

## A RANGER IS USEFUL

**PRESENT**

**SUNDAY, MAY 31<sup>ST</sup>, 2015. 9:36 PM.**

“See you in Valhalla!” Uncle Ruckus shouts as his avatar blasts an RPG at the alien warship.

“Coms! Coms!” Turbo Cakes yells.

*Boom.*

I mow down a group of aliens with an automatic grenade launcher. A notification pops up in the lower-left corner of the screen: *Do-Over just got a Penta-kill!*

“Turbo, if you yell ‘coms,’ you aren’t helping the situation. Just take off the headset and wait for him to stop screaming,” I say and toss my own headset onto the beige couch cushion.

“*Do-Over, don’t go radio silent. Die, you prickless alien bastards!*” the tinny sound of Uncle Ruckus’s voice blares out of my headset.

Turbo Cakes’s shrill voice replies, “*Uncle Ruckus, I swear to God, if you don’t stop screaming right now!*”

My mom always wanted me to play the piano, but the gaming con-

troller is my real instrument. Bobbing and weaving on my couch, I obliterate alien after alien. Uncle Ruckus is fifteen and not old enough to be anyone's actual Uncle. It's just a nickname. Turbo Cakes is a sweet kid who isn't quite sharp enough to dish out insults, so he settles for being the target. Both my friends take a death ray to the face and die, but not me. I tune out my friends' argument and try to focus on the game. I am owning. Even Mozart with his precious piano would be proud.

Then, my internet starts hiccupping.

I snatch the squalling headset back up and shout into the mic, "Guys, I'm lagging, cover me." The internet cuts out. Bright blue aliens taunt me while my character is frozen in place. Thank you, Comcast.

"Crap." I throw my controller at the wall. It bounces off and sends my leaning Jenga tower of Xbox games crashing to the floor. There's an instant pang of regret in my heart as I stoop to pick them back up.

I roll the controller back and forth between my hands as I pace the room, trying to calm down. My foot crunches *Lead Space's* plastic case. Of course the game had to come out the day before we go to summer camp.

I stare down the little "M" on the cover. I can still hear that mocking tough-guy voice from the commercial say, "Play the deadliest game of the summer. Rated M, for mature." The splash art on the game's cover is badass. Blue aliens with guns on their tails fire off lasers at the buff G.I. Joe rip-off characters. One of the muscle-heads is shielding a shirtless chick from the gunfire, and a little tagline reads, "She's humanity's last chance!" I glance back at the frozen, flickering TV. *What's so mature about pixelated blood and boobs?*

Turbo Cakes, Uncle Ruckus and I are all about to be freshmen in high school, so we can't buy M-rated video games. We also can't buy alcohol, see R-rated movies, or drive cars. That's why I slip the newest violent games into Dad's grocery cart at the store when he isn't looking. I'm one hundred

percent confident he notices, but he never says anything. I think he feels bad for me being an only child with parents that are never around. There's an unspoken understanding: he buys me video games and keeps the fridge stocked, and I won't bug him or Mom. They're tired a lot.

It's more complicated than that, though. When people are tired all the time, there's something wrong with them. My parents used to be really outdoorsy. They'd go hunting together for entire weekends. One weekend they came home with over thirty ticks on each of them. I was eight. They got sick from the tick bites and they've never been the same since. I don't blame them or anything. But I miss them.

My headset crackles, "... *getting killed out here! Turbo, Do-Over, where'd you go?!*"

I smirk, dash across the room, and sweep up my controller. My full weight bounces onto the couch and my anxieties instantly dissipate. The Raysword gaming headset settles around my ears. My character barely moves before a swarm of death lasers disintegrate all my gear, tissue, and bodily fluids—leaving nothing but a pile of bones. The puff of red dust from my character's body doesn't even look like blood. A little tag in the lower left corner of the screen taunts me: *Congratulations, Do-Over. You just won a Darwin Award. Lame.*

Uncle Ruckus sighs into the headset. "Man, we almost won that time. But no, you had to lag out, and Turbo Cakes had to go try to sneak a peek at his sister in the shower."

