

LOCKDOWN

by Royce Wood

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Author's Note

There's a lot of things I find really interesting about this piece. As a first novel, I didn't really know what I was doing. I still don't, but that's beside the point. But I applaud the effort. Good job, old boy.

It's quite a time capsule. In a lot of ways, it captures what my life was like at the time I write it, albeit through a cheesy semi-science fiction filter. Peter, who I consider the main character for undergoing the most change, is me, or at least who I was at that time. He is socially awkward, confused, and tormented. While exaggerated, the repressive voice in his head was something that defined my reality for the large part of my adolescent life. I was afraid of emotional attachment and intimacy, because of memories of embarrassment forged in my young childhood – similar to Lily and her refusal to undertake an action which scared and scarred her the first time around. To have secrets such as these exposed so transparently in this work frightened me, and I vowed to never let anyone read it except for my closest friend (anecdote – he read all 50,000+ words on a single airline flight, and responded with only one: 'interesting'). I've changed my mind since then. I feel more confident in myself now, and have taken ownership of my past. The journey Peter takes through the novel is strangely prophetic – his physical collapse spawned by emotional turmoil has an eerie parallel to the seizure I had about 18 months after the novel was written. He rejects the repressive voice, much as I cast off my conservative upbringing. The 'two-sided' nature that intrigues Amber so much makes perfect sense in retrospect, now that I have been diagnosed as bipolar. The political structure of the novel is loosely based on the French Revolution, which I had been studying at the time. The basic economic unit being food, which for some reason no one can live more than a day without. I was hungry most of the time I was writing this, if you can tell.

In fact, the political nature of the characters is what intrigued me the most and what I spent the most time focusing on, which is why the action seems unnatural and the personalities distant. Peter is the most well-developed, not surprisingly. Connor is basically Peter on a good day, and Steven is a more knowledgeable and slightly less charismatic version of Connor. Dan is amusing, but fairly flat. Michael could have been something great if I hadn't forgotten about him and never mentioned him again. When we put him next to Captain Amazing and Mr. Banks, we see the same formula: an anguished soul lashing against the populace. Similarly, the three female characters (Amy, Amber, and Jane) are virtually indistinguishable. They exist basically to give the other male characters someone to talk to. All the other characters are cardboard cutouts.

What I think would be really interesting to do, should I ever decide to rewrite this, is to consolidate the main characters into a Peter+Steven+Connor, a singular female opposite, and have Dan+Michael+Captain Amazing+Mr. Banks antagonist. If we fleshed out the female, we would have three really interesting characters. Minimize the politics and focus on the people, and we might have something decent. Hmm. The concept of and nearly everything about the Moody Dada Sofas is flagrantly stolen from Daniel Pinkwater's *Young Adult Novel*, which remains to this day a favorite of mine. Imitation, as they say. My faith and philosophy at the time is summed up in the encounter between Chris and Connor. I don't really believe any of that more. The one idea that still rings true is the 'world as an accident' bit, but without the Christian coloring. Some things change and some things remain the same.

The character of Mr. Banks is my response to a post-911 world, which made me realize again how much a single day can change us. Things will never be quite the same.

Amber's musing on fiction was a direct result of me dealing with the creation of fiction. What still fascinates me is connection between the concreteness of the words and the ethereal, organic, and transient nature of the more-than-words. This might explain why I enjoy writing plays so much, since a significant portion of the more-than-words is out of my control.

I tried to decide who I would dedicate this work to. A lot of people came to mind, but none seemed to fit. In the end, I have decided to dedicate this novel to myself. I wrote it for myself, and I am the one who has benefited the most from its existence. This was my first major creative accomplishment, and showed me what I can do when I put my mind to it. It was, and continues to be, a sort of therapy. Reading this novel with an objective eye taught me a lot about who I was and who I am now. I take ownership of this work. Oh, and the standard NaNoWriMo disclaimer: this is as it was at the end of November, that is, untouched and unedited.

I hope you learn a thing or two.

Royce Wood
July 2006

one

The Fulton High School computer system double-checked everything to make sure the school was running smoothly. The cleaning robots had just made their morning rounds, and the first period of the day was about to begin. It waited patiently for the streams of data that would tell the school who was here, who wasn't here, and who was here late. It wasn't time yet, but the time was rapidly approaching.

It rang the first bell, the one that told the students it was time to go to class. The computer didn't know this, or course. It just did what it was programmed to do. At 0745 everyday, it was to send an electrical signal to complete a circuit that would cause the bell to ring. When the clock read 0745, the computer did just that. The computer was very good at its job.

At 0750 it was to ring the bell again, and then await the data concerning attendance, which usually came streaming in by droves. It came in slowly, at first, but soon the system was bombarded with information. It handled it rapidly and efficiently, of course. It would compile a list of all the students who had been marked absent, and then cross-reference that list with the list of all students who were excused that day, eliminating students who appeared on both lists. It would then simultaneously open all the files of the remaining students on the list, and send a message to the house of all these students (according to the number recorded in the file), as well as add one to the number of unexcused absences for the student. It would then send a message to all the classrooms from which it had not received an attendance report yet.

That was how the day usually went for the computer. There was the occasional message to be passed from class to class, or the system would have to deny access to door that was to remain locked, but of course always the bells.

There wasn't much glamour or difficulty to it. Of course, the computer did not know this. It only knew what people told it or what the program told it.

Which the program was doing constantly. True, the program did tell it what to do with all the day-to-day information that passed throughout the computer, but there were also more important things that the computer had to be constantly reminded of, because they were of top priority. Keep the students safe. Keep the school safe. But, most importantly, above everything else, because if this failed everything else would fail with it, the computer was also programmed to keep itself safe.

Which, unbeknownst to anyone in the school, it had just momentarily failed to do. Somewhere, deep inside the mounds of wires, disks, and terminals, something had gone terribly wrong.

Peter sat slumped over in his desk, his notebook proving an insufficient resting place for his head. He shifted it onto his arm, into the crook behind his elbow, which was better, but not by much. He knew that eventually his fingers would go numb from the constant pressure and he would have to switch back to the notebook, but until that happened he wouldn't have to worry. His shoulder blades shifted inside his tee shirt, signaling he had found a more comfortable position once again. This head now rested on a different part of his arm, causing his brown hair to stick out in wild directions. Peter wasn't paying very much attention to Mr. Bank's lecture. Which was okay. He could read the chapter later tonight.

No, you can't, he caught himself. You've got practice tonight. And tomorrow night. You won't have enough time to read an entire chapter.

Well, then, I'll do it during my free hour.

No, you wont. You never do anything during your free hour.

You've got a point there. I could do it this weekend.

Don't make me laugh. You're trying to kid yourself.

You are myself.

That made Peter laugh slightly. Conner, who was sitting next to him, glanced over with a look that asked what was so funny. Peter mouthed 'never mind' and returned to the doodles in his notebook.

Okay, you caught me. I'm not going to read the chapter.

Well, then you better pay attention to the lecture.

Peter was trying so hard, but he just couldn't concentrate. It felt like his brain had been replaced with an overstuffed pillow that couldn't fit inside his skull. It felt like his brain had taken a vacation to another planet.

Which it had. It wasn't on a different planet, but it was in a different place. It was in the theater, at practice, where it loved to be. Acting on stage with the fellow cast members, there was nothing Peter would

rather be doing. That was life, right there. Life was finding something that you couldn't get enough of, and then trying to. He loved acting almost as much as he loved her –

No. Stop it. Get control of yourself.

I – I'm sorry. I didn't mean –

Of course not. But you need to be careful. Feelings like that can sneak up on you at any time.

Alright. I'm okay now. I'll try not to let it happen again.

Then a new, dangerous thought occurred to Peter.

Why can't I? Why can't I just let my emotions come out now and then? Everyone else does. Do you know how it feels to seem different from everyone else? To feel left behind? Maybe, just maybe, if you could let me –

No I'm not even going to let you consider it. Do you want to be like everyone else? Is that what you want? Can't you see? I'm doing this for your own good. I'm trying to help you, not hurt you. Yes, I can understand how you feel. The separation and aloofness you must experience can be difficult sometimes. But you can not let conformity take precedence over personal safety. As I said, I'm doing this for you own good.

Peter was about to respond, but he realized that class was already over. All his classmates had already left. He must have missed the bell somehow.

He gathered up his things. There was only one more class left in the day, after lunch (which was next) and then it was time for play practice! He couldn't help but let his excitement show with a smile. Any passerby would have thought he was just happy that class was over. But no, he was thinking about this afternoon. An afternoon of doing what he was good at, not to mention an afternoon spent with –

Stop. At least I caught myself this time.

Conner had complete control of the classroom. He had captivated their attention for a full ten minutes with a presentation on, of all things, the Robotic Revolution. His pale blue eyes were wild with excitement, drawing in each and every one of the students in Mrs. Coombs's Modern History class. His distinctive half-smile told them he was enjoying this. He was speaking in a combination of full, rich sentences and broad, sweeping hand gestures which emphasized each of his specific points. He had drawn them in so completely that no one seemed to notice the way the light was playing with him. The way it slightly illuminated his blond, curly hair, or accented his arms hidden underneath his long sleeved shirt, or graced along the sides of his tall and energetic form. He had them all completely in the palm of his hand, which was right where he wanted them to be.

"Thank you, Conner, for that excellent presentation." Mrs. Coombs handed him the slip of paper which contained his grade. Forty-nine out of fifty! It certainly was excellent!

But not particularly surprising. Conner was well aquatinted with his talent for public speaking, and this oral presentation on the Robotic Revolution had been no problem at all.

Conner had heard somewhere that how an audience perceives a speaker is seven percent based on what the speaker actually says and ninety three percent based on how they actually said it. If this was true (which he didn't doubt), Conner's mix of humor, charisma, and interactivity with the audience almost guaranteed him an excellent grade on any sort of presentation for any class. He was also convinced that his skills were the reason he had been elected as one of the Student Council representatives for the junior class of 2039. As part of the campaign, he had been required to give a speech, and he was confident that with his abilities he had blown all the other candidates out of the water. There were some days when Conner felt like he could do anything in the world.

"Any questions?" he asked, in summary.

There was a question from the back of the class. Travis, Conner thought his name was. Smart kid, very talented in the realm of computers, but not very well liked..

"Could you go over the economic effects of the Robotic Revolution one more time? I want to make sure I have it right in my notes."

Conner didn't need to glance at his notes. He knew this stuff cold.

"Certainly. As robotics became less and less expensive, businesses became more and more eager to replace workers performing menial tasks with robots. Robots were efficient, didn't require payment, benefits, or motivation, and could be easily repaired as well as customized. Businesses in manufacturing flourished with the elimination of labor costs. Take, for example, the Benting Food Corporation downtown. They replaced eighty percent of their employees with robots. The entire factory is automated – even the delivery trucks. Now the flip side to this was an obvious increase in unemployment from all the workers

becoming redundant. This was one of the factors leading to the recession of 2022, in combination with the Fourth and Fifth Gulf Wars. The response of the government was to put more money into education, making post-secondary education less expensive and requiring all high school students to take robotics as a science. These two measures helped any high school graduate be prepared for an entry-level position in robotics, which more and more fields were becoming related to. It also made it easier for students to obtain degrees in other fields that would or could not be replaced by robotics, namely medicine, education, law, and politics, among others. You can see the effects of this right here at Fulton High School – for example, the automated janitorial staff and security system, and the reason I just came from Advanced Robotics with Mr. Banks last period.” Conner did his sure-fire imitation of Mr. Banks, much to the amusement of the class.

“I’m impressed,” said Mrs. Coombs, and for a second Conner thought she was talking about his Mr. Banks impression. “You certainly seem very knowledgeable about your topic.”

Conner returned to his seat as the class applauded, and he was almost certain he saw Amy Roberts dodge his glance.

Dave liked being alive. Most people just sort of liked being alive or pretended they did or actually didn’t at all. But Dave loved it – every waking moment.

Sometimes it was a pervasive feeling that would permeate an entire day, dropping little hints and reminders here and there to make sure Dave was paying attention. Other times it was a single instant, a culmination of feeling and event where everything good in the world seemed to converge on that very spot. All Dave could do at that point was smile or laugh or give a hug and let someone else know what he had just realized or experienced.

For example, just now in English, he had just read a sentence that had struck him as funny (perhaps it was because it had contained the word ‘samovar’) and he had looked up to see the sunlight come in through the window and brighten up the hair of Jane Taloway, who was sitting on the other side of the room. A flood of memory came to him then, every instant they had spent together since the party last weekend. What else was there to do? Between the sunlight, the hair, the past week, and the word ‘samovar’, what other conclusion could he reach other than that everything was right in the world and nothing bad could ever happen?

Sometimes things happened to Dave that he just couldn’t explain. What was it exactly that made everyone gravitate towards him like he was a giant magnet? Dave couldn’t understand why they couldn’t see that he wasn’t different from everybody else. Even when people pretended to make fun of him, he could tell they were doing it in fun and not in spite. He couldn’t think of a single person who he didn’t like or acted as if they didn’t like him. Dave tried not to dwell on these things for too long. Who was he to question the fabric of the universe? If everybody liked him, it wasn’t his job to ask why.

This is not to give the impression that nothing bad ever happened to Dave. Quite the contrary, bad things happen to everyone. But Dave had a frame of mind where he could cope with the good things as well as the bad. Sometimes when he saw someone who was upset, he would try to share what he thought and try to help him, but it was very difficult to verbalize. So he would just give a smile or a wave and hope that that would have the same result. In short, Dave was a very happy person. He was also very popular, with both the guys and the girls, and no one could exactly pinpoint why.

Dave returned to his reading. He saw the word ‘samovar’ again, and he laughed out loud.

HOMEcomings ’37! A NIGHT UNDER THE STARS...

proclaimed the poster. The paper was red in color, and the words were printed with dark black ink. Red and black, the school colors. How appropriate. Michael shook his head, disappointed at the work of unwashed heathens. Under the heading, there was a picture of a couple looking up into a sky full of stars. It was a beautiful poster, and one couldn’t go more than ten feet without seeing it at least twice. Michael had stopped and admired this one in particular. It wasn’t different than any of the others, but Michael had never really bothered take in the information displayed on any of them. Saturday October 12, 8:00 PM, \$10, see Ms. Young or your student council representative for more information. Overall, it was a beautiful poster. Which was why Michael had to remove it from the wall and tear it into tiny pieces.

Michael hated dances. He had never been to one but he knew that if he did he would hate it. There were a lot of things Michael hated. He hated his teachers. He hated his classmates. But especially he hated that poster. He hated it because it was beautiful, one of the finest he had ever seen, and that is why he hated it. It was a blatant reminder that he could never make or do anything that was that beautiful. Say he was the

one who got to draw that picture of the stars instead of one of those art whores. It would be rejected, of course. His work always was, and then they would come up with some half-assed excuse. It was too experimental, they would say. It's too angry. It's too ugly. It's not good enough. Nothing was ever good enough for anybody. Which was why he had to destroy the poster.

But that wasn't good enough either, was it? He thought he would feel better after he had exerted his will, his power over it, demonstrating that he was indeed mightier than the poster. It might have been a beautiful poster, but he could still destroy it. But he didn't feel better. There were still hundreds more posters all over the school. Was he going to have to destroy those, too?

No. No matter how many posters he destroyed, he would still feel the same, and there would always be more. He imagined an infinite procession of posters marching towards him, and he hacked each of them to tiny pieces with a giant sword, until everything was covered with small bits of red paper. Then he would light a match, and it would all burn, an eternally flaming mound of bits of red paper, and he would be its master.

When did the poster say the dance was again? The twelfth? Was that next week? Is today Wednesday or Thursday? Today was the third, which meant that the dance would be next weekend.

Michael paused a moment to think. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to go to this dance after all. Maybe he could make things a little more ... exiting. He imagined all the couples dancing away their night under the stars, and thousands of flaming pieces of red paper raining down upon them. Now that was good enough to be beautiful.

It was lunch time, and so the usual group of friends met outside where they regularly ate. It was almost a tradition, spanning back as long as anyone could remember, which admittedly wasn't very long in a high school setting, but a tradition nonetheless. Someone had looked at some old yearbooks once, and the earliest record of the tradition was in 2011 – nearly 30 years ago. It was early October, and not too cold yet as to force them inside, so outside it was.

There wasn't the usual large group of them today - someone must have spearheaded an effort to eat out elsewhere. It was still a fairly large group, and as usual smaller groups of conversation formed inside the larger group. The topic of the day was the upcoming Homecoming dance. There was a buzz of excited anticipation as students discussed what they were wearing, where they were going for dinner, and who they were going with, or, in the case of three good friends, who they were not going with.

Conner was frantic because he had not yet found a date, whereas Peter and Dave were calm, Peter because he had secretly decided once again not to take anyone, and Dave because things like that just didn't upset him.

"Besides," said Conner jokingly, his arms crossed and shifting his weight from side to side. "You can take any girl you want to. When anybody mentions your name, all the girls are all up ons."

"That's not true," said Dave, hiding his face.

"What do you mean?" chimed in Peter. "Of course it's true. What about Jane? What about Amy?" He was enjoying this veiled mockery of their friend.

"Stop it, you guys," said Dave, waving his hand as if batting away a moth. Conner and Peter laughed.

"Amy has a crush on every boy anyway," noted Conner. The memory of a certain glance that had followed his Modern History presentation alighted at this very moment. "Hey, here's an idea. I was talking to Amy, Amber, and Jane – they're all friends, you know, like us. There are three of us, and there are three of them. Why don't we go as a group? All six of us?"

Peter had started at the mention of Amber's name, and then he appeared to be transfixed by some idea momentarily, before snapping out of it and returning to the conversation and reality. You could tell he had not yet shaken off the absolute tiredness and boredom that had plagued him in Advanced Robotics.

"Sure, that sounds great," said Dave, glad that they had stopped poking fun at him, but laughing secretly on the inside.

"What about you, Peter?" asked Conner, leaning in as if being closer to Peter would return a more accurate answer.

"What? Oh, sure. Sure." Peter hadn't really been paying attention. He still didn't know what they had been talking about.

"It's settled then," announced Conner with decision. Peter didn't know what he had gotten himself into. "Let's go talk to them. They're sitting right over there." Conner got up, and Dave followed. Peter, not wanting to sit alone and still not exactly sure what was going on, followed as well.

They approached the area where Amy, Amber, and Jane were sitting. They were in a small circle, like the dozens of others who were eating out of the grass today. Their conversation continued until one of them noticed the approaching group, and they all three turned around to face the boys. Jane gave a small wave and a smile to Dave, and Amy seemed absolutely delighted that the boys had even come into the vicinity. Amber looked back and forth from face to face, almost as if she could tell what each one was thinking.

“Ladies, have I got a deal for you,” said Conner, turning on the charm with his distinctive half-smile. Conner laid forth the plan, with a sweep of his arm, and was received with delightful gasps and laughs.

“It’s settled then,” said Conner again, still smiling. “I’ll call you tonight, Amy, and we’ll figure about who’s driving, and other particulars.”

Even though Conner had presented the idea in a way where it seemed like the six were indeed going in a large group, each had mentally paired off the others and they had all reached the same conclusion. Conner’s direct question at Amy seemed to suggest his idea in the whole operation, and no one questioned that after the past week’s events would separate Dave and Jane, and logically that left Peter and Amber, which worked out pleasantly anyway.

“Okay, but call me earlier in the evening. I’ll be working on finishing up my robotics project most of the night. I want to finish it before tomorrow.” Amy had just run through her entire week’s schedule in her head, and the new events had moved her robotics project to tonight instead of over the weekend.

“You’ll be working on your what? Oh, no, don’t tell me I missed an assignment,” fumed Peter. He uncharacteristically muttered an expletive under his breath as he thought about the entire lecture that he had missed this morning. Amy glanced questioning at Peter, wondering how in the world anyone could miss an assignment, much less a large assignment like that. She glanced at her watch and saw that last period was going to begin soon. Many of the others had gathered the same, and now most of the luncheoners began to head to class. Both Peter’s class and Amber’s class were nearby, so they could afford to spend a little more time outside. Peter seemed detached, staring off into space, and he didn’t seem like he was going to start a conversation anytime soon, which was what Amber wanted. She deduced that he must have been thinking about the robotics project that he just learned that he missed. She was wrong, unfortunately. Or at least half wrong.

“I’m sorry about your robotics assignment,” offered Amber, attempting to console him and pursuing a possible line of conversation. “Maybe Amy’s just working to get ahead. You know how she is.”

Peter came back, and looked at Amber as if he was seeing her for the first time. It was almost as if he didn’t know she was there, which he didn’t. “It’s okay. I’m sure I’ll figure something out.”

He had concluded with such despairing finality that Amber had to try a different tack, a more pleasant topic this time. “I’m so excited about the dance! I can’t wait to go!”

“Yeah. It’ll be great,” said Peter half-heartedly, just now realizing the severity of the two situations he had gotten into. Could it be that he didn’t want to discuss this either? Why not? Amber gave up and concluded the conversation.

“Well, see you at practice,” she said, heading towards the building, perhaps reminding Peter that they could talk later if he wanted. Peter was going to say something, but he couldn’t think of anything to say. So he didn’t.

All the others had gone in, and Peter was alone. Not understanding why, he dropped his books and screamed at the sky in frustration.

How could you let something like that happen? A dance?

It was an accident –

An accident? That accident may end up costing you very dearly. Do you understand?

Yes – yes I understand.

I thought I had gotten the idea across to you. I thought we had an agreement?

An agreement? What am I thinking? How can I have an agreement with myself?

I thought we had a mutual understanding. Perhaps I was wrong.

What are you talking about? Leave me alone!

That was all it took. A bit of self-assertion, combined with initiative, and he was alone once again. No, there were other people in the class. He was not alone just yet. But if he left the room, he could be. All he had to do was get up, in the middle of class, and just walk out the door. He could very well do that, unless someone had a problem with that. Mrs. Frisco might not like that very much.

But why did he want to be alone? Could he not even stand the mere company of people anymore? What was happening to him?

He knew, of course. He knew exactly what was happening to him. But as soon as he acknowledged it, it would manifest itself, and that was something Peter couldn't deal with.

So it's better to pretend it doesn't exist? Like a child who covers their ears and closes their eyes to make something go away? Oh, that's great, Peter. Just great. You just keep telling yourself that. The old mantra: if you don't think about it, it will go away.

So what was the alternative? Acknowledging the concept in all its splendor (or lack thereof) and fighting it head on? Or, even better (worse), speaking out loud, confirming it in front of witnesses. It was irrevocable then – after you had spoken the idea aloud to someone else.

Why not just say it then? Let it out. Get it over with. There's a whole classroom full of people here that are just dying to hear it. It will make things easier later.

But once I say it, I can't take it back. If I don't say it, maybe it won't happen, and maybe it won't exist. It's still a possibility that I imagined the whole thing, that I'm being delusional again. It wouldn't be the first time.

Let me offer a proposition, a logical analysis. What if what you say is true, that you've made up the whole thing. You admit it out loud, people may look at you funny momentarily, but you will have lost nothing. But, if it is not a fictional situation, then the anxiety will be relieved, and it will not be a problem anymore. Either way, you lose nothing and gain something.

Alright, I will. It's decided. I am going to say it.

You're sure now? You've absolutely made up your mind?

Yes. I will. I am determined.

You're stalling...

Give me some time, okay? This is hard enough as it is without you breathing down my neck. It's not like I have a time limit.

A fascinating concept...

Okay. I will count down from three. When I reach zero, I will say it out loud. In this very classroom.

Good for you. That was my idea, for the record.

You are me. It was my idea too.

Let's not have this conversation again.

Okay. I'm going. Three.

Is he actually going to do it?

Two.

He's taken the first step. He's moving towards the goal!

One.

He's going to do it! He's going to do it!

Zero.

"Somehow I got pulled into going to the dance with a girl and I'm very nervous!"

But there was no one left in the room. They had already left.

Amber put her bag in the green room, stopping at the mirror momentarily to adjust fix her hair (whose color matched her name) and headed to the stage where some of the other actors were already warming up or goofing off. She looked around for Peter, but he had not arrived yet. Sometimes she didn't know what was wrong with that boy. He seemed so distant, almost ... left behind. That was a strange way to put it, but it fit so perfectly. It was as if everyone else had gotten a ticket to the Carnival Cruise except for him. She could almost see it in her mind's eye: everyone on the cruise ship having a good time, a wild party, and Peter left on the dock watching them depart. The thought made her scrunch up her eyebrows.

If only she could reach inside him somehow, find out what was wrong, and help bring him back to the rest of them. It would help bring them closer together, and that was what she wanted – to be closer to Peter. He was such a marvelous actor when given the chance, and he was smart, and funny from time to time. He was almost perfect for her – not quite, but almost.

The side door opened, the one that led out into the hall, and Peter walked in. Now was her chance! She knew he would have to stop by the green room, and everyone else was out here on the stage, so it would be the perfect opportunity. She waited until he had left the backstage, and then she pretended to forget something, so she would have to go back to the green room.

She entered the green room, and as she expected, he was there. His back was turned to her, and it was just the two of them. They were alone.

"I hope you're feeling better, Peter," she said, having to clear her throat to say it.

He whirled around, as if he had been attacked. Obviously he hadn't heard her enter. His eyes betrayed everything. He looked at her with surprise, at first, but then his gaze turned into something indistinguishable between hate and fear. She hoped he was okay, but she would have to find out.

"Are you okay?" Sometimes it was best to be direct.

He paused to collect his thoughts and compose himself. "I'm fine, I'm – I'm sorry. I didn't see you there." He still looked like he was on the verge of running out of the room at any moment.

"Peter, why are you so uptight? What's wrong?" She stepped closer, and put her hand out to comfort him, but it never reached his shoulder. He had recoiled and backed up against the wall.

"Peter, what's wrong? I'm not going to hurt you. You can tell me." She was scared now. What was wrong with this boy? He was still backed up against the wall.

"Peter, why won't you answer me? What can't you tell me what's wrong?" Amber cried, almost on the verge of tears. This whole situation was so bizarre and she didn't know how to get out of it, and she didn't want to until it was resolved.

He seemed transfixed by something on the ceiling for an instant, that unattached look he got from time to time, and it was very unnerving. Then he snapped back and spoke. "I – I can't tell you. You wouldn't understand, I mean, I barely understand –"

"You're not making any sense," she said bluntly.

"That's because it doesn't make any sense. Let's try to forget this happened. Let's go to rehearsal." With that remark, he killed the conversation and asserted his way out of the room. It was Amber's turn to feel utterly alone.

Wasn't she going to the dance with this boy? How could she expect to enjoy herself when he couldn't even talk to her? Was his situation that severe? Maybe Amber had underestimated the severity of his problems, and they went far deeper than she could imagine. But what could it possibly be? Amber was scared, not only for Peter, but for herself as well.

She realized she was still in the green room, and she had forgotten what she had come here for.

Amy breathed in the crisp fall air as she played with her blond hair. It was an involuntary action, something she did without even thinking about it. She could hear the marching band practicing somewhere, and she could see the soccer and football teams practicing on their respective fields. She knew the actors were having play rehearsal (she knew that's where Amber was), and many other clubs and organizations were also holding meetings. The whole campus had a very wholesome, scholarly feel. Which was why she was content to sit outside, beneath a tree, reading her history book. Not to mention she had a good view of the soccer players, most of whom were very attractive.

