

Different and Cool

By RisanF

Submitted: October 25, 2005

Updated: October 25, 2005

Andrew Champion is given a "free-will" project, a weeklong assignment that tests one's ability to make strong choices. Saddled with loudmouthed friends, an unattainable crush, and the geekiest girl in school as a partner, he'll walk a rocky road.

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1 - Monday

Different and Cool: Try a Little Harder

By Reid M. Haynes

Legend:

() Denotes thoughts

// Denotes writing

Note: Expect some anime influence to be prevalent. Green hair, elaborate names, things like that.

Welcome to D&C.

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MONDAY

Across the rolling landscape, Starlight City shone in the radiant sun like the finest collection of diamonds. A large, yet relatively clean city, it carried a certain benevolence that took it a step above its more unsavory neighbors. On the outskirts of town, atop some small hills, the modest campus of Starlight Jr. High sprawled like a centipede down into the valley. And through the crack of an open window, a muffled voice could be heard instructing the class within, sounding strong even from a distance.

"And that concludes my lecture today," a tall, black man of thirty was saying to the class before him.

Slamming shut a large textbook labeled *Philosophy Today*, he stood up from his chair and folded his wiry arms behind his back in a patient sort of pose. "Questions, anyone?" he spoke in a voice that bled the tightly contained energy of a man with much power. He slowly scanned over the room with an eagle's perception, ready to pick out any students eager to contribute to discussion.

Of which there were none.

The class of twenty or so students was unresponsive, to say the least. Tuckered out from a long day of maths and sciences, the kids here had little enthusiasm for the type of learning their teacher wished to bestow upon them. Most disconcerting was the desk in row three, forth from the right. This was where a green-maned lad of fourteen was practically laying on his desk, looking not only like he may start snoozing any moment, but also like he desperately needed it.

Andrew Champion picked with disinterest at a chewed eraser, pulling at the rubbery nub until it threatened to tear off from the rest of his pencil. Looking down at the arrangement on his desk, he let the conversation of the class flow over his head like a stream over so many stones. With his chin in his hand, and his head to the side, he idly looked away from his mangled writing tool over to the clock, wondering when lunchtime was. Food for the mind was something he ill swallowed, and right now, he felt only prepared to handle food for the body.

SLAM! a long, thin implement came crashing down on the desk, making the boy drop his pencil like it was biting him. Looking up from the empty notepaper on his desk, Andy found a dark and very menacing figure above him, boring into him a sensation not unlike the fear of God. "Mr. Champion, if you're not too bored from my lecture on free-will and its proponents," the teacher started sarcastically, tapping the flat end of his yardstick against his shoulder. "Perhaps you could make use of it and try staying awake in class."

A few students let out some light titters, whether it was because of Andy's humiliation or the rather clever comment made by the teacher, it was unsure. The boy merely let out a long sigh, and propped himself up in a slightly more alert manner, wary not to test the teacher's patience again. Still, his gaze was not exactly level and he was again looking rather tired. He just sat there like a statue, letting the shock of the teacher's sharp directive wash through his system to keep him awake.

Free-will. That's what this class was about. With the blessings of the senior staff, Professor Trent Clark had started a special enrichment program in Starlight Jr. High concerning the philosophical matters of

free-will vs. determinism. Normally given to high school students, this special elective was meant to open up young minds and awaken them to higher levels of thinking.

As such, it flew completely over his head.

Andy breathed heavily into the air, letting his eyes close for the moment. What business did he have tackling the mystique and legacy of modern philosophy? He was only fourteen; the biggest decision-making he made was weather to pick the green or orange gelatin in the school lunch line. (he liked the green gelatin) Such things were better left to the wise men on the northern mountains. (philosophy, not the gelatin picking)

"I want all you to work hard on this one," Mr. Clark was saying to the rest of the class, bringing his attention away from Andy for the moment. "Your assignment for the rest of the week is to think of a way you can exercise your free-will in a way different than everyday life. Then, write a hundred-word summary of your thoughts and feelings leading to your decisive actions. Again, any questions?"

And again, the class was silent. Well, save for the frantic scribbling of a young, pigtailed girl in the front row, who had been writing for the last five minutes. Her large, horn-rimmed glasses were nearly falling off her nose as she filled her page with notes, and they did almost fall off as she bolted up in her chair, raising her hand in an excited sort of way. "Ms. Reichardt?" the teacher regarded her, seemingly pleased in her participation.

"What if you're a determinist?" the girl asked, an earnest look upon her face.

The man was unperturbed by this question, taking it in stride. "Well, then, I'm sure there would be a way to approach this assignment from a determinist point of view," Mr. Clark supplied, making a small gesture with his hands.

"But, what if we're just like any other animal or insect, and we do only what we're programmed to do?" she insisted, her wide-eyed stare never lessening in the slightest. "I mean, an ant never rebels against the queen, does it?"

"I'm sure that humans are of a higher mentality than ants," he said patiently, putting his hands on his hips.

"And what if everything is just a bunch of protons and neutrons interacting with each other in a predetermined and unchangeable way...."

A male student practically bolted from his seat. "You're holding up class, Reichardt!" he complained loudly, glaring at the side of him.

"Terrible Tarah," another student moaned, rolling his eyes in frustration. At this, about a dozen spitballs and crumpled up paper wads made their way towards the girl, testament to the highly bored and volatile class.

"Hey!" she squeaked, shielding herself from the onslaught of makeshift projectiles she was currently being bombarded with.

"Enough!" The booming voice of Mr. Clark broke through the rowdy behavior like lightning through thorny underbrush. Quick as wildfire, the students ceased their action and slotted back in the seat. The fire in the man's eyes was burning hotly in the afternoon light pouring from the blinds. It was as if he was some sort of samurai schoolteacher, ready to test his blade on any unsavory student.

Letting out a short breath of exasperation, Mr. Clark then proceeded towards the door. "The paper is due Wednesday, first five minutes of class. There will be no turning in assignments late." Opening said door, he then deftly stepped to his left. "You may go."

Like the breaking of a dam, the students poured out of the door en mass. Though Mr. Clark had moved aside, he found he had to flatten himself against the wall to avoid being trampled by the herd of unruly students. Soon, the classroom had been all but cleared out, leaving a lifeless quality in what had once held much energy. Only two people were left: Andy, gathering his books, and the girl Tarah, still trying to pick out spitballs from her hair.

After seeing his class off, Mr. Clark proceeded through the rows of desks until he arrived at the boy's. At first sight of the tall man, Andy shrunk down in his seat like a whacked mole, finding nowhere to hide other than his seat. A moment passed without action, as the two stared at each other like a father and his disappointing son. "Do...you need something from me, Mr. Clark?" the younger male tried, trying to phrase his question so that it didn't sound too rude.

"Andy, your grades have been slipping," Mr. Clark started without preamble. "This is the second time I've caught you sleeping in here. This class may only be an elective, but it's an important credit all the same."

"I'm...sorry, Mr. Clark." Andy said, rubbing his head in a self-conscious sort of way. "It's just this class is so tough, I can't concentrate."

"Well, you need to learn to concentrate," the teacher said unsympathetically, though not without a certain kindness. "This assignment may very well be your last chance to maintain your C average. Anymore slip ups, and you're looking to repeat Gym next quarter, the class you'd be taking instead of this one."

Andy gulped nervously at this prospect. He had no real desire to take Gym again after his experience last quarter; the wedgie-incident was too fresh in his mind even after all this time.

Mr. Clark paid him no mind, and stepped back from the boy with a short sigh. Facing away, he turned his head to peer at Andy through the corner of his eye. "I meant what I said earlier," he said seriously. "Use your free-will, and you'll decide not only your own grade, but your own fate as well."

Then, he continued off back towards the front of the classroom, where the door still lay ajar after the rush of the kids. Stopping at Tarah's desk, Mr. Clark turned a sad eye towards the gooped-up girl, as she yanked haplessly on a pigtail. He kindly brushed a few spitballs off her head, letting them fall down to the janitor's duty. Then, he snatched up his own bagged lunch and took off for the cafeteria, letting the door swing shut behind him.

As the doorway closed with a slam, Andy continued to sit idly in his desk, his hand once again flipping a pencil between his fingers. The second hand of the standard clock counted away the time he spent in

contemplation, mulling over Mr. Clark's words like there was some sort of subtext behind them. Soon, even Tarah had left the room, taking with her a multitude of books that no school-child really needed throughout their day. This left the boy all by his lonesome, talking to himself like a hero from an old adventure novel he had picked up a few days ago.

"My own fate..."

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The cafeteria was a crowded place, it was true. A steady stream of slightly-hyper schoolkids were lining up alongside the lunch line, receiving whatever forsaken refuse the cooks had decided to dig up for today. The rest of the students were cluttered at several round tables placed sporadically around the spacious, yet swarming room. With the teachers spaced out throughout, it made for a system that barely managed to constrain the students from bouncing off the walls, yet it was workable nonetheless.

"Dude, I've neva' seen anyone get so much ragging from Samurai Trent," a blond boy with hair over one eye said to him, picking up a big, smelly burrito to jam into his toothy maw.

"You're such a bone head, Champion," a silver-haired lad added in, slurping lazily on a soda bought from the machine next to the door. "If you'd just nod every once and awhile, you'd be able to get away with dozing in class."

"Sorry, guys," Andy said, shining an apple on the front of his shirt. "It's just hard to keep up with all this stuff sometimes."

"Only for you," Silver Hair said.

Andy sighed wearily, and continued to wipe the apple free of any excess dirt that had accumulated. The silver and blond-haired boys, Justin and Slick respectively, tended to be less than supportive whenever they heard that the third wheel of their group had been performing badly at any given task. With Slick, it was mostly to derive a good laugh at some else's expense, if the laugh could be found. And as for

Justin...well, he was just plain critical sometimes.

Not the best friends a guy could have, but they did in a pinch.

Trying to get them off the subject, he tried again. "So, what are you guys going to do for your free-will assignment?" he said somewhat-causally, biting into his Washington Red with a resounding snap.

"What are you talking about, Champion?" Justin muttered, regarding his can of cola with a distracted eye. "Whatever we want."

"Yeh," Slick chimed in, his mouth still half full of burrito stuffing. "This is our chance to pull off all the stuff we've always wanted to do, this time with the whole faculty backin' us up!"

"Just think of it," Justin started, putting his hand to his chin in a devious sort of post. "Sneaking into the girl's locker room..."

"Spray painting the statue of Saint Starlight..." Slick added, leaning forward with a slummy smile smeared with taco sauce.

"Putting out the tires of Old Windbag Magee..."

"Buying the Little Mermaid animated series at half-price..."

"Stealing the locker key out of the...*what?*" Justin suddenly snapped back to look at the other, with the oddest look on his face.

The blond haired boy started at bit at the gazes of both Justin and Andy, then scooted away slightly.

"Uh, they're for my little sisters?" he tried, making a shrugging motion with his shoulders.

Slick was fortunately saved from having to explain this further by a high pitched, slightly chirpy voice. "Uh, Andrew Champion?"

Andy lurched up at the sound of his name, turning to where he had first heard the voice. His face visibly fell when he recognized whom it was. Clad in gray overalls, a myopic pigtailed girl was standing just to the side of him, her eyes wide and unassuming. Though her glasses were so thick, one could hardly see her eyes, anyways.

Looking to the both sides of his chair nervously, he looked back towards the girl with the fakest smile one could possibly contour. "Uh, Reichardt, right?" he tried, his lip curling up to show just a little bit too much gum above his teeth.

