

Sons of Nowhere Tales: “Strange and Unusual”

By Nicholas Almand

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Rough hands tore at Reese Mason's back, fumbling until they got a firm grip on his gym shirt. A strong pair of arms tore him off of Patrick Holden's chest. He continued to swing his fists, but he'd already been dragged halfway across the locker room. It was probably a teacher. Shit.

"Mason, what the hell is your problem?" the gym teacher, Coach-or-Mr. Lewis (he wasn't sure which) boomed in his ear.

"Dumbass tripped me!" Reese said, struggling to move his arms. Lewis was stronger than him by far, with a grip that he could only describe as "ex-military."

"You're making a hell of a first impression," the man said, loosening his grip as Reese relaxed his muscles. He noticed the snickering of the other boys once his heart stopped pounding. "This how you solve all your problems, Mason?"

Reese ignored the question. He went by "Ratt," anyway. It didn't sound especially flattering to most people, but he refused to part with the name. Last year, he had been playing the *Titanium Rain III* tablet game and the moniker was randomly assigned to his highest-level pilot. After spending countless hours beating the game, he'd grown quite attached to the handle.

"Mason! I asked you a question!" Lewis snapped. Ratt avoided his eyes. The gym teacher reminded him of a bad mix of a pig and a bull. Something about those squinty eyes and bulky body just put him off. He let the moment boil, refusing to acknowledge Lewis's increasingly intense glare.

“If you’re going to be like that, you’re suspended the rest of the week,” Lewis helped Patrick Holden up off the floor. His nose was bleeding. Good. That’s what he gets. This wasn’t Ratt’s first time at a new school, and the one thing they all had in common is that you couldn’t let people think they could fuck with you.

“Now get changed and go the hell home!”

Ratt slipped out of his gym clothes and back into his hoodie and jeans, careful not to change his socks. He was already short for his age; the other guys didn’t need another reason to mess with him. He couldn’t avoid taking his socks off for the tail end of the swimming unit last week, but he was sure nobody had noticed his feet. Well, kind of sure. Nobody had asked any awkward questions, anyway.

The halls of Eos-Seline Secondary School were crowded when the bell rang. Not that it was too surprising, really. ESSS had to serve as both the middle school and high school for Acis Island. The place stank, though. Half of it was from kids who hadn’t figured out that daily showers were a must, and the other half came from the high school students obsessed with perfume, cologne, and overdoing it on body spray. Ratt slid between cliques of babbling morons, imagining himself as a fish swimming through a reef full of giggling anemones.

“Reese?”

Ratt only half-heard the girl’s voice piping up amongst the wall of chatter. She was probably talking to a different kid named Reese. He kept his eye on the commons area, just outside the front door. With first lunch just starting up, he could slip off school grounds without too much suspicion. The last thing he wanted to do was explain his suspension to a bunch of teachers and random security guards.

“Reese? Reese Mason?”

Great, it was probably a young-sounding counselor or something. Who uses a guy’s full name with a good reason, anyway? Ratt stopped and turned to the source of the voice, making sure to roll his eyes for good measure.

“Oh, hey!” standing before him was a girl in his grade, Tessa Vasquez. Ratt was genuinely surprised to find he recognized her from his English Literature class. She wore black, sort of frilly clothing and crazy-looking hats whenever she could get away with it.

Despite the black outfits, she never hung out with the beach-goth kids who liked to skip school and smoke under the docks.

“Uh, hey,” Ratt said. He felt a little bad for rolling his eyes at her. She seemed nervous, shifting her weight from foot to foot.

“Um, there’s a thing I have to do for AP History. I need to do some independent research for it, and—well, first, it’s about Joseph Merrick, so, to do independent research on it Mrs. Pavel said I could interview someone who also had a… Well, not that your toes are the same! But yeah, would you want to do that?”

Ratt stared at the girl for a moment. She was rapidly turning red.

“Excuse me?” Ratt said.

“Sorry!” Tessa squealed and ducked back into the crowd. Ratt furrowed his brow as he slipped past a trio of seventh graders and out the door. He made a beeline through the commons area, trying not to catch anyone else’s eye.

Joseph Merrick? First of all, who the hell was Joseph Merrick, and why would she need his help to do a paper on him?

He’d just figure it out at home.

The loading station for the Helios Rail System was nearly empty when Ratt slid his student ID over the ticket reader. He thanked God that students got to ride for free. It was gonna be a good ten minutes before the train left the school, and another forty before it found its way to the Cronus District.

The only other people leaving school this early were several other kids who probably got in trouble for one reason or another, and a ninth grader who looked like she had just thrown up. Ratt pretended to crack his neck and crossed his arms. To hell with letting any of these morons think he was an easy target.

Ratt’s face felt hot as he scanned the crowd. A few of the guys were kinda cute, especially the senior with coffee-colored skin and an almost shaved head from the soccer club.

Another stand-out was a chubby nerd in a red collared shirt. With his big nose and his eyes behind a pair of thick glasses, he had a face that reminded Ratt of a koala. Ratt was instantly jealous of his flip-flops, though. They looked comfy as hell, but there was

no way Ratt would ever be able to wear them in public. He figured the kid was probably a sweetheart, but also probably straight.

The senior was a possibility, though. The way he fidgeted waiting for the train was sort of effeminate, at least. Ratt studied him, perking up as he placed his hands at his hips, almost gripping his own ass. Yeah, there was a possibility. Well, there was if he could ever work up the courage to talk to him, anyway. You never knew how guys would react if you guessed wrong. Ratt smiled a little and imagined the two of them holding hands, Ratt resting his head on his shoulder—

The roar of the train ripped Ratt from his fantasy.

“Took long enough!” the senior said. Ratt entered the train in silence, following behind the nerd.

