

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Conor and Janine watched as the trashcan whizzed across the classroom like a hockey puck. It took out the first row of desks like a bowling ball, scooping them up and piling them into the corner where it originated. Zipping back to the front row, it stationed itself directly in front of Mr. Hickins' desk, equidistant from both walls. There it began its transformation.

The trashcan began rapidly spinning in place. As it gained speed it also gained size. The diameter increased five-fold, until the trashcan resembled a small wading pool roughly seven feet across. It lost approximately half of its height in the transformation as well, leaving the edges only six inches high. After resizing itself, the spinning decreased in intensity, finally ceasing completely. The vibrating whine also disappeared, replaced by a thrumming sound, almost like a human heartbeat.

Conor nodded to Janine and they both approached the third corridor. As with the other two portals, they advanced carefully at first, peering over the rim of the round barrier. They looked into the milky membrane, seeing the familiar texture that signified a gateway between worlds.

The corridor happily gazed up at the two travelers. They seemed healthy enough; certainly they could survive a journey even to the extreme edges of the Crossworlds. It undoubtedly would provide excellent transport for its two charges. It could do no less, for serving the passengers of the Crossworlds provided its existence. It enjoyed the prospect of carrying these two wherever they wished to travel. Hopefully, they might say a few good words on its behalf so that others like them would seek its services. The corridor smiled up at Conor and Janine.

Conor knelt and positioned his hand over the corridor membrane. He inserted his right index finger about an inch into the milky morass, and then removed it slowly. The membrane embraced his finger, holding on lovingly until Conor raised his hand to a certain height. It released Conor's finger, falling back into the distorted trashcan without making a sound. Conor stood and grasped Janine's hand.

"Ready?" he calmly asked his girlfriend, as if preparing to step onto a city bus together.

"Three more to go," answered Janine.

The two teenagers dove head first into the transformed corridor. Janine closed her eyes prior to impact, still not one hundred percent sure that she and Conor might not end up with concussions after cracking their heads on the floor. Her concerns proved false, however, because they passed through the membrane as if they had jumped into an ordinary swimming pool. She felt the familiar temperature extremes, this time starting at the crown of her head and racing down to her toes. She also sensed the soothing grip of Conor's hand. She felt reassured by his presence next to her. Without him, she thought to herself, none of these journeys would have ever taken place.

Conor sensed an exit from the corridor. Rather than a clean drop onto solid ground, however, he felt his face and arms being slapped lightly as something passed by them. He opened his eyes after they came to a stop and saw nothing but green in front of him. He inhaled deeply, enjoying the scent of pine floating into his nostrils. Then his eyes focused and he realized that he and Janine both lay within the thick branches of a large tree. They resided amongst many such trees, which formed a ring around the quad of a completely different high school.

With the exception of the trees, this high school held no other appealing attributes whatsoever. The stained buildings stood in a state of crumbling disrepair, with peeling paint and cracked windows. The quad itself seemed very bland and uninviting. No food court existed for the students. A few benches appeared here and there, locked to the ground with heavy, rusting chains. One bench lay on its side some thirty feet from its original location. The left armrest lay in small piles of rubble, obviously the victim of vandalism.

“Everything okay?” Conor asked while squeezing Janine’s hand.

Janine groped around the outside of the pocket on her cargo jacket with her free hand. Feeling the two keys safely inside, she answered Conor’s question. “We made it through, and I still have the first two keys. Where are we this time? I don’t recognize this place at all.”

“Neither do I,” answered Conor. “It’s a school of some sort, that’s all I can make out from here. Let’s climb down out of this tree and take a closer look.

Just as Conor and Janine stepped from their perches toward the lower branches, a harsh-sounding buzzer reverberated all over the school. The two teenagers covered their ears to muffle the raspy, irritating noise. After fifteen eternal seconds, the annoying sound ceased. Conor motioned to Janine and they both sat hidden within the tree’s branches. The thick covering of leaves shielded them from the eyes of anyone coming into the quad. They observed the scene quietly while hundreds of high school students poured into the central area.

One group of about a half dozen boys particularly interested Conor. Bigger than most of the other students, they stood at the entrance to the quad, laughing and making

fun of younger, smaller students. They yelled obscenities, stood directly in front of them in a challenging manner, knocked books out of their hands, and generally made life miserable for anyone who didn't stand up to them.

Conor and Janine watched this go on for quite a while. They noticed that one young pair of fourteen-year-old students drew the ire of the older boys fairly regularly. Most students walked by receiving a single taunt, but these two freshmen seemed to be the main target of the cruel behavior. Wherever they went, at least one of the older boys followed. Unfortunately for the two younger students, their fear held them back. They did nothing to discourage the behavior of the older boys.

Conor almost broke the tree branch in his hand. His knuckles turned milky white as he squeezed it tightly while witnessing the confrontations.

"Bullies," he said to no one in particular. "I hate bullies. They remind me of Denny. Those two kids haven't done anything to deserve that treatment, and those jerks make their lives miserable every day. This key will be a pleasure to obtain."

