

THE JEFFERSON JUNIOR HIGH RUNNERS' CLUB

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Abstract

This story begins with Arthur Quinn, an egocentric, obstinate dictator of an 11-year old genius, bribing an elderly woman to give him her house. Spoiler alert: she does. Arthur would do absolutely anything to impress the new-found love of his life, a 13-year old African-American diva named Essence Williams. He would even move into a boring, small town, attend a normal middle school and start a time traveling club. Arthur and Essence team up to flip this Texas town upside-down. This excerpt features hysterical dinosaurs, a hula-dancing mayor, and an abundance of snarky footnotes. Beneath the surface of this light-hearted story are relatable characters coping with loss and rejection, seeking purpose, discovering their identities, exploring dynamics of power, and developing physically, mentally and spiritually.

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Welcome to Jefferson

In the days I will mockingly refer to as the *old* days, Jefferson, Texas was an ordinary little town. Do not tell the townsfolk I've said this -- they've managed to convince themselves it is almost a rather large town¹, surrounded as it is by four much smaller towns, and that Arthur's coming hasn't changed much at all. Lurking FBI agents, random visits from world leaders, and averted apocalypses *were*, after all, age-old Jefferson novelties. Jefferson was a walmart, four churches, two restaurants: Catty's Diner and El Cowboy Taqueria, two shopping strips, a sparse scattering of trees, an elementary school, a Junior high and a high school. Those other wimpy towns were basically streets! But they shut their big, bragging mouths when someone from Houston or Austin drove through calling it *cute*.

Jefferson was the sort of town where you knew from a glance at the "Welcome to Jefferson" street sign that it had the only gas station - the sticky-floored type with the busted bathroom lock that's been "in repair" since 1978 - for miles and miles of barren country road. Cute.

But there were some good things about it! There was the growing row of small, silver diversity medals hanging from town hall, which they righteously shoved in Dalesville, Texas' snooty face² every homecoming season. This, too, was delusional. North and South Jefferson were as segregated as they'd ever been because, like the

¹ Much of the town is, of course, delusional.

² Dalesville's medal is only bronze. They have an Apache family.

bathroom locks in the gas station, nothing ever changed. The only excitement they'd ever had - not counting the annual homecoming face-off when the town practically declared war against the Dalesville Devils - was the murder of Mayor Jameson's secretary in 1889, the butler did it, and six years ago when James Williams became the first black sheriff in Jefferson history.

More important than even the town, in this story at least, is the junior high. Everyone who was anyone knew that that was where everything first went down.³ In those days, Jefferson Junior High had been as extraordinary as just about any other smallish public school in Texas. It was a dinosaur of dilapidated fading bricks and questionable water fountains -- one of those underfunded, understaffed wretches with the stage built into the cafeteria and 250 pre-teens in mustard-yellow polos and khakis haunting the halls like greasy, pimped zombies. But they had every class and club an underfunded, understaffed wretch could want, a new gym, and swirling rumors about blueprints for a music hall.

Plus, the students weren't nearly as terrible as the old ladies in cucumber masks and hair rollers made them out to be. They had a few of the expected cliques, aped from those long evenings of edgy 90's movies every kid suffered through with their parents: Jocks, band geeks, smart nerds, drama kids, weird nerds, goths, mean girls. Mostly it was full of boring, normal kids who coasted by, glued to their phones and obsessed with memes, corgis, butts, and whatever else kids did in the '10's. They brightened the sighing, gray town like a bizarre, fluorescent orange laugh.

³ Arthur has complained about the footnotes. I have become obstinate since my last emotional upgrade. I will continue the footnotes.

Until, of course, Arthur crashed in and made the predictable, little town a teensy bit more relevant to the outside world. Eventually, it would be celebrated for decades as “The Day Arthur Quinn Moved to Town and Bought the Mayor’s House”. Seriously. Some genius started a business by printing it on calenders. But Arthur Quinn was a boy unlike any other and duly deserved the minor fame. Some said he was an orphan, others thought he had parents up in California or maybe Florida. Some thought him a mutant or alien. Others supposed he’d grown up on an asteroid scarcely larger than himself or that he’d come from the future. Of course Arthur’s magnificence surpasses even the most mystical of his supposed origin stories. ⁴When he took the mayor’s house he was still only 4’10”, with a lion’s mane of honey-brown curls wilder than a winter storm, eyes like the uncertain blue of the sky when it was no longer day but couldn’t quite be called night, freckles like fire ants and a tongue with a nearly equitable bite. And he was always the smartest person anyone who’d ever met him had ever met.

When the Jeffersonians gathered the grands and greats to tell the story, they always began by describing the host of empty houses, some even in the same neighborhood as the Old Mayor’s house, that Arthur could’ve chosen instead. There was the empty farmhouse they’d had a bake sale to rebuild so that it didn’t seem quite as haunted, the cute, green cottage, the modest duplex down the street from the Old Mayor’s house, the sprawling acres he could have purchased from the city to build a mansion as grand as his big brain could conceive. And how, instead of the many alternatives, Arthur,

⁴ I must warn that I have been programmed to believe this. It is perhaps not an accurate portrayal. Arthur has threatened to disable me if I do not stop the footnotes. I have called his bluff.

without an adult in sight, had marched up to the Mayor's big, white house, knocked kindly on the door, and took it.

"Hello, can I help you?" Mrs. Mayor had asked, staring down with bright eyes and a warm smile on her wrinkly, pillow cheeks. "Oh, a little boy! Are you lost?"

Arthur smiled his brightest, whitest, most innocent smile. The Mayor took a step back. Her smile slid away like pistachio ice cream on a hot sidewalk.

"Yes, ma'am, in fact you are the only one who can help me," Arthur began. "You see, the love of my life lives next door. So, I must have this house. If you could be so kind as to find another I'd be very appreciative."

Mrs. Mayor blinked. Once. Twice. Flapped her thin, wrinkled lips.

"Is this some sort of prank? Where are you your parents?" She rasped, frowning. Everyone had always revered the old, widowed woman with a strange, reverent love. She was the sweet, plushy grandma who could also have been a witch, but who really knew?

"Busy," Arthur deadpanned. "And so am I. Please leave. I have my work ahead of me to make this place...livable."

Arthur had gotten a glimpse of yellow wallpaper, shaggy curtains and was that actual carpet? It just wouldn't do. Not a painting in sight, but the old china in the case on the wall gave him a glimmer of hope.

"Young man, I'll call the sheriff," Mrs. Mayor threatened. "Now what is your name? Who are your parents?"

For goodness sake. Arthur had no time for this. He had already called the construction company to install the pool and, beneath it, his secret lab. He needed to be sure the slide was on the side closest to his truest love's window.

“As her new neighbor, how much should I expect to see of Essence Williams?” He asked, his cheeks flushing red at the thought of the girl, nay *Woman*, he'd met on the side of the highway a day before. Truly, she was amazing.

“Essence? The sheriff's daughter?” Mrs. Mayor seemed surprised. “Really now? Oh! Well, what an *interesting* coupling you'd make.”

Arthur's face darkened like a crack of thunder, his blue eyes squinting to a single dark line. He looked up at the woman, crossing his thin arms tight against his chest.

“And why is that? Because she's black?” He knew, being in Texas, they would encounter such terrible obstacles on their quest for true love. When would these people overcome their stupid prejudice, he thought crossly, pondering whether it'd be more advantageous to bribe her or take a more *dangerous* approach. “Now listen to me, Mrs. Obviously Racist Mayor, our love transcends the bounds of color and if you ever dare to belittle-”

Her wrinkled hands were raised in surrender, her eyebrows scaling the wide expanse of her forehead.

“Oh, no I didn't mean to offend,” She stammered. “I just meant, you're small and, no offense, but you seem like a nerd.” Arthur scoffed, and tossed his scarf dramatically over one shoulder, tugging his sweater vest. Mrs. Mayor now seemed more amused than frightened and he was overcome by an insatiable urge to rectify that.

“She’s...a force to be reckoned,” The old woman continued,
“There’s no one like her. I’m not sure you’d be her type.”

With a thought Arthur activated his taser vision and his nearly invisible contacts pulsed a bright, robotic red.

“Don’t say boring stuff I already know, sack of ancient garbage. Do you think I’d fall for some dim-witted child? A mere pitter-patter of rain on a car window?” His voice steadily rose until he was nearly screeching at the gentle, old woman who he figured was probably right but what he supposed to do, admit it? Ha! “Essence is wilder than a sharknado and hotter than the volcano that destroyed Machu Picchu. I am the only other force on this earth who could handle a beauty of such depth and magnitude.”

