

REVENGE
OF THE STAR
SURVIVORS

Michael Merschel

Holiday House / New York

For Melinda, Krista, Gabriella and Jacob

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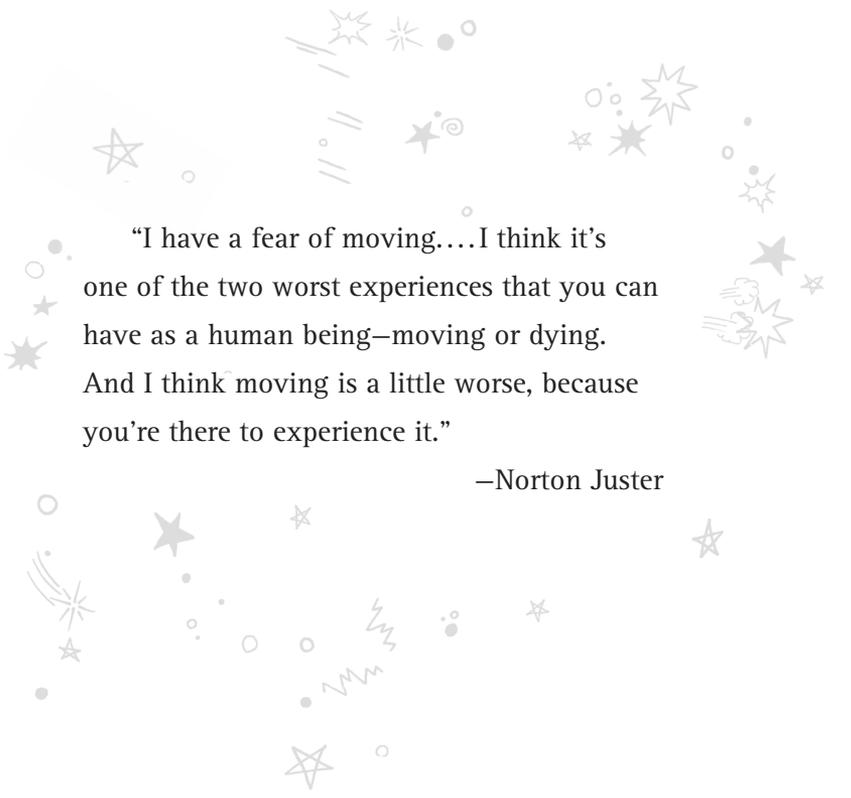
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“I have a fear of moving....I think it’s
one of the two worst experiences that you can
have as a human being—moving or dying.
And I think moving is a little worse, because
you’re there to experience it.”

—Norton Juster



MAYDAY . . . MAYDAY . . .

This is a Priority One distress call.
Can anyone hear me?
Anyone?

My situation is desperate. I have crash-landed on an inhospitable world. Communication with my commanders has broken down. My shields have been compromised. I am critically short on vital supplies. I am isolated. Adrift. Cold.

Lonely.

Worst of all, I am surrounded by aliens. Hundreds of them. All hostile. They *look* humanoid, but so far I have been unable to make sense of their primitive social order, which is filled with arcane rites and rituals that no advanced life form could hope to comprehend.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. I was told I was the best and brightest of my generation and could handle whatever the universe flung at me.

I have learned, painfully, that was not true.

And so I find myself curled up in a corner of my shelter with only the barest necessities for sustaining life: an archaic computer, on which I recently started recording my observations; a supply of space-themed books, salvaged from the wreckage of my previous life; and a few chocolate snack cakes, which I smuggled from the kitchen.

My entire situation reeks of despair. That, and cardboard. From all the moving boxes. They are everywhere, most of them still packed. From the day they arrived in my life, my universe has been a mess.

My future appears as bright as the far side of a small moon of a dying planet near an imploding star.

By which I mean, not very bright. I probably do not even *have* a future.

I cling to one small hope: That if I write down what happened, perhaps I can analyze the data. Find a way forward. Or, in the likely event of my demise, leave a record for whoever comes across my remains. So others can learn from my mistakes.

There were so many. Beginning from the moment I landed.

EXPEDITION LOG

ENTRY 1.01.01

We were hurtling across the planet's surface, seconds away from the drop zone, when my commander spoke.

"You really want to do this by yourself? You're absolutely sure?" The tiny crease between her eyebrows told me she was as worried as I was.

"I'll be fine," I replied. By which I meant, "No, I don't want to do this at all. I have never been so terrified in my entire life. Please take me home immediately."

Unfortunately, I sent that second part via psionic mind blast, forgetting that I was not technically capable of telepathy. So if she received the message, she ignored it.

“OK, then,” she said, as our *Odyssey*-class transport entered the parking lot. “You just need to find the counselor, and she said they would handle the rest. You’re sure you don’t want me to...?”

“I’m fine,” I lied. I tried to scan the terrain, but my breath had fogged the window. I quietly traced an *SOS* in the condensation, then wiped it clean.

“OK,” she sighed. She brought the landing craft to a halt. “Well, good luck then, sweetheart. I’ll see you when you get home.”

She reached across the seat to kiss me, but I quickly slid out of range, pulled the handle and opened the door. Icy, dry January air stung my lungs.

I set my foot on the frozen firmament. *That’s one small step from a van*, I thought. I was too nervous to add more.

The commander drove off, leaving me standing on the curb in a thin fog of exhaust.

