

# **NERD WORLD**

BY

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## A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

The following story is entirely fictional. The characters are not real people. The school is not a real school. The competition, while it resembles any number of actual events, is similarly fictitious. To the best of my knowledge, nothing even remotely this absurd has ever happened at any scholastic competition. Trivia is a safe, fun and educational pastime, suitable for adults and children of any age. Anyone who says otherwise is a liar; may their retribution be swift, pitiless and agonizingly exquisite.

Thank you.

# PHASE I: HYPE

PAUL

I've come to the conclusion that "trivia" is by far the most terrifying word in the English language. I've been through this three times, paged through all the records and accounts in Auckland's, chatted up plenty of my fellow competitors, and I still can't explain just why it is that this little game of ours is so unhinged. No, not all of the crazy stories are true – people just love to add their own bullshit to the mix. But enough of it *is* true, enough to be weird and terrifying.

I'm rambling here, something I tend to do when trivia comes up. Let's start from the top.

My name is Paul Liston. Seventeen years old. Senior at Northwestern High, an insignificant school in one of those little regional hub towns that's just big enough to make the atlases. There are tens, maybe hundreds of thousands of people just like me in this country of ours. I sit across from a few hundred of them every day. Of course, most of those people are normal. Most of those people didn't get an early Wednesday morning wake-up call enticing them to speed towards school hours before the first bell rings, all as part of some ritual they've come to despise. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

High school is strange in many ways. No matter how much society mutates, no matter how the trends change, high school remains more or less the same. It hasn't changed all that much since my parents were my age, and I imagine it'll be the same when I'm well into senility. There's a certain hierarchy in high school that resists all attempts at change or reform. No one acknowledges it, but everyone who grew up in this country recognizes it. It's like a cross between feudal Europe and some sort of sci-fi dystopian novel – we all have our place, one to which we're assigned the first day we enter the building, and we are powerless to change it.

There's a myth about people not fitting in during adolescence. We all fit in somewhere, it's just that most of us don't like where we fit in. The people at the top – the popular kids, the rich kids, the trendsetters – are perfectly happy, of course. So are the entertainers – the athletes, musicians, and pranksters – all of whom have their own special roles to fill. Far beneath them are the misfits, the poor bastards who look different or act different, who come from the wrong families, have the wrong friends or just have rotten luck. They have a place too, it's just not a happy one.

But I'm not the cool kid, or the funny kid, or the bad kid. I'm the smart kid. I've always been the smart kid, as long as I can remember. That's what they used to call me – There goes that smart Liston kid, I'd hear in the hallways. Sometimes, it wasn't so nice. There goes that Liston nerd. Yeah, I heard that one a few times, too. It's cool, though. As the smart kid, I fill a somewhat privileged position in the high school pecking order. It's not that anyone likes me, but I am extremely useful. Someone needs to pass a test to keep peace with his parents? He comes to me. Some official wants the school to look good to his superiors? No better way than finding a pack of smart kids and putting them to work doing smart kid stuff.

So it's a role that comes with some perks, but there is one big downside. Most of the time, I'm effectively invisible. The high school nerd is not a pariah, but he's not a champion, either. He's just there, inscrutable, solitary, far beneath anyone's notice.

There is one exception, though.

Northwest, like most other high schools, participates in the national Scholar's Bowl. You've heard about that, I'm sure – find a couple smart kids with nothing better to do over the weekend, then send them to other schools to compete in trivia contests with other teams of smart kids. Now, most schools just pick their teams out of the gifted program, but the administration of Northwest High has a bit more flair than that. A few weeks before the start of trivia season, they have a special school-wide event. It's called "Trivia Master" and it's basically a scaled-down version of the Scholar's Bowl that's open to all students of Northwest High. The matches are held in front of the assembled student body, and the winning team goes on to represent Northwest.

God, do I love Trivia Master.

Most people look at Trivia Master and see just another sawed-off game show – a quirk of the school, a novelty. However, if you're one of those invisible smart kids, this is the one chance you get to shine. I'm far from the only person who loves Trivia Master. This event is a huge deal. I'm not sure I can even begin to describe how big. Attendance at the matches is up there with homecoming pep rallies, and the behavior of the audience is equally raucous. It sounds bizarre, but it's the absolute truth.