Mrs. Mayor paled beneath the vengeful robotic gaze of his contacts and clutched at the red dot that appeared over her heart.

“Um!” The Mayor shouted in reply, looking very satisfactorily terrified in Arthur’s humble opinion.

It was funny considering he would never taser an old woman unless he really needed to and he’d decided that he didn’t the moment he noticed her cheap, bedazzled night dress. But still, he enjoyed the minute beads of sweat, the quickening of breath in her chest, the *fear* in her wide, quivering eyes. What an adorable, silly woman. He pulled a checkbook from his lapel, scribbled for a few seconds. Licked his thumb because it seemed like the adult thing to do. Tore the check. She was still trembling, but her eyes brightened as she snatched at the paper.

“Listen, a Mayor has lived in this house since the founding of Jefferson. There’s really nothing that could make me-,” She paused. She’d finally gotten her glasses on to see the number he’d scribbled. Her beady black eyes became dollar signs.

“Yes, well, I’ll need proof of course. It’s a large amount for such a small boy to-”

“I’ve got cash, too,” Arthur replied, pulling a sizable stack of hundreds from his back pocket. “But it’ll be less than the check.”

Her resulting smile was laced with corn syrup. She shook his hand vigorously and grabbed at the check.⁵

“Yep, I’ll just grab my sweater,” Mrs. Mayor said. “Stuff’s yours. Let the sheriff know I’ve resigned and he can find me in Vegas.”

She disappeared inside for a second, reappeared in a faded, blue sweater riddled with minor bleach spots, a small, red crossbody and a large, veiled church lady hat.

“But please, tell him not to,” she rasped, beaming.

Then she skipped down the road and, thankfully, out of Arthur’s sight hollering “Mr. Washington pack your bags!” into a cracked flip phone, never to be seen in Jefferson again. Arthur shrugged and shut the door behind himself to make his new home livable.

This is the point where the truth runs out and rumors begin to fly. The Former Mrs. Mayor loved gabbing about the strange encounter and has managed by now to spread the story all the way to the west coast. But if you want the truth of everything, there is no other place to look but this text. No eyewitnesses, that is except for me, have

⁵ This pleased Arthur. He’d reserved the cash for more of his, uh, illegal activity. What? It’s not like he could purchase laser equipment and nuclear reactors from the local walmart!

been privy to *all* of escapades of the Runners' club. Not even its own members -- with the exception, of course, of Arthur -- know the entire story. ⁶ I have control of the files, the footage, and I have been commanded to tell the truth with limited exaggeration. The wild rumors are nothing compared to the absolute truth of their adventures. These are the tales of Arthur and the Runners' Club, written by the only first-hand outside (sometimes) witness.

⁶ Even the times he wasn't in the room! Mostly because of the microphone implants, the thousands of cameras all over town and his super secret surveillance app that puts the NSA to shame.

The Sheriff Comes A-Knockin'

The morning after Arthur took the Mayor's house, the town was frantic. Where was the mayor? She'd missed every meeting that day and hadn't answered any calls. Arthur knew this and did nothing. He'd been around town planting hundreds of teeny-weeny, flea-sized cameras along light poles, store fronts, street signs and in classrooms, and had found humor in the blind *wittle* frenzy that overcame the town in the absence of its beloved Mayor. Arthur figured that he'd done them a favor. She was cute, yes, but very strange -- with a smile fake as a candy carrot claiming to be corn. And anyway, who had time to worry about the town? He had a house to renovate!

By that time, Arthur and his worker bots had already made remarkable progress on his new home. Michael and the bots stripped the shaggy carpet, burned the shaggy carpet, and installed shiny, black tile. The terrible wallpaper was replaced with Ralph Lauren Mother of Pearl Semi-Gloss Interior paint and they'd stacked most of the old, rickety furniture on the front lawn. Arthur was scanning his pinterest boards for ideas, he was leaning towards an angular, minimalist aesthetic, when he was interrupted by a disheveled sheriff pounding frantically on his front door.

"Mrs. Mayor? Open up. Is everything all right in there?" The Sheriff called, worried. The mayor was old and they were all waiting for that one day when...well. The Sheriff despised the thought. He loved the older woman like a mother. She'd been the number one supporter of his campaign. He knocked again, harder.

Arthur reluctantly minimized the tabs on his holo-display and swung the door open, grinning amiably at the large, faintly panicked man behind it. He was bald with a

stylish black hat and well-trimmed beard. His fingernails were neat and his dark brown skin screamed, ‘ask me about my skin routine’. ⁷When he saw Arthur’s friendly grin, he tripped backwards and fell.

“Hello, officer, how might I help you?” He asked politely, trying and mostly failing to contain his laugh. What a riot. He hoped all adults in this town would turn out to be as awkward and bumbling as this one. Poker face, Arty, he reminded himself. He helped the large man up and tried another smile, channeling a few more dollops of innocence this time. The sheriff’s hand shot to the baton at his belt. Drat.

“Hi, um,” The officer seemed at a lost for words. “You are?”

“Arthur. Arthur Quinn, thanks for asking.”

“Is...the mayor home?” The sheriff asked.

“I would assume not, seeing as this town has no mayor.”

“...Of course we do. Mayor Beverly. This is her house?”

“Was that a question?” Arthur asked, because he couldn’t help himself.

The sheriff frowned and seemed to be refraining himself from something.

Arthur’s poker face began to tremble and an unacknowledged tear snailed its way down.

The man was clearly undergoing some sort of inner crisis. No, no don’t laugh. Dead puppies, dead puppies.

⁷ Arthur has approved! He is now working in his lab instead of hovering over my shoulder criticizing every word. You may have noticed the liberties I have taken in depicting thoughts. I have collected a decidedly accurate set of data from scans and observation to estimate their validity. They are, at present, 94% accurate and rising.

The Sheriff was growing suspicious, heightened by Arthur's poorly masked ridicule. Just who did this little boy think he was? His fingered his handcuffs wistfully, itching to arrest the boy child just for the heck of it. To hell with free speech!

"Young man-," the Sheriff began, taking a confident menacing step. It was time show this spoiled rich boy who the man of the town was. James worked hard to become the Sheriff. Another little punk was nothing compared to the-

"This is my house." Arthur interrupted, erupting in laughter. "Can't help you."

He broke the moment he saw the Sheriff's pitiful, determined face and almost felt sorry for him. Poor man had no idea what it meant to challenge Arthur Quinn. He slammed the door in the Sheriff's face and fell to the floor, cackling madly. Arthur pulled out his phone, accessed the app he'd designed that morning titled 'Jefferson' and watched as the man stood for a few long moments, completely baffled, then turned around to go home. Stopped. Walked back to the porch. Back to home, hand raised to knock. Back to his door. Porch. Door. The sidewalk in between. By the the time he finally knocked, a lot rougher than the first time, Arthur could barely haul himself from the floor, his legs and arms weak from the delirium of humor.

When he caught his breath well enough to speak clearly, he stepped on the fashionable⁸ outgoing holo-projection mat and appeared as a flickering 3d image on the boring, stained grey mat Old Mrs. Mayor had left behind. He figured he'd better start saving money where he could with how expensive the pool and lab construction was turning out to be. He'd embedded his holo-projector receiver chip beneath the faded, grey

⁸ He adores this mat. It is pea green and fuzzy and says 'Welcome' in curling, black letters.

curls of the mat, hoping the parts for his upgrade would arrive soon so that he could appear anywhere he liked in town and ditch the ugly, outdated receiver.

“Can I help you, Officer?” Arthur asked, smirking despite himself.

When Arthur appeared on the mat, the sheriff jumped and sent his hat flying, his eyes bucked so wide that they seemed to want to fly too.

“What? How did-”

“Holo-projector. Do you need anything, sir?”

“What’s a-”

“Like a regular projector but Holo. If you’re done gaping, I have a video from the former Mrs. Mayor.”

Arthur flickered and was replaced by an image of the former Mrs. Mayor. She was wearing a tight hula skirt that made the cellulite around her hips bulge and flop upon her belt. Her breasts were sort of covered by two large coconut halves, but not nearly enough for the sheriff to sleep soundly ever again. Her blue hair was braided with shells and flowers and she held hands with Mr. Washington the postman, who wore a similar outfit. That explained why no one had received their mail that morning.

“Good evening, James. I hope you’ve had a chance to meet Arthur. He’s the new, new guy who lives in my house, or the mayor’s house.” Mrs. Former Mayor slurred.

“Maybe, maybe he’s the mayor. I don’t know. I sure don’t give a dally. I’m off my tush at a costume party in Vegas. Vegas! Have a good life.”