The ride back home was almost silent, with most of the other kids texting on their cell phones or messing around with their school tablets. The school was supposed to have pretty severe internet restrictions on their tablets, but after years of recycling the same tablets among the student body, just about all of the tablets had been hacked to allow unlimited access.

Ratt took out his headphones and plugged them into his tablet. Within seconds he was much calmer, jamming out to old KandyApple MP3s. In many ways, their music was a personal haven for him. It was perfect train-riding music, Ratt thought, a mix of grunge and electronica that always seemed to match his mood and uplift it at the same time.

KandyApple only ever released one album in Sweden, and there wasn't much information available about the band. Even the most recent official references to them online were at least two decades old. Still, all of their songs were available for free from the KandyApple Fan Page. The fact that nearly no one else had heard of KandyApple, much less listened to them, made Ratt feel like he was part of the music somehow. It was hard to explain, but it almost felt like KandyApple existed just for him.

Ratt's tablet buzzed. He ignored it, keeping his eyes on the map of the Helios Rail System printed just above the seats. He still wasn't good at this whole “riding the train” thing. Of all the weird things on Acis Island, the thing that weirded Ratt out the most was the utter lack of cars. Sure, there were a few super-rich people in the Hyperion District who had little electric cars for trips around town, but otherwise everybody took the train

or walked. It made sense, really. Acis Island was way out off the coast of California, and pretty much everything had to be shipped in. Nobody was gonna pay to have a car sent from overseas except rich people.

Ratt's tablet buzzed again. He groaned as it continued to buzz, vibrating the entire backpack like an oversized cell phone. After the fifth consecutive buzz, Ratt wrenched it out of his backpack and typed his password into the touch screen.

He should have expected this. His inbox on ES Student Chat was flooded with texts from Patrick Holden, all badly spelled variations of "fuck you" or "I'm gonna kick your ass." Ratt tapped the "report" option listed under each text. He wrinkled his nose at the lack of a "block sender" option. One by one, the messages disappeared, though they were rapidly replaced with incoming profanity.

One text caught his eye, though. Tessa Vasquez was asking where he'd gone, since he hadn't shown up to English Lit.

"Suspended till Monday," Ratt replied and put the tablet into sleep mode. It continued to vibrate the rest of the way to the Cronus District.



Even though nobody would admit it publicly, the Cronus District was where Acis Island put all its poor and working class people. Rent was pretty cheap, especially for Ophion Foundation employees, and it was pretty obvious that nobody who had money would live in the jam-packed apartment complexes that made up the district.

Sure, they tried to pretty the place up for tourists. The exteriors of all the buildings in the Cronus District looked amazing, damn near futuristic with a spotless design sense. They reminded Ratt of the luxury apartments he'd seen in photos of Dubai.

The interiors, however, were a ridiculously different story. Almost without fail, the Cronus District apartments were dirty and run-down on the inside, as if nobody had seen the need to clean them or fix anything since they were built. Case in point: there was a pile of soiled clothes and old towels in the lobby of Ratt's building that had been there since before his family moved in.

Ratt exited the train, noting that he got off at the same stop as the nerdy kid from earlier. He snickered a little when the kid hopped out of the train door and almost lost a sandal under the terminal platform. Ratt decided to follow him from a distance and see if he could find out where he lived. Not that he was stalking him or anything, just curious.

The kid turned at the corner, in the direction of the 7-Eleven. Probably picking up lunch or something, Ratt guessed. He chuckled with a mix of amusement and frustration. Not going to figure out his secret today: not without following him like a creeper, anyway. It was just as well. He still had to decipher Tessa's weird request and see if he could find a way to block Patrick Holden's texts. Ratt shrugged his shoulders and headed home.

The pile of clothes and towels greeted Ratt as he placed his student ID under the sensor at the entrance to the tiny lobby. The place stank of cigarette smoke and old sweat. He made his way up the stairs to his parents' apartment on the second floor. It had been a lucky find, made it a hell of a lot easier to move in than if they'd ended up on the 15th floor like the complex down the street had offered.

Ratt hesitated at the door. His mom was still at work, but his dad would almost certainly be home. Shit. He had to come up with a good reason to be home so early. Not

that his dad really cared if Ratt was in trouble or not. He just thought that it made him look bad if Ratt was screwing up at school or whatever. And really, even that depended on whether it was a weed night or a beer night.

Ratt sniffed at the door. Weed night. Thank god. He slid his ID through the lock and stepped inside.

“Ey, Reese! School let out early?” Ratt’s father’s voice came from the couch. Ratt let out an affirmative grunt. If he didn’t tempt a conversation, he could at least get to his room without having to explain anything. When his dad didn’t reply, Ratt slipped into his room and locked the door.

Ratt kicked the piles of clothes out of the way, making a path to his bed. He fell backwards onto the mattress and turned his tablet on. There were another thirty or so texts from Patrick Holden. Was he really going to keep this up? It started out annoying, but this was getting obsessive. There was another message from Tessa buried in there, at least.

“Oh no! Can you meet after school instead?” it read. Kind of assuming a lot, Ratt thought. He still didn’t know what the hell he had to do with her Joseph Merrick project, anyway. As long as it was on his mind, Ratt opened the web browser on his tablet and did a quick search for “Joseph Merrick.” His breath seized up when the results came back.

The Elephant Man. Birth defects. Major deformities. A freak.

So that’s why she wanted to talk to him.

Ratt rubbed his feet against the carpet, absently sliding his socks off. He looked down at his feet and scowled.

No middle toes. Four toes each: eight total. Born that way. He wiggled his toes, willing two more to materialize as though they’d been there all along. Just like every other time he imagined it, though, nothing happened.

“Reese!”

Crap, what now?

“Reese, come help me find the phone!”

Ratt set aside the tablet and unlocked the door to his room.

