

Sons of Nowhere Tales: “The Rules”

By Nicholas Almand

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“So, based on last week’s class, can either of you identify this fossil?”

[Christopher Howard](#) sat quietly at his desk, while [Dr. Timothy Wu](#) pulled a skull the size of a small dog from a dusty plastic bag. His “desk” consisted of a folding chair attached to a TV tray. [Project Ithaca](#) was never designed to provide schooling for its test subjects, so lessons took place in an unused section of the infirmary. Still, Chris wouldn’t trade this weekly hour for anything.

To his left sat [Alasdair Zadok](#), a boy about 14 years old with bright yellow eyes and brown hair pulled into a ponytail. He was a little weird, even as test subjects went. He wore a pair of mechanic’s goggles everywhere, even to the showers, and his overalls were stuffed with trading cards and computer repair tools. In a way, Chris was glad that he and Alasdair were the only ones Dr. Wu taught. Though Alasdair was two years older than Chris, he still felt safe around him. The two had been assigned the same bunk for that very reason. It was not a feeling Chris had towards many other people.

He had a set of rules for dealing with *them*.

Rule #1: Never make eye contact with them.

Rule #2: Never make physical contact with them.

Rule #3: Never go anywhere with them.

“It’s an eryops megacephalus!” Alasdair raised his hand. Alasdair was probably a genius, Chris figured. He never got a question wrong and he remembered every detail of Dr. Wu’s lessons. Chris enjoyed the time away from the other test subjects, when it was just Alasdair talking. He hated being the center of attention, anyway.

“That’s absolutely right, Alasdair,” Dr. Wu said. He ran his finger over the bridge of the two-foot-long skull. It looked like a cross between a giant frog and a small alligator. “Eryops was an amphibian from the late Carboniferous Period to the early Permian. Its name means ‘drawn-out face,’ because of the size and shape of its skull. As you can see, the eyes are set very far back compared to...”

Chris was impressed with the way Dr. Wu seemed to have the entire history of life on Earth locked inside his head. Chris had trouble remembering what he did last week, let alone trivia about animals that died out before the first dinosaur was born.

Water dripped from his dark brown hair and onto the tray. For the past month and a half, his skin had been soaking wet despite all efforts to dry him off. The scientists studying him thought it had something to do with his [Paradox](#) expanding or breaking down or something. Chris found it annoying, but he was relieved that the water never wrinkled his fingers or toes. He’d read horror stories about a guy who fell asleep in a hot tub and had his skin peel away.

“Well, that’s all for today,” Dr. Wu said, packing up the fossilized skull. “Are there any questions before I go?”

Chris shivered. Over already? The ceiling above Dr. Wu’s head began to darken with black water, threatening to saturate the tiles and pour onto his head. Chris clasped his hands together and did the breathing exercises he’d learned in counseling. Chris’s [Paradox](#) allowed him to create water anywhere he wished using his mind alone, but it often activated whenever he was stressed or frightened.

“Hey, Doc Wu!” A gruff voice boomed through the wall behind him. Chris jumped in his seat when the door burst open. The water on the ceiling swirled and bubbled, but did not fall.

“Doc, you done playing schoolteacher in here?” [Gedeon Vassago](#), the [Ophion Foundation](#)’s Director of Cryptozoology stood in the doorway, silver-haired with a face full of scars. “I got about a million videos hitting the web that show a sea monster hanging out in San Figaro. Wanna see if you can identify it.”

“Oh. Yes, I suppose I can take a look,” Dr. Wu said. He followed the older man out of the infirmary, giving Chris and Alasdair a hasty wave goodbye.

“Can I come? I bet I can tell you what it is!” Alasdair skipped after them, leaving Chris all alone.

Chris kicked his bare feet under the desk, trying to get as much water off his soles as possible before he stepped back onto the concrete floor. The ground was always cold at Ophion Headquarters, but it was especially bad in the barracks of Project Ithaca. It didn't help that he, along with the other subjects, had to “Earn Their Boots.” Someone up top decided that the test subjects needed to earn the right to wear shoes by doing chores and ranking high in Paradox experiments. So far, only 3 of the older kids had managed to pull it off.