I look around the room, trying to change the subject and keep my temper reigned in after such a humiliating death. A half-packed duffel bag catches my eye, so I speak before Turbo flips his lid at Uncle Ruckus's last comment. "Lay off, man. This is the last time we'll get to play games for almost a week. Have you guys packed yet?"

Uncle Ruckus snorts. "Dude, I haven't unpacked from last year. At this

point, I'm too afraid to open my garbage bag of stuff to get out my gear; it's gonna reek."

Turbo Cakes says, "I got a suitcase, backpack, and a drawstring knapsack filled with first aid stuff. I'm worried I forgot something. After all, an Adventure Ranger is always ready." Turbo is your typical by-the-book Ranger. He's a stickler for the rules, always over-prepares for campouts, and his nose is stained brown from the amount of ass he kisses when it comes to any kind of authority figure.

*Thunk.*

I roll my eyes, "Did you just hit your mic saluting? You're sitting at home, not in an Adventure Ranger meeting."

"*A Ranger is always ready,*" Uncle Ruckus mimics. "I'm just gonna rough it, I think. Except for my prank supplies. And maybe my cell phone so I can look at Turbo's sister's nudes."

Sounds of protest tumble out of Turbo.

Uncle Ruckus talks over Turbo's exclamations, "Graduating high school did her two huge favors if you know what I—"

*Boo doop.* The sound chimes in my headset, and a notification pops up on the screen: *Turbo Cakes has disconnected.*

A message from him appears: *Go to hell, Ruckus. I'm gonna get some sleep. See you idiots tomorrow.*

Uncle Ruckus dies laughing. "It's so easy getting him to rage quit. It's not even fun anymore. And easier than his sister, if you know what I—"

"Remember that new kid? At the troop meeting last week?" I interject.

"Yeah, kinda dopey-looking, blonde buzz-cut, kinda skinny, but also fat," Uncle Ruckus says, sounding thoughtful.

"That's called average, moron."

"Yeah, that's it." Uncle Ruckus snaps his fingers. "Shovel looked like your average moron." He explodes into raucous laughter.

“Why are we calling him Shovel again?” I ask, raising my voice over his obnoxious laugh.

“I don’t know. He kinda seemed like a tool. You know... Shovel, tool? Also, I feel like shovels aren’t very smart, like they got a low IQ and everything?”

My mouth drops and I feel my eyelids squint. “No shit, Sherlock. It’s a shovel. It doesn’t have a brain.”

“Exactly, he seems like he’s got no brain.” Uncle Ruckus snaps his fingers again. I don’t have to see him to know he’s shooting finger guns.

“That’s not what I s—”

Uncle Ruckus cuts in, “And that’s Uncle Sherlock to you, bud... Wonder if we could get him to eat dirt? I bet Hawkins’ll make him at some point.”

Anger wells up inside me. “I swear, if you give Hawkins the idea, I’ll make *you* eat dirt.”

“Woah, chill,” Uncle Ruckus says. “I’m only joking around. You don’t need to get so mad all the time. Actually... There’s something I haven’t told you.”

My temper wilts and compresses into a weight in the pit of my stomach, “Yeah?”

“Well, I told Turbo last week but... I just didn’t have a good opportunity to tell you. It’s been really cool getting to know you and Turbo and becoming friends over the last two years in the Adventure Rangers.” Uncle Ruckus takes a deep breath. “I’m moving to San Francisco in a few weeks. This’ll probably be the last time we’ll all be at summer camp together.”

My head lolls back to rest on the couch cushion. Deep breath. My school counselor’s voice pops into my head: *When you feel like you’re going to lose control, look around the room and try to find something for each color of the rainbow.*

At the time it seemed like stupid advice. But credit where it's due, it works. Red... Like my hair. I always cheat with that one.

