

# **NILES WORMWART**

***ACCIDENTAL VILAIN***

***D.M. CUNNINGHAM***



**SPENCER HILL  
MIDDLE GRADE**

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Description: When Niles Wormwart is sent to a summer camp for villains, he discovers his true identity and uncovers a world only thought to exist in comic books.

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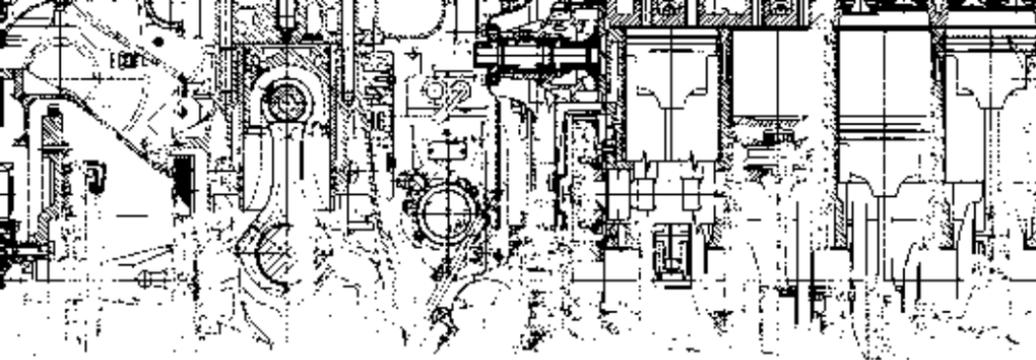
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*For Tara*

*The love of my life and my muse—without you,  
dreams don't take flight.*





## CHAPTER ZERO

“HOLD ON ONE SECOND. YOU’LL HAVE TO START FROM THE beginning. The tape wasn’t rolling.” Officer Dandy’s swollen-knuckled hand fidgeted with the tape recorder.

“You have to push Play and Record at the same time.” I reached out to push the buttons. His sweaty hand swatted mine away.

“I got it. I’m not a total idiot, you know.” With two fingers, I pressed down on the Play and Eject button. The tape shot out from the machine and dropped to the floor with a clatter. “Stupid tape!” Dandy bent over to grab the rogue tape, exposing my fragile hazel eyes to a deep butt crack that would give the Grand Canyon a run for its money.

I didn’t want to tell him it wasn’t the tape that was stupid. I mean, who uses cassette tapes in the digital age? Insulting an officer could get me some serious time in juvie, though, so I kept my mouth shut.

Dandy held up the cassette that was now covered in dirt, hair, and a purple wad of chewed gum. He took a quick whiff of the gum before pulling it away from his face.

“I think you’re going to need a new tape.”

“Are you telling me how to do my job?” The dirty-blond moustache above his lip flapped like a curtain in a summer breeze.

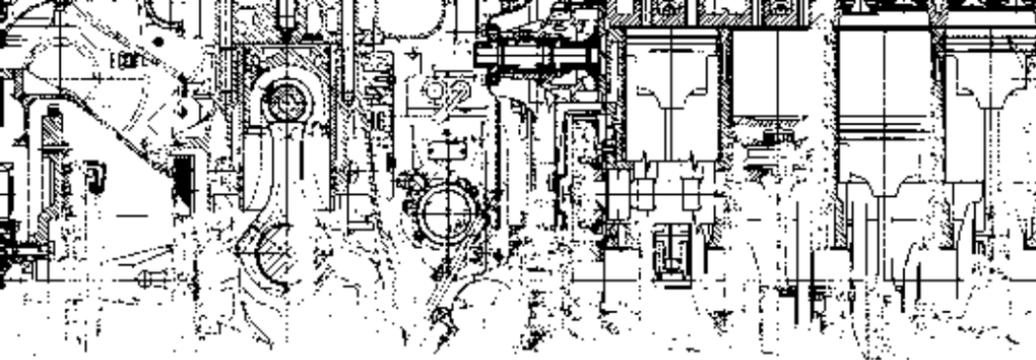
“No. Trying to be helpful.”

“Okay, wise guy. Pretend to be a tree and keep yourself planted to that chair. I’ll be right back.” He pushed back from the table and hiked up his grey slacks.

While Officer Butterfingers is out fetching another tape, I’ll pause my story to introduce myself. My name is Niles Wormwart, and by then I’d been sitting in the interrogation room of the Burbank Police Department for the last forty-six minutes and twenty-three seconds. There was no ominous pool of light or two-way mirror with a group of gruff-looking policemen standing behind it observing this comedy of errors. Unlike in the movies, the room was the size of a broom closet and constructed of stained white brick. A flickering overhead light flooded the room. It reminded me of the light in our school bathroom that made everything look sick and green.

How did an eleven-year-old science genius like myself end up spending his evening with Burbank’s finest? It’s a bizarre story, and you may not believe it. I don’t know if I believe it myself.

