

Fall 2016

Heroes, Past and Future

Benjamin Green
bgreen834@gmail.com

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you [through this survey](#). Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.

Follow this and additional works at: http://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Green, Benjamin, "Heroes, Past and Future" (2016). *Honors Research Projects*. 406.
http://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects/406

This Honors Research Project is brought to you for free and open access by The Dr. Gary B. and Pamela S. Williams Honors College at IdeaExchange@UAkron, the institutional repository of The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Research Projects by an authorized administrator of IdeaExchange@UAkron. For more information, please contact mjon@uakron.edu, uapress@uakron.edu.

Heroes, Past and Future

By Benjamin Green

Ben Green

Where I come from - Critical essay

I have always been a bit of a joker. The quality of said jokes notwithstanding, trying to make people laugh is something I do frequently and I feel that as the years have gone by that is something I have grown rather good with. Though I do not feel like “Heroes Past and Future” is as riotously or overtly funny as some of the other pieces I have churned out both for class and independently, I do feel as though it could at least be called amusing as a whole. No writer just picks up the craft and develops a new and original style completely out of a vacuum, and I am not some mold-breaking genius who has just created a new work with no prior knowledge of style or substance. I have always been a reader and a watcher of film and television, and as such I have definitely taken on traits of many of the writers and directors that I have enjoyed.

I cannot honestly cite influences of the substance I like to work with without saying that, much like with the “raised by wolves” cliché, I was raised by geeks. As such, I was raised on a steady diet of science fiction and fantasy. Some of my earliest literary loves are *Captain Underpants* by Dav Pilkey, *Harry Potter* by J.K Rowling, and *The Belgariad* by David Eddings. My current obsession is *The Dresden Files*, an urban fantasy series by Jim Butcher. As such, it is almost compulsion for me to include some element of the fantastic in my works. I have written many stories over my collegiate career, and very few do not include something involving magic or pseudoscience. I have written about garden gnomes sabotaging a man’s garden, suburban superheroes, a man who is physically incapable of dying, and a haunted house. In my spare time I build larger worlds that would be more at home in a novel or a Dungeons and Dragons adventure than in an eight page short story. They are very Tolkien-esque in scope, but I

wouldn't dare compare myself to him in quality. There is simply too much to cram in and the story would seem rushed. My first love is and always will be world building, but I recognize that building a world is something that can't always happen. As such, I'm not always ashamed when I have to use the world in which we always live. I just usually have to modify it ever so slightly to meet my personal tastes.

Through my classes, I have also gained an appreciation for the physically and metaphorically grotesque through works such as *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelly and *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson. If I do not include a fantasy setting or plot device, you can bet that something or someone is getting blown way out of proportion. One of the works I was praised most for, a short piece called *Saint Nicholas*, features a man named Nicholas going to a mall during the holiday rush. This in and of itself is not overly interesting, however Nicholas perceives this outing as a literal war zone. He ducks and dodges kiosk vendors like a commando until he is finally downed by an enemy round - an unwanted spritz of "unisex" perfume as he is on the home stretch to his car. I did not feel compelled to make Nicholas a wizard or give him a superpower as I tend to like doing to many of my characters, however he is a grotesque of the anxiety those of us feel over the holiday shopping season. This isn't unlike Wing Biddlebaum or many of the other characters in *Winesburg, Ohio*. Though he is not physically deformed, something about his personality is greatly exaggerating, but in this case I try to use it for more of a comic end than Anderson. We all feel anxious holiday shopping, but never to the extent of Nicholas.

I also count myself a great lover of satire. One of my favorite books to be read while I was growing up was *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* by Jon Scieszka.

This is a collection of twisted fairy tales, a personal favorite being *The Very Ugly Duckling*, in which the very ugly duckling just grows into a very ugly duck. As I grew up, other satires entered my life in literature, TV, and film. Notable examples for influences in this include the TV shows *The Tick*, *The Simpsons*, and *Futurama*. Literature wise I can point to Christopher Moore and his books *The Stupidest Angel*, in which an Angel gets a Christmas wish wrong and starts a zombie invasion, and my personal favorite: *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Jesus' Childhood Pal*, which features Jesus (or Joshua, as Biff is quick to point out the translation) and his childhood friend Levi who is called Biff going through childhood, then travelling east so Jesus can learn that philosophy to save the Jewish people. I absolutely adore satirizing a story either by emulating its style, like *The Tick* or *The Stinky Cheese Man*, or by adding a new dimension to the story, like *Lamb*. In "Heroes Past and Future," I am doing a domestic superhero parody among other things, in which I take people who just kind of have superpowers, put them in a suburb in which everyone has powers, and see what happens, and through the lens of the parody I attempt to shine a light on the central theme of the work, which is that people grow to fit their environment. Even so, I did enjoy writing a section in which two old men use their powers to try to win the neighborhood lawn competition. I find that parody and satire are great ways to bring issues or themes to the attention of an audience in a lighthearted way that helps me to not seem pretentious. Pretentiousness is something I absolutely abhor, and as such it is something I avoid at all costs. However, I do also want to have at least something serious in my writing, I don't want to be known for a year then forgotten as "the guy who wrote the one funny story that didn't matter." I find that satire is an enduring art form that I at least like to think I excel at to some degree which allows the writer to bring a serious issue to light. It makes

the audience laugh while they think, and so it is a style I strive to improve with every piece I write.

Something else I enjoy using in my works is the juxtaposition of the strange or fantastic in a mundane setting. My influences as far as this goes could probably be attributed to the urban fantasy setting of Jim Butcher's *Dresden Files* series, in which the main character of Harry Dresden is a wizard and private eye living in modern Chicago, and one of my favorite video games *Psychonauts*, a game written by Tim Schafer which takes place in a summer camp for child psychics. I do not use this in everything I write, sometimes I just put the fantastic in the fantastic and build worlds. At the same time, it is one of my favorite things to do. This is probably especially evident in "Heroes past and future," due to the superhero suburbia setting. I actually based the setting on a modified version of another setting of mine, a gated community for wizards in which a card game a friend and i are hoping to kickstart is set. Some drafts of "Heroes Past and Future" were actually based in that exact setting before I settled for just giving everyone just one "Gift," which is basically a superpower, and working with it. In that it became less like the wizarding world of Harry Dresden and more akin to "The City" from an aforementioned influence: *The Tick*. This is a cartoon based on a comic by Ben Edlund in which the titular character is a super strong and neigh-invulnerable superhero who, upon being assigned to The City as a hero, is taken in to live at the apartment of his sidekick. I could also point to the Disney/Pixar movie *The Incredibles* directed by Brad Bird, except instead of one super family hiding in suburbia we just have a small town full of supers.

Stylistically, I feel my strong points are my dialogue, my narrative voice, and my rather minimalist exposition, preferring instead to let the world reveal itself as time goes on. My

dialogue is something for which I definitely see Jim Butcher in both his works *The Dresden Files* and *Codex Alera*. I can also probably point to film and TV icon Joss Whedon, the man responsible for the blockbuster hit *The Avengers* as well as geek tragedy, the short-lived series *Firefly*. He did also do *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, but I have not seen that series for better or worse, so this is exclusively *Avengers* and *Firefly* Whedon. My dialogue tends to go very quickly, often not attributing the quote to anyone in a dialogue because if there are only two actors, the reader can infer who is talking unless otherwise specified. This is something very much out of the pages of a novel by Jim Butcher, who tends to do that exact thing in his novels. I think it is because, if there is a point with just two characters talking, I see no need to attribute lines of dialogue unless I must show the characters also emoting, because no one is going to be interested in two characters who stand still, faces blank, speaking in monotone, not really talking so much as exchanging information verbally. My dialogue can also be, for lack of a better term, “quippy.” This is where Joss Whedon as well as a touch of the comedy stylings of Monty python come in. It isn’t all the time, but there are definitely some points where my characters have some very Whedon-esque banter that I could definitely see happening in one of his works. This does drive some people crazy, I understand, but there is just something I enjoy very much about writing a witty conversation, in which they keep exchanging one liners.

