "C", "F", "G", and "B". The one marked "C" was currently down.

"What's that do?" Becker asked.

Kenny smiled quietly to himself.

Becker shrugged. "Okay, here goes."

Becker turned onto the road and began to accelerate. Kenny peeked over at the speedometer with utmost interest. Rather swiftly they reached sixty miles per hour, and Kenny's smile broadened as Becker pulled down the lever marked "F".

Becker heard strange noises coming from the car, and felt strange vibrations. He looked out his side window and was alarmed to see what looked suspiciously like a wing was swiftly extending out from under the car. It was white in color with a black stripe running down the center of it from the tip to where it met the car, the stripe broken only in the middle of the wing by the number, "001". He looked out Kenny's window and saw a similar wing, but instead of the number it had the same symbol that was painted on the doors. Looking in the rear-view mirror, he noted that two vertical stabilizers had risen from the trunk. He also noted that while they were white on the inner sides, on the outer sides they were black and had a white "Jolly Roger" emblem on them. He also also noted that the protrusions he had noticed on the back earlier were providing massive amounts of thrust.

He noted this all rather quickly. He had to, as the next thing he noted, with some alarm, was that they were airborne.

"By Sol'Kanar's Horns!" Becker exclaimed.

Kenny did a rare thing for him, which was that he looked confused. "What?" he asked.

Becker was too busy to answer at first, still alarmed at suddenly finding himself operating an aircraft.

Becker decided to use a more common expletive. "Holy shit!"

"Calm down, Mr. Becker," Kenny said. "You'll find that it operates much the same as a car, except that pulling out

on the steering wheel will cause you to climb, and pushing in on it will cause you to descend.”

Becker took a deep breath. Then another. Finally he said, “Holy sh... um... am I flying?”

Kenny nodded.

“Cool,” Becker said.

“Now, when I activate the trans-dimensional-temporal circuits, accelerating to 342 miles per hour will activate the travel threshold.”

Becker balked. “342 miles per hour!?”

“Calm down, it’s only a little past Mach 1.”

“We’re breaking the *sound barrier*??”

“Just a bit,” Kenny insisted. “It’s necessary for proper formation of the threshold while in flight.”

Becker began to mumble incoherently.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Becker,” Kenny said. “When in driving mode, it’s still only forty-two.”

Becker finally managed to regain control of himself. “Um... okay. So, do you know where we’re going?”

“I think so,” Kenny said. “I managed to get a slight trace from when Snarfinkle’s machine travelled, but it may not be reliable.” Kenny plugged a small piece of equipment into a socket on his side of the dash and began making computations.

Becker, meanwhile, seemed to be gaining more confidence at the wheel. He was even smiling slightly.

“Okay, I’m ready, Mr. Becker. Activating the travel circuits... now...”

Becker pressed his foot down hard on the right pedal, and the Edsel began to rapidly accelerate. As they approached 300 mph, and passed it, the car went through heavy turbulence, buffeting back and forth and generally making its occupants feel much like James Bond’s vodka martinis – shaken, not stirred.

Finally, with a sudden surge, their passage became much smoother. Kenny glanced at the speedometer. “Mach one,” he quietly announced.

Shortly thereafter, a vortex opened in the sky before them and they shot through it.

"Where are we?" Becker asked as he drove slowly by a large brick building with four floors and a bell tower rising from the center.

"Well," Kenny said, "that looks like Agnes Scott Hall, constructed in 1891, the main hall of Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Georgia."

"Is there anything you don't know?" Becker asked.

"Of course there is," Kenny responded. "What would be the point of continued existence if there were no new things to learn?"

"So where to from here?"

Kenny consulted his instruments. "Hmm... since it's been a while since the Snarfinkle machine made its trip, my scanners are having a hard time getting a fix on their location. Perhaps while we wait, we should ask around a bit?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Good. Pull up to that residence hall, Mr. Becker."

Becker did so, and they got out of the car.

"Um... is it okay to just go in there?" Becker asked.

"What do you mean?" Kenny asked.

"Well, what if this is a girls' dorm?" Becker responded.

"Well, as this is a women's college, it probably *is* a women's dorm," Kenny responded, walking up the steps and entering the building.

"Oh, that makes sense," Becker said, following.

The woman sat in her dorm room, at her computer, reading a story. Right after she read the words, "The woman heard a noise, looked up from the story she was reading, and turned to see what it was," she heard a noise. She blinked in mild surprise, turned, and looked up to see what it was.

"Oh my God!" she exclaimed suddenly. "It's Kenny and Becker!" She got up from her chair and rushed over to them. "How did this happen? This is so cool!"

"Um, excuse me," Kenny said, "how do you know who we are?"

"Hey, Becker," the woman said. "Where's your headphones? You don't look right without them!"

"What?" Becker asked, confused.

"Hey, wait a minute," she continued, "if you're here, then I must be in the story!" She cheered as she rushed back over to the computer. On the screen, she saw the words, "She cheered as she rushed back over to the computer."

"Story?" Becker asked. "What?"

"Hold on a moment, miss," Kenny said. "Do you mean that you know us from some kind of story?"

She motioned them over to have a look. Kenny looked at the screen and read aloud from it. "Do you mean that you know us from some kind of story?"

"Cool, huh?" Kenny then read.

"Cool, huh?" the woman told him.

"I don't get it," Becker said. "How can everything we say or do be on that computer?"

"Well, it seems that in this Universe, we exist as a fictional story," Kenny told his companion.

"That's stupid. I don't believe it," Becker responded.

"Okay, think of a number," Kenny said.

Becker thought of the number seven.

Kenny looked at the screen. "Seven," he read.

"Lucky guess," Becker responded, grasping at straws.

"I can't believe I'm in a story!" the woman said, working her way back into the scene. "I am such a big fan of you guys, you know that?" She looked at Kenny. "You are so cute!" she beamed.

The door opened and another woman walked in. "Hey, why is there a funny looking Edsel with Robotech symbols on it parked outside?" she asked. "Hey, who are these guys?"

"Oh, it's okay, Mac," the first woman said. She looked at her computer and scrolled down a bit. "They won't be staying much longer."

Becker suddenly lunged at the computer. "Hey, this thing can tell us the future! It'll tell us what happens to us!"

"No!" Kenny exclaimed. "It's too dangerous!"

Becker looked at the computer and read from it. "Suddenly, Becker burst into flames, running about like an ankle-biter on a sugar overdose. 'Help me!' he exclaimed. 'I don't want to die until I've told Justy how much I love him!'"

Becker stooped reading and swallowed hard. "That's impossible!" he exclaimed. "I don't love Justy!" Apparently, he wasn't as alarmed about the spontaneous combustion bit.

Kenny looked at Becker with concern. "I told you it is dangerous to look at your own future, Mr. Becker," he told him. "It seems that whoever writes our adventures agrees." He pointed at the monitor.

Nervous, Becker looked at what was written there. As he read it, he breathed a sigh of relief. "At least, that might have happened... except that previous bit of narration was only intended as a warning for Becker not to look at things he shouldn't."

Kenny looked at Becker. "You see?"

"So... so I don't love Justy?"

"Nor are you going to spontaneously combust," Kenny told him. "It was all a warning."

"So what does this all mean? We're fictional characters?" Becker asked.

"Hey, I don't think so," the woman said. "You're real to me. I follow your adventures with the utmost interest."

"Still," Becker said, "someone *writes* us... We're just pawns of whoever this person is! It feels so... odd..."

"Who's to say that my Universe doesn't exist as a fiction in yet another?" the woman pointed out to Becker. "For all I know, I could be a fictional character somewhere. In fact, I'm appearing in one of your stories right now, aren't I? I don't feel any less significant because of it..." The woman smiled, suddenly getting a feeling of butterflies in her stomach. "In fact, I don't think he'd have given me this cameo if he didn't..." She blushed slightly.

"So you see, Mr. Becker," Kenny said, taking over, "because our author cares enough to write about our exploits, that actually might make us amongst the most important people in our world."

Becker smiled. "Most important people in the world?" Suddenly, he burst into flames, running around like an ankle-biter on a sugar overdose. "Help me!" he exclaimed. "I don't want to die until I've told Justy how much I love him!"

The next moment he was standing there perfectly intact, not even a little bit singed, the only sign of distress being a look of panic on his face. Kenny, the woman, and her roommate all looked at him in surprise.

"I do *not* love Justy!" Becker insisted.

"That was most interesting," Kenny stated. He pulled out some kind of device and started using it to examine Becker.

"I think," the woman said, "that may have been a warning from your author not to let all of this go to your head," she said.

Becker smiled weakly.

"So what brings you here?" the woman asked. "Trying to track down Justy and Proctor?"

"What do Justy and Proctor have to do with anything?" Becker asked.

"Oops, sorry," the woman responded. "I just gave something away, didn't I? Well, since the cat's out of the bag, as it were, I may as well tell you the rest. Snarfinkle has employed Justy and Proctor to do his dirty work for him. They're the ones travelling around in Snarfinkle's Pinto."

"And what are they up to?" Becker asked.

"I don't know if I should tell you that," the woman responded. "Don't want to give everything away, do I?"

"Unless," Kenny pondered, "this is some kind of variation on predestination paradoxes, and we were meant to come here and meet you, so that you could be a source of information to us."

"Hmm... interesting poing," the woman responded, deliberately mispronouncing the word out of habit from a private joke she shared with someone. This was lost on Kenny and Becker, however. She continued. "Okay, Snarfinkle feels that the best way to utterly destroy you would be to gain control of the world." She shrugged. "Evil geniuses... go figure! Anyway, in order to do so, he has sent Justy and Proctor off in his time/space/dimension machine in order to collect an army."

Kenny gasped. "That's... that's... inconceivable!"

Becker gasped. "We must stop him!"

Kenny turned to the woman. "You haven't seen them, have you?"

The woman shook her head.

Her roommate broke in, saying, "I saw a Pinto a few days ago. There was a couple of funny looking kids in Boy Scout uniforms inside. I haven't seen them since, however."

"Well," Kenny said, "we must be going now. Come, Mr. Becker."

Becker snapped to attention, spun around, and followed Kenny out of the door. The woman glanced at her roommate and smiled. Then she turned back to her computer. Being on AOL she had access to its Instant Messenger, and she had been using it as she read the story to converse with someone. She quickly typed in a message and sent it off.

EloraVenus: ::smiles:: Matt-chan, you'll never believe what just happened!

The response was quick in coming, almost as if the person she was conversing with had had it ready to go, and had just been waiting to hit the send button.

Yotsuyasan: ::laughs:: I think I have a good idea, Nickie-chan!

* * *

The two of them got back into the car and Kenny picked up the scanner, which he had left running while they had gone inside. "Excellent!" Kenny said. "I have a fix on their position."

"Where are they?"

"Seems they jumped again only an hour or so after they arrived here... I have the coordinates of their next destination... Imputing now..."

"Well, I'm ready whenever you are," Becker told Kenny.

"Excellent," Kenny said once again. "Let us be off, then!"

The Edsel exited the vortex and both Kenny and Becker suddenly felt a slight feeling of nausea. They soon realized why. The Edsel was floating in deep space.

Becker screamed.

"Calm down, she's air tight," Kenny assured Becker. "Put her in F mode, she can operate in space as well as within an atmosphere."

"Where are we?" Becker asked, pulling the lever.

"Somewhere in deep space."

Becker pointed to something barely visible in the distance. "What's that?" he asked as he steered towards it and accelerated.

Kenny squinted and pushed up his glasses. "Hmm... looks like the *U.S.S. Enterprise*, I think."

"Hey, yeah!" Becker said as they grew closer. He leaned forward. "You know, if it is the *Enterprise*, there's something a bit odd about it."

"You mean the way that one of the warp nacelle pylons is bent at a crooked angle, like it was broken?" Kenny asked.

"Yes."

"I thought that was odd, too," Kenny admitted.

Becker had a sudden thought. "Hey, that could mean... Hey! I think we're in a story Matt used to write!" Becker said. "He gave up on it when he started writing

that story that was a cross between Boy Scouts and that anime series...” Becker paused briefly. “Hey! That means that that is *the Doorprise!*”

Winning *the Doorprise*

"Captain's Unnecessarily Tedious Narration, Stardate 42424.2, Captain Spockman recording.

"This new ship, the *U.S.S. Doorprise*, NCC-0666-A+, is a fine ship, but she'll take a little breaking in. I look forward to doing so.

"On a different note, Captain Smith is looking forward to his new assignment. Unfortunately for me, he will be taking some of my best officers with him. I wish them all the best of luck, however."

Captain Arnold Ziffle Spockman finished his log entry and went on to make an entry in his personal log before he was interrupted by the door chime.

"Come in!" he called out.

The door opened. A man standing in the doorway said, "You know, it's almost time for the ceremony."

"Yes, I'd hate to be late for my own wedding." Spockman grinned. "Philia would kill me."

"Well then, shall we be off, Captain Spockman?"

Spockman joined the man out in the corridor and made a grandiose gesture towards the nearest turbodip. "After you, Captain Smith."

"Dear friends," Captain John Smith began, "we are gathered here today in this place to witness the joining of these two people in the living hell, er, make that the holy union, of matrimony."

John stood there on the stage, his back to the large windows looking out over the aft of the ship. Spockman and Philia, silently holding hands, stood facing him. Behind the two of them, Arthur, Fenchurch, Matt, Sasha, and Lanolia stood watching the proceedings in silent anticipation.

"In many cultures, marriage is a sacred time full of tradition and ceremony." John grinned. "However, there

are those who believe that such things are a bit overrated and want to get things over with so they can go and party."

Spockman and Philia glanced at each other and smiled.

"Do you?" John asked.

"Yes," Spockman answered.

"Do you?" John asked again.

"Sure, I guess," Philia answered, playfully non-committal.

"Okay, you're hitched. Hurry up and kiss her, so we can go and party!" John concluded.

Becker brought the car on an approach trajectory towards the *Doorprise's* shuttle bay.

"So," Kenny asked, "did you ever read these stories?"

"I never got around to it," Becker admitted. "You?"

Kenny frowned. "I meant to, I just had really gotten into this book I was reading and couldn't put it down."

"Good book?"

Kenny nodded. "*The Red Spectrum and It's Relationship to Quasars.*"

"Ah. Haven't read that one, myself," Becker admitted.

The party in Three-Aft was winding down. After it had been discovered that Gremlin, the hostess, was incompetent, Sasha had taken over behind the bar. Thus it was the Chief Engineer's voice that called out, "Last orders, please!"

"Spockman, dear, why don't you head up to the Penthouse?" Philia asked, referring to their quarters on A Deck. "I have to check on something in the science lab, and I'll be right up."

"See you soon," the Captain responded as Philia made her way from the room.

Spockman took a look at his drink for a moment before taking a sip.

"I'll take care of everything," John told him.

"You sure?"

"Yes! Get on with you. It's your wedding night. Have a blast. I'll take care of your other love for you."

"Okay. You have the con for the next, oh... when do we reach *Cheap Skate Nine*?"

John smiled in anticipation of his new assignment. "Ten hours, present speed. I can slow the ship down a bit..."

Spockman grinned in thanks, but responded, "No need. Ten hours will be fine. Don't forget, there's also tomorrow night!"

"Spockman, have fun."

"You too. Call me if there's any problems." Without awaiting a response, Spockman bolted for the door.

"All right, everyone! You've had enough fun! Time to get back to work!" John called out.

"Work can be fun," Commander Atanian pointed out as he pushed his black glasses up absentmindedly.

"True, so let's continue this party on the bridge. Sasha, bring the drinks."

Commander Matthew Atanian placed his iced tea down on his familiar navigation console as he sat himself behind it. He then used his console to tap into the Sci-Fi station, as not only would he need the practice as he was shortly going to be *Cheap Skate Nine*'s Sci-Fi officer, but as Philia had the night off someone would have to cover her duties.

It was then, using the ship's scanners, that he noticed something odd. "Captain Smith?"

John Smith put down his Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster. "Yes, what is it, Matt?"

"We're being followed."

"Followed? By who? Who by?"

"It appears to be... an Edsel?" Matt couldn't believe what he was seeing. "It has taken up position outside the hanger bay doors."

"This is damn peculiar," John noted. "Any theories?"

"Well, hopefully it's not the network here to cancel us," Matt deadpanned.

John blinked. "Network?"

"Old SNL sketch," Matt explained, "never mind."

"Shall I notify the Captain and the First Officer?" Fenchurch asked.

John frowned. "Well... I hate to ruin their wedding night, but I don't see any other choice. Spockman would want to know about this. Have security join him, Commander Prongtoid, and myself outside the hanger bay."

Philia passed two hurrying crewmen as she headed for the science lab. She was just about to enter when Fenchurch's voice called out through the intercom, "Captain Spockman, Commander Prongtoid, please report to the hanger deck."

Philia swore softly and testily flicked on the nearest com-unit. "Fenchurch, what's going on?"

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Commander. There is a craft seeking entry into the ship, but not responding to any hails. It appears to be... well, I don't quite know how to put this..."

"Appears to be what?"

"It appears to be an automobile from my home planet."

Philia arched an eyebrow. "Um... right." She sighed. "Fine, I'll be right there." She picked up the skirt of her wedding dress and hurried down the corridor.

Spockman and Philia met up with John at the outside of the hanger bay. A couple of security officers were standing near by, just in case.

"Scans of the craft show two occupants, both human. They appear to be completely unarmed," John informed Spockman.

"Right." Spockman turned to the two security guards. "Looks like we won't be needing you."

"Hanger bay pressure equalized," the computer announced.

The door opened.

Spockman, Philia, and John walked in.

The door closed.

One of the security guards looked at the other. The second one looked back.

They breathed a sigh of relief.

Suddenly, a five hundred pound anvil fell atop one of them as a tiger leapt seemingly from thin air and ravaged the other.

Sometimes, especially for security guards, there was just no fighting fate.

Kenny and Becker were brought to a conference room, where shortly thereafter they were joined by a group of people wearing uniforms that were similar to (but not quite like) the Starfleet Uniforms first seen in *The Wrath of Kahn*. Near the head of the table were two oddly dressed people, one male and one female. The male was dressed in a tuxedo and the female in a wedding dress. Their manner of dress may not have been odd under different circumstances, but it was certainly odd when one finds oneself on something that is similar to (but not quite like) a Federation Starship.

The man in a tuxedo, who had features similar to a Vulcan, spoke.

Alas, neither Kenny or Becker could understand a word he said. The blank looks they gave him attempted to communicate this.

Next, the female in the wedding dress spoke. Whatever language she used sounded rather different, but was no more understandable than what the man had used.

The man and the woman turned to another man and woman sitting at the table and spoke to them. This new

male and female pair nodded and turned to Kenny and Becker.

"Um... pardon me," the male said in a crisp British accent. "I do hope it doesn't seem terribly rude of me to ask, but do you speak English?"

"Why yes, I do," Kenny responded. The man looked very familiar to him for some reason.

"Me too!" Becker added.

"Oh, good," the woman said, also speaking with a British accent. "This should simplify things."

"Simon Jones!" Kenny exclaimed suddenly.

"What?" the man asked, taken back.

"You look just like Simon Jones."

"Who?" the man responded. "Look, I'm terribly sorry but you must have me confused with someone else. My name is Dent. Arthur Dent."

Kenny smiled. "Of course." He turned to Becker and whispered, "Simon Jones is the actor who played Arthur Dent, so it makes sense that Arthur would look like him."

"Arthur Dent?" Becker asked.

"From *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*."

"That big leather book that Matt has?"

Kenny nodded.

"Well, Matt did write these *John Smith* stories," Becker noted. "Makes sense in some strange way to find *Hitchhiker's* characters here."

"You know, if there are some *Hitchhiker's* elements here, there are bound to be others," Kenny noted. He turned back towards Arthur. "Mr. Dent?"

"Hello? Yes?"

"Would this ship perchance have any Babel Fish in stock? I feel they may help matters along considerably."

Arthur turned back to the Vulcan looking man and spoke to him. A moment later the man nodded, smiled, flicked a switch on the table in front of him, and spoke unintelligible nonsense into a speaker.

* * *

The Pinto was floating adrift in space. Proctor and Justy were pretty much helpless to maneuver it."

"Um... Captain? How do you drive in space?"

"I don't know, you idiot!"

"Do you think they know?" Proctor pointed out of the window, indicating the space craft that was swiftly approaching."

Justy smiled to himself. "Yes, that ship will do nicely."

"Captain? Do you think the translation devices the Professor gave us might come in handy?"

"But of course! Um... you put yours on first."

Proctor reached under his seat and brought out a small cap that would fit snugly on top of his head.

The cap was rainbow colored, solid lines of the different colors coming down from the top of the cap like thick lines of latitude. There was a tiny, brightly colored plastic brim at the front of the cap, and a brightly colored plastic propeller atop it.

Proctor looked at it nervously.

"Well... put it on!" Justy demanded.

Proctor swallowed, remembering Snarfinkle's description of how the device worked. "Yes, Captain..."

He put the cap on.

Immediately, little needles from within the cap bore themselves through Proctor's skull, seeking out the language recognition and speech centers of his brain. Proctor yelped slightly as the cap did its work. When it was finished, the propeller began to rotate slowly.

"Well?" Justy asked when the process seemed to be complete.

"Well... it itches a bit."

"Is that all?" Justy asked.

Proctor nodded.

Justy reached under his own seat and brought out an identical headpiece. He regarded it. "This thing better work. Snarfinkle said once it was put on, only he could remove it."

Proctor nodded, and enthusiastically repeated how difficult Snarfinkle had said the process would be.

"And it only itches a bit?"

Proctor nodded.

Justy placed the cap upon his head.

The next instant he screamed in utter and horrible pain.

When the pain subsided, Justy whapped Proctor soundly with his baton. "You idiot, I thought you said it only itched a bit!"

"Yes, Captain. Once it's on. It hurts like hell putting it on though, doesn't it?"

Justy stared at Proctor, as if daring his companion to repeat what he had just said. When Proctor only stared on in blissful ignorance of his heinous misdeed, Justy swung his baton once more.

A man walked in with the Babel Fish, strange yellow creatures from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* that when put in one's ear instantly allowed that person to understand anything said to him or her in any form of language. Kenny and Becker were surprised to recognize the man.

"Mr. Atanian?" Kenny asked.

"Matt?" Becker simultaneously asked.

"Hello? Yes?" Commander Matthew Atanian responded.

"It's me! Becker!"

"Becker who?" Matt responded.

"It's no use, Mr. Becker," Kenny said. He turned to Matt. "I'm sorry for the confusion, but in an alternate universe you are an Assistant Scoutmaster in our Boy Scout Troop."

Matt looked confused. He sat.

Kenny and Becker each took a Babel Fish. Kenny instantly stuck one of them into his ear, and instructed Becker to do the same. With some reluctance, Becker did so.

"Well then," the Vulcan looking man said, "now that we can all understand one another, what brings you to *the Doorprise*?"

After the pressure had equalized in the hanger bay, Justy and Proctor stepped fourth from the Pinto and headed towards the nearest door. As they approached it, a squad of security guards entered and pointed rather unpleasant looking weapons at them.

Then two figures entered.

"Holy Toupee!" Proctor inexplicably shouted upon seeing one of the two men. "Mr. Shatner, can I have your autograph?"

Both men disregarded Proctor and turned to Justy. "I... (dramatic pause) am... (dramatic pause) Gymnasium T. Flirt! This... (dramatic pause) is... (dramatic pause) my associate... (dramatic pause)."

"I am Captain Justin Schofield. Welcome aboard the *I.S.S. Victorious Horizon*. Now, before we kill you, what brings you here?"

"K-k-k-kill?" Proctor stammered.

Justy laughed. He laughed some more. He paused dramatically, opened his mouth as if to laugh some more, paused again instead, and then laughed.

Flirt looked at Justy.

Schofield looked at Justy.

They both looked at each other.

Then, they both laughed.

"Well, why didn't you say so sooner?" Schofield asked. He dismissed the security squad and indicated for Justy and Proctor to follow him.

"So that's our story," Kenny quietly finished.

The Vulcan looking man, who Kenny and Becker had learned was a Vulquin named Spockman, sat in contemplation for a moment.

"So let me see if I can summarize this," he said. "You are here to stop two people from your dimension from gathering an army to serve a mad genius bent on dominating your world?"

Kenny nodded.

"And if you can't stop them, you're planning to raise a counterforce?"

Kenny nodded again.

Spockman returned to his contemplation. He then motioned towards Philia and John, who leaned towards him and joined him in quiet conversation.

Meanwhile, Kenny took his PDA from his pocket and used it to contact his core computer back at the Laboratory. He scanned through various files until he found the desired information. He read a bit quietly to himself and smiled.

Spockman looked up from his consultation with John and Philia. "Well," he said, "count us in."

Kenny and Becker had been shown to guest quarters while Philia attempted to search for Justy and Proctor.

"That was easy," Becker said.

Kenny looked up from his PDA, from which he had been reading. "Yes, well that seems consistent with this Universe."

"What do you mean?"

Kenny held up the PDA for Becker to see. "Isn't that...?" Becker started to ask.

Kenny nodded. "Matt's stories."

"Is there anything your computer doesn't have?"

Kenny nodded again. "Of course," he then said, "Kevin Keegan's *Football – It's A Funny Old Game* is such a bad book, who'd actually want it?"

Becker thought about this for a moment, and then dismissed it.

He thought about his headphones for a moment. He missed them. With great difficulty, he dismissed that, too.

Then he remembered his question, which he realized Kenny had only begun to answer. "So what do Matt's stories have to do with this?" he asked.

"Well, we are in one of Matt's stories right now," Kenny explained. "Or, rather, inside a Universe extrapolated from his stories. I doubt he wrote about these events happening. After all, these are some of his earlier stories, and he wrote them before he knew us. Me, at least."

"Probably me to, I think," Becker said, nodding. He was still trying to figure out where Kenny was going with all of this. "So what?" he asked.

"Back then, you see, Matt wrote so that his characters served the plot," Kenny continued. "Not the best way to write, you see. Much better to have the plot serve the characters."

"He seems better with that stuff he writes now," Becker said. "That anime fanfic he uses us all as characters in."

"Ah, yes. *Neon Genesis Boy Scouts*," Kenny responded. "He still uses the characters to service the plot on occasion, but he's not quite as bad as he once was."

"So what's the point of all this?" Becker asked.

"Well, since the characters here exist mainly to service the plot, as soon as we offered up a plot they fell right into it."

"Ah, of course!" Becker responded as if he had suspected as much all along. He hadn't.

"In fact, this whole Universe seems to exist mainly to service the plot," Kenny suddenly hypothesized, "which could mean trouble."

"Oh? Why's that?" Becker asked.

"Well, look how quickly we found allies," Kenny said. "I can assure you that Justy and Proctor are probably having similar luck. Also, which do you think would be a better plot? We stop Justy here and now, or..."

Kenny was interrupted by the intercom chiming. "Yes?" he called out.

"Kenny, this is Philia. Would you and Mr. Becker please come down to the bridge?"

The turbodip doors opened and Kenny and Becker emerged into the bridge. "You wanted to see us, Miss Prongtoid?" Kenny asked.

"Wouldn't she be 'Mrs. Spockman'?" Becker asked.

"In the stories, she went by her maiden name as long as she served on *the Doorprise*," Kenny explained.

Philia, servicing the plot along with the rest of the crew, patiently waited for this bit of exposition to pass before she answered Kenny's initial question.

"We think we found the two you are looking for," she said.

"That's good!" Becker exclaimed.

"Not really," Spockman responded.

It was then that Kenny and Becker noticed another starship on the viewscreen. It looked very much like a Classic Star Trek starship, except that it had a definite mean edge that your average Federation starship lacked.

"Schofield," Spockman spat.

"Schofield?" Becker asked. He was reassured in his ignorance when he heard John Smith voice the same question.

It was now Spockman's turn for exposition. "This was from before you joined us, John. The *U.S.S. Doorprise* used to be the *I.S.S. Doorprise*, operating under the old Imperial Galactic Government. When the Empire fell, the United Phederation of Space was one of the powers that arose in its place."

"Ah, yes, I remember that much," John stated.

"Well," Spockman continued, "not every Starship Captain was happy to see the Empire go. Some of them refused to join the UPS and decided they would do whatever it took to see that the Empire did not die."

"And Schofield was one of them?" John asked.

Spockman nodded. "You could say that. Schofield was more like their ring leader. You know, John, I think this might be a very good time to raise the shields."

"I couldn't agree more," John responded. He started to do so.

Before he could get the shields fully raised, however, Philia shouted, "They're firing!"

"Evasive!" Spockman shouted.

"Too late!"

Explosions rocked the bridge. Everything tilted left, everything tilted right, arms and legs flailed wildly... but there was a small shelf in one corner of the bridge upon which sat a vase that seemed to have no purpose in being there other than to remain perfectly still, as if the bridge was not shaking like crazy.

"Get those shields up!" Spockman hollered.

"I'm trying!" John responded.

"They're firing again!" Philia warned.

John's panel exploded. Simultaneously, all of the lights went out, replaced with the eerie red glow of the emergency lighting. Becker coughed as smoke filled the bridge faster than the ship's ventilation systems could clear it.

"Bridge!" came Sasha Dunbar's voice. "We've got a massive radiation leak down here! I have to evacuate Engineering!"

"How long until you can make repairs?" Spockman asked her.

"Sir, I'm not sure I can. Not out here."

Spockman closed the con channel, got up, and walked over to Philia. "Damage report?"

"Defensive systems, offensive systems, propulsion, main power... all down," she said. "Who ever they are, they knew just where to hit us."

"Who? Schofield's ship is a completely different class, he wouldn't have that kind of tactical information. Who knew just where to hit us?"

As if by magic, Fenchurch suddenly announced that she was receiving a hail.

Spockman returned to his chair. "On screen," he said. Four people appeared on the screen. An equal number of people within the *Doorprise's* bridge gasped.

Kenny and Becker gasped upon seeing Justy and Proctor.

Spockman and Philia gasped upon seeing Gymnasium T. Flirt.

"Spockman... (dramatic pause), my Vulquin friend... (dramatic pause). It's... (dramatic pause) been... (dramatic pause) a while."

Spockman rose. "Flirt."

"You... (dramatic pause) still remember. I... (dramatic pause) of course... (dramatic pause) re... (short pause) member you!"

"What is the meaning of this attack?"

Flirt smiled. "(dramatic pause) Revenge... (dramatic pause). I... (dramatic pause) have... (dramatic pause) deprived your ship of power, and... (dramatic pause) when I swing... (dramatic pause) around, I... (dramatic pause) mean... (dramatic pause) to deprive you of your... (really, really long, "can read War and Peace in it's entirety during" type dramatic pause) life."

"If it's me you want, spare my ship. I'll have myself beamed aboard."

"*Your* ship?" Schofield laughed. "I suppose it is at that. After all, you destroyed the original *Doorprise* that you stole from Flirt when you mutinied.

"After you defeated me, Flirt and I ran into each other and over a few rounds of drinks we discovered that we had a mutual 'friend' in common. We knew we couldn't rest until you were dead. Of course, killing you won't be enough. We have to kill your beloved ship with you."

"Come now," Justy said, speaking freely as if amongst equals. "Surely we can't kill them yet. There are at least two peons aboard that ship who have to live to see our grand plans come to fruition."

"Ah... (dramatic pause) yes, so... (dramatic pause) you... (dramatic pause) had said," Flirt responded.

"Transfer over the ones known as Kenny and Becker," Schofield instructed, "and we will allow you time to evacuate your ship before we destroy it... and you along with it."

Spockman swallowed. "We need time to get the Matter Transference Beams repaired. Your first attack did some damage."

Schofield smiled. "I give you sixty seconds."

Spockman turned away from the viewer and began to pace back and forth before his chair. "I swear to you we're not finished yet. Keep nodding as though I'm still giving orders. Kenny?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"How long would it take for you to get your car's dimensional transport thingy configured to take this ship with it?"

Kenny answered almost instantly. "Should take very little time at all. When I'm finished I can signal you, and then all you'd have to do is move the ship forward at forty-two miles per hour."

Spockman nodded and Kenny headed swiftly for the turbodip, Becker just behind him.

"Captain?" Schofield impatiently asked.

"They're headed for the Transference room now, Schofield."

Spockman turned towards Arthur and Matt. "Set a course," he commanded them quietly, "directly for Schofield's ship. At Kenny's signal, move us forward at forty-two mph."

"Aye, sir," they responded, barely above a whisper.

"(Dramatic pause) Captain... (dramatic pause)?" It was Flirt this time.

Spockman pivoted to face the viewer once more. "Please, you've got to give us time. The Transference room is a shambles, we need to make repairs."

"Time... (dramatic pause) is... (dramatic pause) a luxury... (dramatic pause) you do... (dramatic pause) not... (dramatic pause) have."

Spockman had to stall. He walked to the front of the bridge, standing directly before the viewer. "How do I know you'll keep your word?" he asked.

Schofield smiled. "We've given you no word to keep. As I see it, you simply have no alternative."

"I... see your point," Spockman drily responded.

Schofield consulted his digital watch. "Time's up."

A little light blinked on Arthur's console.

"Prepare to receive your guests," Spockman said to the viewer. He then quickly turned towards Arthur and Matt. Arthur nodded and Spockman smiled.

"Engage!" Spockman commanded.

Even crippled, the ship almost instantly reached the miniscule speed of forty-two miles per hour. And when it did, it vanished.

"Shit!" Schofield said.

"(Dramatic pause) Shit... (dramatic pause)!" Flirt said.

Justy whapped Proctor with his baton.

"Ouch!" Proctor said.

"Where... (dramatic pause) did they... (dramatic pause) go?" Flirt demanded to know.

Justy smiled. "There can be only one place," he said, "and we can take you there. Oh yes, we can."

All eyes were on Justy as he spent the next few minutes laughing.

"Of course," he said once he had stopped, "you must first pledge allegiance to the army of Professor Snarfinkle!"

"Anything to get another chance at Spockman," Schofield hatefully said.

Flirt spent the next few minutes dramatically agreeing.

Justy's laughter began anew.

The Doorprise arrived in the regular Universe... or, at least, Kenny and Becker's home Universe. It came into

being on the far side of Earth's moon. The ship then sputtered a bit and came to a stop.

Sasha burst onto the bridge, along with Kenny and Becker. "Captain!" Sasha exclaimed.

"What is it, Sasha?"

"Sir, this ship is toast, and the butter is being spread fast. Recommend we evacuate immediately!"

"Belgium," Spockman cursed. "I just lost one ship, now another?"

"There will be other ships, Spockman," John said. "At least the crew is safe."

Kenny walked over to Philia's station. "May I?" he asked.

Philia nodded.

Kenny did a brief scan of Western Massachusetts. "Here," he said. "Beam everyone to these coordinates. There's enough accommodations for them there."

"What's there?" Philia asked.

Kenny smiled. "My Laboratory!"

Final

Kenny and Becker were running for their lives. The air was filled with the smell of burning. Burning vegetation, burning buildings, burning asphalt, burning... They didn't want to think about what else might be burning. They ran from the smoldering ruins of the Church in the Acers.

The day had started so well. In the morning, Kenny had received a progress report on the construction of the new starship. In the afternoon, he had finally located in which dimension Nicole and Jason had been trapped. That evening, there had been a happy reunion at the scout meeting.

Nicole, the last surviving Porter sister, ran behind them. A few other survivors who had managed to escape were there, too. Luke Walker. Matt Swett. Hopefully they weren't the only ones, but who knew?

Kenny led the way to a dark blue minivan that was suddenly pulling into the parking lot of the former church. It came to a stop before them and the side door swung open. "Get in, quick!" Kenny commanded as another bolt of destruction came out of the sky. This one missed the remains of the church, instead hitting a house across the street. Swett swore. It had been his house.

They all got into the van, and Becker noticed that it seemed to be computer controlled. This came as no surprise to Becker. During his association with the young genius, Becker had never observed Kenny to have anything resembling a parent or guardian. So why should he have expected to find someone flesh and blood to be driving the van that picked Kenny up every week?

"Van, home," Kenny commanded, "Laboratory entrance."

Becker looked at the others sitting in the van as it swerved its way down the remains of the road. Kenny seemed calm and in control, but Becker couldn't help but wonder if that was really the case. Indeed, Swett and

Luke seemed to be in something of a state of shock, sitting quietly and looking straight ahead. Becker was rather surprised that he wasn't in such a state, himself. Perhaps it hadn't just caught up to him yet.

The real surprise to him was Nicole. Nicole, usually the most unflappable of the Porter sisters. The one who stayed "all business" no matter what else was going on around her.

Nicole was crying.

Becker reached over to her and placed a hand on her shoulder. She looked up in his direction, but didn't seem to notice him for a moment. Then her eyes focused. "B... Becker," she said, sniffing. "They're gone. My... my sisters, Jason... Oh, god, Jason! He'd hate that his last words were such a terrible pun!"

Just before the attack came, Jason and Nicole had been telling the Garden Snake Patrol about their adventures in El-Hazard. When Nicole had chided Jason for getting drunk and hitting on the fire priestess Shayla-Shayla, Jason apologized and said he didn't understand how he could do such a thing, pausing before adding, "After all, I've always been more of an Afura man."

"I don't know," Becker said in a weak attempt to comfort Nicole. "Having read a bit of the stuff that Jason's written, I think he'd have liked to go out on a bad pun."