Officer Dandy tripped back in and sat across from me at the table. He slid a new tape into the machine and studied the buttons. His hand hesitantly reached out and paused before committing to the two-finger press-down. Dandy took a deep breath. “Okay, let’s take it from the science fair.”



## CHAPTER 1

“IT WAS THE SCIENCE FAIR AT THE END OF THE SCHOOL YEAR, and I was hoping to take the first-place award from Anish Chopra’s greedy hands. For the last three years, I’ve lost to Anish and one of his hackneyed potato clocks or ketchup-spewing volcanoes.”

“Do I really need to hear all of this boring science stuff again?” Officer Dandy interrupted.

“Wouldn’t that be violating some sort of officer handbook regulation?”

“Okay, fine. Keep going.”



My morning had started off like every other school day, with Glenn Chumbuck trying to yank my underwear halfway up my back. I’d learned to wear full-body polyester-Spandex underwear to combat the constant wedgies whenever I could. They didn’t breathe like cotton, but I also didn’t have to sit on a bag of frozen Brussels sprouts every night to reduce the swelling. The best part of maximum-coverage poly-Spand underwear is that there is nowhere for

some creep to grab hold of like there is with regular briefs, and I can continue about my business without skipping a beat.

The science fair was held in the main double-wide trailer behind the school. They called it Socrates Hall, which didn't make any sense, because Socrates was a philosopher, not a scientist. The school was in the process of expanding, so all the science classes got pushed out back to the temporary trailers until the new wing was built. That was five years ago.

I was especially proud of my project that year. I knew Anish would be expecting me to bring my A game, so that's what I did. I spent four months preparing my science experiment that was going to change the world. I called it the Timepiece. Maybe I needed to work on the name a bit. I thought about the Wrist Wormhole Generator, but that didn't sound very cool. All my hard work had led me to this moment. I stood before the class and presented my masterpiece.

"Nikola Tesla was a Serbian inventor, famous for creating alternating current or, as you may know it, AC power. One of his greatest and undiscovered inventions was a wristwatch that would help you travel through time. Academics theorize that it was created during his years spent in his Colorado Springs lab. Unfortunately, his actual blueprints for this watch have never been found. Many people believe that the government is hiding the blueprints in a vault buried deep in the earth. It also happens to be the same vault storing some famous fried chicken recipe."

"Here we go again. Wormwart and his dorky lectures on boring old guys that no one cares about," Chumbuck blurted out.

Anish flicked Glenn in the back of the head with his middle finger. "Chumbuck, shut your face. I want to hear Niles explain yet another failing project." Glenn rubbed the back of his head and sneered at Anish.

Anish grinned at me. His bravado tasted like fart on my tongue.

"Of course, many inventors tried to build their own Tesla watches and failed. I took all the best parts of their experiments and designed my own." Hanging on my display board was a framed picture of Tesla reading a book in a lightning storm and wearing the watch. "And this is one of the only pictures in existence of Nikola

Tesla wearing the special watch.” Everyone leaned in to get a closer look.

For me, this was a guaranteed A-plus in Ms. Noside’s class, and it would lock in my election to the president’s chair of the science club.

The drama department had let me borrow two old mannequin arms to display my Timepieces as if the great inventor were wearing them himself. I even put tweed coat sleeves over the arms for complete authenticity. The future smell of the Nobel Prize was intoxicating and could make one delirious if one didn’t keep one’s wits about oneself.

These delusions of grandeur could be distracting, and I had to return to the task at hand. But explaining time travel and wormholes to your elementary-classroom peers is like training a dog to drive a car. There is a look of wonderment, but behind the stare is total panic.

“Let’s say you had two bathtubs sitting next to each other and one of them was Monday and the other Tuesday. Monday is filled with water that needs to get to Tuesday. Someone would have to scoop out the water in Monday and put it into Tuesday. That would take time and energy. But let’s say there was a pipe connecting the drains in each tub and the water could move back and forth quickly between each tub without losing time,” I said. “That may be the easiest way to explain how a wormhole works.”

Anish sat there glaring with judgmental eyes and his standard smirk—a puckered face resembling a badger sucking a lemon.

Ms. Noside snored and jolted herself awake. Through her bird’s nest of grey hair, I could see her left eye slowly scanning the room to remember where she was. “That was great, Niles,” she said, wiping a string of drool from her mouth.

“But I’m not finished.”

“Oh. Carry on, then,” Ms. Noside said as she yawned and her eyes fluttered shut.

“If you really want to understand what I’m talking about, I put together a three-hundred-page manual describing every aspect of the watch’s construction and the physics of a wormhole. If you would like to buy a copy, I accept cash only.”

“What’s so special about these stupid watches?” shouted Chumbuck. He shoved a pudgy finger up his freckled nose and twisted it around for a good minute. His question annoyed me. I swear the guy had the IQ equivalent of a box of hair.

“As I’ve been trying to explain, the watch in the picture is one of only two watches in the world that, if set to the right frequency, can together open up a wormhole and allow you to travel through time.”

“That’s lame. I’d rather have a cool car or a phone booth,” Chumbuck chimed in again. His finger had migrated over to the other nostril and prodded upward like he was spinning pizza dough.

