



CROK

#2



fatgator so hungry...everyone looks delicious 1 minute ago from web



ksimon Having the best conversations with inanimate objects. My lint roller says hi. 1 minute ago from web



TheOtherJeff What the frak? I can see the Interwebs. I can see all of it. 2 minutes ago from web



sarahkuhn I just flew...without a plane. 4 minutes ago from mobile text



MattSpringer Surges of electricity coming from fingers. Maybe can use to nuke Hot Pockets? 5 minutes ago from web



castewar Vision clearing. I think I can see through walls. What are they doing with that plunger????? 6 minutes ago from web



smoakes Is everyone OK?! 6 minutes ago from web



sarahkuhn Oh. My. God. 8 minutes ago from web



MattSpringer Everything starting to feel really heavy. 10 minutes ago from web



castewar @TheOtherJeff Everything is really heavy. explosion. But it did something too. trouble focusing. 10 minutes ago from web



TheOtherJeff I think that's all. 12 minutes ago from web



ksimon Friend just texted from window. too! What was that? 12 minutes ago from web



smoakes Holy crap! Big explosion just outside my window. 13 minutes ago from web

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SECRET
ORIGINS
IT ALL BEGINS HERE!

FOR GROK EYES ONLY

SECRET ORIGINS

HEY, BITCHES.

I wish I was a little more enthusiastic, but really, I'm just godawful NERVOUS these days. You know how it is when you have a new movie coming out...or actually, you probably don't know. You've probably never made a movie in your life!

Well, I have, and it is so hard! It's way harder than marriage, as my wife would attest—

Oh, sorry. EX-wife. Marcia left me, apparently... gosh, over 20 years ago?! I was too busy making movies to even notice!

The only good thing is that this is just another one of those *Star Wars* kinds of movies, so it's a little easier. I come out sometimes at places, and I stand in front of peoples, and they yell superloud because they like me lots. Then I say something about Force something and Jedi other something and there's lots of thirtysomething dudes who paid a couple thousand dollars to buy plastic costumes that look like what I made sometimes. Then I make some money.

What I'm REALLY nervous about are some of the other movies I'm working on. You know, the ones that aren't *Star Wars*.

When I finished the last of the movies that are like *Star Wars*, the one before this new one like *Star Wars*, I said to everyone in the reporter thing that I would be making some tiny little movies for myself. Artsy kinda stuff. Just like the ones I studied in that school where they teach of the movies.

(I'm really sorry — my English isn't working good today. It's like how I went when I felt like this and I was writing that movie word thing for the *Phantom Menace* movie thing. Awkward!)

Here's a few ideas I have for movies that are not like *Star Wars*:



—A fella wakes up, goes to work. When he's at work, he gets like really bad poops, like violent poops. Only we don't see his poop — we just see his empty desk and we hear people talking about him behind his back while

he's gone. Then there's a MURDER.

—There's this hooker, see, only she's super NICE. And she goes out to meet this dude to get paid to have sex, only they fall totally in LOVE! And there's a Roy Orbison song. Then there's a MURDER.

—First, there's a MURDER. Then, I don't know what.

Which of these ideas of movies do you like the best? Write in and let me know! The one with the most votes will get a prize! I'll turn it into something like *Star Wars* for you!

Toodles,
Fake George Lucas

Grok: An Alert Nerd Zine

Editors: Sarah Kuhn, Matt Springer, Chris Stewart

Contributors: Sarah Kuhn, Ivan Sian, Ken Simon, Jeff Stolarczyk, Matt Springer, Chris Stewart

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INSIDE GROK

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BIOS

SARAH KUHN lives in Los Angeles with a geek husband, an extensive *Buffy* action figure collection and way too many comic books. She has written for a bunch of nifty publications, including Back Stage, Geek Monthly, IGN, StarTrek.com, and Creative Screenwriting. She is one third of the mighty Alert Nerd collective and also blogs about stuff at Great Hera! (greathera.typepad.com)

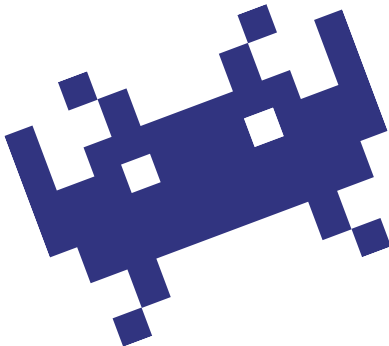
IVAN SIAN Back when the Internets was young, vibrant and paved with gold, Ivan Sian contributed insipid, drunken rants to IGN Sci-Fi. But after them thar webtubes imploded, he moved along to greater heights, submitting even more infrequent articles to the gone-but-not-forgotten Entertainment Geekly. Now that Ivan is older, he's a little less drunken, but no less insipid. Ladies love him, girls adore him, even the ones who never saw him, he's Ivan Sian.

KEN SIMON Ken Simon is a librarian. Google will only make him stronger! Before becoming a librarian, he was an information technology guy. And before that, things get murky, but there was something about quitting law school and feeling very, very relieved. Writing and acting are his first loves, and he wants to visit them more often.

MATT SPRINGER trims his toenails far less often than he should. Despite this disgusting factoid, he has managed to eke out a living in this workaday world, finding gainful employment as a magazine writer and editor, a marketing/PR flack, and a janitor. He is one of three points on the Alert Nerd triangle and has published his first novel, *Unconventional*, through Alert Nerd Press (press.alertnerd.com). He also blogs at Pop Geek (popgeek.org). He lives with a toddler and his beautiful wife in Orlando, FL.

CHRIS STEWART was rescued from a life of crime by Matt and Sarah, who put him to work reviling films at Daily Sci-Fi. He continues to orbit the world of freelance writing while working in the videogame industry in Vancouver. He also runs Proton Charging, a *Ghostbusters* news site and one of the earliest blogs evar.

JEFF STOLARCYK A horror buff, a comic geek, and a gamer, Jeff Stolarcyk supports his hobbies as a freelance writer and educator. He lives with his wife near Scranton, PA, and yes, he has been to all of the places they mention on The Office. Jeff blogs about irrational geekery at ConditionalAxe.com.





We all did embarrassing things when we were adolescents. Right?

Right?! RIGHT?!?!?!?

Please tell me you did.

Well, I did. I did many embarrassing things between the ages of 13 and 19. I've done many, many more since. Hell, I did hundreds of embarrassing things YESTERDAY.

Today, we'll be taking a look back at one of my favorite teenaged embarrassments, writing letters to comic books. (And yes, it hurts to type that sentence.) While my peers were getting stoned, getting laid, and generally preparing themselves for life in what we call "the real world," I was holed up in the damp chill of my parents' basement, pecking out missives on our Myoda PC computer, which I would then print on the ol' dot matrix and carefully stuff into envelopes.

There was a time when I must have been sending eight to ten letters a month. Fortunately, this only lasted about a year. Then I moved on to more sensible teen hobbies, like writing for the school paper and playing Judas in our drama club production of *Godspell*. (This all hurts so bad.)

For my efforts, I got two paste-up pages from ACTUAL COMIC BOOKS. I still think that's cool, and it doesn't even hurt to do so. The editors of *Spider-Man* (that McFarlane one) and *Quasar* (the Mark Gruenwald one) sent me those paste-ups, along with very cool thank you notes printed on Marvel stationery, with Spider-Man on it and everything.

In general, I had a strangely active letterwriting life throughout high school. I used to meet girls at speech and drama camps and then send them letters off and on. They would send me perfumed envelopes and soft-focus Glamour Shots. This is as close as my poor, poor, pitiful penis came to touching a vagina before my twenties.

Let's take a look back, then, at my short if eventful career as a teenaged letterhack.

Hey you guys,

I knew it. I just knew it. Oh, you guys thought you had us fooled, you little stinkers. But it was all a set-up.

BWAH-HA-HA-HAAA!

The new *JLA* is just fine with me. After reading issue #62, I am certain that within a few months, things will be back to their normal level of insanity, and the **true** *Justice League* fans will be able to sleep easy again. Give Dan a little time, and we'll have another Keith Giffen on our hands. (Scary thought, isn't it!)

Thanks for noticin' me.

Sincerely,
Matt Springer

P.S. "Hey, you must've worked up a sweat! How 'bout a back rub?" – BWAH-HA-HA-HAAA!

P.P.S. Bloodwynd looks to be a fascinating new character (if he is, indeed, new; I've never

seen him before). I'm looking forward to seeing more of him.

Perhaps the most shameful aspect of this letter is that there was a time in my life when I thought the Dan Jurgens run on *JLA* – the one immediately after the brilliant Giffen/DeMatteis run – had any redeeming value whatsoever. Along those lines, **BLOODWYND?! Seriously, 16-year-old Mattie?! What the fuck was YOUR problem?**

"Thanks for noticin' me" was my lame attempt at a "clever" letterhack catchphrase. I think it was "Uncle" Elvis Orton who had his own similar catchphrase, and I desperately wanted one of my own, since as a teen nerd, I was basically desperate to be accepted and noticed by any group or subculture that would have me. Still am! Thanks for noticin' me!

Dear Regular letterhack Jason Crase,

I am a fellow reader of *Detective Comics*. I am writing to you so that we can share opinions and ideas. I am looking forward to a fruitful and enjoyable correspondence with you. I will gladly write back, even visit your home, if you like. But, **under no circumstances** do I want a very small frog! Sorry.

Anyway, my name is Matt Springer, and I am a mostly DC man. I collect all the Batman titles (I'm looking forward to the upcoming Grant/Breyfogle *Shadow of the Bat*), all the Justice League titles (what do you think of the "new direction"? Just curious), and a slew of other titles, including *Green Lantern*, the Mutant stuff from Marvel, the *Star Trek* titles, and *Aquaman*. I am also a Trekkie, a computer junkie, and believe that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone.

Please respond. Thanks for noticin' me.

Cordially,
Matt Springer

P.S. Quote for the Day – "Senator, we're both part of the same hypocrisy, but never think it applies to my family."

Superheroes' Secret Origins as Told by My Mom

(Who Overheard Them as Secondhand Gossip After Church)

By Ivan Sian

"So Peter Piper was bit by a radioactive spider and never told his sweet aunt, the dear woman. He then dropped out of school to become some sort of ARTIST. Can you IMAGINE?"

"Oh, that poor Wayne boy. Orphaned at so young an age. I'm sure he'll grow up fine, though."

"Oh, that Susan Storm hooked herself a DOCTOR! Lucky girl!"

