

A knight on the rim is grim

The first week I spent at Splice was extremely lonely and frustrating. It rained a lot, and the rain beat against the windowpane of my room, which was several stories above ground level.

Mr. Hart kept me isolated from the others. I suspected he did it so I'd be craving companionship, wanting to make new friends when he finally decided to introduce them. *He was wrong.*

I was allowed to watch the news, where I saw, indeed, that not only had the house I lived in burnt to a feathery crisp, but they'd rebuilt it and a new family already lived there, as if my family and I had never even existed.

Mr. Hart himself showed me some of his 'toys', like the programmable memory-erasing chip, and the strange watch that Lurch 1 had been wearing in the limo; it had special functions and programs, one of which was being able to restore someone's short-term memory through some sort of electrical impulses to the brain.

"That's a very powerful watch," he explained. "You see, the human brain's alpha waves function in the six to eight hertz range, and the electrical resonance of the earth is between six and eight hertz. All biological systems operate in the same frequency range. Thus, our entire biological system – the brain and the earth itself – work on the same frequencies. If we can control that resonant system electronically, we can directly control the entire mental system of

humankind. Imagine. This watch is a big step toward doing that, but we have a long way to go.”

My head spun thinking about that. I did a lot of thinking in my room, which sported bunk beds, a desk, a simple bureau stocked with clothes in my size, all with the SPLICE logo on them, a TV, a closet stocked with trainers in my size, Converse in a rainbow of colors, and an ornate, computerized chess board with chess pieces. I held out for two days before I gave in to playing the computer at chess. I won every match and was soon bored. All my meals had been brought to me. So far, my roommate hadn't shown his face.

The only other channel I got on the TV besides the local news channel was one that broadcast only adverts, testimonials, and glowing gibberish about Splice and its founder, Mr. M. T. Hart. I hadn't bothered to watch it for any length of time until today, when I changed the channel and saw the pretty blonde-haired girl from the courtyard being interviewed by someone off camera. I couldn't tell when the video had been made. Today? Weeks ago? A year ago?

“Would you save the world if it was up to you?” the off-site interviewer asked. She sat in the courtyard, by herself, at the picnic table. Her eyes were a color I'd never seen before, an intense sky blue with flecks of purple, and there was a deep sadness in them. She frowned. Chewed her lip. Looked away from the camera. “The world is full of liars and magicians. Greed has run the human race since, like, forever.” She paused and there was a faraway look in her eyes, like she was thinking of something else. “*This* world isn't worth saving. And anyway, if it was destroyed, another one would spring up exactly like it, no matter how you shuffled the deck.” She picked up her playing cards and shuffled them then, arching

them into the air and making the mushroom shape of a nuclear bomb. I'd never seen anything like it. The cards were orange and red and actually moved so fast they looked like shooting flames. "You know what's brilliant? A mind that can still drink things in, taste them, see them, and know them without *perfection*."

The image flickered and was replaced with another—the same off-site interviewer asking the same question to the girl with the tattoos. The voice of the interviewer was familiar somehow. "Houdini, if it was up to you and only you, would you save the world?"

Houdini was dressed completely in black—black shorts, black sleeveless T-shirt, black ankle boots. Black bracelets on her arms. Even her black hair was in bunches. She wore black lipstick. I watched in fascination as the tattoos on her arms and bare shoulders moved and danced so rapidly, in iridescent colors of red, purple, green, silver, and black, that you couldn't tell what the shapes were right away. "The world and everything in it is an illusion," she said. "A design, an art, a dance of color. A *deception*." She paused. "Did you know Queen Victoria herself is rumored to have had a tattoo of a Bengal tiger fighting with a python?"

She closed her eyes and concentrated. A Bengal Tiger and a python formed themselves on her arms and began fighting in a flash of colors. The tiger bared his teeth and the python shimmied and shimmered menacingly.

"That's a neat trick, but you still haven't answered my question," the interviewer said.

She picked at a chewed fingernail. "I would. I would save the world."

"Why?"

“For the artists to come. The souls who can see beyond the soaring cathedrals and monuments and bloody, senseless wars to the soul itself, to the homeless beggar on the street, to the heart of living. For the van Goghs and Picassos and the Artemisia Gentileschis’. Do you know who Artemisia Gentileschi was?” She paused. “I can see that you don’t. She was an Italian Baroque painter. She painted in the 1600s, when women painters weren’t accepted by the artistic community or by patrons. She dared to paint pictures of strong, suffering women from myth and from the Bible—victims and warriors alike. A lot of her works show women as equal to men. She was way ahead of her time.”

The TV image flickered again and the chunky, sandy haired boy and girl I’d seen in the courtyard appeared. “You’re twins, so odds are you would both have the same answer. Would you save the world if it was up to you?”

They spoke simultaneously—one said “yes” and the other said “no.”

“Why?” the interviewer said.

The girl who’d said she would save the world spoke first. She was shy and spoke quietly. “I can hear the thoughts of the dead. I can see into the past. It’s really awful and almost all of them are barmy, but there’s something worth saving in most of them.”

“No, there’s *not*,” said the boy, blinking his deep blue eyes and rifling his hand through his sandy hair. A lock of it fell over his forehead. “I’ve been so many places, places I thought would be different from here. The past, the future. No matter where you go, people are *all* the same. *Lame*. The world isn’t worth saving at all. The only thing worth saving is a good, sugary dessert.”

The TV picture swirled and changed again. "Lightning, if it came down to you to save the world, would you?"

I'd been reclining on the bottom bunk. I sat up. Lightning was supposed to be my roommate. He had black hair and intense amber eyes. His hair was shoulder-length and pulled into a long ponytail. He wore dark sunglasses pushed up on his head and fingerless black gloves on his hands. The tips of his fingers, dancing on the tabletop, seemed to glow. His fingernails were painted black. "Would I save the world? Maybe. If there was something in it for me. Like a lifetime supply of salted caramel custard donuts served up to me by a bodacious babe in a bikini." The girl sitting next to him, a smaller version of Lightning, slapped his arm.

"Don't be gross, bro."

"What about you, Chipmunk?"

"I might," the smallish girl said, "but only for the animals. Most humans aren't worth the trouble. But nature, nature moves in mysterious ways. Like bats. Bats use sound waves to guide them in the dark. Do you know baby sharks aren't taught to hunt? They have these special cells in their brains that let them track down the smallest fish hiding under the sand on the ocean floor. Nobody *teaches* them how to hunt. The cells are sensitive to electrical fields in the water. When a fish moves or breathes, the water around it makes these electrical pulses that shoot off in every direction and the shark picks up on it. And don't get me started on pigs! In laboratories, pigs play video games better than chimps do, and they listen to music, too."

Click. The TV picture changed again. A large, muscular teenage boy in a tie-dyed T-shirt stared at the camera. He had red hair and a bridge of freckles across

his nose and round cheeks and a light red beard on his chin. His face was pale. He wasn't smiling. His dark eyes narrowed. "I see no reason to save this filthy, arrogant, stupid, greedy race of humans and, as long as I have my ability," he looked down at his large, pink palms, "I never will." He glanced away from his interviewer. "In fact, had I known I was being created in a *laboratory*, to live this kind of life, to have this kind of 'gift', I would've found a way to destroy myself before I ever grew into anything. Huh. You know what? G.E.H. should be a swear word. I predict *normal* humans will use it as a swear word, soon enough."

I nearly jumped from my chair when the door to my room swung open. And there was the interviewer with a TV camera. I knew what I was going to be asked. Tears sprung to my eyes as a snappy jingle played on the TV behind me, extolling the virtues of the Splice Corporation. It couldn't be. It just couldn't be....