

Brilliant

a novel

composed by

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under the direction of

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INTRO...

...In a land far away, there's a place that's beautiful, every day of the year. It's a land that's tried its best to be the northernmost land of the South. In one particular village, it's nearness to the great Capital has made it ideal for big-city commuters to live there, and as a result, it's makeup is a little different from the usual village menagerie. I say "mon"agerie because it's a little of a monotone menagerie, everyone's differences being the same as the differences in the people of some other village.

Enter Spencer Tibits. Enter Burke, Virginia. The birds were chattering in the trees in front of Spencer's house. He lived in a row-house, on the right side of two other inhabitants in the same building, completely separated from one another. He didn't even notice it, now. The other two inhabitants were very quiet people, and so was he. Spencer took the project on Turkey he'd been working on back in his backpack, and pulled a lone key out of his pocket. He unlocked the door, and, expecting no one, said nothing as he went upstairs to the kitchen. It wasn't long, however, before he heard a repetitive THUMP coming from somewhere above him.

Up the next flight of stairs he went. The noise was coming from behind the one door he wasn't interested in opening, but he did it anyway. Inside, a girl was hitting a punching bag.

"Oh, hi, Spencer." Enter Spencer's sister Tiffany. The pink wallpaper in her room is interrupted by 8x10 magazine pictures of boy bands, interrupting those on one wall is a large poster of Tatyana Ali. Tiffany, too, had just come home from school. Though she was a whole year older, she was often mistaken for his younger sister. She was shorter than Spencer, and looked and acted his exact opposite. She was an athlete and a good student - one look at Spencer told you he wasn't either.

Yes, the weight had a little to do with it. But there was something else about Spencer, something intangible, that just made him look incapable of anything, physical activity included. Maybe it was the way he held himself, kind of slumped and helpless. Maybe it was the clothes he wore: thrift-store faire, never worrying enough about his outer appearance to care.

Spencer remarked to anyone that inquired his last name that Tibits used to be Tibitski, but that the name was changed when his great-grandparents arrived at Ellis Island. When asked his age, he would say fourteen - an eighth grader at East Oaks Middle School. It was the only personal information ever inquired of him.

Spencer walked downstairs and pulled a jar of peanut butter out of the pantry. Bread off the counter. Jam out of the fridge. There was no point in making anything fancy for after-school snack. Spencer made the majority of his own meals, and as a rule, he handled himself better in that department than his sister.

Sandwich prepared, Spencer picked around in the newspaper, hunting for the community section. Someone always got to the paper before him, so he could never guarantee his favorite parts would be in the same place, or even intact. There it was. He pulled it out of the cross-hatched papers on the table and opened to page 4. He looked at something with interest, then tore the entire bottom-right section out of the paper and stuffed it into his pocket. Taking no more time than was required to eat his sandwich, he left the rhythmic THUMP of his sister and headed out the door, leaving his plate on the table, forgotten.
THEME...

...Something must be explained about the two Controllers of Fate. One's name is Gordon, the other David. David dresses in long white coats often resembling lab coats. He is at least six and a half feet tall, though he has never bothered to measure himself. He has bushy brown hair, which is always covered by a peacock-feather hat. His friend is a foot shorter, has no hair, and dresses in various shades of light brown, his clothing made with four times too much fabric, and sewed together in a most illogical way, yet it seems neither to look unfashionable nor impede his habits.

Their daily itinerary consists of the same two activities: walking and talking. How, then, do they control the fate of the universe? The process is simple: Gordon (the one in brown) will, in his own due time, say some seemingly random word or phrase, to which David will inevitably reply "Brilliant!". Gordon's saying will then be incorporated somehow into reality.

Well, you were the one that asked.

What are they doing now? Gordon happens to be saying something very long and complicated into David's ear, and they appear to be walking along an unfamiliar beach. What it is he's saying cannot be heard over the sound of the moving water.

INTRO...

...Spencer lives just a half hour's walk away from his perpetual companion, Paul Fenster. Once there, he lets himself in, knowing that he is expected by all in the house. Paul doesn't live in a row-house like Spencer does. In fact, their house is pretty large, on two floors, and the architecture of it fit the family that lived inside.

Mrs. Fenster, a full-force hobbyist, attacked everything she did with otherworldly zeal and dedication. The staircase was wide and most of the floors were hardwood, allowing her to dash up and down the stairs, carrying various things and sometimes tracking in a little dirt and mud, if the thing she carried had to do with gardening, her primary activity.

Mr. Fenster was a sometimes loud man who carried a briefcase. Apparently he was a sales representative of some kind, though Spencer had never inquired what he sold. He traveled to D.C. only twice a week, staying at

home most days to telecommute. As a result, there was a short maze of hallways that ended in his work-room, down which Spencer had never gone.

Paul Fenster was a home-schooled fourteen year old, not much taller than Spencer, but thin, blond, and looked like he might very well do everything. Dressed in the same thrift-store faire, he held himself in some higher majesty, as though he were the beneficiary of some great knowledge that few others had been given. Paul's room contained little: a single bed in one corner, a secretary containing his school supplies with accompanying fold-out chair, and an old stand-alone arcade game beside it, still functioning. It was in front of this game that spencer found Paul as he entered his room.

"Oh, hi, Spencer." Paul's voice contained in it none of the majesty he seemed to carry in the other aspects of his presence. It was quirky, somewhat nasal, but Spencer no longer noticed it.

The game was FOOD FIGHT. "I never could understand what you saw in Food Fight, Paul."

"Food Fight? This game is an art form, lost to time and left behind by technology. Of course, you have to keep playing before you'll understand, but I'm sure one of these days you'll get it." Paul was on level 9, and finally blasted the last monster with flying slices of watermelon. "Here, take over." Spencer took the two joysticks just as level 10 began, and Paul left the room.

The level was far too high for Spencer to cope. The monsters came out with far too much speed, and they accurately covered him with half a dozen pies. Game over. Spencer started again at level 1, and was still playing level 1 when Paul returned, dressed in a navy-blue suit with matching tie. This was another thing about Paul - he never left the house without dressing his best, and today would be no exception.

"So, what have we got today?" Paul said as Spencer shut the front door behind them. Spencer pulled the torn piece of newspaper out of his pocket and handed it to Paul. Paul looked at the collection of advertisements and knew immediately which one Spencer had been looking at before he tore the piece out of the paper.

"Atom and Eve. Sounds like quite a play. Starts at six, which means we've got two hours before we need to be there. You interested in getting something from the drugstore?"

"All right."

/ / / // Chapter 01: // // / / /
Play

Streetplays have their roots in the oldest street performers, back in Egyptian days six thousand years ago. The American variations happen to have started in Hoboken, New Jersey, in the sixties by era-defining teens looking for new methods of public self-expression. Critics have often equated streetplays to graffiti, bringing crime to the streets and inciting riotous behaviour. Paul and Spencer attended dozens of streetplays in their seventh grade year, and had never had trouble there.

That wasn't to say their experiences hadn't sometimes frightened them. There were plenty of odd people that attended streetplays, many of them homeless, carrying sleeping bags on their backs. A couple showed up for pretty much every performance smelling of alcohol. There were generally enough people there, though, to allow Paul and Spencer a safe cushion from potential endangerment, whether real or imagined.

Today's attendance was no exception to ones they'd seen in the past. There were the usual array of shaggy fellows carrying bedrolls, older men dressed in polyester jackets, and grumbling officials in uniform, wishing they were off duty. Along with these, though, were overweight ladies in brightly-colored dresses, and a man that outdressed even Paul, wearing a tuxedo with accompanying bowtie and cummerbund of vibrant blue.

There was a screen, just a series of thick curtains on rods, really, behind which the actors waited to come on "stage". The crowds were now situated in front of the area roped off as the "stage", waiting, quieting down. Sporadic applause started as a man appeared from behind the screen, carrying with him the playbill, written in big letters on a posterboard. "Welcome to this evening's performance of Atom and Eve, by Charles Woolsley. The main characters are Frederica, an Electron, played by Mikki Reiser, Enviar, a Proton, played by William McKenzie, and Darkbloom, a Positron, played by Charles Woolsley. The performance will last until eight o'clock. Thank you, and enjoy the show!" Applause followed the man as he ducked back behind the curtain.

The entire show involved people dressed in white, full length coats, each coat having the word "proton", "electron", or "neutron" painted on it in big, black letters. The lead electron, Frederica, was attracted to the lead proton, Enviar. They were a hydrogen atom. They went around talking to other atoms, and they were generally nice people. On November Eve, Darkbloom (dressed in a red coat with a white "positron" painted on it) entered the world, and was also attracted to Frederica. He crashed into her, and both of them ceased to exist. Enviar became angry radiation and broke apart a big atom, for which he was jailed.

Spencer didn't understand the significance of the play, but when it was over, he decided he enjoyed it, and so tipped two quarters when the collection hat came around. It is a common custom for streetplays to supplement the purchase of materials for their next play by accepting donations from their otherwise nonpaying audience. If you liked the play, you commonly tipped two quarters. If it was all right, you tipped one. Paul tipped only one this time.

Paul tried to explain that the significance of the play was that social makeup and nuclear physics both followed natural laws that mimicked each other in many ways, but Spencer didn't feel up to understanding such a complicated concept at the moment. Once man, dressed in a white coat with "neutron" on it, came out from behind the curtain and seemed to be heading right for them.

* Somewhere far away, out of earshot and unheard by anyone, David said "Brilliant!"

"How are you two guys doing?" He was talking right to them now, and Paul, who hadn't looked like he'd been paying attention to the approaching man,

turned to face him and began talking almost immediately. How he'd enjoyed his particular performance, the play in general... The man stopped him. "I've seen you two in the audience for some time now, and I think you're the longest-running supporters of our troupe. I've been writing a new play, and I was wondering if you two would like to act in it."

"We, sir, would be honored." It was Paul speaking, of course, he was usually the one to volunteer for these sort of things. "Where do you rehearse?"

"We rehearse right here, in the street. Come back tomorrow at four thirty and I'll have some scripts printed up for you. If you can't do it, just don't show up tomorrow."

"Trust me, we will be here." Spencer thought about questioning the man further, not as sure as Paul was about whether this man could be trusted. But, Spencer thought resignedly, has Paul ever been wrong?

/ / / // Chapter 02: // // / / /
School

"Where is everyone?"

Spencer was looking in disbelief at the empty halls around him. There was literally no one. Spencer looked at his watch.

It's almost time for first period to end, but there's no one in the class. Did I miss something? Is today a national holiday? Figuring since no one was there, there was no point staying around, so he decided to go home to see if his parents were home, too.

*

"Where is everyone?!"

No sister, no parents. This place was most definitely deserted. There was no logical explanation for the occurrence at his school.

Strangely enough, Spencer was not as panicked as he thought he should be. In fact, he was downright unaffected by the strange happening. He went to the kitchen to fix himself the breakfast he'd missed this morning in his rush to get to school on time (he'd ended up being 15 minutes late). As he looked the room over, he jumped back, surprised. There, sitting on his table, was a bunch of fruit. It wasn't the fruit that surprised Spencer; rather, it was the lack of support underneath the fruit.

Since the day he was born, his mother had always kept a bowl of fruit on the table. It was always the same bowl too - it had been a wedding present from an "old friend," a man named Jones that Spencer had never met. Since they moved into this house 5 years ago, Spencer hadn't seen that bowl move an inch. Now, it was gone.

Spencer knew better than to go looking through the house for it - his parents would have some explanation for this, and if indeed they'd been robbed, why wasn't the VCR missing from the television downstairs? Why was the lock still locked? Instead, Spencer skipped breakfast again and headed for Paul's house, ready to relate to him the frankly bizarre occurrences of the morning. He

thought about calling to make sure he was there, but he knew better - their phone line was a business line during business hours - his dad's emergency line.

* *

"Where is everyone, then?" Spencer found Paul in his living room, ironing his shirts. He set the iron down to ask the question.

"That's exactly what I asked. Where do you think they all are?"

"I don't know, but if there's one thing that I've never seen, it's a deserted school. This may be my only chance. Excuse me a moment."

Dressed in his best, Paul left with Spencer toward East Oaks.

* *

"You're right. There's absolutely no one here. Not a single car parked in front. Here, let's see what we can find."

Not the kind of fellows to break or steal, they walked through the corridors, looking instead for some indication that someone would return, or that they'd left for good reason. They found no notices, bulletins, or clues of any kind. By the time they got to the science department, it was apparant that there was some disturbance in front of them, aorund the next corner.

Trying not to take whoever it was by surprise, they walked nonchalantly around the corner, and said "Hi." It was only after taking a second look they realized that they were, in fact, looking at something they didn't expect to see.

Before them was a creature, standing no higher than four and a half feet, hairless and scaly. Its ears were long and pointed at the ends, its skin, a brownish color with green blotches. It had three long, thin fingers on each hand, with bulbous terminations. None of the fingers were opposable. None of these discoveries, however, were noticeable on first examination. The first thing Spencer and Paul noticed when they saw it was that it was wearing a janitor's uniform!

