



Black Water

(Book 5 of Pendragon: Journey of an Adventure Through Time and Space)

D.J. MacHale

I stared at Boon a long time, letting his words roll around in my head, hoping they would settle down in some way that would make sense. They didn't.

"I thought you knew," he said sheepishly. "Most gars can't even speak, that's why I was so surprised to hear you talk. I guess I didn't explain things so well."

"No, you didn't," I said nervously. "You're telling me humans on Eelong can't speak? Or think intelligently? Or work or read or laugh or write or ... or play sports?"

"No, they play sports!" Boon assured me. "Gars play wippen all the time." He then dropped his voice low and said, "But lots of them are killed during the game."

"Oh, that's just swell!" I shouted. "Humans aren't capable of doing anything except getting killed playing games or being eaten by tangs. I feel so much better now."

"But everything will be fine if you stay with me...and put this on," Boon said, holding up the restraint.

"No...freakin'...way," I said. "You're not going to put a leash on me like some kind of...of...animal!"

"But that's what you are!"

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Read what critics and fans have to say about the Pendragon series

"The nonstop plot developments keep the many pages turning and readers wanting more."--School Library Journal, on The Lost City of Faar

"Atalented world builder, MacHale creates endlessly fascinating landscapes and unique alien characters...the series is shaping up to be a solid addition to the fantasy genre and will keep readers not only busy but also content until the next Harry Potter appears."--Voice of Youth Advocates, on The Lost City of Faar

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Man, I gotta tell ya--these books are fantastic!"--Adam

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PENDRAGON

JOURNAL OF AN ADVENTURE THROUGH TIME AND SPACE

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Book Two:The Lost City of Faar

Book Three:The Never War

Book Four:The Reality Bug

Book Five:Black Water

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Book Five: Black Water

D. J. MacHale

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Kitties for Keaton

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Greetings to all.

It's time once again to join Bobby Pendragon and the Travelers in their quest to protect Halla from the evils of the demonic Saint Dane. It's been quite an adventure for Bobby since that night when Uncle Press whisked him away to learn of his true destiny. It's also been quite a journey for me, who had no idea it was going to be so much fun writing about it. But here we are five books later, halfway home, and sharing Bobby's adventures with you all is getting more exciting all the time.

I've had the pleasure of receiving countless letters and e-mails from readers who want to discuss their theories, predictions, and concerns for the future of Halla. There are a lot of creative thinkers out there! I feel as if I'm being treated to the collective creativity of a whole new generation of fantasy-adventure writers. How awesome is that? A big thank-you to everyone who has written.

Of course, I'm not the only one responsible for bringing Bobby's adventures to you. There is a lot of credit to go around and I'd like to spread some of it here. Many thanks go to Rick Richter, Julia Richardson, Ellen Krieger, Samantha Schutz, Jennifer Zatorski and all the good folks at Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing for continuing to support the Pendragon books. As always, Debra Sfetsios and Victor Lee did an incredible job designing and creating an awesome cover. Heidi Hellmich, ace copy editor, has once again done a miraculous job in making me look as if I actually know proper grammar. My own small team of acolytes consisting of Peter Nelson, Richard Curtis, and Danny Baror remain my guardian angels. And of course, my wife, Evangeline, continues to assure me that what I write each day is actually worth reading. Believe me, that is an invaluable service.

Thanks to you all, and to all those who helped bring this latest chapter in the Pendragon saga to print.

I've discovered that writing a continuing story spread out over several books is tricky. Even though each book contains a unique complete story, it's also a piece in a much larger puzzle. Trouble is, not everybody will get the chance to read the books in order, and starting in the middle of a series can be confusing. That means every book has to be written as if it were the first and only book in the series. Yikes! For everyone who has been with me since the beginning, you know that's no small task, because a lot of ground has been covered since *The Merchant of Death*. So with each book, I try to sneak in enough back story to get new readers up to speed, but not so much that veteran readers will get bored. If you're new to Pendragon, don't panic. As you go along, many of your questions as to what the heck is going on will be answered. If you're a veteran, try not to doze off when I remind you of what's happened in the past. I've spread it out all over the place, and if you're not paying attention, you might miss something new. That's a warning to keep you on your toes.