For the two weeks of Trivia Master, everything changes. For those two weeks, I am an important man. When I walk through the halls, people greet me with open arms. They discuss me over lunch – hell, they fight to sit next to me, just so they can get an inside track on the matches before everything goes public. For two weeks, I am not only visible, I am a goddamn celebrity. I'm a beacon, all eyes on me. It's an awesome time, for me and all the other smart kids who live in silence.

Of course, there are always a few people who take things too far. That's the dark side of Trivia Master, the part that no one ever discusses. Everyone likes to imagine that this event is a scholarly competition between mild-mannered dorks. People who believe this have never spent any time amongst the greater North American nerd. Yes, we go to great lengths to get along, but push one of us even a little bit too far and the claws come out. And with dozens of smart kids vying for attention, there's always someone pushing.

That's the real reason I'm hauling ass towards Northwest. It's not because I really care about the rules of the competition. I'm sure they've changed, but it hardly matters to me. I'm more worried about the people who do care, who are eyeballing those rules for weaknesses.

Yes, friends, people cheat. They sabotage and backstab in ways that would leave you awestruck. I could tell you stories – the rumor mill at Northwest is as robust as it is in any other high school – and I imagine that before this is all over, I'll have a few brand new shockers. But here's all you really need to know: For the two weeks of Trivia Master, those smart kids who are being treated like the popular kids start to act like the popular kids – and then they get worse.

For my part, I try to avoid that sort of cloak-and-dagger madness. It's not always easy, however, and with my particular friends it's often impossible. I guess that's why I decided to chronicle this, my final Trivia Master competition. Any other year, I'd never have agreed to do anything like this. But after last year? After all that insanity leaked out to the normals and everyone found out what an asylum this place is? I think the world deserves to know the full truth, to see just how

our kind behaves when the social structures that keep us in check are broken down. I'm not trying to tear anyone down, I just want to dispel some of the creaky old myths that people still hold.

Okay, maybe I do want to tear a few people down. Sue me, I'm not immune. And maybe this wasn't the best day to start this. I'm a little cranky. After all, Ken Greevey – my perennial teammate – called me at an absurd hour this morning to remind me that trivia season was upon us.

Actually, that's a good place to start, because Ken falls squarely inside the "takes it too seriously" camp. Don't get me wrong, he's a great guy and we've been friends for years. We teamed up in three consecutive competitions. We never won, though, never even made it to the finals. And every time we lost, Ken responded by redoubling his efforts the following year. He's so fixated on this that I'm honestly a little afraid of what he might be planning this time.

I don't want to give you the wrong impression, though. Ken doesn't play dirty or anything like that. He's just a touch obsessive. This isn't the first time I've received a wake-up call because he wanted to discuss some insignificant change in the rules on team registry or read me a long list of stats on the other teams. That's Ken's nature. He puts 200% of himself into everything he does. Lord knows he could be worse. A lot worse. Yes, I'm thinking of someone in particular, but I'm not prepared to start slinging mud just yet. Besides, I've still got to deal with Ken and his latest plan of attack. I don't show up on his schedule, he has a conniption. You think I'm exaggerating? You have no idea.

To summarize: Trivia Master is a fantastic competition that displays the best in us but brings out the worst in us. It's my favorite time of the year, but I also dread it every time it comes around. It's a simple game, but it's also deadly serious.

And there's always a reminder of just how serious it can be. This year it was Ken, hopping up and down and waving like he hadn't seen me in years, clutching a messy two-inch binder that resembled the operations manual for a Naval GPS system.

This is my world. I didn't quite choose it, it was there long before I came along, but it's mine now.

And damn it, I could use a break.

# KEN

Allow me to introduce myself. I am Kenneth Greevey, a student at Northwest High School where I have maintained a 4.0 GPA every semester save one. Mandatory practical arts classes are a cruel joke. I partake in few extracurricular activities, preferring to use my free time to socialize with my friends, enjoy a vintage video game, or build my collection of books. Oh, but I will not bore you with the details of my life or the minutiae of my daily routine; there will ample time for this as we proceed. For the time being, I will merely set the stage for the drama that is to come.

