

The Bubble

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First Place

BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2012 Young Writers' Contest

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"Today, I'm going to escape." I said.

Owen, my less lenient friend, smiles. His black hair covers one eye and his style follows the gothic trends. He's never really been in The Bubble, the strict government that runs our school. He knows we can't get out. Even now, people are walking by us rhythmically, in lines and rows, afraid to break the thousands of codes that direct the school population.

My second best friend, Arianna, shakes her head. Her dark brown curls bounce as she does so. "You know you can't break the school codes, any of them. If we do that, we'll be expelled. If we're expelled, we'll be sent into a new school that won't tolerate our doubts. And how can we escape? There are soldiers that surround the exterior of the school *just* to make sure no one escapes. There are soldiers, for crying out loud!"

I lower my gaze from theirs in a silent resolve. I have made up my mind, and whether they will go with me is completely up to them. I start walking, blending in with the steps of the brainwashed crowd, and my two friends follow. Instantaneously, I notice that Barbara Lordly is standing next to me. She used to be beautiful in her uniqueness; so free and versatile. Now she is a part of the school, a part of this unchanging life.

Suddenly, I fall. Nobody falls here, not in The Bubble. Chaos strikes immediately, throwing down its heavy blade upon the mass of students. Others collide and collapse, straying from the path that they follow each day, minds clearing painfully as they are forced to make their own decisions. Shouts surround the fray, and instantly administrators are upon us, trying to keep us in check and get us back on our road to anonymity.

Owen, Arianna, and I shove away from the shouting administrators and link arms as we rush toward the front doors. There is total pandemonium in the hallway now, but I'm just glad I have my friends to escape it with. Owen suddenly separates his arms from ours and looks to both of us, palms on the door. He nods to both of us, and pushes.

Alarms ring, screaming through the hallways as we walk into the sunlight. It's blinding, and we shield our eyes from its alarming power. We've never seen anything like this, this amazing ball of light that shines down upon our untrained gazes. It seems so hot and intense, willing us to carry on in our quest to be free.

Now we sprint; faster than we have ever sprinted before. All we hear is the sound of our feet hitting the pavement repeatedly, our short, raspy gasps for oxygen, and faraway shouts for help behind us as we run. Are there others who are seeking freedom? Have others found a way out of The Bubble? Maybe we have started something that will last throughout the ages. But maybe we have doomed ourselves and our families to a life behind bars.

Finally, we stop. Arianna falls onto the knees of her ripped

blue jeans, the ones that are distributed to all of the kids, and struggles for air. Owen leans against the wall, face dripping with sweat, head facing the ground as if contemplating our decision to escape The Bubble in the first place. I sit down hard, sucking in loads of oxygen as I struggle to take in all of this.

Owen returns to reality first, lifting his head and turning back to us. "We're free from The Bubble. Now we'll go to the city and start new lives. Arianna, you can be an artist, like you've always wanted to be. I can invent new designs that will help people with everyday tasks." He turns to me. "You can do whatever you want to." His voice dies. I can tell that he's fighting his emotions, his will to turn back and submit.

Arianna rises slowly, staring at the distant trees. Suddenly, she points out, jumping up and down excitedly. "There's a city behind those trees. Look, there! There's an outline in the distance. It's waiting for us. It's filled with opportunities and it's waiting for us!" She's shaking like crazy, sweat beading down her forehead as she imagines a future for herself.

I examine both of my friends before heading off towards the city at a fast pace. I know they are following because of the sound of their soles against the gravel. We are at a sprint again, sprinting towards our destinies, which are finally unpredictable and strange. As I run, I feel a slight sense of foreboding, but I brush it off. Why should one feel this way in such a time of success?

We're cutting through the trees now. Arianna leaps onto Owen's back as she grows tired. *Maybe they'll have a future together.* I immediately regret my arrogant thought, and scrub it from my brain. I continue at a comfortable pace, determined as I have ever been.

We reach the edge of the trees and burst through the thick undergrowth. There is a city ahead, all metal and dazzling. It's busy with activity. Lights are everywhere, distinguishing a coffee shop from a bar from a dance studio. Everything seems so wild and free.