Though I do mainly write short stories and (attempted) novels, my first writing course of the creative writing minor was Intro to Script Writing with Dr. Svehla, and as such I do recognize a few screenwriting techniques in my stories. The primary technique I see is my aversion to flat exposition. Sometimes I find it unavoidable, but in a screenplay the writer cannot just have a character tell the audience directly what happened, what is happening, or what

happened. It is not only sloppy, but it ruins the immersion that the reader could otherwise feel in being allowed to discover the world on their own. At this point I must again bring up Jim Butcher. He has written an entire parallel universe into Chicago with *The Dresden Files*, but never at any point does Harry Dresden take the reader aside and just dump information on him or her. Instead he just lives in the world, and if something happens that the reader would need some further elaboration on, such as what the White Council is, why they hate Harry so much, and why the skull in his lab talks and reads adult magazines, he does so through the first person narration. This is also probably something I do as someone with a background of a dungeon master in Dungeons and Dragons. It is my job to build a world and let my friends experience it. I cannot tell them everything happening at all times, I have to leave them some room for discovery. That is what I like to do, I like to allow the reader to experience and discover the world as it comes, rather than giving them a history book on the world and telling them that this is what they need to read in order to fully appreciate what I have plopped in front of them.

I have been told by many classmates that my narrative voice is what pulls my stories through, and I would be inclined to agree with them. It is something that I am very proud of. This is probably due to the fact that my favorite stories, such as *Lamb* by Christopher Moore or here again Jim Butcher rears his head. These stories are both told from a first-person perspective, which is interesting because that is a perspective I usually avoid in favor of a third person limited point of view. However, both the characters of Harry Dresden and Levi who is called Biff are sarcastic, referential to pop culture, and they are not afraid to comment on the events that happen with their own particular brand of wit. This is a voice I have come to love as I have read and re-read these novels, and so as I have enjoyed them so immensely there are times

when I write that I really see Jim Butcher or Christopher Moore poking through, and I am completely okay with that. Butcher and Moore are my favorite authors, of course I would subconsciously seek to emulate them. Lines I have written such as “He heard something snap. Judging from the fact he could no longer feel his legs he assumed it was his spine” (from a recent short story I wrote for my Writers on Writing class) are definitely reminiscent of a Jim Butcher line, which to this day remains my favorite opening to a novel ever, “The building was on fire and it wasn’t my fault.” I sometimes think I do have a bit of Douglas Adams of *Hitchhiker’s guide to the Galaxy*, but I have only read that novel once, though I enjoyed it so much I may pick it up again over break.

As I do feel I have taken on the strengths of my favorite writers, I do feel that I have taken on their weaknesses as well. One of the biggest worries I have about my style, mostly due to my narrative voice and dialogue, is that many of the characters come off as the same. Not all of them in every work I have ever done, some of those characters I feel are very strong and definitely stand up on their own, but at times with the voice or the dialogue I wonder if that is something that the protagonist or conversational partner would actually say or if I am just including the banter when it would really be out of character for a character to say or think those things. I feel as though writing characters can be a strong point of mine, but it can also be one of my greatest weaknesses, especially in something like “Heroes Past and Future” where I am switching between characters in a third person limited perspective and I feel as though I am just writing the same character with a different name. Perhaps it is paranoia, perhaps it is the writer hating his work as writers tend to do. Whether or not it is a legitimate problem or not, it is a worry of mine, and something with which I strive to get better.

No one writes in a vacuum, and I cannot claim to be an exception. My style, substance, and sense of humor have all been ripped from other, better authors. How I write and what I write about are influenced by authors such as Jim Butcher, Christopher Moore, David Eddings, J.K. Rowling, Sherwood Anderson. However, I also have influence from television and film writers such as Ben Edlund, Joss Whedon, and Brad Bird. Perhaps they are not the creators of the finest, most groundbreaking works of art ever put to screen or paper, but they produce what I enjoy, and so I read them and try my best to incorporate what I love so much about them into my own work.

Ben Green

Self-evaluation

When I first started this project, I had no idea what I was doing. My stories tend to take on more of an epic scale with massive worlds, and 40 pages is not long enough for that. Initially, this whole thing was meant to be a meditation of sorts on my experience growing up in a small town that just seems to trap people, I know so many people who just never left or left and then came back. There is a gravity to my hometown. My girlfriend at the time, Josie, was still living there and was refusing to leave, so that spurred on my passion a tad more. There was nothing supernatural or strange about it, it was just small town americana with some quirky characters and some situations I pulled out of my memories.

I hated almost every page of it.

My work is strange, I have a passion for magic and superheroes, sometimes at the same time, and what I had created as some boring rip off of *Winesburg, Ohio* was not what i wanted to write. The original work, titled *Read my Shorts*, was meant to be a humorous look at the world in which I grew up, but what resulted was boring and I was really not a fan. I had spend the entirety of the first semester on the project on a story that I despised.

At the same time, a friend of mine and I are working on a card game which we plan on putting on kickstarter to see if we could get funding to make it. This game is called “Suburbs and Sorcerers,” and it is suburban warfare in a gated community for wizards in which the lawn competition is coming up and you must have the best yard. I took the concept and decided to apply it here. This quickly went from wizards and witches to just people with a singular

superpower I decided to call “Gifts.” With that in mind, I went about revising, and what I came out with is something I feel significantly more proud of than the initial drafts.

The theme also evolved significantly from the early drafts. Dr. Drew and I agreed that it was a mess, mostly due to the fact that I had been in the writing process for such a long time in a very turbulent time in my life. Therefore, the theme was all over the place depending on the mindset I had when I was first writing and for the life of me I had no idea how to make sense of the theme, which was more tangled than earbuds after going through the washing machine. The theme we decided on which I have endeavoured to keep in mind through the editing process is, As Dr. Drew said and I could not put it better, “great men are not born, they are created by their times. In other words, in the context of a small, insulated, backwards town, the heroes and villains are also all of those things because so very little is required of them. The fish cannot outgrow the fish bowl.”

The first story in the collection is also the one I wrote most recently, and it is drawn from a rather vivid memory of mine from early, early childhood. The characters of Jimmy, June, and Joe are, respectively, a very young version of me, my mom, and my dad. This scene is largely drawn from mine and my parent’s memories, and mostly unedited. I never electrocuted my dad, but the yowling about the water in my eyes was very much something I’m sure my dad, whose godlike patience I aspire to, remembers slightly less-than-fondly. That isn’t the important part in this section though, I just thought it would be a good way to bring in the exchange between Jimmy and June. This is almost verbatim a conversation my mom and I both quite vividly remember having. Though this is not the most important moment or a super emotional powerhouse, this moment is supposed to introduce the theme in a very small way. True, small

children don't want to think about moving on to bigger and better things, but I had hoped that June's reaction to it would let a slight amount of panic of her tone shine through. She wants her son to leave, go on to bigger and better things, and wants this to just be a childish tendency.

The second story is the original first story in the earlier drafts. This one is not drawn directly off of any one memory in particular, just kind of the general whimsy of being that age and having an overactive imagination. The main purpose of this section is twofold. First is to kind of juxtapose the previous section. These children are actively dreaming of being in bigger and better places, like in a big city saving civilians or exploring space. They dream of something more. I thought it was important to emphasize that this isn't some oppressive slum in which everyone is physically trapped by socioeconomic factors, like in something like *The Women of Brewster Place*. I also feel that this segment is important for world building. The Gifts of these kids are not up to where they should be. Jake can't fly so much as propel himself into the air and hope he goes where he needs to go. Alexa can't do much more than make some frost in the grass, she isn't exactly Mr. Freeze. They have Gifts, they are just immature, and I felt that stage of development in this world was important to note.

Sections 3 and 4 are kind of inseparable, you can't have one without the other. There are no real stand-ins for anyone I knew at this stage, if anything I think Eddie is more like Scott Farkas from *A Christmas Story*. He's the big fish in the small bowl. I tried to hint that his home life isn't cliché terrible, but it isn't great, he doesn't have a lot of guidance and he has no outlet for his rage and kind of jealousy at the other kids that have fun Gifts when he just has sticky spit. Daniel is kind of the opposite. I'd be lying if I said there wasn't a little catharsis in this for me as someone who was bullied, but that isn't why I wrote it. This is the other side of the coin. Eddie

is the smallest of small time villains, and Daniel is the smallest of small time heroes. Eddie terrorizes kids a few years younger than him, and Daniel saves them. Originally there was more Daniel in the stories as a whole, but he serves more as a distraction from the rest of the story, so I removed a few sections with him.

