

NETHERGRAVE

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“Beacon Heights Academy Lets Boys Excel!”

What a dumb motto. Did it ever occur to the school administrators, when they collected the thousand-dollar-a-month tuition fee per student, that maybe a boy didn’t *want* to excel? Jeremy wished the motto was “Beacon Heights Academy Lets Boys Alone.”

Each term every student in the academy had to participate in at least one after-school activity: drama, debate, the science fair, or a sport. Even if the student didn’t board at the expensive, exclusive boys’ school, but lived in town and went home every day after classes. Like Jeremy.

Jeremy had chosen soccer. Not because he liked it; not because he was any good at it; but because the coach was so determined to field a winning team that Jeremy knew he’d never get played—never in a real game, and rarely even in practice.

Until today. It was the last week of the spring term, which meant that to fulfill the school’s requirement, Jeremy would have to play for at least one minute. And this would be a real game: the Beacon Heights Bulldogs against a tough team from across the valley, the Midvale Marauders. All day long Jeremy had been wondering if he could fake stomach cramps or appendicitis, but the coach would never believe him. Jeremy might be a scared, skinny eighth-grade wimp, but he was a healthy one.

Didn’t matter that he’d deliberately forgotten to bring his jersey and his shin guards to school. “Dig some out of the box,” Coach barked. From the bottom of the smelly equipment box Jeremy pulled ratty shin guards and a sagging, much too large red jersey. When he ran out of the field house, a couple of his fellow eighth graders elbowed each other and snickered—maybe because of what Jeremy was wearing, but more likely because that was the way they usually reacted to him.

He sat on the bench so long his bony rump started to hurt. As the score seesawed—first the Beacon Heights Bulldogs were ahead, then the Midvale Marauders—Jeremy kept praying that the coach had forgotten about him. Not

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a chance. Coach was checking the list of boys from Beacon Heights, frowning at it, crossing off names with a pencil.

"Jeremy! You!" Coach barked. "Get out there. Replace the forward."

Shoulders hunched, Jeremy ran onto the field. Inside his head he was great at sports and games. On a computer he was unbeatable. He understood the geometry of basketball, baseball, football, and soccer, and he knew all the rules because he memorized things so easily. If only he'd had a reasonable amount of coordination, plus a little bit of muscle, he might have played soccer passably. But when Jeremy ran, his head and neck, arms and hands, legs and feet looked like a bunch of paper clips that had been shaken up in a bag: Hooked together haphazardly, they stuck out at all kinds of weird angles.

The coach blew his whistle. Jeremy stumbled forward, trying to get into the open so one of his teammates could pass him the ball. As if they would. All of them knew that a pass to Jeremy would mean losing the ball to the Midvale Marauders. Yet, there it was—the soccer ball—and it looked like it was coming right at him! He got a foot on it, lost it, and in the **mayhem** of other boys' arms and legs, noticed the ball rolling loose. Running after it, he started dribbling toward the goal.

mayhem
confusion;
violence

Unbelievable! He was moving that soccer ball down the field and it appeared he might even kick a goal, his first in his whole two years at Beacon Heights. Concentrating, pumped with adrenaline, he didn't notice that his teammates weren't anywhere near him. No one was helping him, he had no protection, no chance to pass, but it didn't matter, because Jeremy was going to do it! Make a goal! He pulled his eyes off the ball just for a second, barely in time to notice that the goalie was—a Beacon Heights Bulldog! Frantically, the goalie waved his arms and shook his head, but not in time to stop Jeremy's foot, which had already begun its **trajectory** to kick the ball into the net. A perfect kick! Jeremy scored!—for the Midvale Marauders. He'd kicked a goal at the wrong end of the field, scoring a point for the opposing team.

trajectory
curved path
through
space

Coach looked ready to burst a blood vessel as he screamed at Jeremy to get off the field. The Marauders looked ready to bust a gut, punching one another in hilarity while they laughed themselves stupid. The Bulldogs—well, Jeremy knew what would be coming later from his teammates. He was used to it.

