

Cleff by Joey Muller

1. Origins

Tim Clef was a nice kid, a smart kid, but not too smart. He was twenty years old and he had managed an internship – security systems at the New York National Museum. No, not the Metropolitan or the Museum of Natural History, the New York National Museum. It was new.

Hence why they were willing to intern drop-out computer science students to handle some of the most important data on the most important items in the museum – the museum staffers were inexperienced. And despite being new, the museum had a lot of money and had purchased a large number of high value items. I mean, you do need a lot of money to set up another large scale museum in New York, which the government somehow got around to providing money for.

But why a whole new museum? An archaeological dig in Greece turned up a hidden building, four thousand years old, just buried under sand. It was a display museum and archive from the ancient world, and there was just so much in it that it warranted a new building in the New World.

Of course, the museum curator wanted the museum to appeal to more people than just people interested in ancient history, so he gave the museum a generic title and used all the grant money to buy more modern items from other museums so that his museum would be the ultimate

museum...and this meant skimping in a bunch of important things, like security, and hiring, and maintenance, and janitors. The interns did all that. All three of them.

It was all pretty daunting for Time, who had come up with the initial schedule. It required one intern to be at the museum at all times, which meant eight hour shifts everyday, and it also meant he was pretty much only working alone, since the shifts didn't overlap. Well, unless he worked overtime into the other shifts because there was a giant mess left by a two-year-old, or some mischievous teenager had ridden the dinosaur bones and fractured the whole structure.

He liked the night shifts the best. After cleaning up the museum (which took hours, and what Tim called "clean" was dubious) he got to sit in a chair and actually do what he was hired to do: work on security.

Currently, all the valuable items were under lock and key in the vault storage room, with each item getting its own tiny vault. Tim had been given the details on what combination unlocks what vault, (which was kept in a locked file cabinet that he had the keys to) but not what was inside. Tim's job was to open each vault, record what was inside to an in-house database, then encrypt the data so only authorized personnel could find out what item was where and how to get it out of its vault.

It could only be expected that Tim's database would actually have a lot of security problems – after all, he was smart, but he was also a drop-out college student.

“The archaeological dig yielded plenty of valuable items,” the news anchorman informed from the TV, “But the most valuable thing uncovered was a four thousand year old thermos, with scientific equations written on the sides. Reliable sources say that Newton's gravity equation, Einstein's famous “ $E=mc^2$ ” energy equation, and many other formulas were inscribed into their sides. The full inscription has not been officially reported but if this is not a hoax, scientists around the world are very interested in what else is on the thermos, and who discovered the equations thousands of years before modern society learned of them. It is valued at five billion dollars and is deep in the vaults of the New York National Museum, under its prestigious security.”

A man – an ugly, bald headed man in his thirties – stared at the screen, taking in the anchorman's every word. *Five billion dollars, just waiting to be stolen*, he thought. The man touched his large, ugly scar running down his right cheek and whispered one word softly to himself: “Redemption.”

This man had a strange name, but a fitting one: Very, first name; Evil, last name. Very Evil. He picked up the phone and called his partner.

Really, first name; Bad, last name checked his phone and saw a familiar name: Very Evil. *Another one of his schemes*. Really was tired of the petty schemes that Very had been coming up with lately – steal this painting, steal this document, kidnap and hold this political official for ransom – every time they'd been let off with a warning because their

planning had been so pathetic and hilarious it had actually entertained whom they had been trying to steal from. They couldn't even be taken seriously.

Really just couldn't understand it – he felt pretty knowledgeable and professional. He was a scrawny man with great hair and great eyes, an infamous criminal appearance. He never made the actual plans for any of the jobs, but he did everything else, and he thought he did them well. From crawling through vents, to gadget making, to computer hacking, he did his part. But Very's schemes just must have been that awful.

He sighed and answered his phone. “This is it this time,” Very's cold voice spouted with confidence.

“Really?” jarred Really, sarcastically.

“I need you to hack into the New York Museum's database and get me information on a four thousand year old thermos.”

“The five billion dollar one?” Really had heard about it too. Suddenly feeling weird, he replied, “There's gonna be some heavy security on that.”

“Do it,” Very commanded. Very knew when he said less, things worked out better. And things worked especially well when he hung up abruptly. So he did.

Very sat smugly on his stolen old couch (well, stolen from the dumpster) in his smelly New York apartment, waiting semi-patiently for Really to call him back with good news.

He haphazardly looked around his apartment to pass the time.

There wasn't much in the way of decoration – a framed picture of him and his father from when he was a child...before he died – an unmade bed, the mattress beginning to form the shape of his body – the brand new high-def TV, fifty inches – his waste bucket, overflowing with crumbled up and ripped paper – his....

Startlingly, Very's phone began to ring. *That was quicker than I even imagined.* He answered, and Really's voice poured out of the speaker.

“So I went on the museum website, hit login, typed admin for the username and password for the password, and it actually worked! I'm in!” he said with disbelief.

“That's genius!” Very exclaimed in full seriousness.

Of course it wasn't genius – it required a total lack of genius on whomever set up the server actually, but Really accepted the complement either way. The more Very thought he was a genius, the better, Really assumed.

“Anyway, I have the database in front of me, but I can't find anything on a thermos...” Really explained his findings. “But everything's dated and it looks like all the dates are recent, so, I think the database is being added to daily.”

“So...?” Very didn't know if he should feel disappointed or not.

“Well, I'll keep watching it everyday and see if the thermos ever gets added to it...and hope the admin never changes the password.”

Actually, it wasn't even Tim who had set the server to such a stupid password as "password." That had been Gilbert, who thought no one would try to hack the system anyway. Ironic since he was a security intern. Tim wasn't even aware the database was online since the museum automatically logged into its databases.

Gilbert's error made all of Tim's work on encryption practically useless in the end. With all the secure data online, it would have actually been safer to just have a sheet in the vault room listing all the vault combinations. But really, there was incompetence and inexperience all around, no matter who you blame.

One fateful night, about a week after Really had hacked into the database, Tim got around to sorting the G row of the vaults. He had an index card in hand for G1, with its combination on it: 8-13-21. He grabbed the oversized vault dial, turning to each number in sequence, then a click. It opened.

On the floor of the small vault sat a tiny thermos, which Tim carefully picked up and inspected. Seeing the equation " $E=mc^2$ " inscribed on the side, Tim recognized the item. Even with working in the museum eight plus hours a day, Tim watched the news and knew what this was: a five billion dollar thermos.

Oddly enough, Tim felt no temptation to take the item for himself – he felt connected to the museum. He did spend most hours of his days there. What he did feel was a sense of wonder – where did this

anachronistic artifact come from? And what was inside of it?

He picked it up to hear liquid swooshing around, so there definitely was something in there. But now he saw something new – a new-looking circular sticker stuck to the top of the thermos, with the words “Warning: Poison” written in marker on it. *Well, I won't be testing to see if that is true*, thought Tim. He rotated the container, staring at all the letters and formulas that he couldn't understand, and then put it back in the vault, closing it. Then Tim took out his laptop and added the thermos to the database.

“I know where it is and the vault's combination,” Really told Very later that evening. Really had raced to Very's apartment as soon as he noticed the thermos was in the database. Very would have wanted to know immediately so he could start planning as soon as possible. Really was right. Very wanted the thermos in his hands before dawn.

“Don't you need more time to plan?” Really thought going now would lead to certain arrest.

“No,” said Very abruptly.

Really was silent. He couldn't argue with a two letter answer. Might as well figure out what they were going to do then. “What is your plan?”

“Eh, I figure we just walk into the vault room and steal it, then walk out,” schemed Very.

“Um...” Really couldn't tell if Very was being serious. Actually, he

would have been certain Very was being sarcastic had Very not just left the apartment, walking swiftly toward the museum. Really chased after him.

“It's locked,” Very muttered to himself disappointedly. Very and Really were standing at the front entrance of the New York National Museum at eleven o'clock in the night.

“It's closed,” stated Really, slightly being condescending. “What did you think, you could just walk into the museum in the middle of then night!? Look, how about we put this off for tomorrow, get a floor plan of the museum and really think this....”

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK! Very knocked three times on the front entrance of the museum.

“What are you doing!?” Really freaked out at Very. “You don't knock on the door of the place you're going to rob!” Really had lost some composure and self-control; he was definitely talking too loud. To his good fortune, no one was around to hear him....

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK! Again, Very transferred three knocks to the museum's front door.

Tim was walking back to the security office when he thought he heard three tapping sounds coming from the entrance. Are the statues breaking? Is the museum expanding? He went to the entrance room to check it out and now it became clear what the noises were – he heard three knocks coming from the front door.

Opening the door, Tim saw the odd couple of an ugly, bald man and a somewhat handsome thirty-year-old. "The museum's closed," he stated briefly, ready to close the door, when the slightly handsome man stepped forward and said, "We're the new guards."

Tim knew immediately that this man was lying. And lying meant these people were potentially dangerous. But just something about how stupid that statement was, or the combination of the two men together made Tim laugh. "No, you're not," he chuckled, slamming the door.

An opportunity was closing, but Very could not let that happen. With the door about to close, Very rammed into it, forcing his way into the museum. The security kid was standing there in shock. Very tackled him to the ground.

"HELP!" the kid screamed. He squirmed beneath Very, trying to wiggle his way to freedom, but Very was stronger than him and had full control.

"Tie him up!" Very screamed to Really, watching from the entrance. Of course, Really didn't have any rope on him or anything like that, so he didn't know how Very expected him to do that but....

Aha, the chains for keeping people in line when they buy tickets! Really ran to the ticket counter, removed a chain from the queue stand, and ran back to Very's disturbing wrestling match. "Give me his hand," Really bent down to the ground, ready to wrap the kid's hands in chains. With a tiny bit of struggling, Very got a hand out from beneath him. Really

wrapped one hand in chains, then the other, tying it all around the kid's leg. All the kid's limbs were constrained now except his left leg, which was kicking around uncontrollably when Very got up.

“You guys aren't gonna get away with this!” the kid taunted, realizing he couldn't escape. “The other guards definitely heard me screaming, and you guys left the door open!”

“Tie his other leg to this dinosaur!” Very commanded to Really, ignoring the kid's every word.

Really began to do as Very said, but the kid had a point. Someone should have definitely heard them. But then...where were they? Was this kid really the only one guarding the museum?

“I know who you are, what your faces look like!” the kid continued to blather. “You're not getting away with this.” The kid was now tightly chained to the dinosaur, so now only his mouth could cause problems. But Really was more concerned with shutting the front door at the moment. He walked over to the entrance and looked outside – the closest people he could see were the size of ants. He and Very had gotten lucky. He shut the door.

“Let's go,” Very commanded to Really.

“Shouldn't we duct tape his mouth so he can't scream for help?” suggested Really.

“What help?” questioned Very. “What duct tape?” he continued. “Let's just go.”

They hurried up some stairs, Really leading the way through a door

that he saw marked as “Authorized Personnel Only.” This took them into a back area with a few offices, closets, and the like. Really and Very briskly explored the area until they came across a set of double doors – a large enough opening to get large artifacts through. “That's got to be the vault room,” stated Really. Very nodded. Really turned the knob on the door and –

It was locked. “I thought we have the combination for the vault!?” Very screeched angrily.

“No, well yes, we have the combo for the vault, but it's in this room,” explained Really. “Crap, we should have asked that kid for the key.”

“I'll go back and get it from him.” Very marched back toward the front of the museum. Really, on the other hand, began to search the offices in the area for any sets of keys he could find.

The first office was promising. After looking through all of the drawers on one of the desks, Really noticed a labeled rack in the corner. He walked over and saw three names and three hooks. Under the name “Gilbert” was a set of three keys on a ring. Perfect.

Very marched back down the stairs to get back into the main entrance area. He turned to the dinosaur exhibit and –

It had collapsed! And the kid was no where to be –
WHACK! Sharp pain on the head and neck.

Tim had broken free of the dinosaur exhibit by embracing his inner

teenager and forcing the thing to collapse. He had then wiggled his foot out of the chain bounding his two hands. Free to move and hearing someone coming, Tim hid underneath the stairs. The bald man had run out, and Tim sneaked up behind him and whipped him with the chain hanging around his foot.

The bald man was startled and hurt, but not out. Before he could turn around though, Tim threw the chain tying his own hands together around the man's neck.

“Stupid kid, stop...choking...me,” the man grunted as he put his fingers between the chain and his neck. Tim didn't want to choke this guy to death, but what else could he do to protect himself and the museum? Or maybe just himself – Tim did sort of kind of destroy a dinosaur display so he could do this.

For thirty seconds, they struggled; Tim didn't want to pull too hard because in the end he didn't really want to strangle the guy. As the man struggled less and less, Tim let the chain become looser, but that turned against him.

Suddenly, the man slammed his head backward into Tim, and he slipped out of the chains. He immediately ran for the stairs, and Tim chased after him.

With a final click, the vault was unlocked. Really opened it and there it was – the thermos, with the inscribed equations on it. Just as he had imagined. Really quickly grabbed the thermos, slammed the vault

shut and left the vault room to see Very running right toward him – and behind, the security kid, still in chains.

“You got it!” Very exclaimed in excitement, stopping briefly next to Really.

“Let's get out of here!” Really said with urgency, the kid advancing quickly.

