

"Hey guys! There's a hole right here!" said Aaron as the quintet neared the abandoned factory.

The three story building stretched down for the rest of the block. The section of Springfield the five boys were in was quite run down. Once upon a time this building was a bustling factory, but now it was abandoned. The perfect place to finally get to the bottom of that strange kid.

"So he said to meet us here?"

"Yeah, and to bring our 'special friends,'" said David, making sure to make big quotation marks with his fingers as he talked.

"He said he had information on them. Why they're here." Caleb said.

"We know why they're here, it's Ross's fault." Tom said, half-seriously.

"For the last time, TOM, it's not my fault. I didn't know that game was cursed!" Ross shouted.

"No, Accursed is awesome, but that RIFTS game caused everything to go to crap!"

"We'd played RIFTS before! Besides, I bet Grunevald wouldn't say everything's gone to crap!"

Tom looked like he was about to say something, but didn't. He rubbed his tooth necklace instead, reflecting on Ross's words.

"Look, we can argue about how much things suck or not suck AFTER we beat this kid and his monster. Let's just go inside." Caleb said as he crawled through the hole. The other kids followed him. Once they got through the hole they ran to the nearest door and turned the knob. They went through the door into the dim foyer. The afternoon sun shone through the dusty windows. David started to undo his violin case but Caleb grabbed his hand to stop him.

"After we go in further, OK? Don't want anyone to see us."

"But... *sigh* you're right. I'm just tired of dragging this all over the place. At least you guys get some small things!"

"Hey, Amanté's slime box isn't that tiny either. Now let's go."

They walked in further and went into the next door. It was a locker room.

"Just like school." said Aaron as he ran his hand across some shut lockers. David set down his violin case with a sigh of relief, and undid the clasps.

"Let me open it up, honey." A voice said from the darkness. Out of one of the open lockers at the end of the hallway a tall, voluptuous woman in a striking red dress strolled out. The locker is too small to fit a full sized adult woman, but the kids stopped asking questions about the impossible a long time ago. She bent over and ruffled David's hair before lifting the lid. Instead of a violin there was a Thompson sub machine gun. It shone like it was fresh from the factory even though the guns hadn't been made for decades. An image of B.B. King was engraved in the butt, and the name 'Lucille' was engraved along the barrel.

"I don't want you getting hurt, David."

"Of course not. Thanks, Lucille! Where's everyone else?"

"Coming soon, honey."

"Well, let's get them here now!" Ross said. He took off his bitchin' sunglasses and shoved them along the floor. They seemed to speed along at an impossible rate until midway down the locker room, where a hand reached out and grabbed them. The hand was pink with long nails, attached to an arm with gray fur.

"Gimmie a sec, dude!" came a high voice as the hand went back in the locker. While that was happening, Aaron went to the side and set down a portable game machine. As Aaron stepped back it started to undo itself, parts unfolding into a metal hide, expanding impossibly large until it turned into a huge, spider-like robot. Aaron could hardly contain his excitement.

"SAIROC!" he said as he hugged his dear friend.

"Aaron! It is good to be out again. Did school go well?"

"Sure did, but now it's time to get serious."

"Yeah, there's something about that boy we're supposed to meet..." SAIROC said, its image sensors dimming as if in thought. While it stood there the locker slammed open and a lanky anthromorphic rat strode out. Dressed in bright 90's neon colors and with a katana sheathed on his back, he smiled deeply as he high-fived Ross.

"But it doesn't matter bro! We'll beat him or anything else down, 'cause we're the best! Around!"

"Come on, Cool Rat, we do need to get serious though. This is gonna be a tough fight." said Ross.

"Five on one though! We'll cut him down to size!" Cool Rat laughed, punching the air. *"Now where's everyone else?"*

"We're here, you buffoon," said a man with a deep voice and thick German accent. Well, it was once a man. He now has dog like features and strolled on his cloven feet into the locker room from the foyer. Tom clutched his neck but the necklace was gone.

"Grunevald! How'd you do that?"

"It's probably best not to know. Now Caleb, our other friend, if you would be so kind."