Section 5 is a section that probably hits closest to home to me personally. Over the course of this project, I was broken up with by my girlfriend of five years, which threw me off for quite some time. When I managed to find myself again, this section was one of the first things I wrote. Everyone in this story is heavily based upon a friend of mine: The character of Alan is supposed to be a stand in for me, and Violet is meant to be based on my now-ex girlfriend, Scott is an elementary school friend who dropped out of high school, and Manny is a gender swapped version of my friend Amanda. Past of the characters, the point of this is to really hammer in the point that the Gift of the person really do grow to match their environment. The town is strangling Violet, who struggles to heat up a single glass of beer, but Alan has grown from someone who could barely read thoughts to someone who can implant suggestions in someone's head. I felt it important to have a side-by-side comparison. Both of these characters grew up in this town, but one left to better himself and one stuck around. As a guy who has more in his world, he has grown into a pseudo-Professor X. Meanwhile, Violet has done very little since she graduated, she never left her hometown, and so her powers are as stunted as her growth as a person. To me, this feels like the most important section and the one with the strongest connection to the theme.

Though section 5 is the piece that was closer to home, section 6, "The Dread Lord," is the one I enjoyed writing the most. I enjoy Alistair Wentworth and Colin Frost immensely, just

these two old guys having an old feud, each bending the powers of the universe to have a better lawn than the other. This one is most heavily based upon a card game a friend of mine and I are working on. There could be something in there about life and death, and how the unrelenting earth doesn't care about their squabble or something along those lines, but the fact of the matter is that those are just the Gifts I chose for the characters. Both Colin and Alistair are New Avalon boys, they grew up there and never really left the town. As a result their powers are decidedly unimpressive. Alistair could raise the dead, but only vermin, and Colin can control plants, but only enough to tangle up the tiny feet of Alistair's undead rabbit legion. On the other hand, there is Mavis. She is from Germany, she's a woman of the world. She could also end this rather petty conflict with just a stomp and a withering glare.

The segment "The March of the plastic soldiers" is based on how I imagine a night in my neighborhood toy store would have gone if, hypothetically, the owner had a superpower. I decided to bring in Alan again to make the world feel more cohesive. This is a showdown between Alan and Jason and two nameless thugs. This section is another of the stagnant taking on the changed and losing terribly. Also, I thought it was fun to write about one of my favorite stores growing up coming to life.

The final segment "The Fox" is heavily based upon my maternal grandparents. I am not entirely convinced that Papa does not have the ability to talk to animals. George is based on his dog, a Shih-tsu/pomeranian mix named Mocha, who was a lot more high strung before Papa got his hands on the dog. I thought it would help the story to have an exact moment of manifestation of these Gifts I've wrote so much about. That is actually a modified story of my actual Grandpa's time in the coast guard. He did legitimately stop a fight with the words "If you don't

stop right now I'll pinch your head off." I thought it would be good to show the importance of the family in all of this. Eve is kind of overbearing, but well meaning. Though overjoyed that John has the true nature of his Gift revealed, she is pushing for more, probably because she is one of the driving factors in being sure he could discover all he could be. I felt it would be good to end the story with a family, and to show that it isn't a purely unilateral decision to make the most of yourself, it is what you are raised with as well.

I've heard the old cliché countless times: "Write what you know." I wish I could have included more female or minority experiences, but I would only be writing what I, a WASP, perceive as those experiences. However, what I do know is suburban life and superheroes. Over the course of this I have gone through so many paradigm shifts I'm surprised I never got whiplash from all the back and forth, but all in all I feel the message is there: Heroes aren't born, they are made by their times and what is required of them. In this collection, there are characters who stayed and characters who have left. The ones who have left have discovered the true nature of what they are given and now can better utilize it, and those who stayed cannot discover what they are capable of. Through my life and relationships thus far and especially over the past year, that is what I learned. So, that is what I wrote about. I just hope that the message showed through and, more importantly, that it is enjoyable reading.

Part 1: Don't freak out

June laid in bed, pajamas on, ready for bed.

To say it had been a long day would be an understatement. Her husband, Joe, recognized this immediately and commanded her to lay on the bed and watch reruns of M*A*S*H while he gave Jimmy his bath. There was the usual young tenor screeching "You got soap in my eyes!" as a calm baritone responded, "it's just water..."

June couldn't help but chuckle. The kid was a pain in the ass, but he was generally tolerable. You know, when it wasn't bathtime. This screeching was standard fare for bathtime, and Joe was far better at keeping his head.

That was why it was so unusual to suddenly hear him scream "Yeeowch!" from across the hall followed immediately but a loud, dull thump. "Joe...?" She said as she came just short of leaping out of the bed. She knew if she lost it, it would make the Jimmy freak out and there were no winners in that situation.

She took a few tentative steps forward and breathed a sigh of relief when she heard Joe moan and shout, "June, get in here!"

Her pulse quickened for the final five feet as she sprinted into the room to see Joe laying on the ground clutching his hand as Jimmy was on the brink of breaking into a sobbing fit in the tub. "Shhh...shhh, don't cry buddy," she said in a quavering voice as she tried her best to walk slowly to the tub to pick up her son to calm him down.

She was stopped by a hand on her ankle, "Hang on June, bad plan." Joe said as he twitched slightly on the ground.

June looked down and saw her husband try to rise to his feet despite the occasional muscle spasm. She reached her hands out to help him, and he took them readily. “Thanks honey.”

She nearly fell backwards when she saw his right hand. It was as though someone injected boiling water into his arm and it spread into every blood vessel into his arm, creating a magnificent crimson spider web pattern that could be confused for an intricate abstract tattoo for those who didn’t know Joe was petrified of needles.

“What happened?”

Through his twitching face, Joe beamed, “Well, the good news is our son’s Gift is awesome. The bad news is he’s a human battery it just had to come out when I was giving him a bath.”

June was still a bit panicked, but she felt her pulse slowing, “Oh, good. Know who else has an awesome Gift?” she asked.

She smiled as she ran a hand down her husband’s damaged arm. There was a warm, faint light from her palm as she did so, and the red marks disappeared like she was wiping them off of a dry erase board.

Joe’s twitches subsided as he took a deep breath in and out, “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Joe displayed his unscathed arm to his son, “See chief? No harm no fowl. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Jimmy sniffled, “I’m sorry daddy.”

“I’d hug you but the rubber gloves are downstairs. I’m gonna go get in my jammies now, when you’re dried off come give me a hug alright?”

Jimmy nodded. Joe pulled his wife to his chest and rested his chin on her shoulder, “Would you mind taking care of this? Being electrocuted sort of took a lot out of me,” he whispered in the embrace.

“No problem, what got done?”

“Hard stuff’s done, he just has to dry off. You’re the best.”

“I know.”

He chuckled as he released her and went into their bedroom, leaving the mother and her three year old son alone to finish the rituals. She was so glad all she had to do was pull a manual lever to pull the stop on the drain and not reach into the water, and Jimmy clapped excitedly as “Mr. Sucky Uppy,” the little whirlpool of the drain sucking down the water, appeared. She smiled as she watched his son as he sat riveted at the tub draining.

He was a special child.

She threw a towel on him, “Can you dry yourself off?”

He giggled, “Yeah.”

As he emulated Baloo from *The Jungle Book* as he dried his rear, June remembered the last time he decided to be more or less self-sufficient at bathtime, “Be sure to get the rest of you” she reminded.

After the embarrassingly long process of getting her almost-literal live wire of a son dry and in his pajamas, she marveled at him, “You have an amazing gift, and I’m sure it will get even better when you go away to school and figure it out.”

Jimmy looked incredulously at his mother, “I’m never gonna move out, I’m going to live here forever.”

June raised an eyebrow, “oh? And what if you decide to get married?”

He looked confused, “I’m never going to get married.”

“But what if you really love her?”

Jimmy slumped his shoulders in resignation, “Okay, I’ll get married.” He looked up and stuck out a defiant finger, “But I’m not going to kiss,” he said with all the conviction in the world.

She stifled a laugh. He was young, he had a fantastic Gift, and he’d want to know what else he could do.

She came back after studying, but she had left in the first place. Most people who grew up in the town of New Avalon grew old here, but there was usually a time in the middle where they go for soul searching.

He’d go. He had to.

Part 2: Mind Games

Earth special forces Lieutenant Jacob Williams was careful to roll his feet in order to make minimal noise as he padded through the pebbled ground in the ancient ruins of planet Karblak. He pointed towards the rusted ruins of the once-great United Galaxies tower. Nothing but the metal infrastructure was left. He had been sent to this planet at the center of the Milky Way galaxy to investigate the destruction of the Zarblaxian people. The Galactic army trusted only two people with this mission. First was him, for his daring exploits in the defense of Canis-3 had given him quite the credentials. Second was his lifelong friend and comrade: Lexus Frost, whose strength, loyalty, and determination had allowed her to power her way to her current rank.