"Down boy," said Janine as she massaged Conor's neck. "It can't be that simple. Besides, if you go down there and take care of those boys, how will that stop them from bothering the younger students tomorrow, or next week, or any time in the future?"

Conor bristled while he accepted Janine's argument. "So what are we supposed to do, sit here in this tree and watch those students get tormented all day?"

As he completed his last sentence, Conor watched the bigger boys coming toward the tree in which he and Janine perched. He attempted to pick up a pinecone and, with a look of surprise, succeeded. He tested the weight in his hand and after the group of boys walked about twenty feet by the tree, he hurled the pinecone at the biggest of the

troublemakers. The pinecone hit the boy squarely in the back of the head, bounced straight up into the air and sent shards shooting out toward his companions.

The boy turned immediately, scanning the crowd of students for the culprit. Seeing no clues at all from the crowd, he ran under the tree that housed Conor and Janine. Only a dozen feet from Conor and looking directly at him, the boy screamed up into the tree.

“Whoever threw that pinecone better come down from those branches right now,” demanded the leader of the bullies. “You may think we can’t see you, but when we climb into that tree, you’ll be sorry.”

Conor looked down at the bully, smiling broadly. “He can’t see me,” he said, laughing out loud.

“Apparently, he can’t hear you either,” stated Janine. “HEY!” she shouted. “We’re right here! Can’t you see us?”

One of the bully’s friends came up and grabbed his arm. “C’mon Chuck, there’s nobody up there. Let’s go, we only have twenty more minutes until the end of lunch period.” The group of older boys headed away from the tree and toward the campus gates.

Conor looked around at Janine with a malevolent grin on his face. “They can’t see us or hear us,” he said, rubbing his hands together. “But we can obviously touch them and everything else around here.” Janine returned his smile, shaking her head slowly. She knew precisely what Conor had in mind.

The two teenagers climbed down out of the tree and waited by the school entrance for the group of bullies to return. They heard the foul buzzer sound again for a quarter of

a minute, signaling the end of the lunch period. Large groups of disinterested students began filing into the school buildings, accessing lockers or walking straight toward their respective classrooms. They hauled themselves into the drab hallways, talking to their friends and giving hugs and kisses to their significant others. As they filed into their rooms, the second buzzer, indicating late arrivals, echoed all around the school.

As the second buzzer finished its irritating drone, Conor tapped Janine on the shoulder. When she looked over at him, he pointed toward the school parking lot. The group of bullies approached the school from across the street, swaggering along as if enjoying a Sunday walk in the park. The buzzer obviously held no importance to these boys, who must have considered themselves above such petty regulations. As they crossed under the portico and entered the school grounds, Conor and Janine fell in behind them.

Conor felt no specific dislike for any of them. An hour ago he didn't even know they existed. He did have a problem, however, with their insolent attitude toward other students, especially smaller students who couldn't defend themselves. Take any one of these boys and put them in the gymnasium by themselves, and introduce a student who could, and would defend himself, and a remarkable transformation would occur. Bullies, it had been Conor's experience, only pick on people who don't hit back, and only while they're acting in concert with other bullies. They become understandably quiet upon finding themselves alone. Once someone stops cowering to them, or lets them know that a confrontation is likely should they continue their present course, bullies quickly move on to a less dangerous target. But Conor did not expect the younger students to stand up to these boys. They felt the intimidation too strongly. The size and the number of bullies

made the difference in this scenario. Conor thought of the younger students, and then he thought of what happened to his friend Beau. He tasted the bile rising in his throat as his anger began to boil.

He and Janine followed the group of bullies into the building they entered. Once inside the hallway, he started in on them. He pushed one boy's shoulder, slamming him into his friend. The angry boy pushed back hard, yelling at his companion. The first boy screamed his protests while slamming into the wall. A teacher poked his head out from a classroom and admonished the boys for their tardiness. The group of bullies ran down the hallway and escaped into another building. Once safely inside, two of the bullies walked into a classroom and took their seats. Conor and Janine followed them inside.

The teacher immediately singled out the two boys as they entered the classroom and sat down. After dishing out detention slips, the teacher returned to the front of the class and continued with her lesson. The two boys smirked at each other while slouching in their chairs. They paid no attention to what the teacher wrote on the board or to anything she said. They looked out the window, they looked at each other, and they looked around the room to see if anyone cared to visually challenge them.

Conor left his position against the wall at the back of the classroom and moved up behind one of the bullies. He placed his hand squarely on the boy's binder and textbook and pushed them off of his desk. The two items clattered the floor, scattering things in every direction. Immediately the entire class turned their attention toward the boy. Embarrassed, the boy scrambled to pick up his possessions. As he leaned over, Conor gave him a slight shove, sending him rolling forward out of his desk. By the time the teacher turned around, the bully was squatting in the aisle on his hands and knees, his

papers, book and binder strewn all over the floor in front of him. The rest of the students snickered quietly at their desks.

“Mr. Curran!” challenged the teacher impatiently. “First you arrive late to class, and now you completely disrupt the proceedings. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Nothing,” returned the confused boy. “I’m not sure what happened.”