Very and Really ran down the hallway, running away from the entrance toward a place they had never been before. But after a quick corner turn, they realized that they were at a dead end. The hallway continued for a few more feet, and then there was a door – but it was locked. They turned around, but now the kid was right in front of them.

Tim just noticed it. The slightly handsome man was holding the thermos. No! Tim was hurt at his core. They were stealing almost a part of himself, a part of the museum that he had helped to build, and he couldn't let that happen.

Tim lunged at the thermos, trying to grip it with both hand and chain, but there was a sudden yank on his foot and he fell face first to the floor, gripping nothing. The bald man had grabbed the chain still attached to his left foot and tripped him. And before he could do anything, the other man grabbed a hold of his chains, and tied him up again – this time, both legs and hands together so he couldn't move at all. Tim didn't scream for help now. He had been beaten at his own job.

Without the air of panic, Really and Very could finally look at their prize. Inspecting it closely, Really could tell this was the real thing. There were formulas he had seen and had not seen all over, and it just looked ancient...except the label about poison.

“I have a fun idea,” cooed Very, clearly becoming excited. “Why don't we poison mister security here for doing such a great job tonight?”

“Uh...this is a five billion dollar artifact,” Really pointed out. He couldn't believe Very wanted to be reckless with their prize, but he had to admit that Very's idea was evil, and it was fitting.

“And that's a cheap label that we can tear off. No one knows if or what's inside the artifact, so why don't we put its contents to good use?” Very didn't wait to hear Really's quip back; he grabbed the thermos himself and unscrewed it.

The liquid inside was dark black and odorless. Exactly as he had imagined the poison to be. He grabbed the kid's nostrils and held them shut, so that he would have no choice but to eventually open his mouth to take a breath. And when he did –

Down his throat the poison went. Tim didn't want to give up, but he had needed air. He thought maybe a quick breath would have saved him, but before he knew it, tasteless liquid was in his mouth, and he had no choice but to swallow.

Oddly, though, he also felt something else pour into his mouth...a piece of paper perhaps – the world was starting to become fuzzy...

The kid fainted dead the ground.

“You really shouldn't have done that.” Really wasn't so much upset about the death of the kid – he had seen both their faces after all – but Very might have just reduced the value of the thermos in a careless move.

“But oh, was it satisfying,” smirked Very. “After he tried to strangle me, I got him back.” He grinned and screwed the lid back on the thermos. “Let's get out of here and sell this thing.”

As a final touch, Very ripped off the poison label and let it drop and stick to the kid's body. Very neglected to glance at what was written underneath the label as they were leaving though – “God's Elixir.”

2. God's Elixir

“Scandal at the museum!” the news anchor announced to the world. “This morning, we found out that the New York National Museum was breaking work regulations and underhiring on its staff. This information came out after there was a break-in last night and only one security guard was on duty. There was a struggle in the main entrance but the burglar or burglars got away. It is unknown what or if anything was stolen.

“As for the museum, it released a statement that all its previous staff have been fired and replaced with more qualified people. The

security guard on duty at the time of the robbery, though, is still missing – Tim Clef could have fled the scene or he could have been kidnapped, but he has not been seen by anyone since last night.

“In other news, a new building project has just been approved in New York for 4.1 billion dollars. The money provided entirely by an anonymous benefactor, not much is known at this time about the purpose of the building, but it is set to be the new tallest building in New York at one hundred seventy-five floors and two thousand feet. It is speculated the building may be used for office space.”

Light. Sight. Seeing green, blue. Figures, walking around. Skyline. Buildings. Tim's mind was fuzzy, but it was daytime, and he seemed to be in a park. His memory was all blurred. *How did I get here?* he thought, only semi-consciously. He was finding it hard to think.

Museum. Thermos. Bald man. Stolen. Chains. Poison. The images and thoughts stuck out in his mind, but he couldn't form a coherent picture. *Hadn't I been poisoned?* It suddenly struck him. *So what is this park? Wait, what's my name?* Upon realizing he forgot his own name, he went into panic mode.

Music. Treble. Bass. Cleft. Clef? No, it was Cleff, wasn't it? Two F's, right. Wait, what's an F? No, my name is Cleff, definitely Cleff. Now...me. What's me? People. Human. Body. I have one of those. Where are my hands? Wait...where ARE my hands!?

Cleff looked around the space he could, but all he could see was

the park. *Control. Movement. Muscles. I can move my head with muscles to look down! But...I can't move! Wait. I don't think I have a head. Wait, wait, wait, wait. How am I seeing? I don't have eyes!*

Indeed, it was at that moment that Cleff realized his vision was not coming in from two orifices in his head, mostly because he didn't have a head. This launched Cleff into further panic mode as he made further realizations about his situation. *Pressure. Right side. Sitting. Resting. Old man. Sixty years. I think...I think there's someone sitting on me...*

Then finally –

Wait. Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait! I'm a bench!

Yes, Cleff had somehow become a bench in Central Park, and a man in his sixties was sitting down resting on him, not knowing his seat was in fact sentient. Though to be fair, for most of the time the seat didn't know it was sentient either.

I don't want to be a bench! Cleff thought furiously to himself. So then just like that, Cleff was no longer a bench. He fell to the ground in his old, recognizable body. So did the old man, suddenly waking up and startled by the lack of a bench that he was pretty sure he had been resting on before.

Details were becoming clearer in Cleff's mind, but thought was still tricky. *Paper. Mouth. Cough. Throat. Stuck. There's something in my mouth...*

He coughed several times and a piece of paper fell out onto the ground. Four words were written on the paper, but Cleff struggled to read.

“Use,” Cleff said aloud to himself, barely making out the first word.

“I...ite...it,” he made out the second word. “W...well?” he questioned the third word. Lastly he read the final word, which came across a little easier than the others. “Tim.”

Use it well, Tim.

Unfortunately, Cleff forgot who Tim was, so the message's meaning was lost on him.

“You spent nearly all our money on making a building project in New York!?” Really screamed angrily at Very once he was safely inside Very's apartment. “What about my money!?”

“Now Really, it's called an investment. We'll make even more money back later,” Very responded calmly.

Really did not take in Very's air of calmness well at all. He yelled even louder, “That's great for YOU, but I was set for life! If I had over two billion dollars, I'd be rich and I'd never worry again! Who exactly sold the thermos on the black market, again!? Oh right, that was me! Who hacked into the database and found the thing!? Oh, me again! Who...”

Very interrupted, “Who came up with the plan?” This made Really stop talking, though still visibly angered. “Now, remember, you did sell the thing for 4.4 billion dollars. Which you then gave to me to distribute, remember?” Really actually did not remember, because Very had more or less taken all the money for himself when the deal was done. “You still have your share of one hundred fifty million, which, when I give it to you,

will be plenty. But trust me when I tell you that in the end, you'll get to be part of something much...bigger." Very smiled an evil little smile.

Really wasn't very amused by Very's classic scheming. Knowing him, he has grand plans that would crumble apart when put into practice. Very's spent money was as good as gone by this point. But what about his one hundred fifty million? It was total injustice for him not to get his full share, but Really thought if he could just get that amount and get out of there, he never would notice the difference between one hundred million and two billion.

"Give me my money," Really commanded through his teeth.

"I will, don't worry," lied Very. "I had to make another three hundred million deposit on the building though. You'll get it back, trust me," he continued to lie.

Really was trying to make up his mind whether he wanted to throw his friend out the window or not. In the end, he decided not to. Very was not the man to be broken by threats or violence. He might have a stupid head, but he had a strong will. Very's promises of trust didn't comfort him though, but what else could he do? The best plan he had was to work with Very to make sure that his plans went smoothly, or else they'd really lose all their money. And hey, maybe he might just see a cut of the money if Very's schemes would actually work for once.

"Okay, I trust you," Really lied.

Cleff had barely managed to find his way home. He ran up the

steps of his house in a panic and flung open the door. His mom was sitting at the kitchen table, shocked the door had just burst open, until she saw her son's face and it turned into pleasant surprise and relief.

"I was worried sick about you!" Mrs. Clef ran to hug her son. She waited for her son to respond but he just looked confused. In a daze. Disconnected. "I got a call this morning from the museum; they said you were fired! And then you didn't come home and there was that robbery, I just didn't know..."

"Potato," Cleff said plainly and suddenly, interrupting his mom's worried spiel.

Mrs. Clef didn't know what to make of that. Her son was clearly trying to say something else, but he just couldn't get the words out. *He must be in shock, she thought. But what happened to him? Maybe he's trying to say he's hungry?*

She turned around and went to the pantry and grabbed a potato for her to bake. But when she turned back around, her son was gone. "Tim?" Mrs. Clef said to the air, silently worried. "Where did you go?" She walked forward a bit and noticed something strange on the kitchen table: a plate that wasn't there before. And on the plate was a potato.

That's really odd, Mrs. Clef thought to herself. Why would he want a potato if he had one already? She picked it up. It's even hot! Confusion set into Mrs. Clef's mind, but she was only more confused when the potato straight up disappeared from her hand.

"What?" she said aloud. Then she disappeared.

Cleff was a hot potato sitting on a dinner plate. *No!* he thought furiously. *I don't want to be a potato! I'm hungry! Change back!* But to no avail, his thoughts weren't working this time.

Hot. I'm really hot. My insides. Burning. My outsides. Burning hot. He felt contact with something cooler then, and he was suddenly floating above the plate. *Cool. Cold! That's what I want! Not potato! Cold. Winter. Snow. Freeze. Low temperature.*

And suddenly all Cleff could see was snow all around him. It was snowing heavily, and winter fog obscured his sight for more than a few feet. Oh, and it was cold. Real cold. A breeze blew straight into Cleff's body.

Cold. So cold. But...hands. I have hands. I have a body. I'm not a potato! I'm not burning!

He trudged a few steps forward through the winter wasteland, trying to find his way around, but everything looked the same. The burning hotness from being a baked potato was going away, but that only led to a new problem: he was freezing.

Freezing...cold...I want...I need...mommy...

And suddenly his mom was there, in the cold, windy, snowy, foggy wasteland, right in front of him. Mrs. Clef looked around in surprise, fear, and confusion at first, then clutched her body tightly because she was freezing. "What is going on!?" she screamed over the roaring wind.

No! Not what I wanted! Cleff thought. *Mom. But not here.*

Home! Go home!

They were back in the kitchen. Still cold, Mrs. Clef didn't know what to think. She sat down, just staring at her son for a bit.

Cleff looked around just to be certain he was where he wanted to be. It was home. His mom was here, the kitchen was there – he turned – the living room was there, the TV, the couches, the digital clock –

Clock. Measure. Measure time. What is time? Days. Years. Minutes. Hours. Seconds. But...how long is a second, really?

Cleff stared as the clock did something very strange. It began to change. 6:53 quickly became 6:54 and then without skipping a heartbeat, it was 6:55. Then 6:56. 57. 58. 59. 7:00. 7:01. The time was moving even faster now. So fast he couldn't keep up with it. It was eight, nine, ten o'clock. No, eleven! Meanwhile, other things flashed around his vision. Was that his mom looking at him? Talking to him? She was moving too fast to tell – if it was her. There seemed to be someone else there too. With a uniform. He felt taps all over his body, then it was gone as quick as it had come. Four, five, six, seven, eight, nine. It got dark. Then light again. The clock was counting only faster. More shapes moved around him. Pressure on his body. Something trying to move him? He couldn't tell; it was gone.

No! A second is a second! Cleff was flowing through time like sand in a broken hourglass. *I need to stop this! A second is a second. It's not this!*

Dark. Light. Dark. Light.

No! A second is...it's...it's...this! Cleff thought of how long he thought a second was.

The clock froze. 8:42 AM. Three days later. Cleff has stood still for three days.

He turned around to see his mom eating eggs miserably at the kitchen table. She looked up. "You moved!" she exclaimed, jumping up, tears rolling down her eyes. Mrs. Clef was restless. She ran over and hugged Cleff and said, "We're taking you to see a doctor right now."

Doctor. Medicine. Help. That would be great. Let me...say that.

"Good idea," Cleff said in a monotone voice. The first time he spoke in three days.

When Sara Bechdel first heard about the new 4.1 billion dollar building in New York – the money contributed out of no where from an anonymous person – she was suspicious. Being a twenty-four-year-old aspiring journalist, she had to be on the lookout for these things. She was living in her apartment in New York, paid for by a number of freelance articles she wrote, yet a big story still eluded her. But four billion dollars showing up out of no where? She went to the Internet to see what she could find.

Nothing. The web didn't know who this anonymous person was either. Although.... While browsing news sources she saw headlines about the New York National Museum. She remembered there had been a robbery there...what if the burglars stole the five billion dollar thermos she

had heard about and then used that to pay for the building?

It was a wild guess, a total shot in the dark, but she was curious now, and had to investigate. She just had to give that museum a visit. Sara got up from her chair and left her apartment, into the hallway. She saw her neighbor – an ugly, bald man with a scar on his face – about to enter his room.

“Hey neighbor!” Sara didn't actually know his name.

The man didn't even look at her as he entered his apartment. Sara shrugged; there were some people who just weren't friendly. She scurried down the hallway past his door, excited for the potential leads she might find at the museum.

Cleff sat in the waiting room of the doctor's office. Again. The first doctor couldn't find anything wrong with Cleff, though he was confused about how it was possible that Cleff hadn't eaten, drunken, or slept in three days. He was also pretty confused when the color of the walls of his check-up room changed color from beige to light green. He referred Mrs. Clef to bring her son to get a brain scan.