Although her tears did not stop, Nicole did smile weakly. She then punched Becker in the arm.

"Ow!"

"Thanks," Nicole then said. Then she turned away from Becker, and her crying continued.

The makeshift group walked into the Laboratory. It was already a buzz of activity, many of the operatives Kenny and Becker had gathered over the last month running from station to station. Fenchurch came over and led Nicole, Luke, and Swett off to freshen up.

Kenny was greeted at the entryway by his head of information gathering, Number Six. (Becker had asked the

man what his real name was, but he seemed oddly unsure, although he did take a moment to proclaim that he was not a number, he was a free man!)

"Mr. Pendrell," he said, "we have a situation."

"That is an understatement. Half of Springfield has been taken out by orbital bombardment. The church, my house... good thing the Laboratory is secure underground!"

"The computer scans indicate that the cause is an orbital bombardment originating from a ship matching the description of the one Mr. Yung and Mr. Proctor secured for Snarfinkle in the same universe you encountered Captain Spockman."

"They got a space ship?" Becker exclaimed. "Why did they wait a month to attack?"

"You remember how the dimensional transference irreparably damaged *the Doorprise*," Kenny reminded Becker. "My guess is that Schofield's ship suffered similar damage, but not as bad. Probably took them this long to effect repairs."

"Good thing you're smarter," Becker said. "In the time it took to repair their ship, you built a whole new one."

The trio of Kenny, Becker, and Number Six had reached the main computer terminal, where Spockman was already standing. "It certainly is a different ship," Spockman commented as he pulled up a schematic.

"Well, I kept the name *'Doorprise'* for you," Kenny said. "But it's the *Battlestar Doorprise*."

"Like I said, certainly a different ship," Spockman repeated. "Although I agree with you that the increased armament and fighter capacity (What did you call them, Vipers?) will come in handy in a battle situation. It'll just take some getting used to."

"Too bad Matt is gone," Becker reflected. "A match up between a battlestar and a Star Trek type ship. It'd be a sci-fi fan's wet dream."

"I had been hoping that it wouldn't come to a battle," Kenny responded. "I have always believed in peace. But this attack must be answered. Matt and the others... Mike,

Aaron, Gelinas, Billy, Sarah," Kenny choked up slightly as he said one last name, "Kirstin.... they will be avenged."

The Laboratory shook around them and some dust fell from the ceiling as another bombardment began.

"Well," Spockman said, "I suppose I have a ship to get launched then."

"Captain, sensors are detecting something launching from beneath the Atlantic Ocean."

"Another one of that planet's pathetic missile attacks?" Schofield laughed. Flirt joined him. For once, Justy was silent.

Justy stood looking at the baton in his hand. The end of it was coated with a sticky, red liquid. At his feet was the source of the liquid.

Proctor.

He lay on the floor, his skin pale, his head surrounded by a pool of blood.

"Reepares arre finuhally cupleete?" Snarfinkle asked from the main viewscreen.

"Yes, Lord Snarfinkle," Schofield replied. "Our test run was a success. This ship is better then it ever was."

"Eexcelleent. Aye tyre of zis game of escaleeting tenzion wiz Peendreall. You arre to come oot frum yoor hieding plaze beehiend ze moon. Aye have remooved myeself to a zecure locashun, zo yooou may ztart by obleeterating Vezrtoon Mazachoozits!"

The screen went blank.

Proctor blinked and spoke to Justy. "I'm sorry, sir, what did he say?"

Justy laughed. "Yes, the end of the Garden Snakes is at hand!"

"Um... Obliterate sounds kind of severe, doesn't it sir?" Proctor glanced at his master. "I mean, they're our friends! Everyone in the troop! And the girl scouts! And your parents! How am I supposed to eat your peas for you if your mother isn't around to cook them for you?"

"Silence, peon!" Justy exclaimed.

"No!" Proctor shouted, surprising even himself.

"Yes!"

"No, I will not be silent! You've gone too far, sir! This is too much! We can't do this, it isn't right! You can't rule over everyone if they're dead!"

"Justy (dramatic pause)," Flirt, standing beside Schofield's chair, said. "Take care of (dramatic pause) your minion."

"Proctor, go to your room... er, your quarters!"

"No, sir! I will not permit this!"

"Helm," Schofield commanded. "Move us into geosynchronous orbit over Western Massachusetts."

"You," Justy said coldly, pausing long enough to give Flirt a run for his money. "You will not permit this? And who are you?"

Proctor suddenly raised his shoulders and looked directly at Justy. "I am Hecubus Proctor, loyal servant to Lord God Justy Yung. I will do anything for you, sir, even if it is saving you from yourself!"

Schofield turned his chair to face the two Boy Scouts. "Yung, take care of this before I call security to remove you *both* to an airlock."

"Orbit as ordered, sir."

"Sir," Proctor pleaded. "Please, we have to put a stop to this before it is too late."

Justy gripped the baton in his hands.

"Please. They are our friends."

"First target is the structure known as The Church in the Acres. Fire on my command."

"I have no friends," Justy said, raising the baton.

Proctor looked quizzically into Justy's eyes. "Sir...?"

Justy looked down at the body before him. He sunk to his knees. His lip twitched slightly. He wanted to laugh, but he couldn't.

Schofield had turned in his chair again to look at Justy. "Call security and have those two removed from the

bridge," he scoffed. "Brig, morgue, airlock. I don't care. Let them know they can be creative."

Somewhere, in the back of his mind, Justy vaguely heard this. But he didn't care. Nothing mattered anymore.

A short time later security had come and gone and the only evidence of Justy and Proctor was a pool of blood and an abandoned baton lying beside it.

"Sir, the launch from the Atlantic is *not* another missile attack. Sensors now detecting some sort of ship on an intercept course."

"It can't be (dramatic pause) *the Doorprise*," Flirt remarked.

"No," Schofield agreed, "she was destroyed. Hell, we used some of the orbital debris in our own repairs. Is it in visual range?"

"Aye, sir."

An image displayed on the main viewer. It was an image of a battleship, the name "*Doorprise*" displayed prominently on the side of the landing deck.

Schofield and Flirt laughed. "Oh, this is just perfect! Spockman got himself a new ship. Little does he know that we know how to deal with ships like that. Open a channel to our backup fleet."

"Yes, what is it?" a man who now appeared on the screen asked. He had a sinister and calculating look in his eyes, had dark hair that was starting to grey, wore dark clothing, and seemed to be sitting on a throne-like chair upon a large pedestal.

"We may need to pull you into play sooner than we expected."

"Good. I tire of sitting behind this moon. What is the situation?"

Schofield turned to his communications officer. "Relay our sensor data."

After a few moments, the man on the viewscreen chuckled madly. "Oh, you cannot be serious!"

"A problem?" Schofield asked.

"Far from it," the man said. "This will be glorious!"

"Well, we wouldn't want to tip our hand too soon. Await my word, then come out and strike."

The man seemed very amused with himself as he replied, "By your command."

The man's image disappeared from the screen, replaced by that of the approaching battlestar.

Schofield looked to Flirt, and then back to the screen. "Glorious, indeed."

"Coming within range of the enemy starship," Philia reported.

Spockman paced the command deck. Past *Doorprizes* had command chairs. He missed his chair. He'd have to speak to Kenny when this was over. But there were more important matters now. "Prepare to launch the first wave of Vipers."

Fenchurch got busy. "Core Control to Launch Bay Alpha. Stand by to launch fighter probe."

"Acknowledge input," the lead Viper pilot responded. "Recorded and functioning."

"Vector coordinates coded and transferred," Fenchurch continued. "Acknowledge."

"Acknowledged. Ready to launch."

"Core systems transferring control to probe craft. Launch when ready."

On either side of the great battlestar, small, one man fighters began to fly out at top speed, and headed straight for Schofield's starship.

"Now is where the fun begins," Spockman commented. "While we have superior numbers and firepower, their ship has shields while all we have is an armored hull."

"And while we do have the Vipers swarming about," John said, "their ship is more maneuverable than ours."

As if on cue, the ship shook from a phaser impact.

"Damn. Positive shield, now!" Spockman commanded. A large blast shield began to lower over the forward

viewport. Spockman turned to John. "Have I ever told you how reassuring a presence you can be?"

"I do my best."

"Glad to hear it." Spockman turned towards Arthur and Matt. "Swing us around so that our port side is to them, and then have port side batteries open fire."

"Aye, sir."

"Schofield's ship is taking some damage," Philia reported. "They can't keep up with all of the Vipers. Their shields are weakening."

The battlestar shook from another impact. "Just hold out a little longer, people," Spockman encouraged.

"They're starting to back off!" Philia said.

"So soon? What is their shield strength at?"

"Estimate 37%."

"Weakened to be sure, but not yet out. He wouldn't give up so easily, unless..."

"Sir!" Philia interrupted. "I'm detecting two large vessels and hundreds of smaller ships coming from the direction of Earth's moon!"

"What?" Spockman exclaimed. "Negative shield, now!"

The blast shield retracted from the viewport and Spockman looked through it. The Vipers that had previously been swarming around Schofield's starship were now engaged with and outnumbered by slightly larger fighter craft shaped like elliptical discs. Behind them, slowly moving in, were two enormous ships, each one shaped like two flattened cones, one atop the other, connected in the middle.

Meanwhile, with a new threat approaching from the port, Schofield's ship was taking advantage of its greater maneuverability to swing around to *the Doorprise's* starboard side and renew its attack.

"All remaining batteries, open fire!" Spockman commanded. "Launch all remaining Vipers!"

Arthur Dent resisted the urge to say, "So this is it, we're going to die." An, "I've got a bad feeling about this," did manage to escape his lips, however.

"So do I, Mr. Dent," Spockman said. He turned to look at Philia, his wife of barely a month. He felt sad for the time that they would not have together. "But I'll be damned if they don't get us without one hell of a fight!"

"Well," Schofield commented. "Baltar is definitely keeping up his end of the bargain. During our post-repair shakedown, we helped him take out the last one of these 'battlestar' ships in his home universe, and now he's helping us take down the first one of them in ours."

"Poetic, isn't (dramatic pause) it?"

They both laughed.

The battle continued. Fighters on both sides disappeared in small balls of flame. Parts of *the Doorprise* were aflame, but she continued fighting fiercely. One of the basestars got too close and paid the price. It became covered in explosions and began to fall into the atmosphere.

The other basestar was being more cautious, but the surrounding space was still full of Cylon raiders, and the number of Vipers was dwindling rapidly. Meanwhile, Schofield's ship continued to unleash its own destructive power.

A group of raiders managed to break through the wall of Vipers and headed towards *the Doorprise* at full speed. The group split in two, one headed towards the port landing bay and the other towards the starboard. "*Doorprise* death squadron, attack," the commanding Cylon of the group commanded.

The raiders flew into the landing bay, weapons blazing, on a mad kamikaze run.

Explosions riddled *the Doorprise*, spreading throughout the ship. At the last moment, before her death throws managed to consume her completely, *Doorprise* managed to turn towards Schofield's starship and accelerate.

The two ships collided and disappeared in a ball of flame that quickly extinguished in the cold vacuum of space.

Baltar swivelled his throne to face the door to the room as he heard it open and close.

"The battle is over," Lucifer said to him.

"And we are victorious!"

"Victorious?" Lucifer enquired. "Our other basestar destroyed, as well as the spacecraft of our ally?"

"Yes, but we survive, and there is nothing else on this planet that can stop us. Contact Snarfinkle, and prepare our troops for landing at his designated coordinates."

"By your command, Baltar."

"*The Battlestar Doorprise* is gone," Number Six reported. "Sensors show a number of landing craft are being launched from the remaining basestar."

"Headed here?" Kenny asked.

"No," Number Six responded. "They seem to be headed for Europe and Asia."

"What is he up to? I thought his objective was to take us out," Becker said.

Kenny decided to do something a bit drastic yet obvious. He wanted answers, he would go to the source. He picked up the World Super Genius Hotline.

"Ah, heelow, Peendreall. Aye vaz vondeering ven yoo voold cahll!"

Kenny sighed. "You've wiped out all of Springfield, killing probably a couple a hundred thousand people in the process, including almost every friend I have. Do you think you could at least do me the favor of dropping the accent?"

Snarfinkle laughed. "I see I'm finally getting to you. Very well. What can I do for you?"

"I don't suppose, 'Please stop this madness?' would work?"

"No, I don't suppose it would."

"What exactly is your plan? It seems obvious you want me out of the way, so why land ships in Europe and Asia?"

"What do you take me for, some kind of Bond villain who is going to tell you all of my plans so that you can find a way of obverting them?"

"I didn't expect it would be that easy, no," Kenny assured his opponent.

"Of course, since there is nothing you can do to stop me at this point, I may as well tell you. I'm conquering this planet and placing it under my control. And my first step is to wipe out every other living being on the Earth."

Kenny paused. "Um... Isn't that a bit drastic? Who are you supposed to rule over?"

Snarfinkle laughed. "You naïve fool. I'd have thought with your intellect only second to mine that you would have been able to suss that one out for yourself."

"Other dimensions. You're going to repopulate from other dimensions with people who will be agreeable to your plans."

"Precisely!" Snarfinkle said. "Take our friend Baltar for example. He knew that once he took out *the Galactica* his Cylon friends would have no reason for keeping him alive. A world with such people as its leaders, with me as the ultimate authority... Can you imagine it?"

"I'd prefer not to," Kenny admitted.

"Well, tough. That world is to be our reality. I can be a kind master, if I choose to be. So I offer you this choice. Leave this dimension and never return. Otherwise you will die."

"I don't think so," Kenny responded adamantly.

"Well, then. Give my regards to Saruman and his Uruk-Hai. They should be there within the hour."

Kenny hung up the phone as it seemed to be the only way to silence the laughter that then came from it.

* * *

"So, what resources do we have left?" Becker asked.

Kenny looked around the table. Gathered there was himself, Becker, Number Six, Nicole, Luke, and Swett. "Well, there is the six of us, and whatever is in the Laboratory."

"If only we had kept more people here," Luke commented.

"My overconfidence again." Kenny cursed himself. "Putting all of my eggs in one battlestar."

"Anything with an offensive capability?" Number Six asked, moving the conversation forward.

"Nothing obvious. I have plenty of items that have power sources that could be set to overload, but that should be a last resort."

"What if we use your perfection thingy? Turn everyone in the world into the perfect version of themselves?" Becker asked.

"I think not," Kenny said. "When I accidentally did the opposite, and turned the world into the ultimate imperfect version, remember what happened to Kirstin?"

Nicole tried to suppress a flinch at her sister's name.

"She didn't become evil," Kenny continued, "like most of the rest of the world. But she did become a neurotic mess of cleanliness. While Kirstin is good to her core, it still found negative aspects to enhance. And I suspect that many of Snarfinkle's minions, and I fear Snarfinkle himself, are evil to the core."

"So perfecting the world will just bring out the best in their worst?" Swett asked.

Kenny nodded. "Indeed." He sighed. "I just need more time to think..."

The six of them became aware of a noise that had been gradually growing for some time – a rhythmic thumping noise that might be caused by the marching of a force ten thousand strong. "Something tells me this is a bad thing," Swett commented.

Kenny looked at each of the five people with him. "You need to get out of here," he announced.

"What are you talking about?" Becker asked.

"The five of you can take the Edsel and escape."

"And what about you?" Nicole asked.

"I have to stay here," Kenny said. "I have to work as long as I can hold out to stop Snarfinkle."

"And if you can't?"

"I don't know how things can get any worse, but I can't take the chance that Snarfinkle might find anything of use in my Laboratory. I'll have to set the auto-destruct."

"But you'll die," Nicole whispered.

"My penance for not saving the world," Kenny responded.

"No! We're not leaving you!" Becker exclaimed. "You and I are a team! If you won't leave with us, then I am staying with you!"

"Number Six?" Kenny asked.

The former secret agent took Kenny's meaning. He reached into his sport jacket and withdrew a small firearm. "I'm sorry gentlemen and lady, but I must insist that you get into the car as instructed."

"I can't believe you'd shoot us," Nicole said.

Number Six shot Nicole, Swett, and Luke. They crumpled to the floor in turn. Number Six turned the gun on Becker.

"Don't worry, old chap. Tranquilizer gun," Number Six assured him. "Now, I can shoot you, too, but you do have the most experience driving that interdimensional car and I could also use help getting your unconscious friends into the vehicle. Are we going to be a good boy, then?"

Becker nodded.

"There's a good lad."

Within ten minutes, the Edsel was gone and Kenny was alone.

Alone as he was before Becker had become his assistant.

Alone as he was before he met Matt and the Garden Snakes and found their acceptance and friendship.

Alone as he was when he came into this world.

Alone was how he was going to die.

As he listened to the sound of the Uruk-Hai burrowing into the ground to unearth his Laboratory, Kenny followed the fate of the rest of the world with morbid interest on his computer monitor. There should have been some way for him to stop this. He should have been able to stop this. But he didn't, and as penance he would bear witness to it for as long as possible before he had no choice but to blow his Laboratory sky high, killing himself but hopefully taking the Uruk-Hai with him.

Hell, he'd already decided to use the more drastic of his auto-destructs. The safer method involved a controlled shut-down of the Laboratory's power stations while strategically placed explosive bolts collapsed the cave system the Laboratory was constructed in crushing and burying everything inside. The more drastic method... Well, that was as simple as overloading the power source.

Of course, with what he was using for a power source... Three cold fusion reactors and the backup U-232 nuclear reactor overloading would probably take most of eastern North America out when they blew. With that thought, Kenny reflected that hope didn't enter into it when it came to taking out the Uruk-Hai. But he would hope that while Snarfinkle would have removed himself from Western Massachusetts to escape Schofield's orbital bombardment, he still might be in the auto-destruct's blast radius. At the very least, it would mean a heck of a lot less real estate for Snarfinkle to rule over.

Kenny watched on his screen as countless cities across the globe fell, to the Cylons, to the Bugrum, to the Ekosians. Even a few other dark forces that Kenny did not immediately recognize. Snarfinkle had certainly been busy in his recruitment.

The digging drew closer. It wouldn't be much longer. Kenny began to deactivate the reactor safeties. And with a sudden flash of light, the Edsel reappeared.

Kenny looked at it, angry. He had wanted them all to live. The door opened, and Becker, the sole occupant, stepped out.

"Why?" Kenny asked.

"We are a team," Becker responded. "Don't worry, though, I got everyone else to safety. Nicole, Swett, and Becker I left at Nanami's in El-Hazard. Number Six I dropped off in his London where he seemed hopeful he might finally be able to expose The Village. But after that, I had to come back for you. I couldn't let you face this alone."

Kenny shook his head, but smiled despite everything. "You had to pick now to not do exactly what I ask of you?"

"Well, there was also that time with the door," Becker joked.

Kenny was confused. "Door? What door?"

"Oh, I could have sworn I'd mentioned it to you. It was the first time you sent me through time. You told me to make sure I closed the door to the lab? I was in such a hurry to get back that I may not have closed it all the way. But no harm, eh? Just a door."

"This shouldn't be happening," Kenny said.

"I know, tell me about it. About to be done in by Tolkien."

"No," Kenny said, suddenly grabbing Becker by the arms and shaking him excitedly. "Don't you get it? None of this should be happening! We're living in a paradox! You left the door to the Laboratory open! The very same door that you first entered through! The one that should not have been open! You let your own past self into here! And that paradox set this whole chain of events into motion!"

"Wait a moment," Becker said, "are you saying this is all my fault?"

"Yes. No! Um, it isn't important. What is important is that this gives us a chance to fix this!"

"How?"

"You have to go back and close that door."

"Didn't you once warn me that going back in time to stop an event in which we were directly involved would cause a paradox that would destroy the Universe?"

"Very good, Mr. Becker." Kenny smiled. "You were paying attention. Now think: What is different about our current situation?"

Becker did think about it for a moment. The two stood in what would have been silence except for the digging sound getting horribly closer.

"Oh, I know. We're not going to *cause* a paradox because we are in fact *repairing* a paradox!"

Kenny couldn't have been prouder. "I see the time we have spent together has not been wasted on you. I am glad."

"I must be doing something right to make a genius proud of me."

"Go get the Edsel prepped. I just need to get one thing ready."

"Sure thing."

A few minutes later, Kenny ejected a holographic memory disc (and people think these new DVD's are so hot?) from his computer, slipped it into a case, attached a small electronic device onto the case, and started for the Edsel.

Becker watched him approach. The noise from the Uruk-Hai was almost right on top of them now. No... It was too late!

A huge hole appeared in the ceiling high above them as the rock layer between the tunneling Uruk-Hai and the Laboratory's ceiling became too thin. A few of the Uruks were caught in the collapse and fell to their deaths. Others quickly lowered ropes down and dropped on the ropes into the Laboratory.

Kenny ran towards the Edsel. One of the Uruks raised a nasty looking bow, arrow already cocked in it.

There was a nasty thudding sound just as Kenny reached Becker. Kenny stopped and looked down at his chest. "Huh," he said as he noticed the arrowhead sticking out through it. He collapsed to his knees.

“Kenny!”

Kenny weakly held the disk up to Becker. “Leave this... for... my past... self...”

As Becker took hold of the disc, Kenny’s remaining strength left him and he fell to the floor of the Laboratory, dead.

No!” Becker yelled. “No, no, no!” For an instant, his instinct was to charge the Uruk-Hai. But reason, and second arrow that just narrowly missed his head, told him that that would be suicide. He quickly got into the Edsel, set the coordinates, and left.

11 January 1998. To think that only about 10 or 11 weeks had passed since then, but it seemed a lifetime ago to Becker since the first day he had entered Kenny’s Laboratory. Most of it had been worth it. But not what had recently happened. So much death. Everyone Becker knew was dead.

It could not be allowed to happen.

Becker had parked the Edsel a few streets over from Kenny’s house and walked the rest of the way. It seemed almost surreal to see all of the houses around him still standing, the people in this world blissfully unaware of the fate that might be in store for them. The fate he had to stop.

He reached Kenny’s house. A couple of bicycles were parked outside. He walked around to the corner of the house and ducked around the side to watch and wait.

Roughly half an hour later, Bill Hughes, Mike Quadrozzi, Kirstin Porter, and Matthew Atanian exited the house. About the same time, Mrs. Quadrozzi pulled up in her car and offered Hughes a ride home, too. Then Matt and Kirstin got on their bikes and started for their respective domiciles.

Then Becker saw the damndest thing. He saw himself exit the house. This would have been only a bit odd, as he had seen his own past self once before. What made this especially odd was that the past self he was watching was

the one that had seen a past self, and in fact he could see the past-er self of himself as well, about to be narrowly missed by Mrs. Quadrozzi's car. This older, wiser Becker reflected that maybe it hadn't have been the best idea to be walking in the middle of the street with headphones on.

Yet time travel made his head hurt worse than headphones ever could.

"Mr. Becker, where are you?" It was hard for Becker not to respond, but of course his Kenny was gone. This was the other Becker's Kenny. The other Becker looked at the walkie-talkie he was holding. "You should probably be starting back soon."

"I'm standing just outside the house," past Becker responded. "I just had to look outside and see if anything was different."

Becker slapped himself in the forehead. *What the hell had I been thinking back then?* he asked himself. *It was only a few hours for crying out loud. Not like I'd see a pterodactyl or something.*

"I really think you should get back here. If I'm right, your past self should be arriving at my house any minute."

Becker saw himself glance down the road in either direction and notice the third Becker making his way randomly in the direction of Kenny's house. "I think I'll come back now," past Becker said as he went back inside.

Becker new he had to act fast. There was a very narrow window between past Becker's going into the house and past-er Becker's doing so. He snuck into the house just before past-er Becker turned away from the distraction of Mrs. Quadrozzi's car just in time to see the door to the Laboratory almost close.

Becker walked up to the door and closed it.

As the auto locks began engaging, he walked into the kitchen and placed the holographic memory disc down on the counter. The last of the locks engaged, Becker sighed, and he vanished into the nothingness of a timeline that should never have been.

* * *

Jon Becker was walking down the road minding his own business, listening to a new CD he'd gotten for Christmas. It was a PlayStation game he'd gotten from Matt Swett. What he was listening to would sound to most people like that annoying loud screech that you get when you put any kind of computer CD into an audio CD player... but to Becker it sounded like sweet, sweet music.

Cars careened wildly by honking their horns madly as they swerved like mad to avoid hitting the young man. Becker, who was still walking down the middle of the road, noticed none of this. His eyes were closed so that he could concentrate on his music without visual distraction.

He felt a whoosh of a fast moving object going closely by him and he opened his eyes to see what it was. His next words were not at all polite as he noticed a car heading right for him.

He leapt out of the way, most annoyed when his sudden movement caused his player to skip, and came to a halt near a rather ordinary looking house. A flash of movement in the house's doorway caught his attention, but when he looked he saw nothing there.

He then noticed two bicycles down the road riding away, and was somewhat surprised to recognize the riders as Kirstin Porter and Matt Atanian. He was about to call out to them, but they turned a corner and disappeared.

He looked back at the house.

It was perfectly average looking in every respect, except that the yard seemed a little too neat... but still something about it intrigued him.

Kenny smiled as he recalled the day's events thus far. It had been a rather interesting one. Most productive.

The device had worked as well as could be expected, and with some minor adjustments the remote control would be able to function flawlessly. No more random jumps.

The only thing he still needed to work on was a better power source. After all, they had almost been killed when they were stuck on the Red Dwarf. What could he possibly do to prevent that?

He had an idea. He took out the remote and pressed a button. A few minutes later, the Macross Valkyrie had reformed before him. As soon as it had solidified, he was inside it, examining its power source.

"This is perfect!" he exclaimed. If he'd been a lesser person, he'd be drooling with delight. "A few modifications to this design and I can integrate it into the remote's existing configuration with little difficulty! Now, where did I put that hydrosponder?" He looked around a bit. "Oh, there it is."

Becker looked around the house a tiny bit, especially interested in a large door covered in locks. Alas, as might be expected, it was locked and would not budge. After a moment, it occurred to him that maybe it wasn't the best idea to be in a strange house without permission, and so he left.

Maybe he'd pick up some new batteries on the way home.

That night Kenny came up from the Laboratory and went to the kitchen to prepare some dinner for himself. The sight that greeted him when he entered the kitchen perplexed him. "What is this doing here?" he asked, picking up the disc. A small electronic device attached to the disc's case caught his eye. "And why is there a temporal stabilizer on here, unless..."

Hunger momentarily forgotten, he took the disc to a remote computer terminal set up in his bedroom. After he slipped the disc into the disc drive, a video started playing on the screen. He was not surprised to see his own face.

"Hello, Kenneth. This is you, speaking to you from the future. Before you worry about my changing the timeline,

rest assured that it was a future that was never supposed to happen. Things have been set to right, and the proper timeline restored Hence..."

"Hence the stabilizer," Kenny said in unison with his video self.

The video continued. "Contained on this disc are your journals for the time period that has been negated. Just as those who forget history are doomed to repeat it, I fear that even with history back on the proper course, there are things you should be cautious of if this fate is to be avoided entirely. Trust me, it is a fate worth risking light contamination to the time stream for.

"My strongest warning to you would be to watch out for one named Professor Snarfinkle, alias Len Nakrifs. Do not under any circumstances let this person have any access to the Laboratory or any of our research materials.

"On the other hand, there is one who I would recommend you allow access. Read the journals. I trust your intellect. You will know the proper thing to do."

Three days later, after the Boy Scout meeting had drawn to a close and Becker had had his fill of post-meeting socializing, he headed towards the car of his waiting parent. Just as he was about to get in, someone cleared their throat behind him.

Becker turned. Kenny was standing there.

"Hello, Mr. Becker," Kenny said.

Becker tugged off one side of his headphones. "Kenny, what's up?"

"I was wondering... um, would you like to come over this weekend?"

"Sure!" Becker responded.

"Great." Kenny held out a piece of paper, upon which was written, in very neat script, an address.

"Why does this address seem familiar?" Becker wondered aloud.

Kenny turned and headed towards his own ride, which had just arrived. "You'll figure it out," he said.

Becker got into his parent's car and closed the door. "Weird kid, but good," he said as he slipped the headphones back fully on. He had nothing better to do this weekend, though, so he'd go. You never know, it could be fun.

THE HUMAN ADVENTURE IS JUST BEGINNING...

Perspectives

Byte III

**The Summer of Promises:
Make, Kept, and Broken**
by Jason Bertovich

The Story So Far...
(As approved by the Goddesses of
Copyright Infringement, Needless Exposition,
and Pointless Space Filler.)

In the beginning the Universe was created...
But enough about that.

Skip ahead a few trillion years...

Somewhere in the literal backwoods of space,
on a small blue-green planet, the second most intelligent
species on the planet invented something called malls.

These 'Malls' were apparently some sort of
temple or shrine, because millions of the
second most intelligent species would make
all sorts of offers or tributes at these places.

There were those who were assigned by society
to maintain the upkeep of these malls and to collect
the tributes. They were known as 'Mall Employees.'

Now, onto a completely unrelated topic...

On the completely different blue-green planet called 'Earth,'
there were three people whom also were called 'Mall
Employees,' for reasons not readily available.

Then in a period of one week, their lives went
to complete and utter Hell...and back.

That is not uncommon.
It happens all the time.

However, this is exposition. So you probably
want a refresher before you read any new
details on these individuals, right?

To review, John Hoelscher finally overcame and reconciled with his conflicting personalities. He has currently taken a deep affection for a goddess named Linoleum, whom had been cast down from her divine position.

As for Lina, she is on her own mission to find three rogue goddesses and a missing demon, because it was her failure to do so which had caused her previously mentioned casting out.

Jason Bertovich and Nicole Porter have continued to deepen their relationship. This is not unusual because:

- A.) Jason really likes Nicole, and
- B.) Jason's doesn't remember the effects that the 'other author' had on his current status in the universe. So he decided to focus on more important things.

It was because of this intervention by this 'other author' that has had many interesting consequences.

Especially on our final participants Fenira, Sonyarina, Jordiko and Ty, whom we will rejoin very shortly.

And thus you are brought up to speed.
Sort of...

Oh the hell with it...
READ THE ORIGINAL 8 CHAPTERS WILL YOU!

Thus, our story continues...
(Time permitting of course.)

IX: The Guys, a Girl, and a Coffee House (Or, Three Goddesses, a Demon, and Their Secret)

Those who had never graced the streets of a small city in Southwestern Pennsylvania called Uniontown would often be forced to comment on one thing. That Uniontown was remarkably unremarkable.

It was so unremarkable, in fact, that it would take something short of the entire city suddenly being swallowed by the ground below for anyone to even notice it, and it would only be noticed because it wasn't there anymore. Unremarkable as it was, things that take up space tend to be missed when they no longer take up space.

It was the unremarkable nature of Uniontown, Pennsylvania that made it good for one thing. It was a good place for rather remarkable people to hide from rather remarkable situations. There certainly were no more remarkable people than the four individuals we find ourselves focusing on in this story.

Where were these four most remarkable people? Well, logic would dictate that since the topic of discussion was a small town called Uniontown, Pennsylvania, then Uniontown, Pennsylvania would be where we would find these most remarkable people. "Ah, but where in Uniontown, Pennsylvania?" you might ask. Well, if you readers had a modicum of patience, then you might see that was what I was leading up to.

Situated across the street from the courthouse, located in the old and rapidly decaying downtown area, one would see, well, not a lot really. Most of buildings were either old or abandoned or both. However, across the street from the courthouse, one might make out a small wooden sign hanging on a short iron swing arm. On

that sign was, painted in beautiful calligraphy, the words "The Three Sisters' Coffee Bar."

Below the sign was not a door, but rather an old set of stone steps that led into the building's basement. If one were to descend the steps, they would find themselves facing a very old door at the bottom with a badly tarnished brass handle and glass that was so old and filthy that it would take about an hour's scrubbing with a Brillo pad to uncover the words "wash me" which had been written circa 1965.

However, once a person would make their way past the door, they would be pleasantly surprised. Past the door was not a musty and abandoned basement, but rather a cozy and rather attractive-looking coffee bar. The walls were not musty cement, but attractive wood paneling and wallpaper. Wrought iron tables with marble tops were littered throughout the room along with a few small couches, laden with decorative throw pillows. The occasional chessboard or deck of playing cards could be seen on these tables and bookshelves, filled with thick paperbacks and leather-bound tomes, could be seen along the wall. Toward the back of the large basement was a small wooden stage with a couple mic-stands set up arbitrarily. However, the true centerpiece of this place was the bar itself, which was made of solid oak and upon which sat brass cappuccino machines and jars of biscotti.

The ones responsible for transforming what was once a musty basement into this rare slice of New York located in the heart of the rural wasteland, were the before mentioned 'Three Sisters.' Though no one was quite sure why these women called themselves that, since it did not appear, at first glance, that they were related.

These three sisters were not only responsible for decorating this place, but they were also responsible for operating it, which was what they were currently doing in earnest amongst the usual crowd of teenagers and 'twenty-somethings' who happened to frequent this particular coffee bar.

The first sister could be seen carrying a large tray of empty cups, glasses, and mugs back toward the kitchen area. She unceremoniously dumped the glasses in large sink of foamy water. Brushing her straight black hair out of her green eyes, rolling up the sleeves of her white turtleneck and pulling out the pair of rubber gloves she kept in the back pocket of her tight blue jeans, she went about washing the cups she had previously dumped in. Her name was Jordan Kovington, though most of the patrons knew her simply as Jordi.

The second sister was busy herself, as she brought fresh drinks to several tables. She popped her pink bubblegum, which matched her pink sunglasses, which in turn complimented her strawberry blonde hair that was tied in twin ponytails. The pink sunglasses were the most conservative article of clothing she wore as it appeared to the casual observer that her dresser had attacked her. On one leg was a rainbow stocking, while the other was clad in a red stocking with a black spider web design. These led up to the denim miniskirt she was wearing that did compliment the button spangled denim vest she wore. However, neither complimented the white peasant blouse she was also wearing. If there was anything to be said about Sonya Rinaldi, it was that she was *definitely* her own person.

Which brings us to our third sister, who appeared to be a middle ground of sorts between the conservative Jordi and the eccentric Sonya. An Asian goddess whose black hair was streaked with crimson highlights and who opted for white stockings and black leather miniskirts, she was called Lynn Fenton, and she was currently dropping off a fresh batch of orders off at the bar.

Taking those orders was a rather lanky and peculiar man. He was dressed from head to toe in black. Black slacks combined with a black turtleneck, complimented by black satin gloves and small black spectacles. He expressionlessly took the slips of paper from Lynn and went about filling the orders.

This went on for much of the evening, as was normal. This had happened every evening prior since the coffee bar opened. Drinks would be ordered, orders would be fulfilled, drinks would be drunk, and finally, glasses would be collected so they could be washed so the cycle the would continue. And while this was happening, loud music would play, from either the stage or the stereo, games would be played and even the occasional pot would be smoked. However, whenever the last happened, the parties doing the said smoking would usually be asked to leave by one of the before mentioned three sisters. Finally, the last customer would leave and the bar would be empty, save the three sisters and their silent bartender.

And thus, the cleanup would begin, all in order to do it all over again the next day. As Lynn, who was formerly known as Fenny Lin, who was formally known as Fenira, placed the chairs upside-down on the tables after they had been cleaned off, she took the opportunity, as she did almost every night at this time, to reflect on how her and her two sisters came to be here.

It had been some eight months prior that her two sisters had visited her for the second time in a week, a record mind you, at her small apartment in Holyoke, Massachusetts...

Some Eight Months Prior...

Thursday...

Fenny Lin sat in her apartment reading a book. It was one of those rare days off. She looked over her meager belongings scattered over her place. As a Goddess, she could wish for anything she could ever want and live anywhere she ever wanted. However, Fenny felt more content now than she had felt in centuries.

What she had here in this single space apartment, as meager and as little as it was, it was hers. She bought it with her money that she earned from her department store job. She purchased these things and crammed them in her little living space.

She was covered by an odd sense. She actually, almost, maybe, felt Mortal. It was odd. Fenny wasn't sure, but she thought she liked it. She could see how mortals got some sort of satisfaction out of this meager existence.

Today, for example, was her day off. If she was still hanging at the central office, she would lounge around, like she did every day, and this day would add to naught. But this day was to be savored and enjoyed. She looked back at her book, which was poetry by Keats and Blake. Fenny smiled and returned to reading her book. "And they seemed like such normal lads when I met them oh so long ago... shame about that poor Keats boy..." Fenny mused to herself and delved herself back into the literature.

A moment later, the tranquility was broken by a phone ringing. Fenny sighed and rolled her eyes. She wiggled her fingers, at which point the phone then floated from its place on her coffee table and into her hand. She may have felt mortal, but there were still advantages to being a goddess...

"Hello, The Bouncy One speaking," Fenny said into the receiver.

"Um...er....Hi, Fenny," the voice replied.

"Jason honey! How ya been? The big date's tomorrow night, right? Got anything special planned?"

"Well....actually....er...no. I haven't given it much thought," Jason answered.

"Well, I heard good things about this new Sushi Bar in Northampton. Supposedly very authentic and they even have the karaoke and everything," Fenny chattered as she looked back down at her book.

"Sushi bar? Actually, that might be perfect! She's part Japanese!" Jason exclaimed excitedly.

"Oh really?" Fenny asked. Of course, this was not really a coincidence. She knew all along about Jason's new love, but she played dumb.