"It's nothing personal, obviously," Uncle Ruckus nervously continues. "It's just that, you know, my home situation is complicated."

Orange... Like my favorite t-shirt.

"I'm gonna miss you guys a ton."

Yellow... Like my character's gun.

"It's just, I want to go live with my Uncle Mark. We'll still be able to play games and stuff together, though."

Green like my controller. Blue like my walls. Indigo is a fake color. Violet like my bedspread. Deep breath.

"No worries, man. I get it," I say. "I wish I could get away from home too. Let's just focus on making this week the best week of camp ever. Camp Winnebago isn't much of a home away from home, but I still look forward to it every year. There's nobody else I'd rather get lost in the woods with than you and Turbo Cakes." Uncle Ruckus doesn't say anything. This would usually be welcome because he never knows when to shut his mouth. But now? Talking about serious stuff? It makes me uncomfortable. "I think I'm gonna get some sleep too. Morning comes early and all that. See ya."

*Boo doop.* With that, I disconnect from the chat. The mess of games on the floor catches my eye. *I'll take care of it when I get back home.* I leave the TV on and lay in bed listening to the gentle *boo doop* of the Xbox across the room every time Uncle Ruckus gets an in-game achievement.

\* \* \*

**EARLIER THAT NIGHT..**

**SUNDAY, MAY 31<sup>ST</sup>, 2015. 8:53 PM.**

Shovel went through the Adventure Ranger Handbook one more time, going down the entire checklist of things he might need. He had everything except a pocketknife—he wasn't allowed to have one of those yet.

"Hey, Dad?" Shovel called.

His dad's head appeared in the doorway wearing a bucket hat with fishing lures and hooks all over it. "What's going on, sport?"

Shovel frowned at his Adventure Ranger branded backpack. "I don't know if I want to go. I don't really know anyone."

Shovel's dad fiddled with the hand crank radio in his hand. His voice sounded far away. "Sure, sure, I totally agree." He looked up. "Did you know I went to this camp every single summer? I must've gotten a dozen Ranger patches there. Way back when I was a kid, they called me The McTerminator! What's your nickname again?"

"Shovel."

"Great nickname; shovels are useful. Listen, son, you're going to have a great time. We both are. Let's just feel it out for a few days, and if you don't like it, we can leave."

Shovel looked at his dad. "Really?"

"Sure, sure. I'm going to finish getting my fishing stuff together. Nighty night, son." And with that, The McTerminator turned off the lights and closed the door.

The door cracked open, "Don't forget extra socks and underwear." He pulled it shut again.

Shovel sat in the dark for a moment before putting a few extra pairs of tighy-whities into his black leather suitcase. The glow-in-the-dark constellation stickers on his ceiling gave off enough light to see by. He put on his Adventure Ranger uniform and crawled into his twin bed. He opened

his Nintendo DS, booted up Nintendogs, and fed his virtual pets for the last time of the week. With the stylus, Shovel gave each dog a treat and took the time to scratch each one behind the ears.

The Buzz Lightyear alarm clock glared the time at him. Feeling guilty, Shovel gave each puppy another biscuit from the 989 treats in his inventory. Noticing the number, he grabbed the lock-journal from his bedside drawer and used a tiny key to unlock it. He flipped through the pages until he got to the most recent ledger entry. He clicked the light at the end of his pen. Bending its rubber body, the light aimed at the paper while Shovel wrote. *5/31/2015: Go to the store, need more treats.* Using the calculator in the game, he figured out how much ten more dog biscuits would cost. Under the first line, he scribbled, *Buy ten treats, three dollars, will have 999,996 dollars left after.*

Shovel closed the journal, picked up the game, and craned his neck toward the screen to whisper the list of names, “Goodnight Bubbles, Toffee, Moose, Nibbles, and Cujo. I left some toys to play with, so be good.”