"I don't think the rest of the congregation saw Martha Kent for months and then she shows up with a new BABY? We didn't even know she was pregnant! Rumor was she was barren."

"Oh, that poor, crippled Murdock boy. I heard he was hit in the head by some sort of truck. Oh, son, don't worry, he can't hear us from across the room."

"Well, I don't know. He WAS a doctor, but now he's into some weird hocus-pocus. It's just strange, I tell you."

"I'd heard he's foreign. Where do you think the name Norrin Radd comes from? Do you think he's here legally? Oh, should we call the police?"

"I think he's some sort of pervert, peeping in people's windows and the like. Do you think he's on some sort of offenders list? When we get home, look up Uatu on the Goggle. No, I don't know how to spell it. Sound it out! Oh my, I think he's looking this way!"

Ivan Sian is able to drink tall vodkas in a single bound.

You know how back in the day they used to print the full addresses of folks who'd write into comic books, with the idea that nerds would write each other letters and become penpals and found fanzines and become the next generation of Roy Thomases and Paul Levitzes? And you remember how

you'd look at those addresses and think, "Who in their right mind would be desperate enough to communicate about comic books that they'd write a letter to a total stranger?"

That would be me. Sorry, Jason Crase; I don't recall if you ever wrote back, but if you didn't, I sure as hell can't blame you. JFK conspiracy theorist plus *Godfather* obsessive PLUS offering to visit your home IN THE FIRST LETTER equals "scary crank," any way you slice it.

And of course, again with the catchphrase. THANKS FOR NOTICIN' ME! PLEASE NOTICE ME! THANKS!

Dear Joanie,

What's the rumpus? Not much over here. I just thought I'd drop a line to see how things are going in the fast-paced, high-tech, never-a-dull-moment world of Comics Distribution.

I also wanted to break some horrible news to you. No, it's not the fact that Chuck Dixon and Tom Lyle have taken over *Detective Comics* (although that's bad enough – more on them later). It's a mysterious disease I recently contracted. It affects one in four Americans, and can be paralyzingly destructive and horrifying to those who are crippled by its iron grip (Wow! Slant rhyme!). It is **procrastinitis**, the terrible disease which forces people into delaying for days, weeks, or even months, things that should be done as soon as possible. It started out small, with such things as doing an English paper the day before it was due, or being a few days late in getting my order form in. But it grew and grew, until I was sending orders in more than a month after they were due! I cracked when I received a check back for my April order form. That incident was enough to force me to get treatment for my condition, and I am now in a rehabilitation program, thank God.

Anyway, back to the other tragedy. They were called by one *Amazing Heroes* reviewer the "Masters of Mediocrity," and I agree completely. They completely mangled one of the best villains ever to grace a comic book page, and inspired the marketing madness known now simply as *Robin II*. They are

Chuck Dixon and Tom Lyle, and they are now wreaking havoc every month in *Detective Comics*. They have little talent, and are causing me to go into convulsions every time I read an issue. Now, 'Tec #644 wasn't as bad as the limited series, but it did have a lot of awkwardly-drawn scenes, and was so full of cliches they nearly jumped off the page. It's tragic that this upcoming "Year of the Bat" will be scarred by their work, but I guess I'll always have *Legends*.

Thanks for noticin' me.

Sincerely,
Matt Springer

Still desperate for human interaction, I started writing personal letters to several employees of Westfield Comics, the mail-order company where I purchased my comics after my local comic shop banned me because I never emptied my pull box. Pathetic on its own, to be sure.

Here, though, I'm astonished for the vitriol I managed to summon for Chuck Dixon and Tom Lyle. I guess I channeled all the impotent rage I had for the jerks who made me feel like shit at school into hatred for unsuspecting comic book writers. I mean, I've read his Robin stuff since, and Dixon's just not THAT bad.

Oh, and this bit? "It's tragic that this upcoming 'Year of the Bat' will be scarred by their work, but I guess I'll always have *Legends*." I WAS AWESOME.

Thanks for not comin' to my house and punchin' me in the nuts.

Hey you guys,

I just read issue #633. But that's not why I'm writing.

Let's look back a year, or about 12 issues. That would take us to issue #621. The "Rite of Passage" storyline was just wrapping up, by Grant and Breyfogle. Then came the "Demon Inside" story by Ostrander, Henry and McKone, #622-24. Issue #627 (I don't have issues #625 and 626, or 628, for that matter; it's a long story, so don't ask.) was a huge anniversary

Misspent From the Outset

by Jeff Stolarcyk

A LOCATIVE LOOK AT MY SECRET ORIGINS



“He wanted to be a grown-up, not ridiculous, and he did not realize you could be both at the same time, and oftentimes are.” – Peter David, *Tigerheart*

So I've caught myself reminiscing about the geography of my youth – the wheres that I grew up in. Sixty days shy of 30 – the demarcation line – reminiscing seems to be the thing to do. I mean, 30 is old to begin with, but in geek years, it's practically incalculable. At least, that's what I'm told.

Which leads me here. Testing the Thomas Wolfe Theory, I toured the arcades, comic shops and gaming haunts of my youth, comparing them to what was, seeing how they've grown and hoping they'll tell me a bit about how I've grown.

By all estimations, it's a life misspent from a very young age.

The General Hospital Hospitality Shoppe no longer sells comic books; it's where I got my first, a Frank Miller issue of *Daredevil* with Stilt-Man and Heather Glenn. I was 4 years old, and though I was an early reader, I didn't understand much of what was going on except that Stilt-Man was the best villain and that *Daredevil* may have been the most awesome hero, even more awesome than Batman. I didn't know who Wolverine was.

The book was 60 cents, a miscalculated bribe on my grandmother's part – it was supposed to keep me quiet. She was pulling double duty, watching me and her husband, and neither of us made it easy on her.

Today, the prominent features of the shop are the BOGO sale on WebKinz and the expansive selection of Vera Bradley bags, and the portmanteau smell of cafeteria food that wafts into the Shoppe. There are magazines and crossword digests, even the odd coloring book,

but the magazine rack full of comics isn't in the store any longer.

From my gram's house, Koronkiewicz's Pharmacy was two blocks' walk, and when she'd fill prescriptions, I'd tag along and usually have scraped together enough change to buy at least one book – 65 cents now – from the spinner racks. Haphazardly restocked and guaranteed to be ransacked by older kids before I could manage to make it in, I wasn't left with much – random issues of *Star Wars*, *Uncanny X-Men* and *Dreadstar* I somehow managed to rescue from that period are a testament to my blithe unawareness of issue-to-issue continuity. I didn't know what *Secret Wars* was, but the editors' boxes talked about it a lot. Wolverine was a jerk.

Today, the pharmacy is a law office. The spinner racks are gone.

Around age 6, I found my first real comic shop within walking distance of school. Gema Books (so named for the married ex-hippie owners Gene and Mary) was the kind of comic shop that makes people not want to go to comic shops. Gema was a haphazard, poorly-lit hole-in-the-wall with an aloof staff, a layout that borders on the archaeological, and no discernable community attached to it aside from insular cliques of what we now know in this enlightened age as trolls and fanboys. For years, it was the shop of record in Northeast PA.

The store, such as it was, was cramped as hell. Back issue bins, new release shelves and spinner racks all struggled for real estate in the front half of the shop, while the toys and statues, the cash register, New Age books and baubles and the thinly-camouflaged adult section consumed the back half. As a little kid, I found it difficult and exhilarating to navigate, looking for hidden gems and secret history in exactly the same way that an older me would one day pore over marginalia, journals and letters from writers who were “better,” but

never more important than the ones on display in that little labyrinthine comic shop. I discovered the *Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe* here, and was absolutely certain that the final issue was going to reveal all of Wolverine's shadowy past to me (Wolverine, by this time, was awesome – definitely more awesome than Batman and Daredevil combined; he had claws). I count it as my first great Wolverine-related disappointment in life (to be followed by many, many more – including, some 15 years later, Paul Jenkins' *Origin*).

Through the direct market, I discovered the Legion and the Teen Titans and I dutifully combed through the bins until I had as much of each team's back matter as I could manage. I remember thinking that it would be "the best idea ever" if Batman and Shining Knight could team up and fight Gorilla Grodd.

Being owned by ex-hippies, the shop was well-stocked with various incenses, crystals and other arcane devices. Even at a young age, I knew that these were a) utter bullshit and b) to be avoided at all costs.

Today, the storefront houses a chiropractor's office. The store moved a block away, into an actual basement, a move that managed to make it even less inviting than it was previously. That store is now vacant.

Just after *Inferno* – like any true geek, I measure time by crossovers – my parents put their foot down and forbid me from buying comics. It affected my grades, they said. Over the next few years, my grades suffered a slight dip, and though I won't claim that it was a manufactured middle finger to parental authority, the notion is a pleasing one. It wasn't until about 1993 that I returned to comics. Riding the wave of the speculation boom, a sport card/comic shop opened up near my grandmother's house, and each weekend I stayed with her, I'd walk down to that store and buy a new Liefeldian wonder without understanding just how bad it was. *Cable* #1 (\$3.50) was the first. Not surprisingly, the place vanished not long after the Return of Superman. Now it's a tanning salon.

It's a disturbing trend.

The cramped, smoke-filled arcade where I learned the intricacies of Kung Fu and Space Harrying? Now it's a pool hall with only a pair of outdated arcade machines.

The cool, well-stocked arcade that got me through my early teens? A Japanese restaurant.

The ironically-named Phoenix Comics across from my college call-center job? It sells clothing and shows no signs of rising from the ashes.

The Wizard Site, the card and role-playing game store that survived the harsh scrutiny of *The 700 Club*? Today it sells spa products, a fate shared by Dragons Inc., the all-purpose gaming store launched by a pair of my high school friends.

The landmarks of my youth have all grown up. The buildings are all still there, but now they're inhabited by doctors, lawyers, beauticians and the bitter realization that the places where I learned to be a geek have all moved on and that I have not. It's supposed to be the other way around. I mean, in Europe, there are castles that have been castles for centuries, and I would feel much better about being a nerd for decades if my comic shop still sold comics hundreds of years later, just to offer some sense of scope and a tacit nod of approval via its longevity.