Instantly, Arianna falls from Owen's back, tears rolling from her face. Owen kneels down beside her slowly, covering his own darkened eyes from my sight. I'm confused. This is our chance to finally become something, something more than anonymous people. Why are my friends crying?

Arianna sniffs, moving her hair back look at the city again. She turns to me slowly, still sobbing profusely. "Don't look at the city. Look at the people. Just look at the people."

I snap my head around to stare at the moving figures, and realize what is wrong. They're all moving in single file lines, one right after the other. They all seem blank, unfocused on any sort of task. They lack spirit, emotion, and goals that every human being should have.

"The world is a Bubble. We'll never get out."

Dragon

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Second Place

BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2012 Young Writers' Contest

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I'm standing in a white room. Pure white. Smooth, sterilized white. A man in a black coat stands before me, hands clasped neatly behind his back. His face is covered by a featureless white mask. Also clean. Also sterile.

"Did you kill him?" asks the man behind the mask. I pause, and there is complete silence. Not even the sound of a beating heart. Both the man and I no longer have the burden of hearts.

"Yes," I say at last. From the pouch at my side, I pull out the bloody proof.

I halted outside the water-tower, back pressed to the cold metal wall. As the rain fell patter-patter in the night, I kept my eyes riveted on the round metal door leading into the structure. It was the only way into this place. The water-tower: where the liquid of an entire city was recycled, purified, and re-distributed into the gleaming metropolis of MT.

Ironic, that a criminal should come here to hide. Not just any common thug, either. The criminal I hunted was Attempt 5. A traitor to his government, and a threat to the peaceful populace. A failed experiment. A medical guinea pig escaped and on the run. Like every Attempt before him, he had gone rogue.

Now there was just me. Attempt 6. The perfect assassin. I would never rebel. I would never disobey. And?

I was totally invincible. The Containment had finally achieved their goal, in me. This mission was the final test. End Attempt 5, and I would take my place as the government's most elite. Ever.

My nickname was "Swarmer." Time for Attempt 5 to find out why.

The rain began to fall harder. I listened for a moment to its liquid cadence, then edged closer to the door, my focus on the task ahead. The entrance to the water-tower was circular and somewhat domed, like an enormous round shield. The lock had been jammed, and it did not give when I set my hand to the bolt-lock. Most buildings in MT used laser-locks. That the water-tower still used the older, manual kind was a testament to its tremendous age.

So Attempt 5 knew I was coming. No matter. He would fall. I put my hand to the bolt again, and with a lightning-quick jerk of the wrist, I wrenched it off. The metal glimmered as I tossed it aside, then bludgeoned the door open with a single kick. It slammed inward, hinges snapping as it strained far beyond what it had been intended to do. Something in my leg snapped as well, but I paid it no heed. There was a slight tingle as the swarm set to work in my body, millions of tiny nanobots knitting bone and sinew. Rough healing.

I stepped inside, enhanced eyes piercing the shadows of the water-tower with practiced precision. Attempt 5 was in here. It was only a matter of time before I found him, and he knew it. The darkness was no barrier to me. I could see the inner workings of the water-tower as clearly as if it were lit with a hundred fires. The tower was wider than most buildings, and so tall its vaulted ceiling seemed to stab deep into the dark oblivion of the sky. The interior was crisscrossed with hundreds of pipes, all a different shape and purpose. It was a labyrinth. A glorious, deadly labyrinth.

"Ready for hide and seek?" I muttered under my breath. My voice, harsh and metallic, echoed more than I had intended.

"Yes," a voice behind me answered. I whirled, calling on the swarm, and my fingers sprouted claws of black metal. No one was there. I spat on the ground, walking slowly backwards; away from the door, and deeper into the convoluted maze of the water tower. My eye was on the door always: if Attempt 5 made a move for it, I would know.