I lifted my eyes toward the fortress-like structure ahead of me. It was a long, rectangular complex, constructed mostly of rust-hued brick, and it sprawled atop a low, wide hill. Its walls were punctuated at regular intervals by thin windows, kept narrow, I suspected, to prevent escapes.

I swallowed, trying to keep the taste of fear from rising in my throat, and stepped toward the building.

At least I’m properly provisioned, I thought, as I clutched my supply kit. It bore the bright green logo of a major league athletics organization known as the Cosmos. Not being much of a sports fan, I was not entirely sure where or what the

Cosmos played, but I assumed that allegiance to such a team would help me blend in. The backpack was covered in cartoonish rockets and stars; I had felt very lucky the day we found it wedged in the back of the bottom shelf in the clearance section of the department store.

My uniform was certain to hold universal appeal with the natives as well: Jeans with the logo branded onto a small leather patch. A fuzzy brown sweater pulled over my favorite *Star Wars* T-shirt.

During my preflight research, I'd learned that things could get chilly here. So I had prepared by acquiring thick, insulated shoes that protected me from moisture, cold and gamma rays. Moon Boots, they were called. They hissed reassuringly as I walked.

And I had wrapped myself in a forest ranger-green thermo-protective parka, freshly purchased for this expedition. I had specifically requisitioned this model, because the description in the PBS catalog where I had first seen it made reference to the great Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton, who knew a thing or two about surviving in hostile environments. It had a big, furry hood, which I thought might shield me from sudden snow squalls. And with the bright yellow reflective stripes around the sleeves, there was no risk of being lost in an avalanche.

Also, it had the nice touch of being certified for high-altitude use by the RAF, as made clear by the circular insignia on the back, between my shoulder blades.

So attired, I was confident I would quickly blend in.

Yet somehow, I still noticed wary stares as I trudged forward, up the long walkway, past the flagpole, to the entrance.

"Excelsior," I whispered.

I arrived on a concrete dock, where I faced a set of steel doors. Passing through them should have been simple. But three natives loitered there, watching me. I fixed my eyes on the ground. If I could just slip past them without engaging in any kind of communication, I would be perfectly—

“Nice jacket,” one said as I reached for the middle door. The tone of his voice registered as somewhere between “less than sincere” and “extremely sarcastic.” His companions began to either laugh or choke on something, I couldn’t tell which.

I did not return the greeting. Not drawing attention to myself was key to achieving my first-day objectives.

I kept my head down and eagerly tugged on the door.

I failed to open it; it was locked. But my efforts did set three reactions in motion: First, the bolt rattling against the doorframe made a tremendous *CLANG* that drew the attention of every being in the courtyard (so much for not drawing attention to myself); second, my shoulder painfully absorbed most of the energy from my tugging, which caused me to blurt out something akin to “GAHH!”; and third, my clanging and GAHHing set the three loitering natives to a new round of guffawing.

“The door’s *locked*,” one said.

I raised my head, slowly, and tried to scan him with a sideways glance. He was tall—at least compared to me. He had stringy blond hair, long, whiplike arms and a thin, cold smile. His narrow eyes made me think of a big, carnivorous reptile. Only more dangerous.

“Thanks for telling me,” I said, staring at the door. “I could kind of...yeah. Locked. Heh.”

“*Everyone* knows this door stays locked until first bell,” the reptile boy said.

“Uh, I guess I’m new around here,” I said.

“Yeah, I guess I could tell. What’s your name?”

“Clark,” I said.

He snorted. “What kind of name is that?”

I turned to face him. “Uh, the one my parents gave me?”

The looks on their faces indicated I was dealing with simple creatures. So I tried to explain. “My dad liked the explorer.”

Silence.

“You know, Lewis and...?”

Stares.

“He also liked it because of, you know, the Superman thing.”

The reptilian native appeared to think this over, then asked, “So I guess your dad’s a real douchewad, too?”

Derisive snorts.

I didn’t like the way this conversation was headed, so I turned back toward the building. “Umm, I guess I’d better, maybe, try another door and, ah, find the office,” I told it.

The reptile licked his thin lips, as if he had just been served a delicious meal and was about to devour it. “I think they’ll be able to find you just fine, as long as you’re wearing that coat. Jeez, is that a dead skunk hanging off the back of your neck, or what?”

I tried to process this data. The coat? That’s what this was about? But...how could the coat be a problem? When it came to blending in, I had expected a few difficulties—the sort that always occur when a being of superior intellect makes first contact.

But the *coat*?

I scanned the courtyard. Hmm. I *did* seem to be the only person in an Arctic-ready, fur-lined, RAF-certified parka.

YELLOW ALERT, went my brain. Because if my intelligence reports had failed me on the coat, why, they could be wrong about any number of things, such as my—

“And did your mom get it for you at the same Goodwill store where she got those boots?” the reptile asked.

RED ALERT. DANGER. DANGER. I looked down at the Moon Boots, which suddenly didn’t seem all that protective. Another quick scan of the courtyard revealed that everyone else had opted for athletic shoes with a curvy stripe along the side.

And their jeans? All of them bore red tabs. *Not a single branded patch of leather to be seen.*

My mouth went dry. Just minutes into the mission, and I was already outed as an alien interloper!

Stay strong, I told myself. And think fast. But do what? A display of confidence—yes, that could only help.