“That’s enough, Glenn,” Ms. Nosome said. “Let Niles finish his report.”

“Cars and phone booths are fictional time-traveling creations made up by movie studios. This watch is real,” I said.

“I want one,” shouted Gracie Angleberger. She was the richest girl in school and usually got anything she wanted. But she wasn’t going to get her greedy hands on this. One could only imagine what would happen if she got hold of time travel and altered history. We would all be required by law to wear pink cowboy boots and recite lines from squishy teenage vampire novels. The thought of it made the cereal in my stomach migrate up my throat with an intense burn.

“It’s only a hypothetical device, Gracie,” said Ms. Nosome.

“Actually, Ms. Nosome, one of the watches will be on display at my dad’s museum for the next two weeks. They recently found one inside the wall of room 3327 in the New Yorker Hotel, where Tesla died in 1943,” I said. “Anyone who wants to lay eyes on the real thing can get special discount passes right here.” I pulled several passes from my back pocket and held them up.

“Don’t everyone rush up at once. Let’s try to keep some order here.” No one stepped forward. They probably didn’t want to look anxious, so I set them on the table for them to get later.

“Gag. Seeing a stupid watch that some old-fart science dork wore. No, thanks! I’d rather stick my tongue in a blender,” Chumbuck said. The rest of the class giggled.

“Tesla was not a dork!” I yelled at Glenn, and really wished I had a blender at that moment.

“Okay, everyone simmer the boil,” Ms. Noside said.

“It doesn’t seem feasible. Please explain,” Anish said.

“During reconstruction at the hotel, they found it. What’s so hard to understand about that?”

“Not that part. The time-travel wormhole part.”

“Anish, I thought you might say that. So I prepared a demonstration.” I wound the dials on the watches and pushed them into the lock position. “I set it for a future time five minutes from now. No sense in messing with the space-time continuum at this point.”

“Then what?” Anish said.

“The watches will vibrate with great intensity, creating a large bridge of electromagnetic energy between them, and with the proper mixture of negative energy, it will tear a wormhole in space right before our eyes. In theory.”

“Tear a what in the what?” Ms. Noside shouted. “Niles, we can’t have you tearing holes in anything. The destruction of school property is against the law.”

“If I may interject, Ms. Noside, Niles is not tearing a hole in anything, because he doesn’t have the negative energy to complete the experiment,” Anish added.

As much as I hated Anish saying it out loud, he was right. I didn’t have any negative energy, unless you counted the attitudes spewing from my fellow classmates. But it’s not like you can just go to a corner store and buy some. Negative energy had to be created. That was something I hadn’t figured out yet.

“It wouldn’t be the best idea to open a wormhole at a science fair, anyway. Who knows what could happen when it did work?” I said. “We could all be sucked into an endless vacuum of space and be torn to pieces.”

Ms. Noside settled back into her sleeping pose. “Okay, fine. Let’s hurry this up, then, shall we? There are several other projects to get to.”

The watches vibrated and let out a low-frequency hum. The fake arms shook so much that they jarred loose from the display and bounced across the table. And then the watches did something I had never seen them do before. They heated up. The energy they radiated turned them into tiny furnaces that started to melt the

plastic arms. The metal of the watches glowed with a blistering intensity, and the smell of burning plastic was overwhelming.

“I don’t think that’s supposed to happen,” Anish said.

“Well, of course it isn’t supposed to happen. Thank you, Captain Obvious,” I said.

The tweed coat sleeves caught fire and went up in a flash of green flame. Everyone screamed as the display burned faster than a marshmallow over a campfire.

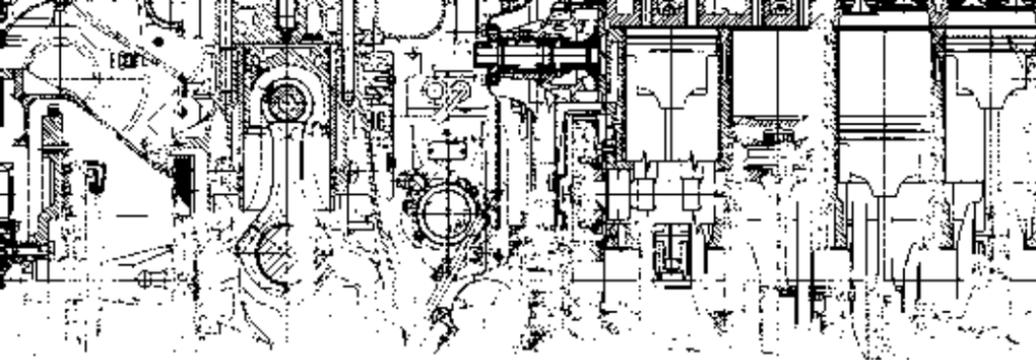
“Let’s all remain calm. There is no call for hysterics,” Ms. Nosome said. But she hadn’t noticed that a wandering ember had traveled through the air and landed on the top of her head. Before I could warn her, a small burst of yellow flame ignited, scorching the hair across her head like dry desert brush.