"It's easy," the proprietor of my current local comic shop tells me, "to run a business like this badly." It's the beginning of a digression in a discussion about Marvel's post-Civil War landscape that involves practically every warm body in the building. Despite two moves and nearly 20 years in business, The Unknown still manages to grow its community and generally keep its head above water. Because not only is there room for frivolity in adulthood, there can't be adulthood without the shoulders of frivolity to stand on, and the trail of failed geek meccas in my wake simply couldn't grasp the balance between the two. And so, when I think about packing the comics up and donating them to charity, eBaying the gaming books and hiding the other nerd paraphernalia and writing off the past 20 or so years as misspent, I stop and remember the 6-year-old poring through back issue bins and it's hard to feel it's been misspent at all.

And then, I think about telling the little brat that Wolverine is an overhyped editorial mess with no real depth, but I doubt I'd have listened. Wolverine has claws, you know.

Jeff Stolarczyk will go far with charm and courtesy. His lucky numbers are 2, 13, 24 and 30.



There is nothing unusual about being a librarian. Last year, 28,000 people descended upon Washington, D.C. to attend the American Library Association's Annual Conference. I was one of them.

There is nothing unusual about being a tech guy, either. Over 87,000 people attended MacWorld Expo in 2001. I was one of them, too.

But wait – here comes the mash-up. I'm a librarian *and* a tech guy! Now *that* is something special!

Except that the Library and Information Technology Association had over 4,000 members in 2006. Google "systems librarian" and you get over 89,000 hits.

I like what I do, but I can't claim to be unique. I'm in a lot of good company.

Oh, but that's my working life. My personal life – evenings, weekends – that's when I shatter all expectations. Brace yourself: I go home. My wife and I decide we don't feel like cooking, so we order in. We watch *Battlestar Galactica* if there's a new episode. Maybe we talk about what we want to do over the weekend. Maybe we just sit around and veg out and waste a perfectly good evening doing nothing in particular.

Isn't that just *weird*?

No, it's not. I have to face it: I'm pretty ordinary. Sure, I have my idiosyncrasies, but don't we all? We all have our talents, our aptitudes and our – er – suckitudes. It comes with the territory of being human.

But being human is a funny thing. Ordinary is not our default, nor is it an effortless state. It's an achievement. Scratch its surface, and you uncover the inner workings that comprise us all – all the quirks, hiccups and quick repairs.

Scratch the surface, and you uncover the secret origins of ordinary.

Cohn's Phone

It's 1978, and I'm in the passenger seat of my parents' Peugeot 504, winding south down Beverly Glen Boulevard. We pass funky canyon homes and hillside dwellings perched on stilts, looking insanely out of place here in earthquake country.

But the 7-year-old version of me is staring out the window at a telephone line, dipping and rising between poles. I'm lost in thought, wondering about the sounds carried along that wire. All kinds of sounds: the voices of men and women, the ticks and clicks of connections made and broken, the hum of a dial tone. All hurtling down the line, paralleling us along the road.

Today, mom is taking me to the office of Dr. Cohn, Child Psychiatrist.

What will I get to do there, I wonder. Play games? My mom says that he's nice and that we can just talk. She says that I shouldn't worry.

We're in Beverly Hills now, cruising south past huge estates set far back from the road.

I wonder what it would be like to be inside one of those mansions... to make a phone call inside one of those mansions. See, if you pick up our phone in Van Nuys and dial a number with a 273 prefix – Beverly Hills – there is a fascinating sound in the background as the ringing begins, an airy sound, a blowing through a red-and-white striped straw sound.

And here I am in Beverly Hills, the other end of the straw.

Inside Dr. Cohn's office, it's all browns: brown couch, brown desk. Brown phone. Mom is in the waiting room now, and I am alone. Where is the doctor?

That brown phone on the doctor's desk – it has push buttons. Not like our rotary dial phone at home.

I pick up the receiver, expecting more brown, a brown dial tone buzzer like the one at home, but no: it's a candy-striped hum, a promise of so much more to discover once I start pushing buttons. The star and the pound sign are mysteries, compelling and a little scary. What will they do?

I try a few digits out, and listen to a recorded voice. "We're sorry, but..."

I try the star button, and there's an inexplicable siren-sounding tone. Sirens? Uh-oh. That can't be good. I hang up and cast a furtive glance around the room, then slink over to a chair to wait for Dr. Cohn.

Cohn's phone – any phone – is a living thing. I intimately know the pitch and warble of a dial tone, the ticks and clicks of a rotary dial. I can sense a change in the empty line as I dial first the prefix, then the suffix. The vague static differs depending on whether the call is local, toll or long distance; whether it's within my Pacific Telephone service area or crossing over into GTE territory. These sounds – they have colors, tastes, personalities. The ring tone in the 363 exchange is bitter, brittle and rough-edged, while 782 is butterscotch candy dotting a ribbon of scratchy cotton. More modern exchanges sound cleaner, less interesting: precise red coils separated by measured, empty space.

Synaesthesia.

Calling is My Calling

Ten years old, and I spend my time dialing, dialing. On Friday nights, my parents go out and it becomes a project. My younger brother and I sit on the bed in their room, watching TV. It's our night to stay up late: *The Incredible Hulk* is on, then *The Dukes of Hazzard*. Maybe we'll even get to watch part of *Dallas*.

By the time Lou Ferrigno flexes his muscles, I'm well into my routine:

1. Pick a suffix, say "1176."
2. Begin at 8:20 pm. Call 820-1176.
3. Listen.
4. Hope for several rings or a phone company recording. (What kind of recording is it? What is the voice like?

What do they say?) Hang up fast if someone answers.

5. Now it's 8:21. Call 821-1176.
6. Go back to step 3.

I'm a walking phone book, with a near-photographic memory for numbers. I know each prefix in my area code. 333 is West Covina. 820, West Los Angeles. 999, Canoga Park.

My dialing finger has a small callus.

This is no idle pastime, though. I'm industrious, ambitious.

Scotch taping a microphone to the telephone's earpiece, I get to work assembling a collection of recordings. Different voices, different messages:

- Your call cannot be completed as dialed.
- All circuits are busy now.
- You must first dial a "1."
- It is not necessary to dial a "1."
- The number you have reached has been disconnected.

I'm creating an aural encyclopedia of the telephone, and finding all the recordings takes time and patience, lots of trial and error.

Then, an idea comes to me, mad scientist style. I dial a number. Someone answers, but I say nothing. I record their voice: "Hello? Hello? Is anybody there?"

Cool! Now I call another number. When they answer, I play back the recording. The result each time is an amazing human symphony, a finely tuned dance of hellos:

"Hello?"
"Hello?"
"Hello."
"Hello?"
"Yes, hello."
"Is anybody there?"
"Yes, I'm right here. Hello?"
"Hello-oo?"
"I can hear you, can you hear me?"
"Well, I guess I'm going to hang up."
"HELLO!"

Click.

The next day, I sit at my parents' typewriter, creating a list of prefixes in the 213 area code and their corresponding cities. In the

afternoon, I bike over to Crest Stationers and spend my allowance photocopying my list.

It feels entrepreneurial.

Geeks with Answering Machines

A year later, and there's bad news. The phone company is modernizing their technology, and the exchanges – all the rings and the spaces in between – are starting to sound sterile and alike. Besides, I'm old enough now to know that it's weird to just be sitting there, dialing numbers.

That's fine. I've found a way to dial numbers with purpose. It's 1980, and telephone entertainment is in full bloom. Of course, you can Dial-A-Joke, or Dial a Word of Inspiration, but those are one-way. I prefer comment lines.

Comment lines are answering machines with a higher calling. You can call up the Input line and record your comment, about anything you like. Then, typically once a week, the host creates a tape for the Output line, filled up with the comments people have left, interspersed with DJ-like transitions, music, or comedic bits. Hear something inspiring or provocative on the current show? Then call and record a response for the next show – and on and on.

I know I'm kind of young for that crowd, but still, I call in sometimes, under my pseudonym. Comment lines are no place for last names. Some people use their first name and their city. I'm "Ken Van Nuys."

I even get my mom to drive me to a comment line party at Straw Hat Pizza. She doesn't like it. I'm allowed to go in alone, but only for 10 minutes.

And here they are, clustered around a large table, their conversation overwhelmed by the sound of a birthday party over near the chirping arcade games. Wow. This is nothing like when Ernest Borgnine offered me his leftover pizza at Anthony's; this is a *real* celebrity sighting! There's Bryan W. Feedback, operator of the best comment line around. And that blonde lady? She's Karen Grateful Dead – frequent caller!

They're friendly and nice, but I'm just a little kid next to them. These people are in their twenties, even their thirties. I don't have much to say, but I introduce myself and shake hands, awkwardly. It's a relief when the 10 minutes are up.

It will be good to hear their voices again – at the other end of the phone line.

Party (Line) With the Stoners

Eighth grade sucks. I'm getting bad grades, and I'm repeating Algebra, with a teacher who spends most of class playing poker with his favorite students. (I'm not one of them.)

Anyway, I have better things to do than Algebra homework. Conference lines are free, run by hobbyists who know how to couple multiple lines together, connecting those adventurous souls who want to talk

to strangers. Just call, then sit around waiting for someone else to call. And, in my case, hope it's a girl.

It's a total ego trip. See, girls tell me they like my voice. They like to talk to me. "13?" they say when I tell them my age. "I thought you were, like, 17!"

On this particular day, magic happens. A girl on the line says that she goes to my school. "I hang out with the stoners. You know, by the back fence? Come hang out with us at Nutrition tomorrow."

I want to, I really do.

The next day during Nutrition, I stand in the playground, staring across the heat waves on the blacktop, looking at the stoners on the other side of the basketball courts. They lean against the fence. Their laughter is flat and distant in the still air.

Which one is she? I wonder. What will she think when she sees me? Was she even for real, or am I being set up for the ultimate humiliation? Ken wants to be a stoner, haw-haw! If I cross over to their side, there's no going back. I'll be marked, forever.

**Some people use
their first name
and their city.
I'm "Ken Van
Nuys."**

I either lose my nerve or come to my senses, turning around to trudge back toward safer ground.

A Good Connection

In the mid-80s, everything is new. New Wave, New Coke, new technology. The conference line has vanished in the wake of its sleazy relative, the party line. How can a hobbyist operating out of his studio apartment compete with the moneymaking schemes advertised by glassy-eyed models on late night TV? Comment lines are disappearing too, their owners buying Apples, Ataris and Commodores and delving into those new socioelectronic worlds called bulletin board systems.

Daytime? I'm an A student, starring in the school play, and a very untalented member of the track team.

Nighttime? I'm dialing, dialing, even if now I let my modem do it for me.

Late at night, Mom comes down the hall and sees the light on in my room. She pokes her head in. "You're still playing on the computer? Shouldn't you get some sleep?"