“Did you check the couch?” he said.

“First place I checked,” Ratt gauged his father’s tone. Wasn’t exactly calm, but he wasn’t pissed yet, either.

Ratt pushed the door open and approached the combination living room and kitchen. His father had overturned half the place, and was currently rummaging through the silverware. He’d already been through all the obvious places he might’ve misplaced the phone. If this went on too much longer, it could turn into a beer night.

“Hang on, let me try calling it,” Ratt said. He ran back to his room and tapped his father’s name on his contacts list. No answer, just voice mail. Must be drained.

“You calling it?” his father said.

“Just tried,” Ratt said. “I think the battery’s dead.”

“Forget it, just get back in here and help me look.” Ratt heard the refrigerator door open. His heart sank as he walked back out to the kitchen.

“God dammit, Reese, would it kill you to put some socks on?” his father snapped, an unopened beer in his hand. Fucker hadn’t even started drinking and he was already on about this. He was going to be impossible pretty soon. He acted like Ratt’s bare feet were some kind of challenge to his manhood, like he had defective sperm or something. And somehow by treating Ratt like shit for it, it was going to prove something? Ratt never got the connection. It was fucking stupid, regardless.

“I’ll check the lobby,” Ratt said, stuffing his feet into his shoes. He shoved his tablet into his backpack and shuffled out the door. There was no point in staying there until his mom came back; it was just going to be another headache that Ratt didn’t need. He ran down the stairs and set out for the train station.



Ratt hadn't realized that he'd fallen asleep on the train until his tablet's buzzing roused him. It was from Tessa.

"Hey, want to come over?" it said. Maybe if it was that nerdy kid asking, he would. This chick thought he was good material for a paper on the Elephant Man.

"Is this about how I'm the Elephant Man or something?" Ratt typed back.

The reply came almost immediately.

"OMG I totally didn't mean for you to think that I think you're the Elephant Man!"

"What?"

"You're not the Elephant Man, I swear! I just never met anybody with a... yeah."

Ratt squinted at the tablet screen. Was she really going to try to make him say "deformity" first? Wouldn't be the first time someone danced around the topic. Tessa texted him again before he could respond.

"Sorry! I didn't mean to offend you."

"I'm not offended."

"Yeah you are, I can totally tell! I'm so sorry if I said anything bad!"

Ratt thought about it for a minute, mulling over the answers he could give. Tessa seemed friendly enough. She didn't seem to have a lot of other friends, so the chances of her sharing a giggle about how she messed with the deformed kid's head were pretty slim. Still, something bugged him about the whole thing.

"How did you find out?"

Tessa didn't reply for a while. Ratt continued.

"How do you know I didn't just have an accident or something?"

"I don't think I should say."

"Why not?"

"Someone in AP History told me about it. I think they like you."

Ratt's heart started pounding. She was playing the pronoun game. "Someone" and "they" usually meant "he" when you were trying to gauge a guy's reaction.

"Who is it?"

“I don’t think I should say, Reese.”

“Call me Ratt. Look, if I agree to do this interview thing, will you tell me?”

Another long pause. Ratt’s breath was caught somewhere between his chest and his mouth. Just say yes already!

Tessa’s reply came at last.

“Okay, Ratt.”

Ratt smiled; his face warm. His fingers danced across the touch screen, letting the feeling spread down his neck and into his chest.

“So where do you wanna meet up?”

“Can you come over tomorrow after school?”

“Yeah, probably. I’m still suspended.”

“I meant to ask about that. What happened?” A sad face icon punctuated her message, weeping huge cartoon tears. It struck Ratt as strangely adorable.

“Nothing, just a fight with some asshole. How do you block people on ES Chat, by the way?”

“You really can’t. You can report them, but it just sends a form letter about e-bullying to their inbox. If you report enough of their texts, it sends one to their parents, too, I think. Either way, there’s nobody actually involved. You’re just going to have to deal with the fact that I’m not going anywhere.” The message ended in a winking smiley face. Ratt answered with a smiley face of his own, only his stuck its tongue out playfully.

Tessa’s next message came with a link attached.

“Want to see something freaky? This was outside my window two nights ago.”

Ratt thumbed over the link and a video immediately started playing. It was Tessa, in what was apparently her room: a gothic-looking place covered in eerie dolls and diagrams of conjoined twins, babies with three legs, and all other manner of creepy shit. Scanning the pictures on Tessa’s walls, Ratt was suddenly grateful that his toes were the only thing wrong with him. The spider web rug was pretty badass, though.

Tessa then turned the camera to the window, catching the Acis Island skyline. It looked like she lived in one of the luxury condos in the Hyperion District. The beach was in the distance, lit up with the blue street lamps that gave it a dreamlike quality at night.

One thing in particular caught Ratt's eye, though. One of the stars in the sky seemed to be growing in size.

"Are you watching?" Tessa's text popped in at the bottom of the video. Ratt ignored it.

The star was moving faster and faster, zigzagging across the frame too quickly for the camera to catch all of it. The light continued to grow, moving closer to Tessa's window. As it drew nearer, Ratt could make out six long, thin beams protruding out of the center of the thing. Ratt thought they almost looked like insect legs, but that made even less sense than the light itself. It stopped dead in front of Tessa's window for a moment before it abruptly shunted off and disappeared into the night. Ratt re-watched the video twice, looking for signs of obvious CGI or other special effects. He suddenly felt cold, realizing there were none.

"What the hell was that?" Ratt typed.

"I have no idea. It shows up almost every night, but nobody seems to care."

"How does nobody care? You have it on video!"

"The security officers said it's not a priority if it's not causing any damage. I uploaded the videos on Skywatchers Universal if you want to see more of them."

"That's crazy as hell."

"If you stay for dinner tomorrow, you'll get to see it in person."

