Characters

The Boys

Main:

Christopher: Either kind of smart or really paranoid.

Derek: The rudest and most sarcastic of the group.

Matt: Keeps Christopher and Derek from killing each other.

Thomas: Mental issue by day, Twilight Zone host by night.

Tyler: A nice guy, but not the sharpest crayon in the box.

Secondary:

Lorson Nells: The leader, though also a complete geek.

Rusty: Lorson’s brave, intelligent and loyal canine companion.

The Girls

Main:

Bethany: The sweetest and kindest of them all.

Dana: The super weird and slightly insane one.

Kayynar Laverĝe: The *completely* insane one.

Louise: A ditzy debutante who thinks she speaks Français.

Sammy: A mean-spirited one, sometimes a downright jerk.

Secondary:

Serge: Kayynar’s brunette but blonde-at-heart aide-de-camp.

Introduction

The idea for this book, as one may soon infer, came to me when I was very young. Like most, if not all schools we had boy-girl playground rivalries, which in this book I jokingly dubbed the “Cootie Wars.” Well, they were all good and fun until one day the girls started throwing rocks at us. Nothing lethal, of course, just the size to give one a nasty sting or get lodged up one’s nose (I should know). But if we threw a single one back –

“Teacher! Teacher! The boys are throwing rocks at us!”

It may have been that point when I started fantasizing about my best friends and I valiantly crusading against the female forces of evil. It was great, and it went through several incarnations before lapsing into my subconscious.

Three years later or so I thought of it again, mostly because I was extremely bored. “Gee,” I thought, “that could make an awesome movie,” but then decided to settle for a book. Obviously there were limitations though. Oh sure, it’s a great story if you’re seven or eight. But no one older than that will stand for adults starting a full-scale war between the genders with guns and planes and things. So I tried to get logical explanations for most of it.

First was Kayynar Laverĝe, who incidentally didn’t get a name until the story’s written form (and probably should have gotten a different one). The way she always looked in my fantasies was inspired by Emma Watson as Hermione Granger from the Harry Potter movies, but Emma or Hermione she was not. She was evil. In most of the original versions she just kind of appeared in a restaurant where Christopher and Beth were having a date and drafted all the girls into her army. Right. Okay.

She and the girls were, understandably, the “bad guys.” But I realized later that that wasn’t fair to them. In real life they are much more kind and sympathetic in general. So I decided that they had gotten into it before anyone knew what was going on. It was never meant to be an army but it evolved that way.

So now Kayynar was painted as the only evil one. But as I thought about it I decided she had been driven to it by some jerk breaking up with her. At first I made it a point that she was *not* insane, but I quickly realized that wouldn’t work so I added the train thing. You’ll have to wait until the third book to find out what exactly is wrong with her, so if (when) this one bombs and I never write the next two, tough tomato sauce (not really).

Prologue

During the summer, when school has let out, on every other Thursday the children of the small town of Buckitooey Falls will gather as one, and head to a small, decrepit old house on the outskirts.

They will wait, patiently, as a battered and worn old man emerges from the house. This is the Storyteller. He has as many stories as hairs in his raggedy gray beard, but most of them are about the Boy-Girl War, which is of particular interest to children this age who are, as you read this, engaged in their own version of it.

He will wait, pretending he does not know what they want. Then, tiring of this charade, he motions them to gather closer, as if to keep precious secrets from spilling to the wind and carrying throughout the world, which knows much less about such things than he, and for now should probably stay that way. He waits a second longer, then, clearing his throat, he begins:

It all seems stupid nowadays, even more so than it did at the time, that the human race could unite against itself with such savagery. Really, according to some incredibly stupid historians, it was merely a scaled-up version of the boy-girl playground rivalries, which is why they are usually referred to as “boys,” and “girls,” rather than “men,” and “women.”

But, it was in fact completely unrelated to the “Cootie Wars,” which proudly counted among themselves the double distinction of both the longest conflicts in history, and those with the least fatalities. (There was, in fact, only one, a little girl with hemophilia who got hit by a pebble.)

It all started with that infamous scoundrel, Kayynar Laverĝe, who grew up in downtown Buckitooey Falls. After the breakup of a long and enjoyable relationship, instigated by the guy having cheated on her, she lost all common sense and decided to go play on the railroad tracks by the hardware store. Why anyone would cheat on her was, and is, a complete mystery. She was kind, intelligent, and even if one was too stupid to appreciate those attributes, she was also drop-dead gorgeous. But, some people are just complete idiots.

Anyhow, Kayynar was getting over her broken heart fast. And playing on the railroad tracks was fun. The first time, she’d had a huge fight with the signalman trying to keep him from reporting her. Now they were the best of friends.

“Howdy, Kayy,” he shouted with a wave.

“Yo,” she replied. “How’s business?”

“Oh, it’s still on track,” he answered, as usual, and they both roared raucously. Kayynar even cheered up for a minute.

“Seriously though,” he answered more seriously, “I’m about to be derailed. The board keeps insisting they need a robot for this type of job. Say they’re the only ones in the county without one and it’s made them a laughing stock. Oh sure, that’s all good and dandy. Where’s that leave me with my wife, six kids and invalid parents who can’t afford nursing homes, that’s what *I’d* like to know.”

Kayynar flipped him a coin. “Quarter for your troubles,” she said.

The signalman squinted at it suspiciously. “This is a hunnert-buck piece,” he explained. “You’re a little over.”

“Oh wow,” she said with mock surprise, “how did *that* get there? My mistake. Keep the change.”

Just like always.

“Oh, one more thing,” he shouted, “better be real careful. Train’s comin,’ due any minute. One of those miles-long things.”

She didn’t notice. This wasn’t part of their routine so her brain, more heavily occupied with fantasies of mutilating and killing in the most painful ways possible while trying to replace those with images of soft fluffy clouds and extraordinarily cute fuzzy animals, stored it in the first subconscious storage bank it came across and promptly forgot about it.

Coincidentally this storage bank was labeled “Precise Dates and Types of When I Have Eaten Cheese.” It promptly rejected the new bit of data in much the same way a school of vegans rejects a cannibal. It became a homeless vagabond, traveling from neuron to synapse for a few billionths of a second before her brain stuck it in another random storage bank, told everyone to behave because it was rather busy for a moment and didn’t want a complete systems overload, and returned to the tasks at hand.

Coincidentally this storage bank was labeled “Precise Dates and Individuals of When I Have Pulled off Flies’ Wings,” and was nearly empty. But we are getting off the subject.