The Northwest High Trivia Master competition consists of two parts: the entrance exam and the tournament. The tournament proper is a sixteen-team, non-seeded, single-elimination bracket. Starting from the quarterfinals, matches are public. Each round consists of two standard sets of ten questions each, two team-participation wager questions, and one sixty-second lightning round. Assuming no challenges or unusual events, a Trivia Master round lasts approximately ten minutes.

Registration for the competition opens one week before the beginning of the tournament. Most people gather their teams in the week prior to that, at a time when serious contestants have been planning their team-building strategy for months. That is what it takes to win in this contest. In many ways, the game is won or lost at registration.

I realize that this is a bold claim, so allow me to present my case. Last year, we fielded a superb team that was widely favored to win, but we fell short in the semi-finals. This was not a failure of skill, however, as any objective record of our performance will conclusively demonstrate. It was a failure of planning. We encountered a collection of questions that were well outside of our collected field of expertise. I had successfully gathered the smartest team possible, but it was a team with similar skill sets. Our range was excessively narrow, and that cost us a shot at the finals. We were victims of foul luck and short-sighted planning.

Many people do not acknowledge any of this this. They refuse to even consider the role that strategy plays in victory. My good friend and teammate, Paul Liston, is among these people. Paul is a fantastic competitor – with an accuracy rate of 98% and an average reaction time of under 300 milliseconds, he is among the best in the state, if not the country. What he fails to recognize is that, at this level, performance is inadequate by itself. He even becomes visibly irritated when I bring up strategy and has even been known to respond with some rather biting invective.

To spare his sensibilities, I restrained myself from speaking of Trivia Master with Paul until one week before registration opened. Even as I placed the call that morning, I suspected that Paul would be cross with me.

"Ken, what did I tell you about calling me early in the morning?"

I was correct. "You told me that you get up at 6:45. I called at 6:50, so I know I didn't wake you up."

"Do you really have to be that literal? I meant approximately 6:45."

"Well, did I wake you up?"

"Fine, fair enough." I suspect that he was humoring me. Paul is a very even-keeled person, always keeping himself in check and minding decorum. Consequently, it is difficult to tell when he is angry. I have become quite skilled at sensing his subtle tells, though. "Just tell me why you were calling me."

"This year's rules came out today. Check it out." I handed him a three-ring binder containing the unabridged rulebook. The rules are easily accessible on the school's website and printed on posters all over the building, but I appreciate the utility of a copy that I can pull out when I need it, that will not break or malfunction, and to which I can freely add my own notes.

He let out an extended sigh – one of his tells. "This is why you called me early? To see the rules? The rules don't change that much from year to year, you know."

Paul is smart, but not very thorough. "Of course the rules changed! Under this year's rules, our sophomore team would have been disqualified. These things are very important to know."

"You've already...How long have you been studying this?"

"Since last night." I flipped open the binder and held it up for Paul. "See? Because we switched teammates at the last minute. They won't let you do that anymore."

"Can we talk about this upstairs?" he said, rubbing his temples. Paul does this frequently, more so during trivia season. He should talk to a medical professional if he continues to get these headaches. "I want to stash my stuff and get somewhere quiet before that asshole shows up."

"I finished running the model."

"Please tell me you're joking."

We were talking about a statistical model. After last year's embarrassment, I took all of the questions asked, classified them according to subject, and fed them into a computer program. Three hours later, I was holding all the data I needed to emerge victorious.

I paged through the binder to the beginning of my personal notes. "No, it really worked. I ran the program on Saturday, and it worked just fine. I would have told you sooner, but I wanted to double-check it myself to be sure. Here's the breakdown from last year: Science, 19.7%; History, 17.5%; Literature..."

"You really don't need to read all of the numbers," said Paul.

"Literature, 14.8%; Math, 13.7%; Geography, 10.7%; Popular Culture, 6.8%; Sports, 6.3%; Current Events, 5.8%; Fine Arts, 4.2%."