With the same care a supermarket manager might take to bag a carton of eggs, he closed the device and plugged in the charger. Shovel laid on top of his sheets in his itchy khaki uniform, Ranger hat, and shined leather boots. He stared up at the glowing ceiling. The night he got the stickers he stayed up naming every star, but he forgot them all by morning. It didn’t seem right to give the stars all new names, so he never did. The boy squinted at the luminescent shapes until they blurred.

“What does it mean to be useful?”



## A RANGER IS COOL

### PRESENT

MONDAY, JUNE 1<sup>ST</sup>, 2015. 2:04 PM.

“Oh my God! The trailer is gone!” Hawkins exclaims in a rehearsed tone for the third time during the four-hour drive. Turbo Cakes twitches next to me, and I give him a pat on the knee to assure him the trailer is, indeed, still hitched to the back of the restored church van. Though, not restored enough if you ask me. The windows don’t even open. I’d be asking for my money back.

Church vans are like something out of *Doctor Who*. It looks like a normal size from the outside, but inside there’s five rows of scratchy seats the color of mop water. Shovel and Treb, the two youngest kids in our troop, sit in the front row. Treb’s pretty quiet, so I haven’t talked to him much. Shovel, on the other hand, has such a smooth brain that if you tell him gullible is written on the ceiling, he’ll first stare at the ceiling deep in thought, then squint as if to magnify a too-small font.

Then there’s Turbo Cakes, me, and Tri-Clops in the second row. Tri-Clops is... probably the weirdest guy in our troop, and that says a lot. I

keep my distance from him as much as possible. Next, Uncle Ruckus is stretched out with a whole row to himself. Behind him is Hawkins. He's an asshole. The cool, older guys—Ducky and his two friends—sit in the very last row. I don't actually know that much about them. Just that they're almost eighteen, so they always get the back row. That's the rule.

Uncle Ruckus, whose acne-mottled face makes him look like a teenage Freddy Krueger, uses his best tattle-voice, "Mr. B, Hawkins is taking the Lord's name in vain again!"

Shovel not-so-casually explores the interior of the van with his eyes. Like a broken bobble-head, the new kid's blond, buzz-cut head swivels around to gawk at the trailer for the third time during the four-hour drive.

I shrink down in the seat, knowing what comes next as Hawkins dives two seats forward, swinging his arm straight over my head toward his target. The most impressive part about the whole thing is the finesse with which Hawkins swings, missing every other kid crammed in their seats like sardines to land a hit on Shovel's tiny bicep, the same place it struck the last three times.

*Wap.*

Turbo Cakes reacts late and covers his head with his hands as Hawkins sits back in his seat. Uncle Ruckus lets out a sound of satisfaction as he stretches his legs across his solo seat. He enjoys conflict of any kind.

"Ouch!" Shovel squeals, throwing his arms up to ward off further blows. He turns around in the seat and gets on his knees, his head inches away from the ceiling. Tears well up in his eyes as he thrusts a finger over my head at Hawkins. "You jerk! You..." he hesitates, then juts the finger further and adds, "ass!"

Mr. B slams on the brakes.

I brace myself against the seat in front of me with my legs so I look unfazed by the sudden shift in acceleration.

Turbo lurches forward against his seatbelt and Uncle Ruckus jams his hand against the back of our seat, trying to look chill.

Shovel lets out a yelp and—still on his knees and facing the rear—hugs the seat for dear life.

Four seconds later, we stop. The weight of the trailer jostles behind the van, doing its best to follow Newton's first law on the gravel road. As soon as it does, we all scramble to buckle in. All except Turbo Cakes, who snaps his seatbelt against his chest with a smug look on his face.

Without air-conditioning, the inside of the van is a hotbox of chicken nuggets and Axe body spray failing to cover up teen body odor. As stocky, red-faced Mr. B glares at us, I try to avoid his gaze, turning to keep everyone in my periphery.