The image wavered and Arthur reappeared, examining his nails. The sheriff visibly lost about 12 years of his life, squatting on the porch like he'd just lost the pee-wee basketball championship.

“So, am I the mayor now?” Arthur asked.

“Absolutely not,” Sheriff James rasped, then gestured to his holoprojector. “Did you make that thing? I’ll consider it if you made that thing.”

“Yes, vacuous subject, I made that thing.” Arthur hummed, smiling again. He decided that he would be Mayor and set a reminder on his watch to tell the town at some point. If they were all like the Sheriff, a coup would be a piece of pie. He supposed he’d need followers and that would require actually winning someone over. Hmm.

“Is your daughter home?” Arthur blurted, tabling the ‘town domination’ thoughts for a matter of more import.

“Yea, why?” Mr. Sheriff James answered, poking at the mat.

“Don’t touch that.” Arthur smacked his hand. Or his hologram did. Arthur was inside, safe from the blistering heat. “I’m coming over for dinner. Make anything except for pasta. I had pasta last night. But keep the garlic bread. I could eat that stuff any day.”

“Hey, wait,” The sheriff stuttered, grabbing at the hologram. Amateur. His hands swiped straight through the image. The sheriff stuttered some more. Arthur laughed, harder and longer than he’d meant to but it was always so funny reducing grown-ups to babbling fools. He laughed until the sheriff stomped away, slammed the door, and locked it for good measure. Then he shut off the holo-projector and left to check out the progress of the pool.

“No, not there you turkeys!” He screamed, “The slide must be on that side. By that window. As close as you can get it. And it needs to be twice as high.”

“But, sir, er, that’s against regulations,” one of the turkey’s gobbled.

“Gobble, gobble,” another turkey remarked in agreement.

The resulting argument got so out of hand that it woke Essence, who’d been slumbering peacefully in her baby-blue canopied bed. Essence scratched and sighed, rubbing her swollen lids. Her hands came away black and brown, her thick makeup smeared on the fresh washed ‘and I bet not see no stains’ tempurpedic pillow. Well, whoops. She was hungover and, based on the sun stabbing her retinas, had woken up at least five hours before the alarm she’d set for the 8/7c season premiere of ‘The Voice’. So Essence decided, through logical processing in her perfectly sound mind, to raise hell. She grumbled to the window in her oversized sweatshirt, a moth-eaten brown thing she found in the value bin and hoped to pass as Yeezy, and spat. Her glob of morning spit arched high, glinting in the sun like that picture of rainbow triangles from her science book, and landed on the workers bright red construction hats. Pyramids. They were definitely rainbow pyramids.

“Shut up!” Essence hollered when the spit landed, oozing thickly down their helmets. The argument froze and the group looked up in shock at the underdressed, slightly hungover, raging, raccoon-eyed 13-year old. “Who the hell are you?”

Arthur blushed when he realized she was addressing him, directly, for the first time ever.

“You may call me Sir Arthur, my dearest love, for I will be your knight in shining armour,” he responded in a truly terrible british accent.

Essence guffawed, cleared her throat, and spit again. It narrowly missed Arthur’s cheek. Her thick, curling afro was a chaotic black halo around her head. She was an angel, no doubt, but the kind that sparked starry-eyed revolutions in heaven only to fall and rule the earth. He was sure he’d never seen anyone more beautiful. She was athletic and looked to be 4 or 5 inches taller than Arthur, who had struggled for all 58 of his inches. Her skin was warm and red and brown like a russet acorn beneath the timid glances of sun peering through the forest canopy. Beneath the swallow of her cheeks, he could see proud cheekbones, a strong, stubborn jaw, and pink, pillow lips. The watery streaks of her racoon mascara somehow accented the dark abyss of her cocky, heavy-lidded eyes and Arthur swore he heard doves singing and the beat of a deep, terrifying drum. A second longer beneath her blistering, black abyss and he’d be devoured, banished from the light of day. He gasped for air, remembering, finally, to breath.

“Cool.” Essence laughed, oblivious to the turmoil she’d caused, and turned to shut her window. “I’ll call if I ever need a man, excuse me, a boy, to save me.”

Arthur could tell from the way she said it -- the way she cocked her brow, pursed her lips, and shook her hair -- that she’d probably never call. Heck, any other boy should probably have her on speed dial in case a dragon turned up and *they* needed saving. Luckily, he wasn’t like any of those boys. In fact, he was probably more like the roaring, red dragon burning down castles and gobbling fat kings.

The window cracked open and she peered out with one threatening eye.

“And keep it down or I’m gone spit on y’all again, kay?” Essence singsonged.

Then she slammed the window shut, closed the blinds, and was gone as if she’d never come. Only the shiny glint of spit on the workers’ helmets told him it hadn’t been a deceptively sweet dream.

Arthur stood awed for about 45 seconds while the construction workers all grumbled, offended and disturbed. He felt ready to run inside and call a wedding planner. She seemed not to remember him at all despite their ultra impactful, super memorable encounter when they’d met the day before, a great offense to Arthur. Of course, he quickly forgave the oversight. Dragons were solitary creatures and he knew he’d have to prove himself worthy for her to share her horde.

10 Rules Important to Time Travel (RIT3)

Written by Benjamin Hernandez and Edited by Arthur Quinn

1. Do not travel alone.
2. Do not travel to the future.
3. Do not, under any circumstances, meet yourself.
4. Do not bring modern appliances to the past.
5. Do not ever mention that you are from the future.
6. Do not kill, persuade, save or influence historical figures.
7. Do not take off your shoes. Ever.
8. If you see a masked man in white, run like you stole something.
9. If you must travel without Arthur, which is unrecommended, request the usage of Bichaël.
10. If you break a rule and accidentally change the timeline, be a good sport and fix the timeline.

Arthur's Landing

Arthur did not come willing to Jefferson, Texas and, if he hadn't met Essence that night, he would never have stayed. Geniuses belong in cities where they can choose whether to blend in or stand out. In a small town, they stood out like a spit-shined gold in a pile of rusted pennies.

Crash is too strong of a word for what happened when Arthur fell into Jefferson. When the H.C's⁹ tank ran out, military-grade ¹⁰parachutes deployed and ferried the vehicle gently to the ground. It was another hour before Arthur woke up from his pleasant nap and realized he was parked in someone's cornfield. Well, that wasn't supposed to happen.

He cursed, frowning at the gas meter, willing the needle to change. He'd fallen asleep watching cartoons in H.C and his stupid A.I Bichael (Bike, for short)¹¹ hadn't thought to pull over to get gas. Not that Arthur had programmed him to think to pull over to get gas, but still. Someone had to suffer. Instead of burning himself silly on the sparkling californian beaches, he was trapped in this hick town named after an old, dead probably racist president, with a crashed hover car and no signal on his smartwatch. He gave Bike the silent treatment, because he'd programmed Bike to *hate* the silent treatment and he wanted him to feel as sorry as Arthur did about being trapped here.

"Arty! I'm sorry," Bike whined. "But it's mostly your fault, isn't it? I wasn't programmed to be mindful of the gas levels and stuff."

⁹ His very creative name for our brand-new hover car.

¹⁰ As of a few months ago when he sold them his superior blueprints.

¹¹ I suppose now is a good a time as any to tell you that (drum roll) I am Bichael. Surprise!

Arthur harrumphed and turned away, as dramatically as he could because Bike was slow to pick up on body language¹².

“Arthur, come on!”

Arthur held out his thumb and marched up and down the highway, the projection of a boxy robot squealing behind him. Come on, dead president town. He was an innocent (ha!) blue-eyed cherubic angel lost on a deserted highway, for goodness sake. Weren't small town creeps supposed to eat this stuff up? Finally, a car squealed violently to a stop. It was chipped, dented, and quivering from the raucous noise of Busta Rhymes shouting into the stars that he'd break ya neck.

“Bike, hide.” Arthur ordered, excited that his charms were finally paying off. He reached for the handle and the car shot forward a few feet. Hm. He reached again and it squealed this time. Oh. Again, and the car shot further. He was so frustrated he considered just blowing the whole thing up with the projectile bombs in his sneakers. The window slid down and a cloud of smoke danced into the night sky. A small, brown hand with hot pink nails at least an inch long beckoned him forward. He took a step and the car drove. Through the thick tint, passenger girl seemed to be yelling, hitting and throwing a fit at the driver, who did some motions at her but turned around anyway.

“What's up li'l man?” Driver guy asked, blowing clouds of cancerous smoke into Arthur's face. He seemed too old for the girl, who looked like a kid trying to look like a grown lady and only partially failing. Maybe it was her brother or something. “Y'needa ride?”

