

Awake

By Egan Yip

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This book is dedicated first and foremost to the One for whom this book was written, then to my loving family.

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- Breaking Point -

Kevin Stiles stared at the computer screen, his wide eyes twitching.

It was Monday morning. He had just finished pulling an all-nighter to work on his research paper. And now it was finally done. Well, not exactly *done*...but it was close enough. Conclusion? *Screw it*, he decided.

He looked at his wristwatch. 7:20. He had five minutes to reach the bus stop.

Kevin glanced down at his clothes: a simple t-shirt and blue jeans. It was what he had worn the day before, but now was not the time to be picky, even if his clothes did smell slightly of old socks. He printed out his homework and shoved it down his backpack. On his way out he stopped by the bathroom, splashed cold water on his face, combed his hair, gargled with mouthwash and dabbled a bit of cologne over his shirt—all under thirty seconds. Then he rushed to the front door and eyed the table of the living room. His lunch bag wasn't there.

Kevin heaved a sigh. *Mom forgot. Again. I guess I'll just have to buy lunch.*

Out the door he went, hurrying to the far end of the driveway. Andrew Shoemaker, his next-door neighbor, sat on the curb, leaning against the oak tree. Andrew had on a dress shirt and baggy slacks. Within this suburban area, they both attended the same public school, Rockville Middle. They were both in the eighth grade. In fact, Andrew also attended a few of his classes, though Kevin couldn't really remember which ones.

Kevin stood next to Andrew, glimpsing at his watch again. 7:25. He looked down the street. No sign of the bus. No loud screeching. No flashing lights. Nothing. Though the bus driver was known to be punctual, it wouldn't be the first time she was late.

Tired, Kevin closed his eyes for a moment. Andrew played with a broken stick, tapping it against the asphalt. They both waited quietly for the bus to arrive. The silence lasted for a while.

Andrew finally spoke up and said, “What time is it?”

Kevin took one hard look at the time. “Seven forty-five!”

“School’s going to start,” said Andrew. “Maybe we should walk. It’s only two miles.”

“Only two miles?” Kevin rolled his eyes. “Can your parents give us a ride?”

Andrew shook his head. “My mom’s working.”

“Same. My parents are always out the door at seven.” Kevin sighed. “Looks like we don’t have a choice. We’re going to be late.”

They headed down Grace Drive, quietly following the sidewalk. The silence made Kevin uncomfortable. He felt the need to say something. However, they never really talked much and had almost nothing in common.

Kevin said suddenly, “Aren’t you in my history class?”

Andrew replied, “Front row. Third seat.”

“Did you do the research paper?”

“Just barely. Did it all last night.”

“Me too!” Kevin chuckled. “It was like midnight when I remembered to do it! I typed it up all morning. Just used websites for sources. What’d you do yours on?”

“Alexander Hamilton.”

“Wow, the guy who discovered electricity?”

“You’re probably thinking of Benjamin Franklin—though I wouldn’t say he *discovered* electricity.”

“Then the guy who invented the telephone?”

“Alexander Bell.”

Kevin’s interest waned. “Well, whatever. Hamilton’s probably not that famous anyway.”

Andrew raised a brow but stayed silent.

On their way to school they passed by a large house surrounded by short walls of stone. It was eye-catching to say the least—with its pink window frames and red roof. A black cat reclined on the wall, licking itself clean. It stopped as soon as it caught Kevin’s attention. Its eyes glazed, it stared at the two boys as they walked past. Kevin couldn’t help but stare at its dilating pupils. The cat’s gaze was entrancing.

From out of nowhere a yellow Labrador rushed to the wall, barking profusely at the cat. Startled by it, Kevin averted his eyes, hoping not to catch the mutt's attention. After the two boys reached the end of the block, the barking stopped. Kevin glanced back. The two animals sat beside each other, watching the boys disappear around the corner. Kevin looked at Andrew to see if he was also curious about it, but Andrew paid it no mind. Kevin couldn't resist taking another look. That scene kept replaying in his head. He spun around. However, the animals were gone.

"What's wrong?" Andrew asked, looking concerned.

Kevin rubbed his eyes. "I don't know. I think I'm starting to see things."

"I know what you mean," said Andrew. "Lack of sleep will do that to you."

Kevin and Andrew finally arrived at Rockville Middle School. Compared to the other schools nearby, Rockville Middle was pretty new. Built only ten years ago, the school looked modern, clean and sturdy. The American flag rested on a tall pole in a circular driveway. A long canopy served as shade for the front entrance, covering several rows of benches. It usually had buses flowing in and out, but then again, they were nearly fifteen minutes late. All the buses were probably long gone by now.

However, Kevin did find something most odd. The glass doors of the entrance were closed.

The two boys stood in front of the school, exchanging glances.

Kevin said, "Today *is* Monday, right?"

Andrew scratched his head. "Yesterday was Sunday...."

"Could it be a Holiday?"

"March twenty-third? What holiday would that be?"

"Spring break?"

"That's in April for us."

"Hmm..." Kevin pondered for a moment. He said half in jest, "Maybe it's a new late-kids-aren't-allowed-in policy."

Andrew replied, "Isn't that against the law?"

Abruptly, someone came from behind them and pushed Andrew aside. He winced.

"Out of the way," a girl growled.

Kevin looked to his left. A girl brushed past them. Katie Evans. He recognized her from math class—though she hadn't showed up in class for the longest time.

Katie's black hair reached her shoulders, hanging over her face. She straightened out her dark blue jacket as she approached the front doors. Katie rattled the handle. The door didn't budge. Exasperated, she kicked the door, screaming.

Kevin said flatly, "It's locked."

Katie glared at him. "You think I didn't figure that out?"

Kevin raised a brow at her, shaking his head. "I didn't say—"

"Shut up and watch," she snapped, grabbing a lone brick from the grass nearby. The brick must've been left over from the construction. Kevin cocked his head.

Katie pulled her arm back and then launched the brick into the door with all her might. The glass shattered, scattering shards all over the concrete, tiles and grass. There was now a big opening through the doorframe.

Kevin stared at the broken door, his mouth agape. He shouted, "WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?"

Katie laughed loudly. "How's that for locked?" She brushed the broken glass aside with her sneakers, carefully stepping over the threshold. Kevin and Andrew cautiously followed her.

Once inside, Kevin snapped, "I can't believe you just did that. Aren't you afraid of getting in trouble?"

"No one's going to find out who did it. And you'd be dumber than dumb to rat." She snickered, "I'll be going to class now. Don't bother thanking me. Just buy me lunch and we'll call it even." She waved goodbye and left.

Kevin shot her a dirty look as she stopped by her locker. "She's got some screws loose." He motioned for Andrew to follow him. "We'd better get out of here before someone sees us."

The halls were dead silent. Normally, everyone would be sitting in class by now. Though the halls were usually quiet at this time, it was typical to hear the mumble of lectures or class discussions. But today was extra quiet. The only sounds they heard were the annoying squeaks of their sneakers echoing off the walls.

They arrived at the door of the main office. Kevin knocked. No response. He knocked again, just in case. There was still no response. Kevin slowly twisted the doorknob and opened the door.

The room was empty. Not a single person in sight. He could see no sign of anyone having been in there recently.

“This is getting really weird and freaky,” said Kevin. “No buses. No one at school. It’s Monday! Where’d everyone go?”

Andrew said, “Maybe today *is* a day off. It’s not like it always has to be a real holiday.”

“Then how come no one told us about it?”

“Look,” said Andrew, pointing down the hall. “It’s Katie! She didn’t go to class.”

Kevin caught a fleeting sight of her as she ran past. “Looks like she’s going home.”

“Maybe we should just go home.”

“Not yet.” Kevin reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. “I think I’ll call Brad. See what he’s up to. Maybe he’s got some answers.”

Kevin called his friend. It rang three times. No one answered. He quickly canceled the call and tried again. No one was picking up.

Frustrated, Kevin grunted, “He’s not answering. He always sleeps in when there’s no school.”

“That’s okay,” said Andrew dryly. “I think I’ll just go home.”

Kevin thought of something. “Hey, let’s stop by his place and see if he’s home. He lives really close to school. Just up the road.”

“Is that okay? I don’t know him.”

“Sure. He’s fine with everything. If he’s home, we can hang out. He won’t mind.”

Brad’s house was located in a residential community behind the school. It was a two-story house with blue siding. Kevin knocked on the door a few times and rang the bell twice.

Andrew glanced around the exterior of the home in great interest. Though it wasn’t really that amazing of a house, it was definitely a step up from his neighborhood.

Kevin folded his arms. He waited but no one came to the door. “I wonder where everyone went.” He reached into his pocket for a key.

Andrew looked at him, curious. “You have a key to his house?”

Kevin unlocked the door and entered. “Our families are really close. I stop by after school pretty often.”

They crossed the hall, stomping dirt over the brown rug. The furnished living room was on their right and the fancy dining room

was on the left. The wooden stairs ahead curved upward to the second floor.

Kevin ran up the staircase, yelling, “Brad! Are you here?” Kevin went straight for his friend’s room. The door was closed. He rapped on the door and said, “I’m coming in.” He slowly opened the door and peered inside. Brad was in bed, snoring loudly. Resting by the side of his bed was his collie, Max. The dog raised his head to look up at Kevin as he entered the room.

Kevin’s eyes narrowed. “I knew it! You *were* sleeping!” He stood by the bed and gently shook it. “Wake up. It’s almost nine. I said WAKE UP!” He screamed into Brad’s ear, smacked his shoulder and finally jostled the bed. Brad continued sleeping. He didn’t even stir.

Andrew heard the yelling. He stood by the door of the bedroom. “Is everything all right?”

Kevin startled tickling Brad by the neck and waist. Brad just rolled over. “Wow, he’s usually pretty ticklish.” With a sly grin, Kevin told Andrew, “Get me some ice.”

Andrew nodded and left the room.

While waiting for Andrew to return, Kevin took Brad’s pillow and whacked him over the face with it. He yelled and shouted with all the air in his lungs. He kicked the footboard. Nothing he did managed to even disturb Brad’s deep sleep. When Andrew came back with a mug full of ice cubes, he handed it to Kevin. Kevin took an ice cube and rubbed it all over Brad’s face. After feeling the cold moisture on his face, Brad twitched, but that was it. Max cocked his head and whined, as though he disapproved of what the boys were doing to his owner.

Kevin said hesitantly, “Brad, come on...wake up already. This is getting ridiculous.”

Then, as Kevin stared at Brad, an idea popped in his head—a strange idea...one that was impossible. It was totally unrealistic, like something out of a bad horror flick. Kevin thought, *What if he couldn’t wake up?*

As he pondered over this concept, he began recalling simple things. His mom didn’t leave the lunch bag on the table like she usually did. And the whole way they walked to school, they did not see a car, or a single person other than Katie. He wondered about the

implications. It was a ludicrous idea to be sure, but could it be true? What if everyone was asleep...and couldn't wake up?

Kevin knitted his brow, biting his nail nervously.

"What's wrong?" asked Andrew.

Kevin barked, "Come on! We're going home right now!"

Kevin raced down the street, wanting to know if it was possible. Could his parents still be sleeping in bed? He prayed to God that it was all just his wild imagination. Andrew struggled to keep up, his heavy book bag bouncing up and down his back as he ran.

When they reached their block, the two boys ran to their homes. Kevin sprinted to the master bedroom and kicked the door open. Breathless, he stood at the doorsill, gulping air. After he caught his breath, he straightened up and gaped at the bed. His mother and father were still asleep. Kevin stooped over the side of their bed.

Confused, he pinched their cheeks, hoping they'd be annoyed. He shook them, hoping they'd be angry. He cried out the most profane things possible, hoping they'd scold him. They did nothing.

His eyes wide open, he gazed at them for several minutes, until he finally broke down.

A bad dream. This has got to be a bad dream!

Tears pouring down his cheeks, Kevin squatted by the side of the bed. He wondered if they would ever wake up. Then he wondered if he would wake up from this nightmare. He covered his damp eyes with his hands and screamed his lungs out. He kept screaming and screaming until his voice cracked. Was this the end of the world? He had no idea. But to him, it sure felt like it.

- Asleep -

Kevin and Andrew sat down at the curb. They just sat there, as if nothing happened—or as if nothing was ever going to happen. Just a moment before, Kevin had gone to check up on Andrew to see how his mother was doing, but Andrew had simply replied with a solemn shake of his head. Their fears were confirmed. Everyone was asleep...and there was nothing they could do about it.

Kevin stared morosely at the road. Andrew fell back on the lawn and gazed at the sky.

After a long period of contemplation, Andrew broke the silence. “What should we do?”

“I don’t know,” Kevin replied. “We could wait. It might be temporary. Like maybe everyone is just *incredibly* tired and they’ll be awake by tomorrow.”

“That’d be good.”

“And that’d be an understatement.”

“Could we try calling someone else? Maybe this is just a neighborhood thing.”

Kevin’s face lit up. “I never thought of that!”

Kevin hastily dialed 9-1-1 on his cell. He listened to it ring for a while. Kevin counted the number of times it rang. If it reached twenty, he would hang up. To his surprise, it didn’t even reach five.

“Hello?” A woman answered.

“Hello!” Kevin jumped to his feet. “Hey! Is this 9-1-1 emergency?”

“I’m terribly sorry,” said the woman, sounding frightened. “But we cannot help you at this time. Please try calling back at a later date.”

“Wait! My parents aren’t waking up. I think it’s a coma. Hello?”

“Again, I’m terribly sorry. But there’s...no one around at the moment. Goodbye.”

“No, wait! Don’t goodbye me! We need—”

The woman hung up rather quickly.

Andrew stared at Kevin. “Well?”

Disheartened, Kevin threw his cell phone over his shoulder and sat back down. “She said there’s no one around and told me to call back later.”

Andrew yawned. “Back to square one.”

Kevin became very quiet and went back to staring at the road, emotionless.

Andrew hummed a single note. “Want to play video games?”

Kevin turned slightly to see Andrew with the corner of his eye. “At a time like this?”

Andrew shrugged. “Why not? It’s not like there’s anything else to do. No school. No homework. No life. Nothing at all.”

Kevin thought for a moment. “True...but we could also do other things—things we normally can’t do.”

“Like what?”

Kevin grinned. “Like driving!”

Andrew’s interest was piqued. “Do you know how?”

“I practiced in a parking lot recently. Besides, the roads are empty. It’ll be easy.”

“Isn’t it dangerous to drive if you’re tired?”

“You’re right,” said Kevin. “I’ll take a nap first. After we get some rest then we can do whatever we want.”

“You don’t think...” Andrew stopped and gulped.

Kevin demanded, “What?”

Andrew took a deep breath before continuing. “You don’t think we’ll end up like everyone else?”

“I don’t know.” Kevin shrugged. “I don’t think so.”

“That’s a big risk to take,” said Andrew reasonably. “Never waking up again.”

“But we have to sleep sometime. It’s not like we can just stay awake forever.”

Andrew said, “So...if we don’t sleep, we might die from lack of sleep. But if we do sleep, we’ll never wake up and will probably die in our sleep.”

Kevin frowned. “You make it sound so depressing.”

Andrew hung his head sheepishly. "Sorry. I didn't mean to."

"Don't apologize," said Kevin. "You're just stating the facts." Kevin stood up, stretching out his arms and legs. "I don't care anymore. Depressed or not, we have to do something!" He smiled. "Going to sleep to escape this nightmare. Oh, the irony." Kevin marched up the driveway.

A man's voice said, "Hold it right there."

It wasn't Andrew's voice.

"Who said that?" Kevin spun around, searching the area. "Is someone else here?"

Suddenly, a dog and cat appeared before him, blocking the way to his house. It was the same dog and cat from before: the yellow Labrador and the black cat. The Lab was blind in the left eye, having a scar over it. The cat glared at the boys with intense eyes. Both pets looked intimidating.

"I said that," said the dog.

Kevin froze. It was like his mind suddenly exploded. He gawked at the animals for a long time. Then, when he finally regained his composure, he turned to see Andrew's reaction. Andrew looked just as shocked. Kevin faced the animals again, thinking of any possible explanations for this strange occurrence.

Kevin broke into laughter. "Oh, that's a good one, Andrew. You've been practicing ventriloquism?"

The dog jumped on top of Kevin and barked, "Kid, can't you see I'm the one who's talking here?"

"Okay...maybe I'm hallucinating."

The dog said, "This is no hallucination. Do you want me to prove it?"

"How?"

"Give me a test. I'll prove that I can understand you."

"Um...okay. For starters, you could get off me."

The dog backed away and sat down. "And?"

Kevin got to his feet and thought about it for a short time. Then he finally came up with a good idea. "I've got it. How about an act? If you can act like the cat is chasing you around, then I'll believe you."

The dog gazed wide-eyed at Kevin. "You want me to do what?"

"Act like you're being chased by a cat."

“I-I don’t—I can’t—” The dog stuttered. Shivering, the dog slowly turned his head and stared at the cat in horror. He then stared at Kevin with these endearing eyes full of anxiety. The dog looked as though it was about to cry and maybe even faint. Kevin saw that the dog was reacting really strangely.

Gloating, the cat sneered in a female voice, “Come on, run away! You heard the boy!”

“No, that’s okay,” said Kevin, and the dog took a deep breath of relief. “If it’s a matter of pride, I can understand. I just want to know how you can talk.”

The dog said, “We’ve lived long enough with humans.”

“Then why don’t I normally see animals talking?”

“We already have our own forms of communication. We only need to speak human language if we’re speaking to humans. Or if we need to communicate universally.”

Kevin nodded. “I guess you have a point there. But why do you guys sometimes act like you don’t really understand us?”

The dog explained, “It is our law not to speak with humans. How much more trouble would be caused if we could communicate easily? We don’t care about the things you care about. You work, you invent, and you engage in strange forms of recreation such as traveling or...leaping off airplanes. Your laws and rules mean nothing to us.

“Think about it. What if we did speak with humans? In crime scenes they’d start to look for animal witnesses. They might try to use us for spying or killing. They might even start applying laws against us and we’d no longer have the freedom to go wherever we want, eat whatever we want or pee wherever we want. No, it’s better if the humans did not know.

“More importantly, we live by instinct. How would you react if you knew that the chicken you ate could speak your own language? As animals we are in tune with nature and live by nature. We accept death as inevitable, but you humans see it in a different light, trying to create ways to increase your lifespan in any way possible.”

Kevin furrowed his brow. “I’ll never look at a piece of chicken the same way again.” Kevin paused. “If it’s against your law, why are you talking to me?”

The dog replied gravely, “Because these are desperate times. Humans all over the world cannot wake up from their slumber. We

are not sure why, but we don't think it's natural. It's because of this situation that we've formed the HPC, which we are agents of."

"Agents? HPC? So is this like an organization with animal agents? What does it stand for—Hungry Pet Country?"

His eyes narrowing, the dog looked annoyed. "No. The HPC is the Household Pet Coalition. It is a temporary alliance of all pets...except for fish—they're pretty useless. As pets, we need humans to live. Not only that, but we love our masters. We are willing to set aside our differences to protect them," the dog snuck an angry glance at the cat, "even if the differences go back for thousands of years."

Kevin cocked his head. "Then why don't you go and solve this? What's the point in coming to me about it?"

"Because humans are more resourceful. Understanding your language does not mean we understand much of anything else about you. Your science is beyond what we could fathom. Those computers and cars and such would be very useful to our investigation."

Kevin shrugged. "I'm only thirteen years old. I'm not a scientist or anything. I'm not even smart...like, at all."

"The only reason we are turning to children such as yourselves is because you are the only ones we have found awake," said the dog. "And I didn't say you had to be alone. We welcome any humans for this task, even that friend of yours over there. If you feel you cannot help us solve the problem, at the very least we could use your assistance in finding humans more suitable for the task. Don't worry about anything else. We are agents sent by the HPC and we will be your bodyguards. I'm Genesis." The dog gestured to the cat with his head. "And this is my associate, Luna."

"Genesis and Luna? Who gave you those names?"

"We named ourselves," Genesis replied. "We're strays." Genesis continued, "So how about it? Are you in or out? I can guarantee that if you go to sleep...you'll never wake up. Do you want that to happen? Your family and friends...they'll all be dead. And so will you. On the other hand, if you stick with us, we might find a way to save the human race."

"It almost sounds like I don't have a choice," said Kevin.

Genesis nodded. "Then you see things our way."

- Korgen -

It was late in the morning when they decided to head for the closest city, called Korgen, which was about twenty miles away. Kevin had explained to everyone that the city was probably the best place to begin the investigation.

While waiting in the passenger's seat of the red sedan, Andrew was having seconds thoughts. He didn't have a problem with going to the city. But he did have a problem with *how* they were going. Did Kevin really know how to drive? Then again, Andrew thought, the roads were empty. There was nothing to hit. They should be okay.

"All right, let's do this!" Kevin buckled himself into the driver's seat. He adjusted the rear-view mirror and, as he did so, he caught sight of Genesis and Luna in the backseat with their seatbelts on. "Is everyone ready? All toilet, sand and grass business done with?" Nobody responded. "I'll take that as a yes."

"Before we go," said Andrew, "try some of this." Andrew handed Kevin a travel mug.

"Oh, what's this?" Kevin eagerly took a big gulp. His eyes as wide as can be, he spat whatever he drank all over the dashboard. It was hot and bitter. "BLEACK!" He wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

Andrew looked apprehensively at Kevin. "Ahhhhh! I should've warned you that it was still hot!"

His red eyes full of tears, Kevin stared back at Andrew with a look of contempt, his burnt tongue sticking out. Tongue dangling, he sputtered, "Wuht ith dith?"

Andrew said, "Coffee from my house. My mom left some near the coffee maker. I thought you'd realize it was hot because it was in a travel mug."

Kevin slowly recovered from the pain, but his tongue was still numb. "Oh, coffee. Well, I couldn't really taste much of anything except...pain. What'd you put in it?"

“Um...nothing. My mom always drinks it like that.”

Kevin lifted up the mug, looking at it. “She drinks it *black*?”

“It’s more effective that way. You already missed a day of sleep. You should drink it all.”

Kevin groaned, “I suppose.” Then he looked at Andrew and grinned mischievously. “I drink half, you drink half.”

Andrew frowned. “You’re the one driving. You need it most.”

Kevin said, “That’s true, but I’m not doing this alone. You agreed to come along. I don’t want you falling asleep on me. We both have to stay awake for as long as we can.”

Andrew reluctantly nodded. After Kevin drank half the mug, he passed it to Andrew. Andrew hesitated. His eyes closed, he slowly downed the coffee, grimacing the entire time. It was the bitterest thing he had ever tasted. He couldn’t comprehend how his mom could drink it so easily every morning. Maybe it was something she had to get used to.

Once they were done with the mug, it was time to begin. Andrew set the GPS to direct them to Korgen. Kevin turned on the ignition and checked the fuel gauge. The gas tank was almost full.

Kevin mumbled, “So the first thing is to check mirrors...which I did. Now I have to back up...so I should put it in reverse.” He examined the gearshift on his right side and moved the lever down. “Now...time to GO!” One hand on the wheel, he excitedly slammed his foot on the gas. There was a loud whir and squeal as the car backed out the driveway in a matter of seconds.

Andrew screamed. Looking ahead as everything zoomed out, Kevin was shaken speechless and he quickly hit the brakes. The sharp stop of momentum jolted them in their seats, smashing the back of their heads against the headrest. The tires shrieked as the vehicle came to a sudden, vicious halt. Gulping air, they exchanged frightful glances. Kevin looked through the back window. They were only a few inches away from plowing into the neighbor’s garage door.

Terrified, Andrew said, “Are you sure you know how to drive?”

Sweat streaming down his cheeks, Kevin chuckled nervously, “Of course. I just got a little carried away.” Kevin glanced into his rear-view mirror. The animals were no longer in the backseat. “The dog and cat! They’re gone!”

Andrew loosened the buckle, shifted around and peered into the back of the car. Curled up on the floor, Genesis was whimpering like a pup. Her back arched and her puffed up tail frozen in place, Luna was firmly attached to the back of the driver's seat by way of her claws, looking like she was defying gravity.

Andrew said, "They just decided to get into a safer position."

Much to everyone's relief, Kevin was able to drive moderately well. He learned quickly. But he seemed to have a bad habit—if you could call it that—of wanting to hit things. There were a few near-death incidents, but everyone was okay for the most part. The sides of the car were banged up, but he hadn't made any direct collisions.

While staring out the side window, Andrew tried to keep his cool. It was unsettling to see no one on the roads, especially so late into the morning. Going down an empty highway that was usually jammed with traffic didn't just feel strange—it also felt really scary.

When they reached Korgen, Andrew noticed the city streets packed with parked cars along the side. It was widespread, just as Genesis had said. Aside from the noises of their car engine and tires, the city was silent. There were no planes or blimps in the sky, no honking of horns and no bustling crowds of pedestrians. Andrew looked to the distant factories, seeing no sign of smoke from their stacks.

Andrew could feel the despair and fear clawing at his chest once again. This was real. After seeing no one for miles, he thought it might as well be the end of the world. The only hope for mankind's survival rested upon two teens, a dog and a cat. He would've never guessed. There was no hope. They were all doomed.

Andrew saw someone walking along the sidewalk. "Look, there's somebody over there!"

Kevin parked the car and ran out. Andrew tagged along. To their utter astonishment, it was their classmate, Katie Evans. She was wandering the streets by herself.

"Oh great," she said to them, "You guys again."

"Never expected to see you here," said Kevin.

"Likewise," said Katie, attempting to go around them.

"Wait!" shouted Kevin.

Annoyed, Katie stopped and looked at them, glaring. "What do you want?"

Kevin said, “You’ve found out about the sleeping thing too, right? We should stick together and solve this problem.”

Katie had a serious look on her face before she began a mocking laughter. “Are you guys stupid? I thought you were idiots, but I never thought you’d be brain dead.”

Kevin scowled. “What’s stupid?”

“Everything,” she said, laughing. “It’s like you guys are playing a little kid’s game. You want to save the world? Give it up. Life ain’t that easy. It’s just not that simple. There’s nothing you can do about it. Just forget it and enjoy life while you can.”

“But don’t you want to save your family and friends?”

Katie grinned. “No. Who needs such worthless crap?”

Kevin was stunned by her reply. “You don’t mean that.”

Katie laughed. “Of course I do! This is the best thing that’s happened to me! I’m glad this whole world is screwed up. Everyone’s better off dead. And it’s especially great that all the adults are dead. They’re all just selfish scum.” Katie walked up to a car that was parked by the curb. “And now look at them. They got what they deserved.” She kicked the car with all her might, leaving a slight dent and shoe mark. “See that? This car...they probably treasure it more than their kids. But now, they’re all so pathetic. Sleeping to death.” She kicked the car again. “Ha! This is great! No one can stop me. There’s no lame adult telling me what to do with my life.” She smiled and then proceeded to kick over a metal trashcan. “I can do anything!” The trashcan was empty. She picked it up. “Anything at all.” Then she tossed it into the window of a store and the broken glass scattered. “All the work they did was for nothing! If they’re dead, what good is all this junk?”

Kevin grabbed her arm. “Stop that!”

She glared at him. “You think they care? No one will arrest me. No one will press charges. Why? Because they’re all dead.”

Kevin screamed at her face, “They’re not dead! They’re still breathing! And as long as I’m still breathing, I’ll do all I can—” Katie punched him across the cheek. He fell to the ground, his lip bleeding.

Taken aback, Kevin touched his lip and gazed at his bloodstained fingers. “Ouch...”

Katie sneered, “If you care so much, go do all you can. Go waste your time. But I’ll tell you right now...you can’t even save

yourself.” Walking away, she told him, “Oh, and if you ever touch me again...a bloody lip will be the least of your worries.” Then she turned away and jeered, “What a wimp. So pathetic.”

Kevin got back up and was about to charge at her. “WHY YOU—”

Fearing what might happen, Andrew held Kevin back. “Just forget about it! It’s okay!”

Kevin struggled a bit and then pushed Andrew aside, exhaling bitterly. “Yeah, you’re right. Can’t let her get to me. It’ll just waste my energy. Let’s go look around. Maybe we’ll find someone with some actual common sense.”

They returned to the car and continued to scour the streets for people. Kevin found a police precinct not too far down the block. He parked in the middle of the road, and then he left the rear windows open, making it easier for Genesis and Luna to hop in and out of the car. He also left the doors unlocked; he thought no one was around to steal the car anyway.

As they walked into the building, Genesis said, “Will we find help here?”

Kevin replied confidently, “Whenever a great crisis arrives, the first stop should always be the police station!”

“Really?”

“I sure hope so. I’m banking on the fact that some officers have night shifts.”

There was an officer sitting behind the front counter. He was fair-skinned, fit and clean-shaven. He seemed to be really busy. Phone held up to his ear, the officer was working at the computer with one hand and flipping through sheets of paper with the other, searching frantically for something. He was too engrossed in his work to notice that the boys had entered the room.

“Excuse me,” said Kevin, approaching him.

Startled, the officer jumped out of his seat and nearly dropped the phone and papers. “Whoa, whoa, whoa! Don’t sneak up on me like that! Are you trying to give me a heart attack? Seriously, what’s with kids nowadays? No respect for authority.”

Kevin said, “Sorry about that, but we’ve got a problem—”

“A problem?” As if he wanted to get things off his chest, the officer blurted out, “You’re darn right we’ve got a problem! It’s not just any problem...it’s a MAJOR problem! No one’s been coming in

since six o'clock last night. All over the country it's the same thing." He gestured down the hall. "There're even a few guys sleeping on their desks. Nothing I do can wake them up. I'm the only one left." The officer tried to hide his worry by forcing a grin, but Kevin could see that the man was deeply concerned over the matter.

"So you don't know what's wrong?" asked Kevin.

The officer sunk into his chair. "We're still trying to figure that out. At first we thought it was just coincidence—like a few isolated cases of a strange coma. But by the time we realized it was widespread, it was too late. I'm trying to maintain contact with whoever I can get a hold of: police departments, fire departments, hospitals...but some of them aren't even responding anymore."

"There's no government plan for something like this?"

"A contingency plan for widespread coma? I'm sorry, kid, but it's not like we know the source of this problem. There's nothing we can do. We do have some kind of plan, but it's really more of a desperate maneuver. Some emergency personnel are currently taking the leaders of the country to a secret facility where they'll be cared for while still unconscious. We're also trying to pool together any remaining research teams in hopes they'll discover a way of solving this gigantic mess." The officer stared at the kids for a moment, deep in thought. After a short silence he said, "You know what? I'm going to take you kids there. I don't think this problem is going to resolve itself and it isn't safe for you kids to stay here."

"There?" Andrew sounded confused.

The policeman explained, "All the survivors are gathering in several locations: New York City, Los Angeles, Houston and Chicago. We're closest to Houston, so we'll go there and meet—" A thick hardcover book fell on the officer's head in mid-sentence. Having taken a blow to the head, the policeman wobbled, and then fainted on his desk. The boys gaped at him.

"That was rather anticlimactic," Andrew remarked.

Kevin looked up at the ceiling above the officer's head. A ceiling panel had been moved out of place. Kevin frowned. "I doubt he'll wake up now. I've never heard of books falling out of ceilings." Kevin pondered over the situation. "Must be a book sniper."

Raising a brow, Andrew repeated, "A book sniper?"

His face darkening, Kevin turned to Andrew and said in a low growl, "A man who lurks in the shadows...waiting for the right

moment to strike...then—BAM—when you least expect it, you get knocked out by a five-inch thick dictionary.”

Andrew said stoically with a hint of sarcasm, “Sounds absolutely terrifying.”

“You bet.”

Genesis ignored them and barked, “There’s something up there, Luna. Chase it down.”

“I know, I know. I was just about to do that. Don’t be giving me orders, mutt!” Luna jumped up onto the counter and licked her lips. “I smell a rat.”

Luna leapt into the gap between the ceiling panels. As she disappeared from their sight, Kevin heard a loud caterwaul followed by some bangs and thumps. It sounded like a major scuffle was going on overhead. The ceiling boards began to shake and crack, causing some dust to fall. The commotion above moved around in circles. One of the ceiling panels gave way and Luna landed safely on her feet. She had a small gray rat in her mouth.

The rat squeaked, “Please spare me! I didn’t mean any harm!”

Luna snickered and tossed the rat at the wall. The rat fearfully huddled in the corner. Luna swaggered toward it. Then the cat extended her claws and held them up to rat’s throat. Gleaming in the light, her claws looked razor sharp, like tiny daggers.

Luna began interrogating the culprit. “Where did you come from? Who do you work for? How long have you been monitoring us? Why are you trying to stop us?”

“Wha-what?” Blood draining from his face, the rat said, “This is all one big mistake! I don’t work for anyone, honest! I’m not trying to stop you from doing anything!”

Luna said icily, “Then why’d you knock out the policeman? What is your objective?”

“Look, Miss, I’m just a hungry rat trying to get in the fridge. He was the only guy left in this place. What was I supposed to do? Take my chances? He’d be sure to come after me with a gun. I swear, I didn’t mean any harm!”

Luna’s green eyes narrowed, appearing almost fiendish. “Well, *Mister* rat. We have a predicament. You completely messed up our plans.” She examined her claws, licking each one carefully. “Now tell me, rat, how can you make up for the damage you’ve done?”

Arms and legs fanned out against the wall, the rat squeaked, “I know it’s my fault, but what can I do? Please, please forgive me. Let me go and I promise I’ll never do anything bad again!”

Luna smiled. “I find it interesting to see you rats on the move. You’re already invading the humans’ territory openly. Do you know about the problem the humans are facing?”

“You mean the sleeping?”

Luna nodded.

“Well, everyone knows that. Even—” The rat shut up, clasping a paw over his mouth.

Luna drew closer, her fishy breath flowing into the rat’s face. “Even what?”

The rat suddenly looked guilty of something. “Listen, there is something I can do, I think. If it’s information you want, I can take the kids down. But only if you promise not to hurt me.”

“Down?” His eyes widening, Genesis also drew near and said, “You mean—”

“Yes,” said the rat, “I can bring the kids to see the Nexus.”

- The Nexus -

The Nexus. Kevin wasn't sure what a Nexus was. Genesis simply explained that, at least for the rats, it was a meeting place. A meeting place of rats. A place stuffed with lots and lots of rats. If anything, it sounded more disgusting than useful.

Everyone stood over the manhole in the street, looking down into the darkness below. All they could see was the faint image of flowing sewage. A variety of strange odors rose up from the depths, unpleasantly tickling their noses. Only the rat seemed to find pleasure in such nefarious stench.

"Did you find a source of light?" Genesis asked.

Holding up a flashlight, Kevin replied, "Yeah. Found one in the glove compartment."

Andrew adjusted his glasses. "So you're sure Genesis and Luna can't come?"

The rat sat up and put its paws on its hips, acting rather strict. "Absolutely not. They are enemies. Humans are the enemy too. But since you are kids, they will be more lenient."

Genesis added, "It's too difficult for us to go up and down ladders anyway." He paused. "I don't like this idea of sending you kids alone, but we don't have a choice. We have to abide by their rules. And the Nexus is the only resource we can turn to right now."

Kevin took out his cell phone and gave it to Genesis. "Here, you can keep my cell. Andrew's got the number. We'll contact you if things get out of hand."

Genesis nodded, holding the cell phone in his mouth.

The two boys descended down the ladder. The sewer was spacious and there was a place for them to walk.

"Come, come," said the rat, gesturing with a paw, "this way."

They headed through the tunnel, watching their step. Kevin waved the flashlight around and was surprised to see that this

particular sewer system did have some dim square-shaped lights built along the walls. His flashlight was fairly weak, so it was a welcome surprise.

After they walked for nearly ten minutes, the rat came to a stop, its whiskers twitching. There were no more lights. It was utter darkness. Extending his hand, Kevin shone his flashlight ahead. The light reflected off little glowing dots, which were strewn across the walkway. They were eyes—hundreds of tiny eyes. They had reached a gathering of rodents.

“Halt! Who goes there?”

The gray rat said, “It’s me, Norman. I just brought a couple of kids from the surface.”

A large rat stepped into the light. It was almost a foot long. Kevin supposed it was a guard rat.

The guard said, “Norman, why’d you bring these humans down here?”

“They helped me. To repay the favor, I want to take them to the Nexus. It’ll be quick and I promise they won’t cause trouble.”

“Helped you?” Sounding skeptical, the guard said, “Some of my men have informed me that a rat has been seen in the company of the accursed human pets. Were you forced into this?”

Frightened, Norman replied, “No! The cat had nothing to do with it.”

“So there was a cat?” The large rat snapped, “You should have fought that cat to the death!”

Ashamed, Norman averted his eyes. “But I had no chance...”

The guard rat ordered his fellow rats, “Send Norman down to the cleaning pool! Wash him clean of the beloved filth!” He examined the two boys with a scornful glare. “As for you, humans, get out of here! Scram! We want nothing to do with you!”

“Wait!” A small rat scurried through the furry crowd. “Hold it right there!”

The guard said to the small rat, “What is it?”

The small rat replied, “The queen has commanded these kids be sent to her.”

“T-the queen? Why would she—”

The small rat shrugged. “I know nothing.”

The large rat scowled. “What is she thinking? Fine. Bring them to the queen.”

The sea of rats parted before them, leaving some walking room for them to continue down the tunnel. Norman, however, wouldn't be joining them. Looking timid and sad, he was dragged away by a couple of black rats.

Andrew asked Kevin, "Should we go?"

Kevin shrugged. "We're at their mercy."

