

*Ten teenagers discover a hidden world....and a horrifying secret.*

## **Zero Hour: The Revelation**

by Luke Fetkovich

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ZERO  
HOUR

THE REVELATION

LUKE FETKOVICH

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## About the Author

Luke Anthony Fetkovich was born on March 23, 1989 in Pittsburgh, PA. He grew up nearby in the small town of Greensburg, and currently goes to Penn State University with an intended major of Film & Video Production. Zero Hour: The Revelation is his first novel. He plans to continue his writing career in the near future with the Zero Hour sequels.

For more info about the author and about Zero Hour, please visit [www.zerohourbooks.com](http://www.zerohourbooks.com).

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# Prologue

Saturday, December 18- 4:53pm  
22 months before Zero Hour

Rain pounded the outside walls of the castle. Wind roared through the glassless window. Thunder boomed overhead while lightning shot across the sky outside.

The room was dark; the only light came from the crackling fire and the candles scattered across the table. Books littered every corner of the quiet space; spellbooks were piled neatly against the wall while others resting on the wooden table contained detailed maps and translations of strange languages.

The woman made no sound as she sat motionless on the velvety chair. The candles and firelight were not enough to illuminate the silhouette of her face, and her long hair as it flowed over her shoulders. She stared forlornly at the vast table before her and the riches piled across it.

A large leather book was open to a page titled 'The Land of Whist'. This book appeared to be an atlas of some sort, as a giant map stretched across both of its tattered and yellowing pages. On

the map were strange drawings of mountains ranges, forests, rivers, castles, villages, and much more.

Beside the book, a purple silk cloth stretched across the table, magnificently complementing the treasures on top of it. Other books, some small and gold, some large and red, were strewn haphazardly over the flat surface. An ornate hourglass with spindly supports and blood-red sand stood to the left. A misty crystal ball sat in an impressive gold base to the right. And all across the great wooden table were piles of coins and jewels. There were stacks of silver pieces and medallions of gold, mounds of rubies and necklaces of emerald, even a magic lamp resting in the center of a heaping pile of bronze beads.

The woman stared from the stacks of silver at one end of the long table to the mounds of jewels at the other, and a tear trickled down her cheek. Here were the treasures they had looted from the Castle of Sir Caldwell when he had surrendered, and the Fort of William the Great when he had fallen defending the tower, and the hidden dungeons of merchant Maguire when he had come over to their side. Here, right in front of her, was a map of all they had conquered in the past two years, from castles and villages to entire lands. And in other rooms of the great castle, more riches lay piled in the corners- far more riches than they would ever be able to count.

From outside the window, the shouts and cries of the angry mob spliced through the night air, so loud that not even the howling wind and roaring thunder could drown them out. It could all be gone in an instant, the woman thought as she stared at the



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table and listened to the angry cries outside. It could all be gone forever if they managed to break into the castle.

She slowly moved her hand towards a long skinny stick lying near the map, and closed her fist around it. It would not happen, no. Not after everything they'd done; all they'd accomplished. This was nothing compared to what they had faced before, although this time the stakes were much higher.

"Vanessa?"

A dark-haired man had entered the room. He stood in the doorway for a moment, contemplating the look on his comrade's face, and then spoke again.

"Vanessa, we must formulate a plan of attack. The mob is nearly at our doors. We can't afford to wait any longer. The time to act is now."

The woman was silent for a moment, but then she finally spoke. "How could this happen, Blade? After all we've done to keep our location a secret, and keep our valuables safe? How could they have discovered us? I don't understand--"

"That's not important right now," Blade interrupted. "Right now we must defend the castle! After this is over we can move on and begin an investigation with our most loyal followers, but forget about that for now. We must concentrate on the task at hand."

But tears were still streaking down Vanessa's face. "This is Mazathor, Blade! This is the Castle of Mystery! No one is supposed to be able to find this place! It's missing from every single map of Whist; lost over the centuries and diminished to

nothing but a legend! How could an outsider possibly discover us?!”

Blade walked into the rooms with his arms folded. “It could have been one of our own, Vanessa!” he cried irritably. “One of our followers may have turned against us. Or maybe someone in the Council knew more than we thought they did! This is not the time to dwell on how we arrived at this situation. That comes later. Right now we must get ourselves out of this mess!”

He walked over to the window and pointed outside. “Have you noticed what’s approaching down there? Surely you must hear their cries, even in this storm! They are almost at our doors, Vanessa! Clear your mind and focus on what needs to be done!”

Blade angrily turned away from Vanessa and gazed out the window, at the endless expanse of forest stretching for miles and miles below. To his far left and far right a mountain chain extended into the foggy distance, as Mazathor itself was constructed on the rocky side of one of these peaks. But directly ahead it was a much different scene.

Hundreds of people were storming along a road that cut through the forest and lead right up to the moat surrounding the castle. The mob consisted of townspeople, knights, archers, nobles, wizards, and even dwarves and elves. Some carried torches and others held lanterns to light their way, but then there were those who bore swords, arrows, and maces.

As he turned his gaze away from the window, a lightning-bolt crackled through the sky, and a low rumble echoed throughout the dark room.

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"Where are the others?" Vanessa asked faintly.

"Drake and Jazmine have already performed the Protectatius Charm on the entire castle," Blade informed her, "and they are downstairs readying more charms at this very moment, I think."

Vanessa was silent for a moment, then decidedly rose from her chair with the stick held tightly in her hand. "They will need my help, then."

"Yes," Blade hissed, his eyes focused on his comrade. "Go and assist them. I must stay here and think things through in peace. Tell Drake and Jazmine I will join all of you shortly."

Vanessa nodded and briskly strode away through the open door. Blade stood alone in the room, his back facing the window, and listened to her footsteps as they clapped along the cold stone hallway and down the staircase.

They were so close, he thought to himself. So close to achieving world domination. In just a few weeks they would control every castle, every village, and every dwelling in the entire land. In just a few weeks the Council of Merlin would crumble down to nothing as they finally surrendered after a long and bloody war. In just a few weeks every wizard, witch, townspeople, and creature in Whist would call the four of them their rulers....and those who refused would be killed, or better yet, tortured.

But it wasn't over yet. They had to get through tonight first. If that happened, all the pieces would fall into place. But if the mob somehow managed to take the castle, everything would be lost.

Blade stared before him at the dark room, and the riches scattered across the table in the center. If the mob managed to get

in here, they would have access to all their secrets. They would be able to look through the books piled over the table and find out who their allies were, and who was working undercover from within the Council. They would be able to access the passwords for hidden locations all throughout Whist; locations where their followers secretly held meetings and built deadly weapons. But most importantly, they would have captured their home base.

Blade took a deep breath as he glanced around the room, and told himself everything would be fine. It was stupid, he thought, to worry about a mob when they had dealt with far worse things in the past. Not even the most talented witches and wizards could stand up against them in a one-on-one battle; by now the four of them were far better than even the Rulers of Rockwell. Yes, everything would be fine.

He told himself to look at the bright side. The Council of Merlin, once so strong and commanding throughout the land, was in pieces. Half of the leaders were dead or wounded by now, and the ones that were left had no place to run, except for maybe Dragonhead Castle. But they would soon take that, too. And on top of all this IAOW was nearly non-existent. Ever since they had taken the base and murdered the general, the army hadn't been the same. The warriors and creatures who were still alive were scattered throughout the land, and the remaining lieutenants couldn't get enough supplies to launch an attack. Things were going their way, and it looked as if they'd finally crossed that crucial hump; the Council and IAOW wouldn't be able to recover

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from this. Now only time stood between the four of them and world domination....unless something catastrophic happened.

Blade turned his back on the room and stared out the window once more. A hundred feet below him, several of the townspeople had dived into the moat and were attempting to swim across. He smiled to himself, because he knew they would never reach the other side....

"Come on, men!" a villager shouted into the night air. "This moat is all that stands between us and the lever for that drawbridge!"

The water was icy cold against the villagers' skin, and the pounding rain only made it worse. One man looked up to see the great castle rising out of the mist that had surrounded it; the walls were constructed of a strange blue stone and the shingled roofs were purple.

As he watched, the mist seemed to drift towards them from the castle, and within a few moments all of the men were surrounded by the fog.

Then someone screamed. The other men looked back as they heard the man's cries and a splash in the distance, but the mist hid the rest of the lake from view.

"Darwin?" one of the men asked uneasily.

Some of the villagers stopped and waited for their friend, but others hastily splashed their way forward as fear took hold.

One bearded man heard someone cry "Rafael! There's something in the water!" as he paddled away nervously. But it was already too late. Ahead of him, something large and green jumped

above the surface, caught a villager with its teeth, and splashed back underwater as the man screamed in terror.

Panic set in. More shouts and screams erupted from every corner of the moat, echoing through the mist even though the other men couldn't see what was happening. People were dragged under left and right, one by one, until only a handful of villagers were left. And as they frantically swam through the foggy moat, desperately trying to reach the shore, the alligators finally caught up with them, too. Dozens of scaly green bodies splashed to the surface, sank their razor-sharp teeth into the men, and dragged them screaming and shouting to the bottom of the moat.

In a matter of seconds, nothing was left of the villagers except a lopsided brown hat floating awkwardly across the water.

A wide grin spread across Blade's face, even though he knew the mob would try again.

"It's alligators!" he heard a knight cry from the shore. "They've been eaten by the alligators!"

"Who's else has got a sword?!" someone else cried. "We must kill them!"

The wizards in the crowd began conjuring wooden rafts out of thin air, and the knights hopped on and set out across the water, their swords raised and ready.

Blade turned away from the window and walked over to the table. He knew they would soon have to face the mob themselves, and wanted something to motivate him; remind him of what was at stake.

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He feasted his eyes on everything they had earned over the past two years, from the coins and jewels to the map showing all they'd conquered. And then he remembered something- the most valuable item wasn't even here.

He whisked his hand into the pocket of his robes and pulled out a large golden key. Then he kneeled down, wiggled the key into a lock in the side of the table, and opened a secret compartment.

There was only one item inside. It looked like a large stone slab, with hieroglyph-like writing all over the surface. Yes, Blade thought to himself, this was the treasure of all treasures. It was the item he was most proud of, in part because he was the one who found it, and it was worth far more than any other object in the room.

He took one long look at it and then slowly closed the compartment. But before he'd completely shut it, it happened.

BOOM.

It was like an earthquake. Blade was swept off his feet and went tumbling to the ground, the candles toppled over the edge of the table, and the stacks of silver coins came crashing to the floor.

The wizard scrambled back to his feet, glancing around earnestly. The tremor had only lasted a second, but it had been extremely powerful. So powerful, in fact, that he knew it was no earthquake; this was something else. He listened keenly as a low rumble echoed throughout the castle, almost like the thunder outside. But this wasn't thunder, either. It was something worse.

The first thing that came to his mind was his wand. He glanced across the table but didn't see it anywhere. *No*, he thought to

himself, *I know I left it here earlier. I put it right on top of this table!* He crawled along the cold stone floor, searching with his hands because it was so dark, but it wasn't there either. *Perhaps something fell on top of it when the tremor happened, he hoped. Yes, that must be it.*

He searched through the mess of coins, jewels, nuggets, and medallions, recklessly throwing items on the floor and pushing others aside as he worked his way along. He had to find his wand; his superior talent was good for nothing without it.

An uneasy thought crept into his mind as he pushed a pile of gold coins onto the floor. Obviously he'd heard all about the mysteries and unexplained occurrences of Mazathor; it wasn't called the Castle of Mystery for nothing. So what if something unexplainable had happened to his wand? Something....supernatural?

No, he reassured himself. That wasn't possible. These things were just legends; unproven stories told to scare children. Sure, sonic sprites were real, but technically they weren't ghosts; they were creatures. Hauntings like the old stories suggested were fake. He knew they were.

But at that moment, he saw something white run out the door from the corner of his eye. Anger swelled inside him; someone was here.

Blade stormed out of the room and glanced up and down the dark hallway. Nothing was there.

"COME OUT!" he bellowed. "I KNOW YOU ARE HERE!"



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His shouts reverberated through the cavernous castle, but no one answered back. He was alone, or at least someone wanted him to think that.

He noticed two crossed swords hanging on the wall beside him, as a decoration. Rage pulsing through him, he strode over and ripped one away, causing the other to crash to the ground. As he held it in his hand, he saw that the blade was sharp and shiny. Good, he thought, now I can take care of this the old-fashioned way.

There was a monstrous staircase to his left, leading down to the entrance hall. Without hesitating, he stormed down it with the sword raised and ready in his right hand.

It was deserted here, too. There was no sign of Vanessa, or Drake, or Jazmine, or any of the others who were living in the castle with them. Something was wrong, Blade thought as he cautiously made his way through the great room. Something was very, very wrong.

“SHOW YOURSELF!!” he screamed, even though he wasn’t sure himself if anyone was really here. “OR ARE YOU TOO COWARD TO COME FORTH?!”

*Plink!*

Something had crashed to the ground on the level below him. Blade raced towards the open door leading down to the dungeons, but didn’t go through. It was pitch-black, and all he could make out were the first few steps of the staircase.

Even though he didn’t believe the old stories, something inside him was telling him not to go down there. But he quickly changed

his mind about staying away; there was an intruder down there who probably had his wand. It was just the upper dungeons, he reassured himself. The upper dungeons weren't so bad; it was the lower ones that you really wanted to stay out of.

His footsteps echoed all around him as he slowly made his way down the stone staircase. At the bottom, he turned the bend and took his first look at the dungeon. High barred windows let the blue moonlight seep in from either end of the hallway, and it was just enough to reveal the outline of a long corridor. But even with the moonlight, it was hard to discern anything; the dungeon was just a maze of dark shadows looming all around him.

Lightning crackled through the sky above and lit the surroundings for a split-second. To his horror, Blade thought he saw a person-shaped silhouette standing in the middle of the hallway far ahead, but once the lightning had passed it was too dark to tell.

Fear began to take hold of him. He gripped the sword more tightly and wiped the sweat from his forehead. *Don't be afraid, Blade, he told himself, only the weak fear. The strong don't let it get to them, and you're strong.*

Slowly but surely, he began walking down the hallway. High dungeon doors rose from the shadows on either side of him. He wasn't sure where they lead, because he'd never spent any time down here. But that wasn't important, he thought. Well, it wasn't important unless the intruder knew more about this dungeon than he did....

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There was another bolt of lightning outside, and this time Blade was sure he saw someone standing in the hallway up ahead.

“WHO ARE YOU?!” he demanded, and his words echoed down the shadowy corridor.

No one answered. So Blade stood motionless in the hallway and listened to the rumble of thunder overhead, afraid to admit he was scared. *Don't be afraid, Blade. Don't be afraid....*

He ventured further down the hallway, unable to see more than a few feet ahead of him. His whole body began to shake as he drew closer and closer to the spot where he'd seen the shadow. Just a few more feet and he would be able to see the person, he thought.

The next lightning-bolt finally illuminated the corridor once more, but this time the figure was gone.

Blade halted. He thought about turning and running back up the staircase for a moment; now was the perfect time, because he had a good excuse. The person was gone, and he had no idea where he'd fled. *No, Blade. You must find him. He's got your wand! Keep searching....*

He turned to his right and almost jumped out of his skin. The sword fell from his hands as he saw an old man leaning against the dungeon door next to him. He had long, curly white hair and oversized spectacles, and his right hand gripped a tall staff with a luminous green orb at the top.

“Scared of the spirits, Maximillian?” he said casually. “Afraid you might encounter something otherworldly down here?”

“M-M-Morpheo!” Blade cried as he hastily scooped up his sword. “It was you!!”

“It was I who what?” Morpheo asked curiously. “Stole your wand, maybe?”

“Hand it over right now,” Blade commanded as he regained his composure. “And my name is Blade! Don’t you dare call me that again.”

Morpheo gave him a piercing gaze. “Your name is Maximillian, and that’s what I’m going to call you. In fact, I’m going to call you Max, just like your mother used to.”

“*Don’t talk about my family!*” Blade roared angrily. “I’m not putting up with these games, Morpheo! I know how you are; always acting like you’re better than the rest of us because you’re with the Council- oh, I forgot, you’re *not* with them anymore. They chucked you out. Well, at least they aren’t complete idiots. For once they did something right!”

“I don’t think I act like I’m better than you,” Morpheo said as he stroked his long white beard, thinking hard.

“Cut the crap, Morpheo. You know all too well what I’m talking about. You think you’re on the right side! You think we are the fools, devoting our lives to dark magic! Well, look where we are now. In a matter of days I’ll be the most powerful wizard in all of Whist, and you’ve just been chucked out of the Council and replaced by some African bloke who doesn’t even know a thing about magic!”

“Oh, I think Mulhassa is more than qualified to be my replacement as Ruler of Eather,” Morpheo answered calmly, as if they were discussing this over lunch in a restaurant.

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"Is he now?" Blade responded with a surly smirk. "Well, we'll see about that when we attack Dragonhead Castle in a few days. Now, hand over my wand or I cut your throat."

Morpheo didn't blink an eye as Blade raised his sword with one hand and held out his palm with the other. He just sighed like he was disappointed.

"Max, I know you're not this dumb," he said flatly. "You can see very well that I have my staff, and you are powerless without your wand."

"I'm not afraid of you!" Blade snarled defensively.

"That doesn't concern me," responded the old wizard. "What concerns me is your future."

Blade rolled his eyes. "Don't start, I'm warning you--"

"You're not one of them, Max. You're one of us," Morpheo went on. "So far you have chosen evil over good, but that decision won't last much longer. You can't follow the wrong road for your entire life, Max. Sooner or later you will turn back."

"How do you know?" Blade retorted angrily.

"Because, deep in your heart, you know this isn't the road that was meant for you."

For a moment or two, Blade was at a loss for words. He shook his head defiantly before saying, "You're wrong, Morpheo. You're an old man and you've lost your marbles. And the best part about all this is I'm going to kill you right now, with my bare hands. Then you'll know you're wrong....and that will be the last thing you *ever* know."

A smile flitted across the old wizard's face for a second.

"Really, now? Fine. Kill me. I won't stop you."

Blade raised his sword and glared Morpheo down, his eyes blazing with hatred. He was mocking him, he thought. The old man was trying to make a fool out of him. But he wouldn't take the bait. He would kill him now and it would all be over forever.

The wizard was waiting. "Well? Go ahead and kill me, for God's sake, if you're so sure of yourself."

But Blade just scanned the wizard hopefully, looking for an excuse. He found what he was looking for.

"Your staff," he muttered. "You're still armed. I won't attack until you've dropped it."

Morpheo let go of his staff, and it fell to the floor with a loud clunk. "There you go, Max. I'm yours for the taking."

Blade didn't move. He wasn't exactly sure himself why he wasn't slicing the old man to pieces at this very moment. Maybe it was harder than it seemed at first. *Kill him, Blade. Look at him! He's mocking you! Kill him now. Show him who's boss! He's unarmed. All you have to do is strike....*

But still, he didn't budge.

"It- it's a trap," Blade finally stuttered as he tried to keep his composure.

"Oh, no," Morpheo answered. "This is no trap, Max. This is for real. I'm trying to prove a point."

"You're trying to prove that I'm a coward!" Blade snapped back.

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“No, Max. I’m trying to prove that I know more about you than even you do.”

They stood staring at each other for a few short seconds, Blade as confused and frustrated as he’d ever been in his life.

“If this was a trap,” continued Morpheo, “you’d already be locked up in there.” He nodded towards the dungeon door rising ominously behind him.

Blade glanced from the door to the wizard. “What’s in there?”

“Look and see for yourself,” Morpheo replied, and he heaved the great door open with all his might.

Inside was a vast room with high barred windows on either side. Blade’s mouth opened in silent awe as he saw Vanessa, Drake, and Jazmine all bound and gagged against the far wall. Their small dark figures were the only thing in the room....wait. No, there was something else lying in the very center of the stone floor....it looked like a pile of long skinny sticks....

“Your wands are there,” explained Morpheo as he raised his spindly finger towards the objects. “Yours is the one in front, nearest to the door. You are free to go get it if you wish.”

Blade stared disbelievingly back at the wizard. How could he have managed to do this? They were the most talented witches and wizards in the entire land; there was no way this was possible. The only way it could have happened was if he’d somehow taken their wands first....outwitted them....that was the only way, and it looked like it had worked....

“You’re going to lock me in,” Blade realized as he glared longingly at his wand, fifteen feet away on the dungeon floor.

“Not if you can reach it first,” Morpheo replied.

Blade glanced from the magical stick to the wizard, unable to make up his mind. He wanted it so badly; it was lying right there in front of him. But could he run fast enough?

He took one last look at Morpheo, who was gazing at him intently, his hand grasping the edge of the open door. Then he set his sword down and focused his eyes on the slim black figure straight ahead. He would show him. He would get there in time, and then he would blast the old man away before he’d finished his trap.

Blade took a deep breath and cleared his mind. Then he ran.

Wind whistled past his ears and everything around him became a dark blur. The skinny stick came closer and closer....he reached his hand out....he dived to the floor....

“*Ropastope!*” he cried as he snatched up his wand. He shot the spell backwards as his whole body hit the ground and slid along the smooth cement floor. But it never left his wand.

As he slid to a halt, he stared, horrified, as a few electric-blue sparks sprung half-heartedly from the tip. Then the spell completely died, and there was nothing but a tiny wisp of smoke streaming from his wand.