I don't respect the man, but I respect the thick, trimmed black mustache on his lip. It dances as Mr. B says, "We've got half an hour left to drive. Don't make me bury one of you in the backwoods." Mr. B has been Troop 99's leader ever since the old leader, his dad, died a few years back. He's hard on us sometimes, but he wants the best for us. Even if it means burying a few Rangers in the woods from time to time.

Everybody, even Shovel's dad in the passenger seat, nods.

Mr. B adds, "Hawkins. Put the seatbelt on. Also, I'm tired of the trailer game."

Hawkins throws his whole head into an exaggerated eye roll, but none of the older guys notice his efforts. He tries all kinds of antics to impress them, so it wouldn't surprise me if they're ignoring him on purpose.

Mr. B continues down his shit list. "Shovel, if I hear another curse word out of you, you'll be cleaning the new bathrooms at camp for the whole week. Treb..."

Treb looks up from his *Encyclopedia of Medieval Siege Weapons*, dark hair obscuring his eyes.

“It’s been two hours,” Mr. B continues. “Finish. The. Chicken. Nuggets. Our Class A uniforms are going to smell like they were ironed by the Hamburglar.”

Reluctantly, Treb puts the half-eaten chicken nugget he had been nibbling on for a good forty-five minutes in his mouth and begins a slow chew.

Mr. B points, “Whatever you don’t eat, I’m throwing out when we get to camp. The next Ranger on my radar cleans the bathrooms tonight. What are we going to earn this year?”

“The Golden Plunger,” everybody drones.

The Golden Plunger is Camp Winnebago’s most coveted award, given every summer. There’s no actual prize, it’s just bragging rights. But there’s nothing teenage guys love more than a good dick-measuring contest. Metaphorically, obviously.

With that, Mr. B throws the vehicle in drive, hits the gas, and the van once again bumps down the makeshift road. Individual trees blur into woody pastels as they streak past outside the window.

We all shut up. Nobody wants to clean the bathrooms. Not to mention, I’m pretty sure we’re running out of breathable oxygen in the van. The air is hot and thick. The van shudders as Mr. B nails a pothole in the road. Under such miserable conditions, I can’t help but think I’d make a great astronaut.

Mr. McNitt, Shovel’s dad, twists in the passenger seat to address the Rangers. “Come on guys, thirty minutes. We’re almost there. Let’s get off to a good start. I know Troop 100 usually wins the Golden Plunger, but this could be our year!”

Mr. McNitt’s too-cheery words hang over us. He’s one of those dads I can’t help but feel bad for. He’s balding, single, and has way too much camp spirit. It’s hard not to cringe every time he opens his mouth.

## The Quest for the Golden Plunger

The tires kick up pieces of gravel that ping off the trailer and do Shovel a belated favor—continually reminding us of its presence.

*Plink.*

Mr. McNitt leans back in his seat as Shovel whines, “But, Dad. He hit me!”

“That’s the game, son. They play every trip.” Mr. McNitt lowers his voice as he turns back to look Shovel in the eye, but it doesn’t make a difference in the silent car. “You’re new to this troop, bud. Let’s try to fit in, huh? What if you try to get Hawkins every once in a while? Then you can punch *him* in the arm.”

*Plink.*

Hawkins snickers.

Shovel’s brow furrows as Mr. McNitt turns back to the front. “Eyes on the prize, fellas. Golden Plunger.”

*Plink.*

A bead of sweat rolls down my cheek. It gets absorbed by a stray strand of crimson hair which I brush behind my ear. “You’d think they could afford a nicer van.”

*Plink.*

“How are you wearing that?” I ask, half-twisting to look behind me.

Uncle Ruckus gestures to his oversized, inside-out, splotchy black hoodie. “What, this?”

*Plink.*

“It’s comfy stuff, my man. This right here is the big spit,” he says.

Hawkins leans forward, his thin nose curled into a sneer. “Does your family even own a washing machine? You look stupid wearing that thing inside-out. I can’t *believe* the troop lets people in who don’t even go to St. George’s Academy. Maybe if you weren’t a leech, they’d have the money to fix the air conditioning.”

