

THE STORY THAT EATS ITSELF

M.E.T.A.
BOOK 1



By Justin D. Tracy & Lorran Garrison

The Story That Eats Itself

My Elevator to Anywhere

Book One

by Justin D. Tracy and Lorrان Garrison

Chapter 1: Sunday Night Popcorn Panic

Look, I know what you're thinking.
Sunday night. School tomorrow. Obviously, we were
working on our project like responsible humans.

Except we weren't.
Because Brain had an idea.

"Imagine popcorn," he said, eyes wild with
invention, "that *feels what you feel*. Like, if you're
scared, it turns blue and smells like sweat. If you're
in love, it smells like cinnamon and your stomach
flips. If you're angry—it hisses!"

Brain is, of course, my actual, LITERAL brain that
jumped out of my head a few years back. Long
story. He runs around on his two noodly legs and
swings from his eye stalks.

Pretty normal.

Wodensday, perched on the window seat with her
laptop open and the actual project half-done,

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groaned. “We were supposed to analyze how emojis replaced hieroglyphs in digital communication.”

“This *is* communication!” Brain shouted, arms flailing. “Olfactory emotion-based snack tech is the future!”

We were in the dining room of the 1888 House—Wodensday’s creepy, beautiful, haunted mansion of a home. Its stone walls and old chandeliers made everything feel dramatic, which didn’t help the tension. Especially when Brain pulled out a hot plate, an old nebulizer, and a glowing green spoon that might’ve once been in Granny Eula’s lab. It was all precariously attached, but it felt full of potential energy.

“Please don’t,” Wodensday said.

“I must,” Brain replied, already pouring popcorn kernels into the contraption. “It’s my brand-new *Mood Infuser*. I can use it to give food the true taste of emotion.” The machine buzzed and gurgled like even it was worried about its purpose.

I sat at the table holding a Sharpie with a half-finished drawing of a barfing emoji in front of me. “Shouldn’t we maybe—like—do the actual assignment?”

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Brain cranked a knob, pulled a level and tapped a button. The kernel started pulsing.

"It's reacting!" he whispered. "Bob! Say something emotionally profound!"

"Uh... I'm deeply tired and filled with dread?"

The kernel turned gray and started to steam.

"YESSSS!" Brain shouted.

"NOPE!" Wodensday slammed her laptop shut. "I'm not getting a zero on this assignment so you can expand your horizons on flavor combos."

Then it happened.

The kernel *burst*—not with a pop, but a wet *splurt*—releasing a cloud that reeked of burnt butter, synthetic pheromones, and what might've been angry-cinnamon. The room filled with smoke and the distinct scent of lost hope.

From under the table, Henry let out a lazy, "Scurple, gurle...." Then he flopped onto his other side and went back to sleep. Six feet of peaceful, oblivious pet maggot.

Granny Eula stormed in, wearing a pink nightgown, bunny slippers and her welding jacket, her gray hair

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frizzing out like she'd been struck by lightning or a curse.

"WHAT IN THE NAME OF TESLA'S GHOST—" she said, pinching her nose closed.

"We were experimenting with olfactory linguistics," Brain offered, wiping goop off his goggles.

"The odor of words?" Granny sighed. "That all depends what they're printed on."

"It was *popcorn*," Wodensday snapped, waving the smoky air away.

"And now it's *ruined*," wept Brain.

"I think it smelled like anxiety," I said helpfully.

Granny Eula pointed at us with the massive wrench she held in one hand. "No more mood-snacks after dusk. And if I find out you used my fog condenser to churn butter, I will turn your skeletons into wind chimes."

She stomped back out, muttering about "teenagers and spiritual grease fires."

We sat in silence.

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Wodensday stood, brushing burnt kernels off her hoodie. "I'm turning in an apology letter and a bag of regret-flavored popcorn. That's our project now."

Brain blinked, a bit miffed. "You're welcome."

"No," she said, grabbing a pillow and throwing it at him. "*No one* is welcome. We can't turn this in! They'll have to evacuate the classroom!"

And that's how our English group project became a public health violation.

Tomorrow was going to be awful.

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Chapter 2: The Substitute from Downstream

Monday morning at school usually smelled like cafeteria disinfectant, but it was overpowered by the emotional popcorn from my backpack. Maybe even worse—I had exactly *one* sentence scribbled in Sharpie on a huge piece of white foam posterboard for the project we were supposed to present today:

“Emojis are like ancient hieroglyphs but dumber.”

Brain called it “pithy.” Wodensday called it “the end of our academic careers.”

So I wasn’t exactly in a good mood when I shuffled into first period and saw the note on the board:

“Mr. Tadlock is out today. Please welcome Mr. Knaye.”

The class groaned. Mr. Tadlock might’ve been ancient, but at least he let Brain doodle on the whiteboard as long as it was “historically relevant.”

Mr. Knaye stepped into the room like he’d been waiting in the shadows for us to arrive.

He was tall. Too tall. Not *basketball* tall —

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mannequin-in-a-department-store-you-only-notice-at-midnight tall.

Waxy skin. Eyelids that blinked slightly off-rhythm. And he wore a corduroy suit that looked like it had never been bent at the elbows.

But the weirdest part was the tiepin. Emerald green, slightly cracked, and pulsing like it had a heartbeat.

Wodensday took a sharp breath. "*Ether crystal!*"

She was right! Just what we needed to power up the crazy elevator in Wednesday's basement! We've been hunting for more of them for months.

Her eyes narrowed, "Do you think he even knows?"

"Knows what?" said Brain, flopping onto his desk. "That we have a sub? I'm sure he does! He *IS* the sub, silly pants!"

I looked back across the room.

I've seen what happens when an ether crystal cracks—I don't recommend being on the same block when it goes—but I'd never seen one glow after it broke.

And something about this one looked... angry.

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“Good morning, students,” Mr. Knaye said in a voice like a steam engine. “My name is Mr. Knaye. As you hear, I pronounce the K in K-naye. It’s like ‘nay’—or ‘neigh’—but with a K in front.”

He smiled.

“I find silent letters dishonest.”

We all sat there dumbfounded.

He handed out worksheets with unsettling speed, gliding up and down the rows in seconds—nothing like Mr. Tadlock’s usual elderly shuffle.

I read the title of the assignment:

“Exploring the Linguistic Roots of Pre-Phonetic Symbol Structures.”

Mr. Knaye turned and smiled. Something about the way his eyes gleamed made my shoulders relax before I even realized they’d been tense.

“Which,” he said pleasantly, “is a fancy way of saying: copy these spooky symbols that look like they were pulled from the walls of ancient tombs.”

I leaned toward Brain and whispered, “Cool. So today we’re doing evil IKEA instructions.”

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Brain didn't answer.

I glanced over. His pencil was already moving.

Across the room, everyone was leaning over their papers, quietly copying the symbols like it was the most normal homework in the world.

The room had gotten very quiet.

Mr. Knaye hummed softly as he walked between the desks.

And for some reason... my hand picked up my pencil.

The page had rows of jagged, curling glyphs. No translations. No instructions. Just... lines and loops and things that looked like they wanted to crawl off the paper and whisper secrets to your pancreas.

I coughed.

"Silence, please," Mr. Knaye said gently. His lips barely moved.

Wodensday raised her hand.

He didn't look at her.

She lowered it slowly, her eyes narrowing.

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I tried copying the first row, but my pen kept slipping. My hand cramped. The paper felt... too smooth. Like it didn't want ink on it.

From his seat, Brain sniffled. "Uh. Bob?"

"Yeah?" I whispered.

"Your nose is bleeding."