Suddenly two strong arms coiled about my neck, squeezing shut in a painful headlock, forcing me down to my knees. "You're a fool," hissed the voice of Attempt 5. The voice of death. His weight bore me down, and his arms choked the breath from me. Before I could make use of my swarm-claws, he twisted my head and tossed me to the ground, breaking my neck with a sickening crack. My skull struck the wet concrete of the floor, and my vision flickered. I slumped to the ground as a painful prickling filled me, and Attempt 5 laughed.

"You're even more pathetic than the last, Swarmer. You're what passes for a Containment assassin these days? Fool. You could have had a real life. Real power. They give you an ability, then twist you to their purposes. You didn't have to. You could've broken free. But now it's too late, and I've killed you. Fool."

"No... I haven't," I grunted. Attempt 5 hissed again, shocked as I staggered to my feet, neck repaired and stronger than ever. The swarm had done its work well.

"What in..." he began, but I slashed his face with my claws first. Blood flew, and he stumbled back, slipping on a puddle of water and banging his head against a low-slung pipe the size of a tree trunk. In a second I leaped at him, but he was already up and lurching away, running along the top of the pipe faster than the eye could follow.

Well, a normal eye, anyway. I leaped atop the pipe and sprinted after him, noting the dent in the metal where his head had hit. The Containment made Attempts tough, always. More fun to kill, I suppose.

Attempt 5 sprung up onto a second pipe and began to flee deeper into the tower. I followed, just moments behind. Duck, dodge, duck, leap. The pipes were everywhere, most big enough to hold me easily, and many were in my way. Much as I hated to admit it, my adversary had an advantage: he knew this place better than I. Higher and higher I chased him, climbing pipe after pipe until the ground dwindled far below me, and the only sound was the beating of the rain on the outside of the gigantic tower.

I never ran out of breath. Attempts had no breath. No circulation. Not even a heart. But we could bleed... dark, sticky blood, too dull to be human. Too black. That was how I would find Attempt 5, of course. The blood from the wound I gave him splattered wherever he went. He had no swarm to protect and heal him. His advantage was gone. Wherever he went, I could find him.

"Time's up," I growled. The swarm buzzed happily in the back of my head.

I was hundreds of feet above the floor, now, and high as it was, the tower still stretched up for infinite measures around me. Attempt 5 vanished, leaping supernaturally high and disappearing in the tangled metal jungle of pipes and valves. He'd gone over a pipe nearly twenty feet high: too high for even me to jump.

I leaped, making perhaps halfway before slamming into the side of the pipe and digging in with the swarm-claws on my hands. The dark metal punctured the pipe, sending a hot spray into the air as I latched securely onto its side. Stab by stab, I clawed my way to the top, grimacing and shaking with the effort. The swarm healed my every strain, though, and my strength was potent as ever when I set off in pursuit once more.

This massive pipe ran through a maze of smaller ones, which I navigated with some difficulty. When I emerged, I found that it ran off into empty air for nearly a hundred feet before disappearing once more into the side of the water-tower's wall. It was a sort of canyon in the pipes: only shadows and darkness on either side, with an infinite depth beneath. I could make out the shapes of things, barely, but enough. The swarm was uneasy in my mind. I ran out to the middle of the pipe, nearly halfway across, then stopped. Attempt 5 was nowhere in sight, and his blood trail vanished at my feet.

Where had he gone? This pipe was the perfect place for an ambush. I looked up...

...and Attempt 5 dropped from the air above me, slamming me down so hard the pipe bent slightly, and I screamed as the bones in my torso cracked in unison under his spike-booted feet. Then my lungs caved in, and the scream became a choke, then nothing. Blood, Attempt-blood, oozed without and within. I thrashed, but it was no use. Attempt 5 had me, and his constant stomping kept the swarm's healing at bay. The microscopic creations healed part of me only to have another part die. Again and again, over and over.

"So that's your power, eh?" Attempt 5 snapped, continuing his morbid work. "I've seen better. Ha! I AM better!" I twitched and spasmed, but the pain did not abate. A slight jostle would send us both over the edge. That was all I needed. He would die, and I would survive. But he knew my secret now, and was doing a frightening job of countering it.