Okay, that's all from me. For those of you who freaked after reading the cliffhanger in last chapter of *The Reality Bug*, your wait is over. For those of you who are new to the series, welcome. You're about to enter a world of demons, heroes, and destiny. All you've got to do is take a breath, turn the page, and step into the flume.

Hobey ho,

D. J. MacHale

March 2004

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PROLOGUE

Acolytes.

That's what this was all about.

It was also about saving humanity from being crushed by a villainous demon named Saint Dane, but that was a little much for Mark Dimond and Courtney Chetwynde to tackle right off the bat. They figured becoming acolytes was the best way to ease into the whole universe-saving thing. The two friends sat together on a musty old couch in a small New York City apartment. They were there to learn the mysterious ways of the acolytes. Not exactly dramatic surroundings, considering they were hearing words that would change their lives forever.

"You are the acolytes from Second Earth now," said Tom Dorney, whose apartment it was. "With Press gone, I'm no longer needed. It may be an easy job compared to what the Travelers do, but I think you'll agree it's an important one."

"We do. Absolutely. Yessir," Mark and Courtney assured him.

Dorney turned to look out his window and frowned. He was an old guy with short-cropped gray hair and excellent posture. He was once a soldier. Old habits die hard.

"Is there something you're not telling us?" Courtney asked.

Dorney sighed and said, "It's just a feeling."

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"What?" she demanded.

"I don't know," Dorney said, troubled. "I didn't like what I heard about Veelox."

"Yeah, no kidding," Courtney said.

"What I mean to say is, be careful. Saint Dane has finally had a victory, and there's no telling what's next. From this point on, I can't guarantee that the old rules still apply."

This was chilling news for Mark and Courtney on their first official day as acolytes. Dorney's ominous warning was very much on their minds as they left his apartment and took the train back to Stony Brook, Connecticut. Just before the train pulled into Stony Brook Station, Mark announced, "I want to go to the flume."

"Why?" Courtney asked.

"We'll bring some of our clothes to leave there."

"But nobody told us they needed clothes," Courtney countered.

"I know. Just thinking ahead."

"That's just an excuse to go there, isn't it?" Courtney asked.

Mark didn't argue. "I guess I just want to see it again. To prove it's real."

"I hear you," Courtney said. "I do too."

When they got off the train, they both went home and gathered up a bunch of clothes they thought a Traveler from some distant territory might need on a visit to Second Earth. That's what acolytes did. They supported the Travelers on their mission to protect Halla. Courtney picked out a bunch of simple, functional things like jeans, T-shirts, a sweater, socks, hiking boots, and underwear. She debated about bringing one of her bras, but figured that was overkill. Mark gathered up a bunch of clothes that were totally out of style. It wasn't like he had a choice. That's all he had. He found sweatshirts with logos that meant nothing, no-name jeans, and generic sneakers. Style was not something Mark concerned

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himself with. He hoped the Travelers felt the same way.

Mark brought one extra item, but hoped he wouldn't need it. It was the sharp poker from his parents' fireplace. It was a woefully inadequate weapon to deal with an attacking quig-dog, but it was all he could find.

Shortly after, Mark and Courtney met at the iron gates in front of the empty Sherwood house. They silently walked around to the side and climbed the tree to get over the high stone wall that surrounded the spooky, abandoned estate. Once over, Mark held the fireplace poker out in front of him, ready to ward off a rampaging quig. Mark's hand was shaking like warm Jell-O, so Courtney gently took the weapon from him. If either of them had a chance of fighting off a charging quig, it would be Courtney.

Luckily they didn't run into any of the yellow-eyed beasts. They made it through the big empty mansion, down into the basement, and into the root cellar that held the newly created flume. No problem. They emptied their backpacks and neatly folded the clothes in a pile. Courtney looked at some of the geek clothes Mark brought, and chuckled.

"Oh yeah, Bobby's gonna blend right in wearing a bright yellow sweatshirt with a red logo that says, 'Cool Dude!'"

"Give me a break," Mark said defensively. "It's my favorite sweatshirt."

Courtney shook her head in disbelief. When they were finished, they both gazed into the dark tunnel to the territories. The flume. They stood together, each with his/her own thoughts as to what the future might hold.