"I'm not tired."

That's not true. I'm half asleep, but unwilling to give in to that unproductive state. There are BBSes to dial into. I know almost all of them; in fact, I've been compiling a list of all the BBSes in the San Fernando Valley, logging into each of them in turn, just to do it.

It feels rather entrepreneurial.

Yes, it's about calling, sorting, listing, but it's becoming something else now, too. I'm getting advice on breaking into showbiz. I'm introducing myself in a New Users forum. For a few magical days, I collaborate with three strangers on a sui generis, raunchy tale starring the Pillsbury Doughboy and Doughgirl. (Rolling in flour has never been so titillating.) And I have met friends online now: Afshin, my Atari gaming pal. Matt, my friend and advice-giver, who calms me down when I'm mad at my parents. Deedee, whose bubbly personality has me flirting until she tells me she's old enough to be my grandma – at which point we become friends.

Tygress, meeting me in person and teaching me how to french.

One day the next summer, I post in a BBS forum, asking for advice. My grandmother is dying. I'm going to see her in the hospital, probably for the last time, and I'm sad, and scared.

"I'm just going to freeze," I worry in my post. "I won't know what to say. What should I say?"

Matt answers my post:

"Tell her you love her."

Today is an Ordinary Day

My day at work:

- Fix library website error.
- Record Facebook video welcoming people to the library page.
- Spend a two-hour shift at the reference desk and help people find what they need. One person wants help finding articles on the philosophical underpinnings of Ayn Rand's writings; the next wants help finding the bathroom.
- Return to my office and make myself available for instant messenger reference sessions.
- Look up an article about technology planning in libraries. I need to know what others are doing!
- Prepare my materials for a class coming in the next morning. I'm going to teach them about researching American history.
- My turn at Scrabulous!

Being a librarian, finding and compiling information, being on Facebook and IMing a library patron: it's all so *ordinary*. Which is fine with me, because my kind of ordinary is about flipping a switch and making a connection, illuminating that 0 bit and making it 1. It's about the sound of a Macintosh blipping to life – a bright, rainbow exclamation point. It's about finding information for people and making friends.

And here I am today: typing, typing, connecting. With you. Telling you about the secret origins of my own original, ordinary life.




















Ken Simon doesn't have an iPhone yet. His childhood self is appalled.

The Facebook Newsfeed for Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters

By Ivan Sian

Profile edit Friends ▼ Inbox(1) ▼

News Feed

-  Beast is playing [Scrabulous!](#) Challenge him to a game.
-  [Zombie Wolverine](#) just bit you. Bite him back!
-  [Charles Xavier](#) thinks you should start concentrating in class instead of thinking about what [Emma Frost](#) is wearing.
-  [Magneto](#) joined the group [X-Men](#).
-  [Magneto](#) left the group [X-Men](#).
-  [Magneto](#) joined the group [X-Men](#).
-  [Magneto](#) left the group [X-Men](#).
-  [Magneto](#) joined the group [X-Men](#).
-  [Dazzler](#) joined the group [Mutants with Lame Superpowers](#).
-  [Angel](#) is wondering when he'll stop molting.
-  [Beast](#) has challenged your knowledge of [Recombinant DNA!](#) Play him!
-  [Charles Xavier](#) knows you've been thinking dirty thoughts.
-  [Emma Frost](#) has been poked by [Cyclops](#).
-  [Emma Frost](#) left the group [Hellfire Club](#).
-  [Marrow](#) left the group [Mutants with Lame Superpowers](#).
-  [Wolverine](#) has challenged [Cyclops](#) to the game [How well do you know Jean Grey?](#)
-  [Jean Grey](#) has been poked by [Cyclops](#).
-  [Jean Grey](#) has been poked by [Wolverine](#).
-  [Beast](#) has challenged your knowledge of [17th Century French Philosophers](#). Play him!



by Sarah
Kuhn

For Part I of this story, please check out *Grok* #1: Pon Farr.

<http://tinyurl.com/4t2ocp>

I always knew Glory Gilmore would come back to me one day, but I never really considered the how of it. Trying to imagine the perfect scenario, the precise sequence of mind-fuckingly symbolic events seemed wrong – I mean, that would basically be me just asking for it *not* to happen, right?

Now I'm thinking I should have put a little more thought into it, should have cobbled together a couple of decent scenarios *at the very least*, because then...well, fuck. Then maybe I could have willed one of those scenarios into being and what happened wouldn't have happened and I'd be able to leave Los Angeles pondering simpler matters, like how much of the expansive *Secret Invasion* checklist I am actually going to commit my wallet to and whether or not Adrian Pasdar will finally cave and give me that 15-minute phoner. (The answer to the first question is, of course, all of it. I'm a fucking sucker.)

Even though it's sort of dramatically necessary for any *Star Trek* captain worth his or her salt to violate the Prime Directive at least seven times per season, I've always thought the concept of non-interference was a generally good idea (probably could have got home a lot

sooner if you hadn't dicked so many Delta Quadrant societies around, *Janeway*).

Unlike the vast majority of Starfleet, I, at least, learned my lesson pretty early on. I said before that Cap'n Douchebag's little act of Glory thievery didn't ruin me for all other men, and I stand by that. However. It did hammer home this notion that's sort of always lurked in the back of my head, this idea that avoiding most kinds of human...entanglement is ultimately for the best. He took the knowledge I had so carelessly given him and he used it. He knew that for me, Glory Gilmore was more than just a stupid action figure.

In other words, the first tiny, spiteful chance someone gets, they will fuck you, and the better they know you, the closer they are... well. The harsher the fucking. Pretty soon, The Alien Society of You is locked in full-on civil war, damaged beyond repair.

You know, I should revise my previous statement: I *thought* I had learned my lesson. But as it turns out, I'm no smarter than your average Starfleet captain.

Goddammit, Janeway. Why'd ya have to go and fuck things up like that?

All I want is a normal pair of sunglasses. The Holiday Inn gift shop is awash with plenty of *non-normal* sunglasses, let me just tell you. Sunglasses with rhinestones, with retina-singeing neon lenses, with Dora the fucking Explorer prancing down the curve of the earpiece. I spin frantically through racks and racks until I finally locate a nondescript grey pair that just screams "mall security" (or maybe "Section 31," if I'm lucky), pay for them, and stumble into the vicious daylight.

I stomp my way over to the convention center. Decisive footfalls. Energy expended. No room for thinking. No time to piece together certain images into...into...

Oh my fucking God. Frak. Frakking fuck. How could this—

No. Stop it. No thinking, only stomping! Brain is blank, blank, blank. These aren't the droids you're looking for.

I stomp through the heavy glass doors, past a trio of scraggly Darth Mauls, up and down the maze of corridors, finally arriving at my destination.

The GinormoCon autograph room is a sprawling expanse clogged with semi-orderly lines of people, all craving one tiny, meaningful moment with their stalkee of choice. Jack Camden is settled into the far right corner, servicing a disgustingly long line of girls wearing clunky glasses and backpacks shaped like goggle-eyed anime characters.

I stomp my way through the lines, ignoring the barriers that have been set up to keep the various groupings of fankids separated from one another. A security minion waves his arms at me. "Miss...MISS! YOU CAN'T DO THAT!"

Well, normally I wouldn't, Sir Minion. I do have a decent amount of respect for nerd decorum, after all. But these are special circumstances. These are...these are...*cataclysmic* circumstances. *Final Crisis*-style, OK? OK?!

After shoving aside a posse of spindly Tyler Mane enthusiasts, I arrive at Camden's table. He doesn't notice me at first, so consumed is he by Sharpie-ing "XOXO" for the kazillionth time.

I clear my throat, glowering at him from behind my Section 31 shades. The clunky glasses girls gaze upon me with disdain. He finally looks up. Those usually brilliant blue eyes are kind of bloodshot today.

"Oh...um...hi," he stammers.

He glances at his adoring public, then back at me. "Listen, guys," he says, raising his voice to address the line, "I need a quick break. I'll be right back and then I'll sign everything. Promise."

He hops up from behind the table, places a hand firmly at the small of the back, and propels me through the crowd, out the door, across the hall. We land in an empty meeting room with a haphazard arrangement of tables and chairs and a buffet of sad-looking bagels.

"So," he says, stuffing his hands in his pockets and shifting uncomfortably. He can't seem to think of what comes after that. He tries to meet my sunglasses-obscured eyes. "You look, uh... pretty today."

Oh, Jesus. Does that line work on the clunky glasses girls? Did it work on *me* last night?

"You got my note?" he asks.

"Yes," I say, trying to sound cool and formal, like a crisis-besieged Aeryn Sun. "Thanks for telling me where you'd be."

We share an awkward pause, our conversational skills apparently exhausted.

"Look," I say, snarling a little just to keep my voice from shaking. "Last night was a serious lapse in judgment for me. But I really need to know if you, uh...remember anything. Besides the sex."

Just saying it makes me a little nauseous. I slump into a chair next to the bagel buffet.

**"These are...
these are...
cataclysmic
circumstances.
Final Crisis-
style, OK? OK?!"**

He just stares at me for a minute, his expression an almost comical mix of shock and confusion.

"Well..." He considers my query, pulling up a chair next to me. "We did use protec—"

"That's not what I mean!" I shriek. I feel like I might throw up. Again. "I mean. I remember the, um, making out and I remember the... other stuff. But I don't remember how we got all...you know. And I don't know what could possibly make me..." I stop myself abruptly.

But he gets it. Immediately. A bemused hint of smile plays across his face. "What could make you...get it on with a shallow, undeservedly famous guy with a vanity rock band?" he asks, sounding out each word carefully.

Argh.

"Yes," I say through gritted teeth.

"Huh." He leans back in his chair, trying – and failing fucking miserably – to keep the grin from spreading across his face. "Well, given that charming attitude of yours, I guess there's no question as to how I possibly could have resisted *you*."

I cross my arms over my chest, simmering.

"In all seriousness...we were both pretty lit," he continues. "You don't think we just got carried away?"

"I don't know," I say. "Maybe. But I just...feel like there was more to it than that."

Here's what I don't say: the moment I remember best, the image that is crystal-clear amidst the blurry mess of drunken debauchery, consists of five bizarre seconds wherein I sank my fingernails into the back of Jack Camden's neck and pulled him close, crushing his mouth with mine. I kissed him first. And I don't know why.

He's still trying to meet my gaze through my UV-blocking barriers. Finally, he lets out an irritated sigh and in one swift, decisive motion, reaches over and snatches my sunglasses, exposing my poor eyeballs to way more light than they're ready for.