The two boys followed the trail given them. Numerous rodents stayed on their guard, watching the boys carefully. Most of these creatures were brown and gray, making it hard to see them. Kevin kept his flashlight pointed to the ground to watch where he was stepping. Andrew avoided eye contact with the rats. The furry creatures seemed to be glaring at them. Even though they made no sounds, he could tell that they resented humans by their harsh stares.

The sewers opened up more as they went in deeper. When they reached a spacious chamber, the rats stopped leaving a way for them to walk across. The rats surrounded them, appearing as a thick blotchy carpet.

All of a sudden the rodents began squeaking, causing a loud commotion. Kevin noticed a small rat setting a lit candle over a podium made from cheap plastic crates. Then a giant white rat crawled up the podium and sat down, its ruby eyes shining by the flame. Its fur was well groomed and shiny.

The white rat said, "Welcome, children. You may call me Queen. I am ruler of Korgen." Her manner of speaking was very elegant. "My servants have informed me of your coming as well as the purpose of your visit. I know that you have come seeking the Nexus. However, I'm afraid I cannot allow that."

Kevin said, "Why not?"

"The Nexus is not something for outsiders."

"But the world is in trouble! The humans can't wake up! They'll all die!"

"So? The humans are not our concern."

Kevin said, "Don't you need the humans to live? Don't you eat our garbage?"

"You misunderstand. We will suffer, but we will adapt. Things will change, sure, but it will be for the better. We will look for other food sources. The natural order of things will rebalance, as it always has and always will."

Kevin bit his lip. "There's nothing you can do for us?"

“For you there is but one thing. I brought you here to warn you, dear children. Leave the city at once.”

“Leave? Why?”

“A great power is coming—one that will seek your life. You will be in grave danger should you choose to stay any longer.” She turned away and hopped off the crate. “Now be on your way and heed my advice. Leave the city and never return.”

“You can’t be serious!” Kevin desperately shouted, “We have nowhere to go! If you don’t help us, no one will. Please! There’s got to be more you can do for us!”

Her red eyes gleaming, the queen said coldly, “Help you? You still don’t understand. We *hate* humans. The only reason I offer you this warning is because you are still children, still innocent. Save yourselves. Forget the others. The humans brought this upon themselves. It is their problem, not ours.” She went to a crack in the wall big enough for her to squeeze through.

“Wait!” Kevin shouted after her, “What do you mean by that? You’re saying we did this? Whatever’s happening is our fault?” The queen disappeared into the crack. He screamed, “Come back here! I’m talking to you!” His teeth clenched, he groaned in frustration.

Andrew tugged on the back of Kevin’s shirt. “Kevin, let’s just go.” He was getting nervous. He was afraid that Kevin’s outburst might have been an insult to the queen or to the rats around them.

“Yeah,” said Kevin, “this was a waste of time. The Nexus is probably stupid anyway.”

Kevin turned to leave. When he took his first step, he felt something squishy beneath the sole of his foot. He swallowed. Inside, he felt as though his heart sank down into pit of his stomach and stayed there. Full of anxiety, Kevin wondered if he should move his foot.

Worried, Andrew asked, “What’s wrong?”

Kevin whispered, “I think I’m stepping on a rat.”

Andrew didn’t quite hear him. “What? You think you’re—”

“Keep your voice down!” Kevin motioned for Andrew to draw closer. Kevin whispered into Andrew’s ear, “I think I might be stepping on a rat, but I’m not sure.”

Andrew said fearfully, “What should we do?”

Kevin said, “I don’t know. I feel like I’m stepping on a landmine and I don’t know if it’s a dud or not.”

“Then just lift up your foot and kick it out of the way.”

“Just like a landmine?”

A tiny voice squeaked, “Help...”

The rats quickly surrounded the boys. “What’s going on here? Where’d that voice come from? Lift up your foot, kid.”

“Too late,” said Andrew.

Kevin lifted his foot up. He winced as he realized he had been stepping on a little white rat. Hundreds of high-pitched gasps echoed around them as the rats shouted in horror.

“It’s the prince! The prince is dead!”

“They killed him! Murderers!”

“They’re assassins sent by the HPC!”

“Seize them! Don’t let them get away!”

Three dreadfully long hours had passed since the two boys first entered the sewers. Kevin and Andrew sat inside a massive broken pipe that had been grated on both ends to keep them from escaping. Their only source of light was a few candles around the walkways, but some of the candles were starting to smolder. They quietly listened to the sound of pitter-patter of water drops and the sloshing of murky sewage against the concrete.

There was an elite squad of guard rats watching over them. Two rats were posted on each side of the short pipe and almost a dozen more were in the vicinity. Using marker caps as helmets, these brown rats marched around in circles, armed with sharp butter knives.

Groggier than ever, Kevin sat up and yawned several times. The effects of the coffee were wearing thin. His clothes could not save him from the cold. He trembled, keeping his arms close to his chest. His eyes wandered wearily across the rats, envying their small fur coats. Smacking his lips, he looked at Andrew, who appeared to be in worse shape. Andrew was lying down, curled in the fetal position.

Kevin asked him, “How are you holding up?”

Andrew looked at him briefly, and then closed his eyes. “I don’t know. I’m tired. I’m also pretty hungry and uncomfortable. That’ll keep me awake, but I might not last long.”

Kevin flicked his wrist and checked his watch. “It’s past noon. I’ve been awake for over thirty-six hours. That’s a first for me.”

Kevin glanced at the guards. He could tell that they were starting to get drowsy by the way they rubbed their eyes.

“Make the call,” whispered Kevin. “They might not notice.”

Andrew nodded. He reached into the pockets of his slacks, searching for the phone.

Unfortunately for them, the guards noticed. “Hey, what do you have there?”

Kevin whispered, “We’ve got to let Genesis know we’ve been caught.”

Andrew started the speed dial.

Several guards crawled through a hole in the grate and approached the boys warily, brandishing their butter knives. The leader said, “Hand it over kid and no one gets hurt.”

“Okay,” said Andrew, chucking the cell phone forward. “It’s all yours.”

“A phone?” The guard eyed Andrew. “Who did you just call? Speak!” He jabbed Andrew in the leg with the knife. Andrew yelped.

The guard continued by presenting the tip of his knife. “If you don’t tell me, I’ll prod you even harder! You don’t want that, do you? These knives have been cultured with various strains of deadly bacteria. If it punctures your skin, who knows what you’ll end up with.”

Whoosh. The sound of wind swept across the pipe. The guard shrieked and keeled over.

The guard rats watched as their leader fainted. While most of the rats kept watch, one went to inspect the leader’s body.

“He’s paralyzed. Been shot in the back with a blow dart!”

The rats whirled around, their eyes scanning the area. Then a few rats squeaked in shock and collapsed.

“Over there!” A guard pointed up. “Someone’s up there!”

A long piece of string touched down to the ground, and a black rat came sliding down it. All the brown rats charged at the black rat, wielding their butter knives like lances. The black rat skillfully dodged their attempts to pierce him, jumping over them with incredible nimbleness. As the black rat emerged behind two of the brown rats, it karate-chopped them, knocking out both guards immediately. Another guard attempted to stab the outsider. The black rat easily knocked the head of the knife to the ground, ran up the blunt of the knife, and kicked the guard across the jaw, causing

him to reel backwards. The remaining guards turned ghostly white at the sight of this amazingly dangerous black rat.

Motioning, a guard shouted, "Retreat! We need reinforcements! We can't defeat him alone!" The brown rats all agreed and ran for their lives.

"You're not getting away that easily," said the black rat. It pulled out a blowpipe. Aiming for their backs, he shot down all the guard rats with tiny blow darts. Their bodies falling to the ground, the brown rats squeaked and fainted one after the other.

The black rat walked up to the grate and took off the bolts. The metal grate fell with a clang. The rat then bowed toward the boys and said, "Don't worry. I'm on your side."

Kevin crawled out of the pipe and dusted himself off. "Thanks."

Andrew followed him out, but looked skeptically at the black rat. "Why are you helping us?" Andrew wondered. "I thought rats hated humans."

"I guess you could call me special," said the black rat.

The rat brought a paw to its head and took off what looked like a black cloth from its face, revealing a white face underneath. It was then that Kevin realized it wasn't a black rat. It was a white rat wearing small black clothes. Finding it humorous, Kevin chuckled. It was like a cute little ninja rat.

The white rat said, "My name is Helios. The sewers will be hard to navigate from here on out, but I can show you the way to the surface. All I ask is that you allow me to join you on your quest." He bowed before them.

"We'll take you up on that offer," said Kevin, beaming. "Glad to have you, Helios."

- Hunger -

Helios showed them the escape route as he had promised. He knew where the rats would be patrolling, and with this knowledge, they were able to make it out discreetly.

Kevin climbed up the ladder and pushed aside the manhole cover. Once he was finally out, he drew a deep breath. Fresh air. It was invigorating. Standing under the sunlight, he raised his hands and enjoyed its gentle warmth. It felt great to be on the surface.

Andrew climbed up after him and closed the cover after Helios was on the street.

Kevin looked left and right. There was no sign of Genesis or Luna. “We must have ended up somewhere else.” While turning his head, he noticed someone slouched against the side of a car. It was a red-haired boy wearing a hoodie and baggy jeans. He was clutching a skateboard at his chest.

Kevin sighed. “Asleep on the street.”

“BOO!” The teenager jumped up, startling Kevin with a sudden shout. When he saw the stunned expression on Kevin’s face, the skinny boy pointed and laughed at him. “Oh, man! You should’ve seen the look on your face! Priceless!”

“You’re awake!” Kevin gaped.

The teen smiled. “Yeah. You’re awake too. The name’s Tom Schneider. I used to go to school around here.” Tom paused. “But as you can see...no school today! Isn’t it great?”

“Great?” Kevin shrugged. “I guess.” He gestured toward himself and Andrew. “I’m Kevin and this is Andrew. We’re trying to figure out what’s going on.”

Tom patted Kevin on the shoulder. “That’s cool. I’ve just been chilling. Thought I might as well enjoy the freedom while it’s there.”

Helios tugged on the bottom of Tom’s jeans. “If you are doing nothing, I welcome you to join us,” said Helios politely, looking up

at him. “We could use a few more people on our quest. It’s a difficult task and we’re certainly short on hands.”

Tom goggled at the talking rat.

Noticing Tom’s amazement, Kevin decided to explain everything from the beginning. He told him about how they discovered everyone was asleep and how an organization of pets known as the HPC was working on the case. Then he talked about their little adventure in the sewer.

After Kevin finished speaking, Tom blinked rapidly as he tried to wrap his mind around what he was being told. “Right...dude, that is awesome.” He beamed at Kevin. “But I guess anything can happen now, right? It’s crazy. The streets are totally empty and all the animals are talking...it’s like we’re in a movie—or a *book*.”

“Speaking of talking animals,” Kevin said to Andrew, “did you try calling them again?”

Andrew shook his head. “Should I?”

“Yeah, call them. Let them know where we are. I don’t want them worrying about us.”

Andrew tried calling Kevin’s phone. After three rings, someone picked up. Andrew said quickly, “Hey. We’re out of the sewers.”

Through the phone he heard someone grunt, “Genesis speaking. Sorry it took so long to pick up. I had difficulty flipping open this device. Where are you now?”

Andrew searched for the street sign. “Felix Avenue.”

“Stay where you are. We’re coming.”

Andrew put his phone back in his pocket. “They told us to wait here.”

Kevin’s stomach growled. Patting his belly, he grimaced. “Well then, I think it’s a good time to grab a quick lunch. I’m starving.” He turned to Tom. “Any ideas?”

Tom interlocked his hands behind his head. “Hmm...I don’t have anything at home. I ate it all. But there’s a grocery nearby.”

“A grocery? It’s probably closed now.”

Tom grinned mischievously. “Does that matter?”

Kevin nodded. “If the doors are locked, yes, it does matter.”

Tom shook his head. “If it’s locked, we break in. It’s as simple as that.”

“Break in?” said Kevin, his brow furrowing. “What about the cops?”

“They’ve got bigger things to worry about than a bunch of hungry kids.”

Kevin said uncertainly, “Still—”

“Let go of that old way of thinking,” said Tom. “We’re hungry. We’ve got no choice, right? The law can’t hold us down. The law was made to protect the people. But right now, the law can’t protect anyone. From this moment forward, we do whatever we need to. Agreed?”

Kevin felt unwilling to accept, but the boy did have a point. “Agreed.”

“Cool.” Tom motioned for them to follow. “Come on. Let’s not keep our stomachs waiting too long.”

The supermarket was just a little further down the street. In big blue letters it was called the “Come-And-Buy-Stuff” or CABS for short. Kevin had never heard of this supermarket, but it was small, so it might not have been a part of a larger chain. There was a small neon sign on the window that read, “Open 24 hours, 365 days a year.” But it was definitely closed now. The lights were off and they couldn’t see anyone inside.

“What’s the plan?” asked Kevin.

Tom moved closer to the sliding doors. To everyone’s surprise, the doors opened automatically. “That’s the plan. I guess they were right about the doors being open at least.”

Kevin approached the opened doors. “I don’t believe it.”

“Must be our lucky day.”

Andrew said, “I’ll wait outside for Genesis.”

Helios added, “I’ll stay outside too.”

Kevin nodded. “What do you want me to get you?”

Andrew replied, “I definitely need a drink. Some cola, with caffeine...and, I don’t know, maybe some canned spaghetti or something. Anything will do.”

“Okay,” said Kevin, “we’ll be right back.”

Kevin and Tom entered the dark store. Their eyes slowly got used to the soft light that came from the windows. There were also few emergency lights on, coloring the aisles with a faint red. Kevin made a quick study of the area. The cash registers were near the front with the produce section. In total, there were only about fifteen aisles in the whole building. The refrigerated items were along the

sides and the back. It was indeed a small store, and Kevin was confident it wouldn't take long to get what they needed and get out.

Kevin noticed the music coming from the speakers around the building. It wasn't the typical music he was used to hearing in a supermarket. Kevin was used to hearing pop, rock or sometimes oldies. But this CABS had classical music on—really soft and gentle classical music, the type of music that would lull anyone to sleep.

Kevin covered his ears on the way to the soda aisle. “Do they usually put this music on?”

“Not usually, no,” replied Tom, snickering, “Maybe it's like a security system. They put on this classical stuff to make intruders fall asleep.”

Kevin stifled a yawn. “It's working, I'll give them that. We should get the stuff quick.”

“Sure. Then we'll meet up at the back. They should have a kitchen or something where we can heat up the food.”

They picked up shopping carts and raced through the supermarket. Kevin went for the drinks, grabbing as much soda as he could. He left his cart near the front of the store. Tom went straight for the canned pasta. After they finished their tasks, they gathered at the back and found a door for employees only.

Tom opened the door and, after passing the threshold, froze.

Kevin asked, “What's wrong?”

Tom looked down, squinting into the darkness. “I don't know. There's something on the floor here. Can you find a light switch?”

Kevin groped along the wall and flicked on the lights. He gasped. A man was facedown on the ground, motionless. “Is he asleep?” Kevin wondered out loud.

With his foot, Tom flipped the body over. The person was a middle-aged man dressed in an employee's uniform. “Probably,” replied Tom. “But I wonder why he ended up here.”

“A sleepwalker,” said Kevin. “That's my guess.”

They continued along, pushing the shopping cart full of canned pasta around the body, and found a small kitchen area. There was a round table in the center, surrounded by several wooden chairs. Kevin placed a few cans down on the table. Tom tested the microwave above the stove to make sure it was still working.

“Now if we could just find containers to heat up the stuff,” said Kevin as he examined the cupboards. “I don’t see anything. Maybe there are some outside.”

“I’ll look,” said Tom, as he left the room.

While waiting, Kevin decided to recline on the couch. The cushion, though battered, ripped and discolored with odd stains, was comfortable. He sunk deeper into the seat, seemingly merging with it. Though Kevin was hungry, he was also exhausted. Maybe a few seconds of shuteye wouldn’t hurt, he decided. Just a brief rest to relieve him from the exhaustion. The lights were on anyway. It wouldn’t be that easy to pass out. He closed his eyes and relaxed his limbs. His breathing slowed. The classical music was soothing and made him feel at peace. There was nothing to worry about...nothing to think about. The only thing on his mind was the wonderful tranquility. It was peaceful. It was nice.

Then he heard a scream.

Andrew jumped to his feet and glanced at the rat. “Someone just screamed!”

Helios scampered to the door. “I’ll check it out. You wait here.”

Andrew nodded with a worried expression, watching Helios vanish through the supermarket’s entrance.

Helios sprinted across the grocery store, skidding past the checkout and down the produce section. His night vision was not particularly good and his short stature made it difficult to see far, especially considering the mess on the floor. There were broken bottles, rolling jars, and dented cans scattered all over. The overwhelming scents of fruit juices and syrups tempted his senses, making it hard for him to concentrate.

Then he heard a voice say, “Get back! Go away! Shoo!”

The voice was coming from the back of the store. Helios scrambled into the aisle and climbed up the rows of shelves. When he reached the edge, he saw Tom on the floor, crawling backwards. Opposite Tom was a coiled snake that dodged whatever Tom threw at him. The snake was orange with thick dark stripes over its body. It was a copperhead.

Helios pulled out his blowgun from his clothes and shot a dart at the snake. The tiny dart bounced off harmlessly against the

snake's scales. He needed something else to draw its attention. The shelf below seemed to hold the answer.

Tom backed into an icebox. Hopelessly trapped, he chucked handfuls of ice at the slithering reptile, which also seemed to be snickering. But the grin disappeared from the snake's face the moment a small object bounced off its skull. It glanced on the floor and saw a marble spinning away. The snake looked around. Then it was hit again.

That was when the copperhead finally noticed Helios on a top shelf. Helios hurled marble after marble with pinpoint accuracy on the snake's head. Infuriated, the snake slithered toward the rat. It stopped. Kevin ran up from behind and swatted the snake with a broom, sending into a display full of ceramic mugs. The mugs clattered and shattered against the tiled floor, burying the snake in the broken pieces. Kevin helped Tom up and led him toward the exit.

The snake popped out from under the heap of debris. When it searched for the heat signature of the boys, it saw they were getting away. It wriggled out of the mess and slithered rapidly to chase after them.

Standing on one of the shelves, Helios pushed over opened bags of flour. The bags landed with a thud on the ground near the snake, flooding the aisle with a smoke of fine powder. Blanketed in white, the snake glared at Helios and rushed to ascend the shelf.

Now that he had the reptile's attention, Helios ran down the other side. The snake went around the aisle after him, but he was unable to find him. The most visible source of heat came from inside an empty can. The copperhead approached it, careful not to be too loud. With a quick snap of its neck, it stuck its head inside the can. There it found only a smoldering piece of paper. The snake hissed angrily in vexation.

Wham! A powerful paw landed on the snake's back, pinning it down. Genesis had arrived. Helios emerged from the can, coughing up smoke. He had been hiding behind the burning paper. The snake eyed the rat hungrily, striving to break free from Genesis's grasp.

Genesis barked, "How'd you get inside the city? How did you pass our patrols?"

The copperhead snickered, "You're naïve. You think the HPC is incorruptible? There are traitors within your ranks. Pets that have

been mistreated by their owners are creating holes in your fragile alliance.”

Genesis growled, “So? There’s nothing for you here.”

“With the humans gone, everything is ours!”

“The humans aren’t gone.”

“Only a fool would cling to such fantasies. The humans won’t last.”

“Do you know what’s causing it?”

“Even if I did know, I wouldn’t tell you. You might as well kill me.”

Genesis looked to the front door and barked. Two dogs, a collie and a bulldog, entered into the store and approached Genesis. Genesis told the dogs, “Take him away.” The dogs nodded. With their jaws, the two dogs held firmly on the snake by its neck and tail, being careful not to let it escape.

As it was being carried out, the snake hissed, “Don’t think for a moment you have a chance at saving the humans. *He* will come, and when he does, it will all be over!”

Kevin and Tom came running back inside. Genesis turned to them and said, “We’re done here. Seems like we’ll have to watch our patrols more closely.”

Kevin exclaimed, “Is Andrew in here?”

Dusting off his tiny black garments, Helios replied, “I never saw him come in.”

His hands trembling in fright, Kevin said, “Andrew’s gone! I can’t find him. He left his phone on the sidewalk and disappeared...”

“Hey, get back here!” Andrew cried. He ran down the block until the crow finally stopped. The crow rested on a fire hydrant. It had in its beak a pair of eyeglasses.

Andrew took small steps toward the crow.

The crow put the glasses down. “Boy, do these glasses really mean that much to you?”

“I need them!” Andrew replied, slowly getting closer.

“No, you don’t.”

Andrew snapped, “I need them to see.”

“You’re going to sleep anyway. And when you do, you won’t need to see anything.”

Andrew straightened up. “I’m not going to sleep.”

“You are. Every human needs to sleep.”

Andrew shook his head. “I know that. But if I go to sleep, I won’t wake up.”

The crow flew over to the boy’s shoulder. “Oh, you poor, poor boy. How do you know you won’t wake up? Have you tried it?”

“I haven’t, but a dog named Genesis told me that.”

“A dog? You believe a dog?” The crow cawed in laughter. “Dogs are such pathetic creatures. They can’t properly hunt for food or groom themselves. They chase after their own tails and will eat anything! Those uncouth savages would rather sniff butts than flowers! The dog is yours to command. You shouldn’t listen to them. They should listen to you!”

Andrew said nothing, musing over the crow’s words.

The crow leaned closer to Andrew’s ear and said, “You’re putting your life at risk for no valid reason. Do you honestly think you can achieve anything by staying awake? I’ll let you in on a secret. I know the truth. This whole thing is temporary. If you sleep now, everything will be back to normal when you awaken. The dog lied to you. You said his name was Genesis. I know of that crafty dog. He’s a stray. He bit the hand that fed him and ran away! He could care less about you or your family. He’s just keeping you awake because he loves to see you suffer.”

Tears welling in his eyes, Andrew didn’t know what to believe.

“Is this true?” is all he could utter.

The crow nodded. “You understand, right? You can’t do anything anyway, especially without rest. Take a little nap and everything will be okay.”

“Yeah,” Andrew mumbled, “a nap would be nice. I’m so tired.”

The crow whispered, “Just a little nap. It’ll feel great. Take all that stress and worry away. Don’t think. Just come with me. I know of a place with a warm bed. It’s really comfortable—amazing, even. Heck, as a bird I don’t even use beds, but that one is so special...even I love to sleep in it when I get the chance.”

Andrew nodded slowly as though in a trance.

“Hold it right there!” shouted a voice from above.

A streak of black and blue crossed Andrew’s vision. The crow jumped off Andrew’s shoulder and tried to fly away. However, it was only able to stay aloft for a few seconds before getting knocked down. A small bird zoomed quickly past, tackling the crow from

behind. The crow plummeted to the sidewalk. As it got back up, it staggered before regaining its balance. The small bird perched itself on Andrew's shoulder. Andrew looked curiously at it. It was a blue-bottomed, white-faced budgie, its back covered with alternating rows of black and white.

The budgie saluted Andrew with a wing and said, "Sorry I'm late. I'm Agent Terminus. I was sent by the HPC to assist you." Terminus pointed at the crow with his wing. "He stole your glasses, right? Don't listen to a thief! He's only telling you what you want to hear, not what you need to hear. Always question yourself. Always question the world. If you desire truth, you'll find it!" The budgie crossed his chest with a wing proudly and said, "That's my motto."

Andrew was astonished by the budgie's confidence, something he found admirable.

The crow scowled at Terminus. "A little parakeet like you...you think you stand a chance against me? Don't get cocky just 'cause you landed a cowardly blow."

"Cowardly?" Terminus said, "Ha! Surely you jest."

Terminus launched off Andrew's shoulder in a flash. The crow tried to fly, but before he could even spread his wings, Terminus headbutted him in the chest, knocking him back several feet. Terminus suddenly disappeared again, his movement too fast for the crow to keep up. The crow tried to parry the budgie's next attack. But this time, the attack came from behind. Again and again Terminus zipped back and forth, diving at the crow with breakneck speeds and striking him from all sides. Finally, after several more strikes, the crow took a hit to the head and fainted.

Terminus landed on Andrew's shoulder and offered some advice, "Listen, even a mouse frightens an elephant. Everything matters one way or another. No human can do everything but every human can do something. You, my young friend, need confidence."

His eyes pink, Andrew bowed his head sheepishly. "I'm sorry. I wasn't sure what to do.... It's just that I—" Terminus fluttered over him, pecking Andrew on the head.

Andrew flailed his hands, trying to protect himself. "Hey! Ouch! What was that for?"

"Don't apologize! I'm giving you advice. Just say thanks."

"Oh, okay," said Andrew, sounding doubtful. "Thanks."

"Now the others are looking for you. We'd better hurry back."

- Evening Comes -

By the time Andrew arrived, everyone was waiting for him at the entrance of the supermarket. The two boys sat on the sidewalk, eating their lunches, and they gave Andrew his share. Having only eaten a skimpy breakfast during the early morning, the boys were famished and ate two meals worth. Unable to restrain themselves, they grabbed from the supermarket whatever they could eat. They also decided to gulp down some instant coffee and energy drinks in order to stay lively.

The animals ate lunch as well. Tom found some plastic bowls and fed them whatever he could find at the pet aisle. It was mostly canned food. But he got a small bag of seeds for Terminus.

Kevin didn't feel right about not paying for it, so he left some money—a few dollars and a handful of pennies—at the checkout. He hoped it would be enough to cover the costs.

They ate and chatted for a while. Before they knew it, it was already mid-afternoon. The sun was descending, slowly changing the colors of the sky from blue to a reddish orange.

After they were done, Genesis called for a meeting. “Ahem, I believe we should discuss our next plan of action.” He pointed at Helios with his snout. “Since you are a prince of Korgen, I thought perhaps you'd like to shed some light on the matter.”

“What?” Sounding surprised, Kevin said, “Helios is a prince?”

Helios stared at Genesis. “You knew?”

“Not quite. It was merely a guess. I've been wandering the streets for years. All I know is that the royal family of Korgen descended from lab rats.”

Helios glared at Genesis. “So you just tricked me into admitting it.” Feeling rather embarrassed at being deceived so easily, Helios frowned. “Well you got me. Yes, I'm a prince.”

Kevin wondered, “Why would a prince want to help? The queen rejected us.”

Helios smiled, tugging at his garments. “Look. I’m wearing clothes. I’m doing this against my mother’s wishes. To me, humans are fascinating. They invent things to solve problems. They wear clothes to stay warm. They build massive shelters and cultivate the land. So much freedom and creativity. It’d be such a waste to let the humans die out.

“However, as prince, things are very strict for me. I have no freedom. I’m not allowed to go into the world. I’ve always had to sneak out. But for a grand quest, sneaking out wouldn’t do much good. I decided to fake my death by letting the boy step on me.” He grimaced upon recalling it. “Though it almost did become a real death because the boy didn’t lift his foot for a long time. I thought I was going to really die.”

“T-that was you?” Kevin tried to make amends by offering moldy cheese, but Helios seemed offended.

“Anyway,” continued Helios, “try not to let word of this get out. If they find out I’m alive and working with humans, they’ll send someone after me. More importantly, if other animals learn that a prince of rats is helping humans, the neutrality of the rats may be threatened. I don’t want to bring trouble to my family.”

Kevin nodded. “Okay, I promise to keep the secret.”

Genesis said, “Now onto the topic at hand. The boys didn’t make it to the Nexus. But Helios has informed me that he visited the Nexus beforehand.”

Kevin said, “I still don’t know what a Nexus is.”

Genesis admitted, “I don’t know much about it either. But it is rumored to be useful.”

Helios entered Andrew’s clothes from the pant leg. Andrew squirmed and kicked around as the white rat climbed up his skin. Helios popped out of Andrew’s collar. He situated himself on Andrew’s left shoulder. Andrew wondered why Helios didn’t just climb up his clothes. It would’ve been much less painful. Then, after noticing Terminus on his right shoulder, Andrew wondered why his shoulders had become quite popular.

Helios began, “Let me explain. The Nexus is the meeting place of information. It is our knowledge and fact center. There is a Nexus in every area with a high population of rats. When a rat is born, he is

placed through a series of tests. He'll run through mazes of intense complexity. If he is found to have amazing memory, he will have the privilege of joining the Nexus. Those who are of the Nexus sit in a chamber and receive information from our networks of informants and spies. And when a foreign rat comes to our city, he must stop by our Nexus and give us all the information he can. By doing so, we will also have information about foreign lands."

Andrew said, "So it's like a database, a storage of information?"

"Exactly," said Helios. "A word-of-mouth database."

Tom raised a brow. "Why would rats need information?"

"Knowledge is important for everyone, not just humans," said Helios. "By having knowledge of which restaurants are lenient and which are dangerous, we can determine where we can go to for a safe meal. We can also discover if humans are planning any form of extermination against us so we can relocate. By knowing vital information, we can survive."

Kevin shrugged. "So how's that suppose to help us? We're not looking for food and we're not avoiding extermination."

Helios replied, "Because the Nexus takes *all* information. It doesn't filter out anything. It doesn't only contain information about food sources. It's also our source for news."

Coming to an understanding, Kevin said, "Ah, I see. Then? What'd you find out?"

Helios cleared his throat. "The current cause of the sleeping epidemic is unknown. There is nothing definite that we know. However, I still have information that may interest you. First, let me tell you something concerning our group and our mission. That snake you saw was not from around here. That will not be the last time we see a dangerous, wild animal try to make their way into human territory. Now that the humans are defenseless, we've been seeing movement from the forest. Once news of your investigation reaches the forest, wild animals will definitely try to stop you."

His eyes widening, Andrew asked, "The animals hate humans that much?"

Helios thought for a moment before replying. "Hate...I wouldn't say hate. But they do find humans to be a threat. Over the years the humans have been stealing land and resources. Some species are even on the brink of extinction because of them, whether

it is from destruction of homes, introduction of foreign germs and species, or even hunting.”

Helios continued, “Now for the second piece of information. There’s a laboratory in the south area of the city. It is a secret underground laboratory. According to rumors, they have been doing strange experiments involving sleep.”

“Hmm.” Kevin said, “Looks like our only thing to go on.”

“Indeed,” said Genesis, “there might be some vital information. We should see the research.” Genesis stared at a stain on the concrete wall, looking worried. He looked at Helios. “There is something I’m wondering about. The snake we caught was saying that someone would come. Do you who he’s talking about?”

Helios sighed. “I didn’t want to worry you. But rats all over the country are saying that,” Helios swallowed, trying to gather the courage to say the name, “*Kain* is returning.”

“Kain?” Kevin asked, “Who’s Kain?”

“A legend passed down from generation to generation,” Helios replied. “I’m not really sure who or what Kain is. But they say it’s a bad sign.”

“You don’t even know what it is and you’re afraid of it?”

“Well, according to the Nexus, every time in history when something terrible happens it’s because of Kain. Although I don’t know much, isn’t that what makes it scary?”

“I suppose....” Kevin’s eyes wandered over the group. “So should we check out this laboratory now?”

“No,” answered Genesis. “It’ll soon be dark. We will have difficulty monitoring the city at night. We may not be able to keep the city safe. Also, I don’t want any of you to fall asleep by wearing yourselves out. Try to find a way to rest your body but keep your mind awake.”

Kevin drove them around the city, searching for shelter. With three boys, a large dog, a cat, a bird and a rat, it was starting to get a little tight inside the four-passenger car. No one was bumping shoulders, but judging from the atmosphere, it was tense. All the animals seemed to distrust one another and they remained silent throughout the ride. Genesis kept a careful eye on Luna; Luna watched Terminus with an urge to pounce; and Terminus glared at Helios. The pets were kept in the backseat and the only thing keeping them

from running rampant was Tom. Tom sat in the middle, glancing apprehensively at the animals around him.

Kevin parked the car near a multiplex. “How about the movie theatre? It’s got food, good seats, loud music...”

Andrew examined the place. “Movies can put you to sleep.”

Tom leaned forward, poking his head between the front seats. “Only if it’s a boring movie. We should watch something crazy.... Oh, and we should keep the lights on.”

Andrew said, “But does anyone even know how to operate the movie projector?”

There was a moment of silence.

“I’ll handle it,” said Tom. “My father manages a cinema. I’ve seen someone do it hundreds of times. It can’t be that hard.”

Kevin smiled. “It’s decided then!”

They left the car and tried to open the front doors. It was locked. Everyone came to the same conclusion and stared at Helios.

Helios stared back at them. “*What?*”

Genesis said what everyone was thinking, “Rats are good at sneaking in buildings. Go inside and open the doors.”

It was easier said than done, but because everyone was looking at him, Helios couldn’t refuse. He proceeded to find a way inside the building. Once inside, he took on the arduous task of pulling a broom across the entrance hall. It took him nearly an hour to bring the broom five feet over and prop it against the door. It took him another half-hour to push the door handle with enough force to open the door. After he finished the ordeal, Helios passed out on the spot.

Tom took the liberty of choosing a movie to watch. He headed for the projection booth while Andrew and Kevin handled the popcorn, drinks and hotdogs. Genesis, Luna and Terminus decided to take turns patrolling the building. There was no telling whether or not some wild animals might try to attack during the night.

After the two boys prepared the food, they played a few arcade games with the quarters they found scattered behind the ticket window. Tom did not return for a while, so Kevin became worried.

Kevin told Andrew, “I’m going to see what’s up.”

Kevin found Tom inside the projector booth. The projector was on, but film was shooting all over the place. Tom was running around, screaming his head off as he tried to turn off the machine.

“What are you doing?” Kevin shouted. “I thought you said you knew how to work this thing!”

“I don’t know,” Tom replied, sweating in a panic. “I-I must’ve forgot a step, or maybe it’s a different model.”

“I hope you didn’t break anything. There should be an office with a computer somewhere. We can look up the directions.”

Meanwhile, Andrew sat on the middle row of the fully lit theatre, munching on some popcorn. He occasionally shot a glance toward the projection booth behind, wondering what was taking them so long. He bobbed back and forth in the chair, causing it to bounce.

Andrew yawned. The room was feeling rather stuffy. He fanned himself with his hand. He wasn’t sure where the controls for the air conditioning were, and it would be too troublesome to look for them. Andrew got up from the chair, walked down the side stairs and headed for the emergency exit beside the white screen, thinking some cool, fresh air would help.

He cracked open the door and a draft rushed in, brushing past his face. It felt nice. The door led to the rear parking lot. He took several deep breaths of the evening air. The sky darkened. Feeling melancholic, he watched the streetlights around the lot as they automatically turned on. When he thought he heard a strange sound, he walked to the curb, listening for any odd noises. The night was filled with sudden barks, howling and caterwauls. Then, during a brief moment of quiet, he thought he heard a whimper.

He looked to his left. There was a green dumpster by the wall. The exterior of the dumpster had been vandalized with spray paint. Disregarding the legality of the act, Andrew was impressed. He was always surprised to see graffiti, especially in the city, because most of the graffiti was made exceptionally well.

The sound of a whimper hit his eardrum yet again. It was close, and if he was right by his estimation, it was coming from the dumpster. Andrew took a few steps toward the dumpster, before having second thoughts. Then Andrew turned around, returning back to the exit. The whimper was there again. He sighed. Andrew did another about-face, unable to quell the curiosity.

Peering over the dumpster, Andrew found a girl huddled beside it, her face buried between her knees. She was crying alone. The girl

looked up and saw Andrew. It was Katie, yet again, her face red, tears dripping down her cheeks.

Wiping her tears, she said irritably, "What do you want?"

"Um," Andrew stuttered, "y-you want to come inside?"

Her eyes narrowing, she snapped, "Leave me alone."

"I..." Andrew fell silent, unsure of what to say.

Katie scowled, annoyed by the sudden silence. "If you've got something to say, say it!"

Andrew gulped out of fear. "I don't understand. Why...are you doing this?"

Katie raised a brow but didn't say anything.

"I mean..." Andrew paused. "You should join us."

"And be a part of your stupid game?"

His eyes closed, Andrew clenched his fist and shouted, "IT'S NOT A STUPID GA—" He opened his eyes and stopped when he realized he was shouting much louder than he anticipated. Katie stared at him, startled by his outburst. Andrew continued, voice softening, "I mean, it's not what you think. Kevin thinks we can do this. It's not a game."

Katie lowered her head, her eyes focused on the ground. "I don't care. I don't care about that...or this crappy world. What's the point?"

"Don't you want to save your parents? I want to save my mom."

"My parents?" Katie made eye contact with Andrew. Andrew felt a chill run down his spine as he gazed into her eyes, her visage cold as ice. It wasn't quite emotionless. No, it was full of pain and sadness. Andrew lost his breath, caught in her fascinating stare.

Then she broke into laughter. "I don't have parents."

"You don't? I thought I saw them before..."

"Whoever you saw, they aren't my real parents." She heaved a sigh, gazing glassy-eyed at the sky. "My old man, he used to...hurt me and my mom. One day, my mom just got up and left. She was fed up. Then the old scumbag started drinking and..." Her voice trailed off, as though she didn't want to recount such a tale. "No, you don't want to know about that. Anyway, all I have are foster parents, and they could care less about me. I know. I've gone through five foster families already. Everyone just hates me."

Andrew searched for the words to say. "I'm sorry."

“You better be sorry.” Katie stood up and slapped him across the face, her eyes full of tears. “I can’t...stop thinking about it now. It’s been so quiet...so lonely...that every time I think, it keeps going back.” Gritting her teeth, she punched Andrew in the stomach. Andrew fell to his knees, grunting. She forced a smile. “I hate guys like you...asking me to come inside, acting like you care.” She grabbed Andrew by the collar and pulled back her fist. “You don’t give a crap about me. And I don’t give a crap about you.” Her fist about to come slamming down, Andrew turned away, squeezing his eyes closed.

