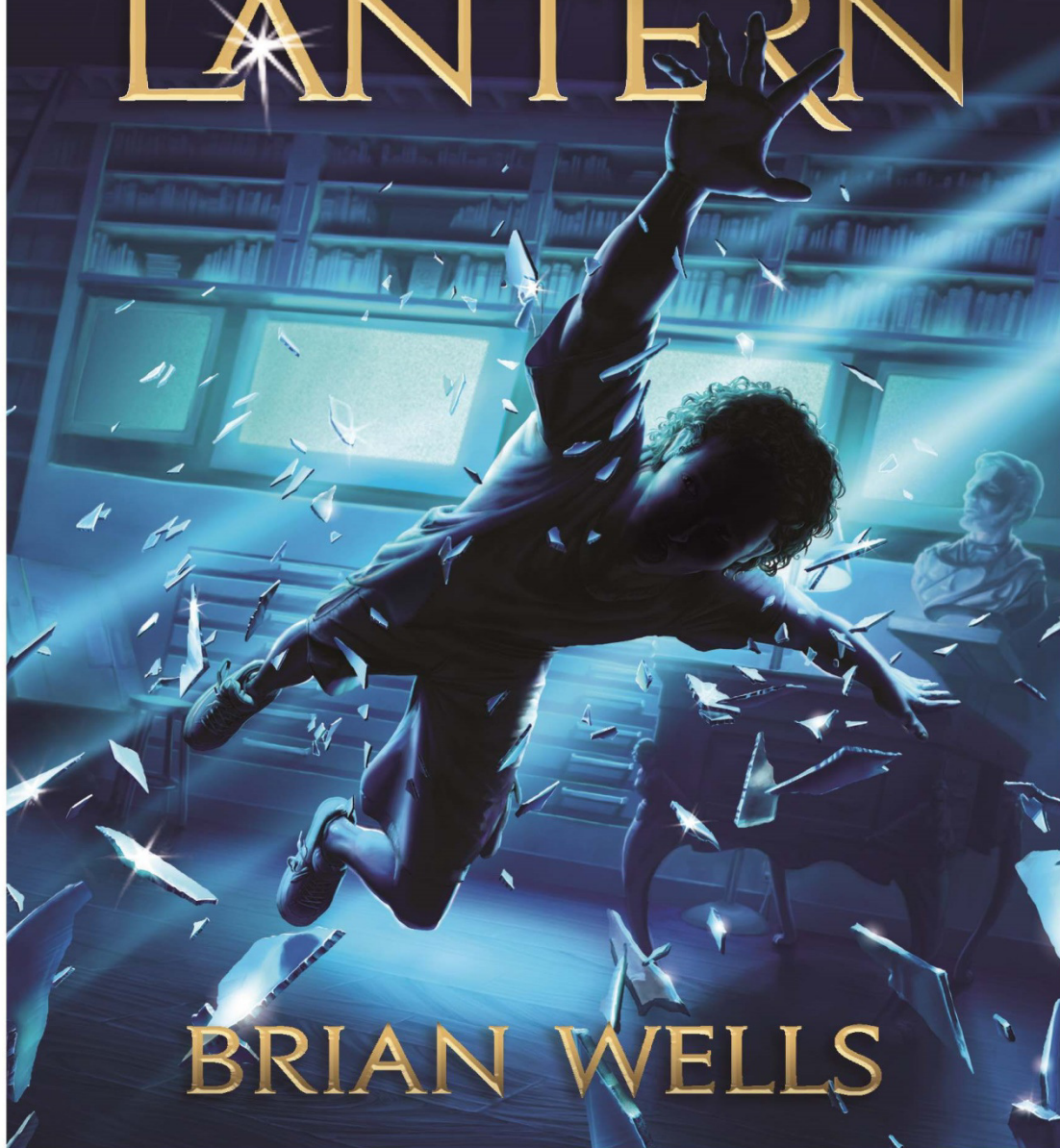


THE LEAGUE AND THE LANTERN



BRIAN WELLS

THE LEAGUE AND THE LANTERN

Sneak Peek Chapters


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BRIAN WELLS



REPUBLICINK
CINCINNATI, OHIO




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This novel is a product of the author’s imagination. While many of the settings are actual, they are used fictitiously. With the exception of deceased public figures who are placed in fictional situations, any resemblance to persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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THE BIG DO-OVER

"IS HE DEAD?"

The voice was muffled and fuzzy. It sounded like a girl to Jake, but he wasn't quite sure. Everything was black and spinning.

"No way. Not dead."

Definitely a guy's voice this time, and much closer. Everything was still muffled though, as if Jake were hearing it through a pile of pillows. If he could just get his eyes open, maybe he—

"How would you know?" It was the girl's voice again.

"No crazy stare," said the guy. "Dead guys always have this crazy stare."

"I said *dead*, not zombie. You watch too much TV."

The voices were getting clearer. And there was gurgling, maybe water. Voices, murmuring, and gurgling . . . and blackness, everything still black.

"How old is he, like eleven or twelve?"

“I don’t know, but he’s a scrawny one. And what’s with the hair? He looks like a wet poodle. Wait, is that drool? Yep. We have a drooler.”

The fog in Jake’s head was beginning to lift. Things were getting brighter. What was he lying on? He felt a tug at his side.

“There’s something smashed all over the kid’s shirt. It looks like, I don’t know, maybe dead squirrel.”

“Ewwwwww! Don’t touch him! Dead things have diseases and stuff.”

“You mean the kid or the squirrel?”

“Both!”

“Nope, never mind. Not squirrel. I think . . . I think it’s corn dog. Yep, dead corn dog.”

The voice was closer now, almost in his ear. A bell chimed somewhere above him. Chimes and murmuring and gurgling. Definitely gurgling.