At school he was constantly getting tripped in the halls, in the aisles, on the gym floor, in the locker room. The other guys had raised tripping Jeremy to an art form. He figured that today, since he'd blown the game, he'd be

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choreographed
arranged
or directed
movements, as in
a dance

in for a world-class tripping. He was right. In the locker room three of his teammates **choreographed** it perfectly: As one tripped him, another bumped Jeremy's left shoulder from behind, while a third boy, in front of him, shoved Jeremy's right shoulder, whipping him around to be pitched face down onto a bench.

"Jeremy, grab a towel and hold it under your nose," the coach bellowed in disgust. "You're getting blood all over the floor."

The bleeding stopped, but the swelling didn't. Afterward, walking home, Jeremy hung inside the late afternoon shadows so no one could notice him. He hoped his mother wouldn't get home until the swelling had gone down at least a bit. If she saw it, she'd just sigh and shake her head in that pitying way, wondering how she'd ever produced such an incompetent son. But his mother rarely got home before eight or nine at night. Usually she had dinner with a client.

Jeremy didn't have to worry about his father seeing his swollen nose, since his father never saw him at all. Once in a while Jeremy would find his father's picture in *Forbes* magazine¹ or in the business section of *U.S. News and World Report*,² which listed him as one of the computer industry's rich, triumphant successes. He owned a corporation that designed printed circuit boards. With Bill Gates³ and Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs,⁴ Jeremy's father had been in the right place at the right time when the computer revolution took off.

Not once since his parents' divorce twelve years ago had Jeremy and his father come face-to-face. Like clockwork, though, every year on Jeremy's birthday a van would back up to the front door of his house. Two techno-brains would carry in a brand-new computer with the most powerful chip produced that particular year, with the greatest amount of memory, the fastest modem, and the biggest monitor screen. They'd install the new computer and transfer all Jeremy's previous programs onto its hard drive, then pack up last year's computer to haul it away.

1 **Forbes magazine:** a business magazine known for publishing lists of the biggest or most successful companies and the richest people

2 **U.S. News and World Report:** a weekly news magazine that covers national and world affairs and business trends

3 **Bill Gates:** the founder of Microsoft

4 **Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs:** the founders of Apple Computers

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Did his father actually *order* the world's best PC each year for Jeremy's birthday? Did he speak the words "I want a top-of-the-line personal computer system delivered to my son"? Or was it just a digital instruction, programmed to come up automatically on the screens of the two techno-brains? It didn't matter. Equipment like that would have made Jeremy the envy of his friends, if he'd had any.

He unlocked the front door. Even though he was hungry, he didn't open the refrigerator, because the clock showed 4:05. He was fifteen minutes late. He'd wasted too much time skulking in the shadows on the way home. Hurrying to his room, he threw his books onto his bed, dropped his jacket on the floor, and turned on his computer.

On the screen, he checked his contact list. The others were already online, their names highlighted in blue:

Hangman

PrincessDie⁵

Dr.Ded

When he clicked on his own online name, Xtermin8r, the screen split from three to four boxes in the chat module he shared with his online friends.

"*You're late, X,*" Hangman typed, the words flowing into the right-hand box on top of the screen. *X* was what they called Jeremy, because *Xtermin8r* took too long to type.

"*Sorry,*" Jeremy typed back in his own box; he automatically got the one at top left.

"*We didn't do the jokes yet. We waited,*" PrincessDie typed.

"*So begin now.*" The words from Dr.Ded marched slowly across his quarter of the screen. He wasn't a very fast typist.

The four of them met online every day after school. They'd first come across one another in a music chat room dedicated to the Grateful Dead.⁶ Eventually, after a couple of weeks of meeting in that much larger chat

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5 **PrincessDie**: a play on Princess Di, a familiar name used for Diana, Princess of Wales, mother to Prince William and Prince Harry of Britain

6 **Grateful Dead**: a rock band formed in San Francisco in 1965, known for a style that fused elements of rock, folk music, bluegrass, country, blues, jazz, gospel, and psychedelic music

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group, they'd decided to form their own module, limited to the four of them. Calling themselves the DeadHeads, they chose online names that had to do with death, and began every afternoon's chat session with "dead" jokes.