Turbo's head droops onto my shoulder. I don't know how he can just fall asleep like that. On my left, Tri-Clops sits in the window seat entranced with a ball of yellow, crusty foam in his hand. He's spent the entire car ride hollowing out the seat in front of him.

"Yeah, or maybe if some of us treated it better," I say.

The van hits a pot-hole, Turbo Cakes's head slips off my shoulder, and he jerks awake. Drool seeps from the corner of his mouth onto my khaki uniform.

"Sorry," Turbo Cakes murmurs, swiping the glob of spit off my shoulder and using it to style his moussed, black hair. It looks the same once he is done playing with it.

I want to detach my shoulder. "Awake from your shortcut," I observe.

Turbo stretches and his little oval face yawns wide, "Always makes the drive go by faster." His eyes focus on Tri-Clops picking seat stuffing out of the hole in front of him. "What a waste of a window seat..." Turbo Cakes says. "You might wanna stop. This van's a relic. You're destroying history."

Tri-Clops hisses at Turbo, then keeps on picking. I can't help but stare for a second at the huge brown birthmark in the center of his forehead, for which he was so aptly nicknamed.

"Yeah, okay," I say. "That's it for me. I'm going to sit with Uncle Ruckus." I clamber over the seat, "I can't take sitting in row number two anymore."

*Plink.*

Ruckus holds up a fist, "Ha. Number two. Nice."

I bump it.

Turbo plays his trump card. "At least I *have* facial hair." Like Vanna White revealing a clue on Wheel of Fortune, his fingers slide down a lone black hair jutting out from his chin. "Talk to me when you weigh more than ninety pounds soaking wet, Do-Over. This baby is ni—"

“9.398 centimeters long,” the whole van drones in unison.

Turbo Cakes wilts. “It’s eight repeating...”

*Plink.*

“You got a disease, Turbo,” I say.

“Tell that to AIDS face over there.” Turbo Cakes points at Uncle Ruckus. He’s been a little *too* quiet. He doesn’t look so good either. I guess Mr. B’s threat really spooked him.

Uncle Ruckus rolls his eyes, “Yeah, everybody make fun of the guy with acne. Claps for you, bud.” He claps for emphasis. “That’s such low-hanging fruit. That’s like calling Do-Over fire crotch. It’s too easy. Turbo, if you can’t play nice, we’re gonna put you down for another nap. I brought my special chloroform hanky.” A soiled Kleenex appears in his hand, then he blows his nose and shivers.

“Do you have a cold?” I ask.

“N-nah dude. I’m good...” Uncle Ruckus pulls the front of his sweat-shirt so it makes a big tent. He tucks his legs and arms inside, looking much more comfortable now. We pass a sign and Uncle Ruckus emphasizes the vowels “Camp Winn-eh-bay-goh. Who the heck names a camp after Treb’s house?”

Mr. B slow-claps as he steers the van, “Uncle Ruckus! Guess who cleans toilets tonight? Bathroom duty, my friend! Look, boys. Let’s read the Ranger Rules as we drive past.” Each sign outlines part of the Ranger Rules and Mr. B, Shovel, and the other little Tenderboots shout-read them. Every. Single. One.

“A Ranger is...”

“Cordial! Compliant! Devout! Honest! Ardent...”

My brain initiates a defense mechanism to put itself in sleep mode. I zone out and let my mind wander instead of listening to the Ranger Rules for the millionth time in my life. Despite the lack of video games, I love

Camp Winnebago. It feels more like home than home does. The more I'm able to get away from my parents, the more I realize that there's so much more to life than sleeping the whole thing away. The only thing that slows me down at camp is... well, everything. Kind of. I'm afraid of a lot of stuff. Not actually afraid, more like aware of all the things that *could* happen. Like, I don't want to get a tick and get sick like my parents. I don't want to swim in the murky lake. The mandatory swim test is easily my least favorite part of camp. I fail it every year. But once that's over, it'll be a whole week away from home. Just me and the guys.