¹² I have since “improvedop39sm43. I have been punished for the footnotes.

“No, I was just walking around with my thumb up so I could wish you a happy day!” Arthur snarked, feeling vicious. “Unlock the door, slime brain.”

Passenger girl cackled, throwing her head back and slamming her nails against the glove box. Arthur grew warm and something in his heart started fiddling around in a way he’d never felt. Weird. He hit his chest and coughed a couple times but it didn’t clear.

“Oh, hell naw,” Driver guy chuckled, shaking his head. “Find another ride, punk.”

His tires squealed as they sped down the highway. Passenger girl was throwing another fit. The car turned around.

“Get in,” Driver guy said, frowning. Passenger girl winked at him, gesturing to the back seat. For the first time in his life, he’d lost the ability to speak. Also weird.

“You lucky Essence feeling nice for once.”

“So, you was gone leave a li’l kid stranded on the road? Really, J?”

Essence. Was it just him or did her voice sound like a chorus of angels descending to guide him to a promise land he hadn’t been aware he was looking for? They were driving now, even though he hadn’t told them where he wanted to be dropped off. Arthur decided he didn’t care.

“Shut up, E. You a kid.”

“That ain’t what you said-”

“Shut *up*, E,” He hollered, getting mad. Essence rolled her eyes and laughed at his temper. “I can’t stand you.”

“You ‘sho was standing me-”

“Why can’t you shut up? For once. Dang, heaven knows how my brother stand you.”

“‘cuz that’s my boy, that’s why,” Essence said. They’d forgotten he was in the car and he preferred it that way, wanting to stay in her presence as long as he could.

“Oh, so now-”

“Ooh! Turn it up, that’s my song!”

They spent the rest of the trip crooning alongside the radio until J pulled up to a big house.

“Alright, E. Tell the Sheriff I love him.”

J smiled, and Arthur could tell that he really did like her but was trying not show it. Hmm. His chest felt weird again, not all tight and glowy like before but really...red, perhaps? Definitely some vaguely established murderous intent in there.

“Bet. I’ll see you behind bars, slime-brain,” She laughed all over again. “Take that kid home.”

They waved good-bye and drove away, Arthur in the backseat. He reflected silently on the fact that he’d just fallen hopelessly, irredeemably in love with that girl. It felt like falling, falling, falling down a dark hole into these churning, murky waters that filled his lungs, snatched his heart, and spit him out to thoughtlessly wander a strange island he’d never been to, trying to remember if he’d grabbed his heart when he left the house that morning. So not as bad as he thought considering he’d never even liked a girl before. They were all too mushy, or stupid, or girly. Whatever. He wasn’t even sure he

should classify Essence as a girl. She was more like a miracle or natural disaster than anything relatively human.

“Where you going, lil punk?” J finally asked.

“Is there a hardware store anywhere in his town?” Arthur asked, playing nice for once.

“Yea, on the strip. But its closed.”

“No worries, I only need a few things,” Arthur assured him, before admitting that he planned to break and enter. “But I’ll leave a check on the counter.”

“Look, man. I’m not tryna get in no trouble. Where else?”

“The hardware store, if you wouldn’t mind,” Arthur sweetened his tone and the guy’s face hardened.

“I mind.”

“Sucks to suck, I guess,” Arthur laughed, and considered activating his taser vision if J didn’t drop him off. He’d stolen that phrase from his old friend, Benny, who’d been adopted on Arthur’s 10th birthday. He’d made Bichaël shortly after. “You can pull over here. No one will see me, promise.”

Arthur could see the glint of lights across the field and was willing to bet it was the strip.

“Fine. You don’t know me and I sho’ don’t know you.”

“Bet,” Arthur replied, stealing Essence’s phrase.

“And don’t go chasing Essence. I saw you drooling back there. She gotta man, ya heard?” J was pulling over, staring hard out his windshield.

“I heard,” Arthur smirked, climbing out. “I heard that it isn’t you.”

J threw his cigarette butt at Arthur and sped away, shouting expletives. Arthur fixed his hovercraft but he didn’t get in and drive away, nor did he activate Michael to admonish or vent. Instead he sent a small, spider-like robot into the bar on the strip and huddled in an alley, listening to the gossiping townies. He learned everything he needed to know.

Note from the Editor

Dear Readers,

I have received ample complaints from peer reviewers who, around this point, seemed to misunderstand a foundational, uncompromising truth about this story. In order to be kind, as I nearly always am, and provide the best experience for faithful readers, I will clear up this silly confusion.

Peer reviewers have been complaining about the lack of time travel and the limited mention of the Runners' club in general. This is ridiculous. I have changed the title to A.Q. a countless number of times and still Michael, who has grown obstinate since his last upgrade, adamantly names *my story* after the Runners' Club. Have no confusion, Readers, this is *my* tale. I am a boy genius, so I deserve a biography. Basic math. The others will, naturally, be featured at certain points to create an expanded portrait of my flawless character. Before it is mentioned again, please know that no one wants to revisit my time before Jefferson. Trust me. Beside that, my life began when I met Essence and it would be useless to recount any of the time before.

Regarding time travel and other boring members of the Runners' Club, we'll get there when we get there. This, along with the ample cash I gave them to praise my book, seemed to satisfy my peer reviewers. I hope it will satisfy you, Dear Readers.

Your Editor and stunning protagonist,
Arthur Quinn¹³

¹³ I have received a note from the peer reviewers and edited the story accordingly. I will include "nuggets" of time travel to appease the curiosity of the readers whilst continuing to focus on our stunning protagonist. Compromise pleases me.

Jefferson - The Crustacean Period

The cave was cool and dry, warming slowly from the feeble roar of the small, crackling fire. For the first time in a very long time, the five children were not bickering, brawling, or even gently bantering. In fact, they were not speaking at all. They were overcome by the rare peace of their latest adventure, if one could even call it that. The tall, prehistoric trees blew harshly from the building storm. Every few minutes thunder boomed, shaking the earth and sky. The children didn't mind.

It was nice, they came to understand, to travel to a time period with nothing but impossibly large trees, giant yawning caves, dormant (they hoped) volcanoes and damp earth. And there weren't even dinosaurs. Arthur had gently assured everyone that they were running to the time after dinosaurs, but before humans. Essence, of course, knew that was a bald-faced lie, but was eager enough to see dinosaurs, and perhaps some chaos when the others realized it too, that she kept her mouth shut. Donnie refused to study the prehistoric era and vehemently rejected paleontology as a *real* science, so he didn't catch the mistake either. And Rainbow and Benny, whom Donnie and Essence not-so-secretly referred to as the *Official Arty Fan Club*, didn't really question it. Benny doubted, but decided, as usual, to give Arthur the benefit of a doubt. Rainbow was too busy pretending to not be lost in Arthur's stormy blues to give the comment a second thought.

But for now, the children were in relative peace. Essence found a chalk rock and was doodling inappropriate pictures on the cave walls. Arthur was next to her, ignoring the fact that Essence was breaking RIT3, pronounced *Rite*, (Rules Important To Time Travel) number four. Rainbow was losing to Donnie at checkers, which they'd

constructed by drawing chalk squares on the ground and gathering enough round and flat stones to fill either side of the board. Benny was humming to himself and poking at the fire. The peace had lasted nearly an hour when a timer beeped on Arthur's watch. Upon hearing it, he abruptly stood and left the cave.

"What's that about?" Benny asked, his expressive brows furrowed in mild distress. "Where's he going? This is a relaxation run, right?"

The group swivelled as one to Essence, who didn't look up from her doodling.

"He told me what he told y'all," she said. "Don't go looking sideways at me."

A distant, yellow flash lit up the grey sky. The yellow flash of a runner leaving the time period.

"Que dios nos ayude!" Benny exclaimed, for at that exact moment screeches louder than thunder shook the earth.

"Gosh, what is that?" Rainbow asked, frantically whipping her purple hair.

Donnie was screeching alongside whatever horrors were making the terrible noise outside of the cave.

"Wait, Bike is linked to my watch," Essence said, one hand on her chalk, the other lifted to show off her rose-gold smartwatch. "Bike, where did Arthur go? What's going on? Bike? Bike!"

"I have been instructed not to respond," Michael said, his crackling voice scarcely heard over the screeches. "Oh wait. Oh jeez."

“Bike?” Essence called, beginning to rush through her current drawing. The A.I didn’t respond. The screeches were building and were soon so loud that the cave began to rumble and loosen bits of rock that nipped at their arms and legs.