"How do you do, fellows." The thing had a voice no different from the average adult's, and though Spencer made to run, Paul was determined to make conversation.

"Hello, sir. Did you see a bunch of kids pass by here, about my age?"

"Oh, them. They're in the other dimension by now."

"Excuse me?" Spencer wasn't sure if he'd heard the thing right, either, so he was glad Paul had asked.

"Oh, don't you know? This here is the dimension of schoolchildren. We've been taking our slaves from here for years, and then making their parents forget they had children. I, personally, have never seen it happen, but you can tell the king of whatever dimension you're from that Raymond, king of Bobblinland, is a good man with good ideas, and we Bobblins have prospered under his reign."

"Thank you, we'll be sure to tell him."

Paul and Spencer walked right past the thing (it was picking up papers that were strewn across the floor and putting them in a wastebasket) and turned a nearby corner.

"What do you make of that, Paul?"

"I'm not sure. Having never been to public school I'm not sure if this is, as that Bobblin seems to indicate, a common occurrence."

"Well, it's never happened while I've been around!"

"That goes without saying. However, everything that Bobblin is saying seems to have a perfectly logical explanation. There must be some kind of wormhole from which they direct their mass-kidnappings, though. A place which takes them somewhere far away, where they took all the schoolchildren. I think we should follow that Bobblin and see where he goes."

It took some time for the Bobblin to finish picking up the papers, but they waited patiently for him to finish, and finally he took off in the direction of the math department, carrying the wastebasket. They followed, making sure he wasn't in the slightest aware they were still around.

Passing a larger wastebasket and dumping the entire wastebasket into it, the Bobblin now turned and headed down the nearby stairs, towards the history and art departments. Paul and Spencer stealthily followed. When they got to the bottom of the stairs, the Bobblin was gone. One door, however, was ajar.

Opening the door, they saw something that was yet stranger than anything they had seen up until that point.

/ / / // Chapter 03: // // / / / /
U-Train

Inside Miss Manning's American Heritage class, there was an enormous subway station. The ceiling was higher than the height of the whole school, at least a hundred feet up, and a perfect dome throughout. There were subway trains branching off in all directions except down, and people standing on all sorts of peculiar platforms, even some that were upside down, waiting for their train to come. The sheer enormity of it was dazzling, and it took some time before they pulled their eyes away from the sight.

The ticket booth for their platform was just a few steps away, and Paul asked how much two tickets to Bobblinland were.

"Bobblinland's on the main route," another uniformed Bobblin answered. "Just a quarter to anywhere on the main route, one way. All-day pass is a dollar.

Paul paid two dollars and received two all-day passes. The U-train headed to Bobblinland was already boarding, and they ran to make sure they got on before it left. They made it, and sat down on the two nearest seats, only then looking up at the people around them.

There were plenty of people there that weren't Bobblins, they looked like normal, everyday people. One of them, admittedly, had blue skin, but the rest were pretty normal. There were Bobblins there, too. They all looked pretty much the same as the one with the janitor's outfit. Some looked much different. You could tell the girls because their skin wasn't scaly at all, it was smooth, though it still looked leathery and was the same color.

There was a man wearing a black cloak in front of them, his face obscured. "Hello, sir." Paul said, cheerfully. The man looked up, pulling off his

hood and looking straight at them. He, too was human, though he looked not quite human, but something else altogether.

His eyes were deep, and empty. They noticed that standing next to him, wedged in between the seats, was a gnarled staff. "You two are probably wondering the meaning of all this."

"Funny you should mention that, sir, because just this morning..."

"You came to school to discover all your friends were missing, yes? I'm aware of your situation. Every time that idiot Raymond takes kids, he always leaves some behind, or forgets to change their memory... now you're on your way to meet him, no doubt. Well, so am I.

"You see, I am the master of every land under the direction of this subway. I have never traveled outside my own domain, because, as far as I know, there are no places in the world worth visiting. Raymond is a king, yes, but he is, too, subject to me."

"Raymond, you mean, the king of Bobblinland?" It was Spencer that asked the question.

"Of course. Don't ask questions to which you already know the answer. At least, not to me." There was something of a threat contained in this man's words, as though he was saying he could destroy them any second.

"Sorry, your highness. My friend was out of line. Please continue." Paul seemed unamused, as though it was clear to him all along that this man was the master of many worlds.

"Apologies. Feh." The man seemed satisfied, and went on.

What he next told them neither one would quite remember. He talked for what seemed like hours, going from one subject to the next, telling simple little stories that didn't seem to have a definite purpose. Spencer and Paul both kept their mouths shut, and from time to time the old man would wave his staff in front of them, though it was usually in between sentences, as if it were on an entirely separate schedule from his storytelling. Often during the stories he made various threats that were directed toward intruders into his lands, and more than once Spencer got the feeling he and Paul were being represented in those characters.

When at last they got off the subway, they weren't sure whether to thank the old man or not, not even sure if he was indeed the master of this place or just some crazy man, so they left him without saying anything. On the way off the subway, they realized they were the only humans that were getting off at this stop. Once the train departed and they looked at the lobby, they saw why:

WELCOME TO BOBBLINLAND
BOBBLIN VALLEY STATION - RED LINE
BOBBLINS ONLY BEYOND THIS POINT
HAVE YOUR ID CARDS READY AT TERMINAL C
VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED

The message was repeated below in Spanish. Spencer gulped audibly.

/ / / // Chapter 04: // // / / /
City

"Well, there's a simple enough solution. We can just get back on the next train and find a better stop, or just go back home..." While Paul and Spencer were arguing, they didn't notice that they were being drawn closer and closer to the front of the ID line, being pushed by the crowds. People were being checked left and right, no one got through the line without having their ID cards checked. Yet, remarkably, though they should have immediately been spotted as non-Bobblin, both Paul and Spencer made it through the line without anyone asking any questions. It was as though they went entirely unnoticed by the guards.

By the time Paul and Spencer had stopped arguing, they were already two-thirds of the way out of the station, heading for a sign that read "Welcome to Bobblin Valley, pop. 42,030,671. Have a Nice Day!" realizing they'd made it past the checkpoint, they made their way as quickly as they could out of the station, and looked for some empty place to go and not be seen by anyone who might turn them in.

There were no empty places to be found.

An impossible crush of Bobblins was heaving left and right, pushing each other, fighting to get into and out of the World Navel U-Train station. The sun outside shone like they would have expected it to on a mid-summer morning, and outside it couldn't have been less than 90 degrees. It was a wave of heat- the heat and the crush of bobblins were making Spencer very uncomfortable, and he looked for some kind of escape route.

* "Information." Gordon said, distractedly.

* "Brilliant!" David shouted.

There was a six-sided kiosk just ahead of them, the words "Information" printed in big silver letters on each side. Spencer pushed through the crowd - Paul following close behind - and when he got to the information kiosk he noticed there weren't nearly as many Bobblins here as there were near the entrance where they'd been. Paul took out the Bobblin newspaper, the Bobblin Valley Post, and Spencer instinctively pulled out the section which he was usually most interested in.

"Streetplays, here in Bobblin Valley!" Spencer said, holding up the torn-out advertisement.

"There's plenty of things here I'm sure I'll never see," Paul said after reading the advertisements for the streetplays, "But I'm going to make sure that a streetplay isn't one of them."

"Which one should we go to, though? There's two dozen there, and no telling which ones are going to be any good."

"Let's try one, then. This one," and Paul said this with the tone of one who had just solved a riddle, "The Castle on the Hill. It starts at the northwest corner of 18th main and Circle Road. We'd better find out where that is, it starts at two, which is in..." Paul looked up at the clock on the kiosk, "An hour and a half."

Spencer looked at his watch and back at the kiosk. They were an hour off. Spencer reset his watch to accurately reflect the time of Bobblin Valley.

"How about we figure out someplace to eat, too. It's time for lunch already, and I skipped breakfast."

"Sure. Hey, look. Paul showed Spencer the map of their section of Bobblin Valley. We're on 18th main now, that play is just a couple miles down the road. We pass a few things on the way. Let's go!"

* *

There were, indeed, a few places to stop by and eat at on the way. Avoiding anything that said "Authentic Bobblin Cuisine," they stopped at a drugstore and got a bag of chips (the Bobblins called them "crisps," which Paul said was European) and some sodas to drink, both of which tasted perfectly normal, much to Spencer's relief. It wasn't long before they found their way to 18th main and Circle, and on the corner, there

* "Shady Chairs." remarked Gordon.

* "Brilliant!" replaied David.

were actually places to sit, shaded by umbrellas (also to Spencer's relief) and each with a very good view of the "stage". A few were already sitting, waiting for the play to start, even though it didn't start for another forty-five minutes. Paul asked if they usually tipped one or two quarters, and they said one will do, two only if one sits in a chair during the play. Satisfied, they sat and waited for the crowds to arrive.

Well, Paul thought to himself during the play, Atom and Eve at least made a little sense. He was right, too. Not even Paul could explain to him the significance of the events of the play, when it was finished.

The story was that of a young Bobblin that was told by an old man the secret to sneaking inside King Raymond's castle. At four in the afternoon, he entered the castle and stole a golden bowl. The play lasted an hour and a half, because it described in detail the way in which the young Bobblin made his way inside.

* "Castle on the Hill."

* "Brilliant!"

When Paul looked up from his chair, though, he immediately knew the purpse of the play. There, on an immense hill in front of them, stood a royal palace. The sun glinted off the hundreds of windows, winking their possibility of great fortunes within... perhaps even their missing friends.

The writer of the play (also playing the part of the old man) came up to them specifically and said, "How did you like my play? Verry Interesting, eh what?"

"And curse me if he didn't wink at us as he turned to leave!" Paul was telling Spencer later, as they started up the hill, the back way, just as Spencer's watch read 4:00.

/ / / // Chapter 05: // // / / /
Raymond's Castle

"Why are we doing this?" Spencer didn't like trudging up hills, his question was posed as a plea for an easier solution to their problem.

"Because, that guy was obviously trying to help us rescue the kids!"

"But how could he possibly know?"

"How should I know? But he knew. He knew, and that's all that's important. We've just got to keep climbing.

* "Big rock."

* "Brilliant!"

Even if there's a big rock in our way,

* "Walking sticks."

* "Brilliant!"

we've got walking sticks, and that means we can get around it."

After walking for half an hour in the summerlike heat, Spencer was tired and very thirsty. An old Bobblin crone was walking down the hill, and unlike most Bobblins, who simply ignored them, she turned back on her journey to come and sit where they were resting.

"That's a nice pair of disguises you have there, but I can see what you two really are."

"Huh?" Spencer hadn't been paying attention, but Paul had. He looked more than a little frightened. This woman knew something about them. And yet, she didn't seem like the type that would raise a fuss about it, like she, too, had some secret about her that made her incompatible with the 40 million others that lived in the valley.

"Don't worry about it. I'll tell you one thing for sure: if you go to the castle, you will be spotted. They will spot you. Then you won't be able to rob the castle."

"Rob the castle?"

"That is what you want to do, isn't it? I can see it in your eyes, the way your mouth moves. You're there to steal some slaves, I think? Maybe one slave in particular?"

"Those kids aren't slaves, they're our friends, and we've got to find out what we can do to get them back."

"Everyone's a slave. The only difference are the masters, and they're all equally cruel. Personally I'd rather be sold into slavery than have to bend under the cruel whip of an ideal. Maybe Raymond is doing your friends a favor. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Don't go to the castle. You'll be spotted."

When they passed her anyway, they both decided they didn't like the woman very much. It was only a short time before they arrived at the east wall of the castle. In the play, the young bobblin had made his way past the guards without so much as a scratch on him. They, too, strode boldly up to the guards, despite Spencer's reservations about an action that would obviously get them killed, they realized that the guards at the gate, though they were in full battle gear, were all female.

"Welcome to the Raymond Estates!" The one said cheerfully, and the other, with an enormous marker, made a small black dot on both of their shoulders as they went inside.

"It was a pun." Paul said with a grunt of distaste.

"What?"

"It was a stupid pun. 'You'll be spotted!' It was just a stupid pun!" Paul seemed more than angry at this; he sounded as though he'd been betrayed by a best friend. Spencer decided now wasn't the time to press the matter further; instead, they took to aimlessly wandering about in the corridors, unsure of where to find the bowl, knowing only of the daring attempts to free the bowl from the clutches of Raymond. All of it was beginning to sound more and more like fantasy, like it was, in fact, only a story.

* "Trees."

* "Brilliant!"

"A grate!" Paul ran excitedly to the courtyard entrance and put his hands to the grate. It was the only locked door they'd seen anywhere in the castle, the only point past which they were not permitted to travel. "I'll bet behind that grate we find something more than just plants."

"Palace guards, just waiting to pounce on us."

"That's not how it happened in the play, though."

"But the old woman said we'd..."

"Do really want to believe anything that that woman says?"

"You're right. Let's go. Here, gimme a boost."

With Paul's boost, Spencer made it easily over the grate. Paul had a little more trouble, but he, too, made it over the grate. Before them, they did, indeed, see more than just plants, they saw an entire forest!