Kayynar finally reached the railroad track and started walking its length. But, wouldn’t you know it, it seemed she’d hardly got there and the crossing guard went down. A train was coming. One of those miles-long things.

No sweat. She would just get off and leap over the crossing guard well before the train got close. She was in very good shape, and she would have managed it easily. Would have.

But, having come here directly from her date where that loser broke up with her, she was still wearing her pretty expensive new dress from Sears. And the darn thing was stuck in one of the rail ties. See where this is going?

Kayynar tugged, and tugged, and tugged, but she took great pains to avoid ripping her dress. Alas, it somehow became more entangled every time.

The signalman was shouting at her as he ran towards the track and tried to flag the train. “Just rip the stupid dress! You can always buy a new one!”

Well, he wouldn’t understand. He was a male, after all. Actually, considering that this was a life or death situation, she would have conceded he had a point, if it weren’t a one-of-a kind creation. One sleeve, you see, was slightly shorter than the other, a rare mistake that made it a collector’s item.

Finally, in desperation, she decided to sacrifice it, and came free. But her momentum flung her face-down onto the track, and when she lifted her head, the huge steel behemoth was bearing down on her.

*Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep*…

The highly trained female nurses of Buckitooey Falls Hospital were no stranger to this sound. But this time, it was different. This time, they would be reassembling an entire human body from torn scraps and shreds and hoping it somewhat resembled the original product. Nobody in this small town had ever done such a thing. Nobody anywhere, in fact, had done such a thing. Oh, well. At least their only male staff member, the pathetically incompetent Dr. Glurch, wasn’t here this morning.

But, as all ill-fated things must happen just when their probability is just above zero, he waltzed in, playing “Weird Al” Yankovic’s “Like a Surgeon Truth or Dare remix” on his iPod, about a hundred decibels too loud. His female coworkers sighed in exasperation.

“Sorry I’m late,” he yelled above the music. “I had to walk Rufus, and doggone it – get it? *Dog*gone it? Well, he ran into the neighbor’s yard ’cause there’s this Pekingese chick he’s got an eye on, but ’er owner had a bone to pick – get it? Bone? Anyway –”

“Just get the defibrillator and make sure it’s working,” the lead surgeon, Deborah O’Brian, ordered.

“Yes ma’am,” Glurch replied with a salute, as he walked to the back singing, “yes, my paaaaaatients die, before they can pay…”

“And turn that darn thing off!” She sighed. It was people like him that had eventually driven the hospital to fire all of their male staff. Those that refused to leave met with rather nasty “accidents.” And Glurch’s “accident” was being formulated as they worked.

He looked the defibrillator over, fiddled with some settings, decided to test it, and – “*Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!!!*”

Well, maybe he would kill himself first.

They all returned to the task at hand. Using reference photos and textbooks and computer software and just a *bit* of guesswork, they began putting the corpse back together. It had sounded like an exciting prospect, but right now it was fast becoming tedium city.

Twelve hours later the preliminary work was done, and they started with the muscles and organs. Dr. Glurch rushed up at that moment, with charred skin and all but his underwear (which was conveniently made of asbestos) burnt to cinders, pushing the defibrillator. “There, I got it to work!” he rasped triumphantly. “Can I get a reimbursement on my here dead iPod –”

“Go order twenty pounds of prosthetic skin and three pounds of Blond Type 3 hair.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He left, and twenty seconds later they heard screaming. “But try cleaning up and putting on some clothes first,” Debbie muttered.

Needless to say, Dr. Glurch was little help with the completed project. If he had been, surely Kayynar’s fate would have been worse. The only glitch, so far as the nurses were concerned, was a small lump of tissue missing from her brain. So small, in fact, that this was its first discovery, and so everyone assumed its absence would cause no major difficulties.

As they all stood around the table, the head surgeon switched the defibrillator on. Electricity poured into the corpse. Sparks flew. Her head, which was all that protruded from under the blanket, was truly an eerie sight, more so because of its beauty than if it had been green, sewn together, and had handles on its neck. Her eyes fluttered open, and the electricity flow automatically stopped.

Three hours later she was able to form a word. “Thaaaaaaaaaaank yooooooou…” Two words, actually. Her voice sounded way too low-pitched, but that would only require a minor vocal chord adjustment.

“Well, yer downright welcome, l’il missy,” Glurch said, bowing. Yessir, that “accident” would have to be soon. “Now, we better make sure yer all tip-top, so what say you get up and try to walk a spell?”

Kayynar frowned, realizing she had no clothes on and that he probably knew it. “You’re pitiful,” she coughed.

“Beg pardon, missy?”

“You’re pitiful!” she screamed rising from the bed, keeping the blanket wrapped tightly around herself. Dr. Glurch unconsciously backed away. “You, and all of your kind!” she continued, advancing towards him. “Loathsome, pathetic scum of the Earth. You sicken me!”

Dr. Glurch began to feel rather sick himself.

Chapter I

In Which the Primary Characters are Introduced

Christopher knelt down and picked up the soggy newspaper from the dirt where it lay. An article in the corner caught his eye: “Local Doctor Nathaniel Glurch Strangled by Unknown Assailant. ‘He won’t be missed,’ says colleague…” The news was always depressing. With a sigh, he put it down and returned to the task at hand.

The morning traffic had already started. And here came grouchy old Mr. Clumpox, of Clumpox & Associates Aluminum Inc., walking his poodle Fritzy. They were both extremely stingy, but Christopher figured with a little more prodding…

He emerged from the alley, looking rather pathetic, which came naturally to him. He pleaded to Mr. Clumpox, of Clumpox & Associates Aluminum Inc., and his poodle Fritzy, “Oh, Mr. Clumpox of Clumpox & –”

“Bite the bullet and tell me what ya want,” he sneered, “as if I didn’t know.”

“Change! You got change?”

Mr. Clumpox of – oh, forget it – dug out the first thing he found in his pocket. He only kept pennies in his pocket, of course, ever since the morning when he’d missed his cup of coffee and accidentally almost given Christopher a thousand-dollar bill – which, to him, was still change.

“WOW! Thanks, Mister! A genuine collectible 2023 double-sided Denver mint penny worth well over a million dollars!”

“WHAT?!” yelled Clumpox. “Dagnabbit, I thought I’d got those all put in the display case!”