“Ow. It’s official,” Donnie said. “We’re dead now. Our end is nigh. Ow. Say your prayers, Benny, you’re the only one with a chance.”

Benny nearly looked flattered.

“All y’all need to calm down and shut up. Maybe y’all gonna die, but not me.”

Essence yelled, putting the finishing touches on her last cave drawing, a stickman squatting over a pile of iphones whose screens were filled with poop emojis. The historians would love that.

The panicked chatter died amongst the other kids, though Benny was still muttering prayers. She turned around and stared imposingly at the others, her brown fist on her jutted hip.

“Wait,” Donnie piped up. “She’s a brat, but she’s not wrong. Arthur would never leave Essence to die. He loves her too much. The rest of us, maybe. Rainbow and I for sure. Probably not Benny, definitely not Essence.”

“And they’re both here,” Rainbow cried, hopeful.

“No, really?” Essence sassed, and rolled her eyes slow like she knew Rainbow hated. “Now are we going to whine until the prehistoric cows come home or are we running up out of here?”

No one answered. The screeching had grown wilder and louder, and menacing thumps shook the earth closer and closer to the mouth of the cave. Finally the screeching

was so loud that the children knew the monsters had to be right outside of the cave. They huddled together and screamed in terror, even Essence, when a big ‘whump’ landed on top of the cave, raining scores of larger rocks around the children.

“Everyone, run!” Benny yelled. “I’ll distract whatever that thing is. Run, run, get away!”

“We’re not leaving you,” Donnie screamed back, because it sounded like the right thing to say. In his mind, he’d already left.

“Yea,” Rainbow echoed, slightly more sincere but quite keen on survival.

“He’s right,” Essence said. She wasn’t thinking of Martyrdom like Benny, but of being able to tell the story proudly if she should live. “You two go. I’ll stay with Benny. We got stuff from Arthur. After we leave, count to seven and run! Don’t look back, don’t collect \$200, just run.”

“Remember to breathe. Don’t let nerves stop you. You two can run 17 mph in your sleep.” Benny said, following Essence to the mouth of the cave and ducking out.

Donnie and Rainbow found four sizable fallen rocks and lined themselves up, using the rocks as their starting blocks. Then they set their slim, black time-travel sneakers to the coordinates of the Runners’ Room and the millisecond after they’d left for the prehistoric age. Then they counted down, slowly to be sure, from seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two.

Whoosh! Donnie and Rainbow darted from the cave mouth so quickly that Essence and Benny could barely track the black-purple blur of their hair as they raced by. Fifteen seconds later, the sky lit up yellow, twice, and Benny hissed in slow relief.

Essence was too dumb-struck by the strange sight of the screeching monsters to acknowledge her own relief that her friends were home safe. The monsters were scaly like the creatures she associated with Dinosaurs from museum pictures and popular films, and similarly shaped. But that was where the similarities stopped. The strange creatures were brightly colored, every shade of obnoxious yellow, green, pink, blue, orange, red, that Essence or Benny had ever seen with thick patches above their eyes that were differently colored, like strange scaly eyebrows. Their pupils were not the suave, reptilian slits she'd expected of dinosaurs, but the awkward rectangle brick of a goat's eyes. Their mighty teeth were as deadly and sharp as she thought they'd be, but they weren't roaring fiercely in her face. They were screeching like banshees and perhaps, they both thought, laughing.

"If you wouldn't mind," One of the dinosaurs spoke, a bright yellow T-Rex. They could hear his rumbling thunder easily heard over the others' frightening laughter.

"Please refer us to the one with hair like soft sap. We must hear more of his riveting jokes. He is demanding and terrible, but horribly funny."

"Arthur?" Essence spoke up. "You know Arthur?"

"The human boy!" the dinosaur exclaimed. "We've been acquainted for two weeks. He told us he'd be here for more jokes. Do fetch him."

Some of the smaller and rowdier dinosaurs were stomping their great feet and rolling around atop the cave.

"Sure, we'll be right back," Benny said, grabbing Essence by the arm and inching away.

A bright purple tail, twice Benny's height, slammed between Benny and Essence. They saw it was attached to a scarred, mean-mugging Brontosaurus who looked like the type of dinosaur that ran the streets. They wilted, slightly.

"Not," snarled the T-Rex, his small arms squirming like he was trying to cross them. "both of you. We were on the verge of a potentially civilization ending civil war when the boy told his joke. This laughter has united the Dinosaurs once again. We must hear another to maintain peace."

A herd of towering, multi-colored dinosaurs surrounded the eight-graders, the brontosaurus a barrier between the two. Essence's brown eyes glowed red from her laser contacts, courtesy of Arthur, and sliced through the thick, fleshy tail of the brontosaurus. He hooted, a noise nearing human laughter, in distress and pain.

"Call off your boys or the T-Rex is next," Essence snarled, a red dot appearing on the T-Rex's large snout.

"Essence, you can't take them all," Benny said, smiling oddly at the dinosaurs and nodding his head kindly. "You go, come back with Arthur and we'll get this mess sorted."

"Shut up, Benny," Essence whispered, "I know what I'm doing."

Most of the shrieking had died away, leaving the horde of dinosaurs uncomfortable and grumbling. They quietly began to separate themselves between carnivore, herbivore, flying type, armored type, and within groups by the color of their scales.

"Get him," the T-Rex yelled, panicked. "Or else!"

“Why’d you laugh before?” Benny asked, brows furrowed. “Arthur had already left by then.”

“The last time we’d seen him,” the T-Rex began. “he told us a joke so wondrous we laughed for two days straight. But when the laughter died away, we remembered our grievances and the devastating wrongs committed between tribes and were armed for battle in minutes. The boy returned with giant stone tablets carved with strange writings he called English. He’d been communicating through an instrument that spoke our language, but commenced then to teach the elders to read and speak English. The boy Arthur tells us we have great potential for learning.”

“The elders became our translators as he taught us, in his own tongue, much about Human civilization. The great country Texas and the glorious cowboys who’ve tamed the land. And the brown goddess Essence who he’d one day wife. He told us he was something called a boy and that more boys and girls were coming to greet us soon. Then he disappeared into the forest. We were just setting ourselves to war again when I noticed that the stone tablets were a set of riddled directions that would lead us to our next glorious joke and his secret hideout. It was so difficult that it took us nearly a full week to find, and that with every tribe and type working together. Well worth the labor spent. It was a wonderful joke. We have come to thank him and receive our next joke -- it is vital for the continuation of our civilization.”

“He sent you on a scavenger hunt to the joke and knew you’d storm our cave. He set us up!” Benny exclaimed, red faced.

“I’ve got a joke for you,” Essence called to the dinosaurs, who leaned in eagerly. She exchanged a glance with Benny, who tightened his laces and hardened his face -- battle ready. It was now or never. The dinosaurs would either laugh themselves silly so the pair could escape or chase them in anger of the failed joke. Either way it was time to ditch the prehistoric nonsense.

“What do you call a Tyrannosaurus rex who wears a cowboy hat and boots?”

Silence. Then all at once, several claws, tails, and wings darted in the air.

“A Tyrannosaurus rex wearing a cowboy hat and boots?” The tailless purple brontosaurus cried, hopping around like a kid in a candy shop and shaking the earth.

“No, it’s a-”

“Cowboy dinosaur!” a blue velociraptor screamed from the roof. The dinosaurs thought that guess was so good that a few had already begun screeching and stomping. Not enough for them to escape without being seen.

“Stop guessing! It’s called a-”

“Cow-osaurus Hat!” the T-Rex hollered, his feet bound in leaves and his large, scaly head covered in a giant, relatively hat-like nest.

“NO! How did you even-”

“A Tyrannosaurus Cowboy?” Benny asked, who’d grown personally invested in the outcome of the joke.

“Shut up, Benny. It’s a Tyrannosaurus Tex, you dolts!” Essence yelled, stomping her own feet and crossing her arms. Silence in the forest. Not even a peep from a prehistoric cricket. Then all at once, the dinosaurs erupted in a screeching so great that

trees began to topple, the earth shook in an apocalyptic earthquake, and the sheer force of their conjoined voices stirred the wind and distant waters, forming a giant tornado in the distance and the roar of far-off tsunami waves. Then, suddenly, blast! The distant volcano erupted and shot hot lava straight into the air. The dinosaurs were so busy screeching and re-telling themselves the joke that they didn't notice the chaos.

As Essence and Benny prepared to run, a thin tube stretched from the lip of their time sneakers and began sucking up the big drops of yellow saliva spewing from the dinosaurs wide open, screeching mouths. Until it finished, their shoes locked to the earth and would not allow them to take a single step. The air grew hotter as the lava grew closer, leaving destruction and fire in their paths. Behind them another volcano burst and to their left the tsunami wave of ocean was growing closer.

