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Keel Over Laughing: The A. . . 's Cup Joke Book, Penguin Group New Zealand, Limited, Penguin Group New Zealand, Limited, 1999, 0140288406, 9780140288407, . One hundred jokes and some cartoons about a race for a certain Cup, yachties, and yacht races. The jokes are generally of an 'adult' nature. Occasional line drawing cartoons are used to illustrate some of the jokes..

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At least twice a month, I see my Wanted poster flashed on the JumboTrons scattered throughout downtown Los Angeles. It looks out of place up there. Most of the pictures on the screens are of happy things: smiling children standing under a bright blue sky, tourists posing before the Golden Gate Ruins, Republic commercials in neon colors. There™s also anti-Colonies propaganda. “The Colonies want our land,” the ads declare. “They want what they don™t have. Don™t let them conquer your homes! Support the cause!”

They always have a different photo running alongside the report. One time it was a boy with glasses and a head full of thick copper curls. Another time it was a boy with black eyes and no hair at all. Sometimes I™m black, sometimes white, sometimes olive or brown or yellow or red or whatever else they can think of.

In other words, the Republic has no idea what I look like. They don™t seem to know much of anything about me, except that I™m young and that when they run my fingerprints they don™t find a match in their databases. That™s why they hate me, why I™m not the most dangerous criminal in the country, but the most wanted. I make them look bad.

It™s early evening, but it™s already pitch-black outside, and the JumboTrons™ reflections are visible in the street™s puddles. I sit on a crumbling window ledge three stories up, hidden from view behind rusted steel beams. This used to be an apartment complex, but it™s fallen into disrepair. Broken lanterns and glass shards litter the floor of this room, and paint is peeling from every wall. In one corner, an old portrait of the Elector Primo lies faceup on the ground. I wonder who used to live here”no one™s cracked enough to let their portrait of the Elector sit discarded on the floor like that.

The plague has hit the Lake sector hard. In the glow of the JumboTrons, Tess and I can see the

soldiers at the end of the street as they inspect each home, their black capes shiny and worn loose in the heat. Each of them wears a gas mask. Sometimes when they emerge, they mark a house by painting a big red X on the front door. No one enters or leaves the home after that—at least, not when anyone’s looking.

We look on in silence as the soldiers draw closer to my family’s house. Every time they stop at a home, one soldier pounds on the door while a second stands next to him with his gun drawn. If no one opens the door within ten seconds, the first soldier kicks it in. I can’t see them once they rush inside, but I know the drill: a soldier will draw a blood sample from each family member, then plug it into a handheld reader and check for the plague. The whole process takes ten minutes.

It’s a plague victim. She must’ve been deteriorating for months, because her skin is cracked and bleeding everywhere, and I find myself wondering how the soldiers could have missed this one during previous inspections. She stumbles around for a while, disoriented, then charges forward, only to trip and fall to her knees. I glance back toward the soldiers. They see her now. The soldier with the drawn weapon approaches, while the eleven others stay where they are and look on. One plague victim isn’t much of a threat. The soldier lifts his gun and aims. A volley of sparks engulfs the infected woman.

I wish we could get our hands on one of the soldiers’ guns. A pretty weapon like that doesn’t cost much on the market—480 Notes, less than a stove. Like all guns, it has precision, guided by magnets and electric currents, and can accurately shoot a target three blocks away. It’s tech stolen from the Colonies, Dad once said, although of course the Republic would never tell you that. Tess and I could buy five of them if we wanted. . . . Over the years we’ve learned to stockpile the extra money we steal and stash it away for emergencies. But the real problem with having a gun isn’t the expense. It’s that it’s so easy to trace back to you. Each gun has a sensor on it that reports its user’s hand shape, thumbprints, and location. If that didn’t give me away, nothing would. So I’m left with my homemade weapons, PVC pipe slingshots, and other trinkets.

I look down and see the soldiers spill from another house. One of them shakes a can of spray paint and draws a giant red X on the door. I know that house. The family that lives there once had a little girl my age. My brothers and I played with her when we were younger—freeze tag and street hockey with iron pokers and crumpled paper.