I rubbed the back of my hand across my upper lip. It came back bright red.

I raised my hand, "Can I go to the bathroom?"

Without looking at me, Mr. Knaye said, "Once you've finished your work."

My eyes went so wide I thought they might fall out. "But I—"

"*Finished*," Mr. Knaye repeated.

Wodensday sat bolt upright. "Do you guys hear that?"

"Hear what?" I asked.

But I heard it, too.

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A soft hum. Not mechanical. Not musical. More like... the room was breathing. The glyphs shimmered ever so slightly in my vision.

Knaye walked between our desks, humming along with the room, low and rhythmic. Almost a lullaby. Almost a sea shanty. Almost a threat.

“Continue transcribing,” he said. “This is the root of all true language.”

My pen moved again. Against my better judgment. My wrist felt cold.

My lip was warm.

I looked at Brain. He looked dazed.

Wodensday’s pencil snapped in her hand.

Something was *wrong*.

And it was only first period.

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Chapter 3: "It's a Girl Thing"

Okay, look. I'm not a professional vibe-reader, but I know when a room is going sideways.

And this room? This room had done a full cartwheel and was currently skidding on its face.

The humming from Mr. Knaye hadn't stopped. If anything, it was getting deeper. Slower. Like it was growing roots under the floor.

I glanced around. Everyone was scribbling in silence — not the focused kind, either. The hypnotized, vacant kind. Kids who normally couldn't sit still for ten seconds were bent over their papers like monks copying cursed scrolls.

Brain was muttering. One eye twitched.

"I'm drawing a spiral," he whispered. "But the spiral's drawing me back. Time is recursive. Bob, do you see it? The paper's breathing."

"Yep," I said. "Super normal Monday."

His noodle moved faster.

Wodensday slammed her broken pencil down. Not hard. Not dramatic. Just... final.

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"I need to go to the bathroom," she said, raising her hand.

Knaye didn't react. He just kept humming his strange song.

Then I started to see things.

The glyphs we were copying weren't staying on the page anymore. They were lifting off the paper—floating in the air around me, pulsing with a faint green light.

"I said," she repeated, standing now, voice sharp, "I need to go to the bathroom."

No response.

Then she tilted her head and said, loud enough for everyone to hear:

"It's a girl thing."

The words hung in the air like an emotional stink bomb.

Knaye stopped humming. Just for a second. He blinked once, like whatever rhythm he'd been following had suddenly skipped a beat.

"No one leaves," he said.

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But his voice wobbled. Just slightly. Like she'd torn a hole in whatever weird mental net he'd tossed over the class.

"I will *pee* on your chalkboard, mister," Wodensday snapped. "You want that? Because I'll do it."

Knaye flinched.

And Wodensday bolted.

She didn't look back. She didn't ask again. She just *left*, shoes slapping defiantly down the hallway.

Mr. Knaye's lips twitched. He muttered something in that language that made my skull itch. But he didn't chase her.

He just turned slowly back toward the board and started sketching another glyph. It pulsed green. Like electric moss on a tombstone.

And again I saw glyphs—hanging in the air in front of me.

Next to me, Brain whispered, "Ah."

"What?" I whispered back.

"The lattice," he said softly. "She disrupted it. The harmonic pattern collapsed for a moment."

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Mr. Knaye's humming grew louder.

The glyph on the board flared brighter. He began sketching another one, fast, sharp strokes like he was stitching the air back together.

And that's when I saw it.

Not just the glyphs.

A net.

Thin green threads stretching from symbol to symbol, weaving through the classroom like glowing spider silk.

Most of the kids were tangled in it.

Brain leaned forward, staring at the pattern like it was the most interesting puzzle in the universe.

"Oh, this is clever," he murmured, already drawing again. "He's rebuilding the overlay."

"Brain," I whispered.

No response.

His pen scratched faster.

I reached over and tried to take it.

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He tightened his gooey grip and kept writing.

“Brain,” I said again.

Nothing.

I tugged the pen harder.

He pulled it back and kept sketching spirals.

I let go.

“Fine,” I muttered.

“Then stay here.”

Brain froze.

His eye stalks twitched.

Then slowly turned toward me.

“You can't tell me what to do!” he said, standing up in his chair.

And just like that, the spell lost its grip on him.

He blinked hard, like someone waking up from a nap they didn't remember taking.

“Focus,” I said. “We're gonna be okay.”

But the truth was — I wasn't sure.

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We needed help. Fast.

And Wednesday had just walked straight into
whatever the next chapter was.

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Chapter 4: Bramble Breaks the Spell

I've seen Principal Bramble mad before — like when Brain set off a potato battery chain reaction that melted three lab tables in the science room. Or when my giant maggot Henry got into the gym ventilation ducts during "Bring Your Pet to School Day."

But this?

This wasn't mad.

This was battle-ready.

The classroom door slammed open so hard the hinges wheezed.

Wodensday marched in first, eyes blazing, and behind her came Bramble, trench coat flaring like he expected to bust a smuggling ring. He scanned the room once — the dim lighting, the blank stares, the rhythmic whisper-chant curling out of our mouths like fog — and growled.

"Mr. Knaye," he said. "What in the name of all that is good are you doing?"

Knaye didn't flinch. He turned slowly, face too smooth, too calm.

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"The lesson is proceeding, Principal," he said. "You are interrupting the rhythm."

"The *what* now?" Bramble snapped, stepping closer.

Knaye's hands twitched at his sides. The green stone in the middle of his tie pulsed faster, like it was breathing.

Wodensday didn't say anything. She just stood by the door, arms crossed, daring anyone to say she was overreacting.

I watched Bramble step into the center of the classroom.

The chants faltered.

The glyphs on the board flickered, like a dying screen saver.

Brain twitched beside me, muttering, "Can't complete the loop... feedback distortion..."

"Mr. Knaye," Bramble said. "You're done."

Knaye hissed something under his breath — I didn't catch it, but I felt it, like a tongue scraping the inside of my ear.

Bramble grabbed Knaye by his shirt.

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And then everything popped.

The tiepin — with the *ether* crystal — shot off Knaye’s tie and spun through the air. It pinged off the whiteboard, clipped the edge of a desk, and ricocheted toward the floor.

“Hit the deck!!” I yelled.

Ether crystals don’t just break. They detonate.

I know that because one time I dropped one. Just dropped it on the floor while trying to carry it across the room. Trying to be helpful.

It was not helpful.

The explosion knocked a door clean off its hinges. Sometimes my ears still ring from how loud it was.

Which is why I ducked.

Everyone else just kept writing.

Everyone except Brain.

He went into action—jumped off his desk, hurdled over me, twisted in midair to catch it in his gooey flesh—

and missed.

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The crystal hit the tile.

Crack.

Not boom.

Crack.

It didn't explode. It didn't flash. It just made this weird snapping noise, like reality's knuckles getting cracked.

The glyphs dimmed.

The hum vanished.

The chanting stopped.

Around me, students blinked. Rubbed their eyes. Looked around like they'd just woken up from a nap they didn't remember taking. One kid fell out of his chair. Another whispered, "Where'd my pants go?"

(He was still wearing them, thank goodness.)

Mr. Knaye stumbled.

His waxy composure cracked — not just metaphorically. I swear I saw a thin line run up his neck like his whole outer layer of skin was just a costume trying to hold itself together.

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Another crack followed it.

Principal Bramble frowned and loosened his grip.

“What in the—”

Knaye’s head tilted.

Too far.

The crack spread along his jaw with a quiet snapping sound, like ice breaking on a frozen lake.

For the first time, he didn’t look calm.

He looked irritated.

