

Rubric

Short Story: The Earpiece of Doom

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Author Bio: Kemin Zhang is a 7th grader who likes video games a bit too much. This 12-year-old likes to swim and read fiction books. Some favorites are Harry Potter and anything by Rick Riordan. A certain friend who will remain anonymous claims that Kemin shares a striking resemblance to "John Egbert" from "Homestuck." (???) Kemin can be found digging holes in the backyard, reading comics, fishing, attempting to skateboard, or biking with friends.

Story:

John ate a cheese cracker. Rose sat beside him. Their friend Dirk sat on a nearby armchair, sipping from a juice box.

"Where's Jane?" John asked.

Rose shrugged. She started knitting.

They were at her house, a mansion on a waterfall. It was a bit ridiculous. There was literally a 20-foot tall statue of Gandalf in the central atrium. Why.. just *why*?

The doorbell rang. Just to be specific, when talking about the doorbell to Rose's house, we are not referring to normal doorbells. This house had a chime system. Rose gracefully got up. "It's probably Jane."

Dirk groaned. "About time!" He adjusted his dorky anime glasses. He thought it made him look cool. John thought it made him look like Ben Stiller.

They were waiting for their friend Jane to do a group report. Jane normally wasn't late.

John heard the front doors open with a creak, followed by the sound of rain battering the ground. It had been raining for the entire day. Biking to Rose's house was unpleasant. Oh the things they did for schoolwork. It definitely had nothing to do with how Rose had a PS5.

A few moments later, Jane walked into the room with a binder and sat down. She looked tired.

"I have notes," she said in the most monotonous voice ever.

Dirk adjusted his glasses again. "Right. So do I." He reached into his sock and pulled out a smelly and stained piece of paper. He set it in front of everybody like a proud cat bringing a dead animal to its owner.

"Hey..." John noticed something behind Jane's ear. "What's that?"

"What?" Jane looked straight ahead, so transfixed on something that John looked to see was she was staring at. She was looking at a marble bust of Nicolas Cage with reindeer antlers. John quickly looked back, but it was too late. He now had PTSD.

"Looks like a hearing aid." Dirk observed.

"Yeah." John agreed. Though Jane definitely didn't need a hearing aid. One would whisper for help from across a classroom and she would whisk over like the guardian angel of confused schoolchildren.

"Isn't that the new Duolingo earpiece?" Rose asked, adding the finishing touches on the sweater she was knitting. It had a kraken on the front. "I heard about those. Sounds cool."

"Oh, that. Um. Yes. Very cool." Jane agreed halfheartedly. Her eyes glazed over. "Teaches me stuff." She opened her binder and pulled out a large sheaf of notes.

John and Dirk exchanged looks. For a few seconds the only sound was needles clacking as Rose added teeth to her kraken.

John finally got out some paper. "Which Greek philosopher should we do?"

They started on their report, taking turns writing and looking at notes. Jane was a constant supplier of facts, nonchalantly reciting them out like a chatbot while the other kids scribbled furiously. After about an hour, they decided to take a break. Rose reluctantly gave John and Dirk access to her PS5. She started knitting booties for her cat, Jaspers, while Jane did the spacing-off thing.

There was definitely something off about her.

John had just beaten Dirk in their 13th round of Tekken 8 when she abruptly got up.

"Where's the bathroom?" She asked in that bot voice. This was strange because of two things: a) Jane was never that rude. She would have at least said "excuse me". And b), while she said that, a strange expression flitted across her face. But it was soon gone, and John wondered if he was seeing things.

"It's down the hall," Rose said. "If you get lost, follow the statues of B-list actors to get back to us."

Jane gave a nod without questioning the B-list actors and left the room.

As soon as she left, Rose tackled John, knocking the controller out of his hand. "THERE IS SOMETHING OFF ABOUT JANE." She hissed.

Dirk paused the game and looked over. "Yup. Noticed."

John drummed his fingers. "Do you think it has something to do with her earpiece?"

Rose facepalmed. "OBVIOUSLY. It's Duolingo."

Dirk looked confused. "Woah, you mean the green pigeon app?"

"Green owl," Rose corrected him.

"Potato potahto."

John wiggled his fingers. "What if the earpiece is MIND-CONTROLLING HER??!!" He said it while making a ghost sound, like "OOooOoOOoOOOoOoo." It made a spooky effect.

Rose suddenly froze.

"What?" John didn't think he was being *that* spooky.