“So this is where you go every week,” a voice said in his ear. Sour breath invaded his nostrils. Chris shivered and went ridged, realizing how close the speaker had gotten. “You hang out with Goggles and learn about dinosaurs?”

The water dropped from the ceiling with a splash.

“Yeah,” Chris was completely frozen as [Eddie](#) walked around to face him. Bald from head to toe with solid black eyes, Eddie resembled a shark. In his time with Project Ithaca, he'd fought with every one of the test subjects at least once, but nothing had been done about his outbursts. Eddie preferred to go after the younger subjects, reveling in his physical dominance over them. He particularly enjoyed using Alasdair's sunny naïveté against him, delivering a nasty surprise when he least expected it.

Yet, Eddie had managed to earn his boots. Perhaps the trouble was Eddie's Paradox. If he didn't want you to see him, you simply couldn't. Chris kept his eyes on his feet. He never liked to think about that.

Eddie drew closer. Chris saw him smirk out of the corner of his eye. “So, did you wet the bed again last night?”

Chris shut his eyes tight. He hoped Eddie wouldn't notice how badly he was shaking.

“Maybe I should go ask Goggles about it,” Eddie said. Chris kept his eyes closed. “He'd know, wouldn't he?”

Chris didn't reply. He'd learned long ago not to engage Eddie in conversation.

Eddie cupped his palm, revealing a sharpened chunk of floor tile. “You know, I bet I could cure that bed-wetting problem of yours. Only takes a few snips.”

Chris didn't reply.

"Or maybe it's Goggles who wets the bed. Maybe you've just been taking the blame all this time," Eddie mused.

Chris didn't reply.

"Maybe I'll pay him a visit. Give him a few snips, just in case. Whatcha think?"

"No!" Chris screamed, but he was gone. The door was already shut behind him.

Outside, the sounds of the nearby cafeteria drowned out the nagging fears in the back of his mind. What was Eddie going to do? Why was he going after Alasdair? Chris ran down the hall and scanned the cafeteria. [Scott](#) and [Kevin](#) were holding hands as usual, [Lucas](#) was eating alone for some reason, [Sam](#) was taking his share from little [Dexter Murphy](#)'s tray, and [Noah Pak](#) sat with his sneakers on the table. Alasdair and Eddie were nowhere to be found, but they had to have passed through the cafeteria to reach the maze of laboratories. He tried not to think about what Eddie might be planning to do to his friend.

Chris had seen Eddie's bad side before. He had been nearly catatonic when he first arrived in Project Ithaca, and Eddie could sniff out weakness like blood in the water. When Chris had refused to hand over his lunch, Eddie pinned him against the wall and meticulously broke each of his fingers. Throughout the ordeal, he'd praised Chris for his screams. The guards had done nothing at first. They watched Eddie torture him for several minutes, and they only got involved when Eddie threatened to bite off his toes. Chris had never forgotten that.

At all times, Project Ithaca was patrolled by no fewer than 6 Ophion security personnel. Most of them were equipped with Tasers or paintball guns filled with pepper spray. A few of them had weapons Chris didn't recognize--big rifles with ugly names. But the guards weren't always there, and they only intervened if things got out of control. The rest of the time, you needed protection.

"Hey Chris! Get over here, I'm starving!" Noah yelled.

There had been an implied arrangement between the two of them ever since Noah had decided he needed an assistant. As long as Chris did as he was told, Noah would keep Eddie at bay... if he felt like it.

“Chris!” Noah stomped the heel of his shoe on the table. He’d been the first to earn his boots, for whatever that was worth. “Don’t forget dessert this time!”

Chris knew what that meant. Noah had already eaten his own lunch, and he was going to take whatever he wanted off of Chris’s tray, too. He’d probably seen Sam doing the same to Dexter and couldn’t be outdone. That’s just the kind of guy Noah was.