Paul nodded and turned slightly away – a possible sign of derision, though I have never conclusively determined if this is another tell. "Great. Now, what do we do with that information, exactly?"

"We use it to plan our team. Between the two of us, we have about two-thirds of the questions

covered. You've got us handled on history, geography and current events."

"I've got current events?"

"Well, you watch the news," I said. "That's all they ever ask about, really. I've got math covered, of course, and we can both field science. That leaves just a few small, yet crucial gaps in our knowledge."

"All right, I see where you're going with this, but let's walk and talk, huh?" Paul can be very fickle, complaining about being called in early one minute, then in a terrible hurry the next. He was headed up the stairs before I even said anything. I can usually keep up with Paul, but sometimes I fall behind due to his slightly greater height giving him a longer stride. Some may argue that I am out of shape, but I feel that this is fallacious.

I caught up with Paul at his locker. "I have a few candidates in mind, but I wanted to run these names past you, get a little feedback."

"Sure. Run those names past me and..."

Paul froze in mid-sentence. I followed his gaze and immediately knew why. The library doors stood open, and Aaron Baines Bellamy was walking out.

"Morning, Paul," he said with a smile. In nature, animals smile to show their teeth.

"Hello, Aaron," said Paul. He was visibly anxious.

"You doing Trivia Master this year?" said Aaron.

"We do Trivia Master every year," said Paul.

Aaron showed us his teeth again. "Good. It's going to be quite a year, you know. I'm glad to know that you're in the mix, I was afraid this year you might step out, it did get a little messy last time."

Paul could barely bring himself to look at Aaron. "...It is my last chance. I couldn't pass that up."

"Good. Contests like this just aren't all that fun without real competition, and there's so little around here. Well, I'll leave you to it." As Aaron walked away, I could hear him mutter something that sounded like "See you at the finish line."

All of this calls for some explanation. Trivia Master should be a gentleman's competition between intellectuals, but there are some people who treat it as a matter of blood and honor. Aaron Bellamy is one such person. He too has a strategy, but his does not account for the rules of the competition. He does not respect the game, nor his rivals. He sickens me, as he does all decent people. Fortunately, Aaron has never secured victory with his tactics. Unfortunately, he knows of no other way to play, and he will do so again.

Aaron's behavior is merely the opening salvo in his grand strategy. I have read much about these

tactics of his. In military parlance, the term is "psy-ops," but you would probably call it "mind games." Mind games are a favorite maneuver in Trivia Master, but Aaron is especially skilled in this field. It is important to inure one's self to such tricks when seeking the championship.

I turned back to Paul. "As I was saying, I've compiled a short list of candidates for the other two slots. This part isn't as scientific as the rest of my strategy, so I thought we could have a little back and forth. Are you paying attention?"

"Yes, Ken."

"Brian Booker, Karen Schumaker, Terry Brown...Jane Anders..."

The last name woke Paul up. "Jane's on your list?"

This was a bit of a mean trick on my part, but a necessary one. It is no secret to me or to any other thinking person that Paul has a terrible crush on Jane Anders. When it is necessary to draw his attention, all I have to do is mention her name. It is not that I do not want Jane on our team. I would love to add her fantastic 78 point-per-round average to our lineup. However, it was simply not a realistic proposition.

"It would be awesome if we had her on the team, she's great for literature and would really make us unstoppable," I said. "But you know she'll be going in with her friends, just like last year and the year before." Paul needs these reminders from time to time.

"Yeah." Paul looked defeated, but he kept going. "Who else you got?"

"I've been thinking about those fine arts questions. There aren't many, but I definitely remember there being more last year. They're real killers, too. You remember how we got screwed by those questions about symphonic music last year."

"And Broadway box office numbers. I still can't believe that one."

"Exactly." I shuffled through my personal notes. "Now, there aren't many teenagers who are going to know a lot about the arts, so I figure we're going to need a specialist, someone who lives and breathes this stuff. That's why I want to get Scott Carroll."

Paul looked puzzled. "Amateur dramatics Scott Carroll? Drama club kids don't do trivia."