The screams grew louder than a freight train as she reached up and felt her burning scalp. Ms. Nosome jerked the hair free from her head and tossed it away. We all stopped and watched as her wig went flying through the air like a flaming squirrel and landed on Anish’s corn-syrup-powered robot display. It also caught on fire—which was good news for me. Everything was burning like gasoline-soaked wood.

The trailer cleared out in a not-so-orderly fashion. It took the fire department seven minutes and forty-seven seconds to arrive. By that time, the trailer was nothing but smoldering ash.

My display, Ms. Nosome’s hair, and the entire science fair had been destroyed. The heat from the fire was nothing compared to the burning sting of a hundred eyes glaring at me. So much for first place, so much for the president’s seat on the science club, and so much for an A-plus.

“Wormwart, remind me to ban you from further science fairs at this school,” Ms. Nosome said through clenched teeth. The patchy strands of thinning hair across the top of her head swayed in the breeze like flowers in a field.



## CHAPTER 2

SCHOOL SENT US HOME EARLY THAT DAY. I GUESS IT WAS A bit difficult to hold class outside while the fire department rummaged through the burned skeletal remains of the science trailer. Some students thanked me for being able to go home early. Gracie Angleberger said I had ruined her perfect attendance record and had other less-than-stellar things to say to me, most of which I will not repeat here because I'm not even sure what some of the words mean. Although I'm sure I've heard them in a gangster movie before.

The walk home was quieter than usual. Glenn and his cronies hadn't tried to wrap my underwear over my head or make me do push-ups into a pile of fresh dog poop. Maybe they thought I was tortured enough today after burning down the science trailer. I wasn't looking forward to getting home and listening to my dad lecture me on science safety and tell me how my projects were a waste of time.

There was a week left before the start of summer break, and I would be a seventh-grader next year at Luther Burbank Middle School. I won't lie. I was kind of thrilled that my dad had made no plans for us this summer like he did the previous summers. As far

as I was concerned, we were going to spend the next three months here in glorious, hot Burbank, which was fine with me. It would give me more time to work on perfecting the watch.

My best friend, Mint Jackson, was going to Dolly World.



“Oh, I love her music,” Officer Dandy interjected.

“It’s not the one based on the country singer, but the one based on the famous girl toy, Dolly Diapers.”

“Oh. Sounds dreadful.”

“Anyway, Mint’s sister got to pick where the family went this year, because she was turning six in June, and Mint picked Destructoland last year.”

“That’s too bad.” Officer Dandy leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on the table.

I call him Mint because he always has a wad of spearmint gum behind his ear for emergencies. His real name is Jackson Jackson. His parents call him JJ, but I prefer Mint. I’m not really sure why he has two first names or two last names. Mint told me his parents couldn’t decide on a first name, so they named him twice because they say twice is nice. That just makes me want to throw up twice. I’m glad I wasn’t named Wormwart Wormwart or Niles Niles. Can you imagine?



Anyway, even though I wouldn’t be hanging out with Mint, I was hoping to help Dad out with the new exhibits at the museum over the summer. Dad was the owner of Plana-Terryum, the local science museum. I told him that the name didn’t really work since he had no space exhibits. He thought the play on words was the funniest thing ever, so the horrible name stuck.

I was especially excited about this summer’s exhibit. Dad had won the opportunity to host a traveling Tesla exhibit, which was

showing off the recently discovered time travel watch. It was the biggest exhibit my dad ever had at the museum and one of the biggest discoveries in science. It was going to be amazing. No one was sure where the second watch was, but there was a lot of talk about it being hidden somewhere on the grounds of Wardencllyffe—his New York lab.

Personally, I think Tesla was buried with it. But I don't think anyone would believe me or would want to dig up a corpse to find out if he was actually wearing it.

Unfortunately, all my grand plans of hanging around the museum changed when my father, Terry Wormwart the Fourth, had a not-so-brilliant plan.

"Niles, pack your bags; you're going to camp," he said.

"I'm still in school, Dad. Summer break doesn't start for another five days."

"I spoke with all your teachers and they gave me the okay to pull you out early." He dug through my closet, looking for a duffle bag. "I wanted to surprise you. This summer camp is real special and it starts earlier than most."

"Summer camp?"

"I enrolled you several months ago."

"What? I thought I was going to help you with the Tesla exhibit."

Dad pulled a brochure from his back pocket and slapped it on the bed. "I already paid for you to go, so you have to!" He dumped my underwear drawer into the duffle bag and tossed in a few pairs of my shorts. "This is going to be great, Niles."

I grabbed the brochure and looked at it. On the cover was a man standing in tight black Spandex with a giant red check mark across his chest. He looked like one of those comic book superheroes.

"Camp Mayhem?"

"That's right. It's the hottest new wish-fulfillment role-playing summer camp. Apparently, all the cool kids are going. Doesn't it sound great?"