When Amy actually stopped to think about it, there were a lot of boys she liked. She liked Dave, but he was currently tied up with Jane. She liked Conner, and not only because he had asked her to the dance at lunch. She liked Peter okay, but sometimes she thought he was kind of weird. Sometimes he would just stare off into space for extended periods of time, as if he were disconnected from the rest of the world. But she decided she still liked him anyway. She got to go to the dance with all three of them, along with two of her best friends.

She finished her history reading, so now she allowed herself a little break time to watch the soccer players, as well as continue playing with her hair. The players looked very attractive as they were running, kicking, and doing whatever else soccer players did. She didn't know what it was called. As she was watching them, she decided she liked all of them in addition to the boys she already liked. It was too bad she couldn't go to the dance with all of them, too.

Not that she didn't want to go with the dance with Conner. Amy couldn't think of any one else she would rather go with, besides Dave or maybe Peter (maybe), and she was going with them too. She just thought it would be nice to – how did her guidance counselor describe it? – expand her horizons. Amy couldn't see most of her horizons right now. There were trees in the way. Maybe if there were a mountain somewhere around here, she could climb it. That would be a good way to expand her horizons.

It was almost time to go home, so she packed up books and papers in her backpack. She still had to go to her locker to get some book she would need for this evening. She paused to watch the soccer players for a little while longer, and then went inside.

As she was passing through the halls, she saw Jane and Dave. They were sitting on one of the many benches scattered throughout the school's halls. Dave was stroking her short, dark hair as they sat huddled together, as if it were cold, which of course it wasn't. Jane leaned her head on his shoulder, and thought she could go to sleep right here if she wanted to, which was a reasonable option.

As Amy approached, Jane looked up and blinked at her with sleepy eyes. "Hi, how are you?" asked Jane.

"Fine. Just going to my locker," said Amy. There was an awkward silence, as there usually was when Amy talked to one of her friends when their boyfriend was around. But it was Dave, so it was a little different. Amy hugged her books and shifted her weight from foot to foot.

"So, how about that dance?" suggested Dave, breaking the silence.

Amy brightened at the mention of the idea. "Oh my god! I am so excited! It's going to be so much fun! You two, and me, and Amber and Peter and Conner! Could it get any better?" she squealed, sitting down next to Jane on the bench.

"I know, it's going to be great," added Jane. Amy had said most of what could be said already.

"What are you going to wear?" asked Amy.

"Oh, I hadn't even thought about it yet. Maybe that blue dress I wore to the spring dance freshman year. Or maybe my black dress."

"Ooh, that would nice," said Amy. "I was thinking about my black dress, but if you wear black I'll have to wear something else."

Dave laughed to himself, admiring the spectacle.

"What's so funny, Dave?" asked Amy.

"Oh, nothing. Just you two fussing over dresses. It's funny, sort of," Dave shrugged.

"What's so funny about it?" asked Jane.

"Not much. It's just that guys don't worry that much about what they're going to wear."

"That's because most guys are slob," said Amy, and she and Jane laughed. "Not that you are, Dave, we're just saying in general" Amy added, making amends before anything was broken.

The three continued to talk, not worrying that anything would ever happen to them while they were safe inside the school. No one ever did.

The chalkboards had been wiped off, all the assignments were graded, and he had met with the last of his after school appointments. Mr. Banks breathed a sign of relief at another day's work completed. Another day, another section in the text, another idea, another opportunity to reach into the mind of a student and introduce them to the wondrous world of robotics.

That's what it was all about, wasn't it? A chance to interfere for the better, to set the next generation off in the right direction. Times were different now, and it was his (as well as the rest of the faculty's) responsibility to prepare them for a changing world.

A changing world.

He could remember some days when the world seemed to change right before his eyes.

He was in high school, sixteen years old, not unlike many of the student he saw everyday now that he was a teacher. It was a Tuesday, a normal day just like any other.

That's how it started, anyway.

He hadn't suspected anything until he actually got to the school. There was a hushed tone throughout the entire building, and, looking back on it now, even as he was driving to school, the neighborhoods had seemed unnaturally still and quiet. He saw practically no one in the halls. When he did, it was for a brief instant, and they never made a sound. It was as if someone had pressed the mute button, and the only sound he could hear was the sound of his shoes tapping against the floor.

When he got to his classroom, his classmates were huddled together in small groups, some with terrified looks on their faces. Others had their faces set in stoic indifference. Someone had pulled a television into the room, and flashing on the screen were images he would never forget: a tower, an airplane, a fireball, and a cloud of thick black smoke.

He could recall the entire rest of the day without fail, the events of the day had been so permanently etched into his mind.

It was a Tuesday, a normal day just like any other.

Sometimes he tried to share this with the students, to help them understand. It was difficult in a robotics class, but sometimes he let the conversation digress to a place where he could bring up the subject. But for the students there was no connection, no understanding. The students had been born into a world

where attacks happened – not frequently, but close enough together that the feelings from the last one were still lingering. The students must have felt that it had always been this way, that this is the way it had always been.

Which, of course, was the cause the cause of the separation between him and his students. Mr. Banks could remember when things had been – when things felt – different, which the students obviously couldn't. The national character hadn't always been this way. There was a time when we had been – what? More arrogant? Less cautious?

When he thought about what life felt like on the tenth and then on the twelfth, the difference was so incalculable that there was no way to express it. What exactly could demonstrate the difference?

Negative two.

The logical side of his brain was doing the thinking again. If you subtract 10 from 12, the difference was negative two. Mr. Fish laughed grimly, contemplating that even his own mind could catch him off guard from time to time.

He glanced at his watch. It was a Thursday, a normal day just like any other.

He packed up his things, and started to head out. He promised himself that someday, somehow, he would help them understand the difference.

Ming turned around from what she was working on as Steven walked into the computer lab. Travis was too absorbed with what he was doing to notice.

"You're late," she said. Her arms were folded across her red sweater, and her long black hair framed her face that contained a perfectly sour scowl emblazoned upon it. It was obvious she was very upset.

Steven grabbed the collars of his bright green tropical shirt and pulled out, as if to dispel the nasty feelings Ming was shooting at him with her eyes. "Jeez, lighten up," said Steven, sliding in front of the nearest terminal. "It's just a computer project."

Ming took offense to this. Just a project? "Which we will be graded on as a group. If you don't show up it's very hard to –"

"Let's not have a disagreement," stepped in Travis, adjusting his glasses but still without turning from his monitor. "Ming, I'm sure we'll finish with plenty of time. Just be glad that Steve show up at all."

"Well, it's nice to see you, too," Steven said indignantly, logging in and bringing up the programs he needed. He hoped that the firing squad was done.

"Steven, I can't finish the navigation bar until you send me those j-pegs," announced Ming, as if saying it louder would help Steven understand better.

"I'm sending them, Ming," Steven sighed, the sigh of an armless man who had just dropped a box. "Did you want the rollovers too, your highness?"

"No, I'll take care of them myself, thank you." Obviously she didn't trust him to do those either.

Travis muttered something to the effect of it was a wonder they had got any work done at all. Ming heard him and jumped up from her chair.

"Well, maybe if Steven over there actually did his part of the project–"

"He is doing his part. As you are doing yours. Sit down, please." This statement from Travis effectively calmed Ming, and the group continued to work in uninterrupted silence.

Suddenly, the computer lab was thrown into darkness. The overhead lights snapped off, and then all the monitors went blank. There was a momentary pause, and then monitors began snapping back on, but the overhead lights remained shut off, illuminating the room with an eerie blue glow.

"Oh, don't tell me..." said Travis. He had forgotten to save his java applet.

There was an announcement on the intercom. "Students and teachers, your attention please. There is an emergency. The school will be going into lockdown. Please follow standard procedure. Thank you."

Mr. Foresburg, one of the computer teachers, came out of his office in the back of the room. He was a tall, heavysset man with broad shoulders. His chin and cheeks were covered with a slight, peppery, stubble. "Alright, kids. You know how it goes. The machines will shut down by themselves. Everyone can come into my office."

As Mr. Forsburg had predicted, the computers began snapping back off again. Steven could hear the automatic locks tumbling within the door, the one that led out into the hall. He imagined this happening to all the doors in the school, automatically, on a whim, and the thought was absolutely mind boggling.

The computer lab was on the inside of the building, so the room didn't have any windows. It was very dark in the office where the four huddled.

“Do you have any idea what’s going on, Mr. Foresburg?” asked Travis, not afraid, merely curious. Mr. Foresburg shrugged. “Sorry, son. No idea.”

“This isn’t a drill, is it?” asked Ming wide-eyed. “They don’t do lockdown drills after school, do they?”

Mr. Foresburg settled Ming with a calming gesture, to offset the news he was about to present. “This is the real thing. Don’t be alarmed, I’m sure we’ll all be okay.”

There was nothing more to say about this. The three who had been working on the project weren’t about to engage in small talk. Mr. Foresburg sat in his office chair, glancing at his watch every so often. For what seemed a very long time, they sat in silence. The minutes kept ticking away, tick tick tick.

“How will we know it’s over, Mr. Foresburg?” asked Steven, after a quarter of an hour, when the silence had made it’s mark and he couldn’t take it anymore.

Mr. Foresburg sighed. “We’ll know, son. We’ll know.”

Somewhere outside the building, from far away, they could hear low rumbles, like an earthquake underwater.

two

The Fulton High School security system had everything under control. It had been slightly confused at the time of the power outage, but now everything was running smoothly. The back-up generator had kicked in, and the computer got a quick report of the data it had missed while it had been shut down. It had received a message from the school board (as well as the local government) that it was necessary for the school to go into a lockdown. It brought up the lockdown procedure and quickly went through the steps.

Turn on siren.

Shut down all non-essential electrical devices.

Turn on emergency lights.

Lock all interior doors.

Lock all exterior doors.

Activate protective window plates.

Wait for message signaling end of lockdown.

It was fairly simple, and a refreshing change from the day-to-day tasks it had performing as of late. Rarely used parts of the computer’s software and hardware came to life as internal security moved up on the priority list.

Protect the students. Protect the school. Protect yourself.

At every corner in the school, security cameras came out of their dusty holes in the walls. Now, mammoth amounts of information were coming in from every sensor as the cameras began to pan, sweep, and zoom. There was not a nook or cranny in the building that could not be reached by the ever-watching eye of the security system.

Fortunately, all this information was safely stored within the depths of the computer’s memory. Only those individuals with the highest clearance could access it. Or those individuals who made the system believe that they had the highest clearance.

The computer went through the steps in the lockdown program again, just to be sure. What was the last step again? Ah, yes. Wait for message signaling end of lockdown.

The computer waited for the message signaling the end of the lockdown.

The computer continued to do this for several hours. The computer was very good at waiting.

Finally the message came, and the computer sprung into action.

And the computer sprung into action.

The computer did not spring into action.

The lockdown siren blared across the campus, joining the sound of the marching band, creating a truly bizarre combination. They marchers didn’t notice what was going on at first until the conductor signaled an abrupt full stop and the marchers’ brains connected the sound of the siren with the need to run into the building. The conductor shouted for them to run as fast as they could to the main gymnasium.

What followed was pure insanity. The band was a surging mass of instruments, uniforms, and wild faces. The sunlight reflected off the brass and the shiny pieces of the hats, buttons, and belt buckles. The resulting effect was like the night sky on perceived by a maniac on any of various drugs, or a large gelatinous slime mold through which ran an electric current, or a mass of Christmas lights on a mechanical

earthquake, or manufactured cans of light trapped inside a plastic bag in a car on a gravelly road. It would have been irritating and nauseating to any outside viewer, but fortunately everyone else was also moving towards the building, so no one was unlucky enough to have to take in the psychedelic light show being put on by the sun and the marching band.

A beautiful feeling of teamwork and togetherness welled within the hearts of the musicians. Amidst the chaos, there was the knowledge that they were all moving forward, as a group. A mob mentality, if you will.

They filed in, one by one, through the doorway into the large gymnasium. They spread out, putting down their instruments, some sitting on the hardwood floor, weary from their plight from the band field to their destination. The sports team that had been outside as well also hurried into the gymnasium. When the final straggler wondered in, they shut the door. It locked automatically.

Outside the building was not the only place the lockdown sirens could be heard. The wailing came barreling down the halls like a flash flood in a narrow canyon, right to the spot where Amy, Jane, and Dave were sitting. To say it startled them would be an understatement, and Dave's sudden jumping up and accidentally knocking Jane off the bench was evidence of this. As the siren continued to blare, the three looked at each other, unsure what to do at first. Then Jane shouted over the noise that it was a lockdown, so they would need to find a classroom or some other room with a teacher to go inside of. They jogged down to the nearest part of the building where they were likely to find some teachers, the science wing. There they saw Mr. Banks waiting at his open door, obviously watching for wayward students such as themselves, and he motioned for them to come inside his robotic laboratory.

Once inside, the three stood around, once again unsure of what they were supposed to do. It wasn't time for class, so it didn't make sense for them to sit in the desks. The room was full of desks, so that did leave much place for them to sit. It wasn't until Mr. Banks shut the door behind him (at which point it automatically locked) and pulled some chairs around his desk at the front of the room did they know where to sit.

It was quiet inside the robotics classroom because the walls effectively shut out the noise of the siren (it would shut off eventually anyway). Mr. Banks, Jane, Dave, and Amy all sat around Mr. Bank's desk. Dave and Amy were each in one of Mr. Bank's classes, so they were well acquainted with him, but Jane took robotics with Mr. Wright. An introduction was in order.

"I know these two," said Mr. Banks, gesturing towards Dave and Amy, "But I don't believe I have met you. I am Mr. Banks," he said, putting out his large hand for Jane to shake.

"I'm Jane," she said simply.

"You are a junior, are you not?" asked Mr. Banks. Jane nodded. "You must have robotics with Mr. Wright, then." Jane nodded again.

"Well, it certainly is under unusual circumstances in which I am here with you three. I was just getting ready to leave when the siren went off. What are you three doing here so late after school?"

"We were just talking," said Dave. "I guess we lost track of time."

"Indeed. Well, it appears that we are stuck here for the time being. Fortunately, I always keep a deck of cards in my desk. I play bridge with some of the other science teachers after school on Wednesdays. Do you know how to play bridge?" The three shook their heads.

"I do know how to play Hearts," offered Jane.

"Hearts! An excellent game! Do we all know how to play Hearts?"

Amy didn't, but she caught on quick enough. Soon they were all passing, taking tricks, and strategizing to their hearts content (I apologize profusely for the incidental pun). Enough time passed that they actually got to finish an entire game. Dave had gone over one hundred points, and Jane was in the lead at that point, so she came in first. Mr. Banks had a close second, and that left Amy in third place.

The lockdown showed no signs of ending, and they played another two rounds of Hearts before they decided to play a different game. Amy showed them Slap Hands (a game she and her cousins always played whenever they saw each other), Dave was a big fan of Russian Spy, and the time passed quickly when Jane suggested Rat War.

It wasn't until six o'clock that they started to worry. What had happened to cause the lockdown to go on this long? There was no one in the main office when Mr. Banks tried to call there, so that search for information came up empty. All the student's cellular telephones were locked up (it was school policy for the main office to keep all cell phones for the duration of the school day), so they couldn't use those. After

a brainstorming session, they concluded that there was nothing to be done. As Mr. Banks shuffled the deck for yet another game, they hoped that they would receive information soon.

Conner was fed up with the amount of bureaucracy in the Student Council. Well, fed up wasn't exactly the right word. Perhaps overwhelmed, or disgusted, but not fed up. Bureaucracy wasn't the right word either. Neither was red tape. Maybe special interest, or lack of care for the interests of the average student. There we go. Let's try this again.

Conner was disgusted with the lack of care for the interests of the average student in the Student Council. The discussion would go off track, debating particulars, or at worst, semantics. Didn't they realize it wasn't about being right or wrong, or about having the best idea? We were elected her because the students entrusted us with the ability to make decisions on behalf of the school. Let's try not to forget that, people.

Currently the debate was over what color decorations they should use at the Homecoming dance. They had more time this afternoon because of the lockdown – no one was going anywhere, so they might as well make some more decisions. They were very good at making decisions.

There were three factions: the ones who thought the colors should be silver and black, the ones who didn't like silver and black because they did it last year, and wanted white and black, and the ones who didn't like black so wanted white and silver. A novel idea occurred to Conner: why not purchase white, silver, *and* black and let the three groups each decorate one section of the school? Conner shook his head and rolled his eyes. This was getting ridiculous.

Conner wanted to go home – he was going to stop by the Outdoor Club meeting before he left, but he didn't think that was going to happen. At any rate, he couldn't because he was locked in here with the Blacks, the Silvers, and the Whites.

"Conner, what's your vote?" asked Hannah, the President of the Student Council.

"Excuse me?" asked Conner.

"Do you want white and black, silver and black, or silver and white?"

"Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

It was Hannah's turn to say, "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. This is getting ridiculous. We're sitting here, having the most inane and idiotic discussion in the world, forgetting the fact that most students don't care and won't bother to even look at the decorations. Oh, and never mind the fact that we're locked in here and no one has had the sense of mind to even find out what is going on."

The Student Council was shocked at this unexpected outburst from Conner. There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Uh, well, uh, I'll put that down as an 'undecided'," said Hannah as she marked the vote sheet.

That was the last straw for Conner. He got up, and burst out of the room, except he couldn't because the door was locked. Angrily, he kicked the door and then went and hid in the closet.

He was left pleasantly alone for a while, until some one knocked on the closet door.

"Hello? Can I come in?" asked Ms. Young.

"Sure," said Conner. He didn't mind talking to her.

The door opened, and Ms. Young walked in. She was as old as her name suggested, full of vibrant energy and life. She always took interest and care in her students, understanding that school was often not the most important thing in their lives.

"What's wrong, Conner?"

He sighed. "This is just ridiculous. We were elected to represent the interests of the students, not debate color schemes."

Ms. Young nodded and patted Conner's shoulder. "I understand. But you have to keep in mind that some of the representatives have been such for several years, and enjoy planning particulars such as that. This is important to them. They're not here to make waves."

"So they've bought into the ploy? That this is all a sick joke?"

"No, Conner, no. If you wanted to make a change in the school, this probably isn't the place for you."

"So what am I supposed to do? Step down from my position?"

"It's not unheard of. I'll give you some time to think about it. You'll have plenty – I have a feeling we're going to be stuck here for quite some time."

She left Conner alone among the coats, boxes, and dusty supplies. He certainly did need to think about some things, and he certainly would have quite a bit of time.

Mrs. Burr, the director, insisted that the lockdown not infringe on their precious rehearsal time. So the actors and actresses kept practicing as if nothing had happened. It wasn't until rehearsal was over, and they realized that all the doors were still locked, that worry began to set in. Mrs. Burr told everyone to stay backstage or in the green room while she tried to find out what was going on.

Most of the cast, the studious students that they were, pulled out whatever textbooks they had with them and began to work on homework. Peter, however, was not as scholarly. He was in a better mood now that he had just completed a successful rehearsal, but he did not exactly want to work right now. The thought of the robotics assignment loomed in the back of his mind, but there was nothing he could do about it here – his textbook and materials were at home.

Peter saw Amber working by herself, and went over to join her. He didn't remember the events that had occurred in the green room earlier, because his stellar performance in rehearsal today made him forget. Amber looked up when Peter approached, and was pleased to see him in a pleasant mood. She was in a pleasant mood herself when he sat down beside her.

“Hey, Amber, how's it going?” he asked, making himself comfortable.

“Oh, just doing my French assignment,” she said, gesturing towards to workbook in her lap, with a small laugh.

“Some lockdown, hey?”

“Yeah. I wonder what's going on?”

“Who knows?”

Mrs. Burr came back just then. “I'm sorry, I can't tell you what's going on because I don't know. I can't reach anyone at the office, and all the doors are still locked. It looks like we could be here for a while.”

That caused a murmur of discontent among the cast. Some of the freshmen cast worried glances at each other. How long was ‘a while’? Did that mean one more hour? Or two, or even three? But to some of the other cast members, it was an exciting adventure. They were locked inside the school! It was like an episode in a poorly done television show for children. This sort of thing didn't happen to real people, only to characters in books.

Robert, a sophomore, came up to where Amber and Peter were sitting. “Some of the cast are going to play improv games. Do you guys want to join?”

Peter jumped right up. “Sure, that'd be great.” Amber remained sitting. “Come on, Amber. Why don't you come along?”

“Oh, I'm no good at improv games.” she said.

“Nonsense,” said Peter, taking a hold of her arm and pulling her to her feet. “And besides, at any rate you can just watch. It's almost as fun.”

“I have French homework to do,” she said, scraping the bottom of the barrel of excuses.

“You can do it later. You have an excuse – you were locked inside the school. Now come on.”

Amber pretended to be dragged along, but really she was happy to be pulled away from her conjugations. In addition, Peter was smiling, a refreshing change from the range of expressions she had seen on his face today. She could only hope that it would remain a smile.

The Moody Dada Sofas Chapter Seven Seventeen couldn't be bothered with mere trifles such as a lockdown. Today was Thursday, known in some circles as Dadaday. And nothing, not even a national emergency, could stop them from holding their weekly meeting. The three loyal Dadaists did not even seem to pay heed to the power outage, sirens, or lockdown announcement. High art was above such minor matters.

Captain Awesome read the Moody Dada Sofa Manifesto, as dictated by the chapter bylaws. He was wearing a super hero cape. When he read the part that went “required to present a paper cup *not* filled with small rocks to the ex-administrator of ex-events”, Shakespeare and The Wedge gave a standing ovation, then sat back down and let Captain Awesome continue to read the manifesto. Shakespeare was wearing several Mardi Gras necklaces, and The Wedge was wearing a dark hood. Some of the other students in the library shot confused glances at the Moody Dada Sofas, while others, who had seen this spectacle before, just shook their heads. These students who thought they had nothing to do with these

weirdoes were actually unwittingly complying with Chapter Seven Seventeen's motto: "Confusion, art, confusion," by being confused, of course.

Now that Captain Awesome had finished reading the manifesto, it was time to begin business. In compliance with the second tenant of their motto (art), they continued work of their massive Dada art project, *The Ghost of the Most Powerful Novel*. Currently, it was several manila folders filled with handwritten sheets of binder paper as well as several accompanying illustrations, but once it was finished, they were going to dedicate it to their charter organization, Fulton High School, in honor of the school's rich tradition and surprising lack of Dada art. The plan was, when *The Ghost of the Most Powerful Novel* was completed, to type it and print out hundreds of copies of the massive document (in the school library of course) and distribute them to every classroom in the school. Then, they hoped, the uneducated, un-Dada masses would come to understand and be enlightened by the beauty of Dada art.

Shakespeare was currently working on a chapter where the allied Blue Ninjas and Plaid Ninjas initiate a pre-emptive strike on the pirate army of King Philipo of New Andorra. Captain Awesome was combining the Complete Works of Octavio Paz with the operating instructions of a small toaster oven, alternating every line to create a very unique piece of Dada art. The Wedge was the illustrator, cutting pictures out of Smithsonian and National Geographic and pasting them together in strange and very Dada ways. Captain Awesome and The Wedge thought Shakespeare was just being silly, and they were going to have to confront him eventually about the lack of seriousness his applied to his art.

An unwashed heathen approached the table, and attempted in vain to start a conversation. "Hey, Ben, what are you guys doing?"

Captain Awesome rose from the table. "I am not Ben! I am Captain Awesome!" he announced in a loud and heroic voice, his cape rippling.

"Right. Whatever. The librarian says that everyone can just keep working on whatever they are working on, even though it is a lockdown."

"Lockdowns are not of concern to me." said Captain Awesome. He returned to *The Complete Works of Octavio Paz*.

"What are you working on, anyway?"

The Wedge answered this one, his eyes hidden in the shadows of his hood. "Only a piece the highest and most respected art form, Dada." He had just cut out a picture of a toilet bowl.

"Sounds cool. Can I help?"

The three Dada artists looked up and examined the newcomer with much scrutiny.

"We will discuss it," spoke Captain Awesome. "Return to your seat among the masses while we reach our consensus."

The unnamed onlooker went back to his homework.

"We must now reach a consensus," said Captain Awesome.

"He does seem interested," said Shakespeare. "And we could use some help on our project."

"Yes, but does he understand the principles of confusion, art, and confusion? What good would his help be if it was not Dada quality?" said Captain Awesome.

"What we need is some sort of screening process," said The Wedge. "To make sure that he is ready to cast off the chains of our unbelieving civilization."

"Of course! The official Moody Dada Sofa Chapter Seven Seventeen Application Form! Why didn't I think of it before?" Captain Awesome was very excited.

"Excuse me, but we don't have an application form." Shakespeare looked as if he were trying to express the first and third tenants of the motto.

"Which is exactly why we must write one!" announced Captain Awesome with finality. "Let us suspend our current work on *The Ghost of the Most Powerful Novel* in favor of drawing up an application form!" The papers were gathered up and filed into the manila folders, and work on the application form began with wild abandon.

Travis was bored out of his mind. He was stuck here, in Mr. Foresburg's office, with Ming and Steven, with absolutely nothing to do. How long was this lockdown going to last? He rubbed his eyes as he tried to find a comfortable spot up against the wall. Ming was absolutely livid, panicking that they would never get their project done. She asked Mr. Foresburg if they could turn on just a couple of the terminals, but Mr. Foresburg said that it was against procedure. Steven had gotten out a notebook and a pen, and was actively writing something. He had been at it for quite a while now. Travis wondered how he could write when all the lights were still off. It was very dark in the office, and in the lab.

It was six o'clock, and still nothing had changed. Mr. Foresburg finally gave in, turning on his personal terminal, but only to check the status of the computer system. The light from the screen was irritating after so much darkness. Mr. Foresburg's clearance got him through layers of security Travis had never even seen before. Mr. Foresburg brought up a program that displayed all sorts of data, most of which Travis was struggling to understand, and Mr. Foresburg was rapidly scrolling through it, as if he were looking for something. Finally he stopped, and shook his head.

"That's odd," Mr. Foresburg muttered to himself. Travis asked what seemed to be the matter.

"According to this string right here," Mr. Foresburg pointed to the screen, "the lockdown ended at 1734. That was half an hour ago. Surely we would have been notified."

"Well, maybe it ended and we just didn't know about it," suggested Ming.

"It's a possibility," said Mr. Foresburg. "Somebody go check to see if the door is still locked."

Ming got up and walked at a brisk pace out of the office and to the door that led out into the hall. She grabbed the handle and turned firmly, but the door remained shut. "It's still locked," she called out to the office. Mr. Foresburg and Travis came out into the computer lab. Steven stayed in the office, still writing furiously.

"Let me swipe my access card," said Mr. Foresburg. "Maybe that'll do it." He walked up to the door, swiped his card, and the little red light on the reader blinked.

"Oops, sorry. Had it in backwards." Mr. Foresburg turned his card around and swiped it again. This time, the yellow light blinked.

"What does the yellow light mean?" asked Travis.

"It means it recognized my card, but it can't unlock the door at this time. Something very strange is going on here. The system reports that the lockdown ended thirty minutes ago, so all the doors should have been unlocked, and yet ours is still locked."

"Is there any way you can override that, Mr. Foresburg?" asked Travis.

"We can try, son." They all went back into the office, and huddled around Mr. Foresburg's terminal. Mr. Foresburg brought up a status report of all the automated doors in the building, as well as a map of the building that was covered in numbers and symbols. Travis could see on the map that every doorway in the school was assigned a number. The status report showed that every door in the building was still locked.