“We should do the Heimlich or a tourniquet or something,” the guy said.

“Right, Einstein. The Heimlich is for choking and tourniquets for bloody stumps. Just call 911.”

“Nah, I got this.”

Jake felt arms wrap around his waist.

“What are you doing? Put him down!”

As Jake was hauled to his feet, he felt a fist thrust into his gut.

“*Aakkkkkkkhh!*” Jake yelped as he coughed forcefully. His eyes popped open and he launched a spray of saliva, corn dog, and mustard into the air.

“Yessss, I knew it! *Not* dead.” The boy dropped him back into the shallow fountain pool. “No crazy stare.”

Jake sprawled on his backpack, flailing like a flipped turtle in the water. He scrambled to his side and lurched to his feet. “Aahh-aahh-*choooooo!*” He launched a sneeze, and his soaked hair sent a mist across the assembled crowd.

“OK, OK, OK,” he sputtered. “I’m OK. I’m OK.” He regained his footing and stumbled out of the stone fountain, tumbling into the boy who had lifted him up.

“Watch it, Corn Dog!” The boy shoved him back toward the fountain where Jake collapsed on the stone lip.

Jake squinted, trying to get his bearings. The late summer sun was beginning to set behind the imposing limestone towers anchoring the university courtyard. A small crowd of college students encircled him, though the blond kid staring down at Jake barely even looked like a high schooler. He wore the name “Greg” on his bright orange shirt and was standing next to a blond girl with a matching shirt that read “Amy.” They both had disgusted looks on their faces.

“What’s going on here?” A police officer on a Segway broke through the crowd. He stopped in front of Jake and eyed him suspiciously before turning to the boy and girl. “What’s with your friend?”

“Whoa,” Greg said. “Not my friend. Never seen the kid before. I think he was messing around in the fountain.”

“What? No! No.” Jake stood up. “That’s not what—*Ahh-choo!*” He sneezed violently, stumbling back into the fountain.

“OK,” the officer said, turning to the crowd. “I’ve got this. Everyone move along.”

The boy and girl stepped back before drifting away with the crowd. Jake heard somebody whisper something about drugs as they passed by.

“Do you have some kind of ID, son?”

“Definitely, yes sir,” Jake said, climbing out of the fountain. He pried a school ID out of his soaked pocket and handed it to the officer. “Not the greatest picture. Need to work on my smile. Looks more like a mug shot. Um, not that I would *know*, I mean, I *would* know, just not *personally*, you know.”

The officer scanned the ID and then glanced up at Jake, pausing as he noticed Jake’s mismatched eyes.

“Heterochromia iridum,” Jake explained.

“Excuse me?”

“One blue eye and one gray eye. My Uncle Gabe says it’s a gift. Makes me see things differently.”

The officer looked back down at Jake’s ID. “So, Jake Hern-
don, what’s the sign say?”

“Presented by University of Chicago Class of 1922.”

“The other sign.”

“Keep Out of Fountain. This Means You.”

“And that means?”

“It means you. I mean, sorry, sir, it means me. But it’s not like that. You see—”

“Son, I’m going to need you to step over here.” The officer pointed to the edge of the walkway. “Walk this line for me.”

“Officer, I can assure you I’m not under the influence of—”

“Son, the line.”

“Yes, sir. Standard protocol. I can respect that. The old

walk and turn.” Jake walked the line perfectly. “What’s next? One-leg stand? Horizontal gaze?”

“Breathe,” the officer said, leaning in close to Jake’s face.

“You know, sir, I’m not sure you want that. I mean—”

“Just breathe, son.”

Jake took a deep breath and exhaled.

The policeman flinched when Jake’s breath hit him.

“Sorry, sir. Mad Hungarian. Corn dog with Budapest fire mustard. Kind of sticks with you. Flat-out nasty. Breath mints don’t stand a chance.”

“OK. You seem clean . . . so to speak.” The officer pulled a notebook out of his back pocket. “So, was this some kind of prank gone wrong? Your friends ditch you?”

“No, sir. No friends. I mean I *have* friends, just none my age, not at the present moment. I guess you could say sixth grade wasn’t a big win socially, if you know what I mean. Tough crowd, but I’m working on it.”

Jake paused and looked down at the ground, then back up, a little defiantly. “This year’s a big do-over that I’m confident will remedy the situation. In fact, curious thing, that’s exactly where I was headed, my Big Do-Over, a middle school reboot of sorts where I . . .”

He looked momentarily stunned. “Wait, prank? No, sir. No prank. Not trying to create a spectacle. As I was saying, I was on my way to a school thing. University Prep Middle School. Summer’s Over Sleepover. You may have heard of it. Seventh grade orientation thing. They call it a sleepover, but word is there’s not a lot of sleeping. Just cheesy team-building stuff. Sorry, that sounds negative, I mean, it could be the

beginning of greatness, right? An epic quest for me, you never know, right?"

The officer stared at Jake.

"So anyway, I'm late. I'm taking a shortcut and there's this, uh, there's this kid." Jake looked for a reaction, but the officer simply continued staring at him silently. "Soooo, yes sir, there's this, uh, this little kid. And, uh, he was crying. Yes, he was crying, like he's in crisis or something."

"A little kid? In crisis?"

"Yes, sir, a crisis of some sort, a traumatic situation. At this point we don't really know. So I said, 'Hey kid, what's wrong?' but he wasn't speaking English, maybe Chinese. Yeah, I think it was probably Chinese."

"A Chinese kid in crisis?"

"Yes, sir, I believe so. Maybe about five. He wasn't saying anything. He just points. And that's when I saw it."

"You saw it?" The policeman started writing in his pad.