I opened up the brochure and continued to read. The guy with the red check mark was holding a scrawny-looking superhero in orange-and-blue tights above his head and bending him into the shape of a horseshoe. It read:

*Tired of boring old summer camps? Are you puny and lame and always seem to have a target on your back? Dying to recognize your inner villain and show those bullies what the underside of your boot looks like while they scrape the gum off your heel with their teeth? With the help of my highly trained staff, you could be the next darkly powerful villain, just like me, The Red Czechmark.*

“This doesn’t sound fun at all. I don’t want to be a villain.”

“It’s just pretend, Son. Besides, villains get to have all the fun. Right?” Dad stuffed my allergy-resistant pillow into the bag and zipped it up. “This will be good for you, Niles. You need to get out and meet more kids. You need to make friends. Think of this as an opportunity to reinvent yourself. You can’t sit inside and work on science experiments all day. That won’t lead to a productive adult life. Besides, it’s only for a couple of weeks.”

“I was hoping to reconstruct my watches and maybe get the training wheels off my bike.” I had him right where I wanted him with the training wheels comment.

“Son, you’re eleven years old. You shouldn’t have training wheels on your bike anymore. Come on. We don’t want to miss the bus.”

“What bus?”

“It leaves soon let’s go.” Dad rushed me outside and nudged me into the station wagon. Everything was happening so fast. My brain was spinning like a merry-go-round. How could he not care about the training wheels? He knew I had a balance problem.

“I have to pee.”

He sighed and looked at me. “Can’t you hold it?”

“It’s not good to hold it. I could get an infection.”

“Please hurry. We don’t want to be late.”

I ran back inside, grabbed my box of watch parts, and stuffed them into my pocket. If I was going to be stuck at some stupid camp for a few hours, until Dad came to his senses, I might as well get some work done.

Dad sped down Olive Street to the Cheap Chews Emporium and pulled up in the parking lot next to three bored kids sitting on their luggage.

Behind them, leaning against a rusty trash can and sipping a Frosty Gulp was the king of cool, the dude of dudes, and the guy

who put rock into roll. At seven years old, my neighbor, Barry Thurber, had already grown a mustache. That was five years ago. Today, his lip looked like it was hosting a woolly-bear caterpillar convention. He always wore a black jean jacket with the sleeves cut off and an Iron Maiden patch sewn on the back. Iron Maiden was some weird heavy-metal band that sang dark songs about creepy historical stuff like mummies, and their mascot was this real gross-looking zombie guy. Dad would never let me listen to them but they sounded real cool. Girls swooned at Barry's wavy black hair and hazel eyes. With a hint of ripe body odor that bordered on sour milk and cat poop, he was the envy of every kid in school.

Even my dad thought Barry was cool, which was really annoying.

"Niles, why can't you be more like Barry?" he'd say. Dad went to school with Barry's dad, and for some reason he has been trying to impress him ever since. Benedict Arnold Thurber owned and operated the largest waste disposal chain in three counties. He was the king of trash, and all of his billboards around town had a picture of him sitting on a toilet atop a giant heap of steaming garbage, wearing a crown. The slogan said, "My kingdom is your dump." I like a good poop joke now and then, but those billboards were cheesy.

Unlike Barry, I was lacking in the body-hair department. To impress my friends, I once drew on a fake mustache with permanent marker. It stayed on my face for three weeks even though I scrubbed off several layers of skin. Eventually, I had to go to the doctor to get a high-powered ointment to have it removed. My lip smelled like a monkey cage and tingled for a week after. I guess the smell was a side effect. Since lip hair wasn't in my near future, I'd tried to grow my hair out like Barry, but I was cursed with the Wormwart curly-hair gene. And instead of it growing down like a lion's mane, it only grew up and out like a weed. People called me names like Q-Tip Boy, Weed Head, and Feather-Duster Face until I got it cut.

Not that I was keeping a list of other reasons Barry was cooler than me, but he had a sweet BMX bike with wolverines painted on the frame, and his seat was made from the skull of a dead pirate. At least that was the rumor. My bike was a green-framed hand-me-

down from my dad that still had the original training wheels attached, a torn banana seat, and rainbow-colored tassels. Dad liked rainbows when he was young. I prefer them in the sky after a rainstorm. Not on my bike.

Another reason Barry was cooler than me—the guy could defy gravity. When it came to doing bike tricks, he was like a NASA astronaut sailing through air with ease. I, on the other hand, was not a friend of gravity. A two-legged giraffe has a better sense of balance than me. Sometimes I would fall over just standing, doing nothing. One time, I fell over while I was picking my nose and broke my finger. It was a pretty small cast, so I could only have a couple people sign it. But I got a lot of attention that week at school. Even Barry gave me a nod.

That was the best day ever.

Dad hopped out of the car, grabbed my bag, and tossed it to the ground. He looked over at Barry. “Hey, Barry, how’s it going?”

Barry took a sip and looked over his mirrored sunglasses at Dad. “It’s going.”