As they approached the twisted skeleton that was all that remained of the magnificent tower, Williams found himself repeating the goal of the mission to calm his nerves: get in, get information, get out. He and Lexus had done it many times before, they would do it again.

Williams held a hand out to signal Frost to stop. He looked back at her and whispered “Anything could happen. Are you ready?”

Frost responded by straightening up, looking up to the summit of the building, and bellowing “Come out fight, Phineas Flame! We’re here to beat you and save the people!”

Frost held out her hands and a gale of arctic cold washed over the battlefield, the sudden change in air pressure making his ears pop and his nose run.

“Lexus, what are you doing?” Jacob Williamson scolded, shivering and brandishing his rifle.

Alexa Frost tilted her head at him, confused. “I’m distracting Phineas Flame so you can save the people?”

“No Lex, we’re exploring the ruins of the United Galaxies building on the planet Zarblak. You’re ruining the surprise!”

“Good, I’ll distract him and you get the prisoners! You can fly, after all.”

“Wait...hang on, pause.”

“What’s wrong, Jake?” Alexa Frost asked as she adjusted the bucket on her head.

The two children stood side by side in the backyard of their school. Though school had been out for a few hours at that point, the playground they stood under twisted up to the sky in its vibrantly-colored glory.

Jake crossed his arms, “We said no Gifts during space adventure.”

Alexa raised her eyebrows and shook her head, “We aren’t playing space adventure. Right now I want to play superheroes.”

“Then why are you wearing the helmet?”

“What, this?” Alexa asked, tapping the bucket, “It’s the frost helmet, it’s the source of my magic powers. I thought you had your magic staff?”

Jake brandished his stick, “No, no, this is my class-III laser rifle. My father gave it to me, and I’m going to use it to get revenge on the guy who killed him. If we’re doing superheroes why am I wearing a helmet?”

Alexa shrugged “I thought it was because you can fly and you want to protect your head if you crash. You won’t do as well loopy. Also your Mom told you that you had to if we were going to play since you bumped your head a few months ago.”

Jake raised a finger to dispute, but quickly realized he had no counterargument, so he folded his arms and grumbled, “I just don’t want to play superheroes. We played superheroes yesterday.”

Alexa threw her arms to her sides and her head to the sky with a dramatic sigh, “We played space adventure, like, three days straight before that. Can’t we play superheroes this time? We’ve done space adventure too much, I’m getting tired of it.”

Jake flopped into the sun-baked gravel, then yelped as he realized how sun-baked it was. A gust of wind lifted him a few feet off the ground and landed him on his feet, but barely. “But I don’t wanna play superheroes, it’s always the same thing.”

“Space adventure is the same. We go in, we fight, we almost die, but we get away.”

Jake stomped his foot, “That’s not true.”

“Yeah, sometimes one of us dies so the other can get away, then we come back to life later. Besides, would you rather be a sad army guy or a guy who can control wind?”

“But I can already control wind, I’m not a space hero.”

“You aren’t a superhero either, but we both could be superheroes one day. Don’t you want practice?”

Jake looked thoughtful as he climbed up the cherry-red ladder, accelerating as he realized how hot it was, then released a gust of wind behind him to get to the top, which was a

tad strong for his small body so after a small, sloppy flip he crashed his back into a plastic steering wheel reminiscent of a pirate ship.

All in all, one of his better landings.

Every now and again he took a sharp breath in as if to retort, then slowly let it out as he spun the wheel ever faster. Alexa smiled “So...how about it Cyclone? With your wind powers and my cold powers we can save the day?”

“Only because I’m sick of fighting with you.”

Alexa grinned ear to ear and shrugged, “I’ll take it.”

In one second, Alexa’s face took on a face of stony determination, “Phineas Flame, face me! Cyclone, get the hostages!”

Jake sighed as he held his arms out and walked in circles as she punched at the air. With each circle he grumbled less and his eyes grew more intense. He listened to his friend bark challenges and scream all the profanities a third-grade vocabulary could muster to their imagined foe. He snickered to himself as he listened to her. *She sounds crazy*, he thought, snickering.

Gradually his strides grew longer and his gaze grew intently. Eventually, his eyes fixed on the slide tower on the other side of the jungle gym.

“Hold on, I’m coming!” shouted Cyclone, King of the air.

The wind whipped his face as he flew to the penthouse suite of the Flame corporation. He had always found the bright red tower an eyesore, he hoped that after they put Flame away for good they could paint it something different. While his loyal companion Frost distracted the big guy, he would get the hostages he held for a 1 trillion dollar ransom.

He gazed to the ground below, watching orange-clad henchmen being buried in snow. He raised his eyebrows as he watched her almost brutally bury waves of henchmen in piles of ice and snow. “Glad she’s on my side,” he muttered to himself as he ascended into the clouds.

As Cyclone gazed heroically at the top-floor apartment of Phineas Flame he laughed “Fear not! I...I...”

He looked back at his partner in the midst of battle. She looked like she was having a hard time. Cyclone dove down at the fight with determination in his eyes. He looked at Frost and saw annoyance in hers, “Come on, I told you to get the prisoners.”

Jake pouted, “I don’t wanna get the hostages. They’re boring, I just run around the jungle gym while you fight the bad guy.”

Alexa crossed her arms, “It isn’t my fault I’m the better fighter.”

“Actually it is, you made up a bad guy you fight better than me.”

“Well then what do we want to do?”

Jake opened his mouth and Alexa pointed at him, “And don’t say space adventure again or I’m going home.”

Jake scratched his chin and paced back and forth. “Pokemon?”

“Meh.”

“Hunger Games?”

“I don’t want to fight you.”

Jake huffed and scratched his head, looking around for some form of inspiration. He paled as he looked over her shoulder. “Um...Alexa? What about ninjas?”

Part 3: The Character Adjustment Specialist

Eddie Vera despised the term “bully.” It implied some sort of idiot who was more muscle than personality and who always had to compensate for something. He didn’t have to compensate for anything, especially not his pathetic excuse for a Gift, no sir. No, he heard his father use some huge business words that he smashed together: “Character adjustment specialist.” It sounded important.

The only character flaw he would confess to would be that he was bored. He didn’t want to sit still for video games or TV were all the same and he had no interest in sports. His gift wouldn’t let him fly like some of the kids, he couldn’t shoot ice or fire. All he could do was spit freaking tar. This was all he had, so he had to make the best of it.

As soon as he saw his beet-red jungle gym he went through his mental checklist. Head up. Chest out. Shoulders back. You only have once chance to make a good first impression, that’s what dad always said before he left for the day.

He saw the two of them. Second, maybe third graders from the look of it. He didn’t care. He considered himself progressive, he didn’t discriminate whether they were two or three grades or years younger than him. They all scrambled the same when he came anyway. The key was the shirt. His dad got it at a concert a long time ago, right after Eddie was born. It was some sort of greenish-brownish hue. He didn’t know if it was supposed to be like that or if it was because he never washed it. The design on it was already so faded, he just knew he would lose it if it took one more round in the washing machine. It was his trademark. It would have been his mouth that was as black as the tar he could spit, but that was only the inside of his mouth. If it

had spread to his lips he knew he'd be the one being adjusted. Kids went running when they saw that bizarre color and faded logo on that old t-shirt he always wore.

Case in point, the two kids sprinted to the top of the slide and tried to hide in the plastic medieval facade. Eddie could have just sprinted up there, but if there was one thing horror movies had taught him, it was all about building up suspense.

Eddie climbed up the bars on the side to get on the gym proper. He took his time and made a conscious effort to be sure every step was heard. He whistled a jaunty tune to himself as he let each step rattle the rubber-coated chains. After each step he took a second to enjoy the frantic whispering from the slide tower. He grinned wider and wider as he grew closer and closer.

When he got to the tower's stairs, he made the loudest steps he possibly could. At about the second step up the two of them slid down at nearly the same time. He followed suit, laughing the whole way as menacingly as he could muster.

As soon as they hit the ground, the kids ran together. In a way, he was disappointed they didn't scatter. That would have made it more fun to catch them. At the same time, it was nice of them to run side-by-side. It was easier to grab each of them by their shirts and drag them back to the jungle gym as they struggled. "What do you want?" The boy demanded

"You to shut up!" Eddie growled through his manic grin.