"She's not going to the bathroom," Rose whispered. "Follow me." She grabbed John and Dirk by their sleeves and dragged them into the hallway and down a few flights of stairs. The air got colder to the point that they could see their breath.

"In here." Rose threw open a door and shoved them inside. For a second it was too dark, then John's eyes adjusted.

"...Huh?" He said, never ceasing to be eloquent in times of confusion.

"My sentiments exactly," Dirk muttered, squinting. It seemed to be a huge basement filled with glowing green shelves. They had cubbyholes with lots of green blinking lights, shining in the darkness. In some cubbyholes, there were green techy cubes.

"The server," Rose murmured. "Where is she?"

"Jane's in here?" John could never imagine Jane coming into a place as cold as this without properly bundling up with a puffy jacket and two scarves. He followed Rose through a winding maze of shelves and green lights.

"AHA!!!" Rose shouted.

And there was Jane.

She was standing, facing the shelf, her face bathed in ghastly green light. Behind her ear, the Duolingo earpiece sat smugly, waiting for something to happen. In her hand was a computer chip.

John wasn't a technology expert. He was bad at coding. But he was pretty sure that chip was important.

Jane's head turned slowly, like a scene from a horror movie. Except she wasn't smiling like Pennywise or anything. Instead, she just looked sad.

"Hey," she said.

"What are you doing?" John asked.

Suddenly, her eyes glowed a neon green. John stumbled back.

"PUNY MORTALS. DO YOU THINK YOU CAN STOP ME???!!!!!"

A deep, demonic voice sounded from Jane's mouth. Rose, Dirk and John slowly backed up.

"I'LL TAKE OVER THE SERVERS." A bright green aura surrounded Jane. She started levitating.

John had a sudden desire to call an exorcist.

"DUOLINGO WILL OVERPOWER ALL!!!!!!!"

John was knocked off of his feet. He was blinded by a flash of green.

When the haze cleared, he stumbled to his feet, coughing. It smelled like New York; smoke everywhere. Beside him, he saw Rose and Dirk ironically in the same pose he was: Back hunched, brow furrowed, shirt over nose and mouth.

He looked over where Jane last was, which was now a smoking crater. Rose's mom would have to do some renovations. Green cubes were scattered everywhere. And Jane was hovering 20 feet up in the air, surrounded by what looked like a glowing green holographic chicken. She was still holding the computer chip. Her eyes were closed. In her other hand she held a green cube. John realized with horror that the cube had a USB port.

"HAHAHAHA... WRIGGLE ALL YOU WANT, WORMS!!! YOU CAN NEVER STOP ME. WATCH AND SUFFER!!!" Jane-but-not-Jane said. Slowly, agonizingly, she held the computer chip closer and closer to the cube...

John knew what about to happen. But wait...

"HAHAHAHAHAHA..." Closer and closer came the computer chip to world domination.

Suddenly, a green cube bounced off of Jane's foot.

"HAHAHaha---huh?" Jane opened her eyes, which at this point looked like irradiated uranium.

John stood there, arm still up. Jane spotted him. Her eyes flared.

John started writing his obituary.

"YAAAHHH!!!!!!!!!!" FOOOOOOOMM. ZAP!!!!!!!!!!

Green everywhere.

John opened his eyes.

"Huh?" He said again, in that rather intelligent way of his.

The first thing he saw was a giant fissure in the ground. The second thing he saw was a small, angry green owl. Jane was slumped behind it, eyes hardly open.

"Woot..." The owl croaked. It looked at John, eyes glowing green with anger. "That laser... consumed much of my energy."

The owl coughed. John didn't know that owls could cough. "But... with the last 1% of my battery power..." He heaved himself up. Jane flinched behind him. "I shall conquer the world."

Jane's hand quivered.

"MY PEON!!! DO IT!!! WE SHALL RULE AS ONE!!!!"

Jane's brow furrowed. She mumbled something.

"No."

Jane suddenly jumped up. She threw off her earpiece and snapped it over her knee. Then she tossed John the computer chip. "Destroy it!" She screamed.

"With pleasure." John threw it onto the ground and bashed it to dust.

"NOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!" The owl vaporized, leaving a single green feather.

Silence.

They made their way upstairs without talking until they got to the living room.

"I'm sorry!" Jane cried.

"It's okay!" Rose exclaimed.

"Cool!" Dirk shouted.

"Yeah!!!" John hollered.

The study session was over. They strolled outside. The rain had stopped, leaving a rainbow.

John felt like a walking cliché.

And then they all walked into the sunset.