Only, it wasn't the regular kind of forest you expect to see. It was a manicured, designed forest, its every leaf bearing the influence of some wise gardener.

Walking in the courtyard, they said little, but Paul did remark some on the nature of the courtyard's beauty. "It's like this," he said. "When you're dealing with trees, inevitably you're dealing with chaos. Roots run wild, and branches can no more easily be sculpted than you can sculpt the sea. Yet, you take a look at this forest, and everything seems neat and tidy and it looks as though it were indeed some kind of sculpture. It's chaos kept neat. And that's why I think whoever made this did a good job."

"Hmm." That's all Spencer said back. He thought Paul was right - he wanted to find out where his classmates were, though. Something told him that here, in this forest, was where his answers would be found.

Then, the mystery was solved. Spencer turned and in the distance saw something that was neither tree nor bush. It was a pedestal - and it was made of white marble. They ran up to it, but they were hesitant to touch it.

Spencer stood there, looking at it for a moment. On the pedestal stood a bowl - it was filled with water.

"Spencer? Is that your mom's bowl?"

"No, but it kind of looks like it."

Both Paul's and Spencer's curiosities were growing, for two reasons: one, what was a bowl doing being kept in a courtyard? Two, did the courtyard being locked have anything to do with the bowl inside?

Paul picked up the bowl with one hand. "What do you suppose it means? Whoops." The bowl jiggled a little, and water from it spilled on both Paul and Spencer.

/ / / // Chapter 06: // // / / /
Bowl

There was a sensation of falling. Something so frightening, and yet is game upon them gradually, gently, as though it were a light that slowly grew in brightness, finally to blind them.

Paul and Spencer lost track of time in a blissful state. Around them was nothing but a clear, pure white. There seemed to be nothing anyone could do to hurt them, ever again - their troubles and sorrows were gone now, and they would exist in that state forever.

The state, however long it lasted, faded at last. Around them white faded to surroundings; blissful quiet, to the sound of wind and distant scratches of noise too far away to be distinct. They were sitting on a pile of rubble - the trees they had seen before were gone, replaced by stumps and fallen, rotting logs. Outside the courtyard, they saw the same hallways and ramparts they had been walking around in earlier - turned to rubble.

Struggling to cope with the new situation, Spencer stood to have a look around.

A woman screamed. The sound shook Spencer to the core.

"Loose children! I've seen them!" The scream came from a Bobblin woman, possibly the same woman that had been at the east gate. (all Bobblins looked alike to him) This bobblin was carrying a whip, though. She began running toward them, holding her whip ferociously in one hand, looking ready to strangle them with the other.

There was no time to think or speak. Paul and Spencer ran. They ran side by side, not thinking to split up or thinking of any way to impede or confuse the attacker. They ran. And they didn't stop until the Bobblin woman was long, long gone.

* *

"So, what exactly do you think the bowl did to us?"

Spencer sat down on a rock, sputtering. he didn't answer.

They were now sitting in a different ruins, one of the building outside of which they had seen the streetplay. It was a mile or two from the castle ruins, again at the bottom of the hill.

"Personally, I think we're somewhere in the far future. The bowl must have had some control over time, that sent us-"

"Hergh." Spencer was still huffing as he sat, his forehead beaded with sweat. "I could go for sometihng to drink right now." he looked disgustedly at a

puddle of dirty water next to him. "If you're right, then this may be all we have to drink."

"Days. Weeks. Maybe years." Paul slouched as he sat on the rock in front of him. "Who knows just how far into the future we've gone? I mean, how long would it take to reduce the buildings to this state?" Paul pushed away some gravel. "Look. Not a trace. Not a single disposable wrapper, not a wax-coated cup in sight. You wouldn't even guess that this place had been a respectable eatery."

"What was that?" There had been some scratching noise that seemed very near. Paul stood up to have a look around, Spencer just cupped his head in his hands and stared at the muddy puddle of water.

Behind Paul was standing a girl. She was wearing a purple shirt, unembellished. Attached to her backpack were a pair of boxing gloves.

"Tiffany!"

Spencer ran to hug his sister, who pushed him away.

"Tiffany, what's wrong? Can you tell us anything about this place?"

"Who are you?" It was the only thing she'd said - and it was said with the tone of one who speaks utter truth because one knows no lies; knows no lies, and holds no memories.

* * *

"So, you really don't remember us, either one?"

"Not a bit."

"You don't remember our house? Your room? Tatyana Ali? You don't know what these are for?" Spencer held up Tiffany's boxing gloves.

"Hey, don't touch those!" Tiffany instinctively grabbed for her gloves - but then let her hand fall. "I'm sorry, it's just I'm used to having to stop the Bobblins from taking my things, is all."

"So you know about the Bobblins?"

"Sure. The Bobblins are the bosses. Madam Klunk was my forewoman until I ran away."

"Bosses? Forewoman? You work here?"

"I don't understand it, either. We're all working in the big factory south of here. I can't remember anything else, but it seems wrong, somehow, so I ran away. Most kids don't see what's wrong with it,

* "Bully." whispered Gordon

* "Brilliant!" replied David.

so they just keep working. Hey, Richard!"

"Richard?" Paul stood to see someone coming up the hill behind them; it was Richard Gulch, the school bully. There were plenty of kids that spread their terror at East Oaks, Richard Gulch, a ninth grader, was their ringleader. "Hello, Richard! Come join us!" Paul had never met Richard Gulch.

"Are you crazy? The last thing we need to be is stranded in the far future with Richard Gulch!" Spencer stood up and pulled on Paul's shirt sleeve, but Paul didn't stand up.

"Hello, Tiffany! Hello, Spencer!" Spencer's jaw dropped. This voice couldn't belong to Gulch. Richard's voice was loud, laced with obscenity and

nasal sarcasm. This voice contained none of these qualities. Yet there it was, attached to Richard Gulch's hulk. Spencer broke out laughing.

"Hello, Richard. I'm Paul."

"What's so funny?" Richard pointed to Spencer, who was doubled up.

"Beats me. Say, what's your story? Why are you here?"

"I can't remember." Richard's voice contained the same element of timid honesty, the tone without memory. He sat down in the circle with the others and said nothing further; he simply listened to the others talk.

They talked for the next hour, Spencer telling Tiffany about herself and what their life had been like; asking questions to see how much she knew. When he told her about her boxing lessons, she would always mutter "That's impossible! Since when do I hit people?" in response; the concept seemed as foreign to her as, well, anything else she was told.

When he was sick of hearing "I can't remember", Spencer looked at his watch. It was 5:00. Paul, who hadn't said much either, turned to Richard.

"Richard, are there any other kids you know that are out here?"

"We're always splitting off from each other, so that they can't find us. And sometimes we go back to the factory to get food."

"Will you show us where the factory is?"

"That's easy. It's not too far from here."

* * * *

From their vantage point above the factory, Paul and Spencer saw the first standing building they'd seen since they'd been influenced by the bowl.

"It's like watching a bad alien movie." Paul said this; it received no response. Bobblins were wandering in and out of the doors, driving cars to and from the building, going about what were apparently their daily lives. At 5:30 on Spencer's watch they saw the Bobblins leave in their cars, headed toward the waning sun, until not one was left.

"Dinner break. They won't be back for two hours." Tiffany said this, and was followed by Richard, then Paul and Spencer as she headed for the front doors.

What Paul and Spencer saw inside was nothing like they were expecting to see. Paul's jaw dropped - there were children there, stretching back hundreds of feet. Spencer recognized these people as the student body of East Oaks. Half a dozen people greeted Tiffany as she came inside - at least a hundred others called a greeting over their shoulders, hard at work at something obscured by plastic guards, as to the nature of which neither Paul nor Spencer would hazard a guess.

Three of the people who greeted Tiffany directly were Heidi Morrison, Jared Brenin, and Gary Mahler, names that Spencer had heard before, but had never placed with a face. Paul asked a few questions as they walked deeper into the factory, but these three knew about as much as Tiffany or Richard - the only difference is that they liked to work.

Finally, Tiffany's destination was made clear. There was a small cafeteria, from which Spencer, Paul, Richard, and Tiffany were able to eat a fine meal. Paul continued to ask questions and discovered that there was a map of this

whole place somewhere in the nearby foreman's offices. After they were finished, Paul and Heidi left the room and returned with a large, brightly-colored map.

What it showed was more than enough to stop the conversation, with a short and indistinct noise from Spencer.

The map showed the city of Bobblin valley, at least part of it, in it's every detail the same city as before. However, the map also showed that the entire city, indeed, everything on the planet, was contained in a bowl - the bowl on the pedestal.

/ / / // Chapter 07: // // / / / /
Solution

"There seem to be three ways out of the bowl, according to the map. The first is the bowl-to-bowl transit system, which is here, in the subway system. The second is the one those cars used when they left for dinner. The road ends at a crack in the bowl here. The third should be obvious. But I don't think we're going to be flying out of the bowl. If we're going to go anywhere, I'd suggest the subway first. I'd rather find a way out there than here where the Bobblins are likely to be."

And so they went. Heidi, Jared, and Gary returned to their stations in the long line of workers, and Spencer, having just realized he didn't know, turned to Tiffany. "What are they doing in here? I mean, what are they working on?"

"I should think it would have been obvious." Paul said with a grin. "I asked Heidi while she and I were looking for the map. They're making Bean Friends!"

Spencer gave a groan. "Bean Friends? Why don't they rebel and destroy the factory?"

"Are they supposed to know how? They don't know; they can't rebel. At least, the ones in the factory don't. Tiffany and Richard here, they knew something they didn't know they knew, and they made it outside."

Paul noted with a laugh to himself that the look in Spencer's eyes was one of grim determination, that he wasn't about to let anyone he knew spend the rest of their lives making Bean Friends.

* * * *

* "Mars is an eyelid." Gordon said it with only the merest shade of amusement in his voice.

* "Brilliant!" replied David, apparently unaware of the fact that Gordon was joking.

"Mars is an eyelid!" the old crone said it loudly, stepping in front of the group as they walked toward the setting sun. Tiffany and Richard distanced themselves about fifty feet in three seconds, ducking behind roofless buildings. Spencer followed, though it took him ten seconds. Paul didn't move.

"Hello again, miss. What did you say?" Paul's courtesy to the old Bobblin woman was met with a wide smile, which managed to make her face look even less human. Spencer then saw through the costume change. This was the witch on the rock, but

"It's not important. I see you've skipped your pretenses." It was obvious she had meant what she had called their "disguises", though Spencer didn't know what she meant by it. She then pointed in Spencer's direction. "And your friend? He is well?"

"Quite well. How did you manage the journey into this bowl?"

"Same way you did, by not thinking about it." Paul laughed. "I didn't say it was funny. Now, I've got to warn you. The Bobblins have all left for lunch, it is true, but there are big nasty guardians at the gate. You'll have to deal with them before you can make it out."

"Wait a minute." Paul screwed his eyes up and to the left, then brought them back down again to face the old woman. "How am I supposed to believe you? You and your puns!"

"Of course it's a pun. But, pun or no, those guardians are going to have to be dealt with if you wish to get out of here."

Spencer came out from behind one of the buildings. Tiffany and Richard didn't follow. The old woman turned now to Spencer.

"I believe I've said enough. I'll let you four get on." The old witch then disappeared in a puff of smoke - and was seen a few seconds later running between the ruined buildings, low to the ground, a stranger once again.

* * * *

"World Navel U-trains." Spencer read it off a sign now on the ground. The building was not ruined at all, and for that reason was easy to spot from a long way off. It wasn't unusual to see signs laying on the ground like this, except the building itself remained untouched. Paul and Spencer pushed open the front doors and headed down the stairs.

Once at the bottom, there was no doubt as to why the Bobblins didn't visit this place. Every hole, every entrance and exit, every train-tunnel and service entrance, even the short hallways that led to manager's offices and the restrooms, no longer led anywhere. They were plugged, each, by their own wall of solid rock.

It was the first time Spencer had seen Paul look distressed. And he looked it now.

"How are we supposed to... curse that woman and her puns!"

It was now 8:30. The Bobblins were already back from their dinner break. The summer sun had already set. It was more than three hours' walk to the other exit. They would have to spend the night there, in the station.

* "Junk."

* "Brilliant!"

"I wonder what we can find in this pile of junk here." Paul began to rummage through the towering heap of broken things, and found a sleeping bag. Immediately the other three began to dig in the same area, and three more bags were produced, one right after the other. Spencer found, among other less-notables, a bag of gold ("What will we use it for?" said Paul.) and something that looked like a very long-handled...

"Meat tenderizer." Paul looked at the thing curiously. "I've got one at my house, only it's maybe a foot long, maybe, and this one is as tall as you are! I'd

keep it around, if for no reason than simply for humor." Spencer replaced it with his walking stick.

Paul found a deck of cards in the heap, and in the one light still shining overhead, they played "go fish" until, one by one, they were too tired to go on.

/ / / // Chapter 08: // // / / / /
Out

They were all roused in the morning at around 9:00. It wasn't easy to figure out when the light from overhead was no longer the flood lamp and became the light of the sun hitting them from the stairs. Richard and Tiffany woke first; they were used to the schedule of the factory. Spencer was next, and the moment he woke up he rolled over and fumbled to turn off his alarm clock - he ended up hitting Paul in the face.