Caleb reached into his backpack and pulled out a metal box. It was an ammo crate with Brazilian writing on it. He opened it up, revealing that it was full of orange slime. As he stepped back a large arm thrust its way out, then another. Soon a vaguely gorilla-like shape climbed into existence. It stood on its two long arms, leaning back to allow its stomach to sit forward so the long, thick, appendage at his groin could rest on the ground. Tom and David chuckled at the sight of the eyeless creature, laughing in sync to their own sophomoric thoughts.

"Thank you, my child."

"You're welcome, Amanté."

"Well, now what?"

"I say we wander in and look for this kid." Lucille said, the Thompson slung low in her hands. She dared not aim it at anything but the floor. *"What's his name again?"*

"Paresh. Paresh Manjappa." SAIROC said. *"It sounds so familiar..."*

"Maybe he's from the same place you are?" said Grunevald, rubbing his chin. *"It would be surprising. All of us are from different worlds."*

"Well, if he is, I think he's changed. I want to say he was an adult? And I don't think he was friendly."

SAIROC replied,

"Yeah, this kid's really weird. He's always spaced out with a smile on his face. I haven't seen his monster, though." Ross said, pacing back and forth. "Are they good? Bad? He just said to meet him here."

"Well, then, we should meet him." Lucille said, walking towards the door that leads into the factory floor.

It was open, inviting them in. The group paused to let the giant robot and demon through, then the rest walked in to the large, dim storage room. Lucille strutted forward and started to swing her gun around.

"MANJAPPA! Show yourself!"

"I'm here, you fools." said a voice in the darkness. From a staircase in front of them a boy of Indian descent stepped into view.

"I'm glad you came, though. It's an honor to meet you and your friends, Caleb."

"Paresh! Why'd you have us come here?" said Caleb, rushing to the front of the group, Amanté close behind.

"You know in your heart why, Caleb. Or do you not remember? Surely you remember, SAIROC?"

"I don't... I want to though... You're bad though. I know that."

"Ha, ha, you still think that, don't you? All I want is to protect our world, SAIROC. No matter the cost, me and my... 'Monster' are here to ensure that."

"Yeah, who is your monster?" said Caleb.

"Oh, he's coming. But before you die, I just want you all to realize how angry I am at all of you. You have this beautiful planet, this pristine home, yet you piss it all away with your wasted time, your video games, your families, your merriment your... your WORTHLESSNESS! I WON'T HAVE IT! I WON'T LOSE THIS EARTH TOO!" Manjappa said as a rush of wind came and knocked the friends back. "You want my monster?!? He is no mere monster. He is the FRACTAL!"

As Manjappa shouted, the gust came stronger towards SAIROC. It jumped out of the way just in time as a shimmer of light passed by. Suddenly, the image sensors on its face lit brightly.

"I remember! The Fractal! It's a powerful robot! Attack! Attack!" The robot said. A panel popped out of its chest and what appeared to be a futuristic rifle popped out. It began to fire bursts of bullets at the shimmer of light. Lucille joined in, gun blazing. The other three monsters got into position, while Caleb ran up the stairs towards Manjappa.

"Paresh! Stop this!"

"Never! You're just going to make things worse. This is all your fault after all!" said Manjappa. He pushed Caleb back down the steps with a force impossible for a child of his size.

"CALEB!" screamed Amanté, leaping into the air to grab his friend. SAIROC had to stop firing to not hit Amanté, which allowed the shimmer to slice past the robot. It let out a shout as it sliced open SAIROC's circuitry like it was nothing. Aaron screamed and ran over to SAIROC. Cool Rat jumped in front of the two.

"I got your back! Get him to safety!" Cool Rat said. He took out some shuriken and started throwing them at the light, striking it repeatedly. He then hopped on his skateboard and did a sick grind on a railing to get some distance on the fractal. But by the time he was on the other side of the factory, the Fractal was there too, slashing at Cool Rat. He had to continue to do Ratical moves to evade rather than fight.

Grunevald stood there, taking this all in, and grabbed Tom by the arm.

"Let us gather our friends and away, my child."

"What? Why?"

"Just further into the factory. We need a plan. Attacking separately isn't working."

Tom sighed, but nodded in agreement. He slipped away to look for a spot. As he searched for a good direction to run into, Grunevald felt a slice at his back. He sighed and rubbed his temples.

"Mein freund, I think you wrong to underestimate us. You will not be allowed to continue making that mistake." He slashed at the shimmer with his sharp claws, and finally understood what they were fighting. The robot was actually so thin as to almost be two dimensional. That is why he was so hard to see. The ghouls chuckled to himself, then heard Tom whisper.