“You have interrupted the rhythm,” he said softly.

Then he moved.

Fast.

He twisted free of Bramble’s grip and launched himself straight through the classroom window.

Glass exploded outward.

Everyone screamed.

Bramble rushed to the window.

So did half the class.

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Outside, the playground looked completely normal. Wind moved through the basketball nets. A loose kickball rolled across the asphalt.

But there was no Mr. Knaye.

No running figure.

No body.

Nothing.

Behind me, Brain leapt forward before I could stop him. He skidded across the tile, snatched up the cracked green crystal, and crammed it into the folds of his brainy flesh.

I grabbed one of his noodly legs and dragged him backward under my desk.

“What are you doing?” I hissed.

He grinned — eyes wide.

“This isn’t over,” he said, patting the fleshy folds where he jammed the crystal. “We’re gonna need this.”

I wasn't sure what he meant.

But I believed him.

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Chapter 5: Monday Evening in the Basement

After the day we'd had, you'd think we'd just go home and collapse. But nope.

Instead, we all ended up back at the 1888 House, down in the basement, like moths to a cursed, slightly radioactive flame. I was still dizzy from the weird chanting earlier, and Brain was acting like he'd just discovered a magic wand in a Happy Meal. Wodensday had this hard-to-read expression—somewhere between “murderous” and “just tired enough to let you live.”

We had homework. A whole group presentation due Tuesday. And we hadn't done anything but set popcorn on fire the night before.

Henry slid around the floor looking for snacks. I had to admit, having a six-foot-long maggot as a pet was weird. But he acted so much like a dog that neither Wodensday nor Brain paid much attention to him anymore.

Then again, Brain was my actual brain running around outside my head, so his opinion on what counted as “normal” didn't really matter.

“I'm just glad Mr. Tadlock's out for one more day,” Wodensday muttered, curling up on the battered

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couch. "If we buckle down tonight, we might actually pass."

Brain sighed and flopped to the stone floor of the basement lab. "If we get another sub as bad as that one, we might just get boiled alive."

"Might," I said. "But what are the chance of that happening twice in a row?"

"In this town?" said Wodensday.

Hamlet, our little town, was a pretty weird place.

I was about to start calculating the odds when I looked over and saw Brain was already three steps down the wrong path.

He stood at the Metavator console, poking buttons like a caffeinated gremlin.

The Metavator is a crazy machine we discovered in the basement of Wodensday's museum house, where she lives with her Granny Eula. It was built more than a hundred years ago by the mansion's original owner, Isaac Beamsender.

It's kind of like Willy Wonka's Great Glass Elevator.

...but more.

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An "elevator to anywhere" made of brass, gears, and a wildly irresponsible number of lightning-rod parts.

It hummed quietly in the corner like it was ready to seek out new life, new civilizations, and places we were definitely not supposed to go.

"Guys," Brain said, grinning. "What if the crystal works in this?"

Wodensday groaned. "No. No weird portals until we've at least picked a thesis statement."

"C'mon!" Brain said, holding up the fractured ether crystal like it was a golden ticket. "It's buzzing again. I think it *wants* to be used."

"It also wanted to possess half our class," I said.

Brain popped the crystal into the Metavator's receiver anyway. The machine gave a soft, metallic *ding*—like a toaster full of ghosts.

"I swear," Wodensday said, sitting up. "If we get teleported again before I finish this outline, I'm leaving you all in the void."

Brain leaned over the keypad.

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“Okay, okay. I won’t send us anywhere dangerous. I’m just gonna type something simple.”

He tapped the keys.

8 – 0 – 8

Brain smiled. “In honor of our very own B.O.B.”

“Really?” I said. “My name?”

Brain winked. “Look at it. Eight. Zero. Eight. Two infinities with a hole in the middle.”

He nodded thoughtfully.

“That’s basically you, Bob. Floating between everything and nothing. You never know what’s happening, but somehow you figure it out just in time.”

“That’s... the worst compliment I’ve ever gotten.”

“And yet,” Brain said, pressing GO, “you’re welcome.”

The crystal pulsed.

The Metavator’s gears shrieked like a choir of metal banshees.

Brain frowned. “Huh.”

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“What?” I asked.

“My eye stalk appears to be stuck in the input dial.”

“Brain—”

And then the fractured ether crystal shattered—releasing a bright green burst like a firework. I was afraid we were all going to be Hulk-ified.

The floor tilted.

The lights bent sideways.

The Metavator doors slammed open.

Wind roared out of the elevator shaft like the whole machine had suddenly decided to inhale.

Brain yelped as the console yanked him forward.

“THIS WAS NOT PART OF THE EXPERIMENT!”

I grabbed one of his legs.

That was a mistake.

The pull doubled.

Henry squealed as six feet of maggot slid across the floor like a living sleeping bag.

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“NOPE!” I yelled.

Across the room, Wodensday grabbed the doorframe.

“Bob, don’t—”

Too late.

The suction ripped us all off our feet.

Wodensday lost her grip.

Henry whooshed past us like a very confused noodle.

And the four of us shot straight into the Metavator.

The doors slammed shut.

And reality?

Yeah.

That gave out entirely.

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Chapter 6: Arrival in the Pocket Dimension

There wasn't a *fall* exactly.

It was more like being yanked through a funnel made of static electricity and doom. The kind of trip where your bones feel like they're looking for the emergency exits from your insides.

Then—

Thunk.

We landed.

The Metavator doors creaked open with a sound like a question mark, and suddenly we weren't in the basement anymore.

We were... somewhere else.

"Oh no," Wodensday said.

"What?" I squeaked.

"The ether crystal."

It was gone.

She looked down at the receiver mount, then back at us.

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"It must've burned up," she said. "Is that a thing that happens?"

"I don't know!" I said.

"None of us do," Wodensday snapped.

That shut us all up.

The ground under my feet felt like dirt, but squishier. Lighter. Like it couldn't decide whether to be real or not. A cold breeze whispered past, but it didn't come from any direction—it was just there. All around.

And above us...

The sky.

Black. Not nighttime black. Not cloud black.

Velvet black.

No stars. No moon. No anything. Just... a vast soft nothingness that made me feel like I might fall *upward* if I stared too long.

Ahead of us, the land curled upward into a single crooked hill, like the planetoid had been stirred with a spoon once and then left to harden. On top of the hill sat a gazebo. Or what used to be one. The wood

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was splintered and sagging. Some of the posts leaned like they were trying to crawl away.

“Where are we?” Wodensday asked. Her breath steamed in the air, even though it wasn’t cold enough for that.

Brain tapped the side of the Metavator, which now looked dim and burnt-out. “This... uh. This might not be Earth.”

Henry slithered out behind us, sniffed the ground with his antennae, and made a noise like a balloon slowly giving up.

“Guys,” I said quietly, “the horizon’s wrong.”

They looked.

The hill dipped sharply on all sides. Just beyond it, the land *ended*. Like a dinner plate. Like you could walk ten minutes and fall off the edge of wherever this was.

“What—” Brain started to say, but then—

“STOOOOOOORRRYYYYYYYYY!”

The voice didn’t come from anywhere. It was everywhere. Loud and theatrical, like someone

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screaming through a megaphone made of thunder and molasses.

“WHO DARES DISTURB THE UNENDING SILENCE WITH THE STINK OF THEIR UNTOLD NARRATIVE?”

“Okay nope,” I said, taking a step backward.

A shape loomed atop the gazebo, silhouetted against the velvet void. Eight feet tall at least. Shoulders like stone pillars. Wearing a loin cloth? And a mask. Oh no. The mask. Twisted. Too wide. Like a theater mask designed by someone who failed art class and started worshipping nightmares instead.