The car rides between places weren't very eventful. Though Cleff spoke earlier that day, he hadn't said anything at all since then. He was busy just trying to think. Or rather, he was trying to not accidentally cause something weird to happen by thinking.

Mrs. Clef had given up talking too. She just drove her car and tried not to be too upset. This was fixable – it had to be.

So there Cleff sat, alone in the waiting room, patiently listening for a call to go to the room to get an MRI scan. Mrs. Clef was away in the bathroom.

Boredom. No! I'm not bored. I'm fine. Don't think. Just don't think.

"Hey, are you okay?" asked the plant in the corner of the room, sounding concerned.

"I'm FINE!" yelled Cleff, frustrated.

Fine. Not fine. Fine. Not fine. Wait. Plant. Plant shouldn't –

"You don't look fine," a voice came from the other direction. Cleff turned and saw that the deer on the front of the nature magazine had stuck his head up and out of its cover. "Are you positive that you're all right?" the deer asked, trying to help.

"You can't talk!" Cleff let out a yell.

"Oh, really?" said the tree in the painting hanging on the wall. "Ask yourself, if we're not talking, then what are you hearing?"

Hear? Hearing ears. Sound. What is sound? Waves. Hitting ears. Why? Why these sounds? Why this noise?

Suddenly there was music blasting in Cleff's ears. LOTS of music. He couldn't make out anything individually; it was like all the radio stations were just turned on at once. Because that's what it was – Cleff picked up on all the radio waves, except he wasn't tuning any of them out.

"This kid's got problems," said the plant to the tree. Cleff didn't hear that – his radio in his head was much too loud.

Radio. Music. Tuning. FM. 99.1. Frequency. Tune. Narrow range.

All the other music suddenly stopped playing – now all Cleff could hear was classic rock. He liked classic rock. Cleff sat back and listened for a bit, closing his eyes...

When he opened them a few minutes later, he saw his mom running around in circles in the waiting room, being chased by a deer. Cleff tuned back in to normal sound and heard her screaming.

It was odd. In spite of the scene before him, for the first time since he was at the museum, Cleff felt calm. Almost in control. He could actually think. He could speak. He could command.

He made the deer disappear from the waiting room and go back to its magazine as if it was moving his finger. Mrs. Clef kept screaming and running though.

“Mom, calm down, there's nothing there,” Cleff told his mom. He spoke with enthusiasm, confidence.

Mrs. Clef didn't know what she should feel right now. Happy her son just spoke again, or scared for her own sanity? Was a deer really just in the room? She sat down next to her son and the cognitive dissonance told her to say, “I know.”

A few minutes later, a nurse came into the room and brought Mrs. Clef and her son to the MRI room. Mrs. Clef watched from the observer's window as her son was laid on the MRI's scanning platform and brought inside the hole in the machine. His mind was being scanned.

Upon getting the results, Mrs. Clef noticed a very surprised reaction on the face of the doctor. “Sam! Hey! Get Doctor Robert!” he ordered to the nurse. She left the room and came back a minute later with another doctor. “Come look at this,” the first doctor said to Doctor Robert.

“No, that can't be,” Doctor Robert looked confused. “What is that? Is the machine broken? Did someone hack it? Is this a joke?”

Mrs. Clef was curious about what the doctors were consorting about, so she walked over to them and looked over their shoulders to see the results of the scan. She immediately knew why they were so confused: The dark lines in her son's brain spelled out the word “Hey.”

Sara looked around the museum upon arriving. To her right, a dinosaur fossil exhibit stood, albeit with what looked like highly fractured bones. In front of her, the line for tickets – it was actually pretty long too – but she wasn't planning on visiting the museum's exhibits anyway, so it didn't matter to her. To her left – there! – an information desk, looking brand new, like it was added yesterday. Sara walked up to it and quickly summed up the clerk behind it: her name was Alison from her name tag, young late twenties, nervous, bit nails, lots of makeup, new job.

“Hi...Alison,” Sara greet smiling. The pause before her name was intentional, like Sara had just then looked at her name tag. She didn't want to come across as a journalist, or in any way nosy. “I was just really curious about something. You know the burglary that took place here a few days ago? Do you...” she went in close and whispered, “Do you know

what was stolen?”

Alison paused a minute – did she want to satisfy human curiosity or stick to museum policy? After all, she had just gotten this new job, but she felt almost like she could trust this nice girl she just met. So, she compromised.

“Well, don't go telling anyone this, but I've heard a few rumors,” Alison said. “I can't tell you what was stolen, but the staff went through everything and there was one item missing.”

“What was it?” inquired Sara.

“We can't release that information,” Alison fell back on museum policy.

“Oh come on, tell me,” Sara said as nonchalantly as she could. “I won't tell anyone, I promise,” she lied.

Alison hesitated.

“Let me guess,” Sara pushed. “Was it the expensive thermos?”

Alison was uncomfortable now. This might get her in trouble, but this lady already seemed to know. She was forced to be a little bit rude.

“Ma'am, that's enough; there are other people in line behind you.”

Sara turned around, and sure enough, someone else was waiting. Defeated, she left the information desk, only to have a thought come to her head. *The old staff! Weren't they all fired? They wouldn't have any obligations not to talk.* If she could find the employee that was here the night of the crime, she would have a first hand account of what happened – what was stolen and what the person who stole it looked like. *Didn't the*

news reports say what his name was and show his picture? Yes, they did!

Excited by her new lead, Sara hurried back to her apartment to do research on the Internet about this employee.

Cleff felt a lot better on the medication. The doctors, as confused as they were, decided to give Cleff medicine to treat schizophrenia – and it actually did a good job of clearing up his thoughts. No longer were weird things happening and he could even speak and talk again. He didn't feel perfect though, so as soon as he got home, he lay down on the couch, zoned out and watched TV.

It was around that time that Mrs. Clef received a call on her home phone. “Hello?” she answered.

“Hi, this is Sara Bechdel, famous reporter,” a confident voice came out of the receiver. “This is the Clef residence?”

Mrs. Clef did not appreciate the call – if this was where she thought it was going, she really didn't want her son being a media piece while he was recovering – but she couldn't lie. “Yes, it is.”

“Is Tim there? I'd really love to interview him,” requested Sara politely.

“No, you can't interview him,” said Mrs. Clef sternly.

“Why not?” Sara asked, still politely.

“Because he's my son and I said no!” Mrs. Clef let her anger out a little.

“But...” Sara tried to argue back, but Mrs. Clef abruptly hung up.

Were all the things that happened to me real? pondered Cleff, laying on the couch. *Was I really a bench? I wasn't thinking clearly for all that time, so they could have just been hallucinations – but – they felt so real. If I could just do something supernatural now, that would prove it, but I don't know how I'd even go about that. If I could just find an independent source maybe.... Ah, yes, that's right. Mom.*

“Mom!” yelled Cleff from the couch, without moving. “Did you recently teleport to a snowy wasteland and then teleport back to here?”

“Get some rest, Tim,” his mom responded back.

That doesn't answer my question, thought Tim. But...Tim. Tim? Why doesn't that feel like my name anymore? Why do I want to call myself by my last name but spelled wrong? Wait. Use it well, Tim.

The phrase on the paper that he coughed out of his mouth upon waking up three days ago. It had to have been the same paper that had flowed into his mouth from the thermos while he was being poisoned! Meaning...

If that actually happened – and it had to have happened – someone knew that bald man would force me to drink that liquid. This was planned. This was fate. And – whoever it was, they want me to make use of my powers. So I can't just sit here, take meds and forget this ever happened. I need to control this.

That night, Cleff had a plan. He wouldn't take his meds so he could see if his powers would come back, but he needed someone else to

observe him as proof. But since his mom shrugged off the really crazy things that happened to her, he thought he'd do something a little more subtle: magic tricks – but with real magic.

With his mom sitting at the kitchen table, Cleff stood at the other end, holding a deck of cards and wearing a top hat he found in the closet. He had absolutely no plan on what he was going to do. But whatever, he probably couldn't follow a plan too well in this state of mind anyway.

Cleff gave the deck to his mom. “Pick a...card,” he stuttered. “Any card.”

She did as told and picked a random card from the middle of the deck. A Jack of Clubs. Of course, Cleff didn't see the card.

Focus. The card. It's...got to be a low card. Yes. A four? That sounds right. Red suit. Hearts.

Mrs. Clef handed the deck back to her son. “Four of hearts?” Cleff asked confidently.

“Nope.” Mrs. Clef shook her head, but she was willing to give her son the benefit of the doubt.

No? But. That had to be right. Are my powers working? Maybe if I just test this. This top card will be the four of hearts! Cleff flipped over the top card of the deck, but alas, it was a completely unaffiliated card: the ten of diamonds. *Maybe if I just pick randomly from the deck? Come on, powers.* He grabbed a random card from the middle of the deck – the two of heart.

“None of those are my cards,” said Cleff's mom, starting to become

unamused. She was willing to support her son, but not if he was just fooling around.

Uh. No. Darn. I need. Coin. Quarter. “Do you have a quarter mom? Let's put this...trick aside for a...moment.” His thoughts were less clear and his speech less flowing. Was that good? It might make the trick work, but it also might make him forget what a trick was.

His mom gave him a quarter. “I'm gonna make this...quarter...disappear,” Cleff announced. He held the coin out in front of him and thought – *disappear!* – but, no luck. *Why is nothing working!?* Cleff screamed angrily in his head.

“Wait.” Cleff had an idea. He took off his top hat and showed the inside to his mom. “Nothing...inside,” he explained.

Except there was something inside – something Cleff didn't know about. “Er, Tim, actually, there's a magic wand in there,” Mrs. Clef contradicted.

Cleff looked inside. A black rod with white tips. But how did it get there? It hadn't just been in the hat, had it? No, he was just wearing it. That didn't make sense. He removed the rod from the hat and threw the coin in – might as well incorporate this into the act. “Now watch! Tap three times...with wand. It's gone!”

After tapping three times on the hat, Cleff quickly peered in on his own work. And, to his amazement – the quarter had actually disappeared! “It worked!” Cleff unintentionally said very excitedly, showing his mom the empty hat. Mrs. Clef was happy to see her son had at least got something

to happen after many failed attempts.

But Cleff was just getting started. Confident, but finding it hard to think, he made the easiest association he could with top hats: rabbits. Without a further word, he closed his eyes, stuck his hand in the hat, and pulled out a rabbit.

Mrs. Clef was pretty surprised when that happened. Her son went from failing simple tricks to someone making a rabbit appear out of no where. "Is that real?" she asked.

Cleff didn't answer, because he wasn't done yet. Upon seeing the rabbit with its white fur, his mind made the association with white birds: doves. While barely obscuring the rabbit with his hands, it poofed into a dove, which flew away.

"Wow!" Mrs. Clef said in amazement. "How did you do that?" But Cleff wasn't paying attention to his audience.

Dove, flying. Floating. Levitate. I bet I could. Let me. And suddenly Cleff found himself levitating above the kitchen floor.

"This is amazing!" Mrs. Clef said, clapping her hands. "I didn't know you were such a good..." Mrs. Clef coughed. Then she coughed again. Something was stuck in her throat. One more cough and a coin came flying out of her mouth, into her hands. She looked at it – it was a quarter sized coin, but instead of having the usual head of George Washington, the coin had the head of the Jack from playing cards. On the tails side, she noticed, flipping it over, was the image of the suit of clubs. Jack of Clubs. Her card.

“How?” Mrs. Clef was in amazement once again. Hadn't she chosen that card at random?

But Cleff was starting to lose it. He couldn't control his thoughts anymore. Falling to the ground, all he could think about was the kitchen table. He was staring at it. Staring intently. So the table melted.

Right in front of Mrs. Clef's eyes, she watched as her table suddenly turned from solid to liquid and splashed all over the kitchen floor in the form of a disgusting brown goop.

That's. Not...Right. Thought Cleff. *I need...meds. Now.* He teleported to the bathroom, where his meds were, and quickly got out a pill and swallowed one. *Much better.* He collapsed to the floor and slept.

When he awoke the next morning, all Cleff needed to see was the kitchen table gone to confirm that his powers were real.

Very and Really looked up, way up at their new building. It was over halfway complete, at only three months in. “It's beautiful,” Very said in awe. They were standing on the street, just outside the construction area. “And today, she adds her one hundredth floor.”

“How are you getting this to be built so quickly?” Really wondered. “And doesn't nobody even know who you are? Why is no one questioning this building just appearing here?”

“Ah,” Very laughed. “There's a very simple answer to those questions: money. Don't worry, it's all being put to good use.” Really still hadn't received his payment.

“I still don't understand why you're doing this,” Really said.

“What's your plan?”

“In two months, when this is done, I'll tell you,” promised Very.

“Eventually, everyone will know my plan.” A mischievous grin.

Five months into Cleff's street magic career – he was doing pretty well, though he had a rough start. For the first month, there was only a very narrow window when he could perform, between when he had no power vs. uncontrollable thoughts. So only being able to do one performance at a time was hindering. Then, slowly over time, he got better and better at it, until the point where he could perform for thirty minutes at a time. With a latency period of eight hours on the pills, he could get in two sessions a day consistently. People were so impressed by his act though that he made a decent amount of money, despite only being on the street for an hour a day.