*Clang!*

The great wooden door swung shut, and Blade heard the metallic clink of the lock as Morpheo slid it into place.

He stared disbelievingly at his wand for a moment as he lay on the cold hard floor. Then he scrambled to his feet, rage pulsing through every vein in his body.



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"*ROPASTOPE!!*" he screamed at the locked door. But the same thing happened; a few sparks leapt from the tip, then nothing. The spell wouldn't work.

"NO!!"

As Blade's shout echoed throughout the room, another noise mixed with it. It was the faint rumble of the mob; they had crossed the moat at last. He turned around slowly, and saw the dark shadows of people begin to block the moonlight from the barred windows surrounding them. They were trapped.

He stuffed the wand angrily into the pocket of his robes and stormed back across the room, until he could see through the small window of the dungeon door. Morpheo glared back at him from behind the tiny steel bars.

For a moment, neither one said anything. They both knew what this meant.

"I should have killed you when I had the chance, Morpheo," Blade hissed menacingly. "I always knew you were too stubborn for your own good. I always knew you'd be a problem long after we'd finished off the rest of your friends in the Council."

Morpheo gazed at him quietly for a few seconds before saying, "I may very well be too stubborn for my own good, Max. You're quite right about that. But I seriously doubt I'm too stubborn for *yours*. You'll thank me for this one day, Max. And I'll eat my hat if I'm wrong on that."

Blade had no will left to argue. It was over; Morpheo had won. There was nothing left to say.

The townspeople had reached the windows of the dungeon, and some were peering inside while others tried to chop the bars with their weapons.

“Look! They’re in here!”

“Faster, men, faster! Don’t let them escape!”

“Look over there! It’s Morpheo! Behind that door! I think he’s trying to help them get away!”

Morpheo shifted his eyes to the windows for a moment before focusing his attention back on Blade. “The townspeople will kill you if they manage to get inside,” he said urgently, “but this is not the end, Max. You must flee at once. Now, this dungeon room may appear to be empty,” he continued as he pointed through the bars, “but search it carefully, and you will find what you are looking for. I must flee, too. I am not welcome here anymore.”

He turned like he was about to go, but Blade stopped him.

“Morpheo? I don’t know what crazy plans you’ve concocted in that head of yours, and I don’t know what you want from me, but let me say one thing. You’ve won this battle, but you won’t win this war.”

The old wizard turned back to the door. “You’re a great wizard, Max,” he responded quietly, “but you have yet to learn that oppression does not lead to power. The wise understand this; the ignorant do not. And this, above all else, is what has put you in this position. You might have had the upper hand when the day began, but now the tide has turned.”

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Blade leaned forward and pressed his nose against the bars, until their faces were only inches away. "Well, I guess every dog has his day," he whispered maliciously.

They glared at each other for a moment, and then the old wizard swept away.

"I'll see you in hell, Morpheo," Blade called after him.

Morpheo paused and looked back. "No, Max," he answered, "we'll see each other before then." He turned away, and then he was gone as he disappeared into the shadows of the hallway.

Blade didn't waste any time. He scrambled back to the center of the room and snatched up the three remaining wands. Then he dashed over to his comrades and pulled off their gags.

"The Rociada Charm!" spluttered Jazmine as soon as she was free. "He's performed it on the entire room!"

"Like I didn't notice," Blade snarled back, nodding to his wand.

*Thwop!*

The four of them turned to see a heavy man whacking away at one of the barred windows with an axe. And more townspeople and knights were hacking away at the others lining each wall.

Then there was a deafening crash from overhead as the lock to the front doors was busted and the mob sprinted inside.

"No..." Blade whispered to himself as he glanced at the ceiling. "Our treasures....our secrets...."

"Blade, we must find a way out of here!" Drake exclaimed urgently. "We must get up there and stop them before they discover everything!"

“It’s too late for that,” he replied forlornly. “It’s over. It’s all gone.”

One by one, he untied the ropes binding his three friends, tears streaking down his face. Then he handed each of them their wands. Vanessa and Jazmine were wide-eyed. Drake looked like he’d just been slapped in the face.

The bars of the windows came crashing to the dungeon floor as the townspeople finally managed to cut them down. All around them, dark figures were dropping into the room, their axes and swords raised and ready.

Blade glanced around frantically, and saw it. In the corner of the room there was a black space in the wall; it was hard to notice because the dungeon was so dark and shadowy, but he could have sworn there was something there....

“Follow me! Quickly!” he commanded, and led the way over to the tunnel.

A giant spider web blocked the entrance, but Blade didn’t care. He wiped the tears from his eyes, and then nearly pushed his friends through the sticky strands. Drake went first, then Jazmine, and finally Vanessa.

“Run! Run!” he shouted desperately. “Don’t wait for me! GO!”

As soon as Vanessa disappeared into the darkness ahead, he glanced back. The mob was almost on top of him. They had realized there was something there, and weren’t about to let them get away so easily....

*Zero Hour*

The last thing Blade saw before he turned away was an armored knight racing towards him with his sword held high. Then he took a deep breath, ducked headfirst through the cobwebs, and began his journey. He didn't know where the secret passageway would lead them, and he didn't know what they would do now, but at least they would lose the mob in the darkness of the tunnel. At least they would escape. At least they were safe.

For now.



# Pronunciation Guide

**Galactico** (Ga-lak-tik-O)

**Sisyphus** (Siss-i-fiss)

**Elysium** (Ill-ee-see-um)

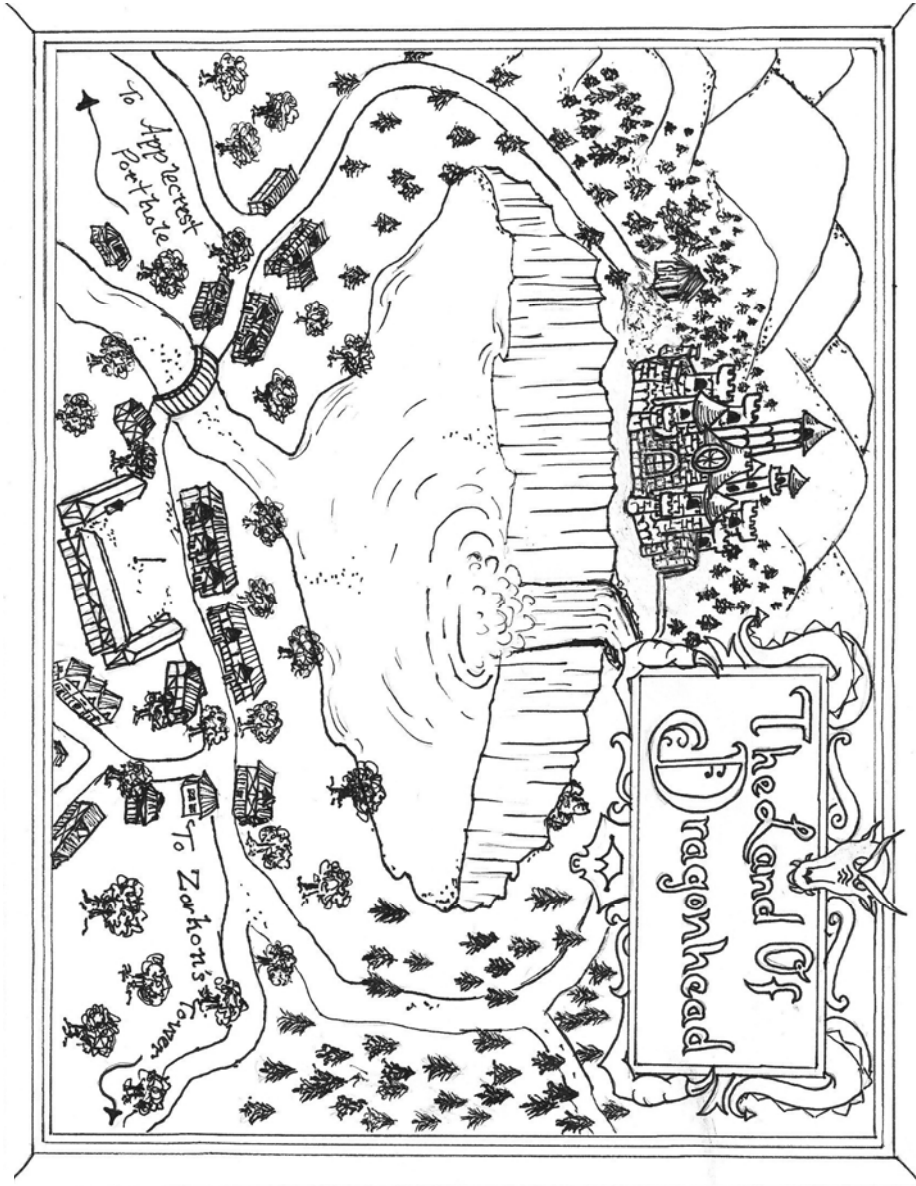
**Eather** (Eea-thurr)

**IAOW** (I-oww)

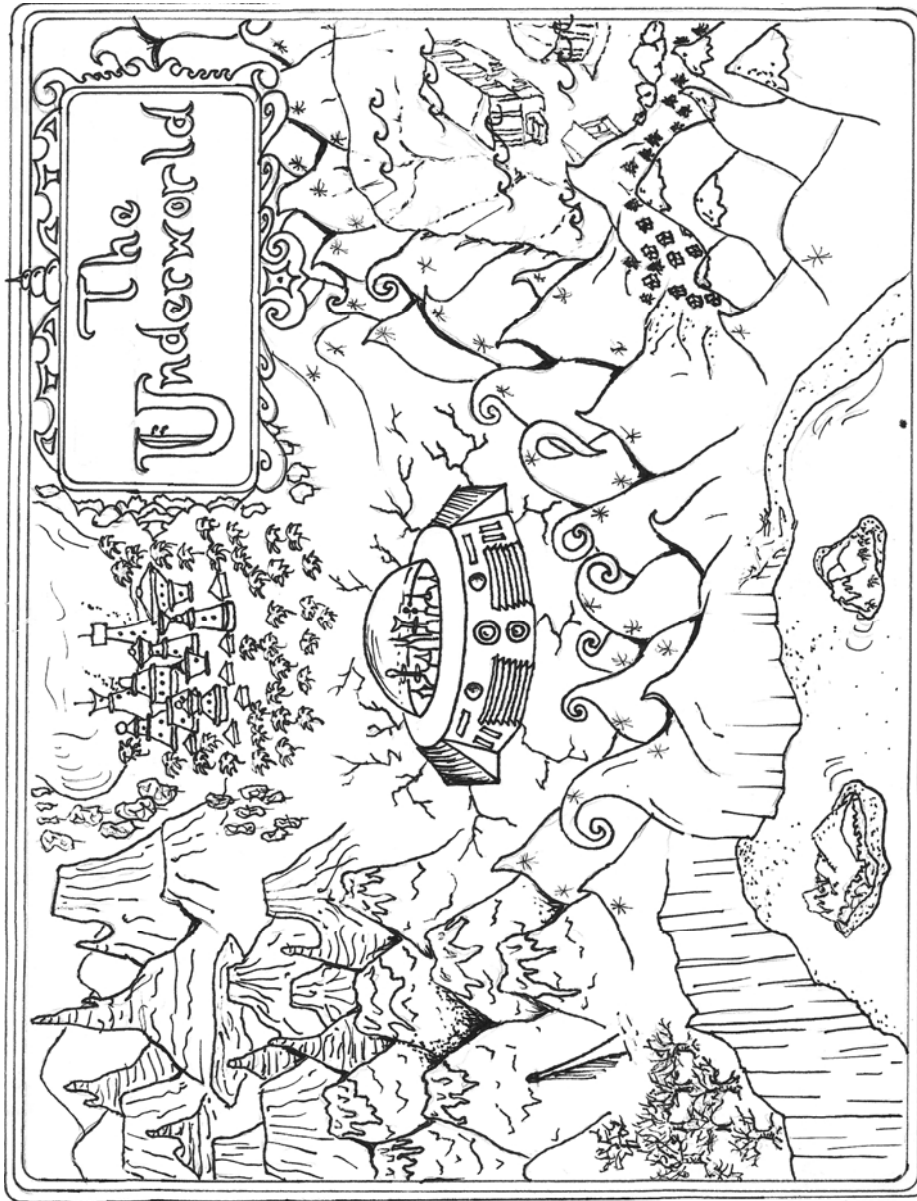
**Yoshiki** (Yo-shee-kee)

**Mulhassa** (Mool-hass-ah)

**Communicaeles** (Cu-mUn-ic-Ay-ell-ees)









# The Revelation

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Book One



# The City of Lights

## Chapter 1

Monday, September 4- 8:21 am

1383 hr 39 min remaining

It was a normal day in the city. Shops and businesses were just opening their doors in the early morning, and birds swooped through the air peacefully between the buildings. Out on the sidewalks, crowds of people thronged towards their various destinations as cars whizzed by them on the street.

Among the crowds of people walked a man. Like many others, he was headed to a meeting for work. In his right hand, he carried a briefcase full of important documents. He was also well dressed, for the meeting would be with a person of high importance. Not his boss, no, but nonetheless a very significant individual. He was rather excited about this meeting; it offered him a break from the grueling, tedious and extremely boring everyday tasks that he normally had to perform. Yes, he thought, today would be special.

The man turned the corner and headed off away from the busy street, along a pathway reserved solely for pedestrians. The buzz of traffic grew more distant behind him. As he looked up, he saw it-

his final destination. The building loomed before him, and the pathway he was on lead right up to its entrance.

Since the building was of such importance, a throng of people crowded the pathway ahead of him, some leaving the building, but most entering. So the man joined the crowd, along with the others who worked in the building or who were also visiting on a special business trip.

The man clutched his briefcase more tightly as people began surrounding him on all sides. As he looked ahead, he noticed somebody much shorter than himself making his way in the opposite direction. The person brushed against him roughly as he made his way through the crowd. He saw that this person, in fact, had brown wrinkled skin and warrior-like clothing. He had a long crooked nose and large pointy ears, along with small arms and pointy fingernails that were almost like claws.

The creature scuffled away behind the man, apparently in a hurry. But the man hardly took any notice; he had seen plenty of these things before.

He ventured further along the pathway, the building looming ever closer before him. Now he noticed another interesting person walking in the opposite direction. This particular man was clad in medieval clothing; he wore a green wool tunic complete with an intricate leather belt. His boots were large, pointed, and made of animal-skin. And he also carried a sword, tucked away in its sheath at his side.

“Arthur?”

The two men stopped at the sight of each other.

*Zero Hour*

“Good gracious, Timothy!”

The man with the briefcase held out his hand, and the person called Timothy heartily shook it.

“I haven’t seen you in at least a year!” the man went on. “How have you been?”

“Oh, I’m living here in the city now!” the medieval-clad man answered enthusiastically. “Thought I’d help the community a bit, you know. Do my duty as a good citizen. I left Elysium six months ago.”

“Tough thing to do, very tough,” the man replied, “but good for you, Timothy!”

“So what brings you here?” Timothy asked.

“Oh, you know, business as usual,” the man replied. “I’m on my way to see you-know-who right now.” He rolled his eyes towards the building in front of them.

“Well, that’s just splendid!” Timothy answered. “Must be exciting? To actually meet him face-to-face?”

“Ah, well, it’s not the first time....”

“Yes, I understand. But even so, I’ve never seen him, and I’ve been here for quite some time!”

At this point the man realized he’d forgotten something. “I’m sorry, but how long has it been since you died?”

“Oh, I’ve been dead for nearly 700 years!” Timothy answered. “And not once have I even laid eyes on him!”

“700 years in Elysium....” the man replied, more to himself. “One day, I’ll get there. One day....”

“Don’t worry, Arthur. With all you’ve done for us, I can’t imagine them offering you anything less than a top-notch palace right in the middle of the city!”

“Ah, no, I’d prefer one along the coast instead,” he answered. “Well, Timothy, I really must be going. Can’t be late for the meeting!”

“It was nice seeing you, Arthur.”

“And you too, Timothy.”

The two men parted, and the man continued along his way towards the gigantic building. In the center of the pathway, islands of decorative flora impressively paved the way to the entrance. A clump of giant trees, accompanied by smaller plants and shrubs at its base, stood in the center of each one, surrounded by a steel dividing-wall. The man looked up at one of the islands as he passed by. The trees rose several hundred feet into the air, but the most amazing thing was that they had golden leaves. Rich dark-red wood made up the trunks, which were twenty feet in diameter at their bases. The smaller trees and plants around it were also golden-leafed, and shimmered magnificently in the daylight.

Now the man turned his attention towards the entrance as he neared it, walking under the shadow of the immense golden trees. The building didn’t have any doors for this particular entryway, rather, the pathway lead right inside it, creating a cavernous oval-shaped tunnel as it made its way to the interior. The roof of the tunnel was made of a smooth, shiny black metal, and hung no less than a hundred feet above the path.



## *Zero Hour*

As his eyes ventured further and further above him, he couldn't help but marvel at the gargantuan size of the largest building in the city. It soared one thousand, two thousand, ten thousand feet above him, its structure growing thinner as it reached increasingly higher in the sky. It was also constructed of a black shiny metal, with differently-shaped blue and yellow lights blanketing its surface. At the very tip of the building, so high it seemed to be in the heavens rather than on earth, sat an egg-shaped chamber. It glowed electric blue and was surrounded by thin black supports that weaved and curved over its surface, making it look like the shell of a giant glowing insect.

The man had almost reached the cave-entrance to the building. He stopped, just before crossing beneath the cavernous ceiling, and looked back.

Galactico was never so vibrant and full of energy. Other structures, some tall and skinny, some low and dome-shaped, but each one of them constructed with the same shiny black metal, reared upwards from all sides. Blue and yellow lights twinkled on the surface of each, some of them tiny and arranged in straight endless rows along the sides of the buildings, and some gigantic and stretching hundreds of feet across so that you could see all the action inside.

Weaving around the buildings was an immense network of superhighways. Some small ones were only four lanes, but others were ten lanes wide, stretching around, under, through, and sometimes even over the black buildings. In some places the roadways curved around the structures high in the air, supported

by black beams anchored far below as if they were the track of a roller coaster rising and dipping through the city, with the roads banked slightly along the curves to accommodate the speed of the vehicles racing across it.

There were even flying cars. They whizzed above and around the man, even underneath the elevated pathway he had just walked over. Huge triangular crafts and small oval ones alike cruised together through the city, each one slightly different. These cars, too, bore tiny twinkling lights of all colors. In fact, Galactico had so many lights that it seemed, if you gazed right into the center of the city, you were looking into a galaxy of millions of stars from far away, some of them fast-moving and others stationary.

In the distance, dozens of miles from the towering skyscrapers of the inner city, was a wall, black with blue and yellow lights to match the buildings. It rose thousands of feet into the air and circled the entire city, so that no matter where you looked it towered far away at the inner city's borders. A colossal, perfectly-circular glass dome, dozens of feet thick, rose from the top of this wall, encasing the entire city. And as the man looked up, high above the black shining towers and the glass dome that enclosed them, he saw a pink sky dotted with bluish-purple clouds, like a strange sunset. There was no sun in the sky, only a layer of these wispy clouds, which bathed Galactico in a dark light comparable to early evening on a cloudy day. But this semi-light atmosphere only seemed to make the city more fantastic, allowing its millions of lights to shine even brighter.

*Zero Hour*

The man finally tore his eyes away from the city of lights and looked ahead into the dark tunnel. He took a deep breath and began making his way into the building.

The tunnel eventually opened out into an atrium- the biggest atrium in the entire city. It was located in the very center of the building, and rose thousands of feet high, growing thinner and thinner as it soared higher, to match the outer shell the man had seen coming in. In fact, this particular atrium almost reached as high as the building itself; the countless floors all formed the shape of a circle, with the open space of the atrium in the center.

It was dark inside, because there were no windows for the daylight to shine through. There were only lights- countless numbers of lights. Most of them were actually windows which lined the curved sides of the atrium, and as the man looked up, the rows and rows of electric-blue and yellow windows he saw climbed so high that they eventually blended together and became one bright blur. It was like a tube, he thought. He was looking up into a shiny black tube with lights lining the inside.

The black glassy floor dipped slowly as he made his way to the check-in counters; in fact, there weren't any ramps or stairs at all in this part of the building. The ground rose and fell with a natural quality, like small hills in the countryside. In the center of the atrium was a shallow valley, so the man actually had to walk downhill and then back up again to cross it as he made his way towards the check-in counters.

The counters were set up much like ticket booths at a stadium. They were nestled in a corner of the giant hall under a canopy-like

roof. Dozens of people waited in line to check in to various appointments, whether they were meeting with a government official to suggest a new cultural center or simply were visiting one of their friends or relatives in the building. There were wizards, and witches, and warrior-like dwarves with axes in hand, and tiny elves with pointed hats. But the man didn't get in line with these people. Instead he ventured towards a different booth reserved only for visitors with special appointments.

"Well, if it isn't Arthur McKnight!" the wizard behind the glass wall exclaimed as he noticed the man. He had a long white beard and wore a fancy eyeglass on one eye.

"Merlin! How are you, my old friend?" the man answered joyfully. "It's been some time since I've seen you!"

"Yes, yes! I believe it's been a year since you were last down here?" the wizard replied.

"One year indeed, Merlin. But I wonder what such an important and talented wizard like yourself is doing checking guests in?" asked the man.