"Augh!" Paul shook himself off a little and stood up. Spencer became aware of the world, and the first he knew of it was that Tiffany was laughing at him.

"Whasso funny?" he said, his eyes unable to focus. Tiffany couldn't remember, of course, her reason for laughing at Spencer's use of Paul's nose as a "snooze" button; the matter was dropped. It was morning; the time for bickering had ended with the first unseen rays of sunshine.

"We're going to have to walk back to the factory to get breakfast." Paul said after everyone was ready to go. "It took us an hour to get here from the factory,"

"But the guards are already going to be back from breakfast by then!" it was Tiffany that spoke up. She's actually starting to sound like my sister, not like someone who... doesn't exist, Spencer thought to himself. Maybe by the end if this she'll be back to normal.

"When do they usually come back?"

"About nine thirty, but they don't get back to their posts until a little later."

"That means we've got to really hurry, and looking at eating at nine thirty, earlier if we hurry. Spencer, why in the world are you bringing the bag of gold?"

"Are you kidding? It's a bag of gold! That's reason enough to bring it along. I mean, come on." Spencer found a backpack in the pile of junk and placed the bag of gold in it. It was only the size of a grapefruit, not really warranting a backpack, but too big and heavy to carry by hand.

"If you're the reason we don't eat this morning, I'm going to be angry with you and your bag of gold." Paul said as he started up the stairs.

Twenty minutes was all it took to get back to the factory. The Bobblin cars were not in the parking lot. Spencer led the way, despite his increased burden. They ran inside, and found the break room set up as a continental breakfast. Heidi was the only one to leave her station to join them. Paul kept asking her if she was sure she didn't want to come with them - each time she told him she was pretty sure. They had orange juice, toast and bagels, and before they left they each brought a little something with them to eat on the way. Heidi told them

to hurry out the back way, instead, because the Bobblins were coming in the front door. Heidi returned to her station.

"I can't believe they're all making Bean Friends." Spencer had been saying it in his head while they ate breakfast; he said it aloud when they were losing sight of it behind and below them - it was situated in a kind of depression in the ground, making it hard to see once you got a certain distance away. Paul answered him after walking a few seconds more.

"Of course, they're making Bean Friends. Do you think the Bobblins would have to make them forget their lives if they were making something else?"

"It's true." Spencer finished his doughnut and dropped the napkin in the nearest public wastebasket, one of the few structures not reduced to rubble in this place.

They walked for as long as it took to get to the crack in the bowl mentioned in the map. They knew it was the right place when they saw an empty parking lot and a door hanging in the air.

"There's the crack, looks like. But... where's the edge of the bowl?" Paul walked up to the door hanging in the air.

"Right here." Spencer put his hand on the empty air around him. Paul stepped away from the door and did the same - his fingers hit against something hard and rough. "Ouch!"

"Who's there?" from behind where they could walk they heard a voice. Through the door came two guards - both Bobblins, dressed in gray uniforms. "Oh, hi Tiffany. You know I can't let you through, boss wouldn't be happy, not at all." Spencer smiled - this guy is actually nice. Tiffany was smiling, too.

"I know you can't, that's ok. Here, meet my brother, Spencer, and his friend, Paul." She's really different - she's never introduced me like that, thought Spencer.

"Hello, you two. We've never seen you out here before. New out of the factory?"

"No, they're just visiting. Richard's here, too. I finally taught him how to play bridge. Here, you two north and south again?" Tiffany took the deck of cards they'd been playing with last night out of her back pocket.

"Sure thing, Tiffany. Say, you brought your own deck? That's good, 'cause Bernhard didn't bring his today." The guards sat down, and Tiffany winked at Paul and Spencer as Tiffany, Richard, and the two guards sat on the concrete and Tiffany began shuffling the deck.

Paul and Spencer walked up to the door and pushed on the handle - it swung outward, and they walked through into a large, empty cafeteria. Paul had just enough time to mutter "That old woman and her puns..." before he looked up. The clock on the wall read 11:58.

They began to run. They ran to the end of the cafeteria opposite the serving line. They were running to the door when a voice stopped them.

"Wait for me!" it was Tiffany's voice.

"Tiffany?" Spencer turned around. It was, indeed, Tiffany. "This is great! How did you escape?"

"Simple. The three of them wanted to play spades, and of I've never learned the rules, so they played by themselves and said I could sit this one out."

"Didn't they realize where we went?"

"Bernard and Rob are nice guys, but when they start playing cards, they're not very good at noticing what's going on around them. Maybe after a hand or two they'll realize where I've gone."

"But you... why did you decide to come with us anyway?"

"After hearing about you and your parents, I think I'd be stupid to not want to find out more about who I was. Maybe who I can still be. Anyway, this isn't the first time I've seen this cafeteria. I opened the door, once, while Rob was thinking about a play. Rob turned to me and yelled to close it, of course, or I would have already gotten out of this place."

"But we... Paul, shouldn't we be back in the forest, now? How do we get back there?"

"That bowl must have

* Lunch Bell. Gordon said it tacitly, in the way he was looking nervously toward the sky, fidgeting with his pocketwatch.

* Brilliant! David shouted as eagerly as he would had the words actually come out of his mouth.

The clock on the wall read 12:00. A hundred bells buzzed loudly all around them, making all three of them jump and cover their ears.

When the buzzing stopped, Bernhard came running in, shouting "Hey! Don't do that!" At the same time, two Bobblins came in, talking to one another, not looking up to see the three humans that were standing there staring at them like forest animals stare at a coming truck.

Without thinking, Spencer took the meat tenderizer he'd been carrying and hit Bernhard squarely on the head with it. Without time for either one to realize what happened, Bernhard made a loud *pop* - actually, the space around Bernhard did, because Bernhard was no longer there. Nothing, nothing from his head to his stone-grey uniform to his shoes - remained. The head of the hammer swung down and hit the ground about a yard in front of Spencer's feet. Tiffany and about three other Bobblins gasped.

"What happened?" it was Spencer himself that asked it, but no one answered.

"This is some crazy dream we're having, isn't it, Spencer?" Paul grinned.

"It sure is. I hope I don't wake up anytime soon." He grinned back. Then, taking the meat tenderizer in both hands, he turned to the crowd now staring at him from the direction of the door. "Now, which one of you is goign to lead us to the palacial chamber?"

*

"I think he's just fine, Tiffany. If it'd hurt him, I figure there'd be more of him left to find. I think it actually just sent him somewhere, just like the water brought us into the bowl. He's in mallet-world now, along with those guards. So let's just worry about our other friends."

It was Paul speaking. They were standing in front of King Raymond's study. The two guards in front of his study joined three others and Bernhard that

had disappeared when Spencer hit them on the head. It was just a matter, then, of getting King Raymond to take their friends out of the bowl, ("And give me back my mother's bowl," Spencer reminded) and leave the way they'd come - World Navel U-Trains.

With as loud a noise as the door would make, they threw open the doors and stepped into the low-ceilinged room. King Raymond was sitting at a desk, dressed in a red sweatsuit that didn't look very royal. In fact, it rather reminded Spencer of Santa Claus. He was wearing glasses, writing some kind of document on brown parchment with a blue ball-point pen, which fluttered to the floor as he turned around swiftly on his swiveling chair.

"What's all this? What's all this?!" He looked up at the stooping three, and saw the meat tenderizer in Spencer's hand. "What do you want!" If he was scared, he didn't show it.

"We just want some explanation, is all, your highness." Paul bowed to the king, who was shorter even than most Bobblins they'd seen, little more than half Spencer's height.

"Ah, I see you have some manners. What can I explain for you that my guards or advisors couldn't?"

"Well, quite a few things, actually. And, we're hoping you'll be able to help us, too."

"Help you? All right, I'm not the one holding the bludgeoning tool. Tell me what you want."

/ / / // Chapter 09: // // / / / /
King

"Just one question, Your Highness. My friend here, Spencer. There are three things of his that were taken by your servants. His bowl, his sister's memories, and his classmates."

"Oh, this is about THAT. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. It's a long story, but I'll tell it to you in as short a terms as I can, as this speech of mine needs writing, and there are some affairs to attend to such as the hiring of more guards to replace the ones you trapped in that mallet.

"Your mother, at her wedding, was given a bowl by her friend and my greatest enemy, Jones the sorcerer."

"Sorcerer? My mom never told me he..."

"No, she was not aware of his position as a sorcerer and would therefore never address him as such. That bowl that your mother was given originally belonged to my grandfather. It was a priceless magical artifact, stolen by Jones some sixty years ago, as a result of a long-standing grudge between his kind and mine. It has the same properties as the bowl I currently use - the one I use now was used as a common serving bowl for a very long time, and its surface had been ground, as you no doubt saw while you were inside."

"How did you know we were inside?"

"That's a good question. How did I know that? Anyway, that bowl would have been my greatest heirloom had it been in the family when I assumed the

throne. It was our family's most prized possession. It has not been damaged, and it is an enormous land, with a lot of room for the more luxurious housing of my workers."

"You mean your slaves."

"Well, I can't speak for them, but I value them much more highly than I think you give me credit for. They themselves prefer to work at that run-down facility than do anything else. The motivation behind the bowl is for their sake as well as mine. You see, I plan on expanding my business. Bean Friends aren't going to be the trendy thing for very long, soon it'll be fuzzy armbands, or dollar-sign removable tattoos, or some other crazy thing. I'll just have to wait and see."

"That's all well and good, Your Highness..."

"Please, call me Raymond."

"Raymond. I don't care about your business. These are more than just your workers. They're my friends, they're people's sisters, brothers, children."

"Not anymore. Their parents wouldn't take them back. They wouldn't know their parents."

"That's because you somehow took away their memories!"

"And I can't change it back. I don't know who can. so do you want me to send them back, where no memory of them exists, where they aren't wanted? To you want me to keep them cramped up in that factory they're in now, or do you want me to give them each a place to live and work, and a beautiful place worthy of spending their free time in? You tell me. What do you want me to do?"

"I want their memories back. I want them to come back."

"That's probably impossible. If that's what you want, I can't find your answer."

"You jerk!" Spencer raised the meat tenderizer and let it fall on King Raymond's head. It made a noise as it bounced off his head, a sort of muffled "GOK".

"Ouch!" King Raymond immediately began rubbing his head at the sore spot. "What did you go and do that for?"

"It's... It's supposed to make you disappear!"

"Well, then it's full, isn't it! Oh..." King Raymond held his hands over the top of his head. A small bump had already appeared where Spencer had hit him.

"That was really... I mean,

* "Disembodied mercenary hands."

* "Brilliant!"

you hit harder than those guys do!" King Raymond waved his hand at the army of floating hands now arranged in straight lines behind Spencer. Each of them held the same weapon - the meat tenderizer, long handle and all. One of the hands floated up in front of Spencer.

"Hello, we're floating disembodied mercenary hands. We saw you were using one of our weapons, and wanted to ask if you could use a few more, and maybe some hired hands to help you use them." If the hand could have grinned, it would have done so then. Spencer imagined it would have had missing teeth, too.

"Sure. Go and hit every Bobblin on the head with those mallets you can. Will this bag of gold be enough?" Spencer pulled off his backpack and pulled out the bag of gold, holding it in the air for the disembodied hand to see. Spencer hoped it had eyes.

"Yeah, that'll be just fine. I'll send out squad one immediately."

"I don't see what purpose this will serve..." King Raymond said, still clinging to his head. The disembodied hands had all left the room, and from somewhere outside and below the chamber they could hear shouted commands.

Paul asked if he could sit down, but said nothing else. After a few minutes King Raymond returned to his speech with his right hand and kept rubbing the top of his head with his left, a reddish goose-egg standing up now where he'd been hit. In a few minutes the head mercenary hand came rushing into the chamber.

"Sorry, forgot ome thing, just procedural, really, but I'm supposed to ask you for a down-payment. Half now and half later, for instance. Not because I don't trust you, mind, but it's just the way we've always done it, you see.

"Sure. Here, I've counted it out. There's three hundred six pieces of gold in the bag..."

"You counted it all out already? When did you do that?" Asked Paul incredulously.

"When you guys were sleeping last night." Spencer replied, indifferently. "Anyway, three hundred six pieces, which means... a hundred eighty three for you now."

"hundred fifty three. That's half."

"Oh! She's right. A hundred fifty three now. Here, I'll help you count it out..." Spencer opened the bag, and his eyes became wide enough to show whites all around. "I... I don't... I'm sorry!"

Paul stood up from where he was sitting and looked inside the bag. He shook his head and say back down. "It's your mess, Spencer. You'd better sort it out."

"What is it? Did he miscount?" The hand moved closer to the bag and peered inside. "I see. I'll be right back. Grasper!" The hand had called over the balcony at the hands now chasing Bobblins down the hill around the castle.

Immediately they stopped and turned around, shouting "Grasper!" to the hands at the castle walls, who, in turn, shouted it to whomever was in the castle that had not yet heard. "Grasper!" was heard everywhere.