Tarah nodded briefly, paying his antics no mind. "Professor Clark thought you needed extra help on this assignment," she said enthusiastically, speaking like chipmunk old in a position of authority. "I'm going to be your partner for this free-will project!"

Andy's eyes bugged out slightly as he fought to retain this new information without passing out. "W-what?" he stammered, lurching away from the girl as if she had bubonic plague. "P-Partner?"

She was completely oblivious to this, too. "That's right!" she answered cheerfully, nodding her head once. "We'll be working together on this so we both can do good." Her glasses seemed to fog over, as she got more and more excited. "I've never had a partner before!" she exclaimed, putting a hand on the boy's shoulder. "I have all sort of scientific research we can try to get ahead of the rest!"

Andy burbled out something in between a gasp and a gurgle. "R-Really?" he managed to get out, his right eye developing a slight tic.

Tarah cheerfully went on ahead of him. "Well, I guess I'll see you later!" she chirped, mercifully cutting the "conversation" short. With a bounce in her step, she moved on back towards her own table in the

lunchroom, becoming just another face in the crowd.

Andy watched her go with a dazed expression, having been hit with way too much at once. Then suddenly, with only a few snickers as forewarning, he felt the added weight of his two friends looming behind him. "Looks like Andrew Champion's got a date with Terrible Tarah!" Slick said with a laugh, throwing an arm around the boy's shoulder.

"Rock on, Champion," Justin mocked, making a thumbs-up motion.

Andy looked back and forth between his brutal buddies, wondering which one of them could possibly be convinced to give him support. Finding neither to be sufficient, he stared straight down the middle of the lunch table, and softly banged his head against it.

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Lunch passed into 3rd Period, 3rd into 4th, and soon it was time to leave Starlight Jr. High for home. A medium-sized Joltswagon pulled up to the carpool around 3:15, rocking slightly with its old, automotive age. It waited patiently among the kids as the correct kid gathered up his backpack and hustled into the vehicle like it was his only salvation. Then, with a small sputter of exhaust, the car was off again, pulling away from the lot and off towards the main road.

Andy watched with relief as the school sank into the distance, falling behind the hills like a sinking city. He then turned around towards the front of the car, where he had a better view of his ever-changing surroundings. The trees made a comforting blanket against the world as they whizzed by, enveloping the car in a sea of brown and green. It was like some deity had heard the boy's call for friendlier skies, and had sought to appease him through the peacefulness of a nature-filled drive.

It had been a long day, to say the least. Justin and Slick had made it their business to tease him about Tarah practically all day, right up to carpool. It made no difference that he had hardly ever spoken to the dorky girl before today; as far as they were concerned, Andy had been dating her since the beginning of time. It boggled his mind how such falsehood managed to infest the minds of the schoolkids, and he only hoped this disease didn't spread itself among the rest of his peers.

Andy arranged himself as comfortably as his safety belt would allow, and sunk into the car seat with a long sigh. As the boy struggled to melt into the treated leather, the driver took a brief look behind in concern. "Something the matter, Andrew?" she asked, turning back towards the windshield.

He made a noise that sounded like a cross between a moan and a snort. "I've had better days, Aunt Mary," he said honestly.

The young lad placed his hands on his stomach and looked up towards the open sunroof. "I'm supposed to come up with something special to do for my Philosophy enrichment class," he explained. "An exercise of free-will, that's what Mr. Clark is saying."

"Free-will?" Mary exclaimed, making a short gesture with her hands before firmly putting them back on the wheel. "How exciting! It sounds like your professor is a real go-getter."

Andy chuckled to himself in almost a resentful sort of way. "It's really not as great as it sounds," he said.

"Oh, but there's nothing too hard about free-will," she insisted, moving the steering wheel slightly towards the left. "It's something you have every day. Mr. Clark is just giving you a chance to express it in ways you haven't thought of before."

The Joltswagon carefully made a stop at the intersection, about four feet from the sign. Mary quickly glanced to the left and right for oncoming traffic, and took a look in the rear-view mirror to check for any cars in back. Once she saw that everything was clear, she quickly dug into the purse on the passenger seat for some unknown object. Coming up with a peppermint, she gathered the object between two fingers, and brought the stick back into first gear again.

They had been driving for about half-a-minute when Andy had started talking again. "It just...kinda hurts my head thinking about it," he murmured, almost to himself. "I mean, I guess I have free-will, but it doesn't seem to effect anything. I mean, I still go to school everyday and I still worry about stupid things. What's so free about that?"

The woman shook her head in disbelief. "Andrew, there's free-will in every aspect of life," she told him, carefully turning the wheel so that the car rounded the turn. Upon finding a straightaway, she took one hand off the wheel and placed the peppermint on the empty ashtray. "Okay, there's a peppermint," she said, turning back towards the windshield. "What are you going to do?"

"Huh," Andy was a bit flabbergasted at this strange situation. He took a closer look at the peppermint, as if it was going to start sprouting legs and dancing the Macarena. "What do you mean?"

"Do you choose to take the peppermint, or not?" she repeated calmly.

The boy struggled to keep from rolling his eyes. "It's a peppermint," he said, losing interest in this thread of conversation fast. "Of course I'm going to take it."

"Ah, but no one's making you take it," Mary said pointedly, making a small motion with her finger before returning her hand to the wheel. "You've got to do that on your own."

As the woman resumed a tight turn through a loopy street in the subdivision, Andy continued staring to stare straight ahead in confusion. "I don't get it."

"Maybe you're feeling sick that day," she started up, keeping her eyes carefully on the road. "Maybe you distrust it on grounds of it being so close to an ashtray. There are many reasons why you would choose not to take the peppermint as there are why you should. Reasons only you can act on."

The car was rolling up to an intersection, a crossover between Lolo Drive and Kirby Parkway. After coming to a stop, Mary made the turn onto Kirby, maneuvering the vehicle carefully past the small pothole that the city hadn't patched up. "Andrew, life's no different than you and the peppermint," she continued, slowing the car down to around five mph. "The stakes may be higher, but it's all a simple decision, once you put your mind to it."

Andy's face knotted up in confusion, his eyebrows twisting into an odd configuration. "If you say so," he assented, shrugging off his doubts with a flex of his shoulder.

"I do say so!" Aunt Mary chuckled jovially as she turned the Joltswagon into their driveway. "I do!"

The peppermint sat abandoned on the ashtray.

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More Coming Up...!

2 - Tuesday

D&C

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TUESDAY

The exhaust beat steadily on the boy's legs as the Joltswagon left carpool for the open road. He watched the car flash behind a stream of trees before it disappeared altogether.

Andy stood before Starlight Jr. High with considerable trepidation, gripping the strap of his backpack tightly. He had not made the slightest bit of headway against his assignment, and he had the sinking feeling that he would somehow be judged for not doing so. If it wasn't Mr. Clark, then it would be Justin and Slick, when they had gleaned the information from him. Academics they were not, but they always let him know when he was behind in some way.

Standing haplessly for a moment. Then he grit his teeth, gathered up his book bag, and made for the school.

Which, today, was quite a different place.

Andy edged off to the side to make way for a kid coming to the back of him, who was currently wearing a large fedora on his head. Tromping over to the side of the schoolyards, the kid leaned against a tree and folded his arms, scanning the terrain for prey. After spying a rabbit, he took off after it, brandishing his belt like a whip. "Die, evildoer!" he cried out as his pants loosened around the waist, running off from the right onto the baseball field.

It was like this everywhere he looked. All around him were kids doing bizarre things, like throwing cards at people and jump roping right into the school. Two kids were even caught in a wrestling match with a teacher, trying to take down the man with a series of headlocks and full nelsons. Too bad they were losing badly, the teacher happening to know a few things about wrestling...and judo, and a whole bunch of stuff in between.

Andy stumbled haphazardly through the crowd before spying Justin and Slick, quietly sizing up the crazy situations, too cool for school. "What's going on here?" he asked the two, running over to them as means of seeking shelter against the storming students.

"Mr. Clark's little pet project made a splash," Slick commented, lightly combing his hair so that it more stylishly covered his eye. "Everybody's getting into it and goin' wild."

"Everybody's acting like a dork, you mean." Justin grumbled, looking over his peers with extreme distaste. "This is so uncool."

A monster card went flying out of nowhere into the small group, the kind featuring creatures with names like Grand Silver Gigatex. Andy, Justin, and Slick made way for the group of seventh graders rushing up, laughing as they carried their monster summoning game to a whole new level.

"So uncool," Justin concurred again, shaking his head in disdain.

Andy looked over at the card players with confusion. Despite the silliness of their action, they seemed to be having fun, so he had a hard time agreeing with Justin. Keeping his comments to himself, he instead opted to change the subject. "So...what are you guys doing for the free-will project?" he asked.

Justin blinked a bit, then glanced both ways to make sure no one was paying attention. Then, he leaned in close and gave Andy his first real smile, albeit a sneaky one. "We got a special thing in store for the girls in Gym," he said slyly, looking like the cat that had caught the canary.

"Yeh," Slick joined in, sliding next to his friend and thrusting his thumbs towards his chest. "Those cute chicky-boos are gonna see the full swingin' hipness of Slick C. Limestone."

Andy nodded in a half-patronizing way, subconsciously backing away from the amorous duo. Maybe he was underdeveloped, but he never could understand their obsession with girls...

A swish of green hair caught the corner of his vision, turning the boy's thoughts away from his judgmental accession of his friends' fancies...and into a fancy all his own. As Andy whirled away from his group, a lovely girl perhaps a little older than himself filled his vision, popping into the center of his thoughts with her long, full mane of green hair and her bright, gleaming eyes. A cap sat lightly on her head, with the words "TAB" printed on the front and two bat wings sticking out of the sides. All of this led up to an image of a tomboyish, yet extremely vivacious babe, able to woo the boys while kicking their butts in every sport offered.

Justin caught his ogling and rolled his eyes. "She's out of your league, Champion," he said to the other boy, his tone sarcastic yet with a touch of warning to it.

"It could happen," he insisted, never breaking his gaze for a moment.

"Yeah, when my grandma wins the All Starlight Beauty Pageant," Slick said, snorting into the cold morning air. "And she was ugly at twenty."

Andy half-ignored his friend and continued to contemplate the distant girl, who was admiring the basketball twirling on her finger. An idea was coming quickly to mind, causing his eyes to widen slightly in realization. "As a matter of fact," he said, his eyes now narrowing slightly with determination. "For my freewill exercise, I'm going to talk to Maru Mari by the end of this week." He slowly put his hands on his hips in an expression of confidence, his face shy but unrepentant.

The other two were less than impressed by this declaration. "Whatever," Justin moaned, waving him off and turning his back. "You'll never pull it off."

"Yeah," Slick said, a tad bit more sympathetic than the cold boy. "You sure you don't wanna go tour the girls' changing room? Adventure of a lifetime, dude."

"I'm sure," Andy responded with a smile, letting his bravado get even higher. He turned back towards the duo. "Don't you worry about a thing," he continued to reassure them. "You're going to see an all new me. No more wimpy waffling for Andy Champion..."

"Excuse me, guys," a soft soprano broke into his monologue, cutting him off. The boy looked up from his diatribe at the source of this disruption, and as a consequence felt his heart leap into his throat. Mari was standing right there with her hands on her hips, smiling innocently at the trio. For the second time this day, Andy was awestruck, perplexed...and completely overwhelmed as far as his mental capacities were concerned.