Merlin smiled warmly. "Arthur, you know me. I can't do enough for this place. I need a break from all of this political nonsense; it's very taxing on my health, you know. Even dead people need to relax every now and then! So I thought I'd help out here for a while. It's a very nice job; I've seen plenty of old friends coming through here to do business!"

"Well, I'm glad to be one of them," the man answered kindly.

Merlin pointed his long skinny finger at the huge piece of artwork suspended above the center of the atrium. "In the

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meantime, I've been admiring those spheres of water. I'm sure you know what they represent?"

"The three lands," replied the man. "Yes, I know a lot about this building. I've been here countless times before..." He glanced behind him to marvel at the enormous piece of artwork.

At about twenty levels high, thick tube-like supports jutted out from the inner walls and came together in the center, where three even bigger tubes dropped vertically from the middle of the structure. Each of these tubes had a humongous glass sphere attached to the bottom of them, but they varied in size and height off the ground.

The lowest and biggest sphere- only about a hundred feet above the man's head- was completely filled with water, giving the whole thing a bluish glow. And inside swam all kinds of fish. There were tiny orange-and-yellow tropical fish, and hammerhead sharks, and jellyfish. There were giant snails stuck to the glass sides, and sea turtles the size of small cars floating carelessly from top to bottom. Then there were the merpeople. The man only spotted two- one mermaid and one merman- and they looked rather bored as they leaned against the glass walls and stared down at all the people below them.

The second sphere, slightly higher up, was filled with green water. But there weren't any sea creatures in this one; instead, there were underwater plants crawling up the glass sides. There seemed to be many different species of plants, but they were all tropical. One was thin and viny, with giant leaves swaying gently

in the water. Another one looked like a palm tree, and yet another one was short and stumpy, with spiky leaves.

The last and smallest sphere was filled with red water. And inside this one floated all kinds of bones. There were human skulls, and animal skulls, and femur bones, and ribcages. Floating around in the center was the biggest one; the skull of a carnivorous dinosaur.

The man shuddered and turned away from the spheres; it was unnerving to see that many bones floating eerily above him.

“So how are things up in your world?” Merlin asked curiously. “Is everything peaceful?”

“Ah, well, you know how it was when you ruled long ago,” the man responded. “There’s always something we have to deal with, even in times of peace. But yes, overall things are going very well.”

Merlin sighed. “And I can never go back up there to see it for myself. That is the limitation on all of our souls! We can never leave this land.”

“Don’t get down on yourself, my old friend,” the man advised. “It happened to you, and it will happen to me someday, too. After I die, I’ll be stuck down here with you! All of us will, eventually. And it’s really not that dull of a place to be.”

“It’s bearable,” Merlin agreed. “Well, we’d better get on with business. There are better places to converse than from behind a glass wall. Let’s see here....”

Merlin rummaged through some strange-looking papers on his counter, and found what he was looking for. He crossed off the

*Zero Hour*

man's name on a long list, and then reached into a drawer and pulled out a tiny silver chain with a key on it.

"Here to meet with the master, I see!" he exclaimed. "Don't let his personality get to you." The wizard winked at the man, and handed him the keychain through an opening in the glass. "Take care, Arthur."

"And the same to you, Merlin," the man called Arthur McKnight answered. With that, he turned and strode back across the atrium and through the crowd of magical creatures.

Above him, a monorail zoomed across the concourse. It had space-age supports anchoring it to the ground, and disappeared into a tunnel at the opposite end of the atrium. Neon lights on the side of the train read 'The Nucleus Express'. But Arthur McKnight wasn't taking the express to get to his destination.

He finally stopped at the edge of the concourse, where a group of egg-shaped elevators were busy carrying visitors to the upper levels. Some were large and double-decked, and some rotated on the way up so passengers could get a panoramic view of the impressive atrium.

A tiny elevator had just arrived back at ground level, and McKnight didn't waste any time grabbing it. He preferred riding alone....at least for a visit like this one. He didn't want anyone else to see where he was going.

But by the time he'd pressed the button to close the door, it was too late. A scraggly old knight had wandered in after him. He was fully decked in a suit of armor, and carried a broken sword in his hands.

"I say!" the knight cried as he noticed McKnight. "What foul villain art thou?"

McKnight groaned as the doors closed; this wasn't what he'd been hoping for.

"I'm not a villain, so put your sword down, please," he replied.

"Art thou not dressed like a foreigner of the holy lands, whom I have come to slay on this blessed morning?"

McKnight stared. What on earth was he talking about?

"Stand tall and raise thy sword, for we shall fight to the death!" the knight proclaimed.

"No!" McKnight yelled nervously, and hurried over to the panel beside the doors. "We're not going to fight! Just hold on a minute, and you'll be on your way!"

There were names beside the button for each floor level, so he scanned the list hopefully. *Center for Babylonian Cultures....Center for Ancient Chinese Cultures....Office of Endangered Magical Creatures....Office of Aid in the Locating of Dead Relatives....Center for Greek Cultures....* Unfortunately, though, there wasn't a level that read 'Center for Deranged Knights Who Don't Realize They're Dead.' *Center for Medieval Cultures* would have to do.

McKnight pressed the button, grabbed onto the silver railing, and stood as far away from the knight as possible. The knight, on the other hand, looked around suspiciously as the elevator began to rise.

"A flying beast! Well, I say! What an unprecedented way to travel!"



*Zero Hour*

"You don't realize you're dead, do you?" McKnight asked cautiously.

The knight looked confused. "What dost thou speak of?"

"Did you die during the crusades?" McKnight went on. "You know? The crusades? Did you travel to the Holy Land to fight Muslims?"

"Ah, you know of our perils!" the knight cried.

Good, thought McKnight. I seem to be on the right track. "Yes, you died fighting in the crusades. They're over now. There aren't any more."

"Curse thy wretched tongue!" yelled the knight. "It is true!"

"OK, calm down," McKnight urged. "Take a deep breath....that's it....yes, you're dead, just like everyone else down here. You're in the Underworld now. You know what that is, don't you? That's where dead people go. But I'm not dead. I'm a wizard from the living world, up there." He pointed towards the sky. "I'm just here in the Nucleus for a meeting. It's a big building in the Underworld."

The doors of the pod-like elevator finally opened, and the knight stumbled out, confused as ever. McKnight leaned against the bar and breathed a sigh of relief.

As the doors slowly closed, he got a glimpse of this particular level. It looked like the inside of a castle, with gray stone walls and velvety red carpets. There was a desk nearby, and the lady behind it noticed the knight and said "Hello there! Welcome to the Center for Medieval Cultures. How can I help you?"

Just then, her friend ran into view and exclaimed, "Guinevere, the floats for the Medieval Pride Parade are finished!"

"How wonderful!" the lady answered. "It's so nice that we've finally got a parade of our own here in Galactico. We've always been such an overlooked part of the population, but that's about to change...."

The doors of the elevator-pod banged shut, and McKnight was left wondering how a knight could be down here for 700 or more years and *still* not realize he's dead. He shook his head; just when you thought you'd seen it all....

The wizard now took the tiny keychain out of his pocket. He wiggled the key into a lock above the panel of buttons, and a tiny door opened. Behind it was the button for the top floor, and it read *The Palace of Darkness*. McKnight raised his finger to the button, but then paused. He stared at it for a few seconds, then shook himself out of his trance and pressed it.

There was a high-pitched sound like a futuristic engine starting up, and the elevator rocketed upwards at over fifty miles an hour. McKnight glanced out the window and saw the first level, along with the structure of giant spheres, growing smaller and smaller below him. All around him, lights whizzed by along with the floors, and he glimpsed quick flashes of people walking along corridors, or sitting at a table in a restaurant, or doing work at their office next to the window....

After a few minutes the elevator finally reached its destination. The view outside the window disappeared, and McKnight was left

*Zero Hour*

staring at a metal wall inches beyond the glass. The doors on the opposite side opened, and the wizard walked out.

At once, two guards came swooping towards him. But they weren't your ordinary guards. They were seven feet tall and had long black cloaks that dragged along the ground. Their hoods covered their faces so that all you could see was darkness where their heads should have been. And the hands protruding from their sleeves didn't have any flesh at all; they were just bones, like a skeleton.

McKnight gulped as he eyed the eight-foot-tall arrow-like weapons each guard carried in his hand like a walking stick. He didn't know why, but this part of the meeting always made him uneasy. There was something about those faceless guards that made him want to turn around and go straight back down to the atrium. But he had business to do.

One of the guards reached into his pocket and pulled out a metal stick. He started waving it up and down in front of the wizard. McKnight knew what was going on, though; he was checking him for weapons or any other harmful devices. The stick would beep if anything turned up, but of course nothing did.

After that, the second guard held out his skeletal palm. He wanted him to hand over his wand, McKnight thought. But he was prepared for this; he'd left his wand back at the porthole he used to travel down here. That had been his policy ever since the very first time he'd come here and these nasty guards had taken it from him. He didn't feel comfortable leaving it in the hands of these creatures; it was too valuable to him. So now he always left it behind.

He shook his head and dug into his pockets, hoping they would get the idea. But as he felt the inside of his robes, his fingers touched something very small and round. His heartbeat quickened as he tried to convince the guards there was nothing there, even though something was definitely there....something they didn't know about....something even more valuable than his wand....

The guards weren't buying it. They glanced at each other, then stepped forward and yanked McKnight's cloak off him. The wizard started to sweat. He clawed at his white tunic nervously as the cloaked figures dug their skeletal hands into his robes.

The first pocket was empty. So was the second pocket. Sweat trickled down McKnight's forehead. He wiped his face with his sleeve, hoping they wouldn't notice.

There was only one pocket they hadn't checked now. The guard reached for it, but then-

"There's nothing in there."

The guard stopped and looked up.

"I do not wish to do your master any harm. I am only here for a routine conference. I am his ally, and I am not hiding anything."

The two guards gave each other looks. McKnight waited, holding his breath. Then the guard made up his mind and thrust his skeletal hand into the last pocket. McKnight stared as the guard felt inside his robes, groping and double-checking every last corner. Then he took his hand back out. It was empty.

The wizard breathed a sigh of relief as he was handed back his cloak. He tried to calm himself down; told himself he was being

*Zero Hour*

stupid. Why was he so nervous? He had nothing to fear. They would never find it; they couldn't. Only he could.

Still, something was out of place. He could sense it. He hadn't ever felt this nervous as he prepared to meet with him. So why was he so tense now?

The guards led McKnight towards a set of doors leading out of the tiny room they were in. As he followed them into the next passageway, he slid his hand back into his pocket and felt the tiny sphere again with his fingers. He just had to be sure....

They were in a giant hallway that sloped steeply upward. It was very dark here, and the walls and floor were made of the same strange black metal as the outside of the skyscraper. Except the walls had scenes carved onto them; scenes depicting humans and monsters battling each other, or winged gods flying down from the heavens, or heroes braving a tempest at sea in their small ship. And a string of circular blue lights lined either side of the sloping floor, illuminating the 3-D carvings from below. But the images were molded in such high relief that some parts of them glowed blue, and others were lost in darkness, casting eerie shadows all over the mysterious figures. Of course, McKnight knew what these sculptures were; they were scenes depicting the various triumphs of the gods.

The guards led him through another set of doors at the top of the hallway, and McKnight found himself in a small room. This room was very dark, too. But instead of sculpted walls, there were full statues here. They lined either side of the tiny room and loomed over McKnight and the guards; one statue depicted

Poseidon with his trident, and another one showed Zeus with his lightning bolt, and then another one- taller than all the rest- depicted a robed man with large horns growing out of his head.

There were benches here, too. They blended in with the surrounding statues; for example, Zeus had the palm of his hand lowered so it created a seat, and there was a round shell in the water at Poseidon's feet creating a bowl-like chair. There was also a perfectly circular window in this room, letting the only light seep in.

One of the guards raised his skeleton hand as the two of them glided through a pair of doors to their left. McKnight understood; they wanted him to stay here in the waiting room while they notified their master that his guest had arrived. So he was left to wait alone in the dark.

McKnight undid the latches on his briefcase and opened it. It wasn't an ordinary case; instead of leather it was made of dark-purple dragon hide. Inside were dozens of pieces of parchment, marked up with fancy calligraphy and cursive writing. He took out his itinerary sheet and glanced over it one last time. 'Discuss decreasing trends in tourism and propose new advertising plan for Whist'. *Well, you have to admit, the Underworld isn't the hot spot to vacation anymore, McKnight thought to himself. Thorr's the place to go now....what else is on here?* 'Propose new porthole in the Canterbury Hills'. *Now that's something we should get to right away. The citizens of Wickerwater have been wanting a closer porthole for decades now....*

*Zero Hour*

McKnight took one last glance at the sheet, and then tucked it back into his dragon hide briefcase. He meandered over to the giant circular window and glanced outside.

He was so high up that the glass dome enclosing the city seemed only feet above him, and the other skyscrapers seemed miles and miles below. The flying cars were just little bright dots in the sky as they weaved through the colossal, shiny black buildings with their blue and white lights. And above them, beyond the glass dome, the purplish-blue clouds floated mystically through the pink sky.

The doors opened and the faceless guards glided back into the waiting room. They pointed through the doors with their spindly white fingers. So McKnight strode past them confidently and entered the Palace of Darkness.

The palace had several parts to it, even though it was open; there were no walls separating each section. To his left was an impressive lounge area with black leather couches and an oddly-shaped glass table in the center. To his right, and slightly elevated above him, was what looked like a circular control board with a seat in the middle. And straight ahead, up a ramp lined with blue lights, was a deck-like area that extended from one end of the huge palace to the other. The entire far wall was made of glass- blue glass that seemed to have a strange glow to it. And curving metal supports snaked along the outer surface, encasing the entire thing. The wall curved inward as it grew higher, as if the palace was inside a giant sphere. This, McKnight knew, was the glowing blue

oval he'd seen perched atop the building as he was coming in. He was inside it.

"You impress me, Arthur."

The voice was coming from a shadow silhouetted against the glass far ahead. It was cold and deep, and caused a shiver to run down McKnight's spine.

"I did not think you would be so persistent in your attempt to meet with me," the voice boomed.

"I'm...ambitious," McKnight answered after searching for the right word. "As you know, it's been over a year since our last meeting, and there are some very pressing matters we need to discuss."

His voice echoed throughout the giant palace, and the figure's echoed back.

"I suppose it did not occur to you, then, that we immortals have greater responsibilities than helping mere wizards like yourself improve the sorry state of your pathetic little land, did it?"

McKnight gulped. He wasn't afraid, though. This just meant he wasn't in the mood to meet with mortals. It was OK; he got like that sometimes. And he hadn't come all the way down here for nothing.

"I believe it is your duty to oversee the various functions of the Underworld and ensure that they are in order, is it not?" McKnight replied in a coolheaded way.

"So you would endure the daunting process of entering this city simply to make sure *I* am doing *my* job?" the figure retorted.



*Zero Hour*

“You know very well that the Council of Merlin and I feel these meetings are in the best interest of everyone,” answered the wizard. “And yes, I did undergo the admittance process just for this. I traveled through Sherwood Province Porthole, flew across the desert by way of the FantasyFlight Transportation Network, went through customs at the gate, had to show them my pass *twice*, and after that they still demanded a DNA test!”

The figure sighed. “Arthur, you know very well why I am so strict on the admissions process into Galactico-“

“Your administration is safe here!” McKnight insisted. “People may not like you, but no one’s out there planning an attack on Galactico, I can assure you that!”

But then he could have sworn- even with a shadow surrounding his face- that he saw the figure smile to himself. “Oh, Arthur...much has happened since we last met.”

The figure folded his arms and began walking towards the lounge area. “I think it best if we sit down for this conversation. Come.”

McKnight didn’t move. He glared at the figure for a moment, wondering what he was up to now. Then he made up his mind, walked over to the lounge, and sat down on one of the leather couches opposite him.

Hades eyed him with interest from across the glass table. Black robes covered most of his body, and several strange necklaces dangled from his neck and disappeared beneath his clothes before you could see what was hanging from them. His eyes were blood red and his skin was dark; a mix between brown and gray. And

two large horns protruded from his forehead, one on either side of his face like a bull.

He snapped his fingers, shouting "Sisyphus!" At once, a tiny little goblin came scuttling out of one of the back rooms of the palace. He was dressed in a fancy black robe and was surprisingly good-looking and well groomed....for a goblin, that is.

"Yes, master?"

"Fetch us some drinks from the cooler. I'll take an Olympian Light, on the rocks. Arthur, what would you like to drink?"

"Oh, I don't want anything," McKnight protested.

Hades glared at him. "You might want to have a drink, Arthur, because I'm not sure how long it will be until your next chance."

McKnight tensed up in his seat; he casually put his hand back into his pocket and felt the smooth object against his fingers. He would use it if he had to....

"Sisyphus, get a Dionysus Daiquiri for Arthur, would you?" Hades commanded.

"As you wish, master," the little robed goblin said, and bowed low before him. Then he scuttled away and disappeared through a different door.

Hades stretched his legs out casually and turned back to McKnight. "As I was saying, Arthur, much has changed since our last get-together. I'm moving up in the world; taking a firmer grasp on what's mine, bringing criminals and wrong-doers to justice...." And then he paused for a moment. McKnight noticed a tiny twitch of a smile on his face. "...and making bold plans that will drastically alter the balance of power on this planet."

*Zero Hour*

"Really?" McKnight said, trying to sound calm. "What sort of plans are we talking about?"

Hades sighed. "Arthur, my old friend, I didn't want to get you wrapped up in all this. But now that you're here, I think I have no choice but to reveal my intentions."

McKnight felt a strange pressure mounting all around him, squeezing him, suffocating him....but it was all in his head, he told himself. He just had to stay calm. He was a quick thinker, and he knew exactly what was happening. So now he had to try and get himself out of it.

"You don't have to reveal your intentions, Hades," he said quietly, eyeing the god meaningfully from across the table. "You could just have me leave."

He grasped his dragon hide suitcase tightly with his free hand, holding his breath for a few tense seconds....

"No," Hades finally hissed, even more quietly. "It's too late, Arthur."

Sisyphus broke the silence when he came running back into the main room of the palace, balancing a tray with two drinks on it.

"Your drinks, master."

"Ah, yes. Thank you, Sisyphus," Hades replied. "Now go and order my guards to come into the palace. I will need them shortly."

"As you wish, master."

The goblin bowed again and made his way back down the ramp, towards the double-doors leading to the waiting room.

"Now," Hades went on as he sat up in his seat, "to business." He took a sip of his Olympian Light and stared McKnight down

with his red eyes. "I'm afraid to say there will no longer be any need for these meetings, Arthur. Times are about to change. Your friends- the Rulers of Rockwell- are about to be, well....dethroned. And the non-magical governments will come to an end as well."

McKnight stared. He didn't touch his daiquiri, and he didn't move a muscle. Fine, he thought. He could play it Hades' way. He would get as much information out of him as possible, and then he would strike.

"The only superpower left will be me," Hades continued. "And with that power, I will be able to accomplish amazing things, Arthur. Unimaginable things."

"And how would you go about dethroning these powers?" McKnight asked. "The last time I checked, you only ruled the Underworld. And you cannot step foot on the surface of earth."

But Hades simply laughed. It was a bone-chilling cackle that echoed throughout the palace. "Oh, I don't need to step foot outside my very own palace, Arthur!" he replied. "I have others who will accomplish all this for me."

McKnight didn't know what to say next. What was he talking about? How could he possibly dethrone the wizard government? Yes, he was a god. But only a god of the Underworld, not the living world.

"I'd very much like to know who these 'others' are," he finally answered.

Hades took another swig of his beer, then glared at McKnight again without saying anything. "Arthur," he finally said, "You are a smart man. But I think enough is enough. I will not jeopardize

my plans by voicing them to the most intelligent wizard in all of Whist. Not that it really matters, anyway....”

McKnight saw his eyes glance upward, and then Hades smiled. A knot twisted inside his stomach, and he was about to whip around....but it was too late. White skeletal hands had grasped him by the shoulders. He was being pulled up off the couch as the guards dug their sharp bony fingers into his skin. He reached into his pocket again and felt the tiny object....but then he stopped. No, he thought. Not now. Not when the fate of the world rested in his hands.

The faceless guards didn't pull him away from the lounge; instead they held him there in a standing position as Hades finally got to his feet. He slowly walked around the glass table, until he was face to face with McKnight.

“Oh, Arthur....I'm so sorry it had to end like this. But it was you that insisted on this meeting and put yourself in this position, not me. I tried to keep you out of danger, Arthur. I tried to protect you. But now I have no choice. I cannot let news of my plans leak to the wizard government, and so I am forced to keep you here....as a prisoner.”

Hades' face was only inches from his. He could see every little crack on his dry, desert-like skin.

“You see, I'm ambitious too, Arthur,” he whispered maliciously, “and my ambition is much, much greater than yours. In a very short time, there will be nothing left of your world. There will only be mine.”

He wanted to use it so badly. He wanted to whip it out and see the look of horror on his evil face....hear him scream....see him fall.... But then McKnight let go of the object and pulled his hand back out of his pocket. Now was not the time, even though it was so hard not to.

Hades backed away, but he didn't take his eyes off McKnight.

"The age of wizards has come to an end," he declared loudly. "And the human race will end with it. There is no denying it. There is no stopping it. And there is nothing you can do about it, Arthur."