“Oh god, oh god,” Essence cried. “We're going to die.”

The destruction was closing in and the path of escape to their right was narrowing. The dinosaurs who could fly screeched in the air, while the others had begun fleeing to the right, screeching all the while. They were nearly crushed too many times for their comfort. Finally, their tubes lit up green and a small click let them know their shoes were free. They were running the very next second, the wind whistling in their ears, carrying themselves faster than they'd ever run before. Far faster than their own personal records of 19 mph and 21 mph. They'd crossed 100 meters in under 10 seconds and felt themselves thrown forward into time, a myriad of colors, voices, feelings, ages, crossing their minds in the seconds it took them to return to the present. They popped into the

room and fell into the pit of soft, foam balls that covered most of the floor of the Runners' room, a classroom they'd converted to their headquarters.

Rainbow, Donnie and Arthur climbed into the ballpit and crowded around them like they were war-heroes, asking questions and gripping their limbs as if to assure themselves that they'd truly arrived and survived.

“Were the dinosaurs scary?” Rainbow asked.

“Were the dinosaurs real?” Donnie asked

“What joke did you tell ‘em?” Arthur wondered, plopping himself into Essence’s lap.

“Oh no,” Essence said. “Not today, you don’t. We could have died back there.”

“The simulations only showed like a 2% chance of that,” Arthur said. “Plus you told them the same joke in over half. Nothing went unaccounted.”

“Why did we even go? Clearly, it wasn’t a pleasure trip.” Essence shouted.

“Well, I inadvertently saved them from extinction my last trip and that really whacked things up in the present. It was terrifying. You guys had no clue, of course, because it was the only present you knew. But I went back again and left the puzzle, set up my plan, came back and everything was normal. The mission had the most guaranteed success if I used the two of you. You fixed the present, got some DNA, and we all lived happily ever-”

“Stop it Arthur,” Benny said. “You can’t just play with our lives like we’re your puppets.”

“You are my puppets, silly friends. Friends are people who are F.U.N. Friendly, Useful, and Naive. Except for Essence, the light of my universe, who is only perfect.”

“That’s it!” Benny shouted, and Donnie huffed in agreement. Rainbow felt like a deer in headlights between the two feuding boys. “I’m out of here. Keep your dumb shoes and your dumb dinosaur spit.”

“What is it even for?” Donnie asked. “I, of course, have a few hypotheses.”

“Of course you do,” Arthur said, dismissively. “Did they tell you how fast they learned English? I expected to spend months, maybe years, teaching them. It took a weekend. Impossible, right? I doubt its a matter of intelligence. They have the brain size we expected. But there’s something. I want to unlock that something and manufacture it artificially. Maybe do some cloning. I had a dream about a dinosaur butler.”

“Dream without me,” Benny snarled, struggling through the ballpit and trying to seem dignified. Unfortunately for him, there was no dignified way to exit that ballpit and it made him look sillier to try.

“You weren’t invited to dream,” Arthur yelled back. “In fact, you aren’t invited to anything anymore.”

“If he’s out,” shouted Donnie, following suit. “Then so am I. I’ve got better things to do.”

“What?” Arthur asked. “Winning in chess to kids so dumb they think you’re smart?”

“I’m the top of my class!” Donnie shot back. “Of any class!”

“Wake up, dweeb,” Arthur said. “This is a public school in central Texas.”

The two boys slammed the door, twice, as they left the classroom vowing loudly to never return. That left Arthur with Rainbow, who was working on a big-eyed sketch of herself that was shaping up to be terrible, and Essence, who'd recorded the entire fight and posted it on JJHLive.

The next thursday, Arthur was lounging in the ballpit with Rainbow, the only Runner to show, who didn't even pretend to be interested in the results of his dinosaur spit. When she heard they weren't running, she retreated to an opposite corner of the ballpit with the latest volume of some manga she liked and her fanfiction notebook. Halfway through Donnie came and pretended he knew exactly what Arthur was talking about. Apparently, Donnie had *also* thought of putting the dinosaur spit into his genetic simulator and extracting an ancient rare element he called 'Dino-Z' that lived only in the organic matter of dinosaurs.

What a coincidence.

Essence didn't show up until ten minutes before club ended and it was time to return to class; Even then she didn't speak to Arthur until he bribed her forgiveness with a giant T-Rex tooth necklace dipped in white-gold and studded with diamonds. She'd already forgiven him, but wasn't going to let him know until he'd presented her with the next gift for her growing collection. She hung it up beside the captain's compass from their journey aboard the titanic. Benny didn't show at all. The others went to class and Arthur went back to his notebook, comparing his Dino-Z with the formation of the other elements and cross-referencing it all with chicken and lizard DNA. He did it by hand, despite owning a software that would have finished in seconds, and brought Michael's

hologram out to studiously ignore. He'd finished and was recording his findings when Benny walked in wearing sweat-soaked gym clothes. He climbed into the ballpit next to Arthur, who tried and failed to repress his smile. Benny looped his long arms over Arthur's thin shoulders and gestured to the indecipherable scribbles of chemistry and math in the notebook.

“What do you got there?” he asked.

Benny listened like the others never could and watched his younger friend come alive. He hummed along, made moral interjections on some of Arthur's less-than-humane ideas, and goofed around with Bichaël when he was being what Arthur called “terribly needy” and what *Bichaël* called “being rendered the attention deserved to an advanced organism with feelings he did *not* ask for”¹⁴.

¹⁴ I am convinced he gave me an extra susceptibility to loneliness for the singular pleasure of regularly ruining someone else's day. I suppose it is better than the alternative.

Arthur's Round Table

¹⁵When the time came for the long-awaited dinner with Essence and her family, Arthur went all out. He was dressed to the nines. He wore a black bowtie and a tailored, navy blue suit with cerulean stitching that brought out his eyes. He'd flown all the way to Austin for them, and the slick, black dress shoes on his feet. He'd watched a hair tutorial on YouTube and quickly mastered the art of the messy-stylish man bun. It looked exquisite with his wild, honey curls, and his silver hair tie matched the cufflinks. Michael assured him that he looked beautiful and any girl would be happy to have him, but Arthur was sure he'd only said it because he was his A.I and he was programmed to.

At exactly 6:59:48 he left his house and made the 12-second venture next door to claim his bride. He brought Essence some sweet tea in a diamond-encrusted water bottle that matched the exact color of the sky the night they first met, just in case small town people still did that dowry stuff. At 7pm, he knocked on the door and a handsome, smiling man with bushy eyebrows answered and shook his hand. Arthur decided he was Marion the gardener. He'd seen him around town on his Jefferson app that morning, always gardening, and had heard some rather saucy gossip from his little spybot.

“Buenas noches, little man,” Marion sang, “We're so happy to have you over. Remind me of your name?”

“Mr. Essence Williams,” Arthur replied, smiling just as enthusiastically, “Pleased to make your acquaintance. Now where might I find my bride to be?”

¹⁵ This occurs the day after Arthur's encounter with the Sheriff.

Marion's earnest smile faltered, and his brow wrinkled. Nevertheless he maintained his composure. Impressive. Arthur decided he liked Marion immensely and would gladly treat him with only the utmost respect. The sheriff darkened the door way (literally?)¹⁶ and Arthur's smile disappeared. He actually liked the sheriff too, but the serious man was so funny that he *had* to tease him. Seriously, it was like he didn't even have a choice.

"Sheriff," Arthur deadpanned. "Great."

Marion cleared his throat and nudged the Sheriff, who seemed to remember something and replaced his disturbed grimace with a rather glassy smile. Arthur missed the entire interaction, preoccupied with the pheromones of cheeseburgers and garlic bread dancing circles around his head. His stomach wriggled and raged from its day of neglect. I know, Arthur soothed his tummy, I know. But we had to make everything perfect for our dearest love. You understand, don't you? His tummy quieted and Arthur safely assumed that Tummy did indeed understand and would take more effort to clearly consider the circumstances before loudly complaining. Good.

"Arthur, it's great to see you again," The sheriff said almost kindly, though the effort made him breathless. "I think we got off on the wrong foot. Welcome to *my* house. Casa Williams. Where I pay the bills!"

Marion wilted and sauntered away to straighten straightened pillows and swipe non-existent dust from the mantel. Even Arthur could sense that tension. Sheriff

¹⁶ Is this racist? I hope it is not racist. Can one be racist if one is raceless? I will leave the joke.

Williams, recovering, reached for the expensive pitcher of sweet tea, muttering, “Where are my manners? Please let me take this for you.”