"I'm scared and excited at the same time," Mark said.

"Really," Courtney added. "I want to be part of this, but it's scary not knowing what to expect."

"Can you imagine being a Traveler?" Mark asked while stepping into the mouth of the tunnel.

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"Well, no," Courtney answered, "to be honest."

"Well, I've thought about it a lot!" Mark declared. "It would be awesome, stepping into a flume and announcing the next amazing place you'd like to go."

"It's pretty unbelievable," Courtney agreed.

"Look at this thing!" Mark said, scanning the flume. "It's kinda like having a jet fighter."

"It is?" Courtney asked with a chuckle.

"Yeah. You know what it's capable of, but have no idea what to do to make it go."

"It's not all that hard," Courtney said. "If you're a Traveler."

Mark smiled, turned to face the dark tunnel, and shouted out, "Eelong!"

He looked back to Courtney and said, "Could you imagineif--"

"Mark!" Courtney shouted.

Mark saw the terrified look on Courtney's face. She was looking past him, deeper into the flume. Mark spun quickly and saw something he thought was impossible.

The flume was coming to life.

Mark jumped out of the tunnel and ran to Courtney. The two backed away toward the far wall of the root cellar, hugging each other in fear.

"D-Did I do that?" Mark asked.

"Or is somebody coming?" Courtney added.

The light appeared from the depths of the tunnel. The musical notes were faint at first but quickly grew louder. The rocky walls began to crackle and groan. They had seen all this before, but only when the flume was activated by a Traveler. Never, ever had a flume been activated by a non-Traveler--until now.

"I-Idon't really want to go to Eelong," Mark cried. Courtney

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held him tighter, ready to hold him back if he got pulled in by the power of the flume.

The gray walls of the tunnel melted into glorious crystal as the bright light and sound arrived at the mouth. Mark and Courtney didn't dare put their hands in front of their eyes because they were too busy hanging on to each other. But neither felt the tug of the flume, because someone was headed their way. Through the bright light they saw a tall, dark silhouette appear and step out of the tunnel. Oddly, the sparkling light didn't go away. The jangle of music stayed too. This had never happened before, at least not that Mark or Courtney knew. But none of that mattered as much as the man who now stood facing them.

It was Saint Dane. He had arrived on Second Earth. The two had never seen him before, but there was no mistaking the tall demon with the long gray hair, piercing blue eyes, and dark clothes.

"And so it begins," Saint Dane cackled. "The walls are beginning to crack. The power that once was, will no longer be. It is a whole new game, with new rules."

Saint Dane roared out a laugh. With a sudden burst of light from deep inside the flume, his hair caught fire! His long gray mane exploded in flames, burning right down to his skull. Mark and Courtney watched in horror as the flames reflected in his demonic eyes. Saint Dane laughed the whole while, as if enjoying it.

Mark and Courtney didn't move, except to tremble.

The fire burned away all of Saint Dane's hair, leaving him completely bald, with angry red streaks that looked like inflamed veins running from the back of his head to his forehead. His eyes had changed too. The steely blue color had gone nearly white.

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He fixed those intense eyes on the two new acolytes and smiled. He tossed a dirty, cloth bag at their feet.

"A present for Pendragon," Saint Dane hissed. "Be sure he gets it, won't you?" Saint Dane took a step back into the light of the flume. "What was meant to be, is no longer," he announced. With that, he began to transform. His body turned liquid as he leaned over to put his hands on the ground. At the same time his body mutated into that of a huge, jungle cat. It was the size of a lion. His coat was brown, but speckled with black spots. The big cat snarled at Mark and Courtney, and leaped into the flume. An instant later the light swept him up and disappeared into the depths. The music faded, the crystal walls returned to stone, and the light shrank to a pin spot.

But it didn't disappear entirely.

Before Mark and Courtney could get their heads back together, the light began to grow again. The music became louder and the gray rock walls transformed back into crystal.

"My brain is exploding," Mark uttered.

A second later the bright light flashed at the mouth of the tunnel to deposit another passenger before returning to its normal, dormant state.