“My mom. Yeah. Ha,” I chortled. “Well, you know, she probably shopped at the same Goodwill that *your* mom goes to.”

I smiled weakly. It was not a world-class retort, but I had been hoping it would buy me some time until I could figure out how to *make* the doors *open*.

Instead, it somehow made the two sidekicks stand up straight, electrified. They watched the reptile, as if awaiting a signal.

His face, which had appeared pale in the wintry air, flushed red. He stepped toward me.

“Did you just...*insult* me?” he asked, in a voice that seemed a lot deeper than someone his age should have been capable of.

I thought, No, technically I just insulted your mother, but I stopped myself from saying that out loud. Instead, I just sort of stumbled away, until I could clutch the handle of the door farthest from him.

“It sounded like he was picking you!” said the smaller of the sidekicks excitedly.

The larger sidekick nodded. “Nobody’s been that dumb since—”

“Um, ‘picking?’” I interrupted, confused. I had neither seen any scabs nor come near his nose.

“You come into *my* space, and start talking about *my* mom, in front of *my* friends? I think it’s kind of clear you’re picking me for a fight,” the reptile said.

Oh. *That* kind of picking.

“You got any smart responses to that, *Clark?*” he asked with a sneer.

I suppose if I had packed a universal translator droid, I might have opted to stick around and try to explain that I meant no harm and came in peace. But all I had were my own wits. Which led me to say, “I’ll be careful?”

I was hoping he would get the cantina scene reference and decide I wasn’t worth the effort—or start worrying about a lightsaber attack from Obi-Wan, which is what had bailed Luke Skywalker out of a similar situation.

But it was apparently the wrong line to have chosen. Because instead of backing away, he glanced at his friends, then stepped closer and said, “You should have *been* careful, *Clark*. People who insult me—they *pay*.”

I didn’t need a translator droid to explain *that*. I just needed to get away, fast. I grabbed the door and yanked with all my strength.

At which moment, the air was pierced by a strange metallic buzz. Which I would later come to understand was the sound of the door being unlocked remotely.

I did not understand that at the time, though. Which is why the now-unbolted door responded to my exertions by flying open with great force—at least until it met resistance.

Which it did, from the side of my face.

I saw stars.

Not the inspiring kind.

1.01.02

Apparently, instructions for entering Planet Festus, a.k.a. Loretta T. Festus Middle School, were posted on a sign right beside the front doors. Next to the buzzer that would have alerted the office to let me in. The buzzer someone had pressed right as I yanked on the door.

I had seen none of this because the reptile and his posse had been blocking my view.

I learned about the buzzer after the aide who saw me lying in the doorway had escorted me to the Festus sick bay, which was operated by one Nurse McDowdy.

The nurse was a large, soft woman whose shape reminded me of a giant pear, although this particular pear had a swirl of reddish hair where the stem would be. Also, her eyebrows were missing, and had been replaced with thick, brownish lines apparently drawn by an old Magic Marker.

Nurse McDowdy communicated with a series of clicks and clacks:

“(Click) I don’t know what it is with you boys. (Clack) Always roughhousing and ignoring the rules. (Click) Don’t have the sense God gave a chicken. (Clack) And on your first day, no less. (Click-clack.) This is no way to make a good first impression.”

Perhaps I would have thanked Nurse McDowdy for her wisdom had she not been pressing a little too hard on the cloth ice pack she was applying to the swelling flesh beneath my right eye.

The good news is that Nurse McDowdy’s quarters were situated in the “office” area I had been seeking. So that much of my mission was done. Maybe she would just provide comfort and a place to rest and let me make a fresh start tomorrow.

But here is a quirk about the chief healer of Planet Festus: She was remarkably disinterested in doing any actual healing. After a few minutes, she reclaimed her ice pack, dispensed some more wisdom—“Maybe that shiner will teach you to pay attention to the rules next time (*click-click-click*)”—and declared me fit for duty.

With that, she pointed me across a narrow hallway to the office of the person who would determine where I would be stationed within the facility: Counselor Blethins.

As I flopped into a seat and tried to process everything that had just happened, I found myself thinking, How did I get into this mess?

This mission, as you might have guessed, had not been my idea. The commanders and I had been based on my home

planet for many years. It was a small, predictable place in a part of the galaxy that was remote but secure. Think of Tatooine, but with oil wells and orange trees instead of Jabba the Hutt and Jawas. Also, we did not actually maintain any moisture vaporators.

One commander was a reporter at the town's newspaper, and the other had a little photography studio where she shot portraits for people who, I presume, did not have friends to take snapshots for them.

Anyhow, a little more than a solar year ago, the commanders acquired their second spawn—me being the first—which somehow ignited a series of events that led to our relocation. They explained the reasoning to me; I can't say I was able to process it at the briefing. All I had really heard was: new job for Dad at a great big newspaper. In a big new city, a thousand miles to the east and a mile higher than our home base.

Then the changes had come at faster-than-light speed. At Halloween, I was tripping over John Kerry and George Bush yard signs while trick-or-treating in my homemade robot costume. By Christmas break, life was a blur of cardboard and bubble wrap and sweaty men with packing tape and my commanders yelling into phones demanding to know why the moving van with everything we owned had first been diverted to Winnemucca and then gotten snowbound in Boise. And now, here I was, a stranger in a strange school, trying to check in two weeks after the start of the semester.