He did have a few accidents too, however. Mostly things disappearing – manholes, building windows, parking meters, an audience member (she was pretty confused when she reappeared a few seconds later). Nothing too bad to get him sued. And nothing too amazing to get him really noticed.

Use it well, Tim. Was he really using his powers well? He could be working in hospitals, doing miracle work, going to third world countries and magically summoning food. He could be helping people, and all Cleff was doing were a few magic tricks to make a bit of money. He told himself

he would go do that when he had more control, but it was five months in – he had control for thirty minutes, twice a day. Or at least control of the things he practiced: levitating, making things appear and disappear as long as they were small enough, magically knowing someone's playing card (real practical outside of magic). Yet he just didn't want to leave magic – not just yet.

Sara was walking through central park when she came across a crowd of people gathering around in a circle. Something caught her eye – a sign floating just over the heads of everyone else – “The Amazing Cleff!” ...Something about that name....

On a whim, she pushed her way through the crowd, until she realized she didn't need to. A face floated up and above everyone else – a man levitating. She knew that face... *That's...that's the museum employee from the break-in five months ago!* She never got an interview with him, but here he was, out in the open.

“Tim Clef!” she said excitedly a few minutes later, when Cleff's performance was over. “I need to talk with you!”

It was complete. Very stared smugly at the work his money did, sitting in his apartment, looking out the window.

“There's just one final finishing touch,” Very told Really, who was staring out the window next to him. “Watch.” Very's smile widened as he took out a small remote and pressed a tiny white button, labeled, “On.”

Really stared in shock at the building. He couldn't believe his eyes. *Was that really on the side the building? Very had some serious guts to do this.*

Very marveled at the sign. It was beautiful. Neon lights lit up the sides of the windows to spell out two words – one on top of the other – in probably the largest font size he had ever seen. They were words that would be seen from all around New York, and it was the name of his new building, in all its glory:

Evil Inc.

3. Evil Inc.

Before Tim could do anything, the slightly handsome man grabbed a hold of his chains and tied him up again – this time, both legs and hands together so he couldn't move. Time didn't scream for help; he had been beaten.

Without the air of panic, Really could finally look at his prize. Inspecting it closely, he could tell it was the real thing. There were formulas he had seen and had not seen all over, and it just looked ancient.

“Come on, let's go,” Really said to Very, wanting to get out of there.

“No wait, we have to dispose of our witness here,” Very pointed out. Really nodded. They had quite clearly been seen by this kid. “Why don't we take him with us? I know a great place where he can go for a

swim – the Hudson River.”

“No, don't!” screamed Tim. “I promise, I won't say anything! Besides, how are you going to get me all the way from here to the Hudson? You can't! People will see you!”

Very grabbed Tim and started to carry his squirming body. “Oh, don't worry about how we'll be getting you there. I assure you, you'll be sleeping with the fishies tonight.”

“Sure, we can talk,” said Cleff a little nervously.

“I'm Sara by the way,” said Sara, realizing she had forgot the formality. “But anyway, let's eat something while we're at it.” Sara could probably get more information out of him if they were together for a significant period of time, like at a restaurant. “You choose.” She wanted him to feel fully comfortable in his surroundings. “As long as you don't have another act you want to do,” she added, not wanting to encroach on Cleff's freedom.

Cleff made a pill appear in his mouth and swallowed it discreetly. Was this woman asking him on a date? He couldn't tell. She was the right age, she was fairly pretty, she wanted to go to eat with him, but she came across as just professional. It seemed like she wanted to talk about business, but what business did he have to talk about?

“Let's go to the pizza place that's just a few blocks away,” Cleff said, a little unsure of himself. *Was pizza appropriate?*

Cleff's worries faded when Sara smiled. “Pizza it is.” They turned

and walked toward the city when Cleff noticed something different on the skyline. “Evil Inc.” emblazoned with bright neon letters.

“Look at that!” Cleff pointed to the giant building.

Sara saw it too, and her suspicions from five months ago were confirmed. There was something awfully odd about that building – and she would get to the bottom of it.

Very and Really boarded the elevator inside Evil Inc. “Watch this,” Very smiled excitedly as he took out his special key and inserted it into the elevator's key slot. They were going up – all the way up. At three floors per second, it took them a minute to get to the roof.

They stepped outside and stood upon a fairly flat, blank roof. “You could keep a helicopter up here,” said Really, trying to piece together what would go on the roof.

“Something like that,” Very responded cryptically.

They walked over to the parapet and looked out at the city. Or rather, down on. Really made sure to stay at least a meter away from Very and a foot away from the parapet for safety reasons.

It was a beautiful view for Very. Leaning over the parapet, he could see everything in New York and all of it – even the other tall tall, skyscrapers, which he was above. Very was far from over with his plan, but this second step had gone so wonderfully that he couldn't help but laugh. He was above everyone else at this moment, and he had done it with the tiniest stroke.

“So are you going to tell me why you built this giant building now?”

Really asked. He was impressed by the view too, but not so much that he had an aura of smugness around him like Very did.

“Well, there are a number of reasons,” said Very, still staring out at the city. “For example, I put up extremely cheap office space earlier this week. It sold out very, very quickly, and I made a lot of money back too. And it's hilarious – they're all working in their offices, going about their jobs in a building that says EVIL in giant letters on the side of it!” Very started laughing hysterically at this. He couldn't contain himself; he couldn't even stand up straight. Then he paused and looked at Really dead in the eyes. “Don't you think that's funny?”

“Uh...” Really stuttered. “Th...that's great and all, but really? That's it?”

“No, there's more,” Very answered. “I've got some labs doing important...research for me, and this is my new home too. You can live here too if you want, there's space on the floor underneath me. Which reminds me, I've got to take care of a small errand with my old apartment.”

Very hurried back to the elevator, getting in it before Really knew what was going on. Really just remembered something Very had said – that he had made a lot of his money back. “Hey, what about my money!?” Really shouted, walking briskly toward the elevator. He wasn't angry – more...concerned.

“Just meet me in my office in two hours,” Very said as the doors

were closing. “We'll talk.”

The elevator shut fully, leaving Really on the roof alone. He could call the elevator and wait for it, but instead he walked back over to the parapet. This time he leaned over the edge, rather than standing a foot away. He looked out on the city, and while he did, he thought.

How had he let such a short-sighted, unintelligent, ego-centric man manipulate him so much? How was he letting this man steal his money? Why was he still cooperating with him? There was a chance Very might hand over his cash when they met in two hours, but it was also very likely that that wouldn't happen. Really needed to take a stand. If Very didn't give him his money this time – well, Very might just get to set the record for longest free fall from a building.

Cleff and Sara sat in a booth across from one another, not far from a TV showing the ninth inning of a baseball game. They ordered drinks – water for Sara, Coke for Cleff – and then Sara started her interrogation.

“So...you used to work at the museum, right?”

Well, that was an odd first question. How did she know that? Yes, Cleff had been on the news five months ago, but – was that normal, he researching him before they go on a lunch date? Wait, was this a date? Despite the smiling, eye contact, arms open on the table, Cleff just felt like this woman wasn't interested in him, but instead what he knew.

Oh, right, he had to answer the question. Cleff realized he was thinking too much and hadn't answered Sara's question yet. “Yeah, I did.”

Sara sensed his hesitation – *Is he suspicious of me?* If he caught on that she was a journalist, he might not want to talk to her. She shouldn't be too up front then and ask immediately about the break-in. "So...what was that like?"

"A lot of work," Cleff responded. "I had to do everything. Cleaning, handling the security, maintenance, entrance ticketing, computer data. Everything." Cleff tried to see if Sara looked impressed by his range of skills. He couldn't read her.

"Wow," Sara said, smiling still. "So was it just too much work for you? Is that why you're doing street magic?" She subtly tried to steer the conversation toward the scandal without explicitly mentioning it.

Cleff was confused by her question. Didn't she know why he left the museum? It was on the news. How else would she know his name? "No, I was fired," he said.

"Oh..." this could get awkward if Sara asked why he was fired. So she tried a different tact. "I think I heard about that. Wasn't it on the news? There was a..." intentional hesitation, "...break-in, right? And you were the only guard there?"

"Yeah," Cleff answered.

"What was that like? It must have been scary," Sara continued to guide the conversation.

"Well..." Cleff started, but the waitress came over with their drinks.

"Would you like to order?" the waitress interrupted. Sara cursed in her head. *Right when he was about to start talking!* Hopefully, he'd

continue without too much probing after they were done ordering.

Sara let Cleff go first; he order two slices of pizza, so she did too.

And then the waitress was gone. They could talk again.

“So...” Sara eagerly started the conversation again.

“Oh right. Well, the two of them got in and they immediately attacked me. Caught me totally off-guard,” started Cleff.

Sara interrupted. “Two of them? Male or female? Ages? What'd they look like?” Oops. That might have been too much like a reporter.

Those are some specific questions, thought Cleff. But he shrugged it off as her really wanting to know what it was like. “They were in their thirties I think, though one man was pretty ugly so I couldn't tell. He had a scar going across the right side of his face.”

A scar on the right side of his face? That seems...familiar, Sara thought, but she couldn't quite place it.

“The other guy though,” Cleff continued, “he was slightly handsome. Not sure how to describe him, but he had good hair.”

Not a great description, but better than nothing. Now she had to ask about the most important thing – the link between Evil Inc. and the museum heist. “So what'd they steal?” Sara looked into Cleff's eyes, giving off a glow of curiosity. She leaned in forward toward him, and gave him a secret smile.

Cleff knew the museum never released the information, but how could he refuse telling this girl? She looked so interested; he didn't want to let her down. “You know that five billion dollar thermos that was in the

news? That.”

Confirmed. Perfect. Now all she needed for the story was to figure out who paid for Evil Inc. – if he had a scar on his face, then she had a story. A BIG story.

In the background, the TV changed from a baseball game to a news report.

“Recent innovations in science are making space travel a reality,” the anchorman began. “Will you be able to afford going to the Moon within five years? Today, we're interviewing German scientist Wolfgang Ritter about huge developments in the field of energy.”

They cut to a German scientist with a gray head of hair and beard. “Dr. Ritter?” the anchor said offscreen. “It's great to have you on.”

“It's great for our work to be so revered,” said Ritter in a German accent.

“So tell us – how big are the findings you and your team have made?” asked the anchor.

“Absolutely enormous,” stated Ritter. There was no exaggeration in his voice. “If we go strictly by the formulas, then we can generate enough energy to get you to the Moon in less than an hour. So if we're sending two hundred people to the Moon at a time, it would cost only one hundred thousand dollars – five hundred a person.”

“Wow, that's impressive,” said the anchor. “But that's only in theory, right?”

Ritter seemed a little offended by that comment. “Our new energy formula is very powerful,” he explained. “Ve’re doing a Moon flight test tomorrow, but ve’ve already done tests in orbit. The satellites ve sent up can go very fast for very cheap.”

The anchor didn't seem to believe Dr. Ritter. He said almost flippantly, “When do I get to go to the Moon?”

“Vell, if you're on the reserve list, six months,” Ritter said, devoid of a smile. “Otherwise, eight months. Ve're setting up a moon base where people can stay fur a few days.”

“That's really exciting,” the anchor said with a fake smile, the camera going back to just him. “Thanks for coming on, Dr. Ritter.”

“Zanks for having me on,” Ritter said, and then he was off-air.

The anchorman resumed his reading of the prompter. “In other news, just hours ago, the New York skyline has been lit by two words that some people are finding offensive: Evil Inc. New York's new tallest building has these words giantly displayed on its exterior. Already, residents have garnered support for a class action law suit against the building's owner, on the grounds that it taints the good image of the city. However, with the recent information that the building's owner's name is literally 'Very Evil' – and image of Very was displayed on the screen – “the courts are not looking into the case, as the building is only named after the person who made it.”

Sara froze mid-bite into her pizza when her eyes hit the TV screen.

A man was onscreen with a caption underneath his name. A bald man with a scar on his face. The caption read, "Very Evil."

"That's..." Sara said in shock, staring at the TV. She couldn't believe it.

Cleff turned around and looked at the TV too. "That's the man from the break-in," he told her. "Is that a name? Very Evil?"

Sara dropped the rest of her pizza back onto her plate. All this time...right under her nose! No wonder she thought Tim's description of the scar was familiar! "That's my neighbor!" she exclaimed. "She lives in the apartment right next to me!" She stood up. "I need to go, I'm sorry." Sara quickly fetched her wallet out, dropped a ten dollar bill on the table, and ran out of the restaurant, leaving Cleff and his pizza behind.

She hurried as quickly as she could back to her apartment, not worrying about any running pains she was getting. She had a target now – the full story was coming together. She had no proof, but maybe if –

Sara rounded the corner of the block and suddenly stopped in shock. Her apartment was in plain view – or rather, what was left of it. The exterior wall was blown open, her room on fire, everything burning. A firetruck passed by in front of her, indicating this must of just happened. Anger welled up in Sara from her core. *Why!?* *Why would Very do this!?* *And why would he target me!?* This was no longer just a big story for Sara – with all her possessions gone, this was personal. She'd bring this ugly, scar-faced, bald headed, disgusting man down.

In truth, Very wasn't targeting Sara; he didn't know who Sara was. He was targeting himself.

After rushing home from Evil Inc., Very wanted to give his old home a proper send-off. His apartment was still messy and littered with his things. Old things that he wouldn't need anymore. He turned on the gas for the oven and walked out of his room and onto the street.