Mari raised an eyebrow momentarily at the boy's inaction, a perplexed expression on her face. After waving her hand to get his attention, she next pointed at an object rolling at the boy's feet. It was the basketball she was playing with earlier, which had somehow fallen inside the trio's inner circle...not that the boy had noticed. Justin and Slick, however, had gotten the idea, and quickly stepped aside, with Slick pulling the lovelorn Andy along with him.

Smoothly, the girl entered into the space the three boys had left for her. Bending over briefly, she scooped the ball up into her arm, tucking it against her side. "Thanks," she responded pleasantly, straightening the bill of her cap with her free hand. And then, she was running back towards her girlfriends, her green hair tossing behind her like a flag of a victorious freedom fighter.

After Mari had departed, Slick slipped over to Andy's side, a twisting smirk on his face. "Some syrup to go with your waffle, Andy-boy?" he said slyly, leaning lightly on the boy's shoulder.

Andy looked down at the pavement, a hot flush of embarrassment on his face. "I still got...four days," he murmured to himself.

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The confines of the school were alive with the crackle of adolescent chatter, most of it frank and unabashed. In Starlight Jr. High, there was a fifteen minute break between second and third periods, where the students were free to wander the halls until the ring of the next bell. Many of the students used the time to talk to friends, complain about teachers, and perhaps discuss plans for a prank on teachers.

Andrew Champion had better ideas.

The boy was waiting behind the corner of a wall, his expression a cross between a big-game hunter and a peeping tom. He was careful to keep from overextending himself into the hallway, so anyone who looked would only see a fluff of green hair and big, bulging eyes. Within his sights was, again, Maru Mari, posting a bulletin for soccer tryouts on a corkboard. With her eyes glowing with eagerness, she was completely unaware of the situation she was in, just like a deer in the sights of a shotgun...held by a one-year-old with no fine motor control.

"C'mon, Andy," he urged himself under his breath, gripping the corner of the wall tighter. "You can do this."

The girl was just about finished placing her notice, and Andy knew he had no more time left to procrastinate. Steeling his muscles, he prepped himself like an Olympic runner about to start the 100 Meter Dash. The boy's gaze heated up in determination, as if he was going to start shooting lasers from his eyes. Then, robotically, he began to move forward into the heat of battle.

"Hi, Andrew," a chirping soprano broke out behind him, like stain glass shattering in an otherwise peaceful church. His nerves twisting like licorice whips, he quickly turned around to find Tarah standing behind him, her arms behind her back in an innocent sort of pose. "W-what are you doing?" he quickly got out, stiffening up as if braking a bicycle within three inches.

"I needed to talk to you about..." The girl halted her dialogue to look beyond him, where Mari was. "Are you peeping on her or something?" she inquired, peering over his shoulder ostentatiously. "That's kinda a gross thing to do. Though I guess some girl's might like that."

"Ah, um..." The boy was practically breaking out into hives at her insinuations. "That was..." He suddenly jerked away from her and retreated completely around the corner, where Mari couldn't see him. "What did you say you wanted again?" he tried, rubbing the back of his head nervously.

"Professor Clark wants us to work together on this project, right?" Tarah began without preamble, her face honest and earnest. "Can I come over to your house this evening? We can get more work done that way."

"T-tonight?" Andy stammered out, scootching away from her as if she was a pit bull with rabies. "Tonight's not really a good night, y'see, I got a lot of work to do in Algebra and there's some chores to be done..." The boy's mind was racking itself for any excuse it could find. He really didn't want Justin and Slick knowing that the school nerd had gone over to his house.

At the end of Andy's babbling, Tarah's face had fallen until it practically hit the floor. "Oh," she murmured, bolstering a look of unhappy confusion. "Maybe another day, I guess." With her head lowered, the girl shuffled on down into the halls, her hands dangling loosely by her sides. And the boy was crestfallen by the girl's aura of depression, a look almost as dour on his own face.

"...hey, how about Wednesday?" he suddenly piped up, saying the first thing that had come to the mind.

The girl halted mid-step and turned on her heel, her pigtails flaying outwards. "Really?" she said hopefully, a look of excitement dancing behind her spectacles.

An embarrassed flush took over his face, as the situation was quickly turning much more heated than he originally intended. "Well, I don't have work on my hard classes that day..." Andy said, trying to put a damper on the excitement.

This did little to quell Tarah's good mood. "Okay, Andrew!" she cheered. "We'll get together on Wednesday!"

Her words brought on a renewed sweat in Andy, as he suddenly felt the presence of the rest of the children in the hallway. "Uh, could you not say 'get together?'" he said, looking nervously back and forth for anyone watching them.

His nervousness went completely over the girl's head. "Why?" she asked, putting her hands on her hips.

"He doesn't want anyone to know how much he loves you," a slippery voice squirmed in from behind the two. Andy jerked around madly to find Justin folding his arms in a 'well, well, well' sort of pose. His smirk was a razor edge carved into his face, preparing to cut the boy down to size. "Right, Champion?"

"It's a dorkapalooza!" Slick chimed in, spreading his arms as if he was some showboat announcer. "Nerds in love! Your thoughts please?" He thrust his pencil in front of their faces as if it was a microphone, seeming waiting for insider comment.

Andy fidgeted like mad within the wrath of his fiends for friends, trying to figure out some quick means of escape. He had almost decided upon the appropriate path of retreat when he saw a figure that now filled him with dread instead of love. Mari had dropped her task at the bulletin board to move into the scene, an interested look on her face. "You two make a funny couple," she said, her pleasant smile a sharp contrast to the look of abject horror on the boy's face.

Andy's eyes darted back and forth between Mari, Justin, Slick, and Tarah. The boys looked like they were going to bust their guts all over the floor in peals of laughter. Mari was cocking her head curiously like a puppy dog whom had just heard a strange noise. Tarah was oddly pensive, leaning away from the guys and looking to Andy for help. He had currently balanced out all their factors into a single course of action, one that he knew he could not deter from.

"See you, Tarah," he said quickly, mustering up a quick smile for her benefit. Then ZIP! he was off towards the other end of the school, leaving the four behind like dust in the wind.

"Wait, hold up!" Slick called out after him, shaking a piece of paper he had plucked from the bulletin board. "Do her glasses smash your face when you make out? Inquiring minds want to know!"

"The press is waiting, Champion," Justin snickered, slowly following after him with the blond boy.

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"I just can't do it," Andy was complaining later, as he picked at his food with his fork. "It's too much trouble."

"Oh, Andy, it can't be all that bad," Aunt Mary said, lowering her own fork and looking at the boy with concern."

"But it is," he insisted. "The day was a disaster. And I don't think it's going to get any easier."

"Hum," the woman sighed with a disappointed sort of air to her voice, not so much with the boy as with the situation.

The family: Andy, Aunt Mary, Uncle Noah, and Grandpa Moses, was sitting around the table for their evening meal. It was Salisbury steak night, an all-time favorite in the small household. Everybody in the family was a heavy eater, so there were generous portions on all of the plates along with large helpings of mashed potatoes and beets. Rounding off the meal was a tall glass of milk, a fine addition to the balance of the meal...and the perfect thing to drown your school-time sorrows in.

Uncle Noah took a large swig of his milk, as if the glass was filled with bourbon instead. "Maybe you're just shooting too high with this assignment," he tried, wiping off a milk mustache from his already impressive facial hair. "Nobody said you had to conquer the world with your choices."

"But the poor boy was so close last time," Mary insisted, shaking her head in disagreement. "I'm sure with effort, Andy will be able to get out how he really feels." Like Justin and Slick, the family was well aware of Andy's feelings toward Maru Mari. Unlike with the two boys, however, he had seen fit to tell them about it up front, while Justin and Slick had to deduce it by themselves. They were a close-knit

family in that regard, even if they were an unorthodox one.

Andy sighed into the napkin on his lap, his head lowered in frustration. "It's not just that scene with Tarah," he explained, making a small swirl in his mashed potatoes with his fork. "I choked two more times after that when I tried again. It's like the incident is telling me that I'm not supposed to exercise my free-will, that I'm just supposed to leave things be."

"Yet, of course, there are alternatives to free-will," a gravely voice spoke up from the other side of the table. Andy looked up in curiosity to find Grandpa Moses staring at him pointedly from his half eaten meal. "What do you mean, Grandpa?" he asked curiously.

"Dad, don't confuse him now," Noah chided lightly, a touch of respectful warning to his voice.

"The boy has to do his assignment, but no one said he had to agree with the theme supported by it," the old man continued, ignoring his son's protests. "Simply explain the actions you have taken, and that accord to the results, you have decided you don't believe in free-will."

"But that's not going to empower Andy!" Mary jumped in, looking up from her cutting of the Salisbury steak. "We want him to believe himself strong enough to make his own choices."

"Is there any reason to make him believe he's stronger than he really is?" Moses said, putting down his fork. "Stronger than Fate? If we had people stronger than their own fate, we wouldn't have all these unmoving cowards in this world who refuse to take a stand for what they believe in. No Andy," he then looked back towards the youngest member of the family. "Life's one track, and the best thing you can do for yourself is understand that you're on the track, going to whatever ultimate destiny it leads to."

"That doesn't make any sense," Noah insisted, putting another bite of steak to his mouth. "You act like nobody has ever done anything big and heroic before."

"That's just their own path," Moses responded. "Those 'heroes' are simply on a track that leads to more productive behavior. It's nothing they're doing outside of Fate."

Noah shook his head and swallowed his mouthful. "I'm still going to say that any old joe can forge themselves into a doer of great things," he insisted, stabbing his fork into his meat and folding his arms, as if he had just slain a great beast.

"I say Andy already has that power now," Mary threw in with a self-satisfied sort of huff.

Andy regarded this exchange with a passive eye, drinking in all the knowledge without feeling the need to add anything in. He looked down at his half-eaten Salisbury steak, still speared with his fork. "A heroic path..." he murmured to himself, eyes half-closed in contemplation. "Am I a hero?"

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More Coming Up...!

3 - Wednesday

D&C

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WEDNESDAY

Outside Starlight Jr. High, there was a large ruckus going on next to the new gymnasium. All over the sports field and black top, kids were playing soccer, baseball, and various hodgepodge games composed of combination. This was due to Mr. Clark's assignment, which was encouraging many to stand up and create their own variant on the school's popular sports. It was encouraging creativity, and it seemed to be a good thing.

Inside Starlight Jr. High was another story.

"No one's gonna even see us comin'," a muffled voice whispered through the hallway, snickering with uncontrollable mirth. "Man, this is gonna be so sweet."

"Shut up," a second voice hissed back, "Your voice carries."

Justin and Slick had managed to give the P.E. teacher the slip, and had entered unannounced into the gymnasium without anyone missing them. Keeping away from the basketball team on the courts, they slipped and skulked through the complex's small hallways, and no one was the wiser. Soon, they had arrived at the girls' locker room, a relatively new addition built to accommodate the girl's basketball team. And the place where actual girls were going to be showering off very soon.

Moving in a pair, the two slipped next to the locker room door, and put their ears next to the wall. Upon hearing female voices, they moved a step back from the door, and leaned up against the wall. "Think this is gonna work, dude?" Slick said, folding his arms and peering at the boy through the part in his hair.

"We took care of everything beforehand, remember," Justin admonished his friend, "All we have to do now is wait."

Thanks to Justin's rich family, the duo had been granted access to the school after dark. Within a few hours time, they had rigged one of the shower knobs to instead trigger the sprinkler system within the locker room. Another hour's work resulted in the hot water heater supplying heat to the sprinkler system. It was the longest, and most ambitious project the boys had ever undertaken.

And when that fateful girl turned on that knob...