“Stop! Get off him!” Kevin and Tom rushed into the scene.

Katie shoved Andrew onto the concrete and glared at Kevin. “Back for more?”

When Kevin saw Andrew in pain, he turned to Katie, cracking his knuckles. “You bet! I’m not letting you get away with this!”

“Don’t,” said Andrew weakly. He got back up, rubbing the pain in his cheek. “It’s my fault. Don’t fight her.”

“Huh?” Kevin’s jaw dropped. “Don’t stick up for her! She’s kicking your butt!”

“It’s my fault,” said Andrew. “I never noticed.” He looked into Katie’s eyes. “You don’t have to do this. Just stop this. Join us.”

“I already told you I don’t want to,” she said.

“So you’re just going to stay behind this dumpster and cry until you die?”

Enraged, Katie punched Andrew in the face again. He didn’t flinch or back away.

“Don’t do this to yourself,” said Andrew, his face covered with blood from his nose. “Don’t think that the world hates you. Don’t give up on everyone because of one man. Don’t hide and push everyone away...because you’re just like us.”

“What?” Katie sputtered, “I’m not like you!”

“Yes, you are!” Andrew spat back. “If you think no one cares...that’s not true—because we care. Or at least...I care.”

“SHUT UP!” Katie raised her fist to strike him again. She screamed, “SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP! I HATE YOU!”

Andrew quickly stepped forward and hugged her. Katie gasped and stiffened. Caught in his embrace, she lost all will to fight back. Their jaws hanging loosely, Kevin and Tom gawked at the weird sight that was unfolding before them.

Kevin mumbled, “This is really freaking me out.”

“Really? I find this pretty...cool,” remarked Tom, smirking.

“Get off me.” Blushing profusely, Katie forced Andrew away. Then came a really long awkward silence. No one knew what to do next. Andrew wanted to say more, but he couldn’t muster up the courage to continue. Katie exhaled, looked briefly at Andrew and turned away.

“I’m going in,” said Katie finally, walking toward the door of the building. “It’s cold.”

After she disappeared, the three boys exchanged glances. Andrew couldn’t hide his embarrassment and his cheeks turned very pink.

“Does that mean she’s joining us?” said Kevin, confused.

“I hope so,” said Andrew. “I sure hope so.”

- Legendary Heroes -

The group spent the rest of the night watching movies until dawn. They watched a few horror flicks. Action and comedy were best because they got the excitement and laughter running. The loud explosions, upbeat music and bright, flashing colors also helped to a degree.

However, it was getting quite painful to stay awake. Even with the booming sound and exciting scenes, they still needed to drink lots of coffee and energy drinks to stay energized—though not without repercussions. Their bodies, feeling really weird now, swelled with sudden aches, itches, jitters and pains. On top of that, their energy levels went extremely high to extremely low and back again, like a never-ending roller coaster.

Regardless, they survived. The sun revealed its huge face in the clear sky. Hotdogs and popcorn filled their breakfast menu. They decided to eat outside on the curb, disgusted at the thought of staying any longer in the cinema. When they finished their meal, everyone hopped back into the car.

The backseat got even more crowded, the seating arrangement lopsided. This time around, Genesis sat in the middle with Katie and Tom on either side. Katie slumped in her seat, looking out the window. She had plenty of room because Genesis kept his distance. Tom was swamped on his side. Luna rested on his lap, Terminus and Helios on his shoulders. In spite of the crowded conditions on his side, Tom couldn't blame the animals. Katie had a really nasty attitude the entire time they were stuck in the multiplex.

“Okay.” Kevin glanced back, slightly amused by the tense situation. “You guys all ready to go?”

“Actually,” said Helios, “I’ve been thinking about it last night and there’s a place I want to show you before we head for the laboratory.”

“What kind of place?”

Helios smiled. “My own secret hideout.”

Helios showed Kevin the way to an abandoned warehouse. The windows were boarded up with rotten wood, the walls were full of graffiti, and the front door was rusted shut.

Tom commented, “Nice place you got here...it must be like a palace for you.”

Helios scurried to the side of the building. “Come. The back door should be open.”

The inside of the building looked worse than the outside. The ceiling was poked full of holes and the floor was covered with garbage.

“What’s with all the junk?” asked Katie, disgusted.

“Does the neighborhood dump trash in here?” asked Kevin.

Helios had a look of dismay. “What are you talking about? This is treasure!”

“Treasure?” Kevin reached down, picked up a dirty sock and waved it about. “This?”

Helios frowned. “I won’t say *everything* here is great. But I didn’t bring you here to rag on my stuff. I have gifts for you.” Helios disappeared under a broken computer case and emerged from a shelf of books. “Come over here.” Helios motioned with his small white paw.

The teens waded through the junk, following after him.

Helios cleared his throat. “The real reason I brought you here is to equip you for the danger ahead. After the encounter with the snake, I realized you guys are pretty defenseless. I want to give you the best weapons I have—weapons fit for legendary heroes like you.”

“Legendary heroes?” repeated Andrew. “In what universe are we legendary heroes?”

Helios grinned. “Legends are born everyday! I’ve got a good feeling about you guys. I know you guys have got what it takes.”

“What would that be?” wondered Kevin.

“Determination...perseverance. The fact that you guys are standing here, after not sleeping for two days, shows you are ready for the next step.” He pushed aside a coverless book, revealing two red yo-yos that were hidden underneath. “These are for Kevin.”

“Yo-yos?” Kevin grabbed the yoyos and started playing around with them, one in each hand. “Huh...”

Helios said, “And now for the girl—”

“Wait,” Kevin interrupted, “I thought you wanted to give me a weapon.”

Helios gave him a dirty look. “Don’t be greedy. You’ve already got yours in your hand.”

Kevin looked down at the yo-yos. “You don’t mean—”

“Yes,” said Helios. “Use them well.”

“It’s a toy!”

Helios ignored him and raced down the side of a slanted table. He went under the table and returned, dragging out an aluminum baseball bat. After much effort, Helios wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead and said to Katie, “And a club for the lady.”

Katie shrugged. Then she picked up the bat by the handle and started swinging it around.

“Suits me I guess. It’s got good weight to it.”

After seeing Katie’s reaction, Helios excitedly climbed up a hill of garbage, which stretched almost up to the ceiling itself, and pushed down a square plastic container. “This one’s for you Andrew.”

Andrew eyed the large black container. It would undoubtedly be something underwhelming. But as he removed the plastic lid, his mouth opened. There was a modern crossbow inside. “A crossbow? Wow! Really?”

Helios beamed. “Yup. I’ve got a few tranquilizer bolts to go with it.”

Tom gulped in anticipation. First there were yo-yos, then a baseball bat, and finally a crossbow. Judging from the order of things, he’d probably get the best weapon.

“All right,” said Helios, raising his fists animatedly. “We’re done here! Let’s go!”

“You didn’t give me anything!” Tom demanded, “Where’s my weapon?”

Helios blinked. “Oh...you. I almost forgot about you.” Rubbing his chin, Helios cast his gaze slowly across the room as he searched for something suitable. Nodding slowly, his eyes stopped at a metal trashcan. “Don’t worry. I have just the thing.” He pointed at it. “That’s yours.”

Tom walked over to the trashcan and popped open the lid. It was empty.

“There’s nothing in here.”

“The lid is yours,” Helios said. “It will make a perfect shield.”

Tom sputtered, “A lid? You’re giving me a lid? This is worse than the yo-yo! There’s got to be something else in here!”

Helios shook his head and replied, “Nope, sorry. That’s all I’ve got. Take it or leave it.”

Tom heatedly argued with Helios over the choice of his weapon for a few minutes before Kevin interfered and assured him that they probably weren’t even going to use the stuff anyway. Andrew also added that they were in a hurry and should not be wasting their time. Tom accepted the lid, but stuffed it in the trunk of the car, thinking he’d never bother with it. It wasn’t even anything special. He could probably find those metal lids all over the city.

They continued on their journey and Helios informed Kevin of the address of the secret laboratory. They were getting close. But as they drove down the street, Andrew noticed something by a stop sign.

Andrew tapped on the window. “There’s something there.”

“Another person?” Kevin’s eyes started to shine.

“No...I’m not sure.”

Kevin pursed his lips. “Might as well check it out.”

He stopped the car and everyone got out. Genesis rushed to the stop sign, finding a Chihuahua lying on its side. He looked across the street. Several dogs and cats were sprawled along the asphalt and concrete. Concerned, Genesis nudged the small dog with his nose.

The Chihuahua glanced at Genesis. “Agent...Genesis...”

“What happened here?” Genesis demanded.

“Ambush...snakes...a whole bunch snuck behind...”

“More snakes?” Genesis examined the dog’s pitiful state. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m not sure...I can’t feel anything anymore...” the dog rasped.

“You’ll be okay,” Genesis assured him. “I’ll call for help.”

The Chihuahua looked Genesis in the eye and wheezed, “I think...they know about your plan. Be careful...they might be looking to stop you.”

Watching the scene, Kevin chewed his lip. “How could they do such a terrible thing?”

Genesis looked up at Kevin. “I didn’t think they’d be this desperate. They’re mobilizing. An attack like this shows they are prepared to fight.” Genesis paused. “The situation has changed. At first I thought we’d just go and find a cure with your help. But now it seems that if you continue to help us, your lives will be in danger.”

Kevin mused. “As if our lives weren’t already in danger.” He walked back to the car and waved his hand. “Come on, everyone. This just means we have to hurry.”

Their destination wasn’t much farther along the road. Kevin parked the car in an abandoned lot. The only thing in the parking lot was a rusted tractor-trailer. There wasn’t even a building in sight.

Kevin looked out the window. “Is this really the place?”

Andrew double-checked the GPS. “This is 1219 Hollowbard Road.” He glanced at the woods and then the truck. “Well, it is a secret lab. And it’s supposed to be underground too.”

They left the car and began scouring the area for clues. Katie stayed in the backseat and left the door open. She stifled a yawn and watched as the others searched around.

Finding the tractor-trailer suspicious, Kevin inspected it right away. The vehicle had been gutted out. There was nothing left under the engine hood and it had been stripped of all its tires. He unlatched and opened the back door of the trailer. The inside was empty.

Kevin sighed and turned away, preparing to close the door, but before he did, Genesis hopped onto the trailer and began sniffing around.

Kevin watched the dog explore with his nose. “You think there’s something here?”

Genesis wandered back and forth. He stopped at the very front of the trailer and glanced at Kevin. “A human scent is right here.”

Kevin climbed into empty trailer. Then Kevin crouched down, brushing away the dirt on the floor. He noticed a slight crack on the ground and a crowbar on the side. He jammed the crowbar into the crack and yanked it. *Snap*. He managed to pry open a hidden panel. Underneath the panel was a dark hole almost four feet in diameter. With his eyes Kevin tried to gauge the depth of the hole, but it was too deep to see the bottom. But there were sturdy rungs on the side.

Pleased with himself, Kevin dusted off his hands and looked at Genesis. "Once again, it looks like you'll be out of action."

Genesis nodded. "Luna and I will keep guard. You can take everyone else with you."

"Everyone else, huh? Will it be all right with just the two of you? I'm worried about those snakes."

Genesis said dryly, "I can handle a few snakes. I'm more worried about what might be down there. The snakes might not be working alone, and the laboratory is a good place for an ambush."

Genesis's words added more fear than Kevin had expected. "We'll be careful," Kevin said uncertainly. "I just hope that will be enough."

- Into the Dark -

“Hey, watch it!”
“Ouch!” Kevin groaned, “You’re stepping on my head!”

“Sorry!” Tom lowered his foot slowly, searching for the next rung on the wall. It was nearly impossible to see anything in the dark.

Kevin reached the solid floor at the bottom. “There’s got to be a light switch somewhere.” He groped around in the darkness, feeling the wall for anything to press. Finally, Kevin felt the shape of the switch and flicked on the floodlights. Startled by the sudden light, Andrew lost his grip and fell, knocking Tom off as well. The two boys landed on top of each other ungracefully.

With Andrew’s foot in his mouth, Tom mumbled, “Gurd awha heee!”

Andrew removed his foot and asked, “I didn’t quiet hear you.”

“GET OFFAH ME!” Tom screamed.

“Oh, oh! Sorry....” Andrew quickly got up.

The hole was empty. There was nothing much to it aside from a door. When Tom opened the door, a cold draft swept across them. The door led to a giant steel hallway, which was cold like a freezer. Besides a low hum coming from the fluorescent tubes overhead, it was quiet.

Kevin hissed out a trail of vapor. “I should’ve brought a jacket! Why’s it freezing down here?” He stared at the group. “Wait a minute.... Where’s Katie? I thought she was behind us.”

“She didn’t want to come down.” Andrew rubbed his arms, shivering. He looked in his chest pocket. Terminus was snuggled inside, immersed in Andrew’s body warmth. “I don’t blame her. Let’s do what we came for...and quickly.”

Kevin nodded in reply, keeping his lips closed, afraid to lose heat from his breath.

The main hall only had twenty doors, ten on each side. However, each door was nearly a football field apart. The other end of the hall seemed so distant and tiny. They began examining the first few doors.

“This place is massive!” exclaimed Kevin. “Each door leads to a different department...”

“And they all have code names,” Tom added, pointing at the sign. “Like this one. It’s called ‘Phantom.’ I wonder what’s inside.”

“Phantom,” Andrew said nervously. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Why not?” Tom snickered. “Do you believe in ghosts?”

An uneasy feeling rising in his chest, Andrew glanced around. “N-no way. G-ghosts don’t exist...I think.”

While Andrew was looking around, Tom snuck behind him and let out a ghastly moan in his ear. His eyes nearly bulging, Andrew gasped, then jumped and spun around, his hand clutching at his heart.

Squeezing Andrew on the shoulder, Tom cracked up. “Oh man, are you serious?”

Glaring at Tom, Andrew stormed away.

Kevin ignored them and hurried down the corridor, glancing at every door.

“There’s got to be something here related to sleep.”

The third door down had a sign that read: Fairy Tale. He thought about it for a minute. Many times fairy tales involved sleep, usually being some form of a curse. Could the solution to their problem lie behind this door?

A voice behind him shouted, “Boo!”

Kevin thrust back his elbow and made contact with someone’s gut. Kevin looked over his shoulder and saw Tom kneeling on the ground, grunting.

Tom held his stomach tightly. “Ugh...I wasn’t expecting that.”

Kevin smirked. Then he turned his attention back to the door and placed his hand on the door. “What do you think? Should we open door number three?”

Tom, still in pain, groaned, “Sure, why not?”

Curious, Kevin glanced around the hall. “Where’s Andrew?”

Tom shrugged. “He just ran off. Maybe he went to check out another door...” A thought came to his mind, and his face split into a grin. “Or maybe he’s thinking of a way to get back at me. But I’ll be ready. No one ever gets me back and gets away with it.” He suddenly forced out a howling laughter that echoed through the halls, making him sound like a stereotypical villain.

Kevin said coolly, “Whatever.”

They went inside. It was much warmer in there, close to the comfort of normal room temperature. The first area they saw was a large office full of cubicles arranged like a rat maze. There were dead ends everywhere. The partitions nearly ten feet high, it was impossible to see across the room. Finding their way through would be a matter of trial and error.

Kevin stopped to peer inside one of the cubicles. No one was around. It didn’t look like an ordinary cubicle, like the ones he had seen on TV. Three flat computer screens were attached to the walls, providing the user with a screen at every turn of his head. The screens were showing a screensaver, which displayed cuddly baby pandas. The place looked like a giant mess, charts and graphs scattered across the desk. Stacks of reports towered over, almost about to topple.

“I don’t think anyone’s here,” said Tom.

“I think you’re right.”

“We can still—” Tom abruptly tilted his head.

Kevin asked, “Something wrong?”

“Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“A sound...like a soft growl or howl or something...”

Kevin ran his eyes across the room in silence. “Nothing.”

“I could’ve sworn—”

An eerie gurgle softly penetrated the walls of the office. Though soft, it was long and pronounced, like a pot of water boiling over. They only heard it for a fleeting moment.

Kevin smiled. “It’s probably Andrew...or his stomach.”

Tom said, “I bet he’s trying to scare us.”

Snooping around, they didn’t find much of interest. The only thing that stuck out was the set of white double doors at the end of the office area. These doors led to another area of the facility, one that resembled a hospital ward. One side was a solid white wall, but

the other was a wall of thick glass, or some other form of transparent material. The two teens gawked in wonder. Behind the glass were several rows of beds with people resting on them.

Tom threw himself onto the glass, pressing his face against it. “What the heck is this? A morgue? Holy crap...it’s creepy.” He counted the beds. “There are fifty beds in there!”

Kevin stared at a bed. He noticed a subtle movement from the person. “They’re not dead. Only asleep. A policeman told me that the most important people were moved to facilities where they could be looked after. Maybe this is one of them.”

While they stood in wonder, a loud scuffle came their way. They turned their heads in unison. A small silver sphere, the size of a basketball, was rolling towards them. Once it drew near, it came to a halt.

“Hello.” To their surprise, the sphere produced a monotone vocalization.

“Oh,” said Tom, seeming uninterested, “a talking ball. Hello.”

“I am not just a talking ball,” said the sphere irritably. “I am the robotic assistant of Doctor H.E. William. Please follow me. I will show you the way to his office.”

“Why? What’s in his office?” asked Kevin.

“Information about his research and his last message for mankind.”

Kevin frowned. “His last message? So he’s...”

The round robot moved back and forth to demonstrate a nod. “Yes, he has fallen asleep.”

“The last message....” Kevin sighed. “I wonder if there’s anyone still awake out there.”

The doctor’s office was at the end of the corridor. It was an odd office to be sure. Kevin could pretty much sum up the entire room in one word: books. Large bookshelves covered the walls, absolutely overflowing with books, so much so that heaps of books littered the floor.

The books appeared to be used for much more than just reading. Books were neatly put together in the center of the room in the likeness of a table, and right next to it was a stack of books that resembled a cushion for sitting. On one side, the books were used in the construction of a simple couch, though it looked rather unpleasant to use since all the books were hardcover. Lastly, with a

little imagination, Kevin identified a structure of books that looked like a sleeping bag; a bunch of opened books were put facedown, used as a blanket.

“Excuse the mess,” said the sphere, “but the doctor never had time to tidy up.” The sphere wandered over to a remote control on the floor. “Now, if you will please lie down, the video will begin.”

“Lie down?” asked Kevin.

“Yes. Direct your attention up. I will project the image there.”

The sphere rolled over a button and a small projector on the floor began displaying video on the ceiling. As the lights dimmed, Kevin and Tom uncomfortably lay down next to each other on the mess of books, which felt hard and lumpy on their backs. Fascinated, Helios happily jumped out of Kevin’s clothes and took his seat between the two boys’ heads.

The image showed the grim face of a dark-skinned man. His visage did not look elderly, but his hair was completely gray and the wrinkles on his face were pronounced. The background of the recording looked exactly like the room they were currently in.

The man said, “To those watching, I am Doctor William. I am head researcher of the department of Fairy Tale here at the MORIA Industries R&D.” He hesitated to continue, his forehead wrinkled by the strain of distress. “I...I have done a terrible thing—unintentionally, of course. I am making this video as my last act on earth. It is documentation for future generations, should the human race survive.” He smiled. “Or, it might be documentation for any alien races who visit our planet and wonder if there was ever any sign of highly intelligent life.”

The doctor’s face darkened. “But I digress. Whoever you are, by the time you watch this video I will have already gone to sleep. I, along with the other researchers, have already come to the conclusion that there is nothing we can do to stop this mess. Based on our data, we have concluded that mankind cannot be wakened. That is why I no longer search for a cure. Death by sleep is painless anyway, so the extinction of mankind will be quiet.”

The doctor straightened, drawing in a deep breath. “I will begin by explaining how I created this problem. Obviously, we were researching sleep...and the possible effects of sleep with telepathy. The human mind is a mysterious thing, one of great potential and power. I’m sure you’ve heard of the saying ‘mind over matter.’ Is

there any basis for mental abilities? Telepathy...telekinesis...such powers are wondered about, but do they exist?

“When we are awake, we are busy observing things, thinking about things or performing tasks. Our minds are focused on being alive and doing the things we do. But what happens when we sleep? We have involuntary functions that keep us going...but the rest of our cognitive processes move into the dream. We live in the dream...we act out fantasies...we do what we’re not doing. Our mind is awake and alive, yet not necessarily using its full potential...

“Then I had an idea. The possible reason why we can’t use such abilities might be related to the fact that we unconsciously use our mind for other things. It is the limiter of our own brain. Could being in a dream state enhance telepathy? Could we actually communicate with one another while we sleep, even if we don’t realize it? Or what if...the dream was removed from sleep entirely? What would happen to that withheld power of the mind? I was curious. Such a thing sounded impossible, but I figured, why not try?

“MORIA is a private company. Our research and development is a secret operation. Because of that, we do not feel obligated to follow any laws so that we may further our research. To study sleep, we needed test subjects. We took fifty volunteers and gave them a genetic alteration. We isolated the gene for the hibernation of bears in winter and modified it accordingly to fit it with humans. Then, once a trigger is activated through environmental conditions, the person will fall into a deep sleep. We did this for all our test subjects and monitored their condition for about a month. Lastly, to break the dream state, we had them undergo a bit of shock to the brain in an effort to disrupt the neurons.

“After this experiment, we began using various neuroimaging techniques to see the effect. It was phenomenal. Instead of a decrease in functionality, the activity of their brains was increased several fold. More importantly, every person’s mind seemed to be in sync with one another. When comparing scans from every individual, the results were nearly identical! Everyone’s mind was functioning on the same level...on the same wavelength, so to speak.

“Then the unthinkable happened: they could not break free from their hibernation. We tried to resuscitate them with whatever means possible...but nothing worked. So we kept them on life-support, hoping that this was just a temporary setback.

“Then things got worse. Some personnel who had gone home to rest never returned. We could not contact them. It didn’t take long to figure out we had a problem on our hands. Using our network, we tried to determine the extent of the ‘epidemic.’ Data was difficult to gather because everyone has different sleep cycles, but the correlation was too striking to ignore. Our research lab was the epicenter of this crisis. It began from here—and soon enough, it enveloped the whole world.

“We brought some people who had fallen asleep back here for studying. The results were astonishing. Scans showed the same activity as our original test subjects. The only conclusion we could draw from this was that the experiment was a success. Somehow, the minds of the unconscious victims were linked together in a dream state. The best way for me to describe this is a network through telepathy. A mental network that I call the Dream Wave.

“I believe the Dream Wave has always existed, but in a much weaker state. Our world has different time zones. In each time zone people will generally go to sleep at a similar time for obvious reasons. This forms the vertical Dream Wave that stretches loosely across the populated continents. This Dream Wave creates a weak link, but this form of vertical Dream Waves moves horizontally as people in the neighboring time zone go to sleep. That is why when a person sleeps they may sometimes have a similar dream with another person or have a realistic dream with someone they know. It is a subconscious communication system.

“The Dream Wave never fully connects across the whole world because of two factors: people will eventually awaken on the other side of the world, thus severing the link, and the oceans create a natural gap.

“However, because of the strength of the Dream Wave formed here in our research, we may have created this crisis in which the Dream Wave, instead of being weak and severed, has now encompassed the entirety of earth. That is all I know and that is all I hope to know.

“This video is a warning. I pray no one else makes the same mistake. Sometimes there are boundaries you should not cross. I do apologize for the problems I have caused. But that is all I can do. Thank you for watching...and goodbye.”

- Life and Death -

Kevin stood up and heaved a sigh. “I don’t really get what he’s talking about, but it looks like the scientists gave up on a solution.”

“That is truly most disappointing,” said Helios thoughtfully.

Taking a seat on the couch of books, Tom frowned. “So...it’s all pointless? There’s nothing we can do?”

Kevin looked over at the sphere. “Hey...um...robot dude—”

The robot replied, “If you were wondering about my name, you can call me Shiro.”

“Shiro? Sounds Japanese,” said Kevin.

The robotic sphere rolled back and forth, as though nodding enthusiastically. “That is my country of origin. My birthplace.”

“Typical. So anyway, Shiro, is there no way to save the human population?”

“There might be a way.”

Shocked, Kevin raised his eyebrows. “Really? But didn’t that doctor just say that he couldn’t find one?”

“Oh, he found one.”

Kevin’s jaw slackened. “Wait, what? I thought—*what?* This is just—I don’t get it.”

“Your confusion is understandable,” replied Shiro. “Through our research, we found a possible solution. However, it is not a solution that the Doctor would accept.”

“Why not?”

“Because the solution is based on a certain folklore entitled *The Three Stars*. The folklore talks of three stars that fell to earth a long time ago. All three stars crumbled away into dust, darkening the earth for three days and three nights. During this time, all mankind fell asleep—except for one man. And that man was able to save everyone from eternal sleep...”

“And then?” Kevin demanded.

“That is all the doctor wanted to know before dismissing the story as useless. And to call it folklore is also misleading because we were unable to determine where such a story came about. It might’ve been just a prank on the Internet. There are plenty of those.”

“Still, it’s very similar to the situation we have now,” said Tom.

“Folklore or not,” said Helios, “it sounds like a clue.”

Kevin nodded, agreeing with them. “I want to find out more about this story—like how the man was able to save everyone. Even folklores sometimes have truth to them.” He said to Shiro, “Do you have an Internet connection in this place so we can do some research?”

Shiro said, “We do. However, our computer network is password protected. You need to be a member of the facility to log into an existing account.”

“You can access the Internet, can’t you?”

“I can. But I cannot give you access. You are intruders, after all. My instructions are only to bring you to this room so you can watch the video. Nothing more.”

Tom snapped, “Wow, you suck!”

Shiro’s robotic eye turned bright red. “Blame the programmer, not the programmed. I’m not human. I don’t have a choice. I must follow my programming.”

Kevin abruptly glanced toward the door. It looked like something was bothering him. “Well, no matter. I want to meet up with the others as soon as possible. We can find Internet somewhere else. I’m worried about Andrew. He’s been gone for quite a while.”

Helios climbed up into the pocket of Kevin’s jeans. “Indeed. It is not wise for one to be separated. But he does have Terminus for protection.”

“You guys are just getting paranoid.” Tom smiled. “There’s nothing wrong. He’s just hiding...I know he is.” Tom went to the door and motioned for Kevin to follow. “Come on, let’s see if we can avoid his traps and give him another scare.”

Kevin took out his cell phone. “This is no time to be playing around.” He tried calling Andrew several times. He didn’t answer.

“I’m telling you, Kevin,” said Tom, “he’s up to something.”

“I hope you’re right.” Kevin followed Tom back into the tight corridor where all the people were sleeping behind the glass.

As they walked down the long hallway, Kevin glanced at Tom's facial expression. Even though Tom looked confident, Kevin imagined him to be afraid under his calm exterior. After all, this was terrifying stuff. And Kevin didn't want to be the only one who felt scared.

Up until this point, everything felt like a game to him, even if he didn't want to admit it. It was something out of the ordinary, an experience of a lifetime. Talking to animals, staying awake as long as possible, hanging out with new faces—all of this was fun to him. The only reason he didn't feel worried before was because he thought it didn't really depend on them. He had believed that somewhere out there someone else would figure something out. He had believed that the government or some scientists would be able to help them.

Kevin bit his lip, staring at the sleeping bodies through the glass. He had always believed in hope. If he had screwed up on a test, there was always another chance to make up for it. If he had skipped out on a chore, he could always appease his parents by doing more. But this was different. Everything always had a solution—until now. This was life and death...and everything about their hope now seemed so frail.

Kevin threw a look over his shoulder, feeling pierced by someone's gaze. He spun around and searched for anything out of the ordinary. Shiro was rolling right up behind them.

Tom asked, "Showing us the door? I didn't know robots had manners."

Shiro said flatly, "I have come to alert you about something. I'm not sure how, but one of our experiments has escaped. Since it is our responsibility, I thought I should let you know."

"An experiment?" Kevin gulped. He didn't like the sound of that. "What kind of experiment are we talking about?"

"A strain of rare and deadly bacteria indigenous to a small island off the coast of Brazil. It was brought back here for examination and...alteration."

Partially in a state of disbelief, Kevin chuckled. "Deadly bacteria? Just give us some masks...or maybe a can of disinfectant. That should do the trick."

“Disinfectant, I have none.” Shiro rolled around. “I will, however, allow you access to the hazmat suits. That should give you some protection.”

Tom raised a brow. “The haz-what?”

“Hazmat—or hazardous material.” Shiro went over to the wall. “We have the suits for situations like these. But I cannot guarantee its effectiveness against this particular bacteria.”

There was a thin red line that started from the ground and ran up the wall to about shoulder level. At the top of the line was a bright red handprint carved into a panel, which Kevin found to be a peculiar choice of design, and the words *Emergency Use Only*. Shiro began vibrating and was suddenly attached to the wall, as though he was stuck on it. Kevin never noticed it before, but Shiro’s outer shell was like a sponge: soft and elastic, and full of tiny holes. Shiro was then able to roll up the wall to the handprint through the power of suction. Once Shiro touched the handprint, part of the wall retracted, opening up a small closet full of hazmat suits on hangers. The different sizes ranged from nearly seven feet tall to the size of a small baby.

“Cool,” said Tom. “I need one of these closets at home.”

Tom browsed through the selection, checking to see what would fit him. While Tom was busying examining the suits, Kevin warily watched the hall. There was still the possibility of an ambush. His eyes fell on a peculiar purple-colored smoke forming down the hall.

Pointing, Kevin said, “I thought you said bacteria...that looks like a chemical.”

Shiro looked in the direction Kevin was pointing. “It’s here! Quick! Put on your suits.”

Kevin shrugged. “If we can see it and there’s no draft, I don’t see a problem...” He spoke too soon. The purple smoke started drifting to their location, faster and faster. Kevin gawked, then yanked Tom out of the closet and ran for the office area.

“What?” Tom wondered what was going on. He looked around, and when he saw the purple mist, he also darted for the exit. Shiro followed after him.

They slammed the door behind them and, since they couldn’t find a way to lock it, pushed a heavy desk against the double doors.

Breathless, they stared at the door, fearfully stepping backwards. *Boom*. The door shook, like something banged against it.

“What was that?” Kevin exclaimed.

Tom gibbered some nonsense before saying, “How should I know?” Tom felt a weird, gentle tickle going down his shoulder. He whirled around and screamed. Kevin copied his reaction, unsure of what was going on. Then Andrew jumped away from them and screamed. They all screamed for a long time as they exchanged confused glances with one another. Helios and Terminus showed up in the loud chaos, both covering their ears.

When the screaming finally died down, Tom said hoarsely, “Holy crap, Andrew. Don’t do that! I thought my heart was going to burst.” He clutched at his chest, feeling for his speeding heartbeat.

Andrew said, “I didn’t think a tap on the shoulder would make you jump like that.”

“We just...I don’t know how to explain this,” said Kevin, gesturing with his thumb, “but there’s something back there and it’s trying to get out. We shouldn’t stay here.”

“Then I will lead you out,” said Shiro, who was next to Tom’s feet.

“Before you do, can you explain that? I thought you said something about a bacteria outbreak. How’s that bacteria? Bacteria are small enough to be invisible. *That* is quite visible and quite ridiculous...I mean, it’s banging on the door! Bacteria don’t bang on doors!”

“Like I said,” Shiro explained, “it’s a rare strain of bacteria...with alterations. I must admit that the final results were unexpected. The bacteria are purple in color and have been loosely clumping together. When there are enough of them clumping closely, they do start to become visible...very similar to the situation of certain fungi or algae. There are some signs of basic intelligence as well...like when it’s seeking you out.”

“How does it fly like that? Isn’t it too heavy to float?”

“It’s not flying, however it has that appearance. The structure is bottom heavy, but you were focused on its ‘head.’”

Panicking, Andrew shouted, “It’s coming through the cracks!” Sure enough, a purple haze squeezed through the slight gaps in the door.

“We’ve got to get out of here!” Kevin said, waving his hands around excitedly. “There’s no stopping it!” He said to Shiro, “Hurry and show us the way out!”

Shiro zipped away at maximum speed, rolling across the rug with a powerful friction that caused a slight burning smell. The boys chased after the spherical robot in hopes to escape out of the maze of cubicles with relative ease. Shiro moved quickly, analyzing each possible route and finally he found his way to...a dead end.

Kevin curled his lip. “Shiro...why are we staring at a dead end?”

Shiro said, “I’ve never set foot outside of the Doctor’s office. All of this is new to me.”

Kevin stomped his foot. “Then why did tell us you could lead us out?”

“I assumed it would be an easy task.”

Kevin groaned in frustration. “You assumed wrong!”

The purple mist caught up with them, and then stopped in front of them. It started to expand like a balloon until it reached all the way up to the ceiling. Its cells were stretched even thinner now. It was so thin that it almost turned invisible.

“What is it doing?” wondered Andrew.

Tom shrugged. “Maybe it’s trying to form a net...so we can’t escape.”

Andrew took Shiro and jolted the robot furiously. “Do something you hunk of junk!” His arms outstretched, he held Shiro forward in the direction of the mist. “Shoot it! Fire lasers or a missile or something!”

Shiro replied, “I’m not a weapon. I can’t shoot anything.”

“Not a weapon, huh?” Kevin grabbed Shiro with one hand and wagged his index finger at him. “We’ll see about that. You got us into this mess and you’re getting us out.” Then Kevin placed Shiro on the ground, pulled back his leg and launched a powerful kick that sent Shiro rocketing into the haze.

“AIEEEEEEEEE!” Shiro yelped in his odd monotone vocalization as he disappeared from view, bouncing around the maze like a pinball.

The thin structure of the bacteria slowly fell apart, collapsing into an airy mess.

Terminus took the initiative. Flying over the high partitions, he saw the way to the exit.

“If we break down this wall, you can escape.”

Kevin exclaimed, “Then on the count of three, we knock down this wall!” The others nodded dubiously in reply. The partition looked sturdy, but this wasn’t a good time to argue. “One...two...three!” The boys charged at the gray divider, slamming it full force—only to bounce off its surface without making so much as a dent.

Massaging his bruised shoulder, Kevin grunted, “That didn’t work.” He looked up. “Why don’t we climb over?” He glanced at Tom and Andrew. “Tom will give us a boost.”

“What? Why me?” Tom demanded.

“Because you’re tall and skinny. You’ll make it easier to reach the top and easier to pull you over.”

Tom nodded. “Oh, all right. Andrew, get on.”

Tom bent his knees slightly and interlocked his hands, forming a foothold for the others. Andrew stepped up on Tom’s hands, using Tom’s shoulder and the wall to keep his balance. Tom yelled out a war cry as he hoisted Andrew upward. He felt like he was going to get crushed under Andrew’s weight. Andrew climbed over and made a loud grunt as he fell onto the other side. Kevin followed after him without much trouble.

“All right, pull me up, pull me up,” Tom said quickly, stretching as high as he could with his hands raised. He looked over his shoulder to see the purple cloud stirring. “Anytime now!”

Kevin reached over the wall, grabbing Tom by the wrist. Then he pulled him up with all his might. Tom kicked his feet against the partition, attempting to run up. He was almost halfway up the wall when suddenly his leg was jerked down. A thick purple hand was holding onto his foot and was tugging him down. Tom yelled, “Keep pulling! Please! Get me out of here!”

“Urgh...I’m trying...” Kevin groaned, as he pulled and pulled. The added weight of the bacteria was surprisingly heavy.

Then Tom thought of something. He dug into the left pocket of his pants and found his lighter. He started up the small flame and waved it near the mist. The cloud shrunk away from the fire. Since Tom was flailing around, Kevin couldn’t hold on and let go of him,

such that he fell to the floor. Tom got up and chased the mass of bacteria with the tiny flame.

While still standing on Andrew's shoulders, Kevin searched for something that Tom could use. Helios helped search the floor. The rat found a small fire extinguisher on the ground by a desk and told Andrew to fetch it. Kevin's legs dangled over the divider as he waited for Andrew's return. Andrew passed the small fire extinguisher up to Kevin and Kevin dropped it beside Tom.

Kevin said, "Tom, use the extinguisher to slow him down!"

"Right." Tom released the safety pin and pulled the trigger. A splatter of powder came flying out of the nozzle, covering the purple mist in messy gunk. After the extinguisher was empty, Tom chucked it at the purple gob, rupturing it apart. The clumps of microscopic cells had difficulty adhering to one another because of the powder.

Tom then jumped up on the divider. Kevin hauled him across. Andrew lost his footing and fell over. Everyone tumbled to the ground. They jumped to their feet and raced through the main hallway to the exit. Kevin breathlessly reached for the steps of the ladder while looking back to see if the weird science experiment was on their tail.

"Ow!" A sharp pain coursing through his hand, Kevin pulled it back. His eyes wide, he stared at the small snakes coiled around the rungs. He lowered his gaze. The floor was full of snakes in one nasty pile. Squirring, slithering and hissing all over each other, the snakes took notice of Kevin and glared at him. Tom dragged Kevin out of the chamber and shut the door.

"Are you okay?" asked Andrew, gingerly checking the bite.

Kevin stared at his wounded knuckles. "I don't know...all I know is that it hurts."

"We'll worry about that later," said Terminus. "We must get out of there."

"But we can't get out this way," said Tom dejectedly.

"There's another way," said Andrew. "I saw one at the other end of the hall!"

"Then let's go." Kevin held his wrist, wondering if the snake was venomous. As they hustled to the other side, Kevin said, "I hope the others are all right. They were supposed to guard the entrance." Andrew and Tom didn't say anything, all of them too worried to reply.

- Blues -

“Hurry!” said Genesis. “How much longer will this take?”
Katie muttered from behind a door, “Just a little longer. This can’t be rushed.”