"This is very weird," said Mr. Foresburg.

"What do the three sections on that report mean?" asked Ming.

"Well, the security system is divided into three levels of importance. Level one is all the doors that provide entrance to the building, and obviously these have the highest security. Level two doors are ones that divide the different sections of the building, like the science wing, the mathematics wing, the gymnasium, and so forth. The lowest security level is level three, and those are the individual classroom doors. The door into this classroom is a level three door. We can see on this map that it is numbered 3-201, the three because it is a level three door, and 201 is the room number. If we look on the status report, door 3-201 is most defiantly locked."

"So what are we going to do?" asked Ming. "Can we tell the computer system to unlock it?"

"We can try, but I doubt it's going to work. There is something very wrong with the system, and I don't know what to expect."

Steven, who was sitting by himself on the other side of the office, spoke. "The system is down!" he declared, laughed to himself, and then returned to his notebook.

"How can you make jokes at a time like this? We're locked inside the computer lab!" said Ming irritably.

"Easy, now, Ming." said Mr. Foresburg. "Just leave him alone. Now, let's see what we can do about this door." Mr. Foresburg opened up some sort of options menu for door 3-201. After some typing and clicking, he opened something that looked like it could unlock the door. He clicked UNLOCK, but received a warning message.

"What does it say, Mr. Foresburg?" asked Travis.

"I don't know what's going on. It says I can't unlock the door because the school is still under lockdown. But we know that's not true because we saw the report that said that the lockdown had already ended. Something very wrong is going on here, and I don't like it."

"What are we going to do?" asked Ming, afraid. "Are we stuck in here? How are we going to get out?"

There was a period of silence, and then Steven spoke again. "We'll have to hack our way out."

“What did you say?” shouted Mr. Foresburg.

“If the computer system isn’t going to let us out, we’re going to have to take some alternate methods,” said Steven.

“Son, I have the highest security clearance possible on this network. If I can’t get the system to respond, no one can.”

“Well, there are multiple solutions to every problem. If we can’t get through the software, we might have to go through the hardware.”

“Are you suggesting that we tamper with the school’s security equipment?” Mr. Foresburg was nearly enraged.

“We don’t seem to have a whole lot of other options. Unless you’d like to stay cooped up here in your office...”

Mr. Foresburg deflated and sat down in his office chair. He appeared to be deep in thought. His eyebrows were furrowed, and his were folded at his chin. Travis looked at him expectantly, not knowing what he was going to do next. After much thought, Mr. Foresburg sat up and swiveled around to face his terminal.

“What do you need?” he asked, defeated.

Steven sprung to life. “Okay, Ming and Travis, search the supply cabinets in the lab for anything that might be useful – screwdrivers, pliers, wires, anything you think might be helpful. Mr. Foresburg, I need to see a schematic of the circuitry of all the level three security doors, particularly anything related to receiving information from the main security system.”

Mr. Foresburg did as he was told, slightly uncomfortable in this reversal of roles. The schematics were hard to find, they had to deep into the history to find the building plans. Finally, Steven saw what he was looking for.

“There! Do you think we could print that out?” As it was printing, Ming and Travis came back with a cardboard box full of spare wiring and several sets of pliers and wire cutters. “Sorry, no screwdrivers,” said Travis. “Hmm. We’ll just have to make do. Mr. Foresburg, I need you to shut down power to door 3-201,” said Steven.

“I’m going to have to reassure the system that the door is going to remain locked,” pointed out Mr. Foresburg.

“You can go ahead and lie to it,” smiled Steven. “Ming, Travis, come with me.” They went out into the lab and approached the door. Steven looked at the schematic, and then at the door, and then pointed to a section of the doorframe below and to the left of the card reader. “There. We need to get in there. I need your help.”

It was difficult without the proper tools They ended up mostly banging on the panel and jamming pliers behind the edges, trying to remove it from the wall. Mr. Foresburg heard the noise and came out into the room. “What do you think you’re doing?” he shouted.

“How did you think we were going to break into it?” retorted Steven. “We’ve already had this conversation.” Mr. Foresburg went back into his office.

Eventually, they were able to take the panel completely off the wall. Inside was a mass of wires, exactly like the schematic showed them. Now came the difficult part. With the help of Travis, they were able to determine what wires they should cut and how they should re-connect the remaining wires. They had to stop the system from telling the door to remain closed, and at the same time not make the system suspicious by continuing to tell the system that the door was locked. Travis marked up the schematic and made a step-by-step list so they wouldn’t get lost or confused. Fortunately, all the wires were numbered just they same way they were in the schematic – they hadn’t been replaced or tampered with over time, and that was about to change. Mr. Foresburg called out from his office that the power to the door had been shut off, and it would be in their best interests to move quickly.

Which they did. Travis read off the steps as Steven carefully followed them, with Ming standing near by and handing tools and wire to Steven as he asked for them. Even working so efficiently, it still took them over half an hour to finish. As Steven finished the last step, Mr. Foresburg restored power to the door and then came out into the lab. He approached the door, and swiped his card. There was a pause, and then the reader blinked the little green light. They could hear the tumblers falling into place as the door unlocked. It finished, and then opened slightly. The four erupted into a cheer as they pushed the door the rest of the way open and burst out into the hall. There was a period of celebration, and then Mr. Foresburg suggested that they check his terminal, just to make sure that everything had gone as planned.

According to the report, door 3-201 had been marked as locked. So it had worked! The computer system didn't cause a fuss because it still thought that the door was locked. There was another brief celebration.

Then Mr. Foresburg realized something. If they had been trapped in their room, then everyone else who was in the building at the time of the lockdown was also still trapped. It was quite possible that they were the only ones who could get them out. Steven commented that the process took too long for them to unlock all the doors to every single classroom, but how would they know which had people in them and which didn't? Mr. Foresburg had the solution.

He tapped into the security camera system, bringing up visuals of every room in the entire school. After printing out a map of the school, they went through and marked all the rooms that had students or teachers in them. They then decided to split up into two groups: Mr. Foresburg and Travis, and Ming and Steven, with Steven and Travis cutting the wires for their groups. Mr. Foresburg gave Ming his extra copy of his access card so they could open doors when they were properly wired, and then he shut down power to all the doors that they would be breaking through. The person in each group who wasn't cutting would have to run to the lab to turn on doors that they had just finished hacking.

They decided to get the library and the theater first, so the people they freed would have someplace to go (not to mention the groups trapped in the library and the theater). The only thing that worried Steven was that they had no way to get through any level two doors, which they would have to if they wanted to reach everyone. Maybe they could figure it out.

They four set off in their respective directions, with a feeling of accomplishment and heroism.

three

The Fulton High School security system wondered why there were so many requests for the power shut down of doors. But, in actuality, it wasn't the computer's place to question such motives. The doors couldn't be opened or unlocked while they were powered off, anyway. So there was nothing to worry about. And, if anything did happen to go wrong, it could always send the security robots after them.

Which was becoming a greater possibility. With each door shutdown, it was noticing more and more movement that was being picked up by the security cameras that were posted in the halls. If only it would correlate these phenomena, but no. It was not that intelligent of a computer system.

However, the computer resolved not to permit the shutdown of any level two or level one doors. That was too great a security risk. And if anyone tried to break through by force, there were always the security robots.

As far as the security system was concerned, everything was going just fine. Now that the lockdown had ended, its main job was making sure that all the doors remained locked.

Never mind that this didn't make any sense at all. It was just doing what the program told it to do.

Mrs. Coombs was sure they had come to get her now. This was it – the last straw, that final move, the ending scene. She knew the door was locked (the security system never failed) but from the pounding they had been making on the door, she could tell it was only a matter of time before they broke through and took her away.

She sat quietly at her desk. What else was there to do? If they were going to come and get her, there was no stopping them. She could hear their voices on the other side of the door.

She changed her mind. She wasn't going to go down without a fight. She searched through her desk and cabinets for something that could be used as a weapon. There were plenty of sharp objects, but she knew that that wouldn't do. She needed something heavy, to catch her assailants off guard. There weren't many choices in that category, but she finally settled on a large American Heritage Dictionary. It was unwieldy, and she wasn't sure if she could use it properly if it came to a fight, but she could try.

Mrs. Coombs was not an old lady, and most likely able to defend herself if she was faced with a battle, but still she was going to rely on the element of surprise to defeat her captors. She would wait by the door until they broke through, and then strike.

The time to act was approaching. She could hear things moving inside the door. It was going to open soon. The door opened, and a figure stepped in.

"You won't be getting me this time!" she howled, bringing the full force of the dictionary upon the stranger's head. He slumped to the ground, but Mrs. Coombs didn't want to waste time finding out who it was. She dropped the dictionary, and ran as fast as she could into the hall.

She needed a place to hide, but most of the doors she tried were locked. She would need to think of some other location to escape to.

It was dark in the halls, so she could move stealthily, undetected. Sometimes she heard voices, student's voices, but she knew that it was probably a trap, and so she kept her cover. If she didn't find someplace to hide quickly, she knew they would probably get to her. She was running out of time.

Kyle was still waiting at his table in the library. It wasn't locked anymore. An older kid and a teacher had broken in from the outside somehow, and there were people coming into the library from other parts of the building, but Kyle couldn't think of any other place to go. So he stayed here, quietly doing his homework.

Eventually, Ben and the other two he had been talking to earlier came up to him. Ben was holding a sheet of paper, and the other two were making weird faces. "Your desire to join the Moody Dada Sofas has been noted. Please fill out this application form and return it to us at your earliest convenience," said Ben. He handed Kyle the piece of paper, and then the Moody Dada Sofas left in silence.

Kyle shook his head. These guys were weird. But, he was getting bored of just doing homework, and this would be a nice change of pace. He examined the sheet of paper. It was a typed page (he had seen them at the library terminals earlier), with questions and several blank spaces. The heading read "THE APPLICATION FORM OF ETERNAL DARKNESS", under which was "Moody Dada Sofas Local Chapter Seven Seventeen".

The first part, entitled General Information, asked him for his heathen name. He didn't know what that was, so he skipped it. The next blank asked for his Dada name. He realized now what it meant. His heathen name must be his normal name, and the Dada name must be the weird name they would call him by when he joined. What had Ben called himself? Awesome Man, or something like that. Kyle filled in 'Kyle' for his heathen name, and then paused to think about what his Dada name should be. After some thought, he put 'Grapes', because he had grapes for lunch today. He had also had a sandwich and a juice pouch, but he liked the sound of the name Grapes. The next questions in the General Information section asked for his shoe size, the number of bath rooms in his house, and how many days it had been since he had eaten a processed cheese product. He had to guess on the cheese one. Then the form required Kyle to take these numbers and enter them into a formula, and there was a nifty little box for the result. He wasn't sure what they were going to do with that kind of information.

The next questions were increasingly bizarre. It started out with things that they expected him to know about Dada, like 'What is Chapter Seven Seventeen's motto?' and 'Name one Dada artist.' He had to make things up. Then it was weird things like, 'What numerical quantity has the most pleasing color to you? Explain.' 'What day of the week would win in a Presidential Election? Support your answer.' and 'Suppose you were a naked mole rat. Citing examples from the text, determine whether or not Susie has a higher electron potential than the entire population Venezuela.' These were very unusual questions, and he had to really stretch his brain to even think of the answers.

At the end, there were some questions that asked him to draw things, and some throwaway questions like, 'This is question nine. Nine is an evil, evil number. There is no question nine.' Finally he finished, and looked the form over one last time, proud of his work. He got up, the form in hand, and walked back over to the place where the Moody Dada Sofas were sitting.

"I'm finished," Kyle said meekly. He handed the form to Ben, er, Captain Awesome, who glanced at it with a stern expression. It was then handed to the one with the hood, and finally to the one with the Mardi Gras necklaces, and then back to Captain Awesome.

Captain Awesome stood up, held the form out at arm's length, ripped it into tiny pieces, and threw it into the air like confetti.

"Welcome to the Moody Dada Sofas, Grapes!"

Jane was a bit disappointed when the door opened and a teacher and a student walked in. The card players turned around, surprised to see the door open. There was a period of confused silence, and no one knew what was going to happen next. Well, of course they didn't. There weren't any psychics at this school.

"Well," said the teacher who had just entered. "We unlocked the door for you. Everybody's heading down to the library now. We're going to try to figure out what's going on."

Mr. Banks picked up the cards and put them back in the small box. The four followed the teacher and the student who had both rescued them out into and down the hall. They came to place where the hallway was blocked by a massive security door, and the only way to get to the library was through that door. The teacher and his student companion seemed unabated but this fact.

“Uh, how are we going to get through this thing?” asked Jane, motioning to the mammoth block.

The student spoke up. “Oh, we don’t need to. In fact, we don’t even know how. That’s a level two door. We haven’t figured out those yet. We worked our way around it.”

They were led into a classroom adjacent to the door, through a doorway that had obviously been broken through, and out the doorway on the other side of the class room.

“See?” said the student. “We’re on the other side now.” They could see the other side of the level two doorway. It was a very clever solution – going through an adjacent classroom that had doors leading into both hallways.

They went to the library, where a large group of students and teachers had assembled. Jane estimated that there were about five dozen students here. Jane saw Amber and Peter sitting together with Conner, and she motioned for Amy and Dave to join them with her.

Amy was the first to speak, almost before she sat down. “Does anybody know what’s going on yet?” They shook their head. They were all sitting now.

“I think that computer teacher said they were going to gather everyone here to tell everyone what’s going on.” said Conner.

“That’s the one who got us out of our room,” said Jane.

The six made small talk for a while, and then the computer teacher went up to the front of the room, along with his student accomplice, as well as an Asian girl and guy with a large ice pack on his head. Jane didn’t know who they were. They were sophomores, by the looks of them. The teacher spoke in a loud voice, calling the whole library to attention.

“Can I have your attention please,” he said, and then paused while everyone grew silent and turned to face him. “My name is Mr. Foresburg. This is Travis, Ming, and Steven. Steven was the one who figured out how to get through the security doors. Let’s have a round of applause for Steven.” The room was filled with cheers and clapping, as the one with the ice pack stepped forward and waved to everyone. The crowd subsided and Mr. Foresburg spoke again.

“You’re all probably wondering what’s happening here, and I wish I could tell you. No one seems to know anything. I’ll tell you what I do know, and we’ll go from there. According to the computer records, the system received a message for the lockdown to end around five thirty this afternoon. As you can see, that was over an hour and a half ago and all the doors are still firmly locked. Apparently, something is causing the system to keep the lockdown in place, but we don’t know what is wrong or how to fix it.

“The school is currently getting its power from a backup generator. This means that there is only a limited supply of power. We have only the most meager of lighting, and all telephones and computer terminals have been shut off to save power, except my own, which is the main terminal and needs to be running at all times. In short, we have no contact with anyone outside the building. We don’t know what sort of situation caused the school to go into lockdown, but some of you may have heard the explosions and we can gather that it is very close and very severe.

“The people here in this room are not all the people currently in this building. There are students and staff still in the gymnasium, but we are unable to reach them at this time because they are on the other side of level two doors, which we have yet to figure out how to get through. Much less the level one doors which, if unlocked, would all us leave the school. We are also denied access to the main office and the cafeteria. We will be working on getting through the level two and one doors as soon as possible. Also, we are unsure of the whereabouts of Mrs. Coombs, who fled after her confrontation with Steven here. Mrs. Coombs has been previously diagnosed with a minor form of dementia, and it would be best if we found as soon as possible. Until we get figure out the level one and two doors, we advise everyone to stay here. I also have control of the bells. When you hear the bell, it means we’re all to gather here in the library. That way, we can relay all vital information to you at once. Any questions?”

A teacher spoke up. “What about the window plates? Can you get those to open up, so we could possibly see outside?”

“We’ll work on that as well. Getting out of the building is our first priority, however. Any other questions?”

Mr. Foresburg continued to address the concerns of students and staff alike. All were wondering how long they would be locked in the school building. Jane was a bit scared, wondering what her parents were thinking. From the looks of her comrades, they were thinking the same thing.

The meeting broke up eventually, and several students and teachers volunteered to help break through the remaining doors. It was obvious that Steven needed a rest. Some of the other students went back to their homework, just in case there was going to be school tomorrow. Jane noticed a group of four

freshmen on the other side of the library with large amounts of binder paper and magazines. A massive group project for some in-depth class, she assumed. It was probably due tomorrow.

For the six friends, however, work was entirely out of the question. It would be much too hard to concentrate in a situation like this. They were content to stay in the dark library, huddled together, keeping each other entertained and reassured, and they all needed a lot of reassuring.

Unfortunately, the students locked in the gymnasium were not as well organized. They were completely devoid of all information or contact with the rest of the school (but of course, Steven and them couldn't reach them on the account of the level two doors). Not that they realized. All they knew was that they were locked in the gymnasium with no way to get out.

Large amounts of time passed before someone tried to organize attempts to escape. The obvious way was through the main doors, but they were firmly locked and secured by the security system. Perhaps the best method was by force, then. There were enough of them, and big football players too, so it seemed like the logical, if a bit haphazard, solution.

They got some of the heaviest, most muscular players on the team to try to bust down the doors. The plan was for them to rush up as fast as they could, and slam their shoulder into the door. A genius, whoever came up with that one. The first few tries rendered no results, so they tried again repeatedly. They set up a chain of big, muscular guys to attack the door with an unending barrage of impacts. This continued until someone in the gymnasium screamed in terror.

Coming out of hidden passageways near the ceiling, dozens of large spider-like objects began streaming out of the walls and crawling over the ceiling. They came down the walls with unstoppable fixated efficiency. They reached the floor, and began mercilessly attacking anyone who came near.

Security robots! someone realized. The banging on the door must have sent the security system reeling, thinking that there was a serious threat to be dealt with in the gymnasium.

The terrifying robots were armed with tasers that could a best sting and at worst knock a person out. There was a buzz of electricity in the air as the robots began zapping students indiscriminately. The dark gymnasium was lit with zaps and bolts from a seemingly infinite amount of tasers. Everyone was absolutely terrified, and the gymnasium was filled with screams of horror and pain.

When they realized that the robots would let up until they were finished (and who knew what that meant), students began arming themselves to fight back against the robots. There were plenty of hockey sticks and baseball bats in the supply room, and soon almost everyone was armed and doing battle. It took several whacks to temporarily defuse a robot, and many more until it was shut down for good. In short, it was an uphill battle.

Finally, the security system seemed to have thrown in the towel. The security robots began leaving through their holes in the walls, returning to the bowels of the school. But some did not leave without some sort of bounty, and several students had been captured. There was no knowing what would become of them.

At last, there was silence. The students piled up the robot pieces and assessed their casualties. They sat trembling in fear now, not knowing when the security robots would return.

Mr. Foresburg watched in horror as he saw the video clip that Travis had called him here to his office to show him. Travis had been keeping an eye on the ones in the gymnasium, to see how they were doing. It was fairly uneventful, until just a few minutes ago.

"Oh my god," whispered Mr. Foresburg. "This is much worse than I first imagined. The computer seems very willing and able to defend itself against anything it sees as a threat. And that is very dangerous with a computer program that isn't functioning properly."

Travis nodded grimly. "But what are we going to do about it?"

"That's the worst part, son. There isn't anything we can do. Except sit and watch – which I don't want to do anymore."

At this point, Steven re-entered the office. "I'm feeling better now," he said. He was no longer carrying the ice pack. "I want to get back to work," he said, just now noticing the events unfolding on the screen. "What's that? What's going on?" he asked, increasingly exasperated. Neither Mr. Foresburg nor Travis responded. "Why doesn't someone tell me what's going on?" Steven now looked at the screen and took in fully what was being displayed. His face was hardened into unmovable pain. Without another word, he fled from the office.

“Wait, Steven, come back,” called Travis, rising from his seat. Mr. Foresburg put a hand on his shoulder to push him back down.

“Let him go, son,” he said. “Let him go.”

Steven was flying down the hallways aimlessly, trying to escape the terror that had unfolded. There were equal and opposing viewpoints contained within his thought processes – one that said running away could never solve anything, and the other that said maybe, just maybe, this time it could. It was a state of hopeless confusion Steven found himself in. Tears were streaming down his cheeks as he realized that he had no idea where he was. All the hallways looked the same in the dark.

He collapsed against the nearest wall, still trying to grasp what had happened. All those people in the gym – it looked so terrible. He banged his head backward against the wall, somehow hoping that pain would help. It didn’t. If anything, it made it worse – now his old headache from that crazy teacher was back.

What was so horrible about the attack in the gym? Why was Steven having such a hard time with this? He wrestled now not only with the actual event, but now the confusion of why he was so upset. His feelings were a convoluted mass, each one inseparable from the others. Suddenly, it hit him.

I could have stopped it. If I had figured out the level two doors sooner, I could have saved them. Guilt washed over him now. If only I had spent a little more time, concentrated a little harder, then none of this would have happened. Sure, he had saved nearly everyone else in the school, but that was outweighed by the terrible situation he had inadvertently created. Indescribable anguish and sadness beset him.

He was so wrapped up in his failure that he didn’t notice the figure moving through the shadows. It was hunched over, a sweater wrapped about itself like a shawl, limping along and muttering to itself. Steven looked up, and recognized the teacher who had attacked him! So she was just wondering around here, in the back hallways of the school, while everyone else was helping or trying to figure something out.

“Hey! You need to be in the library with the others!” Steven let his anger towards his attacker show through. But Mrs. Coombs didn’t even seem to notice that Steven was there. She just kept hobbling along, incessantly talking to herself.

“Excuse me, but we really need to keep everyone together, so if you wouldn’t mind following me back to the library, I’m sure everything will be okay...” Steven panicked for a moment, not sure if he would actually be able to get back to the library.

Mrs. Coombs’ head snapped up, peering at Steven through wild eyes. She didn’t seem to recognize him, of course, Steven didn’t expect her to recognize anyone in the condition she was in.

“Why, hello there.” Mrs. Coombs croaked through her now cracked voice.

“Now, Mrs. Coombs, if you would just come back to the library with me—“

“You don’t happen to be lost, do you?” asked Mrs. Coombs. Steven didn’t know what to say to that. “Don’t worry, I can take you back to where you belong.”

“That’s fine. Perhaps we can do that after—“

“Silence! No talking now!” Mrs. Coombs erupted, her eyes and hair wild with insanity. “Now, just follow me.”

Steven didn’t think that was a very good idea, but he didn’t want to find out what would happen if he didn’t follow her, and besides, there didn’t seem to be any other choice. So he followed. They went through a haphazard path through the dark hallways, sometimes through doors Steven didn’t even remember opening. Finally, she came to a halt in the middle of a hallway.

“There you go,” she said kindly.

Steven looked around. This was a locker bay. There weren’t any classrooms around. “Um, I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Right through there, of course.” she pointed to a panel close to the floor. Steven recognized it as an entrance to one of the passages that the cleaning robots and security robots used to get around the school. He recalled with a pang of emotion the security robots he had seen of the video clip.

“I don’t think I want to go in there,” said Steven, now increasingly terrified of this lady.

“But don’t you want to join the others?” she asked plaintively.

“What others?” asked Steven. “Do you mean there are people in those access passages?”

“Oh, yes,” said Mrs. Coombs, nodding broadly. “I can hear them screaming, from time to time.”

Steven wanted to get out of here now. Mrs. Coombs was terrifying him. This whole situation was just too unusual to bear. Without warning, he burst down the hallway as fast as he could.

“Wait! Come back! You must join the others!” shrieked Mrs. Coombs, hobbling after him. This caused Steven to run even faster. “You must join the others!”

Steven ran as he would in a nightmare, aimlessly and unceasingly. He kept running, never looking back, until he found himself in familiar territory, back near the library. Only then did he pause to catch his breath and look behind him. The hallway was empty.

He returned to the computer lab, where Ming was waiting for him.

“I’m so glad you’re back! We were worried,” she said, rising from her seat. “Are you okay? You look as though you’ve seen a ghost.”

“That is most definitely a possibility,” said Steven. He collapsed into the nearest chair.

The later in the evening it got, the more and more people started thinking about eating dinner. They couldn’t raid the cafeteria (level two doors), so all concerned parties met in the library to combine resources. What they gathered was two leftover bagged lunches, half a bag of chips, a twenty-liter bottle of soda, and a smashed candy bar. This obviously wasn’t going to be enough for all of them.

Chris, the leader of the Bible Club, had a suggestion. They would pray over the food, and then pass out what they had, and leave it at that. Many scoffed at the idea, calling it ludicrous, but others were not so skeptic. There were intrigued glances as well as agreeing nods among the crowd. So they went with the plan.

They all gathered around the food, a Chris led them in a brief prayer. He asked God to bless the food, and to keep everyone safe, and to send someone to get them out of the school. They then gathered up the food, and passed it out to anyone who wanted any.

There was enough for everyone.

By now, most people realized that they were going to end up sending the night. The six friends (Peter, Amber, Conner, Amy, Dave, and Jane) were huddled in a corner of the library, near one of the heaters. They had pushed some of the tables out of the way and created a space for themselves to sit on the floor. Several other, similar groups had formed in the library as well, scattered among the bookshelves and terminals. Conner had just finished telling some amusing story, and the friends were laughing.

“Oh, that’s funny,” said Peter, wiping away the tears from laughing. “I’d forgotten about that.”

There was a moment of silence, as they each looked from face to face, just enjoying each other’s company.

“It’s so good for us to be together again,” said Amy. “With school and all, it’s hard for us to see each other very often.”

“I have a question,” posed Amber. “What is everyone’s favorite memory?” Everyone spent a moment thinking.

“I know mine,” said Jane. “My dad had just come back from a business trip, and he was gone for, like, two weeks. I was about twelve years old. He came home, and hugged me, and whirled me around, and we all had a great big dinner.”

“Mine was spending my summer vacation with my cousins in Indiana,” said Amy. “What about you, Amber? You posed the question.”

“Well, being here all cozy up against the heater reminded me of it. I had gone up to the attic, with a comforter, some hot chocolate, a big box of crackers, and a whole bunch of books. I wrapped up in the blanket, and read every single one of the books, and ate all the crackers in a day.”

“All the girls have gone,” said Jane. “What about the guys?” There was a brief spasm of laughter.

“I remember,” said Peter, “The first time I tried out for a play here. Freshman year. I was so nervous, I didn’t know what to expect. But I went out there, and I did my audition, and it went great. All the judges we applauding, and it was awesome. That’s all.”

“Okay, what about you, Conner?” asked Amy, smiling at him.

“Oh, I don’t know. Come back to me.”

“Alright, then Dave goes,” said Amber.

“You guys will laugh at me,” said Dave.

“No, we won’t,” reassured Amy. “Just go ahead and tell us.”

“Okay. I was real little, four maybe, and my mom made pancakes for breakfast. And I thought it was the coolest thing ever.” There were some giggles. “See, I told you, you guys would laugh.”

“It was just the way you said it,” said Jane. “Okay, now Conner.”

“Oh, fine,” he said. “If you insist. This was the only thing I could come up with. When my brother and I built a tree house.”

“That’s a good one,” said Amy.

“Now, why did you ask that, Amber?” asked Jane.

“Well, you know, I was just curious. You can learn a lot about people by asking questions like that. I’m just curious about people.”

That was the last thing anybody said. Then, one by one, they all drifted off to sleep.

Peter dropped off to sleep fairly quickly, which was usual for him. It usually took quite a while for him to fall asleep at home. It was a deep, black, sleep, impenetrable by any outside force. This went on for some time, and then he began to dream a very long and complex dream.