Ratt groaned at the mention of dinner. He didn't have a cent on him, and there was no way he was going back home until after midnight. Ratt set the alarm clock on his tablet to 11:45 and put it away, fluffing his backpack into a makeshift pillow. The train looked deserted anyway, and nobody had robbed him while he was sleeping before.

He must have hit the snooze button in his sleep, because the apartment was dark when Ratt returned at half past one. The place was still a mess, with all of the pots and pans scattered on the floor and random keepsakes strewn everywhere. The remains of a bunch of Hot Pockets had been left out on the stove. The whole place smelled like pepperoni.

Ratt whispered a string of curses when he got to his room. His closet was a wreck, clothes torn from their hangers and strewn all over the floor. All of his drawers had been emptied and thrown against the walls. His bed was littered with old band t-shirts,

notebooks, pencils, underwear, and dirty socks. Ratt cleared enough room on the bed to lie down and locked the door. Exhausted, he slumped onto the bed and shut his eyes.



“Did you watch the other videos?” the newest message on the tablet buzzed insistently, rousing Ratt from his slumber. Ratt stared at it for a moment, letting his eyes adjust to the sunlight pouring in through the window. He checked the time. 11:21 AM. His mom was already at work, and his dad wouldn’t be up for another hour, at least.

Another message popped up on the screen.

“Oh my god, there’s totally a sea monster in California right now!”

A link followed with a thumbnail preview of its contents. It looked like the back of a giant lobster with a spade-shaped head floating in a bay somewhere. Ratt squinted at the image and closed the link without watching it.

“Creepy,” he replied.

“What are you doing the rest of the day?”

Maybe it was the fact that she woke him up or the sight of his room in shambles, but the message struck Ratt as a test; as if Tessa thought he might have forgotten about the interview. He felt a surge of anger run up his arms and into his fingers.

“I dunno, probably spending all night talking about my least favorite subject with a girl I just met yesterday.”

Tessa didn’t reply. Just as well. If he got lucky, he wouldn’t have to go to her place at all. Ratt dug through the pile, looking for a pair of clean socks, but there were none. He pulled on a pair of dirty socks, noting that his big toe was visible through a hole in the left one. At least the colors matched.

Ratt pawed through the pile of shirts and threw on a sleeveless hoodie over a t-shirt advertising “Some Indie Band.” He thought about changing into a pair of shorts, but his jeans from last night were still in respectable condition. All that remained were his headphones and tablet. Satisfied, he grabbed a Pop Tart from the mess in the kitchen and rushed to the train station.

Ratt spent the next hour riding the train, listening to KandyApple and flipping through “Let’s Play *Titanium Rain III*” videos. It pleased him to note that none of the other players had scored “Ratt” as a handle for any of their pilots. As lunchtime came and went, Ratt fought to ignore the knots in his stomach and turned his attention outside.

From the train window, either of the twin beaches looked like as good a place as any to hang out. Acis Island's two beaches were set opposite each other on the artificial lake at the center of the city, one for the Hyperion District and one for the Cronus District. They were mostly populated by adults and very small kids at this hour, but there were pockets of other teenagers here and there. Once the train crossed downtown, Ratt disembarked at Hyperion Beach. He immediately regretted this decision when the first grains of sand began to seep into his shoes.

A crowd of beach-goths leered at Ratt from one of the private docks that littered the Hyperion side. They were laughing at something. Him? Ratt's throat seized up and he was suddenly afraid to breathe. The guys were all in black Hawaiian shirts and lace-up shorts, with the girls in black sundresses or swimsuits covered in inverted pentagrams. Lots of piercings, lots of bracelets, painted nails, and anklets. All in sandals or barefoot, Ratt noted bitterly. He had to admit he wasn't dressed for this side of town, much less the beach. He thought goths weren't supposed to care about that kind of shit.

Ratt found an open bench on the far edge of the beach and sat down, forgetting to brush the layer of sand caked on its surface. The beach-goths kept laughing, apparently sharing some in-joke Ratt couldn't decipher no matter how hard he strained his ears. He pulled out his tablet and drowned out the noise with KandyApple lyrics. Ratt checked his ES Chat inbox. Nothing from Tessa since that morning, but her link to the sea monster in California was as prominent as ever. Maybe he *had* hurt her feelings.

Ratt clicked the link and immediately paused the video. The right side of the screen was covered in links to footage of UFO sightings from Skywatchers Universal. Most were strange lights in the sky, but none of them quite matched what Tessa had shown him last night. He recognized Tessa's screen name attached to one of the promoted videos and clicked. It wasn't the same clip, but it was definitely the same weird light in the sky, winding around the city like a gigantic firefly.

Besides Tessa's videos, only the other clips from Acis Island seemed to show a UFO with a remotely similar build. It was all in the six weird insect-legs. That detail seemed to be unique to this particular thing, at any rate. The object also turned out to be quite a bit smaller than Ratt had originally thought, only about the size of a dumpster or a very small car. The six beams, though, looked to be three times as long as the object was

tall. After checking it out from so many angles, it really did look like a six-legged spider made of light. Ratt barely realized he was typing before he'd sent a text to Tessa.

“So what do you think it is?”

A song went by with no answer. Dammit! Was she really not going to talk to him?

“I'm sorry about earlier.”

Another song went by. Still no answer. Come the fuck on! He'd apologized already, so what the hell?

“There's just some shit going on at home that I really don't wanna deal with. Shit just kind of sucks right now, you know?”

That was as much as he was going to say about it. It was on her now. If she was going to ignore him, he definitely wasn't going to do that damn interview! He didn't need Tessa anyway, he'd figure out which guy liked him one way or another. It's not like he wasn't going right back to school on Monday!