McKnight glared back at Hades with a hatred he'd never felt before. He could not let this happen. He would not let this happen if it was the very last thing he ever did....

"Take him away!" Hades roared, and he was dragged from the couch, a hooded guard on either side of him. They carried him back down the ramp towards the double-doors, but McKnight couldn't help himself.

"NO!" he screamed, and tried to wrench himself away from the guards. He tried to kick at them and punch them, but they were too strong. In a matter of seconds, they had hauled him to the doors.

"You will pay for this, Hades!" McKnight yelled as he tried to resist the guards. "I swear it! I swear on my life I will do every little thing possible to bring your wicked plans to an end! And then I will bring you down!"

*Zero Hour*

The guards were dragging him into the waiting room, and Hades was still staring from afar with his red eyes, without any expression at all.

“I will kill you, Hades! Do you hear me?!” McKnight roared as he struggled to break free one last time. “I will not rest until you are dead!!”

Even though he was fifty feet away, he could tell what Hades had voiced to himself. He’d read his lips, and they had formed the words “I am a god”.

“Yeah,” McKnight answered more calmly as he finally gave up the struggle. He nodded to Hades, sweat dripping from his forehead. “We’ll see about that. We’ll see.”

The huge double-doors closed slowly, and McKnight didn’t break eye contact with Hades until they finally shut, blocking him from view. The faceless guards dragged him back through the waiting room, back down the ramp, past the up-lit statues, and back into the small entrance room. Then they hauled him back into the elevator, through a back exit, and out into the city.

McKnight knew where he was going, but he didn’t care. He was too full of rage. And finally, as he was dragged into a dark room, something heavy whacked him in the head. His head began spinning; his vision was blurring. He was going to pass out....

The last thing Arthur McKnight saw was a little creature grinning evilly at him and holding a pair of handcuffs. Then he blacked out.

# Parker's Point

## Chapter 2

Thursday, October 19- 5:28 pm

294 hr 32 min remaining

*Click. Click. Click. Click. Click.*

"Are you nervous?"

"Yeah! I can't believe you talked me into riding this!"

"Relax, Katie, it's just the Wild Mouse."

"I don't know....those cars look like they're almost going to fall off the track when they go around those turns."

"That's right, Katie, they *almost* fall off. *Almost*. That's what makes it so fun. You think you're going to fall off but then you don't!"

"I think I'll just close my eyes through this part. We're almost at the top!"

"You know, you're holding onto my arm so tight, I think it's gonna go numb. That's what this bar is for, you know."

"Sorry, Nick. I'm just really nervous, that's all."

"Like I said, Katie, it's just the Wild Mouse. OK, here we go!"



*Zero Hour*

Nick glanced to his right and saw the sun setting behind the mountains, and the vast lake in the center of the park shimmering in the yellow light. Their mouse took a tiny dip as it left the lift hill and began traversing the twisting track, fifty feet above the ground.

They whipped around the first hairpin turn. *Whoosh.*

*"Nick!"*

*"See? That wasn't so bad, was it? Look, no hands!"*

*Whoosh.*

*"Ahhh! No, Nick, that was definitely bad,"* Katie answered, but she was laughing.

*Whoosh.*

The teenagers were thrown to the side of the car as they spun around another bend.

*"Isn't this fun?"*

*"Nick, I'm scared to death, how can it be fun?"* Katie insisted, laughing even harder. *"Oh no, not the big drop! Anything but the big drop!"*

*"OK, now, the number one rule on the mouse is you have to put your hands up while you're going down the drop! Ready?!"*

Katie screamed again as the car nose-dived thirty feet, then rocketed upward, careened around a sharp curve, and dropped again. Seconds later, they leveled out and came to a stop. But Katie had watched the ride from the park pathway enough to know that it wasn't over yet. This was just the halfway point.

*"OK, now I think I'm going to puke,"* she giggled.

*"Just make sure you turn the other way,"* answered Nick. *"Get ready, here comes the best part- the bunny hills!"*

Katie clung to Nick, laughing harder than ever, as they flew out of their seats while the car glided over the little hills. They even raced out over the lake for a few seconds, then turned around over the water and rolled back to the station.

Two minutes later they were stumbling towards a park bench just outside the exit, under a huge oak tree.

"See?!" Nick exclaimed as they collapsed onto the wooden bench, "I told you you'd like it!"

"Yeah, well, I've never ridden a rollercoaster before."

"Exactly! Look at all the fun you were missing. Come on, we've been friends for, like, almost two years. I was bound to get you on that sooner or later!"

"Hey, what time is it?" Katie asked.

"Uhh, it's like....after 5:30," Nick replied, checking his cell phone. "Come on, let's start walking. I told those guys six o' clock, and The Pasta House is all the way across the park. You still don't have to puke, do you?"

"No, I think I'm fine. Just glad I rode that *before* eating dinner."

Parker's Point wasn't your average amusement park. It was old-fashioned, for the most part. Quaint, white wooden structures housed snack bars, souvenir shops, and arcade games. On the upper levels, jack-o-lanterns and fall decorations had replaced flowers on the windowsills. To match the buildings, there were white wooden fences surrounding the attractions instead of the dull metal ones you found at other parks.

The rides, too, went along with the theme. There was a scrambler, a tilt-a-whirl, and a whip. But there were also the

*Zero Hour*

timeless classics- the tunnel of love, the merry-go-round, the ferris wheel, the haunted house (which was extra popular this time of year), and, of course, two outstanding classic wooden coasters.

Still, there were a few modern rides scattered throughout the park, seamlessly blending the old and new. There was a new log ride, a river rapids ride, the steel wild mouse, and the park's main attraction, *Scream*. *Scream* was the park's newest addition, a green and black, state-of-the-art steel giant that towered 150 feet over the other attractions. It was Nick's favorite ride by far, especially at night.

"You did study for that test tomorrow, right?" Katie queried. "I know your mum said you couldn't go out until you studied."

"Yeah, don't worry about that," Nick answered.

"I just remember what happened last time we were all out like this-"

"Yeah, yeah, my mom freaked," Nick answered, "cuz I went out without finishing that report. Really, it's no big deal. I'll just tell her I studied if she asks."

"The only thing is, that would kinda suck if your mom took away your season pass."

Nick chuckled. "Too bad I live here. It really doesn't matter; I could still ride the rides whenever I want. This park is my backyard. I practically don't even need to leave home. Heck, this *is* my home."

He slowed down for a minute, to take it all in. There were hay bails and scarecrows all around, decorating the entrances to rides and shops. Throngs of people passed by while the rides twirled

merrily around them. And above, the Pennsylvania sky was still a deep blue, but growing yellow on the horizon with the setting sun. Then a gust of wind blew several brilliantly-colored leaves from an oak tree above them, so that they floated gently onto the pathway ahead.

“It’s always felt like home to me, ever since I moved here,” Nick went on. “It’s almost like, when I think of ‘home’, I think of this whole park, not just the building I live in.”

Katie smiled jealously. “Nick, you’re so lucky.”

“Yeah, I know.”

The Pasta House was a sit-down restaurant at the back of the park, nestled in a quiet corner by the scrambler. Everyone agreed it was the best place to eat because of the superb, authentic Italian food. It was one of those places where you grab a tray and order cafeteria-style.

Nick and Katie pushed open the glass double-doors of the restaurant and glanced ahead, at the vast seating area. Three people were already waiting for them in a booth nearby. One of the teens was a lot older than the other two, whose feet barely touched the ground beneath their table.

Nick noticed that one of his friends was wet and shivering, with a beach towel embroidered with the words ‘Parker’s Point Amusement Park’ wrapped around him. His dark brown hair was soaked and matted to his forehead.

“Matt, you’re soaked!”

“We just came from Roaring Rapids,” the older teen answered.

Nick grinned. “Oh, that explains it!”

*Zero Hour*

"He always gets hit by the waterfall at the end," the second younger teen, who was a bit chubbier than Matt, answered.  
"Always."

"It's a c-c-curse, I s-swear!" insisted Matt. "I always g-g-get the w-waterfall!"

The others laughed with him.

"So we get stuck with you two again?" Nick joked to the middle-schoolers.

"Dude, my mom won't let us come here by ourselves at night!" protested Ben. "She's ridiculous! I'm like, 'Mom, we're twelve years old, we can take care of ourselves', and she's just like, 'No, you have to stay with Nick and Greg!' Next year, though, we're comin' on our own. I already promised my girlfriend I'd take her some night-"

"Ben, you're in middle school. The average relationship lasts, what? About two weeks?" Greg chuckled.

"Nuh-uh! It's been, like, two and a half already!"

"Yeah," Nick replied, "and your last girlfriend lasted for three hours."

They all got up to grab food, and Ben scrambled out of the booth after them, protesting, "Well, that one was never really official, anyway!"

"You guys'll never guess what I got Katie to ride," Nick said as he grabbed a tray and set it on the sliding bars.

"Scream?" Ben blurted out as he entered the line behind him.

"Nah, go lower."

"Thunder? Shooting Star?"

"Wild Mouse. Come on, that's a big step for Katie."

"Aw, yeah," Ben answered, "that's *real* scary."

"Hey, Ben, I wasn't the only one screaming on that ride!" responded Katie. "Nick says he's going to get me to ride Scream next."

"Hey, tomorrow's the perfect night!" Nick exclaimed as he grabbed a salad from a nearby cooler. "The wait will be, like, ten hours, so you'll have plenty of time to get nervous in line!"

"Man, I can't wait until tomorrow," Greg said. "SpookFest is always better than Halloween anyway." Then he spotted a familiar chef behind the counter. "Hey, Tony."

"Gregory!" the chef exclaimed with a huge Italian accent, "I haven't seen you in a while! How are you doing?"

"Not bad," Greg answered. "Gonna be really busy pretty soon, though, with basketball practice starting."

"And Nick! How are things for you?"

"They're great," Nick smiled back. "You guys must have your hands full getting ready for tomorrow."

"Mamamia, zat reminds me- ze pasta!" Tony exclaimed, and he ran off out of sight.

Another chef took their orders, and returned a minute later with steaming plates of spaghetti, meatballs, ravioli, and fettuccini alfredo.

"So, anyway, is that why they keep the park open this late in the year? Just for SpookFest?" Katie asked.

*Zero Hour*

“That’s right!” answered Nick as they moved up to the paying register. “It draws in a lot of people, though. It’s great for business.”

“Oh, and by ze way, I promised zem a free dinner next time zey came!” Tony yelled from the kitchen.

“Guess this one’s on the house, guys,” the lady at the register smiled.

Nick and Greg were used to getting stuff for free at Parker’s Point. After all, they lived in the amusement park, because Greg’s dad owned a pizza restaurant there and there was extra living space in the building above (Nick was adopted.) They knew half the employees in the park, and Ben and Matt sometimes got in on the free stuff, too. Ben was Greg’s cousin, and Matt was his best friend, but they usually ended up staying with Nick and Greg whenever they visited the amusement park.

“Wow, I completely forgot about that!” Nick exclaimed as they sat down in a semi-circular booth next to a huge plant. “It doesn’t get any better than free dinner at The Pasta House. Man, I’m lucky.”

“Yeah,” answered Greg. “In two years you went from eating orphanage food to getting really good pasta for free.”

“I’m surprised about that,” Katie commented, “about how you couldn’t find a family until you were sixteen. Usually it’s the other way around.”

“I know, no one wanted a little brat like me for a kid,” Nick joked.

"Yeah, well, my parents always wanted another kid," Greg explained as he stuffed down a meatball, "but they couldn't have one. Finally gave up a few years ago."

"Then I showed up," Nick went on.

"Yeah, and about the same time, our restaurant business really started booming," Greg continued. "We started making a lot more, and my parents decided they'd have enough money to put two kids through college. So, at the last minute, we adopted Nick."

"And to think, I was about to leave," said Nick as he swallowed a mouthful of spaghetti. "I'd just turned sixteen and it was time for me to get outta there. Ben, what are you *doing* down there?"

"Just dropped this," Ben answered as he reappeared from below the table and tossed a mini-meatball into his mouth.

"That was *so* gross!" Katie screeched, and Matt squirted soda out his nose at the sight of her.

"Man, do you know what kind of stuff is on that floor?" asked Greg.

"Five second rule."

"Yeah, I told the same thing to Mrs. Sykes after she saw me do that in the cafeteria, when she was on lunch-duty," Matt explained. "But she just said something like 'you've got to practice healthy habits when there isn't a bottle of Funderborf's around'. Still don't know what she was talking about. I think she's crazy."

"Aw, *no!*" Nick suddenly exclaimed. "You just reminded me! We were supposed to finish that vocab homework for her class tomorrow....I completely forgot about it with the test coming up! My mom's gonna freak...."



*Zero Hour*

“Don’t worry about it,” assured Greg. “I’ll just give you mine to copy. I already finished it.”

“OK. Thanks.”

Dusk was coming on outside. The sky had turned a brilliant shade of yellow over the opposite end of the park, across the lake. Then it turned orange as it extended over the water, and finally a deep red as it reached the horizon and disappeared beyond the shadowy hills behind the restaurant. It matched the huge trees littering the park perfectly. Outside the broad glass windows, Katie saw the scrambler spinning around, and people screaming and putting their hands up under the canopy of blue lights surrounding the ride. All of them were on in the park now, creating this crazy blend of beautiful nature and the thrill of an amusement park at night. And The Pasta House, with its bright atmosphere, buzzing crowd, and tranquil location at the back of the park near the forest and mountains, seemed like the coziest restaurant in the world.

“So your pizza place has been doing pretty good ever since you adopted Nick, right?” Katie queried as she munched on her salad.

“Yeah,” answered Greg. “After we really started raking in the dough a couple of years ago, business has been pretty steady ever since. We’ve almost finished paying off the costs of renovation, and after that’s done we’ll be in good shape.”

“So, wait a minute. The park doesn’t pay for all that?” Katie went on.

Greg shook his head. “Parker’s Point owns the building, but we’re responsible for all the extra renovation costs. Which weren’t too bad, by the way, because the building was already previously

used as a restaurant. You see, once the old business moved out, the park owners went looking for a new one. In fact, they were hoping for a pizza place, because they didn't have one in the park at that point. And sure enough, my parents were looking to relocate one of our restaurants. So we moved in."

"But there was so much free space upstairs, they decided to make the most of it," Nick continued.

"So we converted it into two bedrooms, a bathroom, a living area, and a small kitchen and--"

"Bingo," finished Nick. "We get to call Parker's Point our home."

"And they actually let you do that?" asked Katie.

"Well, Katie, it's pretty much our building now. Plus we have a contract with Parker's Point. And technically, they can't just kick us out of the park any old time, so it's a pretty good setup," Greg answered, taking a sip from his Mountain Dew. "It works out perfectly. There's a gravel lot behind the building used for delivering food. We park our cars there, then drive out along the gravel road the trucks use. And this way, it's a lot easier to manage the restaurant, not to mention the fact that we were looking for a new house anyway."

Katie just shook her head in amazement. "That's so cool."

"This all happened before I got here, though," Nick added. "Greg was, like, nine years old. I just know the whole thing from him telling me about it." He slurped the last bit of his Pepsi and set the cup on his tray. "Alright," he sighed, "who's ready to ride *Scream*?"

*Zero Hour*

"Dude, I'm in!" Ben exclaimed excitedly. "Matt, get rid of that stupid towel. We're gonna go ride *Scream!*"

"Ben, you *bought* this for me in the gift shop after we rode *Roaring Rapids*, remember?"

"OK, well, put it in your backpack and keep it as a souvenir or something."

"Uh, I think I'll sit this one out," announced Katie.

"*What?* And I thought I was gearing you up for *Scream* when I got you on the *Mouse!*" Nick exclaimed. "Come on, Katie. Let's ride it together."

"Yeah," Greg answered, smiling at them both from across the table, "and then you two can go on the *Tunnel of Love* afterwards."

Nick blushed. "Greg, me and Katie aren't even going out!" He seemed to be panicking.

Greg rolled his eyes as they all got up and slid their garbage into the nearby trash bin. "Nick, I was just kidding. Relax."

"Sorry, Nick. But I think I've had enough for one night," laughed Katie.

"I'll race you," Ben grinned to Matt as they walked toward the glass double-doors.

"Yeah right, you will!" he replied, and took off after him out into the park.

"Well, Nick," Greg sighed, "looks like you've got to go catch them by yourself. I'm staying behind with Katie, to keep her company."

"Alright. See you guys in a bit," he answered, and set off after Ben and Matt.

\* \* \*

Katie and Greg stared into the depths of the lake below. They were leaning over the wooden fence of the boardwalk on the opposite side of the park from The Pasta House. To their left, at the edge of the lake, was an ice cream shop, and behind them towered the immense lightless shadow that was the lift-hill of *Scream*, as it was completely dark now.

The two teens gazed quietly at the glassy black surface for a few moments before Greg broke the silence.

"You know, Katie, there's something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh, is that why you stayed behind?" she answered.

"Well....yeah, pretty much. It's about Nick."

Things seemed much quieter all of a sudden. They were alone beside the lake, and the buzzing crowd and thunder of the rollercoaster seemed far away behind them, lost in the darkness of night.

"He has a thing for me, doesn't he?" Katie guessed.

"That's the *thing*," Greg answered exasperatedly as he turned away from the lake and leaned backwards against the fence. "Do you know how long he's liked you?"

Katie shrugged.

"Well, he's liked you for a while, put it that way. So I talk to him about it and I tell him he should ask you out. I mean, come on. You're both so much alike; smart, funny, laid-back but at the same

time always full of energy. You both even have blue eyes and blonde hair-

"Well, Nick's is more of a darker blonde, like brownish-gold. But yeah, I get you."

"Really, though," Greg went on, "there's no reason why he shouldn't. And I tell him that, but he still doesn't do it."

There was a short pause.

"So why do you think he doesn't ask me out?" Katie asked, casually folding her arms and leaning against the fence, too.

"Come on, I want to know."

"I'll tell you why," Greg answered. "I think it might be because he's been friends with you for so long. I mean, we pretty much all became friends right after my family adopted him-

"The summer after our sophomore year."

"Yeah. So it's been about a year and a half. And you know what else? He's never really been in a relationship before. There were a couple times last year when he almost went out with someone, but he really hasn't dated anyone for real. I think he's scared he'll screw it up with you, and then that'll ruin your friendship."

Katie smiled lightly. "Well, I guess I'll try not to let that happen."

"I'm actually still not convinced it's not because he's just too scared. I mean, his past attempts haven't really been positive experiences, and I think it's left a bad taste in his mouth. The whole thing's ridiculous, though," he added. "So, do you think you could,

maybe...I don't know. Encourage him? Tell him you like him, or something? I mean, you *would* go out with him, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," answered Katie, "of course I'd go out with Nick!"

"OK," Greg smiled. "So now you know. It seems like I'm always doing this for him; always looking out for him....making sure he gets what he wants....finishing the race for him when he can't run anymore, that sort of thing. But, yeah, now you know."

"You're a great brother, Greg."

Greg couldn't help breaking into a grin. "Yeah, I know."

There was silence between them for a few moments before Greg asked "Wanna feed the fish?" and nodded towards a fish-food dispenser nearby.

"Sure," Katie answered, and Greg dropped a quarter in the machine. Several brown pellets came whizzing out of the chute to land in Greg's cupped hand, and he handed some to Katie.

As soon as they dropped the food over the side of the boardwalk, tons of fish appeared at the surface of the lake. They began squirming over one another, all trying to get the tiny pellets and making a light splashing sound. The teens watched them as they made tiny waves at the water's surface.

As Greg looked into the lake, he noticed the lights and rides of Parker's Point staring back at them. The reflections of *Scream*, the *Wild Mouse*, and a tall free-fall ride with yellow halogen lights spelling 'Parker's Point' at the top all swam before them, glimmering on the glassy black surface of the water. *This is a great place to be at night*, he thought. It was entertaining, relaxing....even magical in a way, though he knew magic didn't exist.

*Zero Hour*

Soon the distant sounds of people shouting caught their attention. They both turned to see Nick, Ben and Matt running towards them.

"Katie, you don't know what you're missing!" Nick exclaimed. "Scream is *awesome* at night! You can't see a thing! It's just *so cool!* You can't even tell when you go inside the tunnel, that's how dark it is--"

"Nick promised us ice cream afterwards," Matt insisted.

"Yeah, well I'm not *paying*," responded Nick.

"OK, whatever. I still want ice cream...."

"Come on, Katie. Promise me you'll ride it with me tomorrow--"

Katie couldn't help but laugh. "I'll think about it, Nick."

"No, promise me right now you'll ride it with me. Come on, think about how much fun the Mouse was!"

"Maybe, if I feel like it."

But Nick stared right into her eyes as he went on. "You know you want to."

Katie stared back with a funny expression on her face. "OK. I promise."

"Yes! Aw, you're going to love it," he exclaimed as they all made their way over to the ice cream shop. "Now I'm going to make you a promise. I'm gonna promise you you'll have a great time riding it with me."

"Oh, yeah? And what if I don't?" Katie joked. "I don't know, Nick. I might throw up on that 200-foot drop--"

"Nah, you'll be fine. It's not that steep, really. It just looks bad."

Caesar's Ice Cream was one of the most famous eateries in the park, because their ice cream was just so good. They had all the flavors; everything from vanilla to chocolate chip cookie dough to rainbow sherbet. As the five teenagers walked through the door, they saw that the place was jam packed with visitors; no one wanted to eat ice cream outside during this time of year. There was even a small line at the counter.