"Grasper?" Spencer dropped the bag. It squished when it landed - Tiffany looked inside.

"Chocolate? How could you mistake chocolate for gold?"

"It wasn't chocolate when I found it..." Spencer was white, and on the verge of tears. Paul stood up again and looked straight at the hand. "What do you mean by 'grasper'?"

"A grasper is what we call someone who chooses to grasp his money rather than let it freely go to his hirelings. Technically it's not what he is, but we treat the cases in the same way."

"How do you treat it?"

"We're going to run him out of town."

A loud moan rose up from the floor.

* * *

"And by the way," King Raymond was shouting at them as they ran down the hill, chased by an army of hands carrying meat tenderizers, "I know how to free your friends. But I wasn't about to tell you!"

Spencer was running in front, crying audibly and half a step away from falling flat on his face. Tiffany and Paul were not many steps behind, in either sense. One good thing about the hands was that they weren't very fast, either by nature or by choice, and the three of them were slowly increasing the distance between themselves and their would-be punishers.

It was clear after a while, though, that they wouldn't be able to keep up their speedy pace forever. Spencer was already slowing down, and Tiffany and Paul caught up with him, and grabbed his shoulders and kept him from falling back into the crowd of disembodied hands. They, too, seemed to be losing their stamina, and with twice their body weight each in the long-handled wooden hammers they carried, it was clear they might not be able to keep it up, either. Some were already stopping, but others weren't. The leader was still going strong; he wasn't even losing ground. His mallet was still raised, ready to strike.

They had been running toward the Bobblin Valley city limits. In fact, they'd already crossed them. All around them was now a kind of grassy, rocky wilderness, with a few trees and bushes. Inexplicably, Spencer turned and headed straight for an upcoming wall of rock, speeding up and pulling his hands away from Paul's and Tiffany's. Though it was not obvious what he was doing at first, it became so soon - a small, unnoticed cut in the rock revealed a dark area, and Spencer was heading for it in the hopes that it would be a cave, and that he, Paul and Tiffany would be able to get through it, but that the disembodied hands would not.

Not knowing what else to do, Paul and Tiffany followed. Spencer pushed himself through the crack as fast as seemed possible. Tiffany followed - Paul was the last to push himself through. A mallet flew through the crack - it bounced and fell harmlessly to the floor, a few feet from where Spencer, Paul and Tiffany were sitting. It was, indeed a cave - big enough and dark enough where none of the three of them could tell just how much of it they'd already been in. The hands remained outside, inexplicably. The lead hand shouted in after them.

"We've run you out of the town, but we're not done with you yet. We'll be waiting. You make sure you remember that. Don't even try to sneak out; we've got you covered."

That was the last said between them. They waited there. Boredom set in after some time. They were thirsty, but there was nothing they could do about it. It began to rain outside, and they got to talking again, about things that had happened to Spencer, and his parents, and Tiffany. Paul gave a lecture on the Mayan culture that was well-received; it was the sort of thing at which the old Tiffany would have turned up her nose; this Tiffany liked it even more than Spencer did. The old Tiffany was my sister, true, Spencer thought to himself realizing this fact, but the new Tiffany is my sister and my friend.

* "Flash Flood."

* "Brilliant!"

Just then, the weather took a turn for the worse. The hands were seen huddling under umbrellas - it was not clear from where they had been produced. Water suddenly came in - and kept coming in.

The feeling, though it shouldn't have been, was much the same as when Spencer had first found himself in the bowl. He felt himself being lifted, carried down the increasingly dark tunnels by some unknown force - the water was all around him, but that was not enough to provide the kind of force that was being placed upon him.

He kept floating down, down, down - there seemed to be no end. He had lost track of his friends, and lost track of time. He didn't try to breathe. In fact, he didn't try not to breathe. There was, however, no end in sight to the water. Soon the ringing in his ears overpowered the sound of water motion, and he passed out.

/ / / // Chapter 10: // // / / / /
Cave

Spencer woke up. He was soaking wet, but he felt quite comfortable. The rock here was quite warm - when he stood his shirt stuck to him front and back, and only his front felt cold. He laid down on his stomach to try and get the full effect of the unusually warm rock underneath him. It didn't work - his back cooled more quickly than his front warmed.

He stood - he couldn't see his friends, but he could hear them; Paul was already up and following the wall with the scrape of his hand; Tiffany was stirring, perhaps sitting, but she was not walking around.

"Paul? Spencer?" No, Tiffany was the one walking, and Paul the one sitting. It was difficult to tell for sure, though, because the reverberation of the cave blurred a sound's origin. Eventually they found one another, and stood together, wet, cold, and getting colder, wondering each in their heads what they were going to do.

Paul explained that he thought it was ridiculous to try and climb back out now - they were too thirsty, too hungry, too tired to do that. It occurred to them that it may very well be after dark, and even if they got all the way back up, those hands may still be there to prevent them from getting anything.

"The only solution," Paul finished, "Is that we must go in search of that water. It has to be in here somewhere. If we can find that water, we can drink. If we can drink, maybe we can figure our way out of this place."

"And if we don't?"

"There is no 'we don't.' We do. We just do."

The next hour was the most difficult in memory for the three of them. They weaved about in the tunnels, not knowing which way led downhill or uphill, not even knowing if it mattered. At the end of this hour, all three, without need for verbal agreement, sat down and leaned against the wall.

As Spencer sat, his eyes slowly adjusted to the light. Light? he thought to himself, as he looked off to the light that was now clearly shining from somewhere beyond his line of sight, from a tunnel that branched off from the cavern they leaned against.

"Paul, do you see it too?"

"You mean the light? Yes, I see it. In fact, I'm thinking about going down that tunnel, when my eyes adjust a little more to the light."

Ten minutes later, the three of them were crawling through the tunnel, turning down each passageway from which the light shone still brighter. Turn after turn, and they became amazed at just how far the light had traveled to reach them where they were. Soon, their eyes could see the rock in it's many deformations pass behind them as they crawled, unobscured by any hint of the former darkness in which they had crawled. It only took a minute after that, but it felt like much longer.

Their current tunnel widened and its floor sloped downward until they were standing and walking three abreast, without having to stop or squeeze closer together. It was clear that whatever it was they were looking for, it was around the very next corner. They were now bathed in undiluted blue light. Paul rushed toward the edge, motioned that it was safe, and Spencer and Tiffany turned to look.

Saying nothing, the three of them stepped into a smooth, large, nearly empty cavern. The rest of the world seemed to disappear as their eyes adjusted to the new light. Soon their world consisted only of that cavern, then only the large tank of water flooding the world with blue light, which became the world itself.

The world had but a single inhabitant. She was hanging there in the world by means of two wide hooks attached to the ceiling; they fit snugly under her arms. In fact, the entire package, water tank and girl, looked complete together, as though without the other, the one would not be complete. Her dress was a bathing suit; its actual color could not be determined in the blue light.

Spencer became aware of two embellishments to an world empty of all save that which has been mentioned. The first was an engraving on the base of the tank. It read, "Property of the Bobblin King Mokli. Care of the current Bobblin King." The second was a large red button, lighted from behind, giving it a purple look.

"What do you suppose this is?" it was Tiffany that spoke. Paul and Spencer didn't reply. They could not talk. They couldn't even think. The girl's looks were doing the thinking for them, now.

"What's this?" Tiffany pointed to the red button near Spencer's foot. Spencer didn't look to see to what she was referring. She hit the button with the toe of her shoe. The blue light flickered and went out. The world was suddenly nothing at all.

"HEY!"

"Turn that back on!"

Tiffany hit the button again. Nothing happened.

"I can't!"

"Now look what you did! Now we'll not be able to find our way out again, and it'll be your..." Paul stopped talking. The tank was rumbling, shaking at its very foundation. They could hear it in the black air around them and feel the vibrations from the hard stone below them. A high-pitched cracking could be heard as the glass weakened and gave.

There was an explosion. Water felt like it completely covered Spencer. It got in his eyes. It was salty, and his eyes stung. He fell to his knees. The glass was around, too, but he wasn't paying enough attention to the ground to notice. Spencer rubbed his eyes for about a minute, then pulled them open. They were all right now. In front of him was the girl, still asleep.

"What do we do now?" The question came from Paul, who then picked up the girl's hand, letting it fall. It fell, and then again after he tried again, straight to the ground, with no indication that the girl's muscles had intervened. He tried a third time, and before he could let it fall, the girl's hand grabbed his. Paul yelled with pain. She'd grabbed him between the thumb and forefinger, and hard, too, by the way he was yelling. She sat up, whipping his arm around until it was pinned behind his back.

"Don't do that again." Her voice was lower than Tiffany's, but higher than Spencer's or Paul's; it flowed, but only due to its terseness - she spoke like an officer giving orders.

"Ok! Ok! That hurts, you know."

She held his arm there for a few more seconds, then let him go. He pulled his arm back around to the front, massaging where she'd first pinched him, between the thumb and forefinger. She then turned to face Spencer. She didn't look very happy.

"What are you doing here?" It was in the tone of voice which really meant 'What are you kids doing here?' but she wasn't any older than they were, she couldn't be. It was the first time Spencer had heard someone of that age using the tone of voice he heard. "Well? Are the Bobblins defeated? Did we win the war?"

"I don't.... think so," for once, Paul was out of his element. He was still rubbing the spot between his thumb and forefinger, and he looked at the girl like a child ready to be punished.

"You don't... think so? So you don't know? Who is the current King?"

"King Raymond." Tiffany answered her, and seemed the least intimidated by this strange girl and her aggressive ways. "We're the only humans here. Everyone else is in slavery."

"I see. What year is it?"

"Two thousand and one."

"I don't care about your years, I meant which year is it in Bobblin years!"

"I... we don't know Bobblin years."

"You live in a Bobblin land, and you don't even know how to count their years? What are you, some kind of idiot?"

"Yes," it was Paul. His head was down. "Yes, we are. We can't answer any of your questions, because we're incapable of complex thought."

"Well, as long as that's settled." She smiled; no one else did. "I don't know just how long I've been down here, but it must have been a long time, and now I'm hungry. You didn't happen to bring any food with you?"

"No. We didn't."

"But surely you... no, I guess you didn't know I was down here. All of this was just a big accident, then?"

"Yes, it was."

"Let's get out of here then and find me something to eat. She stood up and began immediately to walk - it like a march in its rhythm and accuracy, like a ballet step in its lightness and agility. Spencer, Paul and Tiffany scrambled to their feet and began sloshing after her."

* * * *

"Four thousand and one? In Bobblin years?"

"Yes, ma'am, that's right, in Bobblin years." it was the lead hand of the disembodied hands. He had just informed her that she'd been put in that glass case alomst 400 years ago.

"Thank you. These," she motioned to Paul, Spencer, and Tiffany, "are coming with me. Do you have any objection?"

"None whatsoever. The one boy owes a small debt to us, but we will forgive it him." The disembodied hand, if he did not know her, certainly knew something about her, because he was not about to do anything to upset her. As soon as she'd walked by them, the hands left for the south at their top speed.

They had made their way out of the cave by means of a staircase that the girl, whose name was Belisse, had known about. Paul told her everything he could about what they were doing, and why they needed to return Spencer's mother's bowl, and the school full of children.

She had said nothing about helping them or not helping them until they showed up at a deli on the edge of town and ordered some sandwiches. Having taken in all they could, Paul asked if she would help them out.

"I don't know about bowls or kids or schools. They're all good things, and I want to hurt the Bobblins, and that would be a good way, but it's not the best way. I have to kill Raymond and exact my revenge. Then I have to utterly destroy this place. It will take me the rest of my life, but these Bobblins don't deserve this place, and if I the only one that can take it from them, then I have to do it."

"But you can't! If you kill Raymond, then he will never undo his magic, and hundreds of kids, kids just like you, will be trapped forever, without memories!"

"Why should i care?" Paul opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out. Belisse walked out of the deli and shut the door.

/ / / // Chapter 11: // // / / / /
Boating

"Where is she?" Spencer said it as they neared the east entrance to the castle. It was clear the castle had not yet been attacked by the fury Belisse was

sure to be in when she got there. The real question was: Why hadn't she yet been there?

The Bobblin ladies saw the spots on Spencer's and Paul's shirts and smiled, nodding. One of them put a black dot on Tiffany's shirt. She turned to make a protest, but Spencer motioned for her to no worry about it. They entered the castle and headed immediately for Raymond's chamber. Now, they needed to warn him about Belisse, and hope that he will give up the children in exchange for their saving of his life.

* * *

"Have you come to kill me?" It was the question King Raymond asked them as they burst into his study.

"No, we've come to warn you. A great warrior is coming to kill you."

"Why warn me about it? I already know."

"Well, you can't just sit there! If you don't escape now, you'll never be able to help our friends! Aren't you going to do something?"

"No. I'm not." He raised his head to look at them. It wasn't King Raymond. The face was not quite the same.

"You're not King Raymond."

"No, I'm not. I'm here to give him enough time to escape."

BANG.

Belisse threw open the door, and it hit against the opposite wall with a BANG and some flying splinters. The door was now cracked and bent down the middle.