"Well, it'll take some convincing, I'm sure. I just want to know if you're okay with him being on our team."

Paul shrugged. "Hey, I have no problem with Scott Carroll. I'm just wondering who you have in mind to take care of literature."

"You really want me to talk to Jane, don't you?"

"I don't know...you could ask." Paul was always very poor at hiding his embarrassment.

"Maybe I will. See you later, Paul."

Paul is a dreamer. Some days, it is wise to humor him and leave him to his dreams while I take care of our serious business. I had plenty to do and barely enough time to accomplish it all, and I certainly had no time to reassure him about Jane. It is not as though I had much to say to him, anyway.

In actuality, I had already picked out our fourth member. He had precisely the skills we needed to win the tournament. My preliminary estimates suggested a healthy 86% chance of victory with the full team – admittedly one with a low significance, given that I do not yet know the nature of the competition. However, I knew that my choice would displease Paul, and maybe even make him angry.

There are some decisions that simply have to be made. For Paul's sake, I will not involve him.

# JANE

Trivia Master? It's this thing I do.

I'm known in these parts as Jane Anders. Jane the Parent's Dream because I get good grades and never went out and got myself a baby or an addiction. That's a hell of a low bar to clear, but that's how it is in these parts. Yeah, I'm exceptional in some ways, but really I'm more of a lucky slacker. Everyone thinks that smart kids are always obsessed with school, but that ain't me. I do what I have to do to get by. I don't even really do clubs or activities anymore – well, other than Trivia Master.

So here's the long version. Trivia Master is this contest that they hold at Northwest High to determine who will be on the school's Scholar's Bowl team. I guess they couldn't come up with a better way to identify the best and brightest other than having their own mini-competition, or maybe the people who run this place thought it would make them famous. But whatever the motivation, Trivia Master is a lot of fun. It gets us out of class, and it gives me a chance to spend some quality time with my friends. Competition is bonding, and there's nothing that strengthens bonds more than teaming up with your friends and facing down people who really, really want to win.

Yeah, I suppose I should talk about that, too. Ask around Northwest and you'll hear all sorts of rumors about Trivia Master. Some of them get repeated every year – so–and–so put laxatives in someone's food right before a match, or some kid and his buddies cornered a competitor after school to shake him up a little. My favorite rumor was the one about the guy who sent his girlfriend to seduce some other girl's boyfriend, hoping it would break her concentration. They're just stories, ridiculous little fairy tales that we tell each other.

But here's the thing – some of those stories really are true. I've seen some shit go down with my own two eyes. Every year, someone dreams up some brand new trick, or brings back an old classic. The nastier it is, the more they love it. This kind of thing is bound to happen – put a lot of tightly-wound people in competition and some of them are going to seek out an edge, even if they have to flex their ethics to do it.

There will be a lot of that I'm sure, but I can't imagine I'll be seeing too much of it myself – not with my circle. Right now, I'd like to focus on my own Trivia Master experience.

All of this started the week before registration opened, around the time the serious competitors are assembling their super teams. I was hanging out in front of the school with Isabel Morelli. Isabel is an old friend of mine, which has to look very weird to most people. The two of us have nothing at all in common and really don't even run with the same crowd most of the time. She's a queen bee, a real heartbreaker type. Behind the glamor, she's really pretty smart – at least smart enough to know how to get everything she wants. My crowd is a little more reserved. I'm the tagalong, or maybe the project girl that everyone tries to "fix."

Now that I think about it, Trivia Master is one of the few things we can do together. We've been on the same team for three years in a row. Competing with her friends is strange, though, because these are people I do not interact with on a daily basis. Every year, it's "The Popular Kids And That Jane Girl Who Looks Really Awkward And Out-Of-Place." It doesn't bother me, though.

Honestly, it is nice to be able to hang with that crowd for a while. Makes me feel important.

This year was different, though. I knew it was going to be different after that Wednesday. Isabel turned to me and said, "You know what's coming up, right?"

"Sure do. You going to take care of everything this year?"

"Actually, that's what I wanna talk about. You think we could play with your friends this year?"