"Hey!" I squint instinctively. Everything is too big, bright, blurry. "Give those back!" I yelp, batting ineffectually at the Camden-shaped blur.

He stuffs them in his pocket and looks me straight in the eye. "I *might* recall a few sordid details," he says.

"OK," I say, squirming a little under the directness of his gaze. I manage to crack one eye all the way open.

"And I'd be happy to share, but I need to finish this autograph thing. So tell ya what – I have to put on an appearance at that *Level Up* party tonight. And I'm betting you have to do some kind of snarky write-up for your magazine. Right?"

"Yeah..."

"OK. So let's have dinner beforehand."

"I'm not going on a fucking *date* with you," I huff. "Why can't you just..."

"Hey!" he cuts me off, leveling me with an exasperated look. "Not like that. We'll just get sandwiches from that disgusting snack machine in the cafeteria. I'll try to fill in some missing details and you will hopefully talk to me like a normal person instead of a profanity-spewing rageball. OK?"

"I...OK." I glare at him so he knows this still does not please me at all.

"OK." He reaches into his pocket and frees my sunglasses, passing them back to me. "7 pm." He takes a few steps towards the autograph room and the gaggle of signature-hungry fangirls, then hesitates.

"Julie," he says, "do you remember what you said to me? When we got back to your room last night?"

"I told you," I say wearily, "I don't remember anything from the...between part. Why? What did I say?"

He hesitates, a touch of uncertainty creeping into his expression. "Never mind."

I find Mitch and Braidbeard in the convention center's food court, eating a dubious-looking breakfast of tater tots and M&Ms. My sunglasses are back in their rightful place and I haven't even made a passing attempt at taming my hair, which is sprouting from my head like a pissed off mushroom cloud.

"Well, well, *well*," says Braidbeard, taking in my disheveled appearance. "If it isn't the female Tony Stark."

"Goddammit, Braidbeard," I mutter, plopping into the seat next to Mitch. "That's so unoriginal. Can you at least find an actual female alcoholic to compare me to?"

"Like *who*?" he asks condescendingly. "The Tony Stark reference is a classic. It cuts across gender lines."

"What about Starbuck?"

"Sorry, but the only Starbuck I know of is a *man*..."

"Alright, you two," Mitch cuts in. "It's too early for that. Julie, are you OK? We went up to your room last night to check on you, but there were...noises..."

"SEX NOISES," Braidbeard clarifies, apparently for the benefit of the three Klingons at the next table.

"Shhhhhh!" I shush Braidbeard as Kang, Kor and Koloth look on, probably wondering if my raging promiscuity extends to bat'leth-related Kama Sutra positions.

"I sort of...slept with someone," I say, hunching my shoulders and sliding down in my seat. Suddenly, I'm on the other end of a pair of uncomprehending stares.

In this moment, I realize that I better just tell them. Otherwise, I'm in for several rounds of increasingly uncomfortable questions.

I take a deep breath. "I slept with..."

"Well, hellooo! Hello to my favorite journalist!"

We are suddenly assaulted by a pin-thin tornado of elaborately teased red hair – otherwise known as Kirstie Knight, GinormoCon press rep extraordinaire.

"Jules!" she trills, pulling up a chair. "What's up, girlfriend? Are you having a total blast?"

"Yeah, Kirstie, everything is great," I say, my hungover head wincing a little at her singsongy cadences. Kirstie is the only person I know who refers to me as "Jules." She's

convinced that we're destined to have a special bond, being a couple of "gals" on the male-dominated geek press circuit. She enforces this by any means necessary, non-nicknames and all.

"You know Mitch and Braidbeard, right? From Cineplanet?" I say.

"Right, right – nice to see you boys," she says, gifting them with a perfunctory nod. "So," she continues, spinning her tower of hair back towards me, "I heard you made a special friend at the Gathering of Elements soiree last night."

GROKFILE: FELICIA DAY

ORIGIN: COMPUTER GAMES



Creator/actor
The Guild
watchtheguild.com
feliciaday.com

I can remember the computer that my parents had. It was a laptop – quote, unquote – and it was literally as big as a table. The computer itself was 2 by 3, but the screen was about 6 by 6 inches – 4 by 4, maybe. And it was like, green text. As a kid, I ran up a \$300 phone bill calling the 1-800 *King's Quest* line, cause I literally couldn't not die in this certain area. I would just call, because I loved those – *King's Quest* and *Space Quest* and all those graphical adventures. *Faery Tale Adventure* was my first RPG. I remember that vividly, because I would always die with the first two brothers. And then the third brother, I'd be like, "Whoa, I gotta get serious now – it's my last brother."

"What's that?" I croak. "Were you there?"

"Nooo, sweetie, I had like three other parties!" she giggles. "You know how crazy I am during the con. But a very reliable source told me that you were getting pretty chummy with that delicious Travis Trent! Oh, what's his real name? Jim? Jeff?"

Fucking shit.

"I did...meet him," I hedge.

"Mmmm-hmmm!" She gives me a knowing smile. "I gotta go check everyone in for roundtables, but you'll have to tell me every little thing later, Jules! See y'all around!"

With that, she spins her way out of view. And I am once again facing four perplexed eyeballs. I feel like a solitary french fry under the McDonald's heating lamp.

"Whoa," says Braidbeard.

"So," says Mitch, "this...person you slept with..."

"YOU DID IT WITH JACK CAMDEN!!!" yelps Braidbeard.

Those damn Klingons are really going to have something to talk about when they get back to Qo'noS.

"Yes, yes, OK, fuck!" I say, flopping forward so that my poor head hits the table. I decide to stay there for a moment. The plasticized tabletop is cool and soothing.

"Wow," says Mitch. "That's gotta be one of the most impressive con hook-ups of all time."

"Way better than anything from the pon farr-themed room party at Shore Leave '03," agrees Braidbeard.

"And double points for frakking with the enemy," says Mitch. "Was it hotter than Barb's last fanfic?"

"Very fucking funny," I say, my head still resting on the table. My mushroom cloud of hair falls over my eyes, obscuring my vision, enclosing me in a black hole.

Still, I can practically feel Braidbeard smirking.

"Weelllllll, peeps," he says, drawing out each syllable, "I could chat all day about how Julie's little indiscretion is a continuity-frakking twist on par with organic webshooters, but I gotta get to my Graham Barrett interview."

"Eh?" I say from under my hair, suddenly interested in something beyond my own suffering. "How'd you get that? I thought he wasn't doing any press – you know, as usual."

"He made an exception for *me*," gloats Braidbeard. "I guess he's a fan of my column."

"The site, B," says Mitch mildly. "He's a fan of the *site*. At least according to his people, and they're probably lying. They know he needs some decent PR if he expects to make the leap from superstar comics writer to Hollywood

hack. That cranky British 'I don't give a shit about the fanboys who made me famous' mystique is only gonna get him so far."

"Well, whatevs," sniffs Braidbeard. "I gotta go. Have fun being jealous. Oh, and try not to sleep with anyone today, Julie."

Without raising my head, I lift a middle finger at his departing back.

"OK," says Mitch, once we're alone, "I know you didn't want to get into it too much in front of B, but I really am curious. You getting your inner con slut on is an event to begin with. But you getting your inner con slut on with Jack Camden is like...I don't know, the Oh-Em-Gee time leap in *Battlestar Galactica*. I need more details."

I shove my hair out of eyes, push my sunglasses on top of my head and glare at him.

"Ya know," he says, ignoring my death-ray stare, "I wouldn't think less of you if you, like, *enjoyed* it."

I groan. "Why are you being so nosey?"

He shrugs, popping a tater tot into his mouth. "I tell you shit, don't I? I mean, what about my awesome...encounter with that *Ghost in the Shell* girl at WonderCon? You loved that one."

I did love that one.

"I would ask you to tell it again right now if my head didn't hurt so much," I say. "If only for the part where you found out what she was using to keep all of her, um, access points in place."

"Right," he says, smiling fondly at the memory. "But we're not talking about me. So come on – spill. Were there...fireworks?"

I heave a mighty sigh. "It was...fine."

But as I say this, a few choice images flash through my mind. A few choice images that involve Jack Camden being pretty naked. It must be said that they are way better than "fine."

Now I'm *really* going to throw up.

After a nap and half a bottle of Advil, I'm feeling reasonably human by the time night

rolls around. As promised, Camden is waiting for me outside the tiny cafeteria at 7 on the dot. This time, he's added something new to his comics-themed tee/luxury-brand jeans ensemble.

"Glasses?" I say, taking in the Rupert Giles-esque wire-rimmed specs perched on his nose. "Are you trying to blend in with us nerds?"

"I am one of you nerds," he says, smiling wearily. "And my contacts were killing my eyes."

"I brought you your shirt," I say, thrusting a wadded gray blob in his direction. He accepts it, balling it up in one hand. "And your, uh... Glory Gilmore." I lift the flap of my messenger bag to show him Glory, still safe in her packaging. He studies her for a moment, his eyes unreadable.

"I think...I think she's yours now," he says.

"Uh, OK. Whatever."

We proceed to the cafeteria, a cramped, marginally functional box done up in blah institutional grays and strewn with yesterday's newspaper and wrinkled GinormoCon fliers. The food court is closed for the day, so the only option for con-goers in need of sustenance is the oddball assortment of vending machines bunched into a corner of the room. We seem to be the only ones opting for this gourmet adventure tonight.

Camden fishes a handful of change from his pocket. The biggest vending machine is the kind that rotates through its selection with a touch of a button, offering your choice of mummified, plastic-encased sandwiches for two bucks a pop.

"So what'll it be?" he asks, pressing the button and watching the sandwiches spin in and out of view. "Ham? Egg salad? What kind of food poisoning do you want?"

"Um, I'll get my own," I say.

He raises an eyebrow. "I promise this still isn't a date," he says. "But I can buy you a sandwich."

"OK, OK," I relent. "Ham. Egg salad is just asking for it."

He pulls our sandwiches free from the case and we sit. The vending machines chorus together in a low hum as we unwrap our dinner.

"So," I say, twisting the plastic wrap between my fingers, "will you...tell me what you remember?"

He looks at me thoughtfully, as if he's trying to recall the exact details of my face (probably, he is – surely I'm one of many con-quests). I almost expect him to launch into some sort of game-playing, to flash a pseudo-suave grin and ask me how much I remember. Instead, he considers for a moment, then answers.