"Bobby!" Mark and Courtney shouted. They ran to him and threw their arms around him in fear and relief.

"What happened?" Bobby demanded, all business.

Mark and Courtney were both supercharged with adrenaline. "It was Saint Dane!" Courtney shouted. "His hair burned! It was horrible!"

"He said the rules have ch-changed, Bobby," Mark stuttered. "What did he m-mean?"

Bobby took a step back from them. Mark and Courtney sensed his tension.

"What did you do?" Bobby demanded. It sounded like he was scolding them.

"Do?" Courtney said. "We didn't do anything!"

Mark and Courtney focused on Bobby. He was wearing rags. His feet were bare, his hair was a mess, and he had a coating of dirt all over his body. He didn't smell so hot either.

"What happened to you?" Mark asked.

"It doesn't matter," Bobby shot back. He was just as charged up as they were. "Did you activate the flume?"

Mark and Courtney looked to each other. Mark said, "Uh, I g-guess so. I said 'Eelong'--"

"No!" Bobby said in anguish.

"What's the matter?" Courtney asked. "We're not Travelers. We can't control the flume."

"Things have changed," Bobby shouted. "Saint Dane's power is growing. He's got his first territory. It's all about changing the nature of things."

"So ... that means we can use the flumes?" Courtney asked.

"Don't!" Bobby demanded. "It'll just make things worse."

Mark remembered something. He ran back to the door of the root cellar and picked up the bag Saint Dane had thrown at them. "He said this was for you," Mark said, handing the bag to Bobby.

Bobby took it like it was the last thing in the world he wanted. He turned the rotten bag upside down, and something fell onto the floor. Courtney screamed. Mark took a step back in shock. Bobby stood firm, staring at the floor, his jaw muscles clenching. Lying at his feet was a human hand. It was large and dark skinned. As gruesome as this was, there was something else about it that made it nearly unbearable to look at. On one finger, was a Traveler ring.

"Gunny," Bobby whispered. It was the severed hand of the

Traveler from First Earth, Vincent "Gunny" VanDyke. Bobby took a brave breath, picked up the hand, and jammed it into the bag.

"Bobby, what's happening?" Courtney asked.

"You'll know when I send my journal," he said. He turned back and ran into the mouth of the flume, clutching the bag with Gunny's hand in it. "Eelong!" he called out. The flume sprang back to life.

"Is Gunny all right?" Mark asked, nearly in tears.

"He's alive," Bobby said. "But I don't know for how long."

"Tell us what to do!" Courtney pleaded.

"Nothing," Bobby answered. "Wait for my journal. And whatever you do, do not activate the flume. That's exactly what Saint Dane wants. It's not the way things were meant to be."

With a final flash of light and jumble of notes, Bobby was swept into the flume, leaving his two friends alone to begin their careers as acolytes.

It wasn't a very good beginning.

SECOND EARTH

Four months had passed since that incredible, frightening episode in the basement of the Sherwood house.

Mark Dimond and Courtney Chetwynde had done exactly what Bobby told them to do. Nothing. They stayed away from the flume and waited for the arrival of another journal. They waited. And waited. And waited some more. Mark found himself staring at his ring, willing it to activate. He so desperately wanted a sign that being an acolyte meant more than sitting around like a load, pretending all was normal. A few times he called Tom Dorney to see if he had gotten any messages from other acolytes. Dorney's answer was always the same: "Nope." No detail. No chitchat. Just "Nope." Dorney was a man of few words. To Mark, he was a man of one word. "Nope."

Mark went to the safe-deposit box at the National Bank of Stony Brook, where Bobby's journals were securely kept. He sat by himself for an entire day, reading them all, reliving the incredible journey that his best friend had been on for the last year and a half. So much had changed since that winter night when Bobby left Stony Brook with his uncle Press to discover that he was a Traveler, and that his destiny was to protect the territories of Halla.