“Nah, just pulling your filthy stinkin’ rich leg. To see if any money falls out. Sorry for wasting your time, I can tell it must be such a pain in the butt to have money and fame and people to boss around. Tell me, buddy, how many former employees will you be sending my way this month?”

Clumpox snorted. “I’ve a mind to petition you riffraff out of the city,” he snarled, “and I could do it too!” He stomped off.

“Yeah, of course,” Christopher retorted to his fading back, “but we wouldn’t want to hurt your tender little fingers typing all those words, would we? And then think how much the bribery would cost, maybe a hundred bucks per councilman. Wouldn’t want to leave you dry, would we!” Clumpox was now beyond earshot, so Christopher gave up and turned back into the alley.

“Wake up, you lazy street rats! Loitering waits for no one!”

Groaning, his four friends – Matt, Derek, Tyler and Thomas – got up from their concrete bed. “Thanks, you interrupted my favorite dream about stapling my eyelashes to a rabid wolverine’s butt and throwing senile chickens into a tree so the aliens can get them easier but the wolverine–”

“Shut up, Thomas,” said Derek. Derek generally needed twenty hours of sleep, which of course he never got, so he was constantly ready to snap at everyone. Christopher had some news that cheered even Derek up, however, although in just a few days it would have struck fear into his heart:

“The girls are coming.”

“The girls,” of course, were their friends from the alley on the other side of Buckitooey Falls – Sammy, Dana, Louise, and Bethany. Necessity dictated they live in two different alleys, but they visited each other as often as possible.

So began an attempt to make the place presentable. Sweeping dust away, scaring off the rats, and arranging the cardboard beds into armchairs and sofas. Suddenly, Tyler glanced across the street, and noticed them walking towards the alley with McDonald’s breakfasts spilling from their arms.

“Where’d they get that kind of money!?” he sputtered.

“Weapons, my friend, weapons,” Christopher explained. “Feminine charms, puppy pouts, and the threat of being pinched until twenty layers of your skin turn purple and shed – they’ve got an advantage.”

“Duh,” grumped Derek. “But they better share.”

They did. With a cheerful “yoo-hoo” and a kiss-blowing from Louise, they trip-tramped right over. Sammy shared with Derek, Dana with Thomas, Louise with Tyler, and Bethany with Christopher. Matt was feeling rather left out until Beth, and then the others, started to share.

Perhaps it should be clarified at this point that such social structuring was common. All of them knew that if they hoped to have a future, and they did, their spouses would be from this group. And, as time went on, stronger relationships were inevitably formed between the aforementioned pairs. Matt wasn’t an outcast – not any more than the rest of them, anyway – but with five boys and four girls, someone had to be left out.

Derek had explained that since they couldn’t afford to be technically *married* anyway, it wouldn’t be that much more immoral to share someone else’s.

Matt explained that with their feminine charms, puppy pouts, and the threat of being pinched until twenty layers of your skin turn purple and shed, the girls could scrape that much together. It could be a cheap ring, and cake was overrated.

Derek explained that the others would be guilt-tripped into buying wedding presents, and that wouldn’t be so easy.

Matt explained that if they thought the sacred institution of marriage was all about material goods, then that was their problem.

Derek explained that a fist was rapidly approaching from his left.

And so, it remained a pressing issue. But as Matt sipped a cappuccino – unknowingly ruining his sleep habits for life and losing whatever growth he had left – this was in the far corner of his mind.

“Did you hear about the local murder?” Beth asked, just to make conversation.

“You need to be more specific, Beth,” said Sami.

“This one is big stuff.”

“I saw the headline, if Dr. Glurch is the guy you mean,” said Christopher. “But that stuff happens every day. It’s a really crappy world we live in –”

“But it looked like he was torn apart with someone’s bare hands,” Beth persisted. “That’s not your average murder.”

“Let’s focus on the bright side,” said Dana. “In the same hospital room, a living person was reassembled after being torn apart by a speeding train. That’s not your average operation.”

“Ah, oui.” Louise nodded. “Zat Laverĝe chic–” at this point it should be explained to anyone that is as stupid as Louise, that “chic,” as a noun, means 1. the quality or state of being stylish; fashionableness, or 2. sophistication in dress and manner; elegance, which both describe Kayynar perfectly but is not, as Louise thought, the French word for “chick,” which, in this instance, is slang fora girl or young woman, and also describes her perfectly “–ees very–” Tyler grabbed Louise and kissed her passionately, stopping her from embarrassing herself by getting another word wrong, or, in fact, to everyone’s great relief, saying anything else at all.

“Hmmm…” Christopher pondered. “It doesn’t seem to have occurred to anyone that ‘zat Laverĝe chic’ could be a suspect.”

“Well,” Beth pressed, “the other staff said she was unconscious for at least twenty-four hours and couldn’t have done it.”

“The other staff hated the guy’s guts,” Christopher insisted. “Of course if Kayynar killed him they wouldn’t rat her out.”

“You think they’re that callous?”

“I do.”

“But she’s too nice to do a thing like that, stupid,” Derek interrupted, “and really hot too.” Sammy punched him.

“Not like either of you would know what that means,” said Matt. Sammy punched him a little harder.

Dana quickly tried to avert an argument. “Look, guys,” she said, “we’re going to be late for the symposium. Something about ‘our country’s alarming moral decline, not to mention the steadily increasing reversal of traditional gender roles’. I’m just in it for the free pencils.”

“Funny you should mention that,” Tyler told her, “because I was planning on attending a similar thing. It’s got Dr. Ian Malcolm the Fourth, PhD. in Chaos Physics.”

Derek called them both losers.

Dr. Ian Malcolm the Fourth, PhD. in Chaos Physics, cleared his throat. He was unusually hip for a mathematician. His grayish-black hair all poofed up at the front (he slept on it that way every night, to avoid wasting gel) and to complete the cool look he wore dark squarish sunglasses, a long gold chain necklace, and entirely black clothing that showed just a hint of his chest. He also had a weird smile that would encourage you to punch it, if it were worn by anyone else, but on him it simply added to the nearly overwhelming air of charisma and cologne. He cleared his throat again and looked at his audience.

His audience cleared his throat too, and said “hi.”

Malcolm smiled and waved at Tyler. “I’d like to thank you all for turning up here today. For those of you who don’t know me, I’m Dr. Ian Malcolm the Fourth–”

“Hey,” Tyler interrupted, “you’re descended from that guy in Jurassic Park, right?”