I smile, then reach down to untie the cloth. “Some of the stuff we saved up this week. It’ll make for a nice celebration once they pass the inspection.” I dig through the little pile of goodies inside the bundle, then hold up a used pair of goggles. I check them again to make sure there are no cracks in the glass. “For John. An early birthday gift.” My older brother turns nineteen later this week. He works fourteen-hour shifts in the neighborhood plant’s friction stoves and always comes home rubbing his eyes from the smoke. These goggles were a lucky steal from a military supply shipment.

I put them down and shuffle through the rest of the stuff. It’s mostly tins of meat and potato hash I stole from an airship’s cafeteria, and an old pair of shoes with intact soles. I wish I could be in the room with all of them when I deliver this stuff. But John’s the only one who knows I’m alive, and he’s promised not to tell Mom or Eden.

Eden turns ten in two months, which means that in two months he’ll have to take the Trial. I failed my own Trial when I was ten. That’s why I worry about Eden, because even though he’s easily the smartest of us three boys, he thinks a lot like I do. When I finished my Trial, I felt so sure of my answers that I didn’t even bother to watch them grade it. But then the admins ushered me into a corner of the Trial stadium with a bunch of other kids. They stamped something on my test and stuffed me onto a train headed downtown. I didn’t get to take anything except the pendant I wore around my neck. I didn’t even get to say good-bye.

You score between a 1450 and a 1499. Pat yourself on the back because you’ll get instant

access to six years of high school and then four at the top universities in the Republic: Drake, Stanford, and Brenan. Then Congress hires you and you make lots of money. Joy and happiness follow. At least according to the Republic.

It's almost always the slum-sector kids who fail. If you're in this unlucky category, the Republic sends officials to your family's home. They make your parents sign a contract giving the government full custody over you. They say that you've been sent away to the Republic's labor camps and that your family will not see you again. Your parents have to nod and agree. A few even celebrate, because the Republic gives them one thousand Notes as a condolence gift. Money and one less mouth to feed? What a thoughtful government.

"No. It's okay." I peer in the open window at my mother's house, then catch my first glimpse of a familiar face. Eden walks by, then peeks out the window at the approaching soldiers and points some handmade metal contraption at them. Then he ducks back inside and disappears from view. His curls flash white-blond in the flickering lamplight. Knowing him, he probably built that gadget to measure how far away someone is, or something like that.

Minutes later, we see John and my mother wander past the window, deep in conversation. John and I look pretty similar, although he's grown a little stockier from long days at the plant. His hair, like most who live in our sector, hangs down past his shoulders and is tied back into a simple tail. His vest is smudged with red clay. I can tell Mom's scolding him for something or other, probably for letting Eden peek out the window. She bats John's hand away when a bout of her chronic coughing hits her. I let out a breath. So. At least all three of them are healthy enough to walk. Even if one of them is infected, it's early enough that they'll still have a chance to recover.

I can't stop imagining what will happen if the soldiers mark my mother's door. My family will stand frozen in our living room long after the soldiers have left. Then Mom will put on her usual brave face, only to sit up through the night, quietly wiping tears away. In the morning, they'll start receiving small rations of food and water and simply wait to recover. Or die.

The minutes drag on. I tuck my slingshot away and play a few rounds of Rock, Paper, Scissors with Tess. (I don't know why, but she's crazy good at this game.) I glance several times at my mother's window, but don't see anyone. They must have gathered near the door, ready to open it as soon as they hear a fist against the wood.

And then the time comes. I lean forward on the ledge, so far that Tess grips my arm to make sure I don't topple to the ground. The soldiers pound on the door. My mother opens it immediately, lets the soldiers in, and then closes it. I strain to hear voices, footsteps, anything that might come from my house. The sooner this is all over, the sooner I can sneak my gifts to John.

IM SITTING IN MY DEAN SECRETARY'S OFFICE. AGAIN. On the other side of the frosted glass door, I can see a bunch of my classmates (seniors, all at least four years older than me) hanging around in an attempt to hear what's going on. Several of them saw me being yanked out of our afternoon drill class (today's lesson: how to load and unload the XM-621 rifle) by a menacing pair of guards. And whenever that happens, the news spreads all over campus.