“Cool. Love your sunglasses.” Dad gave him the thumbs-up. “Okay, Niles. Have fun. Don’t forget to cream up on the rash at night. Remember what the doctor said?”

“Dad!”

“What?”

“Could you be any more embarrassing?”

“I just don’t want you to forget. You know what happens when—”

“Dad! Stop.”

“Okay. Fine.” He slid into the driver seat and pulled the door shut.

Barry stopped slurping his Frosty Gulp and looked over at me with his nose scrunched up. The other kids snickered.

Why do parents always say the most horrific things in the world in front of everyone? When I’m a parent, I’ll never say things like that to my kids. I’ll be cool and not annoying and not force my kids to go to camp.

Dad waved out the window as he pulled away. “See you in a few weeks!”

I looked down at the brochure clenched in my hand because I

was too embarrassed to look anywhere else. Reading it again, I stopped on ten dreadful words.

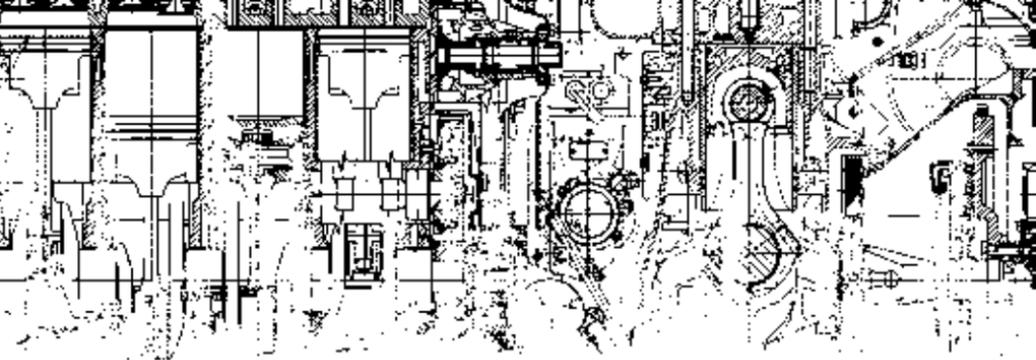
*Enjoy a seven-week odyssey into the realm of villainy.*

Seven weeks. That was my whole summer! I needed to get out of there and fast.

A rickety silver-and-white bus slammed on its brakes and skidded to a stop in front of me. I swallowed a mouthful of grit as a cloud of dust rolled around my head. Plastered across the side of the bus was a large banner that read “Camp Mayhem.” Suddenly, it peeled away and exposed a picture of an old woman slurping squash through a straw and the words “Meals on Wheels” in bright blue. The banner drifted to the ground and settled beneath the bus.

The driver looked around anxiously, leaned over, and pulled the doors open. He had a patch over one eye, and the other eye was white and cloudy like milk. A large wart on his chin with three hairs protruding out of it pulsed like a beating heart. He grinned at me with rotted yellow teeth.

“Well, kid, you getting on or what?”



## CHAPTER 3

THE OTHER KIDS PUSHED PAST ME AND LOADED ON THE bus while I stood there. A small fly buzzed around my head and landed in my mouth. I gagged and choked as it danced around my tonsils.

“Come on, mouth breather,” Barry said after he whacked me on the back. The fly shot out of my mouth and buzzed off. I lugged my heavy bag onto the bus.

Barry sauntered to the back, where a few other kids were sitting. He shot them a smoldering glare and they cleared out, scrambling to other open seats. He plopped down on the bench seat and settled in like an ancient monument.

There was an open seat next to some kid with shaggy black hair wearing a Boba Fett T-shirt. He glanced at me and shifted in the seat.

“Is that seat taken?”

“You can have it if it you want.” Spit shot out of his mouth and dribbled down his chin. Embarrassed, he quickly wiped the drool away with his hand. The bus lurched forward, forcing me back into the open spot next to Slobber Boy. I clenched my bag tight to my side, hoping it wouldn’t get doused with spit before we got to camp.

I wasn't a big fan of mucus or germs, especially from strangers. I gave a glance over my shoulder to Barry, who had his feet up on the seat in front of him and his arms behind his head. Golden beams of sunlight glistened off his mirrored sunglasses.

"That guy's cool," Slobber Boy said. He was under Barry's spell. In fact, he seemed to have intoxicated the entire bus. Even the crusty bus driver was in awe of Barry. The guy oozed magical essence.

"Yeah, I guess so." I turned my attention out the front window. Barry was cool. He was always cool. He ran cool. He talked cool. He even ate cool. It was kind of annoying that someone could be so cool all the time. But, like everyone else, I wanted some of that cool to rub off on me.

"I'm August Feng." The boy expressed through a shower of spit. He swiped the spit away with his palm and rubbed it across his jeans.

"What?"

He coughed, and a small glob of phlegm rocketed through the stale morning air and landed on the bus driver's shoulder, but he didn't notice. Slobber Boy made a wet slurping noise that ended with a wheeze. "Sorry about that. I guess the weatherman didn't warn you of possible heavy precipitation today." He snorted. "I've got overactive glands. In case you were wondering."