"Have you come to kill me?" the Bobblin looked up at Belisse, looking almost royal. Belisse's eyes were open wide, her mouth small.

"No, I've come to kill the king. Where is he? You'll tell me now, I trust."

"Wait five minutes, and then I'll tell you. Until then, I won't."

"I'm not going to wait five minutes. Belisse lifted the knife-ended spear she'd taken from one of the guards she'd met with on the way up to the chamber. "Have you ever wondered what it would feel like to get your legs removed with one of these?"

"He's gone to the island in lake Pooh-bah. It's just a few miles north of here. There's boats already there."

* * * *

"You weren't... really going to hurt him, were you?" Tiffany said to her as they were walking in the direction of Lake Pooh-bah. Belisse, who seemed outspoken about everything else, didn't say anything. The lake was big, bigger than they had expected. They couldn't see the other end of the lake. They couldn't see any island, either.

"Tricked." Belisse was frowning. "How do we know there's even an island out there?"

"Well, we're going to have to find it." Tiffany walked up to the wooden platform extending into the lake, and saw that there were no large boats, only rowboats, tied to the dock. "Here, let's take one of these."

"That's no good. They're too small. We'll take two." Belisse walked up to the dock and untied the knot holding one of the rowboats.

They decided that Spencer and Beliesse would be in one rowboat, and Paul and Tiffany in the other, because that way one boat wouldn't have more rowing power than the other. "Well," Paul said hopefully, "If there's only little boats here, it can't be that far, can it?"

* * * *

The first hour of rowing was a happy one, they were taking turns and laughing and talking in between the boats. At the end of the first hour, they were now in the middle of a lake whose depth could not be determined, and whose shores were only barely visible on two sides, and could not be seen on two others.

A fog came up on the lake. The fog was so thick that even though they were only feet away from each other. They were shouting back and forth to each other, trying to make sure that they didn't lose each other, or worse, crashed into each other. It seemed to Spencer that every time they called to each other, they were getting further and further away...

Finally, it was obvious they were drifting apart. Belisse tried to turn the boat and head back to where Tiffany and Paul were calling, but there was some sort of current preventing her from closing the distance. She shouted instructions to Paul and Tiffany, who were unable to follow them and so were unable to close the distance, either.

As the voices faded, Belisse had more and more trouble figuring exactly where they were coming from, and finally, their calls went unanswered, and they could hear nothing except the motion of the water around them and the noises they themselves were making. The fog was every bit as thick as it had been when it first came upon them - complete and immediate.

The next hour was spent calling names - first to those in the other boat, then to each other. Belisse said Tiffany and Paul were stupid and couldn't follow directions, and Spencer kept saying she really didn't know and they might have had the same problem she had, and it wasn't doing her any good to be so bossy.

The next hour, hostility not forgotten, but at least out of the way, Belisse asked a question that absolutely startled Spencer: "can you tell me more about where you come from?"

Funny thing was, he could. He answered her every question about where he'd lived and what he'd done with stories that made her laugh - her laughter was the most beautiful thing he'd ever heard. She begged to hear more and more about the streetplays he'd been to, and said that it had been something she remembered from her time and people, but she never got to see one, she was always too busy training for her position as guardian.

"Hey, I know, you can come back with me sometime and see one of ours. I'm going to.. at least I was going to, I didn't get to show up yesterday... well, maybe sometime I'll be starring in one, and it'd be cool if you came and saw it."

"That'd be nice." Spencer now saw the Belisse a hundred and eighty degrees from the one he'd first met. She was patient, kind of giggly and full of smiles. The fact that their friends were nowhere to be found didn't seem to bother her. When Spencer brought it up, she said "Oh, I think we'll find them soon enough. Just have to wait for the fog to clear up, is all."

The fog had cleared up some time ago. It was now difficult to see because it was nighttime, and there were clouds over the stars and no moon to be seen.

* "Island."

* "Brilliant!"

A distant blast of light and color jerked Belisse to attention, and immediately she picked up the oars and put them in Spencer's hands, saying "Row. Quickly."

Spencer became alert, too. "What's wrong? What did you see?"

"I saw land." Spencer turned around. A torch was burning, high in the air on a distance castle. Another was being lit as he watched. Spencer pulled on one oar and brought the boat around. He put the oars in Belisee's hands.

"You row. You're faster. I'll guide you."

"All right, I'll row." Belisse then pulled, and pulled again, taking a pace twice as fast as the one she'd used before, but on the same, precise rhythm. She smiled at Spencer, then closed her mouth and stared pulling.

In ten minutes, they were at the castle. Belisse stood up, a little difficult because her arms were quite tired, and Spencer got out of the boat after her, finding it hard to move himself because he was so hungry and thirsty. In the motion of the water, Belisse said she should she could see Paul's and Tiffany's boat. In ten more minutes, Paul and Tiffany were on the shore, too.

"Please don't kill Raymond," Tiffany was starting, "If you kill him then I..."

"I don't intend to kill him. I want to help you and your friends get your memories back. Spencer told me a lot about you, and about who you were. If you never get those memories back, it won't matter that the Bobblins won't have control of our land."

"Wow." Paul slapped Spencer on the back. "I don't know how you did it, but thanks."

"Come on." Spencer was pointing to the castle's entrance. "Let's go find him."

/ / / // Chapter 12: // // / / / /
Master

"There they are!" Guards appeared from behind the corner. There was some noise as the call to arms was recognized. Three more guards joined the two that were already standing there.

"We're not supposed to let anyone in, much less you. Now you come with us and there'll be no more fuss."

Belisse wanted to stay and fight them, but everyone else ran, and so she ran, too. Down skinny little hallways and through progressively shorter passageways they ran, and the guards were not interested in stopping their pursuit.

Tiffany slipped on something and lost her footing, but did not fall. The guards caught up to her, but the others didn't stop running. In the struggle she threw out a fist - she knocked one of the Bobblins clean out. "Way to go Tiffany!"

Spencer shouted, and Tiffany herself was so amazed at what she'd just done that she didn't notice until it was too late that the remaining guards had each grabbed an arm and a leg and were carrying her off. The two groups disappeared from each other's sight and hearing.

"We'd better get her back in the bowl and have King Raymond get rid of her memory again." Out of the shadows came a figure in a dark cloak. He was easily twice as tall as the Bobblins there. "I'll handle that. Bring her here." The man took off his cloak - the Bobblins did not need to see his face; they knew who he was. He draped his cloak over Tiffany so that it covered her completely, then he instructed the Bobblins to drop her on the count of three.

"One... Two..." One of the bobblins made a noise of surprise - he was no longer holding Tiffany's arm, just a fistful of black fabric from the cloak. The man put his cloak back on, and left the Bobblins staring at him as he walked the short distance to a nearby staircase and began climbing the stairs.

* * *

"Won't you please sit down?" King Raymond was sitting at the head of a long table - there were armed guards on either side of him. The table had been set for him and four others. "My other guest will be here shortly. I know you're hungry, if it were my choice I wouldn't feed you, but I'm the one under orders now.

"That's right. My superior has agreed to join me on this island, and he's said that you need food and water. So there you go."

Paul and Spencer were a little reluctant at first, but Belisse told them it was probably all right, so they started eating alongside her. "I'm curious to meet your king. Who is it - the King of all Bobblins?"

"Oh, his title is of an even higher degree than that. King of all worlds. He's the big man on top. The head honcho. The king of..."

"That's enough, Raymond." A tall man in a dark cloak entered the room, stepping soundlessly and gracefully over to the unoccupied seat and taking it, then beginning immediately to eat what was already prepared.

"It was you!" Belisse stood up from her chair. "Stop eating, boys. This was the man that imprisoned me in that cave." She turned and pulled a golden spear off a display on the wall and pointed it at the man in the dark cloak. The man in the cloak stood, too.

"That was the idea. But you're not going to be any good if you're still hungry. Go ahead; it's a little gift from me. Don't eat too much, though, or drink too much either - best to keep your reflexes sharp. What about them?" Belisse was looking at Paul and Spencer, who resumed eating. "I've entered my friend Raymond into a magical contract. If he loses his fight against those two, he must give them the secret of returning their friends' memories and the secret of returning them to their homes. If I lose my fight against you - well, the benefits are in the loss, aren't they? Finish up. I'm just as eager to sort out trouble on this world as you are to get revenge, and as they are to get their normal life back."

The man's face became visible as he ate another bite - Paul nearly spit out the water he was drinking. It was the man they'd seen on the U-train! "You really are everything you said you were, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am. Now finish up." The man took off his cloak and folded it neatly, laying it on the back of the chair before he resumed eating.

They spend another minute or two eating, then one by one they stood and walked to the other end of the room. Belisse was carrying the spear. As the man stood they saw that he was carrying with him a sword. He pulled it out - he had some trouble getting it out of the scabbard. He held it in front of himself, and though he himself looked confident, the blade looked like it didn't know what it was doing. Raymond turned to Paul and Spencer.

* "Pillow fight." Gordon whispered.

* "Brilliant!" David whispered back, excitedly.

"Now, the thing my superior had decided on for a fight is with this weapon. He pulled three pillows off a different display of weapons, tossing two to Paul and Spencer. They caught them and looked down at them in disbelief."

"I'm sure you're not familiar with it. It's a very ancient weapon of my people. For centuries we've used it to settle disputes. Apparently my superior doesn't value this matter over a simple little dispute. But what do I know?"

King Raymond took two steps back, and stood at the ready, pillow held high.

And so the fighting began. Belisse fought, as she did everything physical, with an incredible preciseness and energy that could not be matched. Her adversary, no longer looking like a novice of the blade, was able to parry her every attack. But he was not able to make any attacks of his own. She was winning.

On the other side of the room, Raymond was holding his own against Paul and Spencer. It was clear that Raymond had really practiced and knew how to use the pillow as a weapon. Paul and Spencer, though, had been in many a pillow fight themselves, and though their knowledge of pillow fighting didn't amount to the same level of skill, two against one in any fight is always more than twice as hard. They, too, were winning.

It was a single crucial blow to Raymond's condition that began his downfall. Their pillow fighting had taken them down to the other end of the hall. Raymond was now moving backwards to continue to fend off two attackers; he was headed right for a chair, standing free of the table and at the level of his knees. How such a chair got to be there no one knew, but such things were no longer considered unusual.

Belisse, too, was heading in the right direction. Her fight with the man in the dark cloak had taken them out of the hall entirely, and into a more open side room, which terminated in a wide staircase. Belisse was pushing him further backward now, her spear occasionally getting close enough to scrape across the fabric of his shirt, but nothing more. A sudden noise stopped them both for a moment.

Raymond was on the ground; he'd tripped over the chair. The game was won. Raymond threw away his pillow and pulled something out of his pocket - neither Paul nor Spencer saw what it was.

"So, you've lost. Tell us how to save our friends." Paul put down his pillow and looked down at the fallen Raymond, who looked little more than irritated.

"Come closer, and I'll tell you." He was smiling; though it was not clear what it was behind his back, Spencer wasn't about to get close enough to find out.

"No, you tell us now, where we stand. You have to. It's a magical contract."

"Do you know the penalty for breaking a magical contract?"

"No, I don't. What is it?"

"This." A loud rumble shook the whole building, and seemed to come from somewhere above. It was as though lightning had struck the castle. Spencer thought he could hear a woman's voice, singing, then a quartet of voices, a toneless, vibrating chord.

Both Paul and Spencer had shot their faces upward at the sound of the first rumble. When Paul looked again at Raymond, there was no Raymond at all - his clothes were there, but they were filled with an orange dirt, which was spilling out onto the floor. Paul could see the handle of something that was underneath the clothes. He reached cautiously over and pulled it out from underneath where Raymond had been. It was a knife.

It took a few seconds for Spencer to realize that anything had happened at all. He looked at the knife in Paul's hand, and asked, "Where did you get that?" Paul pointed at the pile of clothes and dirt, which had lost all semblance of a human shape.

What Spencer felt then was not fear or sadness or anger. He simply knew that it had been the man in the cloak's fault, and it was now his, Spencer Tibits's, responsibility that the secret of the bowl be returned to them, as was promised. He turned toward the noise of the fight going on in the side room. Stepping up on the chair which Raymond tripped over, he stepped from that onto the table itself, then he jumped off and started running.

What he saw was a fight he was no longer aware was already being won. Belisse was moments away from pushing the man down the stairs when Spencer ran at him from the side, jumping and trying to tackle the only thought on his mind. The man's left hand flew out - Spencer flew right past him and landed on his shoulder.

Surprisingly, Spencer was unhurt. He stood up and grabbed at the man's head. The man pushed him in front of Belisse's approaching spear, and she was forced to cut her attack short. The man then pushed Spencer into her arms, raising his sword. Belisse pulled her spear up just in time to block the thrust that would have been the end of Spencer; his blade knocked the spear back with such force that it swung back and hit Belisse in the head - she stumbled and fell.

The man raised his sword again. Spencer dived out of the way of the approaching blade. His left arm was already sore, so this landing left him out of commission for a few seconds more than the last did.