Mr. B stops in Camp Winnebago's parking lot with one last *Plink*.

"I know you guys are sick of hearing about the rules," Mr. B says, "but I want to win the Golden Plunger this year. I'll only say this one more time: if anyone thought breaking the rules and bringing electronics was a good idea, let's go ahead and hand them over once we get to the campsite. We need good behavior to win."

*Or I can not hand over my phone and play games on it every night. The choice is simple. Sorry, Mr. B.*

Mr. B tells Mr. McNitt, "Stay put, Joe. Watch them," and heads into the Administration Building.

Shovel squints. "What's that place?"

"That," Uncle Ruckus points with his middle finger, "is pretty much the Mordor of camp. Nothing in there but rules, paperwork, and punishment."

"I don't remember any paperwork in Mordor," Shovel mutters, face scrunching in concentration.

"And that." Uncle Ruckus rotates his hand palm-side toward his face, finger pointing up. "Is the ceiling."

*Ha. Nice one.*



Shovel looks up at the ceiling. He gives a slow nod at the truthfulness of the statement and turns to face the front of the van.

I'm half tempted to tell him to check again for gullible, but it's not worth it. Poor kid's already been whapped on the arm enough times, no point in embarrassing him even more.

Everything is still. We're parked in the middle of a sparsely populated gravel parking lot. The Administration Building sits on the far end of the parade field next to the Infirmary. There's some old guy who looks like a hobo Santa milling around the field, picking dandelions poking up in the otherwise perfect plain of grass. Past the parade field is Cardiac Hill. I can't remember anybody *actually* having a heart attack climbing it, but every time I go up it I feel like I'm going to have one, and I'm only fifteen.

Shovel breaks the silence, stifling a laugh. "Hey, Hawkins, I think the trailer is gone." Shovel's nostrils flare, and a half-smile flicks back and forth across his pale, pre-pubescent face.

Hawkins rolls his eyes, not turning around to look.

"Screw this," says Ducky, the oldest, toughest, and musciest guy in the troop.

The Hierarchy of Coolness goes into effect as each age group waits for their elders to exit. The back row of seats populated by the "men" in the troop, like Ducky, move to get out first. Hawkins will go after them. Myself, Uncle Ruckus, and Turbo Cakes will get out after him. The little kids—Treb and Shovel—plus Tri-Clops will be next. We all know the drill and wait our turn to escape the van.

Everyone except Shovel, who slings the sliding door open and jumps out as soon as the older boys shuffle around in the backseat.

*Does this kid want a target painted on his back from the moment he steps out of the van on his very first campout? Who does he think he is? He won't last the day.*

After Shovel, each Ranger waits his turn to explode out of the van. We breathe deeply, thankful to be free of the Ronald McDonald meets Blazing Phoenix scented cell on wheels.

Shovel is kicking gravel around with a dopey grin on his face. *Maybe he doesn't even know he did something wrong?*

"Dude," I say, "you're gonna get your teeth kicked in."

Shovel's restless feet stop and his smugness wavers.

I continue, "If you don't respect the older guys, they're going to get pissed. Have you learned about graphs in school?"

Shovel nods.

"Okay, well, imagine the y-axis is coolness, and the x-axis is your age." I demonstrate each axis with my arms. "There is a perfect linear equation for the age to coolness ratio." I draw an imaginary diagonal line in the air in front of Shovel's blank face.

"Get it? You're just a little kid. So, you aren't cool. So, you exit the van *after* everyone older than you. That's after Ducky's gang, after Hawkins, after the freshmen," I gesture to myself and my friends, "and you get out with the nose pickers over there living out *Lord of the Flies*." I conclude, sweeping my arm to include Shovel, Treb, and Tri-Clops.

Shovel's eyes track to Tri-Clops, who is balling up seat-foam in his fist.