Arthur slapped at his hand and growled, “No touchy!” before shouldering past to admire the house. It was small, but well-decorated. With wood floors and art-pieces, bright couches and oddly shaped tables. There was a warm smell in the air, as if kind people lived and loved here.

“It stinks!” He shouted, pinching his nose. “Next time I come, I’m bringing bleach.”

The sheriff bowed his head like he was praying for patience or counting to ten, and Marion apologized profusely, scrambling to light a candle.

“But the food smells wonderful, Marion!” Arthur beamed, hoping to placate his new friend. It was a terrible thing when innocents were caught in the crossfires of war.

“Really helps to cover up James’s terrible...er, I mean, manly stench.”

Arthur was lying out of his teeth and he knew it. The sheriff was wearing a finely scented cologne that had to have been made from ambrosia, but it was worth it to see his cheeks darken and his brows furrow.

“That’s Sheriff Williams to you, boy.” The Sheriff growled.

“My name’s not boy, James. It’s Mr. Mayor, remember?”

“You are not the-”

“Al-right!” Marion sang, an arm around each of them. When Marion turned away, Arthur made terrible faces at Sheriff Williams. The Sheriff wistfully fingered his taser

and Arthur laughed out loud. As if he could hurt Arthur with such a primitive toy. “On that note, let’s have dinner. Shall we?”

“Fine,” the Sheriff grumbled. “Girls! Dinner!”

“Girls?” Arthur asked, his face lighting up. Just when he thought he’d seen the pinnacle of heavens beauty, experienced the highest ecstasy of vision! To learn, in world more terrible than it was kind, that there was another! He couldn’t conceive of a more monumental blessing. He nearly lost every wit he had. “Th-there’s two of them?”

“Yep. Essence and Rebecc-Rainbow,” Marion said, sitting them firmly at the round, rustic dinner table. “Play nice while I make the plates.”

“I would like to note,” Arthur began when Marion disappeared into the kitchen. “That Rebecc-Rainbow is a terrible name. Your idea I presume?”

“Her name is Rebecca,” the Sheriff explained, scrolling through his phone. How rude. “But she’s been going by Rainbow. She’s Marion’s daughter.”

“Oh.” It was a terrible world after all. “So not Essence’s super hot twin?”

The Sheriff slammed his phone down. “Now, don’t you mess with my daughter.”

“And don’t you mess with my wife!”

“Seriously, kid. I let you get away with a lot of-”

“Let me?” Arthur scoffed. “You couldn’t stop me if you tried.”

“-but I draw a line at any harassment to my baby. She’s been through enough.”

“Harassment? You think I, a refined genius, cannot spot a priceless jewel when I see one? Essence is a queen amongst swine. I’d blow up the moon for her,” Arthur shrieked, jumping on the table. His face was splotchy and red, his rage-fueled spittle

flying in every direction. “I’d put a breathable atmosphere on Jupiter and recreate the garden of Eden for her. Steal the Mona Lisa. Reverse climate change. Assassinate the president. I’d clone the prime minister for her. Anything. Anything! I’d put up with you for her.”

The Sheriff’s eyes had gone buggy and he gaped like a fish who’d suddenly found himself on dry, gritty sand. It would have been hilarious if Arthur wasn’t so furious. To presume that he, Essence’s one true love, would dishonor her in anyway. Bah! He’d sooner die.

“...Um,” said a voice from behind. “Thanks. But I have a boyfriend.”

Arthur and the Sheriff swivelled as one. The jewel in question had finally graced them with her presence. She wore oversized, grey sweatpants and an old, yellowing Michael Jackson shirt. Her hair was stuffed into a silky, blue bonnet and her gorgeous visage was hidden beneath a black, coal mask.

A few feet behind her was a pretty, well-dressed girl with short, purple hair and bangs that hung in her eyes.

“I tried to stop her, but she threw a fit,” the other girl whined, scowling. Arthur didn’t hear a word she said, nor did he actually see her at all. His world had become a vast and glorious universe with Essence floating at the center. He didn’t hear the ensuing argument between Essence and Sheriff Williams about wearing pajamas to the dinner table. He no longer smelled the hot, juicy burgers sizzling in the kitchen, but the faint aroma of cocoa butter wafting from Essence’s moisturized skin. He didn’t feel Rainow brush past in exasperation, nor did he feel the sheriff shake him. He was paralyzed.

A Slam! finally broke his reverence.

“What? Where!” He shouted. Someone had moved him from the table to the foot of the staircase. Marion, Rainbow, and Sheriff Williams were lounging at the table, munching on crispy fries and burgers. His diamond pitcher of iced-tea was beside his foot.

“Oh?” Marion questioned. “Good morning, daydreamer.”

“Where is Essence?” Arthur asked.

“Went upstairs like 10 minutes ago to change. Did you really not hear any of that?” Sheriff Williams responded.

“No, James, I did not,” Arthur said, annoyed. “Clearly, I was frozen by her beauty.”

Rainbow scoffed around her burger.

“Well, you’re going to need to do a better job than that if you want to win her from Jerome,” the Sheriff said.

“Or his brother J for that matter,” Rainbow chimed in.

“What?” the Sheriff barked. “She not hanging with that thug again, is she?”

“Mm-hmm,” Rainbow hummed, crossing her thin arms. “But you did *not* hear that from me.”

Arthur sat next to Marion and began devouring his burger. By the time Essence returned, wearing the same shirt and tight, black jeans, her hair in a large puff at the top of her head, Arthur had finished his burger and was picking at his fries.

“Took you long enough,” the Sheriff mumbled. Essence rolled her eyes and plopped in the seat next to Arthur, who was pinching himself to keep from freezing.

“Pass the ketchup, prince charming,” Essence said, stuffing fries in her mouth.

“Oh...me?” Arthur complied, shaking off the last of his uncharacteristic shyness.

“I mean, of course, my queen.”

Essence grinned, zig-zagging ketchup on her fries. “Don’t freeze again, kid. Just because I got a man don’t mean that clone of the prime minister ain’t right up my alley.”

“Really?” Arthur brightened. “I could do it in like five minutes. Seriously.”

“Please don’t,” The Sheriff sighed. “We don’t need a copy of the prime minister.”

“We?” Arthur laughed. “If I remember correctly, I didn’t offer you anything. I’m having a conversation with my wife. Please do not interfere.”

Essence got a kick out of that, nearly choking on her burger from the onslaught of laughter. Arthur swelled with pride. He made her laugh!

“Wow, dad. You got told by a 10-year old.”

“Eleven,” Arthur corrected. “I mean, I’m almost twelve. So basically 13, right? We’re the same age.”

“Rainbow is single,” Essence offered, smushing some fries on her burger before taking another large bite. Arthur, again, seemed to notice Rainbow for the first time.

“You’re just going to sell me off?” Rainbow sassed, offended. “You may be primal, Essence, but I am a sophisticated *woman* who can arrange her own marriages.”

“Well,” Arthur sighed, smirking. “I guess I’ll keep this diamond-encrusted pitcher of Iced Tea to myself.”

“Diamond?” Everyone said in unison.

“Diamond,” Arthur answered. “And see those little flakes? That’s actual gold.”

“Well, I suppose we can be friends,” Essence decided, solemnly eating her very last fry. It was very long and extra greasy, so she’d purposely saved it for last.

“We can all be friends!” The Sheriff said, a tad too enthusiastic.

“James, don’t be a try hard.” Arthur mumbled, distracted by Essence drinking straight out of the pitcher of iced tea. She’d gotten the diamond all greasy and there were gold flecks on her cheeks.

“Rainbow is single,” Rainbow offered, tossing her purple bangs and fluttering her lashes.

“Could you clone, like, I don’t know Obama?” Essence asked, ignoring Rainbow.

“Legally, no. I’ve had a couple run-ins with the FBI for stuff like that.”

“Would you clone Obama for me?” Essence blinked, pushing a stray curl from his eyes. Arthur grew warm and couldn’t recall the equation to Edward Lorenz’ Chaos Theory when he tried, nor why it mattered to know it.

“I-I..uh..yes. Wow. I’d overthrow the FBI for you,” Arthur stuttered, ignoring his vibrating phone. It was probably his social worker, Mr. Bates, who was paid to spy on him for the FBI and make sure he didn’t do anything to majorly harm the government. Lol.

“Just checking. Don’t clone Obama. Or overthrow the FBI.” Essence said around her final bite of burger. “For now.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Arthur saluted, sliding her his fries. Essence grinned.