"We weren't doing anything!" the girl complained

"You were on my jungle gym," Eddie barked

Without a warning, the boy slipped out of his shirt and started sprinting away. Enraged, Eddie dropped the girl and sprinted after him. He was fast, but Eddie managed to tackle him easily. If only the other guys could see him now.

The boy squirmed, but the year or two's age difference gave Eddie a significant advantage. He flipped the struggling boy onto his back and pinned him down by the shoulders. Eddie straddled the boy, glowering at him as he started to gather snort and hork mucus into his mouth.

“Eddie, please.”

Sneeeert... Kid was going to need some industrial solvent to get this off.

“Don't do it”

Snoooooort... One of the nice things about having a pathetic Gift is that nothing was serious enough to be truly criminal. He was suspended right now anyway, what were they gonna do, suspend him harder?

“Come on Eddie, stop being such a jerk.”

Hooorkkk... “Say Uncle” he gurgled as a line of obsidian spit descended slowly from his lip.

The boy squirmed and struggled but Eddie was nowhere close to tired. “Say it...”

The spit went yet lower. The boy's arm slipped out from the pin but Eddie caught it again. The spit shook lower, Eddie's stomach was feeling a little upset.

Seeing this, the boy closed his mouth and stopped moving. Eddie chuckled, “Say Uncle.”

The boy's mouth was cemented shut with fear. Smart kid, he did not want to swallow this stuff.

Inches from the boy's face and Eddie couldn't help but smile as the kid closed his mouth. He knew what was coming. Let no one say he wasn't consistent.

Suddenly, Eddie felt his stomach lurch. Was he sick all of a sudden? He didn't eat anything rotten, nor did he have allergies, and he hadn't been near anyone sick. Still, he had felt this before. Before he got held back a year, back when he had picked on...

Oh shit he thought to himself, *it's him*.

The spit fell, but Eddie fell to his side wrenching out his lunch. Suddenly he found himself on his back with a pain in his side and a foot on his chest.

Part 4: The young hero

Daniel was kind of embarrassed for the poor spectacle he had pinned to the ground, body quivering with each time his stomach jumped to eject the rotten food that was not when he ate it. Even though he looked smaller than your average sixth-grader, he and Daniel should have been in the same grade. That is, if the guy was smarter than your average rock. His Gift was simple, turning his spit into tar, but he was sure there had to be more to it. He believed Eddie only got past fourth grade because the teacher was tired of dealing with him, but the fifth grade teacher was stern and knew she could go another round. Honestly, Daniel could really empathize with the poor educators. He hated having to deal with this punk for more than five minutes.

When he went out for his run this morning, all he wanted was to stay in shape for next season. He did not want his kid sister running up to tell him Eddie fucking Vera was picking on her and her friend. On the bright side, he got to practice a little trick he'd been experimenting with for a while. Little of his entropy, little of the lunch sitting in Blackmouth's stomach, and next thing you know that sandwich was rotted instantly and the asshole's body was doing everything in its power to get it out. He kicked Vera onto his stomach. He didn't want to drown him in his own vomit, after all.

His sister immediately went to her friend and asked, "Are you okay?"

He just nodded in response and shuffled backwards almost like a crab, away from the conflict and tried to pull the tar off his face. Daniel's sister followed.

Daniel put a little more weight on his foot.

"Hey there Black Mouth, What'cha up to?"

“Fuck off, Frost. Aren’t you a bit old to be hanging around an elementary school? Sick fuck.”

Daniel whistled, “Geez, do they call you Black mouth because of your spit or the language? Are you a bit old to still be in elementary school?”

“Fuck. Off.”

“I was about to tell you the same thing. I don’t know if you need to make up for your brain or your dick by picking on kids like this, but it isn’t cool.”

“F-”

Daniel put a bit more weight on his foot and held out a hand, “if you curse around these kids again I’m gonna start on your organs.”

Eddie coughed, “You think I’m scared of you, Frost?”

Daniel chuckled, “I think you’ve felt a taste of my Gift, so unless you want to go through that times twelve you’ll listen.”

Daniel was a terrible liar, and Eddie gave a dirty smile at his terrible poker face.

“F-”

In order to add weight to his bluff, Daniel took a handful of grass and held it in front of Eddie’s face, then focused his energy on them. They browned, withered, and rotted through his fingers, dripping through them as they turned into stinking ichor, “For once in your sad life, you had better think of what’s coming out of your mouth.”

He fell silent.

“So, I’m going to lift my foot. You’re going to get up, walk off, and leave my little sister and her friend to do what they want on the jungle gym. Clear?”

He stuck out his chin defiantly and before he had a chance to respond, Daniel put his full weight on his chest for a second.

“Clear?”

Eddie wheezed, “Clear.”

Daniel relented and Eddie staggered to his feet and gave him the finger. Daniel responded by making a false start towards him and watching him sprint away.

“And be sure to get something to eat there, champ, but check the expiration date this time!” he called back.

His sister’s friend was writing on the ground, the tar having fallen on his mouth along with some chunks of what looked like carrots. “Oop, hang on there, buddy.” he said as he placed a hand on the fresh tar, or whatever it was that Vera could spit. Within thirty seconds it dried, cracked, and broke away as the kid gasped for breath.

His sister came closer. “Th...thanks Dan.”

He inhaled sharply and exhaled slowly, “Yeah, no problem. Try not to get in any more trouble, alright? I don’t want my life to just be bailing you out all the time.”

“It wasn’t our fault-”

“I never said it was, you just know how much of a butt head he is.”

His sister just stared at him. He realized at this point that he had raised his voice and was just shy of shouting. He backed up a few steps and fidgeted with his hands. “Look...you two are good kids. I wish that jerk wasn’t around but he is. I’m going to high school soon, I won’t be able to cover you so much.”

“I know, Danny. Thank you.”

Her friend nodded, head downcast.

The corners of Daniel's mouth turned up as he patted his sister on the shoulder. She smiled and nodded before he turned and continued his jog. He could probably stand to go home. He was almost done anyway and even though Eddie was kind of a weasel and he would do it again in a heartbeat, using his Gift still took a lot out of him.

Part 5: Separate ways

When Alan had made the offhanded remark of moving in together with Violet, he didn't think it would spiral into this. He drove up from Outcault Academy to win her back, and here they sat at the brewery, dark beer in front of him and mixed drink in front of her. He didn't know what to say. This was the day meant to commemorate the day he first put his arm around her in high school all those years ago.

"I just don't understand," he said into his stout, "I thought we were good, you were so happy at comic con."

She sighed, "I was, but we just don't feel like a couple anymore."

"I never felt that."

"When you first went away it was a treat to see you. Then I just lost emotion until I was going to see you. Then...nothing."

Alan sighed, "I know."

She put her hands on either side of her head in disbelief, "You didn't."

Alan backed up, "What? No. Jesus, I promised when we started I'd never go in unless you invited me. Geez, you used to trust me. Guess that's how I felt this coming, you know?"

She relaxed a bit, "Yeah."

They sat in silence for a while. Alan snickered and slid his drink to the center of the table, "Do you mind? These things taste better at room temperature."

Violet gave a puff of air from her nose and smiled. She held her hand out and touched the glass. She contorted her face into a focused expression, then for just a second her hand

glowed like molten iron. When Alan reached his hand out, the glass was just slightly below room temperature. “Thanks babe - shit sorry, this is going to take some getting used to.”

“It’s okay.”

“Hey Alan,” said a voice from behind. Alan froze and a look of horror went across Violet’s face.

Alan took a long drink of his beer, not being able to enjoy the improved taste as he plastered a smile on his face, “Heeyyyy, Scott. It’s been a while.”

His elementary school friend walked up and put his greasy hand on Alan’s back. It was everything he could do to keep from visibly cringing. “How have you been?”

“Oh you know, I’m just here for the weekend, I’ve been going to Outcault Academy, pre-law.”

Alan halfway thought about using his gift to see what it would take to get Alan to go away and leave this tender moment, but decided to have some courtesy

“Sweet man, you want to hang out while you’re here?”

“Sorry, I’m planning on helping my grandma with yard work tomorrow.”

“Oh alright, when are you going to be back up?”

“Not sure, class keeps me pretty busy.”

“Oh cool, what are you taking?”

Alan sighed and leaned back. He couldn’t deal with this right now. Time to break his own rule. He closed his eyes and relaxed.