"My friends?" It was an unexpected request. I've spent a lot of evenings running after Isabel's friends, pretending that I fit in. I'm not sure that she's even met any of my friends, or even asked about them.

"Yeah, your friends. You know, try something different. It being the last year and all."

"Sounds good. Were you thinking of anyone in particular?"

"As a matter of fact, there are a couple people I was thinking of." Isabel pulled out a list, which is not something I saw coming. Lists are for the kids who build each year around this.

"You've been thinking about this?"

"Oh, just jotted down a few names I thought of in chem. I mean, you know them better than me, so you can make the decisions, but I would like to ask...oh, I don't know how to pronounce the name..."

"Hannah Bae?"

"Yeah yeah, her." Isabel was getting really animated – can't remember the last time I saw her that excited over anything, especially anything school-related. "So, you think you can talk to her?"

"Well, I have a class with her this afternoon, so that's easy enough."

"Great." Isabel stood up – not a wrinkle in the perfect little outfit of hers, which never ceased to amaze me. "You know, anyone you think might like to team with us. Hey, maybe we can even make it past the quarters this year, huh?"

Isabel isn't as subtle as she thinks she is. I don't know why, but this year she definitely wants to win. It was strange because she never really cared before, but I really didn't care why she cared. My friends ask to be on my team all the time, but they always lose out to Isabel's people. It's hard to overlook her motives, whatever they are, but I was willing to do it.

And then, she said something that made it extra hard to overlook her motives: "Maybe you'd even like to bring Paul on board?"

"You're kidding."

I haven't mentioned Paul Liston yet, have I? Oh, God. He's this kid who's been following me

around like a lost puppy for years, ever since...well, I have a theory, but that's a story for another time. He can barely bring himself to open his mouth around, and I'm sure he thinks he's being real subtle and that I don't know what's on his mind. A lot of people think it's sweet, but then again they don't have to put up with it. Look, if he would just ask me out on a date, I'd probably agree to it if only so that he could move on, but he seems to prefer this weird, dodgy little game. I just don't get it.

Here's the thing, though: Isabel can't stand Paul. I don't think a day has gone by that she hasn't called him a loser or an asshole or something in that vein.

"Seriously, Isabel, you want to be on a team with Paul Liston?"

Isabel laughed. "Oh no, I was just kidding. Who wants that asshole around, right? Just pick whoever you like."

It was a weird conversation, but I did what Isabel asked anyway. Call me a sucker.

You might be wondering why a popular, charismatic type like Isabel would send me to recruit the team. To understand that, you need to understand Hannah Bae. She was a year behind us when her family transferred in two years ago, but she was also so far ahead of the game that we wound up in a bunch of classes together. Quintessential overachiever, you know how it is. She's also the most painfully shy person I've ever met in my life. I think she had all of one friend – me. In three semesters, I never saw Hannah talk to anyone else. So the hard part wasn't going to be getting Hannah on the team, but rather getting her on stage.

But one step at a time. We had a chem lab during third hour, and as usual Hannah was my partner. It was a perfect opportunity. I waited until near the end of the hour, when we had a little bit of downtime, and then I slowly broached the subject.

"You hear about the trivia competition?"

"Yeah, I saw it last year." She kept her eyes down, like she usually does.

"I guess you did. We're putting together a team – Isabel and me, I mean."

"Okay."

"She's letting me pick the team this time."

"Good."

If that sounds awkward, it's because it was. I am not good at asking for what I want. Normally, I just hint at things until the other person figures it out. Obviously, that wasn't going to work with the most reserved person in the world.

So I just said it. "Okay, I've been talking with Isabel and she really wants you on the team. Honestly, I do too. It's a lot of fun and I think it would be a great opportunity for you. What do you say?"

Hannah just kept on looking down at her feet. Neither of us said anything for a good ten seconds after that. That's ten seconds of dead silence with someone I've been handling with kid gloves for the better part of two years. Really, I just wanted to apologize for the imposition and bolt for the door.

But eventually, the poor girl managed to force out a few words. "I really don't do so well in front of crowds."