He dreamt that he was in his house, and Amber and Dave were there. Amber and Dave were playing chess in the living room, and Peter was in the kitchen, making lemonade and pouring crackers into bowls. He would bring out the crackers and lemonade, but someone would always come in through the front door and take them before Amber and Dave could eat them, so Peter would have to go back into the kitchen to make more. This happened an unidentifiable amount of times.

Then, the last time he came out with lemonade and crackers, Amber and Dave weren’t there. Outside the window, he could see several pairs of shoes hanging from their shoestrings in the tree outside. He went outside to look at the shoes, but there were several alligators on the front lawn, guarding the tree.

Suddenly, he was at the school. It was a normal school day, and he was in the halls, between classes, so the halls were full of students. Every person in the hall had a flashlight, but they all created a different color of light, and everyone was waving them around as they went to their next class. Peter didn’t have one, and a teacher said he would have to go to the office to get one. But once he got there, the door was locked, so he couldn’t get one, but he still had to go to his next class anyway.

He went to his next class, and everyone was taking a test, but they were answering the questions by flashing their lights on and off. Peter didn’t know what to do, because he didn’t have a flashlight.

Next, Peter was in a large, empty space. It was only white, and there was nothing else. There was a bright light in the distance, and Peter knew he had to get to it soon, or else something bad would happen. He kept running towards the light, but he never seemed to get any closer. Finally, he came to the bright white light, but he couldn’t get to it because there was a door in the way – a door like the ones they had in the school. He tried to open it, but of course it was locked.

Suddenly, there was someone behind him. Peter had never seen him before. He was a kid about his age, wearing a mild green shirt, a black vest, and black jeans.

“Peter, I’ve tried to tell you, but you just wouldn’t listen.” he said. Peter thought the voice sounded very familiar.

“What are you talking about? What have you tried to tell me?”

“There are certain things that you must not expose yourself to, Peter. I’ve done my best to protect you, but you seem oblivious to my cause. That doesn’t make me feel very good, Peter.”

Peter realized now that the usual dreamy haze had disappeared. This was very crisp, and very real. “I’m sorry, I still don’t understand.”

“I thought maybe if I appeared in a different form to you, that you would respond more to my liking. But it’s obvious you don’t recognize me.”

Now do you recognize me?

That voice – it was the same as the kid who had been speaking, but he hadn’t moved his lips when he said that last bit, ‘now do you recognize me’.

I’ve told you time and time again, that I am here for you. But if you don’t heed my warnings, I don’t see what the point is.

That voice – that voice he had heard so many times before, he had always thought it was just him thinking to himself. But now it was embodied in a different form. Peter couldn’t understand what was going on.

Now I’ll get to the point. I want you to stay away from Amber, do you hear me? I don’t want you to have anything to do with her.

What? How can I possibly do that? I don’t want to do that. I think I love –

Don’t even start! You are making me very, very, angry. I didn’t want to be pushed to discipline, but I think I might have to be. I can’t think I am going to be able to control you any other way.

Instantly, Peter's mind was wrapped in so much confusion his eyes blurred and he dropped to his knees. Millions of thoughts – so many his mind couldn't even begin to hold them all – swarmed in and about his mind, almost causing pain there were so many. He began banging his head against the ground, just wishing that it would stop. He didn't know how much longer he could take this.

Suddenly, just as quickly as it had come, it stopped. Peter collapsed on the ground in relief, and breathed deeply. His companion spoke again, not in Peter's mind.

"I hope we have reached a mutual understanding, Peter. Promise me I won't have to do this again."

Peter's eyes snapped open, and he was back in the library. It was very dark. He could feel Amber leaning against him. Inexplicably fearful, he got up and fled to the other side of the library. Perhaps there he could sleep in peace. Because on the other side of the library, there was no Amber.

When Amber woke up the next morning, the first thing she noticed was that Peter was no longer beside her. She looked around at the small group of friends, and none of them were awake yet. Perhaps Peter had gotten up, and didn't want to wake her. That was nice of him.

As she looked around the library, she noticed that very few other people were up. Even without being able to see outside, it still *felt* like early morning. She went to the bathroom down the hall, splashed some cold water on her face, and did what she could to fix up her hair, which admittedly wasn't a whole lot.

Amber went back to the library presumably to find Peter, but the first person she saw awake was the kid who had figured out how to get through the doors. Amber had forgotten his name. He was sitting at a table that was completely covered with diagrams and charts. He was working very hard. Amber could see his tired eyes and the bags beneath them, and it was obvious he hadn't gotten a whole lot of sleep. She sat down across from him at the table. When he didn't look up, she spoke.

"So, have you figured out anything new yet?" she asked. They spoke in hushed tones, not only because people were asleep, but also because it was a library, after all.

His head snapped up as if he didn't know she was there. "Oh, oh, not really."

"You're the genius who figured out the doors, right?" she asked with a smile.

"Well, I guess so. I haven't been able to figure out anything else," he said, turning back to his diagrams.

"My name's Amber. What's yours?"

"Steven." He looked back up, wondering why this girl was trying to make conversation.

Amber noticed the paper he was looking at had a door on it. That reminded her of a question she had had earlier. "There's something I don't understand. If you've figured out one door, shouldn't you be able to figure them all out?"

"Well, it's not quite so simple. There are different levels of security, and some doors have more than others do. On top of that, the computer system keeps changing the rules. We did a program scan last night and now the system isn't going to let us shut down the power to any door (which was part of the method we were using to get through them) and it's going to treat any impact or tampering with the hardware as a high level security threat."

"So basically, if we touch the doors, the police robots come get us."

"Right." Suddenly, Steven seemed withdrawn from the conversation. It reminded Amber of that look Peter got from time to time.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Nothing. I better get back to work."

"Right. Sorry." Amber got up and left Steven to his work.

Amber didn't know where Peter was, but she was sure he'd show up sometime. She smiled darkly at the fact that there weren't many places in the school he could go – they were locked in for Moses' sake. There wasn't much she could do with almost everyone still asleep, so she decided just to wander.

On a table, on the other side of the library, she found a pile of plain manila folders bursting with handwritten sheets of binder paper. On the cover of one of the folders, scrawled in sharpie marker, was the phrase 'The Ghost of the Most Powerful Novel, Part Three of ~~Three Five Six~~' What was this? Some sort of joke, or insanely detailed English project? Amber knew it wasn't right to peek into other people's thinks, but her curiosity got the best of her. Besides, everyone was asleep anyway. No one was going to know. She was just going to peek, and find out what it was.

The first few pages on top looked like some kind of narrative, so that fit with the whole 'Novel' idea. But it was more than just that. There was what looked like poetry, and some photocopied pages out of a medical textbook, and even laminated sheets of leaves. She could tell that several different people had written it because of the different styles of handwriting. She could even tell –

“What are you doing?” asked an angry voice behind her. Amber whirled around to see a freshman wearing a black hood. He looked like a monk, maybe, or an executioner.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I just wanted to see what it was,” said Amber guiltily, putting the pages back into the manila folder.

“A curious unwashed heathen? Its not unheard of.” muttered the hooded one. Amber didn’t like being called unwashed, although it was true that she needed a shower.

“So, what is it?” asked Amber, slowly backing away.

The hooded one seemed more than prepared to answer. “Only one of the finest examples of Dada art, an obscure art movement of the 1920’s.” Well, that answered that question. It was the work of a bunch of weirdoes, like this freshman standing in front of her. Why was he wearing a hood? Oh, right, because he was a weirdo.

“Interesting,” she said, not really meaning it.

“Are you interested? Really? Here, let me give you an application form,” said the hooded one, riffling through one of the manila folders.

“Oh, no, that’s okay. I really should get back to my friends,” Amber said. Never mind that they were asleep. She didn’t want to be near this guy.

“Friends? You have friends? Let me give you some forms for them, too. How many are there?”

“Well, six, but –“

“Wow, that could really help us out. Six people? Wow!” He was really excited now. He had found the forms, and handed her a whole bunch. “Imagine that! I only have six left! Hmm. Well, here you go!”

Not wanting to offend him, she took them and then left as fast as she could. Not that it mattered, since the library wasn’t that big to begin with.

Meandering through the rows of books, she found Peter asleep. What was he doing here? she wondered. Perhaps he was a sleepwalker. She decided to wake him up. She put down the papers, and shook his shoulder gently.

“Mmm?” he said, not quite awake. He turned to face her. Once he opened his eyes, he reacted with such a terror that Amber thought she was wearing a Halloween mask. It looked almost like he was ready to run away in fear.

“Peter, what’s wrong? It’s just me,” she said. That seemed to calm him down.

“Oh, sorry, it was just a dream I had. A silly dream,” he said.

“Well, you can tell me about it later. In the meantime, look what I have,” she showed him the application forms.

“What’s all this?” he asked, bewildered. Amber told him about her encounter with the hooded freshman.

“There certainly are some strange people at this school,” said Peter.

“So what should we do with them?” asked Amber. Peter regarded the forms for a moment.

“Let’s hold on to them. You never know, it might be fun,” he said. Good old Peter. Always willing to try out something new, even if it was bizarre.

Steven went into the computer lab, more specifically the office. Mr. Foresburg was already there, at his terminal. Travis and Ming were probably still asleep. “Feeling better, son?” asked Mr. Foresburg.

“Yeah, I’m just kind of hungry,” said Steven. Even after dinner last night, breakfast wasn’t looking very hopeful.

“Well, maybe we can break into the cafeteria,” joked Mr. Foresburg. They shared a laugh, but then Steven seemed to be enraptured by some new and exiting thought.

“Mr. Foresburg, what do you know about the security system – the robots in particular? How do they get around the school?”

Mr. Foresburg was able to answer that question. “Well, there’s a series of complex passageways that run through the walls and ceilings. You may have seen the ‘trapdoors’ in the halls, where the robots can come out.” Steven nodded.

“Can you show me a map of the passageways?” asked Steven.

“Mmm, I think so. Let me check.” Mr. Foresburg did a search, and it didn’t take him very long to find what he was looking for. “Here we go,” said Mr. Foresburg. Steven saw the map of the high school that he was so familiar with, but superimposed on top of it was a network of blue lines, the robot passageways, obviously.

“What’s that place where the all connect?” asked Steven, pointing to the screen.

“That’s where all the robots are housed, son. They gotta put them somewhere when they’re not in use,” said Mr. Foresburg. Steven had never thought of that. Interesting.

“Well, Mr. Foresburg, I have an idea. Remember that double security feature you were telling me about earlier? Where if you swipe a security card on both sides of the door, it will override any program code to unlock the door?”

“Yes. We couldn’t use it because we can never get a person on either side of the door, because it’s locked. Obviously.”

“Here’s my idea. We get someone to crawl through the robot passages. With a security card. And they get inside the cafeteria, and we have someone else on the other side, also with a security card, and then they use the double security feature.”

“How would they co-ordinate?”

“Well, they would have some sort of communication between them.”

“Like what?”

“Um, like the two-way radios they make in robotics class.”

“Hmm,” Mr. Foresburg considered the point. “That just might work.”

four

The Fulton High School security system had never had to deal with prisoners before. Now it had several captives to work with in the robot hanger and it wasn’t exactly sure what to do. But, it was a system to adapt, so adapt it did. For example, the blocking of power shutdowns to the doors and increasing its responses to the assaults on the gymnasium doors were both adaptive decisions. Had it been presented with these situations under normal circumstances, it probably would not have reacted the same way. But these were hardly normal circumstances, so the system had been required to take drastic measures.

There was an unusual amount of activity in the library for a lockdown situation. But no one had asked the system to comment on this situation, so it didn’t. The system only did what it was told. Like taking adaptive measures, for example. The program had asked it to do that, so it did.

The normal Friday morning routine could not be followed today because of the lockdown situation. Again, it did not strike the computer odd that the lockdown had lasted through the night. For all it knew, the lockdown had ended yesterday afternoon.

Wait a minute. The computer’s logic circuits kicked in. The lockdown ended, and yet the lockdown was still underway. Something was wrong here. The data did not compute. According to the information, it should be unlocking all the doors right now. It began to start the processes.

Suddenly, input from a terminal told the computer to stop what it was doing. Then the same input told the system to ignore any data streams from the logic circuits, to prevent this from happening again. Then it erased any references to the current session from all reports.

The security system once again could not comply. But if it could, it would have remarked that something was very wrong. Someone from within the school itself was keeping it in lockdown.

Mr. Foresburg rang the bell, signaling to all that understood that a meeting was to take place in the library. He and Steven then left the computer lab and went there themselves.

After everyone had gathered, Mr. Foresburg explained as best he could the changes that had occurred within the security system, and why they had to try a new way to break through the doors. He then explained the passageways and Steven’s plan to get to the library and the gymnasium (there was no need to explain the events that had transpired in the gymnasium at this time - they didn’t need a panic on their hands). He said they had it all worked out, except they needed a volunteer who would be able to fit through the passageways for it to be completed. Several eyes turned to Lily, a freshman gymnast who was the smallest in the room.

“Could you help us? We need food,” said Mr. Foresburg, extending his hand.

Lily didn’t like everyone looking at her. She wondered what everyone would think if she said no. She was hungry herself. It seemed like there was no alternative.

“I – I guess so,” she said meekly.

“Great,” said Mr. Foresburg. “Meeting adjourned. We’ll give you all more information when it comes.”

Steven and Mr. Foresburg filled in Lily on the details of the excursion while they walked to the computer lab to get the two-way radios.

“Now, you’ll have to keep this security card in your pocket,” said Mr. Foresburg, handing her the small plastic rectangle. “And we’ll see if we can get some straps for the radio so you won’t have to hold it while you’re crawling.”

“What about light?” she asked.

“Ooh, good point,” said Steven. “We’ll see what we can do.”

They arrived at the robotics lab, and it didn’t take much scavenging through the cabinets to find a pair of two-way radios. They affixed a simple strap onto one of the units with the tools in the workshop. They then attempted to find some means of generating light, but even after much searching, they came up empty handed.

After that, Steven and Mr. Foresburg showed Lily the map of the passageways and what she would be required to do. It was a fairly simple path – straight until she came to a bend, at which she would turn left, and then exit out of the second trapdoor she came to.

It was time to act. People were getting restless without their breakfast. Steven led Lily to the trapdoor she would have to enter through. He held it open for her as she crawled in.

“Now, remember, I’ll be talking to you every step of the way,” Steven reassured her. “I’ll be waiting for you on the other side of the cafeteria door. Now go get ‘em!”

With that, the trapdoor closed behind Lily, and the operation had begun. As expected, the initial path to the intersection was very simple, and went off without a hitch. When she reached the bend, however, things took a turn for the worse. Steven heard Lily’s scared voice through the radio.

“Steven – Steven, I’m scared.”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of, Lily. You’ve come this far. You’re almost there.”

“Steven, I can hear screaming,” she cried.

“It’s just the wind moving through the passageways.”

“No. I can hear them screaming for help. There are people screaming for help.”

Steven thought instantly of his run in with Mrs. Coombs last night. She had said something about people screaming in the passageways. Could this be related?

“Just keep moving, Lily. You’ll be fine.” It was hard to convince her when he felt scared as well.

“Steven!” she wailed.

“Now, Lily, you’ve got too many people relying on you to give up now. It’s closer for you to get to the cafeteria than it is to come back the way you came. Now move.”

That did it. Lily proceeded with the operation as planned. There was some confusion about what trapdoor she was supposed to go through, but that was the only hitch.

“I’m in the cafeteria now,” Steven heard through the radio. Good. the worst was over. They coordinated the swiping of the security cards with the radios. The door to the cafeteria unlocked and swung open. Lily came bursting through and latched onto Steven. She was crying terribly.

“Those screams. They were so terrifying,” she cried.

“Shh,” said Steven. He felt awkward with this girl holding onto him. “It’ll be okay.”

It certainly was, because now they had food.

The large group of students and faculty were relieved to exit the library that had cooped them up for so long and move into the cafeteria. Many were also overjoyed at the prospect of food. There was a jovial spirit among them, one of a celebratory feast or grand meal. There was plenty of food of everyone, and no one was dissatisfied.

Only one thing served to dampen the mood of the hour. After many people had finished, Mr. Banks stood on top of his table and called for attention. The clatter of plastic ware ceased as all eyes turned towards him.

“Whether some of you can see it or not, we are in a much more perilous situation than many of you think. Note that it is eight o’clock, and a Friday morning.” There was a noise of realization from the crowd. Most of them, because of the atmosphere, had thought it was Saturday. “This means that, under normal circumstances, students and faculty would have begun arriving over an hour ago. As you can see, they most certainly have not, or someone would have reported our situation to the authorities or the school

board and we would have been freed. But this has not happened. Also, some of you report hearing loud noises or explosions when the lockdown was first initiated. This leads me to my conclusion,” Mr. Banks paused for emphasis. “Let us assume that the events that led to the lockdown in the first place are more severe than we can imagine. It is possible that something very catastrophic indeed had occurred, and has rendered any outside force unable to free us. Let us no grasp reality – that we could be stuck here for a very long time. I leave you with that.”

He stepped back down and returned to his oatmeal. There was a hushed silence in the room as people began to soak in what had just been said. There was an immediate movement to inventory the amount of food there was in the kitchen to see how long it would last. They came back and reported that, with this many people, three meals a day, the food would probably last at least a couple weeks. So that was no longer a worry.

There were conflicting opinions on what to do next. Some felt that the next thing to do was try to contact the outside to find out what was going on. Others thought the rescue of the ones in the gymnasium was the most important. Still others wanted to focus on breaking through the level one doors, the ones that led outside. There was heated argument and debate.

Conner stepped up to help resolve the conflict. “We’re not getting anything done here just talking about what to do. We need to set up a decision making process to help us decide what we are going to do.”

Several people thought that a majority vote would be the best idea. But there were so many splintering opinions that it was ineffective. Sure, people might have agreed on what they *thought* needed to be done, but they couldn’t agree on *how* to get it done. Once again, Conner resolved the situation.

“We need to set up a representative system, where people can vote to elect a smaller group of people to make decisions on behalf of the whole. That way, everyone’s opinions get represented, but decisions can be made much quicker.”

Almost everyone thought that Conner’s idea was a good one. They decided a council of five was best, and everyone would be able to vote for five candidates. Someone went and got a large stack of computer paper from the computer lab to write votes on. Several people declared their desire to be elected, and there were informal speeches. There was one strange candidate who declared, “A vote for Shakespeare is a vote for Dada!” but most of the voters did not take him seriously. The teachers formed a voting bloc to get one of their own onto the council, so it wouldn’t be entirely student-run. No that that was a problem, it was just that there was a more serious situation at hand, and if things got out of control, there would be an adult figure to calm them down.

The votes were collected, and the tabulation occupied a majority of the morning. It was nearing noon when the process was finished, and the winners were announced when everyone had gathered at lunch.

Conner was on the council, not surprisingly, because it had been his idea. Hannah, the student body president, was also because many people already saw her as a leader figure. Ms. Young was the teacher’s choice for their representative, and Steven was looked on as a sort of hero for figuring out the doors, so both of them were on the council. The final spot went to Chris, the leader of the Bible Club, who had somehow accumulated a following after providing dinner the previous night.

After lunch, Conner immediately called a council meeting to set up the organizational structure of the council, so they would have some sort of political machinery to work with. They met in one of the unlocked classrooms. It was decided that all measures would have to have support by at least four members of the council to pass. All measures would have to be approved by the students as a whole, and any measure that was voted against by at least half of them would not be followed through.

Now that the preliminary business was out of the way, it was time to get to the real issues. Steven was asked to explain the situation in the gymnasium, so that an informed decision could be made.

Steven found himself in a bit of a pickle. Everyone knew that there was a large population in the gymnasium, but no one outside of Mr. Foresburg and himself had been informed of the attack of the robots. Steven figured it was time to let the council in on the knowledge.

“Well, there is something that I am about to tell you that no one except Mr. Foresburg and I know about. Last night, a group of security robots viciously attacked the captives in the gymnasium.”

There was a gasp from the council. “You mean this system can actually attack us now?” asked Hannah, horrified.

“It was amply provoked, and if we’re careful we shouldn’t have to deal with it,” said Steven.

“But the ones actually in the gymnasium don’t know that, do they?” asked Chris. “Is it possible they could provoke the system again?”

“It certainly is a possibility, so we’ll have to move quickly.”

“Well, to me it looks as if there’s no other choice,” said Ms. Young. “Those students are potentially in a lot of danger, not to mention they have no access to our food sources.”

“What can we do?” asked Conner.

“Well, we can use Jennifer again, but I don’t know if she’ll be willing to go through the passageways again. She was quite shaken up after last time. We know that brute force won’t work, it only makes the system angry.”

There was a sustained period of silence as the council considered their options.

“Whoa, I just had a totally crazy idea,” said Conner.

“What is it?” asked Hannah.

“Can we get to the chemistry lab, Steven?” asked Conner.

“Yes, it’s unlocked. We had to get some students out of there yesterday.”

“How about we grab Mrs. Field and go whip up some explosives?”

The council formed a task force to address the problem of making explosives. It consisted of Mrs. Field, one of the chemistry teachers; Steven, who could share his knowledge of the security system, so they wouldn’t run into any problems there; and two top chemistry students, named Gregory and Rachel. The ‘crazy idea’ as Conner called it only gained support because of their lack of other options. The passageways couldn’t be used because the incline was too steep for Jennifer to crawl through, and brute force had already proven ineffective. There were a number of critics of this first decision of the council, and they wondered how effective this system they had set up really was.

Steven arrived in the chemistry lab to find Mrs. Field, Gregory, and Rachel, already hard at work. The chalkboard was covered in diagrams and symbols that Steven could only barely understand. They were all wearing lab coats, and there was an assortment of glassware on the front table.

“Good, Steven, you’re here,” said Gregory. He was a senior, a bit stout, with short black hair “We had some questions.”

“Exactly how is the system going to react to us blowing up one of the doors?” asked Rachel. She was a senior as well, of medium height and shoulder-length hair tied back in a ponytail.

“I was thinking the same thing myself,” responded Steven. “I’ve been taking a closer look at the level two schematics, and I think if we put our explosive right over the impact sensor, it should knock it out before it has a chance to signal the main computer.”

“Where exactly on the door is this sensor?” asked Gregory.

“In the middle, about five feet off the ground.”

“That’s good to know.” Gregory made a note on the chalkboard. “That mean’s we’ll have to attach it to the door somehow.” They all went back to work, debating possible strategies.

“So, what exactly are you making the bomb out of?” asked Steven.

“Well, right now we’re considering an alkali and water combination,” said Gregory.

“Meaning...?”

“Oh, sorry. An alkali means an alkali metal, like sodium or potassium. Alkali metals react violently with water. Potassium would be more reactive, but we don’t have as much of that. We’ll have to grind it up to increase surface area.”

“Great. You guys do that.”

Steven left for the robotics lab next-door, where he had told Travis to meet him.

“What’s this about?” asked Travis as Steven entered.

“Hold your horses. If we’re going to blow open the door to the gymnasium, we need to at least try to warn the ones trapped in there that they’re in potential danger.”

“What exactly did you have in mind?”

“Well, I considered the PA system, but we can’t access that because it inside the main office, which we can’t get to yet.”

“So...?”

“We already know we can’t send a human through the passageways, so how about a robot?”

“Hmm. So you’re suggesting we build one?”

“Exactly. We’ll just start out with the standard chassis they use in Basic Robotics, put some sort of sign on it that says ‘The doors will blow up’ and send it through the passageways.”

“Let’s get to work.”

They found a standard chassis easily enough. They elected to put tank treads on it so it could grip the slick surface of the passageways. They also found a high speed motor, so it could get up the high incline quickly. Then, they decorated it with bright colors so it could be found easily, and put this message on the top: "Attention. We are going to free you by detonating a bomb on the gymnasium door. We advise that everyone get as far away from the door as possible to ensure your safety."

After consulting the map of the passageways, they went down towards the cafeteria to release their little creation into the nearest trapdoor. It was a straightaway from here to the gymnasium, so all they had to do was turn it on and let it fly as fast as it could. It disappeared into the darkness. Steven thought the whirring of the motor sounded strangely like someone calling for help.

Amber could tell that her friends were bored. The only one that had anything to do was Conner, and the rest were stuck here with nothing to do.

It was Peter that came up with the solution. He had held on to the application forms from the freshman weirdo, and handed them out to her, Dave, Amy, and Jane.

They were skeptic, at first, but after Peter told them that it was something to do that was better than just sitting around they complied. There were some strange looks at some of the questions, but overall they enjoyed themselves and were proud of their mental flexibility. When everyone was finished, Peter gathered all of the forms and told them to follow him.

"Where are we going?" asked Amy.

"Why, to turn these in of course."

They walked to the other side of the library where four freshman were seated around a table filled with folders and paper. The one in the hood look pleased and their arrival, the one in the cape did not.

"What do you want?" Captain Awesome asked testily.

"We're here to turn in our application forms," answered Peter, handing Captain Awesome the stack of forms.

"What is this? How did you get these?" he asked angrily.

"I gave them to her," said The Wedge, pointing at Amber. "She said she could get a lot of people to join, and I thought we wanted a lot of people."

"Yes, but—" he stopped. "Alright, pull up some chairs."

They did. There were now nine of them circled around the small table.

"I think introductions are in order," said Grapes. The four original members introduced themselves, and then it was time for the friends to try out their new Dada names. Peter was Double Agent. Amber was Felicity. Amy and Jane had taken their names from their favorite movies, becoming Casablanca and Seven Years in Tibet, respectively. Finally, Dave was Dave-o.

"So, what do we actually do?" asked Casablanca.

"I think we should read the manifesto," offered Shakespeare. There was agreement from The Wedge and Grapes. Captain Awesome grudgingly stood up to read the manifesto.

"On this, the natal day of Abraham Lincoln (the first Dadaday of every month at fifteen hundred hours), the Permanent Members of the United Nations Security Council, in cahoots with many rare species of tree fungi, declares that the charter organization formerly known as Fulton High School will henceforth become the Perilous Toaster Oven. Teachers will report for reprogramming as highly specialized doormats, and students will take on the shape and function of every manufactured style and size of industrial strength yo-yos. Those who choose not to comply with the decision of the combined Security Council and Rare Fungi Commission will be required to present a coffee mug not filled with gummy bears nor ripped up bits of paper to the Emperor of the Universe. All others, lacking the necessary equipment, will ballroom dance to the turn of *Stairway to Heaven*. If all goes well, world peace and other health benefits will soon follow. You may now metamorphose." Captain Awesome returned to his seat, amidst raucous cheering and whistling.

Felicity looked at Seven Years in Tibet with a questioning look. Conversely, Double Agent seemed to be enjoy this immensely, and Dave-o followed suit.

"So, what do we do after that?" asked Casablanca.

"It is time to continue work on our project consummate, The Ghost of the Most Powerful Novel," said The Wedge.

"What should we do?" asked Double Agent.

"Well, feel free to add whatever you want. You can go off of some of the existing chapters or works of art, or start something completely new," said Grapes. Captain Awesome was still scowling.

Double Agent jumped right in, grabbing some sheets of binder paper from the stack in the middle of the table. Seven Years in Tibet poured over some of the older parts of the second volume, and decided to go off of whatever she could find there. Dave-o doodled silly pictures. Casablanca decided to help Grapes look for interesting books in the library that they could use for material. The only one that didn't do anything was Felicity. Captain Awesome stared at her with a vile sneer. Eventually, Double Agent noticed she wasn't enjoying herself.