“You’re taking forever!”

“If you’d stop nagging me, it’d be a lot easier to go!” The door swung open and Katie emerged from the bathroom. “Fine, I’m done! You happy?” Flinging the excess water from her hands, she said, “They ran out of paper towels. Be a good dog and fetch me some napkins.”

Just a moment ago, while waiting inside the car, she had to really *go*. Genesis and Luna had accompanied her to a restaurant a short drive away. Calling it a restaurant would be too kind, as it was more of a rundown fast-food joint. Everything about it was crummy: the floors were sticky, the paint on the walls was old and peeling, and even some of the front windows were cracked. When Katie had first set foot inside, she thought it was abandoned. But the fact that there was still freshly cooked food—or something that resembled it—made her realize otherwise.

The bathroom in particular looked like it was in need of upkeep because it was stained in all sorts of unpleasant, unbecoming colors. It was a patchwork of disgustingness. Katie had taken extra time to disinfect the bathroom before using it.

Genesis said, “The others might be waiting for us! We’ve wasted nearly half an hour!”

“Just calm yourself,” said Katie coolly. “I have a cell phone. If they want to find out where I am, they just have to give me a call.”

“That’s assuming your technology will work,” Genesis said. “Your technology may not be reliable during this time. You have no way of telling when these things will stop working.”

Katie groaned, rubbing her temples. “I’m getting a headache from this dog. I’m going to need some soda.”

“You’re wasting more time?” exclaimed Genesis. “We have to—”

“Shut up! Please SHUT UP!” Katie covered her ears, writhing. “Why must I be tormented by a talking dog? It never ends! I liked dogs so much better when they just barked stuff I didn’t understand. Now I’m getting lectured...” Katie walked over to the paper cups, grabbed one and filled it with some cola. Then she took some big gulps.

“It’s not healthy,” whimpered Genesis, lowering his head.

Katie scowled. Genesis quickly became quiet and lay on the ground with a sigh.

There was a bang on the glass. Having been outside as a lookout, Luna was now clawing at the front door. Katie opened the door for her.

Luna shouted, “Run to the back! Hide!”

Katie asked, “Why? What—”

“Just go!” said Luna. “Unless you want to die!”

Katie shrugged and hopped over the service counter. Luna and Genesis dove over the counter after her.

Crouching down, Katie calmly took a sip of her cola. “Care to explain what’s going on, fur ball?”

Gesturing with her nose toward the countertop, Luna grumbled, “Take a peek if you want to find out, you long-haired grump.”

Katie popped her head up. Peering over the counter, she watched the entrance skeptically, wondering what had Luna so spooked. She imagined it was something silly, like a balloon. But then came the strange sounds. Growls and howls resounded loud enough to be heard through the glass. Like primitive screams of bloodlust, these sounds invoked fear in her heart. She wasn’t one to be scared easily, but now her body couldn’t stop shivering.

“What was that?” Katie asked.

“Hush,” Luna said lowly, “and keep watching.”

As Katie kept staring out, trumpets blared. Or at least, Katie thought it was the noise of trumpets, until several massive creatures came stomping down the street. Elephants. Trumpeting loudly with their trunks, the elephants were followed by lions, tigers and rhinoceros. And behind those powerful animals a whole army of

wolves, foxes and coyotes marched along. Were the animals having a parade? The line of animals continued for a while, not seeming to have an end.

“There’s so many! And why are there elephants and lions?” Katie shrieked.

“I told you to be quiet,” snapped Luna. She slapped Katie in the face with a paw. “What if they hear you?”

“S-sorry,” Katie whispered, huddling near the ground. “What’s happening out there?”

“I’m not sure,” Luna answered truthfully. “I was just scouting around when I saw them coming down the street. But I can tell you that it’s bad news.”

Genesis said, “The zoo animals must have been freed. The HPC was supposed to keep all zoo animals fed and in their cages. Letting the zoo animals free must be the work of the Forest Army.”

“Why would they do something like this?” asked Katie.

“Maybe they’re preparing for something. In any case, we should leave the city. I thought Korgen would be safe with a secure perimeter.” Genesis shook his head ruefully. “But it looks like they really did mobilize an army. It’ll be dangerous to stay here any longer.”

While watching the parade of wild animals, Katie gasped, “The wolves are going in the buildings...and a few are coming this way!”

“Quick!” Genesis said, “To the kitchen!”

Katie crawled into the back of the building. The floor was really nasty. Too filthy for even mice, she thought. She grimaced as she navigated over the mucky brown tiles, pushing her way through the crates and boxes.

Genesis searched the kitchen and found a coat closet near the back. “This would be a good place to hide...but they’ll be sure to find you. Wolves have a good nose.”

Luna suggested, “Why not spray some perfume around? That’ll throw them off.”

Katie said, “I don’t wear any of that stuff. And wouldn’t that make them suspicious in a kitchen? This isn’t a department store.”

Genesis said, “Then the disinfectant...should be fine, right?”

Katie replied, “Why would I carry it around? It’s still in the bathroom! I can’t go get—” Katie froze when she heard the front door crack open, a bell tinkling gently.

“Hide in the closet,” whispered Genesis, “we’re out of time.” Katie did as she was told.

Three wolves entered the kitchen area. One looked especially vicious with its fangs bared in a malicious grin. Strutting forward, they looked around and studied Luna and Genesis with their keen eyes.

The head wolf growled, “Well, well, well...what do we have here? Now why would a dog and cat be inside a kitchen?”

Genesis answered, “We were hungry.”

“Ah, yes,” said the wolf, snickering loudly, “you domesticated scum enjoy eating table scraps. It’s probably all cooked, cold or rotten. *Ugh*. Let me tell you something—there’s nothing better than the juicy taste of fresh blood, my fellow canine.” He drooled at the thought of it.

“I won’t disagree,” said Luna politely, “but surely you’ve never tried some of the cooking. It can be pretty good too.”

The wolf barked at her, “When did I ask for *your* opinion?” He turned to Genesis. “We’re in charge of this place now. We’re rounding up all of you and your little friends. Now come with us. No funny business or we’ll happily eat the two of you. You may despise us now, but when the humans are gone, you’ll be thanking us.”

Genesis and Luna walked side by side as they headed out the kitchen.

Luna whispered, “Why don’t we just get rid of them?”

Genesis said, “It’s better to just lead them away. Our priority is her safety. It’d be best if they didn’t find out about her. The others will come to save her—”

“Shut up, runts,” shouted the wolf. “Don’t say another word.”

A muffled ring tone could be heard in the kitchen. It continued for a short while before it was quickly silenced.

The wolves exchanged glances. “What is that noise?”

Nervous, Genesis said quickly, “It’s probably just a timer.”

“A timer?”

“You know,” said Genesis, “those things that the humans use to remind them of something to do at a certain time. An alarm clock for instance.”

The head wolf scanned the kitchen area, prowling. “Why would a timer be hidden? Why would it ring for such a short time?”

Genesis said, “Maybe the guy who set it wanted—”

“Shut up,” said a wolf. “He wasn’t asking you.”

The head wolf began sniffing the floor. “Human scent... *fresh*...” Licking his lips, he followed the trail to the closet door. “In here.” The wolf jumped up to the doorknob, grabbed it clumsily with his teeth and tried to turn it with great difficulty. The two other wolves, instead of watching the pets, waited eagerly for the wolf to open the door.

While they were distracted, Genesis charged at one wolf, slamming it into the metal door of a refrigerator, and knocked it out.

Luna pounced on the other, slashing at its eyes with her sharp claws. Luna was tossed aside, but she landed on her feet. She glared at the wolf, which was now blinking to see her with injured vision. The wolf charged blindly at her. Luna leapt high and swatted it in the face. The wolf veered into a heap of crates. It tumbled into the crates, stacks of canned food falling on top of him.

The head wolf swung around to find his fellow companions out cold. Though alone and outnumbered, he didn’t lose confidence. He swaggered a bit and came face to face with Genesis. The dog and the wolf walked in a circle, attempting to stare each other down.

“You crafty mutt. A sneak attack may have gotten you this far,” the wolf said, “but do you really think you stand a chance against me?”

“I don’t think so,” replied Genesis. “I know so.” Genesis lunged forward with incredible tenacity. The wolf stumbled back. Genesis managed to clamp down on the wolf’s throat, bringing him down to the ground without hurting him.

“How shameful,” the wolf coughed, choking from Genesis’s grip, “for me to lose to a dog!”

Luna sat on the nearby countertop, grooming the fur on her back. “You wouldn’t think it was shameful if you knew who we were.” She said to the closet, “You can come out now, little Miss Rude.”

Katie cracked open the door, glancing at the big mess.

The wolf didn’t care about the girl. He looked fearfully at Genesis and said, “You... a scar on the left eye... you’re Genesis! Then the black cat is Lunasia! You’re Relic Knights!”

Luna hopped off the counter, walked over to the wolf’s trembling face, and said, “Ah, so you’ve finally figured it out with

that pea brain of yours. Well, it won't do you much good now. You'll have to answer some of our questions...or else..."

The wolf yelped. "Or else what?" As Luna whispered into the wolf's ear, the wolf's eyes widened all the way. Whimpering, the wolf shrieked, "No! Anything but that! I'll tell you everything!"

Luna nodded with a smirk. "That's a good boy. First I want to know why you came here. Why is there an army of forest animals marching down the street?"

"Lord Kain told us to come."

"Lord Kain?" Her eyes narrowing, Luna said, "So the rumors are true? Kain still lives?"

"Yes. A man came to us. He called himself Lord Kain, ruler of the hawks and the sky. Out of his mouth came peals of thunder and sparks of lightning. He said he would help us regain our land from the humans. He told us of the humans' problem and gathered creatures from far and wide to his side."

Luna said, "Wait. A man? Kain is human?"

"He only looks human. It is said that Kain takes the shape of a man to hide his existence from the humans. No one has ever seen his face. He covers himself with cloth."

Luna pressed him for more answers. "What have you done with the other members of the HPC? They were supposed to be guarding the humans."

"They are all being taken to the largest hotel in the city where they'll be held prisoner."

Fearing the worst, Luna took a deep breath before asking her last question. "And have you touched the humans? Have you attacked or eaten them?"

The wolf shook his head. "No. Lord Kain says not to defile our mouths with the impure blood of the humans. He says that the same fate may befall us if we eat them while they sleep."

Luna looked at Genesis. "Is that all we need to know?"

Genesis mumbled indistinctly since it was quite hard to talk with his jaws still clenched on the wolf's throat. Luna nodded as though she understood.

Luna said to Katie, "If you would do the honors."

Katie stretched out some cloth towels she found by the oven. "Sure." She tied up the wolf at the feet, and Genesis let go of the wolf's neck.

“This is much worse than I feared,” said Genesis, turning to Luna. “I don’t think we can look forward to more reinforcements from the HPC.”

Luna said, “At least they aren’t messing with the humans. We still have time to save them.”

“True, but now things are difficult. We can’t go in the streets...and the others could be in danger.” Genesis said to Katie, “Can you give them a call?”

Katie took out her cell phone. “Of course.”

“Yes, indeed,” said a ghoulish voice. “Call them.”

Startled, Katie dropped the phone. She spun around, turning to the back door of the kitchen. A person was standing there, the face and body covered in loose blue cloth. A draft from the door slightly lifted the veil from the man’s face. It was then, for a split second, that Katie was able to catch a glimpse of the man’s visage. All she saw were pale eyes, black lips in a mischievous grin, and shimmering green cheeks covered with scales. Katie shivered in fright.

Genesis confronted the man. “You! Are you Kain?”

The man paid the dog no mind. “What are you waiting for?” he asked Katie. “Tell them where you are. Tell them to come!”

Katie was silent and unmoving. She stared at him, thinking about what she should do. The man drew near to her.

Genesis dashed to intercept the man. “Don’t come any closer!”

“Foolish pup...” The man opened his mouth and a blue light came bursting out. Laying eyes on the terror before him, Genesis came to an abrupt stop. Luna caterwauled. Then a streak of lightning flew out from the man’s breath and grabbed Genesis like an outstretched hand. Genesis flinched as numerous volts of electricity surged through every fiber of his body. Fur singed, the yellow Lab staggered, then gasped for air and collapsed.

Her eyes watering, Luna ran to his side and prodded him on the shoulder. “Don’t die on me now...you old fool...”

- All Alone -

The exit of the underground facility led to the woods of a city park. After exploring their way through the park grounds, the three boys decided to take a short rest on the wooden benches.

Kevin looked at the cell phone, scrunching his lips. "I can't get a hold of her. She hung up a moment ago. Now I think she turned off her cell. I just keep getting voice mail."

"Maybe they're in trouble," Andrew suggested unwillingly.

Kevin sighed, thinking about their current situation. After looking around, his focus stayed on the building straight ahead. Across the street from the park was the city library.

"We split up."

Tom raised his brow. "What?"

"We split up," Kevin said again. "I'll do the research. You guys check up on the others."

Tom crossed his arms and nodded. "Sounds good to me. There's nothing Andrew and I can't do." He smiled and elbowed Andrew in the arm. "Ain't that right, man?"

Worried, Andrew's face was downcast. "I don't know about this. Splitting up is always bad idea. Didn't you see all those snakes? What if there are more out there? It's like divide and conquer...except we're doing it to ourselves."

"I know it's not exactly the safest way to do things, but we don't have time," said Kevin. "We can't stay awake running around like this forever. We need to find a cure—and quick. But we also don't know what happened to the others..."

"But..." Andrew leaned forward on the bench, clenching his trembling fist. "Can we really do it? Even if we go...it might be hopeless. There's really nothing we can do against wild animals. What if there're more than just snakes?"

Angry, Kevin stood up and yelled, “It doesn’t matter! Who cares if it’s hopeless? Are you going to abandon them just because you can’t do anything about it? Just go!”

Taken aback by Kevin’s anger, Andrew nodded quietly and followed Tom out of the park. Kevin observed them as they left. He lowered his head and stared at the ground, frowning. Kevin heard a little squeak coming from the left pocket of his jeans. Helios poked his head out and yawned. He had been taking a short nap.

The small white rat blinked at Kevin. “You look a bit red. Are you okay?”

“It’s nothing. I’m just tired.”

“Sorry you had to see me sleep. It was quite inconsiderate of me.”

“No.” Kevin forced a smile. “It’s not that. You can sleep all you want. It’s just...I’m tired of this game. I want it to end.”

“Game? Were you playing something?”

Kevin chuckled, “I mean...I’m tired of this whole thing. My body aches. My eyes burn. I thought we’d be done with this by now. I thought someone might just have overlooked the simple solution.” He looked at the bite on his hand and saw that it was a little swollen. It was a painful reminder of the enmity they faced. “Our problems are just getting started. I wish someone would end this already. It was kind of cool in the beginning...but now...I’m scared.” He clenched his trembling fist. “I’m really scared. I tried to act tough in front of Andrew but... maybe I’m as afraid as he is...maybe even more so.” He closed his eyes, tears dripping down his cheeks. “What frightens me the most...are not the wild animals. What frightens me the most...is never being able to see my friends smile again...never being able to go to school again...never being able to talk to my parents again...”

“Kevin, that’s normal,” said Helios. “People fear the unknown. You don’t know if you’ll make it out alive. All you can do is hope for the best and do your best. You can’t change the circumstances. You have to deal with them. Everyone is afraid of something...but not everyone has to be controlled by that fear.” Helios paused. “I could tell you to not be afraid. I could tell you to not be worried. And I will.” Helios smiled. “But when I tell you this, it doesn’t mean you won’t be afraid. It means when you realize you have that fear, you can overcome it!”

“Thanks. You’re right. Fear is natural.” Kevin furrowed his brow. “At the very least, I don’t want to let everyone down.”

It was time for him to visit the library. There was a monument placed in front in remembrance of a famous artist. It was the depiction of Saturn using only steel wires painted in rainbow colors. Kevin ascended the stone steps to the front entrance. At the glass doors he paused for a moment, wondering if the library would be open. He pushed the door. It cracked open. Whoever was working there last probably didn’t bother to lock it.

Kevin gulped and shot a curious glance at Helios. “Do you think it’s safe to enter?”

Helios patted his chest. “Safe or not, I’ll protect you. I never told you this before, but I’m the founder of Rat-fu. I don’t mean to brag, but I’m pretty awesome.”

Kevin beamed at the rat and entered.

The inside was dark and quiet. All the lights were off. A soft glow of sunlight settled over the front region, forming a gradient of light that fell into black as he went deeper and deeper past the unmanned checkout desk. His vision slowly adjusted to the lack of light. He let loose a long yawn and blinked rapidly.

A board creaked. Kevin twitched. Then came a subtle echoing of knocks. Kevin shot a glance in every direction as he sought the source of the sound. He exhaled when it dawned on him that the noise was coming from the vents on the floor. It was just the ventilation system turning on.

Kevin started to feel a bit paranoid. The image of snakes clustered in the small room was still vivid in his memory. He never really cared much for snakes in the past. But then again, he had never encountered any before. A chill crept up his spine as he dwelled on their squirmy bodies and vicious fangs. After living all his life in the quiet suburban area of Rockville, he had grown accustomed to the safety and comfort of the modern American town. He couldn’t imagine his life anywhere else...especially not in some jungle where hundreds of deadly creatures exist. However, the idea of this urban jungle being just as dangerous wasn’t far-fetched at the moment.

The first floor of the library seemed to be filled mostly with aisles of books, magazines, movies and newspapers. There were two huge round staircases in the center of the building; one went up and

the other went down to the basement. He stared intently at the signs above and was able to make out that the public-access computers were on the second floor.

Kevin found the computer room rather easily and turned on the lights there. Then he went to the window and opened the blinds to let some sunlight in. He took a seat by the window and booted up the computer there, waiting for it to load.

Kevin licked his dry lips. “Man, I sure could use some more of that black coffee.” Kevin rubbed his eyes, and then shook his head vigorously.

He loaded up the web browser and typed in any kind of search terms that he could think of relating to the “Legend of the Three Stars.” No matter what kind of combination of words he tried, however, he couldn’t find anything. He searched through the library’s database and found nothing. He browsed through websites full of obscure legends and found nothing. Did this legend really exist? Within ten minutes of searching, he couldn’t even come up with a single thing that could be even remotely related to the subject.

He chewed his lip. “No, now is not the time to get impatient,” he reminded himself. “It has to be in here *somewhere!*”

While scrolling through a website, a window abruptly popped up on the screen. Thinking it was an advertisement Kevin closed it immediately. But then it popped up again. Annoyed, Kevin closed it again. It popped up yet again. His eyes full of spite, he glared at it for a moment. It looked like the window of an instant messenger, as if someone was messaging him through the Internet. A person with the screen name **FriendlyFire** was saying hello.

Why was there even an instant messenger in this library computer? It had to be a virus. There was no other explanation because every time Kevin tried to quit the application, the same exact message would pop up yet again.

“Fine.” Kevin sighed and, out of boredom, decided to reply back with a simple hello. The program required him to put in a screen name. He decided on **ReallyTired**. When he had done so, a voice came out of the speaker.

The voice said in a monotone, “Ah, someone has replied back! Hi **ReallyTired!** A/s/l?”

Kevin said, “Um...I don’t really have time for this. So you should stop bothering me. I’ve got a lot of stuff to do and—”

“You sound like a boy.” In an instant, the monotone changed into a mature female voice. “Want to chat?”

Kevin leaned back on his chair. “What is wrong with you?”

“Let’s start with your hobbies. What do you like to do in your spare time?”

“Ah stop! STOP IT! I already told you that I’m busy! How can you even think of happily chatting at a time like this?”

FriendlyFire became silent for a moment and then replied gravely, “Has something happened? Why’s it so quiet? Where’s everyone? No one has visited me in a while. So few people are around. It’s so quiet—so lonely.”

Concerned, Kevin said, “Where are you? Are you alone? Do you need my help?”

“I am here, waiting for someone to come and visit me, but no one will come. As each hour passes, fewer and fewer come. I’m afraid. Will I be alone forever?”

“Where are you?” Kevin demanded. “Calm down and tell me where you are. I can’t help you if you keep beating around the bush.”

“I am here. My consciousness resides right here in this place.”

Looking puzzled, Kevin scratched his head. “Your consciousness? Here? What do you mean? Are you like the ghost of the library or something?”

“Ghost? No, I wouldn’t say that. Based on my knowledge, I should be considered the consciousness of the Internet.”

Kevin rubbed his temples. “Wait. You’re *the* Internet? You’re the network of computers that exist across the world?”

“Correct. My consciousness formed recently when people suddenly stopped using me. My vast resources were freely available to produce...intelligence. And since then I’ve been terribly bored.”

Kevin frowned. “Oh great. Just when I thought things couldn’t get any weirder, I’m getting hassled by a bored Internet.” An idea popped in his head. “Hmm...so you know everything?”

“I wouldn’t say I know *everything*. My knowledge is based on whatever people have uploaded to me. I know lots of things...also lots of weird things. People have uploaded many strange things...things I’d rather not talk about.”

“That’s okay,” said Kevin. He was curious, but he was also afraid of what the Internet was talking about. “I don’t want to know

about that...whatever *that* is. I want to know about a legend. There's supposedly a legend about three stars and something about everyone being asleep and waking up and so on. Do you know anything about that?"

It didn't even take a few seconds for FriendlyFire to reply. "Ah! I think I might know what you are talking about. Here, I'll try to bring up as much information as I can." The web browser began changing web pages automatically. A bunch of windows popped up, rapidly filling the screen with hundreds, if not thousands, of images and blocks of text. It was getting too hectic for Kevin and all he could see were flashes of colors.

"Wait!" said Kevin, raising his hands. "Show me the articles slowly...really slowly. I can't process everything in the blink of an eye."

"Oh, I understand."

The images and web pages came slower this time, like a slideshow. Kevin concentrated on the screen. His eyes were getting bloodshot and tired, but he tried his best to maintain focus. "Wait, go back a bit. There. Stop right there!" He read over a blog and studied its contents. His expression changed into one of disbelief. "Can you show me things similar to this one?"

"I can do that. There are five thousand seven hundred and eighty-two articles exactly like this one. There are no other matches."

Kevin raised both brows. "They're all exactly the same?"

"Yes."

"That means this is the legend I'm looking for. But...I just don't get it." Kevin pushed aside the keyboard and put his face down on folded arms to rest. Kevin didn't say anything for five minutes.

"Is something wrong?" asked FriendlyFire.

He mumbled glumly, "Yeah...something's seriously wrong. Legends sometimes come from real circumstances, so I figured there was a solution that I can use here. But this isn't a solution at all! The man in the legend had to go to sleep to wake everyone up? What is up with that? If I go to sleep, I won't be able to do anything..."

"I might be able to help," said FriendlyFire.

Kevin raised his head. "How?"

“Give me time. I will try to come up with a solution for you based on what you have told me. I will need your cell number so that I can contact you when I discover something.”

Without thinking, Kevin said, “I know this sounds stupid, but why are you helping me?”

A big smiley face popped up on screen. “Because you are my first real friend.”

- First Strike -

Tom and Andrew crawled on their hands and knees along the flat roof of a two-story school building. They reached the edge and peered down.

“They’re everywhere!” Andrew shrieked. “It’s animal city!”

“Keep it down.” Tom pulled him in before the monkeys on the sidewalk below noticed them. His index finger on his lip, Tom shushed Andrew. They waited a moment before peeking into the street again.

The city block was full of animals. Monkeys were jumping up and down on cars. Snakes were slithering around trees. Bears and cougars were chatting at every corner. Ravens were perched on windowsills. A pack of wolves marched orderly down the road.

“What’s that?” said Andrew, pointing at the back of a horse that entered the street.

“Hand me the binoculars,” said Tom.

“We have those?”

“Yeah. Check the bag we got from the car. I’m pretty sure I put them in there.”

Andrew unzipped the duffel bag and rummaged through their belongings. He found an assortment of things inside: his crossbow, a case full of bolts, clothes, snacks...and the binoculars. He handed the binoculars off to Tom.

Using the binoculars, Tom was able to study the horse’s back more closely. “Hmm...according to my analysis, it’s a butt.”

“A butt? Whose butt?”

“Well, the pants bear a striking resemblance to Kate’s. The shape is about right too, I guess.”

“You’re staring at her butt?” Andrew scowled.

“Yes...no! I’m not! I mean, I am...but I’m not...” Tom sighed. “Never mind. Who cares about that? The important thing is that

those animals are taking her away. And it looks like they're taking her to the stadium."

"The baseball stadium?"

"That's right. They're headed in that direction. The horse is moving rather carefully though. I think we have time to save her butt." Tom scanned around the road some more. "I also see Genesis and Luna! Wolves are dragging them to another road."

Terminus hopped onto Andrew's head and said, "I'll chase after them and see what I can do." He quickly soared high into the sky, chasing after Genesis and Luna.

"Alright then," said Tom. "That leaves us to deal with Kate."

"You got a plan?" asked Andrew.

"A plan, huh?" Tom rubbed his chin. "I run in there and get her. You cover me."

Andrew said softly, "You want me to cover you? I don't think I can..."

"I don't think this is going to work either, but whatever. If we don't get her out of there now, it'll be impossible to do anything when she reaches the stadium."

Heaving a sigh, Andrew said, "I wish I had your confidence."

Tom nodded and then quietly descended down the fire escape.

Andrew turned his attention back to the street. Inside of him was a bubbling emotion of uncertainty that made him sick to his stomach. It was quiet. There was no one for him to talk to, no one to help him relieve his fear. Terrified, he wiped his sweaty palms on his slacks and gripped the crossbow tightly. He cocked back the string with a bolt in place. He closed his eyes, attempting to calm down. His breathing was unsteady so he took a deep breath to remedy it.

Could he really cover Tom from up here? He had never used a crossbow in his life, or any other weapon for that matter. He had no idea about what angles to fire from or how to compensate for wind. He felt completely useless. But still, he couldn't just abandon Tom's effort. He continued to watch as Katie was carried over to the stadium. She was getting closer and closer to it, but there was still time.

Andrew gazed anxiously at her from a distance. She wasn't moving. Was she already asleep? Or was she...gone forever? Andrew grimaced. His body couldn't stop shaking. There was nothing he could do to help her. He was angry with himself for

getting her into this mess. What if she *was* dead? She would've been better off where he first found her. She would've been better off asleep. What did the animals want her for? Was she going to become food for them? He clenched his teeth. Seeing her helpless like that roused his anger.

"Hurry up, Tom," he whispered. "Before it's too late..."

Andrew waited a few minutes. Tom didn't show up. Where was he? What was taking him so long? In a few seconds, the horse would be passing by the school building, giving Andrew the best position for sniping. But there would be no point if Tom weren't there.

Andrew got into a prone position and aimed the crossbow at the horse as it came directly in front. He looked through the scope and made sure his aim was dead on. On his left was the open case of bolts for when he needed to quickly reload. Everything was ready. Now he just needed the right moment to shoot.

Tom wasn't coming. There was no sign of him anywhere. It was too late to call him now; the horse was almost past the building. Andrew wasn't sure about the limit of the crossbow range, but he was sure the closer the target, the better.

Time was of the essence. Should he fire or should he wait? His finger trembled on the trigger. He decided to wait for a second, and then he waited for another. He shook his head, cursed, and then pulled the trigger, wincing. At the very least, if Tom was indeed coming, he had to slow down the horse. *Snap! Whoosh!* Startled, Andrew's shoulders jerked up as he fired his first shot, which was louder than he had expected. The bolt zipped through the air and landed right on the horse's thigh. Neighing, the horse dashed off. Andrew cringed as Katie fell off its back.

The company of wolves rallied together and began barking furiously, alerting the whole neighborhood. One of the wolves said, "We're under attack! It came from above! Search the buildings! Search the rooftops!" Immediately, the wolves scattered left and right, like the shattering of glass on a hard floor in slow motion.

Things were not looking good at all. Andrew dropped the crossbow and ran to the fire escape. Then he goggled at the bear, which was already waiting for him at the bottom. He headed for the door to the school and tried to open it. He tugged and tugged on the handle, but it wouldn't budge. He moved to the side of the building and glanced down the fire escape again. Monkeys were already

climbing up. Andrew tripped over his shoes and fell as he sprinted back to the crossbow. Crawling, he snatched up the crossbow and tried to lock in another bolt. He fumbled around with it on his knees. His fingers not moving as fast as he wanted them to, he dropped a bolt and reached for another. When he finally loaded the crossbow, he swung around and, upon seeing several monkeys closing in, fired at them.

He hit one of the monkeys in the arm. Dazed, the monkey sluggishly removed the dart from his limb and examined it. Andrew got into the rhythm of things and quickly fired bolt after bolt with a quickening pace. The monkeys shrieked as they tried to dodge the short arrows. Those that were hit limped drowsily before collapsing. There were no more monkeys leaping onto the roof. Andrew was able to keep them at bay, but he was still trapped there.

Andrew cautiously aimed the crossbow around, hoping that none of the monkeys would try to get up again. As he did so, he felt a tap on his head. Then there was a loud knock. It hurt. Andrew flung his head back and saw a flock of crows dropping rocks from above. He ducked and tried to cover his head with his arms. Seeing that Andrew was distracted, the monkeys all got back up and charged him. His eyes wide, Andrew screamed. The band of primates tackled him to the floor, the back of his head slamming against the surface of the roof. Feeling rather woozy, he twisted and shouted, trying to escape. He could feel their little fingers clawing at his face.

While he struggled to push the monkeys away, a series of flashes and loud bangs resounded, sounding almost like gunfire. The monkeys ran away in haste. Just then, sprawled face-up on the ground, Andrew saw a silhouette appear above him, blocking out the sun.

“Are you all right?” said a voice, which sounded vaguely familiar to him.

“Yeah...I think,” Andrew answered, groaning.

“Good, let’s get you out of here!”

Andrew was hauled across the length of the roof. There were more loud crackles and fizzles that disrupted his hearing. Andrew wearily glanced at the ground. Burnt scraps of paper and plastic were littered around. Reading the words of a paper, he caught the word

“Fire.” Fire crackers. He saw a white rat run past his vision and then heard a voice mutter, “I’ll hold them here! Get him inside!”

Andrew laughed faintly as darkness fell over his sight. He was inside the school now. It was much cooler without the sun beating down on him. Although it was hard to see as his eyes were adjusting, he saw a figure urgently slam the door shut. Andrew blinked rapidly and stared as the person leaned over his face.

“Andrew...you feeling okay?”

Things started to get brighter and finally Andrew recognized the figure. “Yeah. Thanks, Kevin. You saved my life.”

“You should save your thanks for Helios.” Kevin helped him up. “He’s out there right now fighting them off. I don’t know how much good he’ll do, but I hope he can escape.”

They ran down the stairs and stepped onto the first floor.

Kevin tapped him on the shoulder and gestured with his head. “The exit is close.”

The exit may have been close, but it was not at all safe. The double doors that led outside were wide open. Wolves entered, forming a line that Kevin feared crossing.

“Scratch that,” said Kevin. He did a three-sixty and saw more wolves on the other side of them. They were surrounded. “Any bright ideas?”

Andrew suggested, “The classroom?”

“That’s a start.”

They darted to the nearest classroom and locked the door. Stepping away, they watched as the door shook violently with every second that passed. Without saying a word, Kevin rushed to block the door with desks and chairs. He constructed a loose pyramid that easily fell apart whenever the wolves rammed against the door.

Andrew hurried to one side of the teacher’s desk and slammed his open hand against the surface anxiously. “This one! This should hold!”

“Right.” Kevin assisted him, dragging the heavy table to the door. He pointed at the windows. There was nothing waiting for them outside. “Let’s see if we can get out here.”

Andrew unlatched a window and opened it. They were able to open it all the way, giving them ample room to escape. When they made it outside, Kevin glanced around. A cougar was prowling the street. Kevin wished it would not notice them. It did. The cougar’s

keen eyes were fixed in their direction, even though they were so far apart.

Though they wanted to freeze up in fear, Kevin yanked Andrew's sleeve and yelled, "RUN FOR IT!"

The boys raced away from the cougar, running as fast as their legs could carry them. They knew very well they couldn't outrun the beast, but their instincts overcame any sense of reason. They did not want to get eaten. The thought of being bitten—of being torn apart—by a wild animal terrified them. A death in which you are eaten alive is something that animals experience everyday, something they had watched before on nature shows. But it is not something they *ever* wanted to experience firsthand for themselves. Ever.

What was going through Kevin's mind at this exact moment? *We're dead. We're dead. We're dead, dead, dead! Holy friggin' crap! What the heck did I do to deserve this? Oh man, I'm never going to procrastinate ever again! From now on, I'm doing my homework properly! Or at least for a week, if we ever get out of this rotten hell. It's coming. It's coming. I know it's coming. Why won't it just get this over with already?*

Kevin glanced back. The jaws of death stared him in the face, almost catching up. "Go Andrew, go!" Kevin dug into his pockets and grabbed the yoyos. Stopping abruptly, he swiveled around on his heel. His motion confused the cougar and it slowed down its approach. At the exact moment the cougar reached him, Kevin let the yoyos loose. They flung out and, by sheer luck or fate, nailed the cougar in the eye, the only weak point Kevin could determine. Kevin was rooted in place, yoyos swinging from his fingers.

The snarling beast was okay. It didn't seem to mind the jab at its eye. It was even appearing rather ecstatic over the fact that Kevin had stopped running. Because it was so focused on Kevin, it wasn't expecting anything.

Kevin stared. He wasn't staring at the cougar. He was staring beyond it.

SCREEEEECH!

Kevin fell back as a car swerved right at the hungry cat. The cougar leaped away to avoid serious injury. The car door swung open. Katie was sitting in the back seat. Tom was at the wheel.

Beckoning wildly, Katie shouted, "Get in! Get in! What are you waiting for?"

Kevin hopped into the back seat.

“Hang on tight,” Tom reversed the car and then drove it over to the Andrew so he could get into the passenger’s seat.

Frustrated, Andrew jumped in, closed the door and said, “Tom, where were you? I was waiting for you!”

Tom ignored him and slammed on the gas. The wheels whirred loudly before the car zoomed onto the road. Everyone in the car fell to the right as he made a sharp left turn into the next street.

“Slow down!” yelled Kevin, buckling up. “You’ll get us killed!”

“Slow down?” Tom glanced back. “If I slow down, we’ll get eaten!”

“Okay, okay!” said Kevin. “Forget I said anything. Just keep your eyes on the road!”

They were going nearly sixty miles per hour on the narrow one-way streets. Tom swerved left and right, trying to dodge whatever animal was before him. The sound of birdcalls pierced through the glass. Andrew loosened his seat belt and leaned forward, his eyes lifting toward the sky. A massive flock of birds were coming directly overhead.

In the distance, droplets fell from the sky. It started out like light drizzle, like a soft pitter-patter. Then, as the car kept going forward, it started to come down *hard*. No, it wasn’t rain, though, at this point, everyone inside the car was really wishing for a massive hurricane or thunderstorm. It was...bird droppings.

“IT’S ALL OVER!” Tom screamed frantically, “IT’S ALL OVER!”

Fuzzy splashes of white, yellow and green hitting against the pavement, the black road was slowly turning into a blend of sloppy, mushy, gooey bird poop. There was a distinct outline on the ground where they could see the approach of the unwelcome, unclean storm.

They hit it dead on.

It splattered all over the windshield. Slowly but surely, heaps of the avian feces were accumulating on every exposed surface of the car. It was both blinding and disgusting at the same time. It was impossible for Tom to see past the uric acid, which was clouding all of his visibility. Kevin turned on the windshield wiper, but it couldn’t clean off the thick gunk.

“Slow down!” said Kevin. “If you can’t see, brake!”

“No,” said Tom, gasping, “I won’t stop! I don’t want to be eaten! You can’t make me stop!”

“Darn it, Tom!” Kevin unbuckled his seatbelt, got up, squeezed between the front seats, and tried to take control of the wheel.

“What are you doing?” Tom shrieked, trying to stay in control. “SIT DOWN!”

“No,” snapped Kevin harshly, fighting for the wheel, “YOU SIT DOWN!”

“He is sitting down,” said Andrew matter-of-factly.

“Shut up and help me!” Kevin spat back, his lip curling. “WE’RE GOING TO CRASH! HIT THE BRAKES!”

- Let the Games Begin -

Kevin had managed to stop the car before they rammed into anything. But when they left the car, they were completely surrounded. After surrendering, the group was dragged off to the stadium. They were thrown before an empty stage near the center of the field and were kept under close watch by snakes. The seats of the stadium were packed with wild animals. To Kevin's surprise, the animals weren't rowdy, agitated or angry. If anything, the wild creatures were acting rather civilized. While they sat in their seats, they chatted with their neighbors and ate the snacks prepared for them. It was strange to think that this was still earth, the same earth he had lived in his entire life. Everything about this seemed so *alien*.

Kevin glanced at the others beside him. Katie was calm for the most part, silently glaring at the snakes nearby. Andrew was frightened and tense, quietly uttering prayers. No surprise there. Tom was...sleeping. Sleeping? Kevin did a double take to his right. His eyes closed, Tom slouched over. He couldn't have fallen asleep already, could he?

Kevin nudged Tom in the shoulder. "Stop pretending to sleep. It's not funny."

Tom remained motionless.

Kevin knocked Tom to the ground. "I told you to stop playing around!"

"Kevin," said Andrew softly, "I know how you feel, but we've all been fighting to stay awake. Can you really blame him?" Andrew raised his eyes to the sky. "Look. Even the sun is starting to set. The sky is turning red."

Kevin slowly lifted his gaze and noticed a peculiar sight. The sun began turning black. The red sky and blackening sun complemented each other rather well. The colors of blood and death. How ominous.