"Okay."

"I'm August Feng," he repeated, and extended his hand.

I checked his hand for slime before shaking it. "Niles Wormwart."

"You want to be a villain too?"

"Not really. My dad signed me up for this. I think he's trying to punish me for something."

"Do you have any powers?" August sucked back drool bubbles.

"Like super powers?"

"Super is reserved for heroes. Villains have dreadful, staggering, ghastly, or appalling powers."

"Pretty sure I don't have any of those." I glanced at the phlegm on the bus driver's back as it migrated downward like a snail, leaving a damp trail.

"Why would your dad send you to this camp?"

“He wants me to make friends and ‘get out there.’”

“You don’t have any friends?”

“Of course I do.” I tried to think of all my friends. There was Mint Jackson and then, well, there had to be others. Lately, Mint and I hadn’t been doing that much hanging out since I started working on my special project and he joined the drama club.

“Whatever. It’s just stupid role-playing.” I said.

The bus driver’s functioning eye glared at me in the rearview mirror. I caught his evil stare. It made my stomach twist like a balloon animal filled with pea soup.

“Whatever you say, Wormwart.” August laughed. Every time he breathed in, it sounded like a duck choking on a whistle.

I stole another glance back at Barry, who was cooler than the toenails on a penguin. His silver sunglasses reflected angelic sunlight into my eyes. I quickly looked away.

August kept laughing. Every now and then, globular clusters of spit would fly out and cling to windows, seats, and fellow campers.

The more I thought about it, the more I was pretty sure Dad was upset that I never went fishing with him last summer and this was his way of telling me that I should’ve gone. Wherever this bus was going, he would be waiting for me there, I knew it. He couldn’t stay mad at me forever. He was just as excited about seeing my special project work as I was, even though he didn’t really understand it.

Anyway, I’d fake being upset when I got off the bus and plead with Dad to take me home. I’d even fake an offer to go fishing with him. Anything so I didn’t have to be stuck with these nerds.

The bus made a sharp turn and barreled down a narrow dirt road. The red soil kicked up a thick cloud that coated the windows. The road was riddled with potholes, tossing everyone around in the seats like popcorn.

Not Barry, though. His feet stayed on the back of the seat, and his arms stayed planted behind his head like deep-rooted trees. I wish I could have said the same about August and his tidal wave of drool that splashed over and landed on my cheek. It was cold and sticky and smelled like expired milk.



“I would slug someone if they got their mouth goobers all over me,” Officer Dandy whispered behind his hand that he held up to his mouth. “That’s off the record, of course.” He smirked and winked at me.

I didn’t want to alert him to the fact that the tape was still rolling and it caught everything he said—on the record, of course.

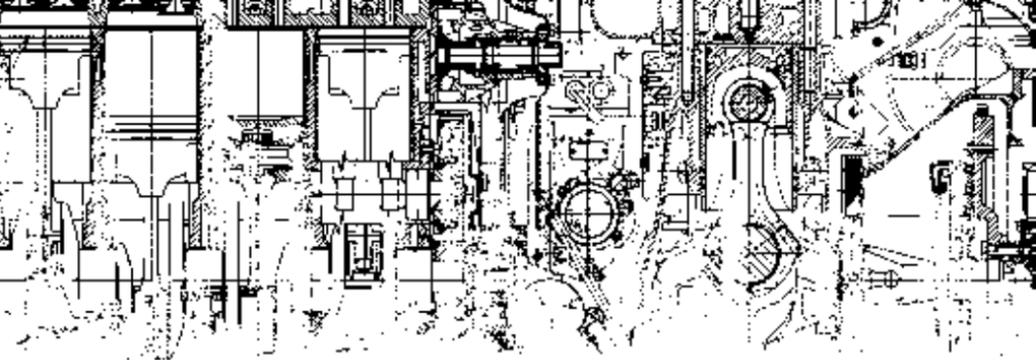


A tornado of thick dust blew past the bus as it screeched to a halt. I knew Dad would be waiting for me when the dust settled. The bus doors hissed open, and the driver turned back to us with a moldy grin.

“All right, you scabs. Get off the bus! I need to get it back before they report it stolen.”

I grabbed my duffle bag and hurried down the steps. The other kids brushed past me toward a giant wooden boat shipwrecked in a field of overgrown, yellow weeds. Six funny-looking cows with long horns grazed around the perimeter. Draped across the side of the boat was a giant black-and-red banner that read *Welcome Villains of the Future*.

Dad was nowhere in sight. Maybe he was running late. I had some time to practice being surprised for when he showed up. Then I’d give him an earful.



## CHAPTER 4

THE SUN HAD SET A FEW HOURS AGO, AND THE OCCASIONAL cow fart broke the crisp, silent air. It was obvious that Dad wasn't going to show up tonight.