Jake was staring at the Chicago Cubs sticker on the officer's Segway, moving his lips while thinking. "Yes, sir." He looked back up at the man. "Cubs hat, right in the fountain. Poor kid must have dropped it."

"And this little kid, where were his parents?"

"My question exactly. Great minds think alike, right sir? Who was it that said that, anyway?"

The officer didn't look up from his pad.

"So, anyway, I'm in a hurry. You know how that is I'm sure, being Chicago's finest and all."

No response.

"But then I said to myself, 'Hey wait a minute, Jake.

What's a guy if he can't help a little kid? I mean where are all the heroes?' Defining moment here. A worthy endeavor. A chance to step up and be a dude. So I went in for the hat but I must have leaned over too far and, wham! Yes, sir, head first. Which surprised me as much as anyone. I mean, I'm not the biggest guy, but my wrestling coach says I've got catlike reflexes. Which makes for mad skills, even if you're undersized. Won sixth grade regionals in my weight class last year. Had my name in the paper. Perhaps you read about it."

"So you're a hero on a mission to rescue this alleged Chinese kid's hat?"

"Well, I'll leave the hero part for others to decide. Real dudes don't brag, right? My Uncle Gabe says, 'Pride goeth before a destruction.' Not that I think that God would just jack me in the head for bragging, but hey, why risk—wait, what do you mean 'alleged'?"

"And how did you end up unconscious?"

"Hmmm. Well, see, I snagged the hat and, I, uh . . . I don't know. Maybe I leaned over too far? I started to feel a little dizzy. I stumbled. Anyway, the next thing I know, this blond kid's pulling me up and doing this violent Heimlich thing with his fist. Not that I don't appreciate the effort, but—"

"So, this little kid. Where is he? And what about the hat?"

"Again, great question. Not your first time at the rodeo, is it, sir? Wait . . . what are you writing, sir? Is that a ticket?"

No answer.

"Yes, sir. The missing kid. I have a theory. I think he . . ." Jake paused in deep thought. "I think he . . . he grabbed the hat. Yes, I think he grabbed it and then sometime during all

the commotion, he found his parents and they went on their way.”

“And the smashed corn dog on your shirt? How does that fit into your story?”

“Oh, that. Right. The corn dog shrapnel. So I mentioned the Mad Hungarian? Right before the little kid situation, I had a little run-in with my lunch. Accidentally smashed a bit of the corn dog goodness on my shirt. It wouldn’t have been so bad but then there was the Heimlich thing. Did I mention that? Yeah, that didn’t help.”

“Look, son, I’ve heard it all. A kid losing his hat? Not even a top-ten story.”

The officer tore out a ticket and handed it to Jake. “You’ll need to appear at the juvenile desk with a parent. You’ve got thirty days.”


“Wait, sir, maybe there’s another theory that would—”

“It’s for impeding pedestrian traffic.” The officer was already stepping back onto his Segway. “I could have made it for trespassing. It’s your lucky day.” And with that, he sped away.

“Yeah. My lucky day,” Jake muttered as he scraped bits of corn dog from his shirt. As if the ticket wasn’t bad enough, he had now gone from maybe-late to flat-out late. He turned to run but smacked right into an old woman. An old Chinese woman. She was smiling, her arm draped around a small boy clutching a wet Cubs hat.

“Thank you, young man!” she said with a smile.

Jake gave them a thumbs-up and smiled weakly before breaking into a jog. Not good. So much for the Big Do-Over.



His chance to snatch middle-school victory from the jaws of last year's debacle was not starting as planned. And now he was late. Late, soaking wet, and reeking like a Mad Hungarian.



FIGHTING EINSTEINS

JAKE HUSTLED ACROSS the cobblestone courtyard, weaving in and out between streams of college students with overloaded backpacks and stuffed messenger bags. While his clothes had started to dry, he couldn't say the same for his water-logged backpack, which left a small stream behind him. He dodged a guy with dreadlocks who was juggling a soccer ball with his feet and ducked through an ancient, ivy-covered archway. He raced across the university lawn and crossed the street as a bell tower chimed in the distance.

This was most definitely not going as planned. At least it was only Level 2 humiliation—in public, but with strangers. Manageable. But now there was impending lateness.

The sidewalk was an obstacle course of bookstore crates and café tables. When he finally passed the Fifty-Ninth Street train station, he knew he'd make it. This might be his first day at Uni Prep Middle School, but he was no stranger to the neighborhood.

Jake was out of breath by the time he reached the soaring Greek columns of the museum. He scowled as he caught his reflection in the revolving door. *Who was it that said, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression?" Was it Gandhi? Or a shampoo commercial?* He tried to finger-comb his mop of curly black hair into submission but failed miserably.

The last of the sun's rays disappeared over Lake Michigan as Jake entered the Museum of Science and Industry and rushed up the escalator into the enormous lobby. Even after all the Saturday mornings here with Uncle Gabe, it never got old. The cavernous space was laid out like a huge plus sign, with four wings spreading out from the massive center rotunda. Each wing had a main floor, then a balcony with more exhibits extending up to the ceiling. Jake stood in the center and spun around, taking it all in as the last of the day's visiting families swarmed past. Straight ahead was the rickety cage elevator that ran down to the underground coal mine. To his left, a 727 airliner jutted out from the east wing's balcony high overhead, appearing to soar over the lobby. Jake's favorite was the towering man-made tornado swirling inside a glass column in the west wing. But he loved all of it. Then he saw the banner on the table: "Summer's Over Sleepover Registration"—reminding him that tonight wasn't about the usual fun.

The Summer's Over Sleepover was a simple concept: The new seventh graders meet their classmates the weekend before school starts, with the eighth graders leading them through a bunch of games. It was a simple concept that any

seventh grader could tell you is absolutely ridiculous, another bad idea from an adult who had completely forgotten the brutal reality known as middle school. Put the seventh graders in their pajamas and under the thumb of eighth graders still working out their own issues from last year. It usually takes about fifteen minutes for this kind of thing to go from fun and games to *The Hunger Games*.