I closed my eyes, trying to recall all the friendly details of my old planet. I could tell you how many steps it took to get from the light switch in my bedroom to the safety of my

covers in the dark (four), how many Jules Verne-era balloons were on the peeling wallpaper border above my door (13½), how many spots in the ceiling were missing those little popcorn bumps because of ill-advised efforts to launch rocketlike projectiles indoors (three), how many movie posters with the words *star* or *galaxy* in the title hung on the wall next to my bed (seven).

Like I said: home.

But for all my affection for the place, I had not been totally opposed to the idea of adventure being thrust upon me. Life on the home planet was not entirely...stimulating. Maybe I felt a bit like an alien among my classmates. They had known me a long time, and most of them usually left me alone with my books, which was nice. But that meant nobody ever really wanted to talk with me about my books, either. A few people even went out of their way to mock me about them.

I had a couple of friends, sure. When I was little, I'd get invited to birthday parties, although that had sort of tapered off in recent years, as almost everyone I knew got attached to some kind of sports team, and that was not exactly my crowd. Of late, maybe I had not exactly *had* a crowd.

Maybe what I mean is, it's possible everybody there had been counting down the days to my departure as eagerly as I had.

I knew that fitting in at a new place might take time—at least a couple of hours. But amid my fears I had also thought, How bad could it really be?

1.01.03

I pressed my fingertips against the cold, swollen flesh on the side of my face. I winced. I could have used some more time with that ice pack.

I distracted myself by surveying Counselor Blethins's office. It was a small space, just across from the nurse's quarters, with pea-green walls and a poster showing a kitten dangling from a tree limb. **HANG IN THERE!** the poster read. Somehow, this was supposed to encourage me.

It is a bad sign when a civilization's chief form of encouragement comes from the torture of fluffy animals.

"Welcome to Festus, Sherman! Sorry that we weren't ready for you," said Counselor Blethins as she dashed in, dropped some papers on her desk and plopped into her chair. She was younger and more spry than Nurse McDowdy, but then I suppose most life forms that were not, say, Galapagos turtles or giant redwoods would be. She had mousy brown hair and a pointy nose and a nervous way of looking around that reminded me of the pet gerbils I once kept.

"My name is Clark," I said, pointing to a folder that held my "academic records," which was upside-down in front of her, atop a pile of similar folders, and wire baskets with still more folders. "Clark Sherman. Sherman is my last name."

"Oh yes, sorry." She laughed. It was a high-pitched, nervous sound. "Clark. That's kind of an old-fashioned...well, I mean, I haven't met many Clarks here."

"Yeah, my dad, um, liked the explorer."

She looked puzzled, so I added, “You know, Lewis and...?”

“Oh yes. Of course. Well, that should be easy for me to remember. Which would be nice. There are just so many students, and so much paperwork to shuffle, that sometimes I think I should just give everyone a number so I can keep track of who’s who.”

She looked me in the eye for the first time and let out a little gasp of horror at the bruise on my cheek, then glanced at the nurse’s office, then back at me, and then apparently realized what she’d just said. “Oh! I didn’t mean to suggest that you should be a number...I mean, your name *is* rather...” Her voice trailed off, and she pointed her gerbil nose into my folder.

She read with intensity. Probably awed, I thought. My course of studies back home had been the most rigorous and sophisticated offered. And, I might add, my marks had always been of the highest order. Perhaps she was questioning whether I even needed to *be* here. Perhaps I would soon be discharged and left to my own devices. Perhaps—

“This is so odd. Our computer has you down as a zero!”

Perhaps things were about to get even worse.

“A zero?” I asked.

Counselor Gerbil-face blushed again. “Well, not you personally, Sherman.” She started to correct herself, stammered and looked back down. “No, I mean your credits. Our district’s computer talked to your old district’s computer, and it’s as if you haven’t completed any work at all!”

I stared at her while she typed something onto a keyboard so old that many of the letters had worn off. She stared at her screen.

“Hmmm. Well, hmmm,” she said. “If you’ll excuse me, I just need to clarify something with the principal.”

As any galactic traveler knows, *hmmm* is a universal

warning that something unpleasant is about to be announced. While she stepped out of the room, I held my breath and hoped I was wrong.

It didn't take long to be let down.

"Well, Clark." She smiled with an excess of sweetness as she returned. "I'm afraid this is going to take some time to sort out. In the meantime, I need to enroll you today. But only certain courses are available at the zero level. So...well, it—it may not be what you're used to."

The worried look on her face told me I was not going to like what was about to happen. "Are you, uh, sure we need to do this today, then?" I offered. "Because I could, you know, come back when the computer has—"

"Oh no!" she said. "No, really, we should do this today. I have to. Principal Denton thinks you..." She paused for a very long second, during which I swear she looked like she wanted to wrap her tail around her face and bury herself deep in a pile of cedar shavings in the corner of her cage. "Principal Denton has made it very clear that enrollment paperwork needs to be completed as quickly as possible. And really, around here, what Principal Denton says, well, it pretty much has to happen."

She looked sideways, cleared her throat, took a deep breath and pressed a button. Her printer groaned and screeched and a piece of paper came out. She cleared her throat again and handed the printout to me.

"Now, later today I'll be contacting your old district to see if we can't clear up some of the confusion. But in the meantime, I've enrolled you in the best courses available."