“Oh just a few literature classes, I’ve always loved reading you know.”

He looked into Scott's eyes and let himself slip into his head, into the realm of Scott's thought. He had tried this a few years ago, but back then he would let himself get swept up into the current, losing himself in the mind of another.

Now, he just slipped past, memory and information floating by like leaves in the wind. These were Scott's hopes, his memories, his ambitions. Alan heard them whisper, but he dodged them rather effortlessly as he moved on to the stream of Scott's subconsciousness. All he had to do was whisper three simple words into the rapid current, "He looks busy."

Alan blinked as he returned to his own head. His vision cleared again to see Scott's grinning face, unaware that anything had happened.

Scott clapped his hands together, "Alright, well I won't keep you," he said as he began to back up.

Alan looked up and offered a hand, "Thanks man, Good seeing you."

Scott took the hand and shook it, "You too."

Once he was out of earshot, Violet shot Alan a death glare, "You didn't."

"Look, this is a tender moment, I just...gave him a gentle, subconscious reminder."

"He didn't look like he knew anything happened."

"He didn't. I'm not the best at everything, but this is something I've gotten very good at."

Violet sighed, "When we met you couldn't have done that."

Alan scratched his head, "That's what I'm worried about, Violet. That right there. This town, this place, it has gravity. You have to get out when you have momentum or you'll never escape."

“I don’t want to escape.”

“There’s nothing for you here. You can work at a restaurant or in retail, you’ll never be able to make the most of your Gift like I’m learning to. That isn’t the future I want for you.”

“Alan, my family is here.”

“And you can come back and visit. Please, I only want you to realize your potential. You don’t even need to come with me, just get out of here. You think my parents or Mr. Frost or Old Man Wentworth would be able to do anything if they never pushed themselves?”

Silence fell over the table. Alan took a sip of his beer, then raised his eyebrows and nodded, “This really is better closer to room temperature, want to give it a try?”

“I don’t like beer,”

“I’m not asking you to like it I’m asking you to try it.”

“That’s alright.”

Alan shrugged, “Your loss, this thing has one hell of an alcohol content. Definitely not driving home tonight.”

Violet snickered.

Alan continued, “It’s just...I don’t know. It was always supposed to be us. We’ve gone through so much, I don’t want to see it end.”

“I know.”

“I know you want to study sign language, and there’s nothing like that here, you’d have more luck in a city.”

“Actually there’s a lot of demand for something here. I’ve met deaf people who wish there was a deaf association or translators here but there isn’t, so they need to pay out of pocket for an expensive translator.”

Alan took another sip, “I didn’t know that. I’m sorry. Still though, you can’t get your degree here. You’ll have to go out, you need to see more of the world, experience more of life. New Avalon...it’s great to grow up in or grow old in. But when you’re young, when you need to find yourself, it can only hold you back. I know you’ve been depressed since you had all that family pass away. I mean clinically depressed, by the way. I think it runs in your family, and as a fellow sufferer I can say with one hundred percent certainty that staying here and maintaining the same old status quo living with a family that’s always mourning and playing mom to your sister when your mom won’t...well, that’s a great way to wind up like...” Alan turned his head to see if he could reference to Scott, but decided the door he went through would do, “Well you know. There’s nothing for you here.”

Violet sucked her lips in and nodded, “I know, I’m working on it. I told my parents I have to work on me, but that means I have to do it alone. You can’t do it for me.”

“I don’t want to do it for you, I know I can’t, I just want to be there for you. I don’t need to spearhead the charge, but I want to be behind you clapping the coconuts together.”

Violet chuckled.

“See? Come on, let me be with you. I don’t like seeing you like this.”

“I know.”

For a long time there was silence. Each of the two looked at each other, neither wanting to be the one to address the elephant in the room.

Alan sighed and decided he had to be the one, “This isn’t just a break, is it?”

Violet shook her head.

“We aren’t getting back together, are we?”

Violet shook her head again.

Alan took a long drink from his beer.

“Can I show you something?” he said, pulling out his phone and shuffling through the video gallery.

She nodded.

“This is my friend Manny, met him at Academy. You’re a lot alike. He even has the same Gift, check this out.”

A young man was on the screen. He was tall and built like a truck, but his sparse, patchy facial hair nearly revealed a face that would have ruined any effect his build may have had. In the background Alan could be heard laughing and talking incomprehensibly.

“He can heat stuff up too,” Alan explained, “but also so much more. He’s got a hell of a party trick.

The young man in the video was standing in a driveway with a cast iron fire pit, sprinkling gasoline onto a small pile of wood. Behind him was a card table with eight shot glasses sitting on it.

He spat on the pyre and it instantly burst into flame, to which the camera had a rough time adjusting. He laughed as he stuck one massive hand into the fire and pulled out a flame. Not a flaming object, he pulled the fire itself from the pit and began to play with it, dancing,

juggling, and spelling words and drawing pictures in the air, and this show was capped by him clapping his hands and the flames scattering into each of the shot glasses behind him.

Alan pulled his phone back and stopped the video, stopping the cheering of the unseen crowd.

“When I met him he could only make hot chocolate without a microwave. Now he does that. He was challenged, he went away from home, and now he found the true nature of his Gift. That’s all I ever wanted for you.”

Violet sighed, “I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but I can’t do that.”

Alan sighed.

“So that’s that, then?”

“I guess.”

“I came up to win you back, you know.”

“I know.”

Alan finished his beer and slapped a few dollars on the table, “You good?”

Violet took the last few mouthfuls from her drink, “Yeah.”

“I’ll walk you to your car.”

As Violet and Alan were walking to the park in which she was parked, Alan was assaulted with memories of the past five years. He remembered the countless walks they took around the village, holding hands and talking about their future. He remembered months ago when they went to Columbus Con as Peter Venkman and Dana from Ghostbusters. All with the woman next to him.

He had spent his entire adult life with her. She was the constant in whatever he had planned for the future.

Yet, for some reason, he wasn't angry. He wanted to be bitter, he wanted to want to forget the great times they had together.

Even so, the strange part is, even though she was possibly leaving him forever, he felt no bitterness or resentment towards her.

He had to get his mind off it, "You're good to drive right?"

"Yeah, those pretzels took the edge off, I'm fine."

As they reached her car, he caught her in possibly their last embrace, "You know what the hardest part about this is? I don't regret a second I spent with you. I wouldn't trade a moment for the world."

They stood there for a while, then she pushed him away and held his arms, "You have to promise me you'll find someone who makes you feel the way I did."

Alan nodded and hugged her again, "Thanks for coming. I needed that off my chest."

Violet smiled, "I'm glad you said what you had to."

Alan released her and backed away, "Goodbye, Violet."

Violet cast her eyes down to the ground and sighed, then looked up again, "Goodbye, Alan. Thanks for the drink."

"Any time. If you ever need anything, just let me know, alright?"

She nodded, "I will."

Part 6: The Dread Lord

Alistair Wentworth sat in his throne, bifocals on his nose as he read through the newspaper. He chuckled at Frank and Ernest. He didn't care what people said, he enjoyed the art of the pun. He always tried to save the funny pages for last, but he just couldn't help himself.

Flipping through the pages he saw that it was puppy day at the library. He wished he could get a new puppy, his old dog was getting a tad...skeletal and decomposed for him to rationalize keeping it around. That and it was far too obedient. Having a dog is no fun unless you have to clean up the odd mess.

The things you learn when you're a necromancer are astounding.

He snapped his fingers and the late german shepherd did it's usual mix of trot and stumble into the room to meet the old man's hand. He had had dogs before, but none had been as wonderful as Bluto. It was a pity when the cancer had gotten the best of him, but at least he was still walking around. Admittedly by the power of his own Gift, but he couldn't bear to part with his old friend. He was fully aware it was an unhealthy attachment, but he didn't care.

He had the dog sit on his feet. It didn't warm the feet, but it warmed his heart just a tad. He skipped over classifieds. He remembered a time he may have glanced over them, but that time had passed.

He looked at some of the ads, amazed at the desperate lengths to which people would get for a buck. Apparently in this economy, the thing that receded most was people's pride. He chuckled at the thought, he'd have to tell Edgar that one when they met for cards next.