"We should go this way!"

"Very well. Lucille! Cover fire!"

"Yes, dear" said Lucille. A glow came to her eyes and the gun changed. It became like brass and started to fire bursts of light. *"Can't keep it up for long, though!"*

"That's all we need." said Grunevald. *"Everyone! This way!"*

All of the crew raced to the door, SAIROC now repaired enough to flee. As Lucille fended off the Fractal the friends ran to the hallway. After a few more bursts Lucille's eyes returned to normal and the gun returned to 'normal.' She glared at Manjappa and ran off. The hallway Tom chose had some of the concrete chipped away to allow for the dirt to show through.

"Clever boy." said Grunevald, rubbing Tom's hair, eliciting a smile from the boy. *"SAIROC! Help me!"*

Grunevald dove as if an Olympic diver, and a shower of dirt filled the room as he began to dig. Combined with the raw mechanical power of the robot they dug a tunnel deep enough for the friends to hide and get a grip.

*"*whew* Good job, SAIROC. Are you still injured?"
"I made some repairs, I'll be OK. Now what?"*

"We need a plan!" said Caleb, thumping his fist. "He said... I should know..."

"Well, do you?" Ross said. "I know you can think of it."

"It's just, it's so weird. Sometimes, when I think really hard, I think I see me as a grown up. And I can almost remember something like Paresh. Like the Fractal."

"I wish I could remember too..." SAIROC said.

"I'm sure you can, buddy! You can if you believe!" said Cool Rat, slapping SAIROC on the back

"BEFUDDLEMENT ALGORITHM ACTIVATED." said a voice from within SAIROC. The robot shouted in fright, its image sensors almost turning white.

"I... I remember more. Manjappa wanted to save the world... by destroying it. We defeated him and Manjappa on the surface of Mars..."

"You went to Mars!?" Aaron said. "Can we go?"

"Not now, Aaron. Not helping." Caleb said, rubbing his temples. "We beat him, but how?"

"Superior firepower. But we were all attacking it pretty hard. We had it spread pretty thin."

Caleb snapped his fingers. "That's it! We were TOO spread apart. If we're all in one place, we can combine our attacks and overwhelm the Fractal!"

"Well, we are already in an enclosed space. Why don't I dig you kids to safety and let our friends concentrate fire?" Grunevald said.

"Let's do it!" Ross said. "I believe in you guys!"

"We do too!" said the kids. They hugged their respective monsters, and went with Grunevald as he dug deeper into the ground. A few more meters down he branched off to the side and stood in front of them. Aaron took out a flashlight to allow them to see.

"Well, I suppose we need to wait while our friends take care of this. I could tell you stories about the old country." said Grunevald. Tom nodded in agreement.

"NO." The other kids replied.

"OK, perhaps about the dark forces that govern our world?"

"NO."

"World War Two?"

"Mr. Glancy talks about it too much." said David, throwing his hands in the air in mock disgust.

"Sometimes you kids can be a handful. Hmm... how about that time I fought the followers of Hastur? That was a fun one."

"Eh, sure, that'll work." said David.

"Hastur..." said Ross, starting to think.

Further up, the other monsters got into position. Lucille put her gun in front of her. Amanté clung to the ceiling, tensing up his seeder organ.

"If you get that on me I might kill you next."

"Focus on the task at hand. I will not seed you"

"It's just weird having it right above my head."

"Hey guys! Let's talk about after school special stuff later! We need to shred this guy!" said Cool Rat, tossing shuriken between his hands as he stood next to Lucille. SAIROC took its place in the back, readying its rifle.

After a few tense moments, the shimmer entered the dimly lit tunnel. The monsters tensed as the Fractal drew closer... closer... then Cool Rat removed his sunglasses. The fractal could see Cool Rat's eyes. They were like dark spheres of onyx on his face. As its image sensors looked into the eyes it could not help but see itself reflected in them, and something else. Something malevolent. The true nature of the universe started to flood its code as it realized its futility of purpose, the reminder of the TITANS and what they did, and why they did it. And you see it too, the futility of this story, the futility of your soul, the waste of

time in reading fan fiction for a fan contest as your days wind down into nothing, the meaninglessness of a life as small as Cool Rat's eye, the hopelessness, the horror, the HORROR-

"NOW!" said Cool Rat, putting his bitchin' shades back on to break the spell. The four monsters let loose their attacks. Cool Rat threw shuriken after shuriken, slicing through the shell. Amanté's seeders shot across the room, biting into the Fractal in a futile attempt to find a host. Lucille and SAIROC shot full auto to hit the robot. To the kids further down the cacophony sounded like the world ending. Ross started to scream, fearing for Cool Rat's safety and that of his friends' monsters. Suddenly, the sound stopped.