“See that you regain control of yourself immediately!” replied the teacher.

As this exchange took place, Conor quietly slid the bully’s desk back about eighteen inches from its previous position. With the students’ attention riveted on the teacher-student confrontation, no one in the classroom noticed Conor’s interior decorating. No one, that is, except Janine, who stood in the back of the room with her face in her hands. Her raucous laughter echoed up and down the hallway as she watched Conor’s little scheme take shape.

Sure enough, when the bully grabbed his possessions from the floor, he failed to look around as he leaned back to sit down at his desk. His rear end grazed the desktop portion of his chair, bouncing off of the front lip of the seat. The desk flew away from him, loudly crashing into two desks to his right. The boy’s momentum carried him back into the desk immediately behind him. He cracked his head on the steel framework of the desk and lay there stunned.

The room exploded with laughter. Now anonymous amidst the collective group, every student in the classroom laughed out loud at the bully’s mishap. No one even got up to assist the boy, for they all held memories of the taunts they received at the hands of him and his friends.

The teacher had seen enough. “Mr. Curran!” she cried out. “Will you please take your detention slip to the Vice Principal’s office and begin your session now?!”

The bully’s friend stood and walked over to give aid to his companion, all the while looking around the classroom for any clues regarding the culprit. Just as he took his last steps toward his friend, Janine stuck her foot in between his legs, tripping him up. The boy went sprawling into his friend, landing in a heap and scattering the boy’s possessions again. The classroom roared with renewed glee as the teacher turned from her position at the front of the room.

“And take your hoodlum friend with you!” she bellowed loudly.

Conor and Janine ran out of the room holding their aching stomachs. They stopped in the hallway long enough to enjoy their fit of laughter, and then proceeded to check the other classrooms. When they spotted one of the other bullies in a room down the hall, they entered the room and stationed themselves against the back wall.

This classroom obviously housed the main collection of art and media supplies for the campus. Conor and Janine looked around and saw paint, clay, glue, and paper of all sorts located in different parts of the room. Innumerable supplies lay on tables or rested on shelves in cabinets that stood against three walls of the room. The students stood languidly around the tables, half listening to the art instructor’s lesson for the day. All except for the one boy who belonged to the group of bullies; he sat perched on one of the tables, fiddling with his car keys.

“Now, class,” continued the instructor, “I want you to be especially careful today as we work on building the foundations for our ornaments. The glue you will be dipping your paper into contains elements that make an extremely powerful bond. Working

without your protective gloves might leave an irritating coating on your hands for weeks. And may the creators help you if you make the mistake of dripping some in your hair. No poisonous elements exist in the glue, so we need not worry about that. Just be mindful of your precautions and we'll all get through this day without incident. You may now begin."

Conor, grinning from ear to ear, looked at his girlfriend. Janine swore she saw the pride of the evil ones dancing in Conor's eyes.

The students worked diligently on their projects, carefully draping layer after layer of sticky paper around the foundations. The boy who belonged to the group of bullies did nothing to contribute to the class or to his project. He did, however, seem smart enough to heed the teacher's instructions. He doodled in the glue with one finger of his glove. He squashed up balls of paper and rolled them around in the sticky goo, stacking them together until they fell down and splattered glue all over the table.

"And what in creation has become of your foundation, may I ask?" queried the art teacher from behind the boy. "Please clean your table and place the materials in their appropriate storage locations. Then wash your hands and come see me for your detention slip. If you refuse to participate with the other students, then you may participate in the Vice Principal's activities in his office."

The bully glared at the teacher, defiantly obeying his orders. *After all*, he thought to himself, *that's what he wanted all along. Stupid art class anyway.* He gave a half hearty attempt at wiping up the residual glue on his table. Throwing the rag away, he grabbed the plastic rectangular box containing the glue in one hand and picked up the lid in the other hand. Even though countless warnings had been issued by the art teacher

regarding fastening the glue box lids tightly, the bully simply placed the lid on top of the box and walked over to the cabinet.

Conor fell in behind him, following him over to the cabinet located at the rear of the classroom. He watched the bully open the doors to the closet, slamming them against the outer walls, of course, and then reach for an open space on one of the higher shelves. *Kick me out of class, will you*, he thought to himself, *let's see what happens to the next student who uses this glue box*. After placing the box on the shelf, he turned to walk away.

Conor reached around the boy's shoulder and slid the box of glue away from the shelf. At the precise moment, he tipped the box so the lid slipped off, providing maximum spillage. The box of glue hit the bully square in the back of his head, sending a shower of sticky white cream cascading over the boy's ears and shoulders. A large portion penetrated the boy's shirt collar, sending a cupful down the boy's naked back. The glue box crashed to the floor so loudly that everybody stopped working on their projects and turned around.

As in the first room, the sight of the bully's predicament created an eruption of raucous laughter. Every student laughed uproariously, primarily due to the comedic scene in front of them, but also because of who this boy was. Every one of them had suffered indignities because of this boy and his friends, and they enjoyed seeing one of them publicly humiliated for once.