Ah, finally, the obituaries. He skimmed the page quickly to see if anyone he knew was on the page and was a little upset that everyone was still breathing. He folded the paper up and

put it to the side. He looked out the back window at the sun setting over the house across the street and smiled. He loved this time of day. The way the sun would set at this golden hour over his bed of forget-me-nots, his fire breathing snapdragons, and especially the roses was nothing short of magnificent. If he felt so inclined, he could have gotten out a canvas, some paints, and have immortalized the house of Colin Frost, maybe have even sold it for a hefty sum.

He watched a band of children walk down the street, then suddenly grow silent and cross to the other side of the road as they got to the front of his house. He didn't complain about the quiet, but he wondered why they thought it necessary.

He smiled as he watched the sun sink deeper and deeper until the streetlights went on and the crickets began their evening song. He took a sip of his coffee as he saw the lights of the houses go out one by one until as far as he knew he was the only one left conscious. His hands fumbled on either side of his chair. On his left he fumbled until he felt the cool, jeweled handle of his cane, and on his right he felt around the end table until he felt the soft ivory of his pipe. He put the stem into his mouth as he filled it with tobacco, reveling in the sweet odor as he lit it up and inhaled deeply. Perhaps the fact that it was shaped like a skull set the kids off enough to merit them running off.

Time to get to work.

The dog loped behind him as he pulled out the cast iron key to his reinforced basement door. He knew he was probably going a bit overboard with the skull imagery with the pipe and now on the key, but he wasn't about to deny what he was, he may as well accept it and move on.

He turned it in the lock, then muttered a small charm under his breath to get the magical lock to click. A bit paranoid, perhaps. However, he felt like the basement of a necromancer merited a bit more security than your average garden shed.

He needed a bit of help from Bluto to pull the door open. He swore it got heavier each and every time he had to do this. He held the railing with one hand and slowly descended down the cobblestone staircase. It wasn't necessary, but he liked the ambiance if he was going to confront the literal skeletons in his closet.

He rubbed the jewel on the handle of his cane to pour his power into the earth and the bones scattered about began to rattle. The gemstone began to glow as he muttered a chant, and the bones began to form into a shape. His voice crescendoed until his bass seemed to rattle the walls, and he lifted his cane over his head and struck the ground. The bones of all those Bluto had killed hopped up, ready to serve their master. He led the skeletons upstairs, then to the front door, then thinking better of it through the kitchen to the back.

He was already on thin ice with his neighbors, at least this way it would look slightly less awful.

He took the clattering bones through the back door. He opened the gate and looked either way. The streets were clear. He pointed the bottom of his cane towards his neighbors house. All those weeks of preparation, collecting the bones and preparing his mind to command a legion, came down to this moment. He narrowed his eyes and silently willed his minions to attack.

The skeletons of all those pesky rabbits who attacked his vegetables were more than happy to oblige.

He watched gleefully as they uprooted the flowers, chewed them, and wrecked general mayhem on the once beautiful lawn. The rodents were as destructive in death as they were in life.

That is, until the lawn itself began to fight back.

The stems and roots of the plants sprung to life, growing to restrain and constrict each twitching form. Alistair shrunk back to his back yard as Colin Frost appeared in the doorway of his home. Though nearly as old as Alistair, he was strong, as old and resilient as an evergreen tree. “Evening Wentworth, these pests sure are bad this year aren’t they?”

Alistair cursed under his breath as he emerged from behind his fence, “Yeah, they’ve been pretty bad this year.”

Colin walked outside and raised the hammer over his head, then brought it down straight down onto the skull of one of the older rabbits. The bones collapsed. “Yeah, it always seems to get bad once the neighborhood declares its beautiful lawn competition, I always have to rush to fix the damage.”

Swing. Crunch.

Alistair felt the whiplash of power returning to his body as each corpse died for the second and final time, but he smiled, “Yeah, well it is that time of the year, breeding season.”

Crunch.

Colin nodded, “That’s true, but I haven’t seen any warrens around here. Truly a strange happenstance, you’d almost think they were specifically after my yard.”

“But that would be ridiculous.”

“Is it though?” Crunch. “Yours seems to be pretty pristine, what’s your secret?”

“Marigolds...?”

Colin sighed and leaned on his hammer, “Look, Alistair, I’m not blind, I know a zombie rabbit when I see one. It was a worthy attempt, but you’re going to have to be a tad more cunning if you’re going to beat a floramancer in a lawn competition.”

Alistair shook his cane in fury, “Damn you and your Gift, Frost! Some of us have to work for our lawn!”

Colin pushed his glasses to his forehead and rubbed his face, “Wentworth, every year. We do this every year when the neighborhood lawn competition -”

“And I’ll keep doing it until you stop cheating!”

If Alistair wasn’t outraged, he would have felt a small tremor in the earth.

“Using your gift isn’t cheating!” Colin yelled.

“Yours should be! Rest of us have to make do with what we have, but you can just make plants do what you want!”

The earth was visibly shaking.

Colin didn’t seem to notice in his rage, “Asshole, I didn’t choose my Gift or yours!”

The door of the house next to Colin’s flew open and an older, sturdy looking woman burst through the door, face twisted into a look of angry annoyance. She took the steps down to the ground, then lifted her foot high and stomped. The resulting quake caused the lawns of both of the men’s lawns to shake and soften, sucking every plant down to each blade of grass into the dirt until the yards of each old man were nothing more than pits of mud.

Both Colin and Alistair fell silent, withering under the glance of the unelected neighborhood matriarch, Lena Hoffman. “There! Now neither one of you gets to win!” She

shouted, angry enough that her normally disguised German accent began to leak through, “Now will you shut up and let the neighborhood sleep? For the love of Christ, ever since Matthew and I moved here you two have been going at it!”

Alistair looked like he was about to protest, but Lena shot him a glance that caused his mouth to nearly sew itself shut.

“This stops. Now.”

Alistair looked as though he was about to protest, but Lena looked him in the eyes and the words died in his throat.

“Let me know if I’m not being clear enough.”

Alistair whimpered.

Colin coughed, “I think we’re good, Lena, thank you.”

Mavis shot Lena a look, “You’re welcome. Now go to bed. You two are old, we farts need our beauty rest.”

Part 7: March of the Plastic Soldiers

Jason waved goodbye to his last customer as he turned the sign on his door to the “closed” side. 9 pm was closing time for Floyd’s Toys. He sighed as he took out his list to take inventory. First, the front: Fake lottery tickets, fake dog poop, fake vomit, fake parking tickets, your one stop shop for a sense of humor in this boring town.’

In the back, the toys of his namesake. Not everyone appreciated the WWE and superhero action figures, but those were why he became an entrepreneur in the first place.

He was looking at stuff in the back room, a tiny little closet he painted to look like the TARDIS from Doctor Who when he heard the glass shatter.

He felt the air from inside come into his store.

“He’s gone ri-ght?” spoke a male voice that powered through a pubescent voice crack.

“Yeah man, he closed up an hour ago, I’m sure he’s gone by now.”

Jesus had he been here that long after closing? He had to get rid of some inventory. Just not like this

“I’m telling you, we take a few of these things, we’ll be swimming in cash. Good as gold to some people.”

Well, the kid, wasn’t wrong, but Jason doubted these little jagoffs knew the collector community at all. Jason palmed his phone, ready to dial 911. His finger hovered over the call button as he heard his display cases break. Then, mind rushing with possibility, he stopped, closed the dialer, and opened the music app. A wicked grin spread across his face. He turned on the store’s sound system, housed in that very room, and turned on “March of the Toys” from *Babes in Toyland*.

He heard them curse in surprise, “The hell?”

“It’s nothing man, keep going.”

Bad move, kiddos, he thought to himself as he grabbed a Voltron action figure from the wall. He focused his energy on it and whispered, “Live.”

The eyes lit up of their own accord. He didn’t have much of an army back here, but a plush Yoda, Voltron, a few superheros, and four “Miracle Action Jesus” action figures he hid back here would have to be enough to start. He just hoped to god they weren’t locals. Certain other Gifts could complicate things

That sounds of surprise quickly dulled and were replaced by the sounds of crunching plastic.

Jason listened and laughed at the cursing, but they weren’t as spooked as he thought, they weren’t leaving. He was hoping to do something pulled from *Toy Story*, but instead it was more along the lines of the toy version of *Les Miserables*. He just wanted to do scare them straight, he didn’t want some kids going to jail and wrecking their lives over some stupid mistake.

Suddenly it all fell silent. Jason rushed out from the TARDIS to see the two boys close to manhood, ski masks on, bags full of toys, but having the whole robbery thing a little bit backwards.