Chris swallowed bitterly as he approached the lunch line. “Cupcake, please.”

He didn’t bother getting any real food. Noah only wanted the dessert anyway, and the sooner he got him off his back the sooner he could figure out where Eddie had gone. He walked up to the table and presented his tray to Noah.

“What is this shit?” Noah spat, kicking it out of Chris’s hands. “Nobody eats the goddamn cupcakes! Now get back there and do it right!”

Chris ducked, stealing another glance around the room. There was still no sign of Eddie, but he doubted he would try anything with Dr. Wu and Mr. Vassago present. He filled his tray with Jello and apple pie and left it on Noah’s table. Chris barely heard Noah’s grunt of approval as he made a bee line to Dexter Murphy. Dexter was a year younger than Chris, with orange hair, glasses, and more freckles than anyone could count. He sat alone, transfixed on a handheld video game.

Dexter had a mixed reputation among the test subjects. He was by far the smallest and quietest of them, and he made a private game out of spying on the older kids. When he slept, his Paradox allowed him to see just about anything that happened on the island. Dexter was your best friend if you wanted to uncover a secret, and your worst enemy if you wanted to keep one. Everyone had learned to check twice behind their backs after Dexter outed Kevin and Scott to the entire security staff. If anyone knew where Alasdair and Eddie had gone, he did.

“Dex, I need your help!” Chris said.

Dexter didn’t *quite* ignore him. He raised his eyes just slightly from the game.

“Dex, it’s important. Did you see where Eddie went a few minutes ago?”

“Yes,” Dexter said, volunteering no more.

“Where did he go?”

“With Alasdair,” Dexter said. “He needed help fixing a computer.”

“Where?”

Dexter shrugged, turning his full attention back to the game.

“Where, Dex!?”

“Upstairs somewhere. Probably Eddie's room.”

Chris bolted up the steel stairs leading from Project Ithaca's cell blocks to the suites above. His wet feet slipped twice, banging his knee against the icy steps. Eddie lived up there, Chris knew. Earning his boots entitled him to a private room that overlooked the open cells of the other kids. Chris struggled against his own heaving lungs to reach the peak of the staircase. He had never gone against his rules, not *ever*. And especially not with Eddie!

Yet here he was.

“Alasdair?” Chris tried to whisper, but his voice came in ragged breaths. No answer came. The suites were connected by a mesh catwalk, and the water that soaked Chris's skin slipped through the cracks as he walked. He shuddered at the menacing glow that peered up from the cell block.

“Alasdair?” He put one foot in front of the other, only absently aware of his actions. Chris passed door after unused door, empty suites held for test subjects who might one day prove themselves worthy of them. He kept one hand on the wall, feeling each of the doorknobs as he crept forward.

Chris was struck by how silent it was up there. For a second, he thought Dexter might have steered him in the wrong direction. But that was impossible. Dexter might be disinterested, Dexter might be distracted, but when it came to information, Dexter Murphy was never wrong.

“Alasdair?” It seemed as though it were happening to someone else. Like a movie. The Paradox water beneath his feet pooled and began to drip into the cell block in a stream. He gulped, petrified to invoke that name.

“Eddie?”

A door creaked open behind him. A hand snatched him at the wrist.

“Nice of you to join us!” Eddie yanked Chris into the vacant suite. It was pitch-black inside, but Chris could feel Eddie's clammy fingers pinning his arm behind his back. The door shut behind them, chilling Chris's blood with the sound of an automatic lock.

“Now that everyone’s here, we can finally figure out which one of you is the dirty little bed pisser,” Eddie crowed.

Chris felt a hard weight strike him in the gut. He lost his balance as another blow hit him hard across the eye. Eddie carefully placed his foot against the back of Chris’s head and bloodied his nose on the floor.

“You know what the best thing is about these empty suites?” Eddie flipped a switch near the door, bathing the room in cold light. “No cameras.”

Chris coughed, crawling to his knees. He still couldn’t see straight, but he could feel the dark water begin to drip from the ceiling.