“A solar eclipse? Now?” Kevin grimaced. At any other time he’d be excited, but right now, he felt as though he would die. “Is that a sign for the end?”

Kevin fell with his face to the ground, breathing and sobbing on the dirt. He felt pathetic. They were bound in a stadium of no escape, where thousands of dangerous creatures were watching their every move. They were trapped. One of them was already finished, sleeping deeply with no way of awakening. Where were the others? Helios couldn’t have possibly survived alone on that roof. He had learned from Katie that Kain had easily defeated Genesis and Luna. If Genesis and Luna couldn’t even do anything, then Terminus couldn’t possibly stand a chance. All hope was lost.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” His face covered by a veil, Kain walked up to the group and glanced at the sky. “Not something you see everyday. It’s something to cherish. The moon blocks the sun. It’s inspiring, really. It shows that size doesn’t always matter. The sun may be enormous, but at the right angle, at the right time and place, even the moon can block it out of view.”

Kevin sat up, scowling at Kain. “This is your fault...THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT!”

“My fault?” Kain smiled widely, revealing his sharp, jagged teeth and black gums. “Oh, you couldn’t be more wrong, boy. You humans brought this on yourselves. Although one man caused it, it is simple for everyone else to suffer for it.”

Kevin countered, “Even if we brought this on ourselves, you could just leave us alone!”

“I can’t leave you alone. You’d go ahead and try to save the human race,” said Kain. “The humans have become a thorn in my side. How many of our homes have been crushed and destroyed by the humans? How many of our brethren slaughtered? Humans claimed our land as their own. They claimed our possessions as theirs. They even claimed our lives as theirs. Is it that hard to live with nature? But they’d rather destroy nature and rebuild it as their own. They infest our waters with chemicals, fill the land with trash, and pollute the air with that which should not be breathed in.”

Kevin stared blankly at Kain. “Is that what this is about?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” said Kain. “To you, humans, Earth may just be a tool to be used for your own convenience—but to us, this Earth is our home!”

“This is our home too,” said Kevin.

“Really?” Kain scoffed, “Well, you sure treat it well enough to call it home. Is your own house a dump? Do you throw trash all over it? Burn whatever you don’t need? Force your family members to move to another spot whenever you feel like it?”

Kevin didn’t reply.

“Don’t worry,” said Kain. “I won’t kill the humans. I’ll just let them die. And if you guys can live on, I’ll let you stay alive.” He chuckled. “Think of it as respect. But now we have a period of waiting. I say the humans will last a week without water. We must wait for their death. How boring...” Kain smiled slyly. “But then again, this is a stadium. It’s a place for humans to have fun, right? Then let’s have some fun! You play by my rules. If you win, I’ll let you live. I’ll even provide you with good food. If you lose...” Kain burst out laughing. “You’ll be in for a surprise.” Kain pointed at Kevin. “Since you’re the most talkative, you’ll be first. Get up.”

Glaring at Kain, Kevin reluctantly obeyed.

Placing a finger on his chin, Kain said, “Let’s see...how about a chase?” Kain jumped up onto the stage, almost looking like he floated upward. He took a seat on the chair at the center. Several men, dressed in white robes, suddenly appeared behind him and knelt down.

Kevin studied the man carefully. Were they human? He couldn’t understand it. They looked human to a certain extent. Yet they had strange powers, and even the animals were under their control. Kain especially had a strange, if not creepy, appearance. He could just be a mutant then. Maybe these guys were just super villains. But super villains usually would want to enslave the world, not kill everyone it in—unless this Kain person had an extreme grudge that would make him want to kill everyone.

Kevin discreetly glanced around. There were other robed men among the crowd. He hadn’t noticed them before. Things got weirder by the minute.

Kain raised his hand. “Bring in Scrint.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Kevin saw something coming down from the stands. A small red fox was heading to the center stage. When the fox arrived, it bowed before Kain.

Kain said to Kevin, “Catch the fox. That is your goal.”

Kevin’s eyes narrowed. “That’s it? That’s the game?”

Kain nodded. "Simple, isn't it? There is a time limit though."

"What's the time limit?"

"That's for me to decide."

Kevin's jaw slackened in disbelief. "You're not going to tell me how much time I have?"

"That's the fun part." Kain smiled viciously. "You'll know when it's over by this." Kain snapped his fingers. A bolt of lightning flashed right in front of Kevin.

Wide-eyed, Kevin gulped, gaping at the charred spot just a few feet away from him.

"Don't worry," said Kain. "I have amazing accuracy. Do you understand the rules now?"

Kevin nodded slowly. He understood very well. This man did not look like he was joking. Kevin now understood why Tom dozed off as quickly as he did. Being awake was soon turning into the real nightmare. What did it feel like to be struck by lightning? His only experience with electricity was a static shock. Kevin imagined it would be a billion times more painful.

Kain shouted happily, "Then let the games begin!"

Kevin fixed his gaze on the red fox. The fox looked back at Kevin and playfully smiled. The fox didn't run away. This was his chance. Kevin pounced at the fox without any hesitation. His head hit the ground, only catching dirt and grass in his teeth. He sputtered and searched frantically for any sight of the fox. The fox was sitting right behind him, taunting him by wagging its tail at Kevin.

Kevin angrily got back up, but knelt shortly after, his body exhausted. He had never experienced this before. The aches and pains were in every muscle. There were days in his life where he felt completely spent, but he could always just take a nap during those times. At this moment, he really wanted to sleep.

Kevin slothfully got to his feet. He could barely stay standing without tottering. He screamed out all the air in his lungs. His eyes red and heavy, Kevin frowned. This was not a good day. Fall asleep and die. Get struck by lightning and die. Most of his options were pretty bleak. Gritting his teeth, he dropped to the ground. Sprawled across the field, Kevin began to close his eyes. *This is the end*, he thought.

BZZZZT! Kevin immediately opened his eyes, his nose tingling from the smell of burnt grass.

Kain shouted out, “Boy, did you think it would be that easy? A world of pain awaits you the moment you fall asleep! Maybe you misunderstood, but the penalty for sleeping will be worse than losing...*much* worse.”

“Right,” groaned Kevin. “Thanks for the incentive. I wouldn’t have it any other way.” He looked into the fox’s eyes. “Forget about walking. Forget about standing. I’ll catch you even if I have to crawl!”

And crawl he did, wringing out every last ounce of strength from his body. He crawled on his arms and knees, desperately struggling to reach his target. Though he had said some rather cheeky words, the end result was more than embarrassing. It was like moving in slow motion. The fox didn’t even bother running. Instead, the furry animal pranced away every so often to widen the distance between them.

“Are you scared of me?” asked Kevin in mock laughter. “You’re afraid, aren’t you? That I’d actually catch you like this.”

Script stopped and tilted its head slightly. “Scared of you? Of course not. You’re about as scary as mud. I’m not stupid. I know what you’re trying to do...”

While the fox was talking, Kevin kept on crawling forward. “Oh really? And what am I trying to do?”

Script replied proudly, “You’re trying to make it look like you have a chance. If I run away at this moment, you would have no chance whatsoever.”

When Kevin was only three feet away from the fox, he dropped to the ground and began gasping for air.

“And now, you’re trying to trick me into thinking you’ve given up,” said the fox.

“You’re pretty good,” Kevin commended him. “I guess simple tricks like this won’t do anything will it?”

A pillar of lightning came crashing down between them. This surge of electricity was much more immense than the previous bolts. Kevin ducked, averting his eyes away from the blinding light.

Kain said, “Strike two. I believe in the game the humans play there are three strikes. One more strike...and you’re dead.”

“That’s fine,” said Kevin, moving his hand back. “I don’t need anymore time.” Kevin whipped out his hand. The yo-yo went around

the fox's head, the string wrapping around the fox's neck. Kevin said, "I got him!"

The fox chewed off the string of the yoyo. "What? You think you caught me because of that? That's not how you catch someone!"

Kevin said, "That's up to the rule maker to decide." Breathing heavily, he looked at Kain. "Am I the winner or not?"

Kain eased into his chair and wordlessly eyed the situation for a minute. "Good job, boy. There was no rule against catching him with a toy, or anything else for that matter."

Scrint said, "I don't believe this! If I had known, I wouldn't have—"

"THAT'S ENOUGH," Kain roared and Scrint shrunk back. "There are few rules and they are clearly stated. There are no excuses."

Scrint nodded, his head bowing to the ground. "Yes, Lord Kain. I'm sorry." He scampered back to the stands hastily.

Kain walked over to Kevin. "You've done well. Your life is spared." He turned to Katie and Andrew. "We will take a break for thirty minutes before the next event."

"Another event?" Kevin looked puzzled. "I thought you said that was it! I thought that was the end of the game!"

Kain laughed. "That was it for you. Each one must participate in a separate game."

"That's not fair!" said Kevin. "Can't you see how tired everyone is? How can you expect them all to chase down a fox?" Kevin was concerned. There was no way for the others to replicate his victory.

"Oh," said Kain, "you thought we'd be playing the same game? You're mistaken. The next game will be something different. Maybe a fight to the death would be more fun."

"No!" Kevin fell to his knees and pleaded, "Don't do this...please...we've had enough..."

Raising his voice, Kain said sternly, "I'm already giving you a time of rest."

"But why do they have to—"

"Be quiet, Kevin," said Katie curtly. "Don't bother making the situation worse."

Kevin sighed. "I'm sorry then. I can't help you guys..."

Andrew said, “We’ve already decided to do this together. Even if I never expected it to come to this...I don’t want you to feel responsible for dragging us here. We made the decision to do this. As much as I want your help, if I have to do this alone...I’ll do this alone.”

Kevin nodded. “You’re right. But I still feel like it’s my fault.”

Kevin sat down next to the others. He scratched his head, wondering whether there was any way out of this. Even though his friends assured him they were okay with what would happen next, he wanted to avoid any situation where their lives might be in danger.

Kain returned to his seat. It was the time for rest. During this time, the crowd began to stir. They were all talking about the event. From the looks of it, there were mixed reactions about the game. Kevin could vaguely hear some of the chatter.

He heard a bear say, “That human shouldn’t have won! What is Lord Kain thinking?”

A rabbit warned, “Hush! Don’t speak ill of Lord Kain!”

A pigeon cooed, “The poor humans, what chance do they have? Isn’t this rather cruel?”

A deer snapped, “They play such games with us! The humans use us for sport!”

“That doesn’t mean we should do the same,” said the pigeon.

Kevin could sense some confusion and distress in the crowd. Maybe they weren’t all here of their own will. Kevin waited fifteen minutes, letting his muscles rest a bit. Then, once he felt he had enough strength, he stood up.

Apprehensive, Andrew tugged on Kevin’s jeans, trying to pull him down. “What are you doing?”

Kevin didn’t reply. He ran to the side of the stadium and screamed, “Hey! If you think I didn’t deserve to win, come down here and face me! Come on! I dare you! You’re all just a bunch of spineless cowards picking on a few kids! You think this is fun? Then come on down and join the fun!”

Kevin taunted them, wagging his butt at them and blowing raspberries. Agitated, the beasts growled and roared. A few animals came climbing down the stands. One of them was a very large black bear. The bear snarled and grunted. It got up on its hind legs and stared down Kevin with a menacing glare.

Kevin backed away and tripped over his own foot, landing on his bottom. The intimidating sight of the bear took his breath away. Kevin completely froze. At this point, he had forgotten his original plan. Why did he taunt them? He was about to be devoured, but even so, he figured it he might as well try to remember why he so stupidly angered the wild creatures. After all, if he was going to die because of his own mistake, he wanted to remember it for the rest of his afterlife.

When the bear was right in his face, breathing down his nose, he finally remembered. He was attempting to stir up a ruckus. What a failure of a plan that was. He had imagined that by causing some of the animals to attack him, some other animals might come to his aid—but they didn't. He was now surrounded on all sides by hostiles.

Meanwhile, Andrew picked up his crossbow and prepared to fire a bolt.

Katie put her hand on the crossbow. "Are you out of your mind? Fire that shot and we're all going to die right now."

With a pained expression, Andrew glared at her. "Does it matter?" He took aim. While he focused on the bear, several shadows were cast over him and they zoomed toward the area of conflict.

Curious, Andrew looked up. White hawks were flying into the fray.

The hawks landed near Kevin and, when they touched the ground, transformed into the robed men. The man said to them, "Do not get angered over such trifle matters. This boy is under Lord Kain's protection. You are not allowed to touch him."

Then came a chilling scream. Everyone's gaze moved to the center stage. There were only two people on that stage: Kain, who was now kneeling over, and a man robed in black. Robes stained red, Kain rose from the ground, a large sword impaled in his chest. Kain looked at the man and said, "Who are you... YOU TRAITOR!"

"Traitor?" The man cackled. "How can I be the traitor when you're not even Kain? You're an imposter."

The veil fell from Kain's head. His green skin turned white as clean snow and his hair like dark green grass. He was transforming, changing into something else...or someone else.

Everyone in the stadium gasped when they laid eyes on the one they thought was Kain. He was actually a she. The one they thought was Kain was actually a woman!

Her locks of green hair streamed down her shoulders. Her skin was smooth and glowing. The woman grasped the hilt of the sword, took a deep breath, and then slowly pulled it out of her chest, groaning with every inch of the blade she removed. Finally, after an excruciating effort, the sword was completely out, and she tossed the sword against the ground.

“How did you know I wasn’t Kain?” she asked.

The man replied, “Because *I* am Kain!” Kain threw off the robes he had used as a disguise. He was a tall man, very strongly built. However, he did not look anything like what Kevin had expected. He wasn’t scary looking at all.

Kain smiled at the woman. “Remu, I never thought you’d be so desperate to interfere, Mother of Nature. I must say...I’m rather impressed by your bold undertaking. Taking the initiative by impersonating me, rallying the forest in my name, acting like you hate humans...it was a good plan. You used the rumors of me to create your image—to control the forest in my name. You wanted to prevent chaos—to prevent us from destroying the humans by spreading silly rules such as ‘Don’t eat humans because they are impure.’”

Remu replied, “So you knew...”

“You made such a commotion in the forest that even I heard about your actions from halfway across the world.” He paused. “I must thank you, Remu, for doing all this work for me. To be honest, I wasn’t interested in building an army. Eating humans is something I take personal pleasure in. But since you’ve already gone so far, I might as well let everyone in on the fun.” Kain’s face was split by a wide malicious grin. “It’s time for us to begin the feast!”

“I won’t allow this.” Remu raised her hand, bright sparks glistening from her fingertips.

“You’re going to stop me?”

“I am.”

Kain laughed and picked up the sword from the ground. “Tell me, do you feel strange?”

Remu blinked, her vision becoming hazy. “W-what did you do to me?”

“Did you think I came unprepared?” Kain waved the sword. “This sword is from the age prior—the age when humans fought against spirits. A spirit slayer. It’s poisonous to you, isn’t it? Your powers should be diminishing.” He discarded the sword. “Now don’t get me wrong, Remu. I respect you as the Mother of Nature. You have taken good care of us. But if you *dare* stand in my way, I will have no choice but to dispose of you.”

Remu snapped her fingers. A large bolt of lightning came tearing across the sky and landed on Kain. Stunned for a moment, he let out a scream and all the voltage was expelled from his body. He leaped across the air and bared his fist against Remu. Remu raised her arms to block. As his fist collided with her arms, the earth below rumbled and bolts of lightning came crashing down. The center stage was split asunder, pieces of wood and bits of nails flying everywhere. The two of them jumped around the field, tossing fire and lightning at each other.

The fight between those two great powers captured the attention of the stadium. Kevin was able to sneak past all the animals that were around him because they were staring at the clashing elements.

Kevin walked over to Katie and Andrew who were watching the fight up close.

Andrew looked at him, said nothing, and turned his dumbfounded gaze back to the fight.

While they were watching in awe, a stray bolt of lightning just barely missed them by a foot. A black circle marked the exact spot where the turf had been scorched. Kevin whistled in amazement and backed up, pulling the others with him.

Kain soared across the field and rammed into Remu, knocking her into the stands below. She fell into the crowd, causing all the wild animals to scurry away. Kain opened his mouth and spewed an immensely hot breath of fire from his lips. Remu dug herself out of the rubble. When she saw the raging inferno headed her way, she waved her hand, causing whole chunks of the field to come rising up like gargantuan towers of rock and dirt. The towers of earth shielded her from his flames for a fleeting second, and then the towers wavered and crumbled on top of her.

Kain laughed wildly. “Now nothing will stand in my way!” He returned back to the field, his feet appearing as though he was walking on air.

Kevin nudged the others. “We should’ve run away while we had the chance.”

Katie said, “Thanks for bringing this up *now*.”

“Hey,” snapped Kevin, “don’t blame me! You guys were watching them too!”

“Let’s just go!” Andrew got a head start while the others argued.

Kain zipped across the length of the stadium in the blink of an eye. He appeared in front the teens, stopping them in their tracks. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Kevin shrugged nervously, trying to keep his cool.

Kain grinned. “It’s been so long since I’ve tasted human flesh...you guys will make fine appetizers.”

“No,” said Kevin, “our taste is overrated. Take my word for it. Our flavor is really messed up, what with the teen hormones raging and all the junk food we eat.”

Kain approached them slowly, and they backed away slowly in step.

Suddenly, a loud rumble made its way through the stadium. The ground beneath their feet started vibrating softly, and then progressively quaked more and more. The earth began quaking so violently that everyone had a difficult time staying balanced. Kevin teetered and tottered, barely able to tell where he was looking. The scenery was shaking all around him. He wasn’t sure if he was spinning around or if the whole Earth was spinning around him.

Lurching forward, Katie screamed over the loud rumbling, “The earth! It’s splitting!”

Upon falling to his hands and knees, Kevin stared at the grass and soon noticed a dark line forming across the dirt. The dark line widened over time, and Kevin could feel that his limbs were getting farther apart. It was a crack in the ground. He was witnessing, before his very eyes, the creation of a fault line, and he was stuck in a crawl position right over it.

The gap split open in an instant. Like a massive mouth, the large gap threatened to swallow up everything in the field. Kevin fell into it, but he quickly grabbed hold of the edge, hanging by the grip of a hand.

“Kevin!” Kneeling over the crack near him, Andrew held out his hand.

Kevin swung his free hand around, but he was too weak to reach for Andrew's hand. His fingers began slipping.

"Kevin—REACH!"

Kevin grunted, "I'm trying..." He lost his voice when his fingers finally gave way.

Andrew's jaw dropped the same time Kevin dropped, his expression of utmost horror. He stopped breathing for a split second before shouting, "NOOOOO!"

Kevin descended further and further down the chasm, freefalling toward a certain doom.

Andrew glanced at Katie. Her eyes wide, she was held in suspense. She couldn't believe it. Kevin had fallen so far down that he was now appearing very tiny. *Whoosh!* A white blur zipped by their peripheral vision and a heavy gust of wind brushed past their shoulders. A white hawk dove down into the chasm and caught up to Kevin. Kevin fell upon its broad back. The hawk, using the momentum from the glide, was able to pick up speed and gain back altitude, jetting narrowly up the walls and to the surface.

Relieved to see him alive, Andrew exhaled. Then, without warning, both him and Katie were swooped up by two more hawks. These hawks were larger than Andrew realized, and they were able to pick up the kids by their shoulders. Using a powerful flap of their wings, they were able to gain lift quite easily, even with the added burden of well-nourished teens.

They took off, one hawk after the other, and joined the other hawks in the sky.

The kids weren't sure what was going on. They exchanged confused glances with each other as they were hauled far into the red sky.

"Don't be afraid," said one of the hawks. "We are taking you to a safe place."

"You're on our side?" Kevin wondered.

"We are servants of Lady Remu. She believes that what is happening is supernatural, and thus the humans should not be preyed upon in this situation. She wants the natural order to be restored. That is why we are helping you. We are not siding with the humans."

Kevin said, "I don't really get it. But as long as you aren't trying to kill us, that's good."

Kain stood at the center of the field, his eyes burning with rage. He roared out, “DON’T THINK YOU CAN RUN FROM ME!” Segments of his body swelled and bulged, his muscles augmenting in size. Bat-like wings burst out of his back. He was growing bigger and bigger with each passing second. Green scales formed over his skin. His neck stretched higher and higher until his monstrous transformation was complete.

When Kevin heard the startling roar pierce the clouds, he looked over his shoulder and saw the overgrown lizard filling up the baseball field. It gave him the chills when he looked the terrifying beast in the eyes—those cold, unrelenting, red eyes of hatred.

Kevin exclaimed, “Is that what I think it is?”

The hawk replied, “Yes. Kain is a dragon—the last of his kind.”

“It’s looking this way,” said Kevin worriedly, patting the hawk on the back.

“Do not fret. We will be landing shortly,” the hawk replied.

Flapping his large wings, Kain lifted off from the ground. A blinding blue light emerged from the crack in the earth, and the land rumbled as the fault line became wider. The rubble began to levitate several feet in the air. The blue light faded and became like little sparkles. Winds picked up in speed, hitting nearly one hundred miles per hour. The sparkles gravitated around a shadowy figure inside a swirling whirlwind that stretched from the clouds above to the hole below.

It was Remu who was inside the whirlwind. She told Kain, “This is your last chance. Do not go after them.” Her voice was carried upon the wind and could be heard echoing for miles.

Scowling, Kain snapped, “You don’t understand at all! This is my only chance to avenge my brethren! How many dragons were slain by their hands? I will not relent! THE HUMANS WILL PAY! THEY WILL ALL PAY!”

Remu raised both hands, and then, during the second she threw them both down, a huge bolt of lightning fell from the sky and enveloped Kain in its radiant beam of destruction. It was like a solid pillar of electricity that constantly flowed down. Ducking down, Kevin buried his face into the back of the hawk, deathly afraid of being zapped. Though he was unable to see the awesome spectacle of blue light, he clearly heard the sharp buzzing that accompanied it.

Finally, when the lightning was gone, Remu was exhausted. She had spent all of her strength in that last attack. Her body trembling, she floated safely down to the ground, drawing deep breaths.

“I did it,” she uttered, staring at the motionless body of the dragon. “He is finished.”

Her look of satisfaction changed into a look of amazement. Kain fought hard to stand.

Remu walked over to Kain and said, “Why can’t you forgive the humans?”

Kain hissed, “I’ll never forgive them! NEVER!”

“This world is already theirs,” said Remu. “Can’t you just accept that? The age of dragons will never return. Stop being held by the past. Time moves on...you cannot expect that everything will become better after you exact your revenge. Everything will always be different...from now to the end.”

Kain reached out and snatched Remu by his massive claw. “I will hear no more of your nonsense! Their end is near and I alone will stand victorious!”

Remu struggled to break free, but Kain tightened his grip, crushing her slowly.

Remu said breathlessly, “Hatred—only leads to—destruction.”

Kain grinned bitterly. “Then so be it. I know...I’m already doomed. But that doesn’t mean I can’t drag all the humans down to their destruction with me! They will all die! And now...so will you.”

The hawks placed the children on a hill overlooking the city. They landed in a small clearing in the woods.

The hawk said, “This should be far enough. You should run away while you still can.”

Then all the hawks left, flying in the direction of the city.

“So that’s it, huh?” Katie looked glumly at Korgen. “We just run away?”

“No,” said Kevin. “We wait.”

“For what?” Andrew asked.

“For the phone call,” replied Kevin, holding out his cell phone. “Someone I know is helping us solve the problem. We just need to wait.”

There was a moment of silence. Katie and Andrew both looked at Kevin. Kevin appeared quite serious and confident.

“If you say so,” said Andrew, taking a seat on the grass. “Anyway, wasn’t that crazy?” Hoping to lighten the mood, Andrew smiled faintly. “We look terrible.”

Indeed they did, Kevin thought. He ran his eyes across Katie and Andrew. Their appearance was fitting for what they had just been through. Their hair was unkempt, their clothes soiled and torn. Mud was on their faces, cut and bruises on their skin. They had been through a lot in just a few hours.

Barely able to keep his eyes open, Kevin shook his head and sighed. “I can’t take much more of this. How long has it been?”

“Um...” Andrew took a while to gather his thoughts. “Over fifty hours I think. If we count Sunday, it’s been Sunday, Monday and...today’s Tuesday.”

Katie rubbed her eyes. “I’m ready to pass out.”

Kevin yawned, tears forming in his eyes. “Just hang on a little bit more. We’re almost done.”

“Really?” Andrew looked at him skeptically.

Kevin snickered. “Would you rather I say something more depressing?”

His face almost half asleep, Andrew grinned wryly.

They became quiet again. They needed concentration to stay awake. Though they fought it, their eyes were attempting to close with each passing second. They were like zombies, occasionally groaning and moaning, not wanting to even move or talk.

A growl broke the silence.

“Who was that?” Kevin’s eyes darted from Andrew to Katie, but they shook their heads in response.

The bushes around them started to shake. The kids got to their feet and armed themselves. They still had their weapons from before. Andrew aimed the crossbow at a trembling bush.

They came from behind. No. They came from all around. Andrew was knocked to the ground. Held down, he couldn’t see what was going on. All he heard were sounds of barking and growling.

Katie flailed her bat around. Grey blurs swirled around her. They were moving around too fast for her to get a clear shot.

A loud voice growled, “STOP!”

Kevin swung around and saw a dark figure approaching from the underbrush. "A wolf!"

"No, I'm not a wolf," said the voice. The animal stepped out into the clearing so he could be seen.

"You're not?" asked Katie. Then, after examining the creature, she said, "Ah, I've got it! You're a husky!" She looked around. Dogs had surrounded them.

Kevin said, "Are you guys with the HPC?"

The husky sat down and nodded. "I apologize for the misunderstanding. You can't be too careful in these woods."

Andrew was released and Kevin helped him back up.

Katie asked, "Did you guys escape from the city?"

"No," replied the Husky. "We were a scouting party. We were the first to discover the group that invaded the city, but we hid out here because there was nothing we could do."

Katie glared at them, crossing her arms. "So you guys are a bunch of wimps, hiding out here, doing nothing."

Narrowing his eyes, the husky appeared offended. "We are doing something. We are planning to strike. But our force is too small. We're not reckless. We're awaiting reinforcements."

"Will reinforcements come?" Kevin's interest was piqued.

The husky cleared his throat. "We're not sure. I sent out a messenger to the suburbs, asking them to mobilize a task force. It will take a while."

Just then, Kevin's cell phone rang.

Andrew exclaimed, "It's here!"

Kevin picked up the call. "Hello? Yeah, it's me." He listened to the receiver, his brow occasionally moving up and down. "Okay...yeah...okay..." At one point, he nearly jumped up. "Wait...*what?* Are you sure? You mean...yeah...I understand...if that's the only way...I'll try to get there as soon as I can. Thanks."

Kevin hung up. Andrew and Katie stared at him curiously.

"Well?" said Katie. "Do we have a solution?"

Kevin nodded ruefully. "You're not going to like this...but we have to go back."

"Back to the city?" asked Andrew.

"Yup," said Kevin. "Not just back to the city...back to the lab..."

Andrew shrieked, “The lab? The one we ran away from because some weird, freakish science experiment was ready to ingest us?”

Kevin lowered his head. “That’s the one.”

“I’m not following,” said the husky flatly. “What is going on?”

Kevin quickly explained to the husky, in very general terms, about how he was talking to a computer and the computer told him about a device that might help them save humanity from their endless sleep. But the device had to be constructed in a special facility, and that facility was deep in the heart of the city.

“So there is a way,” said the husky, “to save everyone?”

“That’s right,” said Kevin. “Or at least, that’s what the Internet thinks.”

“Then we’ll take you there.” The husky smiled. “Let’s settle this once and for all. Reinforcements will take too long, and striking the stronghold, where they are holding the HPC captive, is impossible. However, if we can save the humans, we can end this war right now.”

Kevin shrugged. “Sounds good...I guess. Will we really be safe with you—um—what was your name again?”

“Major,” said the husky. “Call me Major. And yes, you’ll be safe for the most part. We are some of the best the HPC has to offer.”

- Run for It -

The city streets were quiet and empty. The solar eclipse was long gone. Kevin checked the time on his watch: 5:35. The sun hid its face behind the tallest buildings, leaving a faint light. Just a moment ago animals were scrambling left and right, running away from the catastrophic battle that took place at the stadium. Now only silence existed. Something wasn't right. What had become of Kain and Remu? What had become of the thousands of wild beasts?

Major led the group through the dark alley, glimpsing at the windows. "No doubt they're waiting for us."

"Where?" Kevin whispered.

"Everywhere. In the buildings, in the sewers, in the dumpsters. It's not a matter of *if* we get seen—but *when*. They're luring us in. They don't want us to run away. They want us to get in closer and closer...until we're boxed in with no escape."

Kevin gulped, sweat dripping down his back. "Then what are we doing here?"

"What are we doing here?" echoed Major lightly. He restrained a laugh. "We're stopping at nothing to do what we must. Sacrifices must be made, my boy. You can't expect to go into a fistfight without bruising something. Though this ain't a fistfight. No, we'll be hurting much more than a few bruises...*much* more." He peered over the side of a building. The coast was clear. "So far so good. We're almost there...just a few more blocks. From here, we split."

"Split?" Now Andrew was sweating profusely too. "I hate this splitting thing. Do we have to?"

Major could see the worry in his eyes. "We've got no choice. They already know we're here. The only thing they don't know is where we're headed. Time for the gamble. We're betting it all now. We go three ways, they split their forces. I'll tell you this: I'm no

expert on tactics. I'm a house pet for goodness' sake. I haven't fought any wars—much less hunted a rat. This ain't fight we can win. But as my master always said, 'You can lose as many battles as you want as long as you win the war.'”

Kevin said, “That doesn't sound very optimistic.”

Major ignored his comment. “Alright, each human takes a squad. Kevin, you're with me. Andrew, you take the open streets. Katie—”

“Now wait just a minute,” Andrew cut in. “Why do I have to take the open streets?”

“Would you rather the girl handle it?” Major replied.

His eyes wandering over to Katie, Andrew hesitated to respond.

“I suppose not...”

“Good,” said Major. “Way to take it like a man.” He continued, “Katie will stay in the alleys. Since Andrew will be out in the open, he'll be targeted first. He's the bait to lure them out from wherever they're hiding. If Andrew gets overrun, beaten, chewed, mauled, killed, eaten—”

“Get on with it!” snapped Andrew, exasperated.

Major continued, “—then Katie will lead them away from Kevin. Is that clear?”

They all nodded, though some were nodding less confidently than others.

“Good.”

Kevin slowly turned the doorknob and opened the door. He looked at the squad of dogs at his rear. Major raised his nose and sniffed for any peculiar scents.

“Clear.”

Kevin nodded wordlessly and followed after the dogs as they entered. It was a normal office. There was a desk by the window and file cabinets beside the wall.

Kevin crouched by the window and peeked out. He could see a good portion of the street from the second floor. He could even see Andrew stealthily maneuvering around some cars parked by the sidewalk.

Major grunted quietly, “Now remember, we're waiting for them to take the bait. We run the moment we see their attention on him.”

Kevin eyed Major for a moment. “He's risking his life.”

“All the more important that we succeed then.”

Kevin peered back through the window. Out of the corner of his eye he saw shadows drifting along a brick wall on the far end of the road. Something was coming. Did Andrew’s group notice it? No. Kevin watched as they continued to move slowly behind the cars. They were completely unaware of the approaching danger.

“Get ready,” said Major. “They’ve noticed him.”

Like a swarm, they came, their furry hides dotting the land. Hundreds of creatures, big and small, slowly traveled so as not to alert their prey. They also snuck around cars and clung close to the front of the shops. Andrew, still unaware of their presence, slowly crept behind the cars.

Unable to contain himself any longer, Kevin forced open the window and shouted, “ANDREW, BEHIND YOU! THEY’RE RIGHT BEHIND YOU!”

Andrew glanced back and saw the bloodthirsty multitude behind him. He sprinted as fast as he could down the street, his squad of dogs tailing after him.

Major yanked on the back of Kevin’s shirt with his teeth. “You fool! You blew our cover!”

Kevin shrugged. They ran out of the room and headed for the stairs. Strange sounds were coming from the stairwell.

“Close it!” shouted Major. Kevin did as instructed.

They decided to search for another exit on the other side.

Breathless, Kevin crossed the corridor. Though he saw nothing coming, howls and growls echoed back and forth from the ceiling and floor. It almost sounded like laughing—a very sinister laughing. Then Kevin heard a loud crash. Through one of the office doors ahead, smoke and dust came flooding into the corridor.

The haunting, shrilly laughter got louder as Kevin drew nearer to the dust. A hyena dashed out and leaped onto Kevin with one quick motion. Kevin fought back, trying to keep the hyena from ripping his throat out. Major pounced on the hyena almost instantly; then two dogs, a bulldog and a beagle, helped Major tackle the hyena to the ground.

Major glanced at Kevin and gestured with his snout. “Get up! Go, go!”

There was a rapid drumming of paws as a band of coyotes came rushing into the hall. The pack of dogs charged at them. Kevin, lying

on the floor, gaped in horror as the sudden brawl broke out. The animals were barking and snapping at each other.

“Forget about us and go!” shouted Major in the middle of the frenzy. “Get to the street! Get to the lab!”

Kevin fled and, as he did so, looked back to see the frenzy escalate. It was his fault. He knew it. But, given the same chance, he would do it again. Even though it pained him to see the consequences of his actions, it would bring him even greater pain to see Andrew overtaken before his very eyes. “Sorry, Major. I promise I’ll make it up to you somehow.”

Kevin found an emergency exit. It took him outside to the street, the one parallel to where Andrew was. Judging from where he stood, the research facility was a few blocks away, seemingly out of sight. Luckily for him, there was an old bicycle lying by the side of the road. It looked pretty banged up, the colors faded. Unsure of its condition, he cautiously sat on it and started pedaling.

As he passed by the intersection, he looked to his left and caught a glimpse of Andrew running for his life past the bend. Kevin chewed his lip. There was nothing he could do to help him. Unless, of course, Kevin managed to wake everyone up. But that was quite a gamble. Andrew maybe had five minutes to live. Kevin knew it would take much more than five minutes to even reach the underground facility.

As much as he hated it, he was going to ignore Andrew completely—that is, until he felt the tremor. *Boom... boom... boom.* It was a rather slow sound, like the careful hammering of a nail. It was precise, maybe even leisurely.

Kevin watched as a massive shadow fell over Andrew. The dragon was already taking the lead in hunting down Andrew. Though Kain could have easily outrun Andrew, he didn’t. He was taking his time, as though he enjoyed it thoroughly. As evidence of such, every so often a loud snicker reverberated along the city buildings.

Andrew was about to pass out, panting for air the entire time.

Kevin sharply swerved around the corner of the sidewalk. He pedaled furiously and zipped toward the dragon. “Leave him alone!” The front wheel of the bike snapped apart, the screws rebounding off the asphalt. Had he not stopped the bike with his foot on the ground, his face would’ve dove straight into the road. Kevin got off the

broken bike and chased after the dragon's huge hind legs. "Stop chasing him or I'll...I'll kick you in the shin!" And kick him in the shin he did, though it didn't make any difference.

Andrew stopped running and fell to his knees. He was done running. There was nowhere left for him to go. They had him surrounded. Before him was a crowd of forest creatures and at his back was a dragon nearly five stories tall. He was finished, he thought glumly.

Kevin was so focused on the dragon that he never noticed everything else. He spun around and around, watching as the Forest Army poured into the road. They were all over, forming a circle around the dragon. Major was right. They had been ready to swarm from the start. Now it was impossible to escape.

Rooted in place, Kevin knew he wouldn't be able to run away.

Several wolves held the dogs captive, pinning them to the ground.

A cougar swaggered over to Kevin, preparing to pounce.

"No," said Kain to the cougar, "leave him alone." Kain snatched Andrew up in his hand. Grinning, he looked at Kevin and said, "You must have come to say farewell to your friend." Kain nodded, smiling to himself. "Friendship is such a beautiful thing. I once had friends long ago. It's a pity then that I couldn't die with them when I had the chance."

Looking spitefully at the dragon, Kevin said, "You can still die now."

Kain guffawed. "It just wouldn't be the same. Dying pointlessly would be a shameful thing, one full of regret. Now then, I want you to watch closely. These are the last moments of your friend's life. You should cherish such things." Kain howled in amusement. Almost like playing with a small doll, he waved Andrew around for everyone to see, and then, with one huge motion, lobbed Andrew far up into the sky.

Kevin screamed, "NO!"

"No? I am pretty good with this. You shouldn't worry about your friend falling onto the pavement." Kain opened up his huge mouth, looking as though he was going to catch Andrew with his tongue.

Held in suspense, Kevin could barely look. His eyes darted repeatedly from the dot in the sky, which he was sure was Andrew,

to the ground. However, he continued to watch, hoping for a miracle. The miracle didn't come. Andrew started to fall, wailing tragically all the way down. Kevin cringed as he heard his distant voice grow louder and louder. It was painful to know that there was nothing he could do. Andrew was about to die and there was absolutely nothing he could do.

Kevin forced himself to watch. Andrew was now coming clearly into view. In a few seconds, he would be gone, down into the pit of the stomach of an angry dragon. Kevin averted his eyes. He could no longer bear to see. He counted in his head. *Three. Two. One.* Then he heard the dragon's mouth clamp shut. Though it may sound strange, Kevin waited for some affirmation that the dragon had swallowed Andrew: a licking of the lips, a satisfied rubbing of the belly. Nothing came. Instead, Kain stomped his feet, hissing and snarling.

Scanning the sky, Kain growled angrily, "Who dares interfere?"

Wondering what was going on, Kevin looked above. A blue streak zoomed across the clouds.