What entered Spencer at that moment was a seed of survival. He rolled over and grabbed the spear laying next to the unconscious Belisse; he pulled it in front of himself, stopping the powerful blow that came from the man with the cloak. One end of the spear flew back - and it hit the ground, ringing loudly. Spencer swung upward - the man took a step back. Spencer then threw himself forward, first in a sitting then a standing position, using all the range this spear offered him. The shining spear was heavy, and so took both of his hands to swing, but he seemed to manage.

He was taking wild swings, and the man seemed flustered, unable to hold his ground. Spencer's seed of survival was slipping from him; he was beginning to lose the speed with which he'd been attacking. During one of these later swings the man's sword flicked out and blocked. The spear came rought out of Spencer's hands and clattered to the floor. Spencer lost his balance and fell to his knees.

Spencer looked up. The man was standing over him, his sword ready to cut Spencer in two. Spencer himself was not fully comprehending the situation.

"Aha! Whoa." The man and lifted his sword one last time to bring it down on the now defenseless Spencer; his heels were halfway over the edge of the first stair; he fell backward, losing grip on his sword. Back, back, back he bounced. Spencer felt a kind of chill run up his spine as the man came to rest at the foot some 10 stairs lower. The sword he'd carried had come to rest near the top, about two stairs down. Spencer was not aware of this; neither one moved for at least a minute.

Belisse stepped around Spencer hurriedly, telling herself that it was her fault that Spencer was now dead. When she looked at him and saw him alive, her eyes began to shine with tears. Then she turned to see where the man had gone. He was still at the bottom of the stairs, and hadn't yet moved. She took two steps down and handed Spencer the man's sword. Spencer took it and stood up. Paul came running in with the knife at the ready. Belisse picked up her spear, and the three of them marched down the stairs toward the now-defeated Master of Worlds.

/ / / // Chapter 13: // // / / / /
Return

"So, you have triumphed at last."

The man was now sitting, looking up at the three circled around him, all three weapons pointed toward him.

"You promised us the secret of the bowl. Raymond didn't make good on that promise. You have to." Spencer seemed the only onle capable of talking, and so it was he that spoke for them.

"I didn't make any deals with you. If you didn't get what you wanted from Raymond, that's not my problem."

"We're making it your problem." Belisse took center stage, pointing the spear at the man's throat. "Give the secret up. I know you know it. Give it up or suffer the consequences."

"It is not in my power to restore the memories of those children. If there was a secret to the bowls, it died with Raymond."

"I don't believe you. You'd better tell me, or I swear I'll kill you!"

The man looked at her for a second. Spencer and Paul had lowered their weapons, and they were now looking at her, too. She was only looking at the man. It was now her battle.

"There's nothing you can do." The man did not smile or frown; he was merely stating a fact. "Nothing, that is, except make good on your promises."

"Promises?"

"You promised to kill me just now, and before that, 400 years ago."

* * *

Spencer and Paul gasped. Had she really done it? Had she really killed him? She took the spear and ran him through - then she took the sword from Spencer and stabbed him again. Spencer and Paul pulled her away, and convinced her to stop, that he was already dead. She'd said he didn't look dead enough, but it was obvious she'd gone crazy. They left the weapons and headed downstairs. There was nothing left to do now, except head for shore again, leave, and try and resume life as normally as they could, not knowing what it would be like.

They walked down the empty halls in apparant suffering. What they'd lost they couldn't explain all at once; what they'd had was hope, and something to do. Whether they'd lost all hope, they couldn't say, but there was nothing left to do.

The sea of lights shining from Bobblin valley were easily visible from the other side of the lake. It was also easy to see the lights of the castle on the hill nearby. When Spencer and Paul threw open the front door of the castle, though, they didn't see any of these things. What they did see was the man, dressed again in his cloak. He walked into the castle, taking three steps past them before turning around.

"You thought it was going to be that easy?" He laughed. The entire castle gave a great leap. It nearly knocked the four of the moff their feet; it seemed not even the man with the cloak was expecting it. None had steadied themselves entirely before the castle lurched again, and, bending over, the man said, in the tone of someone who'd just seen a trespasser, "Get out!"

Spencer hesitated a little, then ran out of the castle just as it took another leap. Paul and Belisse followed. Spencer was pushing teh boat into the water as teh other two got in; they left and Belisse started pushing away from the island.

The castle gave one final lurch before its towers toppled - everything came down as though it had been a house of cards, bricks falling on bricks, caving the entire structure in on itself. The torches fell, one by one. Most landed in the water. One was caught - it was the man in the cloak that held it. Belisse tripled her pace and they made their way swiftly away from the falling structure and its horrible master.

When the three of them were quite gone, the man in the cloak said, "Get up, you two." he was smiling, and the sound of his voice belonged on an old friend speaking to his compatriots.

Something stirred from the rubble of the castle. Two somethings, actually. The man picked up one of the stones with one hand - his fingers sunk into it. He threw it out at the water - it dangled in the air in a featherlike manner before hitting the water - and floating atop it. The stone was not stone at all - everything that had fallen appeared now to be made of styrofoam.

"C'mon, get up!" the man pushed the blocks away from the stirring piles. Two men were there. One was dressed in a lab coat. The other, in clothes four times too baggy. "It's time to put things back in order."

The three men smiled, looking in the direction of the city and where the Paul, Spencer and Belisse were headed. Gordon turned back around and pulled two bowls out of the rubble. One belonged to Spencer's mother, which he handed to David. The other was filled with water. Gordon poured the water out of the bowl, and said "Kids." before cracking the bowl against a rock near where the other rowboat was tied.

"Brilliant!" David said, in a kind of reverent enthusiasm.

* * *

"You can't really blame yourself, Spencer." Paul was trying his best to comfort Spencer, but it was becoming harder to do so as the futile and sad nature of the situation became almost too much for him, too. "And honestly, what are we doing here anyway? This place is too weird to be real. Everything that's happened, why should we even believe it? A weird country full of green men, the entrance to it is part of the bottom floor of your school?"

"How can it not be real?" Spencer was wiping his eyes; it seemed he was over the worst of it. "I saw my sister, she was real, but she didn't remember me. Now she's been crushed in that falling castle, and she would have been safe, and just fine, if we'd just forgotten about her like everyone else!"

"Yeah, that, why do you think we didn't forget like everyone else?"

"Because we're stupid?"

"It didn't seem to me like we had any choice in the matter. Don't you think there was some reason we did all this?"

"No?"

"Sure there is. We had to try and save our friends. We didn't forget because we weren't supposed to. Maybe that guy that was your mom's friend that gave her the bowl, maybe he was helping us, because we had to try. If your sister was forgotten in our world, she'd be a lot worse off. At least in the collapse she's going to survive and get out. You don't have to think what you're thinking. She's strong and smart. She might have escaped before the collapse and made it not before we did!"

"Yeah, Spencer." Belisse put her hand on Spencer's head as she said this; he pushed her hand away.

"Just get us out of here."

The rest of the ride was spent in silence; there was no fog and from the lights of the city and castle they were able to guide the boat back to the dock where they found it.

"So, you going to come with us?" Paul was the one that spoke up, Spencer hadn't even thought of asking the question - of course Belisse was coming with them; without her, why were they even heading home?

"No, I don't think so." Belisse finished tying the boat and started walking toward Bobblin Valley, its lights twinkling and diminishing in these late hours. She turned to face Spencer directly. "I saw what they did. I've got to stay here until the Bobblins no longer have a place here. As much as I want to be happy, and stay with you and be in your world, I know I can't let these guys stay in power, and to let that rotten Jones keep stealing kids from your world. When I'm done here, the first thing I'll do is join you. But I can't until then."

"All right." Paul was the one that said it; he hoped that if he agreed Spencer wouldn't say anything. Spencer did, quietly, but neither Paul nor Belisse acknowledged that they heard it.

"Traitor."

* * *

The streets of Bobblin Valley were interesting to walk through at night. With Belisse there they were not worried for their safety, and everything was wide and empty without the usual crush of Bobblins about their diurnal lives. Every street seemed a metaphor for the current situation of its travelers; no one to rescue it from its helplessness and loneliness, empty and sad. In the dim light from a malfunctioning streetlamp their faces looked as grey as the pavement, not so much from actual color as from expression.

They passed the shop where they'd seen the Bobblin streetplay, but in the entire place, there was nothing to indicate that it had only been a couple of days ago the place had been packed with bodies, a real bumper crowd; now it looked worn-out and dry as an old, unused ditch. Paul pointed, but stopped himself from saying anything.

Belisse was still with them; she wanted to see them safely to their subway car. Spencer was still not looking at her or speaking to anyone. To him, she represented the sister he lost, and the girl that didn't want to be found again.

Arriving after some walking at the station, (Paul was practically famous for remembering directions) they saw immediately there was something strange going on. The station's lights were all on; there was a notice posted on the door they entered:

Bobworld three-day service:

2am train \$3.50 12pm train \$14.50

Sphere (schoolchildren dimension)

Overnight service special! \$0.45

Trains at: 11:15 12:15 1:15 2:15 3:15 4:15

Advance Tickets Available

When they entered, they heard voices. Not all of them were adult, Bobblin-sounding voices, either. When Paul turned the corner, he nearly fainted. Spencer came closer. Belisse kept him from dropping to the floor like a stone.

One one side were two hundred Bobblins looking for a cheap ride back to the Bobblin homeland. On the other side were eleven hundred East Oaks

students looking for a cheap ride back home. The clock on the wall read 1:50.

/ / / // Chapter 14: // // / / /
U-train

"I... I can't believe it!" Spencer was hugging his sister; she knew who he was now, too. She was still different; Spencer supposed she'd never be the same, but he didn't care. She was his friend now, and she had parents and a brother who loved her, which was all, she discovered, that she'd ever wanted. She explained how the man in the black cloak was the one who sent her back to the bowl, and she'd started making the Bean Friends again, no longer remembering her time outside the factory.

Some time later, they found Richard, too. He seemed the only one not to have regained his memory entirely; he was quiet and kind, as he had never been before, and though he remembered some of his past he still carried with him the look of someone that was not completely in touch with his past and his world. Sometime after they found their friends again and began talking, Belisse turned and walked out of the subway.

"Free admission," the lady at the counter said when they'd asked about tickets for the next U-train to Sphere. "There was some guy came in and paid for every seat on those two trains, and told us to let anyone on that was headed for East Oaks, whatever that is, and that's where you guys said you're going, so you don't pay."

"Bobworld train boarding, please board quickly, and be ready to display your passes to the train attendant." The U-train pulled up with a whoosh of electric speed, the loud grind of brakes, the clack of the train's wheels as they met the rails. They were headed north and slightly uphill, as it looked from the way the track was sitting.

The Bobblins were finishing boarding their train as the U-train that would take the East Oaks students home pulled up. A woman's voice buzzed over a loudspeaker perched high on the wall and at the far end of the station. "Ok, this is a capacity 600 train, so you'll all need to fill up the cars about as much as you can. Once the six cars have been filled up, we'll pull another six up and have you board those." The doors slid open, and people immediately began to push themselves onto the trains. Spencer vaguely thought that this might be a trap, but he ignored himself.

* * * *

They didn't make the first train out, but Paul, Spencer, Tiffany, and Richard were all sitting together as the 3:15 U-train finally began its journey, which was around 3:35. It was only then Paul and Spencer remembered questions that they should have been dying to ask the moment they saw the kids at the station.

"How did you get here, I mean, out of the bowl and in the station?"

"Funny thing, I don't remember."

"What about your memory? When did you get that back?"

"I don't remember that either."

"Heh." Spencer breathed a little chuckle;

"I guess we'll never know, then."

They talked for some time while they were on the train, then, being very tired, Paul and Spencer slept a little.

When they woke up, Spencer looked at his watch and told Paul that it was now 4:30 in the morning. It took Paul a few seconds to realize what Spencer was saying, but when he did, he sat up. The train was still moving swiftly; their ride wasn't over yet. Paul turned to Spencer. "I was just thinking. What do you think people's reactions will be, I mean, when they see us coming back and our story?" The sentence sparked a lively discussion, in which Paul was sure they'd all get in a big war with Bobblinland, and Spencer thought they'd drop it all and give him and Paul a hero's welcome. Either way, it seemed like something exciting was up, and that this event would change the way a lot of people thought about things, maybe even about life. No longer would there be problems with overcrowding, provided Belisse succeeded in driving out the Bobblins from this place.

"Who knows how or what people will think," Spencer said, blinking, then yawning. "I don't know if we should even tell them the truth about this place, what we did. Who knows what kind of crazy things we'd be letting in if we suddenly opened our whole world to World Navel U-trains?"

"If it were just us, I'd say you were absolutely right. But there are a whole school of people here, and there's no way they'd believe any story we could make up about the whole school disappearing, so we may as well tell them the whole crazy truth, and have them not believe us that way."

"Yeah. It's too bad, too. We could have been big heroes if people would believe us."