The shape stepped forward—and the boards under its feet whimpered.

“I AM SHIM-SHAM,” it said, in a voice that made the gazebo shake, **“LORD OF LONELY TALES, MASTER OF MISCHIEF, CONDUCTOR OF INTERACTIVE DOOM!”**

Wodensday leaned toward me and muttered, “He talks like a theater major who wasn’t hugged enough.”

I nodded. “Yeah. Or a haunted thesaurus.”

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Shim-Sham's head turned sharply. "DID SOMEONE SPEAK DURING MY INTRODUCTION?!"

"Nope," Brain said quickly. "All reverent silence over here, sir. Big fans of the name."

"GOOD," Shim-Sham declared, arms wide. "NOW! TELL ME A STORY."

We blinked.

"I—I don't think we have one," I said.

"WHAT?!" He slammed a giant foot down. The planetoid bounced a little. "YOU DARE ARRIVE WITH NO STORY? NO PREMISE? NO CHARACTER ARC?!"

Then I noticed something.

Off to the side, near the edge of the hill—half in shadow, half in gloom—stood a small figure.

Cube-shaped. About two feet tall.

The top two-thirds of it was white. The bottom third was red. It reminded me a little of a Pokéball... but without the charm.

Across the front of its face ran a single rectangular mouth, drawn in a flat, expressionless line.

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He didn't speak. He didn't move.

He just... *watched*.

Quiet. Steady.

Not scared of Shim-Sham.

Not impressed either.

Just waiting.

I pointed. "Uh. Who's that?"

Shim-Sham followed my gaze. His tone shifted—still big, but less angry. Almost... fond?

"AH. MY COMPANION. MY RIVAL. MY PRISONER.
MY... AUDIENCE."

The cube's eyes didn't blink.

"WE CALL HIM... CRUTCH."

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Chapter 7: Tell Me a Story

“**TELL ME A STORY,**” bellowed the demon's voice from everywhere and nowhere at once.

It didn't just echo — it *vibrated*. My ribs jittered like I was inside a washing machine full of thunder.

We stood beneath the creaking, half-rotten gazebo, trying to figure out if we were still dreaming.

Spoiler: we weren't.

Shim-Sham appeared immediately in front of us without warning. Not walked in. Not descended. *Appeared*.

His fingers were too long. And the way he *moved* — all jerky and theatrical, like someone halfway through a tap dance and a nervous breakdown.

“Tell me a story,” he said again, lower this time. “Or be flambéed in nightmare syrup and served with a side of SCREAMS.”

I really didn't want that.

Brain stepped forward, of course.

“Right! Yes! Absolutely! Stories! So, there was this popcorn, okay? But it wasn't *normal* popcorn. It was—”

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“STOP!” Shim shrieked, arms flailing. “Popcorn is an *appetizer* story! I want ENTRÉE! I want RAGE and SORROW and IRONY and CHEESE, yes, metaphysical CHEESE!”

Brain tried to keep going anyway, now talking about burnt kernels and emotional seasonings, but Shim had already flopped over like a disappointed tree and started humming something that sounded like Mozart if Mozart had the flu.

Then Wodensday gave it a shot.

She stepped forward, squared her shoulders, and spoke like someone about to win a debate.

“Okay. Real story.”

“When Helen Keller was a kid, she couldn’t see or hear,” Wodensday said. “The world didn’t make sense yet. People touched her hands, moved her around, but nothing had meaning.”

Shim’s humming slowed.

“But one day her teacher took her to a water pump,” Wodensday continued. “She poured cold water over one hand and spelled W-A-T-E-R into the other.”

Shim slowly sat up.

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"And suddenly Helen understood," Wodensday said, clearly pleased with herself. "The cold thing running over her hand had a name. Everything had names."

Shim made a small strangled sound.

"The whole world clicked into place in that moment."

Silence.

Then Shim screamed.

"THE WATER HAD A NAME??"

He collapsed sideways, sobbing violently.

"AND IT WAS WAITING TO BE CALLED!" he wailed.
"AN ENTIRE EXISTENCE WITHOUT AN IDENTITY!"

He grabbed his mask with both hands.

"What was its name?? Was it Frank?? Was the water named FRANK??"

"No," said Wodensday, "You don't understand—"

He rocked back and forth.

"FRANK THE WATER!" he howled.

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Wodensday frowned, clearly trying to regain control of the narrative.

“No, listen,” she said. “The important part is that after that moment she understood that *everything* had names. Trees, rocks, people—”

Shim shot upright and pointed a shaking finger at her.

“STOP!” he shrieked. “STOP TELLING THE STORY OR I WILL DROWN YOU IN THE FILTH OF THE LAVAWORMS OF ZANTHAR-9!”

He shuddered.

“Which is VERY FILTHY!”

Wodensday blinked.

“You asked for a real story,” she said.

“NOT ONE THAT DESTROYS MY SOUL!”

He kicked the ground dramatically.

“Too much meaning! Too much identity!”

He sobbed so hard tears started dripping from the inside of his mask.

Then, I guess it was my turn.

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I didn't want it to be. But everyone was looking at me. Even Crutch — the quiet cube guy with the permanent thousand-yard stare — tilted slightly in my direction.

So I stepped forward.

"Well..." I said.

Shim perked up. "Yes...?"

"What if," I said slowly, "a story... isn't just a story?"

"Go on," he purred, somehow curling into a pretzel shape while floating two feet off the ground.

"What if it's a... paradox? Like... what if the story is about meaning itself, and how stories *mean* things, but also how we don't know what they mean, and we keep telling them anyway... and that's the story?"

Everyone stared at me.

Shim twitched. "I am... intrigued... but mostly confused."

I kept talking. I couldn't stop.

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"Like, maybe popcorn *is* meaning," I said. "And maybe that's why it burns. Maybe the explosion is the metaphor for—"

Shim screamed.

"YOU ARE MAKING IT WORSE."

"I'm sorry!" I blurted. "I was trying something new!"

"Something NEW?!"

Shim-Sham inflated like a balloon and looked like he might literally explode.

"How about next time you let the *newest* make the *new news?!"*

"What?" I said. I was pretty sure he was about to eat me.

Shim spun like a carousel and pointed dramatically at Henry.

"You! Maggot! What do *YOU* bring to the narrative?"

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Chapter 8: An Unspoken Story

Henry slithered forward.

Then he got really still.

He sort of laid there, all 6 feet of him, sprawled out across the weirdly soft ground.

Then he wiggled. It started in his middle and spread out up and down, like someone had thrown a stone into a pond.

Then he did it again.

But this time...

And something about this tiny universe—just a gazebo on a hill in the middle of empty space—seemed to notice.

The crooked boards of the gazebo creaked. The wind shifted across the hill. Even the dim sky overhead—and the empty void beyond it—felt like it had leaned a little closer.

Shim spun like a carousel and pointed dramatically at Henry.

“You! Maggot! What do YOU bring to the narrative?”

Henry slithered forward.

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Then he got very still.

He sort of lay there—all six feet of him—sprawled across the weirdly soft ground.

Then he wiggled.

It started in the middle of him and rippled outward, up and down his body, like someone had dropped a stone into a pond.

Then he did it again.

A slow, rolling shiver.

But this time...

something noticed.

And something about this tiny universe—a gazebo on a hill in the middle of empty space—seemed to notice.

The crooked boards of the gazebo creaked. The wind shifted across the hill. Even the dim sky overhead—and the empty void beyond it—seemed to lean a little closer.

Henry shivered again.