“Well, no cameras and soundproof walls,” Eddie said. “So I guess that makes two things. But soundproof walls come standard. Cameras don’t work because nobody lives here yet.”

“Eddie!” Chris cried. Dark water fell like rain around his body. “Eddie, please!”

“Eddie ‘please’ what? You’re the one who wouldn’t give me a straight answer about the bed pissing,” Eddie crouched to meet Chris eye to eye. “Now you got me doing this the hard way. Let’s ask Goggles what he thinks.”

Chris looked past Eddie’s face and screamed. Alasdair was naked, hog-tied and gagged on the opposite end of the suite. Rummaging through his shorts for a moment, Eddie brandished the tile shard and knelt between Alasdair’s legs. Chris’s stomach turned sour.

“Goggles, are you the dirty little bed pisser? Are ya?” Eddie tossed the shard from hand to hand, listening patiently as though expecting an answer. Alasdair tried again and again to shout through the gag until his voice went hoarse. In the end, he only managed to sob.

“Look, Goggles, if you’re not the bed pisser, you aren’t doing a very good job of convincing me.”

“Eddie, goddammit!” Chris shrieked. He could barely hear his own voice over the pounding in his chest. He knew Eddie was capable of casual violence and gleeful cruelty, but he never expected him to do something this unhinged. It still could have been a bluff, but there were no guards and no cameras to stop Eddie from doing whatever he wanted to them.

“Eddie, ‘what’ kid? I can fix the bed pisser problem right here and right now with a few quick cuts and a trip to the trash can. What could you possibly have to contribute to the conversation that would make this any easier?”

“Nobody’s pissing the bed!” Chris screamed. The hammering in his ears was getting louder. Eddie was holding the tile dangerously close to Alasdair’s skin. He had to get him to stop! “It’s my Paradox going off at night! It’s my Paradox and you *know* it’s my Paradox! Why are you doing this!?”

“Why am I doing this? Look, if there’s a kid still spraying the sheets at his age, something drastic’s gotta be done,” Eddie jabbed Alasdair with the shard. “If you’ve got a better workaround, I’d love to hear it.”

Chris knew what Eddie was doing. He was going to force Chris to watch or manipulate him into sacrificing himself to save Alasdair. Eddie had made up his mind to do this to one of them no matter what, the son of a bitch! Chris took a long look at Alasdair. He was weeping, helpless as Eddie’s makeshift weapon drew closer to his...

“Fine! It’s *me*, then!” Chris yelled angrily, surprised at the volume of his own voice. “I’ve been pissing the bed!”

“At last, some honesty!” Eddie stood up and kicked Alasdair hard in the stomach. He turned to face Chris, teasing the edge of the shard with his fingertips. “Was that so hard?”

Eddie was on top of him before he could react. In the blink of an eye, there was a shape twice his size pinning his arms to his chest. What had been a second’s adrenaline-fueled decision was now a heavy, sour-breathed reality. Chris’s courage slipped away. Eddie was too strong. He felt his shorts peel away from his skin, and the pit in his gut knew what would come next.

“Quit squirming! This is gonna take a while, and you’re just making it messier.”

That son of a bitch was actually going to do it! He felt the water come. Eddie burst into laughter.

“Oh my God, are you shitting me?”

Eddie hesitated. The weight on his chest lifted ever so slightly, but it was enough to spark the same boldness that had possessed Chris a moment earlier. He thrashed under Eddie, kicking, screaming, and pounding to stop the blade from doing its work.

“I didn’t think you’d actually piss yourself!” Eddie chuckled as Chris squirmed out of his grasp. He continued to laugh; an ugly, halting noise. “I was just gonna cut your dick off, but holy shit! I actually made you piss yourself!”

Chris looked down. The water around his legs was stained a sickly yellow. He squeezed his eyes shut and curled up into a ball, covering his ears against Eddie’s hideous laughter.

“Oh, wait till I tell the guys!” Eddie cackled. He dropped the shard on his way out of the suite, leaving Chris all alone with Alasdair.

Despite it all, Chris smiled.

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