Ratt listened to KandyApple's entire album twice before the tablet buzzed again. His fingers flew as he fumbled with the password. He couldn't click the inbox fast enough.

“Hi Ratt! Sorry about being so quiet, I was in English Lit. But school's out now! Yay!”

Tessa's text was quickly pushed down the list by a string of messages that called him a “sucker punching pussy.” God dammit, Patrick Holden. He reported them all and typed back to Tessa.

“So you're not mad?”

“Mad about what? I've been at school all day, you silly!”

Oh. That made much more sense.

“So where are you, Ratt? Do you still want to come over after school? We're having sloppy joes!”

It occurred to Ratt that he hadn't had anything to eat since the Pop Tart that morning. He'd skipped dinner last night, too. As much as he didn't want to think he was being bribed into doing the interview, sloppy joes sounded awesome. When he thought

about it, he was already kind of being bribed into the interview with the identity of the mystery boy. But screw it, sloppy joes just sounded way too awesome.

“At the beach. Want to meet at the station?”

Tessa responded almost immediately.

“Which beach? I’m getting on the train now.”

“Hyperion. You live near there, right?”

“I do! See you soon!” Tessa’s text spawned an animated heart that floated around the screen like a balloon. After letting it bounce off the edges of the screen a few times, Ratt tapped the icon with his finger. The heart disappeared with a popping sound.

It only took three more songs for Tessa to arrive at the train station. She skipped down the terminal steps with a wide grin on her face, bounding past a half-dozen other students like a hyperactive game of checkers. She stopped at the edge of where the concrete met the sand.

“Ratt! Over here!” A few kids looked at her quizzically, but she carried on. “My house is only a few blocks away!”

“Hey,” Ratt said. He jogged to Tessa’s side, relieved that he didn’t have to type on a touch screen to speak to her anymore.

“I hope you’re ready for the interview!” Tessa was positively giddy, giggling madly to herself as they started down the walkway. “I promise I won’t ask you anything embarrassing or gross or anything like that.”

“What could you ask me that would be gross?” Ratt could think of a lot of questions that would be embarrassing.

“I dunno,” Tessa said. “Like, if you ever used it to get girls to like you.”

“Huh?” Ratt could scarcely even believe what he heard. There were too many things running through his mind about how completely wrong that statement was to say anything coherent. “I don’t... Oh my God, I don’t even know where to begin!”

“You don’t have to *answer* it,” Tessa laughed. “I told you it would be a gross thing to ask!”

“If I tell you something will you promise to be cool about it?” Ratt laughed nervously. You never could tell how this would turn out. If she was super religious or the type of girl who wanted to be a fag hag, things could get infuriating in a hurry. Ratt

looked behind them to check for potential eavesdroppers. They were already three blocks away from the terminal. If she started freaking out, Ratt could still sprint there without having to stop.

“Sure,” the look on her face worried Ratt. He could tell she’d already guessed what he was about to say, but he couldn’t figure out what she was thinking. She was either suppressing a squeal of delight or preparing to draw a Bible on him.

“I, um,” the words got caught in his throat. Shit! He’d practiced this sort of thing in the mirror for when he would eventually tell his parents, but for some stupid reason having another person there threw it all off!

“Kind of like, uh, I don’t really want that. A girlfriend, I mean.”

“Do you want a boyfriend?” Tessa’s face was unreadable. Either that or the nerves were getting to him. Why couldn’t she just hug him or freak out and get it over with?

“Um, that’s... Fuck. Kinda, yeah,” Ratt coughed and looked down at his shoes. This was nothing like in the movies.

“Oh,” Tessa’s eyes fell. Ratt’s heart stopped for a second. Please don’t start about Jesus, please don’t start about Jesus!

“I suppose I should just tell you who likes you in my history class, then.”

“Huh?” Ratt’s heart started beating again.

“Yeah,” Tessa continued, sighing heavily. “It’s the twins, Sarah and Anna Roland.”

“Wait, it’s not a guy?” Ratt balked. “But you were totally playing the pronoun game before!”

“Well, you might have guessed if I said that it was two girls in my class! Plus I have to say ‘they’ when there are two of them!” Tessa said. She suddenly looked worried, clasping Ratt’s hand. “You’ll still do the interview, right?”

“Well duh,” Ratt said, blowing a long puff of air into his bangs. Figures it’d be a couple of chicks. That was totally his luck. “I said I would, didn’t I?”

“Oh thank God!” Tessa breathed an exaggerated sigh of relief. “I thought you were going to run away for a second there!”



“ID’s, please,” a burly Ophion Foundation security officer greeted the two of them at the entrance to Tessa’s complex. He seemed to recognize Tessa, taking less than a second’s glance at her student ID before letting her through the door. He took his time with Ratt’s, though, eyeing him up and down with an air of suspicion so obvious that he might as well have accused Ratt of forging it.

“Go ahead,” he said. Ratt swore the guard sounded disappointed.

The main lobby of the complex was enormous, easily the size of the entire first floor of Ratt’s apartment building. An abstract sculpture made to resemble two people ballroom dancing dominated Ratt’s field of vision, and the ceilings were the highest he’d ever seen outside of a movie. Several kids followed them in, but they scattered to such disparate sections of the lobby that Ratt couldn’t keep track of any of them.

“Holy shit, you actually live here,” Ratt said, more of a statement than a question. Tessa giggled and took his hand.

“Come on, I’ll show you the elevators,” she said.

Another security guard met them at the elevators and re-checked their IDs. Ratt observed that unlike the one at the entrance, this guard was armed with an actual pistol. At least he didn’t stare at Ratt like he was planning to rob the place. The guard pressed a button inside the elevator and let the two on board.

The first thing that struck Ratt on the way up was that the floor in the elevator was carpeted. It was like standing in his room, but without all the furniture.