A medium-sized, athletic-looking girl with straight black hair that flowed over her shoulders was working behind the counter along with two other girls. They seemed to be friends, because they were all chatting while they took orders and scooped ice cream; from what he could hear, Greg figured the talk was mostly about hot boys, dances, and high school sports.

As they finally moved up to the counter, the girl walked over, and her nametag flashed at him under the bright lights overhead, reading 'Lexi Robins'.

"Hey, Lexi."

"Yo, Greg, what's up!" the girl answered enthusiastically.

"Haven't seen you guys in a while."

"Yeah, well, me and Nick have been trying to get a little extra pre-season basketball practice in, so we haven't been hanging out around the park as much. Um, we'll take two strawberry cones, a Creamsicle Delight, and- what did you want, Ben? Oh, yeah, an extra-chocolatey chocolate fudge sundae with chocolate chip cookie bits, chocolate brownie bits and chocolate sprinkles....with chocolate syrup on top."

"Do you want a chocolate cone with that?"



“Uhhh...”

But then Lexi broke into a huge grin. “Just kidding. We don’t actually have chocolate cones, but it’s a good idea. So, anyway, are you guys coming to any of *our* basketball games this year? I mean, you might want to pick up some moves and stuff like that, seeming how...”

“Seeming how what?” Greg answered suspiciously. “Hey, just ‘cause you guys are ranked #1 in the state doesn’t mean you have to pick on the boys’ team.”

“Who said anything about picking on you?” Lexi responded slyly as she scooped up giant servings of strawberry ice cream. “I mean, besides stating the fact that you guys went 2 - 21 last year, lost three good senior players, and score an average of, oh, about thirty points a game while we went 20 - 3, have all our best players back, and score an average of about eighty points a game, no, I wouldn’t pick on you at all.”

Greg’s face turned redder than the ice cream she was just handing Nick and Katie. “Oh, I, uh....forgot to order,” he mumbled.

Greg stared blankly at the ice cream beneath the glass window in front of him while Lexi drummed her fingers on the counter impatiently, then said, “I’ll have the Big Surprise.”

Lexi stared. “The *what?*”

“The Big Surprise,” he repeated. “I want that.”

“What are you talking about?” Lexi questioned, turning around and staring dumbfoundedly at the giant menu behind her. “We haven’t got anything called-“

“No,” Greg insisted. “I just got it yesterday, when you weren’t here. You just had it on the menu yesterday.”

“Well, we don’t have it today.”

“Then I guess I’ll just have to walk you through it.”

Lexi’s face had an expression of utter disgust as she grabbed the biggest styrofoam bowl there was and started piling whatever Greg told her into it. “It’s got one tiny scoop of vanilla, two scoops of chocolate, one scoop of butterscotch....”

Five minutes later, they finally got to the toppings.

“I remember there was red sprinkles on the chocolate scoops....no, you got some on the vanilla. That’s not right; there’s rainbow sprinkles on the vanilla scoop....there you go....and make sure there’s strawberry syrup on just the cookies ‘n cream part. That makes it taste the best....oh, and I almost forgot the cherry!”

When Lexi finally put the giant bowl of ice cream on the counter, she narrowed her eyes maliciously. “You know how much this is going to cost?”

Greg simply nodded towards the menu, where a huge sign at the bottom read ‘All Specials: \$2.99’.

“Here’s your three bucks,” he went on, “and the rest for the other cones. Well, see ya around, Lexi.”

Lexi just frowned disbelievingly back at him as he took the bowl of ice cream and headed to the seating area. Ben and Matt were doubled-over with laughter behind him.

“Did you *see* her face?” Ben chuckled.

“She went redder than you, Greg!” Matt exclaimed.

*Zero Hour*

"Nobody messes with Beaver basketball," Greg answered.  
"And by the way, I'm going to need help finishing all this."

As they made their way through the store, past the huge line that had now formed behind the counter, they caught a few words of what one man was saying to his wife.

"The Big Surprise, eh? Take a look at that! I think I'll have one, too."

\* \* \*

It was after nine by the time they arrived back at Nick and Greg's restaurant. Greg led them to the side of the building, where there were several steps leading to a door. Adjacent to the restaurant was Crocodile River Falls, the new log ride, and the sounds of people screaming and splashing water echoed across the pathway as visitors took their last rides of the night.

"Hey, I think if we go now, we can still catch one more ride on Crocodile Falls!" Ben said eagerly.

"Oh, yeah, and then I'll get soaked all over again!" Matt protested. "It's like fifty degrees out here--"

"Nah, man, it's at least sixty. Tonight's a warm night for October," answered Greg. "I'll ride it with you guys if you want. And then Nick and Katie can, uh, say their goodbyes."

"Sweet! Let's go!"

Ben grabbed Matt's arm and dragged him away as they followed Greg towards the small lake and wooden station nearby. Nick heard Matt muttering something about crazy people as their

voices grew more distant. He and Katie were left standing alone at the side door.

“Well, we may as well head inside,” he finally said, and led the way into the giant building.

The restaurant had already closed, but it was still bright inside. A huge sea of empty chairs and tables covered the green-carpeted floor, while the lights of other eateries and souvenir shops shone through the spotless windows covering the walls from end to end. The ceiling was high, and golden chandeliers hung above to light the space, making the eating area resemble a sort of ballroom. To their right, away from the windows and at the back of the eating area, was the counter and line, decorated with a large pink-and-orange neon sign blaring the words ‘Martino’s Pizza’. Behind that was the kitchens, where the chefs and waitresses were cleaning up for the night.

Nick spotted his mom going from table to table, cleaning each with a cloth and squirt bottle.

“Oh, hello!” she exclaimed, looking up to see Nick and Katie. “Are Ben and Matt with you, Nick? That was Mrs. Andrews on the phone right now; she’s here to pick them up.”

“They went on the log ride,” he answered.

“Oh, I hope they don’t get wet! It’s cold enough out there already! I never did approve of them keeping the water rides open this late into October.... Well, did you two have fun on the Wild Mouse?”

“It was a blast!” Katie answered politely.

*Zero Hour*

“Oh, that’s so nice the two of you went together!” Mrs. Martino exclaimed as she tossed the dirty cloth into a nearby garbage can. “You know, Nick, you really should invite Katie over for dinner sometime, we’d all love to have her!”

“Uh, yeah....”

“And have you heard about the dance coming up at school? The ‘Fall Ball’, I think that’s what they’re calling it....you know it’s coming up pretty soon? I think in a couple of weeks....”

Mrs. Martino didn’t seem to notice that Nick’s face had turned red. “Yeah, mom, I know about the dance.”

“And wouldn’t you two make the perfect couple! Now, don’t listen to me, I’m just the parent, but if I knew a thing or two about high school dances, I’d tell you to ask someone early, Nick! And Katie, I’m sure we could lend you Nick’s grandmother’s old prom dress if the occasion arose (she winked at Katie) that you would need one! I know it’s old, but it really is a thing of beauty-“

“Mom,” Nick interrupted, his face even redder than before, “I don’t think Katie wants to wear grandma’s old dress, thanks-“

“Well, you know, it looked quite good on your grandmother when she was a young girl!”

“MOM! Thanks for the offer and all that, but I think Katie has to be leaving soon, right?”

“Yeah, actually,” Katie answered. “Well, it was nice seeing you, Mrs. Martino.”

“Have a safe ride home, Katie!”

Nick turned away from the image of his mom smiling and waving at them and led Katie to the side door. They stopped for a minute before she reached for the handle.

"See you tomorrow, Nick," she said. "And thanks....for everything."

"Hey, you might actually want to keep that dance in mind," he answered, the words just sort of coming out without thinking, "just incase, you know, somebody asks you to go tomorrow."

Katie beamed back. "Bye, Nick."

"See ya."

A moment later, Nick found himself standing by the door, alone but lost in thought. He hadn't been planning to say that, he really hadn't. But maybe it was a good thing that he did. Heck, he thought, he didn't feel half bad now that he *had* done it.

Before he could really sort things out in his head, the door burst open again and a soaking-wet Matt raced through the room and disappeared through the door leading to the kitchens, where a tiny square window leaked yellow light from inside. He was followed by Ben, and then Greg.

"He's gone off to the kitchens, hasn't he?" Ben asked as he looked around for his friend.

"Yeah, probably cuz it's warm in there, with the ovens and all," Nick answered.

Ben shook his head. "He did that last time, too."

"It's not my fault I've got a curse!" Matt shouted from behind the door.

"Wimp!" Ben yelled back.

*Zero Hour*

Then a small curly-haired dog came bounding into the restaurant from the stairs, barking happily.

"Hey, Biscuit," Greg said lazily to his dog as he petted him on the head.

"What type of dog is he again?" Ben asked as he patted Biscuit.

"He's a cairn terrier," answered Greg. "A light-colored one."

"Yeah, he looks like a cross between tan and white, I'd say," Ben replied. "Is he gonna grow any bigger?"

"Nah, he's about as big as he's going to get. At least that's what the pet doctor told us. We got him right before we adopted Nick, almost two years ago. He was a stray before that; showed up right at our door one morning and we decided to keep him."

Ben looked puzzled. "So, you don't even know how old he is?"

Greg shook his head. "Haven't got a clue. We don't have any idea where he was before he showed up here."

At that point Matt reappeared, looking a little dryer than before, and Mrs. Martino bustled over from sweeping the floor.

"Ben, your mom's here to pick you two up," she informed the middle-schoolers. "She's waiting in the parking lot right now. Better hurry up, so she isn't kept waiting!"

"Alright, alright," Ben answered. "We're goin'...."

Nick ruffled his friend's hair as he headed for the door. "Later, buddy."

"Matt?" Greg called before they left.

"Yeah?"

But then Greg broke into a grin. "Go take a hot shower or somethin', man."

Matt nodded as he went through the door, smiling a little himself. "Yeah, gotcha."

Nick and Greg watched them walk down the steps and head out towards the parking lot, where a solitary car hummed with its headlights on in the darkness. Then they turned and, after locking the door, headed towards a staircase leading from the vast dining area.

The long flight of steps led to the second floor, where there was a small landing with several more doors. To their left, the landing opened out into a living area, but the teens pushed open a door on the right and entered their bedroom.

The room was small to begin with, but the fact that there were two beds, two large dressers, a TV, and a giant beanbag lying on the floor made it seem even tinier. In front of the TV was a videogame system, which was lying in the middle of a pile of wires, controllers, and videogame cases reading things like 'The NBA Experience' and 'Extreme Football 3'. The tops of the dressers were decorated with small sports trophies and pictures of Nick and Greg playing them; the most recent one was their team photo from last year's basketball season. Otherwise, the rest of the room was mostly a mess, but a mess of dirty clothes and school things instead of soda cans and chip bags, most of which were piled in the trash can by the TV.

Greg flipped on the light, and Biscuit came prancing in just before he closed the door. He jumped on his bed and curled up in a ball at the end.



*Zero Hour*

"I'm pooped," Nick exclaimed as he pulled off his shirt and collapsed on his bed. "Think I'm going to bed."

"Whoa, whoa, first we have to talk," replied Greg, who began taking schoolbooks off his bed and stuffing them into his green-and-gold duffel bag, which was embroidered with the words 'Country Valley Beavers', his name, and a basketball.

"Talk about what?" Nick mumbled as he lay facedown and eyes closed on his pillow.

"Katie. What else?"

The little bit of Nick's face that Greg could see smiled.

"So, you know there's the Fall Ball coming up at school?" he went on.

"That's funny," Nick mumbled back. "We were just talking about it before you came back from the log ride. Mom wants Katie to wear your grandma's prom dress for it, how 'bout that?"

"She said that in front of Katie?"

"Of course she did. You know how mom is. I just wish she hadn't said *that*, I mean, anything but that. It was kind of rough," replied Nick.

Greg chuckled. "Don't worry, Nick, I've had to deal with more embarrassing things in my relationships."

"Oh yeah? Let's hear it; I'm not going anywhere."

"I've already told you most of them. But anyway, back to this dance thing. Are you going to ask her?"

"I pretty much already did."

“Wow, that’s news!” Greg exclaimed as he threw his bag to the floor, flicked off the lights, and joined Biscuit on his bed. “Was this when we were out riding the log ride, too?”

“Yeah,” Nick answered, finally turning over and opening his eyes. “I just sort of hinted that I was going to ask her tomorrow. I really don’t know what made me do it.”

“But that’s good,” replied Greg as he pulled the sheets over him. “That’s taking a step in the right direction. You know what I think you should do, though? I think you should ask her out.”

“What? Like, before even going to the dance?”

“Yeah, yeah. I mean, I think you should just ask her out tomorrow, then ask her to the dance as kind of your first date. That would be perfect.”

Nick lay there, staring at the fan on the ceiling, lost in thought again. *Ask her out tomorrow? And I was just planning to ease into it with the whole dance thing; kind of test the water.... Wouldn't that be rushing it too much? I don't know, what if this isn't the right thing to do, and I blow it? I'd really feel more comfortable just settling for the dance right now....*

“You don’t think that would be rushing it too much?”

Greg lifted himself up on his elbows as he answered Nick from across the room. “Nick, if you want to go out with her, then do it! Don’t just lounge around, making excuses, like taking her to a dance instead. You’ve been friends for a while now, so grab the opportunity and go do it! Because if you wait, and take her to a dance here, then hang out with her there, chances are someone else

is going to get to her first, and you'll miss your shot. Let her know you're serious!"

Nick was silent for a second before he said, "Yeah, I see what you mean. It's just that I'm not used to having serious relationships or anything. I'm afraid--"

"-that you'll screw it up. I know. We've talked about this a thousand times. Forget about it. Leave that behind you. Because if you really want something, you're going to have to put all that fear away and just do it. Otherwise...you won't get anywhere. You know what I'm saying?"

"Yeah, I know," replied Nick, even though it had just hit him for the first time what Greg was really talking about. He was right. He couldn't just hang out with Katie, waiting for something to happen. He had to take charge.

"Nick?"

"Yeah?" he answered, looking over.

"It's OK."

It made him feel better, Nick thought, that Greg had said that. Greg knew how to handle relationships; he didn't, yet. But that was OK, because he would figure it out. There wasn't really anything to worry about unless he made himself worry about it.

"I guess if I hadn't grown up in an orphanage it would be different," Nick thought aloud. "You know?"

"Yup," Greg answered. "Hey, tell me more about it. Like, what was it like there? We never talk about that."

"Aw, it's different," Nick answered. "It's way different than here. It'd take so long to explain."

"But it's better here, right? You have to like it better here."

Nick thought for a second, then chuckled, "Food's better."

"It is if you're getting free Pasta House food!" Greg answered, rolling over in bed while Biscuit rested his head on his feet.

"But really, everything's better," Nick went on. "I've got a place to call home, but like a real home. And I've got you, and Katie, and all our friends at school. I even think of mom and dad as actually 'mom and dad', instead of how I did before. I used to just call them that, but not really think it. Now it's different."

"You're lucky, Nick," Greg mumbled as he slowly drifted off to sleep.

"I know. I mean, we get to live in an amusement park. An awesome amusement park. Free admission to all the rides....heck, even free meals at The Pasta House every now and then....it's just great...."

He *was* lucky, Nick thought as he heard Greg begin to snore. And tomorrow, maybe he would get even luckier if he could get Katie to go out with him. That would be the goal over the next twenty-four hours, and he even had an idea of how he was going to do it. It was going to be great....

"Food's better," Greg muttered in his sleep.

"Yeah, I guess it is."

# HOCUS POCUS

## Chapter 3

Friday, October 20- 1:46 pm

274 hr 14 min remaining

Ancient History with Mrs. Sykes had to be Greg's favorite class of the day. Mrs. Sykes was cool, she hardly made them do work at all on Fridays (except when there was a test, like today), and it was the last one, so he could look forward to going home afterwards. Plus he had a lot of friends in that class, too, like Nick, Katie, and Josh. He was even getting to know Nate Kerns, the unwanted kid in the back of the class who hardly ever said a word.

As he made his way down the hall, his duffle bag slung over his shoulder, he caught up with the towering figure of Josh, his basketball teammate, with his football jersey on.

"Yo," Greg said.

"Hey Greg, you comin' to the game tonight?" Josh asked as he looked down at Greg, who was at least a foot shorter.

"Nah, I'm going to SpookFest with Nick and Katie, and maybe a couple other people."

“Yeah? You can go after the game; that’s what I’m doing....hey, what’s that noise?”

As they looked down the hall, a remote-control car came whizzing into view. It hummed steadily as it zig-zagged through the crowd of people, who had all stopped to stare.

“Excuse me! Everyone, can you all just get out of the way, please? Yeah, that’s it, move to the sides....make sure you don’t step on it!”

A small black-haired boy with glasses scrambled by them in hot pursuit, frantically jabbing at what looked like a remote in his hand.

“That kid continues to amaze me,” Josh said in awe as he watched the car zoom around a corner, and the boy run after it out of sight.

“Well, Mikey’s always been the type to amaze people,” Greg answered as they continued down the hall. “He was like that in sixth grade, and here we are, all seniors, and he hasn’t changed a bit.”

Greg wasn’t surprised to see a black sheet of construction paper taped to the small window on the open classroom door as they walked in; Mrs. Sykes was always up to something crazy.

“Hey, big game tonight!” Nick exclaimed as Josh and Greg sat down in the two seats next to him.

“Yeah, and I hear you two aren’t coming to watch me! What’s up with that? It’s my last home game I’m ever going to play as a Country Valley Beaver! You’re both just horrible friends, man. Horrible,” Josh joked.

“Hi, Nick.”

*Zero Hour*

Katie had arrived, and she took a seat in front of Nick. As she turned around to search for her breath mints inside her gigantic purse, Nick turned around and mouthed “tonight” to the other two, pointing at Katie.

Greg nodded and gave him a thumbs up. Nick was ecstatic as he turned back around in his seat; he couldn’t wait for tonight.

Then Mikey came bursting through the doorway, sweating, smiling from ear to ear, and holding his remote-control car in one hand. “It just got out of hand again,” he explained as his classmates stared at him. “It tends to do that sometimes, but I guess I can expect that when I build things myself.” He sat down in the very front seat, stuffed his car and remote into his lumpy backpack, and then pulled out a small paperback book titled *Galaxy Adventures: Volume XVII*.

Another skinny dark-haired boy had just entered the room, and he sat down in the chair behind Nick.

“Hey, man, what’s up?” Greg asked in a friendly voice.

“The usual,” was all Nate said.

“Whoa, what happened to your face? Did you get in a fight or something?” he went on as he took a closer look at him.

Nick whipped around to see that Nate’s face was black, blue and swollen. “Hey, Nate, it wasn’t Stephen Parsons, was it? You know he likes to pick fights....”

“No.”

“Well, what happened?” Greg insisted. “Come on, tell us. We won’t tell anybody else if you don’t want us to.”

Nate was silent for a second, then said, “My brother.”

“Your *brother* did this to you? You got in a fight with your brother?”

Nate nodded, and Greg glanced around at his friends, wondering what to make of it all.

“Listen, Nate,” he went on, “we’re all going to SpookFest tonight, at Parker’s Point. Why don’t you come hang out with us, and we can talk about it then?”

Frankly, Nate was stunned. He’d never, ever really had anybody to call a real friend. Nobody ever wanted to be around him, or talk to him, or for that matter have anything to do with him. But here he was, and Greg was asking him to hang out. It was an amazing feeling.

“Uh....yeah, we could do that, I guess.”

“Alright then!” exclaimed Greg. “How about you meet us tonight at the park entrance? We’ll say, around seven o’ clock?”

“Uh....OK.”

“OK, cool.”

“You’re gonna have fun, Nate,” Nick assured him. “You always have fun at Parker’s Point, especially when SpookFest is going on.”

At that point, a large muscular man came striding through the door. “Michael Simmons?”

Mikey looked up from his copy of *Galaxy Adventures*. “Mr. Koranowitz! Oh, no, please tell me I’m not in trouble!”

The assistant principal cleared his throat, then said, “Mikey, just come with me, please. And is Nathan Kerns here?”



*Zero Hour*

Nate didn't look up, and he just kept staring at his desk while Mikey hastily packed away his book, fearing for his new invention.

"Nathan, could you come with me, please?" Mr. Koranowitz said as he spotted Nate, who then slowly got to his feet and headed towards him.

Nick and Greg glanced at each other, then watched as the assistant principal pulled Nate close and whispered in his ear.

"I know what you did, do you hear me? I know you were the one who started the fight with that freshman. You've even got the marks to prove it. So let's cooperate this time and not do the kind of behavior we did before? You got that?"

Nate didn't respond, but even if he'd wanted to, Mikey had already started apologizing to Mr. Koranowitz.

"This is about my car, isn't it? You know, I didn't mean for that to happen at all, Mr. Koranowitz, it was a complete accident. It won't happen again, I promise! It just got out of hand and started going haywire, but that's the last time I'm bringing it to school, I swear! Do you want to see it? It's my latest model; I even painted it myself...."

Nick and Greg stared as the assistant principal pulled Nate out the door, Mikey following eagerly.

"Gosh," Greg finally said as Mikey's voice grew more distant, "they've got the wrong kid."

"Well, I hope they find out who really did it," Nick replied. "Do you think we could stand up for him? Maybe tell them we know it wasn't him, or something like that? I don't know...."