I read the printout.

I looked up at her.

“Um, I don’t see any of the electives I asked for.”

She sniffled. “Yes, well, all the things you were interested in—Latin class, computer lab—were either full or unavailable to, um, zeros.”

I looked down at the schedule again and then back up.

“You have me in something called Independent Study.”

“That was the one elective that *was* open. You’ll just, ah, be spending that time in the ARC. There’s plenty to read there.”

Which didn’t sound so bad. “What does the little number next to some of the classes mean?”

The counselor shifted in her chair as if she were sitting on something hard and lumpy. “Um, that’s just the course level you’re enrolled in. Level one courses.”

“And that means, like, advanced?”

“In this case, it means more like remedial.”

I shot her a laser death stare. I screamed, “You have GOT to be kidding me! Here I am, a highly intelligent life form from another world, and you have me in REMEDIAL classes?”

But something in the dry atmosphere made the words catch in my throat, and what came out was, “Ummm...remedial classes?”

She squirmed again. “That’s right.”

“But you know I was, like, in advanced classes and all, you know?”

She laughed that nervous laugh. “Yes, well, like I said, I’m sure we’ll be able to work it out soon!”

I stared at the paper in my hands. I stared a long, long time, not quite believing what I saw. And then I raised my eyes, slowly.

“You put me in PE *twice*.”

Silence.

“I didn’t sign up for PE *at all*.”

There was no laugh this time. Just the resigned voice of a person bound to do her duty, no matter how much of my life she had to sacrifice to do it.

“Yes, well, we do require a certain number of physical education credits to graduate. And as I said, no other electives were available to you. So I enrolled you in Physical Education in the morning and Athletics in the afternoon. It’s for people interested in trying out for sports teams. Everyone likes playing sports, right?”

She looked at me, realized I would be considered a ninety-eight-pound weakling only if I managed to gain a few pounds, and cleared her throat.

I stared at her. These aren’t the classes I’m looking for, I thought, pinching my thumb and forefinger together. I can go about my business.

No effect. The Force apparently had the day off.

“It won’t be so bad,” she assured me. “I’ll be working on updating things right away. I have the form right here...” She looked left, and right, and under three other folders, and on top of her computer, and under her keyboard, and then found it still in my folder, which somehow had already slipped beneath the pile of papers on her desk. “And as soon as I get the paperwork cleared up, we’ll find a way to adjust, if necessary. In the meantime, why don’t we just get you on over to the gym and let you start making your first Festus friends?”

Friends I could have used.

I did not expect to find any in the gym.

1.01.04

We left the office and entered the heart of the compound. As we walked, Counselor Blethins kept her head down, and I kept looking for emergency exits.

I did get a good overview of the place. It was basically a pair of extremely long, parallel hallways that were linked by a couple of shorter bisecting hallways. If you were looking down on it from orbit, it might seem like a giant *H* with two lines across the middle. The office was on the lower-right part of the *H*, like a boot, and the gym was at the top-left part, like a large rectangular execution chamber.

Just a thought.

The halls were lined with metallic lockers sunk into cinderblock walls that were decorated with posters that read WOLF PRIDE in the school colors of silver, black and blue. I thought the sign was the work of a particularly inept biology teacher—it's lions that move in a pride, right?—before I realized it was a reference to the school mascot. Breaking up the rows of lockers were doors with thin, rectangular windows laced with wire. Through them I could glimpse either classrooms or holding cells. It was hard to tell which.

Too soon, we were facing a pair of swinging doors. I thought of a medical drama I once watched where someone was always being bashed through such doors on a stretcher, often right before they died.

Counselor Blethins pushed the doors open, and we walked in. I smelled sweat and floor wax, and saw an assemblage of

young males who had been engaged in an activity involving a rubberized ball. They stopped. And stared. At me. It occurred to me that this must be what a womp rat feels like right before it gets bull's-eyed by a squadron of T-16s.

Counselor Blethins walked me up to the sector's regional warlord. He was a tallish humanoid, with a blue cap on his head, a rectangle of facial hair on his upper lip and a whistle resting on the slight paunch at his midsection.

"Coach Chambers?" asked Counselor Blethins, sounding unsure.

He answered with eyebrows raised, as if he were annoyed. Then his eyes scanned me and his nose crinkled a bit, as if something distasteful had just crawled into the back of his throat.

"Keep moving, everyone," he barked at the immobilized players, who seemed to be anticipating some kind of showdown.

He put on a smile that reminded me of the man who sold my father our last car. "What can I do ya for, counselor?"

"Coach Chambers, this is Sherman Clark." She looked at the folder, then over at me. "Sorry, this is Clark *Sherman*. He's new. And he's going to be in your class."

"Clark, eh? That's a name you don't hear very often anymore. Kind of old-timey, isn't it?"

As I started to explain that my dad was a fan of the explorer, the coach got a faraway look in his eyes. It was as if he were staring through me. No, it was as if he were staring at something *behind* me. I turned to look.

He'd been staring at a ball that was flying toward the back of my head. It smacked into the side of my turning face. Right where the ice pack had been.

“GAHHHHHHHHH!” I said.

Coach Chambers blew his whistle. “Who threw that?” he called.

There was a moment of silence. Everyone in the room turned toward a tall, thin-lipped person whose face, even through my one working eye, looked regrettably familiar.