"All wet, all hot!" Slick practically sang, meshing himself against the wall like a streamer of slime dripping down. He sighed, thinking about all those lovely beauties pouring from the locker room, screaming their lungs out. "Think they'll be wearing something other than sports bras?" he asked.

"Could be," Justin smiled to himself, already starting to fantasize. "I know those two exchange student haven't gotten theirs in yet."

"Oooh, yeah!" the blond boy cheered, pumping his fist in the imagined victory. "Lacy, white goodness!"

"Yup," Justin smiled again, letting the peak on one canine tooth slip beyond his lip.

The two made themselves a bit more comfortable on the wall, arranging their backs so that the painted brick didn't dig into their skin. "I can't wait to see all those wet, slippery girls," Slick practically moaned. "Mari..."

"Janey..." Justin joined in lustily, a bit more distinguished than his friend.

"Carol..." Slick continued, a streamer of drool falling off his lip. Then, a strange, twitching expression formed on his face. "Hey, isn't Tarah going to be there, too?" he asked, raising his one visible eyebrow in question.

After letting the image form into their heads, the two turned to each other and made a face. "Eeewww!!!"

Once they had gotten that out of their system, the two boys resumed waiting for the plan to be unleashed. Nervous and anticipant, they began to grow impatient as well, tapping their fingers against themselves in a repetitive motion. The sound of the basketball team practicing became like white noise on a psychologist's office, subtle yet more noticeable than the manufacturer gave it credit for. The wall was hard against their backs, grating against their spines enough to make one wonder if some permanent back injury would emerge from the ordeal.

It was Slick who first broke the silence. "Um, isn't this taking too long?" he said, gritting his teeth and quickly looking back to the locker room door.

Justin remained focused on the door for a little longer, before turning to Slick. "Yeah, a little bit," he responded, his face starting to lose the patience it held before.

They both stood waiting a moment more, twin expressions of screwed malcontent on their faces. A sterile silence took over the hall, cold and frosty like a hospital waiting room.

"Ya know," Slick started, a disappointed scowl coming to his face. "I bet they're not even in there at all."

"They couldn't have left, dolt," Justin snapped, feeling antsy with his impending failure. "We were at the door the entire time." He put his ear up to the wall once again. Not a sound emanated from the girl's locker room, save the biting hiss of vacancy.

Slick pulled away from the wall, having also put his ear up to it. "Let's go in," he whispered, stretching his hand towards the handle of the door. "I gotta see this for myself."

"Idiot, wait!" Justin hissed out, snatching at the boy's shirt. "You'll get us caught!" But Slick moved forward as if he hadn't heard in, and pulled open the door to the girl's shower room. He slipped inside the crack of the door, as a cool wave of sanitized air made its way out. Left with little else to do, Justin went in after his friend, gritting his teeth in irritation.

The two boys steadily made their way across the cool, tiled floor, looking cautiously at the eerily empty bath hall. Their silent footfalls made up the only noise in the shower room, as not even a drip of water could be heard impacting against the sinks and shower floors. It was like nobody had taken a step in here for years, save Justin and Slick.

Slick quickly glanced back and forth, a low growl coming from his lip. Then, he pounded his fist against the wall in disgust. "This is bogus," he complained, snorting derisively into the cold, shower room air. "There ain't any more hot babes here than at a sci-fi dork convention!"

"I don't get it," Justin mumbled, seemingly talking to himself rather than his friend. "The girls are supposed to enter the shower room at 11:30 sharp."

"But if were going to wrangle a couple of pervs, we do it earlier," a third voice suddenly broke out from the silence, light and airy even in the echo of the acoustics-driving room.

"...huh?" Slick suddenly squeaked out in a confused sort of voice. A thick bead of sweat rolled down his chilled temple, the cold caress of dread taking its bony hand unto the boy's heart.

The voice seemed to smile in the darkness. "Get 'em!"

From beyond the corners and in the stalls, a dozen teenaged girls suddenly poured onto the duo, their intent anything but friendly. They slammed into Justin and Slick and separated them, bringing them to opposite corners of the room. Six girls detained Justin by forcing his arms up against the wall, and another six did the same for Slick. In about seven seconds, the boys found they were completely unable to move, pinned like crucifix victims in the dark ages of the world.

Justin valiantly struggled against the bonds of feminine flesh, succeeding only in hurting his wrists. "What...the hell...!?" he growled out, looking back and forth between the pretty, yet devilish looking faces.

Slick was less resistant than his friend, glancing at the girls with a nervous smile pasted on his face. "Y'know, this might qualify as one of my fantasies if I didn't think I was about to die," he said, a slight nervous chuckle escaping from his nonchalant facade.

"Well, you're not going to die," the same light voice spoke out from the other side of the room. "Just a little chill."

Justin and Slick both looked up from their bound positions to see the thirteenth girl exit one of the shower stalls, taking easy steps despite the tension of the scene. Her long, green hair was like a wet blanket, clinging to her shoulders in large swaths. "Maru Mari?" Justin spoke up, his eyebrow cocking upwards. "This was you?"

Mari smiled, oddly pleasant despite the underlying danger coming from her aura. "One of the girl's from your 5th period class yesterday heard about your plan," she explained, folding her arms. "She wanted to tell the teacher, but I decided this would be much more fun." The weird twinkle in her eye seemed to imply that she really thought it so, rather than her statements just being the lining of a venomous intent.

"Uh..." Slick piped up semi-shyly, grinning the grin. "What's 'this?'"

"This this," Mari replied. Then, she turned to the shower room door. "Bring it, Fiona!" she called out, putting a cupped hand to her mouth.

"Okay, Mari!" A voice responded, sounding a bit faint.

Justin and Slick's eyes followed the wave of sound to the door, which was beginning to pull open. Soon, a nondescript girl came forth from outside the shower room, holding a long garden hose. Their hearts were filled with dread as they saw their plan being turned against them, the hose being handed to Mari as if it were an executioner's axe. "Like to see girls soaked, do you?" Mari said with a wide smile. "I think you guys are the ones wet behind the ears!"

"She's evil," Justin pondered to himself, staring transfixed at the gleaming nozzle of the hose.

"She's crazy!" Slick added, also making no other attempt

"No, no," Mari gripped the hose like a cannon, a devil-may-care grin on her face. "She's gonna have loads of fun!"

All the girls save the green-haired one had backed away from the duo, leaving their hands firmly bound with twine connected to wall hangers. A good thing too, because a large bulge was already starting to force its way through the length of the hose. Justin grit his teeth in anticipation of the frigid blast, following the bulge like a blood clot to the heart. Slick was practically hyperventilating, stretching his hands against the twine hard enough to carve notches into his wrists.

"Hope you brought a change of clothes," Mari crooned, bringing the hose up to bear as the pressure reached the nozzle.

"Not my beautiful hair!" Slick whined one last time, cringing.

And then a bolt of ice-cold water exploded from the nozzle, jetting out as rocks from a volcano. "AhhhHHHH...!" Justin and Slick screamed as they were soaked to a crisp, their calls echoing harmlessly inside the walls of the girls' shower room.

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"I don't know if I can really do this," Andy said slightly to himself, cringing away from the door like a rat from a cat.

"You already made the appointment with her," Mary reminded him, gently pushing him towards the door. "You've got to fulfill it."

Sweat was rolling down his head, and goose bumps covered his arms from the shoulder down. "Maybe you guys can just say I'm not feeling well or something," he tried hopefully, turning to his aunt and uncle with a slightly abashed smile on his face.

The doorbell rang a second time, jarring the boy's nerves like a plucked piano wire.

"We're not going to make excuses for you, Andy," Noah said sternly, folding his arms adamantly. "Now, get going and let that girl in!"

Andy sighed, defeated. He turned away from his unhelpful family and proceeded towards the door, putting his hand on the knob. He had already looked through the peephole when the doorbell first rang, so there was no point in delaying the inevitable. He turned the knob and wrenched the door open, trying to stomach his nervousness before he disillusioned his guest.

From the other side of the door, Tarah's smile greeted him like an insurance agent on a holiday, unwelcome yet irrefutable. "Hi, Andrew!" she said cheerily, her face increasingly gleeful every moment. "I'm sorry I'm late!"

"H-hi," Andy responded, remembering himself just in time for politeness. He took in her appearance: a black tank top with a pair of khaki shorts smeared with grass stains. In her arms was a small jar of bugs bouncing against the glass in a vain attempt at escape. All in all, she looked like a reject from a public

television nature show.

Time for contemplating this was dwindling, as the girl was making her way through the door. Andy stepped aside to make room for her and, just like that, Terrible Tarah was in the house, as if she was a family friend stopping for a visit.

It was weird.

"I was catching bugs in the evening," Tarah said to him, handing over the glass jar. "I wanted to show them to you when I came over."

"Uh huh," Andy responded laconically, taking the jar and looking at it with wide eyes. Most of the things inside had frightened him as a young child, and still gave him quivers even today.

"All the interesting bugs come out in the evening, so I tried to catch them before I came," Tarah responded, seemingly taking no notice of his disgust. She resumed taking in her surrounding, looking around the room like a curious monkey. She soon turned towards Mary and Noah, who were waiting at the entrance to the den. "Are those your parents?" she asking, pointing her finger at them like a child requesting a new toy.

"Um, yeah, kinda," Andy snapped back to attention, putting the jar under his arms. "This is my Aunt Mary and Uncle Noah. I'm...staying with them now," he said, gesturing towards the two.

"It's very nice to meet you, Tarah," Mary nodded, taking the initiative for pleasantries.

"Uh huh," Tarah nodded enthusiastically, walking up to them and extending her hand. "Me too!"

In the time the girl was busy shaking their hands like some sort of room worker, Andy took the time to get used to the idea of the school nerd in his house. (Nothing's gonna happen) he thought to himself, idly

rocking back and forth. (Everything's fine)

With that in his head, he meandered on over to the cheerful trio, where Tarah was shaking Noah's hand. He quickly got her attention. "So...you wanna start working now?" he asked her, trying not to lay too much eye contact on her.

"Sure," she said, walking over to him with an eager smile. (and of course staring him directly in the face) The pigtailed girl quickly brought one of the glass jars up to bear. "I think we could study these neat bugs," she said, holding up one of them for him to inspect. "See if they act on free-will."

Andy almost had to suppress a laugh. It was clear on where Tarah's brain currently was: right in the middle of a nature show on public television. "I...don't think that's what Mr. Clark had in mind," he said lightly, pushing the jar away.

"You sure?" Tarah asked, thrusting the jar to his nose again. "They're really cool."

Before Andy could debate on what was to be considered "cool", she was already going into the specifics of her hobby. "See this big one?" she bubbled, pointing out a rather groady looking creature. "It only comes out at night. And this one, it dies just after it reproduces."

The boy stood there politely listening at she continued to babble away about her interests. Another interesting effect was happening too; every time she span the jar to draw attention to another bug, she was unconsciously unscrewing the cap that kept all of them safely locked in.

"And here's a little tick I found in the yard," she added in, pointing to the little green one hovering around at the top of the jar. "They burrow under your skin real good."

"There are ticks in the yard?" Mary piped up, an extremely anxious expression coming to her face. "And now one's in the house?"

"Don't worry," she smiled cheerfully. "It's safe inside the glass...oh, there it goes!" she suddenly cried out, her eyes widening slightly as a small speck darted out from the half opened jar and started springing all over the place.

"ACK!" Mary suddenly shrieked, jumping about a foot back. "KillitkillitKILL IT!"

"I got this one," Noah said in a brawny sort of voice, clenching his fists as if to smash the bug into dust.

"Wait, don't hurt it!" Tarah hollered out, waving her arms around in a panic. "It's a living creature!"