"Well," he says, hesitantly. "As I recall – and I swear I'm not saying this to bullshit you – you made the first move."

I nod quickly, my cheeks flaming. This is the problem with being vampire pale – you can't exactly hide it when you're totally fucking embarrassed.

"But right before you, um, kissed me, you sort of...leaned in, like right next to my ear. And told me stuff."

"*Stuff?*"

"About Glory Gilmore and how some douchebag stole your action figure and how it was really important for you to get it back. And—" he stops abruptly, raking a hand through his floppy hair. Maybe it's just the unnatural fluorescent glow of the vending machines, but I'd swear he's starting to flush a little bit.

"And...what?"

He is suddenly extremely interested in dissecting his sandwich, lifting the top slice of bread and gingerly picking off a paper-thin piece of tomato. He replaces the bread and takes a bite, his eyes focusing on a point just above my right ear.

"That's it."

"Oh, really?"

"Yup. Hey, this sandwich isn't so bad."

"Huh," I say, sitting back in my chair and folding my arms over my chest. "Well, thanks for sharing. It must be really hard to remember all these details, considering the fucking parade of fangirls you've already slept with this

weekend. Think you'll pull a Jimmy Doohan and marry one?"

He chokes a little on his bite of sandwich. "Whoa," he says. "So that cloaking device of hostility you've got going on wasn't just for our interview, huh?"

I shrug.

"OK," he says, putting the sandwich down and meeting my gaze.

"First of all, no fair using the dead for your sarcasm. Second, you're the only fangirl – the only *person* – who I've had the, uh, pleasure of bedding at a convention. And third...maybe you want to summon the

incredible reserve of energy you've got powering that Emma Frost-worthy 'tude and use it to remove the gigantic fucking chip from your shoulder. I don't have to be doing this, you know. Talking to you."

"Then why are you here?" I say, setting my glare to maximum.

"Because..." he looks at me consideringly, propping an elbow on the table and resting his chin on his palm. "Because you asked. Do you remember that? *You* asked. You wanted to solve this Big Drunken Mystery, girl detective."

He locks his eyes on mine and I shift uncomfortably. I feel like he can see right through my skull, into my freaked out little brain. Must be pretty fucking entertaining.

"I...dammit," I mutter. I tear my gaze away from his, my eyes wandering to my untouched sandwich. I poke a hole in the squishy white bread. My arsenal of acidic retorts evaporates from the tip of my tongue, floats off into the fluorescent-lit air. And all of a sudden, a bunch of *other* words are spilling out before I can stop them. "This is...just. I don't have a lot of... experience," I say awkwardly. "I mean, with this sort of thing. I don't usually drink. Or steal. Or...do what we did. And I really wish I could remember more. And I met Jimmy Doohan once and he was really nice. He even took a picture with me."

He nods, encouraging me to keep up my stream of LiveJournal-y babble. I'm not really recognizing this yammering girl who won't shut the hell up. Maybe she's Bizarro Schmuzie?

"I..." I swallow hard. "The idea that I completely lost all control, especially with..."

He raises an eyebrow.

**I feel like he can see
right through my skull,
into my freaked out
little brain. Must be
pretty fucking
entertaining.**

"...with...uh, someone I just *interviewed*," I say quickly, shutting down the rogue LiveJournaler before she gets totally out of hand. "I mean, it's pretty fucking unprofessional, to say the very least."

He lets that hang for a moment. "Wow," he finally says, grinning a

little. "That actually sounded sort of like something a human would say."

"Hey!" I reinstate my glare. "You know, it's not like you came off very well in our interview, either. Could you maybe come up with a few one-liners that aren't already part of your Wikipedia entry?"

He looks surprised for a moment, then slouches back in his chair. "I hate interviews."

"Why? I mean, getting to talk all about yourself...that must rank pretty high on any actor's 'awesome' list."

He shakes his head vehemently. "No. It just makes me feel...I dunno, embarrassed."

"You didn't seem embarrassed. You seemed in pretty full-on fakey TV star mode, actually."

"Yeah, well. It's basically just another kind of acting," he says. "You put on this front to get through it, or you'll come off like an asshole. But the whole thing is mostly people asking for pre-packaged soundbites and lying to you about how wonderful you are. Well, maybe not you." He gives me a rueful smile, a very distant cousin to the Jack Camden megawatt grin. There seem to be fewer teeth involved. "You pretty much just wanted me to prove how lame I am."

"So why do you always go out of your way to claim you're a nerd?" I ask. "Is it just what you think people want to hear?"

"Man." He shakes his head at me. "Julie. What do I have to do to get you to believe I am one of your people?"

"I just..."

"Wait." He suddenly sits up very straight, his eyes glazing over in a way that might charitably be referred to as "slightly demented." He turns this disconcerting gaze on me. "I know."

GROKFILE: MARC WADE ORIGIN: STAR TREK



Senior *Star Trek*
Correspondent
Roddenberry Productions
Roddenberry.com

Former Director, Production
StarTrek.com

I thought I had always been a sci-fi fan, until *Grok* asked about the origin of my fandom. Now that I think about it, I have to blame my mother. She came to California from Germany as a young bride, and somehow developed a taste for science fiction movies. Perhaps it coincided with my arrival, and her concerns (for reasons I won't explain) that I might possibly be from another planet. In those pre-TiVo, pre-VCR days of the late '60s, she would scan the *TV Guide* every week for sci-fi offerings. She would circle titles like *The Man from Planet X*, *The Man With the X-Ray Eyes*, *When Worlds Collide* and *X: The Unknown* so we wouldn't miss them – no matter how many times we'd seen them before. When NBC began offering fresh, new and thought-provoking sci-fi fare – the original *Star Trek* series – we were immediately hooked.

He stands up abruptly, sweeping the remnants of his sandwich into the trash. Then he grabs my hand, pulling me to my feet, and drags me towards the door. He's a possibly crazy man on a mission, his face set in a mask of grim determination. Maybe it's the full-on weirdness of the whole situation, but I don't even blink when he says, in the single worst Schwarzenegger impression I have ever heard, "Come with me if you want to live."

We end up not in some Skynet-plagued future, but at the party we were both supposed to attend in the first place. With the help of a few prominently-placed corporate sponsors (who, Red Bull!), the folks at *Level Up*, a long-running gamers' magazine, have taken over one of the con center's ballrooms, turning it into a blaring whirlwind of gaming stations and alcohol (which I will be steering clear of tonight, thank you very much).

"What are we..."

"Shhh!" Camden shushes me as we approach the check-in table, which Kirstie is presiding over with great verve.

"Oh, my!" she chirps, her face lighting up like the TARDIS. "I guess the party can *really* start now!"

"Hi there," says Camden. "Jack Camden. My publicist, Lois Ryder, was supposed to put me on the list?"

"Of course, darling," says Kirstie. "And Jules, you're on my press list." She cups her hand next to her mouth, exaggerating the gesture as if she's about to share a particularly juicy secret. "Jack, watch out for *this one!*" she stage-whispers. "She's a wild gal!"

"I believe it," he says, grinning. "Listen, I also wanted to sign up for the tournament. Can I still do that?"

"Of course, honey," she says scribbling something on one of her complicated-looking grids. "You'll be an exciting last-minute addition. It starts in five."

"Great, thank you."

I shoot Camden a quizzical look. "What are you..."

"You'll see. Come on."

We make our way into the dark, pulsating ballroom, which looks and sounds like the big rave in the lamest of the *Matrix* movies, only everyone's wearing baggy, logo-emblazoned t-shirts instead of neutral-colored sacks made out of hemp. The only flickers of light are emanating from the various TV screens set up around the room, housing images of death, destruction and really awesome cars.

"Julie! Hey!" Mitch approaches us, raising his beer. Apparently, a gaming party is an officially fancy event, as he has broken out his favorite piece of wearable swag: the much-coveted *Hot Fuzz* t-shirt, which features an intense-looking silkscreen of Pegg and Frost, plus the ominous words "This Shirt Just Got Real."

"Hey, Mitch," I say.

"Hey," says Camden, reaching out to shake Mitch's hand. "Jack. We've talked before, right? The season two junket, was it?"

"Yeah," says Mitch, looking moderately starstruck.

"Nice to see you again," says Camden. "Cool shirt."

"Thanks," Mitch says faintly, blushing a little. Great. In addition to his predilection for girls dresses as cyborgs, it looks like he also has a bit of a Camden man-crush.

"Can you believe this frakkin' thing?" Braidbeard saunters up to us, his nasal intonations cutting through the party's frenetic bleeps and bloops. "Hey, man," he adds, nodding oh-so-casually in Camden's direction.

Suddenly, a spotlight overtakes the center of the room. I squint in its general direction. A mammoth TV screen sits atop a makeshift stage, a tiny, tuxedo-clad figure standing directly in front of it. Actually, I think it's Mr. Tux from the auction the night before. Maybe he's the only convention guest who actually owns formalwear.

"Ladies and gents!" he bellows. "Welcome, welcome, welcome to the *Level Up*-Red Bull-Sony-Helio par-TAY, brought to you in part by MySpace! At this moment, we're going to start the highlight of the night...our first annual *GITAR HERO* TOURNAMEEEEEENT!"

Drunken cheering abounds.

"OK," says Mr. Tux. "Here's how this is gonna work. We have 10...oops, make that 11 contestants! We'll have two brackets, with our players facing off song by song. The final two will advance to our last round, which features a super surprise TWIST! Got it?"

Another slurry round of cheering practically has the room vibrating. I turn to Camden, my eyebrow raised. "This? This is how you're going to show your true geek colors?"

He grins and shoves the balled-up Dr. Strange tee in my direction. "Hold this for me, will you?"

"Huh," I say. "But don't you know how to play the real guitar because of your band? Doesn't that give you an unfair advantage?"

"Julie," he says, "any true geek knows that actually playing guitar counts for nothing in *Guitar Hero*. If anything, it's a handicap."

"OK!" screams Mr. Tux. "Let's bring forth our first challengers. May I please have Greg Roberts and Jack...Camden?" He squints at the card to make sure he's read it right. "Well!" he exclaims as Camden saunters toward the stage. "Looks like we have a CELEBRITY CONTESTANT! Ladies and gents, TV's very own Travis Trent is IN THE HOUSE!"

Camden ascends the stage to wild cheers, shaking hands with the other contestant – a skinny guy in a long leather duster – and accepts his plastic guitar from Mr. Tux. He chooses a bright-haired punk chick as his avatar and stands at the ready while Leather Duster selects a shifty-looking dude with a freakishly large torso. They both gaze intently at the screen, fingers poised over the primary-colored plastic of their guitar controls, as the first song loads up.