"This could be cool. Though...um...I've never had sushi before..." Jason responded.

"It's pretty good. Personally, I'm more of a ramen person myself, though. It sounds like you two will have a good time. Glad I could be of some help Romeo."

"Fenny wait! Don't hang up yet. There was a reason why I called!" Jason interrupted, thinking that Fenny was about to hang up.

"Oh? This wasn't about my famous romance advice?" Fenny asked.

"Fenny," Jason began, much more serious, "have you heard from John these last few days?" Jason asked this with a concerned tone.

"Um...no. I haven't, actually," Fenny answered.

"You haven't seen him even at work?" Jason asked.

"No...I can't recall seeing him there, but then again, we work in different departments."

"Damn," Jason moaned silently.

"What's wrong?" Fenny asked.

"Well, he said that he wanted to talk to me a couple of days ago, but now I can't find him. I stopped by his apartment, and it looks like no one's been home for a few days. The newspapers have accumulated. I'm very worried and no one seems to know where he is," Jason explained.

"That is weird. Tell you what: I'll keep an ear to the ground. If he comes my way, I'll let him know to let you know that he's fine."

"I guess that's all I can do right now. I'd hate to think that he was in trouble of any kind," Jason agreed.

"Keep in touch and let me know if anything comes up."

"Will do. Wish me luck for tomorrow," Jason requested.

"Knock her socks off. Later," Fenny obliged and then pushed the off button. Fenny put the phone down and looked down at her book. She placed a bookmark in her place, something about a Grecian Urn, and closed it. She placed the book at the foot of the chair she was relaxing in.

Fenny placed her hands to her temples and concentrated. Putting her hands to her temples was purely non-effective, but it made her feel better, as it was

traditional. She began searching for John through his emotions. She was having trouble pinning him down.

Finally, something faint came to her. Fenny was immediately flooded by a tidal wave of emotion all at once: Pain, fear, jealousy, anger, but something even darker loomed at the center of this tornado... the desire for destruction. Fenny gasped as she broke herself away from the flood. John was far away, wherever he was. He was facing this alone and no one could help him. Help him from himself.

"Oh, John..." Fenny mentally took a step back, "I never knew what you really had inside. Why didn't I see it before? Was this dark emotion so buried that it hid itself even from me?" Fenny asked aloud. A moment later her question and train of thought were answered and interrupted by a knock on her apartment door.

Getting up from her chair, she treaded lightly toward the door. She then peeked through the peephole. "What the...?" Fenny said, as she moved her head back from the peephole and arched her eyebrows in surprise.

Fenny opened the door "Joridko? Sonyrina? What are you guys doing here?" Fenny said, letting her two divine sisters enter her apartment. Suddenly, something didn't seem kosher. She pondered that uneasy feeling and gave it a voice. "Why are you guys dressed like that? And why didn't you just materialize inside my apartment?" Fenny said, noticing that Jordiko and Sonyarina were wearing blue jeans and sweatshirts as opposed to their normal goddess robes.

"Pack a bag, we don't have a lot of time." Jordiko instructed to Fenny.

"What are you talking about? I don't see why..." Fenny started.

"You've been declared 'rogue!' So don't argue and pack your bag!" Sonyarina shouted angrily, which took Fenny off guard, as Sonyarina was always so quiet and sweet.

"Rogue?! What... why?!" was all Fenny could manage to come up with.

Jordiko grabbed Fenny's arm and dragged her to Fenny's bedroom. "Less talk, more packing. Our car is waiting downstairs."

Fenny reluctantly went to her closet and pulled out a dark brown suitcase. She started rummaging through her drawers. As she did that, she said, "Will you at least tell me what's going on?"

Jordiko pulled out a folded piece of white paper and flipped it toward Fenny. Fenny unfolded it and read it out loud:

Sonyarina and Jordiko:

You don't know who I am but I know who you are. This concerns your sister Fenira. She is in grave danger and therefore you two are also in grave danger. You must seek her after she arrives home on THURSDAY AFTERNOON. That is very important and don't forget that. Then all three of you must go into hiding and take on new identities. This is not a joke. The agency KNOWS about Fenira's activities and are prepared to punish you as well. Hopefully, you will be safe and the Agency will not find you if I can help it. I will try to help you in whatever way I can. After you go into hiding, you must not contact anyone in the Agency or use your powers. If you do so then you are putting yourself in GRAVE danger. Maybe one day we will meet again. Maybe one day I can join you. Tell Fenny, that this is all for her.

*Signed,
A Friend*

Fenny refolded the note. "I don't understand."

"We got that note on Monday morning. Someone dropped it in our lap," Sonyarina explained.

"Who?" Fenny asked.

"We didn't get a good chance to look at him, but I assume he's this friend that is referred to by this note," Jordiko reasoned.

Fenny laughed out loud. "Oh come on! This has got to be a big joke!"

"It's not," Jordiko stated blankly.

"Where's your proof? All I see is a stupid note written by some mysterious guy," Fenny said with a sarcastic laugh.

"It's *NOT* a joke, Fenira!" Jordiko shouted in an angry tone.

"Oh yeah? How do you know?" Fenny asked sarcastically.

"Because I hacked into the Divine Agency's Mainframe," Jordiko stated.

"YOU *WHAT?*!" Fenny shouted.

"Fenny, It's all true! They declared you rogue! They've been gathering evidence for weeks now. What's worse, they declared us as rogue too for aiding you!" Sonyarina shouted.

"Do you have any idea what the penalty is for goddesses who go rogue?! Do you?! They cast you out, banish you to another plane of existence, or *WORSE!* What's worse, according to the info I got from my hacking, they are prepared to move in and apprehend you. I think our *friend* is trying to buy us enough time to escape," Jordiko added.

Fenny felt the energy drain from her body. She slowly sat down on her bed and buried her face into her hands. "Oh... shit..."

Jordiko started grabbing clothes from Fenny's closet and took them off their hangers. "Fenny we don't have time for this. You can do this later. Right now, we need to pack you up," Jordiko calmly stated.

Fenny looked up and frowned. "How do we know that this isn't a trap?"

"We don't. What we do know is, if we had sat around the agency and did nothing, we were guaranteed to be apprehended and reprimanded. At least, this way there is still a chance that we may get through this. So let's get packed up and move. Time is not an abundant commodity," Jordiko reasoned.

Sagging her shoulders in surrender, Fenny packed up what she could in a single suitcase. As she walked outside her apartment building, she saw her sisters' car, which was a sleek red sports car. Fenny dumped her bag in the car's trunk and then walked toward her own car. "You girls go in that car, I want you to follow me in my car," Fenny shouted over to her two sisters.

"Why?" Jordiko asked.

"Because, first, I'm going to withdraw all my money from the bank. Second, since we will not be able to use our powers anymore, then we will need money. That means, somewhere along this trip, we are selling that fancy car of yours," Fenny explained.

Sonyarina frowned. She had really liked that red sports car. That's why she created it with her last use of her power before she was declared missing. However, she could not argue with Fenny's logic and nodded along with Jordiko. Fenny started her car and pulled out from the alleyway that she normally parked. Jordiko and Sonyarina followed shortly behind and thus they were on their way to a new life...

Once on the road, the trio faced a conundrum. Where exactly should they go? It was topic that the three debated lively over coffee and pie at a small truck stop in up-state New York.

"So, where exactly should we go?" Fenny asked as she sipped her coffee.

"Hmmm?" Sonyarina asked with a mouthful of cherry pie.

"I mean, you guys were so anxious to get me packed up on the road. But, where exactly are we going? You had three days to plan this out," Fenny questioned. Her questions were met with blank stares, which made Fenny feel like a new weight had been dumped on her shoulders. "You guys *DID* plan this out, didn't you?"

Fenny swore she could see the dark clouds of depression hanging over her two sisters' heads. Fenny

slumped forward until her forehead connected with the table. "Great. Just great," was all she managed to mumble out.

Jordiko took her fork out of her mouth and tapped it against her plate. "Well, we bought ourselves a little time. If our friend is, in fact, delaying the Agency, then we can think about this. Where could we go?"

"We could leave the country," Sonyarina chimed in.

Jordiko shook her head. "They'd be expecting that. What happens when Gods go rogue? Their normal instinct is to flee and then keep fleeing. Why is that?"

"Because they can't resist using their powers so they get traced and thus they are forced to keep moving," Fenny answered from her slumped position, still not raising her head to speak.

"Exactly. But we know that we cannot use our powers, so we can settle down into some quiet and boring lives and pretty much lay low until the most severe heat is off," Jordiko reasoned.

"That's all fine and dandy, but that still doesn't answer where we should go," Sonyarina countered.

"True. Let's look at this rationally, shall we? The Agency is no doubt expecting us to flee as far away from our previous location as possible and to hide out somewhere in the ass-end of the universe," Jordiko stated.

As Jordiko spoke, Fenny couldn't help but think back to a conversation she once had with Jason when the pair had first met. It had been Christmastime, and Fenny had happened to have bumped into her new co-worker, John, who in turn had bumped into another mall employee named Jason. Fenny and John convinced the exhausted Jason to join them at their own Christmas party at Filene's. As the trio sat around a small table in a corner of the employees' break room, the three began to discuss more about themselves...

Fenny looked across the table to Jason. "So, you guys both moved here, eh? Where you from Jason?"

"I come from a small town called Smithfield, Pennsylvania, which is located in Fayette County, which

has the wonderful distinction of being the poorest county, per capita, in the entire state," Jason answered.

"Poor, eh? Rural, I take it," Fenny asked.

"Yeah. It's like having the ass-end of the Universe located conveniently in your own back yard. I tell you what, if you ever wanted to simply disappear forever, that be the place to do it. No one would think to look there because no rational person would ever want to voluntarily live there."

Fenny snapped from her reverie and lifted her head. "I think I have an idea..."

And what an idea it was. It almost seemed too perfect. It was like hiding right under the Agency's nose, because really, why would anyone want to relocate to the desolate rural wasteland that was Southwestern Pennsylvania.

The coffee house idea came shortly afterward because of Fenny's natural obsession with coffee. As the saying goes, sell what you know. Fenny knew coffee. Using the money they gained from selling the sport's car as collateral, the trio managed to get a small business loan and after picking out the not-so-obvious location, they went about turning the abandoned building into their business, renting the basement for their business and taking the floor above to turn into a living space for the three of them.

It had been a lot of work, but the 'Three Sister's Coffee Bar opened only a couple months later in early December. It was then that Fenny's past briefly visited her.

Fenny remember it well. It had been the night that their bar opened. Fenny was working the bar itself and she had struck up a conversation with on of the customers.

"No kidding, you're from Holyoke? Well, it truly is a small world!" the customer had said with a laugh.

"Are you originally from there too?" Fenny asked, filling his mug.

"Originally? No, I still live there. I'm just down here on business," the customer explained.

"No kidding?" Fenny asked. She then thought about something for a moment and returned her attention to the customer. "Can I ask you a selfish favor?"

"Well, maybe. I do have a weakness for pretty ladies who serve me coffee," the customer said with a sly grin.

Fenny blushed. She then pulled out a small white card and began writing. After a few minutes, she handed the card to the man. On the front of the card was an address and on the back appeared to be a short message. "I was wondering if maybe you could please drop that in the mailbox of that address."

The man scratched his head. "I don't understand. Why can't you just mail this? It's kinda a long way to go just to avoid spending 32 cents."

"It's a long story. This could be my only chance to send this. Please," Fenny pleaded.

The man shrugged his shoulders. "What do I get out of this?"

Fenny pulled out his check. It had quite a number of scribbles from the vast number of drinks he had ordered. She then tore the check in half. "I think that is worth quite more than 32 cents."

The stranger grinned, but couldn't hide his disappointment because he had been hoping for something else. "Indeed. I guess it would be no trouble for me."

"Oh, and if you could, please don't read the note. It's very personal," Fenny added.

"My word is my bond," the stranger said and pocketed the card. He then finished his coffee and got up from his stool. Before he turned away, however, he took her hand and kissed it. "I hope I come through here again." Having said that, he left.

* * *

And thus, Fenny found herself back in the present, cleaning up after another night's business. After she had set the last chair up on the tables, she walked over to the last table left, where Sonya and Jordi sat with a large pile of money and papers. Sitting down, she went about helping her sisters go about adding up the receipts and making sure the money matched.

Sitting down, she began to sort through the pile of bills, while Sonya began to unroll the register tape. Fenny sipped her cappuccino while she counted. Soynarina, her back to the bar, leaned forward and 'psst' her two sisters. Fenny and Jordi leaned closer.

"What's up Sonya?" Fenny asked.

"Hey guys. I've been meaning to ask you guys, but am I the only one who has this weird feeling about Tyler?" Sonya whispered.

Jordi nodded her head. "Yeah, I've been meaning to mention that myself. Fenny, I know that you hired him and all, but he's starting to creep me out."

Fenny looked over her shoulder toward the bar. Tyler continued to wipe it with a damp rag. "What's wrong with him?"

Sonya shrugged. "I don't know exactly what it is, but he got me feeling all weird inside. Like I know him from someplace."

"Same here," Jordi added.

"Well, that's hardly a good reason," Fenny chided.

"It's not just the weird feeling. The guy barely talks," Jordi said.

"And he never takes off those gloves and sunglasses. It's one in the morning and he's wearing black sunglasses. It's just creepy," Sonyarina whispered.

"This coming from our resident fashion expert," Fenny mused. "He seemed nice enough in the job interview. So what if he doesn't talk much. He's a good bartender. Maybe he just needs to work here a little longer," Fenny reasoned. She was met with stares from her two sisters. She raised her hands slightly in surrender. "Okay guys, I'll

tell you what. Since I hired him, I'll get him to take off his glasses. Will that help any?"

The others nodded slightly. Fenny got up from her seat and walked toward the bar. She then rapped on the bar lightly to get Tyler's attention. He looked up from his wiping and looked at her. Fenny spoke first. "Tyler, I've been talking to the other girls. You've been a great bartender and have definitely helped ease the workload on us three."

"Thank you, Ms. Fenton," Ty said quietly.

"But we're a little concerned. You seem to be very stiff and not very personable. So, I was wondering if you would mind just being a little less stoic. Maybe smile a little more and talk a little more to the customers," Fenny said.

"Is that all?" Tyler asked.

"Well, my two sisters would just be a little more comfortable if you could occasionally take off your sunglasses," Fenny added.

Tyler seemed to stiffen even more at hearing the request. Finally, after a long pause, he spoke. "I'm sorry, Ms. Fenton, but I can't do that."

Fenny arched an eyebrow in surprise. "And why not, might I ask? This place isn't exactly a tanning bed."

"I'm very sensitive about my eyes. Can we please leave it at that?" Tyler said quietly.

"Tyler, I'm sure you have pretty eyes. No one's going to judge based on your appearance here. Sonya is proof of that," Fenny said jokingly, trying to comfort the obviously nervous Tyler.

"Hey!" Sonya shouted in protest.

"Please, Ms. Fenton..." Tyler whispered, as if pleading.

"Okay Tyler, I'll leave it be. I can see that you are very sensitive and...HEY LOOK AT THAT!!!" Fenny suddenly shouted, pointing toward the back at the stage. As soon as Tyler jerked his head, Fenny grabbed the glasses and pulled them off his face. "Yoink!" she said playfully. "See that's not so bad is..."

Fenny suddenly stopped. The glasses slipped from her hand and fell to the wooden floor. Fenny stared in a stunned stupor. Sonya and Jordi jumped up to see what was wrong with their sister.

"What...what the...?" was all Fenny could manage. Looking back at her, Tyler looked surprised and terrified, all expressed with his yellow cat-like eyes.

"SHIT!!!" Jordi screamed. "It's a search demon!"

Sonya immediately grabbed a chair to use as either a weapon or a shield. She looked both angry and scared. "Who are you?!" Sonya shouted.

Tyler immediately threw his hands up in surrender. "Please calm down. I'm not here to turn you into the agency."

Sonya heard this and seemed to calm down slightly. However, she still didn't put the chair down completely. Jordi, on the other hand, still seemed extremely tense.

"Answer her question. Who are you?" Sonya demanded.

Tyler lowered his arms. "I had hoped to at least wait a few more weeks and have gotten to know you better before this moment had come. I'm the one who tipped you off about the Agency declaring you rogue so many months ago."

Sonya set the chair down. "Sit," she instructed.

Tyler slowly walked out from behind the bar and sat down in the chair. The three women then walked and leaned against the bar, facing him. Jordi crossed her arms. "You have a lot of explaining to do, so you better start at the beginning."

Tyler rubbed his yellow eyes with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. After a long pause, he spoke. "My real name is Ty. I used to be a search demon and like you, I have been declared rogue. The reason I helped you is a long, complicated story and I'm not sure how much of it you'll believe."

"Try us. You'd be surprised at what we'd believe," Fenny urged.

Ty nodded. He collected his thoughts and began to recall what had happened...

Some Eight Months prior...

"Old Mother Hubbard, this is Jack and Jill, repeat, this is Jack and Jill. I've made visual confirmation. It looks like we do have a rogue on our hands. Awaiting further instructions. Over."

A few moments passed and then a noise came into a small earpiece lodged in the Ty's ear. "Roger, this is Old Mother Hubbard. Continue to keep tabs on the rogue. Begin Operation: Little Bo Peep. When the opportunity arises, approach the rogue. Give her the usual ultimatum. Over."

"Cease and desist or termination from the agency?" Ty asked while he continued to keep Jason and Fenny in his binoculars.

"No. Cease and desist or termination from existence. The agency is now cracking down on this continued abuse of our Immortal/Mortal involvement directive. We've already reprimanded her 'sisters.' They told us where she was. Do you understand your orders, Jack and Jill? Over," the voice continued.

Ty nodded to himself. "Understood Old Mother Hubbard. This is Jack and Jill signing off," Ty said into his collar while continuing to keep Jason and Fenny in his binocular sights. He watched the pair get into Fenny's station wagon. Ty smirked. "Oh please Fenira, a station wagon? Where's the 'baby on board bumper sticker'?" he guffawed.

He continued to watch as the pair sped down the busy street toward the mall. Ty looked around and prepared to dematerialize when a cough caught his attention. Looking over to his right, sitting next to him on the same branch, was another man, also dressed in a black trench-coat and fedora.

The new man smiled at Ty. "I wouldn't leave just yet, Mr. Ty," the new man said.

"Who are you?" Ty asked. "It wasn't necessary for the Agency to send me backup."

"I don't work for the Agency," the man said matter-of-factly.

"Oh?" Ty queried.

"I want to show you something," the man said as he pulled out a small laptop computer. Opening it, he then typed a few keys. "This may feel a little weird," the man warned.

"What do you mean weird?" Ty asked. He got his answer when the man hit the enter key and the pair vanished from the tree branch into thin air.

Ty felt the world melt away in one instant and suddenly gain cohesion again another. Looking around his surroundings. He was in an empty room with a hardwood floor. A single shaft of light focused on two steel folding chairs facing each other. Ty saw the man motion for Ty to sit down in one of the chairs. Ty obliged and the man took the other.

"Care to tell me where we are?" Ty asked.

"We are someplace very far away, yet incredibly close," the man answered.

"What kind of answer is that?" Ty asked, annoyed.

"A very, very complicated one," the man answered. "That, however, is not what is important. Sure, I could give you every single 'fact' as you wish to perceive them, but all that would do is muck up a complicated situation even more. So, I'm going to give you a simple explanation that you can believe to be truth."

"Oh, is that so? What is this explanation then?" Ty asked, now even more confused and annoyed.

"The reason I have brought you here is to show you what the future holds and to help you change it," the man explained.

"Change the future? Why me?" Ty asked.

"Because I know you. I know that after what I show you, you will most definitely change the future and I want it to be changed."

"How will you show me this?" Ty queried.

The man then typed some keys and turned the laptop around so Ty could see the screen. The man then hit a button and a window opened and expanded. On the screen he could see himself and Fenira.

Over the next hour, he watched a story unfold as he and Fenny tried to outrun the other search demons. Fenny tending to his wounds. Fenny and him talking. Finally, he watched as he died in a hail of divine gunfire. He watched as Fenny wept over his bleeding body and then transformed into her ultimate divine form thus killing his ex-brethren. The movie ended and the man closed the laptop.

"Not a very pleasant ending Mr. Ty," The man said.

"That's what will happen?" Ty asked nervously.

"That's what *could* happen, Mr. Ty. It doesn't have to," the man explained.

"But why me?" Ty asked.

"Because I know you better than you know yourself, Mr. Ty. I know that you have had a secret crush on Fenira for more than the last three decades. I know you always felt that you could never tell her how you felt because she was a goddess and you were a demon. I know that you volunteered to follow her because you were hoping to prove that she had not gone rogue. I also know that you could never turn her in if she had. Now, I am giving you a chance to help her again, to help her sisters, and maybe even help yourself.

"What do I have to do?" Ty asked, eager for an answer.

In the next several hours, the man laid out a very complex plan with a very specific timetable. Ty was to warn Fenira's sisters of the Agency's investigation. They would in turn take care of moving themselves out of harm's way. Ty, in the meanwhile, would distract and delay the Agency for a while, thus buying the sisters time to secure new identities. Finally, Ty would merely have to vanish himself and maybe find his way to the three rogue goddesses, if he so chose.

After they had finished, Ty found himself shaking the stranger's hand. "Thanks for your help."

"Don't thank me just yet. If this is to succeed, it will depend all on you. I wish you luck, though. It's time for you to go now. You remember everything you have to do, don't you?" the stranger asked.

"Yeah. Thank you anyway."

"Don't think anything of it. I have something to gain from it myself." The man then started typing again. "Besides, I have a strong feeling you'll succeed with flying colors."

Before Ty could ask what the stranger had meant by that last cryptic exchange, the stranger pushed a key and Ty once again felt the world lose all cohesion. When the world came back into focus, Ty found himself back inside the Divine Agency. He was standing outside the lounge. It was the past Monday, just like the stranger had told him Ty would reappear. In his hand, he held the envelope containing the letter that Ty and the stranger had written. Looking toward the open lounge door, he could see Sonyarina and Jordiko sitting there, just like the stranger had promised.

Taking a deep breath, Ty started in motion something that would forever change his life. He quickly walked in the entrance, walked past the two sisters, dropped the envelope in Jordiko's lap and quickly exited the other door, never looking back.

The days and weeks that followed were an interesting blur. Ty had to admit that he was having fun leading the other search demons on a wild good chase. While Fenny and her sisters were in New York, Ty had Gez and Shi scratching their heads in New Jersey. When the sisters opened their bar, Ty and the others were wandering around Rio de Janeiro. By the time Ty had abandoned the others and disappeared himself, he had the search demons spending Christmas in Tibet.

After almost two months of leading the Agency away from Fenny and her sisters, Ty longed to join those rogue goddesses more than anything else.

Ty finished up his story and looked up at the three goddesses looking down at him. Sonya was the first to speak. "How did you find us?"

Ty smiled, knowing that he was probably going to be asked that. "Dumb luck actually."

"Eh?" Jordi queried.

"Well, after I ditched my 'comrades' in the Himalayas, I returned to Holyoke in hopes of finding some clue to finding you myself. I happened upon a guy, who was not a postman, dropping something into your friend's mailbox. Upon investigation, I found out that you had set up a rather nice little shop here in this rural rest station outside the 10th circle of Hell," Ty explained.

"So, right after you found out where we were, you came here?" Fenny asked.

"Nope. I knew that I needed to buy you guys more time. I figured that by that the time the other search demons realized that I had abandoned them, they would put two and two together and realize that I was aiding you. So I decided to play a real life game of 'Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego' with them. After four months, I finally came back and prayed that you were still here. You were. I applied for the bartender job. You hired me."

"Could they have followed you here?" Jordi asked, both serious and very nervous.

"Very doubtful. Right now, they are following clues that have us in Toronto, Tokyo, outer Mongolia, Madagascar, the Alaskan pipeline, Baja California, the Falklands, Atlantic City, Orlando, Holland, Ireland, the Mir Space Station, working for the WB network, Viet Nam, and enough places to keep them busy for years to come," Ty said, grinning.

Fenny walked over to Ty and knelt down so as to be eye level. "Why did you lie to us then? If we had known it was you who had helped..."

"I honestly didn't expect you to just accept a search demon right off the street. I wanted you to get to know me first and to realize that I was a good guy," Ty explained.

Sonya and Jordi looked at Fenny, who had stood up again. "What should we do Jordi?" Sonya asked.

"Could you two please leave me and Ty alone?" Fenny asked her two sisters. The pair gave Fenny a confused look, but finally agreed. After the pair went up the stairs, Fenny took Ty's hand and helped him up from the chair. She then led him to the main door and the pair walked up the stone steps to the street above.

Looking at all the streetlights and to the full moon that hung overhead, the pair walked. A cool May night breeze blew between the two. Finally, Fenny broke her silence. "Ty, you told us quite a lot tonight."

"Yes," Ty agreed.

"Were you being honest when you said that you've had a crush on me for a long time?" Fenny asked quietly.

Ty stopped and looked at her. "I was. I still do. In some ways, I've envied the me who died in that other future. He at least got to tell you his real feelings."

Fenny sighed heavily. "It's an awful lot to absorb right now."

Ty sighed himself. "I understand if you three want me to leave."

Fenny turned to Ty and kissed him on the cheek. "Actually, I was going to ask you to stay with us. Would you?"

"What about your sisters?" Ty asked.

"I'm sure they'll come around. I want you to stay," Fenny whispered.

"Why?" Ty asked, hopeful.

"Because you deserve a rest from your journey and maybe, a chance at happiness." Fenny then squeezed Ty's hand. After she let it go, she turned back and walked toward the coffee bar. After a few steps, she looked over her shoulder. "Goodnight Ty. I'll see you tomorrow." With that, she walked down the steps and disappeared.

Ty smiled and began to walk away. After a few steps, he stopped, looked over to his shoulder and whispered, "See you tomorrow, Fenira." He then started walking again toward his own apartment.

The next morning, in the suburb of Holyoke, Jason Bertovich walked out of his apartment and to his mailbox. He squinted his eyes and pulled out his sunglasses. A cool breeze blew through his now short again hair. He had experimented with growing it long, but after a few months, the way it got in his eyes annoyed him to no end.

However, for what hair he decided not to grow on his head, he instead grew on his face as he now sported a short chinstrap beard, which was a constant source of ribbing from his 17 year-old girlfriend, Nicole. Scratching his face for a moment, he then pulled out his mail. Looking over the collection of bills and junk mail, a small, embroidered white envelope caught his attention. Opening in, it looked to be a card. On it was written, "To Jason Bertovich and Guest." Jason looked it over quickly and decided to open it.

He opened it and began to read it out loud, "You are cordially invited..." He then stopped and laughed. "Well, I'll be damned."

X: Those Wedding Bells Are Breaking Up That Old Gang of Mine Part 1 — You Are Cordially Invited...

The sun slowly made its way across the mid-morning sky in the quiet suburb of Holyoke. A gentle breeze blew and flowers were gently swaying and enjoying the warm summer sun. The main entrance of the Blue Creek Apartment building opened. From out of building walked twenty year-old Jason Bertovich.

As soon as he had made his way outside, he immediately paused and squinted his eyes. From out of his shirt pocket, he pulled out his sunglasses and slipped them on. Jason deeply inhaled and sighed in contentment. Yes sir, the winters were brutal, but there was nothing like May in New England. Another breeze wafted past Jason and he ran his hand through his now short-again hair.

Over the winter, Jason had experimented with growing his hair out and even wore it in a small ponytail for a time, much to the chagrin and constant teasing of his friends. However, the infatuation with the lengthy locks was short-lived and the irritating way they got in his face and eyes drove him to a hair stylist. He emerged with a shorter, and much more manageable mane upon his skull.

However, for what hair he had exorcised from his dome, he was content to relocate onto his face. Jason was now sporting a reddish, short chinstrap beard, which was an even greater source of teasing from his seventeen-year old girlfriend, Nicole.

Scratching his face for a moment, Jason walked over to the mailboxes and opened his designated box. He pulled out a small bundle of envelopes. He quickly shuffled through the collection of bills and junk mail, but paused when he came to small embroidered enveloped with his name and address handwritten on the front.

Opening it, it looked that there was a card inside. "To Jason Bertovich and Guest" was written on the front. Having looked the front over, Jason quickly opened it and scanned the handwritten message inside. As he scanned, he read out loud. "You are cordially invited," He mumbled and then paused. A moment and another breeze wafted by and Jason let out an amused chuckle.

"Well, I'll be damned. He finally did it! That son of a bitch finally did it!" Jason exclaimed loudly and reread the card to make sure he had not simply imagined the message the first time:

*You are cordially invited
To the wedding of
Charlotte Firestone and Travis Evans.
On June 27, 1998
At the home of Mr. And Mrs. Evans*

*Please call (724)555-1221
to RSVP by the 1st of June*

*Jason, We would love you to come
down a few days early and see us all.
We miss you too, you know!*

*^ ^
—*

*Love,
Trav and Charl*

Jason chuckled again and put the card back into the envelope and proceeded to place it inside his shirt pocket. As he placed it there, he felt a small something, which immediately triggered a memory of why he was out and about so early in the day on his day off. He had things to do and places to go before he was scheduled to meet Nicole after her school day ended.

He walked into the lot where his car was parked and dumped the other mail unceremoniously onto his

passenger seat. He started his car and pulled out of the lot and headed straight toward the Holyoke Mall. He had a date with the engravers...

A few hours later, outside the building that housed Springfield Central High School, seventeen year old Nicole Porter found herself waiting outside the building with her twin sister Kirstin. A breeze wafted between them and both Kirstin and Nicole couldn't hide the smiles on their youthful feminine faces. It was just something about the last day of the school year. No matter how old you got, from kindergarten all the way to high school, the last day was about celebrating the privilege of summer freedom, a concept that many adults seem to have forgotten.

This was a particularly special last day. For Nicole and Kirstin, it symbolized not the end but rather a beginning. This day would officially mark the beginning of their reign as the seniors of Springfield Central High, a title they gained when the previous seniors abdicated the throne on the last day.

Oh sure, there were the perks along with its own responsibilities. There were college plans to be made, but those could wait for the moment. The summer before the senior year was a time to truly enjoy the benefits of being young, often one of the last chances before a world of college and work ate away that precious freedom.

After a moment of savoring that freedom, Nicole glanced at her watch and grew an annoyed look. Kirstin noticed it and before she could ask, Nicole answered the unasked question. "He's late." The 'he' was Jason, and he was, in fact, late. However, before Nicole could glance at her watch again, the pair heard the tinny beep of a car horn and noticed Jason's cream-colored coupe pulling up along the school.

Nicole and Kirstin walked up to the car and the passenger side window rolled down. Jason looked out it and greeted the pair. "I know. I'm late. Sorry. I got caught in the traffic of graduating seniors fleeing for their

lives." A moment later, the lock on the passenger side door popped up and Nicole let herself into the car. Kirstin stood there on the sidewalk. Jason looked across Nicole at Kirstin. "Hey, can we give you a lift home?"

Kirstin shook her head and smiled. "It's okay. I'm catching up with some friends in town. We're gonna celebrate a little too, then I'm gonna meet with Aaron tonight. You two have a good time and I'll see you tonight sister." Kirstin said. She then stepped away from the car and waved Nicole and Jason goodbye. The cream coupe then pulled away.

As the car made its way from the school, Jason looked at Nicole and smiled. "I guess congratulations are in order, Ms. 'Officially a Senior Now.'"

"Oh, they are? Well, in that case, thank you Mr. Bertovich. What do I win?" Nicole said with a sly grin.

Jason feigned deep thought. He rolled his eyes upward and pondered the question. "Well, I guess I could be persuaded to take you out for a day of fun and dinner tonight at the *Rising Sun*. Of course, I'm sure you much rather go to the library and start studying for next year."

Nicole feigned considering the second option. "Yes, that did seem like a good idea, but I'm not one to stand in the way of such well laid plans. I concede to your idea of treating me to a day and evening of fun."

"I'm so glad you decided to be persuaded, "Jason deadpanned.

"So then, where is our first destination?" Nicole asked.

"Well, I figure you wouldn't be opposed to some shopping and a light snack at the mall," Jason answered.

"The mall?"

Jason arched an eyebrow. "You don't like?"

Nicole shook her head. "No, it's not that. I just figure that ever since you started working there again, that would be one of the last places you wish to spend your free time."

Jason nodded at the assessment. "True. It is a pity that my internship at the station had to end, but I was lucky enough to get the job at the book store. You know

what? It's really not that bad, though. Since the biggest jerks at the E.B. don't read anyway, it saves me a lot of aggravation. Besides, even if the mall was still a source of annoyance to me, having a good time with you is more that worth it."

"Such a sweet sentiment," Nicole said with a giggle.

"I'm a sweet guy. I also am a guy who happened to put away a small bit of funds for you to enjoy this day."

"Oh, is that so? And what are those funds for?"

Jason looked at Nicole as he slowed the car down to pull into the mall parking lot. "My dear. Those funds are for whatever your heart desires today." Having said that, Jason parked the car into a space.

A few hours and a light snack later...

Jason and Nicole made their way along the second floor. Nicole carried a few small shopping bags in her hands, leaving a few rather large ones for Jason to carry. The pair made their way through the stores making small purchases here and there. Jason even managed to take advantage of his employee's discount when Nicole purchased a few financial planning books at the local Waldenbooks.

They had made their way through the mall together looking through each store, with Nicole even managing to negotiate a few discounts with the more liberal store clerks. It was obvious that this was Nicole's day as whenever she entered a new store, Jason was a step behind her.

Well, all but one store. As they approached the Victoria's Secret, Nicole stopped Jason in his tracks, told him to hand over his wallet and wait outside with her bags. Jason slowly pulled out his wallet to hand over to her, but not before removing his credit card, then giving it to her. She smiled at his shrewdness and entered the store, leaving Jason to sulk with her bags by a large pillar.

Now, as the pair walked along, Jason could no longer keep it inside himself. "So, are you going to show me what you got?"

"Nope," Nicole said nonchalantly.

Jason sighed. "You know, if someone is going to pay for something, it is traditional to at least tell him where his money went."

Nicole grinned broadly and shook her head defiantly. "Sorry. I don't remember signing a full-disclosure agreement."

"Not even a hint?" Jason pleaded.

Nicole considered the request and then nodded. "I just bought myself something new to sleep in."

"Oh," Jason said. "I guess I won't be seeing it then."

Nicole shrugged her shoulders. "Not for awhile, at least... and *only* if you're very good."

Jason almost tripped over his own feet at hearing this. Nicole tried to stop herself from laughing loudly, but was only partially successful. This brought a few odd glances from passer-bys and a bright red glow from Jason's face.

"I think I broke him," Nicole smirked. Jason tried to regain his composure and kept looking straight ahead. The pair continued on through the mall and began to walk past the video arcade. Jason kept walking, but Nicole stopped and looked at it.

Jason stopped and looked back. "Nicole?"

"How about a few games?" Nicole asked.

"I thought you didn't care much for videogames?"

"I don't really. But I know you like them. I don't recall there being a rule saying that we couldn't do anything you enjoy. Come'on, let's go in," Nicole said with a smile.

Jason shook off the embarrassment of a few moments ago and followed her with much enthusiasm.

The pair entered the arcade and they were immediately assaulted by loud noises. Everything from car crashes to full blown explosions. However, above all the chaos, Jason could swear he heard something else.

Nicole detected it as well. The pair looked at each other and asked the same question. "Dance music?"

The pair decided to inspect further and moved toward the back of the arcade. Upon reaching the back, Jason and Nicole saw several people crowding around a rather large machine. Two people were currently jumping around on a steel platform in front of the screen while loud music blared out of the side speakers. The pair on the machine proceeded to touch several lit panels at their feet. Each had an arrow on it and there were two such panels to the front and back of the player and also to the left and right, while the other player had the exact same set-up on their side of the machine.

Jason's smile broadened. "Sweet!"

Nicole looked at him and simply arched a confused eyebrow.

Jason continued his thought. "I've seen this before. That convention I went to a few months back had a demonstration of this game. It's called *Dance Dance Revolution*. It's a sort of dancing game from Japan. You have to hit the panels on the floor with your feet in time to the music while matching the arrows that scroll by on the screen."

"Interesting," was all Nicole could manage.

"It looks like one of the new *2nd Mix* machines. I heard about these. They supposedly got a whole bunch of new music and stuff." Jason then looked at Nicole like a tike on Christmas. "Wanna give it a try?"

Nicole just couldn't say no to that face. She nodded and Jason ran over to the change machine and took out a handful of quarters. He ran back to the machine, grabbed Nicole and the pair stood in line with the others who were waiting their chance to play this rather quirky game from the other side of the Pacific.

Soon it was their turn and Jason and Nicole stepped up onto the steel platform. Jason inserted some change and hit the start button. Soon a menu of options popped up. Jason pushed a couple buttons and a menu of songs appeared. Nicole only recognized a few of the artists, but

noticed an eclectic mix of music styles blasting out as samples of the music played. Finally Jason selected a song that seemed like a suitable pop-style dance song.

"Show me your performance!" the machine shouted at the pair. Arrows began to scroll up the screen and the pair tried to time their stepping on the panels with the beat, however they both almost stumbled over their own feet. Eventually the song came to an end, and a grade appeared. They had both scored 'D's.' "That wasn't your real dance. You can do better!" the machine chided.