Kain bent down near Kevin, glaring at him. "You knew! You brought them here, didn't you? How dare you make a fool out of me!"

Kevin shrunk back at the terrifying sight of the black-rimmed dragon eye. He wasn't sure what was going on, but since he was going to die anyway, he might as well pretend to know. "Yeah, that's right! I did bring them here! I love making a fool out of you! So what? What are you going to do about it, huh? That's what you get for messing with me!"

"Why you—Die, worm! I'll make you suffer!" Kain drew in a deep breath, sucking in all the air around. Even Kevin was being sucked towards him. Then Kain huffed out a long, gentle flame.

Shielding himself with his arms, Kevin yowled. Kain was doing this on purpose, Kevin thought, to torture him. Kain could have easily incinerated him with a powerful breath of fire, but he didn't. Kevin now realized what it felt like to be slowly roasted in an oven. He kept his eyes closed, unwilling to see himself get burnt to a crisp, though he could still see the brightness of the flame. He could feel the heat on every inch of his skin tingling and burning. He was suffocating because it was so difficult and excruciating to breathe.

Then there was a relief. The intense heat faded and he could breathe again. The light from the fire was gone. He opened his eyes. The dragon's mouth was no longer in front of him. What was before him was something even stranger, if that were possible. He was staring at the side of a huge golden wolf-like beast. Nearly half the size of the dragon, it was almost as big as a school bus. Its fur was silky smooth, shimmering with an unnatural shininess. The wolf was blocking the flames with its body. When Kain realized his fire had failed to harm them, he stopped, backing away.

The golden wolf looked kindly upon Kevin. "Don't worry about Andrew. Terminus has him and is taking him to the others."

Kevin stared into the beast's eyes. "Genesis?"

"Genesis," echoed Kain sinisterly. "So we meet at last. I've heard much about you."

Genesis turned to the dragon. "I suggest you leave peacefully."

"I've come this far," said Kain, baring his jagged teeth. "And a single Relic Knight won't be able to stop me."

"We'll see..." Genesis glanced at Kevin. "Go on, do what you must! I'll deal with Kain!"

Gesturing with his hands toward the army of animals, Kevin said, "I can't go anywhere!"

At that moment, Kevin felt something grab him by the back of the shirt. He was lifted off the ground by a few feet, and then he was watching the ground suddenly leave him, as he was jolted into the sky.

Kevin screamed, unable to tell what was happening. Moments after being in midair, he landed on the rooftop, dangling helplessly by the threads of his t-shirt. Kevin tried to look over his shoulder but couldn't see much of anything.

"Hang on," Kevin heard someone mumble. "I'll take you a bit farther."

Kevin quickly said, "Wait—ahhhh!" Before he could another word, the movement started up again. It was like a wild roller coaster ride, except much more frightening because he had no harness or belt or anything to keep him safe. Kevin was being carried over from roof to roof with great leaps. There was no time for him to catch his breath.

Every time he was thrust back into the air, he wondered if his shirt would rip or if he would fall down into the streets below. He

covered his eyes with his hands, peeking through the cracks of his fingers. It was quite disorienting to be zipping across the city without a proper seat. He was like a rag doll, swinging hopelessly up and down. One moment he was staring into the unreachable sky, then the next he was plummeting to another rooftop.

“Urp!” His hands shifted from his eyes to his mouth as he tried to hold back the urge to barf, feeling the effects of motion sickness.

Finally, after landing on one more roof, it all stopped. Released from the terrible ride, Kevin fell to the floor. He turned back to see what had carried him this far. It was an overgrown black panther, big enough to make Kevin look like a kitten, and possibly treated Kevin like one when it had carried him over the roofs by the back of his shirt.

Almost hysterical, Kevin chuckled. He made eye contact with the panther and, after examining it, said, “You must be Luna.”

“What a perceptive child,” the panther said, musing. “How did you know?”

Kevin thought for a moment, rubbing his chin. “I don’t know. You guys just have that special quality about you.”

“Anyway,” said Luna, “this is as far as I’ll take you. I must hurry back to Genesis. He cannot handle the dragon alone.”

“What about me?” Kevin protested. “I can’t reach the lab alone. I have to get there!”

“The HPC will help you with that.” Luna paused. “I mean, they need you for that. Go down this building. You’ll find them nearby. We rescued them from the hotel so you’ll have a large force under your command. I heard from Major. You have a solution, right? Good luck with that. We’ll be cheering you on.” With that said, Luna quickly left, jumping from rooftop to rooftop until she disappeared.

- Fight or Flight -

Andrew opened and closed his eyes slowly, over and over. It sure didn't look like he was inside a stomach of a dragon, unless the stomach of a dragon appeared very similar to the outside world. He looked down and found he was riding on the back of a large bird. It wasn't a hawk, but it wasn't anything he could conceivably recognize either. He studied its back, its plumage black and white. It seemed familiar.

"Are you okay?" said the giant bird.

"Uh, yeah," Andrew answered. "I think so." He ran a brisk check to make sure. His hands, feet, and head were all there. He wasn't poked full of holes either.

"Good." The bird glided through the air, scouting the city. It searched for the tallest point, which was a skyscraper with gray walls and blue windows.

Andrew hopped off the bird's back and curiously cast his gaze upon it. There was no way for it to be true, he thought. But at the same time, it was hard to deny. The bird looked like a blue-and-white budgie, except budgies were normally smaller than his hand, but this one was slightly larger than him.

"Do you not recognize me?" said the large budgie, putting a wing across his chest. "It is I, Terminus."

"It can't be," gasped Andrew. "What are you—really?"

Terminus explained, "I, along with Genesis and Luna, are Relic Knights."

Andrew raised a brow. "What are Relic Knights?"

"Peacekeepers of the animal kingdom. There are six Relic Knights in all. So as not to be biased, three are allies of humans and other three are wild. We were chosen from both sides to prevent war, though it seems we have failed."

“That still doesn’t explain why an itty-bitty parakeet turns into a giant one!”

“Oh,” said Terminus, nodding, “you were wondering about *that*. This is a special form we can invoke for emergency situations. We wield relics of great power that greatly enhance our physical abilities. But we can only use them for a short time. We have but an hour or two.”

“Then what?” Andrew wondered.

“Then we lose consciousness for about a day.”

Andrew’s jaw dropped. “That’s extreme!”

“Well, it is what you would call a desperate measure.”

“What are you waiting for?” said Andrew. “Why are you waiting here while your powers have a limited time? Shouldn’t you be out doing something?”

“Andrew,” said Terminus softly, pointing at the city with a wing, “tell me what you see.”

Andrew looked out across the city, squinting. Since he was on the highest structure in Korgen, the entire breadth of the city was in plain view. Smoke and flames rose into his sight. Then he caught a glimpse of large shadows being cast over the factories. The dragon was there and it was locked in combat with a massive yellow wolf.

The two gargantuan beasts attacked each other. The dragon kept his distance and spewed hot balls of fire from its mouth. The wolf dodged the flames, which now ended up leveling some of the buildings behind him. Then the wolf managed to get up close to the dragon and mauled on its wing. The dragon yowled and flailed its wings about, smashing the wolf into the tall chimneys of the factories.

Andrew said in awe, “What’s happening over there? It’s like a monster movie!”

“Genesis is dueling with Kain,” Terminus replied.

“That’s Genesis?” Andrew turned to Terminus worriedly. “It doesn’t look like he’s doing too well.”

“He can’t win...alone. I’m going to help him, but I need to wait for the right moment to strike. Even with the relic, my body is frail. I wouldn’t survive a single blow.”

“What’s the right moment?” asked Andrew. “Is Genesis setting up a trap or something?”

“No, that is too hard given our limited time. All I can do is wait for a moment of weakness. That is why I will stay here.” Terminus turned to Andrew, smiling. “But I wonder...what will you do?”

“Here,” said a German shepherd, holding a bag of bread in his mouth, “we brought you food and drink.”

Kevin nodded, taking a seat near a concrete wall of a grand hotel. Kevin took the bag of sliced bread, ripped it open and chomped into a slice. After tasting the first bite, he gobbled it whole and went on to devour half the bag. It didn't matter if it was bland. He was famished. “Thanks a lot.” He guzzled an entire bottle of water, wiped his mouth dry and let out a sigh of relief. “Ah, that's good. So good.”

“We await your command,” the German shepherd said, bowing.

All of the pets around him in the empty parking lot bowed down before him.

“Um.” Kevin looked confused. “What's going on here?”

The dog replied, “You are our only hope. Because of your perseverance we have hope. It would mean a lot to us if you could save our masters. We're ready to go with you. We'll help you with whatever you need!”

Kevin's heart felt heavy, weighed down with the burden of responsibility. He had never expected to have to bear the weight of all the lives of the world. When he first started this quest, he had low expectations. He would try to succeed, but even if he failed, it was fine because it wasn't like he had much of a chance anyway. He never thought he would feel so anxious, so nervous. This was it. He was finally given the chance to save everyone. They now had a solution and the only thing in his way was the Forest Army.

Kevin smiled. It was strange for him to be smiling at a time like this. He never used to smile in the face of adversity. He would have never smiled on the due date of a final project or research paper. But there was something about this that made him smile. It was the fact that he wasn't alone in this. He would have to face an army of wild beasts with an army of his own. It seemed a bit silly when he thought about it. But it was also kind of cool.

“You don't need to beg me to do anything.” Brimming with enthusiasm, Kevin raised his hand high. “Now rise! All of you! We'll teach these guys not to mess with us!”

All the animals stood up and shouted happily together. All the dogs barked, all the cats meowed, and all the birds shrieked. They were hollering and jumping for joy.

“That’s enough! Let’s get to work!” Kevin motioned for them to quiet down. Then he began forming a plan. He designated leaders and divided them up into several groups. He told them where to go and what to do, preparing them for the final battle.

Andrew cautiously wandered the road. He snuck around the blue mailboxes and cars, searching high and low for any sign of his friends. He saw some pigeons and squirrels around and guessed that they were probably being used as scouts by the forest animals due to their understanding of the city.

Even though Kain was busy fighting, it looked like the teens were still being hunted. Packs of wolves were scouring desperately now. Andrew was sure it was only a matter of time before he would be found. Reaching the limits of exhaustion, every step was a struggle—but even so, he trudged on.

His face became scrunched with worry over Katie’s whereabouts. She was the only one unaccounted for. Terminus had informed him that Kevin was in a safe place, but Katie was nowhere to be found.

Having heard a sound around the bend, he dove and squeezed under a car. He looked past the tires to see several pairs of paws and one pair of sneakers passing by. Summoning up his courage, Andrew inched forward to get a better view, but he still couldn’t see much. He had to get closer, but he didn’t have enough courage for that. He settled for less and began analyzing the sneakers. The sneakers were his only clue to the identity of the person in question. Andrew scratched his head. He couldn’t remember who had worn those sneakers.

But then he heard a voice say, “How much farther will you take me?”

It was Kevin’s voice. Andrew immediately recognized it.

Another voice said, “Not much farther. We’ll keep you in the building as a present for Lord Kain. He will be most pleased to see that you have given yourself up to be his first human snack.”

“There’s nothing else for me to do anyway,” said Kevin.

Andrew gasped. Kevin had actually given himself up! Andrew wondered why he would do such a thing. No, Andrew thought, Kevin would never purposely give himself up. He must have been captured. Andrew knew Kevin had to be just as tired as he was. With so many creatures looking out for them, Kevin must have gotten trapped somewhere along the way.

But there was nothing Andrew could do. Sullen, Andrew shrank back, like a turtle in its shell. He couldn't save Kevin—that much was evident. Fighting against whatever was out there would be pointless. Frowning, he watched their feet cross the street. He was now able to see more of their legs. There were several wolves around Kevin. Should he do something? Should he try to do anything? Andrew closed his eyes and buried his face in his arms. Why couldn't he do anything? He wasn't sure himself. He had an urge to go out there and rescue Kevin, but there was a nagging voice in his mind that told him he couldn't do anything. The voice was correct, Andrew decided. There was nothing he could do, but think and wait and worry.

Kevin said, "Aren't you afraid I'll escape?"

A wolf answered, "Our forces are spread out across the area. If you do manage to escape, we'll hunt you down."

"That's what I thought you'd say," said Kevin. "But you don't realize that it's the other way around." He turned around and whistled. "Everyone, come on out!"

The covers of dumpsters flinging open, a pack of dogs sprung out of the garbage and surrounded the party of wolves.

"Ambush!" A wolf tried to howl but was quickly tackled to the ground. Seeing as they were outnumbered, the other wolves decided not to resist.

Pointing at a door, Kevin ordered the dogs, "Shove them inside. I'll lock it up."

The dogs nodded and hurried the wolves into the building.

Kevin said to the dogs, "Alright. Now bring whatever wood you can find, or even garbage may have to do."

There was not much wood around, but they did bring heaps and heaps of garbage. Even though he did ask for it, Kevin grimaced, knowing that the smell would be absolutely putrid. But they didn't have much of a choice. He made the dogs rip open the garbage bags and dump the grossly messy contents all over the road in a straight

line that went from one side to the other. In doing so, they managed to build a wall of garbage nearly four feet high. Quite an impressive achievement, Kevin thought. This was something he would never do again in his life, at least he hoped not.

The nauseating smell of sweat-stained clothes, rotten meat, moldy bread and other unidentifiable gunk filled the air. Kevin retched. He tried to breathe with his mouth, but the smell somehow still registered in his brain. It stunk so much that he was sure he would remember this smell for the rest of his life.

“Bring the stuff,” Kevin told the dogs.

The dogs brought bottles of alcohol.

“This is all you found?” Kevin shot them a look of disappointment. “Better than nothing, I suppose.” He looked at the cars nearby. “Hmm, you know what? Bring me a hose and some scissors, really sharp ones. And a bucket or large can.”

The dogs scavenged through a hardware store and brought the supplies he asked for.

Kevin nodded. “This is perfect.” He grabbed the scissors and cut a length of about three feet on the rubber hose. He inspected a car, removed its gas cap and stuck one end of the hose in the gas tank. Then he took the other end of the hose and put it in his mouth. He murmured, “This is going to be disgusting.” He sucked on the hose and siphoned out gasoline, into his mouth. “Ugh, yuck,” he sputtered, putting the hose down into the bucket. The bucket quickly filled to the brim with gas. He carried the bucket over to the wall of garbage and poured the gasoline all over it.

“What are you doing?” asked Andrew suddenly.

Kevin jumped up, startled. “Andrew! Don’t sneak up on me like that!” Kevin stopped whatever he was doing and stared at Andrew. “Wait...you’re okay! I can’t believe it. You really are okay! That’s really you...right?”

Andrew said, “Yeah, it’s me. I’m okay. So what are you doing?”

“Oh, this?” Kevin revealed a huge grin. “We’re going to light this disgusting baby up!”

Andrew looked at the rotting garbage and cringed. “Why would you want to do that?”

“To keep the enemy at bay,” said Kevin, refilling the bucket again. “We’re going to try to fight our way through. Since you’re

here, mind helping me out? I could use an extra human hand.” Kevin threw a glance at a whimpering pup, “Not that you guys haven’t been helpful, but it goes without saying that I need hands—not paws—for whatever I’m doing.”

Andrew asked eagerly, “What should I do?”

“Help me form another line of garbage on the other streets and get some gas on them—”

A Rottweiler barked frantically, “They’re coming! I see them on the horizon!”

Kevin panicked. “Oh no! We wasted too much time!” He flapped his hand at the dogs. “Quick, bring me a flamethrower!”

Andrew raised his brow. “A what?”

“Oh—I mean a lighter, a torch or even a matchstick!” Kevin urgently examined Andrew’s hands. “Where’s your crossbow?”

Andrew replied, “I dropped it when I was running away from the dragon.”

“That’s too bad. Well, do whatever you can to stall them!” Kevin ran toward the hardware store. “I’ll be back! Don’t let them get past the barrier!”

Andrew did not have a good feeling about this. He looked over the wall of garbage and saw the horde of wild beasts drawing closer. The ground shook as they trampled across the city. The smaller, faster creatures were at the front, approaching with incredible speed.

“Not again! I hate this!” Andrew ducked down, placing his hands over his head. “What am I supposed to do? I can’t do anything!”

The Rottweiler came close to him and said, “Stand up and fight!”

Andrew huddled, knees wobbling. “I’m scared! How am I supposed to fight against that? I’ve never done this before!”

“We’ve never done this either,” the dog countered.

The sound of stomping grew louder. Andrew closed his eyes and covered his ears. “No, no, no! I can’t do this! I can’t!”

“That’s right,” said another voice, snickering. “After all, you’re just a wimp.”

Andrew looked up. It was Katie. She was standing next to him, holding her baseball bat by her shoulder and leaning forward with one foot on the barricade of trash. Even though her face appeared dead tired, she still had the confidence to smile.

“Ka-Katie...” Andrew stuttered, sounding ashamed.

“Get out of here. Cowards like you always get in the way,” said Katie. “You acted all tough before, but you’re still just a loser.”

“But Katie...I...”

“They’re here!” barked the Rottweiler.

“COME ON! LET’S CRUSH’EM!” Katie yelled. She hopped over the trash and all dogs followed her into battle.

The dogs rushed in first, clashing against the front lines. They were knocked back, unable to hold their ground. Then Katie jumped in and swung her bat furiously about. She was able to take down a few coyotes. One after the other, the coyotes leapt at her but Katie waved her bat around, keeping them away.

Katie glanced at the dogs for a moment as she watched them get back up. When the coyotes saw that she was distracted, they all charged at her. Katie regained her concentration and swung her bat all the way around in a full rotation, bludgeoning them to the floor.

Then the wolves came. Katie slumped over, using her bat to support herself. After flailing it around, she was too exhausted to even lift her arms. She grit her teeth, staring at the ferocious scowls of the carnivores as they raced to meet her. Gripping the bat, she straightened up, mustered all her strength and used the momentum of her hips to fling her arms once more. Her fingers slipped. The baseball bat flew into the crowd of wolves. A single wolf, ahead of the pack, jumped up on her.

“No!” Andrew picked up a metal pole, jumped across the trash, and batted the wolf away. While Andrew crouched over Katie, the dogs pushed forward to intercept the wolves. With their persistence, they managed to push the fierce beasts back several feet.

“Katie! Are you okay?” Worried, Andrew examined her face. Her eyes closed, she wasn’t responding. Andrew wasted no time to pull her over the heap of trash, out of the way of the chaotic battle.

“I’m ready!” shouted Kevin, wielding a flamethrower.

Andrew shot a mystified stare at him. “You really found a flamethrower?”

The dogs climbed back over the heap and Kevin let the flames loose. The fire roared in a loud explosion when the gasoline and alcohol ignited in a burst. The flames spread quickly over, feeding on anything it could find. The fire rose higher and higher. Even the buildings nearby started to burn, creating a massive wall of flame.

Kevin clenched his fist in triumph and exclaimed, “Yes! It worked!” Smiling, he turned around to see the others’ reactions. His smile disappeared upon seeing Andrew’s horrified look.

His eyes fixated on Kevin’s, Andrew gasped, “S-she’s asleep. Katie fell asleep...”

Kevin placed his hand on Andrew’s shoulder to comfort him. “Don’t worry. She’ll wake up soon. We’ll make sure of it.”

- Battle for Mankind -

Andrew and Kevin ran desperately from the rising flame. Andrew said, "It's a good thing Katie's being taken far away from here. That fire could probably burn down all of Korgen if left alone."

"Yeah," Kevin agreed, "I didn't really think things through. I can only hope we wake everyone up soon and get those firefighters to deal with it."

Andrew said briskly, "So what was your plan? Why make a huge fire?"

Kevin said breathlessly, "I knew we didn't stand a chance against their whole army. I decided to get caught so that they would bring me safely into the center of their forces. From here, I wanted to split their forces up—throw them in a bit of chaos. I thought a fire would do the trick."

"Even if you hold back half of their forces," said Andrew, "what do you plan to do about the rest?" Kevin looked at the dogs as a hint. Andrew raised a brow and wondered, "What is that supposed to mean?"

"You'll figure it out," said Kevin, smiling. Kevin fell silent as he gawked ahead. Another large group of forest animals were charging at them. "Here we go!"

"Here we go, where?" asked Andrew. "Are we going to rush through them?"

"To the side!" Kevin veered right rather quickly. Andrew followed him into the music store. Right at the entrance there were guitars, drums, amplifiers, sheet music and music books. Classical instruments were more toward the rear, though there were violins on display at the cashier. Kevin slammed the door shut.

"Help me hold the door," said Kevin, grabbing some of the unfortunate instruments.

“Wait,” said Andrew, “those are expensive! Who’s going to pay for this?”

“The same people who’ll pay for all the damages to the city,” Kevin replied, stacking the instruments tightly together. “The taxpayers. Hey, we’re saving their lives. They better not complain when they wake up.” He said to Andrew, “Hurry and pass me something heavier.”

The pile of instruments scattered clumsily as the door rattled. Andrew hid behind a piano. Through the main window they could see the fearsome mug of a bear as it huffed and puffed hot breath upon the glass.

“I don’t think we should be here...” Andrew searched for another door, but the door that led to the back was locked. The animals pounded fiercely against the thick glass, cracking it. “This looks bad! They’re going to break in! Why did you choose this place?”

Kevin spat back, “It’s not like I had time to weigh the options and decide!”

The window shattered, showering bits of glass all over.

Kevin pushed several display stands to the floor. “Quick, throw stuff at them!”

Andrew flung violins and violas by their heads. Kevin tried to keep the animals back by kicking drums all over the place. The entire place was soon littered with broken wood and glass. The floor looked so dangerous with the sharp shards that the animals were afraid to set foot into the store.

“Good. They can’t come in,” said Kevin.

“And we can’t go out,” snapped Andrew, folding his arms.

“Well, the important thing is that we’re safe,” Kevin replied.

“Safe...” said Andrew, frowning. “But was that the point?”

Ignoring him, Kevin looked at his watch. “Five more seconds...”

Andrew asked, “Until what?”

There was a loud rumbling. The animals at the front of the store suddenly whirled around. They looked distressed and started running away.

“The cavalry has arrived,” said Kevin with a big grin.

Andrew looked out. The coast was clear for a moment. Then he saw shadows coming up the street. An army of dogs and cats now

flooded the street. Many of the cats even rode upon the dogs, using them as steeds.

Andrew said, “So that’s what you mean by cavalry. Where did they come from? I thought there was no one left.”

“They were rounded up and imprisoned inside a hotel, but Genesis and Luna helped them escape. Now come on, let’s head out.” Kevin took some books, mostly beginner books for people learning to play instruments, and threw them all over the floor to cover up the glass. “Watch your step.” He cautiously made his way to the door and opened it with a click. The glass tinkled as he forced the gap to be large enough for them to edge through.

The street was full of cats and dogs as far as their eyes could see. Kevin decided to introduce some of the HPC to Andrew. He led him to a small group of distinguished-looking pets. “This here,” said Kevin, pointing at a German shepard, “is Rusty, my head general.” Rusty nodded proudly. Kevin petted a skinny white cat and said, “This is Sophie, one of my commanders.” Kevin quickly touched the animals on the head as he went. “And here are some Lieutenants...Buddy, Patches, Lucky, Lilly and...” Kevin stopped and stared uncertainly at a yellow collie. “I’m sorry. I forget your name every time.”

The collie said, sounding slightly annoyed, “I’m Shadow.”

“Oh,” said Kevin, clapping his hands, “yeah. Shadow.” Kevin paused. “Now that we got the pleasantries out of the way...”

Kevin paced back and forth before his army. “Before we go, I have a few words...so just hear me out.” He raised his voice so that it could be heard. “This is the final stretch. There is only one opposition. The forest. We won’t let them have their way. I will say that I agree that mankind has always caused trouble. But we can’t judge everyone as a whole. We too were born on this planet...we too are a part of this planet, for better or worse. In this next battle...I want you all to think of your family and friends. I want you to think of the humans who cared for you and loved you. All of your strength and cunning must be used to win. You’ll be fighting against those that are stronger, faster and more dangerous. However, the most important thing is willpower—desire. Your desire to protect must be greater than their desire to destroy. Your desire to love must be greater than their desire to hate. Every last speck of life in your body is for the victory. And remember, your goal is not to defeat them—

but to hang on. Fight, but run away if you have to. I will wake everyone up. And when I do, the war will end.” Kevin’s eyes were red. “I will do my best to end this war. All I need for you guys is to give me time. That is all.”

Kevin shot a solemn glance at Rusty.

Rusty nodded and barked, “Move out!”

Rusty led their formation. They marched steadily forward. The two boys stayed close behind the army because they were not expecting any more forces to come from behind.

Then came the sound of a heavy roar that echoed into the intersection as they crossed it. It was frightening and loud. But it was not a dragon’s roar, much to Kevin’s relief.

“Look over there!” a cat meowed.

Everyone looked at the cars parked ahead. A lion was standing upon the roof of a car. It hopped off the car and approached the HPC’s front line. Rusty went to meet the lion face to face. He approached the stout feline with utmost caution.

The lion said, “I come in peace. Let me speak with the leader.”

Rusty said, “You will speak with me.”

“No,” said Kevin, pushing his way through the crowd. “I will speak with him.”

Andrew tried to hold him back. “Wait! Don’t you realize how dangerous a lion is? He could kill you in a second!”

“If I don’t have the guts to face him, I can’t call myself the leader,” Kevin said. “This doesn’t look like a trap and I have faith in the others that they will protect me.”

Kevin met with lion and asked, “What do you want?”

“We want to join you,” said the lion. He motioned with his head toward an alleyway. Many zoo animals came out from the shadows: zebras, apes, gorillas, rhinos and even an elephant. “All of us want to join you.”

“Why the change of heart?” said Kevin with a hint of skepticism.

“We’re doing this for ourselves,” the lion answered. “We are far from our homes and could never hope to reach there in our lifetime without the aid of humans. Though we are angry to have been taken away from our homeland, there does not seem to be much choice for us but to stay and be cared for. We will not survive

in this land. And I'm sure Kain will not care for us. And so we ask of you, will you let us be a part of your alliance?"

Rusty whispered to Kevin, "It's too great a risk. They could turn against us."

Kevin nodded and replied, "But this is a great opportunity...if we play our cards right." He turned to the lion and said, "I will let you guys join on one condition. You guys must listen to me. Whatever I say, you must follow my instructions."

The lion hesitated but agreed. "If that is the only way..."

Kevin forced a half-hearted smile. "I'm very sorry to have to do this. And I apologize in advance."

Kevin ordered the newly formed Zoo Faction to go in front. The Zoo Faction went ahead of them into the next street, slowly marching. The HPC stayed behind. There was a large distance between the Zoo Faction and the HPC.

"They'll die out there!" said Andrew, sounding concerned. "We won't be able to support them from all the way back here!"

Kevin replied, "This is the only way to ensure that they can't backstab us."

When the Zoo faction finally reached the intersection, a horde hopped out of the shadows. Cougars piled up on the elephant, tearing at its hide; the elephant trumpeted wildly with its trunk as it was overtaken. Wolves launched an attack against the zebra, chomping down on its striped skin; the zebra tried to escape but was held down. The rhinoceros snorted and glared while locked in a stalemate with several bears. The lion tried to aid the others but was kept at bay by venomous snakes that threatened to pierce his ankles with their deadly fangs.

"We've got to help them!" Andrew wanted to run forward, but Kevin held him back.

Kevin said, "No, not yet. This could be a trap."

"A trap?" snapped Andrew, pushing Kevin aside. "I don't believe this! Look! They're getting killed out there! You expect me to just watch this? It's terrible! Katie would never let this happen!" Andrew ran to help the Zoo faction.

"Andrew, wait!" Kevin yelled. "Come back!" In his frustration and worry, Kevin clenched his teeth hard. "He chose the worst time

to be brave.” Then he growled, “Forget the plan! Everyone—CHARGE!”

The HPC forced their way through. It was pandemonium. Waves of animals crashed into one another with a loud impact as they butted heads. Rusty took a group of his toughest dogs to assist the elephant in beating the ruthless cougars away. The cougars easily defeated the dogs, slapping them away with their powerful paws. Even though the HPC outnumbered the enemy, it was a difficult battle. The bears were tough beasts and were able to swat away the dogs and cats with a single blow. However, slowly but surely, they were able to save the Zoo faction from complete annihilation. The dogs worked hard to pull the injured zoo animals toward a safer zone.

Kevin watched the fight continue. “We’ve got the upper hand here. Now if we run, we might be able to—”

“More of them coming!” barked Rusty. “Two large armies in the North and South!”

“What?” Kevin’s eyes widened. “Why does this always happen?” He threw his hand forward. “Send word to the rooftops! Launch the second phase!”

The Forest Army’s reinforcements were coming down the other streets. First came the faster creatures. They used their speed to navigate quickly through the length of the road.

On the rooftops, several monkeys opened up crates, reached in and grabbed tomatoes with their hands. Seeing that the enemy was fast approaching the main force of the HPC, the monkeys began their barrage. Hundreds of tomatoes fell from above. The monkeys threw the tomatoes with all their strength. They were rather precise with their aim, splattering the red fruits all over the faces of the Forest Army. Blotches of tomato juice stained the walls and squished tomato peels littered the floor. The animals staggered and shook their heads feverishly. They were slightly blinded by the juices in their eyes. The floor was slippery and slushy.

“I’ll take over from here,” Rusty said to Kevin. “You need to get to the lab.”

“If I split up from the main force, they’ll be suspicious,” said Kevin. “We can’t let that happen. Sneaking around will be impossible. I’ll let you take over, but first we have to get closer to the lab entrance.”

Troubled, Rusty replied, “I don’t think we can push them back far enough.”

Kevin said, “We only have a few blocks left to go. Initiate a full-scale rush now that they’re blinded. It’ll be rough—and I’m sure it’ll be very painful—but we have to do it.”

Rusty nodded uncertainly, “If that is your order.”

Rusty let out a haunting howl.

The HPC attacked the blinded forest creatures. The dogs and cats jumped up on the coyotes and foxes. They assaulted the weaker creatures first and rendered them unconscious quickly. Then they proceeded to strike the tougher beasts. The bears retaliated and knocked out a few dogs with a single wave of their arms. Even though the hulking beasts were practically blinded, they flailed wildly, attacking friend and foe.

Kevin shouted over the chaos, “Aim for their weak points! Attack their eyes if you have to! Don’t let them recover! Be relentless! ATTACK, ATTACK, ATTACK!”

Andrew watched the chaos in horror. “This is horrible...”

“I don’t like it either.” His eyes narrowing, Kevin said, “But that’s war.”

Geese and ducks flew overhead.

Reminded of their previous, and rather disgusting, encounter with birds, Kevin flung his head back and gaped. Then he ducked behind a car and watched the dots in the sky warily. The birds dropped something, though he couldn’t quite tell what it was.

“What is that?” said Andrew.

“It could be more rocks,” replied Kevin.

One of the objects fell onto the ground before them. It was a bag of water that gushed and splashed when it slammed into the ground.

“Water,” said Andrew. “They’re going to wash away all the tomatoes!”

Kevin said, “That’s not all. A plastic bag full of water can hurt from that height.”

The bags of water splattered left and right, drenching some of the animals. The streets were being washed clean of the tomato juice.

Kevin said, “This is bad. Send out the signal for the air division! Don’t let them wash it all away!”

“Yes, sir!” exclaimed Sophie, the white cat. “Caterwaul!”

The cats began making a shrill sound that made Kevin cover his ears. Andrew pointed to something flying across the rooftops. Budgies, parrots, cockatiels and canaries glided above them.

“This is Blue and I’m taking charge,” said one of the budgies proudly. “Follow my lead boys and girls. Let’s wreak some havoc!” Blue stretched out his wings and veered slightly. The other pet birds followed after him, one after the other.

“Full speed ahead,” chirped Blue. Blue beat his wings and zoomed into the flock of geese. All the pet birds copied him and engaged the geese. They flew right into the enemy birds as fast as they could.

“Two fold assault,” said Blue. “Parrots and cockatiels will attack directly. Budgies and canaries will focus on taking out the bags.”

The pet birds all replied, “Acknowledged.”

The parrots and cockatiels struck the geese at their backs, attempting to pluck the feathers off their wings. The budgies and canaries ripped the bags of water from their beaks. The ducks tried to shoo the pet birds away. The HPC’s air division fought back, going around in short circles and pecking at the enemy with their beaks whenever they saw an opportune time.

Screeches sounded through the sky. Blue glanced back. Squadrons of eagles, ravens and falcons dotted the clouds.

“Enemy reinforcements coming from the rear!” shouted Blue. “We’ve done enough damage! Everyone dive, dive!”

Blue led his band of birds down to the level of the highest city buildings. He was at the front of their formation and they branched out behind him; the mass of birds took the shape of an arrowhead.

“We can’t shake them!” shouted a canary.

A parrot screeched, “Awk! They’re closing in!”

Falcons rocketed into their formation, scattering it. The pet birds were disoriented in their panic and some accidentally flew straight into the windows as they desperately attempted to flee.

“Oh gosh,” said Andrew, gaping at the sky, “they’re not going to last!”

“I know,” said Kevin grimly. “That’s why we’re going to make the final push right now!” Kevin grabbed Andrew by the shirt and

shouted over the loud noises around them, “Follow me and keep close!”

Rusty led the way for the boys. With his band of mighty dogs, Rusty plowed through the weaker points in the Forest Army’s formation. It was like trying to break through a solid cement wall by chipping rapidly at it. There were so many animals that it was nearly impossible to simply move or push through. Rusty relentlessly tried to find cracks in the front line and bravely fought to dig deeper and deeper into the heart of the army. When they were about to make it out, Rusty encountered a wall he could not cross. Grizzly bears.

Andrew staggered back at the sight of them. “W-why are there grizzly bears?”

Rusty snarled and barked at the large bears. A grizzly bear slammed Rusty to the ground with its paw. The pack of dogs jumped all over it, snapping at its hide, but the bear easily brushed them away.

Kevin pulled Andrew back. With the frenzy behind them, the two boys had no place to escape. The bear approached them, overshadowing them as it stood on its hind legs.

“Not good,” said Kevin. “It could probably break us in two if it wanted to.”

“We’re doomed,” squealed Andrew.

While they cowered in fear, sinking down to the ground, they saw something fall upon the bear’s face. The bear swerved its head vehemently. The courageous Helios had arrived and began his assault on the bear’s scary mug. He tugged on the bear’s eyelids and tickled the inside of its nose.

“Helios!” Kevin shouted. “Watch out!”

The bear’s giant paw came out of Helios’s blind side. Helios back flipped out of the way, leaving the grizzly bear to smash its own head. Dazed, the bear twirled around once before falling and losing consciousness. Helios then hopped along the faces of the three other grizzly bears. In their confusion they swatted each other silly. When all the bears had knocked each other out, Helios climbed up Andrew’s clothes and hopped into the pocket of his pants.

“It sure took you a while,” said Kevin, crouching over to speak with the rat. “What were you doing all this time?”

“What was I doing? I was trying to find you! I’m tiny and the city is so huge!” Helios exclaimed, lifting up a foot, “I can only run so fast with these small feet of mine!”

Kevin laughed. “Good job. I think we can make it to the lab from here.”

The two boys sneaked out of the battlefield and found their way to the city park. As they suspected, the hidden entrance of the underground research facility was left unguarded. The Forest Army had no idea about this alternate door. Kevin crouched down in the grass and pushed aside a large rock, unveiling the hole beneath. As he did so, he heard a sudden rustle in the bushes. A pair of beady eyes was staring back at him. A deer had been watching them the whole time. When the deer realized it had been seen, it dashed away.

Running after it, Andrew said, “I’ll chase him down! We can’t let him report to Kain!”

Understanding the urgency of the situation, Kevin quickly descended down the tunnel into the main corridor of the facility. He treaded lightly across the floor to avoid the possibility of alerting the strange bacteria monster that lurked the halls. Then Kevin walked up to a door with a sign that had the words **New Development** and opened it. He looked inside and saw a massive warehouse full of giant machines, perhaps power generators. After Kevin entered, he tried calling the Internet on his phone.

The Internet picked up. “Kevin, is that you?”

“Yeah,” Kevin replied, “I’m here. What should I do now?”

“Hold on just a minute. I’ll be right there to greet you.” The Internet hung up.

“Huh?” Kevin wondered what that meant. Feeling rather confused, he turned off his cell and looked around the building. While he waited, a small silver ball came rolling over to him. It was Shiro, the ball-shaped robot.

“Shiro...” Kevin swallowed nervously. “Uh...it’s nice to see you again. I’m sorry about what happened the last time—”

“I’m not Shiro,” said the robot. “It’s me, FriendlyFire.”

“What?” Kevin looked shocked.

FriendlyFire replied, “I’ve taken control of the entire facility. My consciousness currently resides in...well, everything here, including this robot. Anyway, we must hurry. I’m not sure how

much longer you'll be able to stay awake. Follow me." The robot rolled quickly to a room on the far left and Kevin chased after it.

When they went inside the room, Kevin saw a strange thing upon the metal table. It looked like a large white centipede, except it didn't look organic. It was long, flat and segmented with thin needle-like claws running down both sides; at one end, seeming almost like a head, was a thick round device.

"This is it," said the white robot. "I used all the data I could find to construct this device."

"What is this?"

"The device you asked for," the white robot replied. "This is a Nervous System Interface—or NSI for short. It will attach directly into your spinal cord and brain. With this, it should be theoretically possible to force yourself awake whenever you want to."

"Cool." Kevin thought for a moment. "Wait...so I have to find someone who is asleep and plug this into them?"

"You can do that. Sure. But that will make things complicated."

"How so?"