I glance over at Braidbeard and Mitch. They're both completely riveted, eyes bugged wide, mouths slightly agape. "Aweeesooooooooome," breathes Braidbeard, practically singing out the word.

The song, "Barracuda," is a bit of a lightweight for the true *Guitar Hero* enthusiast, but on expert mode, it's still pretty fucking crazy.

For the first verse or so, Camden and Leather Duster are neck and neck, strumming the thumping pseudo-chords with precision, heads bobbing along in near unison. Then Camden flubs a tricky run of notes, falling behind.

"Star power," murmurs Braidbeard. "He's gotta do it."

When the dusting of stars appears onscreen, I inhale sharply. But Camden knows exactly what to do, tilting his miniature axe into the air with greater-than-necessary flourish. Punky Girl lights up in response, emanating a supernatural glow, spinning her guitar around her leg. Leather Duster, unfortunately, is a little

slower on the uptake. No dubious acrobatics for his avatar.

"ALRIGHT!" Braidbeard shrieks, pumping a fist in the air.

"You OK, Julie? You looked a little nervous there for a minute," says Mitch.

"I'm fine," I say. "It's just stuffy in here. Hard to breathe."

After that, Leather Duster never recovers and

his popular blog, cruises to victory in the other bracket. He and Camden are the last men standing. "ALRIGHT," bellows Mr. Tux. "These two fine gentlemen will move on to our very special FINAL ROUND. Now. I told you there was a surprise twist, didn't I?"

The crowd screams in the affirmative.

"Right!" says Mr. Tux. "These gods of gaming will NOT be playing *Guitar Hero!!!*"

There's a collective gasp. "Fuckin' weak sauce!" someone yells.

GROKFILE: JON COLLINS ORIGIN: ROLE-PLAYING GAMES



Executive producer/actor
Fellowship of the Dice
fellowshipofthedice.com
jeezjon.typepad.com

I'm not quite sure how it started. But the books came into our house. My older brother, maybe? They offered such interesting ideas. And abilities. It was about 1981, and me and my brothers met in secret. We read the rules, got our dice and started. I liked telling stories prior to that – in kindergarten, I directed a skit with myself and friends reenacting *Where The Wild Things Are* on my front porch. So I took up the books, and my brothers leaned in...and we started playing *Dungeons & Dragons*. This started my gamer career, which I've been doing on and off ever since.

"RATHER," continues Mr. Tux, undaunted, "they will have to prove their might in another milieu! We're gonna have them face off in an oldie but goodie, in that staple of arcades AROUND THE WORLD..."

"BOOOOOO!" screams the heckler.

"This dynamic duo will be demonstrating their best moves innnnnnnnn...*DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION!!!*"

The crowd actually doesn't know quite what to make of *that*.

"And," says Mr. Tux, rushing ahead to cover up the sudden silence, "here's another TWIST. Both gentlemen will need to find a PARTNER to compete with! It

Camden strums his way to a fairly ass-kicking victory.

"Wow," says Mitch, lifting an eyebrow. "Your new boyfriend is pretty good."

"Not bad," I say, trying to appear unimpressed. "But that was one song and the Angel wannabe up there was pretty slow on the uptake. There's no way Camden can beat the nerd elite."

And yet, as the challengers come, he takes them down one by one. He bests a combat booted goth girl on "Black Magic Woman," whips a stone-faced teenager at "Rock You Like a Hurricane," narrowly beats out a Harry Knowles doppelganger on "Raining Blood."

Meanwhile, Barney Springshorn, a gangly, fedora-sporting gamer who I recognize from

will be...a DOUBLE DANCE DANCE DUEEEEEEL!"

The crowd, having had time to recover (or maybe just down another beer), finally gets it together and lets loose with an ear-splitting cheer.

"Come back in 30 minutes!" cries Mr. Tux. "And our champion will be REVEALED!"

With that, the pulsing music comes back over the loudspeaker and the room explodes into excited chatter. Camden steps down from the stage and wends his way through the mass of people, stopping here and there to receive the occasional high-five.

"Kick ass, man!" exclaims Braidbeard, as Camden re-joins us.

"Really sweet," says Mitch, handing him a beer.

They all look at me expectantly.

"That was...neat," I finally manage.

"Well," says Camden, "I suppose you've already cycled through expert mode on every song in existence, right?"

"HA!" Braidbeard snorts. "Julie is sooooo not a gamer. She's like the Meg White of *Guitar Hero*."

"Hey, come on now," says Mitch. "That's not really fair to Meg White."

"My geekdom lies in other areas," I sulk.

"Uh-huh," Camden looks at me bemusedly. "What areas would those be?"

"I don't know...everything else?"

"Comics, for sure," says Mitch.

"Ahhh, yes." Camden's expression softens. "I know that much." He meets my gaze for a moment, the flickering lights distorting his features in the dark.

"Hey, let's...let's go hang in the hall," I stammer. "I really can't breathe in here."

We file out, Braidbeard keeping up a steady stream of questions about Camden's fake guitar technique as we proceed to the less claustrophobic confines of the hall. "So in expert mode, do you think it's better to keep your index finger on the red or the green?" he asks, brow furrowed. "I've heard arguments for both, but I'm just not convinced green is a viable option..." I groan, tuning him out.

"So," says Camden, once we've made it to the cool, open space beyond the party. "What's with your non-gamer status? It's throwing me for a loop, here."

"I just can't get into any of it," I say. "It seems like such a time-suck. You spend hours and hours doing the same bullshit over and over and what do you get at the end? A fake princess? Bragging rights on some fucking message board? Pointless."

"Also," says Mitch, leaning into Camden conspiratorially, "she's really bad at them."

"I'm sure if I put in as much effort as you, Mitch, I too could easily become a level 5000 mage on *World of Warcraft*," I say. "But I just don't care."

"There is no level 5000," says Braidbeard. "Unless they added that in the new expansion pack..."

"I *know*," I say hotly. "I was exaggerating."

"OK," says Camden. "But why are comics and TV and all that any better? Isn't there a time-suck element there, too?"

"There's storytelling," I say. "Relationships. Something for me to get really invested in that doesn't involve clicking on a certain configuration of buttons."

"Uh-huh," Camden nods, looking less than convinced. "You have a lot of theories about stuff, don't you?"

"Yeah, you should hear the one she has about yo—OW!" I deliver my best Vulcan nerve pinch before Braidbeard can get the rest of his sentence out. He shoots me a wounded look.

"Alright," says Camden, looking thoughtful. "So I know you're all about the Glory Gilmore. Who else?"

"Jean Grey," I say. "Jenny Sparks."

"The Spirit of the 20th Century," Camden intones theatrically, a hint of his crappy Schwarzenegger impression creeping in. "Jenny, I get. But Jean? I still think you've got more of an Emma thing going on. Speaking of which, what are your thoughts on the unholy union between Miss Frost and Scott Summers?"

"Oh, no," mutters Mitch.

"Fucking lame," I say. "Two great characters made un-great by a totally contrived relationship."

"And..." Mitch eggs me on.

"And!" I say, pointy finger gesticulating all over the place. "We spent how much fucking time believing in Jean and Scott? They go through this whole epic thing and there's death and reunion and pining and all of these struggles that aren't just, like, 'men are from Mars,' but are life and fucking *death*. They're this endgame couple, right? Then when they're

actually together, what happens? Cyclops can't keep his psychic dick in his pants."

"Well," says Camden, as I try to catch my breath, "there was a little more to it than *that*. Sounds like you've got kind of a nostalgia death grip on the storylines you liked as a kid. This is all very fascinating, though – I didn't know you were such a romantic."

Before I can respond to this infuriating little morsel, we're interrupted by a svelte figure clad in a black tank top and ass-boosting jeans. She's teetering down the hall in her glittering high heels when she spots Camden and stops abruptly. "Jack?"

"Oh...hey, Claire." He goes a little pale, shifting awkwardly from foot to foot. I glance from him back to the high-heeled interloper and realize that I recognize her. Her hair is usually dyed jet-black when she's playing Glory Gilmore, but she's let it grow out now that *The Periodic Seven's* on summer hiatus. Her blondish-brown roots hug the top of her scalp, her tresses pulled back into a sleek ponytail. She's Claire Yardley, Camden's onscreen co-star. "What are you doing here, anyway?" he asks. "I wasn't expecting to see you 'til the panel tomorrow."

"I promised I'd do a little appearance at the party – and hey, open bar," she says, giggling and flicking her ponytail over her shoulder. "I saw you up there, putting your best...skills to use. Are you all set to bust a move?"

"I...I dunno," he says, eyes wandering to the floor and staying there.

"Oh, Jack," she pouts a little, but her eyes never lose their mocking spark. "What's wrong? You can't find anyone to dance with? I bet one of your little nerd girl fans would be up for it. Of course, she'll probably bolt once she sees your doll collection..."

"They're not dolls," he mutters peevishly. "They're die-cast robots from Japan and some of the older ones were really hard to find."

"Uh-huh." The right corner of her mouth curls into a humorless grin. "Well, maybe your mad eBay skills can also help you find, you know, *the one*."

He meets her gaze, eyes shrouded in hurt. "Why do you...just stop it," he says, his voice drifting to a whisper. He stuffs his hands in his pockets, shoulders hunched, lips pressed tightly together. His entire body is caving in on itself.

"Oh, babe, you know I'm just teasing," she says, rolling her eyes. "God. Anyway, I bet all the little gossip blogs would just love it if you had to forfeit. Why don't you give them something to talk about?"

GROKFILE: FRED CHAO

ORIGIN: JOHNNY HIRO



Writer/illustrator
Johnny Hiro
fredchao.com

The first issue of this comic was made for one reason: To get in a girl's pants. I didn't expect *Johnny Hiro* to go beyond issue one. I just wanted to get it done, printed, and sent off to a girl in North Carolina. Well, things worked out beautifully, as Chris at Adhouse Books wanted more than one issue, and I am now part-time drawing comics (something that I've wanted to do since I was 8 years old). And more triumphantly, the girl has moved up to New York with me. We share a cozy (that's New York slang for "stupidly small") apartment in Brooklyn. We have no cats.

"No." The voice is thin but determined. And inexplicably coming from my mouth. Aw, fuck. I think it's that stupid LiveJournal-y girl.