"Traitor... Rebel... Recreant!" I spat, blood dribbling from my mouth. Attempt 5 snorted.

"I don't think so. I'm an experiment. We both are. Nothing more. Pawns in their game! See how a pawn is rewarded? See?!" He stomped and stomped, and I regained my ability to scream. "You know what the name of this city is? M. T. EM-TEE! EMPTY! There's nothing here!" Attempt 5 grew hysterical, his stomps more erratic as the wounds in his face blurred his vision. "Nothing but hate!" he went on. "Violence! Suffering! We don't keep the peace, we Attempts... we kill it! We kill! That's all we're good for! Even now, now that I've broken away, I can't stop killing!" My blood coated his boots, and he stepped back, glaring at me through swollen eyes. He had slit pupils. Why was that? I couldn't think straight. The swarm was working desperately, but it could only work so fast.

"I... will... kill..." I managed, trying to get up and collapsing again. My own claws bit into my hands, causing more damage.

"No, no you won't," he hissed vengefully. "You're Swarmer, right? I know your name, but you don't know mine. They gave me one, all right. The blasted Containment! I wasn't known as Attempt 5, back when I served." He kicked me one last time. "You know what they called me?"

"Rebel..." I repeated, feeling deathly weak.

"DRAGON!" He screamed, and lunged forward, grabbing me by the neck and hoisting me off the ground with practiced ease. He was bigger than I'd realized. Much, much bigger. And his size was increasing by the minute! Smoke poured from his mouth as he laughed, coughed, then laughed again.

Dragon. So he could fly. That explained the leaps. And how he'd ambushed me. My mind started to clear...

...and Dragon opened his mouth, releasing a torrent of glowing fire that enveloped my head, incinerating my skull and blowing it to ash in a matter of seconds. My body went limp, and he dropped it on the huge, dented pipe, laughing hysterically. He bent down, as if to pick me up again and toss me over the side. But a queer look of consideration came into his face, and he shook his head. Rising up, he stepped over me and began to leave. I could not see him, of course, but I was aware.

Or rather, the swarm was aware. He should've tossed me over the edge. Now it was too late. The tingling sensation filled me and increased. It was unbearable pain. Unbearable bliss. The swarm could do anything to me.

I was the swarm, and it was me. We were one. That was

Ghost Fire

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Third Place

BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2012 Young Writers' Contest

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The fire had engulfed the house faster than she had anticipated; she thought she would have time to get herself out. She looked to her left, a hallway, rafters fallen periodically throughout, fire burning like a wild animal. She looked to her right, a staircase that led to the door, stair set ablaze, flames licking up the walls. The only other choice she had was to turn around and go back the way she had come.

She spun on her heels, behind her, a hallway, also ablaze but not quite as badly, but standing there an ethereal girl. She looked at her, and the girl looked back; she knew the girl, she had the same golden blonde curls and green eyes. She wore the nightgown she had fallen asleep in, but she knew she could no longer be alive, no one in this house besides her was.

She smiled. "Alice, play with me," she said like it was any other day. I took three long steps back. Mistake, I found myself at the edge of the stairs. "What's wrong Alice? I want to play." She came towards me.

"No! Stay back!" I screamed. "Go away, you died,"

She smiled. "Yep, I did sis, and do you know why I did?" She asked. Alice looked around quickly, searching for a way out of there. "Because you killed me," she said. Suddenly, she wasn't the same eight-year-old little girl Alice had known, that she had loved. Now she had turned into something else, something different and frightening. There was a black aura around her little body, her teeth had turned sharp, her eyes, her beautiful green eyes, had turned fiery red, and her skin, that perfect pale skin, had become burned and blackened. "And now it's your turn,"

She was right there, not even a foot away from me. She placed both of her little hands on my chest and pushed.

Alice fell for what seemed like an endless moment, the fire that was licking up the staircase was now touching her skin. She wasn't ready to die, especially not here, he had told her it was all going to be okay, he had said they would run away together, that they would be together for the rest of their lives. She couldn't believe that she had listened to him. "Claira!" She screamed before her head smacked the ground and everything went black.