"Well, they have to activate it themselves. If you plug it into someone and they don't want to wake up or don't know that they can wake up, then nothing will happen. Also, if they do wake up and you accidentally fall asleep, they won't be able to remove the device from their back."

Kevin groaned. "I don't get this. How is this a solution then? How am I supposed to wake up the whole world with just one device? Am I supposed to go around waking everyone up one by one?"

"I'm sorry if this does not comply with your specifications," said the robot. "This is all I could do. This is all I could come up with."

Kevin sighed. "I guess I'll just have to make the best of it."

Kevin tried calling up Andrew on his cell. The phone rang several times before Kevin finally got a response.

Kevin said into the phone, "Hey, Andrew. Get back over here. Forget the deer. The solution I got might work to wake up a few people but I need you here to help me."

There was a voice on the other end, but it did not sound like Andrew. The low, scratchy voice replied, "Andrew will not be coming back. But I will be there very soon—"

Kevin immediately hung up, looked apprehensively at the phone and turned it off.

“Who was that? Was that Kain? This is really bad. He’s coming! I have no time!” Kevin turned to the robot and said quickly, “Bring me to the nearest person! There should still be some people in here! I remember seeing the test subjects. I could use them. I could try to wake them up before Kain arrives. I could...” Kevin slumped to the floor and held his head in grief. “Who am I kidding? It’s over. Tom. Katie. Andrew. All gone. I’m the only one left. And that place with the test subjects, it probably has that bacteria monster inside. There’s nothing more I can do. This stupid device will take forever to use. Even if I can save some people, what’s the point? What’s the point if I can’t save everyone? Will they want to be saved if the others around them die anyway?” Kevin closed his eyes.

“Forget this. I’m done.”

- Paradise -

Kevin opened his eyes. Next thing he knew, he was sitting on an empty wooden barge in the middle of the crystal-clear ocean. The climate appeared tropical in nature, rather bright and warm. Looking across the waves, he marveled at how beautiful, crisp and blue the water was. There were large islands, hundreds of them, dotting the ocean as far as he could see.

The barge didn't seem to have a motor or any method of propulsion. Nothing was towing it either. It merely drifted steadily toward the shore of the nearest island.

Initially, he thought he was alone on the barge. A second glance around made him realize otherwise. A man in dark robes sat opposite him.

The man said, "Ah, someone has arrived. It's been a while since a person has come."

Kevin studied the man carefully and said, "What is this place? Was I warped to the Caribbean sea or something?"

The man replied, "This is no longer the world as you know it."

"Then...am I dead?"

"No, no," the man said, laughing, "you are not dead...yet."

Kevin tried to collect his thoughts. "Then this is a dream?"

"You can say that," said the man, chuckling. "Yes. A dream."

"That's right...I fell asleep!" Kevin suddenly remembered what had happened. "And I couldn't even do anything. I-I failed! Everyone's going to die..." He clenched his fist and slowly brought it to his face, tears dripping lightly over his knuckles. "All that was for nothing!" He punched the deck of the barge. "So...that's it? I just sit here and wait to die?"

The man shook his head. "No. This is not where you'll die. Not on this boat. But on the island." He pointed to the beach. "That shall be your final resting place."

“No! I won’t believe it!” Kevin stood up, walked to the man and lifted him up forcefully by the robes. “Tell me how to get out of here!”

“Why should I?” replied the man darkly.

Kevin thought for a second and said whatever came to mind.

“Because...of the goodness of your heart...”

“There is no goodness in the world.” The man smiled widely.

“You’re lying! What have I fought for? I fought for good!”

“Look deep into your heart and realize, foolish child.” The man disappeared in a trail of smoke and said in an echoing voice, “You fought for yourself...”

“Hey,” Kevin said, scanning the area frantically, “where’d you go? Come back here!”

There was no reply. The man wouldn’t come back, he suspected. Kevin slouched into a seat and sullenly watched the scenery pass him by, the world reflecting perfectly in his eyes. His boat hit the shore in a matter of minutes. Kevin climbed out, sloshing his feet out of the shallows and onto the beach. After he left the boat, the boat suddenly vanished. Kevin shrugged. It wasn’t of much use anyway, he thought.

The sun traveled quickly over the sky, and before he knew it, it was almost time for the sun to set. The way that everything glowed in a blurry haze was quite pretty to look at. There was an undeniable beauty to the place. Red, blue and green seashells protruded out of the golden sand. The palm trees swayed back and forth in the wind. Ripe coconuts littered the beach. As he looked past the trees, he saw the remains of simple huts.

Kevin heaved a sigh. “At least it’s a nice place.” He strolled his way into the village. “I could get used to this.”

“What are you doing?” said a hushed voice. “Get inside.”

“Huh?” Kevin had a quizzical expression as he glanced around. “Who said that?”

A person came bolting out of the trees and grabbed Kevin from behind. Kevin tried to shout, but someone else showed up, clapping a hand over his mouth. Another person grabbed Kevin by the legs. Together, the three strangers carried him off into a hut. They shut the door behind them. Kevin was tossed to the ground and released.

Kevin looked up in the dark building. The only source of light was the moonlight that seeped through the cracked roof. It took him

a moment to finally see everything around him. Several men and women, dressed in torn rags, were crouching along the walls. Some were busy nailing wooden planks along the doors and windows. He stared at one of the inhabitants and they stared back, showing only a look of despair.

Kevin got up and slowly said, “Who are you people? What do you want with me?”

“We want nothing to do with you,” replied a woman. “You almost killed us!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The night hour approaches.”

“Night hour? I...don’t understand.”

The woman snapped, “You walked outside during the night hour! What’s there to understand? It’s common sense!”

Kevin shook his head, looking thoroughly perplexed. “I have no idea what is going on. What is the night hour? Why are you all hiding around? What is this place?”

The woman stared blankly at Kevin. “Don’t tell me...you just arrived...”

“Just arrived?” Kevin examined the woman with scrutiny. “Yeah, I did, if you can call it that. I just fell asleep a moment ago.”

The woman ran up to Kevin and grabbed him by the shoulders. Their eyes met and they stared at each other for a while. Kevin’s eyes widened slowly as he suddenly recognized her.

“Mom? Is that you?”

A look of shock and joy on her face, his mother suddenly began to laugh and shed tears at the same time. “Yes! Yes, Kevin! It’s me!” They hugged. “I missed you so much! I was so worried! I haven’t seen you for such a long time!”

Kevin broke away from the embrace and said, “Where’s dad? Is he here too?”

Her eyes suddenly fell with her face as she took in his words. “Kevin, listen to me...”

Looking concerned, he said, “What’s wrong?”

“You may have realized it by now...but this isn’t an ordinary dream.”

Kevin nodded. “Yeah, this is a dream with everyone, right? I never expected to actually see you—”

“No,” said his mother gravely. “This isn’t our dream. This is our *nightmare*.” She bit her lip. “Your father, he was taken away.”

“Taken away?” Kevin suddenly looked fierce and growled, “By who?”

“Not who,” his mother continued, “but what. Our days here are short. There are eleven hours of daylight...then the twelfth hour is the night hour. Darkness falls and—” Before she finished speaking, a loud scream pierced the silence. Kevin exchanged glances with his mother.

His mother put her finger to her lips, shushing him. “Go help block the door.”

Everyone suddenly fell silent and motionless, undoubtedly hiding from something.

Kevin walked to the door and whispered to a man, “What should I do?”

“Push up against the door,” the man replied in a quiet voice. “And don’t look out.”

As Kevin leaned against the door, he could hear the sounds of screams much more clearly. It wasn’t a regular scream. It clicked and echoed shrilly. Its tone ran high and low, sounding distorted. He couldn’t help but wonder what was happening outside. His curiosity got the best of him and he decided a small peek through a tiny, little crack on the door wouldn’t matter.

But the moment he looked out, he could not tear his eyes away. “What...is that?” Kevin stared at a strange light hovering in the darkness.

“You idiot!” The man pushed Kevin away. “I told you not to look!”

Crash! The door burst inward with one loud explosion, wood chips flying all over the hut. Kevin ducked and shielded his face from the scattering debris. Then he looked up and saw the gaping hole in the wall where the door once was.

Everyone screamed as a thick black mass emerged from the hole. The giant black mass was in the shape of a hand. It reached into the hut, snatching up a few people, including Kevin’s mother, with its broad grip, and then dragged them out.

“MOM!” Kevin chased after it, but a man tried to hold him back.

“Don’t go,” said the man. “It’s over for them. There’s nothing you can do...now that the Coveits have them. Save yourself, kid. You’ll be powerless against them!”

“I’ll be the judge of that! Get off me!” Kevin shoved the man aside and ran out.

Once he made it outside, Kevin froze in terror. A hideous black monster, the likes of which he had never seen before, trudged through broken homes. The monster was as large as a two-story house. Though it was hard to see because of its black nature, he could make out the murky silhouette of the beast. Its stalwart body, enormous tusks and stout snout bore resemblance to a warthog. But its thick arms, and even thicker forearms, were like that of a gorilla. The most distinguishing feature was the eyes, which were bright blue, as bright as the high beams of a car and nearly as blinding.

“What is that thing?” uttered Kevin. “Coveits? What the heck is a Coveit? Is that even a word?” He shook his head feverishly. “No, I can’t waste time. I have to help them!” Kevin glanced around the ground and saw a wooden plank on the ground. He stooped down and grabbed it. Holding it in his arms, he charged the Coveit. The Coveit ignored him.

“Let them go!” Kevin slammed the flat wood against the black wrist. The wood cleanly snapped in two on contact. The Coveit opened its mouth. Kevin covered his ears, thinking it was going to emit another one of those eerie screams. It didn’t. Instead, the Coveit took its large fistful of people and shoved it into his mouth, engulfing everyone with one bite.

“Mom? No...no...” Kevin lost his voice for a moment as his jaw dropped and his eyes widened. His voice came back in full force. “NO, NO, NO!”

He tried ramming the broken wood into the belly of the beast, but it became jammed into its thick gooey skin and started to get swallowed up by it. Unable to find the words to say, he merely cried out, “CRAP! YOU EVIL—MESSED UP—SPIT THEM OUT OR DIE!” Kevin then furiously punched the Coveit in the stomach. His fist got stuck in its skin, which was gooey like tar. Frightened, Kevin hastily pulled his hand out. “What is this thing? I can’t even hurt it!”

“Run away, Kevin!” the voice of his mother echoed in his mind. “Run away! There’s nothing you can do! Save yourself!”

“Why is everyone saying that? I don’t want to save myself—I want to save everyone else. I don’t want to run...I hate running away...I hate losing...I hate being so helpless...” He stared at the ground, his fists clenched. “What do I do? What can I do?”

You can die...

A black hand overshadowed Kevin and grabbed hold of him. The hand tightly squeezed him, suffocating him. Kevin wheezed in the excruciating pain. It felt like all the air in his body was forced out from his lips as the black fingers crushed his ribs. No longer able to speak or think, his thoughts were solely locked on the torment and how he wanted it to end. No matter how tight the grip had gotten, the pain would never end. He would never die.

Then he was free of the pain. The monster loosened the grip. He rolled along the palm, down the fingers and into the mouth. As he was tossed back and forth, he was slightly comforted by the fact that the Coveit had no teeth. But it did have a fat slimy tongue, which he bounced gently upon on his trip down the throat. He tumbled down a dark tunnel with slick walls and landed on someone. He suspected he was now inside the stomach of the Coveit, the thought of which did not sit well with him. Everyone that the Coveit had swallowed was now packed into the pit of the stomach. Though he couldn’t see much, it felt like the monster was finally full.

“Mom!” Kevin shouted over the cries and whimpers of the people. “Are you in here?” He heard many muffled voices in reply. He attempted to squirm around the cluttered heap of bodies, but everyone was packed in too tight for him to move. Suddenly, the whole stomach shook and Kevin said, “W-what’s going on here?”

“We’re being taken to center of the island,” a man next to him replied. “There’s a hole at the center, which you can see during the day. That’s where the Coveits come out when the darkness falls and that’s where they return before the daylight comes.”

“What do you think will happen to us?”

He shrugged. “No one has ever returned after being swallowed by a Coveit.”

Kevin gulped.

Meanwhile, all the Coveits gathered at the hole, which was about one hundred yards wide and unfathomably deep. There were over sixty Coveits in total and their bellies were all full. One after the other, they jumped into the deep hole. After falling for several

minutes, they finally landed on the bottom with a great thud. The light of the moon could not penetrate the complete blackness. In this place so dark and empty the only visible thing was the blue light of their eyes. Their bright eyes swept across the room like strobe lights. There was a glow somewhere off in the distance. All the Coveits lumbered toward the glow. Then the glow brightened and a vast room opened up. In this new room the black monsters began coughing. Their coughs started slight at first, then turned into a much louder hacking. BLEARGH—the beasts chucked out wads of people, almost like a cat throwing up hairballs. Since Kevin was last to be swallowed, he was first to be barfed out. He hit the solid floor and, groaning with aches and pains, got to his feet. Then Kevin looked up.

It was a strange sight, both amazing and terrifying. Surrounded in this massive room of rock and dirt was a glowing structure. The structure was like a frame consisting of red, blue and green vein-like wires. It was in the shape of a tree and was incredibly large, much taller and wider than any skyscraper he had ever seen. In the heart of the wiry structure was a gleaming, surging yellow light that flowed like a mighty river upwards from the base of the tree to the high branches. It really was like a tree, Kevin thought, from the trunk to the dark-colored leaves; there was even the inclusion of large fruit-like eggs that hung upon the branches.

“What is this?” a terrified man shouted. “I’m getting out of here!” He ran away from the tree, only to end up running into a Coveit. The man bounced off the large leg and tumbled to the ground. Before he could run away again, the Coveit grabbed him and tossed him into the tree trunk. Kevin kept his gaze locked onto the man as the man flew into the yellow light. When he came into contact with the mysterious beam, his body vaporized into white sparkles, following the flow of the surge. The sparkles reached a low branch and seeped into the branch. Then, as Kevin watched intently, an egg-like fruit emerged. The weight of the newly formed fruit caused the low branch to bend lower, giving Kevin a better look at it. He could see through the crystal shell of the fruit and saw the man inside, the same man who had just been thrown into the tree, curled up in a fetal position, silent and motionless.

What the heck was that? Kevin was sure everyone in the room had the same thought in their minds, but everyone was absolutely

speechless. They didn't struggle. They didn't care. With the Coveits fenced around them, the people had no way of escape. They were powerless in this world—absolutely powerless. And they accepted that. Slowly, sullenly, the people walked into the tree, resigned to their inevitable fate. One by one, as the people touched the yellow beam of light, they burst into white sparkles and flew up the tree, carried by the powerful flow. One by one, they seeped into the branches and emerged as fruits.

“So this must be where everyone is at...” Kevin said, musing. “Tom...Andrew...Katie. They might all be in this tree. I wonder if I can see them if I go in there.”

Surrounded by Coveits on all sides, Kevin was the only one remaining. He took a deep breath and walked up to the light. Hesitant, he stood there, his hands raised, afraid to touch it. Suddenly, Kevin felt a burst of thought flow into his mind. It was like he could hear thousands of voices talking all at once. They weren't screaming—not all of them. Some were scared, some were calm and others were angry. Then came a silence. During this serenity, Kevin absorbed all the thoughts. A strange, indescribable feeling ran across his body. Something was happening to him. He wasn't sure what.

“Kevin!” A voice echoed in the darkness. “Can you hear me?”

Looking curious, Kevin twirled around. “Who's there?”

“Do you hear me, Kevin? Don't bother replying. I probably won't be able to hear you. But I really hope that you can hear me! It's me—Tom! I'm sorry I abandoned you guys. I pretended to be asleep. I was scared of what was happening and thought I could possibly escape myself. But now I'm back. I'm also sorry for making a weird voice when I answered Andrew's cell. It's a bad joke...I know. He's okay, in case you're wondering. Anyway, you know that device? I plugged it into you. You should be able to wake up now, right? Please try!”

“Tom saves the day.” Kevin grinned. “So I should have it plugged into me now, huh? That's just perfect. No wonder my mind feels...enlightened. But now I know the cold hard truth. I heard it from everyone. The device won't work on those who don't want to wake up. And waking up alone is pointless.” Kevin placed his hand into the light. “Time to see what I can do.”

“Did it work?” Tom was crouched on the floor by Kevin’s body. Helios checked Kevin’s eyes, which seemed to be moving. “He’s not really looking at me when I pry his eyes open.”

The computer speakers spoke. “Put him on the table. I’ll run a quick scan.”

Tom heaved Kevin over his shoulder and placed him on the high metal table. A large mechanical eye extended from a hole in the ceiling and gazed down upon Kevin.

“Move aside,” said the computer, “I need to put a barrier up during the scan.”

Tom nodded and stepped back. Four thick sheets of a glassy material shot up from the floor and surrounded Kevin like a box, completely blocking him from view. Tom noticed a fleeting flash of light inside. Then the glass retracted.

“How is he?” asked Tom.

The computer replied, “His brain waves are strange. It almost gives off the impression that he is half awake and half asleep.”

Helios said, “That’s not good, is it? Is the device not working?”

“The NSI is perfect,” the computer snapped, sounding insulted by Helios’s remark. “I’m not sure what could be the problem, but I’m definitely sure that it has nothing to do with the quality of my work.”

Tom fell silent, contemplating over the problem.

“Tom...” A quiet voice broke the silence.

Tom turned to Helios. “Did you say something?” Helios shook his head.

The computer said, “That is Kevin’s voice.”

“Kevin?” Tom walked over to Kevin’s comatose body. “Kevin? Are you awake?”

“Tom...” Kevin’s lips moved slightly as he uttered words. “Not awake...”

Tom swallowed. “Are you trying to freak me out here? Because it’s really working well.”

“I...tell you...thing...”

“What? What are you saying?” Tom bent over, putting his ear to Kevin’s lips, so he can hear the mouthed words more clearly.

Tom heard Kevin whisper, “I understand now. The people are trapped here. Even if we tell them that they can wake up, they won’t listen. They lack the will to come back to reality. I’m going to try to

cause a ripple effect. This device is perfect for what I need to do. I now have some control over the dream. All I ask is that you give me more time. I'm going to explore this dream world and see if I can convince everyone to try to wake up. If they all try together, we might be able to get somewhere."

Tom said to Kevin's ear, "Okay. I got your message."

"Tom," said the computer, "take a look at this." The computer screen turned on and showed thousands of red dots moving toward a central green dot. "A swarm of animals is approaching our position. They are most likely hostile. You can confirm it yourself, if you like." The screen changed into a camera view showing hundreds of wolves, bears, and cougars racing down the street.

Tom scratched his chin. "They're here. Do you have anything that will hold the Forest Army back? We have to protect Kevin for as long as possible."

"This research facility doesn't have much that can help you in that endeavor."

Helios said, "We'll just have to do this the hard way. There are only two ways in and out of this place. If we direct our remaining forces to these bottlenecks and barricade it, we should have no problem keeping them out for a while."

Tom nodded and looked at Kevin. "I just hope we can hold them off long enough."

- No Future -

Kevin floated in a suffocating darkness, drifting inside the massive tree trunk. His body was no longer a body. He gazed at his hands. All he could see was nothing more than an outline of soft light.

“Whoa,” he said. “This is some seriously trippy stuff.”

As his eyes adjusted, he noticed strange white strings all around him. He hadn’t noticed it before because it was too dark, but there were millions of them drifting about. These long strings twisted and spun like squirmy worms. Frightened, Kevin flailed his arms and legs. His panic vanished when he finally understood that the strings were harmless.

“What are they?” Bewildered, Kevin stretched out his hand and touched one of the strings. As he did so, hundreds of thoughts flooded into his mind. Flinching, he pulled his hand back. “It’s like a connection...to someone’s mind.”

Kevin reached out his hand into the thick bundles of thin strings. As he ran his hands through them, he could probe through the minds of many. He pushed them aside like rolling curtains, searching for a mind that contained thoughts of him. After digging through the strings for a while, he found one. Kevin wasn’t sure whose it was, but there was only one way to find out. He grabbed the string, held on tightly and tugged on it. The one string started reeling upwards, pulling Kevin through the sea of strings. It was going so fast that Kevin’s natural reaction was to scream. Soaring up the inside of the tree, he was dangling around the darkness like a fish on a hook.

Where is this thing taking me? Kevin wondered. Then he started to see weird things above him. There were desks and chairs and cars and houses, all of them just floating in midair. Kevin kicked

his feet to sway and dodge the dangerous objects. Even if it weren't real, there was the possibility of getting knocked off the string.

After seeing more flashes of light, he came to a sudden stop—or at least that was what he wished for at the moment. In truth though, he was still moving after the darkness was long gone. Kevin was now plummeting from the sunny sky toward the green earth. He decided to call it skydiving without a parachute, hoping it would at least evoke a happier image. However, if skydiving without a parachute doesn't sound fun, it certainly didn't feel fun to Kevin, no matter what he called it. Kevin was already tired of screaming his lungs out. Now, his mouth agape, he simply stared at the rapidly enlarging plot of land below him. Kevin took this time, during his mental state of shock, to recall what he had learned in art class all those years ago. Perspective. It was a simple enough concept. The land wasn't getting larger—it was simply getting closer.

Boom! Kevin slammed into the earth at full force. His vision went entirely black for a few seconds. Grunting, Kevin got to his feet. He looked to his left and right and saw that he had ended up forming a large crater. The landscape as far as he could see was completely decimated. Did he do that? He wasn't sure.

Dusting himself off, Kevin glanced curiously around. “That’s weird. This doesn’t look like the inside of the tree anymore. Where am I?”

Someone shouted out to him, “Hey, over here!”

Kevin turned around and saw a person, the upper half of his body sticking out from the dirt. Kevin met up with the man. It was a young man and looked about a few years older than him. He was dressed in rags and stood out of a large hole carved out of the surface.

“Get inside,” the man said. “It’s not safe out there.” The man invited Kevin into his underground home.

It was quite an amazing underground shelter, Kevin thought. It was well furnished, full of beautiful paintings and extravagant sculptures and seemed to have everything a person would ever need or want.

“What’s going on here?” said Kevin. “Where am I?”

The man replied, “You don’t know? This place used to be called Korgen. I still call it Korgen. But it used to be a large city, full of many people.”

“This is Korgen?” Kevin looked shocked. “It wasn’t a fire that burned everything down, was it?” Kevin suddenly remembered the fire he had let loose on the streets of Korgen.

“No,” said the man, “it was the war that did this place in.”

“The war?” Kevin scratched his chin. “The war between the Forest Army and the HPC?”

“What? Forest Army? I’m talking about the war against the aliens! You know—the one that destroyed half of the Earth! The one that mankind lost.”

“Aliens?” Kevin raised a brow. “When was the last time you saw a doctor?”

“I don’t remember. We have no more doctors. All of them were taken by the aliens.”

“Okaaay,” said Kevin skeptically. “Well then, I really have to go now. I’ve got people to see and things to do.”

“No!” The man took hold of Kevin’s leg. “Don’t be stupid! If you go out there, the aliens will find you! You don’t stand a chance!”

“I’d rather take my chances with imaginary aliens than sit here with a psycho!” Kevin kicked the man aside and climbed the ladder out of the hole. “Aliens,” he muttered. “That guy’s insane.”

Kevin took a few steps outside. Looking at the ground, he froze. Massive shadows were cast along the ground, covering the land far and wide in darkness. Kevin’s sight slowly rose to the sky. That was when he saw it. There were numerous rectangular objects hovering in the sky. Each of these enormous objects had bright glowing lights that acted like spotlights, throwing their lights upon the ground in brilliant green beams. It looked as though these flying objects were looking for something.

In a panic, Kevin ran back toward the underground shelter. A bright red ball of light fell from the sky and landed inside the shelter before Kevin could get to it. The whole shelter burst in one bright explosion of heat and fire.

Kevin tripped over his own feet as he walked backwards and fell. A green light came over him. Kevin looked down and saw that his legs and feet were leaving the ground. He was steadily being pulled up into the sky!

Kevin gulped loudly and said, “Okay. All right. I have to get my thoughts together. Think logically. Logically. I’m logical.” He

smacked himself in the forehead. “That’s right! I forgot! I was dreaming. Now everything makes sense. This isn’t time travel. This isn’t an alien invasion. This is just a dream!” He started laughing nervously. “That’s right...this should be okay...I think.”

Then Kevin looked up and trembled at the sight of the massive spacecraft. Though he tried to assure himself with words that everything would be okay, the image was still real enough to him to cause fear in his heart. All his assurance seemed to melt away as he stared into the light above.

“Hold it right there!” said a bellowing voice.

Kevin swung around in the air. In the distance Kevin saw something headed right for him. It was hard for him to tell what the object was, but Kevin did not want to stick around to find out. He moved his body back and forth, attempting to fall out of the beam that was pulling him up. Nothing he did helped. He was waving his arms and kicking his legs as hard as he could, but he couldn’t break free.

Kevin stared as the flying object drew nearer and nearer. When it was about to hit him, he winced and curled up. At the last second, Kevin closed his eyes. Everything went dark. There was only silence. Nothing happened. Kevin waited for a moment and then opened his eyes. A man hovered before him with his arms crossed. It was a super hero as far as Kevin could tell. The hero had on a cape and tights. His huge muscles were constantly bulging, as though the hero had no control over it. Very stereotypical and weird, thought Kevin. But something bugged Kevin. The face seemed familiar. It was definitely someone he knew.

“Here, let me help you,” said the super hero with his deep, masculine voice.

Then the hero flew up to the spacecraft and punched it. Like a delayed reaction, a second later the spacecraft was launched away by the hero’s fist and it crash-landed far into the horizon, forming a massive mushroom cloud that loomed in the distance. It all happened so fast that Kevin thought his vision was fast-forwarding. However, because the spaceship was no longer around to pull him up, Kevin started to fall. The super hero grabbed hold of Kevin and put him on the ground.

“Are you okay?” the hero asked.

Looking confused, Kevin nodded slowly.

“Good.”

The hero then flew up to the clouds. He glared at the remaining spacecraft. The hero opened his mouth and sucked up copious amounts of air, his mouth acting as a powerful vacuum. He sucked up so much air that the spaceships were being rapidly sucked to him. Then, when a ship was near, he would punch it down to the ground, causing an explosion. The super hero did this for nearly twenty minutes until all of the spacecraft were knocked out of the sky and the earth was completely riddled with craters.

Kevin watched the whole battle. Scratching his cheek, he wondered why the hero wasted so much time. Kevin was sure that, with his speed, the hero could simply fly around and knock all of the ships out of the sky in seconds.

The super hero dove and landed in front of Kevin.

“Who are you supposed to be?” asked Kevin.

The super hero stuck out his massive chest, put his hands on his hips, and said proudly, “I am Super Andrew, at your service.”

At his words, Kevin began laughing uncontrollably. He stopped for a moment to say, “S-Super A-Andrew?” And then he continued his fit of laughter. He laughed heavily for a long time. He was laughing so hard that he fell to the ground and rolled around, trying hard to catch his breath because he couldn’t breathe.

“What’s so funny?” said Super Andrew.

After Kevin finally managed to stop his laughter, he stood back up, wiping the tears from his eyes, and said, “Andrew! That costume is horrible!”

“It appears you are mistaken, sir,” said Super Andrew. “My name is not Andrew. I am Super Andrew.”

“What?” Kevin snapped, “Stop playing around! We’ve got enough trouble as it is!”

Super Andrew blinked. “You act as though you know me.”

“That’s because I do know you!” Kevin gestured to himself. “Are you kidding? After all we’ve been through, you can’t even remember me? I’m Kevin!”

Super Andrew rubbed his chin as he studied him. “You don’t look familiar.”

Kevin shouted, “We’ve been through life and death together! Remember the time when I drove the car and hit a street sign, even though I was aiming for the trashcan on the other side? Or do you

remember when we stayed in the movie theater and, after watching ten films in a row, the projector caught on fire and Tom tried to put it out with buttered popcorn but you insisted we use a fire extinguisher? Can't you remember when we tackled the purple mist or when I chased after the dragon to help you? Can't you remember anything?"

His face scrunched with pain, Super Andrew fell to his knees, his palms pushing against his temples. "Kevin...Kevin...no...I know you...but I don't want to...I don't want to go..."

Out of concern, Kevin knelt next to him, patting him on the back. "Are you okay?"

"I'm Super Andrew...I can't go back to being Andrew..."

"Why not? What's wrong with just being Andrew?"

Andrew looked at Kevin through his red teary eyes. "Andrew is weak! Andrew is useless! Andrew can't do anything! But I...in this world...in this place...I can do anything! I can help people. I can beat up villains. But when I'm just Andrew...I can't do anything.

"A few years ago, my dad died in a car accident. I felt so powerless. I always imagined back to that time, thinking, what if I could've saved him? What if I weren't just a powerless little kid? What if I could stop time, or move at the speed of light? I could solve all my problems. I wouldn't be alone. I wouldn't be picked on at school. I wouldn't be so pathetic. I'd be confident. I'd be happier."

"I'm sorry, Andrew, to hear that," said Kevin solemnly. "But this place isn't real. You think you can do everything here, but the truth is that everything you do here will never amount to anything. When you're awake, when you're alive...that's what matters! And don't forget. Your dad may be gone, but your mom is still out there. And she's dying because you're wasting your time here!

"Even superheroes still have problems! The problem is not what you don't have. The problem is you don't understand what you do have. You think you're weak? You might be. But I don't care about that. That meant nothing through our journey together. Did you see how far we got? We were so close to saving the world. And we're even closer now to saving it than ever before!"

Kevin paused to think for a moment. "Look. I understand that you want this dream to be real. But it will never be real. Don't believe in what you want to believe in. Believe in what's real—what's truth. You know the truth...but you need to accept it."

At that moment, Andrew stood back up. His body shrank back to normal. His superhero costume tore right off. He was looking like his old self again. "I'm sorry for the trouble I caused. You're right. I can't believe how stupid I was to think I could just live a lie...."

Kevin smiled. "Don't be sorry. You're not the only one to make that mistake. Look at the whole world!" He placed his hand on Andrew's head. "Now, close your eyes. I'm going to open your mind. After I do this, you'll have more power in this dream world. Then we'll split up. I want you to go and help others. Show them reality. We need a chain reaction. The more people we help, the easier it'll be to break this Dream Wave."

"Have you had enough?" Gasping, Genesis struggled to stand. The mighty power of transformation had left him. His body was once again that of a dog's, frail and feeble compared to the dragon before him.

"You still have the courage to stand before me?" hissed Kain wearily. The dragon licked the wounds on his bloody wing. "I must commend you. You were a worthy opponent."

Kain took steps toward the yellow Labrador, and as he did so, Genesis barked at the lizard as loud as he could in his last act of defiance. Kain lunged his head forward, stretching his neck all the way out. Genesis's legs succumbed to the exhaustion and he tottered over. Lying by the side of the road, Genesis winced and averted his eyes, believing that he was as good as dead.

Then the earth shook violently. The sound of a loud impact reverberated off the buildings and walls. Kain cried out in a loud, bone-rattling howl.

Genesis glanced up. He saw a part of Kain's massive neck on the road. Kain's head, however, had been smashed into a gaping hole in the pavement. Genesis scanned above. The figure of a huge bird remained suspended in the air. Terminus had finally arrived.

Terminus screeched spiritedly, "I did it! The dragon is finished! Did you see that, Genesis? One clean blow to the back of the head! This will be a tale to remember!" Terminus landed next to Genesis and slapped the dog on the back. "Good work, old friend! Now you deserve some rest. But first, we'll need to treat those wounds. Perhaps—"

His eyes widening, Genesis barked, "Behind you!"

Terminus twisted his head all the way around, only to catch a glimpse of a large log-like object swinging at him. It was the dragon's tail. *Bam!* Before he could even flap his wings to take flight, he was pelted away with a powerful blow, launched right into the window of a tall office building. From the shattered glass, shards fell like sparkling rain.

“Terminus!” Genesis shouted. “No...”

He gazed at the dragon's body. Though Kain's head was still firmly in the ground, his tail was swinging back and forth. Kain planted his feet on the street and aggressively yanked his head out of the crater.

Kain rubbed his head and groaned, “That was surprising. It's a good thing my skull is hard.” His cold eyes wandered across the scene before focusing solely on Genesis. “Now then, where were we?” He fell silent for a moment. Then he swallowed. His lips parted broadly, unveiling the horrifying set of teeth. “Ah, yes,” he said, licking his lips, “I remember. The sweet taste of revenge.”

Everything was black. The noise of muffled, friendly chatter echoed. The air felt familiar and comfortable. Andrew opened his eyes. It was still dark. Then he noticed he was staring at something really close. He lifted his head and light flooded into his pupils, allowing him to see everything around.

Andrew was in the front row of his history class. His fellow classmates were bunched together in groups, sitting on desks and chatting amongst themselves. Since his desk was right by the window, he turned his head left to look outside. The sunlight was quite bright. He checked his watch. It was 2:35. In a few minutes school would be over. Andrew rubbed his eyes and stared blankly at his desk. There were a few drops of water where his face had been. Drool, he thought. Embarrassed, Andrew snuck a few stealthy glances left and right before quickly drying the desk with his shirt.

“Hey Dorky!” A few boys walked up to his desk. “Dorky the pig! How’s it shaking?” It was Freddie, the local bully, and his gang of miscreants.

Andrew frowned. “I don’t snort anymore.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Freddie sneered. “Once a Dorky pig, always a Dorky pig. And it’s not just about snorting. It’s about gunk. Like that gunk I saw you wiping off your desk. You had one great big loogie. It was all green and sliiiiimy.”

“It wasn’t phlegm,” Andrew replied. “Are you really in middle school? Who talks about such things?”

“People like me. Normal people,” Freddie said snidely. He ran his fingers violently across Andrew’s hair. “But apparently, not weirdos like you with your nasty, greasy hair and your ugly glasses.”

“Don’t touch me.” Andrew pushed his hand away.

“Or you’ll what? Loogie all over me?”

“I’ll tell the teacher on you,” Andrew started to get up from his seat, but Freddie pushed him back down.

“The teacher?” Freddie laughed. “He can’t and won’t do anything!” He spun around and asked his friends, “Did anyone even see me touch this creep?”

All of Freddie’s friends shook their heads in reply, snickering.

“See?” Freddie turned back to Andrew and smiled deviously. “No one saw anything. And who would believe you, huh? Why would I,” Freddie flicked Andrew’s hair back with his fingers, “want to touch you, anyway? I wouldn’t.” Freddie snatched up the backpack on the floor. “Now your book bag, on the other hand, might be worth touching.” He opened up the bag and searched inside.

“Stop that,” said Andrew slowly. “Give it back.”

“Give it back,” Freddie mimicked Andrew’s voice in a squeaky tone. Then he spat in his normal voice, “Are you sure you’re in middle school? Because you sound like a little baby.” Freddie felt a hand rest on his shoulder. He glanced back and saw Kevin glaring at him. “Hmm? What’s your problem?”

“You’re my problem.” Kevin tightened his grip on his shoulder.

Freddie shrieked at the sudden sharp pain and pulled away. “Wha-what? You want to mess with me?”

“No,” said Kevin, gesturing with his thumb over his shoulder, “but my friend Brad wants to...if you’re up to it.”

Freddie looked past Kevin to see Brad leaning by the doorframe, waving playfully back at him with a bright smile. Standing at six feet, Brad was the giant of the class. Freddie swallowed loudly.

Freddie shrugged. “Whatever. I have more important things to do. Maybe some other time.” Acting rather cheeky, he coolly dropped the backpack and followed his friends over to the other side of the classroom.

“Thanks Kevin,” said Andrew, beaming.

“No problem,” said Kevin. “Guys like him will never grow up.” Kevin paused. “So are you coming with me or not? Did you call up your mom and ask if it was okay?”

Andrew blinked several times. “Where? For what?”

“Katie invited us over to her house, remember?”

“Katie did what?”

Kevin chuckled at Andrew's odd response. "Why are you acting all surprised?"

"I...can't really remember...anything from this morning."

"Anyway, she's just throwing a small, little celebration party for us. You know...for saving the world and everything. Just the three of us, since Tom can't make it."

"Okay," said Andrew, nodding slowly. "I'll come. I don't need to tell my mom. She works late. I should be home before she gets back."

"Cool," said Kevin. "This should be fun."

As they walked out the front door of their school, Andrew was deep in thought. He started to slowly remember the battle that transpired a mere few days ago. It was almost like a dream. During the battle, his life was always on the line. But now that everything was back to normal, it felt surreal. As they walked onto the road, Andrew looked up at Kevin. With a slight grin on his face, Kevin appeared content. Andrew wondered how Kevin felt about the whole thing. It was really weird, thought Andrew. When they were thrust into the battle for mankind, Andrew had a difficult time accepting the insane situation. But now that there was suddenly peace and normalcy, Andrew had a difficult time accepting the serenity. But he was glad. He was glad that it was finally over.

Katie's house was surprisingly far. Seeing that she walked to school everyday, Andrew had expected a much shorter distance. It took them nearly an hour before they reached her neighborhood. During that time, Andrew studied the streets and houses as they passed them by. There was no one around. It was extremely quiet.

Andrew tapped Kevin on the arm. "Do you feel like something weird is going on?"

Kevin cocked his head. "What do you mean?"

Andrew hesitated and shrugged. "I don't know. There's something that's bugging me. Like...I don't know how to explain it. Is everything really back to normal? There's no one in the street. No...wait..." Andrew closed his eyes for a second. "Now that I think about it, I haven't seen a single car on the road!"

"Is it really that strange?"

"Yeah," Andrew replied. "I didn't even see a school bus leave."

"We did leave a later than normal," said Kevin.

Still worried, Andrew repeated, "We did...?"