I was hungry. So hungry, I could eat my own arm. Unfortunately, the only thing around to eat was dirt and grass. But I wasn't about to join the cows in chewing on the foul-smelling weeds that would give me bubble guts for a week. One of the reasons I hate germs is that I always get sick whenever we eat out. Dad says that I have a delicate constitution. If you decode that statement, it means I have a picky stomach. Usually I end up eating soup or rice or bananas.

I searched through my duffle bag for a banana or rice cake. Then I remembered that I didn't pack the bag. Usually, I would take snacks because you never know what might happen. It's always good to be prepared. I read that in a Boy Scout manual once.

Walking toward the ominous ship that sat partially buried in the cracked mud was my only option. They had to have food inside.

Standing four stories tall and covered in tiny porthole windows, it looked more like an apartment building than a swashbuckling vessel of the salty seas. A long wooden plank stretched over an

empty moat that led to the entrance. It creaked and moaned under my feet as I approached the front door—it was locked.

“You gotta be kidding me. I’m locked out?” I squished my face against the glass door and peered into the dimly lit hallway. There was a girl in her pajamas shuffling past under a dim pool of light at the end of the hallway. I knocked on the door and waved.

She stopped, looked at me, and then glanced at a clock on the wall. She sauntered toward the front door in her matted bunny slippers and glared at me. Her finger stretched out and pushed the button on a small speaker box next to the door.

“Yeah?” she grumbled.

“Can you let me in? I was waiting out here for my ride, but it didn’t show up.”

She looked at me, pointed to her ear, and shook her head.

“What? I don’t understand.”

She growled into the speaker box. “You have to push the button on the speaker box; otherwise, I can’t hear you.”

To my left was a rusted metal speaker box with a single green button. I leaned toward it and pushed the button. It squealed and hissed. I jumped back to see the girl covering her ears.

Agitated, she leaned into the speaker box. “You can’t stand that close! Feedback!”

I gave her the thumbs-up, stood back, and gingerly pushed the button.

“Can you let me in?”

“You a student?”

“Um...I think so?”

Pausing to itch her nose. “What’s your name?”

“Niles Wormwart.”

“Hold on, Miles,” she said and walked away.

“It’s Niles.”

Ignoring me, she was already halfway down the hall and rounding a corner. A few minutes passed, and my stomach was growling louder than an angry bear. Right about then, I wished I had a wad of gum behind my ear like Mint.

The girl came back with a hulking man close to ten feet tall. His head looked like a giant block of cheese with a shock of white hair

and yellow eyes. He spoke into the speaker box with a heavy Russian accent. I recognized the accent from a movie that I'd seen where the bad guys hijacked this submarine and they wanted to destroy the United States. In the movie, they called them Russkies. It sounded like a cute nickname, but apparently it wasn't cute to them. This guy was anything but cute.

"Wormwood, we were expecting you earlier." His voice was deep and thick like liquid cheese. His *Ws* sounded like *Vs*.

"I was waiting for my dad. I don't think I'm supposed to be here."

The man looked down at the clipboard and studied it for a moment. "Yah, pretty sure you are. We have full paid tuition." He pulled a ring of keys from his belt, unlocked the door, and pushed it open. "You might as well come in. Won't be going anywhere tonight unless you want to hang out with the oxen." He pointed to the field.

I glanced back at the oxen surrounded by a thin cloud of green methane gas. They grunted.

Irritated Girl yawned and itched her nose again. Under the dim hanging light, I got a better look at the man. It was the Red Czech-mark, the hulking villain guy from the brochure. He was wearing motorcycle boots and a bathrobe patterned with red duckies. A dark-red tattoo of a hammer and ax crossing each other was inked around his neck and throat.

"Lucky will show you to your room. We can make proper introductions in the morning." He marched off in the opposite direction with his boot heels clicking, then stopped and turned back. "Oh, by the way, your dad called..."

Of course he did. I knew he would cave. "He must have called to say that he would be here in the morning."

"No. He said you would tell everyone you were not supposed to be here and we should ignore that. So this is me, ignoring that statement." He snapped back into marching stance and continued on.

Lucky led me up the stairs.

"Is there anything to eat around here? I'm starving."

"Cafeteria is closed for the night. Check the vending machines in the main hall."

“Oh. I don’t have any money.”

Lucky stopped, reaching into her pajama pocket, and held up something in a torn silver wrapper. “I got a half-eaten bar of taffy if you want it.”

I snatched it out of her hand and stuffed the whole thing in my mouth.

“Wow. Do your parents not feed you?”

My teeth were cemented together with banana-flavored taffy, so I couldn’t speak, only mumble.

We walked down a long hall to a door. “This is your room. Try not to start any fires or tornadoes, collapse gravity, or clog the toilet. Plumbing sucks in this place.” She turned and shuffled back down the hall.

“Mmkay.”

As I stepped into the room, a deep, raspy wheezing followed by thick gurgles broke the silence. Through the darkness, I could barely make out the shape of something, someone, sleeping on the top bunk. Whatever it was, I prayed it wouldn’t gobble me up in the middle of the night. I thought it would be best to sleep with one eye open.