The office is quiet except for the faint hum coming from the dean secretary's computer. I've memorized every detail of this room (hand-cut marble floors imported from Dakota, 324 plastic square ceiling tiles, twenty feet of gray drapes hanging to either side of the glorious Elector's portrait on the office's back wall, a thirty-inch screen on the side wall, with the sound muted and a headline that reads: "TRAITOROUS PATRIOTS' GROUP BOMBS LOCAL MILITARY STATION, KILLS FIVE" followed by "REPUBLIC DEFEATS COLONIES IN BATTLE FOR HILLSBORO"). Arisna Whitaker, the dean secretary herself, is seated behind her desk, tapping on its glass—no doubt typing up my report. This will be my eighth report this quarter. I'm willing to bet I'm the only Drake student who's ever managed to get eight reports in one quarter without being expelled.

It meant this simply to be a statement of fact, but it sounded sort of taunting and doesn't seem to have made her any happier. "Let's get something straight, Ms. Iparis," she says. "You may think you're very smart. You may think your perfect grades earn you some sort of special treatment. You may even think you have fans at this school, what with all this nonsense." She gestures at the students gathered outside the door. "But I've grown incredibly tired of our get-togethers in my office. And believe me, when you graduate and get assigned to whatever post this country chooses for you, your antics won't impress your superiors there. Do you understand me?"

I nod, because that's what she wants me to do. But she's wrong. I don't just think I'm smart. I'm the only person in the entire Republic with a perfect 1500 score on her Trial. I was assigned here, to the country's top university, at twelve, four years ahead of schedule. Then I skipped my sophomore year. I've earned perfect grades at Drake for three years. I am smart. I have what the Republic considers good genes—and better genes make for better soldiers make for better chance of victory against the Colonies, my professors always say. And if I feel like my afternoon drills aren't teaching me enough about how to climb walls while carrying weapons, then . . . well, it wasn't my fault I had to scale the side of a nineteen-story building with a XM-621 gun strapped to my back. It was self-improvement, for the sake of my country.

As Metias opens the door and steps inside, I can see some girls out in the hall stifling smiles behind their hands. But Metias fixes his full attention on me. We have the same eyes, black with a gold glint, the same long lashes and dark hair. The long lashes work particularly well for Metias. Even with the door closed behind him, I can still hear the whispers and giggles from outside. It looks like he came from his patrol duties straight to my campus. He's decked out in his full uniform: black officer coat with double rows of gold buttons, gloves (neoprene, spectra lining, captain rank embroidery), shining epaulettes on his shoulders, formal military hat, black trousers, polished boots. My eyes meet his.

"Not a problem, Captain." The dean secretary waves her hand dismissively. What a brown noser—especially after what she's just said about Metias. "It's hardly your fault. Your sister was caught scaling a high-rise during her lunch hour today. She wandered two blocks off campus to do it. As you know, students are to use only the climbing walls on campus for physical training, and leaving the campus in the middle of the day is forbidden."

I ignore Ms. Whitaker's false smile as I follow my brother out of the office and into the hall. Immediately students hurry over. "June," a boy named Dorian says as he tags alongside us. He'd asked me (unsuccessfully) to the annual Drake ball two years in a row. "Is it true? How high up did you get?"

Metias doesn't say another word as we make our way down the corridors, past the manicured lawns of the central quad and the glorious Elector's statue, and finally through one of the indoor gyms. We pass by the afternoon drills I'm supposed to be participating in. I watch my classmates run along a giant track surrounded by a 360-degree screen simulating some desolate warfront road. They're holding their rifles out in front of them, attempting to load and unload as fast as they can while running. At most other universities, there wouldn't be so many student soldiers, but at Drake, almost all of us are well on our way to career assignments in the Republic's military. A few others are tapped for politics and Congress, and some are chosen to stay behind and teach. But Drake is the Republic's best university, and seeing as how the best are always assigned into the military, our drill room is packed with students.

By the time we reach one of Drake's outer streets and I climb into the backseat of our waiting military jeep, Metias can barely contain his anger. "Suspended for a week? Do you want to explain this to me?" he demands. "I get back from a morning of dealing with the Patriot rebels and what do I hear about? Helicopters two blocks from Drake. A girl scaling a skyscraper."

I try to meet Thomas's eyes again in the rearview mirror, but he keeps his gaze on the road. Of course, I shouldn't expect any help from him. He looks as tidy as ever, with his perfectly slicked

hair and perfectly ironed uniform. Not a strand or thread out of place. Thomas might be several years younger than Metias and a subordinate on his patrol, but he's more disciplined than anyone I know. Sometimes I wish I had that much discipline. He probably disapproves of my stunts even more than Metias does.

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