The bully stared angrily at the students, looking for someone to blame. While he pondered his next move, Janine stood on a side table undoing the twist-tie on an immense bag of confetti. The bag sat on top of the cabinet where the unfortunate boy had placed

his glue box. Just as the bully started to shout at his classmates for laughing at him, Janine removed the twist-tie and let the bag drop to the floor.

The impact from the eight-foot drop released a wall of confetti that consumed the bully from head to toe. As the remaining chips of paper filtered down to the ground, a dazed and very colorful boy stood in the rear of classroom, totally mute. For the second time in minutes, the students roared with laughter. Even the art teacher, concerned about the boy though he might have been, bent over and belly laughed with the rest of his students. Conor and Janine guffawed right along with them.

Finally worn out, the art teacher escorted the boy down to the nurse's office. With every classroom they passed, a new wave of laughter rolled down the hallway back to the art class. Conor and Janine walked out of the classroom in search of the last of the bullies.

In the next building they found the last three boys in a large theater-style classroom. They walked into the room and examined the scene. Around fifty-five or sixty students encircled a piano in the middle of the room. They sat in folding chairs clutching various musical instruments. Seated at the piano, the music instructor fingered a few notes while speaking softly to the students. The leader of the bullies and his two friends sat at the perimeter of the group. Although they looked disinterested, they held their horns in their laps and faced the music instructor. Apparently, thought Conor, this instructor handled her class with a firm hand.

“Now class,” she continued, “today we will attempt a new sheet of music that will present a challenge to many of you. Up to this point in the semester, all of you have performed admirably in harmony with each other. Today we will begin learning to play

in smaller groups. Our individual musical scores will, after much practice, complement each of the other scores. Together, we will produce a concert-quality piece that even your parents might appreciate during the holiday recital.”

Conor listened to the music instructor continue her introduction. She handed out sheet music to all of the students, including Chuck and his two buddies. As soon as Chuck took his music from the instructor, Conor smiled broadly as an idea danced inside his head. He looked over at Janine, communicating his intentions.

Janine couldn't believe the shenanigans Conor had planned for this room. Before this surprising journey, she never dreamt Conor could be so mischievous. She had to admit, however, that this might be his shining moment.

The classroom remained extremely quiet while the music instructor delivered her final instructions. The students sat silently, paying attention to her every word. It reminded Janine of a great music hall with a prominent orchestra preparing to deliver an opening movement.

A strong, low tuba blast heralded from the rear of the classroom. The music instructor had never in her life heard a more sickening sound. It seemed as though someone had expelled as much air as they could into the tuba's mouthpiece, with no regard to pitch or tone. Every student in the class turned around to find the offender.

“Mr. Simmons,” stated the music instructor as she stood to collect the full view of the offender. “While you and your two friends might find amusement in that little prank, I assure you the other students do not. I certainly find it distasteful in a cultural environment such as this. Are we understood, Mr. Simmons?”

Chuck the bully simply sat with his mouth wide open, unable to respond. He still wanted to know for his own sake how the tuba managed to make a sound while laying in his lap. He looked at his two friends, who returned his look with befuddled stares of their own.

Conor and Janine stood right behind the three boys, waiting for their next cue. They received it as soon as the music instructor began speaking again.

“As I alluded to before the interruption,” she continued, “our purpose here...”

They crouched down and blew into the horns held by Chuck’s two buddies. Half-blowing and half-laughing, they still managed to manufacture a considerable racket.

Cut off in mid sentence, the music instructor sat on her piano bench listening to the screech of a clarinet and the strangled blare of a French horn reverberating around her classroom. Although lasting only a second or two, the violent disruption grated on her nerves. She slowly stood and turned to see the two boys to the left and right of Chuck sitting with their hands in their laps. Their nervous smiles and sweaty foreheads instantly gave them away.

“What in the name of Mozart is going on here?” she asked forcefully. The music instructor did not normally yell at her students. In almost all cases, a stern rebuke in a calm but effective voice served just as well. However, she found herself struggling to keep her composure this day. “Am I to believe that the sole purpose of your joining us today is to disrupt the entire class?”

The boys had no answer. They sat with their mouths hanging wide open, trying to find some explanation to deliver to their teacher. After digesting her glaring eyes for a few seconds, they lowered their gaze and stared at their shoes.

“Please, boys,” the music instructor said sternly. “You must try to control yourselves. You’ll get your chance to play your instruments soon enough.” Turning back to her piano, the music instructor addressed her students again. “This is the cadence for the first movement.”

As soon as she began addressing the keys on her piano, a low, repeated blast emerged from the back of the room. The tuba emitted a sound almost exactly like a farting noise. It sounded like when Conor or one of his friends placed their palm in the armpit and flapped their arm. The low, rash notes kept repeating until the music instructor jumped up from the piano bench.

“Mr. Simmons!” she screamed. Leaving all decorum aside, she bellowed at the three boys in the back of the room.

The clarinet and the French horn answered her in unison. They too sounded like someone trying to control a bad case of gas.

The class finally fell apart. They all started to laugh at the boys in the back of the room. Soon the tuba joined in again and the room became a symphony of laughing students, a farting brass section, and a screaming music instructor.