And suddenly the air around us filled with... him.

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Not words.

Never words.

First came the smell of wet dirt. Rot. Rain-soaked leaves. Old wood. Then hunger—so sharp and blank it barely even felt like a feeling, more like a hole in the shape of a living thing. Then cold. Then dark. Then the blind, writhing certainty that the world was something you found by eating through it.

I staggered.

There was a flash of something bright and strange—thought, almost. A taste of panic. A taste of Brain. Not enough for sentences. Just enough for shape. Just enough for more.

Then came us.

My smell. Brain's. Wednesday's.

Fear.

Confusion.

A hand that didn't strike.

A voice that didn't call him a monster.

A feeling I can only describe as being gathered in instead of shoved away.

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And then—

warmth.

Home.

His name.

Not a sound, exactly. More like the feeling of being called and kept.

Henry.

My eyes stung.

I didn't know if what I was seeing was memory or translation or some gross emotional bug magic this place was doing for him, but all at once I understood something I'd never really understood before:

Henry wasn't telling Shim-Sham a story.

He was telling him how he became Henry.

When it ended, the hill went still.

Shim didn't move.

Neither did we.

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Finally, Wodensday whispered, "...Did we just get the maggot origin story?"

Brain's eye stalks trembled.

"That," he said quietly, "was actually kind of amazing."

Shim stood very still.

For the first time since we met him, he didn't look theatrical.

He looked... uncomfortable.

"That," he said slowly, "is not the kind of story I ordered."

Shim took a deep breath.

And then he exploded.

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Chapter 9: Run, Run, Fast as You Can

Not literally.

But he jumped into the air, spun five times, screamed "*NO ONE RESPECTS NARRATIVE STRUCTURE!*", and started chasing us around the hill.

We ran.

Around.

And around.

And after the third lap, we realized something:

We weren't running in circles metaphorically.

The whole planetoid *looped*.

No matter how far we ran, we kept ending up where we started — right back at the gazebo.

Shim-Sham cackled behind us.

"RUN FOREVER, LITTLE PLOT WORMS! YOUR FEET SHALL OUTLIVE YOUR BRAINS!"

We ran.

Around.

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And around.

And around.

At one point I risked a glance over my shoulder and immediately regretted it. Shim was gaining, his mask grinning like a haunted theater poster.

My brain picked that exact moment to get dramatic.

Great, I thought. First I almost get brainwashed into joining a creepy symbol cult in first period, and now I'm going to get eaten by a demon.

"I SURVIVED FIRST PERIOD FOR THIS?!" I yelled.

And that's when Wodensday tripped.

She hit something soft and rolled sideways off the path into a heap of junk I hadn't even noticed before.

I didn't think.

I dove after her.

We crashed into a pile of torn costumes, cracked stage masks, broken prop swords, half-burned notebooks, and loose script pages fluttering in the strange wind like dead moths.

"Are you okay?" I asked, scrambling up.

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Wodensday pushed herself upright.

A sheet of paper was stuck to her hand.

Not just stuck — **glitter-glued**.

Pink, sparkly glue clung to her palm like it had made a lifelong commitment.

Wodensday stared at it with the kind of calm horror usually reserved for biohazards.

“Oh absolutely not,” she said.

She tried to shake it off.

The paper stayed.

She wiped her hand on her sleeve.

Now the sleeve sparkled too.

Her expression went from irritated to personally betrayed.

“Great,” she muttered. “Now I’m contagious.”

Then she noticed what was actually stuck to her hand.

A page.

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Not notebook paper.

Script paper.

She squinted.

And then she read the line printed on it out loud.

“I survived first period for this?!”

I stopped breathing.

That was my line.

The one I’d just shouted while we were running.
Word for word.

Her eyes widened.

“Guys...” she said slowly. “I think we’re inside a story.”

Brain skidded to a stop beside us. Henry oozed down the slope with a wet **thp** and stared at us with his tiny black eyes.

Up on the hill, Shim-Sham was still yelling like a Shakespeare villain on a sugar crash.

“I WILL TURN YOUR BRAINS INTO RHYME
SCHEMES! I WILL TAP DANCE ON YOUR PSYCHIC
WOUNDS!”

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“Why does he always yell in capital letters?” I wheezed.

Brain looked around at the junk heap, eyes widening.

“This place is a junkyard of abandoned ideas,” Brain murmured. “I think I just sat on a metaphor for broken dreams.”

Wodensday was still trying to peel glitter off her hand.

“It’s in the seams,” she said darkly. “This is how it spreads.”

Then she froze.

Slowly, she lifted something out of the heap.

A dusty, bent script.

Not a notebook. Not a journal.

A real script. Typed. Brad-bound. The kind people actually rehearse from.

The glitter glue on her palm had stuck the cover to her hand.

She turned it toward us.

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On the front, in block letters, it said:

THE STORY THAT EATS ITSELF

I stared at it.

"...That's a terrible title," I said.

Brain tilted his head.

"Counterpoint," he said. "It's amazing."

Wodensday flipped it open. The pages were full of stage directions and dialogue.

Her eyes moved fast.

Then slower.

Then she stopped.

"Oh," she said quietly.

"What?" I asked.

She held the page out to us.

Brain leaned in. I leaned in. Henry leaned in, which mostly meant he slumped closer and smelled curious.

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Chapter 10: The Script

At the top of the page it said, SCENE FIVE — THE BANISHMENT

I skipped to the end of the scene:

DEMON:

Then the story belongs to me.

The Demon reaches for the final page.

But Bob refuses the hand of the Demon.

BOB

No.

Bob takes the page.

Bob speaks the final line.

BOB

Then the story ends.

The Demon is banished.

At the speaking of the final line, the Visitor must depart by the rule of completed tales.

Brain blinked.

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"...That's not a play," he said softly. "It's a ritual," he whispered.

"A theatrical banishment ritual," Wodensday said.

Henry gave a thoughtful gurgle.

I pointed at the script.

"So what you're telling me," I said slowly, "is that the only way to get rid of the demon... is to put on a play?"

Wodensday nodded.

Then she looked up the hill — toward the crooked gazebo, where Shim-Sham was pacing like an extremely patient shark.

"We perform it," she said. "We finish the story. When the ending lands, he's forced out of this plane of existence."

"NOPE," I said immediately, standing up.

"No, no, no. I do not do stages. I do not do acting. I got hives just watching *Our Town*."

"Bob," she said gently, "this isn't just a performance."

She tapped the script.

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"It's an exit strategy. We banish the demon, and then we figure out how to get home."

Henry nudged me with his squishy head.

Brain put a hand on my shoulder.

"I will portray myself," he said solemnly.

He straightened up and adjusted his posture like an actor preparing to enter the stage.

"A lesser mind might assume such a role would be simple. But the illusion of effortlessnes is the highest form of craft."

He gestured thoughtfully.

"Hamlet requires anguish. Lear requires fury. Willy Loman requires despair. Blanche DuBois requires fragility."

Then he tapped himself on the chest.

"But Brain..."

He paused.

"Brain requires precision."

I stared at him.

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Brain nodded gravely.

“Only a master can make mastery look natural.”

“Great,” I said, my voice cracking. “Maybe I can play a tree. Or a curtain. Or a pile of dust.”

Wednesday turned another page.

Then she looked up.

“Bob,” she said. “Don't you remember?”

Uh oh.

“You're the one who speaks the final line.”

My stomach dropped into my ankles.

“What?”

She turned the script toward me.

There it was.

My name.

The last line of the scene.

Then the story ends.

Under it, in bold stage direction:

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The Demon is banished.