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The same night Bobby left, his family disappeared. Any record that they had ever existed disappeared right along with them. More importantly, the curtain was pulled back on the incredible truth that the universe didn't function the way everyone thought. Bobby's journals explained how every time, every place, every person and every thing that had ever existed, still did exist. It was called Halla. Halla was made up of ten territories that were connected by tunnels called flumes that only the Travelers could use. But the most frightening truth contained in the journals was that an evil Traveler named Saint Dane was doing his best to destroy Halla. Saint Dane would travel to a territory that was about to reach a critical point in its history, and do all that he could to push events the wrong way and send the territory into chaos. It was up to Bobby and the other Travelers to stop him. They had been pretty successful, too. Denduron, Cloral, First Earth--all victories over Saint Dane and his evil plots.

But then came Veelox.

Veelox was a territory doomed to crumble because people chose to live in Lifelight, the wonderful, virtual-reality world created by a supercomputer, instead of in real life. It marked Saint Dane's first victory over Bobby and the Travelers. Mark worried that the toppling of Veelox meant Saint Dane had even more power than before. He worried that the rules had changed and that the demon would now be more difficult to defeat. He worried that the battle would soon come to Second Earth. He worried that this was the beginning of the end for Halla. Mark worried a lot. He was good at it.

And on top of it all, Mark and Courtney were now acolytes. Up to this point their job had been to read Bobby's journals and keep them safe. Basically they had been librarians. Now they were in it. Being acolytes meant they would support any

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Travelers who came to Second Earth and help them blend in with the local culture. They

were psyched and ready for the challenge. Finally, they had the chance to take an active role in helping Bobby.

But in spite of all these exciting and scary developments, it turned out that there was nothing for them to do. Mark felt like an anxious racehorse stuck in a gate that wouldn't open. He'd walk through the halls of Davis Gregory High, where he was a sophomore, look at the other kids, and think, Do they know the danger we're all in? Do they have any clue that I'm one of the few people in Halla who is trying to protect them? The answer was, of course, no. To the other kids at school, Mark Dimond was nothing more than a nervous brainiac who ate too many carrots and didn't wash his unkempt, greasy black hair often enough. Guys like Mark were like wallpaper...always hanging around but totally invisible.

Things weren't going much better for Courtney. Life had changed drastically for her since entering high school. Courtney had always been the girl who had it all going on. She was pretty, with waist-length brown hair and deep gray eyes. She had lots of friends and, most notably, kicked butt in every sport she played. Courtney was a legend. It didn't matter what sport either: soccer, volleyball, softball, track...She even wanted to play football, but the rules wouldn't allow it. But since coming to Davis Gregory High, things had changed. Courtney wasn't the best anymore. Maybe it was because the other girls caught up. Maybe it was because she never had to try very hard, and it was paying off for those who did. Or maybe it was because she had lost something intangible. The spark. The magic. Whatever. The result was that Courtney looked bad. In soccer she was demoted from varsity to JV and then quit the team. That was big. Courtney never quit anything. Ever. But she quit soccer. She

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sought refuge in volleyball, her favorite sport. But things weren't any better. Courtney didn't even make the team. She got cut. Cut! Courtney had never been cut. It was humiliating. At first the other kids were happy to see the queen dethroned, but after a while they started feeling bad for her. Courtney didn't want pity. That was the worst.

If there was one word you could use to describe Courtney Chetwynde, it was "confident." But that confidence was taking a severe beating, and she was starting to question herself. It affected the rest of her life too. Her grades took a nosedive; she stopped hanging with her best friends; and she fought with her parents. She hated their constant, worried looks that silently asked, "What's wrong with you?" The frustrating truth was, she didn't know. It was eating her up.

But Courtney wasn't totally self-absorbed. She knew her troubles were puny compared to the bigger dangers lurking about. Bobby Pendragon, the guy she'd had a crush on since she was four years old, was flying around the universe battling an evil demon who wanted nothing less than the destruction of everything. Courtney realized that on a scale of one to ten where ten was the worst, getting cut from volleyball was around negative forty. Knowing this, Courtney felt guilty when she worried about her own little problems. But she couldn't help it, which made her feel worse. She couldn't control events in Halla; she could only deal with her own life...and she wasn't dealing so well.

Mark and Courtney were an odd couple. Under normal circumstances they would never have been on each others' radar. Shy nerds didn't hang with awesome jock girls. It was one of the realities of high school. But these two were joined by their friendship with Bobby. They knew Saint Dane had to be stopped and were prepared to do whatever it took to help their friend. But

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after months of being acolytes, they hadn't done a single thing that had anything to do with life outside of boring old Stony Brook, Connecticut.