Nope. Jake caught himself. Not going negative. Fresh start. Do-over. Be positive.

The last of the families streamed out of the closing museum as Jake approached the table. A woman in a University Prep sweatshirt was finishing packing up.

“I’m sorry, sweetie,” she said, glancing up at Jake and his mustard-splotched shirt. “I think the ‘Fun with Food’ camp was earlier today.”

“What? No, ma’am. I’m here for the sleepover deal. Jake, Jake Herndon.”

She looked him over once more, eyebrows raised as her eyes settled on his mustard stains.

“Oh, this.” Jake pulled at his T-shirt. “There was an incident. Little kid. I tried to do the right thing. You know, rise to the occasion. But it went south. And then there was an over-aggressive Heimlich. But I—”

“Well, let me check,” she said as she scanned her clipboard. “Wait. Jake Herndon. There you are! You’re new. That’s . . . well, that’s just great!” Her voice rose two octaves and she made a mock salute. “I’m Mrs. Everjoy and I’ll be your cruise director for this trip!”

Jake smiled and dropped his soaked backpack on the table

like a bag of wet noodles. “Sorry, ma’am. Collateral damage. Maybe there’s a dryer in the building?”

Mrs. Everjoy slid the wet backpack behind the table and gave Jake the classic “you poor thing” smile. She grabbed a walkie-talkie. “Alby, we’ve got a Tardy Tony who needs a bit of a makeover. Could you bring over one of those shirts from the gift shop?” She glanced back at Jake. “Extra small if you’ve got it.”

“Small’s fine. I don’t need extra—”

She waved Jake off. “And maybe a wet wipe too.” She stepped out from behind the table, cleared her throat, and motioned to the banner as if it were a new car. “Welcome to the Summer’s Over Sleepover!”

Jake gasped as he felt himself being squeezed and lifted off the ground from behind. When his feet returned to the floor, he spun around to find himself in the awkward embrace of a mascot with a white lab coat and an oversized head.

“That’s what we call an Alby Welcome!” Mrs. Everjoy said, going in for an unsuccessful fist bump with the character who apparently couldn’t see her fist from inside his giant head. The mascot had a fuzzy white mustache and crazy gray hair; it looked like he had been electrocuted. The front pocket of his lab coat was stuffed with pens, mechanical pencils, and a slide rule. He released Jake and turned to Mrs. Everjoy, handing her a plastic bag dramatically, as if it were a major award.

“Thank you, kind sir!”

Alby waved an oversized gloved hand at Jake and scurried away.

“Alby?” Jake asked. “Is your mascot dude Albert—”

“Yes, sir. We’re the Fighting Einsteins.” She peeked in the bag. “Well, shoot it all. I guess these are the only smalls they had left. Better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick, though. You can change in there,” she said, pointing to a bathroom. “But hurry up. When you hear the music, you’ll know we’re starting.” She motioned to a stage in the corner of the lobby where kids were gathering. “You don’t want to be the Late Great Jake!”

Jake ducked into the bathroom, passing a janitor replacing the paper towels. He stepped close to the mirror. *Whoa.* What was that twisted mushroom on his head? Oh, yeah, his hair. *Should have gone for that back-to-school haircut. A quick sink-shower should help.* The janitor gave him a strange look as Jake stripped off his matted shirt and threw it in the trash. Jake splashed his hair and chest and patted dry with a few paper towels. After a second attempt to get his hair to obey, he gave up and pulled the T-shirt out of the bag.

“Nooooooo!” Jake cried out as he looked at the shirt. He spun for the trash can. Empty. He swung open the bathroom door and leaned out. No janitor. In fact, there was no one at all. Then the music cranked up. Jake dropped his head. *OK. Salvageable situation. Review your options. A: Go in shirtless. Bold move, but high potential for Level 3 Humiliation—Public and In Front of People You’ll See Again. B: Sneak away. Pursue homeschooling. C: Suck it up and put on the stupid shirt.*



LEVEL 3

JAKE FOLLOWED THE SOUNDS back to the stage area. Dance music bounced off the marble walls while blue spotlights circled the rotunda dome high overhead. A hundred nervous kids gathered around several folding tables stuffed with pizzas and drinks. This was it. This would be his world, his people. Pop quizzes, field trips, forced fun, the whole deal. He just wished he wasn't entering this brave new world a half hour late, wearing mustard-stained cargo shorts and a pink Hello Kitty astronaut T-shirt.

The kids swarmed the pizza like jackals descending on a fallen antelope. Jake jostled his way through the crowd and just barely managed to grab one of the last pieces. He wasn't sure how this would mix with the Mad Hungarian still rumbling in his stomach but he wasn't going to pass up free pizza. He pulled a hot sauce packet from his damp pocket and squirted it on the slice.

Now the mingling. The dreaded mingling. What was it

his teacher had said? Nimble. He needed to be more socially nimble. He rolled his shoulders and surveyed the room. Basic middle-school stuff. Everyone huddled with their friends, like pioneers circling their wagons against hostile invaders. He moved toward the closest group, hovering just outside their circle. The indirect approach. He followed the conversation. He laughed when they laughed. Then there was a pause. Perfect time to jump in. What was that opening line he'd come up with last night? Something about that song that kids liked so much this summer. But before he could step in, the group moved as a pack to the drink table.

No problem. Jake spied another cluster. He guessed that they were Level 2 social strata. Not the cool crowd, but somewhere in the middle. Definitely attainable. He inched closer. He still couldn't remember the line. He'd have to freestyle it.

