

FREAK THE MIGHTY

look like maybe Freak is lying and a total goon like me would never get it, and I want to tell him he's wrong about Freak and the dictionary, but instead I just shut my face and go down under.

Grim, he's okay sometimes, like when Tony D. chased us into the pond, but most of the time he thinks he knows everything, which he doesn't. And if you don't believe me, look under "grim" in the dictionary, it sure doesn't say "a smart grown-up". No way.

So I'm hanging out down under, listening to some of my thrash tapes on the fake Walkman I got last Christmas, when Freak pops up on the side of my bed. Because of the headphones and the volume being pumped up to mega-decibel I never hear him come in, he's just suddenly *there*, like whoa! and I'll bet I jumped about a foot.

Freak rolls his eyes and goes, "Ah, music, how it calms the savage beast."

"How'd you get here?"

"Would you believe teleportation? No? Then I came down through the bulkhead door like always. And like always, I have a quest in mind."

Right away I go, "My feet hurt."

"We don't have to leave this neighbourhood."

"Cool. What kind of quest is this?"

RATS OR WORSE

Freak grins. "A treasure hunt. Except we don't really have to hunt because I already know where the treasure is."

"Where?"

"Underground," he says. "Specifically, in the sewer."

"Yeah, right," I say and sit back down on the bed. Freak is looking at me sideways and I can tell he's not telling me everything, which he almost never does, not all at once.

"Truth," he says. "The treasure is hidden in a storm drain. This has been confirmed by visual observation."

"Treasure in a storm drain? You mean like gold and diamonds kind of stuff?"

"Possibly," he says, acting mysterious. "Anything is possible."

The deal is, we have to wait until night, so no one can see us messing with the storm drain. Not just night, Freak says, we need to do it at exactly three in the morning.

"Optimum darkness occurs at oh-three-hundred hours," he says, looking at the new watch his mom gave him, the kind that tells you what time it is in Tokyo, just in case you're wondering. "We must dress in black and cover our faces with soot."

FREAK THE MIGHTY

For the next couple of hours we try to find soot, but it turns out you need a fireplace for soot, or at least a chimney, so Freak finally decides that my idea about using regular dirt will have to do.

"I've got black dungarees," I say, "but no black shirts. Can I just wear a dirty shirt?"

Freak makes a face and says, "What a *disgusting* idea. Don't worry about the shirt, I'll get you one. Can you manage black socks?"

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You ever notice how long it takes for things to happen when you know they're *supposed* to happen? My fake Walkman has a built-in alarm, and I set it for two in the morning and wear the headphones to bed, but before you can wake up you have to fall asleep, and I never *do* fall asleep because I keep waiting for the alarm to go off. Which is, I know, typical butthead behaviour.

I'm lying awake in the dark on a hot summer night and I'm thinking, *Treasure in the sewer? What kind of quest is this, huh? Is Freak completely making this up or what?*

Meanwhile there's this cricket making this creaky cricket noise that normally is okay, except when

RATS OR WORSE

you're trying to fall asleep then it's *not* okay, and you want a big can of Raid, send it to Disney World or insect heaven or wherever it is that dead crickets go.

Question: How come Freak knows about this stuff in the storm drain?

Question: How come we have to put dirt on our faces?

Question: How come three in the morning?

Question: How long do crickets live?

Finally I give up on the first three and work on the cricket problem, but the little critter is pretty clever, it stops cricketing whenever I get too close, and I never *do* find it and squash it with my shoe, which I swear I am ready to do, even if crickets are supposed to be harmless.

And then after almost for ever it gets to be two-thirty and I figure that's close enough, I'll go up and wait under Freak's window like I promised.

There's no moon, the sky is dark and empty, and the back yards are so lonesome it feels creepy and exciting – the truth is, I've never been out alone at this time of night.

I only fall down a couple of times, which isn't bad considering how hard it is to see. When I get to Freak's bedroom window, he's waiting for me.

"You sound like a car wreck," he says. "Here,

FREAK THE MIGHTY

you better put on this shirt so you don't glow in the dark."

Out of the window he hands me this silly-feeling shirt.

"Hey wait a minute, this is your mom's blouse!"

"It's black," he says. "That's what counts. The camouflage factor."

"Forget it," I say and give him back the Fair Gwen's blouse.