"Did... did they win?"

"You did. Congratulations."

The kids and Grunevald spun around as Manjappa stood behind them. But he was different. Now, he was still of Indian descent, but he was an adult male. He wore sleek, futuristic clothes. He stared at Caleb.

"I should have known you would. I concede defeat. I guess I wanted this world too much. But be on your guard. The others are on their way, followed by the one who gathered us all. May FATE be in your favor."

Aaron's flashlight flickered out for a second, then back on. The man vanished just as quickly as he appeared. In his place was a few pieces of paper. David picked them up.

"This is weird. It's wording looks like a play. But it's in a foreign language. I can't read it. Can you, Grunevald?"

The boy handed the papers over to the ghoul. He looked them over, and shook his head. Ross thought he saw something in his eyes, but Grunevald held firm.

"I can't. I believe it's French. I'm more of a German man myself. Well, all's well that ends well. Let's get up and get you kids back home. I know Tom probably has dinner waiting."

The children began to climb the tunnel and leave the factory. As they reentered the locker room their monsters said their goodbyes. The kids blinked, and their monsters were gone, leaving only their totems. Ross grabbed Cool Rat's sunglasses and put them on. As his friends ducked under the hole in the fence he looked up in the sky, staring at the sun. He knew this was only the beginning.

Epilogue

"So that's what happened." said Ross into his cell phone. "Wish you could've been there, Thad."

"Wow, crazy. Yeah. Wish I could've been. That fight sounded awesome."

"I feel like you should've been there. You and Jason. Don't know why."

"Huh. Well, not much I can do here in Chicago. Oh, yeah, right! I will be coming down for the Fourth of July! We should totally hang out!"

"Of course! I can run a game."

"Sure, just not RIFTS. Anything but RIFTS."

"I swear, it was just like any other time we played. I still don't know what happened!"

"Well, neither do I. Just one wacky night at MetaGames"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm just glad Mr. Glancy was there. I keep meaning to ask him about what's going on. I feel like he might know."

"Well, he might. Mr. Glancy knows everything."

"You getting into any situations of your own in Chicago?"

"Well, no, not really. It's really boring here, I'm surprised Yuon's taking it so well. I'm just doing school. School, school, school."

"One day you'll be free."

"Yeah, but god, it feels like it's been forever and it's gonna be forever. Well, I gotta run. Smell you later!"

"Ha, ha. Later, Thad."

Thad hung up the phone and sighed. He felt a giant paw touch his shoulder.

"One day you'll won't just be back home for vacation. One day."

"But what about you, Yuon? You deserve to go home too."

"I know I will be back. And the See Yee On will be stronger than ever. But, while I am here. I will impart my wisdom to you, my child."

"Yep! Thad and Panda Crime Boss! The best team ever! Thaddeus and the Bear, next fall on USA!" Thad said, gesturing wildly.

"Heh, heh. I think I saw a vid like that once. Starring an octopus though."

"A chuckle!?! I got a laugh! Yay!!" Thad said, hugging Yuon.

Back in Springfield, after Ross hung up the phone he started to walk towards his bed. He started to shut off the light, but then whipped his head towards his window. He thought he had heard something. He went and looked out, but saw nothing but the empty street. Sighing, he headed back to bed. He took his sunglasses out of his pocket and put them on the nightstand. After he pulled the covers over him he felt them tighten to tuck him in and a hand caressing his forehead.

"Night champ. May your dreams be awesome and the air you catch Ratical!"

Ross smiled and drifted off to pleasant dreams. Outside, the girl breathed a sigh of relief from the bushes, convinced she wasn't heard or seen. She bolted away from the Payton residence. The spray painted message began to dry on the garage door.

PARAGON IS ALWAYS WATCHING

The End?