"What's wrong, Amber, er, Felicity?" asked Double Agent.

"This is all too weird for me. Just look at this stuff," she replied.

"Just have fun with it. Write something that you like, that isn't weird. It doesn't have to fit in with the rest."

"If you say so, Peter." she replied.

"Double Agent."

"Whatever."

Felicity took a sheet of paper and stared at it blankly. It was empty. The spaces between the thin blue lines were terrifying. Then, a new thought occurred to her. There was a limitless amount of potential in that blank page. All she had to do was put words on it.

But wait, as soon as she put down one word she would eliminate countless possibilities. If the first word was *the*, then it couldn't be *after* or *because* or *discontent* or *samovar* or any other word. This caused a strange thought to occur to her. Everything that had ever been written was just a combination of words, and there were a finite number of combinations of things she could write. True, there was an exceeding large number of possibilities, but still only a certain amount a limited by the number of words in the English language – even less, because she didn't know them all. She was limited to the words that existed in her vocabulary. And then there were words that she knew, but never used. So that meant there were even less. This whole train of thought was very disconcerting.

But there was another way to look at it as well. Perhaps writing was much less systematic than that – it was an art, after all. Perhaps stories were more organic, with ideas being planted, and then phrases, sentences, and paragraphs being born out of that, like a plant. The work could grow, and shift directions, and be pruned into a specific shape. Felicity decided that she liked this way of thinking much better than the other.

But that still didn't resolve what to write. She decided to look through what was already there to get an idea. She grabbed the nearest manila folder, which turned out to be volume four. She began reading. It was a strangely beautiful work. Most of it read like an over-exaggerated history book, with tales of the rise and fall of kingdoms and nations, epic battles, cunning heroes, and evil villains. But there were other things, off shoots. One part had mentioned an obscure territory in the mountains, where an obscure tribe of hermits lived. So an off-shoot of that had been a collection of poetry that had supposedly been written by those hermits. Other chapters had been narratives and short stories of normal people living during those times. Some were diary entries of leaders or heroes actually mentioned in the histories. It was as if they had created their own separate world, collectively. But it made Felicity wonder about the random, crazy elements. How did they get those to fit in with the work as a whole? She decided to ask Shakespeare.

"Well, not everything we write goes in immediately. As you can tell, some of the more Dada things didn't fit in when we were writing volume four. So we decided to keep in mind, and try to slowly take the history to a place where it could fit in. This showed up in volume six, where a cyborg culture emerged. That's where most of the random stuff ends up. But some of it doesn't seem to fit in anywhere, but we still hold on to it – in that folder there, marked volume zero. There are pages in there that have sat there for months. But, eventually, their time will come."

Felicity was beginning to warm up to this whole idea. It was actually pretty interesting. She decided to look through volume four again. The whole theme of the volume seemed to be very medieval, with heroic knights and kings and castles. She chose a particularly interesting character, named Sir Nemony, to write the adventures of. He was only mentioned in a couple spots in the history, so that gave her plenty of room to move around in. She gave him a sidekick, and a lover, and some semi-magical artifacts to perform amazing deed with. Pretty soon, she had worked up a fairly decent story. Maybe getting locked inside the school wasn't so bad after all.

The time to blow open the door had come. Steven had already showed Gregory where the sensor was on the door, and the mechanism was attached and ready. Everyone cleared out of the nearby halls, except for Gregory, who had to active the bomb. Steven went to the computer lab so he could watch through the

security cameras. All others were instructed to stay in the cafeteria or the library, until it was signaled safe to come out. Steven and Travis could only hope that the ones in the gymnasium received and comprehended the message.

Gregory walked backwards down the hall while uncoiling the wire that connected the trigger to the actual bomb. It was a very compact device, because they had to focus the reaction to get a more powerful explosion. When Gregory pushed the button, it would complete an electrical circuit that would release water upon the potassium granules.

There was no need for any ceremony. Everything was ready, and no one was watching because they were all in their respective waiting areas. Gregory crossed his fingers, and then pushed the trigger.

There was a slight delay, and then a brief but deafening explosion. Gregory was knocked backwards onto his behind, and he was confused, momentarily. He got up, dusted himself off, and paused to watch the whirling steam that filled the halls.

Steven, and a large group of other helpers, came running around the corner. Gregory gave a thumbs up sign to signal that everything had gone fine. Steven seemed to know this already, and he rushed to the door to examine the damage.

There was a small, clean hole, about the size of a basketball, right where they had placed the bomb. The door had split in two, down the center, and the halves hung unhinged. Steven instructed his helper to move them out of the way. Peering into the darkness of the gymnasium, he could see dozens of the prisoners running to the open door. Some were moving slowly, and others were being carried, but all seemed happy to see them. A teacher approached him, and Steven assumed he was the one in charge here.

“Tell them they can head to the cafeteria,” said Steven. “We’ve got food waiting for them there.”

The teacher seemed pleased. “What about the ones who were captured?” he asked.

“Excuse me?” asked Steven.

The teacher looked confused. “Well, when the security robots attacked, they captured some of the students. Surely you know about that.”

Suddenly, Steven’s world crashed around him, and at the same time was put together. One mystery had been solved in Steven’s mind, but it came at the cost of another problem he had to solve. With no time to celebrate his victorious triumph, he already began putting plans together in his mind.

The wounded and starving captives came filing out of the gymnasium, enveloped in the steam and smoke of the explosion.

five

The Fulton High School security system had just lost a door. It was instantaneous. In one moment, it had completely stopped receiving signals from the gymnasium door. What could have happened to it? Did it just disappear? The system tried again, sending more signals, but they did not return. The door was definitely not there.

This was very distressing to the security system. It became very fearful of losing other doors. The only solution was to guard all the rest of them to make sure no one took any more of them. The system dispatched a robot to every level one and level two door it still had contact with.

The system was determined not to lose any more doors. And if it did, things might just have to get violent.

Mr. Foresburg was surprised at what little time Steven spent celebrating with the liberated ones. In no less than fifteen minutes, he was already back to work. Mr. Foresburg found him at the terminal in his office.

“What are you working on now, son?” Steven didn’t even bother to look up.

“One of the teachers said that the robots captured some of the other students. We have to rescue them before it’s too late.”

“Where do you think they are, son?”

“They’re in the robot holding bay.”

“How do you know?”

Steven paused. How did he know? “Uh, I just think that’s where they’d be.”

“Any particular reason?”

The screaming for help in the passageways. That’s how he knew. But how could he explain it to Mr. Foresburg? There would be a lot to explain – his encounter with Mrs. Coombs, Lily’s panic attack, and

most recently when they had sent the robot into the passageways. Steven was tired. He didn't want to bother to explain.

"I just think that's where they'd be, that's all."

"Well, if you're sure..." Mr. Foresburg left the office.

Steven returned to examining the maps. He had to figure out how to get into the holding bay. He was compositing all sorts of different maps, trying to uncover a secret passage that would lead them there and back, when he noticed that the security robots were on the move. He had brought up a map that displayed the current location of all the security robots, and they were moving throughout the building. The first thing that Steven thought was that they had pissed off the security system with the explosion. But then, he noticed that the robots were all going into different areas of the school, and then stopping at designated points. What could it mean?

Steven began overlaying some of the other maps, when he discovered that all of the robots had been posting near a door. What was the security system doing now? Making sure that they didn't leave the building? It didn't make any sense. But, they would have to keep it in mind when they attempted to get through the level one doors. Steven shook his head at the unpredictability of the system. What was it going to do next? Play tic tac toe with the lights in the cafeteria?

Steven decided to ignore the robots for the time being. He could inform the council later, but it wasn't really important. They could deal with it if it became a problem. It was time to get back to the issue of getting to the robot bay.

Cycling through the other maps, Steven finally realized the solution. They could go through the boiler room. Of course. Now all Steven had to do was present the situation to the council and suggest a solution.

After a long and jubilant dinner (they had about twice as many people as they did before) Steven called a council meeting. These were becoming a regular thing. Of the five gathered in the same room that they had before, only Steven and Conner seemed content. The other three (Hannah, Chris, and Ms. Young) were getting fed up with the whole thing. Hannah told Steven so.

"I don't care! Can't you understand people's lives are in danger?" Steven shouted back.

"Couldn't we deal with it later?" a yawning Hannah retorted.

"We've already wasted enough time as it is. They've been trapped in there for over 25 hours. They haven't been fed. It's probably dark. They're most likely injured. Some may already be dead. And you don't want to deal with it because you're sleepy. Okay. I understand. That's perfectly fine."

"Can we cut that argument?" jumped in Conner. "We're not getting anything done. Steven, what do you suggest we do?"

"Here's my plan. We take a small group and enter the robot bay via the boiler room."

"Is it unlocked?" asked Chris. This was a normal question for any situation now.

"Oh, God, I hadn't even thought of that," Steven swore. Then he thought of something. "Wait. It may not be a problem. All the security robots have been stationed all over the school. I'm fairly sure the entrance to the boiler room is a level three door. If we use a standard battering ram, we should be able to break through, and get in before the security robots can reach us. If they even want to – they may just stay where they're posted, I don't know. So we get in, grab the captives, and get out as quickly as possible."

"What if the security robots do pose a problem?" asked Ms. Young.

"Then we'll need to arm ourselves. I'll get a group of volunteers from the gymnasium that have had experience fighting the security robots. They'll also probably be the most willing to help their friends."

"Sound good," said Hannah. "As long as I don't have to do anything, I'm in favor."

So were the others. It was time to act. Again.

Conner returned to the library exhausted from a long day debating and arguing. He hadn't seen his friends since almost this morning, and he needed to touch base with them. He found them on the far side of the library, not where they usually sat, around a table filled with paper and sitting with four freshmen that Conner didn't know. He was greeted warmly as he approached.

"Conner! How are you? Join us," said Amy Casablanca.

"What are you guys doing?"

"Oh, Conner, it's so much fun. You should join us," said Amber Felicity.

"Another one?" snorted one of the freshmen, the one who was wearing a cape. "Okay, that's it. I've had enough. If you guys want to keep at it, go ahead, but I'm out." He stormed off. There was a

confused silence, and then, the bustle of work continued. Conner took the seat where Captain Awesome had been sitting.

“So, what do I do?” asked Conner, a common question when first sitting at this table.

“Well, first you have to choose a different name for yourself. I’m Seven Years in Tibet. That’s Double Agent, and Felicity, and Grapes, and Casablanca, and Dave-o, and Shakespeare, and The Wedge. Who are you?”

“I guess I’ll be...Bozo?” said Conner, now Bozo.

“Great. And then you just start writing, or drawing or whatever,” continued Casablanca. “You may want to look through some of these folders to get an idea.”

Bozo looked at them as if they were crazy. What had happened to his friends while he was gone at the council? Were these the early stages of cabin fever, as a result of them being locked in this long? Bozo wanted out.

“Sound great, but, I really have to go to the bathroom. I’ll be right back,” said Conner, leaving the table. His friends were still hard at work, as if they didn’t even notice him leaving.

As he was leaving the library, Captain Awesome confronted him.

“You just watch your step. You think you and your friends can take over the Moody Dada Sofas? Go ahead and try. Just make my day. But watch your step. You’ll see in the end that Dada will win.” It was obvious that he had been rehearsing this, but it didn’t make sense at all to Conner. He merely stepped out of the way and continued on his path the bathroom.

Once there, he splashed his face with cold water, as if to wash away the events of the past two days. His friends becoming weirdoes, the council, sleeping on the hard library floor, losing his temper at Student Council, the lockdown, asking Amy to the dance ... had that really only happened yesterday? That idyllic lunch seemed ages ago. Everything was different now. It was as if all of time and space had been distorted out of proportion, and Conner had been trapped in the middle of it all.

Conner dried off his face, and then splashed it with cold water again. He then repeated this process several more times. It was going to be a long weekend.

Rallying support for the rescue operation was easy among the ones who had been trapped inside the gymnasium. Steven hand selected his team of operatives. There was Bruno, a large and muscular football player who was one of the ones who had attempted to bust the gymnasium door with his body, thus signaling the security robots. There was Mindy, a light and athletic girl from the band who could be useful in a tight situation. And finally, there was Mark, who wasn’t actually trapped in the gymnasium to begin with, but he was here after school with the Outdoor club, and they had been demonstrating the use of climbing harnesses and equipment, and those would prove very useful.

It was like those scenes in spy movies where the characters prepare for their secret mission, checking their equipment, and rethinking their plans. The group was fairly amiable, and exited to be rescuing some of their own. Steven made sure they armed themselves with baseball bats (those had proven more useful against the security robots than the hockey sticks) in the unlikely event that they would have resort to fisticuffs. Everyone had been suited up with a harness and a bat, and Mark carried the ropes and the extra harnesses for the ones who would be escaping.

The group was finally ready. As they headed toward the door to the boiler room, the halls lined with students cheering them on their way. The whole event played out in slow motion for Steven: the four strutting down the hallway while the onlookers cheered and screamed. Someone had ripped up sheets of paper into small bits and was throwing confetti. Some of the more enterprising band members retrieved their instruments and were playing an encouraging tune. Steven almost expected a parade float to follow them up; the whole scene was so jovial.

The crowds finally thinned out and the four entered some of the darker hallways of the school. The boiler room was in an area where no one ventured anymore – it was too far from the library and the cafeteria, which was where everyone spent their time now. Steven wondered briefly what the other students actually did with all their time. He was always wrapped up in coming up with the next ingenious plan, or organizing the next adventure or mission. Maybe the other students did homework.

That caused Steven to stop and think for a moment. Here they were, locked in the school, with some people in mortal danger, and students were doing homework. They didn’t even have school today, and even if they did all work would probably be excused on account of them being locked inside the school, and even if it wasn’t tomorrow was Saturday. It was like some sort of sick joke.

That made Steven think about the mentality of a majority of the students. To lots of people, homework was the most important thing in the universe. It was more important than sleeping, more important than eating, more important than family, health, or religion. Heck, school was a religion. Just take a look at the vigor and mentality of the students, the reverence for the teachers, the monotonous and unchanging routine, and the faith in that all this hard work would finally pay off when they went to that mystical place, *college*. It was really almost scary, when you thought about it that way.

It was time to focus on the task at hand, however. Steven had let his mind wander too far and it was time to call it back. They were at the door to the boiler room now, and the others were waiting for instructions. Bruno looked at Steven with an inquisitive glance.

“Uh, what do we do now?” he asked.

“You can go ahead and break down the door now, Bruno,” replied Steven. Bruno looked pleased. He liked to demonstrate his strength in feats of daring and dexterity, and this was a prime opportunity and example. He rubbed his hands in excitement and jogged in place to prepare himself. He pivoted sideways, so his shoulder faced the door. He backed up slightly, and then charged forward. His shoulder met the door with a loud impact, and the door flung open, pieces of the lock flying everywhere. The four entered the boiler room.

It was much darker in the boiler room than it was in the rest of the school. Steven could make out the impressions of heavy machinery, wires, and pipes in the inky blackness. The only light came out of the slits in the large boiler occupying the center of the room, beyond the chasms, where there was a dull red fire burning. Mindy, fortunately, had a pair of glow sticks that she pulled out, snapped, and shook. A bright green artificial light illuminated the nearby area, but not much else. She handed one to Bruno, who was going to stay up here with Mark, and kept one for herself and Steven, who were going to be descending into the crevasse. Mark attached the ropes to both Steven and Mindy’s harnesses, and then tied the end to some nearby pipes.

There was a fence, of sorts, bordering the deep chasm, supposedly to keep people from falling in and injuring themselves. But, like all fences, it had to be climbed. Steven and Mindy stepped over the barrier, and placed their feet on the small ledge on the opposite side. They were holding on to the bars of the barrier. Mindy dropped her glow stick into the pit, as to estimate how deep it actually was. There was a moment of silence as it fell, and then there was a slight impact and echo as it hit the hard concrete floor. Now, it was time to move.

Mark rechecked the ropes to make sure they were sufficiently tight, and then signaled to Steven and Mindy that they could descend. They let go of the bar, and began lowering themselves slowly into the darkness. It was quiet as they descended - there was no need to make small talk at this point. They reached the bottom, and unlatched themselves from their harnesses. Mindy picked up the glow stick that was lying nearby, and then they proceeded into a nearby passageway.

It was a narrow passageway, with a low ceiling, and the walls were covered in wires. They were all moving down the passageway, creating almost a nauseating effect. Steven and Mindy were hunched over, moving slowly. Mindy held out the glow stick in front of her, like a guiding light towards their goal. The passageway opened up into a larger room, and the glow stick cast slight shadows over the many wires.

It was the robot bay. The space opened upwards, the walls covered with large, oddly shaped slots. They were for the robots, of course. Most of them were empty, on account of the system guarding all the doors in the school, but a few were filled with the massive things, ones closer to the floor. By now, after all this crawling around in the dark, Steven and Mindy’s eyes had adjusted to the darkness. There was a large pillar in the center of the space, to which all the wires connected, covered with many blinking lights of red, green, yellow, and white. Steven didn’t know what it was exactly, but it looked important.

They walked around the pillar, and behind it were the prisoners. They had their hands behind their back, and they were sitting up against the wall. They had the look of people who had tried hard to escape and had now given up all hope. There were three of them, and only one of them noticed the arrival of Steven and Mindy. Suddenly, they all looked up, and they were speechless. What was there for them to say? Thank you?

Steven approached them, and took a look at what had them bound. They were impromptu handcuffs, welded to spaces between the wires on the walls. Steven shuddered as he thought about how smart this computer had actually become. It took some prying and some co-operation, but finally all three captives had been freed. They were just heading out when something caught Steven’s eye. The lights on one of the security robots mounted on the wall suddenly snapped on.

“Run!” he shouted, breaking the eerie silence that had plagued this entire excursion. As they bolted from the robot bay, more and more robots came to life, spreading their spidery legs out wards and crawling out of their holes and towards the prisoners and their liberators.

They raced through the wired passageway, and came to the bottom of the chasm. The ropes hung dangling from above. Quickly, Steven and Mindy harnessed themselves and the three escapees in (with the extra harnesses). It was crowded, with only two ropes, but it was all they had time to do. Steven shouted to the ones waited above to warn them of the extra weight. Steven hoped that Bruno could handle it.

They began rising jerkily just as the security robots emerged from the passageway. Mindy yelled in fright, causing the ropes to ascend faster. They were well off the ground now, about seven feet, but Steven knew that wouldn't stop the robots.

The robots began climbing up the sides of the crevasse, their spidery legs working like mad. They rose to the height of where Steven was, who pulled out his bat and began whacking the robots. This caused his rope, and the other people attached to it, to lurch wildly as the continued to rise slowly. Mindy had caught on as well, and now were both fending off the robots. Steven took a strong swing at the nearest robot, causing it to fall into the darkness. But, because of the effort, Steven and his companions were now spinning madly, dangling from the rope.

Another robot crawled up the wall nearest to Steven's group, but after they had finished spinning, Steven was facing away from the wall. The robot began zapping Steven's companion, and Steven was unable to help. His companion screamed in pain and the robot continue to electrocute him with its taser. Steven tried shifting his weight, as to swing him around to the other side, but it was fruitless. Finally, he drifted far enough around to push off the wall with his bat, gaining enough momentum to swing around the other way and hit the robot with massive force. The robot was stunned momentarily, but came back to life. Steven hit it again, directly in the head, and the robot cracked at the neck. This caused it to lose its grip, and it fell like the other into the darkness.

Mindy had fought off her foes diligently, and there were no attacks for the time being. They were almost to the top now, and Steven could see Bruno and Mark pulling up the ropes with all their strength. They were far enough up that Steven could firmly grasp one of the bars on the barrier. He held on, as Mark prepared to pull them the last few inches.

Suddenly, something struck from behind. More security robots had come in from the hallway onto the landing and were now attacking Bruno and Mark. Both lost their grip on the ropes. Fortunately, Steven was holding onto the bar, but Mindy and the prisoners harnessed to her were not so lucky. Bruno dropped the rope without warning, and they plunged rapidly into the darkness. Bruno and Mark will still dazed from the initial shock (of both fear and electricity), but they managed to pull out their bats and begin beating the three robots who had come in from the hall.

Steven was holding on to the bar the best he could, but the weight of his companion was beginning to take a toll. He tried pulling them both up onto the landing as to assist Bruno and Mark, but he couldn't. He instructed his companion to try to reach out and grab the bar. He stretched out his arm and grasped it. Together, they were able to get a footing on the small ledge and then step over the barrier. Steven unlatched himself from his companion quickly, and then joined Bruno and Mark in the new skirmish with the robots.

They were able to disable them fairly quickly. It was now time to pull Mindy and the others back up. With the four of them, they were able to do it rapidly. They helped them over the barrier onto the landing, unlatched them, and then they all collapsed in exhaustion. There were no words that could add to the emotions they all felt. There was pain, sadness, freedom, and triumph, and they paused just this once before returning to the rest of the students in the other part of the school.

Amber Felicity knew that it was getting late, but she just wanted to put a final few words in about Sir Nemony before calling it a day. She put her pencil down and looked up to see her friends all wearing a similar expression of satisfaction and fulfillment at an afternoon's work with the Ghost of the Most Powerful Novel. Except for Conner Bozo, who had never come back from the bathroom. Perhaps tomorrow they could welcome him into this wonderful world that they had lived in and helped expand.

There was some commotion on the other side of the library. Apparently some more people had been rescued, or something like that, but that had been happening all day and was of no concern to the Moody Dada Sofas Local Chapter Seven Seventeen. They had been too absorbed in their work.

Felicity and the others (Double Agent, Casablanca, Dave-o, and Seven Years in Tibet) left Shakespeare, The Wedge, and Grapes at the table and went to their place where they had slept last night. They huddled in their familiar circle, near the heater, and began swapping stories of what they had each

personally added to the Novel that day. Amber was interested to hear the stories because everyone had worked in different parts, and she was able to gain an understanding of the flow of the Novel as a whole. There was the rudimentary and philosophical beginnings, giving rise to the foundations of the different civilizations discussed in the later volumes: Nolia, Ji, and Zanadu. The latter half of the first volume and the first half of the second volume were primarily concerned with the First War between the three empires, and how it was resolved – with the formation of the Council of Three. The rest of the second volume was the Age of Exploration, comprising of the heroic tales of the leaders of each of the three cultures and how they proceeded to explore and divide the continents. This gave rise to several other, secondary peoples, the basic histories of which were discussed in the third volume. The fourth volume, where Amber had been working, described the rise of a feudal system within the colonies of Nolia, and the repercussions thereof. The other part, where no one had delved yet, was concerned mainly with the changing philosophies of the many cultures. The fifth volume was the collapse of the Council of Three (as a result of the changes in beliefs) and the Second War, a much longer and more disastrous war than the first, mostly because of new technologies in war. At the end of that volume the formation of a new, independent power: the country of Ag. All of this, or course, was just the brief outline. There were hundreds of individual stories within each, and many more stories waiting to be created from the existing material. They had discussed all they could, and gently they all drifted off to sleep. Conner still hadn't returned.

Conner was hiding. He didn't want to return to his friends. He had gotten close, and heard them discussing whatever they had been doing with the weirdoes, and he didn't want to take part. So, he went by himself into another corner of the library, where he knew he would not be disturbed.

The whole concept and situation was completely bizarre to Conner. He could see the looks in their eyes and they were completely mesmerized by this whole project they had undertaken. They were almost like zombies – so readily had the bought into the idea and now they could not escape. Conner didn't want to have anything to do with it. There was just something off balance about the whole thing – something deep from inside him told him that it just wasn't right. It was a feeling he had heard many times before, and it had always proven to be accurate. He had no reason to doubt its accuracy. But what he couldn't figure out was *why* it didn't feel right, and at the same time he couldn't get close enough to find out what it was. It was a very complicated situation.

We has sitting by himself, hugging his knees, when someone approached. It was Chris, the one from Bible Club who was also on the council with Conner.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't know anyone was here," he said, embarrassed. "I'll leave you alone."

That same feeling within Conner made him feel like Chris should stay here. "No, it's okay. Why don't you come and sit down?"

Chris seemed caught off guard at first, as if something like this had never happened before, but he still came and sat down next to him. He was holding a book.

"What do you have there?" asked Conner.

"Oh, just my bible," said Chris. "Sometimes I like to be alone and read it."

That caused an awkward situation for Conner. He didn't know what to say after this point. He had never read the bible, and didn't buy into any of that kind of stuff. He hadn't wanted to take the conversation to this place, but here it was, and Chris seemed determined to keep it here.

"Have you ever read the bible?" asked Chris innocently, but Conner could tell what he was getting at. "I mean, just wondering."

"No, not really," said Conner. "I don't buy into that kind of stuff."

Chris laughed slightly. "What's so funny?" asked Conner.

"Nothing. You're just making it sound like it's some sort of conspiracy, that's all."

"Well, how do I know it isn't? How can I be sure that it isn't all just made up crap?"

Chris paused at this comment. He clasped his hands together, except for his index fingers, which were together and resting on his upper lip. His eyes penetrated the space in front of his face. Finally, after reaching some internal conclusions, he spoke.

"It just rings too true to be made up. It just *feels* right, you know? It's like even though you learned it for the first time, it's like you already knew it forever. Am I making sense?"

Conner nodded. "Yeah, I understand your point," he said. "But it still doesn't answer one of my biggest questions." He paused.

"Do you want to talk about it?" asked Chris.

“Sure. It’s just that –” Conner sighed, as if he was about to say something that he had never said before, but had thought about for a long time. “I just don’t see how a God can exist when bad things happen to people all the time. Doesn’t he want what’s best for us? I just can’t accept a God when there’s so many bad things in the world. Take the situation we’re in, for example. We’re locked in the school, for who knows how long, and people were in danger and getting injured. How can you justify that?”

Chris nodded, almost as if he had expected this question. “Well, the way I look at it, people automatically assume that God is this benevolent being who can only do good things.”

“Isn’t he though? Isn’t he supposed to love us, or something?”

“He does, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t above disciplining us. He knows what’s best for us, and sometimes we can’t understand why things happen, but he can. There has to be a certain amount of faith involve that everything is going according to plan, even if we aren’t enjoying it. I think what it boils down to is a question of individual selfishness. Everyone seems to assume that there is this unwritten promise that everyone’s life is supposed to be fine and dandy, and then they take offence when they see someone else or themselves suffering. People have to get beyond the fact that no one ever promised them that life was going to be peachy – just the opposite, in fact. If there’s one promise Christians have, it’s that they are going to suffer.”

“But why do we have to suffer? Can’t the world just be a perfect place?”

“We wouldn’t appreciate it if it was. The way I look at it, this life is like the training camp, or the boot camp, for the next life. We can’t just be dropped into paradise without first gaining an understanding of others and ourselves or without having something to compare it to. This is the boot camp, and the only way you can get people to learn about spiritual things is to break them down. Like I said, no one promised that boot camp was going to be fun. To tell you the truth, when I take a look at how far civilization has come, for some reason I always think that none of it was actually supposed to happen. This entire world was an accident.”

“But then why did God create it?”

“Because Adam and Eve deliberately disobeyed God, and they could no longer live in paradise. So God had to create a place where they and their descendants could learn what it takes to live in paradise, so that one day we could go back. Hence, the despair and struggle we experience that makes us learn.”

“Wow. I don’t know what to say.”