We drove up to the creepy house with the same stupid song blaring. We had been listening to it for most of the drive to the new house. It didn't matter to me what my mom and dad said, I didn't think this house was very new. It looked old and rather decrepit even though the real-estate agent assured us that it had just been rebuilt due to a fire.

My father turned the car engine off and turned to us in the back. "Alright boys, shall we go in?"

"Yeah," My little brother said in excitement. He hadn't minded moving from the city, he was so young it probably didn't matter to him where we were. But me on the other

hand, I was set where we were, I was happy in the city, happier than I could have been anywhere but this little place in the middle of nowhere was going to be the death of me.

"What about you Jasper?" My mother asked. "Are you as excited as Chris?"

"No," I said and threw my car door open, I grabbed up my backpack and my iPod and leaned against the car while the rest of my family got out. We walked up towards the house, which I was bound to hate, I did want to try to make this work for my parents, but that didn't mean I was happy about it.

My brother reached for my hand. I shook him off and followed my mom and dad up to the house. The second we walked into the house, I got the worst feeling in the world. It was a dark, cold feeling, something that I had never felt before. "What's wrong sweetheart?" my mother asked.

"Nothing," I said. I looked around; it looked like a grandmother's house. There was charred lace everywhere, little dolls on every flat surface, wicker furniture, flower patterns. It was probably the grossest thing I had ever seen. The smell of old smoke filled the air.

"Well, it should feel a bit more like home once we get all this stuff out of here, and get all of our stuff in here." she inhaled deeply. "Just smell that homey aroma."

I looked at her, could she not smell the smoke? "Yeah, whatever," I said.

"Why don't you boys go pick a room upstairs?" my father suggested.

Chris smiled and nodded. He grabbed my hand and tried to pull me up the stairs. "Come on Jasper," he said. "Let's go," he pulled harder.

I sighed and allowed my brother to pull me up the stairs but as we did, I swear I saw someone at the top, but when I looked, whatever it was, was gone. "Did you see that?" I asked Chris.

"What? No," Chris said as he let me go and ran off into one of the rooms. "Wow, this room is so cool," I rolled my eyes, that kid was so weird, I swear he has no relation to me whatsoever.

I looked into the room across the hall from the one Chris had gone into. Way too pink for my taste so I walked right back out. I walked down the hall a ways and opened another door, I wasn't happy with this room either. I looked down the hall; the only other room on the hall was a closed door. I walked towards it and tried the handle, it turned. It was much plainer than the other rooms, no floral wallpaper, no bright colors, much more to my liking.

I threw my backpack down onto the bed and looked

around; I got the feeling that I wasn't welcome in here for some reason. I sat down on the bed; this room looked like it hadn't been touched in a very long time. "I don't like people in my room," I heard a soft female voice say.

I jumped to my feet and spun. There was no one in here. "Who's there?" I asked softly. "It's okay, I don't mean harm," I said. The smell of the smoke suddenly became stifling.

"I don't like people in my house," the voice said again.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Leave," the voice said.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Leave now,"

I heard Chris's scream from the other room. I raced out of the room and the last place I had seen my brother. "Chris what's wrong?"

Chris was sitting in the middle of his bedroom floor, shaking like crazy, and pointing at something in the closet. I walked into the room. "Chris?" I asked.

"I saw her there, a little girl, about eight years old, wearing a burned nightgown. She had a dark glow around her, her skin was burned and blackened in certain areas, her hair was golden curls, and her eyes, glowing red. She smiled exposing sharp teeth he replied." "Hello little boy, do you want to play?"

I grabbed my brother's hands and yanked him out of the room. "What is that?"

"That is a very angry spirit," I said as I slammed the door shut.

I heard something down stairs, something like a bang or boom, an explosion? "Leave now"

I jumped and turned, this time she was there, she was about my age, the same long golden hair as the little girl, the same red eyes, but she looked different, not so many burns, her head crooked.

I smelled something then, smoke. "You'll die, the same as me... killed..." she said directly to us. "Killed by this fire!" She said coolly pointing around the room.