"Maybe we should try an easier one this next song," Jason suggested. Nicole nodded her head and agreement. Jason cycled through the music choices and selected another one. The second and third time through, the pair seemed to find it much easier to hit their panels and by the time their game had ended, they had both managed to score a 'C' at least once.

The pair stepped off the machine. Nicole found her breathing was slightly heavy and she was sure her face was just as flushed as Jason's. Jason looked at her and smiled. "Kinda fun, eh?"

Nicole nodded. It *WAS* fun. It was so different. This wasn't some pointless violence that didn't require any thinking. This was matter of coordination and actual physical exertion. She was intrigued. She also noticed how people were lining up to dump quarters into it and she would be lying to herself if she told herself she wasn't intrigued by that aspect of it. She wanted to learn more about it. Finally she looked at Jason. "Wanna play again?"

Jason was taken by surprise by the question, but then again, today seemed to be a day full of surprises. "Um... Sure!" Jason replied enthusiastically. The pair then stepped into the line again.

The pair found themselves coming up to the machine a few more times in the next couple hours. Each time, they found themselves getting more comfortable with their movements and both seemed to moving more fluidly in time with the music.

Finally, as they came up to use the last of their quarters, Nicole asked Jason, "Hey, what is that option called 'Couple?'"

Jason looked at the option for a moment and slightly shrugged his shoulders. "From my understanding of it, I think it means that two players play at the same time, but instead of against each other, they perform a joint routine each with their own unique set of steps."

"Let's try it!" Nicole said enthusiastically.

Jason nodded and selected the option. Nicole then picked a song and the routine began. After a few moments of awkwardness, the pair began to make sense of the new style.

By the time their third song had ended, Nicole found herself finishing the last step and almost tripping. She ended up falling into Jason's chest. He, in turn, caught her and kept her from knocking them both down.

"Sorry," she said tiredly. A moment later the small crowd who had gathered began clapping. This caught Nicole by surprise. She looked up at the grinning Jason.

"I think they think we did that on purpose."

Nicole smiled herself. "Maybe next time, we should." She then took Jason's hand and proceeded to bow in appreciation and then took him by the hand and stepped off the machine with Jason in tow.

The pair exited the arcade and the blast of fresher air hit them. Nicole's legs felt slightly weak and she was sure she would regret this game in the morning, but right now another dull ache was making itself known.

As if by some telepathic bond, Jason asked, "Hungry?"

"Famished!" Nicole said. The pair proceeded to leave the mall and go to their favorite restaurant. *The Rising Sun Sushi Bar*.

The pair found themselves walking into the restaurant and greeted by Angela Manors before they had both fully walked in the door. "Kobanwa, my two favorite customers!"

"Kobanwa Anako-chan!" Jason and Nicole responded in chorus.

Angela turned around and motioned for them to follow. "At the behest of Jay-chan, I have secured your favorite table near the main stage, the rather comfortable booth you both seem to favor. A fresh pot of tea and a fresh tempura appetizer have just been set out, along with our rather extensive karaoke songbook for you while you decide your order," Angela said happily, thinking back to the rather large tip Jason had given her and Mr. Segawa to ensure everything would be ready for their arrival.

As Nicole seated herself, Angela brought out menus and a tray with Nicole's favorite beverage. Angela then excused herself and returned to the kitchen. Nicole thoughtfully sipped the drink and looked at Jason. "You've been very busy the last few days haven't you?"

"Well, it is an important day. This is the beginning of what should be the best year of your life," Jason said.

"That's an interesting way to put it. Your senior year must have been incredible," Nicole stated. For a brief moment, she could swear she could read discomfort on Jason's face, but it was gone the second it appeared.

"It was something I will never forget," he managed after a moment. Then he smiled and took a piece of the fried tempura off the appetizer plate. He then pushed the plate over to Nicole. "We should really eat this before it gets cold."

Nicole picked up her chopsticks and proceeded to pick a piece of broccoli off the plate, but stopped. She could swear she noticed something glinting in the light. She inspected closer and picked a few pieces of tempura off the plate. As she poked through the plate, she finally got a better view and noticed a small chain sitting near the bottom of the plate. Confused, she snagged the chain with her chopsticks and proceeded to lift the offending object out.

When she pulled it out, she finally noticed a small silver pendant. She then took the object in her hand and inspected it fully.

"My my! Maybe we should tell the health inspector! This is a most unusual thing to find in food," Jason said trying to keep a straight face.

Nicole inspected the pendant. It was Japanese katakana engraved on a small circular pendant. Nicole recognized the symbols. It was Japanese for "Success." On the back was a small inscription: *May success always be your companion – Jason*

"Oh....Jason! Its lovely," Nicole said in quiet amazement. Jason then proceeded to step around the table to put it around her neck. He sat back down and Nicole felt the pendant with her fingers as it hung around her neck. "Its beautiful."

"I'm glad you like it. I really wanted to put the right words on it. This seemed appropriate," Jason said quietly. Nicole stood up and walked over and gave Jason a kiss on the cheek. As she say down, before she could another word, a pair of familiar faces stepped up to the table.

"I take it that you gave her your gift?" John Hoelscher said with a smirk.

"Looks like we gave him just the right amount of time," Lina Wells, John's girlfriend and ex-goddess, said with a nod.

Nicole looked up in surprise. John and Lina proceeded to sit down at the booth, John next to Jason and Lina next to Nicole. Nicole looked at the new couple and shook her head. "Jason planned all of this didn't he?"

"Well, he's a sucker for surprises. Congratulations on another year done. Just don't get lazy this last one," John said mock-sternly. He then handed Nicole a card from both himself and Lina. Nicole read the card and thanked the pair for the gift certificate inside.

Angela returned and took the two couple's orders. After she was finished, the four were alone again. Nicole proceeded to open the large the tome and peruse the song list. Jason then reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a small white envelope.

"This being a day of happy surprises, I would like to tell about another one I received this morning," Jason said happily, holding up the envelope.

John pulled out his own envelope and smiled. "We already know."

"You too? I didn't realize that you were that good of friends with Trav and Charl," Jason said, confused.

"Well, after I met him at the convention we went to in February, I kept in touch with him. We've become pretty good friends. He said that they wanted me to come down and see them again," John explained.

Nicole took her lips off her straw and decided to clarify some details for her own benefit. "What's going on Jay?"

"Oh!" Jason said, embarrassed because he forgot that she was the only person at the table not in on the news yet. "This morning I got an invitation. My best friends back home are getting married next month. So I will be going back home soon to see my family and friends."

"That's wonderful, Jay," Nicole said.

"Well, that's only part of the good news. I really want you to come with me and meet my family and friends," Jason said enthusiastically.

Nicole stopped in mid-sip. She put down her glass and looked at him with an expression that could be both called happy and sad. "Jay honey, it's a lovely sentiment, but I don't know if Sarah would ever consider letting me leave the state with you alone."

The impact was immediate. Nicole could read the crashing waves of disappointment on his face. At that moment she decided to throw the odds to the wind for once. She smiled sympathetically. "But I'll try to convince her."

The impact of that statement was also immediate as Jason's face brightened instantly. "Then I'll put you down as a yes because when it comes to negotiations, I know no one who can say no to you."

"We'll see if that reputation holds strong then," Nicole said with a weak smile.

Soon orders were taken and food was brought out. Dinner conversation focused on the wedding trip and it was decided all four would drive down to Pennsylvania as a group in Lina's rather spacious minivan. They would all stay at Jason's parents house during the trip and would return the day after the wedding. Nicole could tell how important this wedding was to Jason as she listened to him recant tales of him and his best friend's misadventures.

Shortly after Jason had finished his last rice ball, Angela came to their table for karaoke sign-up. Angela pulled out her pencil and started writing on the clipboard in her hands. "I'm sure I can count all four of you in for tonight's competition."

"Actually, You can scratch me off for tonight," Jason said. This drew a look of surprise from Nicole.

"Me too," John added, which drew a look of surprise from Lina.

"Aw guys! Why not?" Angela asked.

"Yeah, I want to know that as well!" Nicole asked sternly.

"Me too!" Lina added.

"Well girls, every time we come here, either one of you two always wins. Our fragile egos need a reprieve from this savage beating," Jason said with John nodding in agreement the whole time.

"Of course, I've always been interested to see the two of you join forces and sing a duet," John added.

Jason nodded in agreement with the statement.

Nicole and Lina looked at each other and then to their boyfriends. They both sighed. Nicole decided to speak. "Alright boys, your male egos are spared this week. But you now owe us a nice desert!" Lina nodded in agreement.

"Does that mean we get to hear two angels sing in harmony?" Jason asked, hopeful.

"Anako-chan, please put me and Lina down as a team," Nicole said.

"YAY!" John and Jason said at the same time.

"They're such children sometimes," Lina whispered into Nicole's ear. Nicole nodded and then opened the songbook to pick a 'proper' song for their two fans...

A short while later, the contest began in earnest, bringing forth a cavalcade of would-be pop divas and rock icons, in their own minds at least. Finally, Mr. Segawa introduced Lina and Nicole and if expectations weren't high already, they had just passed by the summit of Mt. Kilimanjaro. There was quiet hush from those who had heard either of these two sing before. Nicole signaled that they were ready.

From the speakers a sound emerged that immediately brought forth memories of John Travolta and white polyester. A retro-style disco beat filled the room and Nicole and Lina began to sway seductively to the rhythm.

Nicole:

Makin' me feel that I want it
Is makin' you see that you know what I need
You're breakin' the rules cos you want it
There's so much you can do that will make me see that

Lina:

Makin' me love and adore you baby
Is makin' the most of the way that I feel
I'm takin' a chance, movin' for ya
Cos when you touch me I just can't believe that it's real

Both:

So come on baby, do it to me good now
Do it to me slowly (Nicole: oh yeah)
Be the one and only (Lina: uh'huh yeah)
And do it to me right now (Nicole: baby, baby)

Nicole:

Make me believe that you want it
And make me believe that you'll always be true

You better not lie or deceive me
If you do, then we're through, so it's up to you

Lina:
So take me to places I'd never ever
Never been able to go
You've taken it higher and higher
But baby you know, that it's so, get it on lets go!

Both:
So come on baby, do it to me good now
Do it to me slowly (Nicole: oh yeah)
Be the one and only (Lina: uh'huh yeah)
And do it to me right now
(Nicole: do it oh yeah yeah yeah yeah!)

So come on baby do it to me good
Do it like you should (Nicole: oh yeah)
Like you said you would (Lina: uh'huh yeah)
And do it to me right now (Nicole: ri-right now)

Nicole:
There's a party in my head
But you should have been there with me now
(Lina: what you say, what you say)

Lina:
Well you started on my head
Better finish what you said to me now
(Nicole: what you say, what you say)

Suddenly the music began to build up in crescendo of disco fever. Nicole and Lina left the stage and walked over to their table and each grabbed the hands of their respective boyfriends. In an instant, Lina and Nicole had John and Jason swinging them and spinning them in such a way that one could swear he or she could see a mirrored ball hanging on the ceiling. Suddenly and fast and fevered the music began, it stopped and Nicole and Lina placed

their left hands on their male partner's chest to stop him. They raised their microphones to their lips and the music began again.

Both:

So come on baby, do it to me good now
Do it to me slowly (Nicole: Come on baby!)
Be the one and only (Lina: uh'huh yeah)
And do it to me right now
(Nicole: and be the one and only!)

So come on baby do it to me good
Do it like you should (Nicole: oh yeah)
Like you said you would (Lina: uh'huh yeah)
And do it to me right now (Lina: do it to me ri-right now)

So come on baby do it to me good now
Do it to me slowly (Nicole: slowly)
Be the one and only (Lina: oh yeah)
And do it to me right now

The music came to a final stop and Nicole could feel the rapid nervous pounding of Jason's heart with her left hand. The crowd clapped loudly in approval and Nicole and Lina took their much-deserved bows while their boyfriends clapped in the wings. The four walked back to their table.

"Looks like that game didn't take all your natural rhythm," Nicole said with a cat-like grin on her face.

"Let's just say I had some motivation," Jason said.

The evening continued as one would expect. It came as no surprise that the team of Lina and Nicole claimed the trophy once again from the mob of vocal hopefuls. Shortly before Nicole's curfew, Jason had brought her to her doorstep. A brief moment of hesitation set in. Nicole was positive her sister Sarah was waiting to pounce on her and Jason if there was any improprieties. A

moment passed and Nicole gently kissed Jason on the lips and went into her apartment. She watched from the window as Jason walked to his car with a happy swing in his step and waved him off as he drove away.

The apartment was quiet. It looked as if she was the first to arrive home Nicole decided that she had had a long enough day and decided to retire for the night. Setting her shopping bags down in the living room, she took her *Victoria's Secret* bag into the bathroom with her.

A few moments later she emerged wearing a solid white baby doll gown that reached down to just slightly above mid-thigh. She smoothed out the materials and seemed pleased with the frilled edges and how comfortable it felt. She then slipped on the sheer white robe that went with it. She then paused as she passed the full-length hall mirror to admire herself.

She smiled at her reflection. This was a big day in all sorts of way. She felt that this put a perfect cap on it. It was sexy, but still held that clean purity. She felt like a real adult this night. This was an adult purchase, but it reflected a sweet naivety that made it not *TOO* adult. She then walked to her bedroom and opened the door.

Upon entering the room, she saw her twin sister lying on top of her bed on her stomach, clad in her purple flannel pajamas, reading a lengthy novel. Kirstin looked up and gaped in awe. "Wow! Nicole, that is so pretty!"

Nicole blushed slightly. "You like it? I just got it today on my shopping trip with Jay."

Kirstin gasped. "You mean, he bought that for you?! Oh my! You might not want to tell Sarah that."

Nicole shrugged. "He hasn't seen me in it. Actually, he hasn't even seen it period. I made him wait outside the store as I took his wallet into the store with me."

"Nicole!" Kirstin said disapprovingly. "That's not very considerate! You shouldn't have taken his money like that."

Nicole grinned. "Actually, he only thinks he paid for it. I actually bought this with some of the spare liquid assets I had at my disposal. Jason means well, but if I

didn't watch him, he'd spend all his money on me until he was in the poorhouse. I simply decided to spare his ego a small bruise. I don't think he even realized that I actually slipped a few dollars into his wallet to help with the dinner bill." Nicole then giggled.

Kirstin narrowed her gaze at her twin. Nicole was sometimes so irrepressible. Though Kirstin had to admit that she also envied that very trait of her twin's. Nicole pulled the covers of her bed back and slipped the robe off. She then sat on the edge of her bed for a moment. "Sis, can I tell you something?"

"What is it, Nicole?" Kirstin asked noticing the more serious look on her face.

"Jason's best friends from Pennsylvania are getting married. He's going home next month for a few days. He wants me to come with him."

"Oh my," Kirstin replied.

"I really want to go. I think it's really important to him, but I don't think Sarah can understand that."

"I know," Kirstin said, understandingly.

"I'm going to ask her tomorrow. I was wondering... Um..." Nicole paused and placed her two index fingers together a few times.

"Yes?"

"I was hoping if tomorrow morning if you could make your special 'Happy sunshine banana pancakes' for breakfast. They're Sarah's favorites."

"I see. You want me to help you get her in a good mood and butter her up," Kirstin said with a comprehending nod.

"Well... Yeah," Nicole finally said.

"Okay sister. I will help you," Kirstin said.

Nicole walked over to her sister's bed and hugged her tightly. "Thank you Kirstin!"

Kirstin looked at her sister and then grinned. Nicole recognized that grin all too well. Nicole should recognize it as she had spent several hours perfecting it in the mirror. Kirstin then spoke. "Of course, my aid doesn't come cheap. I seem to also be in need some new

sleeping attire, maybe something more fitting a woman of my age. I'm sure you could easily arrange that dear sister."

Nicole looked at her sister and gave the most scrutinizing look she could muster. "Kirstin, we've definitely shared a room way too long." However the pact was made and Nicole decided to turn in. She needed her energy for the battle that was sure to ensue the next day.

Nicole awoke to the smell of a certain breakfast confection promised by her twin. *God bless her, she even sacrifices a chance to sleep in so she can help me*, Nicole thought to herself. Then her thoughts went to her promise last night and what she should buy her sister.

Her first thought was to be evil. Nicole could already imagine the horrified expression on Kirstin's face when she opened up her package to find a black see-through teddy with matching garters and stockings. Of course, Aaron would probably appreciate the gesture greatly a couple of years down the road.

Alas however, the small Angel version of Nicole had kicked the evil version right off Nicole's shoulder and out of her mind. Nicole was resolved to find something a little more conservative for her sweet twin. After all, Kirstin would have plenty of time for black lingerie in college. Nicole giggled at her own evil mental lapse. Nicole set about changing into something more suitable for breakfast.

A few minutes later, Nicole entered the kitchen and saw Sarah at the table already relishing a mouthful of banana pancakes. Kirstin was presently pouring another batch onto the griddle. She looked over her shoulder and greeted her sister.

Sarah broke from her reverie and noticed Nicole. "Good morning, sleepy. We were wondering when you were going to wake up. I hope you weren't planning to make a habit of this all summer."

"Its only the first day of vacation and Saturday to boot. I do feel I am owed my beauty rest once every few months," Nicole replied in turn and then sat down to a plate with pancakes stacked on it. She inhaled deeply and sighed. That smell of banana always made her feel content and happy.

However, behind the contentment, Nicole's mind was working overtime in preparing her dissertation. Sometimes battling Sarah in a contest of wills was like trying to defeat Perry Mason in court. However, now was not the time to begin, but soon it would be.

Kirstin sat down at the table with her own plate and all three lightly chatted about their nights. Sarah had ended up seeing a double feature with Matty Hayes. Kirstin and Aaron had joined a group of scouts and had dinner at Perfume's Pizza. Soon, the last bit of syrup had been sopped with pancake and Kirstin got up to clear the table.

"Hey Kirstin, why don't you let Sarah and me take care of that," Nicole said, throwing a knowing look to her twin.

Kirstin understood and nodded. Sarah felt an odd feeling. This was certainly new. Kirstin almost always put up a fight when it came to things like that. It was also very rare for Nicole to openly volunteer for the domestic duties. Then there was the matter that Kirstin happened to have Sarah's favorite breakfast waiting for her as she awoke. If she didn't know better, Sarah could swear they were up to something.

Kirstin exited the kitchen and Nicole grabbed a pair of plates and placed them in the sink. Sarah took the syrup and butter and placed them in the refrigerator. Sarah then went for the juice and milk. Nicole placed the last of the plates in the sink and started to fill the sink with soapy water.

"Well, I'm waiting," Sarah said crossing her arms.

Nicole turned around and noticed the stoic expression of her sister. "I guess I can't slip one by you."

"Well, after this long, I can tell when I'm being buttered up. So what do you two want?" Sarah asked seriously.

"Actually, it's just me. Kirstin was doing me a favor," Nicole admitted.

"I see. Then I'll rephrase my question. What do you want?"

Nicole hated it when Sarah gave her that stern look. She felt as if she were being given the bright light treatment at a police questioning room except there was no good cop or bad cop, just sister cop. "Fine, I'll come right out and tell you. Jason is attending a wedding next month and he wants me to come with him to Pennsylvania."

Sarah narrowed her gaze. "Oh. Is that all?"

Nicole felt her chest tighten. This did not feel like a good sign. Sarah had only uttered four words so far when Nicole was expecting a tirade. She braced herself for more.

"Well, let's have some details," Sarah said. "How long?"

Nicole's mind snapped at attention. "Four days."

"Is it just you two?" Sarah questioned.

"No. It will be Jason and I, along with his friend John and John's girlfriend Lina. We'll be taking Lina's van down as a group."

Sarah cocked her head and considered that. Then she fired her next question. "And where will you be staying?"

Nicole felt herself grow more relaxed. She was prepared for these questions. "At Jason's parent's house. Jason will be sleeping in his old bedroom on the ground floor. I'll be sleeping in the guestroom on the second floor. John and Lina will have the guestroom on the first floor."

"I see," Sarah said nodding. She then appeared to weigh Nicole's answers and cocked her head from left to right. Finally she closed her eyes. "I'm sorry Nicole, but the answer is no."

Despite all her preparations, Nicole still didn't feel prepared for the immediate rejection. "But Sarah..."

Sarah held her hand up to stop the plea. "I'm sorry Nicole, but you're only seventeen. I just don't feel comfortable with you going so far with a boy without my supervision." Sarah then picked up her glass of juice and took a sip.

Nicole could feel the anger rising within her. She wanted to control it, but she just felt so angry at Sarah's overprotectiveness. She unleashed all that anger with a single comment that just seemed to slide up her throat, past her tongue and out her mouth. "Sarah, I just told you that he and I would be sleeping on different floors. Frankly, I think if his penis could reach that far, then he'd have trouble walking."

Sarah's eyes bugged at hearing this and she choked on her juice. She then shouted between coughs, "WHAT did you just say?!?"

Nicole felt herself spine hardening. She straightened herself up and realized that this had turned from a battle of wills to a proverbial all out war. She hardened her gaze and matched her sisters angered face. "Let's not mince words shall we? I'm not eleven years old. You're afraid that if I go off with him, what? I'll screw him at the first opportunity I get? Hate to break it to you sister, but I'm not that easily seduced. My hormones rank pretty low on my priorities pyramid right now.

"I have a lot of bigger plans in mind, the first being finishing high school and then college. I'm not going to ruin that with fifteen minutes of primal behavior."

Sarah slammed her hand on the table, causing the other juice glasses to shake. "You know damn well, that it's not you I'm worried about!"

Nicole crossed her arms. "Oh that's right, Jason will rape me with this opportunity. He'll introduce me to his parents, then his friends, and then he'll have his way with me. Right? Dammit, Sarah! Not every guy is some sex-crazed rapist! I thought you knew him well enough by now to know him better! Jason is not Rodney!"

Sarah was about to respond just as loudly but then grew quiet. Nicole knew it. She had said the one thing that might have been too much. Nicole and Kirstin weren't quite sure why Sarah broke up with Rodney at first, but they had their guesses. Nicole was positive that Rodney had tried to pressure Sarah and Nicole knew that her older sister was way too strong-willed to succumb to the clumsy charms of that oaf. It seemed that it was then that all his real stripes were visible. They broke up shortly afterward, but Sarah never fully disclosed what happened, but one thing was clear. After that experience, Sarah was a lot less trusting of men.

Sarah sighed and closed her eyes. She sat down and hung her head. Nicole walked over to her sister and placed her hand on Sarah's shoulder. "I'm sorry Sarah, but it had to be said."

"No. I'm sorry. You're right. You and Kirstin aren't eleven anymore. I'm your legal guardian, but I've been more like a gargoyle trying to scare away anything I think is threatening. You're a senior in high school now. Soon you'll be recognized by the law as an adult. I should be the one to recognize it first," Sarah said quietly.

"Sarah..."

Sarah raised her hand to silence Nicole. "You can go."

Nicole suddenly felt a surge of adrenaline rush through her. "Really?!"

"Really," Sarah confirmed.

Nicole latched onto her sister and hugged tightly, thanking her more than once. Sarah patted Nicole on the back. "But don't think I've gone soft. Before you go, all three of us are going to have a long talk. We'll probably have a few more long talks when you come back too. It's time I've started treating you like the adults you are. I can't shelter you anymore, but now I've got to teach you."

"I can't think of a better teacher," Nicole said and hugged her sister again.

"This is so beautiful!" a voice from the doorway mumbled. Nicole and Sarah looked up to see Kirstin

standing in the doorway with a few tears running down her cheeks. She then ran in and joined the pair in their hug.

It was a touching scene indeed. And indeed there were a couple long talks between the three sisters. However, after it was all said and done, life had pretty much returned to semi-normalcy in the town of Springfield, MA (Save for a few misadventures the author wishes not to mention for they are, quite frankly, best left to another author [or rather *The Other Author*.])

May had turned to June and June seemed to blur by like one hot, long summer afternoon. Before he had even realized it, the time had come for him and his band of friends and lovers to make their way south. Things didn't blur by as fast for Nicole, but for her life was always one new experience after another, however it did catch her just a little bit by surprise when she looked at the calendar and realized that she would be leaving the next day.

It even caught her by surprise that she was standing in her apartment's living room with her luggage waiting for Jason to arrive. It had just seemed like yesterday that she had managed to convince her sister Sarah to allow her to make the trek with Jason (or rather, if life could be compared to a story, she felt as if a whole month had simply been summarized into a couple short paragraphs.)

She laughed at her own thought. No, that was just too ridiculous to consider. She picked up her two bags and proceeded to leave the apartment so she could wait for Jason outside in the cool breeze of the early morning. As she stepped outside, her sister Sarah called out to her. Nicole turned around.

"Have a safe trip. Remember what we talked about," Sarah said as she gave Nicole a hug.

"I will sis. I'll try to bring you guys back a souvenir," Nicole said, though she couldn't think of anything worth bringing back from southwestern Pennsylvania farm country.

Sarah then released Nicole from her hug and held out a pair of envelopes. "Have a good time. Oh, since you're going outside, could you drop these into the mail for me?"

Nicole nodded and took the envelopes. She then stepped outside again and took her bags down the small flight of stairs. Upon reaching the bottom, Sarah closed the door and returned to her own morning rituals. Nicole couldn't blame her. While Sarah had changed a little bit, it still must have been difficult for her to watch her little sister go off on a trip like this. Nicole set down her bags and stretched a bit. She then remembered the envelopes and walked over to the outgoing mailbox.

She opened the lid of the large blue box but then paused. She frowned slightly. She looked at the two envelopes. The first had Kirstin's name on the return address. The other had her own. She dropped her sister's envelopes into the box, but hesitated afterward. She stared at the envelope that bore her name on the upper left hand corner.

Nicole still wasn't entirely comfortable with it, but her sisters seemed so up for the idea that Nicole found herself getting swept up in the moment. However, in a more rational moment, she found herself not as eager.

But her sisters knew Nicole much too well. They had used that dreaded word: "Opportunity." If there was one thing Nicole couldn't pass on, it was an opportunity. This could really open a lot of doors for her.

However, she kept thinking back to Jason. She did feel for him greatly, she'd maybe even go to the extent of saying the word *love*. But even if it wasn't true love, there was something keeping her from putting that envelope in the mailbox.

She closed her eyes and slid it in the box quickly before she could stop her hand from gripping it again. She sighed heavily and hoped Jason would understand.

As if fate had timed it, Nicole heard a van horn honking nearby. She ran over to her bags and walked to the sidewalk where Lina's van pulled up to. The back

hatch popped open and the window rolled down. Lina slid her sunglasses down her nose slightly.

"Toss your bags in the back. Sorry we're late, but John packs way too much. He might as well be packing for three people."

John coughed loudly from the passenger side. Jason waved from his seat behind and opened the door to climb out and help Nicole stow her bags. Jason closed the hatch and Nicole and Jason took their seats on the short bench seat behind Lina.

Lina pushed up her sunglasses. "We're burning daylight! Let's roll!" The van then pulled away from the curb and sped toward the highway. Destination: Smithfield, Pennsylvania.

The highways of America's northeast stretched on for quite a while as the maroon minivan sped onward toward Pennsylvania. Jason played the part of tour guide as they passed local points of interest. Which included anything and everything from the Little League Hall of Fame in Williamsport to the state capital in Harrisburg. Jason had an even more vocal diatribe prepared as the van entered the Pennsylvania turnpike for the final leg of the trip.

After driving the road for two hours, Lina and John had agreed that, yes, a blind chimpanzee could in fact design a better highway system and, yes, that the roads were probably better in downtown Beirut. One thing that was definitely agreed upon. After driving some two hundred miles on the road, and after having seen that about one hundred and ninety-seven miles of it were limited to one lane and lined with orange barrels, and after not seeing one *SINGLE* person actually doing any said work on said road, it was agreed that PENNDOT did, in fact, stand for: Permanently Ensuring No Normal Driving Occurs Today.

As the van entered the town limits of Smithfield, Jason guided them toward the bottom of what he called

'The Pit.' A rather quirky design feature of the town of Smithfield, in which the entire town was located on several hills, creating a giant concave valley. Jason's family's house just conveniently happened to be at the bottom of that concave.

The van pulled into a long gravel driveway and pulled up into a gravel lot that was surrounded by a green lawn, trees, and stone flowerbeds which led up to the centerpiece, the two-storied house of red brick and gray siding.

The van came to a stop. Everyone piled out to stretch their legs and arms. Nicole looked across the large hay field at the setting sun, which blazed a bright red. Jason walked up to her and put his arm around her.

"It's beautiful," Nicole said.

"Yeah, its nice. The real treat is to go up on Jumunville summit and watch it set. The horizon just stretches on forever."

Nicole pointed to the field in front of them. "Is this your family's property too?"

"That's my grandfather's. He cuts the field about twice a summer for hay to feed his cows. However, a large chunk of this area was once all my grandfather's and its been split up to my various relatives or sold off."

"I see," Nicole said nodding. She then leaned her head on his shoulder. "Can I ask you one more question?"

"Sure."

"Well... that house we passed. The one over there," Nicole said pointing to a pink house on the edge of Jason's driveway. "Were those geese in that makeshift chicken coop?"

"Yeah. Geese right now. That structure has also housed pigs, chickens, goats, sheep, swans, and dogs. Not necessarily in that order," Jason replied nodding his head. "Of course, seeing as I've been gone awhile, I'm sure there been some new experiments in my absence."

Nicole looked up at her boyfriend's face. "One last question. Why?"

"Welcome to Smithfield, dear. Population: Mostly nuts."

In the absence of a sane reason, Nicole accepted the answer. Nicole was beginning to believe Jason's horror stories, though was still positive that it can't all be *that* bad. Nicole decided to get her bags and help unload the van.

Turning around, Nicole saw a couple standing on the front stoop of the house. A man and a woman, both appeared to be aged in their mid to late forties, possibly early fifties. The woman was small, not measuring more than five feet. Her hair was red and wavy and she wore a brightly colored sweatshirt and blue jeans.

The man was very similar to Jason in that he had a stocky frame and very broad shoulders. He wore khaki pants and a white dress shirt, unbuttoned at the top. The couple waved.

Jason smiled and waved back. "Hey mom! Hey dad! Guess who decided to drop by?"

The two couples brought their things into the house and were given the dime tour. Jason introduced John and Lina to his parents as he did with Nicole. Everyone was showed to their respective rooms to take their luggage. Nicole simply placed her bags in the guest room and made her way downstairs. She walked down the hall to the door that Jason pointed out as his.

She slowly opened the door and looked inside. The walls were covered with various posters and action figures were on various shelves and cupboards. There was thick layer of dust covering all the toys and mementos. Nicole ran her finger along the bookshelf and it came back positively gray.

"Sorry bout the mess. I basically left an ultimatum for my mother to not enter my room nor touch my stuff until I eventually came back to reclaim them," Jason said leaning on the door frame with his arms crossed.

Nicole eeped and spun around. "Sorry. I didn't mean to snoop."

"You are a curious individual. Curiosity can have repercussions. It can also have rewards," Jason said, still leaning with his arms crossed.

"What kind of repercussions?"

Jason shrugged his shoulders. "I could feed you to the geese, but that would just put a damper on the whole trip. I was thinking of taking you to a party tonight."

"A party?" Nicole asked.

"If you guys wanna go. I just called Trav to let him know we're in. Trav and Charl are holding a pre-wedding get together at his parent's house. If you guys are up to it, I'm sure there'll be good food. I was figuring maybe to take a few moments to stretch out our legs and then head over," Jason explained.

"I'm up for it. I want to meet this mystery couple whose wedding I'll be attending," Nicole said.

"Count us in too!" John and Lina said from behind Jason in the hall.

"Then I guess we're going to a party," Jason said.

Jason yawned lightly as the van pulled into the driveway of the Evans residence. He hated to admit it, but he was starting to feel wiped, but he missed his friends too much not to attend. The quartet parked the van next to several other cars and they all piled out.

As Jason and Nicole made their way across the lawn to the back of the house where the party was surely being held, the front door opened unexpectedly. A young man with a thick, long mane of dark brown hair and a bushy goatee, followed by a small petite girl with cropped black hair both came rushing out.

"Trav! Charl!" Jason shouted to the pair.

"Jason!" They both shouted back and ran over to greet the whole group. Jason quickly exchanged quick embraces with his two friends. The engaged couple then walked over to John and gave him a quick embrace as well.

"Glad you could make it!" Trav said to John.

"Glad I could too," John replied and then introduced Lina to the pair. Lina greeted them and gave them her best wishes for their upcoming nuptials. Trav and Charl then turned their attention to Jason and Nicole.

"I *assume* that this is the Nicole you've talked so much about in all your e-mails," Trav said looking Nicole up and down.

"You assume correctly, Trav, Charl, this is Nicole Porter," Jason said gesturing his hands over to Nicole. Nicole in turn greeted the couple and also wished them well on their wedding in two days' time.

Trav then slapped Jason on the back and motioned him to follow. Come on. Everyone's around back. Everyone was wondering if you were going to make it to the party.

"Great! I'm pretty sure everyone is famished. I'm assuming that there is, in fact, food waiting for us," Jason said as all six made their way around the house.

"You assume correctly," Charl said as they first started seeing various people milling around in the back yard.

As John and Lina set out to meet and greet, Jason took Nicole around to meet his friends. The first stop was Trav's sixteen year old sister Staycie. She enthusiastically shook Nicole's hand and then zoomed off to greet John and Lina.

Shortly afterward, a rather tall and broad man with a slightly thinning hairline and thick glasses introduced himself to Nicole. His name was Jason Burchianti and Jason told Nicole how he was the oldest member of their tiny clique at the ripe age of 24. Burchianti told Nicole how he was a chemist for a chemical company in Pittsburgh.

"So, I hear that Trav got you penciled in for Best Man duties, eh Jay?" Jason said, throwing an elbow lightly into Jay Burchianti.

"Yeah. I know he would've asked you, but..."

"No need to apologize. He couldn't have picked a better guy for the job, though..." Jason then took Jay aside

briefly and starting whispering into his ear, "Is there gonna be a celebration of the end of Trav's bachelorhood?"

Jay looked around quickly and then whispered to Jason, "Aye, there will be. Tomorrow night. I've reserved the top room at Meloni's for the occasion. Be there at seven-ish and be prepared to give Trav your two cents," Jay confirmed.

Jason then smiled. "Beautiful. Good work my friend. I won't miss it." Jason then came back to the waiting Nicole, who crossed her arms at the stupid grin on Jason's face.

"What was all that about?"

"Male bonding my dear," Jason replied holding his hands up in innocence. Nicole continued her scrutinizing glare as to indicate that he would never get away with a secret. A moment later she relented. Jason took Nicole's hand and the pair continued their trek into Jason's past.

A moment later, a female voice spoke out. "Jason?"

Nicole looked at her boyfriend and was assaulted with a barrage of new faces. At first, she could read pain, then maybe anger, then simply discomfort. Jason slowly turned around and faced the girl, not realizing that he had started to squeeze Nicole's hand.

Nicole tried to read Jason's face, but now it had gone to a neutral expression. "Shelly."

The girl, who had a long mane of chestnut hair, a slightly stocky build and very thick glasses also wore a slightly neutral expression. "Its been a while, hasn't it?"

Jason nodded. "Time does fly. I see that you managed to get away from Michigan."

Shelly nodded. "I wasn't going to miss Trav's wedding for anything."

"No, you certainly don't ever seem to miss things," Jason said. Nicole could definitely read a hint of anger in his voice.

Shelly appeared to be taken slightly off guard by the statement. She then looked around as if trying to find something. Jason turned to Nicole. "I'm going inside for a coke. You want one?" Nicole nodded and Jason turned around to open the door. Nicole noticed that he

had entered the kitchen and then opened another door and proceeded to walk down a set of steps.

Nicole stood there for a moment with Shelly. Shelly shifted nervously and then coughed. She then turned toward Nicole. "If you excuse me, I have to freshen up." Shelly then opened the same door and walked down the same stairs.

Nicole was quite good at reading a situation and decided that this was worth investigating. She quietly opened the back door into the Evans' kitchen and then began to make her own way down the stairs stealthily.

About three steps down, she heard voices. Nicole halted and kept her position. She could see shadows looming, presumably formed by the light of a refrigerator. Nicole could hear her own heart beating within her chest. She could hear Shelly's voice and she assumed that meant Jason was also there.

Shelly's voice crept its way up the stairway first. "Jason, Will you please at least talk to me?"

Jason's voice floated up next. Nicole detected a very angry tone to it which seemed so inconsistent with the Jason she knew. "What part of 'I want nothing to do with you again' don't you understand? I made it clear: you and me are done. I came here to see my best friend, not you."

Nicole tried to keep her breathing quiet. She listened intently as Shelly's voice came next, this time quavering.

"Why are you being so mean to me? What did I do?!"

Jason's voice came next. It was filled with intense anger. "You know, I would expect that you still wouldn't even realize how you hurt me after all this time. But then again that was always consistent with our relationship wasn't it? As long as Shelly was fine, who cares about everyone else? I did love you Shell. More than you could've ever known, but you threw that away. Now I see that you are a selfish woman and I want nothing to do with you again. I am glad you are well, but beyond that you are a stranger to me."

Nicole watched as the shadows disappeared and she heard the sound of a refrigerator door closing. She started backing up the stairs slowly to avoid being seen, but the oncoming footsteps stopped.

"Just tell me what I did! You owe me that much!" Shelly hissed angrily.