"What's that smell?" one of the kids asked, sniffing the air. They made pained faces and moved away.

Awkward. Note to self: More Old Spice, less Budapest fire mustard.

He scanned the room. Maybe there was another lone wolf who hadn't found a pack. How about that tall kid in the corner? The one working the "hang by the food table" strategy. *Wait, is he wearing a Captain America T-shirt?* Yes. A good reminder. Just what Jake needed. Not the T-shirt, already had it. Wished he was wearing it right now.

No, what Jake needed was a quest. A quest would be just the thing. It's how all the greats became great in the first place. It's how scrawny Steve Rogers became Captain America. It's how Dr. Jones became Indiana Jones. Even in Gabe's

favorite—*The Princess Bride*—just one worthy quest turned Westley into a hero.

Yes, that was the missing piece. He just needed a quest of his own. A moment to step up and be a dude. He knew he could do it. He just needed the chance. Rescue the princess from the tower, crush the evil empire, restore order and justice to the universe. But first he should probably lose the Hello Kitty T-shirt. Jake was halfway into a daydream where he was saving the entire girls' soccer team from Nazi robots when he glanced back toward the kid in the Captain America shirt. What was that kid doing? Jake watched the boy pull a tube of hand sanitizing gel out of his pocket and rub it all over his hands, twice, before picking up his pizza. *OK, maybe not the right sidekick.*

The music faded and Mrs. Everjoy bounded onto the stage. "What up, what up, young bucks?" She made a big game show motion with her hands. "I'm Mrs. Everjoy, your humble class advisor and new bestie!"

What up young bucks? Bestie? Classic BFF advisor prototype. Trying too hard.

"Tonight, you join the long, prestigious line of University Preparatory Middle School students. Tonight you are arriving as one hundred individuals. But Sunday afternoon you will leave as a class, a family. And what a class you will be." She read from a list in her hand. "Seventy-five of you scored in the top 1 percent on the National Middle School Aptitude test. Three of you are world-class pianists, four are accomplished violinists, and we have more than a few ballerinas, junior champion tennis players, swimmers, and fencers. The rest of

you, I guess, are straight-up slackers! JK. JK. Whewww.” She wiped her head with a handkerchief and returned to her list. “Eighty of you are coming up from our prestigious University Grade School. Please stand so all our new friends this year can get a good look at you.”

She led the room in applause, accompanied by a “Woo-woo” from a teacher in the back. “Another seventeen of you are part of our international exchange program. Please stand.” There was more applause and light woo-wooing. “Welcome from Dubai, London, Shanghai, Paris, Mumbai, and Mexico City.”

Jake looked around the room. They may have been from all over the world but everyone looked like they shopped at the same store. Everyone except a dark-haired girl sitting in front of him. Her shirt was a funky patchwork of colorful animal and flower symbols stitched together. She had an exotic-looking woven band on one wrist and a silver bracelet engraved with some kind of tribal markings on the other.

“Well, welcome all. Tonight is—” Mrs. Everjoy suddenly stopped, squinting through the spotlight toward the back of the room. “Oh yes, did I forget something?” The teacher who had been woo-wooing was saying something to her.

“My bad, my bad. Eighty of you are coming up from our grade school, seventeen are international exchanges, and there’s three of you who are . . .” She looked down at her clipboard. “Well, it doesn’t say, but there’s three ‘others.’ Would you wonderful, beautiful others please stand?”

Jake didn’t want to stand, but as everyone’s eyes settled on him, he gave in. He slowly rose to polite applause along

with the dark-haired girl in front of him and the tall kid in the Captain America T-shirt. All three quickly sat back down.

“Well, again, welcome. And oh, yes, that reminds me— this year is especially exciting because I’m proud to say that this is the first year of our Everyday Einstein Scholarship, which opens our class to one student who might not get the chance otherwise.”

For some reason, Jake felt like everyone’s eyes were settling on him again.

“Alrighty. Now before we break up for the Einstein Pride Scavenger Hunt, I need everyone to grab a sticker out of the bag that’s passing by, slap it on your cell phones, and drop them in the bag. That’s right, homies! We’re kickin’ it old-school tonight. Confiscating yo cellies.”


A scavenger hunt, thought Jake as the bags passed through the aisles. *This might not be so bad. Maybe it won’t be the usual team-building nonsense*, like those awful trust falls. Whoever came up with the idea of having strangers catch you as you fall backwards into their arms? Maybe Jake just had trust issues. Or maybe it was because Wayne Browning wasn’t fully engaged at Camp Greenwood last summer, and Jake’s trust fall became a lot more “fall” than “trust.”

Mrs. Everjoy dropped the bag of phones into a footlocker and slapped a padlock on it.

“OK, let’s get this party started! Crews, go ahead and huddle up with your eighth grade ambassadors for your first clue.”

As the kids quickly gathered in groups, it became obvious that Jake and the two “others” didn’t know where to go.

Mrs. Everjoy stepped back to the mike. “Oh, and if you’re



one of our wonderful others, you can join the orange crew for tonight.”

The next three seconds were a blur, as if Jake were in a slow-motion dream . . . a very bad dream.

What are the chances? Actually, in Jake’s short twelve years, the chance of this kind of thing seemed to be pretty high. He tried to melt into the wall as Greg and Amy, in their matching orange shirts, waved him over to their crew.



CRACKING THE CODE

JAKE JOINED THE GROUP, doing his best to hide in the back of the huddle. *OK, now I'm glad I changed my shirt. Even Hello Kitty is better than them recognizing me.*

“Gather round, munchkins.” Greg blew a whistle that was completely unnecessary. “You heard Mrs. Everjoy say this stuff about getting to know each other and it not being about who wins. Well, that’s fine for the other teams, but not for us. For us, it’s about winning. We’ll get to know each other by winning. Everyone else will get to know each other by losing. Any questions? Great, let’s talk tactics and strategy.”