He waited, staring at his house, waiting for a fire to start. Very waited five whole minutes. "This is taking too long," he said to himself and went back into his apartment. Finding a lighter, Very lit it and –

BOOM! A tiny explosion. Very was disoriented. *Fire. Smoke. Pain. Scar burning. Sounds of cars crashing. Crying. Father.* Very snapped back into the moment. He was a little burnt, but was successful; his apartment was on fire. He was about to run for the door when he remembered the picture of him and his father hanging on the wall. Very quickly unhooked it and hurried back to the street.

Rushing away from the building and toward Evil Inc., he heard an even larger explosion behind him. Very did not turn around – that life was behind him. The only past he was carrying with him was a single picture.

"What do you mean you can't determine the source!?" Sara screamed at the fire marshal. "Do you think a responsible independent person like me would really leave the oven on as opposed to some ugly man literally named Very Evil!? Do you think a man with Evil in his name is above arson!?"

“I'm sorry,” explained the fire marshal. “But the explosion was in the pipes between your rooms. We can't determine whose fault it is.” Noticing Sara was ready to scream at him again, he added, “I'm sure your insurance will cover the damage.”

Sara growled to herself and turned away, to see Cleff looking at her from the end of the block. She walked over to him and started to vent her frustration at him. “The man who stole from your museum – he's my neighbor, and he destroyed my house!”

“Yeah, I see that,” said Cleff.

“We're gonna send this man to prison for a long time!” Sara continued. “Come on! Let's go to Evil Inc. and get some incriminating evidence!” Sara stormed off in the direction of the large building, not even looking to see if Cleff followed. He did.

Really stepped out of the elevator and into Very's office. Very had made the top floor of Evil Inc. his whole personal penthouse, with the opening to it coming from a special elevator leading into his office. At the other end of the room was a large desk and behind it was a giant set of windows, overlooking New York. Very's desk was bare except for a single framed picture covered in ash. Very was sitting at his desk, staring straight at Really.

“Come in, sit down,” Very said, being fairly imposing and pointing to a small chair (compared to Very's large prestigious chair) sitting in front of his desk. Really walked all the way across the room and sat.

Very began his proposition. He took a briefcase off the floor next to his desk and placed it on top. "I have one hundred fifty million dollars that I'm willing to give you in this briefcase," he explained. "But if you listen to my plan and become a part of it, I'll give you a billion dollars."

Really wasn't falling into Very's trap. He grabbed the briefcase, checked it for money, closed it, and immediately got up and walked back toward the elevator.

"Really, now this is just irrational," called Very, trying to get him to come back. "Don't you want more money?"

Really didn't turn around; he just kept walking. He made it back to the elevator, and pressed the call button. The call button didn't light up, and Really was suddenly horrified. He had already walked into Very's trap. He wouldn't be allowed to leave unless Very got what he wanted.

"That's right," Very called across the room. "I control the elevator."

Really turned around. "Come, sit back down," Very said, giving a false smile, thinly veiling the threatening nature of the situation. Really walked back across the room in silence and sat down.

"Now, are you ready to listen?" asked Very.

There was only one answer. "Yes," said Really.

"Good." Very opened his desk and took out a map of the world, placing it out on the desk facing Really. Really looked down at it. There were a bunch of X's all over the map, some on land, some over sea. One was over New York City.

"Do you know how unstable our planet is?" started Very, his words

sounding rehearsed. “Not just the people on it, but the planet itself. With all its seismic activity and plate tectonics and movements in the core, the crust we live on is only thinly keeping us supported. Now...what if we generated enough force at a bunch of different locations all at once. Like...this orange here.” Very took out an orange from another drawer in his desk. Putting one palm on one side and one palm on the other, he smushed the orange together, destroying it.

Really couldn't believe his ears. He knew Very was evil, but not this stupid and senseless. “Wait...you're telling me you built this giant building but now you want to destroy the world?”

Very explained. “It's not a but – it's a because. One of those locations – the weak points in the crust – is right underneath this building.”

“You already know where the weak points are!?” Really said with confusion. Very was the worst schemer he knew. How could he have possibly done all of this? His calculations had to be wrong. His plan would never work!

“What do you think this map is for?” Very pointed out. Really looked down at it again and counted the X's. Thirteen, all around the world. This was an ambitious plan. It also could not be Very's plan. But who would design such an evil scheme?

“So what, are you just going to blow up with the world too?” questioned Really.

“No, no, that would be silly.” Very was acting like his idea was a harmless prank. “I have a personal space ship coming in a few days,

import from Germany. I'm escaping to the Moon and you're invited too if..." his tone changed from playful to serious, "you'll cooperate."

"What do you want me to do?" asked Really hesitantly, afraid of what Very would say.

"Make bombs," said Very.

Really was not going to help Very destroy the world. He liked the world, and the things he could buy with money. He might have less of a moral conscience than most people, but he still liked other people. "No," Really refused.

"Fine," Very said, his persistence with Really ending. He tapped a secret button under his desk.

Really felt a sharp pain in his rear. "What did you just do!?" he screamed, but he knew soon enough. Everything was getting fuzzy.

"Oh, that's just my favorite chair," Very laughed. "He's got anesthetic needles engineered into him. A little gift from my friend Wolfgang Ritter – I think you remember him."

But Really didn't even comprehend that last part. He fell back in the chair, asleep.

Tim looked out the window of the pick-up truck Really was driving. It was dark, but he could see that they were driving over a bridge. Tim was still chained up.

"So your name is actually Really Bad?" he asked, continuing a previous conversation.

“Yeah,” confirmed Really. “And your name?”

“I'm Tim. Tim Clef,” he answered.

The truck came to a stop. Really pulled over to the side of the bridge. He got out of the car and walked around to the other side, opened the door, and grabbed Tim.

“You don't have to do this,” Tim tried to change Really's mind.

“Your partner isn't around. You could just let me go and you'll never hear a word from me!”

“I'm sorry, but you're not getting out of this one, Tim,” Really said quietly, mournfully.

“My mom will miss me.” Tim tried to appeal to Really's emotions.

“I feel bad, but you've got to go.” Really hoisted Tim in the air, about to throw him over the rails of the bridge...

And he did. Tim fell all the way down, over one hundred feet into the Hudson River. Really barely heard the splash. And Tim was gone. Only the fish knew him now.

Really sighed. He didn't like doing it, but it was necessary. He had to get rid of the evidence.

4. Evidence

Very was eight years old and sitting in the passenger seat of his dad's van. Daddy had told him he was his special lookout and to tell Daddy

in the walkie-talkie if he saw any police. So Very did his job and looked through the van windows and scanned the bank parking lot. All was quiet.

A few minutes passed until suddenly, daddy was hurrying into the van holding several large bags. He dropped them in the middle of the car and jammed the gear in drive. “Good job, son. You kept the car running,” Daddy said.

As the car accelerated, the bags opened slightly, and Very looked inside. There was a lot of money in the bags. Daddy pulled out onto the road and sped away. Ten seconds away from the bank, Daddy looked at his son and smiled, “And we got away safely.”

Too early. Police sirens, right behind them. Daddy stuck his head out the window and looked back to confirm. “Uh-oh, this is bad – hold on, Very!”

Gas pedal fully down, the van accelerated to full speed on the moderately busy road they were driving on. Daddy dodged cars on either side of the road as he swerved from side to side. But out of no where –

A car Daddy didn't see!

CRASH! A head-on collision. Very could barely understand what had happened – it went by so fast. He felt a sharp, deep pain across the right side of his face as glass broke. Lots of force on his body – then they were still.

Very looked to his left. His father had been crunched by the car, and a piece of metal had pierced his chest. “Daddy!” little Very cried.

No response.

Very didn't even feel his own pain now. It didn't matter; he had to save Daddy. But as he was about to stick his hands in the wreckage to dig his father out, he was grabbed from behind and pulled out of the car.

“Hey, there's a kid in here!” the police officer holding Very shouted.

No! Thought Very. He squirmed. *They're gonna let Daddy die! I have to help him, but this terrible man won't let me go!*

Very was carried away from the wrecked car. He watched as his dad's van got smaller and smaller, more and more distant, and there was nothing he could do. That would be the last he'd see of his father. Very bled on his face, but mostly in his heart.

Sara and Cleff stood outside, at the front entrance of Evil Inc. Sara was explaining how she planned to get incriminating evidence on Very. “I'll have my phone on voice recorder in my pocket. We get to his office, tell him about how we know everything he did, get a confession out of him, and police will be swarming this place before you know it.”

They walked inside to find themselves in a fairly empty lobby. A clerk stood at an information desk across from them, and a long hall of elevators was to their left. They walked up to the front desk.

“We need to speak to Very Evil,” Cleff told the clerk.

She responded quickly. “Very Evil does not take visitors.”

Sara glared at Cleff for a moment, but shed it when she came up with an idea. In a British accent, she said, “We have a scheduled appointment. He'll know about it, it's an important proposition.”

“The only person allowed into Very's office today is Really Bad,” the clerk said clearly.

“Well, that must be a mistake,” Sara said in an offended tone. “His office is the top floor, right?” she guessed. The lack of a correction from the clerk told her she was right. “I'll go up there and sort this out myself.” She began moving toward the elevators.

The clerk spoke up. “Very Evil's floor can only be accessed by a special elevator.” Sara stopped. “So you're not going to reach him that way,” the clerk finished.

Sara walked over to Cleff. She whispered, “Let's just take the elevator anyway, you know, see what we can find.”

Cleff and Sara walked to the elevators and called one down. It opened and they stepped inside. “Well, let's go as high up as we can,” said Sara. Looking at the buttons, that was the one hundred seventieth floor, so she pressed it and the doors closed.

The elevator ride was quiet. Cleff stared at Sara's arms and legs, then looked off for a bit. Sara just stared at the door. When the elevator finally opened, Cleff and Sara found themselves in a scientific laboratory. Lab tables, sinks, lab coats, computers, large monitors all about – the lab was actually fairly crowded. Plus, the people there actually looked like they were doing things.

Sara walked up to a scientist – Cleff following – intrigued by whatever research they could be doing in this place. “Hi, could I talk to you for a second?”

A female lab worker turned around and looked at Sara. “Who are you?” she asked with an air of snob in her voice.

“I’m new,” Sara lied. “I was just wondering what you’re researching.”

The snobby lab girl said, “A new girl four months in! Sheesh! We’re monitoring the Earth’s crust for weak points.”

Sara squinted. That marked her as something odd. Earth crust weak points? “Why are you monitoring that?” she asked.

“Omigosh, get with the program. You signed up for this, no?” the lab girl snobbed. “We have another team that’s gonna go in and resupport the crusts. This is an eco-project.” The girl turned around and went back to her work on the computer she was at.

Something about that description felt very off to Sara, but she couldn’t figure out what it was exactly. It just didn’t seem like she was getting the full story. Sara moved in close to Cleff and said to him, “Something’s not right here.” When Cleff didn’t really respond to that, she asked, “Are you all right?”

“Um...” Cleff started. “I need to tell you something important.” Sara looked a little confused by this – anything important really should have been divulged before they were stuck on one of the highest floors of Evil Inc. Nevertheless, they walked into a corner where there were no lab workers close by, and Cleff told her what was on his mind.

“Those magic tricks I do?” Cleff confided. “They’re real. I know that’s hard to believe, but I’ll show you in a moment what I mean, I think.

But I'm probably not going to be able to think or control myself soon.”

Sara became even more confused. Did this magician really think his magic tricks were real? Did these lab workers really think they were working on an eco-project in a building called Evil Inc.? Was she the only sane person in the room? She responded with the most logical response she could think of: “What?”

Cleff didn't seem to be concerned about her confusion. “Very's office is five floors up, right?” he continued. “I bet I can just jump us right up into his room.”

Cleff grabbed her hand and immediately their surroundings changed from busy laboratory to empty bedroom. Sara gasped and took a step backward. She looked around the room – a well-made bed, large window, a few doors, a desk. It looked like a really nice hotel room. How did she just get here?

“What did you just do?” Sara asked.

“We jumped. This should be Very's office's floor,” Cleff responded.

“But...how did we jump?” Sara said in disbelief.

“Uh...I don't like thinking about that too much,” Cleff answered. “It just happens.”

Then – behind one of the doors – they heard a muffled scream. Cleff and Sara rushed to the door and opened it. It was a closet and on the ground, tied up with duct tape over the mouth, was a slightly handsome man with nice hair.

“That's the other guy from the museum heist!” Cleff exclaimed,

and he ripped the tape off the man's mouth with full force.

“Ow...that hurt,” the man complained. He looked up at his two rescuers. It seemed proper to at least let them know who he was. “My name is Really, by the way. Really Bad.”

“Why are you tied up in the closet?” Sara interrogated.

“Very...he's evil,” Really answered.

“Yeah, we know that,” Cleff said flippantly.

“No, he's really evil,” Really stressed. “He wants to destroy the world.”

Despite experiencing magic first hand, Sara was in disbelief at this. “How?” she asked.

“He said there are weak points in the Earth's crust and that he's going to apply force to them all at once,” Really spoke quickly.

This clicked in Sara's head. That's why the people downstairs were doing what they were doing – but they didn't even know it. “We need to stop him,” she said with conviction, suddenly getting involved with something bigger than she expected. She looked over at Cleff.