“We’re almost there,” Tessa said, bouncing up and down on her toes. “It’s the 35th floor.”

“I know,” Ratt said. He couldn’t help but betray his jealousy a little. “It was hard not to notice when the armed butler pressed the button for us.”

“Oh that’s Muhammad. He’s really nice,” Tessa grinned. Ratt gave a half-hearted laugh. As long as he’d been alive, nobody with a gun and a badge was ever “nice.” A lot of other, less flattering words came to mind, though.

The elevator made a weird honking noise and the doors opened.

Tessa's family condo was enormous; easily five times the size of Ratt's apartment. He found it almost unreal, disturbed by how astonishingly clean it was on top of its sheer size. There was nothing on the floor, no stains in the carpet, and the toaster, microwave, and refrigerator looked like they'd never even been used. It looked like the sort of place people would mock-up for a TV show.

They both took their shoes off at the door. Seeing the state of Tessa's home, Ratt pulled at his sock discretely, rotating it until the hole was safely hidden underfoot.

"I'm home, dad!" Tessa said. "Don't be alarmed, but I brought a boy with me!"

Ratt instantly froze. A large man in his late 40's emerged from a room that was too deep into the condo for him to see. He had a beer gut and the sort of bushy mustache that either meant he was friendly, or meant he was *too* friendly. He had to be her father, even if his skin was noticeably darker than hers.

"Your mother will be home around midnight," Tessa's dad raised an eyebrow, eyeing Ratt. "Is this the same boy you've been talking about all week?"

"Um, yeah," Tessa blushed. "We're going to do that interview thingy today."

"Well, it's about time," her dad laughed, turning to Ratt. It was a loud, joyful bellow that reminded him of a mall Santa. "She's been trying to ask you about that project since your second day at school, did you know that? When did she finally go ahead and do it?"

"Y-yesterday," Ratt said, feeling too awkward to say anything more.

"That sounds like my little girl," Tessa's dad laughed again and gestured to a huge pot on the stove, positioned next to a pile of paper plates and hamburger buns. Ratt smiled a little. "Go ahead and pick up some sloppy joes. Take as many as you want, we made more than enough."

"Thank you, sir!" Ratt said, scooping sloppy joe meat into the buns. The smell was intense, with a blend of American and Mexican spices mixing with the smell of cooking beef. Ratt couldn't stop himself from wolfing the first one down as soon as he'd made it. The second and third sloppy joes didn't even make it out of the kitchen.

"You got a pretty big appetite for such a little kid," Tessa's dad chuckled in a way that told Ratt he meant no offense. Ratt smiled, savoring the flavor of sloppy joes in his

mouth. He felt like dancing, but he hoped Tessa's father couldn't tell how hungry he really was.

"Tessa, go ahead and do your interview thing in your room," Tessa's dad said, as though he'd debated the point with Tessa before. "Just keep the door open, okay?"

"Okay!" Tessa grabbed Ratt's wrist and led him to her room.

It was definitely the same room from Tessa's video. The various photos of people with severe birth defects were much bigger than he expected, and to his horror, he could see them much more detail than they appeared on the video. Was this how Tessa thought of him? Did she see him in the same light as the woman with enormous legs or the boy with 31 fingers and toes?

The spider web rug was still badass, though. Ratt sat down on it and crossed his legs, hoping Tessa hadn't noticed the hole in his sock.

"Um, want to get started?" Tessa said, her voice quivering a little. "But uh, do you mind if I get a few pics? Of your feet, I mean. For the written portion of the project?"

"I don't care," Ratt said. He should have expected this, really. He sighed and tugged at his socks. Tessa let out a loud squeal when his toes came into view.

"Geez!" Ratt wrinkled his nose at her. "They're not that horrible!"

"No no no," Tessa said. "That's not it at all! They're just so *cute*!"

"What?" Ratt's couldn't help but shake his head. This was new, to say the least. Most people acted like they were going to puke when they saw his feet. The only thing really wrong with them was the lack of a middle toe, but the normal reaction was always somewhere between "grossed out" and "stay the hell away from me."

"They're... cute," Tessa said, hiding her face in her hands. "Sorry."

"No, it's okay," Ratt cracked a hint of smile. "I'm just not used to that."

"You don't think I'm weird?" Tessa's face emerged from behind her fingers.

"Nope," Ratt said. "No weirder than me, anyway. I'm the one with the stupid feet."

"They're not stupid," Tessa giggled. "They're unique."

"Okay, *now* you're weird," Ratt laughed. Damn, this conversation would be so much more awesome if Tessa were that cute chubby kid.

“You shouldn’t be ashamed of them. Who else in the world can say they grew up with exactly eight toes?” Tessa said. “Do you have any idea how rare that is?”

“I gotta be honest. I’ve never really thought about it,” Ratt said, placing his hands over his toes.

“It’s called oligodactyly,” Tessa smiled, pulling Ratt’s right hand away from his foot and poking his toes with her finger. “It’s super rare actually for it to happen on its own, and not part of another syndrome or something.”

“Sometimes people end up with just two toes on each foot, or only two fingers on each hand. That’s usually ectrodactyly, though, the thing Lobster Boy had,” Tessa pointed to a photo on her wall. Ratt’s eyes went wide. The picture showed a teenaged boy displaying his bare hands and feet. It was enough that he only had two digits each, but the gap between them was so wide and deep that they honestly did look more like lobster claws than human limbs.

“But it’s really rare to have it the way you do,” Tessa poked his toes again and Ratt let out a sharp laugh. Her nails tickled. “Usually it’ll just be on one foot or one hand, or both of them with different amounts of digits. Actually, it’s really lucky that both of your feet are the same!”

Ratt pulled his foot out of her reach. He was anything but lucky.