"Owe?! I owe you?! Everything I ever did, I did for you! Goddammit, stop thinking about yourself for once!!! This is not Shelly's World with everyone else is just living in it!"

Nicole then heard footsteps coming her way. Nicole quickly backed up the stairs and hid behind a kitchen counter. A moment later, Jason emerged from the steps and quickly walked outside. Nicole waited a few moments and then proceeded to follow his out.

Upon reaching outside again however, she couldn't detect Jason anywhere. Nicole saw John and Lina and walked over to them. John and Lina were talking to Trav and Charl, who wore worried expressions.

"Have you seen Jason?" Nicole asked.

Trav pointed to an area past the house, over the eastern horizon. "He said he needed a walk to clear his head." Nicole then nodded and proceeded in that direction. Trav placed his hand on her shoulder. "You might want to just leave him be for a bit."

"What happened between him and that Shelly woman?" Nicole asked.

Charl frowned. "They used to be pretty serious. It didn't end well, for anyone."

Nicole then continued her way toward the eastern horizon where the stars were already visible. As she walked the party became less audible and she could hear the crickets chirping. As she passed over the top of the slight slope, she saw the land started to slope downward again. At the bottom, she saw Jason sitting alone.

Nicole carefully made her way down. Jason's head perked slightly as she approached. "Whoever it is, I don't want to talk about it!"

Nicole stopped her advance and crossed her arms. "Congratulations. It takes a lot of effort to hide something from me, but you managed to succeed. An ex-girlfriend no less. I am thoroughly impressed by your skills."

Jason whipped his head around toward her in surprise. "Nicole! Wha...?"

Nicole uncrossed her arms and walked over to and ended up sitting next to him on the grassy slope. "You know, I don't think I've ever seen, or rather heard you, so angry before. Oh, I've seen you when you were annoyed, but never so genuinely angry."

Jason turned his head away in shame. "I wasn't trying to hide it from you on purpose. I just wanted to forget it ever happened."

"Was it that bad?" Nicole asked.

Jason nodded his head slightly. "Yes. It was an time of my life that I want to never revisit."

"Because of what she did to you?"

Jason shook his head violently. "No. It wasn't what she did to me, it was the person I became because of it."

"I don't understand," Nicole said taking Jason's hands into her own.

Jason sighed heavily. "I had met her in my senior year of high school. Immediately, I was intrigued by her. It didn't long for me to ask her out.

"That was the start of a eight month relationship, my first truly serious one at that. I loved showering her with gifts. I was only making maybe forty dollars a week at the time, but I would've gladly spent it all on her.

"Sure, she wasn't perfect, but neither was I, so how could I criticize? What did it matter that she wasn't very open to some of my unique interests, while I experimented with hers? I didn't matter, I loved her and was willing to see past even annoying habits.

"Did it bother me when she constantly went on about her last relationship and how much she missed him? Sure, but what right did I have to complain? I was just grateful to be in her company.

"When she told me that she was moving to Michigan and leaving pretty much forever, I immediately offered to drive her and her things there. After all, I had to make use of the last bit of time I had with her.

"And after she was gone, I'm sure she would miss me and let me know how important I was to her. A validation that my time with her was important." Jason then snorted in contempt.

"Of course after she was gone, I heard from her less than a handful of times in the months that followed. She never wanted to discuss our relationship. She just wanted to make idle chatter. After all, why should she need to validate my value to her? She was where she wanted to be. She had all she wanted and she even found someone to give her a ride there.

"Every time she called, I was there with a shoulder to cry on. For every hurtful act her exes did, I was there to comfort her. But now she was done with me. She didn't need me anymore. I felt used, like a disposable boyfriend. I had tided her over until she could be where she really wanted to be. She did to me what she always weeped over having had done to her."

Jason stopped and looked to Nicole. She noticed a fresh trail of tears running down his cheeks. "What had I done to deserve that? I gave her everything I had. Even a thing I could never give anyone else. Now I was tossed aside? Didn't she know that hurt me?!"

Nicole put her arms around Jason. Soon his breathing calmed. He wiped the tears away with his arm. "But what she did to me was worse than simply throwing me away. I felt as if I deserved it, like I was a bad boyfriend and I deserved to be thrown away for a better model. Then I got angry. Very angry. I wanted nothing more to let everyone know how mad I was. It almost ended up costing me all my friends.

"But the worst thing was after it was all over, I felt like I could never trust women again. I hated that about me! I liked being nice to women! All I ever wanted was to make

someone happy, but now I was afraid to ever give anyone that much of me again."

Nicole felt her grip loosening on her boyfriend. "You mean, you don't trust me?"

Jason looked at her and frowned. "At first, I was afraid to trust too much. Then something changed a few months ago."

"What changed?" Nicole asked, her voice quavered slightly.

"I realized that I loved you. I truly loved you and that loving you was worth putting myself out to a risk like that." Jason then took her face into his hands and gave her a kiss on her lips. Not a passionate kiss but instead a tender kiss of gentleness and trust.

Nicole opened her eyes and felt the need to breathe again. A moment later she turned away. "Jason, I love you too."

"You do?"

"I really do. You are the first man to ever open his heart to me. Everyone except my sisters always try to keep a safe distance from me. I don't blame them. If I were them, I'd be afraid of me too. After all, I'm Nicole, Financial Warrior," Nicole said with slight sadness.

"Nicole..."

Nicole shook her head and continued, "Jason, lets explore this new territory together. Let's not have any more secrets. From now on, we go through this adventure together."

"I promise," Jason said as he took Nicole's hand in his. "We're in this together and wherever it takes us, we go together."

"Hey Jason!" A voice called up from the top of the hill. Nicole and Jason looked behind them to see John and Trav walking down the hill.

Jason quickly wiped away any traces of his previous tears and got up from his seated position. He helped Nicole up. By that time, Trav and John had made it to the bottom of the hill.

"She left Jason, It's safe for you to come back," Trav said.

Jason hung his head slightly. "Sorry bout that. I didn't want to cause a scene, but I had to get away from her."

"She went home. She'll be at the wedding, you know," Trav said with a cautioned tone.

Jason squeezed Nicole's hand. "I know. But it's time I moved on."

John spoke. "The party's dying down pretty much. Trav and Charl offered to take all of us out to a coffee bar they like to frequent. You up for it?"

Jason shook his head. "Not tonight. I am really spent. I want to have some energy for tomorrow. Can you guys drive me home before going out?"

"Why don't you just take Lina's van? I'm sure Trav can drive the rest of us in his car, right?" John asked.

Trav nodded. The four then made their way back up the hill. Lina and Charl met them at the top. Soon the groups split up. Lina handed Jason her keys and Jason and Nicole ended up going back to his home together. John, Lina, Trav, Charl and Jay all squeezed into Trav's car and departed for nearby Uniontown.

At Jason's house, Jason and Nicole found themselves on his couch watching a video from the collection of tapes he hadn't been able to take with him to Massachusetts. She sat upright while he had laid his head on her lap. She played with his hair occasionally. Jason sighed slightly. He was finally beginning to move on. A new chapter was opening up before him and her. Now, they had to write it.

Meanwhile, Trav, Charl and Jay led John and Lina down a set of stone steps, which were located under a hanging wooden sign. On that sign, written in beautiful calligraphy was the name of the establishment: *The Three Sisters' Coffee Bar*.

Entering the basement locale, John and Lina were stunned to see that it was not a musty basement dive, but

rather a slice of New York located in the most unlikely spot. Trav and Charl spotted a table able to fit them all and sped toward it before it was taken.

As the five took their seats, they chatted about the wedding, which was only two days away now. A short while later, a woman walked over to take their drink orders.

“Hiya! Welcome to the Three Sisters’! What can I get ya this evening?”

John’s ears perked and he whipped his head up at the source of the voice. That voice! It was too familiar. He couldn’t believe it, but his eyes didn’t deceive them...

“Fenny?!?” John shouted in shock.

Lina whipped her head at the direction of his comment. “Fenira?!?!?!?”

Fenny found herself dropping her pad and pen. She stared at John in a stupefied shock. Life was about to get very interesting again.

BOY SCOUTS 1/2
presents
Other Stories

Troop 180 Chronicles II: Bang! Thwwpp! Boom!

by "Mr. A"

The light was diffused by the smoke that was contained in the dimly lit room. The outsider strode toward the room, aware of its ominous appearance. The wisps of smoke failed to deter his approach, as he was confident in himself. Once inside, he scanned the group of faces that turned toward him upon his entrance. The four men seemed to be with purpose, although only they knew just what that purpose was. One of the five spoke up.

"Hi, Mark! Glad you could make it!" boomed Bob Martin, as Mark Abert looked around for a place to sit. He found none. The other three, Mr. William Shmuler, Mr. Tim Walker, and Mr. John Hawley, quietly added their greetings in their own fashion. Mark waved his hand about, as the smoke from John Hawley's ever-present cigar began to bother him. Hawley didn't take the hint, and continued to puff away.

"Here is our outline for the program for the shooting sports campout, as you requested," stated Scoutmaster Shmuler, as he glanced in Hawley's direction. Mark noticed a certain nervousness about the way Shmuler spoke, but he immediately dismissed it.

Tim Walker handed over a piece of paper with the written program neatly typed. "We're glad that you could get the time to do this for us," he drawled. Mark began to read over the proposed schedule.

"I hope that having this meeting now isn't interfering with any responsibilities you may have at your troop meeting," he said, before making any comments on the schedule.

"No, not at all," said John Hawley quietly. "Justy is in charge. He is doing a good job."

The sound of laughter filtered into the smoke filled kitchen of the Church in the Acres. "Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

"Sounds like the kids are having fun!" said Mark. "I've met Justy before. He is a rather pleasant young man."

"We like the way Justy does his job," Hawley said in the same quiet tone.

"Well, what do you think?" asked Bob Martin. "Does the program meet with your approval?"

"Sure, it looks fine," answered Mark. "Norm Jacques will be with us to assist with the Shotgun part of the program, and I will have a group of boys from 180 with me to help out with the Rifle and Archery portions. We'll have no problem running the Shotgun range in the morning, as outlined here, since Norm can't stay for the entire weekend. After lunch we can run the other two ranges in whatever order that you choose. Just let me know what that order is. The evening looks good also: free time and a joint 192-180 campfire. I say let's present this to the kids."

"Excellent!" said John Hawley. "They are right through that door. You and our Scoutmaster go and discuss this with 'the kids'. We have other items on our agenda that need our attention at this time."

Mr. Abert and Mr. Shmuler then exited the kitchen. Mark was glad to get away from the cigar smoke. The two men entered the hall of the Church in the Acres to confront the Scouts of Troop 192. They stood at the entrance to the hall and watched for a few moments. Justy, the Senior Patrol Leader, seemed to be running some sort of physical fitness program with the troop. He kept loudly proclaiming to the members of the troop to "bow down", as in some sort of calisthenics routine. Most of the Scouts ignored him.

"We should wait till Justy is finished with his program," said Mr. Shmuler. "Feel free to look around."

"I'll do that!" said Mr. Abert, and he gravitated toward a group of faces that he found familiar. The members of the Garden Snake Patrol greeted him as he entered their

corner of the hall. Matt Atanian had just arrived, and was removing his trademark trench coat and fedora.

"Hi, guys!" said Mark. "What's up?"

"Hi, Mr. A" said several members of the Patrol. Matt Atanian was carrying with him his leather bound copy of "The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy" which prompted Mark to remark, "I see that you have your Bible with you."

"It's not a Bible," responded Matt, who then sat down and invited Mark to do likewise. After standing in the smoke filled kitchen for a while, Mark gratefully accepted the invitation. He and Matt engaged in small talk for a few minutes. Gradually, he noticed a small young Scout in a perfectly put together uniform sitting a few seats away from them. Mark's attention was immediately attracted to the large tome that the boy appeared to be studying. Its title was "Advanced Theories of Spatial-Temporal Mechanics."

"Wow! I am impressed!" he said. "I've been meaning to pick up a copy of that book for quite some time now."

The young Scout peered over the top of the massive book. "Hello," he said timidly.

"Mr. Mark Abert, let me introduce you to Kenneth Pendrell," said Matt.

"Pleased to meet you Mr. Abert," responded Kenny. "Do you have an interest in the sciences?"

Mr. Abert explained to Kenny that he was employed as a teacher of the sciences at a local high school. "I'd love to be able to discuss some of this with you some time. Will you be at the upcoming campout?"

"I believe I will," said Kenny. "I would like to ..."

He was interrupted by Scoutmaster Shmuler. "Mark, it's time to speak to the Troop about the campout."

"I'll talk to you later, Kenny," said Mark, as he got up and walked to the front of the hall with the Scoutmaster. Mr. Shmuler spoke with Justy, who waved his hand dismissively, and got up and left the hall, accompanied by another Scout who made a great deal of opening the door for him.

"Boys," Shmuler said, "I'd like to introduce you to Mr. Abert. He has just been appointed as the Shooting Sports Director for summer camp. He'll be running the shooting ranges for us on our upcoming campout at Moses. We'd like to present the program as we have outlined it to you, to see what you think."

"Good evening, Troop 192!" said Mark with as much enthusiasm as he could muster.

"Hi Mr. A!" said several members of the troop.

"Have we got a great weekend planned for you guys!" said Mark. He then described to the troop the details of the Shooting Sports Campout. The proposal was received with enthusiasm, with many of the Scouts eager to sign up to go. Sadly, not all were free that weekend, but enough were available as to make the event a go.

As luck would have it, the weather was perfect, with warm temperatures and clear skies forecast for the entire weekend. Troops 192 and 180 arrived at the Horace A. Moses Scout Reservation early on Friday evening. The two troops set up their tents on the parade field, just in front of the camp's Trading Post, which was closed for that weekend. As there was no organized program for Friday evening, the members of the two troops were free to socialize. Many wandered off to various areas of the Reservation, while others chose to remain in site, mostly to play cards and converse.

"Did you bring a deck?" said Matt Atanian to Mark Abert, referring to Magic: the Gathering.

"Of course I did!" said Mark. "In fact, I've brought several. Choose your poison."

Several members of both troops immediately joined the two. Jimmy Broder, Troop 180's resident self-proclaimed Magic expert, brought out his latest creation and joined the game. His ever present buddy, Pete Greaves, sat nearby ready to provide comments on the game. Having nothing better to do, Mike Quadrozzi retrieved his deck from his pack and also joined in. Matt

Abert seemed to be content to just observe while consuming his favorite camp snack, spray cheese. Kenny Pendrell was satisfied to sit within earshot and read his book; this time it was *The Brothers Karamatzov*.

"I'm just going to do some light reading," he explained.

Becker sat within earshot, his ever-present headphones blaring out some sort of unidentifiable music. Brian Abert and Matt Fowler were also near, lashing together sundry "camp gadgets". From an unfortunately too near distance, the high-pitched cackling of Troop 180's first year patrol, the Magpies, could clearly be heard. All around, members of the two troops were milling about, some seemingly without a purpose. Camp was settling in normally.

The four way Magic game proceeded rather uneventfully, with the participants engaging mostly in small talk. Conversation eventually got around to the program for the following day.

"Norm should be just about finishing up on his range," said Mark. "I hope that everyone enjoys themselves there. Unfortunately, we were only successful in obtaining two guns, so there will be some waiting."

"I don't think that waiting will be much of a problem," said Mike. "Shotgun is popular enough in camp; I doubt if anyone will mind waiting."

"Shotgun?" piped up Kenny, suddenly looking up from his book. "I don't remember any mention of 'shotgun'!" A look of almost panic crossed his young features.

"As I recall," mused Matt, "you were 'indisposed' when that topic was discussed at the troop meeting. Is there a problem?"

"Not really, Mr. Atanian," replied Kenny, closing his book. "It's just that I would have liked to have done some preliminary preparations for that activity. I really should go and work on some calculations now."

"Oh that shouldn't be necessary, Kenny," chuckled Mark. "Norm and I can help you out with any problems that

you might have. There's no need to treat this like a physics problem!"

"Kenny likes to put new meaning into the words, 'Be Prepared,'" said Mike, as Kenny left the group for his tent.

"Ah, I activate my Pestilence for a total of eight points!" exclaimed Jimmy, totally oblivious to the conversation around him. "That kills off everyone's creatures, and kills of all three of you guys except for me, thanks to my Ivory Tower! Honkin', I win!"

"Honkin' great, you won Jimmy!" exclaimed Pete.

"Yes, Jimmy, I guess you do," said Mark.

"Anyone want to play again?" asked Jimmy.

Everyone did, and thus went most of the rest of the evening. Just before lights out, Mark met with Mr. Shmuler, Mr. Walker, and Norm Jacques to firm up the following day's activities. Everything seemed all set to go, so they all turned in for the night.

The cackling of the Magpies lasted well into the wee hours of the morning, and thus very few were able to get a good night's sleep. Breakfast was attended rather sporadically, as not all were able to climb out of their sleeping bags on schedule. Thus it was a groggy gang of Scouts that hit the trail toward the old Rifle Range, which was where Norm had set up his Shotgun Range. As usual, Norm did a good job of setting up this range, with proper safety perimeters, numerous sets of safety glasses and earmuffs available for all, and the clay thrower right in the center of the launching area. Billy Gelinas was first up.

Boom! Went the shotgun, as Billy skillfully blasted the "clay pigeon" from the sky. Boom! Boom! Bill successfully hit ten out of ten of the clays.

"I am very impressed!" remarked Norm, as Billy finished his turn.

"Thanks, Norm," said Billy. Mark also added his congratulations to Billy's fine performance.

Several other Scouts then had their turns, but none of them matched the excellence of Billy Gelinas. Finally it was Kenny Pendrell's turn.

"I don't know," mused Norm. "You are kind of small. Do you think you can handle this?"

"I'd like to try, Sir," replied Kenny.

"I'll stand behind him, Norm," said Mark.

"Well, okay," said Norm, and he began to coach Kenny on how to hold the shotgun, how to fire it, and how to point it at the flying clay.

"Ready to try it?" asked Norm.

"Yes, sir," replied Kenny, his previous concern seemingly forgotten.

"Good, let's do it!" said Mark, standing behind Kenny.

"Pull, sir!" shouted Kenny.

The clay pigeon went flying. Boom! went the shotgun. "Oof!" went Mark, as Kenny went flying into his gut. Mark landed on his butt. "Ow!" said both Mark and Kenny simultaneously.

"Are you guys okay?" asked Norm.

"Yeah, I think so," replied Mark.

"Yes, sir," said Kenny, having taken little hurt beyond the initial shock, thanks to the cushioning effect of Mark's gut.

Norm and the other Scouts helped the two to their feet, and it turned out that neither of them was really injured. Kenny began to mutter something about forgetting to factor in a resultant cosine as he and a few of the other Scouts began to wander back toward the campsite. The morning Shotgun session was just about finished anyway, so Mark and a few of his Troop 180 Scouts stayed behind to help Norm put away the Shotgun equipment, since Norm had to leave shortly.

As it was now close to noon, the Scouts decided to break for lunch. The next shooting event was Archery, which was to be held in the far corner of the field, right where it is normally run during Summer Camp. Lunch itself was rather simple and uneventful. At the conclusion of the rather simple and uneventful lunch, the Scouts strolled over to the nearby Archery Range.

Kenny performed quite well here, seemingly much better prepared, and being matched with a bow better

suited to his diminutive stature. However, the real competition turned out to be between Billy Gelinas of Troop 192 and Jimmy Broder of Troop 180. Billy had always displayed a talent for the shooting sports, and his performance wasn't a big surprise, but the members of Troop 180 were quite surprised at Jimmy's seeming natural talent for this activity.

"Where did you learn how to shoot like that?" asked Mark, as Jimmy scored his eighth consecutive bullseye. Mark had originally taught Jimmy the basics of Archery the year before.

"I dunno," said Jimmy, "I just like doing this. I think it's real honkin'."

"Yeah, real honkin'," shouted Pete from the sidelines.

Thwwpp! Thwwpp! The arrows continued to hit the targets with surprisingly great accuracy. The majority of the Scouts still on the shooting line had settled into just shooting for fun, not paying much attention to their own scores. The Scouts on the sidelines had settled into an expectant hush. Even the Magpies were silent. All eyes were on the competition between Gelinas and Broder.

"Wow!" Mark thought to himself. "I had both of these guys in my Archery Merit Badge class just last year! I am amazed at how good these kids have gotten!"

The hot sun began to take its toll on the archers. There was very little shade on the Archery range, which was a problem that Mark had to contend with every day of Summer Camp. Whether it was due to the tension of the competition, or the sweat that began to form on the brows of the competitors, finally one of the Scouts scored a mere 9, rather than the score of 10 that resulted from a bullseye. Cheers went up from the spectators.

"Congratulations, Jimmy!" said Billy with all sincerity. "It was fun shooting against you!"

"Thanks, Billy," said Jimmy. "You are a real honkin' good shooter yourself!"

"Yeah, honkin' good!" exclaimed Pete from the sidelines.

"You guys both should consider shooting competitively," said Mark. "I know of a few places where you could join a league. Do you think you might be interested?"

Both Billy and Jimmy said they were, and Mark said that he would get them the names and addresses of nearby shooting clubs that they could join. Mr. Shmuler approached and suggested that the Scouts be given a break after the very tense display that they just went through. Mark agreed that this would be a good idea, and all that were in attendance headed for the shade of the trees or their tents. With the exception of the incessant cackling of the Magpies and the blaring from Becker's headphones, the camp became rather quiet for a while, since most had not gotten a much sleep the night before.

The evening dinner was the next item on the agenda, and as planned by the adult leaders, was a "pot-luck" meal, with each of the Troops bringing items to share. Troop 180 provided generous portions of Jambalaya and Brunswick Stew, prepared by the Scouts and overseen by their "master" chef, Matt Abert. Surprisingly, there wasn't a drop of spray cheese in either recipe. Troop 192 had enough hot dogs and hamburgers for all. Everybody ate well, and no one went hungry except Matt Atanian, who is a notoriously picky eater anyway. Sharing the meal seemed to increase the bonds of fellowship between the two troops, and all in attendance stated that they looked forward to the upcoming Spring Camporee where they would camp together again.

After supper, all that could (some were "too full" and others – the Magpies – were "volunteered" to do clean up) hiked up to the Rifle Range. This was a very nice facility in camp, having its own wooden pavilion and numerous benches to shoot from. Mark served as rangemaster, and again a spontaneous competition developed. After an hour of continuous "Bang! Bang!" from the .22s, Billy Gelinis once again emerged with the best score, with Brian Abert and Matt Fowler running a close second and third place.

"Billy is rather good with a gun!" remarked Mr. Shmuler.

"He sure is," agreed Mark. "I'm glad that he is on our side!"

"Yeah, he's honkin' good," said Pete.

"Yeah, honkin' good," agreed Jimmy.

All the Scouts then pitched in to assist Mark in putting away the rifles and all the equipment. They then began the hike back to the Trading Post and their campsite. It was beginning to get dark. A bit too dark.

When they arrived back in camp, those that had stayed behind had built up a nice fire for all to sit around and relax after their busy day. The fire was built in a half-barrel, in accordance with the orders of the camp Ranger, for no ground fires could be built on the field.

"Hey Mr. A," said Matt Fowler, "how about a story?"

"Well, I don't know, Matt," muttered Mark at the suggestion.

The other members of Troop 180 joined in in urging Mark to entertain them with a story of some sort. The members of Troop 192 just sat in puzzled anticipation.

Finally, after a few moments of thought, Mark began: "The Story of Winnie the Pooh," Mark announced.

The Scouts groaned. "That's very un-honkin'," exclaimed Jimmy.

"Yeah, very un-honkin'" agreed Pete.

"Guys, trust me," assured Mark.

Grudgingly, the Scouts settled in, willing to put their trust temporarily in "Mr. A."

"Once upon a time, there was a young boy whose name was Christopher Robin. Christopher Robin lived near a small patch of forest that was known as the Three Acre Wood. He had many friends. One day, one of his friends told him about a bear named Winnie the Pooh that lived in the Three Acre Wood. Christopher became very delighted at this news, as he had always loved bears.

"I will find him and make him my very special friend" said Christopher one day.

"And so Christopher Robin entered the Three Acre Wood searching for Winnie the Pooh. And eventually he found him.

"Hi, Winnie the Pooh!" exclaimed Christopher Robin.

"The bear immediately attacked and ate Christopher Robin, because bears are carnivorous animals and this one especially hated the name Winnie the Pooh. The end."

The Scouts sitting around the fire were silent. Slowly, a few chuckles erupted, and finally the entire group broke into loud guffaws. The rest of the evening was spent in trading camp stories between the two troops, an occasional Monty Python song, and numerous jokes. Gradually, the tired members of Troops 192 and 180 drifted off to their tents, all being quite tired thanks to the Magpies, who were already in their tents gabbing and giggling away. Most of the others were too tired to care. It was rather dark out. A bit too dark, but nobody cared.

Soon the only sound that could be heard was the snoring of the adults and the cackling of the Magpies. But nobody cared. They were all very tired. And it was very dark out. A bit too dark.

Suddenly, a brilliant white light came stabbing downward from the sky, enveloping two of the tents. The tents containing the sleeping bodies of Jon Becker, Billy Gelinas, Brian Abert, and Matt Fowler slowly began to rise into the sky, breaking free of the stakes that ordinarily anchored them to the ground. Nobody noticed. The two tents disappeared into an iris-like opening. Nobody noticed. A second column of brilliant white light stabbed downward, and the same thing began to happen to the tents containing the Magpies. Halfway up their ascent, the Magpies tents reversed their direction and were returned to the ground. Nobody noticed. For a third time, the brilliant white light stabbed downward, this time lifting the tents containing Matt Atanian, Matt Abert, Jimmy Broder, and Pete Greaves into the iris-like opening. The opening then closed. Nobody noticed.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Anime Deathmatch

Pay-Per-View: Boy Scouts ½!

by Matthew Atanian

"Anime Deathmatch" created by Jason Bertovich



"We Didn't Invent Violence, We Just Perfected It"

An Introduction

Before we bring you to Anime Deathmatch Pay-Per-View: *Boy Scouts ½*, I thought many of you may like to know... what in the hell exactly *is* Anime Deathmatch?

Anime Deathmatch is the brainchild of a man who likes to be known as BoneparteOzaki, who was inspired by a TV series called Celebrity Deathmatch. In Anime Deathmatch, anime characters from different anime series meet and beat the living hell out of each other for usually no good reason. Usually it's bloody, and usually at least one competitor doesn't live through the match.

As it is only fair to give credit where it is due, the following are attributable to BoneparteOzaki: The Anime Deathmatch logo, the characters of Toro Watanabe, Shane Calloway, and Vince McAfee, and events mentioned as happening in previous Anime Deathmatches, as well as, of course, Anime Deathmatch

itself and the format it which it is written. But guess what? Unlike most of the things I write where I borrow from others, I actually had BoneparteOzaki's blessing to write this! Huh, who'd have thunk it?

Of course, it goes without saying that those offended by blood, gore, profanity, and humor in poor taste should *not* read this.

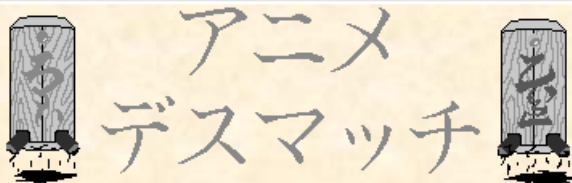
Also, remember, that this is not real. These are fictional characters (albeit some based on real persons). In real life, killing other people, especially in gruesome and graphic ways, is strictly a no-no.

Oh, and just in case anyone even thinks for a moment that it is, this story is *not* an official part of the *Boy Scouts* ½ continuity. As you will see after reading it, it would be awfully difficult to continue the series if it were...

Live from the Moses Scout Reservation, let the confusion begin because it's time for...

BOY SCOUTS 1 1/2

Anime Deathmatch



"We Didn't Invent Violence, We Just Perfected It"

Shane: Hi, I'm Shane Calloway

Toro: And I'm Toro Watanabe, and this is ANIME DEATHMATCH!!! Tonight is our third pay-per-view, BOY SCOUTS 1 1/2!!!

Shane: <flipping through pages> I'm confused. Why are we doing a deathmatch, a Pay-Per-View no less, with fanfic characters? I mean... <holds up pages> this thing is, like, the ultimate gratuitous self-insertion fic!

Toro: Well, it seems that the creator of *Boy Scouts 1 1/2*, Matthew Atanain, financed the entire event in an effort to gain more publicity for his series.

Shane: My God, have we sold out that much?

Toro: SHANE NO BAKA!!! <hits Shane with mallet> We have not sold out! It's just that Anime Deathmatch is expensive to produce, what with all of the arena destruction and lawsuits from the families of deceased audience members.

Shane: That explains why we've had more commercials, lately, too.

Toro: Speaking of witch:

commercial sign

Plagiarism sucks, and payback's a bitch, so make sure you go out and purchase the all new direct to video sequel to one of anime's most beloved classic series.

**Kimba the White Lion 2:
Kimba's Pride
Coming only to video in the Spring of 1999**

commercial sign

Toro: Well, we have four exciting matches lined up for you this evening.

Shane: But first...

Toro: Don't even...

Shane: THE RULES!!!

Toro: SHANE NO BAKA!!! <hits Shane with a large metal spatula. There is a loud, wet thud and Shane goes down. The crowd cheers. Toro notices a red smear on the spatula, and a pool of blood forming around Shane's head on the floor.>

Shane: <barely conscious> Ouch...

Toro: Oh, no! Our budget's already in the toilet, or we wouldn't even be doing this sell-out pay-per-view! We can't afford *another* new co-host.

Voice: Never fear...

Toro: That voice...



Voice: Washu-chan is here!

<A smile painfully forms on Shane's face>

Toro: Washu-chan?

Washu-chan: Just leave this to the Number 1 genius scientist in the Universe!

Toro: What are you doing here?

Washu-chan: I thought I could use Shane for some medical experiments. I suppose I'll patch up his head, too. I could have him back in... maybe a week. <drags Shane away>

Shane: <almost incoherently> Magic... fingers...

Toro: Well, great. Now I'm without a co-host. What will I do?

Mike: I'll be happy to fill in!

Toro: Mike Quadrozzi? But you're a character from *Boy Scouts* ½! Aren't you in the last match?

Mike: Well, I can help 'till then.

Toro: Oh, all right.

Mike: Okay! <switches to a voice that is a cross between Alex Trebec and John Cleese> And now, the rules!

Rules:

1. The match is not over until one competitor is dead.
2. Outside interference is not only allowed, but encouraged.
3. Foreign objects may include:
 - a. Cutlery
 - b. Blunt objects
 - c. Household appliances
 - d. Body parts
 - e. Audience members
 - f. Road signs
 - g. Cars (both foreign and domestic)
 - h. Artillery
 - i. Mechas
 - j. Mystic Powers
 - k. Explosives
 - l. Plants
 - m. Animals
 - n. Ancient Demon Gods
 - o. Haiku
 - p. Horrible Dubbing
 - q. Pokemon
 - r. Flukemen
 - s. Black Oil
 - t. Morley Cigarettes
 - u. Agent Spender
4. Foreign objects may not include:
 - a. Ring Announcers
 - b. Agent Scully (but you can throw her at me!)

Toro: What the hell was that?

Mike: Well, I like the X-Files. What can I say?

Toro: Whatever... Now, for our first match. Let's go over the stats:



Name: Dan Wellington

Occupation: Student, Summer Camp Staff

Likes: Fire, Fire, oh, and Fire

Dislikes: Fire safety rules



Name: Shayla-Shayla

Occupation: Muldoon Priestess

Likes: Fire, Fights, oh, and Makoto Mizuhara

Dislikes: Any kind of safety

Mike: Well, I think we're in for quite a match, with the

Pioneer Valley Council's most infamous pyromaniac going up against Roshtaria's most famous fire priestess!

Toro: Okay, let's hand things over to Vince McAfee

Vince: Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls, Children of all ages, this is ANIME DEATHMATCH! <cheers> Coming into the amphitheater from the patch of trees on the left, from Troop 815, wearing the green Boy Scout Uniform, Dan Wellington! <cheers from other scouts in the audience>

Dan: <Waves> Hi.

Vince: And coming from the patch of trees on the right, from Mt. Muldoon, wearing the tight red mini-skirted ensemble, Shayla-Shayla! <cheers>

Shayla: Let's get this over with! I left Makoto alone with Nanami, and I have to get back before it's too late!

Toro: <whispers> I don't think It's Nanami she has to worry about. I think Ifurita...

Shalya: <Shouting> What're you talking about over there?

Toro: Um, nothing!



VS.



Dan Wellington vs. Shayla Shayla
All's Fire in Love and War

Mike: And there's the bell!

Toro: And Shayla starts with her characteristic blue and red swirly lines!

Mike: Very technical description there... Oh! And Dan pulls out a lighter!

Toro: A lighter? Against mystical elemental powers?

Mike: You don't know Dan!

Shayla: Take this!

Toro: And Shayla fires a blast at Dan! Oh my God! Dan's entire left arm is on fire! The crowd is going wild!

Dan: That's nothing! I can do the same thing.

Mike: And Dan is... Dan is lighting his own right arm on fire? Why? For God's sake, WHY?

Toro: And the crowd is ecstatic!

Mike: But Dan's still up! His arms are both fiery pieces of charred flesh and bone, but he seems like he's unhurt!

Toro: The man's not human!

Mike: Oh, and Dan is throwing himself at Shayla! Now she's catching on fire! The crowd is going wild!

Dan: Yes!

Mike: Dan seems to be enjoying himself.

Toro: And Shayla isn't moving. How is this possible? Is Dan human?

Mike: That's a good question.

Toro: Well, it seems that the first match has gone to Dan.

Mike: Shows that even a fire priestess can't stand up to a Boy Scout pyromaniac.

Toro: As the cleaning crew clears away the charred remains, we'll go over the vital stats for the next match:



Name: Taylor Kuntz

I.Q.: 12

Likes: Red haired woman who he won't realize is really a man

Dislikes: Man whom he doesn't realize is above-mentioned red haired woman, squirrels

Mike: That bastard!



Name: Tatawaki Kuno

I.Q. 13

Likes: Red haired woman who he won't realize is really a man
Dislikes: Man whom he doesn't realize is above-mentioned red haired woman

Toro: Is it my imagination, or is there something similar about these two?

Mike: It's not your imagination.

Toro: Why did they agree to fight?

Mike: One of them overheard the other talking about his "red haired goddess," wouldn't realize that he was talking about a different red haired goddess, and challenged the other to a fight.

Toro: Hold on, wasn't Kuno killed in the last pay-per-view?

Mike: That Washu-chan is amazing, isn't she?



VS.



Taylor Kuntz vs. Tatawaki Kuno

The Battle of the Brainless

Vince: Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls, this is tonight's second match! <cheers> Coming out of the patch of trees on the right, wearing the crumpled uniform and the black leather glove, from Troop 86, Taylor Kuntz! And from the patch of trees on the left, the Blue Thunder of Furinkan High, Tatawaki Kuno!

Kuno: You dare covet my red haired beauty? Say your prayers, for I shall smight thee!

Kuntz: Your red haired beauty? Listen, you loser, she's my red haired goddess! I'll kick yer ass!

Toro: I think we're in for an interesting match here, folks.

Mike: I don't think so, Toro.

Toro: Why not?

Mike: You're forgetting that while he can't beat Ranma or any of the other Ranma characters, Kuno is still a martial artist, while Kuntz... well...

Toro: Hmm... Good point. Hold on, we're getting some action here... Kuntz is charging at Kuno with what appears to be a rusty pocketknife!

Mike: <shudders> Rusty pocketknife... GO KUNO! KICK HIS ASS!

Toro: You know, the announcers are supposed to be impartial.

Mike: Let's see you be impartial when one of the competitors once tried to disembowel you!

Toro: Point.

Mike: Oh! And Kuno just sliced Kuntz in half with his bokken! YES!!!

Toro: Oh, the humanity! The crowd is going wild!!!

Mike: Well, shall we see the stats for the third round?



Name: Justy Yung

Likes: Power, stepping on anyone lower than him, kissing up to anyone higher than him

Dislikes: Anyone lower than him

Secret Shame: Once electrocuted himself on a wall socket while licking the walls clean in the Chief Scout Executive's office



Name: Katsuhiko Jinnai

Likes: Power, Conquest

Dislikes: Makoto Mizuhara

Secret Shame: Once electrocuted himself while trying to wind Ifurita up with something other than her key

Toro: I was getting worried, the stats had been pretty normal so far... but that is disgusting!!!

Mike: If you'll excuse me, I think I'll be sick.



VS.



Justy Yung vs. Katsuhiko Jinnai Antagonist Clash!

Vince: Coming from the patch of trees on the left, wearing a kakkhi Boy Scout uniform, from Troop 192, Justy Yung! And from the patch of trees on the left, wearing a Shinonome High School uniform, from the Bugrom Empire, Katsuhiko Jinnai!

<the crowd is silent, cheering neither competitor.>

Toro: This is a tough match. It's clear the crowd is hoping for neither side to win.

Mike: Personally, I wouldn't mind if Jinnai won.

Toro: What happened to impartiality?

Mike: You don't know Justy, do you?

Jinnai: I am the ruler of Shinonome High School.

Justy: I am the ruler of Boy Scout Troop 192.

Jinnai: I am the ruler of the Bugrom army!