“I agree,” he said.

“Well, untie me then. I can help you,” Really pouted, annoyed about his condition.

“Uh...” Cleff hesitated. This man had fought and stolen from him earlier; why should he trust him?

But before Cleff or Sara could do anything, the door on the other side of the room burst open. And standing on the other side of the door

was an angry, ugly, man – Very. “Step away from him!” Very commanded with anger, and Cleff and Sara took a step back and stared straight at Very.

“You!” Very pointed at Cleff. “I...you're the kid from the museum! I thought I poisoned you!”

Sara smiled. Her voice recorder had caught that statement. Connection to the museum and attempted murder. Incriminating evidence.

“And how did you get in my office!?” Very screamed.

Oops, thought Sara. *Our breaking and entering is on there too.* Oh well, she could try to lie her way out of it. “Your secretary let us up here,” Sara spun from her head quickly.

“That's a lie. Had you come up my elevator, I would have seen you,” corrected Very. He moved closer, looking imposing.

Tensions were high. Very knew this. Sara knew this. Really knew this. Cleff disappeared.

Scar, scar, scar, thought Cleff. *I can be a scar, why am I not a scar? A burning scar, electricity, lightning. Burn shock. Oh no. I'm a scar. Where'd my body go? There, a rope! That's like candy. I'm a rope and...this is tight. Let me loosen up.*

Outside Cleff's mind, Very's scar began glowing red and burning. He fell to the ground, claspng it, and shouting in pain. It felt like his face was on fire, or as if there was electricity passing through his face.

On the other side of the room, Really's rope tying him together became loose. He was free and stood up. Unconcerned with how he was

freed, Really quickly ran after Very and tackled him to the ground. But Very was not under Really's grip. He crawled away as quickly as he could, toward the door. Really gave chase, but Very made it through, slamming the door and locking it.

“Crap! We're locked in!” Really shouted.

“Oh, you'll be more than locked in soon,” Very mumbled evilly from the door.

Sara noticed it first. “There's a hissing sound!” she exclaimed. She panicked, not knowing what to do besides hold her breath.

Really looked at Sara, then motioned to the window. If they could just break the window, it could diffuse the gas. Really ran over to the it, but his fists could make no dent. Sara would have to be more clever than that.

She observed the room briefly – it was mostly featureless, but she stopped upon the desk, for it had drawers. Getting an idea, she ran over and pulled the drawer out from the desk, removing it completely. Then she ran for the window and smashed into it with all her might. *Nothing! ... except...did someone say ow?*

Uh-oh. She accidentally took a breath. Sara was getting sleepy. Very sleepy. *No! Fight it! I can't fight it. I'm...tired...*

At the last moment, the window became liquefied and began morphing. It was alive. The window went from being a flat surface to being two liquefied hands, one picking up Sara and the other Really. First, they hovered above the ground slightly, but then the hands pulled them

outside, to an over two thousand foot vertical drop below them. The hands melted away, and Sara and Really fell.

Sara was barely aware that she was falling, hardly able to stay awake. She just couldn't panic because she wasn't aware of her situation. Really too, was fairly out of it; all he knew was that he was frightened. But Cleff knew.

Falling. Friends. I let them...fall. Fall. Long. Gravity. Death. They could die. Need to catch them. Need...a body.

Cleff appeared out of the thin air one thousand feet above the ground, levitating just off to the side of Evil Inc.'s tower. He looked up, seeing Sara and Really falling straight down toward him. Without thinking – he caught them in his hands, but the force of their fall made him start falling with them.

I'm falling now too! Don't fall. Slow down. Must stop.

And Cleff, carrying Sara in his left hand and Really in his right, began to decelerate. Eventually they were falling at feather speeds, right above the pavement. Cleff hit the ground at this slow speed, then released Really and Sara from his grip. They were safe from the fall.

Cleff barely noticed the crowd of onlookers with camera phones recording and people staring as he collapsed to the ground too.

Sara awoke a few moments later, when a member of the crowd shook her body to see if she was alive. “How?...how did you survive that fall? That was amazing!” the crowd member said, amazed by Sara's wakefulness.

“I...how did I get here?” Sara was confused. The last thing she remembered was being gassed in one of Very Evil's rooms.

The bystander showed her his camera phone footage. It showed two falling bodies, then suddenly a third person appeared in mid-air and slowed the fall of the other two.

Cleff wasn't kidding about his magic stuff, Sara thought. Though, she already knew that. Then she remembered: she had incriminating evidence! She needed to get to the police immediately! Very had almost killed her in that tower, and it was only luck that she even managed to escape.

Sara looked over at her two partners, Really and Cleff. Really had just been successfully resuscitated by the crowd, but Cleff was still out cold on the ground. Well, she should probably wake him up before she went out to the police station. She crouched down low next to him and shook him. “Hey, wake up,” she said softly.

Cleff came to. “Meds,” he mumbled, barely conscious. Sara didn't really know what that meant, but she just noticed she was holding a small pill in her right hand. *This must be the medicine that he must be referring to*, she thought, and she placed the pill on Cleff's tongue in his open mouth. Cleff closed his mouth and swallowed. He lay there for another minute.

But then Cleff hopped up, conscious and well. “Did all of that just happen?” he asked. He was in disbelief of his powers again – it had been months since he had had an incident like this.

“Yeah, it did,” answered Sara. “But we need to get to the police station now. We have evidence on Very Evil.”

“Well, maybe we'll look into it over the next few days,” the police officer told Really, Sara, and Cleff after they had told their story and presented their evidence.

“Maybe!?” Sara screeched at the officer. “This man can't be allowed to stay in New York! He's too dangerous!” She hadn't said the part about destroying the world out of risk of sounding too crazy.

“We're busy people, and we're not quite sure how much that sound clip really proves,” responded the cop.

Sara was fed up. If the police weren't willing to help her now, she would have to make them want to help – by bringing her story to the media.

The next day, Very Evil's kidnapping, poisoning, and museum heist were all over the news. Office workers didn't come in to work because they no longer wanted to be associated with the building they worked at: Evil Inc. Very saw the news too, after waking up early in the penthouse. This was a huge story – everyone knew – so it couldn't be covered up with money. He took the elevator to the roof and ran to the parapet, and looked down. Everywhere surrounding his building were cop cars, ready to storm the building. As soon as they found his special elevator, he was doomed.

He had a way out, of course, but he'd have to leave his beautiful building behind much earlier than he had expected. He called Wolfgang Ritter on his phone. "I need my personal space ship today," Very ordered.

From the other line, "It's untested und not fully ready..."

"Bring it here to Evil Inc. now," Very interrupted, his patience wearing.

"Vell, alright. Ve'll fly it over," Ritter conceded.

Sara stood in the crowd of police surrounding Evil Inc. on the ground. *Success.* As soon as the media had gotten word of her story, they had to react. Very was the most wanted man in New York, and he was about to be put behind bars.

But all of a sudden, there was a loud sound of exhaust coming from way up in the air. Sara jumped back in shock, then looked up toward the top of Evil Inc. A ton of smoke was pouring off the sides of the building. Then she saw a tiny object rise above all the smoke, flying upward and spewing exhaust out the bottom. *Wait. Was that a space ship? No! Very was getting away!* But there was nothing she could do.

A weight fell upon Sara's shoulders now. She was one of the only people to know about Very Evil's plot to destroy the world, even with the huge scandal over him. And now that Very was no longer a part of Earth, he could potentially destroy the world at any moment. She needed to stop his plot at any cost. Luckily, Cleff and Really and her had exchanged numbers before parting yesterday. She would need Really to know where

there were weak points and Cleff to get to them.

They all met in the pizzeria in a booth. “He had a map with a bunch of X's on it,” said Really. “All over the world – I can't give a specific location except for one: underneath Evil Inc. itself.”

“How much time do you think we have?” Sara asked.

“Well, he wanted me to make bombs for him, so he can't be done setting up yet,” answered Really.

“Then let's go back to Evil Inc. today, and check underneath the building to see what we can find,” Sara suggested. “Do you think you could get us underneath the building, Cleff?”

Cleff looked out the window, aloof from the conversation. He turned to Sara when she repeated his name and just said, “I get the feeling we're doomed.”

Police all around the building. Cleff was dragged there by Sara and Really, the kid refusing to move on his own. There was no getting in by conventional means, but Really and Sara had Cleff.

“Cleff, just think about underground,” Sara told Cleff.

Doom. Ground. Death. Buried. Under. Ground. Under. That's not what she wants. We're at Evil Inc. Underground. Path? Wait. I see a bomb under there!

Outside Cleff's mind, the ground began to shake – then, a meter wide slit in the ground began to form. No, not a slit, a staircase. A

staircase leading toward Evil Inc. When the ground stopped shaking, Sara and Really peered down the newly formed path. They couldn't see where it went from the ground level.

“Well, let's hurry, before anyone else notices,” Sara said, being adventurous and dragging Cleff along with her. Sara hurried down the steps and Really followed. *Why did Cleff know to make a staircase? And where did it lead?*

After hundreds of stairs, they found what they were looking for. Cleff has made a new entrance to a large cavernous room with nothing in it but rocks – and a giant bomb right in the middle.

“Oh my god,” Sara muttered upon recognizing the gigantic device. She turned to Cleff. “Get rid of it! Now! Make it disappear!”

Cleff walked around the bomb lifelessly and slowly, dully staring at it. Finally, after giving it a thorough stare-over, he turned to Sara and Really and said, “We're doomed.”

“So make it disappear!” screamed Sara in frustration. “Whatever it is you do to make staircases appear and catching people falling, or making cards disappear, use that to make the bomb disappear!”

Bomb. Disappear. Cleff's head raced. Nine. Disappear? Go poof? Eight. This thing. I have to get rid. Seven. of it. Why is my head. Six. counting down. Five. I'm not doing that. Four. That's coming from somewhere else. “Three,” he said aloud. No. Disappear. “Two.”

Sara was bewildered by the counting down. “No!” she screamed. “Don't set it off!” But the bomb hadn't been set off by Cleff. It had already

been remotely detonated minutes ago, and an invisible timer was ticking inside the bomb. Cleff was merely interpreting it.

“One,” Cleff looked at the ground, defeated. Then he looked up at Sara and smiled at her.

Pretty. Her face. “I like...”

KABOOM. Loud noise. Destruction. Everything being destroyed. Destroyed. Destroyed. Destroyed. Destroyed. Destroyed. Destroyed. De

–

Very watched it all from his office window on the Moon. He had triggered it all earlier than he had wanted to – only seven of the bombs were in place. But that seemed to be enough for him. He grinned heartily as the world contorted itself, splitting, cracking, caving in on itself, parts breaking off. All the people in pain, in horror – and he was just sitting in his office, laughing at them. Maybe it was better to only have seven bombs rather than thirteen. Thirteen would have been too thorough – the world would have split apart much too easily – people would have died easier. No...seven bombs brought more suffering – the world was being destroyed, but slowly – so he could watch and enjoy it. All from his little office on the Moon.

5. The Moon

Very wasn't the only one to survive though. Plenty of Germans had went up to space to the moon base that day to be greeted to a base ruled over by Very Evil. It only took a lot of money going form Very's pocket to Wolfgang Ritter's, the head scientist, to make this so.

There were also a small number of people who had prototype space ships too – besides Very's early model, several others were sold to a few multimillionaires – and upon feeling the ground shake and open up below them, they fled to their space ships with their closest friends and family and took off for the Moon.

There also was a very peculiar case where a man standing right next to one of the bombs survived as it went off. Miraculous indeed, especially when you consider that the two people standing next to him were vaporized instantaneously. But the survivor, well, he was vaporized too, yet somehow his mind – his consciousness – stayed intact. But it currently had the brain power of an infant; no, a dog; no, an insect; no, a cell. Cleff was conscious, but no thoughts swirled in his brain. Only patterns. Sounds, loops, repetitions. The bomb going off, Sara screaming – Cleff didn't comprehend these sounds, but they were playing in his head. And they horrified him. He might have no brain at this point – he might be drifting in his thoughts entirely, but he still felt horror. That was all he felt. Horror. If you could even call it that. For minutes, hours, just these sounds playing back, or maybe it was static, and what was he? Was Cleff a thing? Where were his thoughts? Cleff couldn't even think questions – and none of the answers would ever be clear. He was a part of the void – like

everyone else is supposed to be a part of when they die – but Cleff could not die. Certainly not like this. Again, not that he knew that.

But then – it all stopped. Cleff had thoughts again. Except, all he could see in front of him was darkness. He saw only black, but it was a comprehensible black. He knew things were just dark because he was seeing it. His thinking consciousness was back.

But do I have a body? Cleff asked himself, floating in the darkness. He looked down, and there it was. Pristine and intact – undamaged. It had reassembled itself somehow – maybe from some deep need hidden in Cleff's consciousness to have a body – or maybe it was just magic. Regardless, Cleff turned his head around to observe his location: space.

Behind him, the destruction of the Earth. The horror continued even in self-awareness – the world was destroying itself. Continents once as steady as rocks were burrowing themselves deep into the Earth, and water and magma overtook everything. Land was splitting, the crust was breaking, and Cleff just watched. He had these powers – he had the power to be breathing and living in space right now – yet nothing in him told him that he could prevent this disaster, this tragedy. Maybe the power to reset the world was locked away in him, but he couldn't find it. He didn't even know himself. He didn't know how he got here and –

Sara. Her face. He didn't actually see it melt away in the explosion, but he saw the horror on her face before it disappeared – before he disappeared. And...he never finished his sentence – that he liked her. He liked her – and now she was gone. Everything was gone, except the horror

and the Moon.