It was making them absolutely, totally crazy.

The only thing that kept Mark from going off the deep end was the Sci-Clops science club at school. The summer before, Mark had designed and built a battling robot for the state science fair. He won first prize and got an invitation to join the prestigious club. Mark wasn't used to being rewarded for doing something that was usually considered geek territory, so he welcomed the chance. Mark found that Sci-Clops was full of brilliant students who shared his curiosity about the world around them. A Sci-Clops meeting was a minivacation from the relentless social pressure of high school. It also helped get his mind off the imminent destruction of the universe.

Four months to the day after they saw Bobby and Saint Dane at the flume, Mark anxiously watched the clock tick toward the end of the school day. Mr. Pike, the teacher who led Sci-Clops, promised that a special guest would be speaking that day, and Mark was dying to know who it might be. When the bell rang, he gathered his books and walked quickly toward the science wing. He hurried across the student center, entered the science wing, and was halfway up the back stairwell when his day began to unravel.

Standing on the landing, smoking a cigarette, was Andy Mitchell.

"Hey, Dimond," Mitchell wheezed. "Smoke?"

"Hate" is a strong word. The word "hate" shouldn't be used lightly. Mark hated Andy Mitchell. From the time they were little, Mitchell bullied Mark. It was the classic scenario: smart nerd vs. pathetic loser. Mark would stress over taking alternate routes around school to avoid crossing paths with him. Encounters

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invariably ended up with a punch in the arm, or an Indian burn or, as they got older, the threat of serious violence. Their relationship came to a head when Mitchell stole Bobby's Traveler journals. Mark and Courtney cleverly got them back and nearly got Mitchell arrested in the process. Having finally beaten Mitchell gave Mark a bit more confidence in dealing with the imbecile, but he still preferred not to.

Mark ignored Mitchell and walked past him up the stairs. He fully expected Mitchell to grab him for some obligatory noogie-type humiliation. Instead Mitchell stubbed out his cigarette and followed. Mark stopped and whipped him a look.

"What do you want?" Mark demanded.

"Nothin'," Mitchell answered while pushing his greasy blond hair out of his eyes. Mark could smell the cigarettes on his breath. Gross. He turned and started up the stairs again. Mitchell followed. Mark stopped and spun back.

-What?"he demanded.

"What 'what'?" Mitchell asked innocently. "I ain't doing nothing!"

"You're following me. Why? You gonna shove me in a locker or ask for money or...or..."

"I'm going to the Sci-Clops meeting," Mitchell answered.

On the list of answers Mark expected, this was below last. It was so far from last, it was in another state. Mark stared in shock, waiting for a punch line that didn't come.

"You're going to the Sci-Clops meeting?" Mark asked. "Why? We going to experiment on you?"

"That's real funny," Mitchell snarled. "Pike asked me to join."

If Mark didn't grab on to the railing, he would have fallen down the stairs. Had he heard right? Was the dreaded Andy Mitchell, professional ignoramus, truly asked to join the

elite

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science club? Andy Mitchell was a moron, and that was paying him a compliment. Mr. Pike must have gotten Andy Mitchell mixed up with somebody else. Sci-Clops was made up of science brains who had dreams of attending MIT. Andy Mitchell was a lamebrain who dreamed about being old enough to buy beer and getting a tattoo. Mark concluded that it had to be a mistake.

"Oh, okay," Mark said, trying not to laugh. "Let's go. Don't want to be late for your first meeting."

"They'll wait," Andy snapped back snottily.

The two continued up the stairs to the physics floor. Mark couldn't wait to see Mitchell's reaction when the mistake was discovered. Wishing total humiliation for someone wasn't exactly noble, but after the years of havoc Andy Mitchell rained down on the dweebs of Stony Brook, he deserved it. When they entered Mr. Pike's classroom, most of the Sci-Clops members were already sitting and waiting to begin. They were a precise bunch. Mark took a seat in the back of the room because he was still one of the newer members. Unlike the bus where the cool kids sat in back, in Sci-Clops the senior members sat right up front. It was one of the many things Mark liked about the club. Andy Mitchell, on the other hand, chose a seat in the first row like he owned the place. Mark loved it. He couldn't wait until Mr. Pike called him out. It was every dweeb's dream come true. Twenty against one. An excellent nerd vs. terd ratio.