"Maybe. But even so, look at your classmates, they've all gained new friendships, and a love of work and teamwork. You know how valuable that is? That's better than rewards or space or anything else, in my opinion. I've looked at the records of every school in the State of Virginia, and no establishment holds a candle to what you guys learned here. I may have to come join you in public school, now that there's going to be a good one."

They continued to talk for another half hour, at which time the PA system sounded the call to stand and be ready to leave the train. The train stopped entirely, and after ten minutes of waiting, the PA system announced that cars 7 through 12, which included their car, were the next to be let off. Spencer stood first, and as the doors opened they stepped off the train and back into the tangled mess of ups and downs and all arounds that this World Navel station was. The sign above them read:

WELCOME TO SPHERE
EAST OAKS STATION - RED LINE

Spencer could not have been happier.

Kids were running, just dashing up the stairs. The calendar read October 19th, the day of the disappearance, and the kids all began to pile into their

classes, looking at each other and knowing that they'd somehow been sent back to the very second before they'd left. Spencer had U.S. History 1st period. "Here, come to class with me," he told Paul, who agreed. Tiffany had a class in the Math department and left their company. Richard did not know to which classes he belonged, and so he was directed toward the office to get a copy of his schedule.

They were not talking to each other as the class began, but they were looking at each other, wondering each who would be the first to tell, or if the adults ever had to know.

As the bell rang for class to start, the students immediately burst forth - with meaningless chatter. The entire experience disappeared from their minds as the teacher started writing page numbers for their homework assignment on the board. Paul reached behind and pulled his History notebook out of his backpack. It did not seem strange to him that he should be going to school when he was usually at home this time of day; to the best of his knowledge, he'd never been home schooled. In fact, he'd never missed a day of school.

/ / / // Chapter 15: // // / / /
Usual

When Spencer came home, his mother asked about the missing bowl. "I really don't know where it's gone. No, I didn't take it to play with it or anything. Yes, I know that it's an old present, but this is the first I've heard of it being missing."

"Jones told me he'd come one day to pick up the bowl, I just thought maybe he'd stick around to say hello before going." Spencer's mom looked out the window in the kitchen that faced the backyard.

Spencer showed up at Paul's house at a quarter after four. Paul answered the door, already dressed in his best. "We're going to be late," He said to Spencer impatiently when Spencer got there. They had a play rehearsal at four-thirty.

* *

There were two dozen people that showed up to the streetplay where they'd seen Atom and Eve, now looking no different than any other area of concrete, without its crowds and its makeshift curtain. The man that had approached them earlier was there. It was getting cold, and Spencer wished he'd put on a jacket before coming.

The people that were there were typically the kind of people Spencer saw at the plays - ten of them he'd seen in other plays and seemed to be regulars, the others seemed to be there, just like him and Paul, on the orders of the director. The Director stood up, and unzipped the green backpack that had been on the ground next to him. Out of it he drew a sizeable stack of papers, which he set down on the concrete before beginning to speak.

"Good, you're all here." Spencer noticed immediately that this man had been around the theatre; he was projecting his voice like an actor saying a line. "Now, I've got a couple things that I want to do today, and the first is to finish

some casting. Those of you that I already talked to, you can go home now, we won't need you in this production of Food Fight". Half a dozen people picked up their things and left. Spencer wanted to ask why they weren't needed, but decided he'd better listen to the director.

"You said the name of the play was Food Fight?"

"Yes, that's it. A play discussing the psychological significance of the arcade original." Paul's face changed; he was now looking like a student in the presence of the sensai.

Paul immediately started into a string of questions relating to the particular aspects of "Food Fight" that had made it into the play. The director answered his every question with the same excited tone; no one in the crowd, Spencer excluded, found this in the least unusual or inconvenient.

Having finished their short discussion, which took about ten minutes, the director began to hand out parts. "I was only sure of two parts when I started this script, and the rest of you can choose which parts you want for yourselves." The director bent down and picked up the two scripts on the top of his pile and tossed them into the laps of Paul and Spencer. "I hope two of you will be familiar with the script when I talk to you next. I'll see you next Tuesday for your first rehearsal."

Paul stood and, clutching his script, left for home, Spencer tailing. It seemed to Spencer that this wasn't the first time Paul had been in a streetplay, though Spencer did not know how that was possible, since he'd known Paul for as long as the two of them had known about streetplays. Like so many other unexplainable things that had been happening, like Richard Gulch trying to be nice to him all of a sudden, he shrugged it off and forgot about it.

Their next rehearsals were pretty fun, though sometimes they took a lot of time, so long one time that Spencer was late for dinner. Paul had it easy, he only had to remember one line, and just had to keep saying it whenever Spencer addressed him. Spencer, though, had to memorize five lines, which didn't seem like a lot, but he was always saying them out of order, which, though he didn't see any difference, the director said was an absolute no-no. "You are the keystone of the entire play, your performance has got to reflect the psychology of the play as a whole." That's what Paul had told him; what it meant, Spencer was not sure.

At the end of six rehearsals, Paul and Spencer were asked to run through their material with the rest of the cast. They showed up at 7:00 and stayed till after dark. The director took the play from the top and Paul and Spencer's big scene, despite Spencer's slight reluctance to act, was met with enthusiasm and support by all. Though the scenes in which Paul and Spencer appeared were at the beginning and their work was quickly done, they both stayed to see the rest of the play and give the same support to the rest of the cast that they'd been shown.

At the end of eight rehearsals, their scene was done, and they were asked to continue to practice their lines together and come back for the dress rehearsal in a week from Thursday. They did.

Spencer was hardly expecting the costume he got. His character's name was "Gordon," and he was listed first on the playbill. The clothes they had for him looked like they could have been normal-looking, slacks and polo shirt, had they not been made of enough fabric to clothe a 20-foot-tall man. He had some trouble getting into them, but once he had, the effect was instantaneous. He looked like a Gordon, and the reaction of the cast was also immediate. He was the perfect man for the part. Spencer couldn't remember when he'd felt prouder.

Paul's costume was a lab coat. His character's name was "David", and he was listed second on the playbill. Incidentally, the third person on the playbill was "Jones, Master of Worlds, not appearing in this production." Spencer thought it was all very strange, but Paul said that the director had told him it was the only proper way.

They came on and there were a few sitting where the audience was going to stand, and they applauded Paul and Spencer as they came on "stage". Neither Paul nor Spencer knew who they were, but they later learned that they were spouses and friends of other cast members.

They performed their scene, and stood silently for the next scene as the narrator introduced the main character, after that they slipped behind the curtain, where they remained for the remainder of the play, which lasted an additional ninety minutes. Back there, they silently played hangman with some other cast members using a pencil and notebook that Paul had brought for that very purpose.

At the end, the director was very pleased with everyone's performances, and was eager to begin the play tomorrow. He reminded everyone of the earlier than normal start time due to the time of year and gave everyone a performance schedule, indicating they should show up at least an hour early to get in costume, and told them, finally, to have fun, because that's what it was all about.

Early that next morning, Spencer and Paul were sitting in the back row of U.S. History, trying hard not to fall asleep as Mister Ferris prepared them for next eight weeks' new course material by giving a lecture on the accomplishments of the Presidents of the United States between 1844 and 1881. The first President of the time period was James K. Polk.

"There is a popular song that highlights the particular accomplishments of James Knox Polk very well. I've brought a tape of it to play in class."

As the song played, and Spencer chuckled, recognizing the band as one of his favorites, an administrator slipped into the room and whispered something in Mister Ferris's ear. When the song finished playing, Mister Ferris said, "Before I continue, I have a new student to introduce." A girl walked into the room, catching no one's eye. "Her name is Buleezy."

"It's Belisse." She seemed mild and a little nervous.

"Oh, I'm sorry, where are you from, Belisse?"

"I just moved from Vancouver."

"Oh, that's nice. Anyway, she's going to be joining us in class, I understand that she has already caught herself up on the material we covered. Now, find yourself a seat there and we'll continue. Those of you paying attention noticed that the song mentioned Matrin van Buren, who we've already studied.

Since this is all in the same time period, when tensions were beginning to turn into what would eventually become the Civil War..."

Belisse walked to the back of the class, and sat down at the desk in between Paul and Spencer. "I decided to end my crusade against the Bobblins a little early. I figure as long as I'm here, guarding the front door with you guys, they won't be coming back anytime soon."

Spencer burst out laughing. It was a laugh of relief. Suddenly everything was explained; he remembered where they'd been, what they'd done, and who this girl was that now sat next to him.

Something marvelous had occurred, and though there only four people in the world that knew anything about it, that number would soon grow. Something was about to change at East Oaks. Nobody was to remember the whole story of what happened, except the three in the back row of Mister Ferris' 1st period, but it was to be something cherished and not forgotten for a long time to come.

Apparently, Paul's memories returned, as well, because he, too, started laughing. Belisse started laughing. Mister Ferris slapped his ruler against his own desk.

"What exactly is so funny?" He was glaring at them; interrupting his lecture was not something he was fond of doing more than once a period.

"Never mind, Mister Ferris," Spencer said, still smiling. "I don't think you'd get it."

"Well, if it has something to do with James K. Polk, I'll be glad to hear it."

"It does! This lady saved the world from little green men, and I helped!" Someone else in the class burst out laughing. It was Wesley Morrison. Nobody ever paid much attention to Wesley Morrison. He turned around and winked at the three in the back row. Spencer smiled back.

Not replying, Mister Ferris pulled his eyes back to the front of the class and continued as though there had been no interruption. "Now, if you will please open your books to the beginning of chapter nineteen, and take out your homework, we'll begin correcting..."

Paul was writing something on his notebook, and silently tore off a little piece of paper, passing it over to Belisse on his right.

"Do you want to go to a streetplay?" was all it read. Belisse nodded in response as Mister Ferris continued his lecture, not paying attention or not noticing what took place. Belisse turned to her right and smiled at Spencer. Spencer smiled back.

* * * *

It was half an hour before the play started, and people were already starting to show up. Paul was already in costume and behind the curtain, doubtless talking to Andrea, one of the other cast members with whom he spent almost as much time as he did with the director. Belisse had not shown up. The sun was shining behind the trees as it set; Spencer noticed it was no longer much like autumn. Only a few shriveled leaves remained on the trees now. The trees looked bare, as beautiful in their unadorned logic as anything can be, clear, and understandable.

Fifteen minutes until the play started, and Belisse was there. She walked right up to the front, and gave Spencer an energetic hug, which he returned. They talked some, and a girl came out from behind the curtain telling him they were ready for him to get in costume. He shouted back, "Ok!" then turned to Belisse again. "It's not like you to give up on a fight."

"How would you know? But you're right, it isn't. I think you're more important to me than the fight was. 'Friends above revenge' used to be a favorite saying of mine. I guess I didn't have the courage to live it until now."

"Friends? So that's what I am, a friend?"

Belisse only raised an eyebrow. Spencer laughed and went backstage. He put on his costume over his street clothes, which was pretty easy since his costume was far from tight.

One minute before he was supposed to be onstage. Spencer was getting nervous. There were a lot of people out there, people he'd never met. When he stepped out from behind that curtain, he'd have to do the scene he'd done over a hundred times by now, but he was going to have to do it, that one time, and not be distracted by whatever may be going on in the sometimes loud audience, and he was going to have to do it for Belisse, who was there in the front row, where she'd been for some time, waiting for the play to begin.

The director was now at the front of the audience, putting before them the poster-sized playbill, and announcing the play. Everyone applauded and he ducked, pointing to Spencer and Paul, mouthing "You're on." He then gave them the thumbs up, and Spencer and Paul appeared from behind the curtain to applause, which died down quickly, in anticipation of the play's opening lines. Belisse was glowing, the look in her eyes was one of wonder and admiration.

Spencer, as Gordon, walked toward one end of the stage, Paul following, and they did their scene.

"Gem."

"Brilliant!"

"King."

"Brilliant!"

"Food."

"Brilliant!"

"Vermin."

"Brilliant!"

"Triumph."

"Brilliant!"

They walked to one end of the stage, and dropped their heads. Applause brought the narrator to the front of the stage, and behind him was the main character, Freddy Vigoro. After he was announced, Paul and Spencer stepped behind the maroon curtain.

/ / / / / // Chapter 16: // / / / / / / /
Unusual

"Time you said those things you've been wanting to say, before we go."

"Two old men in Scottish attire with Japanese platform shoes playing badminton with a large frozen strawberry."

"Brilliant!"

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Somewhere far away, a hyperactive nine-year-old named Daniel floated through the air of a dinner hall in which a wedding reception had been planned, its every detail set out, then forgotten.

He danced vigorously to music that was not playing on the underside of a large chandelier. Two or three small crystal jewels dropped from the chandelier and smashed on the ground below. Pleased with himself, he continued eating the wedding cake, and finished it not long after that.

Slowly, the lights dimmed in the dining hall. Daniel pulled on the doors; they were locked. He then sat down at the head of the long table, and made no further motions.

-

"That was really great, you two. I think we did very well, all things considered. Don't you?" They both nodded.

Jones, carrying his bowl, then began walking with them down the beach down which they had been walking when that first fateful "Brilliant!" was said. In the distance, the island with its fallen castle could be seen.

"Ending."

"Brilliant!"