Malcolm grinned sheepishly. “Well, yes–”

“I’ve only read the book. But I love that guy! He’s awesome! It’s a shame he died.”

“Actually, he survived,” said Malcolm. “He comes back in the sequel.”

“Gee, thanks for giving it away.”

“No problemo. You should have expected that. Don’t you remember the concept of chaos theory?”

“D’you remember any good quotes from him?”

Malcolm thought a moment, then said, “‘You are indeed very pretty, Dr. Sattler. I could stare at your legs all day.’”

“Uh, I meant about chaos theory.”

“Oh.”

There was an awkward silence, and then Dr. Ian Malcolm the Fourth, PhD. in Chaos Physics, cleared his throat again and decided to start the symposium. “All right,” he said, “to start out with, bluntly, here is a chart of men’s and women’s rights, circa 0 A.D, when Christ was born or thereabouts. Now you will notice women couldn’t do much of anything, and that’s deplorable, but –”

Tyler raised his hand and patiently waited to be called on. “What about the ‘moral decline’ part?”

Malcolm shrugged. “If I know you street rat types, and I do, you’ve got no problem with moral declining. You’ve been quite close-knit and lived separately from the rest of us for as long as history, and something about eking out a pathetic existence humbles you quite a bit. Not to mention that’s where most of the religious people are now that things have gotten – well, you know.”

“I hear you,” said Tyler. “People are living in fear of the Antichrist coming and all that but firstly, he’s already here, and secondly, they invited him. Why do you care about this anyway? You’re not much like your ancestor.”

“My ancestor,” Malcolm stated huffily with the air of someone trying to preserve his dignity, “was from the age when Chaos Physics was a newly discovered branch of mathematics. Times change, kiddo, and three generations later it’s time to find practical applications for it.”

There was a pause while he went over some painful memories, and then he continued. “I suppose I seem arrogant, considering I’m one of them myself, but I’m also one of you guys, y’know? I went to school for years before anyone realized no one was paying for my education, and by then I’d earned a scholarship. I was only twelve, mind you, and even though I’d already started cussing and smoking and losing my virginity, I wasn’t prepared for what I ran into in college. At the same time my mom was evicted, so I went to live with some friends of hers who happened to be street rats – you don’t find that term offensive do you?”

“Not at all. There are lots of somewhat nastier alternatives.”

“Great. So, anyhow, maybe these street rats aren’t angels, but that’s how they look to a twelve-year old next to college people. On New Year’s Eve, one night, we all got drunk, myself included. But then…” his eyes filled with tears. “Then, I sobered up with a real throbber, but the others were still drunk, and… I saw what somebody was doing to somebody else, and, and… I was scarred for life.”

He quickly regained his composure and hastily exclaimed, “But, when your ancestor gets eaten by a T. Rex you tend not to worry about that. It’s not really relevant to any of this. I was just trying to make a point which, incidentally, also isn’t relevant to any of this, but you gotta connect with your audience. You guys are doing great, y’know, don’t let society’s ills get dumped on you like they are, ’cause civilization is a worthless load of –”

“Yes, yes,” Tyler hurriedly interrupted, “but let’s not generalize too much. My associates and I were just discussing earlier a famous, wealthy, *above* average girl named Kayynar Laverĝe. But she’s really nice.”

“And how do her peers view her?”

“Well, naïve and ditzy, but –”

“And, anyhow,” Malcolm went on, “I’d advise you to be wary of her. Surely you’ve heard about how she got hit by a train and pieced back together?”

“Yes, that’s why my associates and I were discussing her.”

“Beware, my friend. Something has gone horribly wrong.”

“And how do you know?”

“Chaos theory. This is the greatest advancement medical science has ever made, and there is no possible way for its first unprecedented utilization to work one hundred percent well. Phase space, you will remember, doesn’t move that way. Instability is built into it.”

“But–”

“Imagine a propeller blade, a slightly warped propeller blade, with a droplet of water moving down its surface. The droplet, at times, as it reaches the edge of one propeller blade and moves to counter it, split and reform. Perhaps it will not reform, in which case you will have a great disaster, metaphorically speaking. But if it does, it will not be exactly as it was before. Unless it’s lost some of its mass, probably no one will notice. But it won’t be quite the same. The constitution of its molecules will have been scrambled and rearranged. In short, you have a different droplet of water.”

“But how do you know something’s gone *horribly* wrong, that it’s not just a little mistake?”

“Because there *are* no little mistakes. Say I go back to the time of dinosaurs, if you will excuse the irony, and step on an ant. Have I just wiped out the one ant?”

Tyler didn’t quite follow him, and said so.

“No! I have wiped out his children, and his children’s’ children, and their children, and so on, more so with every seceding generation. By the time we return to the present day that has reached staggering billions of ants. There goes, also, any advances in natural selection that they would have made, any animals that would have preyed upon them, any diseases they would have stopped the spread of by feeding on carcasses. I have made quite an impact, by killing what we so wrongly think of as insignificant.”

“There was no mention of it in the paper.”

“Well, of course not, there’s no need to get us afraid of a trip to the doctor’s, they say. The powers that be might lose their funding.”

He waited a few moments for this to sink in, and then returned to the chart. “You know, of course, that chaos theory will not let these figures stay constant.” He flipped through some more charts, showing how they progressed century by century, until the present day. “As you see,” he continued, “there is no real progress until women gain the right to vote, in 1920. Then for the longest time they could not get equal wages for equal work with men, but for some reason they got the right to murder babies in 1973. Once we actually started making progress on the wages issue, everything started falling into place faster and faster, much like mankind’s accumulated knowledge. This is good, obviously, *if* it stops when the two genders are equal. But we passed that point, about 2050 A.D.”

“Oh, dear…”

“The most alarming aspect is how many of these rights aren’t legally spelled out, but they get because of what they are. I hate to stereotype, of course, but the potential for abuse of power cannot be ignored. Perhaps you’ve heard the phrase ‘feminine charms, puppy pouts, and the threat of being pinched until twenty layers of your skin turn purple and shed?’”

“Hmmm… yes, that does sound slightly familiar.”

“And here is a men/women employment chart from 1800 A.D., another from 1810 A.D., and so on until now. Until about 1920 or so it’s very poorly documented, but you can see how women employees started to multiply rapidly. Mostly during the World Wars, of course, when all those soldiers were gone, and if we were to have another one now… of course, as with the rights thing, these things are good. The problem is when they come at the expense of equally qualified males.”