“Hey, shouldn’t we do names?” one of the seventh grade girls asked.

“Sorry. When I said ‘any questions,’ I meant no questions.”

“It’s just that, I think we’ll work better as a team if we, you know, know each other’s names?”

Greg gave her an icy stare. “OK, we’ve got a few minutes

before they give us the first clue. Knock yourselves out. Why don't you start, Miss Team-Building Expert?"

"OK," she said, either missing Greg's sarcasm or choosing to ignore it. "I'm Sevita Bahkta, which is a Hindi name from my father's side. My dad teaches physics at—"

"OK, Chatty Cathy! Don't need the life story," Greg interrupted. "How about you, big guy? Why don't you go next?" He pointed to the tall African-American boy in the Captain America T-shirt who had stood as one of the "others" earlier.

"Sure. TJ McDonald," the boy responded.

"Welcome, Cap," Greg said, referring to TJ's shirt while reaching out and shaking his hand. "Looking forward to seeing what you have on the court. Our seventh and eighth grade teams are combined."

TJ looked at him, confused, while pulling a small bottle of sanitizer out of his pocket and squirting gel on the hand he had shaken with.

"Basketball," Greg said. "Basketball."

"Right. Not my game." TJ responded with a sigh. It was clear this wasn't the first time he'd been asked this.

"Sorry," said Greg. "I just thought, because you're, well . . ." "Tall? Dark? Handsome?" said TJ. "Guilty, guilty, guilty. But no basketball. I do know my way around a saber though, second place in the under-14 category at nationals. They scored it as third, but I was robbed. It was second. So fencing, and if there's a Quidditch club, I'm all in."

"Great," Greg interrupted, rolling his eyes. "So if we run into any pirates or wizards, we're good."

While Greg cut off each seventh grader as they introduced

themselves, Jake slipped behind a support column to turn his Hello Kitty T-shirt inside out.

Greg motioned to the dark-haired girl Jake had noticed earlier.

“Lucy Garcia,” she said, stepping forward. “We just moved back to the States from Nepal.” She gave everyone a small smile.

“OK,” Greg said. “Now that we’re all feeling the love—”

“You missed someone.” Lucy motioned to Jake behind the column. The kids moved aside, exposing him as he was half-way through pulling his shirt back on.

Greg broke into a huge grin, nudging Amy. “Corn Dog!”

So much for do-overs. Level 2 meet Level 3.

“OK, Corn Dog, give us your name and your favorite condiment. Well, never mind,” Greg said, pointing to the mustard on Jake’s shorts. “I guess we just need the name.”

“Ahem, Jake Herndon. Excuse the clothing, there was a situation. An incident, really, a crisis. A corn dog, a little kid in peril, I didn’t have time to—”

“OK, again, life story? Not needed. But hey, this is great. We’ve got Captain America *and* Captain Corn Dog. How can we lose? Avengers unite!”

“Assemble,” Jake muttered under his breath.

“What was that?” Greg asked.

“Assemble,” TJ jumped in. “He said *assemble*. It’s ‘Avengers assemble!’ Not unite. Unite would be X-Men. *X-Men United*. Although that’s really just from the second movie. And even then most just call it X-2.”

Jake nodded in agreement.

“O . . . K . . .” Greg said, rolling his eyes.

Captain Corn Dog, thought Jake. *This could be a problem.* Jake had become somewhat of an expert on embarrassing nicknames. This one had potential to stick. Funny story? Check. Short and catchy? Check. Created by an overconfident loudmouth? Check. Definite stickiness. *Better just ignore it.*

Jake smiled his “I get it, I can take it” smile.

“OK, crews!” Mrs. Everjoy was back at the microphone. Your ambassadors all have their first clue. On the count of three, you can open your envelope. We’ll see you at the finish line for the Epic Einstein Ice Cream Bash! One . . . two . . .”

On the count of two, Greg tore open his envelope and read the card aloud: “ ‘Their loss is our gain. We cracked the code just the same.’ OK, I have no idea what that means, but it doesn’t matter.” Greg tossed the clue card to the floor. “Here’s the deal, newbies: I know how this works from last year. They start each team with a different clue. You get a different token at each clue station. First team to collect all the tokens wins. Instead of messing with our clue, we’ll split up into three groups and follow the other teams. When they get their first token, we’ll grab one too. Meet back here as soon as you have it. Then we’ll start on our clue. We’ll be way ahead.”

“You know . . .” Jake raised his hand. “I don’t think that’s the spirit of—”

“That’s why you’re not supposed to think, Corn Dog. I’m the team leader, I’ll do the thinking. You just do the doing.”

Greg pulled three of the boys next to him. “We’ll hit the lower level.” He grabbed Sevita and two other girls and shoved them toward Amy. “Chatty Cathy, you go with Amy to

the balcony floor. And you three others,” he motioned to Jake, TJ, and Lucy, “cover this main floor. As soon as you have your token, meet back here.”

They all raced out, leaving Jake, TJ, and Lucy standing in the middle of the room. Jake was staring at the floor, silently moving his lips and talking to himself.

TJ plopped down in one of the seats. “Look, I say we grab a few Yoo-hoos from the vending machine and chill out until it’s ice cream time.”

“Ahem.” Jake cleared his throat, still staring at the floor. “Maybe we should try to do it—you know, solve the clues. If we flat-out crushed it, that would be gigantic, right?”

“OK. I guess that’s one way to go,” TJ said. “We’ll call that Option B. Chilling with Yoo-hoos is Option A. Solving the clues, a solid Option B.”

Jake read the clue off the floor. “‘Their loss is our gain. We cracked the code just the same.’ So what do they have here that was lost?”