Justy: An army?

Jinnai: Beat that, if you can. Ha ha hahaha HA HA
HAHAHahahahAHAHA!!!!

Justy: You need a second in command? That must be tough work. Can I get you some coffee?

Jinnai: What? Coffee?

Toro: What the hell just happened?

Mike: You're forgetting. Justy will squash those under him, but those above him he'll kiss up to like there's no tomorrow.

<crowd boos... shouts of "We want blood! Where's the fighting!? Come on!!!">

Toro: I'm having bad flashbacks to the Extreme Science match from our last pay-per-view...

Jinnai: Well, actually, I prefer tea...

Justy: Coming right up! This way, please... <They walk out the amphitheater together...>

Mike: I think, unfortunately, Justy won.

Toro: What do you mean?

Mike: Justy will wait until the time is right and take over from Jinnai. I feel bad for all of El-Hazard... but, hey! At least he'll be out of our hair now! All right!

Toro: Well, I think it's time for the final match... The main event...

Mike: <loses the Trebek/Cleese voice> Oh, I've got to get going!

Toro: What am I going to do for a co-host?

Mike: <shouting to someone in the audience> Provost! Come'ere!

<audience member comes down>

Derek: Hi!

Mike: Take over for me, okay.

Derek: Sure, will do. <Mike Dissappears into the trees>

Toro: Who are you?

Derek: Derek Provost. Troop 180. Nice to meet you.

Toro: <mumbling to himself> It's okay... just one more match to go, and it'll be all over... just remember, we need the money...

Derek: What?

Toro: Nothing... Here's the vital stats:



Names: Matt, Aaron, Mike, and a couple of Bills

A.K.A.: Matty Hayes, a duck, a squirrel, a cat, and a dog

Likes: Magic: The Gathering, Anime, British Comedy
Dislikes: Cold Water



Names: Serena, Amy, Raye, Mina, and Lita
A.K.A.: Sailor Moon, Sailor Mercury, Sailor Mars, Sailor Venus, and Sailor Jupiter
Likes: Shopping, Food, Fighting Evil
Dislikes: Pretty Sammy

Toro: Didn't Sailor Moon get mortally wounded in the last Deathmatch?

Derek: It's amazing what...

Toro: Let me guess... Washu? <Derek nods> That Washu has odd taste in who she'll save... Kuno... Sailor Moon... Shane...



VS.



**The Sailor Scouts vs.
The Jusenkyo Scouts!
The Main Event!**

Toro: I thought they were Sailor Senshi?

Derek: They had to go with the dub terminology to get the whole "Scout" angle in there...

Toro: Ah...

Vince: Ladies and Gentlemen, this is the event you've all been waiting for! From the patch of trees on the left, wearing the Sailor Fuku with the really short skirts, the Sailor Scouts!

Derek: <drools>

Vince: ...And from the patch of trees on the right, wearing the Boy Scout Uniforms, from Troop 192, the Jusenkyo Scouts!

Toro: Seems a clear-cut match. Five super-powered girls against five ordinary guys.

Derek: <looks at Sailor Scouts, drools> Let's get the match started! I wanna see some jiggle!

Toro: I miss Shane...well not really...but...

Sailor Moon: <poses as she speaks> All right, you Nega-creeps! Get ready! In the name of the moon, I will punish you!

Matt: Um, we're not from the Negaverse.

Sailor Moon: Oh, sure. Like evil people just go around saying, "Oh, look at me, I'm evil!"

Derek: The Sailor Scouts do know why they're here, right?

Toro: It was Shane who set up this match. I think I'll have to talk to him when he gets back...

Derek: It looks like Mike and Bill Hughes are pulling out bows and arrows.

Toro: And the other Bill is pulling out a rifle.

Derek: Well, he does have every shooting sports merit badge known to man...

Toro: But what's this? Sailor Mercury is on the move!

Derek: <drools>

Sailor Mercury: Mercury Bubbles Blast!

Toro: Everything has been enveloped with a cold, wet mist. It's hard to see anything... It's clearing up... The Jusenkyo Scouts seem to have changed into their alternate forms!

Derek: Bill Hughes has caught Luna's eye and the two of them are going off into the trees. Artemis won't be happy.

Toro: That's sick...

Derek: You don't know Bill Hughes, do you...

Toro: I've been hearing that a lot, lately...

Sailor Moon: Excuse me, miss? Have you seen five evil Boy Scouts somewhere?

Matty: Um, no...

Sailor Moon: Where'd they go?

Toro: What's that in the audience? Some audience members have Dan Wellington!

Derek: He's still on fire, and seems to be enjoying it!

Toro: They're throwing him at Sailor Mars!

Sailor Mars: Mars Fire Ignite!

Toro: It's no good! Dan's enjoying it too much! And Sailor Mars is down!

Derek: Matt, er, Matty seems to have something behind his back!

Toro: It appears to be a can of... Kiwi/Mocha Fruit Juice?

Derek: Don't ask... Oh! And Matt hurls it at Sailor Venus! Blood spatters as it hits her head! She's down! Look at her jiggle as she falls!

Toro: You're sick... Oh! And the crowd is going wild!

Sailor Jupiter: Jupiter Thunder Strike!

Toro: Oh my GOD! Looks like roast duck for dinner tonight! Bill Gelenas goes to avenge Aaron as he jumps on Jupiter and tears at her throat. OH MY GOD! THERE'S BLOOD EVERYWHERE!!

Derek: Mike has been attacking Mercury! She's got scratch marks all over her! Oh, God, I envy Mike getting to touch her like that!

Toro: You're a sick man, Derek.

Derek: Yes, I am!

Toro: Well, the only Sailor Scout left standing is Sailor Moon, and it seems that Matty is ready to take her on!
Sailor Moon: Moon Tiara Magic!

Matty: Fedora Attack!

Toro: Isn't that fedora Matty just threw an ordinary, everyday hat?

Derek: I always thought so...

Toro: DEAR GOD! Sailor Moon's Tiara just went through Matty's hat like a hot knife through butter! Oh, and it just took off Matty's head! OH MY GOD!!!

Derek: Damn.

Voice: Hey, BITCH!!!

Derek: Who's that?

Toro: My God, it's Pretty Sammy!

Derek: <drools>

Sammy: I said we'd meet again! <Sailor Moon cowers>
Take this!

Toro: Sammy has just brought her baton down on Sailor Moon's head!

Derek: Oh my God! You can see Sailor Moon's brain!

Toro: Small, isn't it? Well, I guess Sammy learned her lesson last time, and killed her right away, not giving the other Senshi, er, Scouts, time to rescue her.

Derek: None of the other Sailor Scouts are standing, either, and out of the Boy Scouts, Mike and Bill Gelenas are still alive, and Bill Hughes is probably still alive... doing... <shudders>

Toro: Maybe you're not so sick, after all, Derek.

Derek: Thanks... I think...

Toro: Well, I'm Toro Watanabe.

Derek: And I'm Derek Provost, filling in for Mike Quadrozzi who was filling in for Shane Calloway.

Toro: Please join us next time for another Anime Deathmatch! Remember, we didn't invent violence, we just perfected it!

Anime Deathmatch Boy Scouts ½ II: The Nightmare Continues

by Matthew Atanian

"Anime Deathmatch" created by Jason Bertovich

Anime Deathmatch Boy Scouts ½ II: The Nightmare Continues (Killing Spree Jamboree '99) A Short Introduction

Hello, everybody! Matt Atanian, here! It's been a while since I wrote the original *Boy Scouts ½ Anime Deathmatch*, and to be quite honest I thought it would forever be a one-of-a-kind story. After all, in the original *Boy Scouts ½ Anime Deathmatch*, a good portion of the main cast was killed off.

Even after getting requests from quite a few fans, I still thought I'd never revisit the Deathmatch ring. And then, one day, I was struck with a sudden muse... and, well, here we are...

Before we continue talking about the new Anime Deathmatch, let us digress a bit back to the original one. The version of that story that appears on my website is a bit different then the one that is incorporated into the official Anime Deathmatch storyline. The major difference is the ending, Jason's version of which will now be seen for the very first time on this website:

* * *

Toro: Well, I'm Toro Watanabe.

Derek: And I'm Derek Provost, filling in for Mike Quadrozzini who was filling in for Shane Calloway.

Toro: Please join us next time for another Anime Deathmatch! Remember, we didn't invent violence, we just perfected it...perfected it...perfected it...

(Image start blurring, and going all squiggly and that kind of shit...)

Toro, in bed, sits up...

Toro: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH
HHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!

Toro looks around and gasps for breath...

Toro: Now...will someone PLEASE.... tell... me... WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT ALL ABOUT!?!?!?!? THAT'S IT! NO MORE FAN FICTION BEFORE BED! It's turning me into some sort of FREAK!

Toro then looks and smiles at his at his HIS FUCKING HUGE PILE OF MONEY

Toro: Thank God that can't really happen...Heh heh heh...
Pay Per View in the forest...now that is silly... Oh, yeah...
before I forget...

Toro pulls out a pen and goes to his List of things to hit Shane with and adds "Giant Pizza Spatula" to it...He then pulls the sheets up and settles back in...

[illegible]

To Be Continued...?

* * *

Jason's major change, as you can see, was that he made the whole experience into a bad dream that Toro had. While a little stunned initially, I soon came to see that this was the only way that my story could be kept largely intact and yet still become an official part of the Anime Deathmatch series. After all, in my story Sailor Moon is killed, and she still had a major roll to play in later Deathmatch stories. (Although, judging by what was to come to pass, I'm sure Toro would have loved if that part *hadn't* been a dream...

(This new BS½ ADM will have only one version appearing on both our sites, as I was much more careful this time to make it fit into ADM continuity.)

After the first BS½ ADM, many changes happened in the ADM Universe that would be most helpful for you to be aware of if for some unfathomable reason the only Deathmatch you've ever read is mine.

One of the minor details was five hundred changes to the Anime Deathmatch logo, until it reached it's current (and presumably final) version as used in this story. Also during this time, the format in which the story unfolded gradually changed and became more refined as well, until it too reached the current format as used in this story.

More importantly were some story developments. Of course, the best way to find out what happened would be to go read it for yourself. For those lazy bastards, however, here's the short version:

In the first BS½ ADM, the hosts were Toro Watanabe and Shane Calloway. Yet here we find Toro and Guy Makihashi. What happened to Shane, you ask? Well, Shane was actually the second co-host. The original was Guy, who was killed during the Ifurita (OAV) vs. Ifurita (TV) Deathmatch, when Ifurita blew up the entire arena. (Toro survived by a chance of fate...) However, Shane

later revealed himself to be Guy in disguise, and now is back to hosting in his original identity.

During all of this, Anime Deathmatch was the victim of a vicious corporate takeover at the hands of Bill Gates of Microsoft and Quincy of the Genom Corporation. (Two most evil corporate leaders...) Now in control of Anime Deathmatch, Gates and Quince set about trying to make the lives of Guy and Toro an utter hell...

Also during all of this, Belts were introduced into Anime Deathmatch, one of them being for the Hentai division. (Hentai, if you don't know, is the Japanese word for Pervert.) It came as a total surprise to everyone when Tenchi Masaki, long considered one of the biggest eunuchs in anime history, competed for the belt. He had changed completely, from innocent high schooler to ultra-pimp-daddy almost overnight...

Which brings us to now... Anime Deathmatch is in turbulent times... Toro and Guy have more than had it with Gates and Quincy and things could boil over any moment... Toro's stressed out to the maximum... maybe he needs to unwind with some fanfics before bed?

A few final notes: Of course, it goes without saying that those offended by blood, gore, profanity, and humor in poor taste should not read this. Also, remember, that this is not real. These are fictional characters (albeit some based on real persons). In real life, killing other people, especially in gruesome and graphic ways, is strictly a no-no. Lastly, this story is not a canonical story within the *Boy Scouts ½* Universe.

Now, without further adieu:

Toro Watanabe sighed as his limo pulled to a halt in front of the building he lived in. It was a rather nice building, and the penthouse apartment he had was quite lovely, the best in the building. The second best, of course, belonged to Guy. Fortunately the penthouses were part of their contract, so those bastards Gates and Quincy hadn't been able to take them away... yet...

Toro had just come back from his late night training session. He was in his peak physical condition. He was gonna take pure pleasure in wailing on Gates *and* Quincy. Now if only Guy would get his ass in a gym and actually lift weights instead of looking for change for the candy machine. He sighed to himself and looked at his home.

Still, lately the penthouse didn't excite Toro as much as it once had. Nor did the hordes of attractive, young, nubile ADM groupies that were lined up along the path between his limo door and the entrance to the building. In the past, he would likely have invited a few of them up to see his apartment, but lately he hadn't been in the mood.

It was all the fault of Gates and Quincy, of course. Bastards. ADM had been the victim of a vicious corporate takeover. The stress and worry of what had once been a fun, dream job were beginning to have a serious affect on his life away from work as well. He just couldn't have fun anymore. He could of course quit ADM, but that would be letting Gates and Quincy win, and there was no way in hell he'd let that happen.

He walked the gauntlet from the limo to the building entrance, hardly paying any notice to the hordes of screaming women willing to throw themselves at him. He sighed as the elevator door closed and the lift began it's ascent. He sighed as he swiped his keycard through the lock and opened the door. He sighed as he kicked off his shoes and flopped into a chair.

As he flopped, his hand brushed against something – a pile of papers. He picked the papers up and looked at them. On the top of the first sheet was a title: *Boy Scouts ½, part 14: Perry Joins the Troop.*

"Heh, *Boy Scouts ½*," Toro said aloud. It was one of his favorite fanfic series, as it was rather unique. No other fanfic series he knew of took the approach of introducing completely new characters and using the original characters only a little tiny bit, often not at all. True, many characters were based on real life persons. It was the ultimate in gratuitous self-insertion fics. But still, it was good reading. In fact, Toro recalled once having a weird dream one night after reading too much *Boy Scouts ½* before bed.

He was tired, and from his last experience he knew it was a bad idea to read fanfics before bed, but he was also eager to read this new story. A few paragraphs in, however, he was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Who the hell could that be?" Toro asked, cursing. He walked over to the door and opened it, surprised as all hell to see Matthew Atanian standing on the other side.

"Hello," Matt said, stepping through the doorway. "Mind if I come in?"

"Um... no, not at all," Toro responded, confused.

"Sorry to bother you," Matt said, "but I felt it was time to do another *Boy Scouts ½* Anime Deathmatch."

Toro scratched his head, confused. "What are you talking about?" he asked. "We've never done one."

"Ah, you're confused. Of course. Allow me to explain. First off, I must mention that I am not the fictional character of Matthew Atanian as represented in *Boy Scouts ½*. But rather I am a fictionalized representation of the actual, real life Matt who is the author of *Boy Scouts ½*."

Toro nodded. He didn't understand what Matt was talking about, but felt it would make his headache worse if he asked Matt to clarify.

"Anyway, *Boy Scouts ½* and Anime Deathmatch are, of course, mutually exclusive. Therefore, something had to be done in order to make the first *BS½* ADM fit into both universes. In the *BS½* universe, the way that it fit was that it didn't. The story was declared non-canonical and no

characters have any memory of the story's events. In ADM, the story was presented as a dream that you had."

Toro was beginning to have something of a clue as to what was being said. "Are you implying I'm fictional?" he asked.

"No implication about it," Matt responded. "You are. Don't worry, however. I'm sure that you'll probably just remember all of this as a dream or something."

"Uh huh," Toro said, not convinced. "I don't believe a word of this, you understand."

"Really?" Matt asked. "Fine, answer this."

Matt snapped his fingers, and Billy Gelinas appeared in a puff of smoke. "If the first BS½ ADM was all just a dream, how could there have been a clip from it in the First Anniversary Spectacular?" Billy left as he had come in, disappearing in a puff of smoke.

Toro looked at the puff and responded with the only answer he could: "SHUT UP, BILL!!!" He then slumped back into his chair.

"It's true," Toro asked, "Isn't it? All of it's true. I'm not real."

"Hey," Matt responded, "you're as real as you think you are. As I said, you'll probably remember all of this as a dream, and who's to say it isn't? You ever see the movie Total Recall? Every time I see that, I'm more convinced the whole thing is a dream. Row, row, row your boat, eh?" Matt lowered his voice to a conspiratory whisper. "And hey, as this is all going to be a dream, anyways, we can do this ADM without Gates, Quincy, and their corporate lackeys."

Toro looked up at Matt. He smiled. "You're right. We've got a show to do, damnit!"

Matt smiled. "Great! Let's..." He was interrupted by a knock on the door.

Toro went to answer it and returned a moment later. He handed an envelope to Matt. "It's for you," he said, perplexed.

Matt, similarly perplexed, took the envelope and tore it open. As he read the paper he had extracted from within,

his expression changed from confusion to wonder to utter horror.

"What is it?" Toro asked.

"It's a challenge for a match," Matt said. "A challenge... to me?"



Boy Scouts 11211
The Nightmare Continues
(Killing Spree Jamboree 99)

+The darkened arena becomes ablaze with the usual pyrotechnic display, The crowd cheering holding homemade signs, etc...+

Guy: Hi there folks, I'm Guy Makihashi!

Toro: And I'm Toro Watanabe, and this is ANIME DEATHMATCH!!!

Guy: And this certainly is an exciting night here tonight! For tonight, we are finely free for one evening of the shackles of Gates and Quincy!!!

Toro: That's right, Guy! Not only that, but we have quite a few exciting matches lined up for you, in this, our second Boy Scouts ½ related event!

Guy: I'll never forget the first one... Oh, sweet Washu-chan...

Toro: Anyway, here are the matches we have lined up for you this evening. First off, in a match whose origins can be traced back to the first *BS* ½ ADM, it's Proctor vs. Ifurita in the battle of the flunkies!

Guy: Next we have a pair of Amazon cousins going head to head in Perfume vs. Shampoo!

Toro: Then a surprise challenge to the Hentai Belt in Derek Provost vs. Tenchi Masaki!

Guy: And lastly, our main event! Matthew Atanian, the creator of *Boy Scouts* ½, will face off against a mystery opponent!

Toro: This last match should be full of surprises. No one knows who Matt's mystery challenger is, not even our own Trevor Bravo, who is at this very moment interviewing the mystery challenger...

+Cut to Trevor in locker room with mysterious cloaked figure+

Trevor: Why have you challenged Mr. Atanian to a fight to the death?

Cloaked Figure:

Trevor: Um... Okay... Is there anything at all you wanted to say concerning today's match?

Cloaked Figure:

Trevor: I see... Um... Is it true that you and Senator Palpitine are one and the same?

Cloaked Figure: I am NOT Darth Sidious!

+Cloaked Figure raises hand and makes a pinching gesture. Trevor begins to choke. Cut back to Guy and Toro.+

Toro: Well, I'd hate to be in Matt Atanian's shoes right now!

Guy: We'll check back in with Trevor later. Now for our first match.

Toro: This match goes back to the first *BS½ ADM*, when two of a kind faced off in the ring and left together, seemingly new comrades. Let's take a look at some of that patented old footage...

+Cut to footage from the first *BS½ ADM*+

Jinnai: I am the ruler of Shinonome High School.

Justy: I am the ruler of Boy Scout Troop 192.

Jinnai: / am the ruler of the Bugrom army!

Justy: An army?

Jinnai: Beat that, if you can. Ha ha hahaha HA HA HAHAHahahahAHAHA!!!!

Justy: You need a second in command? That must be tough work. Can I get you some coffee?

Jinnai: What? Coffee?

Toro: What the hell just happened?

Mike: You're forgetting. Justy will squash those under him, but those above him he'll kiss up to like there's no tomorrow.

+crowd boos... shouts of "We want blood! Where's the fighting!? Come on!!!"+

Jinnai: Well, actually, I prefer tea...

Justy: Coming right up! This way, please...

+they walk out of the amphitheater+

Mike: I think, unfortunately, Justy won.

Toro: What do you mean?

Mike: Justy will wait until the time is right and take over from Jinnai. I feel bad for all of El-Hazard... but, hey! At least he'll be out of our hair now! All right!

+Cut back to Guy and Toro+

Toro: They left as comrades, but something has since gone horribly wrong. And now these two are back, and settling things the way they always do... by letting others fight for them!

Name: Proctor

Status: Assistant Senior Patrol Leader

Claim to Fame: Well meaning but klutzy, always foiling his beloved leader's fiendish plans.

Name: Ifurita

Status: Ancient Demon God

Claim to Fame: Well meaning but ditzzy, always foiling her leader's fiendish plans.

+Cut to ring+

Vince (on PA): Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, children of all ages, This is ANIME DEATHMATCH!!! Coming into the ring led by Katsuhiko Jinnai, from the El-Hazard TV Series, Ifurita!!!

Ifurita: Hi all you people! I'm really sorry I blew up you're arena last time! I'm going to be really Evil this time and just blow up my opponent! That'll make my master happy!

Jinnai: That's right, Ifurita! You get that sniveling little worm, Justy!

Vince: And coming into the ring led by Justy Yung, from Boy Scout Troop 192, Proctor!

Proctor: Are you sure about this Captain? Isn't she like some powerful ancient weapon or something?

Justy: Don't you worry about that, now, Proctor! Just get that sniveling little worm, Jinnai!

Justy & Jinnai: Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha hAHAHAHAHAHahaha ha ha ha ha!!!

Jinnai: Stop that, you imbecile! That's my laugh!

Justy: No, you stop it, you peon! That's my laugh!

Mills Lane: Why don't you both stop it and get the hell out my ring?

+Justy and Jinnai leave the ring and stand at opposite corners+

Mills: Okay, you two lackeys, I want a good, clean fight. Now, LET'S GET IT ON!!

+Bell rings.+

Guy: Proctor and Ifurita seem to be sizing each other up...

Toro: No, I think they're just looking at each other, dumbfounded.

Proctor: Captain? Do I have to this? It seems kind of... dangerous?

Ifurita: Master, do I have to do this? It doesn't seem nice to beat up on this guy, and I have to be nice so I can be the best at being evil!

Proctor: Captain?

Ifurita: Master?

Toro: While our attention was drawn by the match, it seems like Jinnai and Justy have vanished!

Guy: I'm getting word from ringside that there seems to have been a struggle. We'll have more for you when we find out what has happened.

Toro: Meanwhile, Proctor and Ifurita seem to be going off for some tea.

Guy: This seems eerily familiar... except without the back stabbing...

Toro: Well, that was unexciting, wasn't it? Anywho, let's check back in with Trevor and see if he has any more for us.

+Cut to Trevor in locker room with Matt Atanian. Trevor is gingerly rubbing his neck.+

Trevor: Well then, any idea what just happened with Justy and Jinnai?

Matt: Of course I know. I'm the one writing this story. In fact, I control everything here. For example...

Trevor: My, that is a lovely fruit bat mangrove nostril.

Matt: See?

Trevor: Why did I just say that?

Matt: I made you say that. As I said, I control everything here.

+Matt snaps his fingers. Trevor becomes a walrus. Matt snaps his fingers again, returning Trevor to normal.+

Trevor: Ahem... Well, then. So what happened to Justy and Jinnai?

Matt: What, and spoil the surprise? You'll find out in good time, don't you worry.

Trevor: I see. Now, the big question is this: Who is your mystery challenger?

Matt: *frowns* Haven't a clue.

Trevor: But don't you control everything here?

Matt: Yes, and that's what worries me. There seems to be a higher force at work here.

Trevor: I see. Well, thank you for the interview.

+Cut back to Guy and Toro.+

Guy: Did Trevor just make it through an entire interview without suffering major bodily harm, while actually getting some interesting information?

Toro: This must be a dream. Only explanation. Anyway, on to the next match:

Name: Perfume

Home Village: Joketsuzoku

Curse: Spring of Drowned Guy

Interest in Main Character(s): Wants to kill 'em

Name: Shampoo

Home Village: Joketsuzoku

Curse: Spring of Drowned Cat

Interest in Main Character: Wants to marry him

+Cut to ring.+

Vince (On PA): Entering the ring, hailing from Perfume's Pizza, one chick with real gender issues, Perfume! And now entering the ring, hailing from the Cat Café, this combatant really is the cat's meow, Shampoo!

Mills: All right, you two, I want a clean fight, two cheeseburgers, a large fry, and a large Sprite! And don't fill the damn cup all the way to the top with ice and put in only a drop of soda! Now, LET'S GET IT ON!!!

+Bell rings+

Perfume: Now, cousin, I show great-grandmother that I am true Amazon warrior!

Shampoo: Don't make Shampoo laugh! You nothing but joke!

+Perfume charges at Shampoo, trips on a shoelace, flies into the ropes, and snaps her neck.+

Guy: Ouch!

Toro: That's gotta hurt!

Cologne: (from audience) That child is such a disappointment...

Guy: Even though we finally got some violence in here... at last... I can't help but feel... cheated. What fun is it when one of the combatants kills themselves... accidentally... first thing in the match?

Toro: I know what you mean, Guy, I know what you mean... Well, let's check back in with Trevor:

+Cut to Trevor in hall way, standing with Makoto Mizuhara and Mike Quadrozzi+

Trevor: Well, we've had a breakthrough in what happened during the Proctor / Ifurita match. With me here is Makoto Mizuhara and Mike Quadrozzi.

Makoto: Hi.

Mike: Hi.

Trevor: Could you explain what has happened here tonight?

Makoto: Well, Mike and I heard about this match up, and thought it would be the perfect opportunity to kill two birds with one stone, as it were.

Mike: That's right. While all of you were distracted by the match...

Makoto: Especially Jinnai and Justy...

Mike: We snuck up on them and captured them both.

Makoto: We then diced them up into tiny little pieces, freeze dried them, put all of the little pieces into handy dandy zip-lock bags, and turned the bags over to the Galaxy Police. The bags will be taken to GP HQ, where they will be put into subspace storage, safe from escape for all eternity.

Mike: The officer we gave the bags to was most helpful. Mihoshi, I think her name was...

Trevor: I have a bad feeling about this... Back to you, Guy and Toro!

+Cut back to Guy and Toro+

Toro: Well, now we have a match that is sure to be exciting...

Guy: And not just because of the violence content!

Toro: That's right! After all, when the Hentai Belt is on the line, there's sure to be some scantily clad women involved!

Guy: And scantily clad women are certainly a big draw for a Boy Scout from Troop 180, and he is here tonight to challenge Tenchi Masaki for the Hentai Belt!

Toro: And to think that not long ago, Tenchi was considered by many to be anime's biggest eunuch. He set that record straight, but now Derek is looking to set a new record straight!

Guy: Um, Toro, you ever wonder why we talk the way we do? Does it ever seem like it just doesn't make sense?

Toro: SHUT UP GUY!!! It's just "announcer speak." You should know, you're an announcer, too...

Name: Tenchi Masaki

Claim to Fame: Former "eunuch," now the biggest pimp daddy in anime history.

Likes: Big shiny belts.

Name: Derek Provost

Claim to Fame: The Leprechaun. The Walking Hormone.

Likes: Things that jiggle other then Jell-O, unless the Jell-O is in a big vat with two scantily clad women in it in the middle of a cat fight... me-ow!!!

Vince: (on PA) Entering the ring... first preceded by his posse giving him a grand ol' entrance...

+Isaac Hayes walks out onto the entrance ramp. Behind Hayes, Ayeka and Ryoko step out in sequin gowns. Isaac motions for a cue, and the theme from "Shaft" Begins to play...+

Hayes: Who is the Prince all the girls wanna see?

Ryoko and Ayeka: Tenchi!

Hayes: You daaaaaaaammnnnnn right.

+Tenchi Masaki walks out onto the ramp, wearing a neon green vest, gold chains, a giant pink pompadour hat with a yellow feather, sequin studded sunglasses and a pair of gold fist rings. The Hentai Belt is draped over one shoulder.+

Vince: Tenchi Masaki!!!

+Crowd cheers+

Hayes: Who is the guy, that all chicks think is superfly?

Ayeka and Ryoko: Tenchi!

Hayes: Can you dig it?

+Tenchi puts a cigar in his mouth that Ayeka lights. Ryoko takes his belt and drapes it over the ropes near their corner.+

Vince: And now entering the ring, with no fanfare at all,

accompanied by no one at all, from Boy Scout Troop 180, Derek Provost!!!

+Derek enters the ring. Tenchi puffs on his cigar. Derek spots Ryoko and Ayeka. Moments later, Derek is standing in a puddle of drool.+

Toro: You know, I have a funny feeling I know what strategy Tenchi is going to use in this match.

Guy: I suspect you're probably right, and if you are then I will be the next challenger for the Hentai Belt.

+Tenchi continues to smoke as Mills Lane checks over the two...+

Mills: Okay, you two...

Derek: I'M THE LEPRECHAUN, DON'T TRY TO KILL ME @\$%!!!

Tenchi: Hold on a moment, I have a "proposition" for Mr. Provost here...

Guy: Sign me up as the next challenger!!!

Tenchi: Now you could try to win that belt, KNOWING full well that I'm gonna kick your ass. But tonight, I'm gonna make you the deal of a lifetime. In exchange for forfeiting the match, not only do you get to live, you can also have the lovely Miss Ryoko *for the whole damn night*.

Derek: The whole night?

+Tenchi nods+

Derek: Ryoko's the jiggly one there, right?

Ryoko: **whispering to herself** It's only for one night...it's

for Tenchi...it's only for one night... He promised that this is the last time...

+Tenchi nods+

Derek: But... if I beat you and become the Hentai Champion, don't I get *both* the girls, *all* the time?

Ayeka: We will never abandon Lord Tenchi!

Tenchi: You think you stand a chance, little man?

Derek: I'M THE LEPRECHAUN, DON'T TRY TO KILL ME @\$%!!!

Tenchi: Still, I can be reasonable... What if I throw in the lovely Miss Ayeka as well?

+Ayeka gasps. Ryoko snickers at her.+

Derek: Both girls? *All night?*

Tenchi: *All night, all yours...*

+Derek ponders this for less than a nanosecond before dragging Ayeka and Ryoko out of the ring with him.+

Hayes: Who's the man who's the Hentai king?

+Silence... Tenchi looks confused for a moment before realizing that since both Ayeka and Ryoko are gone, there's no one to sing the next part of the song. Tenchi grabs his belt and sheepishly leaves the ring with Hayes.+

Toro: Well, then... Um...

Guy: Think we'll ever get a real match tonight?

Toro: Well, the next one certainly has some promise. The main event!

Name: Matthew Atanian

Fanfic Creations: *Boy Scouts ½*

Most Recent Embarrassment: Realizing that he spent enough at Otakon 1999 to solve all national budget problems.

Name: ????

Fanfic Creations: ????

Most Recent Embarrassment: ????

Toro: Ah, the excitement of a mystery challenger!

Guy: We should find out soon what his or her identity is!

+Cut to ring.+

Vince: (on PA) Entering the ring, wearing the black trench-coat and fedora, none other than the very guy who is typing this as I say it, MATTHEW ATANIAN!!! And coming into the ring from the other corner, a mysterious guy who gets his disguises from Cloaks 'r' Us, um... GUY WHOSE NAME I DON'T KNOW!!!

Cloaked Figure: Are you ready to die, Matthew?

Matt: That voice... It couldn't be...

+The mysterious man throws off his cloak to reveal...+

Toro and Guy: Jason Betrovich!!!!

+Jason is dressed like Roy Bromwell from Rival Schools, wearing tennis shoes, light-blue denim jeans, a white dress shirt with the sleeves partially rolled, black fingerless fighting gloves, a red dress vest, and a dark red tie. +

Matt: Jason!? But why?

Jason: I'll tell you why... You never return my e-mails any more! You're too busy with that damned Final Fantasy VIII! "Oh, I'm sorry, Jason, I can't talk to you now. I'm too busy fantasizing about Rinoa."

Matt: Actually, not that this helps, but I'm partial to Quistis...

Jason: Not only that, but your website wouldn't be half as popular as it is if I hadn't helped you with some promotion... and yet you've got over 10,000 hits and I'm not even at 6,000 yet! This is the thanks I get for listing your site on AnimeLinks.com!

Matt: And who do you think listed your site on the Anime Pitstop? And where did you get the idea to join the Anime Fan Fiction Webring? And where did you get the idea to do a first anniversary contest for your website? Hmmm? Some people are so ungrateful...

Jason: Oh yeah? Oh, yeah?!? Well what ever happened to those *Ranma* tapes I asked you to make for me? One little favor, and I'm still waiting for those tapes!

Matt: Well, okay, I'm starting to see your point...

Jason: And one last thing! Why the fuck can you never even spell my last name right? Have I ever screwed up Atanian? No! I don't think so! For the last time, asshole, it's *Bertovich*, not *Betrovich*!!!

Guy: Whoops! Hope he didn't notice!

Toro: Can't blame us... It was Matt who typed our words.

Guy: Good thinking, Toro. Anyway, with all of this arguing, I think we're in for a good match at last.

Toro: I hope you're right.

Mills: All right, you two. I want a good clean fight, I want a nice house in the suburbs, I want a wife, three point four kids, and a dog named Suzy. Now, LET'S GET IT ON!!!

+Bell rings.+

Matt: Now, Jason, I hope you weren't planning on any fancy Rival Schools techniques. As you know, I've barely ever played that game and wouldn't know how to describe anything as I write this.

Jason: Damn you, Matt. Fine, I guess I'll just have to resort to stupid, simple, easy to describe moves!

+Jason delivers a swift uppercut to Matt, and then follows that up with a couple of blows to the stomach.+

Jason: How's that?

Matt: *between coughs and hacks* That... was good... thanks... easy to... type...

+Matt catches his breath+

Matt: But you're forgetting one crucial thing, Jason-kun....Jason: Oh? What's that?

Matt: I'm writing this story... I am **GOD** here! And now a scene from, "Pete, part two."

+Jason begins flying around, and the sounds of fists impacting with him can be heard. It seems very much like an invisible force is pummeling him.+

Jason: *between coughs and hacks* My compliments... that was... good, yourself... but... *you're* forgetting something...

Matt: Oh? What's that?

Jason: You may be writing this story, but you set it in *my* Universe. Therefore, *I* am God here, not you! I've let you have your fun long enough. No more games!

Matt: Oh... Oh, shit...

+Jason delivers a swift leaping uppercut to Matt...+

Jason: TWISTER UPPER!!!

+Jason then leaps and slams his fist into the ground, a moment later the ground under Matt explodes...+

Jason: TOUCHDOWN WAVE!!!

+Matt flies into the corner...+

Jason: How's that? See, you didn't have to lift a finger to get your ass kicked... heh *smirk*

Matt: I commend you... *wipes blood from mouth* But... dammit! QUIT SMIRKING!

Jason: Don't like my smirking, eh? Just for that... heh...

+Jason snaps his fingers and four exact copies of the English Dub Minmei appear around Matt. They begin singing.+

Minmeis: Stage lights, splashing, the feeling's smashing...

+Matt desperately clutches his ears and screams in inhuman terror.+

Guy: My, God!

Toro: Oh, the humanity!

Audience Member: Hey! Jason! Matt! I challenge whoever wins to a Jell-O wrestling match!

Guy: Was that?

Toro: Yes, it was!

Guy: The Bouncy Goddess herself!

Toro: Fenny Lin!!!

Matt: Jell-O wrestling... with Fenny...

Jason: Oh... Oh, shit...

+Matt suddenly swings his arm in a wide arc, smashing the head of each Minmei as if they were watermelons and his arm was a Sledge-o-matic™.+

Jason: Matt... Friend... I may have been a bit hasty there... Matt?

+Matt grabs Jason by the tie and lifts him off the ground. He swings him in a wide arc, until he's built up enough force for Jason to reach escape velocity.+

Matt: Jason?

Jason: Yes, Matt?

Matt: Quick trivia question for you... What was the ending theme song for Neon Genesis Evangelion?

Jason: "Fly me to the Moon?"

Matt: Gladly!

Jason: Noooooooooooooooooo!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

+Matt lets Jason go. Jason goes flying, smashing through the roof. He keeps flying away, disappearing into infinity, still swearing.+

Jason: Screw you Ataniaaaaaaannnnnnnnnn...

Guy: Oh, dear... Who is going to write the next Deathmatch?

Toro: Don't worry... I think this is all just a dream... I hope... Isn't it?

+Fenny, wearing a Sailor Fuku, runs onto the ring and throws her arms around Matt. The two walk off into the sunset, hand in hand.+

Guy: *watching Matt and Fenny walk off* Yes, but whose dream?

Toro: Well, that's all for this evening.

Guy: I'm Guy Makihashi.

Toro: And I'm Toro Watanabe, for all of us at Anime Deathmatch, "We Didn't Invent Violence, We Just Perfected It." Goodnight!

End Transmission

* * *

"What the hell is this?"

Jason ~~Betrovich~~ Bertovich stared at his computer screen in shock. He had just finished reading the new Anime Deathmatch story his friend Matt had just written.

* * *

Toro Watanabe slowly opened his eyes. Had he dozed off? He must have... He was still seated in the comfortable chair he had flopped into after coming home. Clutched in his hand was the *Boy Scouts* ½ story he had been reading.

"Thank god," he said, "just a dream."

Or was it?

Anime Deathmatch Boy Scouts ½ III: KSJ2K

by Matthew Atanian

"Anime Deathmatch" created by Jason Bertovich

Anime Deathmatch Boy Scouts ½ III: KSJ2K (Killing Spree Jamboree 2000) A Short Introduction

Hello, everybody! Matt Atanian, here!