Mitch and Braidbeard, who have been watching in stunned silence as two of TV's biggest superheroes exchange these decidedly unheroic words, whip their heads in my direction. Claire raises a plucked-to-all-hell eyebrow, noticing me for the first time.

"He's not forfeiting," I say firmly. "I'm his partner – dance partner!" I awkwardly grab Camden's hand to enforce this notion. It seems like the thing to do. He looks at me vacantly.

"And," I continue, "some of those robot imports *are* hard to find. Especially at a decent price."

"Huh," she cocks her head to the side, her face a mask of condescension. "Well, like I said, Jack – you can always count on your nerd girls. Good luck!" Before any of us can respond, she pivots on her spiky shoe and stalks off, ponytail swinging insolently.

We exhale in unison. I realize I'm still clutching Camden's hand in a death grip and drop it like a hot rock.

"I..." Camden's bewildered gaze flicks from me to Mitch to Braidbeard. "I'm sorry... about that. Excuse me." He hobbles a few feet away and sits down hard on the floor, leaning against the wall. He looks like Eeyore, post-tail loss. Like he can't get back what's been taken away, even though it's right there, within reach. Something in my gut twists, a long-dormant but familiar ache.

"Wow," breathes Braidbeard, shaking his head in awe. "Travis Trent. Pwned."

"Give me a sec," I murmur. I stride over and slide down the wall, sitting next to him.

"Hey," I say softly. "Thank you."

"For what?" His knees are drawn up in front of him, arms resting limply on top, hands balled into fists. He won't look at me.

"For giving me Glory Gilmore," I say. "That was really cool. Thank you."

He doesn't respond. I take a deep breath and try a different tack. "So," I say carefully. "Bad break-up?"

"Yeah," he says, eyes still glued to the floor. "I thought...I mean, I told her. That she was, um, the one. It may have involved a homemade card with a *Matrix* reference." I wince a little. "I couldn't see what she really was," he continues, shaking his head. "But while I was making my stupid card, she was banging the executive producer. And possibly his assistant. She said she didn't realize we were—" he goes into a fairly decent impression of Claire's bored cadences "—like, *serious*." He finally meets my eyes, mortification haunting his entire face. "That was a year ago. We're...we're OK on-set. She's professional, you know? Cordial. But whenever I have to see her in a social way, it

just...fucks me up. Stupid." He sighs, flopping his head back against the wall with a dull "thunk."

We sit there for a moment in silence. Finally, he seems to come to a resolution. "Enough of this," he says. "I'm gonna go tell Barney he's officially the champion."

I brandish the newly-freed Glory in front of his nose. "What would Glory Gilmore do?" I ask.

"No." There's that damn voice again. I'm kind of starting to like her. Go on, LiveJulie. "Camd—Jack," I say. "I meant what I said. I'll be your partner."

He looks at me uncomprehendingly, glasses sliding down his

nose.

"Look," I say, eyes narrowing. "Are you really gonna let that...that *Mundane* get to you?" I root around in my messenger bag, pulling out Glory Gilmore. I quickly and expertly liberate her from her packaging. The molded plastic makes a satisfying "pop" as it separates from the stiff cardstock. Camden looks slightly horrified – yet intrigued – by my blithe destruction of her mint-on-card-ness.

I brandish the newly-freed Glory in front of his nose. "What would Glory Gilmore do?" I ask. "Not that fucking poser with the stupid shoes. The *real* Glory Gilmore. Remember in issue #24 when Dr. Halogen released his deadly airborne toxin into the city? It crippled the rest of the Seven?"

He nods slowly. "Glory was the only who wasn't affected – she was inside, in the lab. But she couldn't go help them, because she'd be exposed to the gas."

"Right." I nod approvingly. "So what did she do? Did she just sit around and whine and bitch and *take it*?"

"No," he whispers.

"That's fucking right!" I exclaim, waving plastic Glory around. "She used her mad scientist skills – her *human* skills, the ones she had before she became a superhero – to formulate an antidote. Then she kicked Dr. Halogen's ass."

I take Jack's hand, gently uncurling his balled-up fist, placing Glory in his open palm. I look him dead in the eye, enunciating each syllable.

"What...would...Glory...Gilmore...do?"

He smiles a little half-smile, coming to life at last. "OK," he says. "Let's go."

As it turns out, Barney is a pretty good Dance Dancer. He's recruited a friend who looks like his even lankier clone and they're stomp-stomp-stomping away, following the merciless rain of onscreen arrows.

"This should be interesting," Jack says, watching them go. "What with you not really being a gamer and all."

"Are you actually objecting to my incredibly generous offer?" I say.

"No, no," he assures me. "I appreciate it. A lot."

Barney and BarneyClone finish off their routine with flair, landing in place on the dance pad.

"ALRIGHT," yells Mr. Tux, as the audience cheers. "Very nice. Now, let's bring out finalist number two. Once again, I give you...JACK CAMDEN! And, er...PARTNER!"

Jack gives a little wave to the crowd as we stroll across the stage. I squint into the light, trying to pick out Mitch and Braidbeard, but all I see is a mass of misshapen, big-mouthed faces, like everybody's just watched that fucked-up video in *The Ring*. We take our places on the side-by-side dance pads and train our eyes on the screen.

The song boots up. It's a random Japanese jam that sounds like the opening theme for an aggressively-perky-bordering-on-frightening kids' TV show. I take a deep breath. Step, step...stepstepJUMPJUMPstompstepstomp...

Jack tears his eyes from the screen for a split second, glancing in my direction. "WHAT....WHAT?!"

"EYES ON THE SCREEN, JACK!" I bark. JumpstepstompstompJUMP...

OK. Here's the truth. I'm really fucking good at *Dance Dance Revolution*. It is the only game in the known 'verse that I am actually good at. I somehow ended up with *Mammoth Media*'s free review copy and dance pad and hooked it up one night in a fit of insomnia-induced boredom. I may not be a level 5000 mage in some made-up world, but I can do expert mode on "In the Navy." Suck it, Mitch.

Stepstompstep!
Stepstompstep! At last, we land in formation (STOMP!), and I raise my hands over my head in exultation. Cause I know we did pretty awesome. Way more awesome than the BarneyClones.

"WELL!" Mr. Tux strides back onstage, looking very pleased with himself even though he hasn't actually done anything particularly spectacular tonight. "Looks like we have a WINNER! The first annual GinormoCon *Guitar Hero Dance Dance* Champion is...JACK CAMDEN! AND

PARTNER!!!"

The crowd roars with approval. And I finally allow myself to look at Jack. His cheeks are flushed, his eyes wild. His glasses are propped onto his face at a crazy angle, having been jostled all over the damn place during our routine. And he's looking at me like I have just given birth to a Cylon hybrid baby right there onstage.

"What..." he sputters. "How..."

I shrug, reaching up and adjusting his glasses back into place. "Now you know my mutant power."

He smiles then, a full-on beaming grin that makes his eyes crinkle up at the corners. It's not the cheesezoid "I'm a TV star" grin or the teasing "let me show you my mad vid skills" grin or the pained "Claire Yardley sucks" grin. It softens the sharp planes of his face, rendering

**I take a deep breath.
Step, step...
stepstepJUMPJUMP
stompstepstomp...**

**Jack tears his eyes
from the screen for
a split second,
glancing in my
direction.
"WHAT....WHAT?!"**

them less sculpted, less refined. I realize then that I'm standing very close to him, closer than I have since...well. You know. I can't seem to look away from that smile, and as my eyes wander over his face, they are drawn to a faint, milky-pale crescent near the left corner of his mouth. A scar. A non-perfect, non-geometric element. Weird. They must cover it up with makeup for the sho – oh. *Oh*.

Suddenly, I remember. My brain rewinds, sorting through the bleary bits and arranging them into one clear image. We're sitting on the couch of my hotel room. I'm sinking into its depths, the alcohol percolating in my brain, wondering if the cushions are going to swallow me whole. I feel like I'm made of liquid, my head flopping to one side as I try to focus on this strange person next to me. His body is angled towards mine, his arm hanging lazily over the armrest. He's telling me about how it's so easy to feel lost sometimes. And alone and weak and *stupid*. That's what he was trying to tell me earlier...you know, about that *Periodic Seven* storyline with Glory Gilmore? Issues 10 through 14? It just came out wrong. It always does. His features are so defined, so larger-than-life, as he speaks. I try to concentrate on one at a time. Eyes...blue, blue, blue. "Blue" is kind of a funny word. Mouth, stretching across his face, his amazingly symmetrical...wait. There's a ghostly, crooked half-moon tracing a tiny path right next to his mouth. He notices me squinting at it. Big Wheel accident, he explains. When I was 6.

Something about that stabs straight to my heart.

I lean into him, placing my hands on his chest. My lips brush his earlobe as I tell him about Glory Gilmore. About how I always lose her. About how issues 10 through 14 were my favorites, too. I've never met anyone else who loves those issues...who even likes them. That's how I feel, I say. That's how I always feel. Issues 10 through 14.

And then I dig my fingernails into the back of his neck and pull him close, crushing his mouth with mine.

I am yanked back into the present by another deafening cheer. Mr. Tux has just gifted us with our amazing prize... "–a free CASE OF RED BULLLLL!"

"Go ahead and donate that to our fellow partygoers," Jack tells him. He gives a final wave to the crowd, grabs my hand and leads me offstage. I follow him in a daze.

When we hit the party floor, he starts running, pulling me along like a lead-filled caboose. We run through the hall and out the door, escaping into night. I lean against a handy convention center pillar, winded. He starts jumping around like a maniac.

"That was AWE! SOME!!" he cries, pumping a fist in the air. "So fucking cool. I wonder if we can come back next year and defend our title? Maybe if we..."

"Jack," I finally croak.

He snaps to attention. "What?" he says, going all serious. "Are you OK?" His hands fall gently on my shoulders, eyes searching my face.

My back is still glued to the pillar. It props me up, allows me to meet his gaze.

"I remember."

This time, he kisses me first.

Once again, I am awakened extremely rudely. My cell phone buzzes for attention, skittering across the nightstand like a hyperactive insect.

"Mrph. Don't get that," Jack murmurs into my neck. I am, however, fairly sure he's technically still asleep, so I gingerly remove the arm that's draped over my hip and ease myself into a seated position, flipping open the bug-phone.

"Hello?"

"Julie?"

"Mitch! What's with the wake-up ca–"

"It's Braidbeard," he interrupts, his voice tense. "He's in big trouble. You have to...you have to help him. You're his only hope."

TO BE CONTINUED

Sarah Kuhn is recuperating in the White Hot Room.

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