PrincessDie: *Okay, here goes. Question: What does a songwriter do after he dies? Answer: He de-composes.*

Hangman: *Good one. Here's mine. Question: What does a walking corpse call his parents? Answer: Mummy and Dead-y.*

Dr.Ded: *Ha ha. Q: How do you kill a vegetarian vampire? A: Put a steak through his heart.*

Hangman: *All right!!! Your turn, X.*

With all that had happened that day, Jeremy hadn't thought up a dead joke. He hesitated, then typed, "Q: What kind of pants do ghosts wear? A: Boo jeans."

Hangman: *Bad one, X.*

Dr. Ded: *Your joke stinks, X. It's from preschool. You better do better than that.*

PrincessDie: *Yeah—you better—do better—the Grateful Dead could have made a song out of that.*

Hangman: *Your penalty, X—find two excellent dead jokes for tomorrow. I mean excellent.*

Jeremy was the fastest typist in the group. His fingers flew across the keys as he entered, "I apologize, guys. Today was a busy day for me. I played in a soccer tournament at school, and I kicked the winning goal. Everyone in the stands jumped up, and they were yelling my name and cheering—so cool! Then my mom and dad took me out for burgers and fries to celebrate. That's why I logged on late today. Even this morning I was too busy to look up dead jokes. In gym they announced I'm gonna be the captain of the wrestling team."

If his online friends only knew it, that was the biggest joke Jeremy could have possibly told them.

Now he typed even faster, trying to get it all in before the three other DeadHeads started up again. "After they made me captain, the wrestling team guys poured a bottle of Evian water over my head. They said it should have been champagne, except we'd all get kicked out of school if they did that. So I was wet all over and I had to borrow a hair dryer from Miss Jepson—she's my French teacher and she's a real babe and she likes me—like more than just a regular student. I think she'd go out with me if I asked her."

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He'd told his online friends he was a high school junior. They thought he was a star athlete and a student-body officer and a lot of other things Jeremy was careful to keep track of so he wouldn't forget what he'd told them. To keep his lies straight, he printed out each day's online chat and saved the hard copies in a three-ring binder.

Hangman: *Gotta go now.*

Jeremy typed, *"Already? I just got here."*

Hangman: *Gotta write a heavy-duty report for earth science.*

PrincessDie: *Me, too, gotta go. To meet a guy. Don't freak, Xtermin8r. I know you want to be my guy, but you're in Ohio and I'm in Oregon.*

In real life—IRL—Jeremy lived in Pasadena, California, but his father had been born in Ohio, so that's where he told his online friends he was from.

Dr.Ded: *I'm outta here too, guys. Gonna do some major surfing—the ocean kind. Surf's up too great to waste. Find you all tomorrow. Don't forget, X, you owe us two "good" jokes.*

On the screen, the names of his three friends turned green: The color change meant they'd gone offline. Then their boxes disappeared, leaving Jeremy's words alone on the screen.

It wasn't that they'd deserted him, he told himself. He'd been late—they'd probably chatted for quite a while before he got there. At least they hadn't done the dead jokes until he logged on. Why hadn't he come up with a better dead joke? Maybe they didn't like him today because he'd typed such a rotten joke. He felt himself sinking into his expensive padded office chair, weighed down as if he'd swallowed a heavy paving brick. His last words, *"Already? I just got here,"* vibrated on the screen.

He sighed. Might as well print out the day's chat and file it in his binder. His cursor was on its way to the "Print" command when his name appeared on the screen.

Jeremy, followed by a question mark. One of his online buddies must be back.

He typed, *"I'm here."*

More words followed: *Click your middle mouse button, Jeremy. And turn on your microphone.*

*M*ore words followed: *Click your middle mouse button, Jeremy. And turn on your microphone.*

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vortex
something
that resembles
a whirlpool

whorls
things that
whirl, coil, or
spiral

synchronization
having sound
happen at the
same time as
action

domain
territory

persona
the personality
one projects in
public

avatar
an electronic
image that
represents the
computer user

When he clicked the mouse, the screen exploded with color—swirling waves of such brilliant hue he raised his hand to shade his eyes. “Hey, what is this?” he asked out loud into the mike.

A man’s voice, deep and mellow, answered through the audio system, “Welcome to Nethergrave, Jeremy.”