“I want the three of you up front right now,” she yelled angrily. “Since you insist on disrupting the class, I will give you two choices. You may spend the rest of the class serenading us or you can find your way to the Vice Principal’s office with detention slips. I won’t have any more distractions.”

Chuck and his two friends numbly accepted their slips. They left their instruments on the floor and turned toward the door. As they walked away from their seats, they heard

a quiet chirp from the clarinet, and a low accompanying blast from the tuba. They jumped a little and hurried out the door.

“OUT!” yelled the music instructor one more time.

The three boys exited the music building and found their companions lounging around outside. One had a large lump in the back of his head, another looked like a reject from a bad movie, and all of them nursed sour moods. This had certainly been one bizarre day for all of them.

“Somebody’s behind all this stuff,” said Chuck. “I don’t know what happened in our music class just now, but we sure as heck didn’t make all that noise.”

“Someone tipped the cupboard in art class,” chimed in the unfortunate boy, still picking gooey chips of paper out of his hair. “I’ve been in and out of those cupboards all semester, and nothing like that ever happened before.”

“Someone pulled my chair out from under me,” said a third boy. “I almost broke my neck and everyone in the class just laughed their heads off.”

The rancid buzzer sounded across the campus for the final time. Because it signaled the end of the day’s classes, it was the only buzzer the students enjoyed hearing. The doors in every building slammed open simultaneously as hundreds of students happily left the school grounds.

“Someone’s going to pay,” said Chuck as he scanned the crowds pouring into the quad area, “and there’s the someone I’m talking about.” Chuck stepped off the stairs and walked briskly through the quad. His five buddies trailed along in his wake. As they passed through the quad and rounded a corner by one of the science buildings, Chuck’s

friends saw the intended victims. They all smiled together as they closed in on the younger, smaller students.

Conor and Janine watched from a classroom window as the six bullies surrounded the two freshman students. Standing in the middle of a group of larger, stronger boys, the two younger students stared straight ahead and waited for the worst to come their way. The six boys taunted them, grabbing the sweaters from their shoulders and slapping their books from their hands. One of the younger students started to shake as his eyes welled up with tears.

“Look,” said Chuck in a mocking voice. “The little baby’s going to cry.”

“Leave us alone!” shouted the shaking boy’s friend. “Just go away and leave us alone!”

The order from the younger student sent a shock of electricity through Conor’s entire body. He sensed a feeling of *déjà vu* as he remembered demanding the same thing of Denny Burton.

“These jerks just never learn,” said Conor as he turned away from the window. He grabbed Janine’s hand and pulled her along behind him. Running as fast as they could, Conor and Janine found themselves outside and next to the circle of bullies in only a few seconds.

A large crowd of students had gathered around the confrontation. Chuck seemed determined to extract his pound of flesh from the younger students. They had all been humiliated today, and he and his buddies planned to rebuild their reputations at the expense of these two innocent boys. When one of the bullies pushed the crying student down to the ground, Conor had seen enough.

“Whatever happens,” he said to Janine, “stay right here next to this building. I’m sure I’ll be able to come back to you, but just in case, I want to know where to find you.”

Janine grabbed his hand and squeezed it, hard. “Conor,” she demanded, “I told you I don’t want to be left alone. What are you planning to do?”

“I’m going to make sure that these two students never get bothered again,” replied Conor. “I promise you’ll be fine. Just stay here, okay?”

“Okay,” Janine said reluctantly.

Conor placed his hands across his chest and closed his eyes. He focused on his breathing and then called forth an image of the Lady of the Light. He thought back to the time she appeared to him over two years ago. Before finally appearing in corporeal form, the Lady floated in his room in a cloak of pure light. Her form existed, but only as light and energy. In this state the Lady could travel anywhere, assume any form, become invisible, or strike out with immense power. Conor focused on the vision of the Lady of the Light’s energy balance. He visualized the power of the Light entering his body and consuming him completely. He felt the tingling sensation reach the tips of his toes and fingers. Even his hair seemed to dance on the top of his head. He slowly opened his eyes and took in the scene around him.

Janine watched in fascination as Conor altered his form right before her eyes. Where a young man once stood next to her on these strange school grounds, a being of Light now floated softly above the grass by her side. She dared not speak to the apparition, and in all honesty she felt terribly afraid of it. The being of Light was Conor, but at the same time it wasn’t Conor. She silently held her breath and watched as he walked through the crowd and penetrated the circle of bullies. Without hesitating, he

approached the young student who had defied Chuck and his buddies. With a final surging step, Conor invaded the student's skin, disappearing inside of his body.

"I said leave us alone, you idiots." The remark came from the younger student just as one of the bullies moved to push his friend down again. The bigger boy immediately turned to confront the other student, but something about him caused the bully to hesitate. The younger student's eyes burned with a strange light, and he seemed suddenly very sure of himself. The bully held those eyes but did not advance another step.

"C'mon, knock 'em both down," urged Chuck. "What the heck are you waiting for?"