Freak sighs. "Okay," he says. "Roll around on the ground and darken yourself."

That's easy, and better than wearing some dumb blouse. "What about you?" I ask, when I'm covered with dirt, enough so I want to sneeze.

Freak goes, "Beware the Force, earthling," and he stands up in the window and I can see he's got a Darth Vader costume on, except he's not wearing the mask part. He opens the window all the way and I lift him out and put him on my shoulders.

He goes, "Pledge to me your fealty," and I say, "Huh?" and he says, "Never mind, there's no time to look up 'fealty'. Just promise you'll do what I say."

"I promise."

"Go to the end of the block," he orders. "Attempt to conceal us in the shadows."

RATS OR WORSE

That's easy, because the street is one big shadow. It's so dark I can hardly see my feet, or maybe I got some dirt in my eyes, but the point is no one sees us because there's no one to see us. You'd never know anybody lived here, let alone a whole blockful of people, it's like we're on an empty planet or something.

"Was the real Darth Vader as tall as this?" Freak asks from where he's riding high up on my shoulders.

"I thought it was just a movie."

"You know what I mean. What's that!"

"That" is a cat that runs out from under my feet so out-of-nowhere sudden that my heart goes *wham*.

"Was it a black cat?" Freak wants to know.

"Too dark to tell," I say. "Are we almost there?"

Finally I figure out it's hard to see because the Darth Vader cape is hanging in my eyes, but by then we're at the end of the block and the storm drain is right there by the kerb.

"See if you can pull it open," Freak says. He's standing with his arms folded, and the expression on his face – well, he really *does* look like a pint-sized Darth Vader.

I hook my hands in the storm drain grate and give it a heave but nothing happens.

FREAK THE MIGHTY

"I can't budge it."

"Try again," he says with his arms folded, like he's a lord of the universe.

I try again and it's like the grate is Super Glued or something. No way can I pull it up. Freak is tugging at my leg and he goes, "Option Two is now in effect."

He reaches inside his little cape. Out comes a flashlight, one of those small kinds that look sort of like a cigarette lighter, and also a spool of kite string.

"I devised a special retrieval device," Freak says.

"Looks like a bent paper clip on a string," I say, and Freak tells me to shut up and follow orders.

"You hold the string," he says, and then he gets down on his knees and shines the little flashlight through the grate. "Can you see it?" he asks. "Can you?"

I look, but it's hard to see anything and it smells like something died in the storm drain, which come to think of it, it probably did. Rats or worse.

"Down there," Freak says. "The beam is hitting it right now."

"That? That's just a piece of junk."

"Wrong," Freak says, real fierce. "It *looks* like a piece of junk. It may very well contain fabulous wealth. Drop the line down and see if you can hook it."

I'm thinking, boy, what a butthead, rolling in the

RATS OR WORSE

dirt for this little Darth Vader so he can play pretend games in the middle of the night, but I do what he asks, I drop the hook down, and much to my surprise, it actually hooks into something and when I pull up on the kite string I can see what it is.

"A purse," I say. "Looks like a grotty old purse."

"Careful," freak says. "Pull it up to the grate so I can grab the strap."

I bring it up an inch at a time, and Darth – excuse me, Freak – manages to get his small hand down through the grate and grab hold of the soggy old purse and then he almost drops it. I yank it up on the kite string and we both manage to squeeze the slimy purse up through the bars.

"Whew! Mission accomplished," Freak says.

The old purse is torn and wet, and I don't want to touch it unless I have gloves on.

"Gross," I say. "Somebody must have flushed this down a toilet."

"No way," Freak says. "I saw one of Tony D's punks stuff it down there yesterday morning."

"Yeah? They must have stole it."

"No doubt," Freak says, and he opens the clasp and points his little light inside the purse.

By now I know there isn't going to be any treasure, but still this is pretty cool, recovering stuff

FREAK THE MIGHTY

that Blade's gang ripped off from some little old lady or whatever.

"A wallet," Freak says, and he flips open this cheap-looking wallet, the kind that's made to hold credit cards.

There's no money inside, but there is a plastic ID card, and on the plastic card is a lady's name.

"Loretta Lee," Freak says. "I'll bet you anything she's a damsel in distress."

Which, as it turns out, is almost true. The real deal is that she's a damsel who *causes* distress. Which we find out the very next day.