But before they could discuss it any further, Mrs. Sykes ambled into the classroom. She was holding a cup of tea, but more interestingly, clad in a black cape and wearing a pointy witch's hat over her long, curly red hair.

"Good afternoon, class!" she smiled, closing the door behind her.

"I can't wait to see what this is all about," Nick whispered to Greg.

"Well!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands together after she'd put her tea on her desk. "We have two important announcements before we begin! First of all, I would very much like to congratulate Cathy on her debate team's outstanding performance yesterday! A round of applause for Cathy, everyone!"

The class half-heartedly clapped their hands for a short Asian girl at the front of the class.

"And I would also like to wish Joshua good luck in his final home football game tonight! I really wish I could come, but you know I can't miss the festivities at Parker's Point this evening!"

Nick's stomach twisted into a tiny knot. She was about to tell them all to put their things beneath their desk and get out a pencil for the test. And he hadn't studied.

"Well, that brings us to today's topic," Mrs. Sykes continued. "Now, I know I said the test on Ancient Egypt would be today, but I've decided to delay it--"

"Yes!" Nick exclaimed as the class cheered.

"-until next Friday. After that, we will begin our studies of the Classical World, and then move on to Ancient African Civilizations.

*Zero Hour*

Joshua, I'm sure you'll be delighted to learn all about that when we get there!" she added, but Josh couldn't look less enthusiastic about learning where his heritage came from.

Mrs. Sykes went over to her desk, picked up a large candle she had brought from home, and lit it.

"Now, I know we're not supposed to have candles in school," she explained as she flicked off the lights, "but seeing how it's Friday and Halloween is nearly upon us, I've decided to treat you all with a little ghost story of my own. Oh, and I've brought some candy to go along with it!"

The class cheered again while Mrs. Sykes pulled a monster-sized bag of candy corn from her handbag and handed it to Cathy.

"Just pass it along, and everyone can take one handful. There we go. *Now* we're in the Halloween spirit!"

Mrs. Sykes leaned back against her desk in the dark room as the class grabbed handfuls of candy corn. The oversized witch's hat cast shadows on her face in the candlelight.

"Very well. Let's start at the beginning. Of course, you all know about the history of Halloween; we reviewed that last week. But what I haven't told you is the history of witches....and wizards, of course."

"They actually *exist?!?*" one kid blurted out from the back of the room.

Mrs. Sykes gave a mysterious smile. "Well, Bobby, that's for you to decide, isn't it? I'm only going to give you the facts; what we know is true. Or, rather, what I know is true. Because I've seen things that most other people will tell you is impossible. I've

traveled to Europe, visited gothic cathedrals and mystifying castles, and experienced the horrors of a curse, the wonders of a charm, the power of an enchantment—

“That stuff’s not true,” Josh blurted out.

Mrs. Sykes stared back at him with a puzzling, not angry, expression. “Pardon?” she said politely.

Josh shrugged. “I don’t believe in it. It’s all just a bunch of hocus pocus to me.”

“Really, Mr. Hughes?” Mrs. Sykes replied. “Well, you are entitled to your own opinion, of course, but I think you should know that Halloween is one of the oldest, most mysterious, and most celebrated holidays in the world. And it’s not for nothing that millions of people gather ‘round the world in unison to celebrate it each year.”

She began to pace back and forth in front of the class. “No, there is something magical occurring here. Just think about it. If all of it is simply made up, why is it, then, that so many people believe black cats are bad luck, and so many people claim to have seen the ghosts of people that passed on years ago still roaming the earth? Why is it that so many medieval knights were depicted defeating dragons, when supposedly they never existed? And why was it that almost two dozen villagers were hanged in the Salem Witch Trials of so long ago?”

Josh, like the rest of the class, was dead silent.

“Do any of you believe all these occurrences are really just a few peoples’ whimsical fantasies and ideas brought to life? I believe they are not. There is something else out there. Something so

*Zero Hour*

fantastic that ordinary humans, like ourselves, will go to great lengths just to convince ourselves it isn't true."

Mrs. Sykes stopped pacing in front of Josh. "Now, Joshua, that brings us to the question. Is it really just a bunch of hocus pocus?"

"Um...."

"Or are you just tricking yourself into believing what you want to believe?"

Josh's glared back at Mrs. Sykes, wondering what to say, when the classroom door burst open, causing the black construction paper to fall off the window and float to the floor as Mikey re-entered the room.

Mrs. Sykes whipped around. "Michael! *Put that paper back up there!!*"

"Wha-? Oh, sure. Sorry, it's just that I was so excited. Mr. Koranowitz let me off without taking my car. And he didn't even give me a detention!"

"How wonderful, Michael. Yes, just tape it back up like that and have a seat. I'm only so flustered because of Mr. Higgins....the principal, you know....can't have him finding out I'm doing more illegal activity in here!" answered Mrs. Sykes as she adjusted her witch's hat. "I've already been threatened with losing my job twice!"

But seconds after Mikey had finished taping up the paper, there was a knock at the door, while the class burst into agreement about Mr. Higgins.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Sykes, we've got your back-"

"Mr. Higgins just likes firing people-"

“He gave me an extra detention just for getting *too many* detentions!”

“Oh, someone’s at the door!” exclaimed Mrs. Sykes as she scrambled around the room, blowing out the candle, stuffing it under her desk, and flipping the lights back on. “It’s just that he’s really been getting to me these past few weeks,” she went on as she headed towards the door. “Yes, Mary, you’re quite right, I do agree. Mr. Higgins really *is* an annoying prick....oh, Mr. Higgins! What a pleasure to see you!....well, of course you can observe my class today....come again?....no, I certainly was *not* just talking about you! What a silly thing to think....please, come in....”

Mrs. Sykes scuffled back into the room, followed by a short, heavy-set bald man in a suit and tie. He seated himself at the back of the room and quickly pulled a pad and pencil from his briefcase.

“*Katie!*” Mrs. Sykes gasped as she frantically searched for her lesson plans on her desk, “You know you’re not supposed to have candy in the classroom! Goodness gracious, you silly girl, eating it alone is one thing, but passing it around to the entire class! I respect your thoughtfulness, of course, but this is completely unacceptable! Yes, just put it away like that....”

Katie hurriedly stuffed the giant bag of candy corn inside her purse, then gazed perplexedly up at Mrs. Sykes along with the rest of the class.

“*Well?*” she bellowed. “Why haven’t you all got your books out? Come on, let’s hop to it! Class started five minutes ago! My, oh my, I’m going to have to start giving detentions at this rate....”

*Zero Hour*

There was a shuffling of zippers, papers, and pencils as everyone hastily pulled out their materials. Mrs. Sykes snatched up a sheet of paper from her desk, pulled the giant projector-screen down in front of the chalkboard, and rolled the clunky old projector into place.

“There we go. Well then, today we will begin learning about the classical world of the ancient Greeks. I know we have yet to take the test on ancient Egypt, but since that has been delayed until next week, we will commence with the subsequent chapter in the book!” she said in a stern voice that didn’t match her appearance at all (she was still wearing the oversized witch’s hat). “Got to keep up with the curriculum, you know!” she added, smiling nervously in the direction of Mr. Higgins.

The old projector hummed to life, and Mrs. Sykes’ PowerPoint presentation appeared on the screen as the lights were dimmed again, blaring the words ‘Classical Mythology of the Greeks’. The class waited, silently sitting in the dark, as Mrs. Sykes began her lesson.

“Now, before we begin learning about the Greek civilization, I thought it appropriate to first teach you their *religion*, or what’s commonly known to us today as ‘mythology’. Does anyone remember from the game- er, pop quiz that we took last week- what the definition of mythology is?”

Mikey’s hand shot in the air. No one else even bothered.

“Go ahead, Michael.”

“It’s a collection of myths that belong to a particular culture or region.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself! Now, as you are all aware, Greek mythology is everywhere, even in our culture. Just go to the movies, or a theme park, or even read a fictional book from the library. Chances are, if you look for it, you can find Greek mythology almost anywhere. Long ago, it was considered very important to know all these ancient stories. However, today many people don’t even know one. But you’re all lucky, because we’re going to spend all of next week learning them. Today will just be an introduction.”

Mrs. Sykes clicked the mouse on her computer, and an old renaissance-style painting appeared on the screen, showing about twelve half-naked figures seemingly pausing for a photo-shoot in the clouds.

“Does anyone want to take a guess at which one is Zeus? Yes, Cathy?”

“Isn’t he the one in the middle, with the lightning-bolt?” replied the girl from the debate team.

“Indeed, he is,” Mrs. Sykes answered. “Zeus, as most of you already know, is the king of the gods; he’s the person in charge. In fact, the lightning-bolt has come to be Zeus’ main weapon and symbol. It was given to him by the Cyclopes; those are the one-eyed monsters of Greek mythology. But do you see these two figures here?”

She pointed to two other male figures, to the left and right of Zeus. “Any guesses as to who they are?”

“That one’s Poseidon,” exclaimed Mikey, pointing to the tall, muscular, bearded man with a trident in his hand.



*Zero Hour*

“Right again, Michael! Now, the trident that we associate with him was also forged by the Cyclopes. Poseidon, as you might know, was the older brother of Zeus, and he ruled the oceans. And Zeus had one more brother....this person, right here.”

Mrs. Sykes now pointed to the second figure, slouching towards the bottom of the painting. He, unlike the others, was fully clothed in dark robes. He had a shiny helmet on his head, and didn't look very pleased about being with his fellow gods and goddesses.

“He's Hades, the god of the Underworld. Can anyone guess what gift the Cyclopes gave to him?”

Nick stared at the image for a moment, then muttered “the helmet” under his breath.

“Nick, what do you think it is?”

*Darn it, he thought, should have kept my mouth shut. Why do teachers always hear everything?* “Uh, the helmet?”

“Quite right you are, Nick! In fact, it is called the Helmet of Darkness, and it makes its wearer invisible.”

*An invisible helmet? Nick thought to himself. Yeah, that's what I want next time I see Mr. Higgins or Mr. Koranowitz coming down the hall. Probably would be helpful if I blew it with Katie, too. I could just wear it in here and she wouldn't ever notice me.*

“Nick?”

Mrs. Sykes' voice brought him back to the real world and away from his daydreams. “What? Sorry, what was the question?”

“I was asking if you could take a guess at what the significance of the Underworld was in Greek mythology?” Mrs. Sykes replied calmly.

He saw that the slide had changed to what looked like a map of a strange land, with different locations labeled all over it in various colors. “Uh, isn’t that where people go when they die?”

“Precisely,” Mrs. Sykes answered. “As I said, Hades was the ruler of the Underworld, and it was a very well-known place to all the ancient Greeks, although no one ever talked about it if they could avoid it. You see, it was normally a very horrible place to be. Yes, Ms. King?”

A small girl at the back of the class had raised her hand. “Isn’t the Greek Underworld also referred to as ‘Hades’ sometimes?” she asked.

“Ah, very good point, Hannah, I’m glad you brought that up! You’re absolutely right; many people *do* refer to the Underworld as ‘Hades’. But this is a misunderstanding. You see, Hades, as he was the Lord of the Underworld, was feared by many people, both living and dead. In fact, he was so feared that after a while many people began to associate him with all the dreadful horrors of the actual land. His name and this fear people had for the Underworld itself were linked together, and so many people began referring to it as just ‘Hades’.

“In addition to all this, Homer, who wrote the Iliad and the Odyssey, referred to the Underworld as the ‘House of Hades.’ Well, as time passed, the ‘House’ part of it was left out, and just the ‘Hades’ remained. This could also be another reason. But since the god of the Underworld is already called Hades, we will simply refer to his land as ‘The Underworld’ in our class. This way it will be much less confusing.”

*Zero Hour*

Mrs. Sykes took her laser-pointer and pointed towards the top of the map.

“So now let’s focus on the different *parts* of the Underworld, now that we’re on the subject!” she said enthusiastically. “See this area up here? This is Hades’ palace, where he rules with his wife Persephone.”

Greg focused on the area around the red dot, and saw a strange castle-like building. No doubt it was an artist’s whimsical representation of what Hades’ palace would look like. But hey, he thought, it was all made up anyway, so why not make it interesting?

Mrs. Sykes was now going on a rant about how Persephone had been captured by Hades and taken down into the Underworld on his black-horsed chariot to be his ‘Queen of Darkness’ forevermore. They may have been an ancient civilization, Greg thought, but the Greeks sure did have crazy imaginations.

“So that’s the story of Persephone,” finished Mrs. Sykes as she finally took a deep breath. “Now let’s move on from Hades’ wife, to Hades’ pet!”

She pointed to a large river running through the Underworld. “This is the river Styx,” she began, “and all the dead souls must cross it to reach the Underworld. Now, there is a gate on the far side here, which is guarded by a dog. A *three-headed* dog, that is.”

Greg, who was resting his head lazily on his desk, shifted so he could hear better; this stuff was starting to get good.

“His name was Cerberus, and he guarded the gate to make sure the souls of the Underworld *stayed* in the Underworld,” Mrs. Sykes

explained. "And there was also Charon, the ferryman. In order to reach the Underworld, a soul first had to pay him to take them across the river. This was done by giving him a gold coin, which the Greeks usually placed under the tongues of people they buried."

*"Nick!"*

Greg had just thought of something, and was trying to get his attention from across the aisle.

"What?" Nick whispered back, checking to see if Mrs. Sykes would notice them. She was so immersed in the lecture, though (now explaining the other areas of the Underworld), he didn't think she would.

Greg mouthed something to him, but Nick had no idea what he was saying. He gave him an I-don't-get-it gesture, and Greg whispered something that sounded like "Whanaru going toowasker?"

Nick threw his hands in the air. "I can't hear you!"

Greg shook his head and began shuffling through his folder, looking for a blank sheet of paper.

"Now, there were three different places a person could go to live after they reached the Underworld," Mrs. Sykes went on. "And Hades had the pleasure of choosing their fate, since his palace was the very first place everyone went as soon as they arrived there. But, you see, it depended on how good a person you had been while on earth, and how worthy you were of each land.

"The majority of these souls was sent to a place called the 'Fields of Asphodel'. Now, these fields were by no means a happy

place. Usually, the souls just wandered about aimlessly, with nowhere to go and nothing to do, for all eternity.”

“Sounds boring,” Josh grumbled.

“Oh yes, I can imagine it was *quite* boring,” she replied. “But that was not the only fate for those who entered the Underworld. There was also Elysium, or, if you fancy, the Elysian Fields. This place was reserved for the very best souls; in other words, the Greek heroes such as Hercules and Odysseus and Perseus. In fact, if you weren’t a hero on Earth, you probably weren’t going to go to Elysium. But was it a place to be!”

Mrs. Sykes pointed to a spot near the edge of the map, which looked greener and more plentiful than the other areas. “In Elysium, the sun always shines and the skies are always blue. The souls pass their time playing music, singing, dancing, feasting, drinking, playing sports, and, well, just about anything else that has to do with partying!”

Greg had just passed Nick a piece of paper, which read:

**When are you going to ask her tonight?**

Nick turned to Greg and whispered “on the roller coaster”, grinning from ear to ear.

“The *what?*”

Nick glanced to the back of the room, but Mr. Higgins seemed to have dozed off, as he was slouched against the back wall with his mouth open.

"The roller coaster!" he whispered a little louder, making a wavy motion with his arm.

Greg grinned and said, "Awesome!"

"Greg?"

"Erm, I'm sorry Mrs. Sykes, I didn't hear-"

"Not to worry!" the teacher answered kindly. "I was just making sure you were paying attention, that's all! Can you guess who the last land in the Underworld is for?"

Nick didn't think Greg could look any more confused.

"Uh..."

"Well, let's think," Mrs. Sykes responded. "If the Fields of Asphodel are for the common, ordinary souls, and the Elysian Fields are reserved for the very, very best and most honored souls, then who do you think Tartarus is for?"

Nick saw his brother mouth the word 'Tartarus' and stare blankly at the screen as though Mrs. Sykes' hint had only made him more confused.

"Uh, that would be for the really bad souls?"

"Right you are, Greg!" was Mrs. Sykes' enthusiastic answer as she pointed to a dark mountainous place on the map. "Tartarus was more or less the Greeks' version of hell. It was the deepest place in the Underworld; in fact, most Greek legends will tell you that Tartarus was as far below the earth as Mount Olympus was above it! You see, it was the prison of the old Titan Gods- the ones Zeus and his friends defeated to take control of Mount Olympus and become the new rulers of the universe- and it was not a very

nice place to be. As you can imagine, nobody wanted to end up in Tartarus.”

At this point Mikey raised his hand.

“Yes, Michael?”

“Excuse me, Mrs. Sykes, but I’m a very curious person-“

“You can rest assured we all know that, Michael.”

“-and I was just wondering where exactly *was* the Underworld? I mean, was it underground somewhere, or....?”

“Ah, very good question!” exclaimed Mrs. Sykes. “And I guess the answer could be debated a bit. You see, some Greek legends claim that the Underworld lies deep beneath the earth’s surface, in a cave-like atmosphere, almost. To reach it, the hero usually had to sail his ship into some gigantic cave, or something along those lines.

“However, there were those who believed the Underworld lied beyond the oceans, and the only way to reach it was to sail across the seas! You must remember, back in the days of the ancient Greeks, not much was known about the size of the earth or where it ended; these things were only hypothesized. And the Americas hadn’t even been discovered by Europeans! So, some legends told of the Underworld existing far, far away from land as they knew it, on the other side of the ocean.”

Mikey sat pondering Mrs. Sykes’ response. “Erm, Mrs. Sykes? Can I ask you where *you* think the Underworld existed?”

Mrs. Sykes gave a small laugh and replied, “Well, Michael, you must remember these are only legends! Whether or not the Underworld actually existed, we will never know. But if I had to take a guess at it....”

She wisely gazed at Mikey for a moment, then winked.

"I'd say it was beneath the earth."

*Zing!*

Half of the class began stuffing their books and notes into the backpacks, while the other half made a mad dash towards the door as the bell rang. Mr. Higgins appeared to have woken up from his doze, as he hurriedly stuffed his papers back into his briefcase, straightened his glasses, and waddled to the front of the room.

"Well, Gloria," he grumbled, "I'd say you did a half-decent job with that lesson, to say the least!" But Nick, who was busy packing away his things, was wondering if he was just making it all up, since all he'd been observing was the insides of his eyelids.

The principal headed for the door, then stopped just shy of it and turned around. "Oh, and Gloria," he added, "you do know that Halloween's not until the week after next, don't you?"

Mrs. Sykes, decked out in her witch's costume, simply blushed.

"You're almost as bad as Mr. Pailer," he sighed as he shook his head.

"Oh, you mean Ignatius Marcus?" Mrs. Sykes replied curiously.

But Mr. Higgins rolled his eyes. "I never did understand him!" he growled. "His first name's Vlad, and then he follows it up with not one, but *two* middle names, which are Ignatius and Maxus—"

"Marcus," corrected Mrs. Sykes.

"Oh, whatever," the principal replied. "He liked to be called by his initials anyway. Mr. Vlad I. M. Pailer, that's how he liked to sign his name." Then he sighed. "Strange fellow. Always used to wear capes in class, just like that one. And he was always so pale in



the face. Come to think of it, not once did I ever see him eat or drink anything, on top of that! What was it that he said to me? Something about 'liking his food fresh' ...."

Mr. Higgins shivered at the memory of Mr. Pailer.

"Well, he's gone now, so it doesn't matter anymore," he added. "Probably went back to Romania, or wherever he was from."

Mrs. Sykes just stared as Mr. Higgins turned and strode away, muttering to himself as he went along ("Vlad....what kind of a first name is that, anyway?").

Greg, Nick, Josh and Katie were the last to leave the room, with Katie's purse bulky and heavy from the giant bag of candy corn.

"Have a nice weekend, Mrs. Sykes," Greg said.

"Oh, and the same to all of you!" their teacher answered. "I may even see some of you at SpookFest tonight!"

"Well, Katie," Nick said as they entered the buzzing hallway and joined the crowds of students thronging towards the doors, "just a few more hours 'til we ride *Scream!*"

"Nick, if I remember correctly, you promised me I was going to have a good time on that," Katie answered cleverly.

"Yeah, well, that's because you *will* have a good time on it!" Nick replied.

"OK, so I guess that means if I don't have a good time, you have to promise me something else."

"Sure, OK," Nick responded a little uneasily, not quite sure what she was up to.

"Then it's a deal," Katie said. "If I don't have fun on *Scream*, you have to take me on the *Tunnel of Love* afterwards."

*Luke Fetkovich*

Nick couldn't help the fact that he was blushing- again. He and Katie both looked back at Greg, who was staring at the ground but grinning from ear to ear as he shook his head.

"Alright," he laughed. "From now on, I'm through with you two."

# Halloween Horror

## Chapter 4

Friday, October 20- 6:34 pm

269 hr 26 min remaining

Nathan Kerns watched silently as the police car drew nearer. He was standing on the sidewalk in a quiet neighborhood of Country Valley, cozy houses with wrap-around porches surrounding him. It was nearly dark; the sun had set over the mountains and the sky was a grayish-blue.

He already knew who it was; the police officer's name was Robert Early, but he called him Rob for short. And he'd already seen him once this week, in fact, he saw him about twice a week on average. So he knew everything. He knew that Nate had no parents, and he knew about his brother. And he also knew about all the stuff Nate did; smoking, doing drugs, underage drinking, getting into fights....the whole lot. That was why he got busted so much, Nate thought to himself. Because Rob knew about every little thing.