“I think you’re overreacting again, sir.”

“Shut up and let me talk. There’s no need to give them retribution, no need to make up for what our ancestors did. That was the past, and all we need to worry about is *now*, and getting everything equalized once and for all, like it was, however briefly, in 2050.”

“Is it impossible to keep it like that?”

“Oh, fluctuations would be inevitable,” Malcolm said, “thanks to chaos theory. But yes, if the human race wasn’t stupid, we could keep it at more or less the same spot. Then, with our own petty social problems under control, we could focus on entire races of people who *still* have no rights and are being mistreated.”

“Wow,” said Tyler, “this is insane.”

“Sometimes,” said Malcolm with a wink, “it takes an insane perspective on things to make the world progress.”

“Wow.”

“Free pencil?”

Dana waited expectantly and stared at the stage, chewing her fingernails nervously. She was beginning to wish she’d gone to Tyler’s thing. Ian Malcolm *was* kind of cute. She realized she was starting to drool and suppressed that reflex by contemplating how anyone could fit “Our country’s alarming moral decline, not to mention the steadily increasing reversal of traditional gender roles” onto a pencil, and hoping they’d succeeded because otherwise she was wasting perfectly good preening time here.

What the heck, she decided, and started preening anyway.

There was a loud drumroll that caught her entirely by surprise, and then Kayynar Laverĝe leaped onto the stage, which caught her even more by surprise. Reportedly this lady was still in a hospital bed relearning how to talk and sucking food through a straw.

“Welcome, welcome,” she said, bowing, “I see we’ve got quite a turnout today. Sorry to have this scheduled the same day as Dr. Malcolm’s little shtick, and on such deplorably short notice too, but I promise you won’t be sorry. Any questions before we begin?”

Dana raised her hand but didn’t wait to be called on. “I thought you were in a hospital bed relearning how to talk and sucking food through a straw.”

Kayynar’s smile froze. Her eyes narrowed. Her voice lowered. “You must have been misinformed,” she said.

“Oh, that makes sense,” said Dana.

Beth suddenly had an inexplicable sharp pain in her stomach.

“All right,” said Kayynar, as the smile regained its warmth, “any more questions? No? Okay, I’ll get right down to business then. For most of human history, we’ve been mistreated, right? I mean, fewer rights, lower wages, that sort of thing.”

Someone coughed. Someone else said… “Er, *we*?”

Kayynar sighed, and decided, quite rightly, that not everyone in the world was as intelligent as she. In fact she had always known this and had carried it as a subject of great pride, but often felt the need to reconfirm it when someone missed something so plaintively, glaringly obvious as this.

“Look at everyone around you,” she instructed. They did so.

“Now, do you see any similarities between yourself and all these others?”

There was some confusion as to who should answer, so Sammy did: “Is that a tone of condescension in your voice?”

Kayynar saw no reason not to be truthful, so she said, “yes.”

“Why, I oughtta–”

Louise suddenly arrived at a conclusion and yelled out, “Zey’re all *chics*!”

There was an awkward silence.

Kayynar broke it. She pointed at Louise and said, “Is this kid with anyone?”

Sammy, Dana, and Beth reluctantly raised their hands.

“My most heartfelt condolences to all of you. Now, this symposium is a *gender* thing, right?”

“Er, what about moral declining?”

“Look,” she exploded, and went through Dr. Malcolm’s whole shtick in less than a minute. Then, out of breath and more than a little flustered, she said, “I couldn’t agree more with the idea that we should get things equalized. But hey, is it really so much to ask that we enjoy our moment of triumph before we consent to that?”

Everyone thought she was insane.

“The world is a terrible place,” she said. “It’s up to us to take a shot at fixing it. That’s why I’m forming a little group here. Think of it as sort of the new TGIF club. We’ll just have fun, hang out, keep the males under our gentle but stern thumb, and get paid to do it. I estimate it should take us about fifty years at a maximum to get everything straightened out.”

Beth had another inexplicable sharp pain in her stomach. “Miss Laverĝe, ma’am,” she said, “that sounds very noble, but are you sure you aren’t you just exploiting our fundamental human greed and selfishness to make us demand higher prominence because of events from the past that had nothing to do with us?”

Kayynar gave a strained chuckle. “I suppose it might seem that way from some perspectives.”

“I just have to be sure,” said Beth, “that you really have everyone’s best interests at heart, before I make any commitments.”

“Beth, for Christmas’ sake *shut up*!” Sammy hissed.

“Well,” said Kayynar, nodding slowly, “you seem to be a wonderful, honest young lady with high moral scruples. Exactly what this world needs. Trouble is, the world doesn’t *want* them. You can’t get anywhere nowadays unless you’re willing to cheat. I’ll accept people like you. They won’t.”

“I thought *you* were that kind of person.”

“Times change, doll,” she said wistfully. “Look, it’s not like we’re evil or anything. It’s just a little group.” She studied Beth’s face. Beth was a beautiful woman, but she was clearly a street rat. Her freckles were obscured by a layer of dirt, which piled up into her dimples and had a tendency to crumble when she smiled. Her brown hair was pretty, too, but it was ratty and tangly, and the dirt obscured her blonde highlights. If she had some decent money, well, she could be a cover girl. Kayynar decided to go for the jugular vein.

“Anyone special in your life?” she asked.

Beth instantly turned a pretty shade of pinkish-red.

“Dark alleyways are no place for young love,” Kayynar insisted. “Maybe if you all had your own houses… nice, clean, roomy houses… maybe a dog… if you could afford to go out to restaurants, to buy bouquets and presents, and… rings…”

Beth struggled with the decision, but Kayynar knew before she said anything what her answer would be. “Well, that about wraps it up,” she concluded. “Free cookies, ice cream, and pie?”

“What!” Dana huffed. “No pencils!?”

When the girls returned, they looked considerably different. They’d been washed, manicured, and perfumed. In fact, Matt smelled them coming from three blocks away. When they came into view, his jaw dropped and just kind of hung there for a while.

“We’ve got jobs,” Beth explained unnecessarily.

“This,” Matt decided, “calls for a celebration.” He let out a yippy birdlike call, and the others came scurrying out. “Christopher,” he said, “get some sodas.”

Christopher snapped him a sharp salute and disappeared through the back door of Duff’s Stuff.