“Sorry, Coach,” Reptile Boy said. “I should of caught that. I was just distracted by the appearance of Miss Blethins and her daughter.”

The class laughed. The counselor blushed. The corners of the coach’s mouth twitched. He didn’t think that was funny, did he?

“*Hunter*,” he said to Reptile Boy. “Watch it.” He turned his head and coughed. It sounded a little bit like laughter.

The counselor looked unsure as to what should happen next. She started to walk toward me, as if to offer aid, but balked. She looked up at the coach. “Perhaps, Coach Chambers, you could take a moment to assign someone who would be able to help guide—”

“Blethins,” said the coach, in a tone that was partly derisive, partly dismissive, and just a touch malevolent, “you can go. He’s on my turf now. We’ll take care of him.”

He made a little flicking motion with his fingers. Some of the class laughed.

The counselor looked at him, and over at me, then bowed her head as she thrust a map of the school at me and walked out.

The coach sized me up for about two seconds, grunted, “Get a uniform by tomorrow or be ready to run laps,” and told me to sit in the bleachers.

I looked at my chronometer. I was 33 minutes into the

mission. If my gear had included a self-destruct button, I might have broken my finger pressing it.

1.01.05

For the rest of the day, I was directed to and from a series of exhibit spaces. The signs on the doors read, ENTER AND GAWK AT THE BLACK-EYED ALIEN FREAK. That's how I felt, at least, as I was introduced to each class. And at the end of it all, I had to go back to the gym. It was like the least appealing time warp ever.

Coach Chambers again parked me in the bleachers. As he divided the class into scrimmage squads, I noticed another kid in the stands. He had made his way to a high row, far behind where I sat, and had avoided being chosen for any teams. I was ready to climb up and ask how he had managed that, but when I looked his way again, he had disappeared.

Before I could figure out how, I heard squealing.

Some other sort of uniformed group had occupied a space at the other end of the gym. The uniforms were blue, and the persons wearing them were engaged in ritualized chanting.

A stray ball bounced toward their zone, and one of the uniforms caught it. The uniform, it turns out, was wrapped around a girl. She took a few steps toward the basketball chaos before she returned the ball with a gracefully executed underhand volleyball serve.

Wow, I thought. Life forms like that could make this planet a lot more hospitable.

She had skin that made me think of a commercial for tanning oil, the kind that smells like coconut pie. She had hair that made me think of the cover of a fashion magazine. And she looked back at me with a curious smile that made me think—Wait. A *smile*? Is she *smiling* at me? Why, yes, I think she is indeed—

THWACK.

A wildly errant basketball hit the side of my head.

“Hunter!” Chambers yelled.

“Sorry, Coach. It just slipped out of my hands.”

When I could focus again, she was gone.

And it was clear that my explore-and-establish-contact mission had transformed into something entirely different.

My new objective: survival.

1.01.06

When the final bell rang, there was nothing I wanted more than to flee the premises. Well, almost nothing: I urgently needed to find a way out of my double-PE predicament. So I ran back to the office, where I hoped to ask Counselor Blethins about fixing my schedule. Fast.

I got lost twice on the way, but I arrived just as she was packing up her things.

“Oh, hello, Sherman. Is everything OK?” she asked weakly.

“Uh, no, actually,” I started to say. But then her face fell, as she stared at someone, or something, that had walked into her office right behind me.

Her lower lip trembled slightly. A voice as deep as space and cold as Pluto spoke.

“Ms. Blethins?”

“Yes, Principal Denton?”

“Is this the new student Coach Chambers called us about?”

“Yes, Principal Denton.”

“In my office, please.”

My stomach lurched as if a thousand middle school voices had cried out in terror and were suddenly silenced.

She nodded at me in a way that said, You’d better follow, or we’ll both regret it.

I turned and found myself walking behind a large humanoid. His stiff movements reminded me of a stormtrooper, one who had let himself go just a bit. His suit was brown, and his hair was shoe-polish black, styled in stiff, tiny, orderly curls—so orderly that they might have been stapled into place. I thought—cyborg? He did move somewhat mechanically as he led me to his office.

We entered. He turned and gestured at me to close the door. I took a seat in a hard black chair that faced his desk. He stood, looking at a folder. He surely could hear my racing pulse and shallow breathing, if not the trembling of my very DNA.

“I heard about your little run-ins today, Sherman.”

Oh, thank goodness. He was actually here to help!

“Well, yeah, there were a few, I guess,” I said, relieved. “In the gym—”

“Yes, Coach Chambers told me all about what he saw in

you. And I can see for myself,” he said, lifting a folder off his desk, “what a record you have.”

To me, that could only mean he had my actual permanent record, the one that showed my exemplary scores on several state tests, or my second-place finish in the Pack 85 Pinewood Derby, or the science fair project where I made a battery out of a—

Then he dropped the folder, and as it slapped against his desk, he almost, but not quite, sneered: “How does one manage to get to eighth grade with virtually no credits?”

And *CRASH*, there went my final hopes of easy resolution.

“Sir,” I said, as my stomach did a somersault, “I think somebody made a mistake.”

“Yes, he did,” he said, as his steel eyes—definitely cyborg—bored straight into the fear center of my brain. “Starting with your picking a fight the moment you arrived at my school.”