The Moon floated in the sky far away from him. The smaller white desolate rock surviving while its older brother – bigger and more alive – was crumbling. It was his only destination now though – the only place he could go, so he could do the only thing he could think of to do: Put the man behind all of this, Very Evil, into the worst torment he would ever feel – no, that the Universe would ever feel. Very would feel Cleff's own horror, but an infinite amount of times worse.

Anger coursed through Cleff's body, and he propelled himself toward the Moon.

Wolfgang Ritter walked into Very's office holding the item that started it all – the God's Elixir thermos. Grief and anger were worn across his face. He was troubled deeply – clearly. He started, “I have zinned. I never should have bought zis trinket from you, you evil man. If I had known you would do zis – to my friends – my daughter – I would never have allowed you to have any of my money. Maybe God vill have mercy on me if I return zis trinket – it's not like you can do anything more with it anyway.” Ritter threw the thermos as hard as his old bones would allow into Very's face. Very let it hit him and fall to the ground.

The scarred villain laughed a bit at Ritter's misery. “Dr. Ritter, please,” he said playfully, “don't take all of the credit. Because really, this was all me. None of it was your doing.”

Ritter scowled and turned to leave, but then turned back around to

add a small quip. “You're not going to live very long up here, you know. Everyone hates you. And money is worthless here. Nothing can protect you.”

Very giggled briefly to himself. “I don't really care what you do to me now. I already destroyed your world. I won.” Ritter stormed out of the room as Very only laughed. The thermos lay still on the ground next to Very's desk.

Really Bad walked into Very's office holding the item that started it all – the God's Elixir thermos, still fully intact, liquid inside and all. “Ritter gave this back to me as he rescued me from Earth,” Really explained. Really was upset at the destruction of the world, but he had his composure still. After all, he didn't have much on Earth anyway. “I can't believe you, Very. This is horrible, what you did. Who actually agreed to make those bombs for you when I refused?”

Very smiled. Really, as horrified as he was, was curious about his own work. “Lots of outsourcing, and lots of time. Actually, the first seven came easy, and I think I could have destroyed the world then. But I wanted a clean destruction – so it took a few months of unclear objectives and contracting – but in the end: I won!” Very laughed.

Really looked down at the thermos. “God's Elixir,” he said aloud. “You know, everyone's focused so much on what's been written on the side of this thermos – but not on the liquid contained within it.”

Very stopped laughing. What was Really talking about? Who cares

about old water in a four thousand year old container?

Really started to unscrew the top of the thermos when out of no where, another hand appeared on the thermos. Confused, Really looked up and saw a familiar face suddenly in front of him. A face he thought he had thrown into oblivion.

“Who...what...but...didn't I kill you when I threw you in the river?” Really babbled.

Cleff touched down on the Moon. Barely conscious from the lack of air – barely conscious from everything that had happened – all he knew was that he had to get inside that moon base. Cleff trudged toward it, miles in the distance. His body was just a shell now. A shell for his ultimate goal – to make Very Evil feel the consequences of his actions. His feet plopped forward, slowly, one after the other, slowly, so slowly, walking toward the base.

Hours of monotonous walking later, Cleff had made it all the way to the base. He was in front of the air lock door with no way of knowing how to open it, but he didn't care. Cleff walked right through the walls, like a ghost.

The entrance room to the base was grand, but no one was in it. Two stories, large central staircase, hallways leading every which way. Cleff didn't see any of it. His body told him which direction Very was in, and he followed this pure instinct, devoid of thought. Cleff climbed the staircase and walked like a zombie to a small doorway in the corner of the

room. He didn't bother to use the door handle – Cleff walked right into the door, breaking it off its hinges and making it fall inward. The door fell to the ground, and Cleff stepped inside the room to be standing in Very's office.

Very stood up from his chair. “You!” he shouted. “Again! How did you get here!?”

Cleff just stood still, staring at Very in silence. He breathed slowly, trying to summon all of the horror within him. Then, without a further word passing between the two, Very grabbed his head and started shaking it. He began to scream. Not a normal scream either. A high pitched, blood curdling scream. Very fell to the ground and started rolling around, still screaming. Cleff gave a small smile, mildly content. He continued to stare at Very, who was writhing in horror on the floor, when he noticed something – the thermos on the ground. With the goal of making Very feel pure horror complete, Cleff picked up the thermos, and his thoughts began to clear a little.

This was the thing that started it all, thought Cleff. This tiny object destroyed the world. Started it all. Started. Start. Start? Where did this come from? I want to know.

Cleff gripped the thermos tightly, and a few seconds later he disappeared. The thermos fell to the ground, next to Very's body, who was still doomed to squirm in horror.

Yet Cleff hadn't let go of the thermos himself. He was still holding the past version of it – or rather the past versions of it. He was tracing it

backwards through time – he needed to see where the thermos had come from. He needed to see what started it all.

6. Started It All

Cleff was in a museum with an exhibit about the thermos sitting in front of him. Except the inscription about the item was inscribed in stone in a language that he couldn't quite comprehend.

Cleff looked around his surroundings. The architecture was ancient – thousands of years old, it looked like. A man wearing robes approached Cleff, and he said something in a language that Cleff didn't understand.

Language. Words. Man, talking. Saying περίεργα ρούχα. Wait. How do I know what letters those sounds make? Greek. Language. Words. Strange clothes. He's asking about my clothes?

“I'm not from around here,” Cleff replied in perfect Greek.

“Oh,” said the man, Cleff now understanding his language. “How did you get in? The Museum of the World's Wonders is closed.”

“I just appeared here,” said Cleff.

The man was annoyed by this response, but he kept his composure. “I must escort you out of here, I'm sorry.” He grabbed Cleff by the arm, but Cleff retracted.

“No! I have to know where this thermos came from!” Cleff blurted.

The man grabbed Cleff more violently this time. “No, you have to

leave!” Trapped by the man's grip, Cleff let out a feeling of frustration from within himself, and the man suddenly collapsed – unconscious.

With the man taken care of, Cleff had freedom to investigate the thermos on display. It was entirely unprotected, no glass case or anything, just a pedestal and a fancy pillow. He looked at the Greek inscription again, now that he understood the language: “Thermos with strange markings on it: unknown meaning. Found by a shepherd while walking on the high roads.”

The inscription was fairly vague on where the thermos came from – but Cleff realized in that moment that all of this tracing of the thermos' past did not matter. He could destroy this thermos right now, and Very would never have the money to destroy the world. It could all end now, and everything would go back to normal. Cleff picked up the thermos and

–

Well that was odd. It was light. There was no liquid inside of it. Then – where did the God's Elixir itself come from? Oh well, it didn't matter, really. Cleff would be getting rid of the thermos forever anyway in just a few seconds.

“Wait!” a voice Cleff recognized shouted in front of them. “You'll create a paradox if you destroy that!”

Cleff looked up to see Really Bad had popped out of no where.

“Really?” Cleff had no idea how he was here. “Weren't you destroyed in the explosion?”

“What explosion?” Really asked. Well actually there was the

destruction of the Earth, but that was less explosion and more...collapsing and crumbling.

Cleff ignored his question to his question. "What are you doing four thousand years in the past?" he asked.

"You told me that I had to stop you from destroying that thermos. So I followed it here. Or maybe I brought it here, I'm not sure," Really explained.

"What?" Cleff had no idea what Really was talking about.

"Look, I don't know what's going on either; I barely know you," Really said. "I mean, I thought I drowned you, but now you're here. All I know is that I need to follow this thermos to the future, and I don't even know why I know that. Just don't destroy that thermos!"

Cleff was about to ask more, but Really touched the thermos and disappeared. Cleff was alone again (well, besides the unconscious man on the ground). Cleff looked down at the thermos. If he couldn't destroy it, then he could still trace it backward farther. Cleff held the thermos tightly, and disappeared.

He reappeared on an unpaved road on a mountainside, no thermos in sight. No civilization in sight either. This must be the place that the inscription was talking about: the high road where the shepherd found the thermos. But where was the thermos?

Cleff looked down the road for a few seconds, seeing nothing, until out of thin air, the thermos popped into existence and fell to the ground. No, that couldn't be right. How could the thermos just pop into existence?

There had to be more. Cleff picked up the thermos and investigated it. The equations were still on it and it was still empty. Nothing was making any sense.

So Cleff did all that he knew how to do. He held the thermos tightly and disappeared – this time, following the thermos into the emptiness it came from.

Cleff reappeared back in Very's office on the Moon, holding the thermos. Oh, and Really was holding the thermos too. And Very and Really were both very confused.

“Who...what...but...didn't I kill you when I threw you in the river?” Really babbled.

Cleff was confused by the comment – it was the same thing Really had said four thousand years ago – but when had he been thrown in a river? And why wasn't Very writhing in pain? And how did Really make it back to the Moon? And...the thermos was full now! When did it become full? And how had it been that when trying to track the thermos backwards into its past, he wound up in the future?

All these contradictions were flowing through Cleff's head, which wasn't even working at full capacity, so all he could answer was, “I don't know.”

Very chimed in now. “Ah, the twerp from the museum. Thanks for making it so easy for me to destroy the world. You were a big help.”

Cleff didn't exactly have it in him to summon unspeakable horrors right now, so he just stretched his arm across the room to punch Very in

the face, making him fall to the ground, out of his chair, unconscious. This left Really and Cleff together to speak.

“Why is everything so different?” Cleff asked Really.

“What do you mean?” Really needed clarification.

“Well, this thermos is full, but I should have already drank its contents when Very forced me to drink it earlier, him thinking it was poison,” Cleff gave as an example.

“No, that's not right. Very told me to kill you, and I did. I threw you in the Hudson,” Really said.

An explanation came to Cleff's head. This was a different series of events. The thermos had come from another timeline. It must have originally come from this point in time, meaning two things: Cleff could still trace the origin of the thermos further backward, and that the thermos was about to be emptied and it was about to disappear.

Cleff spoke with confidence. “Really, I need you to do something very important, and it's going to sound crazy. Drink the liquid in the thermos and hold it real tight. Think about four thousand years ago. And whatever you do, make sure that this thermos isn't destroyed.”

What?” Really was confused. This kid he barely knew seemed to trust him. This kid he killed trusted him.

“Just do it,” Cleff said.

Really stared down at the thermos in his hand. He opened the top of it and stared in at the dark liquid inside. *Well, here goes. Not like it matters since everything else is gone.* Really chugged the elixir down. *Now*

what am I supposed to do? The world's...getting...fuzzy. Just...hold tightly and think about four thousand years ago. Four thousand...years ago.

Cleff held the thermos too, thinking about the past. But he needed to go back in time to the thermos' past, not with Really. A few seconds later, they all disappeared – Cleff, the thermos, and Really, leaving Very unconscious in his office alone.

Cleff was in the ancient museum again, the exhibit of the thermos in front of him. The robed man saw him and was walking toward him. Cleff just saved himself the trouble of talking to him and made the man fall unconscious by staring at him.

Which timeline was Cleff in? If he was in the same timeline as before, Really should appear when he grabs the thermos, and the thermos would be empty.

Cleff grabbed the thermos, and it was full. Different timeline then. He read the inscription for the thermos exhibit, but it was the same as before. The thermos appeared on a high road and was found by a shepherd.

Yet...something did seem a little different about the thermos. The inscriptions on it – the equations – they seemed...newer. Less ancient and worn down. Maybe it was nothing and he didn't notice it before, but it was odd. It meant this thermos probably had even more history that Cleff had yet to uncover. So...

Back to the high road. Same situation as before. No thermos, then

one suddenly pops into existence and falls to the ground. Cleff picked it up. Still full. Still, the inscriptions looked new. Cleff held it tightly now, and disappeared, his curiosity taking him to a place he could never expect.

Really's duty to warn Cleff not to destroy the thermos was done, yet for some reason, Really felt his journey was not yet complete. He touched the thermos and disappeared, leaving a confused Cleff behind in the ancient museum.

Really reappeared in a vault room that he was oh so familiar with: the vault room for the New York National Museum. It was uninhabited, and Really stood in front of vault G1 – the vault containing the thermos, if it was still in there. After all, Really had no idea what day it was. He just knew there had to be a reason why he was here.

He opened the vault from memory, and there it was, the thermos lying there in its oversized container. He picked it up. Empty. What had that Tim kid said? Something about how he had been poisoned by Very but survived? If Really filled the thermos with water and maybe put a poison label on the thermos, he could make that timeline happen.