On Jeremy’s twenty-one-inch monitor screen, with its sixteen million colors, a whirling **vortex** appeared, so three-dimensional he felt he could dive into it. Never had he seen color this intense, or screen resolution so high. It was more vivid than an Imax theater movie.

He stared, unblinking, until it seemed he was being sucked inside the vortex. Wow! What fantastic imaging, he thought, but then he quit thinking so he could give himself entirely to the illusion of flying through the **whorls**. They rotated around him; he was a weightless body caught in a fast-spinning, kaleidoscopic tunnel. As he neared the end of the vortex he saw the face of a man growing larger and larger until it filled the screen.

A real face? Probably not. It looked more like a mask. The black eyebrows angled upward, too symmetrical to be natural. Beneath the cheekbones, green-tinged shadows formed triangles with the apex at the bottom, just touching the corners of the too-red, too-smiling mouth. Black hair peaked in the center of the man’s forehead, then swept back as sleekly as if it were molded plastic.

“Who are you?” Jeremy asked.

His lips moving in not quite perfect **synchronization**, the man answered, “I’m NetherMagus. You’ve entered my **domain**.”

Jeremy glanced at the Internet address on the top of his screen—<http://nethergrave.xx/>. He’d never heard of a domain extender called “dot xx,” but then, new ones got added to the Internet every day.

The man—or the mask—continued, “Before you come any further into Nethergrave, Jeremy, select a **persona** for yourself. Your very own **avatar**. You can choose whoever you would most like to be. Or I should say, *whatever* you would most like to be.”

One by one, images emerged on the screen, not simply masks like NetherMagus’s, but full-body images: a unicorn; a princess wearing a tall, peaked cap with a filmy scarf wafting from it; a Roman soldier with a bronze breastplate; a falcon; a Medusa who had hair of writhing

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snakes; a Japanese warrior, his samurai sword raised as if to strike; a hood shadowing his face so that no feature showed, only glowing eyes; a sinewy jaguar that loped gracefully, its muscles bunching beneath a sleek, tawny coat that gave off shimmers of light like ripples of sheet lightning on a hot midnight—

“That one,” Jeremy said, pointing.
“The jaguar.”

Immediately he saw clawed feet running just ahead of his line of vision. They were his feet, because he was the jaguar, looking out through gleaming, molten jaguar eyes. Shifting his glance from side to side he saw whiskers projecting outward from the edges of his face, and a moist black nose—he had to almost cross his eyes to see the nose in front of his face, but there it was: a jaguar nose. When he tried wrinkling it, the muzzle curled as if in a snarl. And it didn’t hurt like his real nose did. But wait! His real nose had stopped hurting; had it actually become the animal nose? It didn’t matter—this was a fantastic role-playing game, with a great first-person point of view. He felt as if he were inside the jaguar, looking out through its eyes.



“It’s so cool!” he exclaimed. “I never knew a game existed with graphics and special effects like these. Can I download it so I can have it on my hard drive?”

Still smiling, NetherMagus merely answered, “There’s much more to see. Come forward.”

Jeremy no longer needed the mouse; he just willed himself to move. Mental control, wow! He’d read about it, but this was a first for him. On his monitor screen the **terrain** spread out before him, and then surrounded him. He saw thick, densely leaved trees with strange faces and bodies—animal and human—entwined in their branches. How could colors be

terrain
landscape;
territory

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submerged
under water

dark and at the same time so vibrant? And the sounds! Frogs croaked, waves splashed, water dripped; he heard dim growls, subdued roars, the soft moaning of wind, but none of it was scary. It felt warm and dark and primitive, as though Jeremy knew this place, as though he'd been here long ago, when he was a baby waiting to be born.

"Move around, Jeremy the Jaguar," NetherMagus told him. "Explore my domain."

With his shoulders and haunches swiveling powerfully, Jeremy stalked the rain forest, feeling every muscle as it contracted in his perfectly coordinated body. He was passing cleanly through odd, swaying creatures: a clown head on a seal's body; a mermaid on a swing made of moss; a pool with dozens of **submerged** birds, their feathers changing colors as they fluttered beneath the water. "I gotta E-mail your URL address to my friends," he cried. "They'll freak over this!"