Picking a fight? *I’m* not the one who had picked anything. There had been a big misunderstanding, and then a door had hit *me*. Hard. Wasn’t it obvious that I was in no position to be picking any fights?

I should have said that out loud. But all I could do in actual response was rub my bruised face and stare blankly.

“Sherman,” he said haughtily, “I was hired to maintain order and discipline around here. To keep the peace. And I will use whatever means necessary to keep order and discipline intact. Do we understand one another?”

I understood that I needed to get out of there as quickly as possible. So I nodded.

“Good,” he said. “Then we won’t need to see each other much.”

“Keeping away from you would make me incredibly happy, sir,” I said.

This seemed to anger him.

I wanted to tell him that I meant no disrespect, but I had run out of strength.

So I just ran.

1.01.07

I tried to summarize everything for the command unit on duty when I made it back to base. She was in the kitchen, unpacking dishes, as I walked in. The younger spawn was in a restraining seat, pounding a cracker into a brown, paste-like substance.

“Hi!” the commander said cheerfully. “You made it home, right on time! That’s great! How was—” She halted, and gasped. “Your face!”

“It’s nothing,” I said. “Can I have some medicine? The grape kind?”

“But what *happened?*” she cried, rummaging through boxes that held spices, silverware, glassware, oven mitts, a never-used fondue pot and her collection of hand-tinted post-card images of several jackalope, a Paul Bunyan statue and America’s Largest Ball of Twine—but apparently, no pain medicine.

“It was an accident,” I said. “I hit a door. And then a ball.”

I probably should have told her about the scheduling fiasco, and the additional “stray” balls that hit me as I was leaving the gym, and how I got lost going to three of my

classes when the counselor forgot to arrange an escort. But I was still in shock, and embarrassed about being chewed out by the principal. And I thought, I'm too old to be crying. In front of her. Over this.

"Oh, Clark!" she said. "Sit down! I'll find the medicine. And I have a box of cupcakes here somewhere. Just sit! And let me—"

At the same moment the spawn began to scream, and the commander's phone buzzed with someone from the mortgage company, and as she was hanging up from that, the doorbell rang and some workers arrived to install the new dishwasher.

I made my way to the sofa, pushed aside some bubble wrap, and sat.

From the kitchen, the commander kept trying to question me. But it was becoming clear to me—she was busy. She didn't have time to worry about things like cupcakes, or how klutzy I was, or my mission in general.

I needed to find a way to take care of myself.

I had a *duty* to take care of myself.

And I therefore *would find a way* to take care of myself.

I turned on the TV.

The channels were wrong, and there were not enough of them; the cable company said it would be weeks before they could get an installer out. I recognized some of the network logos as I flipped through the over-the-air offerings. What had been Channel 4 at home was now 6. What had been 12 was now 2. There was nothing on 8. And at first I thought the same of 31, which was barely coming in at all.

But then, when I twisted the antenna slightly to the left, I saw it.

STAR SURVIVORS.

And for a moment, all was right in the universe again.

Allow me to explain.

Star Survivors is the story of the USS *Fortitude*, a twenty-third-century space vessel that, cast across the cold universe by the shock wave from a freak ultranova, spends each episode in a desperate search for a way to rejoin humanity.

Along the way, the crew—led by the resolute Captain Aristotle Maxim and his loyal, inventive first officer, Commander Conan Steele—battles various life forms and navigational hazards that make survival a day-to-day struggle. Only by luck, wit and courage can they hope to live.

The episode I stumbled across was the one where the shuttlecraft is sent to a planet that is supposed to be a tropical paradise. But it turns out the sensors are being jammed and the landing site is really a barren desert with these land-squid things that surface unexpectedly and drain the life force out of the guest star.

As I watched his corpse get slurped into the sand, I could totally relate.

This is why you should ignore anyone who tries to tell you that *Star Survivors* is an entertainment program. It is so, so much more.

It is a guide to orderly behavior in a confusing world. It creates role models in places where they do not otherwise exist.

Don't tell me that it's just a bunch of actors in funny costumes. I'm not stupid. Or crazy. I know the difference between Apollo 11 and Ceti Alpha XII. One happened on a soundstage. One did not.

Star Survivors is a refuge. It is a beacon of hope that my future will be something entirely different from my present.

Which, like a life force-eating land-squid, completely sucks.

**“Damn the gravity mines.
And the asteroid field. And
the tractor beams. There is
one way home for us and that
direction is: Full speed ahead.”**

—Captain Maxim
Star Survivors Episode 3,
“Where Space Angels Fear to Tread”

EXPEDITION LOG

ENTRY 2.01.01

Each morning I wake up and tell myself, *this is the day things start to get better.*

Each day I do my best to charge into battle the way Captain Maxim would want me to.

Each day my results are less than...stellar.

Today, day ten of the mission, unfolded in typical fashion:

0800 hours: Exited transport. (I can't always count on a ride, but today was pretty cold, and the commander took pity.)

0801 hours: Sought cover.

0803 hours: Was discovered by Ty Hunter, Jerry Sneeva and Bubba Pignarski. You met them in the earlier report. I meet them every day at the entrance, where they often provide a fashion critique. Or other observations on ways I might improve myself. I would quote them, but these guys use words that are fouler than the inside of a tauntaun.

Sneeva is small, curly haired and rabbitlike, in a twitchy way. When he plays defense on basketball, he is constantly poking, prodding, reaching and slapping until the ball comes loose. On offense, he spends a lot of time looking around at what everyone else is doing, and dishes the ball to them.