"He's older, yeah, but he's an outlier," I explain. "Outliers are really bad. It means you're weird. This stuff isn't an exact science. Just don't be weird, and don't die, and one day you'll be cool."

I pat Shovel's head and go stand with my friends. Mr. McNitt is still sitting shotgun reading the *Ranger's Life* magazine. Maybe he's missing some brain cells and likes the van's hotbox? I can't help but wonder if Shovel is a chip off the old block; that maybe he'll never be cool. Looking at his dad, there's no *way* that guy was ever cool.

"What was that all about?" Turbo Cakes gestures toward Shovel, who

is staring up at the sun like he's trying to figure out its color. Well... At least he'll be protected by his disability if he ends up blind. Maybe it's for the best this way—nobody picks on blind kids. Probably.

“Just trying to help him survive the first week, at least,” I say.

“I don't think it worked.” Uncle Ruckus nods toward Shovel.

I watch in horror as Shovel dances up with a stupid-ass smile on his face and punches Hawkins in the arm. Hawkins spins, spit slinging from his mouth in a snarl.

“Gonna bruise, Hawkins?” calls Uncle Ruckus. “I've seen Treb close books harder than that.”

Treb doesn't notice the jab. He's too busy half-cradling his book as he attempts to coerce what looks like a half-dozen chicken nuggets into the already-full pocket of his khakis.

“Shut up,” Hawkins spits. He shoves Uncle Ruckus into me and stomps back over to Shovel. *This kid is so stupid, why didn't he run when he had the chance?* Hawkins delivers two punches to the already-forming bruise on Shovel's bicep. “You don't get to punch if I don't look, *retard.*”

Hawkins starts walking away when Shovel sputters, “But you did look. You looked at the trailer as soon as you got out of the van. I saw you.” A chorus of exclamations erupts from the group of older boys; a mish-mash of ooh's, cuss words, and other unintelligible sounds come together to play one of Bach's unreleased symphonies: *Masses, Humiliations, Hawkins.*

“You're an outlier, Hawkins!” Shovel yells.

I smack a palm to my face. Shovel doesn't get it. He doesn't know when to stop. I crack my fingers to see everyone else look at each other, their faces asking a silent, “What?”

The summer sun glints off the rows of aluminum sheets drilled into the side of the trailer. Each dent and imperfection serves as reflective jump-off

points for the rays of light seeking to photo-bleach the eyes of all those who look at the giant tin can.

Shovel sniffs. “You looked. I saw you.”

Hawkins whirls, grabs Shovel by the scruff of his uniform collar, and jerks him to face the trailer attached to the rear of the van.

“Let me explain. The point of the game...” Each word flicks off Hawkins’s tongue like boiling venom. “...is to trick little idiots like you into thinking the trailer came loose from the van *while* it’s driving. You see the trailer? All your stuff is in there.” Hawkins jerks Shovel’s collar forward, forcing him to take a step toward the van. “If it came detached, all the stuff would be gone. So. The. Point. Of. The. Game.” He forces Shovel to take a step with each word until he is inches away from the trailer. “Is not to look when the van is *moving*. What am I supposed to do, live my whole life without looking at the trailer again?”

Hawkins is hunched over, jutting a finger into Shovel’s red, wet face. He jerks Shovel’s collar again, smooshing his face against the shiny metal trailer. I feel the heat radiating off the glorified dumpster on wheels even from where I’m standing. Bright red letters above Hawkins’s head read, “Troop 99, Property of the St. George Catholic Academy.”

“Now, I think—if you wanna be tough—we’d better toughen you up.”

Shovel’s chubby cheek smears against the trailer. Tiny beads of sweat sizzle as they stream down his face toward the metal sheets. Static shoots down my forearms and pools in my hands. I hate bullies.

“It’s hot! Stop, stop, it’s hot!”

Hawkins presses harder. “You got it, retard?”

Shovel’s tears slip down his face to join the beads of sweat. They sizzle in harmony as his chubby cheek fills in the dents and imperfections on the trailer.