"But I don't know my lines," I whispered. "And I definitely don't know how to banish a demon!"

She smiled.

"Good," she said. "Because I'm taking over as director, and we're making edits."

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Chapter 11: Casting the Roles

"We're going to perform it," Wodensday said again, like it wasn't the most terrifying sentence ever constructed.

"To please Shim-Sham," Brain added thoughtfully. "He hoards stories the way a dragon hoards gold."

He nodded.

"Which honestly... admirable."

"I'm not doing it," I said.

No one heard me.

Wodensday had already unrolled a piece of canvas she found in the junk pile and was using a stick of charcoal to scribble notes.

A trail of pink glitter still clung to one of her sleeves, catching the weird light every time she moved.

She noticed me noticing it.

"Say one word," she said, "and I'll bury you in stage rubble."

I looked away.

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“Okay. Brain, you play yourself. Obviously. You barely follow a script anyway.”

Brain bowed deeply. “I shall bring great honor to the role of Me.”

“Henry,” she said, turning to our giant maggot, “you can be... uh... the chorus. Ambient sound. Emotional landscape.”

Henry wiggled affirmatively and let out a low, gurgling buzz. He was in.

“And Bob,” she said, turning to me—

“Nope.”

“Bob.”

“I said nope.”

She raised an eyebrow.

Brain nudged me.

“C’mon, man,” he said. “The script literally says you speak the final line.”

I crossed my arms.

“That sounds like a terrible design flaw.”

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Brain shrugged.

“Maybe,” he said. “But according to the ritual, the story doesn’t end until you end it.”

My chest got tight.

Like, tight-tight.

I felt it blooming behind my ribs, crawling up the back of my neck, fizzing in my fingers.

I knew this feeling.

I hated this feeling.

“I can’t,” I said, trying not to sound like I was about to cry. “I don’t do crowds. Or stages. Or scripts. Or... people looking at me.”

Wodensday softened. “Bob—”

“No, seriously,” I said. “Second grade. Thanksgiving pageant. I was supposed to say ‘I brought the corn.’ Four words.”

I rubbed my nose without thinking.

“I had a cold. One of those ones where your head feels like it’s packed with wet cement.”

Brain made a sympathetic noise.

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"I stood there in my paper pilgrim hat. Gym full of parents. Cameras. Folding chairs."

I held up four fingers.

"My entire job was four words."

"I brought the corn."

I swallowed.

"I opened my mouth."

Nothing came out.

"So I tried again."

Still nothing.

"The hat slid down over my eyes."

I paused.

"And someone laughed."

Brain winced.

"So I laughed too," I said. "Because when you're seven and people laugh at you, sometimes your brain thinks joining them will help."

I stared at the ground.

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“And that’s when the sneeze happened.”

Henry leaned forward.

“It had apparently been... waiting.”

Brain slowly covered his face.

“I tried to turn my head like the teacher said.”

I made a small helpless gesture.

“But the hat slipped down over my eyes.”

A beat.

“So I didn’t turn.”

Henry buzzed nervously.

“And when the sneeze came...”

I grimaced.

“It came out the front.”

I swallowed.

“My face. My shirt. The paper pilgrim collar.”

Another pause.

“And the first three rows.”

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Silence.

Very quiet.

Then the screaming started.

“My mom had to come onstage and walk me off while I was still holding the fake corn.”

I crossed my arms.

“They called me Booger Pilgrim for three years.”

Nobody spoke.

I took a step back.

“I can’t do it,” I said. “I’m just gonna mess everything up. You should pick someone else.”

And then—

A voice.

Quiet.

Dry.

Like wind through an empty hallway.

“You don’t have to be loud.”

We all turned.

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Crutch hadn't moved the entire time. He'd just been sitting there at the edge of the trash heap like a forgotten prop.

But now the little cube rolled forward a few inches.

"You just have to be true."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

Crutch's red half glinted faintly in the strange velvet light.

"It means you're not a puppet," he said. "You don't need to perform."

He tilted slightly.

"You need to remember."

Brain blinked.

"Whoa," he said softly. "That was the most poetic thing I've ever heard come out of a cube."

Wodensday stepped closer.

Her voice was steady.

"We're not an audience, Bob."

She tapped the script.

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“This isn’t a play to impress anyone.”

She met my eyes.

“It’s the truth that ends the story.”

I looked at them.

At her.

At Brain.

At Henry.

Even at Crutch.

My weird, terrifying, ridiculous, squishy little family.

My hands were still shaking.

But I nodded.

“Okay,” I whispered.

“Okay. Let’s do it.”

And in the distance, the crooked gazebo began to
creak open—

like a curtain rising.

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Chapter 12: The Retelling Begins

The stage was... trash.

Literally.

We'd cleared a little circle in the garbage pit, flattened a few moldy carpets, and propped a rotted plank against a pile of broken props to serve as our "backdrop."

It looked less like a theater and more like the world's worst yard sale.

The gazebo loomed on the hill behind us like the crooked garden pavilion of some forgotten vampire's estate, its warped beams creaking softly in the wind.

But that's not where Shim-Sham was.

Oh no.

He sat—if you could call it sitting—on a throne made of jagged stone and ribcage-shaped branches.

Every so often one of his long fingers scratched lightly against the arm of the throne, like he was already getting impatient.

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We were doing a play for a demon. Cool. Totally normal.

Wodensday gave me a nod. It was time.

I stepped forward.

Or tried to.

My left foot snagged on a strip of caution tape and I nearly face-planted into a microwave. Somehow I caught myself, stumbled twice, and ended up in the middle of our garbage-stage.

Center stage.

Such as it was.

My hands were fists. My heart was tap-dancing on my ribs. My tongue felt like a paper towel.

I opened my mouth.

And forgot everything.

Line one: gone. Line two: also gone. Brain was miming popcorn explosions in the background, Wodensday was narrating confidently from her scroll, and I just stood there, blinking like I was buffering.

Shim-Sham growled.

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The shadows around him curled tighter, like smoke with teeth.

“Is this *acting*?” he hissed. “Or a stammering *autopsy*?”

I swallowed. My knees were threatening to file for separation.

I was ready to back out. Seriously. I was two seconds from walking off the stage and pretending to vomit behind the set when—

Crutch caught my eye.

He was just sitting there on a half-crushed bucket, one tiny corner of his square face tilted forward.

He didn’t say anything.

He just nodded. Once.

And then—

Henry.

I didn’t hear him slither up behind me, but suddenly he was there. All six feet of pale maggot, easing onto the stage like he’d always belonged there.

He didn’t say a word—he couldn’t.

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But he let out this low, humming gurgle.

Warm.

Steady.

The kind of sound that makes you feel like things might actually be okay.

That did it.

I closed my eyes.

Took one breath.

And remembered.

“I brought the corn,” I said.

The line from second grade.

Not exactly the correct play.

But it was a start.

And it was mine.

Wednesday looked up, surprised.

Brain froze mid-pose, a popcorn kernel balanced on his fingertip like it was some kind of stage magic.

I stood a little straighter.

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My voice was still quiet.

But it wasn't shaking anymore.

"The night before," I said, "we were supposed to be working on a presentation."

I swallowed.

"But instead... we tried to invent emotional popcorn."

Brain's eye stalks twitched.

Wednesday didn't interrupt.

Henry gave a soft, encouraging hum.

So I kept going.

Sentence by sentence.

Word by word.

I told the story.

Not perfectly.

Not loudly.

But honestly.

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Up on his throne of stone and crooked branches,
Shim-Sham leaned forward.

One long finger curled thoughtfully against his chin.

He didn't interrupt.

He didn't rage.