After I wrote the second *Boy Scouts* ½ ADM, Jason-kun told me that it should be an annual ADM event! Well, he may have said it half-jokingly, but you know the old saying. "Be careful what you wish for..."

Once again, there have been quite a few changes in ADM since the last *Boy Scouts* ½ one. Format-wise, it seems my prediction that the format had stabilized and would probably not undergo any more changes was incorrect... and the new format is reflected within this story. (The changes were not as drastic between this and the most previous as they were between the most previous and the one prior to that, however.)

The largest change, format-wise, for ADM was the start of AnimeDeathmatch.com. That's right, ADM got it's own website. Many of the earlier matches have not yet been moved over from Jason-kun's old site, and can still be found on BoneparteOzaki's Little Old-fashioned Interdimensional House of Horrors. Story-wise, many events also took place. However, many of them are not relevant to this story, so rather than spoil them for you I'll leave you with the choice of going to read them for yourselves if you wish. I will mention that Guy and Toro

triumphed over corporate domination, however. Also, when a new interviewer was needed the job went to John Holscher (whom some of you may know from the *Perspectives* character).

A few final notes: Of course, it goes without saying that those offended by blood, gore, profanity, and humor in poor taste should not read this. Also, remember, that this is not real. These are fictional characters (albeit some based on real persons). In real life, killing other people, especially in gruesome and graphic ways, is strictly a no-no. Lastly, this is story is not a canonical story within the *Boy Scouts ½ Universe*.

Well, time for the third Boy Scouts ½ Anime Deathmatch. Let's get it on!

Backstage at the ADM arena, Toro Watanabe was muttering to himself. "*Evil* Tamahome, *evil* Tamahome... Blast that Guy!"

For some reason, during the latest show Guy had deemed it necessary to "correct" Toro every time he had referred to Tamahome by insisting he refer to him as, "*Evil* Tamahome."

Toro hated being corrected.

Guy, meanwhile, was off to the side, his latest Toro-inflicted head injury being bandaged by Washu, decked out in her nurse's costume. He noticed Toro and waved him over. "Toro!"

Toro sighed. "What do you want, Guy?"

"Hey, after I'm done here, want to go out and throw a few back?" Guy asked as if nothing had happened.

The blissfully ignorant look on his co-host's face made it almost impossible for Toro to hold himself back from wielding The Makihashi Mallet once more. He stopped himself however, as another, much more fiendish and insidious plan began to form itself in his brain.

"Nah," Toro said. "We need to get to sleep early tonight so we can be fresh for that photo shoot tomorrow morning."

"But Toro, you know how much trouble I have getting to sleep without a 120 proof blood supply!"

Toro smiled. "Guy, my friend, perhaps all you need is a little light reading before bed." Toro put down his briefcase, opened it up, and pulled out a thick stack of papers that he then handed to Guy.

"*Boy Scouts ½?*" Guy said, looking at them.

Toro nodded. His smile widened.

"I thought you said that fanfiction gave you nightmares if you read it before you went to sleep?"

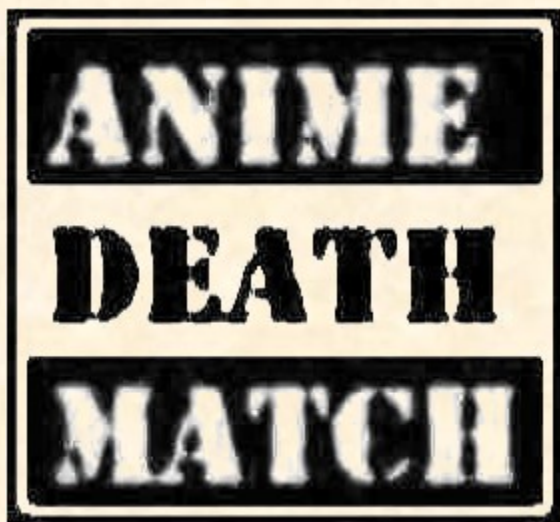
"What?" Toro feigned shock. "I never said that! No, you must be mistaken. The best nights of sleep I've ever gotten was after reading a bit of the ol' *Boy Scouts ½!*"

"Well, if you say so, Toro, it must be true!"

"Of course it's true," Toro said reassuringly. "Have I ever led you astray?"

Begin Transmission

Broadcasting around the globe, to several parallel dimensions, the leader in Anime-related Brutality Sports Entertainment...



BOY SCOUTS 1 / 2

KSJ2K

(Killing Spree Jamboree 2000)

+Pyrotechnics explode and thousands of fans jump to their feet. They're all women, and they're all wearing "I LOVE GUY" t-shirts.+

Audience: *In Unison* We love you Guy!

+A suave laugh comes as we cut to the announcer's booth. We see that the laugh is coming from Guy Makahashi, dressed in a shiny new tuxedo. His hair is immaculately combed and his teeth and eyes sparkle with brilliance unparalleled by the brightest stars in the heavens. Next to him sits Toro Watanabe, wearing a diaper, a dunce's cap, and nothing else. For some inexplicable reason, he is holding a cat by the tail. Much to the cat's displeasure, Toro is swinging it around violently.+

Guy: I'm Guy Makahashi!

Cat: Mreooowwwwwww!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

+Guy good-naturedly chuckles as he ducks to avoid a close pass by the cat.+

Toro: And I'm the biggest idiot in the world!

Guy: *still laughing in suave good nature* Yes, of course you are, Toro.

+Toro hits himself in the forehead with the cat and tumbles backwards out of the announcer's booth. Guy laughs good naturedly.+

Guy: Oh my! Looks like once again we'll need someone to fill in for poor Toro.

+Matt Atanian drops down from the ceiling in a rig like the one Tom Cruse had in Mission Impossible. He lands right in the seat that Toro vacated and unclasps the harness.+

Matt Atanian: Mind if I fill in?

Guy: Not at all, my friend. As a matter of fact, I can't think

of anyone better to guest host, as this is a *Boy Scouts* ½ related Deathmatch special!

Matt: Another one? Toro's had two of these dreams already.

+Guy laughs good naturedly.+

Guy: Well, I suppose it's time for our first match. For this match, Derek Provost of Troop 180 will be locked in a hermetically sealed dome that we've specially installed over the ring. And as of yet, he doesn't even know who his opponent will be.

Matt: That's right. It's a mystery opponent for Derek. And here to interview him before the match, we have a special guest interviewer.

Guy: Or shall we say... interviewers?

Matt: That's right, Guy. Here to interview Derek is...

Guy and Matt: The entire female cast of *Goldenboy*!

+Cut backstage to find Derek Provost standing in a puddle of drool. Standing with him is the president of Tian Software, wearing a red dress so tight and revealing that she may as well be wearing nothing at all; Naoko in her school uniform; Noriko from the noodle shop; Ayuko Hayamizu clad in her thin bathing suit; Reiko Terayama in her racing clothes, sitting astride her motorcycle and occasionally revving the engine; and Chie from the anime studio.+

Madame President: Derek, thank you for speaking to us.

Derek: *drooling* No problem.

Naoko: So, Derek, this is your third appearance in Anime Deathmatch, is it not?

Derek: *drooling* Yes, it is. I almost feel more at home here than I do within the regular *Boy Scouts* ½ series. Here, I feel as if I have a part to play... as if I'm important.

Noriko: And you don't feel so in *Boy Scouts* ½?

Derek: *drooling* Here I've done everything from help announce a match to successfully compete in a match of my own.

Ayuko: But didn't you lose your match?

Derek: *drooling* Technically, I suppose... But it sure was worth it!

+Derek drools at the memory of Ayeka and Ryoko.+

Reiko: And in *Boy Scouts* ½ you don't feel as important?

Derek: *drooling* No! All I am there is a two-bit character who spends all of his time lusting after women or cowering in fear from a small aluminum can. Mind you, the lust part I don't mind... But that Kiwi/Mocha Fruit Juice is just too much! I don't want people to think that all I am is some guy who is afraid of fruit juice!

Chie: Thank you very much, Derek.

Derek: *drooling* No problem. What are you ladies doing after the show? Want to get together?

All: Sorry, Derek. We've got to find Kentaro!

+Derek pouts.+

Derek: *under his breath* Lucky bastard...

All: Back to you, Guy.

+Cut back to Guy and Matt in the announcer's booth.+

Guy: Thank you, ladies.

Matt: Well, Derek is being led into the ring now by Mills Lane.

+Cut to the ring.+

Vince (on PA): Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, Otaku and Otakettes, children of all ages, and special guests from the Batley Townswomen's Guild... This is ANIME DEATHMATCH!!!

+Audience breaks into a frenzy of cheers, except for one group of old ladies covered in mud who are too busy attacking each other and clubbing one another with their purses.+

Vince (on PA): Coming into the ring now, returning from his glorious defeat in the last *BS*½ Deathmatch, from Troop 180, Derek "The Walking Hormone" Provost!

Mills: All right, Derek, I want a good clean fight. When you're ready, give us the signal and we'll lower the dome.
Derek: Um... where's my opponent?

Mills: You'll find out soon enough. Now, let's get it on!

+Mills walks out of the ring, leaving a very confused Derek behind. Derek gives a weak thumbs-up and a huge, clear dome lowers from the ceiling.+

Guy: That dome is specially crafted from Transparent Gundarium Alloy, making it virtually impervious to any form of attack.

+The dome makes contact with the ring and a series of noises come from the sealing mechanisms.+

Matt: And there go the seals. Now not even a microbe can get in or out of that ring.

Guy: You could release e-coli inside the ring and feel safe taking your family on a picnic right next to it.

Matt: And there's still no sign of Derek's opponent. Are we just going to sit here and wait until Derek asphyxiates? That could take a while...

Guy: Wait! Something's happening... A small panel has opened in the center of the ring and something is being raised up... Can it be?

Matt: I think it is...

Derek: NooooooooooooooooooooooooooooOOOOOOOOOOOO
OOO!!!!!!!

+Derek watches in horror as a small aluminum can is raised into the ring. The can is quite beaten up, covered in gouges, scratches, bite marks, and blood... But it is still completely intact and unopened.+

+The bell rings+

Derek: NooooooooooooooooooooooooooooOOOOOOOOOOOO
OOO!!!!!!!

Matt: And so far, Derek is just standing there in shock.

Guy: Kiwi/Mocha seems to be taking its time sizing up its opponent.

Matt: This could take a while. Even though technically this match has started, shall we go over the stats?

Guy: Yes, let's.

Name: Derek Provost

Bio: Member of Troop 180 and frequent guest in Fan-fic inspired nightmares of ADM hosts.

Name: Kiwi/Mocha Fruit Juice

Bio: Mysterious, unopenable can of unspeakable vileness and frequent guest in the nightmares of Derek Provost

Matt: Derek seems to have recovered from his initial shock and is cautiously circling his opponent. The Kiwi/Mocha is confident and has yet to make a move.

Guy: Derek feints left... He feints right...

Matt: He charges! Oh my god!

Guy: Derek is swinging madly, left and right! The can is taking it without even breaking a sweat! It's inhuman!

Matt: Derek delivers a swinging kick! The can goes flying into the dome!

Guy: The can uses the ricochet from the dome to launch a flying attack at Derek! It's moving at a fantastic speed! Can Derek move in time?

Matt: No! Derek's stuck like a deer in headlights...

Guy: Like shit on shingles...

Matt: Like Lum on Ataru... Lucky bastard...

+The can flies at Derek and hits him smack dab in the middle of the forehead with such force that his head explodes, splattering on the inside of the dome. The can hits the dome again and falls to the ring, rolls a bit, and comes to a stop... still perfectly intact.+

Guy: That had to hurt!

Matt: Actually, I doubt he had time to feel a thing.

Guy: Well, on to our next match!

Matt: One is the nicest money grubbing conniver you could hope to meet. The other is a pet with a secret.

Guy: When secrets are revealed, will this poor kitty stand a chance? I think we're in for some carnage tonight, folks!

Matt: Let's see those stats!

Name: Nicole Porter

Bio: member of Girl Scout Troop 42, a nice girl if a) she doesn't want your money or b) you haven't been pretending to be a cat so you can take advantage of her and she finds out

Name: Neko-chan

Bio: Nicole's pet cat... so she thinks...

+Mills Lane leads Nicole into the ring. Neko-chan is already there, leashed onto the opposite corner of the ring and frantically trying to get away.+

Nicole: So let me get this straight. All I have to do is spray Neko-chan with a water gun and I get two hundred bucks?

Mills: That's what they told you, missy. Here, I was instructed to give you this.

+Mills hands Nicole a super-soaker with steam rising from it.+

Nicole: Um... Okay. I'm sure Neko-chan will understand. It's only water.

+Neko-chan's frantic escape attempts increase dramatically but prove no less futile.+

Mills: Let's get it on!

+Bell rings.+

Guy: This could get ugly.

Matt: I hope no one in the audience ate recently.

Nicole: Neko-chan, calm down! It's only water. Do this for me and I'll get you some of the expensive cat food, okay?

+Neko-chan meows pitifully, as if pleading.+

Matt: I can't bear to watch!

+Nicole aims and fires. Neko-chan is enveloped in a cloud of steam.+

Neko-chan: Meeoooooooouuuch! That's hot!

Nicole: Neko-chan...? You... You spoke?

+The steam begins to clear, revealing Bill Hughes leashed to the corner post. He is frantically untying the leash.+

Nicole:

Bill: Um... hi.

Guy: How long do you think it'll take her to figure it all out?

Matt: To figure out that her beloved pet cat, who has seen her change clothes, who has shared her bed, was Hughes all along?

+Guy nods.+

Matt: I give it another zero point three five seven seconds.

Nicole: You... It was you all along? It was you... all along!?!?

Hughes: Oh shit...

Nicole: Die! Die! Die! Die! Die! Die! Die! Die! Die! Die!

+With each cry of "Die!" Nicole brings her foot down hard on Hughes' head.+

Guy: How can he take that kind of punishment?

Hughes: Please... Nicole, I love you!

Nicole: Love? Love!?

Matt: Oh my god! She's gouged his eyes out!

Nicole: That was for all of the times you... you looked at me!

+Hughes howls in pain.+

Guy: What's that she just put on her arm?

Matt: Looks like some kind of clawed gauntlet. I don't even want to know where she got it!

Guy: Oh my god! She's... She's...

Matt: She's literally tearing his heart out!

Guy: If this wasn't fiction, I think I'd be sick!

Matt: This isn't a match, it's a massacre!

Guy: But sometimes, that's just what the ADM fans enjoy!
Audience (except the Batley Townwomen's Guild, who are still fighting amongst themselves): Nicole! Nicole! Nicole!

+Nicole stands over the fallen Hughes. Hughes, a look of terror on his face, looks up at her as she begins to feed on his still beating heart.+

Matt: I think things are starting to become a bit too excessive for my tastes.

Guy: But aren't you writing this?

Matt: Yeah... what am I thinking?

Guy: Well, we do seem to have a clear-cut winner, Shall we move onto the next match?

Matt: Yes, let's.

Guy: All right! The main event!

Matt: In the past, we've had the Jusenkyo Scouts vs. the Sailor Scouts... we've had Matt vs. Jason... What could we possibly do to top that? What would be the ultimate *Boy Scouts* ½ related Deathmatch?

Guy: A team up of Matt, Mike, and Jason vs. Rumiko Takahashi, Chris Carter, and Kevin Smith?

Matt: That one's not for Deathmatch, but it's coming soon to Court TV.

Guy: Ah...

Matt: Also in the past, we've had Kuntz vs. Kuno... Perfume vs. Shampoo... But now... The ultimate team-up of *Boy Scouts* ½ vs. *Ranma* ½!

Guy: No way! You don't mean...?

Matt: Here we are folks! Matt Atanian, Mike Quadrozzi, Aaron Abdelmaseh, and Bill Gelinas vs. Ranma Saotome, Genma Saotome, Ryoga Hibiki, and Mousse!

Guy: Well, you'd better get down to the ring, then. What shall I do for a co-host?

Matt: No, I'm author-Matt. Competing in the match is character-Matt.

Guy: Ah. But hold on, didn't Matt and Aaron die in their last Deathmatch appearance?

Matt: Hey, Guy. This is your dream. You figure it out.

Guy: Well, our own John "Fanboy" Hoelscher earlier did interviews with both teams. Let's go to those now.

+Cut to John, dressed as Char Aznable, in the BS½ locker room with Team Boy Scouts.+

John: So, this is actually your second time in the Deathmatch ring, is it not?

Matt: That's right, John. It's good to be back.

John: Even though you died last time, didn't you, Matt?

Matt: *rubbing his neck* Yeah, I suppose I did... But still, my team one last time, kicking some serious Sailor Moon ass, and we intend to kick even more ass this time.

John: Does it concern any of you that your opponents are trained martial artists and you are... well, you're nothing?

Mike: That did worry us at first, but we sat down and had a nice chat amongst ourselves and we came up with what we hope will be a winning strategy.

John: One of your former teammates is not fighting with you this evening.

Aaron: That's right, Hughes has his own match.

John: Are you worried about this loss in your numbers?

Aaron: Well, not particularly. After all, if we had him, our team would have one more then our opponents. Not terribly fair if you ask me.

John: Not terribly fair, even considering that you're going up against – let me stress this again – four superbly trained martial artists?

Aaron: Well... um...

John: How do you feel about Hughes's match tonight?

Gelinas: Well, it was nice knowing Hughes. We'll miss him.

John: So you don't suspect he'll have much of a chance?

Matt, Mike, Aaron, and Gelinas: No way in hell!

+Cut to John, now dressed as Kodai Susumu, in the *Ranma* ½ locker room with Team Ranma+

John: So, how do you guys feel about *Boy Scouts* ½?

Ranma: How dare they call themselves *Ranma* Fanfiction? I'm nowhere in it!

Genma: Ranma, my boy, don't be such a whiner!

Ryoga: You've got it lucky, Ranma! I'm the only *Ranma* character who does appear regularly, and all they ever have me doing is wandering around lost!

Ranma: So? How's that different from usual?

Ryoga: *What was that, Ranma!?*

John: Um... guys, save it for your opponents! So, Mousse, what are your thoughts?

+Mousse glomps onto John.+

Mousse: Shampoo!!

John: *sweatdrop* Put your glasses on!

+Mousse does as instructed.+

Mousse: Hey! You're not Shampoo!

+Mousse shoves John away, throwing him into the lockers. The lockers become quite dented and John slumps over, unconscious.+

+Cut back to Guy and Matt.+

Guy: So, Matt, any predictions on the outcome of this match?

Matt: As I *am* writing this, it would be unfair of me to make such predictions. Suffice to say, the outcome shall probably be the last thing anyone expects.

Guy: So, Akane will appear, she and Ranma will finely admit they love each other, Sarah will appear and declare her love for Matt, both teams will get together and go out for a nice dinner at a fancy restaurant, and everyone will live happily ever after?

Matt: Um... no. Make that the second to last thing anyone would expect.

Vince (on PA): Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, Otaku and Otakettes, children of all ages, and special guests from the Batley Townswomen's Guild... Time for the main event!!!!

+Audience breaks into a renewed frenzy, except for the Batley Townswomen's Guild who are still too busy attacking each other and clubbing one another with their purses.+

Vince: Coming into the ring, here for their second time, from Springfield, Massachusetts... Team Boy Scouts... THE JUSENKYO SCOUTS!!!

+Audience bursts out cheering, except for the Moonies who hiss and boo.+

Character-Matt: I don't think they like us...

Mike: Well, Sailor Moon's gained a pretty big following... I'm sure they still remember our victory over her.

Aaron: I hope they're ready for a repeat performance!

Vince: And now coming into the ring, hailing from the Nerima District of Tokyo, Japan... Team Ranma!

+The whole audience bursts into tremendous applause and cheers, even the Moonies.+

Gelinas: Somehow I don't think we're the favorites here...

Character-Matt, Mike, and Aaron: SHUT UP, BILL!

Mills: Right! Will the team leaders come forward?

+Character-Matt and Ranma walk to the center of the ring, where Mills Lane is standing.+

Mills: Okay, this is a four-on-four free for all match, no holds barred, hot and cold running hoses provided at each corner of the ring. Once the bell rings, the match continues until one entire team is mashed into a sweet bloody pulp. You understand?

+Ranma nods. Character-Matt gulps and nods.+

Mills: Okay! Let's get it on!

+Bell rings.+

Guy: And both teams are so far staying on their sides of the ring, sizing each-other up.

Matt: A pity that these are the *Boy Scouts* ½ characters competing and not their real-life counterparts... I know some information that I'm sure could be used against them.

Guy: Such as?

+Matt suddenly stands up and points down into the ring.+

Matt: *shouting* Look! A hundred-yen coin!

Genma: What? Where?

Guy: I can't believe it! Genma is looking for the coin, leaving himself open to attack! Oh, and Aaron delivers a swift shoulder into Genma's heavily padded stomach!

Ranma: Yo, old man! Haven't you learned yet not to fall for that old trick?

Genma: Ranma, my boy, have I not taught you to respect your elders? You shame me, boy...

Ranma: Find me some elders worth respecting, and maybe I will!

Guy: What an unexpected development as Ranma and Genma suddenly start fighting each other!

Matt: How is that an unexpected development?

Guy: Didn't you give Team Boy Scouts an unfair advantage with that hundred-yen ploy?

Matt: What can I say? I am a benevolent God...

Ryoga: What are you two doing? Those Boy Scouts are the enemy!

+Aaron grabs one of the hoses and sprays Ryoga with cold water.+

Guy: Had to happen sooner or later... Let the fun begin!

+Mousse grabs a hose and sprays Mike. Character-Matt grabs a hose and attempts to spray Mousse, but Ranma and Genma tumble in the way and end up getting hit. Mousse turns his hose on Character-Matt. Matty then succeeds in getting Mousse.+

Matt: Lots and lots of changing going on down there... Now Ranma got Aaron and Gelinias.

Guy: It all comes down to opposite forms.

Voice: Pretty ladies!!

Guy and Matt: Oh, no...

+Ranma and Matty scream as Happosai appears

from nowhere and attempts to glomp onto them in rather... delicate places.+

Ranma: Take that, you old freak!

Matty: And that!

Guy: An unexpected development...

Matt: Happosai appearing and glomping every attractive woman in a ten kilometer radius, or Ranma and Matty working together?

Guy: The latter.

Matt: Now that one I will admit was unexpected.

Guy: Finely some more friction between the teams, as the ducks square off.

+Mousse is flinging all sorts of knives, chains, and other weapons at Aaron.+

Matt: He deftly dodged left, then right... Getting ever closer... What is Aaron's plan?

Guy: Oh! He's got Mousse's glasses, and he's flying high over the ring with them. Mousse is flying blind, now... And there goes a knife flying.

Matt: My god, right into Genma's rear end!

Genma: Brarroror!!!!

Matt: And now Genma's swiping away at Mousse... And Gelinas charges at P-chan!

Guy: He's got P-chan in his mouth and he's swinging him around wildly!

Matt: Where's FOX when you need them? They could be filming this for a new installment of When Animals Attack!

Guy: Can it be? P-chan has squealed his last... Seems he's truly lost his way.

Ranma: Ryoga! No!

Guy: And Ranma seeks to avenge her fallen comrade.

Matt: Always knew those two were friends. Pity it took the death of one of them for either of them to admit it.

Guy: Matty moves in to block Ranma's attack... Cat fight! Cat fight!

Matt: But Hughes is dead from the last match, and Shampoo isn't competing...

Guy: No, two girls.

Matt: Pity Provost has to miss this. What am I saying! One of those two girls is me! (Well, sort of...)

Guy: Good thing that's only sort of, Matt. Otherwise you'd be in a lot of pain right now. Oh, that has got to hurt!

Matt: Yes, but Matty bought Gelinas enough time to charge at Ranma...

Guy: And Aaron's sweeping back in towards Genma...

Matt: Who, by the way, has just eaten Mousse...

Voice: Ready ladies?

Guy and Matt: Who was that?

+A woman who looks very much like Eric Idle in drag suddenly walks into the ring. She turns towards the audience and blows a whistle. Suddenly, the ring fills with middle-aged British ladies in drab clothing, all bashing away at each other (and the legitimate fighters in the match) with their purses.+

Guy: What the bloody hell is going on?

+The mayhem continues until ten minutes later... Then, the woman with an uncanny resemblance to Eric Idle again blows the whistle and the women disperse.+

Guy: I say again, "What the bloody hell is going on?"

Matt: I can't see any motion on the ring... Just the competitors lying still in a pool of blood.

+Mills walks into the ring and looks around a bit.+

Mills: And the winner is... The Batley Townswomen's Guild!

Suddenly Guy bolted awake.

"What was that?"

He looked around and saw that the television was on, and that was what had woken him. Pity, he had been having such a good dream.

Monty Python's Flying Circus was on, so he watched a bit of that. Then, he read some more *Boy Scouts* ½ before finely going to sleep once more, this time for the rest of the evening.

Toro arrived early for the photo shoot the next morning. He was feeling extra good for some reason this morning, and he couldn't quite put his finger on why.

He couldn't wait for Guy to arrive, so he could see how tired and shagged out his co-host would be. Ah, yes, that was the reason he was feeling extra good this morning.

He laughed.

He walked into the studio and immediately stopped laughing when he saw a bright eyed Guy chatting with a rather attractive young photographer's assistant.

"Guy?!"

"Oh, Toro! Hi." Guy turned his attention back to the young woman.

"GUY!?!?"

Guy looked back to Toro. "Hey, Toro, are you the biggest idiot in the world?"

Toro blinked only once before responding, "No. You are."

Guy smiled and once more turned back to the photographer's assistant. "All right!" he said to himself. "This is *not* a dream."

Toro sighed heavily and pulled Guy away from the woman. "Um, Guy, did you read that stuff I gave you yesterday?"

Guy smiled. "Sure did. It was just like you said. Best night of sleep I've ever gotten!"

Toro balked. "No... no disturbing dreams or anything?"

"Disturbing?" Guy smiled. "No, not disturbing... Now, if you'll excuse me, Toro..."

Guy went back over to the photographer's assistant.

Toro sat down heavily and buried his face in his hands. "Why me? *Why me!?*"

Afterword

Howdy, folks! I hope you've enjoyed this, the second published collection of *Boy Scouts ½* stories. (As with last time, this isn't anything *terribly* special, I suppose, since it is *self*-published.)

Anyway, one bit of house keeping before we get to far into the notes. In the first book, I told you that if you wanted to read anything not yet available in book form, you should go to The *Boy Scouts ½* Universe website. Well... the address for the website that I gave in the last* book? Yeah, ignore that. Between then and now, that website sadly went bye-bye.

But hey! The website is new and improved in a new location! So if you want to find it, go to the following URL:

<http://bs1-2.weebly.com>

Now, on with business.

Well, with this volume and the first, that should cover everything that takes place within "Year One" of The Boy Scouts ½ Universe.

Sort of...

As I mentioned, Jason is rebooting *Perspectives*. As of now, he has written a new *Perspectives I*, and as I write this I expect the new *Perspectives II* shortly. But due to some timey-wimey stuff involved with this reboot, I'd still include the original *Perspectives I – X* in my recommended reading, and would suggest holding off on the reboot until done with everything else in "Year One." So yeah, having this Book II on your shelf is still entirely appropriate.

Someday, probably many years from now alas, there will hopefully be a Book IV with the new *Perspectives*, following the Book III containing *Boy Scouts ½ in Japan*. But those two hypothetical volumes don't have the

advantage of over a decade's worth of writing already in place... so I fear you may have a bit of a wait! So please, visit the website above to keep up with things as we go!

* For later editions of Book I, the website address was corrected to present the new one. Sorry for any confusion if you have such a corrected edition and go looking in it expecting to find only a wrong URL!

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Authors' Notes and Disclaimers

As has been mentioned, this novel was originally published online as a few continuing series of short stories. Each story was preceeded and/or followed by some notes and disclaimers. These are sometimes fairly brief and to the point (just disclaiming the elements that may have been borrowed from other sources) but more often include ample notes on the stories themselves, as well. For the sake of completeness, these notes will now be presented here.

Perspectives From the Food Court

Introductory Notes

This is a work of complete and total fiction. Well, most of it is...well, actually none of it is. The names and places mentioned haven't been changed because no one was innocent. The events mentioned happen during *Boy Scouts ½, part 11: Matty's New Wardrobe? Shopping Spree from Hell*. The characters in focus are thought to be mere extras, but as this story unfolds, it is revealed that it is in fact they who are the true heroes of this world.

Now, without further ado, I present *part 11.5* of *Boy Scouts ½*....

General End of Story Stuff

I never said it was supposed to be an entertaining story. As always, most of these characters belong to Matt Atanian, except for the character based on myself. (No one owns me!) Matt, you can add your own usual disclaimers now as your are better at it than me...

Matt's Notes

Well, even if you never said it was supposed to be an entertaining story, I sure as hell thought it was. How the hell does an airplane loose a wing? That seems a stretch even for UPS. I mean, come on! Are there these bandits who go into airports at night and make off with the wings?

Also, most of these characters do not belong to Matt Atanian (also known as "me"). Ryoga is of course borrowed from Takahashi Rumiko's *Ranma ½*. As Jason said, no one owns him. This is simply because no one wants to. ^_^ Likewise, John and Fenny are based on actual persons, and I think it would be safe to assume that "Headphone Boy" might just very well be Jon Becker, who of course also has a real life counterpart.

Perspectives From the Food Court II: The Least You Could Do

Introductory Notes from Matt:

Well, no sooner had I received Jason's first side story, then I got an e-mail from him saying, "Matt, I got an idea for another!" And I didn't have to wait long, as just a bit lower in my mailbox was another e-mail from him, saying, "Matt, here it is!" Well, here it is! (And I haven't even gotten the first one online yet... which, of course, is a moot point to those of you reading this online, as obviously they're both online by now...

Anyways, here it is. In it... well, here's how he put it. "Actually, I'm brewing up a very short follow-up story... It basically takes place on the Sunday morning of Matty's date but in involves our lovable clerk and a conversation with another underused chara(cter)... it's one of your chara(cter)s and I won't tell you who until I write it...ya interested in another side story from me?"

Well, he didn't wait for an answer before writing it, but lucky for him I was interested, and here it is. That

character he mentioned of mine is one that I actually was planning to use a bit more in *part 12* when I write it, and indeed he included a bit of back story on her that I would have included in *part 12*. Of course, I'll still use it in *12*, as not everyone is fathful enough to read the sidestories, and those who are probably know it already, anyways, as they're probably also the ones who would read the character guide, and it's all in there.

Well, I'll stop boring you with all of this drivel and get on with Jason's story. (If he keeps it up with these, who knows? Could be a whole spin-off in the works! Wouldn't that be something? A spin-off of a fanfic? What'll they think of next?!)

Disclaimer

Well, nothing much to disclaim, here. No use of Boy Scouts, nothing borrowed from Takahashi-sama. Although I suppose I should mention that the consept that UPS would ever deliver on a Sunday is obviously a fabrication of the author's immagination.

You know, Jason, I was disapointed by the complete and total lack of Fenny in this story! It seems to me that you might just have to make *Perspectives from the Food Court* into a trilogy to make up for this. (And to think, this whole bloody mess started when I just included you, Fenny, and John in *part 11* for brief cameo apearences... If I only knew then what I knew now...)

"I know about twenty words and that's it. Greetings, suffixes, and a few choice insults. That about sums up my knowledge of the Japanese language." Funny, that about summs up my knowledge of Japanese, too. Must be the standard for the average Otaku...

Perspectives from the Food Court III: The Bouncy Goddess Relief Hot-line Counseling Service

Author's Pre-story Notes

OK, Well, I told Matt that I wasn't gonna write this part until Part 12 was done. Then, he went and actually wrote Part 12! Doh! Now, that means I have to keep my word... I'm such a baka! Bakabakabakabakabakabakabaka!

Anyway, this series is now gonna switch gears in a manner of speaking. Matt put it best. "I started out wanting to make this into an ensemble story, but it was turning into *The Matt Atanian Show, featuring a dog, a cat, a duck, and a squirrel.*" That's exactly what is happening to Perspectives. I began as a proposed ensemble series, but it was quickly becoming *The Jason Bertovich Story featuring two other people.* So to nip this in the bud, I'm gonna make the primary focus of this chapter our "lovely Goddess, the bouncy one herself, and no I'm not mad at you for leaving me at the Baltimore Bus station and I still love you" Fenny Lin. Ahem... This story takes place right after *Part 12: A Night of Magic* and takes place on the Monday that follows.

And now, on with the story...

End Notes

OK, So I figured I try my hand at a little Romantic Comedy-Drama. Or as I call it, Roma-Dramedy. Anyway, I figured I try to go a little deeper than normal. Hope you enjoyed it. Anyway, I wouldn't fear too much. I don't plan to kill off anyone or anything...yet. Guess it's time for the preview of the next part...

Ahem...

What secret keeps Shoe Clerk John Hoelscher awake at night? Why is he always talking to himself? Can Fenny

leave well enough alone? Will something as simple as a savage beating keep Jason away from his date on Friday night? Will the heavy hand of Drama put a damper on this whole side series? Find out in the next part of *Boy Scouts ½: Perspectives from the Food Court Part IV -- "Table for One, Tea for Four."*

OK, now it's time for Matt to add his own little disclaimers and words, otherwise what would be the point for me to read this again? Take it away Matt...

Matt's Words of Wisdom

Well, Jason seems to have more then picked up the gauntlet I threw down in my notes at the end of *Perspectives II*. This story makes it a trilogy, and judging by the three little words at the very end of the story, unless Jason plans to do the Douglas Adams thing, it will be more then a trilogy.

I doubt if it has ever happened in the history of fanfics that the world's most gratuitous self-insertion fanfic has spawned the world's most gratuitous self-insertion spin-off...? With Jason planning at least one more *Perspectives* story, that certainly would seem what these stories would have to be classified as: a spin-off, no longer just a mere few side stories...

Over all, I enjoyed this one immensely, although I was shocked and alarmed by the events at the end. I will certainly look forward to *Perspectives IV* to see what happens next. In fact, since the next mainstream *Boy Scouts ½* story, *part 13*, doesn't take place until Christmastime, I suppose that Jason has a pretty free reign over the events of this universe for the next few (story-time) months.

Of course, he also has his other series, *Anime Deathmatch* and *Jusenkyo Muyo!* to take care of, but I still look forward to the next *Perspectives* as he has the time. (Speaking of time, I must find the time to write that *Macross/Eva Deathmatch* for Jason that I've been brewing in my head for a while...)

Now for disclaimer stuff: well, nothing really borrowed from *Ranma ½* or the BSA in this one, but I think it's worth mentioning that Jason seems to have taken some inspiration from the anime series, *Oh, My Goddess!* Well, see you next story!

Perspectives from the Food Court IV: Table for One, Tea for Four

Author's Pre-story Notes

Well, it's time for us to delve ourselves into this little universe and by that, I mean it's time for *Perspectives from the Food Court Part IV*. (Yay...)

In this edition of Author notes I thought I would examine our three main characters and their Real Life influences...

Jason Bertovich -- Based on the author who, much like Atanian, has deemed it necessary to self-insert himself into this little world. He, like the author, is an employee of the Electronics Boutique chain of software outlets and experiences the daily joys of selling software to complete morons. Jason has recently moved to Holyoke from about half a year prior and is enrolled in a local university. He lives alone and mainly lets his smart-assed nature get the best of him.

Fenny -- Based off the Bouncy one known as Fenny Lin. The character Fenny Lin is in fact an otherworldly Goddess called Fenira, and is part of a large network of Deities. She is "Incognito" in Holyoke as a department store sales clerk due to the intense emotional "Love Energy" that runs rampant in this little town.

John Hoelscher -- based off the real life John Hoelscher. The character of John works at the shoe Department of the same department store as Fenny, i.e. Filenes. Still rather underdeveloped in terms of character, ergo that is why he is the focus of this episode.

Let it be known now, though this story takes place in New England (Western Massachusetts to be exact) none of these people are actually from the area. Fenny is from the Baltimore region of Maryland, John lives in Western Ohio, and the author lives in Southwestern Pennsylvania (also known as "The Cultural Wasteland.")

I guess I've yacked long enough and you people actually wanna read a story. (Otherwise why would you be here?) So here it goes...

Jason's After Story Notes

Ahhh...another installment of *Perspectives* done and finished. I can't believe how this story is writing itself. It's kinda amazing how this started as a semi pure comedy, and now it's come to this. Well. I've decided that the next part will be the final installment. Don't worry, I promise to try to tie off every loose end. Ok...? Ok, I guess it's time for a preview of the next and final chapter of *Perspectives*...

How will it all end? What will happen to our lovable clerk, the luckiest and unluckiest man in the universe? Our runaway goddess with dark forces out against her? The man whose own mind has turned against him? Is there a dark presence that binds them together? Will Jason's Dream Date turn into another nightmare? Can John Escape himself? Can Fenny discover the forces against her before it's too late? Most, if not all these questions will be answered in *Perspectives from the Food Court V: The Final Perspective*.

Oh, and if anyone was ever wondering, The incident with the racial slur in part 2 is based off a real life experience. I will not repeat what was said, but I wish to say that Prejudice and Racism are both evil things that have no place in our society.

Well, it's now time for my favorite part of any of these stories, Matt's own little perspective on *Perspectives*...