Really got to work. He reached into his pocket to see what he had on him to find to his surprise: a marker, a circular sticker, and a slip of paper. *How strange. I never put those in my pockets, but they were exactly what I wanted right now.*

Really wrote, "Warning: Poison" with the marker on the circular sticker and stuck it to the thermos. Now then...he still had this slip of

paper. He could leave a message for Tim to let him know everything was going according to plan, but he shouldn't give away too many details about the future so he wouldn't cause a paradox. "Use it well, Tim" came lazily to mind – vague enough in meaning to be interpreted in more than one way, but specific enough to let Tim know that he was being taken care of, that he was being watched over. Really wrote the phrase down and slipped it in the thermos. *Use your new life well, Tim, because I stole it from you before. Now to get some water –*

But Really suddenly felt very sick. He couldn't move his legs, falling to the floor. He was going to upchuck something – he knew it. For whatever reason, instinct told Really that the best place to upchuck was the thermos, so he unscrewed the top and puked in. But...this didn't feel like ordinary vomit. He felt not like he was releasing food from his body, but his essence. He looked in the thermos after he puked – a dark, odorless liquid. *Where did it come from? Why was it so clean? Why do I feel fuzzy again?* Really looked down at his body, and it was disappearing. But he didn't feel like he was going into nothingness, no, there was something else he was moving into. Words were appearing in the air – "The five billion dollar one?" Memories disappearing. Surroundings changing. He was back in his home. Holding a phone. Why did he feel weird suddenly? He didn't feel weird. He was normal. He was just in a phone conversation with Very.

"There's gonna be some heavy security on that," Really told Very.

"Do it," said Very, and he hung up. Really sighed and started

working. He logged onto the museum website and tried logging in as an admin, with the password being “password.” To his surprise, it worked. He quickly picked up his phone and called Very back.

Cleff appeared in a scientific laboratory, with a team of four people staring at him in confusion. The thermos was in front of him, hooked into some sort of strange machine, about the size of a microwave. It had plenty of buttons and meters on it that Cleff did not understand. This was the future, clearly.

“Did it work,” one scientist asked.

“No, it's still there,” said another.

“But look at his clothes! We must have accidentally brought him in from the past.”

“Is that how he got here?”

“Someone ask him.”

Cleff asked a question of his own to these four scientists: “What year is it?”

“2189” answered a man who looked about in his forties, but losing hair and wearing glasses. “What year are you from?” he asked back.

“2014,” Cleff answered.

“That's right before the cataclysm,” a female scientist pointed out. She was in her late thirties or so and wore short hair.

“The cataclysm,” Cleff questioned.

“A few more years into your future, a man named Very Evil will

plant giant bombs in five locations around the world and blow them all up at once. This caused the Earth to become unstable – volcanoes erupted, earthquakes split open the ground, extreme weather raged, and now we're in an ice age. Half of the world's population died and human civilization has greatly suffered,” explained the woman.

So this is a separate timeline where Very Evil didn't have the resources to destroy the world, but he still managed to wreck it, thought Cleff. Meaning even without the thermos, the world would be in ruins.

The man continued from her, “We're trying to prevent all of that from happening by making our past history more advanced. When previous generations have access to our theories now, they'll be able to use space travel and other scientific advances to reduce the casualties in the cataclysm.”

“Why don't you just stop Very Evil?” asked Cleff.

“Well – it's a fluke really that we can do this at all,” answered the woman. “We found this thermos in a museum and it had a strange liquid inside it. We investigated and determined we can send this thermos back in time using its liquid, so we built a time machine and wrote all of man's important equations on it. We'll change history for the better when we send it back in time, we hope.”

So that was where the equations on the thermos came from. These four scientists, just trying to help. But in the process, they created an even worse timeline: one where the world gets destroyed. It was becoming clearer and clearer to Cleff that there was in fact a source to all this

madness. He could remove the thermos from the timeline if he wanted to, but bad things would still happen because of one man.

“Go ahead and send the thermos into the past,” said Cleff. “But you're not going to change anything, I'm sorry.”

“What?” asked one of the scientists.

Cleff touched the thermos and disappeared. He was going even further back into the thermos' timeline.

Cleff appeared in the vault room in the New York National Museum, right in front of vault G1 – the vault that holds the thermos. He was about to open it to check on the thermos, but he heard someone coming. Cleff hid behind another row of vaults.

Footsteps came extremely close to him, but then they stopped. He heard a vault opening, and Cleff got curious. He peeked out to see who was opening the vault, and it was himself – his past self, doing intern work. Tim was opening vault G1. Cleff moved behind a different set of vaults to get a better view of what was going on.

Tim opened the vault, and inside was the thermos – except it was different. The thermos was pristine – no inscriptions. *So...in this timeline, Very had no motivation to steal the thermos because it wasn't so highly valued – no one knows the power of the God's Elixir itself. Yet Very is still going to go on to wreck this world anyway.*

Tim put the thermos back in the vault and closed it. Cleff hurried to the door to leave the vault room while Tim was filling in data, and then

after that, hurried outside to New York's streets. He had a goal now – a way to save everything – he had to stop Very. And he knew where his apartment was.

Upon entering the apartment building, Cleff hurried up the stairs to approach Very's front door. *This is it. I'm going to kick down this door, and then just make Very disappear. That will resolve everything.* But right as Cleff extended his foot backward, voice stopped him.

“Hello,” said Sara Bechdel, poking her way out of her room. Cleff put his foot down. “What brings you to these apartments?” Sara asked the question in a friendly tone, yet she was a stranger to Cleff here. “I'm Sara, by the way.”

This is not the Sara from before, thought Cleff. She's Sara from a different timeline, and I don't belong here. I can't talk to her; I just need to end this.

But Cleff couldn't kick down the door now. Not with her watching. “I'm Cleff,” he answered. “And I'm just seeing a friend.”

“The bald guy?” questioned Sara. “He has friends?”

“Well, yeah,” Cleff lied. He knocked on Very's door. A few seconds later, the ugly, bald, scarred man answered.

“Who are you?” Very asked scornfully.

Sara giggled to herself as Cleff's lie fell apart, and Cleff felt a tad embarrassed. But his embarrassment was irrelevant – the mission needed to be completed. Very was right here, right in front of him, and he had yet

to destroy the world. He needed to go.

“This is important, Very,” Cleff said, trying to act like he did know the man – well he did, but not in this timeline. “We need to speak in private.”

Very paused to think for a moment but then said, “No, go away,” slamming the door.

“What a friend,” Sara quipped at Cleff sarcastically. Cleff sighed.

“I really do know him though,” Cleff defended himself. He knocked on Very's door again. No answer.

Cleff was limited in his options. He had to stop Very now. He had to restore everything to order. He had to break in Very's door, but Sara didn't seem to want to move – she just watched him.

“Hey Sara, don't scream please,” Cleff requested, deciding on his course of action.

Before Cleff even saw her make a facial reaction to his words, Cleff smashed Very's door in. Sara screamed. *Darn it*, thought Cleff. *But really, it doesn't matter. As soon as I do this, we'll all be safe.* Cleff walked into Very's room to see Very scurrying to open one of his drawers, pulling out a gun, and aiming it directly at Cleff.

“Back off!” Very screamed. “This is my apartment and I will not hesitate to kill you!” Cleff advanced forward toward the man, and Very shook in slight fear. Very didn't know how this kid didn't find his gun intimidating.

When Cleff was halfway across the room, Very fired. Cleff felt pain

pound him in the chest, but it didn't incapacitate him in any way. He just kept moving forward. There was a scream from the hallway behind him – Sara's.

Cleff got a quarter of the way there – another shot fired into his chest. More pain, but again, he didn't care. None of it would matter when Very was gone. Cleff made it all the way across the room to the bald man now, and he rested his palms on Very's head. Very fired another shot, but his whole body was shaking in fear. Somehow this man was impervious to bullets.

And now it was Very's time to disappear. Cleff had done this before many times in his magic tricks. It was just a matter of controlled use of his power, and then Very would be off in the void of non-existence.

Yet for some reason, when Cleff looked down at Very, he didn't see a man of evil. Yes, this was the man that would destroy the world several timelines over, but...this was a frightened man. A scared man. A scarred man. Cleff looked deep into Very's eyes and Cleff's thoughts began to swirl.

Scar. Redemption. Child. Father. Car. Accident. Death. Hatred. Redemption. Evil. Twenty-five years ago.

And suddenly Very and Cleff were no longer in an apartment, but a bank. Very's gun disappeared from his hand, but he was still trembling in fear.

“How did I get to a bank!?” Very shouted in confusion.

Clearly Very had failed to notice his surroundings, because

something very important was going on in this bank: it was being robbed. All over the bank, people had their heads on the floor as a man with a shotgun walked over them.

“I said stay quiet!” the man rushed over to Very and pointed the shotgun in his face. Very trembled in fear and elation as he recognized the man: it was his father.

“Dad?” Very muttered confusedly to himself. Very realized where he was – twenty-five years in the past – but how in the world was that possible? And shouldn't he be eight years old and sitting in the car? He never set foot in the bank when his dad robbed it. He just played lookout until his dad came back and they...crashed.

Very looked at the kid who brought him here. Maybe this guy didn't want to hurt him after all. Maybe...this kid, whoever he was, wanted to change Very's history for the better.

Very whispered to Cleff, “Why did you bring me here? This is the day my dad died.”

Cleff answered to the best that he could. “I don't know how we got here. I just touched you and now we're here.”

An idea clicked in Cleff's mind. *Very's dad died today? Very didn't have a father growing up? What if...what if the source of all this awfulness was not Very's fault but instead the fault of the tragedy that happened to him: Very's father dying.* Cleff asked a simple pair of questions. “How does he die, and when?”

“A car crash,” Very answered the former question quickly. He

thought for a few moments, observing his father stuff bags full of money, before answering the latter. “In like two minutes.”

Very's father grabbed the money bags and ran out the door.

“Quick!” Cleff said to Very, getting up. “We have to stop that from happening!” Cleff and Very ran toward the door, following Very's father outside. When Cleff and Very made it down the bank's steps, Very's father was already entering his car, parked right outside in the parking lot.

They had to think fast. In just moments, the car would swerve away, off to its doom. “Where's your gun!?” shouted Cleff to Very.

“I don't know! It disappeared!” Very replied. He panicked and searched his pockets. Nothing.

The car began to move – there was no time. Cleff ran to the exit of the parking lot and stood there. If Very's father wanted to leave to pursue his doom, he'd have to go through Cleff first.

Very watched the scene from the distance. His father, seeing a person blocking his way out, didn't even care. He sped up his car and then rammed it into Cleff, but Cleff was a statue. The middle of the car morphed around him, completely totaled.

Only seconds later were there police sirens. All around police advanced up to the car, and in just a few moments, Very's father was captured and arrested. Very touched where his scar was. *No scar. Wait, why did I think I had a scar? That would be silly – I didn't have time to get a scar. I am only eight after all.* As the police gently helped Very out of the wrecked car, he asked, “Who was that man that stopped the car?” *It was*

really strange. A man strong enough to stop a car appears out of no where, then immediately disappears. Very put it out of his mind.

Daddy looked down at his son. "I'm sorry, Very" he said. "I failed." Then he was dragged away into a police car. Little Very didn't know why, but for some reason he felt happy – he felt like a huge disaster had just been averted. He smiled.

Cleff appeared again, back at the high road from four thousand years ago. How had he gotten here? Usually the jumps he made were intentional at least – but all Cleff could find in his thoughts was that he had to do something important.

He waited a few moments like before, waiting for the thermos to pop into existence out of no where. But...a few minutes later, and nothing happened.

Cleff had a gut instinct inside of him. Maybe this was his turn. Maybe he created the thermos in the first place – right here, right now. What he thought to be the cause of a ton of trouble was really part of the solution.

The oh so familiar fuzzy thoughts. *Thermos. Me. Create. I. Am. God's Elixir. Thermos. Me. I. Am.* Before Cleff realized it, he was floating in the air. *Thermos. Me. I. Am. God's Elixir. Creation. Now. Me. I. Am. Thermos.*

And then Cleff fell to the ground, unmoving. Granted, he probably wasn't moving because he was a thermos.

Epilogue

Tim sat in a booth at his favorite pizzeria alone. He had just gotten off of a long night shift at work and really need some pizza.

The waiter came over to take his order. A nice-looking bald man with a great smile. "Can I just have two slices?" ordered Tim.

The man began to write that down when a strange girl slipped into Tim's booth. "Sorry," she smiled. "This place is crowded. Mind if I sit here?"

Tim didn't mind. This girl was actually pretty cute. "I don't mind at all," he said. He smiled back at her.

She turned to the waiter. "I'll have two slices," she ordered. She looked back at the man for a second, thinking she might recognize him – she did. Of course she did, it was her next door neighbor!

"Very! Hey! I didn't know you worked here!" she said.

"Well, you know, it's a job," said Very, then walked away to fulfill the order.

"Four slices," Very told the order to a handsome man with nice hair, working the oven. It was Very's friend Really.

"Four slices coming right up," Really said, and he shoved another pizza pie into the oven.

Back at the booth, the girl introduced herself. "Hi, I'm Sara."

“Hi, I'm Tim,” Tim said back. He couldn't help but feel like there was already a connection between him and this girl *Sara*. *Have I met someone else with that name before? Maybe – it is a common name after all*. Maybe there wasn't anything deeper. He should probably just make small talk.

Tim smiled and asked, “So what do you do?”

“I'm a reporter,” she answered, looking in Tim's eyes and smiling. “Got any big stories to report?” she added jokingly.

Tim thought for a bit – nope, he couldn't think of anything too interesting to tell her. “Nothing big,” Tim responded. “My life is the museum, really. I'm pretty much always there.”

“Oh, that's too bad” laughed Sara. “I'm still looking for a really big scoop. I want to get some front page news!”

“Well, you sure came to the wrong guy!” Tim said in jest. Sara and Tim laughed. It was funny, really. Very.

The End