"Well, I don't either." Pause. "Let me put it this way: Yes, it's a large crowd, but it's not like you're out there all alone. You're in a group, there's a buffer between you and everyone else. Plus it's dark in the auditorium. You can't even see the audience from the stage."

She stopped to think for a moment. "Isabel asked for me?"

"Asked for you by name. She said, 'Jane, I want you to get Hannah Bae on our team.'"

"She got my name right?"

"Absolutely." I'm not sure, but I think I had a big, ridiculous grin as I said that.

"Well, I guess if I'm needed, I can give it a shot."

"Terrific! You're gonna have a lot of fun."

"But, um...I've heard some stories about some of the things that kids have done to win."

"Oh, they're all exaggerating." There was that grin again. "It's just a game, there's no pressure at all."

I am really a terrible liar, but Hannah bought it all the way. Was she really that naïve, or just playing along for my benefit? Or maybe it's self-delusion? In any case, I had her on the team. That made three members on our real-deal competitive team, and I still had several days to fill out that last slot. It was all turning out so easy.

Too easy, really. Nothing ever goes this smooth. I have a terrible feeling about this.

# AARON

"Trivia." I hate that word. More precisely, I hate that dismissive little tone people always apply to the word, that trace of a sneer at the end. When people talk about "trivia," they imply that gaining knowledge for its own sake is a waste of time. "Worthless knowledge," there's another one. That one comes from the same little minds that turn their noses up at the space program or research into the fundamental elements of reality. If they can't use it to make you a fancy phone, it's no good, huh? There is no "worthless knowledge," only worthless people who can't comprehend the true power that knowledge holds. Ungrateful bastards. If I had my way, all of them would be out huddling around a fire in some godforsaken waste until they learned the proper respect.

"Worthless knowledge." With those two little words, they dismiss my entire being. My whole goddamn life since I was old enough to put two words together has been about achievement in the intellectual realm. Aaron Baines Bellamy, seven years old, taking his first overall win at the science fair. Aaron Baines Bellamy, eleven years old, taking the ACT and outscoring half the college-bound seniors in the room. Aaron Baines Bellamy, fourteen years old, cleaning up at the state forensics festival with his paper on the philosophy of mind. And none of it matters. No matter how much I achieve, I still have to put up with these subliterate couch jockeys who open their noise-holes to utter that phrase "worthless knowledge" right in my face.

That's why, for all my achievements, the one thing I've always really wanted to do was compete in the national Scholar's Bowl. Picture it – a whole league of people like me, all of them looking to show the world what a superior mind can do. A chance to escape from this festering mire of mediocrity, if only for a short time. But no, I never got a shot, and why? Trivia Master. The pursuit of knowledge turned into a cheap spectacle for the gratification of a braindead mass audience. Question lists bloated up with real trivia about pop culture fluff. They'd let us clear a round or two, then feed some easy queries to the other team and smack us right back down. We never had a fighting chance.

But I'm over that. You see, this year is different. It isn't about the competition, or Scholar's Bowl, or the pursuit of knowledge. It's about justice. It's about my chance to right a wrong that I've lived with for more than six years. It's about what I owe to one treacherous little worm, a backstabbing bastard whom I was once foolish enough to consider my friend, a scrawny little turd who thinks he can get away with anything because of who he is. Everyone knows what this year's Trivia Master is about. That's why they're all watching us. They're waiting to see us go head-to-head. They want to see blood. I don't plan on disappointing them.

And that is the only reason I actually sat down with that weasel Brian Booker.

"Aaron, are you with me?"

"Yeah, Brian."

"I know you're skeptical, but I've run the numbers on this."

"You've told me."

Let me set the scene for you. We're sitting in the library – me and Brian Booker and some kid

named Sid Richardson. He's supposed to be a real hot-shot local musician, one of those garage band heroes that everyone fawns over. Personally, I've never heard his work. It all sounds the same to me, anyway. Brian swears up and down that the kid is smart, though. Normally, I might accept his judgment, but I think he really just wants to hang out with a guitarist.

That day, he was still trying to convince me. "I've been talking to this guy, and he knows more about music than anyone I've ever met. You know how they pack those lists with music questions? Sid here will get us an extra twenty points a round, minimum."