“Probably a lot of things. But first, how about we vote on that Yoo-hoo proposal?” TJ looked around, realizing that Lucy was gone. “Hey, where’s the Nicaragua girl?”

“Nepal,” Jake said.

“What?”

“Nepal,” Jake repeated. “She said she just moved back from Nepal.” Jake turned to see Lucy on the other side of the room, jiggling the handle of the “Staff Only” footlocker.

“If I can get my mobile back, we can Google the clues,” Lucy said.

Jake lost his train of thought. He wasn’t sure if it was

because of the way she pronounced “mobile” (MOH-bile) or because he was just now seeing her up close. She was a little taller than Jake, though not so much as to make him feel short. But her eyes—they were the most intense green eyes he had ever seen. She twisted a paper clip and jammed it into the lock.

“Whatthewhat?” TJ stood up. “Not sure what a ‘MOH-bile’ is, but I’m pretty sure there’s an official lockdown on those cell phones. I don’t how they roll in Nigeria, but I’m not looking to add ‘breaking and entering’ to my college application.”

“Nepal,” Lucy corrected.

“Right. Well, ixnay on the breaking and entering, Miss Nepal,” said TJ.

“Lucy,” she said, standing up and turning back to the boys.

“Hmm?” asked TJ.

“My name is Lucy. Use my name and I’ll use yours. Or would you prefer Captain What’s-His-Name?”


“Uhh, uhh, uhh.” TJ appeared to be losing his breath. “Captain What’s-His-Name?”

“The little cartoon on your shirt.”

“Really? Little cartoon?” TJ looked to Jake, who grimaced uncomfortably. “It’s America. Captain AMERICA. Like the land of the free, home of the brave, the first Avenger. Need I go on?”

“So, TJ it is,” said Lucy, tossing the paper clip into the trash can. “That’s not going to work. It’s a double-pin lock. I could open it, but I’d need to break it.”

Jake was staring at the floor again, muttering to himself.



“‘Their loss’ and ‘our gain.’ I’ve been to every exhibit here, more than once, and I can’t think of . . . Wait! The U-505 submarine downstairs. Stellar! They captured it from the Germans in World War II. It was their loss and our gain.”

“Sounds like a stretch,” Lucy said. “What’s that have to do with a cracked code?”

Jake grinned. “Germany’s secret code machine was on-board. It helped us win the war.”

“I guess that’s worth a shot,” said Lucy as Jake picked up the clue card and pointed across the lobby to the stairwell.

Lucy headed for the stairwell with Jake close behind. TJ brought up the rear, muttering something about Yoo-hoos and Option A.



AS ABOVE, SO BELOW

WHEN THEY EXITED THE STAIRWELL, they arrived in the cavernous lower level, a sprawling cement room as big as a stadium. In the center a massive German submarine, nearly three stories tall, was bathed in floodlights and docked as if it had been captured yesterday.

“I’ll bet it’s somewhere over here.” Jake walked to a glass display case. Inside was a strange typewriter-looking machine.

Lucy read the card next to the machine. “M4 Enigma machine taken from the U-505 German submarine. The Enigma and its codebooks were rushed to Washington, D.C., to help the Allied code-breaking effort.”

“Their loss was our gain,” Jake said.

“We cracked the code just the same,” Lucy replied with a smile.

TJ spotted a yellow clue box under the display. “Bam! Ten points for Gryffindor!”

Before he could open the box, Lucy reached in and pulled out the bright yellow envelope. She tore it open and tossed the envelope to TJ, keeping the card. TJ flinched but managed to catch it.

“Next clue.” Lucy read from the card. “ ‘As above, so below.’ ”

“Great,” said TJ, throwing the crumpled envelope back to Lucy. “Weirder and weirder. Next thing you know, Mr. Wonka’s going to take us on a psychedelic boat ride.”

Lucy gave TJ a puzzled look.

“You know,” TJ said, squirting his hands with more gel. “Willy Wonka? Oompa Loompas?”

Lucy’s look of confusion didn’t change.

“Wow! Avengers I kind of understand, but no Willy Wonka in Namibia either?”

“Focus,” Lucy said, not commenting on the fact that TJ still couldn’t remember Nepal. “ ‘As above.’ I’ll check out the exhibits on the balcony. Why don’t you two see if there’s anything on the main floor. Meet back here in ten.”

“Whoa,” TJ said. “I don’t remember electing you Supreme Commander.”

“Suit yourself,” Lucy called over her shoulder as she headed toward the stairwell.

“OK. And then there were two,” TJ said, turning to Jake. “Now how about those Yoo-hoos?”

Jake was staring at the floor, his lips moving silently. He looked up at TJ. “She’s not right.”

“Who? Funky Thai girl? I agree, on so many levels.”

“No, I mean about ‘so below.’ ” Jake headed across the

room. “Let’s check out the first floor but I think we might need a different strategy.”

“OK, so that’s a pause on the Yoo-hoos for now.” TJ followed Jake into the elevator.

When the doors opened, the two boys stepped out into the north wing of the enormous main lobby where a sea of half-opened shipping crates surrounded a towering Ferris wheel.

A huge poster reading “Chicago: Then and Now” was stretched along the massive far wall. “Temporary exhibit opening Monday,” Jake said, looking for any signs of a yellow envelope. “Supposed to be flat-out classic.”

He pointed to the Ferris wheel. “That’s a replica from the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. They’ve also got choice stuff from the Civil War, the Bears’ Super Bowl trophy, Michael Jordan’s shoes, even props from movies made in Chicago.”

Two security guards stood by a large opened crate.

“No way.” TJ stepped toward a gleaming red and blue metallic robot over thirty feet tall. “Optimus Prime?”