"It's a devil!" the man insisted, moving over to the tick's current position and throwing punches at it. "Time to exorcise!"

Andy put his hand on his head in quiet disbelief. "Is this Murphy's Law?" he supposed for a moment, as the chaos around continued to swell and boil.

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Time passed and floodwaters subsided. Andy was now up in his room with Tarah, figuring that they'd get work done better in comfort and silence. The room wasn't exceptionally large, but it was enough for two people to occupy. With the door closed, it made for a cozy little hovel for the two teens to curl themselves up in. Cozy enough that Andy was still glad that his friends had no idea on how close he was to the braided girl tonight.

Placing her hand on the electric globe, Tarah marveled how the streamers of lightning flew to her fingertips. "This is neat!" she said enthusiastically, rapping her fingertips against the glass.

"Uh, yeah," Andy responded, trying his best to humor her. "I got that at a science exhibit two years

back."

"That was the Aviana exhibit, right?" she queried, straightening her glasses on the bridge of her nose.

"Right," Andy smiled, a little more humor in his voice now.

Tarah smiled back and proceeded to the bed Andy was lying on, bringing with her a lukewarm plate of linguini. Against Mary's judgment, they had opted to bring their meals upstairs, so they could work while they ate. She placed her food on a small end table, and sat down on the bed next to where he was lying. "Now what?" she asked, looking down at the boy's flash of sea green hair.

Andy brought his pen to his lip, studying the blank page before him. "I guess we start on this free-will thing," he started up, glancing towards the girl from the corner of his eye. "You have anything?"

Her response to this question was brief and blunt. "Nothing."

The boy started at this, and raising himself on his elbows. "But you're supposed to be smart," he protested. "I mean, you get good grades in everything, right?"

"I'm only really good in sciences," Tarah explained, looking up at the whirling fan above her. "I get Cs in humanities."

"Huh, and I thought you were supposed to help me," he said somewhat bitterly. He sighed and looked down at his hands. "I've been swinging and missing all week with this assignment."

The girl seemed to come to a revelation. "Did you want to talk to Maru Mari yesterday?" she asked him, looking at him furtively. "I'm sorry if I messed it up."

Andy looked at Tarah in surprise, wondering how she had made the connection. But he soon shook it off with a slight chuckle. "That's okay," he told her, offering her a brief smile. "Chances are I would've messed it up on my own anyhow."

"...But you tried," she said, looking at him with sympathy. "Mr. Clark would understand you just wrote something about what you did and turned that in."

"I...don't want to just blow it off," he tried to explain, shaking his head with disdain. "I want to get somewhere in this assignment. It's confusing me, and I want to conquer it."

At that, a light smile flowed to Tarah's lips. "That's neat," she said, cocking her head slightly to the side. "I like to do things like that, too."

Andy turned towards the braided girl, a strange expression on his face. With Tarah's soft expression imploring him, he stared straight through her spectacles, got the first good look at her eyes. They were a calming, pure blue, with both depth and charm swimming in the irises, as well as a measured amount of both innocence and experience.

Their eyes remained locked for a moment more before Andy suddenly broke the contact with a quick moment of his head. "So...uh, what do you want to get out of this assignment?" he asked her, rubbing his head and trying to get rid of the strange feeling he had experienced earlier. "You know...free-will and all that."

"Oh, I don't believe in free-will," Tarah responded quickly, almost a little bit too quickly for the severity of the subject matter.

Andy reared up slightly at this unexpected answer. "You...don't?"

"Yeah, it's a combination of outward stimuli and the inward reaction to it," she explained, flopping down lightly on the bed. "Life is cause and effect, whether the cause takes place within the body or not."

There's no need to say the mind's capable of control when it's just a machine, being controlled itself," Tarah's eyes then narrowed softly behind her glasses, as she stared seemingly through the ceiling. "There's no need to blame people for who they are or what they do. No need to blame anyone."

Andy gaped at the girl as if she had suddenly started speaking a foreign language. The words she spoke seemed as random and incomprehensible as the rest of her statements, yet it was clear that there was something very important behind it. Where was all this coming from? And why wasn't it sitting well with him?

It was becoming clear that this assignment was going to take him to some strange places within his head.

The boy was so deep in thought that he scarcely heard Tarah when he had gotten off his bed. Still, he looked up when he saw her staring down at him. "Andrew, can we rest for a little while," she asked. "I'm feeling tired."

"Um, alright," Andy consented, looking at her cautiously.

She nodded her thanks, and set about wandering the room, absently picking at the various knickknacks again. A moment of silence passed between the two, in which Andy was thinking very hard about saying something. When he had reached a consensus, he bolted off the bed like a rocket launch. "W-why don't we do something fun for a little while?" he asked her.

Tarah turned slowly towards him, a surprised look on her face. "O-okay!" she finally responded, a somewhat excited smile coming to her face.

Andy smiled in return, a slightly abashed look on his face. "That's good," he responded, putting a hand on the back of his head and running it through his hair.

Another brief moment of silence. "So what do you want to do?" she asked eagerly, moving a bit closer to Andy.

He gulped a bit at her close proximity, and looked away. "Well, we have something in the living room that's kinda fun, if a bit weird," Andy said, his hand still within his hair.

Tarah cocked her head to the side. "A videogame?" she asked curiously, blinking a few times.

At this the boy peeked back at her with a small, almost mischievous smile. "Not a videogame, but..."

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The loud reverberation of the karaoke machine rocked the small living room like a car on hydraulics. Its pulsating rhythm sought to control the heartbeat of its audience, pushing them into the mood that suited it; unabashed enthusiasm.

"I still can't believe you purchased that infernal device," Uncle Noah was grumbling to Mary, his hands practically crumpling up the newspaper he held in front of him. "It's caused us nothing but pain."

"Hush," the woman admonished him, taking short sips of her Puar tea. "It was Andy's 11th birthday present, and he's gotten so much enjoyment from it." She put down her cup, and folded her arms in defiance of her husband. If you were to look close, you could see small streak marks where she had gripped the cup too tightly.

The two adults, large wrinkles of stress forming in their eyes, did their best to tolerate the mind numbing song from the high-tech device. Not to mention its overenthusiastic singer.

"WIDE WIDE WORLD, LET ME TAKE YOUR HEART!" Tarah squealed into the microphone, holding it close to her warbling mouth. "ONLY YOU CAN SOOTHE MY SOULLLLL!"

Andy sat on the sofa between his aunt and uncle, staring transfixed at the bespectacled girl who had transformed from a school oddball into some sort of karaoke demon. Politely, he refrained from covering his ears from the high-pitched siren that had made a death by shipwreck more appealing. Instead, he regarded her with a curious sort of stare, strangely entranced by her. (She's really getting into it.)

The song mercifully ended a second or two before the Champion family's eardrums burst. Placing the microphone on top of the machine, Tarah skipped back towards the sofa with a spring in her step. "Was that good, Andrew?" Tarah asked eagerly, smiling widely at the boy before her.

"Uh...it was nice," he generously lied, conjuring up a false smile for the girl's feelings. "Very...enthusiastic."

She noticed no duplicity in his tone, due to either cluelessness or nonobservance. "Thanks," she said, twirling her right braid with a finger.

Andy grinned in return, his pleasant mask becoming real in that instant. For some reason, the situation was simply too feel-good to even worry about the condition of your ears.

Taking a large breath of air and wiping her forehead, Tarah moved aside, leaving the path to the karaoke machine clear for the boy to cross. "It's your turn!" she said cheerily, making a motion towards it.

Andy nodded briefly, then left the sofa to proceed towards the bulky device. Picking up the microphone from where the girl left it, he tapped his finger against it a couple of times, and was rewarded with a few straggled clucks from the speakers. A somewhat silly expression overtook the facial features of Andrew Champion, and he turned towards his audience with a faux-debonair look on his face. "Ladies and gentleman, we are now taking requests," he said in a cool voice to the microphone. "What shall we hear?"

"I like `Talk to Her Heart!'" Tarah called loudly, even though they were only a few feet apart.

The boy cocked an eyebrow at the suggestion, though it did not completely squelch his zeal. "Talk to Her Heart" was a song done by the ten year old group Moi Taurus that was popular back then, but relatively hated now. "Are you sure?" he asked her, cradling the mike lightly in his grip. "It's pretty old."

"Uh huh!" she said eagerly, pumping her fists eagerly. "I can even dance to it!"

Well, if she was willing to dance to it, he was willing to sing it. Committed to the decision made, he plugged in the appropriate number into the machine, while Tarah moved to the front of the room beside him. During the brief time before the song started up, the girl and boy took the time to rearrange some of the furniture so that Tarah would have room to dance. Soon, everything was prepared, and the song was about to start.

The music began with the sound of drum machines, followed by a flurry of computerized brass hits. The pigtailed girl began bouncing back and forth to the beats, her pigtails becoming like the pendulum in grandfather clocks. A bead of sweat rolled down Andy's temple, as he fought to maintain a halfway calm expression. At least a guy, unlike some Moi Taurus hits, *could* sing it.

As he started singing, Tarah began swinging back and forth, making small circular motions with her arms and hands. Her eyes were half closed, and there was a ghost of a smile on her face. She performed a twirl that sent her braids flying like propeller blades, which caused the boy to wince slightly as the hair got a little too close to his eye. But Andy still kept his eye on the girl's form, rocking and rolling with the best of them.

She danced a lot better than she sang.

The music continued onwards, and the song got no better because of it. Yet Andy's mood had improved so much that he could now sing the song with a straight face. Tarah finished an impressive spin and took a brief look at the boy, smiling brightly for him. And he just smiled back, any thought of the project, school kids, and even Maru Mari floating away like a note just played...

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"I didn't know you were such a good dancer," Andy said, taking a small sip from his juice box.

"My mom made me take dancing classes," Tarah said somewhat coyly, a smile of shy pride beaming on her face. "You're real good at singing," she added in, perhaps to take some of the attention off herself.

"I kinda have a lot of practice..." he chuckled, slowly running a hand through his hair.

The two fell into a comfortable silence, sipping from their respective drinks. They were sitting up in a dilapidated tree house in a mighty old oak in the middle of the backyard. Tarah had actually complained at first, claiming that the nails and extra weight hurt the tree. But he had managed to persuade her to come saying that the time outside would be refreshing after blasting their ears out indoors.

With his feet dangling over the side of the tree house, Andy looked over to where the girl was sitting, and then chuckled slightly. Tarah was currently distracted by a small caterpillar crawled up the side of the wood, obviously analyzing and categorizing it in her head. When she caught him, she simply smiled up at him, unabashed by his staring and unembarrassed. And the boy just smiled back,

Suddenly, Tarah straightened up a bit. "My mom's probably coming soon," she said, a slight trace of disappointment in her voice. "I need to get ready to go."

Andy nodded slightly, smiling serenely. "We didn't get a lotta work done, did we?" he said with a small laugh.

The girl giggled in response to this. "So, is your mom or dad coming home soon," she asked, turning her head slightly to face him directly. "Maybe I can convince Mom to let me stay a little longer, so I can meet them."

And then Andy's face darkened just a little bit, and he stared straight up ahead at the roof of the tree house. "They're not coming home," he said softly, his voice deceptive neutral. "They died...car accident."

"Oh..." Tarah squeaked out, her eyes widening for a second. "...sorry,"

Andy turned to the girl with a strained grin. "It's alright," he said, trying to wave off her concern. "It happened a long time ago."

Tarah stared down at her feet, looking embarrassed. "But your aunt and uncle seem pretty nice, right?" she tried, seemingly not sure on how to carry on the conversation.