I pushed my brother towards the stairs. The smoke I smelled was no longer a scent, but pooling in the air. "Go," I said. He didn't move so I pushed him. "Run. Now,"

"No, don't go," the little girl said. "I want a friend."

"I mean it Chris run," I said.

The fire erupted around us, we both jumped in fright. I looked down the stairs; there was no way to get down there without the stairs breaking or us getting caught on fire. There was no other way off this landing. "Mom! Dad!" I screamed", no reply.

"They're dead," the older ghost said, "Just like our parents, killed by the serpents of this fire,"

"And we're going to kill you," the little girl said.

The fire burned hotter, the air in my lungs seemed to evaporate, and I coughed. I grabbed my little brother by the arm and pulled him close. "Get on my back," I said.

"You boys aren't going anywhere," the older girl said.

"Come on," I went down on my knee; he nodded and motioned to get on my back.

"I said you aren't going anywhere," the older girl said.

Something grabbed my little brother and threw him against the wall. "Stop it, we didn't do anything to you!" I screamed.

The flames licked towards my brother who was pinned. I wrapped my arms around Chris's torso and pulled him hard but it felt like there were invisible wires holding him. "Stop it, he's just a kid."

The flames were getting closer, like a snake stalking its prey. "He must die, for our game to work!" the older girl shouted.

"Let us go!"

The little girl sauntered forward. "But I want a friend to play with,"

My brother whimpered in fear as the girl moved closer. "Go, please, just leave me. We'll both just die if you stay." He sobbed.

"No way in hell," I snarled. I pulled harder fighting whatever had hold of him. As soon as the fire was close enough to burn us, the restraint, whatever it was, disappeared. I yanked my brother away from the wall. We stumbled, and he fell on top of me.

I pulled him up and we ran towards the stairs, the fire blazed up in front of us. "Stop it," my brother screamed.

"I don't want to, it's fun" the older ghost said. She was suddenly right in front of us. She grabbed me by the front of the shirt, smiling the way girls do sometimes, but this wasn't a girl, she had the strength of three men and was able to drag me to the edge of the stairs. She turned to Chris, smiling wider. "All it takes is a little push." She said. "Just like this,"

She placed her hand on my chest and applied the slightest amount of pressure, suddenly I was free falling, I was too shocked to even try to stop my fall, I just fell. I heard my little brother screaming my name, over and over again, I wanted to reply, but I couldn't, I was frozen. A voice in my head told me to do something to stop my fall, anything, but there was nothing I could do.

The fire was hot around me, and when I hit the floor, my head made a definite smack, I slid a couple of feet and hit the other wall before I stopped moving. The smoke was starting to get to me, my lungs burned with the effort to breathe, my head was getting light, my body was starting to feel like it weight a hundred tons. "Jasper!" Chris's voice screamed again from the landing.

"Not dead," the little girl said from very close by. "But very near it,"

I heard fast footsteps on the stairs, I tried to open my eyes, but my body wouldn't respond to my commands. "Jasper, please don't die," he begged. A coughing spell hit the little boy and he pressed his body against me, the smoke was starting to get to him too. "I need you," he whispered.

Rafters crashed down very close to us, Chris cried out in shock, he needed to get out of here, there was no way I was

Dragon, *cont. from p. 32*

what Attempt 5, Dragon, did not and could not understand. He was inferior. And now... he had angered me.

I concentrated all my energy into swarm-growing my head. Before Dragon had even reached the maze of pipes, I was almost entirely restored. He heard a noise—the nanobots, perhaps—but there was nothing he could do. He turned, surprised beyond belief as I leaped to my feet, ready to fight again despite an only half-grown skull and one eye.

“I... am... invincible...” I spat. Dragon paled as he realized the inevitability of his death. With a curse, he let loose a second storm of flames, which I charged through heedlessly. They could not harm me... not permanently. Not even deeply. The burns hurt, but the furious power of the swarm overcame all injury. Again and again Dragon roared, spraying me with fire, but in moments I had reached him. He raised a hand to block, and I slashed it off.