Mr. Pike walked to the front of the class. He was a pleasant-looking guy who Mark figured was in his thirties, with longish hair that was starting to go gray. "Exciting day today, guys," he began.

Mark hoped he would have opened up by kicking Andy Mitchell's butt out of the room. But he was willing to wait. He knew it would only be a matter of time.

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"We're going to be talking about the creation of a new polymer material that is unique because of its extreme flexibility and tensile strength."

Tensile strength? Mark wasn't exactly sure what that was. The only tensile he knew about was the kind you put on Christmas trees. Whenever Mark wasn't sure about something at a meeting, he'd nod and pretend to understand. That was okay; he liked learning new things. The trick was not to look like an idiot and try to figure it out as they went along.

"Our guest today has been conducting some groundbreaking experiments in this field, and I, for one, am very excited that he's here to share his findings. So let's get right to it. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you...Andy Mitchell."

Mark sat bolt upright and let out an involuntary "Huh!" Nobody heard him. They were too busy applauding. He watched in shock as Andy Mitchell stood in front of the group and started digging into his backpack. Mark's brain wouldn't accept this. He looked around, expecting to see some guy in a suit and tie jump out with a microphone and shout, "Surprise! Candid Camera!"

Andy Mitchell coughed into his hand, then brushed his long greasy hair out of his face with the same hand.

Mark nearly puked.

Andy said, "I ain't great at giving speeches. I only know what I know."

Mark wanted to jump to his feet and shout, "Nothing! He knows nothing! He's an idiot!"

But instead, the other members shouted encouragement. "Don't worry about it. We're cool here. Just be yourself."

Mark was on the hairy edge of a scream. Most of the Sci-Clops members were juniors and seniors, so he figured they didn't know Andy Mitchell. But they were going to get to know him real fast. Mark was sure this charade would end as quickly as it began.

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Mr. Pike announced, "Andy is a sophomore here, but he attends science classes in a special program at the University of Connecticut."

"You guys wouldn't know me," Andy explained. "Except for science, I'm not all that smart. You won't see me in any of your AP courses."

The members chuckled knowingly.

Mark squeezed the desk in anger. They liked him! They thought he was clever! This can't be happening! Andy Mitchell smart? Attending college science courses and researching subjects Mark never even heard of? Bantering with the Sci-Clops crowd? Mark had heard people say: "I thought I was dreaming," but always thought it was just a saying. He never thought anyone could really think they were dreaming. But right then, Mark seriously wondered if he was in dreamland.

Andy Mitchell reached into his backpack and pulled out a small, soft silver bag that looked like the kind of bag his mother used to put things in the freezer. "This is what I've been working on," he explained. "Looks like a regular old bag, right? It ain't." He grabbed the bag with two hands and pulled. The silver bag stretched out as wide as his arms would reach.

The kids gasped.

"The thing is," Andy said with a slight strain in his voice from the exertion, "even though it goes way out, it's still real strong. I could probably put a piano in here and it wouldn't break."

The only thing that was close to breaking was Mark. His mind locked. His mouth hung open. If anybody looked at him, they'd call for an ambulance. The kids of Sci-Clops applauded. Andy beamed. Mark didn't think he could take any more....

And that's when his ring started to twitch.

He didn't react at first. He was too busy being stunned. But a second later, when the ring began to grow, he was yanked

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back to reality. It was the bright light that started to flash from the gray stone that did it. It was a good thing he was sitting in the back of the room because nobody else saw it. He quickly clamped his hand over the ring.

"You okay, Dimond?" Andy called from the front of the class.

Every one of the Sci-Clops members turned to look at Mark. Mark felt like he was in one of those dreams where you suddenly discovered you were only wearing underpants.

"Uhh, y-yeah. I'm fine," Mark stammered. He stood up, caught his foot on the leg of the desk, and nearly tumbled over. "I-I-just remembered I g-got something--"