In Duff’s Stuff, one could find most anything. It was a popular tween hangout, with comic books, candy bars, and soda. Besides that it also sold all kinds of random secondhand junk from food processors to loaded guns to things a normal average person wouldn’t really want to know about. Fortunately the vending machines were in the back. Christopher ambled over to one that looked old and rusty.

He whistled cheerfully as he pressed his back against it and surveyed the crowd. Next to him a punk with purple hair and his everythings pierced was screaming obscenities at an invisible giant rabid radioactive virtual reality hamster as he proceeded to beat the snot out of it. No threats here.

He emerged from the store, triumphantly displaying Coke and Mentos for Tyler and Louise, Pepsi for Thomas and Dana, Mountain Dew for Matt, orange Gatorade for Derek and Sammy, and for himself and Beth, Dr. Pepper. “The doctor is *in*,” he said, and took a long swig.

Back inside the shop, the punk had been rather messily devoured by the invisible giant rabid radioactive virtual reality hamster (coincidentally, the game was called “Attack of the Invisible Giant Rabid Radioactive Virtual Reality Hamsters) and decided to cool off. He went over to the vending machine right next to him. The door had been unceremoniously duct-taped onto its torn hinges, but even so he was very surprised when it came detached and fell on top of him.

“Well,” Beth announced (by now you should know she was the spokesperson for the group), “we can tell you the bad news, I guess.”

“The bad news!?”

“Yeah,” Sammy interrupted (by now you should also know she was the interrupter for the group), “we’ll be busy a lot of the time and have to move around the country for more symposiums and stuff.”

“But in a year or so, we’ll be able to settle down, get married, and move into a nice house with all the luxuries we want,” Beth reassured Christopher.

“Guess who’s employing us!” squealed Dana.

Without warning, Sammy wheeled around and punched Dana right in the face, wiping the blood onto a wall with a distasteful grimace. “Our employer wishes to remain anonymous at this time,” she explained, “as certain also unnamed parties may find his or her failure of great interest.” She glance angrily at Tyler with this last bit, but he was busy snorting Coke out of his nose and didn’t notice.

“In fact,” said Beth, gritting her teeth, “we’re leaving tomorrow for Florida. So long.” She gave Christopher a long, passionate kiss, and he suddenly wished she would leave for Florida every day.

In fact it took quite a bit longer than that, but some things do not need to be shared. They stayed and talked long into the night and the next morning they were gone.

Chapter II

In Which Things Get Weirder

“Mail!” yelled the stewardess droid, unceremoniously throwing a pile of letters at the surprised Louise, Dana, and Sammy, and the preoccupied Beth, who reacted little more than a tombstone.

They were staying in one of Florida’s finest motels, La Chalet de Something-or-other. Louise had fallen in love with the title right away.

Thus follows an account of their mail:

Louise received a letter coated with perfume and written in French. Actually it was a sample of her own perfume taken the night before she left, and the French was actually just random romantic-sounding gobbledygook, but naturally her nose had grown accustomed to her own smell, and even more naturally she didn’t know French from a dialect of Swedish Pig-Latin. Tyler knew this from experience.

Dana received a much shorter but more personal letter. It was a poem:

*Roses are red,*

*Violets are blue.*

*I’m schizophrenic*

*And so am I.*

It was the most romantic thing she had ever heard.

Sammy’s was sort of a combination between the two. Derek had simply written down the lyrics of “Weird Al” Yankovic’s “Since You’ve Been Gone” and credited it as a poem of his own design. (He had heard this song when he was three years old, right before his parents kicked him out of the house.) Sammy found it very touching until she heard the ending.

Beth was jarred out of her meditative state by Sammy’s outburst and noticed the letter sitting on her lap. She opened it excitedly.

*Dear Beth,*

*Things aren’t the same without you at all. We’re all bored and depressed. If Mr. Clumpox offered me a million dollars right now I wouldn’t take it. Well, okay, that’s a lie, but I’m still bored and depressed.*

*The others send their regards. Derek is being a whole lot meaner than usual, and we finally voted to make him live in another alley for a while. That’s the closest we have to psychiatric stuff here, you know. Anyway he came back with bruises all over and an ice pick shoved up his nose, so now we’re in the middle of a war with the Cougar Gang. This never would have happened if you hadn’t left.*

*You know Thomas’s favorite dream of stapling his eyelashes to a rabid wolverine’s butt and throwing senile chickens into a tree so the aliens can get them easier but the wolverine escapes so he can’t do the traditional alien greeting ceremony? Well, it finally came true. The Cougar Gang has a pet wolverine and the chickens are its food, and they were only too happy to lend them to him for this purpose. Thomas is in about as good condition as Derek and the aliens still haven’t showed up.*

*Tyler and Matt are pretty occupied. Tyler makes up stories and skits and Matt helps him for lack of anything better to do. They tried to show us their premier of “Death in the Mental Hospital” but about halfway through, when the detective was searching the autopsy room, a hand grenade came flying in. We thought it was part of the act until they started running and screaming. Thomas and Derek had to be carried out and I thought they’d never make it. When we returned half an hour later, someone decided to pull the pin and throw it back.*

*I’d enclose a paragraph about myself but I don’t want to worry you. If I’m still alive and mobile when you come back, we’ll have a nice surprise.*

*Love,*

*Oh, that’s a toughie, huh?*

Beth wrote her own letter back to him and hastily attached the newspaper clip she had been reading a moment ago. It was from her tediously organized collection, mostly collected from dumpsters or even more commonly the side of the road. It read: “Votes are in. Citizen of the Year is Kayynar Laverĝe.” It was from less than a year ago.

Under that it read: “Long loved and admired by the residents of Buckitooey Falls, Kayynar defines a model citizen to the letter. She is always looking for opportunities to help her contemporaries and never rests until she has done so. This is a woman who smiles for absolutely no reason other than to brighten someone’s day, and picks up litter constantly with no thought of reward. Outspoken yet polite in her uncompromising belief of high moral standards during these sadly troubled times; Kayynar refuses to bend to the ways of the world. Congratulations to her on winning a week’s trip to the casino, which she has refused, a bundle of cash, which she has given to charity, and our undying respect, which she will never be able to dispose of.”

So what on Earth had made her act so shady at the symposium? It was a mystery, but Beth knew there was more to it than met the eye, and she sure as heck was going to figure it out. She had to make sure Christopher was on guard too.

Christopher read the letter, which was an account of the symposium, and the article. He frowned.

“Heads up!” yelled Derek. “Here they come!”