“So really, you’re one in a million,” Tessa said, ignoring Ratt’s expression. She giggled. “And trust me, I really can’t tell unless I count your toes.”

“Huh,” Ratt avoided her gaze. He could tell Tessa was counting his toes, over and over. It made him feel a little pale, but it wasn’t an entirely bad feeling. At least she wouldn’t yell at him if he decided to wear sandals someday.

“Um, mind if I take the pictures now?” Tessa held up her tablet, pointing the little black circle on the back towards Ratt.

“I guess,” Ratt said, uncrossing his legs so that she would have an easier time seeing his feet. His face felt hot. Good God, was he really doing this?

“Thanks!” Tessa said. He refused to make eye contact as she snapped photo after photo. He felt a sick again. This was what he imagined a stripper might feel on her first night out. What was Tessa’s deal? She was taking pictures of his feet from every angle

she could think of, and it felt more than a little weird. After the sixteenth and final photo, Ratt put his socks back on.

“So, what is it like to live with a congenital malformation?” Tessa said, reading from her tablet. Ratt almost ignored the question. Couldn’t she figure it out for herself?

“I guess I’d have to say it sucks,” Ratt said. “You can’t wear the stuff you want, can’t really go swimming without people staring at you and asking questions, and you can’t ever take your socks off in front of people for the same reason.”

“You can’t wear the stuff you want?” Tessa said, typing furiously on her tablet.

“Yeah, like sandals or whatever,” Ratt kept his gaze on his feet, working the hole in his sock around each of his toes. Did he really have to explain every little thing? “People would stare and talk shit, and don’t even get me started on my dad. He’d never let me have sandals in the first place.”

“Is that really a big deal?” Tessa said. “I mean, I don’t own sandals either.”

“Yeah, but that’s your choice. You can, but you won’t. I can’t. It’s totally different,” Ratt said, rolling his eyes. He instantly regretted it when he saw Tessa shrink into herself.

“I dunno, I guess it’s that I can’t that makes me want to,” Ratt continued. Tessa remained silent, but started to type on her tablet again. “Like, if someone tells you that everyone else can have ice cream except you, it makes you suddenly want it more than ever?”

“I think I understand,” Tessa said. She continued to type, but read the next question anyway. “Does your malformation have an effect on your home life? What, if anything, does it change around the house?”

“Fuck that,” Ratt snarled. His family was the only thing he hated talking about more than his feet. “Do you have any other questions?”

“What’s wrong with that one?” Tessa said, suddenly sounding concerned. Ratt groaned. She probably already pitied him without hearing word one about his family.

“Just drop it,” Ratt said, louder this time.

“Are you guys okay in there?” Her dad’s voice boomed into the room over a loudspeaker that seemed to come from everywhere at once. For God’s sake, these people had a loudspeaker in their home?

“I’ll go on to the next question if you want,” Tessa said.

“Fine,” Ratt said.



Ratt answered thirty-seven interview questions in total. He was grateful that Tessa avoided talking about his home life, other than asking if there was a family history of congenital malformations. There wasn't any, really. He had an uncle who lost a leg to diabetes, but that wasn't the same thing at all. Most of the questions pried into how his toes made his life different at school and in life generally. As much as he hated to admit it to himself, it was great to have a few hours to vent about his toes, and even better to talk to someone who wouldn't call him an emo bitch just for having goddamned *feelings*.

"Is that it?" Ratt said, looking towards the window. It was getting pretty dark outside. He hadn't really thought about it before, but there seemed to be a million more stars out here than there were back in the U.S.

"I think that's all I need," Tessa was grinning from ear to ear. "Thank you so much for helping me out with this."

"Sure," Ratt kept his eyes on the window. "Say, when does that light of yours show up in the sky?"

"The one from my videos?" Tessa blinked at Ratt so fast he thought it might have been Morse code. "I didn't think you really wanted to see it."

"Dude, of course," Ratt smiled. "It's a UFO that actually shows up on a schedule! You expect me to pass it up?"

"Cool! Well, it shouldn't be long now," Tessa said, peering at her tablet. "Maybe another 30 minutes to an hour, I think."

"Awesome," Ratt said. It was almost nine o'clock, and the longer he stayed at Tessa's, the better. He really wasn't looking forward to the scream fest that would probably await him when his father realized Ratt hadn't cleaned the apartment that morning. On top of that, if he hadn't found his phone by now, who knows what kind of mood he'd be in? Either way, it would be a beer night for sure.

"Oh! Oh! Ratt, look!" Tessa practically bowled him over, shaking his shoulders hard enough for Ratt to wish he knew a good whiplash joke. He squinted at the window, scanning every star for signs of movement. He almost missed it at first. It wasn't in the sky, exactly. It was between the buildings, definitely below the skyline and certainly in

the city itself. Holy shit, it was real! It was totally real and flying straight for Tessa's window!

The light moved fast, faster than anything Ratt had seen before. Even the train seemed to move at a snail's pace compared to the weird light with its six insect legs. It veered to the left, too fast for Ratt to keep up with it. Ratt looked all over the view from the window, hoping to catch another glimpse of it.

Suddenly, Tessa's room was bathed in pale blue light. Ratt shielded his eyes immediately, fearing he'd go blind from the intensity of the flying object.

"Who the fuck are you?" a young-sounding voice came from the light, though it was muffled by the window. It sounded like a kid his age, maybe younger. "You her boyfriend, blondie?"

"W-what?" Ratt said, unable to look at the light directly. The color in the room began to change. The pale blue was beginning to dim, sinking rapidly into a deep red. In a flash, the red light was out of sight, with only the red hue splashed across the street below to give a hint that it had descended rapidly down the side of the building. The glass in Tessa's window was warped now; twisted by the intense heat.

"Oh my god it can *talk!*" Tessa said, slapping her hands over her mouth. "And I totally didn't tape any of that!"