"Yeah..." he responded, nodding his head. The boy looked back towards the roof again and began to slowly lean back over onto the floor. "Aunt Mary and Uncle Noah were living in a small house before the accident," he said, almost seeming to break off into a monologue. "A week later, they moved into our old house so that I could stay here. After a little while, Grandpa Moses came in too from his small apartment, so I'm never really alone. The guys've been real great to me for these past four years."

"The guys've been great, but...." A strange expression overtook Andy's face, and he sat up again to peer at Tarah. "I was always real close to my mother. You know, talking to her about everything, things like that." He stared off into the distant trees beyond the backyard fence, watching them sway with the slight breeze. "I can still hear her voice sometimes late at night, giving advice. So whenever I'm in trouble, I sometimes try and think about what she might say to me."

The boy suddenly felt a light, moist sensation on his cheek, the telltale twitter of bangs against his face. Reacting strongly to the kiss, he quickly whirled back towards its source, a look of amazement on his face. Tarah was subdued, with a small blush tingeing her cheeks, yet still smiling. Her eyes twinkled lightly within their glass containment, which seemed to reflect his own shocked expression almost perfectly.

The two continued to stare at each other...

"Tarah, your mom is here," ...and a projected voice suddenly burst out from the back porch, all but destroying the mood which had accumulated in the tree house.

"W-wha...?" The girl in question burred out, her eyes widening as if she had seen a ghost. Jerking back and forth in a panic, Tarah eventually lost her place on the tree house floor, and began to slip out and off of the tree. "Whooooaaa!" she cried out, flailing her arms in a panic as he. Only Andy's quick hand and thinking saved her from a bumpy rendezvous with the cold, hard ground.

Dangling by the arm, Tarah looked upwards at the boy, who was straining heavily to hold her light, but still considerable human weight. She smiled a goofy sort of smile. "Whoops!" she chirped, obviously feeling very silly in that position.

Andy grunted a bit, putting another arm to use in keeping her up. "Yeah," he responded, a strained smile coming from his face.

Scooting slightly forward, the boy carefully lowered Tarah onto the ground. Once accomplished, he backed up a bit and stared down at the girl, a curiously hollow expression on his face. They looked at each other a moment more, feeling more and more awkward.

"Well, uh, I'm going now," she said, looking to the side for a brief moment before turning her eyes to Andy once again.

"Um...yeah," he managed, blinking a few times.

They both hesitated a moment, struggling to find something to say. "Hey, I'll see you in school tomorrow!" Tarah tried, a small bit of excitement smile coming to her face.

"O-okay," Andy replied somewhat laconically, staring wide-eyed at her.

The girl stood silent for a moment more, still locked in some sort of strange staring match with him. Then, she slowly turned into a run towards the door, where Aunt Mary was holding it open for her.

Clearing the lawn in a scant few seconds, she arrived at the porch and entered the door. And then, with her fingers gripping the doorframe, Tarah spared one last look at the boy before she disappeared into the house, towards her ride home and normal life.

Andy sat silently for about fifteen seconds after the back door fell shut, like a statue of cold stone. Then, he flopped onto his back, the sharp hardness of the wood against his back feeling somewhat refreshing. His eyes were unfocused, seeming to stare off into another world. Maybe he had been in another world, a moment ago.

He slowly placed his hand against his cheek where Tarah's lips had grazed it. (What...just happened?) he wondered to himself, his voice wavering slightly in the brisk breeze.

Only the crickets answered.

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More Coming Up...!

4 - Thursday

D&C

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THURSDAY

The sports field was filled with a variety of athletic accomplishment and daring dexterity, courtesy of the many fine athletes. The cheerleaders, too, had arrived; doing some rather impressive flips and spins in their routines. A few of the boys had appeared from out of the woodwork to peek at said cheerleaders, thinking their spot under the bleachers somehow made them invisible.

Two boys weren't feeling up to it.

"Detention..." Justin growled, leaning his back on a fence.

"For two weeks," Slick finished up, making a whistling sound.

They both sighed into the breezy air, feeling incredibly weary for their age.

Their little stunt on Wednesday had not gone unnoticed by the faculty. The girls had immediately gone and told the gym teacher of their plot. (conveniently leaving out the part about their watery revenge) The teacher was furious, and had sent them up to the principal's office on the spot. The principal, too, was furious, and thus the long-term punishment.

"Free-will..." Justin began, putting his hand on his cheek.

"Is not what it used to be," Slick added on, shaking his head in mock-disappointment.

"Well, at least you have something to write about," Andy joined in, sipping a small can of cola. "I'm still only halfway done with mine."

"Because you couldn't talk to Mari," Justin said, a note of disgust creeping into his voice.

Andy's face fell. "I wish you wouldn't bring that up," he complained, putting one of his hands into his pocket. "It's not like I didn't try."

Slick tsked, his face in a mockery of disapproval. "Andy, Andy, Andy," he taunted, waving his finger back and forth. "Can't you try not bein' a wuss, just for fun?"

"Heh, Andy not being a wuss is like Tarah not being a dork," Justin sneered, his mouth becoming sharp and craggy. "Totally impossible."

The two laughed uproariously, their earlier fatigue vanishing away. Andy groaned unhappily at another laugh at his expense. It seems that whenever he had a pleasant experience, it was balanced by yet more pain. He was beginning to feel like some loveable loser from a comic strip.

And something about the way they mentioned Tarah triggered a vibe within him. He didn't know why.

Eventually, the mirth died down, and the threesome resumed lazing about on the fence. Eventually, Justin turned to Slick with a 'gimme' expression. "Limestone, you got any smokes?" he asked, holding

out his hand.

"Just a sec," Slick said, rummaging through his backpack for said item. A moment later, he came up with two packs of Morvarian Unfiltered. "Snuck them away from pops just last night," he added, handing one of them to his silver-haired friend.

"You can't smoke those here, you know," Andy said, ever the goody-goody kid in situations like this.

"No one's gonna notice us, Champion," Justin reasoned with him, reaching into his jacket pocket for a lighter. "The track supervisor's an idiot."

Seemingly determined to ignore any more criticisms, he turned away from Andy to tend to his cancer stick. In a second, he had the thing lit and ready, and was in the process of placing it in between his lip. But before he could take his first puff, Slick interrupted him with an urgent notice. "Yo, someone's comin'. Douse it!"

"Andrew!" a light voice was calling out from the black top, becoming closer every second.

Justin looked around in a panic, obviously thinking he had been exposed. But soon, his face returned to his original lame candor. "Feh, it's just Reichardt."

"R-Reichardt?" Andy squeaked, suddenly looking very nervous. Whose last name was that, again?

Sure enough, Tarah was bobbing excitedly towards them, her pigtails bouncing excitedly on the sides of her head. In her arms was a writing tablet and a pencil, looking like they were about to fly out of her hands at any moment. With a small skid, she arrived at the trio's little spot under the sun. Her face was red and beaming, and sweat was clinging to her glasses.

Andy's face was probably redder.

"Andrew, I just thought of a few new things for our free-will assignment!" the girl said enthusiastically, pumping her fists for emphasis. "You gotta come see!"

"Buzz off, Reichardt," Justin said snidely, bringing the smoke up to his lips. "We're busy."

"But I need to hurry up and tell him before I forget it!" she babbled quickly, almost bouncing up and down. She took a closer look at the cigarette. "Those things are bad for your health, you know," she commented, pointing it out as if he didn't know it was there.

"Thank you, Surgeon General Tarah," Slick sang out in a mock-announcer's tone of voice. Justin chuckled a couple of times at this, accidentally hacking up some smoke in the process.

Tarah looked a little bothered by this, but quickly puffed back up. "I mean it," she insisted. "Studies have shown that you can get lung cancer as early as thirty if you keep it up." She turned back towards the green-haired boy. "Andrew, can we go?" she asked, her eyes imploring him behind the glasses.

"I...um..." Andy stammered half-wittingly at this request, completely panicking at what to do. Talking to Tarah in his own house was one thing, talking to her in front of his friends was something else. Sweatdrops rolled off his temple as he imagined one embarrassing scenario after another. If Justin and Slick knew that she had kissed him back at the house...

In the end, it was all taken out of his hands. "Whatcha got there, Tarah," Slick said slyly, creeping up to the side of the girl and reaching for her notepad.

"Hey, stop!" Tarah said, shrugging away from the boy and wrapping her arms protective around her pad. "It's private!"

"Private, huh?" The blond boy pondered, slowly easing away from the pigtailed girl. Then, with a deft

movement of his hand, he reached out and snatched it from her hand. "Public property if I ever saw it!" he crowed, holding the object above his head and laughing insanely.

"Give it back!" she cried out desperately, trying to reach for it by standing on tiptoe.

Slick was a lanky, young man, so her attempts were up to no avail; he just held it higher. Looking over to Justin, he started to wind back for a throw. "Go long, Justin!" he said, using his other arm to keep Tarah at bay.

He threw the notepad, a smooth toss that fell directly into Justin's waiting arms. Sparing not a moment, the other boy flipped through the tablet, until his narrow eyes widened with glee upon finding the latest entry. "Hey, listen to this," he snickered, his teeth glimmering in the early afternoon sun. "Andy's such a neat person. I hope that he likes me and my lizards."

"Oh, that's rich!" Slick hooted loudly. As Tarah dashed over to Justin, the notepad was thrown again, and the blond boy thumbed through the pages. "'I gave him a kiss that felt really nice?'" he read out loud in a shocked sort of voice, looking like he had just seen brain surgery first-hand. "What did you do with that girl on Wednesday, Andy?"

"Stop it!" Tarah practically screamed, starting to hold the sides of her head. Her face was flaming red, and a few tears were forming at the corner of her eyes.

Slick made a pouty face towards the girl, acting like he was moved by her display of emotion. Then, he tossed the pad to the third person in his party. "Catch, Andy!" he called out, a bright smile of excitement on his face.

Andy started a bit at this and, more by reflex than anything else, caught the pad in his forearms. Staring at it like it was the tablet the Ten Commandments were written on, he was left at a loss for what to do with it. Something rectified by the various voices calling out to him.

"C'mon, Champion, hurry up and toss it!"

"Andrew, please give it back!"

"Read us another lovely entry, Andy-baby!"

Andy looked back and forth between the three teenage faces; Justin, craggy and overbearingly vicious; Slick's, hardly lucid in its rabid glee; Tarah's, looking like it was about to burst into tears. His face erupted with a fresh wave of sweat, feeling more heat than even the hot sun could account for. The pad felt heavy in his hand, as did the responsibility he carried with it. So he did the first thing that came to his mind:

He threw the pad.

And the game of keep away continued.

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Five minutes later, the sports field was a vacant wasteland of dirt, grass, and dust, looking like it had been abandoned for years. The equipment and balls had all been put away, and the athletes have gone inside to exercise their minds instead of their bodies. A wistful gust blew by, making a spectre-like howl through the nets of the soccer goals. Only a boy and girl remained to hear this howl, the latter hunched over by a torn notepad, the former standing over her like a silent soldier.

"Tarah," Andy said quietly, moving closer towards the girl.

"Just go..." she whispered into the wind, closing tear-strained eyes heavily.

The boy moved a little bit closer.

"JUST GO!" Tarah suddenly screamed out, her fingers digging into the rough turf below her hands.

Andy stayed for a moment more, his face a mask of anguish and pain. Then, he took off for the school, leaving the pigtailed girl to tend to the broken spine of a book, as well as the broken heart of an angel.