The rocker piped in. "Yeah, man. And I can cover you on movies, sports, I'm pretty good on geography..."

"All right, Sid." I waved him off. "You don't need to sell me on this. Brian vouches for you, that's good enough for me.."

"Awesome!" said Sid. "Hey, you got a fourth guy yet? 'Cause I met this kid Leon who's looking for a team."

"Thanks." If I wanted your opinion, I'd ask for it. "I think we're going to pick out our fourth."

"Cool, man." The rocker stood up to leave, and not a moment too soon. "Hey, Aaron, want to trade numbers? I got Brian's but not yours."

"That's okay, Sid, I deal with all the team stuff," said Brian. I don't know if he sensed that I was getting irritated or if he just wanted another excuse to fawn like some starstruck sixth-grade girl. "I'll call you later, all right?"

"All right. Talk to you later, my man. And nice to meet you." Sid shot me some goofy little finger gun, and then he was gone.

Then it was just Brian and me, and I could already sense that he wanted to talk strategy. Brian can't seem to get it through his head that I don't care about strategy. That's his fixation, not mine. It's not like I enjoy his company, I brought him on board to serve a specific purpose. The whole reason he's here is so that he can worry about strategy and statistics and all that crap while I focus on the important parts. But no, I have to get daily briefings on what everyone else is doing.

"I've been keeping tabs on Jane Anders. Her team's going to be tougher than I thought."

"I'm not too worried." Brian seems to think that I should be scared of Jane. Why? I'm faster than her. I have a greater breadth of knowledge. I'm smarter in general. Why should I worry?

"You should be worried. Word is that she recruited Chong!"

"You mean Hannah Bae?"

"Well, yeah."

Scholar's Bowl participants love to give each other nicknames, but they're usually not this racist.

Hannah and her brother were on a team when they were in middle school that swept the regionals. Some of the idiots on the other teams – who had evidently never seen Asian people before – started calling them "Ching" and "Chong" and it stuck. Small minded pricks. The two of them aren't even of Chinese descent.

I wasn't about to start a fight over this, so I played it off. "What's your point, Brian?"

"We should get the brother...uh..."

"Andrew. His name is Andrew." Our strategist can't even remember the names of the people he wants to recruit. Racist little troll, I can't believe I'm going to share a stage with him. "I'll talk to him. There must be something he wants that I can get for him."

"Great! Let me know if he'll do it, because we don't have much time and all the good candidates will be taken soon."

"I'll tell you this afternoon."

I hate this. Competitions like this aren't supposed to be about gamesmanship or strategy. They're supposed to be a meeting of the minds, a contest of wills. In a just world, we wouldn't have to put up with any of this. It would just be me and Paul, *mano e mano* before the entire world. That's the only thing I'm interested in planning – just what I'm going to do to that backbiting pecker. It's not enough to beat him, not by a long shot. He has to be humiliated. I want him to limp off the stage in shame. I want him to hide the clippings from his children because it still stings him.

Damn it, I'm getting off track again. You're going to have to forgive me, this is all I can think about this time of year.

Andrew Bae was not an easy man to find. I heard he used to be a serious overachiever – enrolled in a half-dozen clubs at any one time, competitions most weekends, the whole nine yards. Then he moved here, and just faded right into the background. No more clubs, no more meets, nothing. It's such a waste, but not everyone can handle the pressure. Hell, this guy – the king of the Junior Scholar's Bowl – didn't even enter Trivia Master last year. People asked him, but he always turned them down.

But he said yes to me. It's just like I told Brian – everyone wants something. It's just a matter of figuring out what it is.

The only time I have to talk to Andrew is between classes. That meant staking out his locker, something I don't like doing but which is necessary at times. It gave me just five minutes to bring him around to my way of thinking. It took me a few tries before I ran into him, and once he did I didn't waste time with long introductions, I went right into my pitch

"Andrew? Aaron Bellamy. I don't want to waste your time, so I'll get right to it. I'm putting together a trivia team, and I need you on my side."

He just shrugged me off. "Sorry, I'm really not into that sort of thing."

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