But at least he was trying to be helpful, he reminded himself. Rob was also trying to be there for him; sort of fill in the role his parents would have had. Nate was smart enough to figure that out, and you had to give him credit for being a nice guy.

“Gee whiz, Nate, I’ve been looking for you for almost half an hour,” Rob said as he pulled to the side of the road and got out. “First I tried your house, then the playground.... Well, I’d better get to the point.”

Nate waited silently, his arms folded. This was about the billionth time he’d been lectured by a police officer in his life, and he couldn’t be less excited. What was it this time? He hadn’t been doing anything illegal all day. OK, well, there *was* that cigarette after school. But come on. *One cigarette?*

“Dan’s been in an accident,” Rob said gravely. “He wrecked his motorcycle on his way home from work today.”

Oh, so this was about his brother. Well, he hadn’t been expecting that.

“Listen, Nate,” the officer went on more urgently, “it’s bad. He’s in real bad shape. We....we don’t know if he’ll make it.”

Nate was still silent. He didn’t talk much, but standing there with Rob, he realized he just had to let it out. “Well, that’s good news.”

Rob stood contemplating him for a second before saying, “Nate, did....did he give you that mark on your face?”

“This and every other one I’ve ever had in my entire life, yeah.”

“Oh,” answered Rob. “I didn’t know about that.”

There was silence again between them.

*Zero Hour*

“Well, I’ve got to be going, Rob. I have somewhere to be,” Nate finally said as he started walking. “I’m going to meet some friends. You know those? Like, *not* what Dan is? Those things?”

“Nate, I told him you’d come to the hospital,” Rob said hurriedly.

Nate turned around.

“I told him I’d bring you. He’s expecting you to be there.”

Oh, great, he thought. Just what he didn’t need. His brother screwing things up again. It was amazing; he could even screw things up when he wasn’t around. Here he was, looking forward to having a great time at Parker’s Point in a way he’d never done before- that was, hanging out with friends instead of doing something illegal- and Dan goes and gets hurt just in time to ruin it all.

Nate took a deep breath. “You know, Officer Rob, that’s nice if you told him that and all, but I really would like to just go to the amusement park and hang out with my friends tonight. You see, I’d rather spend my time with people who want to be with me instead of people who like to use me as a punching bag.”

The police officer looked something between worried and sympathetic. “Nate, he might not make it out of this,” he said solemnly. “You’ve lived with him your whole life-“

“Unfortunately.” Nate paused for a moment, then said, “Listen, I’m done with Dan, alright? He’s not going to be a part of my life anymore. I just turned seventeen a couple months ago; I can get along OK without him making my life hell. I just got invited to go hang out with some kids tonight, and I’m not going to pass that up

for him. No. From now on, I'm going to do what I want, and nobody's going to stop me anymore! Alright? I'm sick of all this....he's pushing me around, your always telling me what to do....it's like, no one respects me. So thanks, but no thanks. I'm getting out of here."

Nate turned around once more and headed off, but this time he wasn't stopping.

"Nate, I'm only trying to help," Rob called after him.

"Oh, OK," Nate yelled back, "you can help. Give my brother this for me, will you?" And he showed him the finger before turning his back for good and disappearing into the darkness.

That was probably about the most he'd ever said at one time in his entire life. And it felt good, he thought. It gave him a chance to let it all out, and he let it out to someone who knew him, which was even better. Maybe it would finally dawn on Officer Rob- he *didn't* really know him. No one did.

But there was an uneasy feeling in Nate's stomach as he walked the final few blocks to the park entrance. Dan was hurt bad, that was what Rob had said. *'He might not make it out of this.'* He didn't feel bad, but he didn't feel exactly good, either. It wasn't like he really cared what happened to Dan, after all. Why should he feel anxious about it, or worried? That would be stupid.

*Serves him right*, thought Nate as he imagined how his brother would feel when Officer Rob came back. He would tell Dan that he wasn't coming, and then he would realize what he'd done. *This is sweet revenge*, he thought. *He'll finally realize what a horrible, good-for-nothing asshole he's been to me, and he'll regret it. He'll regret being an*

*Zero Hour*

*alcoholic and getting drunk all those times and beating me up afterwards. He'll regret every little thing he's ever done to me, and he'll think "Man, I shouldn't have acted like that to Nate." Then maybe he'll die right there, Nate pondered. He'll die right there and that'll be the last thing he ever thinks. That would be great. Sort of.*

It would actually be horrible, he thought, but it would feel so good. He already felt good for turning him down after Officer Rob promised him he'd come. It was like smacking him in the face for everything he'd done. It was like saying "screw you." And you know what? Now he was going to enjoy SpookFest and have the time of his life while his brother sat in the hospital, mulling over what a horrible person he'd been. It was sweet revenge. *Sweet revenge.*

He had reached a four-lane road that intersected the street he was on. Beyond it was a vast parking lot littered with cars, and a little ways down he spotted the park entrance bathed in special green and purple lights for the occasion.

Five minutes later, he'd traversed the walkway leading around the gigantic lot, and found himself entering a crowd of people waiting outside the gate. Some of them were standing in line to get in; others were waiting around for their friends.

*It has to be around seven o' clock, thought Nate. Those guys should be here somewhere.*

He looked around at all the people; some were illuminated under the green and purple lights, and others were just shadows in the darkness of night. As he gazed at the scene, it struck him how different he was from everyone else. All these people were just

hanging out on a Friday night with their friends like they always did. They went to school, or college, they partied on the weekends, they made a few bucks at their part-time job, and in the meantime they chatted about all the drama in their lives; who broke up with whom, who's weird, who's cool, and who just got a new car.

He wasn't like that. He didn't hang out with friends, he wasn't dating anyone, and he didn't have a part-time job. He went to school, got bullied by the administrators because supposedly he was 'one of those types of kids', went home, got bullied again by his brother, and then escaped to the playground where he could smoke and be alone. That was about a normal day for him. Nick and Greg weren't like that. They were ordinary, but they were cool.

"Yo, Nate!"

Ah, there were the normal kids.

Nick, Greg, Katie, Ben and Matt were standing at the edge of the pathway, near a clump of trees and away from the crowd.

"What's up, man?" Greg said as Nate made his way towards them.

"Not much."

"Hey, have you ever been to SpookFest before, Nate?" Nick asked.

"No."

"Well then, you're gonna have the time of your life!" he exclaimed. "That's, like, a sin. You're....how old are you? Seventeen? Yeah, and you've never been to SpookFest. That's horrible."



*Zero Hour*

There was a giant banner strung out above the quaint little brick building you had to walk through to enter the park, reading, "Welcome to Parker's Point's SPOOKFEST...have a frighteningly good time." As they approached one of the ticket booths, Nate noticed the attendants were even dressed for the affair.

"See, we get in for free because us three have season passes, plus me and Greg live in the park," Nick explained to Nate. "Wait a minute- you've got enough money, right? I think it's twenty dollars....wait, no, there's a discount for students....I forgot about that. OK, so it's only fifteen!"

Nate dug into his pockets and pulled out a few dollars and some coins while Ben and Matt went ahead of them and paid.

"Uh....six, seven....I've only got \$8.62."

Of course, he thought. He never carried that much money around; usually he only had enough to buy his next pack of cigarettes. Well, so much for a fun night out.

"OK, here, gimme that," responded Nick as he grabbed the money from Nate's palm. "You take this. I can scrounge up a couple extra bucks for myself." And he handed Nate his season pass. "Just show it to that lady and she'll let you in."

Feeling slightly awkward, Nate took the little plastic card and proceeded to the ticket booth. He held it up for a woman wearing a black cat costume, complete with a mask and pointy ears. She smiled at him and nodded, so he walked through and entered the park, where an amazing scene unfolded before him.

The fountain near the entrance had red dye in it, making it look like blood, and also sported red and white up-lights to enhance the

effect. And all around the stone base, jack-o-lanterns of all shapes and sizes had been lined up. Nine of the biggest pumpkins had been placed in front of the others, facing Nate, with a letter carved into each so they spelled 'SpookFest'.

The lights on the roller coasters had been completely turned off, including those in the station; in some cases, blacklights had replaced the overhead station lights, causing the white shirts of riders to glow blue. The pavilions had been boarded up and transformed into haunted houses. And the nearby food stalls had covered up their normal menus and replaced them with new ones reading things like 'Warty Witch's Apple Pie', 'Pumpkin Juice', and 'Monster-sized Cookies'. Nate noticed one of the attendants (who was actually dressed like a warty witch) passing out goblets filled with a bright lime-green drink to park-goers, calling it her 'magical potion'.

"Welcome to SpookFest!"

A man dressed like a vampire handed Nate a copy of the program, and as he glanced at it, he almost couldn't believe how much there was to see and do. A magic show at 9:00 by the Lakeside Theater? A mad scientist bringing his monster back from the dead at 10:00? Make-your-own potion starting at 8:30 near the ferris wheel? *Take a romantic voyage down Parker's Point's creek as you float under the famous coasters and log ride in a coffin!?* Were they serious??

"Dude, me and Matt are going by ourselves tonight!"

"Yeah, that would be nice....for us."

*Zero Hour*

Nick, Ben and the others had caught up to him, and Nate turned to see Nick and his cousin in a heated discussion.

"Except I promised your mum I'd look after you—"

"Come on, Nick!" Ben groaned. "Like I've been saying, we're in seventh grade. I think we can manage on our own. We're not scared of monsters or anything like that."

Nick chuckled. "Yeah, except the time last year when Matt wimped out inside the haunted house!"

Matt turned red.

"OK. *He's* scared of the monsters. But don't worry, I'll look after him," Ben joked.

"Ben!"

"Alright, alright! You're not scared of any monsters," he smiled back. "So we'll see you guys later, OK?"

"Yeah, whatever," replied Nick as he watched them stroll off into the crowd, Ben talking excitedly with his friend ("Hey, Matt, guess what we're going to do first? The haunted house!")

"Come on, Nick." Greg was grinning at his brother as he watched the two middle-schoolers.

"What?"

Greg shook his head. "You know you're happy they're gone. Now you two can hang out in peace." He nodded towards Katie.

"Not really. I mean, I guess it's kind of nice—"

"*Nick!* Don't even start that."

"No, I'm serious!" Nick half-laughed, half-protested.

“OK, fine, you know what?” Greg replied. “Now that they’re gone, I’ll let you two go and do what you’ve been waiting for all day.”

“Wait a minute,” said Katie, “you mean you and Nate aren’t coming with us on *Scream*?”

“Oh, I think we’ll let you two ride it alone,” Greg answered, and winked at her.

Nick smiled. “Yeah, good idea. So, we’ll catch up with you two later?”

“Call my cell,” Greg replied as Nick and Katie headed off in the direction of *Scream*. “Well, Nate, I guess it’s just you and me.”

They began wandering in the other direction, around the opposite side of the lake, with no particular destination in mind.

“So, anyway,” Greg began as they walked past a pumpkin-carving exhibit, “what happened between you and your brother?”

Nate suddenly realized how weird it would feel to actually talk about his problems with somebody his own age. He’d never really done that before.

“He got drunk and beat me up,” he answered bitterly. “That’s about the whole story.”

“Well,” Greg replied slowly as they dodged a group of young girls who came running out of the nearest fun house, screaming at the top of their lungs, “does this happen all the time?”

“Yep.”

“That’s not good,” answered Greg. “Listen, Nate, have you talked to anyone....you know, like your parents or somebody....about this?”

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"My parents are dead."

Greg looked surprised. "Oh, so...it's just you and your brother at home?"

"Yep."

Nate felt a little gratitude toward Greg as he watched him contemplate the situation as they walked along. It felt good to actually talk about this with someone else. But, he thought, Greg didn't know the latest news about his brother. Should he tell him?

"Well, you can't keep letting him do this," Greg finally said. "Maybe you should- *Mrs. Sykes!*?"

A woman with long, frizzy red hair and an oversized witch's hat appeared in front of them. She was talking to two other people- a small boy with black hair and glasses and a short olive-skinned girl.

"Oh, good evening, Greg!" she exclaimed. "And Nathan! What a pleasure seeing you two here! And to think, right after I ran into Cathy and Michael!"

Of course, Greg thought. Cat (which was Cathy's nickname) and Mikey always hung out together; they were both smart and sophisticated, plus they took nearly every AP and Honors class together.

"So you dressed up for SpookFest, too?" Greg asked politely, pointing out Mrs. Sykes' hat and cape.

"Oh, if I wore this in *school*, of course I'd wear it to the festival tonight!" his teacher answered. "After all, it is a Halloween celebration! I was just telling Cathy and Michael some old stories

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about this place; stories I remember from long before all of you were born. What is it that I was saying....?"

"You were talking about the old wishing well," Cat answered.

"Oh, yes, indeed I was! Thank you, dear. As I was saying, there are some very mysterious stories regarding the well....in fact, I believe it's right over there, isn't it? Let's go take a look."

Cat, Mikey, Greg and Nate followed Mrs. Sykes away from the main pathway and over to a secluded area surrounded by gnarly overgrown trees. In the center of the cleared area was a stone well so old it looked like it was built in the 1700's. It had a pointed roof of dead rotting wood, but the bucket had been taken away and a plaque stood in front of it, reading:

#### **THE MCHENRY WISHING WELL**

*This well was constructed by the McHenry family in 1797, when they owned a farm here and used this land for fishing and growing wheat.*

*Legend says that Suzie, one of the young daughters of the McHenry family, fell into the well while playing one night. The McHenrys and their neighbors attempted to save the girl, but to no avail. Her body still has not been found to this day, and some say she still haunts the area at night, protecting her grave from visitors in the park.*

A chill ran down Greg's spine. So this place was haunted.... He gazed nervously at all the gnarly, twisting, claw-like limbs surrounding them. Just then there was a powerful breeze that shook the dead trees, causing them to creak eerily in the night.

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Mrs. Sykes had begun explaining a recent ghost story she'd heard about the well, but her words were lost in the noise of the wind and trees.

"This place is spooky," Cat exclaimed as they all looked around cautiously. But it wasn't spooky in the same way the fun houses and dressed-up park assistants were. This was spooky for real.

Mikey eagerly proceeded up to the well and peered inside with Greg. You couldn't see the bottom; it was just a black hole....or was it?

"There's something down there."

"What are you talking about, Mikey?"

"There's a green....*something*, like a mist or something!"

Greg strained his eyes, and thought he could make out a sliver of green within all the blackness. "Yeah, maybe...."

He paused for a moment, then fished in his pocket for a coin and pulled out a penny. "Well, the ghost of Suzie can't mind a little cash," he said light-heartedly, and flicked the coin into the well. It spun rapidly in mid-air, hovering over the black abyss for a second before falling into darkness.

Mikey and Greg waited. But there was no sound; no *clink!* that signaled the bottom of the well. Nothing.

"Must be really deep," Greg said uncertainly, and turned away. "Come on, let's go. This place is freaking me out."

"Well, you do know of the old ghost story involving Mr. Harvey?" Mrs. Sykes exclaimed enthusiastically as they headed back towards the main pathway. "Supposedly his ghost haunts this area, too! You see, John Harvey was a good friend of Isaac Parker-

who founded Parker's Point, of course, back in the late 1800's- and they visited this same area one night--"

*Boooooooo.*

Greg stopped dead in his tracks, as Mrs. Sykes' informal history lesson was cut short. He stared ahead, at all the people happily enjoying the festival thirty yards away, not daring to turn around. That had been the freakiest sound he'd ever heard in his life; it was like a moan, but it was unearthly, and it *echoed*....

Fearing what he was about to see, he turned around. A bright slime-green light was illuminating the inside of the well. But that wasn't all. Mist- or smoke, he wasn't sure- was pouring over the top of the well and onto the cobbled stone path surrounding it, and it was *glowing* from the green light inside.

"Uh, Mrs. Sykes? Are there any ghost stories about this well involving green mist?" he asked, his voice shaking.

"No, I can't think of any," she replied as she gazed in awe.

"It's probably just part of the festival," Cat said in an upbeat, hopeful tone. "You know? There's probably somebody down there doing that."

"Nobody ever goes down there," Mrs. Sykes whispered. "Not even for SpookFest."

"Well, then, does anybody have a digital camera, or something?" Mikey exclaimed. "We've got to get this on tape! What if it's, like, supernatural?"

"Shut up, Mikey," Greg exclaimed as his classmate thrust his hand into his pocket, pulled out his cell phone, and started



snapping pictures. "I'm going to go check it out. Are you coming?"

Mikey glanced from Greg to the well. "Uh....yeah, of course. I don't want you to go by yourself." But Greg could tell he was scared.

Why was it, he thought, that he was forcing himself to walk back here when he was so scared? Curiosity, he decided. That had to be it.

He and Mikey were now five feet away, with the green mist swirling around their feet. *Nothing's going to happen*, he told himself as he inched closer and closer. He looked back at Mrs. Sykes, Nate and Cat, who were staring transfixedly at them, their eyes wide. *Nothing's going to happen*. He glanced at Mikey, who fearfully looked back at him for a moment. Then they broke eye contact, took two steps forward, and gazed into the well.

You couldn't see three feet below the edge of the stone walls, because the mist was so thick. It just seemed to appear; come up from the inside and pour out along with the green light. That was it.

There were a few tense seconds of silence.

And then they both heard it- the moaning, echoing sound. It was coming from inside the well, getting closer, moving upward....

*"Get back!!"*

Greg pushed Mikey backwards, and they both stumbled to the ground. The moaning turned to a high-pitched screech as something large and green burst out of the well and crashed through the old wooden roof, sending a shower of splinters over

the two teenagers. There were two more high-pitched screeches and a gust of wind, and Greg, shielding his eyes from the debris, looked up to see three giant wisps of green soaring high into the air above them.

*"Aaahhh!"*

*"What the-?!"*

Greg frantically looked around to see Nate, Cat and Mrs. Sykes running back up the pathway towards the crowd. The ghosts, if that's what they were, had stalled in mid-air hundreds of feet above them, and now plummeted at an angle towards the main pathway of the park, screeching horribly. Greg pulled Mikey back to the ground with him as the ghosts shot overhead, leaving a trail of green mist in the air behind their tails.

*"Holy crap! Holy crap! Look at that! Greg, look at that!"*

Greg could care less what Mikey was talking about; his mind had gone numb. All he could do was stare far ahead at the festival as the green ghosts flew over the park guests.

Then the screams began. People cursed, stalls slammed their doors shut, and jack-o-lanterns were smashed to pieces as people ran over them. The train of one of the nearby wooden coasters slammed into the second one waiting at the station, because one of the attendants was staring wide-eyed at the scene.

The ghosts had dived into the crowd. Greg saw a few specks of bright green darting through the sea of frantic people for a second or two, and then, amazingly, one man was thrust high into the air. He soared thirty, no, fifty feet above the crowd before falling into the lake nearby. But now there were more people being catapulted

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into the air seemingly from the ground, and they landed back on the pathway, disappearing into the crowd. Then one of the green ghosts burst high into the air with a woman, twisting around her like a serpent. At about fifty feet, it unraveled itself and went screeching away as the woman plummeted onto the roof of a souvenir shop.

As the throng of terrified visitors scrambled off in either direction, the ghosts hot on their tails, the pathway in front of Greg and Mikey cleared to reveal bodies- lots of bodies- sprawled across the ground amidst the debris. Greg couldn't believe it; he was seeing it but not registering it. It couldn't be....he must be dreaming....

"Holy crap, Greg, what the hell was that?!"

Greg shook himself out of his trance.

"Oh God," he muttered, his voice quivering. "Where did the other guys go, Mikey?! Did you see them?!"

"They just ran into the crowd up there, that was all-"

"Well, half the crowd up there is DEAD, Mikey, *do you see that?!?"*

"They're....they're *dead*? But....but....they can't be dead...."

"No *shit*, Mikey! Of course they can't be dead! Evil green spirits can't just freaking fly out of nowhere and freaking kill people!! Of course that can't happen!! So *what the hell is going on??!"*

"Well I don't know, Greg! Maybe....maybe...."

"Maybe *what!*? There is no 'maybe', Mikey!! That can't happen!! It *can't!!!"*

Sweat was covering Greg's face, and he felt a lot colder than he had five minutes ago. He was white with shock, he was scared, and most of all he was confused.

"Greg, we have to get out of here."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Tell me that just didn't happen."

"Greg, I don't know what's going on either, but I think we should try and find the others....or....(Mikey glanced nervously at the dead bodies fifty yards away)....or get out of here, because....well, because I don't know what's going on either--"

"Mikey, just tell me that didn't happen."

"Greg, *it happened*, so what do you want me to do?!"

Greg didn't open his eyes. Instead he placed his sweaty hand on his forehead and shook his head back and forth.

"Come on, Greg, we need to get out of here!" Mikey insisted as he grabbed Greg's arm.

"I'm not going out there with those things!"

"*That's the only way out!!* Come on, it's not that far to the park entrance!"

"Let's just....sneak through the woods, or something--"

"The *woods?!!*" Mikey replied disbelievingly. "Through *there?!!* You can't see a thing in there, Greg, it's pitch black and thick with stumps, and branches, and all sorts of stuff to trip on!! We'll never find our way out! Come on, we'll keep an eye out for those....things."

Greg breathed heavily before saying, "OK."