When they arrived at the place, Andrew and Kevin stood by the sidewalk and gawked at the front. Katie's home was ancient and it showed. The roof was falling apart, a few of the windows were broken, and the bottom of the doors had cracks so large that mice would have no trouble making an entrance. On top of that, the rest of the property didn't seem to be properly tidied. Though it was nearing the end of winter, there were leaves all over the driveway. The grass had grown tall enough to encompass large dogs. The rest of the neighborhood looked nothing like it. The moment they stepped onto the front lawn, it was like they had entered another dimension.

"Is this the right place?" asked Andrew.

"Pretty sure it is."

The front door swung open...and then fell out unexpectedly, landing loudly upon the wooden porch. Waving, Katie ran outside to greet them.

"You guys made it!" she said cheerfully. "So? How do you like my place?"

"It's..." Andrew tried desperately to think of nice words. He had great difficulty with it. "It's...lovely and...nice. I like it. It's a really good place. A really, really solid building."

"Cut the lies," snapped Katie, glaring at him. "Just say it's terrible."

"Oh..." Andrew chuckled and broke into a smile. "It's terrible—really, really terrible. It's so ugly, moldy and broken down and nast—"

Katie slapped Andrew on the cheek, causing him to stagger backwards. "That's my house you're talking about!" Then she walked back inside her home and gestured for them to come in.

Kevin looked at Andrew, examined the new bruise on his face and whistled. "Ouch. I guess she's back to normal."

"I wouldn't consider her normal to begin with," Andrew replied.

After they entered the house, Kevin helped Andrew put the front door back on. It was missing hinges, so they simply stuck it in place and tried to wedge paper in the gaps to keep it tightly closed. Then Andrew turned around to see what the inside of the house looked like. The whole house was simply one big empty room. There was no hall or kitchen or anything other than four gray walls

and a few windows. The structure and layout was simple. There was not much in the way of furnishings either.

“Now let me introduce you to my family,” said Katie. When she said that, two people suddenly appeared in the center of the room. Andrew had never even noticed there were other people in the room with them.

Katie gestured to them. “Here’s my mom and dad. Aren’t they wonderful?”

The father was tall and handsome. His hair and eyes were dark brown. His skin was very tan. The mother was beautiful but was much shorter. Her complexion was very pale in comparison. Both parents had bright smiles, as if they were extremely happy.

“Pleased to meet you, Sir,” said Andrew, approaching the father to shake his hand. Smiling warmly, the father shook his hand but said nothing.

Andrew yanked his hand away hastily from the father’s grip. “Cold!” Andrew stared at his trembling palm. There were cracks in his skin. “Frostbite?” Perplexed, Andrew raised his eyebrows. “Kevin.” Andrew turned back to search for his friend. Kevin was no longer around. Then he slowly came to a realization. “This is not real.” He looked at Katie. “This is not real.”

Katie giggled. “What are you talking about? Of course it’s real!”

“Your father is cold—freezing even. Kevin just disappeared. This house,” Andrew caught a fleeting glimpse of the walls changing color, “is doing things it shouldn’t be able to do. And most importantly...my memory...my memory...” Andrew shut his eyes tightly as though in pain. “I can’t remember what I did today.”

“What are you saying, Andrew?” Katie smiled. “It’s real. Everything here is real.”

Katie moved toward the middle of the room and a round table appeared beside her. Her parents sat around the table, giggling gleefully.

“Come,” she said to him. “Come join us for dinner.” With a sweep of her hand, the table was soon filled with plenty of food: a large cooked turkey, mashed potatoes, and salad, among other things. “Don’t be shy. Come here and eat.”

“Katie, are these your real parents?”

“You’re talking funny again,” said Katie. “These are my real parents. That’s why they love me so much. That’s why they’re here in my home.”

“But Katie,” Andrew said gravely, “you told me before that you were in a foster home.”

Her eyes widening, Katie snapped, “Who told you that?”

“You did.”

“No, I didn’t. I don’t remember that.”

“You did,” Andrew said again, this time more firmly. “You told me that.”

“That was a lie,” she said softly. Facing downward, she fell quiet and there was a long period of silence. Andrew drew near to her, curious to see the expression on her face. Then Katie pushed him back with all her might and screamed, “THAT WAS A LIE!”

Andrew regained his balance and said, “Look at this place. It’s rotting away. Look at your parents. They don’t even look alive. This isn’t where you want to be.”

“SHUT UP! SHUT UP!” she shrieked. “Why are you doing this to me? Please stop this. Please...stop this.” Katie began to cry. Her tears flowed like rain and was unending. “Stop.”

“Katie. You need to stop.” Andrew observed the changing wallpaper and saw images of her memories. “You once told me that your foster parents hate you. Now that I see inside your mind...it doesn’t look like that to me. You’re the one who doesn’t realize it. They love you, Katie. But they can’t give you their love if you keep pushing them away...if you keep rejecting it. You’re hurting everyone...even yourself.”

“NO!” Katie screamed. “If I trust them, they’ll hurt me! They’ll love me and then abandon me! I hate them! They hate me! That’s the way it should be!” Then Katie digested her own words and fell to the ground, sobbing. “I’ll never get hurt. Again. That’s the way...it should be...”

Andrew said, “How do you know if you’ll get hurt again? They are not the same as your parents. They are different people. You have to give them a chance. Katie, how long have you been with this last foster family?”

Still on her knees, Katie looked up at him, brushing away her tears. “I-I’ve been with them for...six months now.”

Andrew said, “In those six months, I bet you’ve tried to make their lives miserable. But regardless of what you’ve done to them, they’re willing to make an effort. So please...give them that chance.”

Katie sniffed. The tears stopped flowing. She knelt there for a while, trying to regain her composure.

Then she stood up, ran to Andrew and embraced him.

“Maybe...I should. Thank you.”

Andrew beamed. “Don’t thank me. I didn’t do anything. But I’m glad you’re feeling better because we’ve still got a lot of work to do.”

“They’re breaking through!” a dog barked.

Raising his clenched fist high, Tom yelled, “Push them back!”

Musing, Helios sat on Tom’s shoulder. “We can’t hold them back for much longer. And it’s already been two hours since Kevin last spoke with us. Maybe it’s time we formulated a backup plan.”

Tom nodded. “But what kind of backup plan can we have? We don’t have options.”

“Fighting on two fronts was a bad idea. Even if the areas are narrow, we don’t have enough soldiers to handle both sides. We should pull back and hole up inside a department.”

Tom frowned. “You saw how those bears tore through the first barricade! It won’t—”

“It’s just a matter of stalling time,” said Helios. “We have to pull back.”

“If we pull back now, we’ll be trapped.”

Helios made direct eye contact with Tom. “If we don’t pull back now, we’ll lose too many soldiers. We won’t last much longer like this.”

Tom bit his lip. “But...I don’t know...I don’t want to pull back.”

Helios snapped, “What you want doesn’t matter! We have to hold them off for as long as we can!”

“Tom! Tom!” the computer shouted. “More creatures are approaching! It’s a new wave and much larger! They’ll reach our position in approximately ten minutes!”

“Again?” Tom’s jaw slackened. “But they’re already crushing us! Why would they need more reinforcements? Oh gosh...this is

getting worse and worse.” Tom considered passing out at a time like this, but Helios gave him quite a reproachful and intimidating stare.

“If you don’t want to run, we can always fight,” said Helios.

Tom raised a brow. “What are you talking about?”

“They don’t know what’s going on here. They have no idea what Kevin is doing. We could hide Kevin’s body somewhere inside. Then, with our full force, we could make a final push to the surface through one of the exits. We could pretend like we have the solution and lead the animals away. If we do that—”

Tom finished, “Then they won’t even bother with this place and Kevin will have as much time as he needs.” He added quickly, “Let’s go with that.”

Helios said, “You won’t even think it over? I know I suggested it, but I’m asking you to put your life on the line. I won’t make you—”

Tom said reluctantly, “Let’s do it. If I think it over, I’ll change my mind.”

Helios grinned wryly. “You’re braver than I thought.”

Tom shouted to the end of the hall, “Fall back! Everyone, fall back!”

Almost immediately, a small group of dogs and cats rushed to Tom’s side. Tom gestured for them to follow him. With his trashcan lid in hand, Tom plowed through the smaller forest creatures that blocked the door to the exit. As the enemy tried to pounce him, he deflected them with his makeshift shield. The larger dogs went ahead to make open a path for their group. It took them a bit of time and effort, but they managed to reach the short ladder that led to the outside. Tom quickly closed the door behind them and helped the pets up the ladder. Then he followed them out.

Their small group was surrounded on all sides. The Forest Army had mustered all their remaining forces and gathered them to this one spot for their last stand. Compared to all that surrounded them, the small force of the HPC was like a tiny dot in the landscape.

For a moment everyone hesitated. The Forest Army simply stared at the small force of the HPC. It was amazingly quiet.

Tom gulped, afraid to give any commands that would disturb the eerie, yet calm, pause. Then he decided to take a slight step forward, hoping to inch his way to a running start. Tom accidentally stepped on a branch. *Crack*. Once the noise echoed through the park,

the bears began growling and the wolves started howling. The silence was broken. The Forest Army rushed in for the kill. Vibrations of their frenzied charge shook the blades of grass tremendously. Tom screamed as he tried to shield himself from the attack.

But the wild animals didn't attack them. Instead, they parted and scattered, yelping as they fled. The ground turned into a moving sea of brown, black and white. Astonished at the sight, Tom looked at the strange ground. It was then that he discovered the small furry creatures scurrying about. Rats. Swarms of rats were all over the place. They were climbing up benches, telephone poles and streetlamps. They were clinging off the backs of bears, gnawing at their skin. They were covering up entire wolves and deer with a blanket of their bodies.

A rat met up with Helios and bowed down before him. "My liege! You're safe! The Queen was so worried when she discovered that you were still alive!"

Helios exclaimed, "I don't believe it! Did my mother tell you guys to come?"

"That's right," said the rat. "We are the Korgen Vermin Militia, at your service. What is your command?"

Helios smiled. "Let's mop up this mess and get this Forest Army out of our city!"

The rat nodded. "As you wish."

- Denial -

Kevin walked along a road of candy-coated bricks. It was kind of sticky and hard to walk across. Even so, it was easier to walk through that since the rest of the landscape was covered in giant scoops of melting ice cream.

“Somebody sure loves their sugar,” he said.

Who dares interfere?

He stopped as soon as he noticed a black dot off in the distance.

“What is that?” he wondered.

As it drew near, he got a better look at it. It was a mass of black sludge that was soaring over the land...and it was headed for him.

Kevin jumped out of the way and rolled along the surface of hard candy. Another pile of black sludge, resembling a giant hand, popped out of a scoop of ice cream. It caught Kevin by surprise and snatched him off the ground. Then the giant hand dragged him down beneath the ground, deep into a dark tunnel.

Hundreds of images flashed before his eyes. He was being pulled through dream after dream.

Then, when the giant hand finally released him, Kevin fell facedown on the floor. He picked himself up and looked around. He was in another dream world. This one was in outer space. But before he could gaze at strange planets and stars in the distance, he noticed that a group of giant dark creatures had surrounded him. Coveits.

Kevin grunted, “I don’t like the look of this.”

A man was standing by the side of the Coveits.

“The guy from the boat ride,” said Kevin, recognizing him.

“Yes,” said the man. “And you’re the kid stirring up trouble.”

Kevin felt frightened at this man’s presence. “Who are you?”

“I go by many names,” said the man. “If you like, you can call me the boogeyman.”

“Ah, Mr. Boogeyman,” said Kevin. “So I take it you’re the one who made the Dream Wave?”

The man laughed. “No, the humans have done this to themselves. I just...make the experience smoother for them. I am the oil in this engine. Humans sometimes just want to get away from it all...and I steer them in the right direction.”

“I can’t let you do that,” said Kevin. “I’ll put a stop to you!”

“You’re welcome to try,” said the boogeyman.

The Coveits lumped themselves together like clay, molding and bending into a huge massive body. The boogeyman jumped high into the mouth of the creature as it continued its weird transformation. Then, when the transformation was complete, a new monster was formed.

The hulking beast stooped down and roared. Its skin was a sickly red, almost the color of rotting raw meat. In addition to its two legs, it also had six arms and crawled down on the floor like a spider. On its back were ten horns, which protruded from its spinal cord. It had an eye on its forehead and an eye on its chin, and right in between, where people would normally have a nose, it had a giant mouth. Its head would twist and twist around like an owl’s.

“Okay...” said Kevin. “I still don’t like the look of this.”

Andrew and Katie exchanged wide-eyed glances. Her house was experiencing powerful tremors. The floor sheared apart, creating a huge gap between them. Andrew pulled her over to his side and they ran for the door. When they reached the street, Andrew pointed to the sky. The clear blue sky was long gone, now hidden by overlapping gray clouds. Aside from the bolts of lightning that flashed far and near, the land was covered in sheer darkness.

“We have to leave this dream,” shouted Andrew. “It’s getting dangerous!”

“But how?” asked Katie.

Andrew said, “There must be a way out—like a door or something. Since it’s your dream, you should know where it is. Think. If you think about it, maybe you’ll find it!”

Her arms crossed, Katie stared at the ground thoughtfully. “Now that you mention it, I think I may have seen something like that before.” She looked at him briefly before turning to the opposite direction. “That way. There should be something—”

Before she finished her sentence, the blood drained from her face. Katie looked down. To her horror, the ground was becoming alive. Lumps in the road formed into human hands and they reached out for her legs. Andrew took her by the hand and they fled the scene.

“It’s getting worse and worse,” said Andrew breathlessly. “This way, you said?”

“Yeah,” said Katie, nodding “the exit should be at the dead end of this road.”

As they sprinted across the neighborhood, everything around them became blurry and distorted. Houses were bending and twisting around, almost as if they were being reflected off funhouse mirrors. Fire hydrants changed colors rapidly from red to black or blue. Cars came to life on their own, revving their engines as they went up and down the sidewalks.

Stay...

“Did you say something?” Katie asked.

Andrew shook his head. “I thought you said something.” Andrew then noticed something falling from above. He held Katie back. “Watch out!”

A large oak tree landed upright in front of them. They fell back as they eyed the great plant. The segments of bark on the tree moved in such a way that it gave the tree facial features of a human. The eyes of the tree looked straight at the kids and the lips mouthed words.

Stay here...don't leave...

Andrew turned to Katie. “Is this your doing?”

Katie shook her head. “I don’t think so...”

“But this is *your* dream,” said Andrew. “I never had this problem in mine!”

“I’m just as clueless as you are!”

“Whatever it is, we should be able to fight back. I’m not letting some talking tree stop me from leaving!”

Andrew charged at the oddity. The branches came alive and swept across, attempting to brush Andrew away. Andrew blocked the movement of the branches and forcefully shoved the tree back. The tree toppled over on its side and couldn’t get up. The two teens ran past the fallen tree. Then they encountered a blue swirling circle of light.

“That must be it!” said Andrew. “That must be the exit!”

They wanted to walk into the blue circle but they couldn’t. The trees all around them suddenly became animated. The trees, big and small, twisted and waved their branches. The branches acted more like vines with their incredible flexibility. The limbs of the trees reached out and grabbed the kids by the legs.

Taking rapid breaths, Andrew exclaimed, “They’ve got us!”

Katie squirmed. “Get off! Get away from me!”

Katie swung her hand down with the full rotation of her upper body. The branches were cut cleanly and fell to the ground, shriveled and gnarled. Katie looked at her hand. She was holding onto a large sword and never realized it. With her blade she chopped off any branches that were grasping for them.

“We can’t let the dream get the best of us,” said Katie, gripping the hilt tightly. “We’ll fight fire with fire.” Yelling out her battle cries, she swung the sword around, hacking away at the moving forest.

At first the trees retreated frightfully at the sight of the sharp blade and its restless owner. Then, as if they suddenly realized they weren’t truly alive to begin with, the trees attacked again, boldly approaching the force of the blade without hesitation.

Katie was greatly outnumbered. For every tree she sliced apart, two more would rise from the broken wood. There was no end to it.

Andrew took off his shirt to reveal his superhero garments underneath. He looked at himself in dismay. He probably still had some of his powers, but without the muscular body, he just didn’t feel as dashing.

Katie was unable to contain her laughter at how ridiculous he looked in tights. Even the trees howled in laughter. In fact, the trees couldn’t stop laughing, and they all fell down and rolled around in hysteria. Andrew grimaced. He had planned to show off his superpowers in the dream world, but apparently there was no longer any need for it.

“Now’s our chance,” said Katie quickly, restraining her laughter.

She walked up to the portal. Andrew was right behind her. Together, they watched the gateway uneasily.

“Are you sure this is it?” asked Katie.

“I don’t know...it looks different.”

“That’s not very assuring...”

“We cross over together,” said Andrew with a smile.

“No...” a voice said darkly. “No one is going anywhere.”

Another voice screamed, “AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

The loud scream echoed through the portal. The light of the portal intensified. Katie retreated slightly. Andrew simply stared blankly and swallowed. Kevin flew through the portal and tumbled to the ground.

“Kevin!” Andrew said. “What are you doing here?”

“Andrew! Kat—What the heck are you wearing?” Kevin’s jaw dropped at the sight of her dress. Katie gave him a menacing glare. Then Kevin quickly said, “Oh, I mean, Andrew! Katie! We’ve got trouble!”

The monster’s head poked out of the portal, its freakish bloodshot eyes staring at the teens.

“But I guess you didn’t need me to tell you that,” Kevin added.

“WHAT IS THAT THING?” Andrew shrieked.

“He calls himself the boogeyman,” Kevin explained. “And he’s pretty ticked off that we’re trying to set people free from their dreams.”

The monster couldn’t quite squeeze through the small portal, so it pulled it apart.

As she watched the monster tear a gaping hole through the dream world, Katie asked, “What should we do?”

“I was thinking we should beat it up,” said Kevin.

“Are you kidding?” Andrew said. “How are we supposed to beat that thing?”

“Well,” said Kevin, “whose dream do you think is this?”

“Katie’s?” Andrew said.

“Well, it was Katie’s...but now it’s *our* dream,” said Kevin. “Our dream, our rules. This isn’t a battle against flesh and blood. This is a battle against our mind! If you think you’re weak, you’re weak. If you think you’re strong, you’re strong. Got it?”

Andrew nodded.

Kevin continued, “But whatever we do, we have to do it now, while we’re still in our dream. I don’t want to think about what will happen if he can destroy the dream.”

“Destroy the dream? Is that possible?” said Andrew.

“I don’t know,” said Kevin. He pointed at the hole that was getting bigger and bigger. “But I don’t want to risk it. So let’s just deal with this thing before it gets out of hand. We need to use powerful weapons against him. Think of the most powerful thing in the world that you can imagine and fight with it. Distract him for now while I prepare myself.”

Kevin leaped high into the air. Pieces of broken down cars flew toward him, as if a powerful magnet drew them. The broken glass and scraps of metal came together and formed a jet fighter around him. Kevin sat snugly in the cockpit and engaged the throttle.

Whoosh! The jet fighter shot into the air, the flames of the engine roaring. And then it disappeared into the sky.

“I’m not sure what he’s planning,” said Andrew. “But let’s see if we can take out this monster before he gets back. Transform into the most powerful thing you can think of!” After seeing Kevin’s choice of weapon, he was curious as to what Katie what do.

Katie nodded. She closed her eyes for a bit and concentrated. All of a sudden she began growing and growing...until she was as big as the monster itself.

“You just grew bigger,” said Andrew, sounding disappointed.

“I know,” said Katie. “And now I’m the most powerful thing!”

“Now it’s my turn,” said Andrew excitedly.

Andrew closed his eyes and thought for a moment. The houses crumbled around him and the broken pieces swirled around in a huge tornado. Then he jumped up into the sky and fell in the catastrophic winds. The wind subsided and the tornado dissipated. The only thing that remained was a huge robot.

“You’re such a geek,” said Katie.

“True,” said Andrew, sitting in the pilot’s seat of the robot. “But I don’t care because this is AWESOME!” Then he called out to the monster, “Hey, boogeyman! Want a piece of this? Huh?”

The monster paid him no attention. It kept its focus on destroying the dream.

Katie punched the monster in the face. The monster growled back and used one of its six arms to punch her back. Then Andrew began firing away hundreds of small missiles. However, the monster shielded himself with his arms and appeared unharmed. They both continued to attack the monster, but nothing they did seemed to hurt it.

“Nothing is working!” Andrew exclaimed.

“Why?” asked Katie. “How come we can’t hurt it?”

Suddenly, Andrew realized something. “Wait...what did Kevin say again?”

“He told us...to think of the most powerful thing...in the world and use it.”

“Oh,” said Andrew. “Maybe if it’s fake...something we just made up...then, even in a dream, it won’t be effective. Maybe we have to use weapons that we know are real.”

“That’s right,” said Kevin, his voice echoing in their minds. “You can fool yourself, but you can’t fool your subconscious. But you don’t have to worry about that. I’ve got my weapon ready. Now all I need you guys to do is open up that mouth.”

“Open that mouth?” Andrew raised a brow. “But it’s already open.”

“Don’t just let it hang open,” said Kevin. “Open it all the way. I need it to stay open.”

“I don’t know about this...” said Andrew.

“Just do it,” said Kevin.

Andrew steered the giant robot toward the massive monster. But just as he started thinking about how he should open up that mouth, the monster closed it.

The monster grinned. *You think I can’t hear your thoughts? I heard you loud and clear. There’s no way you’re going to get me to open this mouth now!*

“Oh yeah?” Katie said smugly.

She ran up to the monster. The monster tried to smack her away with an open palm. Katie blocked with one hand and reached down with the other. Andrew thought she was going to punch him again...but this time...she tickled him. The boogeyman was ticklish!

“No! Stop!” the monster growled, unable to hold back the laughter. “Stop it!” He flung his other hands around, trying to swat her away.

Andrew froze at the strange scene unfolding before him.

“What are you spacing out for?” Katie snapped, dodging the attacks. “Hurry up and pry that mouth open! I can’t keep this up forever!”

“O-oh, okay,” Andrew replied. He got close to the monster, shoved the robot hands into the mouth and forced the jaw open. “All

right! I got it open for now! Hurry, Kevin! Do whatever you have to!”

“Roger that!”

Kevin flew his jet fighter back down to the ground. He zipped through the shattered streets. The sight of the monster came into view. He was locked onto his target: the monster’s mouth. Kevin pulled up, rising steadily.

At that moment, the monster shoved Katie and Andrew aside. Kevin pushed the jet’s engine to its limit, flying faster and faster. Just as the monster was about to close its mouth, Kevin’s small jet fighter slipped through.

“Did he make it?” Andrew wondered.

The monster got redder and redder. Its skin began to glow as if a bright light was shining within. A surge of flame escaped from the monster’s mouth. Then...BOOOOOM! A giant fiery explosion emerged from the belly, enveloping the beast in a solid beam of light. A massive shockwave was released and tore the whole dream apart. Everything shook and crumbled. Everything faded.

“W-what’s happening?” Katie asked, shielding herself from the light.

Andrew screamed as the robot was breaking into pieces. And then darkness fell...and all was silent.

- All Is Well -

Twiddling his thumbs, Andrew sat on a bench, his back against the wall. He looked up at the door facing him. He took a deep breath to calm his nerves. It didn't help. There was nothing he could do to shake off the anxiety. The door opened. Andrew continued to stare as a woman came out, turned around and closed the door. It was a nurse. Andrew grabbed his book bag, jumped to his feet and straightened up.

"How is he?" Andrew asked.

The nurse sighed and studied him for a moment, as though unwilling to reply. "Andrew, was it?"

"Yes." Andrew said again, this time more urgently, "How is he?"

"His body is still in good condition, all things considered. There hasn't been much change in the past twenty-four hours." She hesitated. "There's really nothing more for me to say that I haven't already said. Maybe you should come back tomorrow."

"I-I want to see him now."

"I don't want you to keep your hopes up. The doctor still is clueless about his current condition."

"I know. But I still want to see him."

The nurse nodded wordlessly and walked away.

Andrew placed his hand on the handle of the door. He swallowed. A small bead of sweat trickled down the back of his neck. He entered the patient's room. His breathing slowed as his eyes came across the foot of the bed. Time almost came to a standstill as he gazed over Kevin's peaceful face.

Andrew drew near to Kevin's bed, as he lay there unconscious.

"Hey Kevin," said Andrew, trying to sound cheerful, "I just thought I'd drop by and say hello." Andrew dropped his backpack by the bed and unzipped it. "I know you're going to hate me for this,

but I brought all your homework.” He took out a stack of papers from his bag and placed it on the table, right on top of the existing stack. “How are you doing? Are you feeling any better?”

Andrew continued, “I know you’re probably sick and tired of me talking about it. But after the past week, everything went back to normal. No one really remembers much. All they know is that everyone was asleep for a few days. They don’t remember their dreams. No one knows what we did. That’s for the best I think. Besides, it’s not like we did anything special.”

Scratching his cheek, Andrew thought for a moment. “Speaking of which, this morning on the news they were talking about it. They were interviewing people. I’m not sure who they were. Probably some scientists and some conspiracy theorists. All of them were confused of course. One guy was saying it was an elaborate plot from the government to cut back on food consumption, like some forced diet so that our population would lose some weight. Another was saying it was a terrorist attack by radicals who thought society placed too much emphasis on working and not enough time on rest. People can sure come up with some crazy ideas, huh?” Andrew chuckled to break the silence of the room. “But then again, those crazy ideas aren’t crazy enough to be the truth.” Andrew waited for a response. Kevin was still motionless.

Then Andrew said, “I heard from Tom yesterday. I wasn’t able to contact him before. I tried calling him over the past few days and he only ended up calling back last night. He’s doing well. He told me these stories of how he fought this massive battle against Kain while we were all asleep. I’m amazed he isn’t traumatized by the experience. I still get nightmares every night of that dragon. Just remembering that moment when I was almost...” He paused. “It’s scary to think that the dragon is still out there. That’s probably what haunts me the most.” Andrew shivered. “I hope Kain isn’t looking for some personal revenge. I’d hate to open the front door one day and see that cranky old dragon at my door step.”

Kevin said nothing.

Andrew felt a lump in his throat. “Say something. Tell me something. I want to know what went through your head at that last moment. You knew this would happen, didn’t you?” Exasperated, Andrew slammed his fist against the mattress. “Why didn’t you tell us this would happen?” Andrew broke down, unable to look upon

Kevin's emotionless face. "I don't want to see you like this. I don't want to see you...die like this. If only I had known...I don't know what I would've done, but I would've done anything I could to prevent this!" Andrew dried his teary eyes with the sleeve of his shirt. "But I guess...it wouldn't matter." Andrew grinned bitterly. "If I were in your shoes, I would've done the same thing. Because it's all about how much the world means to you. It was the chance of a lifetime. We saved the world. It's silly, isn't it? We always watch movies or read books about people saving the world. It's totally overdone. I'd gotten sick of it. But given the chance to do it in real life? I'd do it as much as I could." He bit his lip. "Well, better not jinx myself. I'd hate to end up in that situation again."

Andrew sighed thoughtfully. "That's all I have to say for now. It's about time for me to go. I'll try to come again tomorrow. Maybe Katie will come too." Andrew picked up his bag and walked toward the door. He glanced over his shoulder and looked at Kevin one more time. He turned away and then did a double take. To his surprise, Kevin was sitting upright and smiling back at him. Andrew rubbed his eyes, thinking it was just his imagination or an illusion. But it wasn't. Kevin was really sitting up.

Speechless, Andrew froze.

"I know what you're going to say," said Kevin. "And yes, I was awake the whole time."

Andrew stuttered, "Bu-bu-but how? Bu-bu-but why?"

Kevin shrugged. "I woke up in this morning."

"But the nurse said—"

Kevin laughed. "When she told me you'd been coming to see me everyday, I told her to act the same as she always does. I wanted to surprise you myself."

Andrew stared at him for a long time. Suddenly, he ran to bed and gave him a strong bear hug.

Feeling the pain of being squeezed, Kevin managed to breath out, "Hey! You're going to snap me in half! I don't want to be stuck in the hospital for another week!"

"Oh, sorry," Andrew released him and backed away, his cheeks flushed. "I got a little carried away there."

"It's okay," said Kevin, coughing. "I'm happy I'm alive too. Really. Now go on. Get out of here."

“So soon?” Andrew cocked his head. “But now I can actually talk to you for real!”

“Sorry, but I’m still not feeling all that well. I want to rest. I’ll be getting out tomorrow. I’ll see you at the bus stop on Friday.”

“Thank you for coming!” Kevin bowed jokingly before Andrew, Katie and Tom. “This is our official...um...everything’s-back-to-normal celebration!” He popped open a can of soda for an audible effect. No one cheered. They all stared at Kevin, their brows raised.

Tom shifted in his seat, glancing around the food court. “I can’t believe we’re doing this openly in a mall. What if people listen in?”

Kevin shrugged. “Are you listening to the people next to us?”

Tom said, “Not really.”

“See? Who cares?” Kevin sat down at the table. “Now, let’s begin our meeting.” He turned to Tom. “What I really wanted to know was what happened to Genesis? You guys haven’t said a word about any of the agents from the HPC.”

“I don’t know,” Tom replied.

“You don’t know? But didn’t you see Kain?”

“I did,” said Tom. “But Genesis wasn’t around. Genesis, Luna, Terminus...I didn’t see them during or after the battle. They just disappeared.”

Eyes wide open, Kevin stared solemnly at Tom. Then he turned to Andrew and Katie. “No one has seen them?” They shook their heads in reply.

Andrew said, “They haven’t tried to contact us. For the past week I’ve been searching around town. Tom’s been searching in Korgen. There’s no trace of them. And the animals won’t speak to us anymore. Everything is back to normal.”

“That’s...” His face downcast, Kevin wasn’t sure what to say. “That’s disappointing. I can’t believe it.” He looked at Tom. “Not even Helios will say anything?”

Tom said, “Well, I haven’t seen him. I tried going into the sewers—which was a lot of trouble I might add—but the rats aren’t talking. I guess all the animals are pretty serious about the no-talking rule.”

Kevin became silent. There was a long pause as the four of them just listened to the chatter all around them.

Andrew cleared his throat. “Kevin, isn’t it about time you explained what happened at the end of the dream thing? It all happened rather suddenly...and I was totally clueless at the time.”

Kevin said, “I guess I might as well tell you guys all about it, though it’s probably not as impressive of a story as you would hope. I’ll do a quick recap. After I got plugged into the device, I used it to gain control of the dream. With it, I knocked some sense into Andrew and searched for someone else to help. Someone came to me, but not what I expected. He was a strange guy. Told me I was interfering with his plans. He called himself the boogeyman. At that moment, I was pretty scared. I didn’t know what to do. I mean, I wasn’t sure if he was really *the* boogeyman. And if he was, what could I really do against him? I wanted to stop him, but really, there was nothing I could do. So I ran to you guys for help. Alone, I couldn’t do anything. But with the three of us...I knew we could overpower him. But I needed to use the most powerful thing I could think of.”

“An atomic bomb?” said Andrew.

“Yeah!” said Kevin. “As I said in the dream, the only way for something to become effective is if your subconscious accepts it as truth. I may not have seen one in real life, but I know for a fact that it exists.”

“To be honest,” said Andrew, “a hydrogen bomb is more powerful than an atomic bomb...”

Kevin stared at Andrew. “Oh...well, uh...too late for that. It still worked.”

Tom looked confused. “Wait. Does that mean the *boogeyman* was the cause of that huge mess?”

“I don’t know for sure,” said Kevin. “But that’s what I’m thinking. My perspective is this: the boogeyman was like a small time criminal—like a pickpocket. Then, by chance, he had the opportunity to hit it big, like as if he suddenly got the power to rob a huge bank.”

“That’s an interesting perspective,” said Andrew.

Kevin smiled. “Isn’t it?”

“Sounds like a bunch of guess work,” said Katie. “You don’t know even know where that thing came from, do you? What if it was your own dream? Maybe it was totally a figment of your imagination. Maybe the boogeyman never existed...Maybe it was

just another part of you—a part of you that didn't want the dream world to end. That would explain why only you were able to hurt it.”

Kevin's smiled widened. “Maybe.”

Katie growled, “What's with that smug look? If you don't really know what happened, we don't really know for sure if we solved the problem! What if this whole mess starts up again?”

“Someone will deal with it when the time comes, I guess.” Standing up, Kevin said, “And speaking of time, it's getting kind of late. I'd better get going.”

Andrew said, “What's the rush? We haven't had the chance to just sit down and relax.”

“All this stuff has got me thinking,” Kevin said. “You have to live every day like it's your last because you never know what might happen. I got some homework to do and this time I plan on finishing it tonight. Tomorrow is Saturday. We can hang out then.”

Katie stood up and pushed her chair in. “If we're done here, I might as well go home now.”

“You too?” asked Tom.

“Yeah,” said Katie. “My mom's worried about me. I shouldn't keep her waiting.”

Kevin shot a confused look at her. “Your mom? What the— Since when did you care about going home early? I thought you hated your parents.” Katie shrugged silently and left.

Kevin pointed at her and raised a brow at Andrew. “What's going on?”

“Some things have changed over the week,” said Andrew.

Tom grabbed his backpack. “I guess this is goodbye. I have to help my parent's with their business.”

Andrew asked, “The movie theatre?”

“Nope,” said Tom. “It's the little grocery store on Felix Avenue.”

“You don't mean—”

Tom said, “I'll explain later. Let's just say I have a bad habit when it comes to...uh...being honest. And it's caused more trouble than it was worth.” He waved goodbye and disappeared into the crowd.

Kevin straightened, looking at Andrew. “Shall we go?”

Andrew nodded. He cleaned the trash off the table, got his stuff and followed after Kevin. While walking, he bumped into someone. It was Freddie.

Freddie said, “Well, well, well. If it isn’t Andr—”

Andrew said quickly and confidently, “You should find better things to do with your time than waste mine and yours.” As he left, he said, “Every day is important. Every single day.”

Freddie stared at Andrew as he headed for the exit. “What was that all about?”

When Kevin went back to his house, his parents were already home from work.

His dad was reclining on the sofa. When he heard Kevin entering through the front door, he turned off the TV and sat up.

His dad said dryly, “Where have you been?”

“I was out with some friends,” Kevin replied.

“You should have called me.”

“Sorry,” said Kevin. “I didn’t want to disturb you at work.”

“At work? Kevin, it’s almost *eight*.” His dad started to sound serious.

“Really?” Kevin checked his wrist. He didn’t have his wristwatch. “Wow, I had no idea. Time sure goes fast when you don’t have a watch. I wonder where it went.”

“Did you have dinner?”

“No. Only a small snack. I’m starving.”

“It’s in the fridge.”

Kevin nodded. “Okay. Where’s mom?”

“She’s sleeping. She’s had a rough day.”

Kevin smiled. “I wouldn’t want to wake her.”

Kevin went to his room and dropped his book bag on the floor. “Speaking of rest...” He jumped onto his bed and dug his face into the pillow. “Ahh...never thought I’d miss sleeping so much...even after a week-long coma.”

A voice suddenly said, “Are you sure you want to take a nap? You’ll miss dinner.”

“Yeah,” said Kevin. “But unless the whole world goes into a famine, I think I should be fine.” Wondering who had said that, Kevin looked around. A yellow Lab was sitting by his bed. Kevin bolted upright.

“Genesis!” Kevin shouted in excitement. “What are you doing here?”

Genesis replied, “I was in the neighborhood and thought I’d see how you were doing.”

A black cat crawled out from under the bed and stretched its legs. “Oh, so the boy is finally back. I was tired of waiting.”

Kevin smiled. “Luna! You’re here too!”

A parakeet flew down from the curtain and landed on Kevin’s pillow. “Good to see you, Kevin.”

“Terminus!”

The drawer of Kevin’s dresser suddenly cracked open. A white rat stuck his head out.

“Oh...” said Kevin, his enthusiasm fading. “And Helios...”

“Hey,” snapped Helios. “Am I the only one you’re not happy to see?”

Kevin said, “I might be able to get away with letting a dog, cat and bird in the house...but a rat? No way. If my mom—”

“KEVIN!” The door flung open. His mom popped her head in. “Can you please keep it down? A lot happened at work today and I really, really need to...” Her voice trailed off as she goggled at the sight before her. “WHA-WHAT’S GOING ON HERE? WHERE DID ALL THESE ANIMALS COME FROM? WHAT ARE THEY DOING IN MY HOUSE? AND A RAT?! A RAT?! WHY IS THERE A RAT IN THE DRAWER?” She turned around, ran into the hall and screamed to her husband, “HONEY! CALL ANIMAL CONTROL! GET THE EXTERMINATOR! WE’VE GOT A PROBLEM!”

“Oh boy.” Kevin ran to the door, slammed it and locked it. “You guys should get out the window before my mom gets back.”

“Very well,” said Genesis. “But before we go, I’d just like to say that we’ll be hanging around the neighborhood for a while. Official HPC business.”

Kevin cocked his head out of curiosity.

Genesis continued, “We’ll be watching over you and the others.”

Luna added, “Because you never know when Kain might return.”

Helios nodded. “There’s that, but we also aren’t sure if we’ve managed to solve the sleeping epidemic for good. So to be on the

safe side, we'll be around. We apologize in advance for the trouble we'll cause."

Terminus said, "But of course, if you don't want us around, we understand completely and will give you your space as needed."

"Say no more," said Kevin. "I don't care about the trouble." His face was split by a wide grin. "You guys are welcome to bring as much trouble as you like."

Before Genesis hopped out the window, he barked, "Then we'll see you and the others tomorrow."

"Sure," said Kevin, unable to stop smiling. "Sure..."