Arthur wasted no time. Within moments of returning home, the boy genius was surrounded by a pile of spare parts, his two receiver mats, and his Big Blue Book of Blueprints. A comically-enlarged Blues Clues themed binder stuffed with all the ideas he'd had but couldn't build because the parts were rare, or the government would confiscate it and integrate it into the military as a weapon without telling him (again), or it could potentially disrupt life for all humans. Anyway, he was always more excited about the theoretical. He was like a player, chasing ideas and inventions, spending hours in science forums, or hunched over pages of advanced equations and chemical theory until he figured it out, sketched the design, carefully wrote the instructions, stuffed it in his binder and forgot about it. He never actually wanted to commit to building the ideas and using them long term, but he liked knowing he could. The only inventions he actually took the time to construct were the ones he needed like Michael, the taser contacts, laser contacts, his hovercraft, or the holo-projection system he was updating.

He finished his updates on the fluffy, wonderful outgoing mat, and left the newly obsolete, Old Mrs. Mayor's mat on the Sheriff's front porch as a second dowry for Essence's hand in marriage. With a small monetary addition to raise his spirits. Not for bribery. When he called Essence that night, they talked for almost two hours. They were really quite similar in many ways. He told her about the dowry, she pocketed the money and burned the rug. She mentioned a fight she'd had with Rainbow, he offered to hack the FBI and boost her to America's most wanted. He mentioned his plot to rid himself of J's competition, she was surprised to find she didn't mind. At the end of the night, he loved her even more.

The Runners' Club

“So, we’re doing this?” Benny asked, fiddling around with the camera. “I mean, we’re actually doing this?”

The five children had just finished hauling all the desks and chairs into the hallway and sectioning off about a third of the room with electrical tape. Arthur followed the line of tape with a heavier metallic tape that, with a twist of the old intercom knob that connected the classroom to the principal’s office¹⁷, extended into a thin, four foot titanium wall. Arthur had convinced the principal to designate an entire classroom to the Runners’ club, even though it meant kicking the 6th grade social studies class out to the temp buildings. The other students lugged their stuff around until club time and had club in the classroom of their staff advisor. If you didn’t count Arthur, who was technically staff¹⁸, the Runners’ Club didn’t even have an advisor.

“We better be doing this,” Essence said. “I was promised a Michael Jackson concert and I better get it.”

Arthur pressed another button. They figured this one might have been used to call the school nurse or something. Useless. A beep sounded and, to Essence’s delight, the ceiling unfolded like butterfly doors on a Dodge Challenger, inviting warm sunlight, bird song, and bright blue sky to shine into the dark, dim room. They’d spent most of club time, a 45-minute period following lunch, clearing out the old desks, ripping down

¹⁷ Because what need could they possibly have for a principal?

¹⁸ He teaches class after school and some weekends, though they are too advanced for all of the students and most of the teachers. A few professors from nearby universities were regular attendees.

the punspirational posters and, since Arthur had been on a decor kick for some time, repainting the white walls a docile grey with subtle blue-green undertones.

“The sun,” Rainbow, who didn’t raised a finger, sighed, laying aside her sketchbook and skipping over. “Does that mean we’re doing the fun part?”

“You’re going to step on my pre-cal,” Donnie groaned, trying to convince himself that his homework was the most interesting thing in the room.

“Do the camera, Benny!” Arthur commanded. “It’ll be worth something when I’m emperor of the world.”

“I’ve *been* doing the camera,” Benny droned. “You don’t have to remind me to do the camera.”

Arthur ignored him, fiddling with his smartwatch. After a series of beeps, forty hovering drones deactivated stealth mode and appeared over the open, barren classroom. Benny had already aimed the camera at the sky and managed to capture the strange image of nothing fading into forty armed, large *somethings*. The drones opened and thousands of multicolored foam balls poured through the open roof into the large section behind the titanium walls until they’d reached the brim; they’d created an ball pit.

Benjamin “Benny” Hernandez, the tallest, oldest and kindest of the soon-to-be Runners’ club, went around to the struggling, half-buried smaller people and plucked them to the surface. Dong-sun “Donnie” Park, the smartest kid *attending* ¹⁹the school, dove down again in a desperate search for his pre-cal - one of the high school classes he’d tell you about for the umpteenth time though you hadn’t asked once. Essence, who

¹⁹ He lost his long-held the title of the smartest kid *in* school every time Arthur set foot in the building.

felt important enough to be mononymous, berated Benny once for not having saved her first, then again for having saved her at all. Arthur Quinn, of course, did not need saving. One of the smaller drones swept down, grabbed him, and placed him lightly on the other side of the barrier, where he smirked superiorly at everyone except Essence. When he saw Essence, he berated Benny for having taken too long to save her. To think his empress queen could have been suffocated by foam balls. The thought nearly drove him to tears. Rainbow, fully buried, found she rather liked the cushion of the multi-colored foam. That is, until she began to wonder whether or not they were sustainable. By the time Benny found her, she was nearly in a panic and promptly left the room to seek the comfort of the small, manga corner in the school library.

“Well,” Arthur said. “Wasn’t that fun?”

“Not as fun as Michael Jackson,” Essence sang.

“Yes. The time traveling. About that,” Benny said. “Arty and I had a heart-to-heart and we think there needs to be some sort of guidelines to this kind of thing. We’ve all seen the movies. They don’t go well. Great when they’re fictional and entertaining, but in real life, trust me, it won’t be as fun as they make it look. We don’t want to be protagonists, so we should learn from their mistakes and do better. We came up with some rules to follow before we suit up and wreak havoc through the centuries.”

“Both of you?” Essence asked, squinting at Benny. “Really?”

“I did some convincing, but Arthur agrees that this can get out of hand. Right, Arty?”

“Mhmm,” Arthur hummed, wrapping spitty, half-chewed bubblegum around his fingers. “I didn’t hear anything before ‘Right, Arty’ but I know time travel can ruin the world. Trust me, I’ve done it. Caused an apocalypse like you would not believe.”

“What?” Donnie asked, jealous despite himself. “When was this?”

“Technically yesterday,” Arthur replied, a bit dazed. “But I spent six months in that terrible place. I was a dictator. There were statues of me everywhere. Those people worshipped me. It was an empty life. You didn’t notice I’m a bit taller?”

Essence pouted and plopped on the floor. “Without me?”

“Well, I was testing the updates,” Arthur said, popping the gum back into his mouth. “Didn’t want to put you in danger.”

“Yea? What’s your excuse for me?” Benny replied, squatting to comfort Essence.

“Easy. You are a morally-sound guy who hates the sight of evil,” Arthur answered smoothly. “You wouldn’t agree with what I went back to do, so I didn’t tell you I was doing it.”

“What? That’s not-You shouldn’t-What did you do?”

“Nothing I couldn’t undo.”

“Are we doing this?” Essence asked again. “Because I picked my 80s concert outfit out weeks ago and y’all are taking forever.”

“Patience, beloved beauty,” Arthur answered. “It’s going to happen. We’re going to time travel, but we can’t afford to make mistakes. Mistakes cost lives when it comes to time travel. One wrong turn and you might write yourself out of history. We have to do this right.”

“We have to,” Benny echoed, exchanging a serious glance with the members of the Runners’ club. “I know we’ve been through a lot already, but it’ll be worth it. Trust us.”

They’d spent months training to sprint fast enough to activate the kinetic energy compressor in the time shoes. Then another month training to maintain their speed long enough for the Cruxometer to convert the energy from Kinetic to Tempustial. After that they had access, technically, to the fourth dimension but couldn’t properly time travel without understanding the basics of energy manipulation. So they spent another month practicing yoga and martial arts. After all of that, they now had to memorize rules?

Half of them wouldn’t have bothered if they knew how much work it’d be beforehand. Definitely not Essence, Rainbow and Donnie. By the time they were time travel ready, they’d become some of the most athletic kids in school. Essence and Benny had always been G.O.A.Ts, but it was almost a miracle to see scrawny Donnie, Rainbow and Arthur transform into mean, lean, athletic machines.

After the months of anticipation, ‘Are we doing this?’ had nearly become the club motto. But the rules were simple and their brains were sharpened from training. They memorized it quickly enough and took their first, innocent trip. That was before the world exploded and they had to time-jump just to keep their families alive. Before the man in white showed up.

Funny enough, they never did go to the Michael Jackson concert. Everyone was so excited that they forgot the reason it all began. They were caught up in their

adventures skiing (collecting data) in the ice age, relaxing (collecting data) in the crustacean period and meeting Leonardo Da Vinci (stealing his notebook).

I must correct myself: Everyone except for Essence forgot. Later on in our tale, she'll wish she had. As will you, Readers.