By now a group of almost two hundred students clamored around the scene, trying to get a closer look. The two younger students and the six boys provided a spectacle for their entertainment. The outcome seemed certain, but nevertheless, no one wanted to miss an event of this magnitude at their school.

Chuck's friend appeared to be caught in a tough spot. He couldn't back away from the younger student without looking bad, but at the same time, the look in the student's eyes unnerved him. Unable to make a decision, he stood like a statue waiting for someone to bail him out.

"C'mon!" Chuck said impatiently. "Knock the kid down so we can get on with it."

The younger student turned his attention to Chuck. "Why don't you knock me down? What's the matter, you afraid?"

When the crowd of students watching the confrontation heard this remark, they whooped and cat called in unison. The roar from the crowd made Chuck and his friends all the more determined. Chuck would not allow another humiliation this day.

“You little jerk,” he said as he walked forward, preparing to kick the younger student in the ribs. He grimaced with the effort he put into the attempt. This kid was going to pay for everything that happened to them today.

Conor watched through the eyes of the younger student as the bigger boy advanced on him. With his years of training, it seemed so simple to anticipate the attack. He saw the leg coming forward with plenty of time to defend and counter.

The younger student stepped inside the bigger boy’s right leg as the kick came toward him. Grabbing the leg at the kneecap, he stepped forward, planting himself right beside Chuck’s left foot. He leaned into the right leg while scooping the grounded foot out from under Chuck.

The bigger boy crashed down with a wicked “whump,” sending dirt and debris flying everywhere. The crowd whooped again, this time with greater enthusiasm. They had never seen anyone stand up to this group of bullies before, much less make them look bad in front of the whole school.

In the next few seconds, all hell broke loose. After throwing down the bigger boy, the young student ran over to his friend. Yanking him up by the straps of his backpack, he shoved him into the waiting crowd. The large group of onlookers accepted him into their protection, allowing the smaller student to turn and face his foes.

Conor turned to assess his situation. Chuck lay on the ground screaming orders to his friends. The other five boys spread out, closing off any avenue of escape. After what

happened to their leader, they meant to deliver a sound beating to this little brat. They needed to restore their place in the school's pecking order. If they failed to show the rest of these students who ran the school, their position here would be greatly reduced. Conor knew this better than anyone. He also knew that when confronted by an overwhelming force, the best strategy was to attack. He thought for a moment of his friend Beau, lying in a hospital bed back home, and he knew exactly what he had to do.

The younger student waited until all five boys had positioned themselves directly in front of him. Before they could decide who would deliver the first blow, he stepped toward the middle boy and lashed out with his right leg. The kick caught the bigger boy square in the crotch, sending him to the ground like a sack of beans. Dropping his right foot and then planting his left with the toes opposite his next opponent, the young student delivered a stinging sidekick to the knee of the boy to his right. The kneecap buckled and the bully hit the ground screaming and writhing in pain. The throng of students screamed their delight in a rousing cheer.

Two down, three to go, thought Conor.

He felt a hard punch hit him flush on his right cheek. He hit the ground but rolled away quickly, avoiding the kicks of the bigger boys. He sprang to his feet and shook his head to clear his mind. He looked at his opponents, trying to comprehend a strategy for fighting four larger opponents at once. Chuck had brushed himself off and now stood at the head of the remaining pack of bullies.

Conor looked across the circle at his opponents. He may have let his anger get the better of him this time. These boys were tough, and not to be fooled with. He had angered and embarrassed them, and now he showed them that the younger student could defend

himself. They wouldn't fall for any more surprise moves. They meant to beat him badly, and Conor began to feel as though they just might accomplish their goal.

"Remember, young Champion," called a voice from deep within his mind.

"Sometimes brute force balanced with speed overcomes a superior opponent."

"Yes, young one," added a second voice. "The combination of speed and cunning presents an outstanding equalizer."

Conor didn't have the time to comprehend who spoke to him, although he felt a sensational charge rush through his body upon hearing the voices. Heeding their wisdom, he sprang into action.

The younger student rushed headlong into the four boys as they came toward him. At the last second, he dove under the legs of the boy on the left. After scooting under his legs, he rolled and stood positioned to battle only one boy instead of four. He immediately lashed out at the bully, bringing a roundhouse kick right up to the boy's face. He snapped off the kick, dislocating the bully's jaw in one strike. Assuming a fighting stance with the completion of his kick, he waited for the next bully to attack. The bigger boy rushed in clumsily, allowing for an easy foot sweep. Conor let him reach out to grab him, and then turned completely around while dragging his foot under the boy's legs. The larger bully fell down and hit his head hard on the ground. He lay there unmoving but not seriously hurt.

As the crowd roared their encouragement to the smaller combatant, Chuck's last remaining friend grabbed his arms and locked them behind his back. The bigger boy stood with his legs positioned to deflect any attack coming from below. The young

student had fought bravely, but now they had him trapped, and Chuck came forward with hate burning in his eyes.

“Pretty good, kid,” said Chuck as he surveyed the scene. “Pretty good. You took down four of my friends, but now you’re going to pay the price.” He slapped the young student across the face, bringing a trickle of blood up over his lip.

