

SETTING THE STAGE

*PLACE: Science classroom, Big Bend High School,
Susquehanna Territory, PA*

*TIME: Winter, early 21st century, AEMP 01, 318 days after
EMP has destroyed all electronic microcircuitry*



Meet me in the science classroom at 4:50.

“It will be dark,” their English teacher added, “but everybody will be gone. I must see both of you immediately.” Michael knew Mr. Cample thought highly of them – at least he once did – and that he didn’t mince words.

Little did the senior suspect how long the next ten hours would be, and how life as he knew it had come to an end.

Michael made it up to the second floor, just as the soon-to-be valedictorian with shoulder-length dark blond hair, with predictable punctuality, entered the classroom door thirty feet ahead of him. Faint light from inside erased some of the blackness from the hallway. Quietly he sprinted to the door she’d left open to help anyone behind her get there more easily. A hint of her perfume lingered.

His ears met the sound of flapping wings. A large starling grazed the wire that ended in a lone 100-watt bulb hanging down from the twelve-foot high ceiling. Across the chalkboard and charts of the

human body on the wall danced oversized, winged shadows of the trapped creature.

The girl, the only person there and legally blind, seemed not to notice. She stood far across the room facing the tall, single window, just behind and to the left of the teacher's long desk. Bending, she pulled at handles on the window. With surprising ease it slid up a foot from the paint-chipped sill, and a gust of cool air entered. Then she pivoted to the side and turned, her back pressing against the wall, facing the room as an artist might stand by a painting on canvas, waiting for critics to appear and ask for explanation. Since her glasses were off, Michael knew he hadn't been seen.

"Cour - a - cour - a - la - la - loo," the girl sang softly into the gray silence. A chill ran down Michael's back, yet he felt warm. He unzipped his black leather jacket. He tucked back down in the inner pocket the rolled-up science article, "The Sleeping Dragon," written years ago, but that only yesterday his adopted father had given him to read. The girl turned back to the window and, tracing circles in the air with her hand, pointed to the opening.

Instantly, the bird attached itself to the dangling cord. The light and its shadows danced faster. The creature cocked its head.

"Cour - a - cour - a - la - la - loo," the girl repeated, facing the window.

The bird fluttered down to the right of the desk and landed on an oversized knob to a door large enough to lead somewhere else larger than the small storage closet actually behind it. Again, the bird cocked its head. The girl tapped the sill with her finger. In an instant the creature was through the window and gone. She closed the window.

"You can come in now, Michael," she said just loud enough, without turning.

Just then their teacher arrived behind him. He was breathing deeply. Without speaking, the two entered and strode to the front of the room.

Cample dropped his angular frame into the chair behind the massive desk. Veins stood out on his neck above the open collar of his faded plaid shirt. His full head of black hair was shiny in the faint light.

“Sorry, I’m late,” he said, “but Stanley and Feinsteck have had nothing but trouble from some bird in here all day—in the only room that still has light.”

“It was only a starling, Mr. Cample,” said Michael, running a hand through his dark curly hair. Oddly, two old-fashioned, left-handed student desks were closest to the desk across from the teacher. The girl lowered herself into one, Michael the other.

“Now *why* did I ask you to come here now?” asked the teacher. “And neither of you can guess?”

“No sir, I’ve no idea,” said Michael.

“Nor I,” said the girl.

The troublesome bird was forgotten. Michael noticed the two moderately thick binders on the teacher’s desk.

“Triana,” he whispered, “he’s got my story for the senior honor’s project up there! Is the other—”

“Sorry, Michael” —she pulled her hair to the side— “I just can’t...”

Too late he’d realized the girl’s glasses weren’t on and the desk itself was probably as much a mystery as anything on it.

“Michael, you’re 17, and have lived here all your life,” said Mr. Cample, “and Triana, you’re new...but 16?” —she nodded— “and probably the most gifted student I’ve ever taught. You’re both only months from a graduation everyone once thought was impossible. Why throw it all away? May I be candid?”

“I’m almost 18, Mr. Cample,” said Michael, “and about being candid — we expect you to say anything you want.”

The girl nodded in agreement.

“Okay, I’ve heard how you and your church...” He paused.

“It’s all right, Mr. Cample,” said Michael. “Speak freely.”

“How you and your church,” the teacher continued, “preach *honesty*.”

“Yes,” said Michael.

“Well, then, how could you have done something so stupid and obviously wrong? And I’m not going to let you get away with it! I may not believe in God, at least in the way you do, but there is a right and wrong. And I’m going to make you realize that.”

“What have we done?” asked Michael.

“Done what?” repeated the girl.

How in control she sounded, thought Michael. And looked. She sat straight, but though her skirt fell just over her knees, he sensed they were slightly shaking. He glanced away to the closed door, then up to the dark gray of the ceiling. He brushed back his hair, much darker than the girl’s, and which fell just to his eyebrows. He mustn’t be impatient. Despite Cample’s dramatic way, he was usually fair. With resolve, Michael clutched the scarred top of his chair, leaned forward, and fixed his eyes on the teacher. He would look ready. But ready for what? Except for the dull roar of the generator two floors below, there was silence.

“You know,” said Cample, ignoring their questions, “millions, have died outside the Territory this year. Thank God we don’t know how many! We’ve been fortunate —”

““Thank God’ we’ve been *blessed!*” interrupted Michael, immediately wondering why he’d said anything.

“ ‘God’ is a word today, Michael, that doesn’t come boxed with deity. We in the Susquehanna Territory have been *fortunate* — call it what you will — but don’t forget it! We’ve lost things that a year ago we never dreamed we’d give up. While we wait for THE PROBLEM, as it’s called, for things to return to...uh...normal, we —”

Suddenly, the dull whirring of the generator ceased and the lightbulb flickered out. Fresh silence gave way to the rattling of a window by an

icy breeze as a clouded winter sun surrendered its last light. Cample leaned over, raised the globe of his ever-present lamp, and lit the wick. A spiral of sooty smoke rose into the darkness. He lowered the glass and the room once again brightened.

The teacher focused on the boy and girl.

“While we wait for what comes next, we mustn’t lose what we still have. Things that *really* matter! Things that make us what we truly are. If you think I’m misguided, or silly, to make such a big thing out of this, in a sense, you’re probably right. Quite frankly, I can count on one hand the number of students I can talk to like I am now. But *integrity*, Michael, Triana, if people like you two and me” –he paused– “if we start *cheating* in things as inconsequential as this” –he pointed to the two binders on the desk– “what do we have left that matters beyond self-preservation? What dignity is there?”

“If,” said Triana, “you’re talking about our *separate* honors projects” –though Michael knew she couldn’t see them, she turned toward where they lay – “our topic was hardly ‘inconsequential!’”

“It was important to me,” said Michael, “and I sure didn’t cheat.”

“So you deny it—both of you!” Cample smiled and for some reason the light within the glass chimney flickered. The boy and girl exchanged glances.

“Let me be clear. If you think I’m going to let this go, think again. I have ethical standards and I don’t need God to help me out. And I don’t care who thinks I’m blowing this all out of proportion. The school will side with me. And” –he looked at the girl– “I’m certain you don’t want some of this to be made public!

“As you know, I’ve studied a lot of folktales—stories about other places and times long ago. But believe me, there are no stories, or I should say, stories *of this world*—which are like the two you handed in. I’m convinced you—you of all people—cheated. But even so, your stories are far from complete.

“And I think you’d like to know, I just may have some more things that you, especially you, Triana, would like to know right here” –he pointed to his briefcase–“information I think you know nothing about.