No one had to look up to know who. For the past week the Cougar Gang had done everything they could to make their lives stink even more than usual. Now they were here in full force, ready to end it.

Derek held them off with a piece of pipe while the others readied for war. Duff’s Stuff had financed them on this part, in return for a mention in the press release Derek was determined to make. They had everything under the sun, and they were going to use it.

First was a running chainsaw. Thomas flung it at random into the crowd and heard a satisfying shriek of agony. “Revenge,” he cackled, and followed it up with a volley of cordless power drills.

At the same time Tyler was throwing cans of soda which had been shaken for about three hours straight. They impacted on peoples’ heads, knocking them woozy senseless before a blinding, stinging spray hit them.

The Cougars were routed within five minutes. The boys cheered. “This calls for a round of soda,” said Matt.

“I think I used it up,” said Tyler.

“Well you could have aimed better,” said Derek, lifting his wet foot. “It’s all over the floor here – no wait – this is –”

They turned as a Cougar approached the mouth of the alley. He smiled cheerily at them and dropped a lighted match into the gasoline.

The flames rushed towards them. “In here!” yelled Christopher. He was pointing at the building next to them. It looked fireproof. It looked durable. It looked safe.

When they got inside, they realized that it did not fulfill that last requirement.

“Oh crap,” said Matt. They had interrupted a meeting of girls who were not thrilled to see them.

“Uh, hi,” said Christopher, who was the worst negotiator that ever lived and about to become the worst one that ever died, “We’re just trying to take refuge, see. We’re sorry if this is a private meeting or anything, but we’ll try to make this quick. Anybody got a phone we could use?”

He was met with twenty or so suspicious stares.

“Not that we want to intrude on your privacy and take your stuff,” he added hurriedly, “it’s just that there’s a really bad fire out there, and we’d really prefer not to be roasted alive like so many chestnuts. Only,” he added as an afterthought, “if it’s all right with you, since you appear to be the ones with a fireproof, durable, and… hopefully safe building. Just give us a phone for a sec, and we’ll be gone.”

The cold stares did not subside, but the girls discussed to each other in the corners of their eyes by means of a complex sign language about whether they should comply, or tell their visitors what they could do to themselves. Most seemed in favor of the second option.

“It’s in your own favor as much as ours,” he insisted, getting desperate, “because I don’t suppose you all want to be cooked either, do you?” What he didn’t know was that their lingerie was made of asbestos and they consequently couldn’t care less.

“Why didn’t you let *me* handle it?” hissed Derek. “*I* have a way with chicks.” The looks which crossed over their faces at being called *chicks* seemed affirmative of the opposite. “You know,” he hinted, “maybe we should find somewhere else to go. It’s hotter in here than it is outside.” If the looks on the girls’ faces had been cold, and then angry (which they were), then now they were filled with a very raw essence of primal ferocity and unchecked hatred that could have scared Satan into paying tithing (which they weren’t quite, but that was the closest comparison anyone has yet found).

Finally, one of them opened her mouth to say something, but at that moment another girl walked in from the next room. She took one look at the scruffy degenerates standing in the doorway, and her hand went to a side holster. The boys darted back out into the alley.

Instants later the five of them were running from an onslaught of bullets. Tyler, who was slowed down, caught one from same in the small of the back and went down.

The alley entrance was now blocked by the flames. “I vote we surrender,” said Christopher. “Hey, why didn’t we just do that in the first place?”

“They stopped shooting,” Matt pointed out, always the optimistic one.

“You! Civilians!” someone shouted. “Surrender, and this whole issue doesn’t have to get any more complicated!”

“Aren’t they civilians too?” Derek wondered aloud.

The girls were closing in like so many savage wolves, or rather like so many drunken Nazis armed with submachine guns, which are a good deal more frightening. Tyler, with his last fading ounce of strength, stuck his foot out and tripped the leader, who cracked her face open on the pavement. “Get… the… gun… and… tell Louise… ” Tyler fainted, with an unnecessary but dramatically enhancing rasp of agony.

Having her pretty little face mutilated did not stop this woman. She sprang to her feet and started shooting again.

But Christopher and Derek had already moved to grab the gun. Derek got hold of her wrist and tried to twist. The girl kicked him into a wall and shot at him, but Christopher chose that moment to leap at her and ruined her aim. She shook him off like a leaf, but then Derek was back with Thomas and Matt at his side. Together they wrested the gun from her grip just as she squeezed the trigger down and held it. Suddenly her figure was only lovely if you were into abstract art.

The other girls, seeing this could quickly escalate out of control, fired a staccato burst and fled. Thomas gasped and sank to his knees, a gaping hole in his sternum.

And speaking of fire, the flames were barely under control by firefighters, who had arrived when a nearby tenant had complained that her “bedroom is too warm.” The firefighters had rushed to her house, drenched her with a forty GPS hose, and had a hefty lawsuit filed against them before someone looked out the window and noticed the problem.

“There might be civilians in there,” one said.

“What, those vermin?” said another. “That’s not our concern. Just put out the freakin’ fire, will you?” In a rare example of karma, a stray bullet holed his oxygen tank. “Get the coppers!” he choked.

“Forget the coppers,” said the other, rather shaken by this turn of events, as he flattened himself against the wall. “We need the militia.” He pulled out his phone and punched an autodial to Buckitooey Falls militia HQ. The phone call went as follows:

“Hic! ’Allo?”

“This is firefighter 1138 calling from alley 297. There is some sort of a firefight going on here.”

“Well – hic! – thash *yer* deportment, fella.”

“Beg pardon?”

“A fuh-fuh-fire*fight*,” the man explained patiently, “ish fer fuh-fuh-fire*fighters*. Hic! Get the drift?”

“Sir, what I mean to say is, people are being shot here.”

“Well why didn’ chew shay so? Hic! Thash duh-duh-differen’.”

“Just get here right away, for the love of–”

“What kind of – hic! – peoplesh ish dey?”

“Beg pardon?”

“Y’know, nermal deh-dah-deeudes er them – hic! – shtreet ratsh.”

“We have no way of knowing, sir, but we’re assuming the latter.”

“The wha’?”

“The street rats, sir. This is an alley, after all.”

“Well, shon of a hic!-hic!-hic! Why’re ya callin’ at thish hour fer them flah-fah-fellersh! Ish only a coupla sixpacks left till dawn, y’know, I need a blah-bah-beauty shleep, hic! An’ I gotta hic!-hic!-hic!-hic!-hic!” *Thud.*

The firefighter almost took off his helmet to begin tearing his hair out in frustration but stopped when a droid came on.