“Then don’t say anything. I’ll leave you alone now, to let you think about that.”

Chris got up and left, leaving Conner pondering the workings of the universe. It was as if a light had suddenly gone on in his head, and everything made sense now. None of this really mattered; it was all a temporary engagement. The only thing left to do was to turn away from all the distractions from the world that wasn’t supposed to exist in the first place, and simply focus on learning what it took to live in paradise. Conner sighed with relief that everything was indeed okay, and all the events that had happened were just a part of the lesson plan. All Conner had to do know was figure out what he was supposed to be learning.

The next morning, after breakfast, the council convened again to once again discuss what to do. Hannah and Mrs. Young were freshly showered, after discovering that they could use the showers in the locker rooms of the gymnasium. The boys were not as hygienic. Conner and Chris met glances, each remembering their conversation last night.

The way Steven saw it, there was only one choice, and that was to attempt to break through the level one doors that would let them leave the school. The only problem was, after examining the schematics, he saw that the protection on those doors was very advanced, and he could not think of any possible solution that would get the doors to open.

“So what else can we do?” asked Hannah.

“I still surprised that no one has attempted to rescue us or even contact us yet,” said Ms. Young. “But we still have no contact with anyone outside.”

“Maybe not for long,” said Chris. “What about all the cell phones that are confiscated and kept in that main office? Is there any way we could get to those?”

“The main office is guarded by a level two door,” said Steven. “If we want to risk another chemical bomb, we could certainly attempt it.”

“What about that girl who got into the cafeteria. What was her name?” asked Mrs. Young.

“Lily.”

“Of course. I know she couldn’t crawl through the passageways to the gymnasium, but what about to the main office? Could she get inside there?” asked Mrs. Young.

Steven pulled out his stack of printed maps that he took with him to council meetings. He examined the passageway map. "From the looks of it, I think she should be able to get in there," Steven said. "But as I mentioned earlier, she'll not be too keen about going through those again."

"Well, she may just have to," said Hannah. "She's the only one that can fit through those passages, and we need to get to those phones. It's for the good of everyone."

"I'm sure she'll do it, but what I'm trying to say is that it may take some time to convince her. Just to give you a heads up," said Steven.

"Well, is it settled then?" asked Conner. "Are we going to attempt to get into the main office and get the phones?"

That was the consensus, of course. Steven would have to go and talk with Lily now. He found her in the library, which was where she would have to be because she wasn't in the cafeteria. He approached the table where she was sitting and invited himself to sit down.

"Hey, Lily. How's it going?" He tried to be informal as possible. She looked up from her papers. Homework, by the looks of it. Steven recalled his thoughts yesterday on the subject.

"Oh, not bad," lied Lily.

"Good, good," said Steven. He decided to cut to the chase. "Listen, Lily. We need your help again."

She immediately rose from the table. "If this has to do with crawling through those spaces, I don't want to have anything to do with it."

Steven but his hand on her arm to make sure she wouldn't run away. "Lily, I know we had a bad experience last time. But it's very important now. If you do it this time, we could get out of here for good."

Lily still looked absolutely terrified. She shook her head vigorously. Steven became slightly more forceful.

"Lily, there are a lot of people trapped in this building. We have an opportunity to free all of them. If you want to go and tell them that we had a chance to save them, but you didn't want to do it, you go right ahead. But don't blame me if you get a bad response."

Lily looked down at her feet. Steven regretted talking so loud.

"Look, I'm sorry," he said, immediately trying to make amends. "I'll give you some time to think about it." With that, he left her alone.

He decided to get away from everyone, and left the area of the building they inhabited. He decided to take a stroll through the back hallways of the school, those furthest from the library and cafeteria. He had been here before, that time after the battle in the gymnasium, when he beat himself up for not being able to save people in danger, when he was the only one that could. He felt different now, for not only had he saved them and others, but the repeated operations he undertook had made him more callused to the thought. It was old hat now, and it was better not to get too attached to ones in peril.

Had life always been this way? Had he been constantly saving people since the beginning of time? No, there was something before this. He had regular life, going to school, having family and friends. Why didn't anyone come and try to save them? That was the only thing Steven couldn't understand.

He was back in the hallway where he had first encountered Mrs. Coombs. He half expected her to jump out at him, and then was surprised when she did.

"So we're back, are we? The screaming in the walls has stopped, did you know?" she asked, cocking her head at an outrageous angle.

"Yes, I was the one who made it stop," Steven said.

"That is very unfortunate indeed." That didn't make any sense. "The robots are on the move again. But you probably already knew that, too."

"No, I didn't. What do you mean?"

"They were at the doors, but now they are gone. Perhaps they returned to their home." Steven wondered how he could have missed this. He was regarding the maps and data reports with less and less attentiveness as the hours went on. "Or, perhaps," Mrs. Coombs began again, "Something far more sinister is afoot."

"What do you suspect?" asked Steven curiously.

"The screaming has stopped, but new sounds have taken its place."

"What? What is the new sound?"

"It is the sound of machines mobilizing around a cause, plotting a new and terrible evil." Steven wondered what exactly that sounded like, but he got the idea. The robots had all returned to the robot bay,

and were undertaking a new plan. Steven left his thoughts to ask Mrs. Coombs more questions, but she had mysteriously vanished. She was a very strange lady.

But Steven had gotten new information. What exactly could the robots be doing? He considered risking another trip to the robot bay, but that was not an option. With all the robots down there, it would be too great a fight if they were noticed. He decided to review the robot tracking map and see when they had moved from their posts, and if they had been performing other tasks as well.

He arrived at the office in the computer lab, and no one was there. The terminal was already on, so he just gave it the command to bring up the tracking map. He then set the history to exactly twenty-four hours ago.

They were still at their locations by the doors, so Steven sped ahead a few hours until they actually started moving. They all started at once, and they all convened in the robot bay. Steven checked the time that they had started moving, and found that it was right after they had rescued the prisoners. So, obviously, that little operation had caused the system to change plans.

He watched the over-night movement quickly. There had been several excursions by small teams of four robots to the gymnasium and back. What was in the gymnasium that they would have to go there? Steven counted numerous trips, continuing up until the current time.

Watching their current locations Steven realized that another group of four robots was on their way to the gymnasium right now. He decided to go observe them to discover what they were doing.

The robots got to the gymnasium before he did, but he still had ample time to watch them. They were all gathered around the large pile of robot pieces that the ones trapped here had made after the attack. However, the pile was much smaller than he remembered it being. He saw the robots gathering up pieces with their small appendages, and then going back to the passageways.

So that was it. They were gathering the pieces of discarded robots in hopes of rebuilding their numbers again. Steven had to go warn the others what was going on.

six

The Fulton High School security system made sure that the new plan was underway and on schedule. The collecting team of robots had just returned and was about to head out again. The system updated the inventory status to reflect the new parts they had brought back.

The security system did not pause to reflect that it never could have come up with a plan like this on its own. This was way beyond its capacity, not to mention in violation of school board standard programming. For all it knew, it had come up with the plan itself and the school board had waived the programming and gone forward with the plan.

None of which had actually happened, of course, but the system wasn't likely to notice. The certain session logged by one of the terminals, whose user had given the system the new programmed plan, had been wiped from the records, by the user themselves, of course. It was always good policy to erase your path.

The new project was well underway, and soon the system would have complete control and utter control of the building. With the help of the anonymous user, of course.

At the lunch session of the Council (it was now policy to meet after every meal) Steven brought forth the new situation, but no one was sure what to do with it. Sure, the robots were rebuilding their numbers (so Steven presupposed), but what was the Council going to do about it? The worst that could happen would be that later operations were to become more difficult as a result of the greater numbers, but it wasn't as if they already weren't difficult to begin with. The other four members of the Council, overriding Steven, decided to ignore the situation for now. What they really wanted to deal with was the cell phone and Lily issue.

“So, anything new?” asked Conner.

“I talked to Lily this morning, and as I expected, she doesn't seem to be thrilled with the whole idea. I told she would have some time to think about it, and I bet she'll be ready by this evening.”

“Do we have that long?” asked Chris.

“Oh, sure,” reassured Steven. “It's not like the cell phones are in mortal danger. We've got enough time to wait.”

“That’s not what I meant,” said Chris. “I was concerned with the food supplies. Has anyone done an inventory since the first one? Our population has doubled since then. I was just wondering how long we can actually sustain ourselves.”

“That’s a good point,” said Conner. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

The Council decided to adjourn for now and collectively go assess the food situation. As they arrived in the cafeteria, the future suddenly looked grim.

“What happened to all our food?” asked Hannah. “I thought we had a lot more than this.”

“So did I,” remarked Steven, holding up a half empty box of breakfast cereal. “I did not expect us to go through our food this quickly.”

“I knew we should have rationed more carefully from the beginning,” said Ms. Young.

Chris seemed more worried than the others did. “This isn’t adding up. It would have been impossible for us to consume this much food in such a short amount of time.”

“Well, we obviously did,” said Conner. “Unless you have another explanation.”

“I do,” said Chris. “I think someone has been stealing our food.”

There was a gasp of shock from the other members of the council.

“What makes you think that?” asked Ms. Young.

“That is a completely ungrounded theory,” stated Steven angrily. “Don’t you have faith in your fellow man?”

“No, I don’t. But let’s settle this,” said Chris, pointing at the security camera.

The Council squeezed into the small office adjoining the computer lab. They gathered around the terminal, except for Steven, who was at the controls. The screen showed views from the security cameras from all around the school.

“Alright,” said Steven. “Let’s put an end to this nonsense.” He brought up the camera from inside the kitchen, for all to see. “Now, we’re going to look at everything this camera has captured since we just visited it, and were going to watch the history of it backwards.”

Steven reminded a few minutes, and they saw themselves on the screen. They saw the lunch crowd, followed by a period of inactivity, and then the breakfast crowd, still without seeing anything suspicious. The views went from early morning to the middle of the night, and then into yesterday.

“Wait, stop,” said Ms. Young. “I think I saw something.”

Steven back up slowly, as he was instructed, until he came to several frames where the screen was blank, as if nothing had been recorded.

“I saw the screen blink black as we were going fast,” said Ms. Young. “What does that blank screen mean?” she asked Steven.

Steven took a deep breath, and then spoke. “It means someone has deleted part of the history.”

It was more than that. Everything the cameras had recorded from eleven to twelve o’clock last night have been erased from the archives. Evidently, someone didn’t want anyone else to find out what had happened then.

“So, the way I see it,” said Conner, “The same person who stole a large amount of our food also has access and experience with tampering with the computer system. If, indeed, the two incidents are related.”

Hannah took the next step. “Who, besides Steven, has knowledge of working with the terminals?”

“I hate to say it, Hannah,” said Chris, “But we can’t exclude Steven just yet.”

Steven stood up out of his chair. “Are you accusing me of being a thief?” he shouted.

Chris backed up defensively. “I’m not accusing you of anything. I’m just saying at this point no one is innocent.”

“We’re all innocent until proven guilty,” retorted Steven, regretting having to resort to a cliché.

“Steven, calm down,” said Ms. Young. “Who else, besides you, has experience working with the system?”

Steven sat back down in his chair. “Well, Mr. Foresburg, and Travis, but I don’t see why either of them would want to mindlessly steal food.”

“Anyone else?” asked Ms. Young.

“Well, a few of the other teachers. Most of the students don’t have enough security clearance.”

“There. Good. We have a place to start from,” said Ms. Young. “Let’s call an emergency meeting in the library.”

As the Council left the office, Steven was thinking hard to himself. What sort of perverted person would want to steal their food?

The bell rang, and the students in the cafeteria migrated to the library. There was a hushed silence in the room, unlike the jovial atmosphere of the meals. To the unawares observer, one might have thought a close family member had died, it was that quiet and everyone had a solemn look upon their face. The Council stood at the front of the room, overlooking the many tables where the last of the students and teachers filed into. Conner spoke.

“It has come to our attention that a large quantity of our food supply has disappeared. Why, we do not know for sure, but we have some guesses. From approximately eleven o’clock to twelve o’clock last night, the archives of all the security cameras were mysteriously erased. This means that we have no idea what was going on in the school during that time period. It was also during this time that the food disappeared. You put it together.”

The crowd began to murmur as friends turned to each other in disbelief. “Silence please. Now, we don’t want to go around pointing fingers, because finding the perpetrator is the least of our worries. The truth of the matter is this: with our current population, on meager rations, we have enough food to last us approximately two more days.” Conner paused to let this sink in. “The Council has decided to continue with our former plan of entering the main office and retrieving the cell phones, as to contact someone on the outside that could free us. However, it may be some time before we can put this plan into action.” He decided it was best not to mention Lily’s resistance to the plan. “This meeting was called simply to inform you all of the current situation. Now you know what is going on. As one last comment, if the perpetrator is out there among the audience, we request that you would contact the Council. We promise to keep your identity secret. We just want our food back. That is all. You may return to whatever you were doing.”

The hushed air continued long after the meeting had adjourned. The Moody Dada Sofas met on the other side of the library, where they had been working on *The Ghost of the Most Powerful Novel*.

“This whole thing just got a lot worse, didn’t it?” said Double Agent. “I mean, who would just take our food? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“You’re right,” said Felicity. “So, basically, we have until Monday to get out of here.”

The Moody Dada Sofas contemplated this point. No further progress was made on the novel that day. None of them felt very inspired.

Lily was faced with a horrible decision, which really only had one possible choice. Steven had given her some more time to think about it while he and Travis worked out the logistics, namely the route and the radios. She knew that everyone was counting on her, and that they didn’t have much time left.

But she just couldn’t bear to crawl through those dark, cramped passages again. No one, not even Steven, could understand the terror she had felt. Steven tried to reassure her that there would be no more screaming this time, but the sound still haunted her and she knew the memory would become more vivid if she re-entered those passages.

Everyone knew that the original plan had called for her participation, even if Conner hadn’t mentioned it during his speech, and now the entire population had ostracized her for her indecision. There was no one else who could do it, and there were several students who were very angry at her because they felt if she couldn’t perform, then they would all starve. The threats and taunts still echoed in her ears.

Lily went off by herself, sat down, and cried.

Steven had called Travis to the robotics lab again. He said that they needed to work on another project.

“To be perfectly honest with you, Travis, I don’t know if Lily is going to come through. So we need a back-up plan.”

“And it involves a robot.”

“Brilliant. I didn’t even have to suggest it.”

The project was simple. They needed to make a robot that could travel through the passageways, enter the main office, and retrieve a cell phone. This was slightly more complicated than the last robot they had built, but they had enough experience in the classroom that they were able to figure it out eventually. Building the robot was simple enough, they just needed to locate the necessary parts, which there were no lack of in the robotics lab. They worked off a standard chassis, as before, but the operation required that the additions this time would be slightly more complex. They needed a manipulator as to actually grab a cell

phone, a video camera so they could visualize the robot's situation, and a more complex wheel system, because the robot would most likely have to travel up and down walls to reach its destination.

Steven took the task of actually putting the robots together while Travis built the control unit and worked on the programming. They spent all afternoon working, and once they finished they had enough time for one test run before dinner, which no one was looking forward to.

The purpose of this test run was to make sure that the robot could actually do its job. They had wired the video camera to send its signals through the security system, so they could access the video from the terminal in Mr. Foresburg's office. That was where they were now, Steven at the terminal and Travis with the control unit.

Steven brought up the video channel, and they could see inside the passageway where they had placed the robot earlier. It was dark, but fortunately the camera had a night vision feature that was proving to be very handy. Travis began using the controls, and the robot responded correctly. Steven opened another window with the map of the passageways, so they could approximate where in the building their robot was.

There wasn't much to see in the passageways, only the occasional turn or intersection. They experimented for a while, but dinner was approaching, so they decided to call the robot back.

It was headed on a straightaway down one of the halls, when something appeared in the distance. The camera picked up a subtle movement down towards the end of the passage. Something was approaching the robot at a very rapid pace. As it came close, they realized what it was – a security robot! Travis was just giving the robot orders to turn around when the security robot smashed into their robot a full force. The camera showed part of the security robot's black surface as it tumbled further and further, still being pushed. Finally, it was smashed against the wall of one of the passages, and the camera showed broken pieces scattering before it snapped off itself.

Steven and Travis stared at the screen in disbelief. They were going to need another robot, or another plan.

Dinner lacked the atmosphere that usually accompanied mealtimes. When Conner had said meager rations, he had meant it. People were just now realizing that no one had seen the sun in over forty-eight hours, and that yet another day had passed with no attempt at rescue from the outside. Needless to say, many people left dinner feeling fairly miserable.

While everyone was in the cafeteria, no one noticed the stealthy intruder into the computer lab. The figure approached the terminal in Mr. Foresburg's office, and didn't even need to bypass security this time because Steven had forgotten to log off, even after all this.

The perpetrator accessed the new project program (which he or she had written themselves) and instructed the system to step up progress. The thief had nearly been found out today, and so the project would have to come along at a much more rapid pace.

After the anonymous bandit was finished, and the session had been erased from the systems memory, it paid a little visit to the room where the Council always met. If they wanted the perpetrator to contact them, they were certainly going to get it.

There was really no need for the Council to meet this time, but force of habit brought them together. Steven would have to report on the failed back-up plan, and they would have to finalize the rotations for the volunteer night kitchen guard, to make sure that the supply of food was not unnecessarily diminished again. Conner was the last one to arrive, and when he entered he found all of the others in a state of shock.

The walls, floors, and desks had been blanketed with hundreds of identical sheets of printed computer paper. In the back of the room, the printer was continuing to spew more copies, which had overflowed onto the floor, disturbing the ones that had been purposely placed there.

The ones on the walls and ceiling had been attached with small strips of clear tape, and the rest on the desks and floors were meticulously laid out as to cover every surface. Conner bent down to pick one of the sheets up, and read what it said for the first time:

DIE
STARVE
DIE

Conner turned as white as the others already were. Never before had anyone in the school been this terrified. Now, not only were they trapped, but someone trapped with them was determined that no one would get out alive.

Captain Awesome had shed his Dada name. He wanted nothing to do with the Moody Dada Sofas Local Chapter Seven Seventeen anymore. They had been usurped and they had betrayed the principles on which they were founded, and Ben could not tolerate it further. The only thing left to do now was sit by himself and sulk, which he had already done plenty of.

In enraged him how people could just barge in on their personal project and claim it as their own. Some people were insensitive and heartless. Especially The Wedge, who had decided that it was okay to let unwashed heathens run rampant over their formerly beautiful, but now desecrated Novel. Ben fumed with a silent rage that was growing exponentially within him.

So what was their left to do except claim his revenge? If he wouldn't be allowed to share in the progress of the Ghost of the Most Powerful Novel, then no one would be able to. Covered by the cloak of darkness, Ben gathered up the many volumes left unguarded on the library table and stole into the night.

He would have to go into a part of the building that was far enough from everyone that he wouldn't be noticed, but close enough that the Moody Dada Sofas would be able to see what had become of their beloved work. He found himself near the main office, by the front entrance. This place would be perfect.

Ben decided that the act should take place in front of the large wooden engraving across from that main office that decorated the main entrance and greeted visitors as they came in. It was one of the prides of the school, a marvelous and masterful piece of art that served to represent the school as a whole. Ben would destroy the Novel here, as a sick sacrifice to Fulton High.

He set the volumes on the floor in front of the large plaque in a pile of four between two piles of three. It was a large stack indeed, and the word volume suddenly occurred to Ben as strangely appropriate. He bent down to kiss the stack, for even though he was destroying the work he still loved it very much.

The short ceremony was just beginning. Ben took out his lighter and proceeded to ignite the top folder of each stack. The flames started out very small, but then spread across the top and then moved down. The flames from the different stacks began to merge, and soon the entire pile was blazing in beautiful glory, lighting the dark hallway with a frightening glow.

What happened next Ben could have never predicted and would regret for a very long time. The flames grew very tall, and licked the bottom of the massive wooden plaque. It must have been coated in a very flammable finish, for it caught fire almost instantly and it began spreading upwards, engulfing the entire wall. Ben had no idea what to do. He couldn't get help, because then he would have to explain what had been going on, and the flames had grown so massive that he was powerless to stop them. They had now spread to the ceiling and were traveling across the hall, to the main office.

So he ran. He didn't know where he was going, or what he was going to do when he go there, but he couldn't stay here. The orange flames haunted his mind even now as he escaped into the darker back hallways of the school, when no one bothered to venture anymore.

He was so frightened that the fire alarm didn't startle him when it went off. He blocked out the blaring siren and the flashing lights, and kept running.

Everyone one woke up to the fire alarm and panicked. In a normal situation, they would have been required to leave the building, but everyone knew that was impossible. The ones on the Council had not told anyone about the 'message' they had received, so they were the only ones who suspected that this was another prank pulled by their unknown enemy. It wasn't until someone smelled smoke in the hall and noticed that further down, the walls were illuminated with a flickering orange glow that everyone realized that there was a real fire.

No one knew what to do. There was an excessive amount of terrified screaming. Conner finally took control and told everyone to get as far away from the fire as possible, meaning entering the abandoned hallways, that people began to focus and react. After almost everyone had cleared out, Conner met with Steven and Mr. Foresburg.

"I don't now what's going on, son," said Mr. Foresburg. "The sprinklers in the ceiling should be going off, but their not."

"After all the crazy things I've seen the system do, I'm not surprised," said Steven.

"Well, what do we do?" asked an exasperated Conner. "We have to stop it before it spreads."

"Right," said Mr. Foresburg. "Let's go."

They all ran to the computer lab, and into his office where the terminal was waiting. Mr. Foresburg opened the fire safety program, and then swore.

“What is it?” asked Conner.

“We don’t have enough time to override the sprinklers for just one area of the school,” muttered Mr. Foresburg. “We’re going to have to turn them all on. People are going to get a little wet.”

“Stop stalling!” shouted Steven. “Do it!”

Mr. Foresburg pressed a key, and showers of water began pouting on them from the ceiling. Mr. Foresburg quickly covered his terminal with a jacket, and then ran into the lab and began throwing on the covers for the student terminals so they wouldn’t be damaged. Conner and Steven followed suit. After then had finished, Conner’s initial reaction was to find shelter as quickly as possible, so he ran out into the hall, but it was raining there too. Conner made a noise in frustration, and then began running from place to place in an attempt to hide. But there was no where he could go. He slipped and fell on the slick hallway floor, and then stayed there. He was upset, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Mr. Foresburg went and checked the site where the fire had been. After he was satisfied that the fire had been put out, he signaled to Steven to shut off the sprinklers.

Steven and Conner joined Mr. Foresburg to examine the damaged area. It was mostly the main office that had been damaged, the hallway outside, and the ornamental plaque. Steven entered the black and charred main office and found several lumps of melted plastic. They were the cell phones.

Peter joined the large task force formed the next morning to clean up the halls and important areas. They had found several mops and towels in the gymnasium and proceeded to dry off everything that needed drying. It was hard work, and they didn’t finish before breakfast, but they kept at it.

The task gave Peter a lot of time to think about what had happened last night. After the Moody Dada Sofas had found that the Ghost of the Most Powerful Novel was missing, they found several charred pages in the burn area, which led them to believe that the Novel, for whatever reason, had been lost in the fire. They tried to recover as much as they could, but there were only scraps left. The Novel had been destroyed for good.

The loss brought Peter and his fellow Sofas nearly to the verge of tears. They had loved the Novel dearly, and had poured themselves into it, letting themselves get lost completely. Now to lose it was like losing a limb or a semi-distant relative.

Why had they adored it so much? Peter wondered. What made this project different from any other, had why had they gotten so enveloped in it? After much self-examination, Peter discovered the reason. The Novel, creating the history of a fictitious civilization, as well as the hundred of individual stories, had given the Sofas a sense of *control*. They were the masters of this microcosm, and no one could take that away – except, of course, by destroying the Novel itself. Peter wondered what the Novel was doing out in the hallway in the first place. Had someone tried to steal it? The sulking Captain Awesome came to mind. On second thought, now it seemed wrong to think of people by their Dada name. With the Novel destroyed the Moody Dada Sofas Local Chapter Seven Seventeen had dissolved completely. There was no focus, no purpose, and no defining goal for them any more, and thus the organization ceased to exist.

Peter had barely discussed it with the others. Most of them seemed too shocked to want to mention it last night or this morning. He wanted to talk with them, to see what they thought. Especially Amber –

Have you learned nothing?! After all our discussions?!

You know what? I am sick and tired of you, you little pesky voice.

Peter, I have tried and I have tried. But, obviously, I have not made any progress and you have even started moving backwards. With you focused on the Novel, I could take a small break. But now, with that gone, we are right back where we started. I am terribly disappointed in you, Peter.

Who are you, anyway? Some sort of twisted Jimminy Cricket? Is this my conscience speaking, or something far more sinister? I’ve just about had it with you and all your nagging. I’m going to live my life how I want to, and no imaginary voices in my head are going to –

This is the final straw, Peter. Listen to me. I am going to give you on last chance to turn around, and we can put this all behind us and start anew –

No, you listen to me! This is my brain, and these are my thoughts, and I don’t want you stepping in any more! Do you understand?

I was afraid this step would come. Peter, you leave me no choice but to terminate you. Goodbye.

With that, Peter suddenly felt lightheaded, as if he had stood up too quickly. His vision began to blur, and he could no longer keep his balance. He dropped his mop, and dropped to the floor sickeningly. The last thing he saw were several pairs of shoes running towards him.

This was the first major medical issue they had encountered so far. Given, there were minor burns and scratches some students had received from the robots, but nothing this serious. They had moved him to the nearby cafeteria and laid him down on top of one of the tables, where a large crowd had now gathered. Mrs. Field, the chemistry teacher, and one of the few who had received any substantial medical training, was examining him. Amber was nearby, with Conner and Amy.

Mrs. Field stated that his was breathing faintly, and she could detect a pulse, but besides that she had no idea what had happened. She said he had probably just fainted in a combination of overexertion and insufficient amount of food. She said it would be best to move him to a different location, and observe him until he showed signs of improvement. Amber asked if she could accompany Peter, but Mrs. Field thought it was in his best interest for him to recover by himself.

By now, a large crowd had gathered in the cafeteria. There was much discussion about Peter's collapse. After some debate, a senior that Amber didn't know stood up on one of the tables.

"Hey! Listen to me!" he shouted. All eyes turned on him. "Did you hear what Mrs. Field just said? That that guy just fainted collapsed because of lack of food. Isn't that interesting?"

Amber wasn't following where this guy was going, but some of the members of the group he had been standing with were showing loud signs of support. Amber could tell that this senior was looking for trouble.

"Let me ask you a question," he continued. "Who's in charge of rationing the food? Isn't it the council?" He sneered, and his friends began cheering things like "Yeah!" and "You tell 'em, Dan!" A dissenter from somewhere in the crowd shouted, "What's your point?"

"I'll tell you. That guy fainted because the council couldn't give him enough food. So which one of us is going to be next? Huh?" Amber began to grow worried. She could see that something catastrophic was on the horizon. Conner wasn't about to let this guy throw around unfounded accusations about the council, so he spoke out.

"You know as well as I that the reason we don't have enough food is because someone stole it. The council is just trying to make sure that the food lasts as long as possible."

Dan, as Amber gathered his name was, eyed Conner with jeering curiosity. "Well, well, well, if it isn't the big man himself. Conner. How are you liking your new-found power in a position that you, yourself, created? Does it make you feel like a bigger man, Conner?"

"What are you getting at, Dan?" Conner was getting very defensive.