“Patience now, my young apprentice,” called a new but familiar voice in Conor’s mind. “Wait and see what your bravery earns you.”

Chuck hit the smaller student in the gut twice. The student groaned but held his place. Just as the bigger boy prepared to strike again, a blur flashed out of the crowd, coming directly in Chuck’s direction.

“LEAVE HIM ALONE!” the young student’s friend shouted as he hit Chuck broadside running at full speed.

The leader of the bullies fell down into the dirt again, this time with another student’s arms wrapped around his neck. Try as he might, he couldn’t shake the smaller student off of him. He rolled on top of him, punched him in the head, and tried to scratch at him, but nothing could force the student to release his grip.

Chuck’s friend found himself consumed by the scene unfolding in front of him. He relaxed his grip on his opponent’s arms, giving Conor ample time to finish the contest.

He stamped down as hard as he could on the bigger boy’s right foot. At the next instant, he rolled his body down and away from the bully, releasing himself from the grip on his arms. To the bigger boy’s credit, he didn’t hesitate at all, but instead threw a wild right-handed punch at Conor’s head. The punch never came close to its target. Conor

stepped outside the punch, grabbed the bigger boy's right hand, and twisted it around his back. With his free hand he applied intense pressure to a point on the boy's neck just below the jaw line. The bully dropped to his knees and fell down at the smaller student's feet.

Now for the last one, thought Conor as he turned to look at Chuck and the young student's friend. Together, the two students quickly subdued the bigger boy. The crowd of onlookers, now nearing four hundred strong, roared its approval as they sensed victory for the two freshman students.

While the second student wanted to kick Chuck in the face over and over again, Conor held his arms over the bigger boy's head to prevent any damage. "We're not like them," he said. He turned his attention to Chuck, now spitting dirt and leaves from his mouth. "I'm warning you and all of your friends for the last time. LEAVE US ALONE! From now on just LEAVE US ALONE!"

The young student lifted himself up from Chuck's back, allowing the bigger boy to stand on his own. The two students backed away a couple of steps and let Chuck gather up his friends and leave. The six bullies ran through the massive crowd of students, withstanding a chorus of catcalls and verbal challenges from the large throng. Things at this school would be very different for these boys from now on.

Conor dismissed himself from his service, floating out of the younger student's body. After stepping a few paces away, he watched as the first student collapsed in his friend's arms. Hurt, but not badly, he looked up as dozens of other students came to his aid. The multitude that witnessed the contest remained to care for their brave comrade. They laid him out flat on his back and tended to his wounds. They sat his friend down

next to him and saw to his needs as well. The two young students had fought bravely in front of the rest of their friends; they would now care for them until they felt better. A comment floated by, informing them that the school nurse would be along shortly.

Conor stepped away from the crowd and found Janine positioned precisely where he asked her to stand. He moved across the grass and floated over next to her, looking in her eyes the entire time. Smiling at her, he thought deeply about the Lady of the Light.

Janine watched as Conor transformed himself from a being of Light into a young man again. The process moved along quickly, with the solid light dissolving into a shower of silver sparkles. The blinking points of light disappeared one by one, leaving behind a normal-looking, fourteen-year-old high school freshman. As the final light flickered out, Conor winked at Janine and turned his head. A nice-sized bruise colored his right cheek.

“Conor,” said Janine as she examined his cheek, “in that state, how could you be hurt like that? As a being of Light, shouldn’t you have been immune to any type of injury?” She reached out to touch the bruise and check the cheekbone for damage. As she brought her hand up to his right cheek, something rather bizarre began to occur within the bruise. It seemed to be changing shape right before her eyes.

“Conor, wait,” she told him. “Hold still. Don’t move a muscle.” She placed her hands on his neck and jaw, holding his head in one place. She watched the bruise change form completely, and then smiled broadly as the finished form glistened with a ruby red luminescence. Withdrawing her hand from Conor’s jaw, she placed it directly under his cheek. As soon as her hand maintained the proper position, a red key dropped from

Conor's cheek into Janine's hand. The skin on Conor's face now looked as though nothing had touched it at all.

"Look," she said, holding the key out in front of Conor.

"The third key," said Conor, his eyes wide open. "That came out of the bruise?"

"It reformed itself *from* the bruise," answered Janine. "Can you believe it?"

"I stopped having doubts about the Crossworlds a long time ago, Janine, answered Conor. "Just wait until you meet one of the Champions. You'll never question anything you see again, either."

"What makes you think I'll meet them?" asked Janine as she placed the third key into the zippered pocket of her cargo jacket.

"Something happened during the scuffle with Chuck and the other bullies," replied Conor. "I started to doubt whether I'd be able to pull it off, you know, whether I could help this student overcome all those boys. Suddenly I heard voices calling out to me, voices of the Crossworlds Champions. They coached me and gave me encouragement."

Conor stared quietly at the school nurse as she tended to the two freshman students. He seemed to be far away, thinking about some past memory. Janine listened as he spoke again.