He didn't laugh.

He listened.

And slowly—

very slowly—

he began to smile.

And that was the scariest thing of all.

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Chapter 13: Opening Night

It was chaos. Beautiful, ridiculous chaos.

Somehow, in that weird looping trash-pit stage, we put together a full-on performance. No lights, no microphones—just trash, nerves, and pure commitment.

Brain was playing Mr. Knaye, our creepy substitute. He'd used a glob of melted neon chalk to make a glowing green tiepin that looked like radioactive gum. He delivered his lines in a slow, gravelly voice that made him sound like a cross between a haunted Roomba and a cursed Ikea catalog.

"Copy the glyphs, young ones," he intoned, wobbling his eyes dramatically on the ends of their stalks. "FOR LANGUAGE LIVES IN THE ROOTS OF MADNESS."

It was... a choice.

Henry played Crutch.

We taped two juice boxes to his sides to make him look more cube-shaped, and he wore a bent cardboard mask that turned his face into nothing but sharp angles and concern.

But honestly?

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He was amazing.

He didn't say a word—obviously—but every time he turned toward me, his whole body hummed like a tuning fork of empathy.

The real Crutch watched from the edge of the stage.

And for the first time since I'd met him—

he looked proud.

Wednesday, meanwhile, was Shim-Sham. But not just Shim-Sham. She went full Shakespeare-villain mode. She found an old velvet cloak in the trash pit, flung it over one shoulder, and delivered every line like a prophecy shouted from a mountaintop.

"GIVE ME A STORY OR GIVE ME YOUR SOULS!"

I mean—chills.

And me?

I played... me.

At first, that felt like cheating. Like I didn't bring anything special to the table.

But then I realized something.

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Maybe that was the whole trick.

I didn't need to pretend to be brave.

I just needed to stay.

Keep talking.

Tell the truth.

And somehow...

it worked.

When it came time to reenact Shim's epic rage-chase around the planetoid, we committed.

Wodensday roared and cackled like a demon with theater training, whipping her cloak through the air like she was commanding a horde of dragons.

Brain somersaulted off an old tire.

Henry slithered in terrified figure-eights.

And me?

I took off running and shouted, "I SURVIVED FIRST PERIOD FOR THIS?!"

That got a laugh.

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Even from Shim-Sham.

Especially from Shim-Sham.

He leaned forward, his mask unable to hide the sharp teeth showing in his grin.

We kept going.

Not just telling the story now—hitting it.

Landing on it.

Every weird beat we'd lived through started falling into place, one after another, like the script had been waiting for us to catch up.

The popcorn disaster.

Mr. Knaye.

The cracked crystal.

The chase.

The loop.

The trash pit.

By the time we reached the end, it didn't feel like we were performing anymore.

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It felt like the story had maneuvered us exactly where it wanted us.

Wodensday drifted left.

Brain froze near the broken plank backdrop.

Henry hummed low at the edge of the stage.

And I realized—with a horrible lurch in my stomach—that I was standing exactly where the script said the Boy was supposed to stand.

Across from me, Shim-Sham had gone still.

Not relaxed.

Waiting.

Hungry.

Like he knew this part.

The wind turned the loose pages at our feet.

The crooked gazebo groaned above us.

And suddenly we weren't just kids in a trash heap putting on a play for a demon.

We were there.

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At the ending.

When I finally stopped moving, a little breathless and a lot sweaty, my heart pounding hard enough to shake my ribs, Shim-Sham rose from his throne.

Slowly.

Laughing.

Delighted.

And for once, I didn't feel like a mistake.

I felt like the main character.

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Chapter 14: The Final Bow

When it was over—when we’d told the whole, ridiculous, spiraling story and acted out every last popcorn explosion and eldritch chant—there was a pause.

A silence so deep it felt like we’d fallen off the edge of a cliff and were waiting to hit the ground.

Shim-Sham didn’t speak. Didn’t move.

He just stared at us, standing in front of his jagged throne of broken story-fragments, fists on his hips. His giant mask tilted slightly, as if trying to read between our lines.

I could hear Henry’s faint breathing beside me. Brain was still frozen mid-bow, like he wasn’t sure if he should stand up or keep playing dead. Wodensday’s cloak had slipped from her shoulders.

Then, slowly—deliberately—Wodensday stepped forward and dropped to one knee.

Like a knight. Like a queen. Like herself.

“We gave you a story,” she said, loud and clear. “Now let us choose our ending.”

I held my breath.

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Shim’s fingers twitched. His mouth opened... then closed again. He looked enormous in that moment—not just tall or dangerous, but *heavy*. Like he was made of everything that had ever gone unsaid.

Then he laughed.

It started as a low chuckle, then rose into something wild and giddy and... weirdly delighted. He clapped his hands once—so loud it shook the ground—and threw his arms wide.

“YES,” he bellowed. “YES, YES, YES! THAT’S HOW YOU END A STORY!”

He stood, his tattered robes flaring behind him like smoke. “What shall it be, then? Shall I give you a chariot made of thunder? A feast with the gods? A musical number with laser wolves?”

Brain raised his hand hopefully at that last one.

Shim cackled and waved us off. “No, no, I know what you really want.” He turned, swaggering toward the trash heap, his long fingers rummaging through bent props and shattered metaphors.

He paused. Lifted something.

A tiny shard. Faintly glowing green.

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My breath caught.

An ether crystal.

Shim held it between two fingers like a precious gem.

“It’s small,” he mused, “but then again... so are you.”

Then he tossed it to me—underhand, casual.

Like someone flicking a dime across a quiet street.

Except this dime could probably erase a small town.

I watched it drift through the air between us, almost floating.

And somehow—

it came straight to me.

I caught it.

Warm. Buzzing. Alive.

“You’ve earned your exit,” Shim said. “Take your bow.”

And so we did.

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All four of us—me, Wodensday, Brain, and Henry—bowed low.

And for once, the story didn't eat us.

It let us go.

For once, we were all on the same page.

"Home?" Wodensday asked, brushing the glitter off her sleeve.

"Home," I said.

"Home!" Brain echoed.

Henry gurgled meaningfully.

We turned back to Shim-Sham, who was now dabbing his eyes with a bedsheet that looked like it was trying to escape.

"Thank you," I said, clutching the glowing green ether crystal.

He sniffled again. "Go. Before I change my mind and turn you into a four-act tragedy."

We started toward the Metavator.

Then Brain stopped.

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“Wait.”

We all turned.

Brain was looking past us.

At Crutch.

The little cube hadn’t moved. He was still sitting at the edge of the trash pit, exactly where he’d been watching the whole play.

“Come with us,” Brain said.

Shim-Sham tilted his head.

Crutch didn’t answer right away.

And suddenly the leaving didn’t feel simple anymore.

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Chapter 15: Crutch Stays Behind

“Come with us,” Brain said, his voice cracking in a way I’d never heard before.

Crutch just shook his little cube-shaped head. His voice was calm, steady, like the quiet click of a lock settling into place.

“I understand this system,” he said. “That one... not so much.”

We all stared at him.

This small, stubborn red-and-white cube who had just helped us stage a play in a cosmic trash pit.

Who’d lived here with Shim-Sham—this loud, terrifying theater-goblin—longer than any of us could imagine.

“But you’ve been stuck here for—” Brain started.

“I wasn’t stuck,” Crutch interrupted. “I was waiting. For you.”

Wodensday’s eyebrows drew together like a question she didn’t want to ask. Henry slithered up and nuzzled Crutch’s side. It looked like a hug—a weird, squishy, silent one. Crutch let it happen.