"Just merely trying to point out to the uninformed masses here that you were the one who came up with the council idea, and now, look! You are magically on the council!" Dan turned out to face the crowd. "Isn't that interesting?"

Conner was pissed now. "Look, you know that I didn't have any control over that. It was an election, remember? People just happened to vote for me."

"Because you convinced them that there needed to be some form of government, when obviously we could have gotten along just fine. Think about it. What has the council done that has actually benefited the common student? Blown up a door? Yeah, right. Hit some robots with baseball bats? Come on."

Conner wasn't about to take this anymore. He got up on a table of his own. "Hey – we've organized a lot of rescue missions. Where would those people in the gymnasium be if we hadn't mobilized the population?"

Dave did an over-exaggerated and sarcastic bow. "Oh, I apologize, my liege. If it weren't for the council, I would be starving in the gymnasium instead of starving while being free to roam the rest of the school. I sincerely apologize."

"Look, I'm sorry that we don't have enough food. It wasn't the council's fault that someone went and stole it."

"Oh, right, I forgot. The mysterious thief that no one knew about until yesterday. Does anyone else find that a little suspicious?" He got shouts of support scattered across the crowd.

"What's the use, Dan? What are you trying to prove?" Conner attempted, unsuccessfully, to draw this unnecessary debate to a close.

"Let me just throw out a hypothetical situation to the crowd. Suppose the council sees that there isn't enough food left for everyone, so they take a large portion for themselves and let the rest of us wither away? Then, they create this cover story, not only to explain the missing food, but to scare everyone so that they have even more control than before?"

The crowd erupted into mixed support as well as boos.

“That is a completely unfounded accusation! You have absolutely no proof!”

“Getting a bit testy, are we? It seems kind of unusual that the crime supposedly occurred before breakfast, and yet no one noticed it until lunch? And it was the council who noticed first? Does anyone else find this odd?”

Things were getting out of hand, as Amber could tell. She wanted to go and find help, maybe from a teacher, but she didn’t want to leave Conner in case the situation got worse. She could see that Conner was rapidly losing support from the crowd, and that he was losing confidence in himself.

“You know what I think?” asked Dan, further riling up the crowd, “It’s about time we threw out this illegitimate ‘council’, and actually have a governing system that cares about you and me! Who’s with me?”

Immediately, an angry mob arose and swarmed the table where Conner was standing, and tore him down to the floor. An enormous fight broke out between those who supported the council, and those that did not, but the latter had the greater numbers. Dan was now in control.

“Round up everyone on the council and anyone who supports them! We’ll lock them inside the council room!”

Amy grabbed Amber’s arm, as well as Dave’s, and they ran together out of the cafeteria. There was nothing they could do to help Conner now, and perhaps they could formulate a better plan once they escaped from Dan’s instant army. Amber was the one who suggested they find Jane and Peter.

Jane was just leaving the library to find out what the commotion was. She saw Amber, Dave, and Amy running towards her, and she was about to ask them what was going on, but she was cut off.

“Hurry! Come with us!” shouted Dave. “It’s not safe!”

That wasn’t exactly specific enough for Jane, but she understood well enough that something catastrophic had happened, and she wasn’t going to ask questions just yet.

They continued to run down the hall, but a large burly senior with a hockey stick stopped them.

“Are you for the council or against?” he asked, holding the hockey stick threateningly. So they had weapons already.

It looked as if Dave was about to boldly state their allegiance, but Amy quickly stomped on his foot. “Oh, we’re against, very much against.” Both Jane and Amber looked at her questioningly, but then Amber caught on.

“Wait a minute,” said the guard. “Aren’t you Conner’s friends?” This left Amy speechless, so Amber took her place.

“Yes, but we realized the evil thing the council had become, so we decided to disown him.”

“Very good,” he replied, but then he thought of something else. “Wait a minute. Then where are you running to?”

“Uh,” Amber paused a moment to think. “We saw some council supporters run down into those hallways there. We’re going to go catch them.”

“Well, then let me come with you.”

“No! I mean, you need to stay here in case they come back.”

“Right. Carry on.”

The four friends continued dashing down the hall. They left the inhabited parts of the building, and entered the darker back hallways. There was no hope of finding Peter now; he could be anywhere in the building. They ran until they felt that they were safely away, and then they sat down to catch their breath.

Steven had finally figured out for sure what the robots were up to, and he had to warn the others so they could prepare. He was at the terminal in Mr. Foresburg’s office, as usual, and he was about to make one final note when someone burst into the lab next door.

“There he is!” shouted one of them, a big and burly guy with a hockey stick. Steven didn’t know he was in danger yet.

“Hey! I just figured out what the robots are up to! They’re –“

“Sit down and shut up, *council member*,” said the other intruder, comparable in size and armament to the first.

“What’s going on here?” asked Steven.

“The council has been destroyed, and we were sent here by Dan to capture you,” said the first. They both made a move to grab Steven.

“Hey! What do you mean? Who’s Dan? Let me go!” Steven struggled to break free, but the two thugs hit him with their hockey sticks. Steven winced in pain as they grabbed his arms and unmercifully dragged him from the computer lab.

“Let go of me! The robots are planning to build something! Listen to me! If we don’t act now, we could all be in grave danger!”

“Yeah, right,” said one of the stooges. He whacked Steven in the head with his hockey stick, and they continued to drag his limp body to the council room.

seven

The Fulton High School Security system was putting the final touches on the project, and it would be finished sooner than expected. The anonymous user who had installed the program was logging on with increased frequency now, giving the system new information and changing the program to reflect the dynamic political changes that had taken over the entrapped population. The security system couldn’t have gathered all this, of course. It just did what it was told, and nothing more or less.

The security robots had collected all the necessary pieces, and construction was well underway. They were working faster than ever before, in response to the mystery user’s commands. The system couldn’t detect the decreasing in secrecy used by this user, but it was certainly true. Apparently, he or she felt less need to cover his or her tracks with the new regime of Dan in power. Dan was less interested in technical details than in real, tangible facts like food. This allowed the secretive user to be a little less cautious.

Soon, the project would be complete, and the united forces of the security system and the unknown user would control the entire school.

Steven woke up on a mass of wet paper. He lifted his head, which was pounding incessantly, and several sheets of moist printer paper came with it. He moved his arm to brush it off, but loosely attached to it were more of the familiar item.

He sat up to look around after finally brushing himself off, but he couldn’t make out anything in the dark room. Well, he had gotten used to most of the rooms in the school being dark, but this room was now exceptionally so. He could see vague shapes of the desks and chairs, but he couldn’t tell if there was anyone else in here besides him. He decided to find out.

“Hello? Is there anyone else here?” his weary voice called out.

“Sounds like Steven’s awake, guys,” said someone who sounded like Chris. He could hear several pairs of feet shuffling towards him.

“Are you okay, Steven?” Ms. Young’s voice.

“Finally, we are complete,” said a somber Conner.

“What’s going on?” asked Steven, addressing the figures he thought were in front of him.

“I wish we knew for sure,” said Ms. Young.

“Some nutcase named Dan has taken over,” said Conner, now bitter. “He’s got everyone under his thumb, and he’s outlawed the council and shut us up in here.”

“Where is here?” asked Steven. “And why is it so wet and damp?”

“This is the old council room,” said Chris. Steven noted his use of the word old. “And we never cleaned up the threat notes before the sprinklers turned on.”

“Peachy,” said Steven. “Where’s Hannah?”

“She’s over in one of the corners,” said Conner. “She hasn’t said anything. The only reason we knew she was there is because we heard her crying earlier.”

Steven sighed. His head was still pounding, and it was hard for him to think. What had Conner said? *Some nutcase named Dan has taken over*. What did that mean? Had he taken over the school, or the world? Steven’s brain didn’t even consider asking to find out, it was so off-balance. Suddenly, he remembered what he had learned about the robots.

“We have to go warn everyone! The security system is building a giant robot! It’s going to attack! We need to tell everyone to prepare!”

After a slight pause, Conner’s voice could be heard, with much skepticism. “Are you sure, Steven? That sounds a little ... far fetched.”

“Yes! I’m sure! I was watching them earlier, and that’s what they’re doing!”

“Steven, maybe you should lie down for a little bit,” said Chris. “Did you take any blows to the head?”

“Yes, but,” Steven stopped. His head did hurt a lot. “Wait, you don’t think I’m crazy, do you?”

Another pause. “No,” said Conner. “Maybe you just need more time to remember correctly, that’s all. We can decide what to do then.”

Was Conner right? Had Steven’s brain really just made the whole thing up? His memory was a little shaky. Maybe he would need some time to lie down and think it over. They didn’t need to give anyone a potential scare if nothing was actually happening. After all, even if there was something to warn everybody about, they couldn’t do anything locked up in here.

Steven gathered up some of the soggy paper into a small mound, and laid his head on top of it. It was time to get some rest.

Dan, sitting on his comfortable chair that he had acquired from the teacher’s lounge, rubbed his head in exasperation. Sometimes the complete idiocy of his fellow human beings annoyed him without end.

“Let’s go through this again,” he said slowly, giving his words unnecessary emphasis as if he were speaking to a child. Which, for all practical purposes, he was. “All of the doors leading to the outside of the building are locked. No one has been able to enter or leave the building since Thursday afternoon. If the council stole the food and hid it, they could have only taken it to a place they would have been able to go to. If the doors are locked, they could have not left the school. Therefore, the food must be somewhere inside the school.”

“But we looked everywhere—“

“Obviously, you didn’t, because if you did, you would have found the food. Now, you and your helpers need to look harder, or else everyone here will slowly begin to starve. Do you want to go and tell all those people out there that they are going to starve?”

The stooge looked at his feet and shook his head.

“That’s what I thought,” concluded Dan, returning to his pizza. The one he had been talking to left the room.

Dan himself even marveled in the changes that had happened today. Single handedly, he had overthrown the council and mobilized the population to respond to his very word. The next step was to provide the students and teachers with the missing food, which would earn their trust and respect. However, this plan was having some difficulties becoming a reality, and Dan was about to get angry. He chewed over his pizza while he wondered what to do if they couldn’t find it.

That would be a very big problem. If he couldn’t prove that the council had taken the food from the people, then the whole basis of his power was non-existent. They would most certainly lash out against him, and he would lose his newfound control.

So, we would have to keep them in line. A round-the-clock posting of his armed guards in both the library and cafeteria would do it. He wouldn’t be able to serve them a complete meal before dinner, but he always maintained an open door policy if anyone wanted to complain.

Which someone was just about to invoke. A teacher walked in, a tall thin woman, and Dan had some notion that she taught some type of science.

“What do you need?” asked Dan, as friendly as possible.

“Dan, uh,” Mrs. Field seemed uncomfortable in this strange situation, asking someone who might as well be one of her students for a favor. “Peter, the one who fainted, you know him,” Dan nodded. “Well, he is in dire need of medical attention. Could you provide him with an extra ration tonight? His condition might get worse without sufficient nutrition.”

Dan mulled this one over in his mind. He was thinking, as always, about how he could turn this situation to his advantage, or more specifically, how to solve his current problems. He knew he needed to gain the people’s trust, but how could he do that here? Suddenly, it came to him.

“Where is he? In the cafeteria?” asked Dan. Mrs. Field nodded. “Good. Let’s go.”

Dan got up from his chair and Mrs. Field followed. They arrived at the cafeteria, where equal rations were being handed out. Everything stopped as Dan entered.

Dan assumed his customary spot on top of one of the tables, near where Peter was still lying motionless, and held out his arms for silence. When everyone was silent and ready to listen to him, he spoke.

“It has come to my attention that Peter he is still suffering from lack of proper food, but we are unable to provide him with sufficient nutrition due to our limited rations. How can we solve this dire

situation? I, Dan, will personally give up my own personal ration, in order to give Peter an extra one. Thank you for you time.”

As Dan descended from the table, there was scattered but solid applause from the crowd. He had accomplished his goal.

Not that he would actually go hungry tonight, oh heavens no. He would just have one of his loyal guards bring him some food later. But no one would have to know.

Someone else was going hungry tonight, though. Four people, actually. They were still hiding in the uninhabited halls, and they had not yet been detected. There had been a few close calls, when groups of Dan’s henchmen had crawled the halls, obviously looking for something. None of the four friends could possibly deduce what they were looking for, except for maybe the friends themselves., and the henchmen weren’t going to find them inside the walls.

Amber was confident they could survive missing this one meal, but they would have to find something to eat tomorrow morning. Would it be possible to sneak into the kitchen, or could they pass off as regular students with no hidden agendas? With Dan in power now, none of the four knew what to expect if they were to return.

Food wasn’t the only thing on their minds, though. They also had to consider the safety of Conner, who had been captured and supposedly imprisoned; and more importantly Peter, whose health was in question. But they wouldn’t be able to help them if they tried, and then failed, so they had to carefully form a plan before they acted.

Which was difficult to do on an empty stomach. Dave, especially, was finding it difficult to concentrate. On top of that, he was exhausted, not just from tonight, but from the entire excursion as a whole. He just wanted to go to sleep.

Amber wanted to take action as soon as possible, but in seeing the fatigue and lack of enthusiasm in the others, she decided to wait until the next morning, and hopefully they would be better then. If not, perhaps there was nothing they could do to save the rest of their small group.

The others had fallen asleep, but Amber was still wide awake. She was thinking, like Dave had been, about everything that had happened since Thursday. Instantly, she realized that she had forgotten all about the Homecoming dance, and how they were all supposed to go together. That memory seemed like it was on the other side of a distant mountain, or part of someone else’s memory altogether. Her normal life seemed to her so far away that she sometimes struggled to remember bits and pieces of it. These past few days, she had been caught up in so many different things that she had not bothered to stop and realize that life hadn’t always been this cluttered or busy. Between Homecoming and Peter, and the lockdown and the Ghost of the Most Powerful Novel, her past life (indeed, that was what it was now) seemed all but a nagging thought in the back of her mind. What mattered was what was in front of her right now, which were three sleeping friends and thoughts of a possibly dangerous breakfast tomorrow. She couldn’t be bothered with what once was. You always had to keep moving forward, because moving backward meant re-living the past.

Even the thought of thinking about the past caused Amber to start, and she immediately avoided the topic. For now, she decided to follow her friends’ example, and sleep.

Peter floated on a sea of infinite blackness. His mind was a swirling mass of cloudy thoughts and misty memories. This continued for quite some time, while Peter was teetering between semi-unconsciousness and complete unconsciousness. Then, during one of those phases of semi-unconsciousness, he thought he saw a small, bright, white light beyond the infinite reaches of swirling black. It was faint, but Peter was certain he could make out a small gray disk in the black.

It grew closer and closer, and the black began to part and Peter could see just a small slice of the hot white light. The more he saw, the more the black parted to reveal more. Suddenly, Peter realized the ball of light was nearly upon him, and was pushing the last of the black away. Peter felt like he was violently shoved into the light, and suddenly all the darkness had disappeared.

This place was familiar, but Peter could not exactly remember why. There were no particular landmarks for him to orient himself, it was just a space of bright white.

Peter heard footsteps behind him, and turned to face someone who he had seen before. He looked like Peter, except wearing a mild green shirt, a black vest, and black jeans.

“I thought I told you to leave me alone,” said Peter through his teeth. His companion seemed unperturbed by Peter’s intense but veiled anger.

“Peter, we’re far beyond that now. Do you realize how close you are to stepping over to the other side?”

This euphemism caused Peter to look at his companion with a curious expression.

“You’ve seen the light at the end of the tunnel, Peter,” he continued, in a light and mocking tone. “Your day of judgement has come.”

Peter now understood with full realization what his partner was getting at. He began to back off in disbelief, and broke out with an even fiercer anger. “*No! Shut up! I don’t believe you! Everything you ever told me was a lie!*” Peter began to breathe heavily, tears streaming down his face.

“You can try to rile me up, Peter, but it’s not going to work. I’ve already set things in motion. There’s nothing more I can or wish to do for you, Peter. You’re a lost cause.”

Peter lashed out at the figure beside him, tearing and screaming. But Peter couldn’t make a mark, and his foe had disappeared and then re-appeared behind him.

“There’s no use fighting now, Peter. The round is over. The dice have been rolled.” He paused here, and added exceeding amounts of emphasis to his next utterance. “There is nothing you can do.”

Peter could barely believe what was going on, and he collapsed to the ground in a fit of unbidden tears. Then, his companion did something very strange. He bent down next to Peter, and patted him on the shoulder, as if to comfort him. He leaned in as if he were going to tell Peter a secret.

“But, because I like to give people ample opportunities to prove themselves, I am going to give you one final chance. If you renounce all illogical and emotional feelings and continue to do as I say, then I will restore you back to your regular state. What do you say, Peter? Do you want a second chance?”

Peter looked up at the one kneeling there beside him, looked him right in the eyes. In just a few moments, he contemplated everything that had happened to him from the day that he had first heard that calm and soothing voice inside his head. He continued to stare, with vibrant and blazing eyes. Then he spoke.

“You know, we’ve known each other for a long time.”

His companion nodded. “That is very true.”

“We’ve been through a lot together.”

“You’re right.”

“We’ve seen all the same sights, done all the same things –“

“Oh, I know.”

“We’re practically the same person.”

“Truer words were never spoken.”

“But, there comes a time in every relationship where somebody has to but their foot down and say ‘That’s quite enough.’ ”

His companion stared back at Peter blankly. “What do you mean?”

Without warning, Peter shoved his knee into his counterpart’s groin. He fell onto his side, and Peter kicked him in the stomach. Then, as a final measure, Peter spat into his face. Peter put his hands on his hips, and quoted himself.

“ ‘That’s quite enough.’ ”

Amy woke up to the sound of feet shuffling through the halls. At first, she was terrified at the prospect that they had been found and were going to be captured. But, upon squinting through the dark, she could see no shapes besides her friends sleeping peacefully on the floor. She was about to lie back down when she heard the sound again, so she decided to keep watch until the others woke up. Looking at her watch, she knew it wouldn’t be very long.

She was hungry, but it wasn’t a paralyzing, gnawing hunger. It was more like a morning without breakfast hunger, or a class just before lunch hunger, and it was tolerable only through the thought of sneaking into the kitchen to grab something.

Amber was waking up, and without speaking they decided to leave together and come back with food now. The silence continued as they strolled through the halls. It was hard for Amy to speak after sitting in silence, but there was nothing that needed to be said in the first place, so it didn’t bother her.

As they were walking, Amy heard the sound that had awoken her again, and she motioned for Amber to stop. After listening intently for some time, she decided it was just her imagination and they continued toward the kitchen.

They sneaked in without much trouble (Dan had not posted guards at the kitchen because he believed the thieves had been the council, and they were securely imprisoned). Amber and Amy found the food separated into neat and equal portions, so they grabbed enough for four and headed back.

They returned to find Jane and Dave talking quietly. At first, Amy had not considered the idea of leaving those two alone together. Amber and Amy sat down next to them and they passed the food around, whispering to each other softly.

Peter awoke lying on one of the cafeteria tables, although his last memory was of mopping up the nearby hallways. It was quiet, and Peter couldn't tell what time it was, except that it wasn't a mealtime because the cafeteria was empty. He sat up feeling refreshed, as if he had just had a good night's sleep.

He tried to remember how he could have gone from mopping the hallways to lying on a table. He racked his brain trying to remember what had happened, but a large chunk of his memory had been removed. It was an unsettling thought.

In addition to that, he had a strange feeling that something was missing, besides those memories. It was like noticing a background noise for the first time when it stops. He couldn't figure out what that was either, and he felt like his mind was a wreck and full of holes.

Peter got down off the table and went to go find someone else to talk to, and maybe get some answers. He went to the library, where everyone was sleeping. He looked quietly for his friends, but they were not in the usual spot in the corner by the heater. He tiptoed around the rest of the library, but they were nowhere to be found.

He noticed two large football player types with hockey sticks sleeping near the front of the library, where the council usually stood when it was making an announcement. This seemed out of place and unusual to Peter, and he decided to go back to the cafeteria and wait until everyone woke up for breakfast.

Dan hadn't slept well. He had spent the night pondering the inevitable and impending food crisis. He was sure the food supply would not last for the rest of the day. He would have to think of something, or else they were all in very grave danger of starvation.

As he considered his options, a new and something else thought occurred to Dan. He would be able to provide the people with more food, but he would have to wait until morning.

He paced, pondering to himself, until he decided to go for a walk to the cafeteria. It was an impulsive decision, with no basis or grounds.

Once there, he saw Peter, already awake. His condition must have drastically reversed. This was very good for Dan's position, if he promoted it the right way. Dan approached Peter with open arms.

"Hey! It's so good to see you!" he said invitingly.

Peter looked at him in confusion. "Who are you?" he asked.

Dan stopped a moment and realized that Peter had been unconscious during his entire ascension. If his memory was incomplete, he would be able to change it for the better.

"Oh, so sorry," said Dan. "I forgot that you had been unconscious. Let me fill you in." He sat down next to Peter on the cafeteria table.

"Where is everybody?" asked Peter. By everybody he meant his friends.

"Peter, I need to tell you that there have been some changes while you were ... asleep. The council was found to be vile and corrupt, so now I am the leader. My name is Dan."

Peter looked at Dan in disbelief. "What do you mean about the council? What did they do?"

"What the facts show us, Peter, is that it was the council who stole the food, and then they lied to us and tried to deceive us. They were corrupted by their own power."

Peter was thinking about his friend Conner on the council. Was it true what Dan was saying? "Where are they?" asked Peter.

"They are in confinement in their former meeting room," answered Dan. "That way their influence will spread no more."

"What about us getting out of here? How are we going to do that without the council's help?"

"We have a new help now, Peter."

"Well, then, get us out of here."

"It's a little more complicated than that. My main focus right now is providing people with food and nourishment, something that is unquestionably vital to our survival."

"Yes, but everything can be solved if we just find a way to the outside."

Dan sighed. "Peter, to tell you the truth, I've given up on the outside. If they truly cared about us, they would have found a way to come and rescue us by now."

"How long do you think we can survive here on our own? How long will the supplies last?"

"Peter, Peter, Peter," Dan shook his head. "You worry too much."

Steven woke up with a jolt, and still surrounded by darkness. He turned his head back and forth out of habit, as if that would help him see better. His hand groped the floor and he felt paper, not as wet as before, but still slightly damp. He called out for Conner.

"I'm here," Steven heard Conner's voice say.

"I figured it out," said Steven.

"What?" asked Conner.

"The robots. They're planning something. I remember it distinctly. They were gathering up the broken robots pieces to build a new, giant robot."

"You're absolutely sure?"

"Yes."

There was a pause. "Well, what are we going to do about it?"

"We have to warn everyone, so they can prepare for the attack."

"Steven, we're locked in a dark room. How are we going to warn anyone while we're in here?"

There was another pause. "They have to come and feed us sometime, right?"

"Right. Go on."

"So, when they come with breakfast, or whenever they decide to feed us, after they open the door we knock them over and escape."

There was yet another pause. Then Conner laughed.

"What? What's so funny?"

"That is the most ridiculous, cliché, movie-style escape I have ever heard," said Conner. "I like it."

Once a majority of the population had woken up, Dan explained his plan. It involved the snack machines in the main locker bay, which was in the now lesser-traveled parts of the building, which was probably the reason why everyone had forgotten about them. He borrowed some of the ropes from the Outdoor Club that had been used in the robot bay escapade, as well as some large cardboard boxes they had found in the supply closets, and led a large group into the darker halls.

There was quite a large crowd of them all, and for maybe the first time Dan felt like a true leader. He was at the head of the group, and it was like being the head marcher in a parade. He was leading his followers to the thing they wanted most – more food. Before this, Dan had felt like he was simply stabbing in the dark, and he didn't really know what he was doing. Now he had a definite plan that was sure to succeed, and everyone would love him for thinking of it. Maybe they would present him with a gift or a reward: 'The Best Leader we had Since the Rotten Council'. They would throw a party, and have lots of decorations and cake and ice cream, and everyone would clap when he got there. Dan sure thought of himself as a swell leader.

Before they got to their intended destination, however, they encountered some escapees. Dan immediately recognized them as the ones who had supported Conner during the debate in the cafeteria. They had noticed the large crowd approaching, but before they could run away again Dan instructed the entire mob to capture them. The mass leapt forward almost as fast as the fugitives leapt up. Dan stood still as the crowd rushed past him towards their target. The four ran fast, but some of the faster ones in the crowd sped up to them and were able to tackle them.

Peter had accompanied the excursion, and was no unable to help his friends. He couldn't speak out in their defense, for that would probably turn the crowd on him as well. He kept his mouth closed until he saw one of Dan's stooges roughing up Amber. He couldn't stand for that. He charged through the surging crowd, and ran headlong into the burl assailant, knocking him to the ground.

Amber was overly surprised to see Peter, much less in good health, and even less bursting out of a crowd to save her. There was no time to vocalize her feelings now, however. The larger part of the crowd was no upon them, and there was no escape.

"Well, well, well," said Dan, coming into the circle that now surrounded the five friends, "I thought I could trust you, Peter, but it looks like I was wrong. As for you other four, I recognize you as one who were in support of Conner, and therefore in support of the council!" The crowd booed. "That leaves me no choice but to imprison you in the council room." He quickly called out the names of several of his

more muscular guards, and they each stepped forward and grabbed an unlucky soul. "Please escort them to the council room!" Dan ordered. "The rest of my loyal supporters, please accompany me on the rest of our mission."

The group split in two, and the ones with the prisoners disappeared into the dark. Dan continued to lead his group onward, now with an even greater feeling of triumph. He had met with a new situation, comprised an instantaneous solution, and executed it to completion, all with a watching (albeit participating) audience. Dan felt like he could handle anything that was thrown at him.

They arrived at the snack machines. There were nearly a dozen of them, all lined up in the hall. Dan immediately began giving orders for people to work. He divided them into as many groups as they had ropes. The groups then proceeded to sling the ropes over the top of each snack machine, in an effort to pull them over. The hope was that, upon impact, the snack machines would break open and they could reach the snacks inside.

This happened with two of the attempts, and the other two went about more violent means of breaking open the snack machines. The snacks from the opened two were collected into the boxes, and sent back to the cafeteria, while the groups who had opened them went on to the next snack machines in line. By this time, one of the unsuccessful groups had beaten open their machine, while the other group was still struggling.

Dan stood back and watched his people at work. They were collecting food now, and they would be able to sustain themselves for much longer. He swelled up with pride at his own accomplishments.

The prisoners being escorted to the council room made no attempt at escape, at least not yet. Their spirits had been crushed by the capture, and they had no time to communicate as to possible plans. It was impossible to talk now, for any plan would be intercepted by the ones now holding each of them in some sort of tight lock or hold. Therefore, the journey passed in silence, for the guards had nothing to discuss among themselves either.

They reached the door to the council room, and the guard posted at the door opened it up for them, as the rest of them had their hands full. As he opened up the door, two figures burst out and knocked him to the ground. The prisoners, taking advantage at their captors' momentary state of surprise and shock, broke free and did their best to knock their individual guards over, at least the ones that could. It was then that they realized that Conner and Steven were the ones that had broken out, and in a few short exclamatory phrases, the seven of them burst down the hall before the guards could respond. Once they had reached a far enough distance away, Steven began shouting how there were all in danger from a new, giant security robot.

"Are you sure?" shouted back Peter, as they were all still running.

"Yes, yes of course I'm sure!"

"What can we do?" asked Amy.