"A few moments later I heard a third voice," he continued, "one that convinced me that the Crossworlds Champions were speaking to me. Purugama contacted me the third time, I'm certain of it. I could never forget the sound of his voice. I'm pretty sure that Ajur and Eha penetrated my mind before Purugama."

Janine cocked her head while speaking to Conor. "Ajur, Eha, Purugama?"

“The names of three of the Champions of the Crossworlds,” replied Conor. Ajur, an immense and powerful jaguar, Eha, a giant cheetah, and Purugama, a huge flying cougar who I’ve known for almost five years. They all possess magical powers, and they can communicate with us. You’ll never meet a more fascinating group if you lived to be five hundred years old.”

“They may still be locked in the cage of fire,” continued Conor, “but some force allowed them to communicate with me while I inhabited that student’s body. If they can speak to me, then the cage could be weakening, and we might be able to free them. If we find a way, Janine, our safety in this altered world will be greatly enhanced.”

“It must be the keys,” stated Janine firmly. “As we collect each key, the evil ones’ hold over the Crossworlds weakens and their prisons become harder to control. That’s all we have to do, Conor, if we find the other two keys and complete the set, I’m sure the cage of fire will disintegrate and your friends will be freed.”

“I hope you’re right, Janine,” replied Conor. “I have a feeling the creators sense the collection of the keys as well. They must be marshaling their strengths right now in anticipation of our collection of the fourth and fifth keys. I just hope we get to witness the Circle of Evil being banished from the Crossworlds forever.”

After watching the school nurse and about twenty others transport the two freshman students into the administration building, Conor and Janine walked back to the central quad area. Life had returned to normal around the campus. With the event concluded, the school looked the same as it did every day. A few students remained behind, languishing around the quad, talking animatedly about the way “those two kids

stood up to Chuck and his buddies.” A light wind blew through the area, sending leaves and small pieces of discarded paper sliding along the cracked concrete.

“So how do we get back to Mr. Hikkins’ classroom?” asked Janine as she looked around the quad for anything that looked remotely supernatural.

Conor watched the leaves while they whirled around in the wind. They appeared to engage in a peculiar dance, almost as if choreographed by some magical force. He stood there silently, patiently waiting for some sort of pattern to emerge.

Then he saw it as the leaves separated from the small shreds of paper. Running along the ground toward the trees, they seemed to join together like a colony of ants in search of food. Conor followed the course of the leaves and looked up toward their destination. They moved in the direction of the same trees he and Janine had emerged from after traveling through the corridor from Mr. Hikkins’ classroom. Conor blinked his eyes a few times to be certain of what he saw in front of him.

“Mind of the creators,” he said in a state of awe. “The *fingers of the forest!*”

Before Janine even realized he was gone, Conor ran across the quad toward the welcoming branches. He seemed to be in a state of euphoria, as if he suddenly found a group of old friends and couldn’t wait to embrace them. She quickly followed, trying her best to catch up with him. With Conor’s supernatural speed, however, she could not close the distance between them. In fact, Conor sped away from her at such a rapid pace, she thought she might lose track of him at any second.

Conor stopped running and watched the crackling leaves form a whirling tunnel in front of the *fingers of the forest*. One section of a large pine tree leaned over, straining to drop a welcoming hand of fronds at the far end of the leafy tunnel. *So this is our way out,*

he thought, *the fingers of the forest will help us travel back to Mr. Hikkins' room*. He smiled broadly and turned to find Janine.

She almost clipped him on the nose as she ran up behind him at a full gallop. She planned to clap him on the back to remind him of his companion here in this strange world, and when he turned around, her arm swing almost carried her hand into his face. Janine wanted to dress him down again for leaving her alone. Once she stood next to him and saw what lay before them, however, she could only speak softly while her eyes tried to comprehend the scene.

“What in the name of...?” she asked, awestruck.

He returned his gaze to the funnel of leaves and the welcoming branches. “These trees possess magical powers,” he answered. “They saved my life during my adventure with Purugama. They came here to escort us back to Mr. Hikkins' classroom. The *fingers of the forest* live and breathe just as you and I do, Janine. They provide protection and cover for friends of the Crossworlds Champions. With their assistance, I distracted a horrible monster long enough for Purugama to free himself and destroy him.”

Conor pointed to the fern tree presenting a welcoming hand at the end of the whirling tunnel of leaves. “See how the one tree bends over to help us climb up into the branches? That's exactly what happened four years ago when Purugama sent me away to hide from his evil foe. I climbed up into the leafy branches and the *fingers of the forest* kept me invisible until I could surprise Drazian and attack him. I've never been more frightened in my life. The day I fell from that branch and landed on the shoulders of that horrible beast I thought I would pass out from fear.”

“Just like when the young student came to his friend’s aid today, right?” asked Janine. “Even though you were terrified, you still faced extreme peril to help your friend.”

“Exactly the same,” replied Conor. “When you know you might be badly hurt, jumping into a scuffle like that takes a lot of guts.” Conor looked around the quad one more time. He whispered a silent goodbye to the two young students and to Chuck and his group of bullies. He sincerely hoped they might all gain something positive from their experience today.