XXXXX

The winds had their way with the sturdy hardwood trees, swaying their branches as if they were only reeds. It roared and hurraed through the leaves, sending many of them flying off into the open air. The Champion residence whistled slightly with repeated gales, unable to completely resist Mother Nature's berating. It was a night of torment, a dawn of darkness that drove all to hide in their homes away from the bat like flapping, desperately trying to compensate with hot cocoa and other warm treats.

Andy ignored the rattling of the windowpane beside him, though it sang like a wind chime. Rather, he didn't hear it, so focused he was inward that he rejected anything outside of himself. His eyes were hardened almost into slits, twinkling with some unknown negative emotion. In his shaking hand was a chew marked pencil; rather disgusting, since it was mechanical.

He had been sitting at the desk in his room for almost an hour now, long enough to grow slightly uncomfortable in his seat. But if you were to take a look at him, you could see that discomfort was least of his worries. He was rigidly hunched, like the long suffering writer trying to make good his or her latest story. Able to let the world go by without batting an eye, save to the misfortunes within their own head.

After the incident, he saw no more hint of Tarah Reichardt for the remainder of the day. Even when his eyes surreptitiously glanced over to the places she should've been, she was not there. Starlight Jr. High's energetic squabbling between peers had become hollow and false to him. It was as if she had disappeared completely from his life, and had taken away his life too.

(Because...I threw her out of my life,) he thought quietly to himself. With a sigh, he put down his mangled

pencil aside the lightning globe that still bore Tarah's fingerprints. Leaning back in his chair, he planted his feet on the ground to prevent from falling over. With a hand to his chin, and a morose expression, he simply brooded over the past few days, looking more like a philosopher than a fourteen-year-old boy.

Tarah was perhaps the worst liked person in school, outside of any school bullies. She was awkward as all get out, relentlessly drowning in unimportant details and entranced by the most ordinary of things. She could babble on and on about the most trivial of subjects until you were ready to swat her like a gnat. Nothing more than someone to be dealt with, and then forgotten as soon as possible.

All this, and she still didn't deserve the treatment he had...or rather, *hadn't* given her. She had come to him seeking friendship, and he had thrown it back in her face with wishy-washy cruelty. It was a far cry from his behavior yesterday. He might as well have told her he loved her up in that tree house.

(Singing with her, taking her to your favorite place, telling her things you've never told anyone,) Andy's eyes narrowed. (...what was I doing? Of course she thought I liked her)

But he hadn't been thinking. He had just taken her hand and ran with her to the distant shores of imagination, regardless of anything. Bathing in forbidden springs, enjoying forbidden fruit. With those actions he had led her on, deceived her.

He...had liked her.

(No!) he cried out from within his mind, feeling trapped in his own head. (She was supposed to be just the school geek! She's not a person, a friend, or any of that. She...she's...)

He broke off from these painful thoughts with a growl, desperately shaking his head free of the spiders that threatened to devour. Slumping over on his desk, he struggled with his own consciousness, feeling like it was a weight too strong to bear. His eye fell upon his half completed report, mere scribbles on a page of notebook paper. With wide, fearful eyes, he began to read from it, and was promptly disgusted by the words that came from his own mind.

/In the end, I decided that there is no such thing as free-will. People are easily forced into action by other things, and then forced again just as easily into a different action by more things. We fool ourselves that we have control in order to keep on living. But we are powerless to do anything outside of Fate./

With trembling hands, he held the paper in front of him, running over the lines again. He felt himself get extraordinarily angry each time he re-read the words. That's why he was now crumpling up the manuscript into a wad and tossing it to the side. And that's why he was swatting the lightning globe off the desk to fall upon the floor, shattering into sparks, wires, and a million pieces of broken glass.

A mere moment later, the sound of footfalls was heard tromping quickly up the stairs, as in emergency. The door knob shook repeatedly, the person behind it obviously struggling with their own enthusiasm in opening it up. Swinging it open, Uncle Noah burst into the room, looking for all the world like a firefighter who had just axed his way in. "What the devil's going on here?" he demanded somewhat harshly, though he didn't mean for it to come out like this.

And all he saw was a boy with his head in his hands, shaking with insurmountable grief and looking like his best friend had just died.

"Andy, what are you doing?" Noah asked, his tone lightening up slightly for the boy's benefit. "Why is everything a mess?"

"Andy!" Mary cried, peeking in through the doorframe and looking like she was near tears herself. "Oh, Andy!"

"G-Grandpa...w-was right..." the boy stammered through his sobs, snorting loudly and wetly. "I...can't d-do anything...no such t-thing as free-will."

"Andy, what are you talking about?" Noah persisted, trying to keep him on subject. "You're not making sense,"

"T-Tarah's gone," Andy blubbered, his face hot with shame and defeat. "I g-got ridda her. Justin and

Slick, they m-made me...didn't w-want to..."

"That's enough, Noah," Mary said sternly, placing a hand firmly on her husband's shoulder. Scooting beside him, she made her way over to the boy's chair, where he was still hunched over the desk. Placing her arms around his shoulders, she leaned her head against his trembling back. "Hush now, sweetie," she whispered into his ear. "Everything will be alright."

Andy didn't seem like he was in any state to believe her words. But slowly, his hand moved upwards to grip the woman's meaty arm, clutching it and bringing it closer to his chest like a good luck charm.

"You've really been struggling with this project, haven't you," she said understandingly, slowly closing her eyes. "Perhaps you could use a break?"

He nodded weakly, his eyes still shut tightly closed.

At the aunt and nephew sat in silence in the middle of the room, Noah stood stiffly in the doorway, watching them silently. Slowly, he turned away and began walking to the window, looking out to the not-so-distant winds surrounding the house. The trees were still shaking with their fury, pleading for the rampage to stop. "Damn, but it's a rough night," he said roughly to the gusty night, his face screwing up into a stoic scowl.

XXXXX

The karaoke bar maintained a lively atmosphere, even at such a late hour. All throughout the small establishment, people of all ages were clambered into the seats, staring at the spotlighted stage where a lone performer warbled Frank Sinatra's "Fly Me to the Moon" into the standup mike.

Andy and his family struggled to maneuver around the claustrophobic arrangement of booths and chairs, trying not to jostle anybody en route. The music swam around them like lukewarm coffee, creating the illusion that they would have to dogpaddle their way to their seats. The boy found the noise a stark contrast to his own tormented thoughts, and he could feel the anger and self-loathing take a back seat to

the but strangely relaxing tune. He could now analyze his own situation without falling prey to it.

When everything had calmed down at home, Aunt Mary and Uncle Noah asked if there was anything they could do to make him feel better. Still rather weepy, Andy had weakly suggested, much like a child wanting a treat after a harrowing ordeal. Looking back, he felt slightly ashamed in having them cater to his own weaknesses. Still, the Champion family had piled into the family Joltswagon and headed out to the small bar fifteen minutes away.

"Busy night," Noah said lightly, lifting his arm slightly to avoid clocking an elder gentlemen in the head.

"I suppose everyone wants to drown their sorrows in music tonight," Mary pondered, following right behind the man.

Andy put his hand to his chin, his vision growing slightly unfocused. Why had he chosen to rejuvenate himself with the very pasttime he had enjoyed with Tarah only a night ago? Wasn't that just twisting the knife he had stabbed himself with earlier today? And yet, for some reason, this is what he really wanted to do right now.

They had reached their table, and everyone sat down in the circular booth. Andy, Mary, and Noah did their best to get comfortable in the rough leather seat, all of them slouching back and putting their arms on the head rest. A moment later, a waitress put three glasses of water on coasters bearing the establishments insignia. They drank their water lightly, letting it's crisp sting envelop their tongues and wake them up.

A modest show of hands began clapping, and Andy turned his head back towards the stage. The song had ended, and the singer was retreating back to her seat, leaving the mike free for the next performer. A man wearing a blue sports coat and a rug on his head moved up to the standing mike. "Well, that was "Fly Me to the Moon" by Frank Sinatra," he spoke out to the small audience. "Next up, we have a young man who's making his first appearance here in three years: Andrew Champion!"

A polite series of claps sounded out sporadically through the karaoke bar. "That's you, dear," Mary whispered to the boy, nudging him gently with her elbow.

"Show 'em what the Champion house can do!" Noah bellowed enthusiastically, punching his nephew lightly on the arm.

Andy nodded briefly, and left his drink to stand up and ease his way out of the booth. Steadily, he made his way through the tables towards the small stage. The eyes of the crowd were rather disconcerting, as they seemed to be watching his every move, ready to deliver divine judgment. But he just gulped down his nervousness and proceeded towards the microphone, where the rug man stepped aside and left him to it.

Standing alone on the stage, Andy took a moment to catch his breath and relax himself. He hummed a few bars to himself, trying to make sure he still had enough knowledge of the different keys. He looked out furtively to the people in the crowd, most of which had rather skeptical faces. (they really didn't care for the last number) But Mary and Noah gave him the thumbs up, and most of his fears were alleviated.

A mere moment later, the first lines of the music began emanating from the speakers set up throughout the bar. It was a soft, slow tune, the kind that was popular a few years back and retained a following even now. Andy's face was now passive, a soft porcelain-like serenity to his features. Calmly, he drove into himself, bringing forth the appropriate feelings he deemed necessary for the performance.

(Tarah....)

And then he began to sing.

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Andy leaned against the wood paneling, his arms crossed against his chest and his eyes half closed. Somewhat lethargically, he turned his head towards the stage, squinting slightly from the multicolored lights hanging overhead. Mary and Noah were singing a duet, an old timey song that only the previous generation really appreciated. The crowd seemed to enjoy this as much as his own song, though.

He had done really well on the stage, he considered. The crowd had apparently enjoyed the energy and enthusiasm he had poured into his singing, and he had won them over two-fold. A lot of the folks had given him a bit of congratulations or a slap on the back, to which he politely accepted with a smile. It did feel good knowing that something he did had such a positive effect on his surroundings.

He sighed lightly, leaning his head down and closing his eyes. Ultimately, it really didn't matter what the crowd thought of his song. It was just something he had to get out, like a soap-box speech at an assembly. You hoped it would have the desired effect, but it wouldn't change the situation even if it was hated.

Andy finished this thought with a small smile, then lowered his head and closed his eyes, letting the music take him away to a different place. The melodies and chords drifted like fish down a winding river, caught and filleted by his ears for his enjoyment.

A moment later, a voice broke through the clouds that had settled over his mind. "Hey, didn't expect to see you here!" it chirped, strong yet feminine. "Andy, right?"

The boy's arm hairs stood on end as his subconscious recalled the voice. Quickly, he woke up to the world and took a look at his present company. "Maru Mari!" he exclaimed, his eyes widening like saucers at a five-star restaurant.

The forest-maned girl giggled slightly, folding her arms. "That's me!" she said cheerfully, smiling

The noises of the crowd moved around them like water around a rock. "W-what are you doing here?" Andy tried, feeling a slight sense of unworthiness overtake him.

"I started going here about two years ago, when I first moved here from Aviania," she explained, making a small gesture with her hands for emphasis. "I actually want to sing for a living, so I like to get in some practice in front of a live audience whenever I can."

"Oh," Andy said dumbly, his facial expression something in-between entranced and embalmed. The two stood silently for a moment more, the train of conversation reaching a twist in the rails. Determined to keep the stacks puffing, he racked his mind for something to say. "Um, I just sing for my own sake," he tried, smiling nervously and trying not to choke.

"Probably the best reason to sing there is," Mari responded, her face beaming. Andy smiled back, and suddenly, he felt a lot more comfortable with his crush than ever before.