Jason's Favorite Part of the Story

It's your favorite part, is it, Jason-kun? Oh, the pressure!

Well, first off there was one bit of this story that seemed a bit out of character for me, but I couldn't quite think of a way to fix it so I left it. Basically, I don't think Matty Hayes would give her number out. She'd probably tell the cops she didn't have a phone and just give them Mike's number or Aaron's number and tell them they could leave a message with Mike or Aaron. But it's just a minor point, so never mind and I'll shut up about it now.

Speaking of the cops... it sure makes sense for them to publish a sketch of the only witness to a crime when the dangerous perpetrators are still at large, doesn't it? That's sure one way to protect the public. ^ _ ^

I must commend Jason on what a superb person he is. I hope that if I ever wake up with multiple injuries (including a concussion) after being drugged up with sedatives and painkillers that I am coherent enough within minutes of gaining consciousness that I can hold intelligent, well thought out debates with people.

Also, if I ever get seriously hurt, I hope I get sent to this neat-o hospital with such a friendly staff who all insist that you call them by their first name. (This applies to the friendly officer Stan as well.)

Jason managed to slip in a reference to his fictional masterwork: *Anime Deathmatch*. The hosts of WDF's "Monday Night Madness" were none other than *Anime Deathmatch*'s co-hosts.

How does Bill appear in Jason's dream when the two have never met? The answer: "SHUT UP, MATT!!!"

Last on my list of friendly criticism... is it just me, or does everyone in Jason's world have to smirk at least 42½ times a day?

Well, I for one look forward very much to the final *Perspectives*. I hope that it's not as final as it sounds. If we're lucky, perhaps in the future Jason will be willing to revisit the *Perspectives* universe once again some day.

One final message directed towards our online readers (which is undoubtedly 99% of the people who will read this story): the delay between part III and this one is not at all Jason's fault. The blame lies solely with Mike Quadrozzi. (Actually it probably lies more with me, but it's fun to blame Mike.) I had decided to do one super-mega-big-huge update when *part 13* is ready, and had to wait for Mike to finish writing it. As it is, since Mike took so bloody long, I ended up not waiting after all... Oh, well...

Perspectives from the Food Court V: The Final Perspective

Author's Notes, part I (pre-story notes):

Welcome Perspectives readers, BoneparteOzaki here with the some Notes for you all...

Welcome to the final installment of the *Boy Scouts ½* spin-off series *Perspectives from the Food Court*. Before I begin, I must take the time to thank anyone who took the time to read these short stories and to those who actually *enjoyed* them (little joke...~_^) It has been an extremely satisfying experience as an author to stretch myself a little as a writer and it has given me ideas to use in future works.

Thanks also go out to Matt who gave me the opportunity to intrude into his domain and not simply saying "This is my smegging series, go to smegging hell you smegging smeg-head!"

Okay, as I said before, this is the final installment of Perspectives. This one is different than the others as it is written in a 4 act structure. Just thought I let you know that ahead of time. Okay, On with the show...

Author's Notes, part II (post-story notes):

Well. It's all said and done with. That's it for the Perspectives from the Food Court. What a weird, wild ride it's been.

Thanks to anyone who read these stories. Thanks to anyone who commented favorably on them. And thanks to anyone who eagerly waited the several months for this final chapter. I hope it didn't disappoint, maybe enlightened, and entertained you.

Thanks to Matt and all the other BS½ writers. Your work helped me get through my creative slump.

If you were wondering what Nicole was singing about, I won't print a translation here, but go to Aeka's 'S' Shrine and see why I couldn't put it here. Also see why Mr. Segawa was so flushed. ^_^ BTW, The song Jason was singing was '7 o'clock News', the opening theme to *Kodomo no Omocha*. Here's a translation:

*The rumor that I love you is true
Yes I do, whether I am asleep or awake
No use trying to avoid you
No reason to be embarrassed like that*

*Kicking out all other loves, I am getting into you
Do you think that that is such a bad idea
Twilight is approaching quickly, children go home together
Today's affair, one of "Burning Love" which I should be
able to report to you*

*7 o'clock news!
(& o'clock news Ah! It's on the air!)
Please report our relationship
Ah! (ah!) Do not blame me for a kiss's reality
Love is causing this town to smoke, fire isn't doing it!
Ah! (ah!) We shouldn't live halfheartedly
Am I crying for what is impossible?*

Will any of these people return again? Well, Maybe *Final* isn't as final as it sounds. Let's just say that I do plan to one day return to the *BS½* universe, but that is somewhere off in the future. I have other projects that require my divided attention.

Thank you and goodnight, readers. As always, if you have any comments, criticism, or questions about this or any of the *Perspectives* stories, just send it along to Makoto_chan@elhazard.net.

Now, let's give it over to Matt, who despite popular beliefs, didn't actually write the ending, that was just a creative twist, and his final perspective on *Perspectives*...

Matt's Final Perspective

Wow.

Not quite what I was expecting... but quite excellent.

It's interesting that Jason included a rather large reference to *End of Evangelion* in this story, as *Perspectives* and *Evangelion* unfolded in a similar manner. Both started off funny, and both ended quite seriously, both ending with a message on the nature of reality.

I'd hardly call this an end, though. As is said within the story, these characters will continue to exist within the *Boy Scouts ½ Universe*. In fact, I had already made a reference to Jason in *part 16*, which happens after this story, so I am quite glad he didn't screw things up by erasing the events of *Perspectives*.

We can still hope to see a continuance of *Perspectives* outside of brief references in the main series, as well. I know that Jason plans to write a *Perspectives / Kanny's Lab* story featuring Jason and Nicole. Also, I had had an idea for a *Perspectives* story brewing in my head for a while which I am still quite keen to do. Jason's made things a bit challenging for me by putting Fenny into... for lack of a better term, shall we say, "Goddess Protection Program?" I had hoped to include all three of the *Perspectives* trio, after all. Who's to say that I won't find a

way to still include her? And Jason has said that he hopes to one day return to the *BS½* Universe... Maybe it will be with a sequele to *Perspectives*, and maybe it will be with something new. Either way, I look forward to it.

I must say that I am thrilled that I get to be the hero in this story. Who'd have thunk it? Still, I cannot help but wonder if Jason was inspired to include The Author and The Other Author by a certain match in the second *Boy Scouts ½* Anime Deathmatch? Well, I'm not saying that was where he got the idea, but it is an interesting theory.

(Jason has since told me in the time between my original writing of these notes and my finely getting the story online that he had in fact had the idea before my writing of *BS½* ADMII, so I guess it was all just one of those wonderful coincidences that the cosmos likes to throw at us now and then...)

Well, this now closes out *Perspectives from the Food Court*. To think this all started with brief cameo apearences in *part 11*... What a long, strange trip it has been...

Of Possible Futures: The Tale of Neko-chan and Bertovich

Matt's End of Story Comments

Well, this seems to be a further extension to the oddness of *Boy Scouts ½*. I speak of the series itself, not the content of the stories. Where else could you have a side story to a spin-off of a fanfic? I guess Hughes took it personally when Jason started to get interested in Nicole and had to do something about it... Calm down, Hughes! She's fictional!!

Anywho, some brief comments on continuity: In *Perspectives III*, Jason revealed that Fenny is a Goddess, and the Goddess who is orchestrating things in this story seems to be a very different type of Goddess. Is it possible for the Goddess in this story to co-exist in a

reality with Fenny and her sisters, and whatever divine organization they work for? I don't know. That's up to Jason, I suppose, but as I doubt he'll address the issue, let's just assume that there are at least two separate and distinct organizations of deities in the Universe. (Would certainly explain why it's such an odd place...) He's under no obligation to consider this canonical (even though it would be nice if he did).

Lastly, the usual disclaimer stuff: There's references in this story to *Ranma ½*, of course, as well as *Star Wars* and probably a few other things I just missed. (It's almost 2:30 a.m. as I type this disclaimer, keep in mind.) It was all without permission of their respective owners, as the God of Copyright Infringement is no doubt obliged to inform you.

Jason's End of Story Comments

Well, I guess I should be flattered that Bill decided that I'm his new arch enemy. Question: WHY AM I USUALLY THE BAD GUY?!?! Darth Bertovich?... Hmmm... Probably should have been Darth Mall. (Bad pun, I'm sorry...*bow*)

On the subject of goddesses and gods, and immortal omnipotent beings...

OK, Fenny is a member of a Immortal group of Dieties that deal with mankind. But as with most things, they do not have knowledge of these gods, who are actually higher up the scale, and who knows? Maybe their are beings higher up the scale of this Being who are messing with reality themselves? Ugh! This is giving me a headache! Let's put it simple. There are two sets of dieties. But Fenny's group doesn't know of the second, and the second don't care about Fenny's so I guess this story is cannonical...um...yeah.

If Bill has tensions toward me now, wait until he reads the dreaded "first Meeting" Between Jason and Neko-chan in Part 5, which is the final "*Perspectives*" story, but who knows what the future holds after that.

Um...that's it, Kudos to Bill for this work, and kudos to you for reading the Perspectives series. As always Feedback is welcome to all the BS ½ writers... so SEND FEEDBACK!!!

Perspectives VI: A Christmas Perspective

Author's Notes & Disclaimers

Hi, everybody!

Well, at the end of *Perspectives V, The Other Author* promised the character of Jason that things would continue. As I suppose *The Other Author* was probably supposed to be me, I could hardly go back on my word, now could I?

And thus I submit for your approval *Perspectives VI*. In a way, this story brings the series full circle, back to it's beginnings. The over all tone is lighter, for one thing. (Not to say that the darker tone of the more recent Perspectives stories was a bad thing. They were very good stories, in my opinion.) Also, this story takes events from an original *Boy Scouts ½* story (this time, Mike Quadrozzi's *part 13: Yes, Virginia, It's a Wonderful Life with 192, Though I Wouldn't Call It Christmas in Heaven*) and re-tells the day's events as they unfolded from the perspective of other characters.

Of course, this is just the starting point for this. There are a few unanswered questions in this story, which I will take at least two more new and upcoming *Perspectives* stories to answer, so stay tuned!

Now for the legal stuff: Jusenkyo curses and the character of Ryoga borrowed without permission from *Ranma ½* by Takahashi Rumiko. In the *Perspectives* stories that Jason wrote, he always said in his notes at the end how he looked forward to my comments on the story. I think it's only fitting to now turn the tables on him, especially as I am quite keen to see what he has to say about this work. Without further ado... here's Jason!

Jason's Outlooks and Viewpoints

Just as I was about to take a break from *Perspectives* to go on to other endeavors that require my attention (The biggest of which is my internship in a city four hours away from home...) Matt-kun comes along and picks up the slack wonderfully.

Now he's got me all excited and intrigued to what he'll do next. This "Segue" series is a wonderful addition and I'm glad that Matt-kun decided to take an active role.

Great job on showing just how heartless a clod Justy Yung really is. I like this Lina character... Hmmm... now she is an enigma... One I wouldn't mind trying to solve...

Some people have been overall shocked to see the darker tone that *Perspectives* took as the story progressed. I guess I've wanted to comment on it now that we're in a remission period. When I first envisioned *Perspectives*, it was meant to be a short humor side-story building off a cameo appearance. However, I began to see much more potential. *Perspectives* is my interpretation of life itself viewed through many different perspectives (I mean you can't get any different than a goddess, a Twin, a Sales Clerk who has the worst chain of luck in history, and a clerk with multiple personalities.) However, like life, things aren't always going to be happy or humorous. Yes, sometimes everyone is miserable. That's why I really like this chapter. It shows the characters happy again. Life is like that. Despite anything that can and does happen, people will usually one day find a reason to be happy again.

Happy Belated Christmas.

Perspectives VII: A Hoelscher Carol

Author's Notes & Disclaimers

Hi, everybody! This ends my second entry into the *Perspectives* series, and there is still one more to

come. This one ties up the loose ends left with John Hoelscher; he is now healed, both physically *and* mentally. There is one more thing left to explore. Exactly what is up with this Lina character? And folks, that is precisely what we will find out next time...

For those who do not know and are curious, "cosplay" is an abbreviated term that comes from, "costume play." I'm no expert on the subject, but I believe the term came from Japan where it was used by Japanese otaku (obsessed fans) of anime and manga, and the term was embraced by otaku over here when they began to partake in the activity of dressing up as their favorite characters.

The title of Jason and John's cosplay skit is a variation of a title for a skit they actually did at one convention. The skit (in real life) was called, "The New Millennium of Anime AKA the Y2KJ Problem." For readers who didn't get it (and you'd probably have to be an *El-Hazard* fan to get it) Y2KJ is a pun, combining Y2K and the initials of Jinnai Katsuhiko. (If one were to put his given name first and his family name second, as English speakers would, his initials would be KJ.)

Now, the usual disclaimer stuff. First off, I think it's obvious that this story was inspired by the classic Dickens story, *A Christmas Carol*. Also, one brief scene is borrowed from Jason's *Perspectives from the Food Court V*. Lastly, thanks to the real John Hoelscher for being kind enough to answer a few questions when I bugged him.

Now, we'll move onto others' comments. Not only Jason's, but I thought John may like to comment, as well. After all, this story is all about his character.

John's Comments

You want MY opinion? It's pretty cool... and it's sort of eerie. You've almost made an exact copy of me into this story (though I do not have 3 anime like personalities controlling my every move... and the fact that I still live in Ohio). I like the fact that this is one of those rare pieces of fiction where there is no violence, no action, no one-

person-vs.-the-world plot. It was somewhat real with believable characters in a fictional setting... which is a good read also. Anyway, it's cool Matt, keep it up and... if at all possible, can you make that Lina chick somewhat *normal*? ^_~

Jason's Comments

Matt-kun shoots and scores! He's continuing the *Perspectives* Legacy nicely... heh, it's nice to know that I can go on vacation from *Perspectives* and that it will continue to expand and grow.

It was really nice to see Matt make a scene on how these three (Jason, John, and Fenny) came to meet in this frozen land of Springfield, MA. I was always wondering how to work that, and Matt-kun solves the mystery.

Remembering Shinji's earphones... nice touch.

Oh! Before I forget! Matt did a hell of a job reorganizing the *BS½* Universe. I feel honored that *Perspectives* warranted it's own section.

Well, until Matt decided to grace us again with another masterpiece... Ciao! Adios! Sayonara! And many others...

Perspectives VIII: Fall from Grace

Matt's After Story Notes & Disclaimers

Hi, everybody! Well, this brings to an end my chapter in the "*Perspectives*" saga. I guess now it all falls back to Jason again when he decides to add more to these characters' lives. I hope I've left him with some interesting stuff to work with.

The cookie stand argument is from the movie *Mallrats*. Finely got around to seeing it and *Clerks* yesterday, and seeing as *Clerks* was a major inspiration for Jason's first "*Perspectives*" story, and this bit from

Mallrats included talk of food courts... I couldn't resist the little homage.

I included a bit of Karaoke in this one. Jason seems to like it. And besides, John singing *The Conqueror Jinnai* was something I couldn't resist. Nor was having Lina sing the opening theme from the anime series, *Oh My Goddess!*

And so I bid farewell from my involvement as an author in the "*Perspectives*" series. I hope it was enjoyed by all.

Jason's Bit

Well, well, well... I must say, it's been another wild ride. Just when you think things are slowing down and life is returning to normal, all hell is about to break loose...

I have to say, some nice new information on the inner workings on the Divine Agency...will more secrets be revealed?...hmmmm...

Gotta love teh little homage to "*Mallrats*," not my favorite Kevin Smith movie, but still notable for it's great Silent Bob and Jay sequences... hmmmm... hmmmm... oh yeah... the gears are turning...

Well, I have to say that I've enjoyed Matt-kun's contribution immensely and now I'm ready to return to the *Boy Scouts ½ Universe*.

Coming Soon:

It's summer and the weather is warm, but with every summer comes the chance of Summer storms. The next intriguing Installment of the *Perspectives* saga. Places to Go, People to see, and questions to answer, all coming soon...

Perspetcives Byte III
The Summer of Promises:
Made, Kept, and Broken.

Kenny's Laboratory

Disclaimer

Well...let's see... most of the stuff I "borrowed" this time around was acknowledged within the story itself, such as *Stargate*, *Sliders*, *Doctor Who*, *Robotech*, *Red Dwarf*, etc... Dialogue for Roy Fokker was lifted straight from the Robotech novel "Genesis" by Jack McKinney. Dialogue from the scene between Lister and Rimmer was lifted straight from the episode *The End* by Rob Grant and Doug Naylor.

What might not have been as clear to anyone who has not seen the film *End of Evangelion* was the destination of their second slide. They landed in NERV headquarters right in the middle of Third Impact. Good thing they left so soon...^_^

And of course, as usual, *Jusenkyo* curses are borrowed without permission from *Ranma ½* by Rumiko Takahashi.

Kenny's Laboratory: Enter the Becker

Disclaimer

This story borrowed a bit from *Red Dwarf*, *Robotech*, and *Stargate* again, but only in continuity references to the first Kenny's Laboratory. The main source that this story borrowed from was, of course, *Back to the Future*.

And of course, as usual, *Jusenkyo* curses are borrowed without permission from *Ranma ½* by Rumiko Takahashi.

You know, Snarfinkle's dialogue is hell when spellchecking... Oh, well...

Have a nice day.

Kenny's Laboratory: Hell Comes to Springfield

Jason's Post-Story Notes

Yeah, I know I say this every couple years or so, but I'm back. Just feeling some old writing muscles out and this is the result. Hey, my own little self-insert is only half a page! I must be slipping in my old age.

Anyway, before Matt can so graciously point it out, this story is heavily influenced by an episode of *Red Dwarf* called "Angels and Devils," especially in a scene involving one author who I know has been apt to wear stockings in public...

Anyway, in terms of timeline, this is not really part of the main Kenny's Lab story (Which I am still curious to see how it turns out and may end up contributing more than that like I had originally planned but then got distracted by ten million other things.) Obviously it has to take places sometime after part 2. If you wanna say it falls in between parts 2 & 3, fine, but frankly, it can happen pretty much from now to infinity.

I really like the character of Kenny and how he's almost two characters. If you notice that in the main series he's much more soft-spoken and timid, but in the *Kenny's Lab* stories, he really busts out of his shell. I tried to keep that same flavour with this little story.

Anyway, as for me, I have been dabbling with finally finishing *Perspectives* (Yeah I say that every couple years) and I DO actually have some written for it and with Matt writing again, it seems more likely that it will finally become a reality as the main series catches up time-line wise with *Perspectives*.

Anyway, let's see if old Matt-kun has anything to say before we put this bad boy to bed. Matt?

Matt's Notes

If you hadn't made a point of saying I would have pointed it out myself, I would have just quietly fixed your error, and none would be the wiser. But now I must display my *superior* geekdom by pointing out that the *Red Dwarf* episode was actually titled "Demons & Angles." (Also, for extra geek points, it was filmed under the working title of "High and Low.")

Interesting story, Jason my friend. Only one small problem. I had intended for *Kenny's Lab* to have *no* side stories. So I suppose I have no choice but to slip it into the series proper, facilitated by the fact that unlike the main series and your *Perspectives* series, the instalments of the *Kenny's Lab* series are unnumbered. And so this one shall be quietly slipped in between the second and third ones, the only clues that anything is amiss being the copyright date, and the fact that the file names on the website do indeed contain a number and this one shall be numbered in the order it was written, not in the order in which it appears on the index. (And for those reading this offline without access to such clues, I'll just spill the beans and say that in the order they were written this is actually the seventh one.)

Well, that's all from me, I suppose. As far as the future of *Kenny's Lab*? Well, I don't know. I know the series had some fans, particularly Mark Abert, but while I would like to finish things up some day, right now I am concentrating on the continuing resurrection of the main series. But patience will hopefully some day be rewarded, and someday, somehow, *Kenny's Lab* will return!

Kenny's Laboratory: Perspectives from the Magnificent World

Disclaimer and Author's Notes

Some things borrowed, obviously, from *El-Hazard*. Then, of course, the usual suspects of *Sliders*, *Back to the Future*, *Stargate*, etc... Also, a tiny bit of Douglas Adams crept in concerning the effects of capitalization...

This story was originally going to be written by Jason Bertovich, and would have been the only story in this series to have been penned by an author other than myself. However, do to various reasons we shan't go into here, he was unable to write it. I was still intrigued by the idea, however, and so undertook it myself.

Only the basic idea was Jason's, however... I'm quite sure that had he written it, it would have turned out quite differently. (Sorry, Jason... I just couldn't resist that bit with Shayla-san...) I'm curious as to what he'll think of this story... And I'm also curious as to how things would have unfolded had he written it. That second curiosity, however, shall probably be forever a mystery...

Have a nice day.

Kenny's Laboratory: Professor Snarfinkle

Disclaimer

The usual. ^ _ ^

Kenny's Laboratory: Adventures in Time and Space

Disclaimer & Notes

Hi, everybody!

Well, I hope everyone doesn't think that the cameo I gave Nickie-chan was too gratuitous of me... I had written it a while ago, actually, before I had even begun work on the third Kenny's Laboratory story, and I had just been waiting for a chance to fit it in. (Well, I had written most of it ahead of time. The bits where they discuss Justy and Proctor were freshly added when I decided that this story would be a good place to include the scene.) The idea of Kenny and Becker seeing one of their own stories was inspired by the "Now" scene in *Spaceballs*.

Bits here and there are inspired by such sources as *Stargate*, *Back to the Future*, *Sliders*, and *Doctor Who*.

As I'm sure you can guess, the next story in the series will involve characters and situations from an earlier series I wrote. While this series used to be available online, it was removed when I made the decision to change to a *Boy Scouts* ½ only website. Don't worry, I shall make every effort to make the story readable to someone who has no knowledge of my previous works.

As for the series that the fictional Matt is mentioned as writing... "that story that was a cross between Boy Scouts and that anime series..." This is not *Boy Scouts* ½.

Ranma ½ doesn't exist within the *Boy Scouts* ½ universe. (Or rather, it does not exist as a fiction but instead as real life events.) However, it is not unreasonable to assume that fictional Matt would begin writing a series of stories combining Boy Scouts with some anime series. After all, real life Matt did. If he (or rather, I) hadn't, you wouldn't be reading this right now. As for what anime series fictional Matt may have used... well, I'll leave that to the mists of ambiguity for now. I may develop the

idea further later, I may not. Just rest assured, it is not a hentai (adult) series!

Well, that's all for now! Hope you enjoyed! See you next story!

Kenny's Laboratory: Winning the Doorprise

Matt's Notes & Things

Well, this story takes us to an earlier Universe of mine... this one derived from a combination predominantly of *Star Trek* and Douglas Adams, although it had a bunch of other stuff mashed in as well.

For those very few of you who are familiar with *Spockman Adventures* and the *John Smith* series, the events of this story take place at the beginning of *John Smith XVIII: Through the Looking Glass*. For continuity's sake, events on the *Doorprise* prior to their detection of Kenny and Becker are lifted straight from that story. (If Philia had made it to her lab before being called away when Kenny and Becker arrived, things would have turned out differently, indeed!) For more information on *Spockman Adventures* and the *John Smith* series, please see the page for this story on the *Boy Scouts ½* website.

Also, the two books mentioned by Kenny are in homage to *Red Dwarf*.

So, what's in store for our next adventure? Well, I haven't quite figured that out myself, yet, so who knows? Hope to see you again soon with more *Kenny's Laboratory!!!*

Kenny's Laboratory: Final

Matt's Notes & Things

Here at last, here at last. Thank Belldandy Almighty, it's here at last!

I present to you the conclusion of *Kenny's Laboratory*.

I've never been fond of the "reset button" cliché that is used sometimes in time travel stories, but I'd like to think that it was well earned here. It does bookend nicely, and has been the plan for quite some time. Years, in fact... But that shouldn't be a surprise since it has been over seven years since the last one of these stories was written. (Well, by me at least. Jason Bertovich's contribution, the third story in order of chronology, came in 2005.)

God, that's a long time. Hell, I've had an entire long term relationship in that time.

So I'm definitely not the same person I was last time I was here. I won't go into many details, as this is certainly not the place, but since the relationship was mentioned in other places on this site (especially with things like her writing a story, or an in story continuity mention of a sorts with the *Boy Scouts ½ Epilogue*), it is worth mentioning that unfortunately my relationship with Jessica Pysz has come to an end.

Still, life must go on. Therefore, any single females living within a reasonable driving distance of Western Massachusetts who are interested in 30-something male anime / science fiction fans who live currently live in their parents' basement, send all applications to Yotsuyasan@aol.com.

Just kidding. Maybe.

On to story notes. Kind of a dark one, eh? Maybe it is a thing of spin-off finales, if Jason's *The Final Perspective* is any indication. I kill off pretty much all of the "good guy" cast and a good chunk of the "bad guys," too. Hell, I kill two different versions of Matthew Atanian. And no, this

does not mean I have a death wish, just like the fact that Matty Hayes does not mean I secretly wish to be female.

I was amused that as I was writing the first mention of Captain Flirt in this story, a Priceline.com commercial came on the television. On the subject of Flirt, although I suppose it could be amusing in small (dramatic pause) doses, I sure find his dialogue a lot more annoying to write than I once did. This, and the fact that he and Schofield are kind of redundant characters and both were kept purely for continuity reasons, is why most of the dialogue went to Schofield.

Likewise, I was finding Snarfinkle's accent bloody annoying to write in again. Fortunately, one scene I once wrote where he was talking to his mum did give a pretty good clue that it was an affected accent, giving me an easy out to drop it.

Once upon a time, this series probably would have gone on a while longer, with Kenny and Becker going on more adventures, gathering more forces, thwarting Justy and Proctor in comedic ways in the process. Yet I could just as easily leave all of that out, and still get to the end.

Even then, I left out a plethora of gratuitous references that would have just bloated the story, like mentioning that Kenny had two medical units, both of which happened to be the 4077th M*A*S*H. (One would have been the film version, the other the television version.) Other than the big one which I shall get into in the next paragraph, the only 100% new reference I think I included here was the character of Number Six, and he did in fact have some purpose in this story, as I doubt any of the others would have left Kenny if given a choice.

Now then. So here I was. It was pretty obvious that I would have to present some sort of battle between the two forces, and since I had introduced spaceships in the previous story, it seemed like a no brainer that it would be a space battle of some sort. I suppose since I had been watching a lot of *Battlestar Galactica* as of late that it came as no surprise that that should creep into it. Mind you, most of what I've been watching was the new *Galactica*,

and I patterned things in this story off of the old *Galactica*. The reason for this is that when this story takes place, new *Galactica* hadn't been invented yet. Now, logically, nothing says that a parallel universe based off of new *Galactica* couldn't have still existed. Still, it wouldn't have felt right to me. Thus, I went with the classic.

Jason's final words: Way back when I wrote the story where Jason and Nicole ended up in El-Hazard, Jason gave me feedback which boiled down to, "Good story, but why did I hit on Shayla-Shayla? Afura Mann is my favorite of the Muldoon Priestesses." I just had to throw in an in story reference to this. Jason seemed to like it. His response when I gave him a sneak peak: "Dying is easy. Comedy, that's hard."

Now onto the usual stuff. Disclaimers!

This story is not endorsed by or meant to reflect the values of the Boy Scouts of America. (Although one hopes that their values would include preventing global genocide.)

Elements from the story are taken from *Star Trek* (both in the parody aspect from my earlier stories, and in the passing mention of Ekosians, the Nazi characters from the original series episode Patterns of Force), *Battlestar Galactica*, *El-Hazard*, *The Prisoner* (Number Six), and... oh, yeah. I guess Number Six wasn't the only new reference after all. *The Lord of the Rings*. Obviously the novels, for similar reasons that it was the classic *Battlestar*. Oh, and in excerpts from *Enter the Becker*, I believe there was mention of *Red Dwarf* and *Macross / Robotech*. These were all used without the permission of their respective owners. Hopefully that's everything, and I didn't forget anything!

So, is this the end of *Kenny's Laboratory*? Yes, it is. For now, at least. I will not rule out the possibility of a future sequel story. Part of me is still bloody curious what Kenny and the Juniors were up to on the west coast.

But for now... So long, farewell, auf wiedersehen, goodbye!

Additional Note: Above I jokingly inquire after any females interested in filling the position of girlfriend. I never did get any replies to that... but in any event, sorry ladies! I had better luck elsewhere, so the position is filled!

Perspectives IX: Three Girls, A Guy, and a Coffee House

End Notes

Spring is here and with it brings a new collection of 'Perspectives' stories. I hope I didn't leave my fans, if there are in fact any, waiting too long. I'm sorry for the incredibly long delay, but many other parts of my life took precedence.

Needless to say, it looks as if I'm back and while I can't guarantee a rapid pace for the introduction of new stories, I think I can leave you with a short preview of what is to come in Byte Three...

Future Chapters of Perspectives Byte Three The Summer of Promises: Made, Kept, and Broken

Part X: Those Wedding Bells are
Breaking Up That Old Gang of Mine
Part 1 – You are Cordially Invited...

It's a very special Perspectives Wedding, but who's getting married? Who's all invited and what effects will this have on the universe as we know it?

Part XI: Those Wedding Bells are
Breaking up that Old Gang of Mine
Part 2 – Ask Not for Whom the Bell Tolls

Old and new friends meet and old and new foes arrive.
Things will certainly come to a head... Oh yeah, and
there's still a wedding to worry about.

Part XII: Those Wedding Bells are
Breaking up that Old Gang of Mine
Part 3 – Till Death Do Us Part

The Perspectives gang will never be the same again. The hardest part of life sometimes, is saying goodbye. Who won't be returning to Massachusetts after this chapter?

Part XIII: The Summer Storm Part 1 –
Dark Clouds on the Horizon

Promises were made and promises were broken.
Who was doing the breaking?
Why? And how will this affect the future?

Part XIV: The Summer Storm Part 2 –
Rain Washes Away Everything But Tears

The final chapter of Byte Three. Things begin and things end. Sometimes, things that end then begin anew. This chapter will prove all three statements true. The more things change, the more things sometimes stay the same.
A lot of changes are certainly in store.

Is this the end of the Perspectives saga?
Only those who read will know for sure.

Matt's Comments

The man is back! A new installment in the *Perspectives* saga, and it is just the beginning. Looks like some interesting things are in store for our favorite mall employees. I know a bit of what is to come... but I shan't spoil the surprises! And, I am sure Jason still has a few surprises in store for *me*, as well.

I wonder... who was the man in a trenchcoat and fedora who helped out Ty? Could it be another appearance of the mysterious "Other Author"?

Well, see you with the next installment of *Perspectives*. And with a little luck, perhaps it won't be too long before I see you with some more adventures with the main series.

Ta ta, for now!

Additional Notes from 2013

Regarding the list of future stories given in Jason's notes above: The list is accurate as far as the next story is concerned. After all, Jason wrote it shortly after this story. But then... Oh, a decade or so kind of passed. And Jason does have plans for *Perspectives* to continue! But this continuation will be in a way that is very different to what is presented above. However, the above list of stories as planned in 2002 and as originally presented with this story's notes is preserved for posterity.

Perspectives IX: Those Wedding Bells Are Breaking Up That Old Gang of Mine Part 1 – You Are Cordially Invited...

Jason's End Notes

Well, another chapter is in the books. Hopefully. Of course, if Matt decided to withhold this one, I guess it wouldn't matter either way, would it, as you would never read the end notes anyway.

This chapter seemed to go everywhere didn't it? I wanted to experiment with a few different dynamics and am quite pleased with the results.

For the record, a lot of this story is based off some real events and emotions. It's been about a year, but certain things still eat away inside of me. By putting it down on paper, I feel a lot better. I hope no one was too uncomfortable with learning a little more about me. I have always used *Perspectives* as a way of venting out some real emotions or at least some thoughts currently

running inside my mind. Chapter five will always stand out as one of those where my mind was running a million miles a minute.

For some purposes, some names were changed, while others are the names of my real life friends in Pennsylvania. Don't worry, they'll get more lines next chapter, I promise.

I hope no one was offended at any scenes. I don't think anyone would, but then again *Perspectives* has always been kinda the R-rated cousin of the more PG-13 *Boy Scouts* ½. So I do tend to push some envelopes on language and tone. Then again, I think that is why it has some appeal to some of the more regular *BS*½ readers. It's kinda like offering a liquor menu at a restaurant, it's not to everyone's tastes, but some appreciate the option.

The song sung by Lina and Nicole was "Right Now" by Atomic Kitten. It's a europop song that has a very retro 'seventies' feel to it. Check it out, if you can.

One last note: People who know me know I can't resist throwing things I like into my stories... especially karaoke. So for those who were wondering when I would do it, I have finally added a reference to Dance Dance Revolution. Will it play a massive and consuming element of future stories? Will it bog down future parts much like Magic the Gathering once did in *BS*½? Hmmm.... Nahhhhhhhhhh... It's just too much of a pain to write down what the game is like in any great detail... So, to answer the question: No, DDR will not be used to solve any problems to resolve any love triangles / hexagons / polyhedrons...

Hmmm... looks like I'm done here. Until *Part 11*, this is Jason bidding you a nice summer. Hopefully, I'll get one more out before summer's end, but job hunting and some other web projects keep me busy these next few months. Hopefully, Matt will have *part 23* up and about soon.... Speaking of Matt, Hey Matt got anything to say yourself? How about you Jessi? Got any *Perspectives* fan art to show off? Hmmmmmm?

Matt's Notes – 2013 Edition!

Hello, folks. Matt here, writing from the far flung future of 2013. As many of the two or three readers my website likely has may know, about a year ago the website (previously hosted on Tripod) vanished completely. I've spent some time restoring it, and it pleases me that I am now getting this, the last story that existed on the older website, back online! Alas, this one was last for a reason: I foolishly had no copy of it on my computer, and unlike other stories in a similar situation, this story was not available on archived versions (via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine) of the old website. Thus, it had to be reconstructed using the original file as Jason first sent it to me.

For the most part, this was not a huge issue. It made putting it back online a somewhat more involved process, but at least it was still doable. But alas, there is one aspect of this story, as it existed on the original website, that is now forever lost to the past... never to be seen again. And that is whatever notes I had put on at the end of the story. Thus, "Matt's Notes – 2013 Edition!"

Ahem...

"Greetings from the world of tomorrow!"

So here we have the final vintage *Perspectives* story! Some good stuff here. Did certainly hint at a more adult aspect to some of the characters then would have happened in the main series... But this is *Perspectives*, so it's all good. (Heck, a part of me cannot help but wonder what Nicole might look like in her Victoria's Secret purchase... Then the rest of me says, "Bad Matt!" whaps myself on the back of the head, and dismisses the thought.)

If people are looking forward to *more Perspectives*, worry not! Jason, some months ago, actually did send me his next *Perspectives* story. However, while I don't wish to say too much and spoil anything, I should warn you it may not be what you expect. But hopefully it will entertain you. I wish to get at least one (maybe two) new *BS½ in Japan*

stories first (so I suppose I'd better start writing again, or else!) but I can promise you, with a smirk on my face as I type this, that *Perspectives* will return.

Troop 180 Chronicles II: Bang! Thwwpp! Boom!

Author's Notes

Once again, this story is a result of a conversation between Matt Atanian and myself. Matt asked me to develop the idea of the "shooting sports campout," and this is what I was able to come up with. Again, I hope it meets with the approval of the fine readership that frequents this website.

I had originally intended to finish this story a year ago, but numerous obligations (including having to buy a house and move into it) that come with being an old person kept interfering with its completion.

To the best of my knowledge, this story is entirely original and therefore I don't have to do the disclaimer thing. Matt, feel free to comment and / or disclaim as you see fit.

Matt's Notes

Well... what a strange, strange world we live in. This is "to be continued," which could very likely mean that *Boy Scouts* ½ is soon to have a *third* spin-off! (*Outlast* isn't really a spin-off in my mind... It's more a special supplementary series. I suppose we should get the second *Outlast* written, huh?)

(Come to think of it, I need to get more *Kenny's Laboratory* done, too! Oy!)

Well, very nice story all around. It is certainly interesting to see Boy Scout Troop 192 from the point of view of an outsider, someone who is not involved in Troop 192's internal politics. (This story *must* take place before

the '98 Spring Camporee. Mark would probably no longer think of Justy as a "pleasant young man" after Justy tried to help out the terrorists. Of course, Kenny and Mark worked together during the Spring Camporee, as well, and their first meeting is depicted in this story.)

Well, nothing much to disclaim in this one. As Mark said, it is entirely original. (I suppose, if I wanted to be picky, I could mention that Winnie the Pooh [the non-carniverous version] is from the books written by A. A. Milne.)

Well, see you next story!

Anime Deathmatch Pay-Per-View: Boy Scouts ½!

(No notes.)

Anime Deathmatch Boy Scouts ½ II: The Nightmare Continues

Notes From Matt

I had never intended to write a second *BS½ ADM*, even though many people had written and asked me about the possibility of doing so. However, I was suddenly struck by a muse there was no denying, and I hope you are satisfied with the results.

Notes From Jason

Wow what a dream, within a dream, or am I still dreaming? Or am I even the dreamer?!? FUCK! Now, I'm more screwed up then I was after I saw End of Eva... Thanks Matt, thanks a whole lot... Seriously, This WAS a dream (at least I hope it was... otherwise... well...) Whose dream it was, now that is a question... The PPV is next up... get ready!

Anime Deathmatch
Boy Scouts ½ III: KSJ2K

(No notes.)