“Thank you for calling your local friendly militia HQ,” it droned annoyingly. “I am sorry to inform you that due to circumstances within our control, our secretary is currently unavailable to take your call. Please tell the nature of your emergency, and I will inform the chief or transfer you to somewhere else that can better handle the nature of your situation. How may I help you?”

Actually no one ever heard it because the firefighter was busy yelling at it to shut up and get on with it. When he realized his voice was being recorded, however, he got on with it himself. “Hey, we got a little situation here,” he said. “There’s a little firefight –”

He stopped when he realized his voice wasn’t being recorded anymore, because someone, the chief in fact, had walked in and the droid was talking to him.

“Who was it, XKR?”

“Just some drunk lunatic cussing his head off. You don’t pay me enough for this job.”

“We don’t pay you anything for this job.”

“Ha, ha, how silly of me to forget.”

It is completely irrelevant, but may as well be pointed out, that while people have for centuries overestimated themselves in almost all fields of technology and science, robotics was an exception. They were still trying to invent artificial intelligence and didn’t quite realize they’d already done it.

“Why’s my secretary on the floor? He been assaulted?”

“No, just at the Budweiser again. I simply don’t understand why you humans enjoy abusing your bodies like that. You wouldn’t catch me filling my external input connection port with bubble gum, would you?”

“Call it a Zen thing. So, you got a number for that call?”

Firefighter 1138 suddenly realized that just because he wasn’t being recorded didn’t mean they couldn’t hear him, and since he could hear *them* that had darn well better be the case.

“Look,” he said, and explained the situation in five seconds.

“All right, we’re on our way,” said the chief. “Recommended course of action, XKR?”

“Suggest we charge the alley and kill everyone in our way, like always.”

“I really got to figure out who taught you sarcasm.”

“What’s sarcasm?”

When they arrived, they found that the girls had cleaned out. Tyler, of course, was playing a harp – or an accordion, depending on where he went – and Thomas was severely wounded.

“Dang it, we’re not the parameds!” yelled one, kicking Thomas’s limp form. When he saw the girl leader’s shredded corpse, however, with Christopher, Derek, and Matt kicking it as they shrieked curses to her ancestors and her family’s ancestors and her friends’ ancestors and some dead people who had nothing to do with her but wouldn’t be coming back to protest, he couldn’t help but smile. He admired spirit.

“Hey, looks like the date’s over,” he teased. “All righty, Red Group, help these civilians while me and Gold Group chase the refugees. They’re not getting away with this on *my* watch!”

Gold Group was the specialists. Leading the charge was a large golden retriever named Rusty, who sniffed them out and barked. Lorson Nells, who was sort of a reject for his geeky demeanor and irrepressible love of Star Trek but had become second-in-command of Gold Group for his combat experience and the fact that only he could understand Rusty’s barks, followed closely. “C’mon, they’ll get away!”

Rusty led them over the alley wall. Lorson found himself face-to-face with a small private plane preparing to take off. He ducked just in time to avoid being gunned down, but several others with slower reflexes were hit.

Lorson turned his duck into a roll, which put him in a position to blast at the aircraft’s vulnerable underbelly. Realizing at the last second that it would not be destroyed fast enough, he attached a tracking device instead.

“Fetch me a plane,” he ordered.

Gold Group fighter 11B was in the air before you could say, “Miles Standish.” Rusty piloted while Lorson Nells manned the guns. Along for the ride were Christopher, Derek and Matt.

“Look,” Matt protested for the fifteenth time, “we’re just a bunch of nobodies. We don’t even have last names. Why do we have to come along?”

“They may have had a reason to attack you,” Lorson explained patiently, also for the fifteenth time. “but not my group. It goes beyond the standard rights of such organizations, according to Regulation 62995328.4963. We need you to testify in court once we catch them.”

“‘Standard rights’ means nothing to those with resources, especially women,” Christopher protested. “And that Kayynar Laverĝe is some sort of tactical genius. She’ll weasel around this somehow.”

“Not around murder,” Lorson said confidently.

“Oh yeah?” Christopher shot back. “It’s a bit late to say that. How about that guy Dr. Glur–” Suddenly, the plane was rocked by gunfire. The other plane emerged from a cloud, charging them head-on.

“Dive, Rusty, *dive*!” Lorson screamed.

“Some tracking device,” Derek snapped.

“Well, if I hadn’t been busy discussing with you ignorant – they’re on our tail, Rusty! Loop!”

Rusty did all he could, but the other plane could not be shaken off. Warning lights began to blink all over the cockpit. “Gee, said Derek, “it might help if we were shooting back at them!”

“I must try for a diplomatic solution–”

“It’s too late for that, geek! Shoot them out of the sky before they do it to us!”

Reluctantly, Lorson swiveled the guns around and poured out everything they had. The other plane’s nose burst into flames.

“Yes! Let’s hear it for Regulation 45387690.216!” yelled Lorson. “According to that, no one may build a plane with more than 3.5-inch thick armoring for anything other than military purposes!”

“Of course,” explained Christopher, “there’s no reason that should stop them. As soon as Kayynar finds a loophole, they’ll update.”

“Oh, shut up, you whiny, paranoid freak,” snorted Derek. “You’ve lived in an alley your whole life. What do you know about politics!?”

“More than the politicians,” Christopher said in the most ominous voice he could manage, which was pretty pathetic and caused laughter to erupt all over the tiny cockpit.

“Uh, guys,” Lorson interrupted, “not to be a wet blanket, but the tracking device says they’re still up here.”

Derek snorted again. “And we just shot down a hallucination?”

“No, but – shoot!”

“I’m proud of you for controlling your language under pressure,” Derek mocked.

“No, I mean it! Shoot! Who’s got the freaking guns!?”

“You do, stupid!”

Lorson Nells flashed him a finger (and not the one way sign either) and poured everything he had into the plane which had come out of nowhere and was approaching them fast from the right. A few dents appeared in its surface and it sheared off.

“Uh-oh,” he said. Christopher started singing the “I Was Right” song and Lorson flashed him five more fingers. This time, however, they were curled into a fist, and came far too close for comfort.

Warning lights flashed and buzzers rang as the plane came back. Rusty tipped the nose up towards its underbelly to get a shot at the more vulnerable mechanics. But it was hopeless, because