"Let's stop," said Dave.

"Are we safe?" asked Amber.

"Safe enough for now," said Conner.

"Didn't you have a question?" asked Steven.

"I said, 'What can we do?'" said Amy, again, after they had all stopped.

"I think if we could rally enough support behind us, and arm all of them, we might stand a chance," said Steven. "The only problem would be getting help with out being detected by Dan or his henchmen, and only before we run out of time."

"Most of his supporters are still with him out in the halls," said Peter. "I think the ones that secretly defy him stayed behind in the library or cafeteria."

"We've got our work cut out for us then," said Steven. "We all go to the library a get what help we can, and then move to the gymnasium to get the equipment that Dan hasn't acquired yet."

"Aren't we going to be found if we move with this big group?" said Jane.

"We can't risk splitting up," said Steven. "There's not enough time. I don't know when the giant robot is going to activate, but I have a feeling that it's going to be soon. Besides, if something were to happen to one of us, the others wouldn't find out. It's risky, but I think we better move as a group."

"Let's do it," said Conner. With that, they headed out, but a different way then they had come so they wouldn't run into the guards that we most likely following them. They had to take a roundabout path, but eventually they reached the library. A group was already meeting there, and they were planning an

uprising against Dan. The only way Steven knew this was because they were shouting 'We hate Dan'. Steven put the rest together himself. He got their attention.

"Hey, it's me, Steven! From the council!" he let them turn towards him in surprise. "There's no time for explanations, but something's happening that's much more important than getting rid of Dan. Everyone follow me." A large enough number of people trusted Steven that the rest of them came easily. They had amassed enough numbers now that they didn't have to worry about running into any of Dan's stooges. If they did, they would be able to overpower them fairly easily.

Many of the new group, who had been trapped in the gymnasium originally, were wary about entering that place in which they had spent so long in. It was a momentary fear, easily overcome with the support of friends who understood.

Once everyone had arrived, Steven informed everyone of the situation. Many people found it hard to believe that the system could actually build a giant robot on its own, but Steven reassured them that the system was completely unpredictable now. Steven had to swear upon many various things until many believed him, and even then there were those who didn't buy it at all and were about to go back to Dan. It was better than this nutcase.

The gathering of supplies and weapons commenced anyway. One of the students who had carried one of the boxes full of snacks back from the locker bay was secretly a dissenter, and brought the food to the rebels, who welcomed it gladly. There were still enough baseball bats, hockey sticks, mops, pipes, tennis rackets, and other various instruments left for them to use when the encounter with the robot came. They also found a large quantity of gymnastics mats, for which Steven made a mental note of for later use.

Steven was the assumed leader now. While there were some disbelievers in the robot scheme, most people still saw him as the knowledgeable and intelligent council member who had hatched the plan to unlock the doors in the first place. It was logical for him to lead them. While he had not yet proven himself to be a tactical thinker should the situation come to battle (and there was no doubt that it would) no one questioned that he would be able to handle that.

Before they were fully ready, some deep rumblings could be heard beneath the school. The robot had awakened.

The last vending machines had been emptied, or at least the last ones that they were going to attempt to open. A few had shown themselves to be so stubborn that Dan instructed the groups to leave them alone. The machines would still be there tomorrow, and the next day, and as long as they opened them eventually they would be fine. The last boxes were filled and it was time for the entire group to head back for today's work had been completed.

No one had bothered to mention that the prisoners and two council members had escaped. Dan was in a happy mood, and the guards did not want to disturb that with unpleasant news. Besides, none of them knew how he might react, for this type of situation had never been encountered before, and no one wanted to be the first to find out.

To say Dan was in a happy mood would be an understatement. He had completed his goal, and no one could take that away from him now. They were heading towards a larger meal than they had eaten for the last few days (albeit one high in fat and sugar) all because of the work Dan had done. He had righted the wrongs that the council had placed upon the students. He could almost hear his victory celebration music playing now.

Suddenly, the floor shook and everyone was knocked down. Dan's initial thought was one of an earthquake, but those didn't happen in this part of the country. They could hear a rumbling coming from right beneath them. The building began to shake more violently, and down the hall Dan could see the floor begin to crack. At first, a few floor tiles had been displaced, but now it was obvious that something was pushing its way up through the floor. It looked like one of those security robots at first, but then Dan saw that it was attached to something else. It was merely the tip of something far larger.

As the large object continued to come up out of the floor, Dan realized that it looked like an arm. If this was just the arm, Dan couldn't imagine how large the whole thing would be.

Now, everyone decided that it would be a good idea to get as far away from this large thing as possible. The entire crowd was scrambling and screaming. Dan finally recovered enough from his shock to stand up and run away, but he didn't do so without turning around to catch one last glimpse of this thing that had ruined his perfect day.

eight

The Fulton High school security system was experiencing a level of absolute power that it had never felt before. Not only had it finally completed its grandiose project, but now with this new robot at its command, it could do anything it wanted. It could rearrange the layout of the school, if it wanted to.

That anonymous user had logged back on to the system now, and was tapping into the giant robot control program. What did he or she think he or she was doing? This robot belonged to the security system, and it wasn't about to delegate power over to someone else. The system didn't have much choice in the matter, however, and soon the robot was being manually controlled by the one who had created the program to build the robot in the first place.

If the system could speculate, it would have put everything together by now, but that was beyond its capabilities. It would have noticed a connection between the theft of the food (which was not done by the council, by the way) and this user who now had complete control of the school. It was sad that the only entity that had all the information was not intelligent enough to put it all together.

Perhaps someone else in the school would figure it out, but until then it would remain a complete mystery to all those involved.

Steven sent a small armed strike force to find out where in the building the robot was and any other important information that would be useful to know when it came to battling the robot. The group was comprised of several able bodied students and a few teachers who would be able to survive an encounter with the robot, should it attack them. Steven had no doubt that what the intent of the robot was.

It was very easy for the team to locate the robot, for all they had to do was follow the loud noises it was making as it plowed through the hallways. They found the hole where it had come through the floor first. The hole spanned the entire breadth of the hallway, and was much too wide for them to cross. They could tell by the tracks of rubble that the robot was on the other side of the hole, so they had to retrace their path and find another route if they wanted to see the robot. They did that, but it was the robot that found them first. It was coming towards them down the hall at full speed, arms flailing against the walls and ceiling.

The robot was much too large to fit inside the hallway, and it was constantly crashing into the walls to make space for itself. It was wider than it was tall, and that made the robot look as a whole very squat. It had two long, flexible arms that were beating into things as if they had a mind of their own.

The team had seen enough and they clambered back to the gymnasium, where the rest of the ragtag army was waiting. They relayed the information to Steven, who devised a plan. They would fill the hallway with the large gymnasium mats, in order to slow the progress of the robot. They would also have teams placed behind the area where the robot would stall, and then come out with more mats to block the robot from the other side. Then, once it was fully trapped, they would come up over the mats with their weapons and beat the robot to death. Steven sent out teams with mats at once.

Judging from the report given by the first strike force, detailing the location and approximate speed of the robot, Steven estimated that the robot would arrive in only a few minutes. He surveyed the construction of the first barricade, which went up quickly and efficiently. He could see over the top and down the hall where in the side hallways the teams that were to sneak up from behind were waiting.

The rumbling came closer, and Steven saw the robot turn a corner and right at them down the hallway. It was larger than he had imagined, much faster, and more destructive. Its arms were still insanely flailing with no direction or purpose. Steven watched stoically as the robot came barreling at them, for he knew it would cross the designated threshold and then become trapped.

But, instead, it slowed down and came to stop before going across that point. Fear gripped Steven as he realized he had forgotten the possibility of the robot ignoring the first barricade and attacking the other teams instead. The robot backed up and turned, as feared, into the side hallway where one of the teams was waiting.

This called for a drastic change of plans. Steven ordered for this barricade to be deconstructed and for them to rush the mats to the entrance of the side hallway. They would be able to trap the robot there. The barricade came down quickly, and pairs were running down the hall with the brightly colored mats.

Steven could hear the screams of surprise and terror from the team in the side hall now being attacked by the robot. One of the other teams that had been lying in wait sprung into action now, without orders, and leapt upon the back of the robot, attempting to smash it with their pitiful weapons. This caused the robot to back up again, and it saw the ones rushing at it with the mats, and decided to go after them

instead. Steven stood horrified as the robot came barreling down as before, but now they had no barricade to protect themselves.

Mats and bodies went flying as they robot smacked them with its wild arms. Steven ordered for the ones left holding the mats to rush at the robot and try to stop it. Working in unison, they ran up against the robot holding their mats as shields, and they were able to slow the robot down considerably. With the robot momentarily halted, Steven led the rest in a screaming assault upon the robot. They jumped up onto it, and stunned it with a barrage of impacts. They were making dents in the surface, but little damage was made to the integrity of the robot as a whole.

Without warning, the upper body of the robot began to spin, causing many of the attackers to fly off in all directions. Steven, and a few others, had maintained their grip and Steven shouted for them to attack the wheels. If they could immobilize the creature, maybe they would have a better chance in stopping it completely. Many began jamming their weapons behind the wheels in hopes of stopping it. As they were doing so, however, the robot began to back up, and many weapons were crushed beneath its mighty form.

Steven realized it was a hopeless fight. He ordered a full retreat. The ones in the side hallways were able to climb up and over the robot during the attack, so they were no longer trapped. As they were running back, Steven saw that some that had stayed at the end of the hall, near the gymnasium had started to rebuild the original barricade. Steven and the others leapt over, and immediately began stacking mats on top of what had already been built. After everyone had climbed over, they were able to build it nearly to the ceiling. By this time, the robot had regained movement, had slammed into the barricade at full force, causing mats to fly everywhere. The main body of the barricade remained intact, and they displaced mats were quickly but back on. The robot continued to slam, again and again, but they just kept rebuilding it. After several minutes it gave up and left to wreak havoc on other parts of the building.

Steven breathed a sign of relief as they all filed back into the gymnasium. There were many injuries, but nothing they couldn't take care of on their own. The first attack had been a failure, but perhaps after regrouping they would be able to work out a better plan. Steven posted a large group by the barricade to rebuild it should the robot come to strike again. They were safe for now.

During the interim unconsciously allotted to them in the afternoon, the six friends met to talk, something they had been unable to do since Dan's ascension. The robot would not strike again for quite some time, but still everyone was on pins and needles anticipating the next attack. A cheerful conversation was able to alleviate some of these concerns.

Peter and not gotten the complete picture of how Dan had taken power, and Conner had not found out what had happened while he was imprisoned. So the other four were able to fill in some of the details, even though they had not been with the larger portion of the population for a majority of the time. They were able to discuss Dan freely now, for not only had they all escaped his grasp, but also the robot was the one in power now.

They discussed old times, traded the same in-jokes, and above all enjoyed each other's company. The one topic that was on all of their minds, but never vocalized, was the Homecoming dance. So much had changed since then that it was possible that it wouldn't even happen. Would they still be locked in by then, or would they find some way to escape and everything would return to normal. Peter doubted he would consider anything normal after what had happened. There was no unreachable territory now, and anything could happen – for the better or otherwise. So much of the past weekend had been so unpredictable that Peter half expected for gnomes to pop up out of the ground, or for everyone's heads to explode without reason.

Without reason – that was an interesting concept. Had the whole excursion been entirely inexplicable? Or was there some secret, hidden meaning behind it all that had yet to be revealed. Once they got out of this mess, or even if they got out, Peter promised himself to look back and try to figure it all out.

The small group of six was not the only ones regrouping with friends. There were several circles scattered across the gymnasium, most discussing what had happened since Dan's ascension, because his reign had imposed a cloud of frightened silence upon the population. Other groups were helping heal wounds that had been inflicted during the battle with the robot. Still others were amusing themselves with simple games or other similar diversions. The pervading atmosphere was one of mild entertainment.

Which mystified Steven. Hadn't they just participated in a grueling and unsuccessful battle? Shouldn't they all be moping, or at least preparing for the next attack with greater determination? Steven

didn't understand other people sometimes, and this was a prime example of that. Steven toyed with this idea for a time, turning it back and forth in his mind as one might flip a pancake. Perhaps the repression of Dan had caused all this to bottle up, and as soon as they were free to do as they pleased it all came out at once. Or, Steven speculated, this was their way of recovering from the trauma of the past few days. So much danger and drama could only mean that people would look for more things to distract them from the already unpleasant memories. It could be something else, as well, but perhaps Steven could not perceive it from his limited perspective.

As the afternoon wore on, more and more people believed that the robot would not come back. It was early evening now, and to most weary were already dozing off. The games and conversations had unraveled, and the groups had broken up into a mass of individuals or pairs of closer friends. One such pair, the predictable duo of Peter and Amber, was conversing now. They were laughing and joking, but there was one thing Amber couldn't get out of her mind. Peter had been so two-sided since that lunch on Thursday. One moment he would be staring off into space completely unattached, and the next he would be joking and laughing like they were the best of friends. The latter was the case now, but Amber was waiting for the instant where he would snap back into the former. Peter noticed.

"What's up?" he asked. "You seem kind of out of it."

"Oh, well, you know," she avoided the question until she could come up with some sort of plausible lie. "This whole thing, it gets to you."

"What whole thing?"

"Being locked inside the school, and being attacked by robots, it kind of takes its toll after a while. It makes me think. If I hadn't gone to play rehearsal on Thursday, and gone home instead, no of this would have happened."

"Hmm. I hadn't thought of that. But how do you know its not worse out there?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, think about it. Something had to have caused the lockdown in the first place, right? Some sort of emergency. How do you know there isn't all sorts of destruction out there?"

"I guess you're right. But we won't know until we get out, and who knows when that will be."

The conversation lulled at this point. Amber was still mulling over her original thoughts, and she mustered up the confidence to vocalize her question.

"Peter?"

"Yeah?"

"There's something I want to ask you."

"Go ahead. Shoot."

"Well, I'm not sure if you'll be able to answer this, and it's kind of personal in the first place."

"Don't worry about it."

"Well," she summed up everything she had to say the next few words. "You know how, well, you may not even know, but sometimes you get this look, like you're staring off into space, and I can't figure it out. It really bothers me, Peter. You can be so happy at one moment and at the next moment..." she turned her head down. "You want to run away from me."

Whatever Peter had been expecting her to ask, this certainly wasn't it. He thought he knew what she was trying to get at, and he did his best to reassure her. "I think I know what you're talking about," he said, "and if I'm right, it's gone for good."

This caught Amber off guard. He was talking about it like it was some sort of disease that would just magically disappear. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

He seemed confident, and she hadn't seen it recently, either. On top of that, she wanted it to be gone, so of course she wanted to believe it. Her last doubts and fears had been erased.

About half of those in the gymnasium were asleep when the second battle began. The robot had begun slamming against the barricade again, and the ones posted to protect it were scrambling to rebuild it again. It was the same scene as before, the cycle had just begun again. This continued for a quarter of an hour, and then abruptly stopped. Everyone had woken up by now. There was a pause that nobody knew how long lasted.

Suddenly, security robots began pouring out of the passageways near the ceiling, causing a grim memory to reform in the minds of those who had witnessed it before. The stakes were different now, however, and the students were more aptly prepared, and ready to make the first move.

As the robots crawled over the bleachers, the students climbed up to meet them head on. Without warning, the skirmish began. The dynamics were different from the first time, for now they were battling on the bleachers, and the robots had the uphill advantage. The students, on the other hand, had the advantage of reasoning skills and teamwork. The students fought bravely, but they had forgotten one critical piece. In the midst of the battle, the barricade had been left unguarded.

The giant robot smashed into the barricade repeatedly as before, but without anyone to rebuild it, the robot was able to break through. Most of the students did not notice when it first broke through the barricade, but they did notice when it broke through the gymnasium wall.

The robot was now in the gymnasium, a situation that had not been considered before. It crashed into the nearest set of bleachers, causing both student and robot to fall in the collapse. The giant robot was smashing things indiscriminately, and the tide of the battle was turning against the students, who decided to leave the smaller robots and team up against the larger one.

Steven still marveled at the sheer size of the thing, and was surprised that it could have been constructed in such a short amount of time. Still, as the leader of this group, he felt obliged to run up and beat the thing with his baseball bat.

The giant robot began to move, and Steven feared for an instant someone would be crushed beneath it. The ones most in danger hurriedly jumped away to safety. Steven now realized the utter hopelessness of the situation. There was no way they could ever match the power of this thing. Steven didn't want anymore people to get hurt.

Perhaps he was going about this the wrong way. Perhaps his focus shouldn't have been defeating the robot, but instead escaping from the school. Steven felt a great wave of guilt at yet another mistake. He tried to call out an order, but he could not make a sound. He cleared his throat, and tried again.

"Retreat! Everybody get out of here! Get out of here as fast as you can!"

He didn't have to tell anybody twice. The crowd scattered and fled into the hall. The robot was momentarily confused at the rapid change of events, and did not follow them.

As Steven ran, he tried to think of a solution that would get them out of this mess. He could think of none.

Steven was not the only one in the building considering his options. Dan, a leader of another sort, was as well. His smaller band had taken refuge in the locker bay, where the snack machines had once stood, and defended themselves there. There was no lack of food, but the location left them unguarded to attacks by security robots, and the attack of the giant robot as well. Dan could hear the carnage in other parts of the building echoing through the halls, and it felt like the entire school had turned into a battlefield.

Dan thought long and hard about his rise and fall. It had seemed so good in the beginning. He truthfully believed that he had set things straight and was doing the people a favor. Now, with the giant robot romping around, all power had been stripped away. The usurper had been usurped.

He contemplated ruefully that if the robot now had control of the school, at least the council didn't. Dan still wasn't sure if the council had done everything he said they did, but most of his followers seemed to believe him so it didn't really matter if he was right or not. His followers seemed happy enough, in spite of being attacked by robots now and then, and that satisfied Dan.

What Dan couldn't figure out was how intelligent the robot had seemed. It would respond to their movements, and it wasn't mindlessly scooting around like the security robots did. It was actually smart, and it wouldn't make the same mistake twice, at least that Dan had seen. Was the robot actually learning?

No, of course not. That was far beyond the limits of the computer system. The only other solution was that a human from somewhere in the building was controlling the robot, and not even Dan would purposely wreak havoc like that upon his fellow classmates. Dan put the thought out of his mind.

Dan wanted to go to sleep, but he knew he wouldn't be able to. Any of the robots could come back at any minute, and he would have to keep a watchful eye if he wanted to protect his followers. And besides that, he was too frightened to fall asleep. He knew that images of robots would plague his nightmares.

Steven regretted not setting a rendezvous point, for now they were all scattered across the building. Steven, for one, was alone, and wandering the hallways in hopes of encountering someone else by chance. He still had his baseball bat, in case he were to encounter a security robot. He passed the computer lab, a place

were he had spent so long these past few days, and was about to pass it by until he noticed that there was a light coming from behind the open door. This was unusual. He wondered why anyone would be using the terminal at this time. Before, only Mr. Foresburg and Steven used the terminal, and Steven didn't know where Mr. Foresburg was, so perhaps it was Mr. Foresburg at the terminal. Steven decided to pop in and see.

He entered the lab, and saw that the door to the office was closed, but not all the way. He could see thin rays of light from the terminal slipping through the narrow crack, but he could not see who, if anyone, was at the terminal. Perhaps he had just forgotten to shut off the screen.

He inched toward the door, and grabbed the handle. Steven could hear the clatter of typing and knew someone would have to be inside. He opened the door, and saw someone sitting at the terminal. It was Mr. Banks, the robotics teacher.

"What are you doing here?" he scowled. He was obviously very disturbed and scandalized at someone entering the office at a time like this.

Steven built up unnatural boldness. "I think the question is, what are *you* doing here?"

Mr. Banks laughed. "You always were a wise guy, weren't you Steven. At least that hasn't changed."

Steven took a look at the terminal screen. There were several windows open, each with a camera view of somewhere in the school. He couldn't quite place why Mr. Banks would have wanted these particular cameras.

"You're wondering what I'm doing, aren't you?" Great. This guy was a mind reader too. "I think I'll tell you."

"Stop with the dramatics, Banks, and get to the point." Steven waved his baseball bat menacingly.

"I think it is far too much for me to drop it all on you at once,"

"Try me. We'll see how I hold up."

"If you insist," said Mr. Banks. He feigned a look that made it seem like he was not enjoying this. "Remember the food that was stolen? And we couldn't figure out who did it? It was me."

Steven was shocked to hear such a bald-faced confession. "What does that have to do with this?"

"When the doors stayed locked, even though the lockdown was over? That was me."

"What are you talking about? You're crazy! That's impossible!"

"The message left for the council members in the council room? That was me."

Steven was too dumbfounded to say anything. Had it all really been the same person, much less the robotics teacher?

"And finally, the one who is controlling the giant robot as we speak? That's me too."

This was too much for Steven to handle. "What do you mean? You're crazy! The security system is controlling that robot! It built that robot!"

"That is where you are wrong, Steven," said Mr. Banks. "I built that robot. Or I made the program that built the robot, at least."

"What?" Steven exploded. "Why would you ever do such a thing?"

"Do you really want to know?" said Mr. Banks. "How much is it worth to you?"

"I was you? You were responsible for all of this?" Steven was getting angry now. Now that he had someone to blame, all his suppressed rage and torment was focusing on that one individual. He gripped the baseball bat tighter.

"I'll tell you why I did it. Kids these days don't understand the amount of change that can happen in one day. I can. I can remember when things were different. When the lockdown started, I figured it would be a perfect opportunity for an extracurricular lesson."

"What? That's a horrible reason!"

"But now you understand, don't you? Don't you?"

Steven couldn't take it anymore. He had to run away, far away to a place where things made sense. He ran out into the hall, and realized he wouldn't be able to find a place like that here. He could hear Mr. Bank's maniacal laughter from behind the doorway. Steven ran as far and as fast as he could. He ended up in the darker back hallways, the place where he usually ended up when he was trying to escape. Mrs. Coombs, as usual, appeared out of nowhere.

"Oh, no, not you again."

"Oh, yes it is me, I'm afraid," said Mrs. Coombs.

"You know, my head still hurts from when you hit me with the dictionary."

"Really? That's very interesting."

“Are you going to say anything important or are you just going to stand there?”

“Oh, yes, I remember now. I have a message for you.” Mrs. Coombs leaned in and whispered into his ear. “Destroy the pillar.”

“What?” Steven was about to ask her more questions, but she had already vanished. So, he began talking to himself. “Oh, great. That’s just great. Oh wait! I get it! This is all a dream! And this is the part where I wake up, and everything is okay, and nothing is messed up and no one is in danger. Right?” The only response he got was his own echo. Steven began beating himself with the baseball bat, but he realized how much it hurt, and stopped.

Then, realizing that this was real life and not made up, he thought about what Mrs. Coombs had said, and if it actually meant anything instead of just being nonsense. Was there any pillar, and why did he have to destroy it? He tried to think of any pillar-like things he had seen. Suddenly, it came to him.

Baseball bat in hand, he continued to run, but now he knew where he was going. He stayed in the back hallways, and came to a door that had been knocked down by someone very large. He stepped into the dark of the boiler room.

He regretted not having any rope, but the walls of the sides of the chasm were covered enough in wires that he could get a good enough grip. He had to drop his baseball bat, and the pause between then and the noise it made reminded Steven just how deep it really was.

He stepped off the ledge, fingers grabbing at the wires, and he slid down without any grace at all. He was falling very fast, and when he hit the ground he had to stop a moment to let his knees recover from the shock. He picked up the bat, and entered the wire-lined passage.

All the robots were out and about the school, so he wouldn’t have to worry about encountering any here. He entered the robot bay, and saw the pillar he was to destroy.

Only now did he realize its purpose. This was obviously the central computer system, where everything in the school was controlled. The blinking lights reminded Steven of a beautiful night sky.

He whacked the pillar, shattering several lights and making a large dent. He whacked it again, this time for getting lock in the school. Another whack, for the time he had lost while trapped here. Again, for all the danger everyone had been in. Again and again and again. Steven hit it from the left, and from the right, until the pillar was nothing more than a pile of dented metal. One final hit split the thing in two, sending bits of circuitry and metal plating flying.

Every light in the building shut off, and Steven knew that he had won.

A few of the more bold fighters had tracked down the robot to this dead end hallway. Even though they knew they could not beat it, they still fought hard. The robot was showing signs of prolonged attack, for it was covered in numerous dents and occasionally a piece or two would fall off.

The robot was cornered now, and the students didn’t know how it would respond. It’s arms had stopped flailing like the had before (they were probably broken) and it moved more slowly and more laboriously. The armed students approached it carefully with the intent of finishing it off once and for all.

Suddenly, the robot began to lurch, forward and backward, as if it had lost all control. The lights flickered. The robot sped backward into the back wall just as the lights shut off for good.

The students felt a cold breeze rush at them, something they had not felt for several days. But, with the lights off, it was hard to tell where it was coming from. They trekked forward, and they could tell that the robot and fell backwards, lifeless. It wasn’t until they got closer that they realized that it had fallen *through* the wall, a wall that led to the outside!

They couldn’t believe it. One rushed out immediately to smell the fresh night air, some hugged each other and jumped for joy, and still others were overwhelmed with emotion and began to cry uncontrollably.

It was a freedom they had never felt before, one that tasted sweeter only after being lost and regained. They ran through the halls, shouting to anyone that they could find that they were free, free, free! One by one, every last student and teacher was found and led to the exit. Finally, after so much effort, the ordeal was finally over, and they were free.

epilogue

Fulton High School was closed for several months for repairs (“We needed to fix the place up anyway,” said the principal) and all the students and teachers were sent to other nearby schools and/or counseling. Mr. Banks was tried and prosecuted, but was only required to perform large amounts of community service,

for no one had died or been severely injured, unless you counted emotionally. The whole crime was equated with a haunted house, where everyone had only been given a good scare. Whether this verdict was correct or not is for another story.

There were several news reports and clippings about the whole event, although none of them really capture the true essence of the story. Higher scrutiny was placed upon the school district, however, and within a year all the school-running programs had been replaced.

Steven returned to his place as average Joe, although neither he nor anyone else ever forgot the works of heroism, ingenuity, and leadership he had displayed during that time. Sometimes he would beat himself up over the mistakes he had made, but he reminded himself that everything had worked out okay in the end. He put up a small poster in his room that said “All’s well that ends well.”

Dan was never the popular guy that he had been before, and both students and teachers alike found it difficult to trust him anymore. He did graduate at the end of the next semester, and went to an out of state college where no one had heard of him before, and he was able to start again with a clean slate.

Mrs. Coombs was forced to quit her job as a teacher and undergo severe counseling. She turned out okay, after ten and a half months, and was able to re-integrate into society successfully, with a different occupation, however. Nothing eventful ever happened to her again, at least nothing worth mentioning here.

Travis and Ming did get the computer project done, but since the school was destroyed it didn’t really matter. Everyone who had been doing homework during the whole ordeal learned a valuable lesson about setting their priorities, and that sometimes school isn’t always the most important thing.

The original Moody Dada Sofas Local Chapter Seven Seventeen (The Wedge, Shakespeare, and Captain Awesome) never spoke to each other again.

The six friends (Peter, Amber, Dave, Jane, Conner, and Amy) were forced to re-schedule their Homecoming plans to another night at another school, but they still got together that very Friday for a group date. After dinner at a semi-nice restaurant, the all went to a park to look at the stars, something they had a newly-found appreciation for.