"Your friends, the DeadHeads," NetherMagus said, not as a question but as a statement.

"How'd you know?"

Magus
magician or
sorcerer

"I'm a **Magus**; I know things," the mask answered. "I know about PrincessDie—the only one of your group who is what she says she is: a pretty girl, an excellent student. But she's growing bored with the rest of you, Jeremy. Tomorrow she'll leave you, because she has outgrown your little chat quartet."

gargoyles
grotesque
human or
animal figures

Figures swam past Jeremy—exotic **gargoyles** and pale spheres as transparent as air. "Then I guess it'll just be us three guys," he answered, shrugging, surprised at how mighty his shoulders felt in the shrug. "Just Dr.Ded and Hangman and me."

NetherMagus murmured, "Hangman will be lost to you too, Jeremy, although not because he wants to be. His school grades are so bad that tonight his parents will remove the computer from his room. He will be—as you young people say—grounded. From the Internet. Until his grades improve, which they will not, because very soon he will join a street gang."

"You couldn't possibly know all that stuff," Jeremy said scornfully as his claws—no, his fingernails—dug into soft turf. No! Dug into the keyboard. This was a game, the most incredible game he'd ever played, but still a game.

His father's people must have programmed it into the computer's hard drive months ago, as a surprise for Jeremy, just before they delivered the new

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computer on his birthday. They probably figured Jeremy would stumble onto the game right away. Long before this.

Maybe, during all these months, his dad had been hoping to hear from him. Waiting for Jeremy to thank him. What if he'd had the game designed especially for Jeremy and was right now sitting expectantly in that big office Jeremy had once seen in a picture in *Newsweek*, just waiting for a phone call from the son he'd abandoned twelve years earlier—

Or maybe—not.

"Come back, Jeremy," NetherMagus urged gently. "Don't you want to know about Dr.Ded?"

"No!" When Jeremy shook his head violently, his ears moved in an odd way, as though they were flexible and had grown higher on his head. "Wait, I guess I do. Yes."

NetherMagus told him, "Dr.Ded has deceived you far more than you've deceived any of the others."

"Me? Deceive? Oh, I guess you mean those stories I make up online. You know about them?"

"I know everything about you, Jeremy. I know that today you disgraced yourself on the soccer field—a truly humiliating experience! But back to Dr.Ded. He isn't a boy like you. He isn't a boy at all. He's a fifty-two-year-old stroke victim. He can't walk."

"Wrong! He said he was going surfing this afternoon."

The deep voice remained gentle. "He's confined to his bed, Jeremy. Soon he'll be moved to a nursing home that doesn't have an Internet connection. And you'll be all alone, Jeremy, abandoned by each of your online friends."

Jeremy swallowed, but his throat made an animal sound like a whimper. "What'll I do?"

The red smile on the face, or mask, grew even wider, as though it had been sliced by the samurai warrior's sword. "Stay with us, Jeremy. Live forever in Nethergrave. Here no one will ever abandon you, I promise."

"How do I get to Nethergrave?"

"You're already there!"

"I know everything about you, Jeremy. I know that today you disgraced yourself on the soccer field—a truly humiliating experience!"

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"Jeremy?" The call came from outside his bedroom door.

After a moment the door opened and his mother called again, "Jeremy? Sorry I'm so late—I was with a really important client. I just checked the refrigerator and you didn't eat your dinner. Why not?"

Struck by the animal's power and the incredible gracefulness of its movements, she stood quiet for a minute, staring, pressing Jeremy's jacket against her chest.

Entering the room, she peered around for her son. His schoolbooks had been flung on the bed, and his computer monitor glowed, but Jeremy wasn't there.

She bent down to pick up his jacket from the floor. As she straightened she caught sight of the computer screen. On it a jaguar raced through a clearing in a rain forest, its lean, sinewy body stretching and compressing as it ran, its tail soaring proudly. Struck by the animal's power and the incredible gracefulness of its movements, she stood quiet for a minute, staring, pressing Jeremy's jacket against her chest. The image of the jaguar moved her in a way she didn't understand. The animal was more than beautiful; it looked—triumphant!

She wondered if Jeremy had seen it.