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“OK, good. Let’s go,” Mikey answered, and he tugged Greg along as they made their way back to the main pathway.

\* \* \*

“So is this ride supposed to be scary, Nick?” Katie asked as their train left the station and began climbing the lift hill.

“Oh, yeah! You’ll be thinking you won’t make it to the end,” Nick grinned back in a teasing way. “And the best part about it is we’re in the front seat, so we get to see the track ahead of us; that makes it even scarier!”

“But it’s not *too* scary?”

“Don’t worry, Katie. Like I said last night, you’re going to have a blast just like you did on the Mouse!”

But she couldn’t help the queasy feeling in her stomach as she glanced up and saw the shadowy track extending endlessly upward.

“So anyway, while we’re here,” Nick shouted over the noise of the lift hill, “I figured I’d ask you something.”

Katie broke a smile. Was he really going to do it like this?

“I was wondering,” he went on as Katie beamed back at him, “if you wanted to....to, uh....”

*Well? He’s not going to chicken out right here? No, Nick’s not going to do that.*

“To....”

*Wow, he actually is going to chicken out! Come on, Nick, what is up with you?!*

But then she noticed that Nick wasn't even looking at her. He was looking beyond her, out over the park as they climbed higher and higher.

"Nick?"

Katie glanced down, and didn't know what to make of what she saw. There were three green wisps of air circling the merry-go-round. Special effects for SpookFest? Then she noticed people screaming and running away down on the pathway. Screaming and running? Well, it *was* SpookFest. But something wasn't right....

One of the green wisps had flown over to the freefall ride and was circling the base rapidly. A moment later, it had somehow squeezed itself into the tower through a crack at the bottom. Then there was an explosion of sparks and fire, and the ghost reappeared and shot away through the air as the entire ride began to tilt towards the coaster.

Katie was barely aware of the screams and people pointing as she watched the giant freefall ride plummet towards the earth and crash through one of the massive hills of Scream. The yellow halogen sign circling the top of the tower was smashed apart; the letters of 'Parker's Point' flew everywhere. The black superstructure of the coaster shattered to pieces as steel beams and pieces of green track exploded outward, and the tower split the ride in two before slamming to the ground with an earth-shattering boom.

Katie stared at Nick to make sure she wasn't hallucinating, but the look in his eyes told her it was all too real. She glanced ahead

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again to see the shadow of the hill silhouetted against the dark night sky, and the track climb high only to end at the top.

"We have to get off this ride," Nick stated calmly, only because he was paralyzed with shock. He shook his lap restraint wildly, but it wouldn't budge; they were locked in.

"Katie," he said urgently, "see if you can wiggle yourself out of the restraint! Maybe we can jump off before we get to the top--"

Too late. The clicking of the lift hill ended and their car nose-dived as they reached the top of the coaster. Katie screamed as they found themselves plunging 150 feet down the first drop into darkness. Seconds later they were hurtling up the following hill, into the starry night sky.

Nick managed to twist around in his seat, grab hold of the headrest behind him, and pull his legs out from under the lap restraint. "Katie!" he screamed through the wind, "do what I did! See if you can twist around and get out from under that bar!"

Katie was too scared not to as she grabbed hold of the headrest and wiggled herself out of the restraint amidst all the G-forces.

"There you go!" Nick screamed. "Now don't let go of that headrest, whatever you do! Just *hold on!!!*"

He knew this ride too well; he'd ridden it too many times. And it was all going to pay off, Nick thought as he eyed the shattered hill a thousand feet down the track.

"OK! Now, the ride levels out and there are brakes at the top of the next hill!" he screamed. "The train almost comes to a complete stop, so we're going to jump off then! OK?"

Katie nodded as she clung to the headrest with all her might, her knees bent frog-style as she crouched on the seat like Nick.

“OK, I’m going to tell you when to jump, and we’re going to do it together, alright!?”

“OK!” Katie yelled back, fear engulfing and nearly paralyzing her if it weren’t for Nick. Nick knew what to do....it was going to be OK....

“Alright, here comes the hill!” screamed Nick. “We’re almost there!”

Katie fought the forces threatening to pull her away from the headrest as the train zoomed down a small drop, then raced up the next hill towards the brakes.

Nick narrowed his eyes and focused his mind as the straight section of track came into view ahead of them. He could feel the brakes slowing the train down....20 miles per hour....15 miles per hour....

“OK, take my hand!” he cried, and grasped hold of Katie, still clinging to the headrest with his other hand. “NOW!!”

With a rush of adrenaline, they jumped over the side of the train together and rolled onto the skinny metal platform paralleling the track that was used for emergency stops. Several other people had followed them and dived off, too, but the rest were carried away, screaming, into darkness.

Nick couldn’t hold back a smile as he saw they were still holding hands.

“You OK?” he asked Katie as they lay on the platform.

“Nick!” she answered, beaming up at him. “*You did it!*”



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"No, no, *we* did it!" he answered. "So you're alright, right? You didn't get hurt or anything? OK, good. Come on, let's get out of here and figure out what's going on!"

He helped Katie to her feet. Then they left the other frightened park guests behind as they scrambled down the skinny winding staircase that led from the platform.

Nick tried to block out what must have been happening at that very moment, until he heard a startling explosion and several screams in the distance. He didn't look around; he didn't want to see it. He was safe with Katie. That was all that mattered.

Katie reached the bottom of the twisting staircase still clinging to Nick's hand, but half-dizzy and struck dumb with shock.

"Nick, w-w-what's going on?" she asked uncertainly as they scrambled through the underbrush beneath the ride, darkness surrounding them.

"*What's going on??* Hell if I know!" he yelled back as they dodged bushes and small trees. "All I know is we've got to go find Greg and the others and then get outta here!"

They managed to squeeze their way back into the park between a pretzel stall and the merry-go-round (which was spinning crazily fast), and found they were near Caesar's Ice Cream. Nick had just taken Katie's hand and was leading her through the terrified crowd, when they ran into....

"*Lexi?!!*"

"*Nick!* And Katie! Oh my gosh, I can't believe I ran into you guys!!" Lexi exclaimed, still wearing her Caesar's outfit. "What's going on? I was just working inside the shop, and all these people

just started screaming and running away outside, and I heard a whole bunch of explosions, and then there was, like, this *mini-earthquake*—

“That was the freefall ride,” Nick answered grimly, nodding towards the empty skyline behind them.

“Oh my....” Lexi stared, disbelievingly, at the empty spot in the sky where the freefall ride used to be, and then turned around in a circle to get the full impact of what was happening. Then she noticed the ghosts, who had retreated to the other side of the lake and were vigorously destroying rides and shops.

“No way.”

“Yeah,” Nick replied as he saw the fear in her eyes. “Listen, Lexi, we have to get out of here, *now*.”

There wasn’t any need for more conversation; the three of them sprinted through the crowd in the direction of the park entrance, Nick still clinging to Katie. They passed the boardwalk where Greg and Katie had talked the night before, passed the Wild Mouse, and had almost reached it when a voice made Nick skid to a stop.

“NICK!”

He whipped around. Josh was standing there, stationary in a sea of running people, still wearing his football jersey.

“*Josh?! Wait a minute, I thought you were at the football game!!*”

“It got delayed!” exclaimed Josh. “So I just got here now. You won’t believe this, but the other team’s bus broke down coming through the mountains, and they weren’t going to get here in time!

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So they rescheduled it for Sunday! Hey, what's all the commotion about?" he added as he glanced around.

Nick had no idea what to say. "Uhhh....listen, Josh, there's really no time to explain. Come on, we're gonna go find Greg and Nate, and then get out of here!!"

"Wait a second, Nick!" Katie shouted. "What about Ben and Matt?! We can't forget about them either!"

"Oh, and *Biscuit!*" Nick cried as he skidded to a halt again. "He's in the house! I've got to go get him!"

"Well, don't *leave* us!" Lexi protested as Nick sprinted away, and she, Katie and Josh ran after him.

"Listen!" Nick yelled through the chaos as they approached the pizza restaurant, "Somebody call Ben and Matt! We have to find them! I'm gonna call Greg's cell phone and see....*GREG!!*"

Greg and Mikey had appeared, both sweating and frantic.

"Oh, thank God!" muttered Greg, while Mikey starting blurting out everything he could about what they'd seen.

"-and then they just started throwing people all over the place! I've never seen anything like it, I mean, this is going to be all over the papers--"

He scrambled after them all as they headed towards the restaurant.

"Nick, you're, uh, going the wrong way!" a white-faced Greg yelled.

"*Biscuit*, Greg, *Biscuit!*"

"Oh, right! I'm comin', too!"

“Listen up! Nobody’s parents are here, are they?!” Nick called back as he gasped for breath. “No? OK, good. Mine are out, too! So after Biscuit - we need to find Ben and Matt - and - and then get out of here-“

“No, we have to find Nate and Cat!” Greg exclaimed as they sprinted up the steps of the restaurant.

“Cat’s here too?!” Nick panted as he wrenched the door open. “Oh, *Jesus...*“

Biscuit was already waiting for them. He dashed out the door and down the steps, barking madly.

“Biscuit, *wait up, buddy!!*” Nick yelled, and then swore under his breath as he slammed the door shut again. Then he turned to see the spirits, a hundred yards away, wreaking havoc near the entrance but slowly making their way towards them.

“Go, go, go!” he shouted as he stumbled down the steps after his dog. He had no idea what Biscuit was doing; he was sprinting across the park, away from the spirits, but barking frantically like he was chasing a cat or something. Well, at least he’s going in the right direction, Nick thought to himself as he ran after him through the crowd.

“Nick, the exit is *that way!!*” Lexi shrieked as they all dashed after him.

“Well, Lexi, the *freaking exit is BLOCKED right now, SEE?!!*” he screamed back as they all made their way around the lake and deeper into the park. “Now, *somebody call Cat or Nate while I try and get a hold of Ben and Matt!!*”

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Lexi glanced back as she was running, and saw the ghosts catching up to them as they ran. They were humongous, transparent, aqua-green wisps of air. And she noticed something else- there were *skeletal figures* inside them; bony ribcages and arms and skulls made up the structure of their bodies. They were terrorizing the screaming crowd; swooping down on them and thrusting people into the air like rag dolls. The police had even taken cover; she noticed their patrol cars (which were actually small park rovers painted black) sitting in the middle of the pathway, their engines running but completely deserted. Could they? Nah, they were probably too slow....

Nick reached into his pocket as he was running and grabbed his cell phone. They *had* to get a hold of Ben and Matt. . . .

He tried to go into contacts and scroll down, but it was almost impossible to do so while trying to keep up with Biscuit and dodging debris and people at the same time. *Aunt Tiffany....Bart....Becky....*

“WATCH OUT!!”

Nick looked up just in time. He dived out of the way as an electricity pole came crashing down onto the path, sparks flying everywhere.

*There it is.* He pressed the call button as he sidestepped the remains of a pizza. Then he cursed again as he saw the screen.

**“Calling: BETHANY”**

“No, no, no!” he shouted as he zigzagged through the fallen telephone wires. *Must have accidentally pressed the one after Ben....I’ll*

*just dial his number manually, that'll work....814....956-71....is it 3 4 or 2 4 at the end? 2....4....*

"Look out!"

One of the ghosts had zoomed into a small wooden gift shop twenty yards behind them. Seconds later it exploded as the spirit burst out, sending a shower of white splinters through the air. Nick ducked as debris fell all around them, and held his phone up to his ear.

"The number you dialed is currently unavailable," a female voice said. "Please press one for your operator, press two if--"

"WHAT?! No, no, this can't be happening!!"

Nick whipped around and tried to run backwards as he called to Greg. "Did you get a hold of anybody?!"

"No, Cat's not picking up and Nate doesn't have a cell phone!" Greg answered from ten feet behind him.

Nick threw his hands into the air. "OK, now what?!"

"Nick," Greg yelled as he glanced back at the spirits and the path of destruction forming behind them, "they....they might not have made it!"

"Don't say that!" Nick panted as he tried to keep pace with Biscuit.

"No, Nick, you don't understand!" Greg gasped as they passed the Shooting Star roller coaster. "They ran - right into the - the crowd when those - ghost things showed up!"

Nick was about to argue back when he heard the whiz of an engine coming from a nearby path. Then there was a tumultuous crash as Mrs. Sykes, Nate and Cat crashed through a popcorn

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machine and onto the main pathway, Mrs. Sykes driving one of the deserted park rovers while Nate and Cat clung on beside her.

“Haha!” their teacher cried as she steered the vehicle through the mess of spilled popcorn. “Take *that*, you spirty scumbags!!”

“Aw, I’m going on that thing!” Mikey exclaimed, and dashed over to jump on the back.

“Yes!” Nick cried, jumping and punching the air with his fist. “OK, so now it’s just Ben and Matt! And the haunted house is right up here, so maybe we’ll find them around somewhere! Go, go, go!”

Biscuit was in the lead far ahead, and Nick and Greg were hot on his tail. Lexi and Katie scrambled to keep pace behind them, with Josh and then the rover with Mrs. Sykes, Nate, Cat and Mikey bringing up the rear. They had almost reached the opposite end of the park, with the lake to their left and attractions to their right, but the rest of the shocked crowd and the ghosts were right behind them.

“Mrs. Sykes!” Josh exclaimed as his teacher swerved dangerously through the falling debris and downed electricity wires.

“Have no fear, Joshua!” Mrs. Sykes cried, her red hair tangled in a crazy mess as the tiny car jolted up and down. “We’ll outrun these supernatural scoundrels yet!”

“Mrs. Sykes, you gotta get off that thing before you get somebody killed!” he yelled, shaking his head.

“Oh, don’t worry, dear! I’ve driven golf carts before!” Mrs. Sykes answered as the rover crashed through a garbage can, spilling junk food and plastic cups everywhere.

“Mrs. Sykes, I bet you can run faster than that thing!” Josh replied as he nervously eyed the advancing spirits. “You know my friend Andrew? Well, he’s a linebacker and he weighs over 300 pounds! And I bet *he* can run faster than that!!”

“Ah, it’s about the battle, not the flight, Joshua!” Mrs. Sykes shouted as she steered the vehicle through a jack-o-lantern display and the pumpkins tumbled onto the pathway. “Take *that!*”

Biscuit was leading them straight into the haunted house. He pushed open the door with his paw, and Nick raced in after him.

The costumed people who usually hid in the corners had fled from the house with the park guests; inside it was deserted, but almost pitch-black. Greg, Katie, Lexi and Josh sprinted in after him, and then finally there was another deafening crash as the park rover plowed through the wooden door and came to a stop.

Cat, Nate and Mikey jumped off the car, and Mrs. Sykes took a glance back at the newly-made hole in the wall before shouting “Onward, friends!” But Nick had already dashed after his dog and down the rickety steps that led to the basement. The other teens followed in hot pursuit.

“*Ouch!*” Nick cried as he was tripped up halfway and went tumbling down the rest of the stairs.

“Nick? Is that you?”

“*Ben?!*” he exclaimed as he realized who he’d just tripped over. “No way! And Matt! Aw, this is *awesome!!*”

“Well, what do you know!” Greg said, a little out of breath as he reached the bottom with the others.

“Guys, what were you *doing* down here?!” Nick asked.



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“What do you think?! Hiding!” Ben answered. “Everyone else just went running, and when we saw those....those *things*, we just ran back in and hid down on the steps so we could still hear what was going on. But get this, Nick! Check this out! We think there’s a secret passageway or something down here, because-“

“You mean the one Biscuit is barking at right now?” Matt butt in.

Nick sprinted around a dark corner to find himself in a skinny, dimly-lit corridor, with the only light coming from a caged yellow bulb halfway down. The side-walls were made of wood, but there was a smooth plank spanning the length of the floor that was connected to some kind of machine beneath, and it was *vibrating*.

“Moving floor,” Nick muttered to himself as he stumbled across it, spreading his arms and using the walls for support. “They have these in fun houses all the time.”

“Wait, this is still part of the walk-through?!” Greg asked from behind as they all followed Nick.

“Yeah, yeah, this is the first part of it!” Ben exclaimed excitedly. “And there’s a huge scary room around the bend up there.”

Nick had reached the end of the corridor, where Biscuit was frantically pawing at a slab of wood that seemed out of place on the wall. He pushed his dog aside and rapped on it with his fist.

“It’s hollow, so there’s definitely something behind here!” he called back to the others, who were clumsily making their way down the skinny hallway and over the vibrating plank. “I’ll be right back!”

And he disappeared around the bend.

*Crash!*

It sounded like the ghosts had entered the haunted house. But within seconds, Nick reappeared, carrying a heavy, monster-sized fake skull with both hands.

“Hey, Nick! Whatever you’re doing, hurry up, because those things are in the house!” Josh yelled.

“OK, OK, well, I found this in the room back there, so it might work. Everyone stand back!” Nick replied over the vibrating of the plank and the crashes from overhead. He gave an enormous heave and hurled the skull at the wood like a bowling ball. It smashed through the board, creating a huge hole that led into darkness.

Greg glanced up and saw a green light seeping through the cracks between the wood, flashing back and forward. “Oh, no....”

Nick peered into the black hole. “Hey, you guys, I think this is some sort of underground tunnel or something!”

“Well let’s take it, because we’re dead if we stay here!” Josh exclaimed.

But just then there was an ear-splitting screech and a thundering boom that sounded like it was coming from just around the corner and up the stairs.

The teens all made a mad dash across the rest of the vibrating plank and towards the gaping hole at the end of the hallway. Biscuit was the first to enter, still barking relentlessly. Nick got on his knees and scrambled in after him. Ben and Matt, who were the smallest, managed to squeeze in at the same time. Then came Greg, Mikey, Katie, Lexi, Josh, Cat and finally Nate, with Mrs. Sykes bringing up the rear.

*Zero Hour*

It was indeed a tunnel; only about two feet high and several feet wide. The sides and roof were all rock, but the ground was made of soft dirt, or at least that's what it felt like to Nick. He couldn't see a thing; it was pitch black.

He crawled on, not knowing what to expect or where it would end, but feeling much safer. They had escaped the haunted house and the evil spirits, but where were they going now?

"Nick, can you see anything up there? It's so dark--"

"Ow! You just stepped on my *hand*, Matt!"

"Well, I can't tell where I'm going!"

Nick put Ben and Matt's bickering out of his mind and focused on making his way forward. He thought he could hear rushing water to his right, and as he glanced over thought he could sense, rather than see, a side tunnel leading off in that direction. But common sense told him to keep straight. And sure enough, a few feet later he spotted a tiny light up ahead.

"There's something up here, everyone!" he called back. "I think it leads outside! Just a little ways to go!"

Five minutes later, Nick was pulling himself out of the tunnel and gasping fresh air as he collapsed onto a dirt floor. He closed his eyes and relaxed for a moment, then opened them.

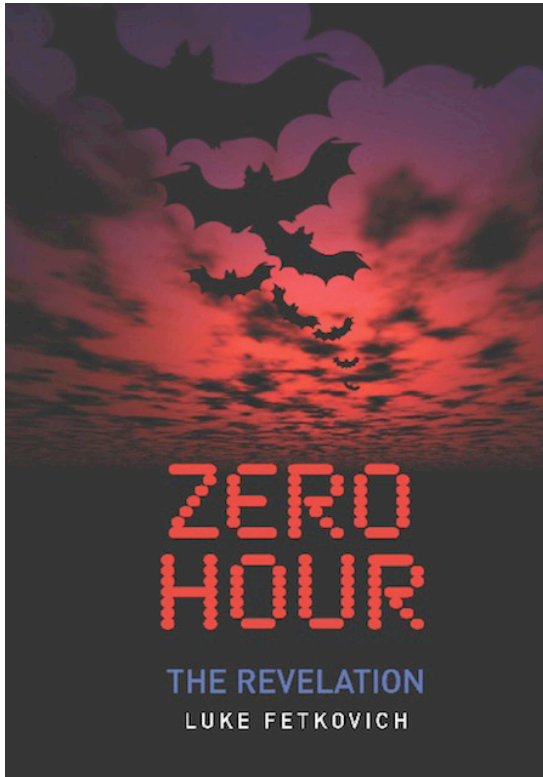
The exit to the tunnel was under the giant root of a huge oak tree; Nick would have thought the black space underneath was just the lack of light caused by the overhanging root if he didn't know better. They were in the middle of a forest, but even though it was night, he could tell they weren't anywhere near Parker's Point; this forest seemed different from the ones surrounding the park.

He slowly got to his feet and turned to see a broad dirt road cutting through the trees about thirty feet away. But what was interesting wasn't the road, but the people standing on it. There was a massive black horse leading a huge caged cart, and several hooded figures surrounding it in the moonlight. Beside them stood a man who looked like he was half-wolf because of his hairy face, long snout, and clawed hands. No, Nick thought, it couldn't be....

He stared in horror as the wolf-man, who was talking to one of the hooded figures, turned his head, stared right back at him, and grinned evilly, showing sharp yellow teeth.

"Looky here! We have visitors," Nate heard a gruff voice say as he worked his way towards the light at the end of the tunnel. His stomach twisted into a tiny knot; where were they? He crawled up the last bit of tunnel more hastily and peeked his head outside. Before he knew it, sharp claws had snagged hold of his shirt and were pulling him out from under the tree.

"Welcome," the gruff voice snarled, "to Whist."



*Ten teenagers discover a hidden world....and a horrifying secret.*

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