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I didn't say anything right away. My throat was tight. Like the silence you hold before a big truth lands in your chest.

"I get it," I finally said.

Crutch turned to me.

"I don't like going where I don't know the rules either."

His square face blinked—once—and for a moment, just a moment, it looked like he was smiling.

We piled into the Metavator. Wodensday set the ether crystal in the mount. Brain checked the coils. Henry sloped into his favorite corner.

I hesitated.

Then I stepped back out.

One last thing.

I walked to the edge of the trash pit and pulled the script from where we'd left it—*The Story That Eats Itself*.

It hummed in my hands, still warm from everything we'd poured into it.

I turned to Crutch.

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“You’ll keep telling stories, right?”

He gave the tiniest nod.

I tucked the script under my arm.

Henry gurgled—a soft, slow ripple. It sounded like applause.

Shim-Sham was perched on the gazebo now, his giant legs dangling off the edge.

He looked... calm. For once. Like a volcano that had gotten really into yoga.

He wasn’t looking at us.

He was watching Crutch.

“Tell it again someday,” he called out, waving a hand like a velvet curtain.

I climbed back into the Metavator. My finger hovered over the GO button.

Crutch raised one arm.

Not a wave exactly—more like punctuation.

I hit the button.

The Metavator lit up green and started to pulse.

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And just before we vanished, I swear I saw Crutch smile again.

Just a little.

Just enough.

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Chapter 16: Tuesday Morning Debrief

We landed in the basement of the 1888 House with a soft whump.

For half a second, nobody said anything.

Then Brain let out a long, slow “whoooooooooaaaaa” that ended in a wheeze and a giggle.

Wodensday collapsed onto the nearest couch with the grace of a deflated kite.

Henry sloped out of the Metavator and curled around my foot like he was saying, “Same.”

We were home.

Somehow.

The basement lights were still on, and they cut through the ether dust still hanging in the air. Everything smelled like old popcorn, ozone, and stage fright.

I rubbed my eyes. “Did we... do all that?”

Wodensday muttered from the couch. “We still have to present our popcorn project tomorrow.”

My stomach made a sound like it was trying to disappear into another dimension on its own.

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Brain blinked, clearly trying to reboot. “Wait. Tomorrow?”

Henry crawled up my shoulder and gently pinched my cheek with his giant mandibles—not enough to hurt, just enough to say, *You’re still alive, dumb human. Good job.*

I think it was comforting.

In a terrifying bug-monster kind of way.

I looked at the others.

We were wrecked. Our clothes were filthy. I think I had cosmic soot in my eyebrows. Our popcorn idea was still dumb. And I had no idea what we were going to say when we got up in front of the class.

But.

We’d survived.

Shim-Sham. The play. The whole impossible mess.

I took a deep breath and stood up. My knees cracked like bad foreshadowing.

“Let’s go make the weirdest, dumbest, bravest popcorn presentation this school has ever seen.”

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Brain gave a solemn nod. "Mood Popcorn... the Director's Cut."

Wodensday straightened. "Correct," she said brushing glitter from her sleeve. "Places, everyone."

It was showtime.

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Chapter 17: Mood Popcorn Redux

Standing at the front of the classroom the next morning, smelling faintly of burnt sugar, trauma, and cheddar dust, I had one unifying thought:

I cannot believe we are actually doing this.

Mr. Tadlock was back—pale, sniffing, and looking like he'd been fighting off a stomach bug and losing. He peered at us over his glasses with the kind of concern normally reserved for electrical fires or surprise audits.

"We're ready," I said, my voice cracking only a little.

Wodensday nodded and clicked play on the mood-popcorn video we'd cobbled together late last night—well, technically early this morning, somewhere between the "existential crash" and the "Henry gurgled encouragingly while we sobbed into beanbags" phases.

Brain stepped forward, arms wide.

"Friends. Educators. Curious minds. Today, we bring you... *Emotive Alchemical Sustenance.*"

I sighed. "It's popcorn."

"Not just popcorn," he added, wagging his eyebrows. "This is popcorn that responds to

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emotional input through scent and sound. Except instead of actually working... it does this.”

He hit the sample button on our popcorn rig.

The machine hissed, puffed, sparked—and let out a sound that can only be described as a cat yodeling through a trumpet full of bees. The scent was halfway between “birthday cake” and “fear of abandonment.”

There was a beat of silence.

Then someone in the back clapped.

A single slow clap.

Then more joined in. A weird, confused ripple of applause spread through the room like a virus of *what the heck was that and why did I like it?*

Mr. Tadlock furrowed his brow.

“So... was this meant to be... functional?”

Wodensday shrugged. “Not exactly. We were exploring communication breakdowns. The way meaning collapses under emotional pressure.”

Brain jumped in. “And how even failed experiments can still convey truth. Through the lens of

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performative chaos. Think of it as... popcorn-based poetry.”

I grinned. “Or just three weirdos trying to make something that felt like us.”

More clapping.

Tadlock blinked. Then, very slowly, scribbled something on his clipboard.

Back at the 1888 House, we checked our grades online.

B.

That’s it. Just a big, lonely B at the top of the feedback sheet. No explanation. No comment. Just one letter somehow holding the weight of a hundred impossible memories.

I stared at it.

“We did all that... for a B?”

Brain shrugged. “Yeah. But it was a good B.”

Wodensday nodded. “It’s the best B I’ve ever gotten.”

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Henry, waiting in Wodensday's backpack like a wiggly emotional support creature, let out a low, contented gurgle.

And me?

I looked at my friends, thought about Crutch, thought about Shim-Sham, and thought about how popcorn will never smell the same again.

Then I smiled.

"Yeah," I said.

"It really was."

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Chapter 18: After School

Down in the ancient basement laboratory, the Metavator was finally cool enough to touch. It let out soft metallic clicks, like it was exhaling after a long sprint. The humming from the new ether crystal—Shim-Sham’s parting gift—was low and warm, almost... content. If a crystal could feel anything at all.

I sat on the rug, knees up, the script in my lap. **The Story That Eats Itself.** Not just a play. Not just a memory. It felt like something alive. Like it had been waiting for us to come along and finish writing it.

“Do you think he’s still there?” I asked quietly, not looking up.

Wodensday didn’t have to ask who I meant. She never does. “I think he always will be.”

Brain flopped into the armchair backwards, arms dangling off the sides. “We could go back,” he said. “Find Crutch again.”

Wodensday shook her head, her tea steaming gently between her palms. “Not yet. He chose to stay. We should honor that.”

I nodded. Didn’t like it. But understood.

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Later that afternoon, all four of us were gathered around the low table in the front room. Granny Eula was off somewhere hunting down a lost barometer, muttering about mercury. Henry had curled around the base of the Metavator, gurgling softly in the kind of way that meant he was thinking. Or dreaming. Or remembering.

Brain picked at the edge of his cup. "Not all cages are made to be broken," he said. "Some are just... familiar."

Henry hummed low and steady—the note of almost understanding. Then added a little gurgle that sounded, unmistakably, like **maybe someday**.

Wodensday raised her teacup. "To growth."

Brain clinked his. "To staying the same."

I grinned. "To both."

We sipped. The house creaked softly. Outside, the wind shifted.

I glanced at the script again. The cover was bent, a little sticky, and possibly smelled like burnt popcorn.

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“Maybe next time we pick something less dramatic,” I said, running a thumb over my name—scrawled in the margins of a page I didn’t remember writing.

Brain smirked. “Or more.”

The Metavator pulsed gently behind us—soft blue light cycling like breath. Not loud. Not insistent.

Just... waiting.

The crystal flickered once.

But didn’t break.