"So, what made you come out tonight?" she asked causally. "The announcer dude said Andrew Champion hadn't been here in three years."

At that, the boy turned his gaze towards the floor, his smile waning slightly. "I had some things I wanted to get off my chest." he said quietly, somber as an old man. "Singing seemed to be the best way to do it."

Mari's face suddenly grew serious, and she moved closer to Andy. "This is about Tarah, isn't it," she stated softly, her eyes narrowing.

He jerked up like he had been shot through the chest with an arrow. "W-what?" he stammered, feeling a hot rush flowing to his cheeks. "Who told you that?" he demanded, his voice cracking weakly.

"Easy, Champ," she said, putting her hands up to signal Andy to 'cool it'. "Tarah tutors me sometimes in biology. She was really depressed today, and didn't even talk my ear off about the joy of the different types of chlorophyll."

Andy regarded Mari's words with an increasingly saddened expression, and he lowered his head. "So she's not okay," he said quietly, more to himself than to the girl before him.

"Doesn't seem like it," she answered honestly, her own face starting to mirror that of her companions. "What happened between you two?" she asked finally.

The boy hesitated for a moment, wondering if he should be telling her things he was only recently able to admit to himself. But he didn't have such a high opinion of Mari for nothing, and he found himself wanting to trust her. "It was just one night," he began, closing his eyes with a mix of embarrassment at having such fun with a nerd, and embarrassment for his failure. "We were doing that free-will exercise, and it ended up with us..having a lot of fun." He peeked at her through the corner of her eyes. "I don't know what to do."

"What do you *want* to do?" Mari asked him, pressing him on.

Andy said the first thing that came to mind. "Be her friend," he blurted out, the words tumbling out like barrels down a slope. As the words left his lips, he quickly looked away and touched them, as if he couldn't believe what came out.

Mari was smiling gently at him, her eyes twinkling with some sort of pride. "That's real cool," she said, shaking her head in awe. "So, what's stopping you?"

"You..." The boy jolted a bit, the inclination of her words hitting him like a caffeinated drink poured over his head. "You mean you actually think I can do it?" he asked her, wide-eyed and almost disbelieving.

"You've got free-will, Andy," she stated. "But that doesn't mean every decision made is equally easy. You've got to apply yourself in this world if you want something in it. That's what I believe."

The longtressed girl leaned against the same wall Andy was stationed at, looking up at the twinkling lights above. "Every day is a new opportunity for me to express myself," she said, a slow smile flowing to her lips. "I think about all that I can accomplish before the sun goes down, and it gives me energy that way. Life's never boring that way." She turned towards the boy with a smile. "Right?"

Andy stared at the girl, transfixed by more than her outer beauty. The words were striking a special place in his heart, the part that desperately needed the nourishment of advice that neither his aunt nor uncle was able to give him. Suddenly, he felt a tremendous strength developing from within, along with a certain almost giddy feeling. "Yeah, that's sounds real good," he said slowly, as if the idea was still

dawning within him.

He suddenly straightened up. "Yeah!" he cried out, clenching a fist dramatically. "I'll just try a little harder!" Andy turned towards Mari and grabbed her hands. "Thanks a lot!" he told her, shaking them enthusiastically.

"Uh, yeah!" she stammered, a bead of sweat rolling down the side of her face.

Their hands remained tied together for a moment more. Then, upon realizing what he was doing, the boy suddenly let go of her hands with a chuckle. "Uh, sorry," he said nervously, putting his hands behind his back.

"It's alright," Mari responded, looking a little bit embarrassed herself.

"Andy, it's time to go," a soft voice spoke out from the other end of the karaoke bar.

Andy turned to see his aunt and uncle at the front door, looking like they were about to step outside. "Uh, looks like my ride is about to go," he said with a chuckle. "Sorry..."

"Well, I'm probably going to get called soon anyway," she said, looking over to the empty stage. "See you later!"

The boy nodded briefly, then started to walk on over to his family, leaving her behind. Then, he stopped and whirled around. "Mari!" he suddenly called out, struggling to keep his voice clear.

Mari blinked. "What is it?" she asked, her face clueless and innocent.

"...Alright if we have...talks like this more often?" he asked her, ignoring the blush that came to his face.

The girl stood with a blank expression on her face, and for an agonizing moment, Andy thought he had ruined it all. But soon, she broke out into an honest smile once again. "Sure," she answered cheerfully, nodding her head.

Andy's grin was like a Cheshire cat. With a smile once again on his face, he strolled on through the crowd, who were already cheering for the next performer. Meeting up with Mary and Noah, he walked with them to the door, swinging it open and letting a blast of cold air into the establishment. "Hey Uncle Noah, can we stop by one more place before we go home...?" he asked while leaving the karaoke bar for the twilight town outside.

XXXXX

Within the comfort of home, Tarah was sprawled across her bed, her ladybug adorned sheets ruffled slightly with her movements. Her hair was a frumpy mess, and her glasses were almost falling off her nose. In front of her was a fish tank modified to carry a respectable amount of lizards. Right now, she was stroking one of their chests with her finger, causing it to emit small cooing noises as it kicked its leg much like a dog would.

(He never really liked me,) she mused morosely, her eyes dried and her soul sore, "At least you like me, Cornflower," she said softly to her pet, smiling halfheartedly down at it.

The lizard made a small noise of satisfaction, squealing in a bizarre, cutesy manner. Her smile became a little bit more sincere, and she continued to pet it.

A few moments later, a voice called out from downstairs. "Tarah, there's someone at the door for you!"

The girl lazily lifted herself up by her elbows, feeling a little bit confused, since she heard no doorbell. "Who is it, Mom?" she asked loudly, still keeping her finger on the lizard.

"Andrew Champion!" it answered promptly, the tone remaining the same. "From school!"

And Tarah's entire body was electrified like a spire in a thunderstorm. She ended up jamming her finger straight into Cornflower's chest, causing it to let out a screech of indignation.

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Next Up- the Conclusion!

5 - Friday

D&C

XXXXX

FRIDAY

The interior of Mr. Clark's classroom was alive with the chattering of children, like a pentagon of pint-sized politicians. They were speaking about their weeklong project with gusto, bantering back and forth enthusiastically on how they did. The school board would've been pleased about the interest they were showing in school matters. To be fair, however, most of the conversation was dealing with how one project was going to kick the @\$@ of another project.

The conversation died as the teacher reentered the room, much like a concert hall does when the conductor gets started. And this conductor, with his ruler tapping his shoulder, demanded nothing short of silence. Mr. Clark stood like a grand commander at the front of the class, ready to deal out prize or punishment at will. There would be no mercy today.

"Class, as you know, this is the final day for our project," he began methodically, pacing sternly in front of the white board. "I have heard about many of the results by hearsay. Some of them were honorable," Here, he stared at a batch of reliable A students, who sat smugly in their seats. "Some were very dishonorable." His gaze shifted to the back row, where two students stiffened viably at the unwelcome attention.

"I wish he wouldn't bring that up," Slick muttered under his breath, melting under the leaden gaze of his teacher.

"We have many varying stories among us, which are sure to be inspiring," Mr. Clark continued, halting in-between the middle rows of seats. "Two students have requested before class that they go first. Mr. Champion, Ms. Reichardt," He gestured to seats at opposite ends of the room. "Please come forth."

The classroom's collective mouth was agape as Andy and Tarah proceeded to the front of the classroom, looking like it was the most natural thing in the world to be together. Coming to a halt just to the left of Mr. Clark, they stood side by side, with one paper among them. For a few seconds, they whispered back and forth amongst each other on how to conduct their speech. Then, with a small cough, Andy began.

"I don't know much about free-will," he started, staring straight ahead at the twenty or so students crowded around the room. "I always assumed I had it and that was that, but then I encountered events that made me doubt whether it even existed at all. It was then I realized that free-will was not just a God given right, it was also a tool to be used. It is from here that the term 'willpower' comes into play, for you need strength of character to wield it properly and enact your own design upon your life."

At this point, Andy handed the paper over to Tarah. "There are people who let life drift on by, without taking time to use their free-will," she chirped out, a bright expression on her face. "But everybody has the power to change their life for the better, no matter their situation. Children and adults alike, we can all put to use our free-will and shape a future we're proud to live in. This is what Andy and Tarah think."

And then they stopped, and took a short bow to the class. They were stunned.

"Excellent job," Mr. Clark commended them, a slight smile on his face. "A rival for high school thinking, I believe. Class, you would do well to remember their words," He made a motion towards the desks. "You may take your seats,"

The two started back toward their desks, looking fairly confident in themselves. As they went, the entire class followed them with their eyes, as it just dawned on them what had happened. Tarah had a huge, ear to ear smile on her face, looking like she had just received Christmas five months early. And Andy had the stoic look of a warrior who had just won a battle, and was ready for the rest of the war.

Along the way to his desk, Justin whispered harsh into Andy's ear. "Champion, what are you doing?" he

hissed, leaning forward to look him in the face.

And Andy closed his eyes, feeling a strange wave of excitement flow through him. "Whatever I want," he responded, a wry grin coming to his face.

They both took their seats, and class resumed.

XXXXX

In the hollows of the empty school corridors, two pairs of footsteps were heard echoing down to the lunchroom.

"Thanks for carrying my bug jars, Andrew," Tarah said, happily proceeding down the hallway with her books tucked in between her arms.

"I still can't understand how you managed to get them from class to class," Andy responded, closing one eye and peering at her through the other.

"I take two trips," she explained, giggling lightly and smiling up at him.

The two reached the doorway to the lunchroom. The boy started to put his hand upon it, but Tarah quickly grabbed onto his arm. "Do...you really want to do this?" she asked him, a somewhat vulnerable expression on her face. "You know...be friends?"

Andy just smiled gently, putting his hand firmly on top of her. "I've already made up my mind," he told her. "The rest of the world will just have to get used to it."

The pigtailed, bespectacled girl stood for a moment with a small blush on her face. But soon, she broke out into a beaming grin, "Okay!"

They both turned back towards the door, making brave faces as they pushed opened the door. A stream of light burst forth, along with the chatterings of schoolmates over lunch hour. Tarah took a short glance at Andy, as if trying to reassure herself that the boy was still there. Andy just closed his eyes, holding his hand to his heart as if in prayer.

(Wish me luck, Mom)

Then, they headed into the room, and into all the danger that comes with being alive.

END

As reward for making it this far, here's a picture of our lovely odd couple, Andy and Tarah. You can clearly see the anime influences here, from Andy's wild, green hair to the slick, black jacket he wears. Tarah's such a cute meganekko, isn't she? Enjoy.

Like D&C? Then try some of my stories at FanFiction.Net, some of which contain similar themes:

I WANT YOU BACK (The Wonder Years)

Continuation of Ep. 21. (AU) After the horrid square dance, Kevin tries to make amends to the three pigtailed Margaret Farquhar. Yet, once again, he is torn between wanting to be popular and wanting to be her friend.

OPERATION: T.A.M.I.N.G. (Codename: Kids Next Door)

After an ordeal at the carnival, Laura Limpin becomes attached to Numbuh Two, taking him home with her. This is of course an exercise in diplomacy, given her alterego, the Big Badolescent...but could the inventor boy be the one to soothe the savage beast?

IN A BIT OF A SLUMP (Dragon Ball/Dr. Slump)

Arale's innocent naiveté collapses at the jeers of several cruel men, throwing the android girl for a sudden, emotional spin. Can the friendship and love of Goku bring her back to herself before she abandons all that she once was? GokuArale.

Until next story, ja ne! ^_^