It’s from the *Transformers* movie they filmed here,” Jake said.

“Really? Awesome. How do you know about all this?” TJ couldn’t take his eyes off the robot.

“My Uncle Gabe works here sometimes. We’re coming to the exhibit when it opens next week.”

They walked to the center of the floor where a security guard with curly red hair stood next to an industrial-looking steel cabinet. The front was marked “Lincoln Library” just above a high-tech keypad.

“Whoa,” TJ said. “That case looks like it could survive a nuclear explosion. What’s in it? The crown jewels?”

“You could say that. I think it’s why Uncle Gabe wants to come,” Jake said. “He’s really into the Civil War. It’s President Lincoln’s hat and gloves.”

“Cool, although I think a life-size Optimus Prime might be the real crown jewels.”

“It’s the hat and gloves the president wore the night he was assassinated. Complete with blood stains.”

“What? Weird. Cool, I guess. But weird. But cool, I think. But still weird.”

The red-haired security guard turned to the boys. “Hey kids, you’re not allowed in this area.”

“I can respect that, sir,” Jake said. “But we’re on a bit of an official exercise here. The Uni Prep Scavenger Hunt. You may have received a memo. Anyway, we plan to be the victors and we think—”


“Not here. Not tonight. This wing is no access until it’s set up.”

“Sorry, sir,” Jake said as he and TJ turned back. “I have another ‘so below’ thought I want to check out. See if Lucy found anything upstairs. Meet back here in ten?”

“I still like the Yoo-hoo plan better,” TJ said, stepping into the elevator. “But if you say so.” He added, as the elevator doors closed, “Captain Corn Dog.”


It should just die if I ignore it, right? Jake thought as he crossed the lobby to the coal mine wing. *Just ignore it.*

So below. As Jake approached the old cage elevator, he remembered how scary the trip down into the coal mine had




been when he was little. The rickety chain elevator and the dark walls seeping with water were almost too much. Now it was one of his favorite exhibits. When the elevator reached the shaft floor, he slid the cage open and stepped into the passageway as the cool, damp air enveloped him.

His eyes slowly adjusted to the dim light coming from the wall lanterns and he began edging down the stone path. He passed an open room with crusty miner equipment and head-gear hanging on the walls. A small wooden table stood in the center, covered with old lamps they'd used to detect poisonous fumes. Jake remembered that this was where the guides would light a lamp as part of the demonstration. He scanned the room but there was no sign of any clues.



When the path ended at the entrance to the mine train, Jake realized he hadn't seen an employee down here, not a single one. As he turned back toward the elevator, he felt an extra chill. On his next step a thunderous explosion rocked the tunnel. The lights shattered and the cave was plunged into darkness. Broken glass and dust rained down on Jake's head as he was slammed to the floor.





CAVE DARK

THERE'S DARK AND THEN THERE'S CAVE DARK. The kind of dark you only get where there's absolutely no light. The kind of dark you can feel. Jake choked through the swirling dust and rose to his knees. He held one hand in front of his face. He couldn't even see his wiggling fingers. *Cave dark.*

He tried to stand but fell back to the floor, his ears still ringing from the explosion as he wiped dirt from his eyes and spit dust out of his mouth. Had the explosion knocked out all the power, or just down in the mine? What had caused the explosion? Would there be more?

Not wanting to wait to find out, he stumbled to his feet and fumbled his way to the wall. He could feel the cool, damp air and hear the water trickling further ahead.

This is totally manageable. Just scoot my feet slowly along the wall and I won't fall onto the tracks.

He shuffled for about ten minutes before reaching what he hoped was the way back through the tunnel. His hunch

was confirmed as he felt the stone wall become damp, then slick with water. Jake moved more quickly as the narrow passage began to expand, though everything was still pitch black. Jake thought his eyes would have adjusted by now, but without even a hint of light, it didn't matter.

He finally came to an opening. He let go of the wall and took a careful step. If his memory was correct he should—*oomph*. The table's edge painfully confirmed his hunch. He was in the demonstration room and headed in the right direction. He leaned against the table. Why was he breathing so hard? *Stay calm. Be positive*. Slowly his breathing returned to normal. *What was that?* He'd thought he heard someone. No, not exactly heard, more like felt. He could feel the room's air moving slowly across his neck, as if someone else, or something else, was breathing. He stood completely still. Nothing. *Maybe cave dark makes you cave crazy?*

He eased his hands along the tabletop. He had an idea. His fingers finally landed on a small box the size of a matchbox. *Exactly* the size of a matchbox, because it was a matchbox.

Yes. Now the lamp. He swept his hands across the tabletop. He felt the cold metal of the lantern just before he knocked it off the table. The sound of the shattering glass echoed off the stone walls.

So now we have a good news/bad news situation. Good news: I found the lamp. Bad news: I smashed it into tiny pieces and I'm now going to die a slow, painful death in the dark. Jake slowly searched through the broken glass with his foot. On one swipe he managed to kick the base of the lamp. He leaned down and gingerly picked through the pieces. The glass was

definitely toast and the top was dented, but the rest seemed to be intact.

Slowly, carefully, Jake pulled a match out of the box. He fumbled for the right end before striking the match against the side. There was a scraping noise followed by the match snapping in two. Not even a spark. He tried again. And again. Same result. He had one match left.

“Use the Force, Luke. Use the Force,” he quietly mouthed to himself. He carefully dragged the last match along the side of the box.

First, there was the unmistakably crisp sound of a flame sparking to life as a burst of light filled the chamber. This was immediately followed by a boot flashing from the shadows and slamming into Jake’s forehead, sending him crashing back to the floor. The ancient lamp clanged along the stone floor, casting a flickering shadow onto Jake as a dark figure hovered over his crumpled body.

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of The League and the Lantern!**

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