A slash and a grapple, and I had thrown him down to the pipe, straddling his weakening body as I pummeled him with iron-clawed fists. As his flame winked out and his life fled him, Dragon screamed but one desperate, electrifying word.

“FREEDOM!”

I stopped. He gasped, a mass of wounds that would not survive if I chose to strike again.

I spat on him.

“I offer you freedom...” he moaned.

Something clicked into place. Why was I here? Why was I killing Dragon? Must I?

Our eyes met. I saw in him despair... and realized that an identical look was on my own face. A realization cut into me like shards of glass.

I did not want to kill him.

The man in black looks on in silence. His features, hidden behind the hideous white mask, show me no sign of his thoughts. I am left to wonder on my own. Will he believe my story? Will he see through my deception? I have thought the Containment to be gods. Invincible, like me. Omniscient, like the government they serve. Or claim to serve. Dragon has left me with so much doubt, though he spoke only one word.

“You have done well,” says the man in black. So... he does not know. He believes.

“I... am pleased to serve,” I reply, placing Dragon’s severed hand back in my pouch. I loathe to touch it. Death no longer pleases me as it once did. My body is blackened from Dragon’s fire, whatever features I once had destroyed. The world will never know who I am, or what I look like.

The world will never know Attempts. I hope. I turn to leave, but the man’s voice stops me.

“Attempt 6,” he says, monotonous and grim. “Report to me in fifteen-hundred hours for your acceptance into the Containment. There you will be thoroughly briefed on your next assignment.”

“Which will be?” I ask. I am bold as I have never been before. It surprises the man in black, who merely looks at me closer.

“The hunt and capture of Attempt 2,” he answers.

Ghost Fire, *cont. from p. 36*

going to be able to move but he could still get out. “Bring down the house,” said the older girl.

I heard sirens, thank God. If the fire department could get here in time maybe we could both get out. “Neither of you is leaving this house, you’re both going to die here and now,”

It stopped, the presence suddenly evaporated into the flames as though it had never been there. I forced my eyes open. The sirens were on us now. Everything was beginning to look very black, as though there was a veil being placed over my eyes. The only thing that was keeping me conscious was my younger brother’s presence.

Shouts of, “Is there anyone in there” emanated around us.

Chris sat up a little. “We’re here,” he screamed. I just hoped his voice wasn’t overwhelmed by the flames. We were in luck, rescuers came bursting into the house then, a few of them spotted us, but my relief took the last of my consciousness.

Everything was very quiet in the room when I came to. Something was pressing uncomfortably against the skin of my mouth and nose and there was a rather numb sensation all throughout my body. I reached my hand up to the uncomfortable thing on my face but someone’s soft, familiar touch stopped me.

“Jasper, that has to stay there,” Chris said from very close by. I opened my eyes and found him sitting in an arm chair beside me. He smiled a little and moved to sit on my bedside. “We made it out alive,” he whispered tears rolling down his cheeks. “I almost lost you because of a ghost, everyone keeps telling me that I’m crazy but I know what I saw.”

I reached my hand up slowly and brushed a tear off his cheek.

“The doctors weren’t sure if you were going to be able to move again because of that fall. You broke your neck, they called it a hangman’s fracture, they said you’d never move anything ever again, they said you were lucky to be alive.” Thicker tears ran down his cheeks. “But there was one doctor who said he might be able to fix it, and look at this,” gestured to my arm. “You’re moving.”

I wanted him to stop crying, I wanted to tell him to relax but I couldn’t make a sound with this mask on my face. I knew what it was now that I had opened my eyes, an oxygen mask but I didn’t want it.

I caught movement out of the corner of my eyes. I looked towards the window and staring back at me were the faces of the two ghosts, one’s was burned and the other’s head crooked. I screamed. They smiled. The fire erupted.

**Honorable Mention – BSFS Jack L. Chalker
2012 Young Writers’ Contest**

Hums Like White Pills

Rebecca Cerasoli

Shadows in Half Light

Logan Watson