They were putting all of the action figures back on the shelves, arranging them as they had found them, one even licking a finger and rubbing a smudge off of a Randy Savage.

Standing behind them was one of his favorite regulars from when he got started, Alan Hunter. Alan grinned, “Hey Jason, how have you been? Dropped by to see if the stomping grounds were open, guess these guys thought so.”

Jason took a few cautious steps back, “The hell?”

“Yeah, I didn’t choose a Gift that’s morally grey, but it can be useful. I try to go without, but it looked like you needed this one.”

Jason chuckled, “Yeah, wow, good timing.”

Alan shrugged, “I always had a knack, probably why I’m trying to figure this out at Outcault Academy.”

“Yeah, but wow. When I met you you’d just read minds then need to rest.”

“Sometimes I wish it would have stayed that way,” Alan sighed.

They sat in silence for a while watching the two teens put their score back where they found it. Jason smiled, “I remember when I was still raw. Could only do one thing at a time for maybe five minutes.”

“Wow, and now you’re going *Small Soldiers* on their ass.”

“Oh don’t even get me started on that movie.”

What followed was a lengthy analysis of the film as two criminals cleaned up their mess. As they finished their cleanup, Alan looked directly at them. Jason saw Alan’s eyes roll back in their sockets.

The two teens pulled their masks off, looked directly at the camera, smiled, and waved.

“Want them to leave their IDs?” Alan asked.

Jason shivered. This was as creepy as it was helpful, “I don’t know how necessary it is with the camera, but it couldn’t hurt.”

Alan nodded, then the two men took out their wallets, removed their drivers licenses from them, then they walked out the way they came.

“Can either of those guys repair a window?”

Alan raised his eyebrows, then shook his head, “One can vibrate his body fast enough to shatter glass, and the other...” He laughed, “Wow, really? That’s still all he’s got? Explosive snot. Not even high explosive, more like those little poppers you throw at the fourth of July. That’s why they were just stomping around, if they used their Gifts they’d have been freaking useless.”

Jason sighed, “Damn.”

Alan’s eyes returned to normal, “I’m sure you could get something from the inevitable suit.”

“Yeah.”

They talked about the legal options, neither one overly familiar with the law, then Alan said, “I knew them, you know. Back in the day. They came in right before I graduated. Rode the bus with me in middle school. They were dicks then, too. I mean at one point they jumped me and a friend in the park, remember Kevin?”

Jason raised his eyebrows, “Really, they just jumped on you and Kevin?”

Alan chuckled, “Yeah, nothing came out of it, some lady was there and yelled at all of us. Not surprised to see they’re robbing a toy store and their Gifts aren’t all that impressive.”

Jason sat on the counter, “It is sad though. Seeing those young people waste their potential like that. I kind of don’t want to press charges.”

Alan cracked his knuckles, “That’s your call, Jace, I did tell them to walk away but I can’t make a long standing habit. They may be back.”

Jason pulled a phaser from *Star Trek* from a shelf and pulled the trigger, causing it to release sounds from the TV show, “This is their chance to turn their lives around. They’d better hope they don’t show up again.”

Part 8: The Fox

Will took a sip from his diet soda as he lounged on his back porch, watching his black fox sprint around the gated portion of his massive backyard. He took a deep breath in and let it out slowly, smiling. It was a good day to be alive.

“Hey.”

And there it goes.

“Hey.”

He heard the fence jingle as the fox started jumping at the fence.

“Hey.”

He sighed, “Quiet, George.”

“HOW CAN I BE QUIET DO YOU EVEN SEE THIS?” The fox screamed in it’s husky tenor.

Will rubbed his eyes, “Man oh man, George, calm down, it’s just John.”

“WHAT’S HE DOING?”

“He’s here to help Eve with the computer I think.”

“WHY?”

He sighed and rose to his feet, “Come here, you.”

He sauntered up to the fox and lifted it off it’s feet, then gently scratched behind its ears, “Feel better?”

The fox sighed, “yeah.”

Will went to his porch and sat, putting George in his lap. There were a few seconds of respite before the back door opened and George squirmed and leapt out of his lap, barking incomprehensibly. “Yes, hello George, it’s good to see you too.”

His grandson scratched behind the fox’s ear, and it slowly leaned into the hand and groaned contentedly. John laughed, “Hey Papa. George is in pretty rare form today, what’s he saying?”

Will listened to the contented moaning as the small canine enjoyed the attention and smiled, “He’s just happy to see you.”

John picked the fox up and cradled it in his arms, scratching its belly as he sat down.

“You get the computer thing fixed?”

John chuckled, “Yeah, I just had to modify the resolution.”

Will raised an eyebrow and nodded, “Ah,” it sounded easy enough.

His grandson made it sound so simple, and then there was Will who felt like the damn thing was going to catch on fire every time he turned it on. He remembered the old days, he didn’t need that.

John broke the silence, “Oh, not sure if Mom told you, but I caught a mugger the other day.”

Will gave a small smile, “Really now?”

“Yep, was walking home late and I heard some sketchy stuff. Big guy threatening another guy with an aluminum bat.”

The back porch opened and Eve walked out. Both of the men looked back, “You telling him about your heroics?” She asked, grinning.

John beamed, nodding.

“Did you tell him about-”

“I was getting to it.”

“Oh that’s my favorite part!”

“Well, I tried to get him to stop, he tried to take the bat upside my head, but you know how that song and dance goes.”

That was true. Will remembered when the boy had fallen in their gravel driveway and just got up smiling without a scratch. It was a good thing the accident prone child couldn’t be damaged.

John continued, “Well, he was understandably freaking out and was running away, but I didn’t want to just let him go, so I stopped him.”

Will raised his eyebrows, “How’d you do that?”

John smiled and looked around, “Hey grandma, do you have an old flower pot I could use?”

After a few minutes of contemplation and searching, an old, broken ceramic pot was placed on the railing of the deck. John stood up, putting a perturbed George on the ground. He shook his shoulders out and looked at the pot, then down with intensity in his eyes as he thrust his hand out and the air itself seemed to ripple in the direction of the flower pot, which proceeded to sail across the yard.

Eve clapped and bounced in her chair. George screamed obscenities in his surprise. Will’s eyes widened. Damn. Damn damn damn. That kid already had it made with his Gift but now with that... “Man oh man, scooter, what was that?”

John beamed as he sat back down, “Far as I can tell I absorb and store kinetic energy which I can release at will in a pulse.”

Will nodded thoughtfully. Geez this kid was smart, but he thought he got the concept, “So they hit you, you can hit them back harder?” he asked.

John snapped his finger and pointed to his grandfather, “That’s exactly it, yes.”

Eve leaned forward, “Did your grandfather ever tell you about how he found the true nature of his Gift?”

John smiled as he lifted George back into his lap, “yes, is that the one with the guys who tried to pick a fight with him when he was on shore leave in the Coast Guard when he grew to twice his size and threw a trash can with one hand?”

Will smiled to himself. “What did you say again, Papa?” John continued, “‘I’ll pinch your head off?’ Then they ran?”

All three of them had an intergenerational laugh at that point.

“Oh, well you know I was never gonna hurt ‘em, I just didn’t want any trouble,” Will explained.

“I know Papa, if you’re taking the hero path you can’t want to hurt people.”

“So aside from that have you looked into what you’re going to do for a job?”

Will smiled, he knew the question was coming. Still, it was something he was curious about as well.

John began to talk about all of his classes and his future prospects, Eve interjecting regularly to tell him her thoughts, and Will listened. He said he was hoping to be a science

teacher, at which Eve was thrilled but cynical, suggesting other avenues, double majors, minors, and other things he could do.

She could be a tad overbearing, but she meant well.

Eventually, Will saw the annoyance begin to creep into his grandson's eyes and decided to be his salvation, "Well buddy, it's good to see you're doing well, when do you want to head back?"

John looked at his grandfather, "Thanks Papa."

I'm giving you an opening, John, use it he thought.

John stood, gently placing George back on the ground, and stretched, "Well, I better get going now actually if I want to beat traffic."

Good job.

They all said their goodbyes as John walked out the door, all the while George screaming "WHERE ARE YOU GOING WHY ARE YOU DOING DON'T YOU LOVE ME?"

As soon as they were alone, Eve smiled, "I'm sure he'll do fine, but I can't help but worry about him," she said.

Will scratched his fox behind the ears, "I'm sure he'll do fine, so I'm not worried."