Bubba is built round and strong, like a boulder. He is possibly almost as intelligent.

Ty is the long-armed Death Star they orbit. He's always smiling with those razor-thin lips, but his eyes stay narrow, like a sniper getting ready to pull the trigger. I saw a face like that in a comic book once. The villain's name was Sinister something. He was a cold-blooded killer with nerves of steel (literally, on account of some kind of nuclear accident) who kept blasting and maiming and wounding and—

Where was I? Oh, yeah. Dodging them before school. It's a significant part of my morning.

0810–1505 hours: Attended school. My days are a blend of me seeking out Counselor Blethins; me being avoided by Counselor Blethins; me being induced to sleep by my remedial classes; and me being exposed to torture by various spherical instruments in PE and Athletics. Classes that I happen to share with my three least-favorite life forms, who also seem to be maxing out on their PE credits. Lucky me.

1505 hours: Sought route to home base that would not go past Hunter, Sneeve and Pignarski. Failed. Endured further verbal abuse.

1530 hours: Arrived at base. Sought high-sugar nourishment. Assured command unit that all is going according to plan.

She is shockingly easy to fool. After particularly bad days, I tell her I have a lot of homework, and I close the door to my quarters so I can “focus.” This buys the solitude I need to recharge.

You might be wondering why I haven't gotten around to debriefing my commanders about what I am experiencing. “Are they even fit to lead?” you might ask.

In their defense, they *do* ask about my classes. I tell them things are fine. This is true, from a GPA standpoint. They see 100s on my quizzes, same as ever. They believe all is well. And it is what I want them to believe—that I can handle things myself.

Here's how I see it: They have so much to worry about. His new job. Her new studio. All these boxes. Oh, and the little spawn, who is extremely loud and frequently smelly.

With all that going on, eighth-grade interpersonal relations should not be their priority, right?

Which is why, when they ask me about making friends, I tell them I'm seeing lots of interesting new people. And why, when they pressed for details about my black eye, I blamed only my own clumsiness.

Half-truths like these seem to make them relax. And I hope it keeps them out of my affairs while I sort things out on my own.

After all, I am supposed to be an explorer of superior intellect and ability. Doctor what's-his-name was able to save the universe who knows how many times with not much more than a telephone booth and a sonic screwdriver. Shouldn't I be able to figure out middle school?

1600 hours: Shut off overwhelmed emotional centers by engaging *Star Survivors* on the vidscreen.

I wish I could spend my whole life here.

Granted, the worst problems the USS *Fortitude* must face are radioactive comets, antimatter-reactor meltdowns and fanged, leather-skinned aliens with plasma beams—nothing as bad as what I am up against. But at the moment, the crew is all the companionship I have.

2.02.01

Planet Festus seems fraught with peril in every quadrant. Except one: The Academic Resource Center.

For starters, it is a large room filled with books. My kind of place.

Second, those books are on high shelves. It is easy to hide there. And when people can't find you, they can't hurt you.

Third, there is Ms. Beacon.

Ms. Beacon is the commander of this zone. She answers to the title of ARC Coordinator, but the plate on her desk identifies her as LIBRARIAN. Which would make sense, because on other planets, this zone would be called a library. I suspect she was promoted some time ago and is just waiting for the new deskplate to be assigned. From the looks of things, she has been waiting a while.

She is fairly old. My guess is at least forty. Her hair is streaked with gray, and she keeps it cut short. She has glasses of the type that allow her to scowl at people up close *and* far away. When she adjusts them a certain degree, her irises seem to take up the whole lens.

Back on Day One, when I was escorted into the ARC for my first Independent Study class, the intercom summoned Counselor Blethins to an urgent consultation with Principal Denton right in the middle of her introduction. The counselor had scurried off midsentence, leaving me and Ms. Beacon staring at one another. She looked me up and down, adjusted those glasses, looked me up and down again, and adjusted her vest.

“So,” she said. “They messed up your schedule and

Counselor Blethins has parked you here for an hour because she can't figure out where else to put you."

I was stunned. It was the first time at Festus that anybody had spoken to me with what seemed to be honesty.

"Yeah," I said. "I think that's about it."

She furrowed her brow and puckered her lips in distaste. "Well," she finally said. "What do you think we should do?" She enunciated each consonant precisely.

I looked into those glasses and caught a reflection of myself staring up at her. "Well," I said, "if you've got a place where I can sit and read, you can go about your work. I'm kind of at home in libraries."

Although it would not have registered on any photon sensor, at that moment I do think I detected a twinkle in her eye.

"I am certain I can arrange something," she said, and showed me where to sit.

Since then, Independent Study has been the one hour I look forward to. Ms. Beacon pretty much leaves me alone, except when she asks about the book I have brought. Usually, it's a collection of science fiction stories, or something involving an apocalypse. If it's a tie-in to a movie or a TV show, she suggests that I might want to look for something a little more illuminating next time. But other times she listens to me summarize a plot and nods approvingly.

And those tiny bits of encouragement—I cling to them. I cling to them the way the people in those post-atomic wastelands cling to the sight of a lone, colorful insect buzzing over the ashes, or to a hint of something green and growing on the distant horizon.

In other words, it is not much. But we look for hope where we can get it.