"I-I think it hates me," Ratt said, praying that the warmth he was feeling in his pants was from the light.

"We've gotta follow it! I'm so putting this up on Skywatchers Universal!" Tessa said, grabbing an expensive-looking digital camera from her dresser. "Come on!"

"Wait, what?" Ratt tried to will his legs to move, but they wouldn't cooperate. He lay on the spider web rug, paralyzed.

"I don't think you want to be left alone with my dad," Tessa said, adjusting a black straw hat on her head. She was out of the room and into the hall before Ratt could remove his sock and put it back on with the hole once again on the sole.

Tessa was almost out the door when Ratt stuffed his feet back into his shoes. The elevator ride down was surprisingly quick, but the late hour was probably a factor. When they got to the lobby, the place was in a panic. There was a line that circled around the entire lobby full of people yelling at the front desk about "heat damage" and "property

value.” Tessa bolted past them without a second’s hesitation. Ratt barely managed to keep up. Luckily, the guards didn’t give a shit about checking the IDs of people leaving the building.

The searing red light appeared stopped in mid-air, hovering over the street just outside of Tessa’s building as though it had been waiting for them. Ratt could see that the six insect legs were at least 15 feet long. Tessa had her camera out, filming every second of it.

The light said something, but it was too far to remotely understand every word. “Bitch-ass,” “blondie,” and “my girl” was all Ratt could make out over the ocean wind and the sheer distance between them. The light tore across the sky again, leaving only a red streak that burned a straight line towards the beach.

“Oh my God, I think it’s a kid,” Tessa said, pointing the camera to her own face. “It’s a kid or an angel maybe? I don’t know, but I’m not going to stop until I find out.”

“Are you sure about that?” Ratt raised an eyebrow, ignoring his racing heart and trying his best to look calm under the circumstances. By now, he was certain that the warm feeling in his pants was not from the light. Well, not directly, anyway. Still, he couldn’t let Tessa go alone. Her dad seemed nice enough, but if anything happened to her, he could bet Mr. Vasquez would come looking for him.

The sprint all the way to the beach was grueling. The streak in the sky faded much slower than Ratt had expected it to, and it felt like they were running under the fires of Hell. Ratt could feel his skin burning the longer he ran. He’d definitely be beet red by the morning. The blocks flew by, bathed in hideous red light. It seemed like something horrible could happen at any moment. Ratt was impressed, though. Even running at full speed, he couldn’t manage to keep up with Tessa’s pace. She had one hand on her camera, and the other keeping her hat on her head. Yet, somehow she completely outclassed Ratt when it came to running. Even if he had wanted to get out of the interview, Ratt realized, he wouldn’t have stood a chance at getting away from her.

The beach wasn’t exactly crowded, but there were still far more people there than he’d expected at this hour. The same beach-goers from that afternoon were arguing with a small army of Ophion Security Operations Specialists. An Ophion Foundation truck was parked on the sand, guarded by a group of officers. All of them were heavily armed

with the sort of guns Ratt had only seen in movies. One of them even hauled a rocket launcher over his shoulder! They did not have the sort of load out that meant “peaceful procedure.”

“Stay back,” an officer stopped them before they could even get as close as the beach-goths. He was carrying a shotgun, and though he never raised it, Ratt got the feeling that if they did anything stupid, he might use it out of sheer nerves.

“What’s going on back there?” Tessa asked. Ratt turned to see several of the officers pulling a naked body out of a portion of the beach where the sand had turned to glass. They quickly covered the body with a blanket and lifted the form to its feet. Even as Ratt was being shoved away, he could work out that the form shivering under the comforter was a little boy with jet black hair. No, he wasn’t a little kid or anything, he was just short. He was teenager for sure, maybe a kid only a little taller than him. The burning light was a kid? What. The. Fuck.

“You’re going to leave. Immediately,” the officer took hold of Ratt and Tessa’s shoulders, his voice drawn deep. He definitely wasn’t going to budge. The kid in the blanket waved at them as the officer walked them halfway back to Tessa’s apartment. It occurred to Ratt that if he couldn’t catch the train at the beach, the next nearest station was at least 12 blocks away. Not that it was impossible, but Jesus Christ, really?

“Uh, Tessa? You guys wouldn’t happen to have a car, would you?” Ratt said.

“I can’t believe I got video of all that!” Tessa replied, jumping up and down like she’d just won the lottery. “And the UFO is a boy! A flying boy! Do you think he’s an angel?”

“Don’t wanna think about it,” Ratt groaned. At least it was obvious that Tessa wasn’t crazy or putting one over on him with the UFO, but what the fuck? The light was somehow a kid? No alien ship? No TARDIS? Not even a jetpack? The kid just... flew? Ratt couldn’t decide if he was horrified by the idea, or simply jealous that it wasn’t him.

“Does this mean we have to go to church from now on?” Tessa mused. She was in her own world, clearly. Eyes wide for an instant, Ratt realized that a car ride with Tessa and her dad would reveal his soaked pants to both of them. He immediately aborted the idea. A 12 block walk was a small price to pay to keep *that* a secret.

“I’ve gotta go,” Ratt started down the street. If he could get far enough away from the beach, the security goons wouldn’t bother him on his way to the Homer Street terminal. He touched his face, shocked to feel the sharp pain of a sunburn. He stopped and turned to face Tessa.

“Hey, um,” Ratt said.

“Yeah?”

“You mind if we hang out again sometime? Just, you know, for fun?”

Tessa smiled.

“I’d love to.”

Contact the Author



<http://www.sonsofnowhere.com/>

Nicholas Almand

Email: sonsofnowherenovel@gmail.com

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/mnicholasalmand>

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Sons-of-Nowhere/>

deviantArt: <http://nickalmand.deviantart.com>

