

We Can See Through the Machines

The Incarnations of the Americas

Volume V

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Dedicated to all the faceless people who were responsible for developing all the cool software I've used over the years- thank you for your hard work!!! And, as always and forever, to my wife Victoria and to our new doggy Crosby. See honey, I can call you Victoria in print.

This first quarter of this book was written to a wide assortment of jazz from the length and breadth of the careers of Miles Davis and John Coltrane as well as a "Miles Davis" channel on Pandora.com. But then I discovered the music Pandora played when you put in "Benevento/Russo Duo" as a channel and listened to that for the next month or so. Finally, my ex-disdain for Radiohead grew into a reversal of positions, and finally a near obsession with the music- the final half of this book saw them slowly crowd out everything else. In many ways, I feel like I'm trying to make up for lost time.

The book was written mostly in my home in Chesterton, Indiana except for a few thousand that I wrote in a cabin on the top of a mountain in Tennessee.

THE INCARNATIONS OF THE AMERICAS

I- Portal

II- Ialtaboath

III- The Clearing at the End of the Path

IV- The Music of Dreams

V- We Can See Through The Machines

VI- Bang

VII- Exodus Episode

“... reminds me so much of the Hindu concept of Indra’s net... sometimes described as being a great net extending throughout the universe, vertically to represent time, horizontally to represent space. At each point where the threads of this Indra’s net cross one another is a diamond or a crystal bead, the symbol of a single existence. Each crystal bead reflects on its shining surface not only every other bead in the whole net of Indra but every single reflection of every reflection of every other bead upon each individual bead- countless, endless reflections of one another.”

—Israel Regardie in the Introduction of Robert Anton Wilson’s Prometheus
Rising

PART I

The rules of the Indra Recruiting School #75-96 were very strict and left little room for discussion. No deviations from established guidelines were tolerated. You were only allowed to receive 3 demerits before you were expelled from the school- and that was for your full nine years- from age 6 to 15.

Under normal strictures, Tikka Masala would've been ejected from the Indra Recruiting School two weeks into her first year. She committed an expellable offense when she shot a rubber band across the room and hit Carnie Hammerank in the eye- bursting the blood vessel. Many, many, kids were thrown out of the school for much, much less. For example, Terrier Fermat was caught three times chewing gum in class over a 6 year period. His third strike saw his expulsion from the school.

For his part, Carnie was a bully, but not of the physical variety. Physical bullying wasn't typically a problem with Indra recruits. As a general rule, the more muscle bound kids didn't make the cut. Verbal abuse was tolerated, or perhaps even encouraged among the kids. Of course, you could never direct such abuse at a teacher- but if you were in a bad mood- and felt like verbally assaulting someone in your peer group- then the school's official policy, actually written in the student handbook, was "Sticks and stones will break your bones but words can never hurt you."

Carnie had a gift for looking at a person and picking out their weakest point- and then immediately ripping into it like a jackal on a hunk of antelope. Because he used his tongue instead of his fists- Carnie's behavior was tolerated by the teachers. There were some who believed the bully's viciousness was good for the kids- that children were too weak as it was and needed to grow some backbone.

Tikka's rubber band incident occurred at dinner time. Carnie was mercilessly picking on a younger boy sitting next to him. The boy was fat, and as a new six year old recruit, was extremely homesick. Carnie verbally worked the boy over like a prize fighter working a heavy bag. Left hook, "You're a fat pig" right hook, "Mama's boy crybaby" until eventually the boy was so demoralized he broke down completely, putting his head on the table and sobbing.

Tikka watched this from her place two tables down and stewed in her fury. She knew the kid. His name was Griff- short for Griffon. She remembered his name because there was only the first name- no last- just Griff. They weren't really friends or anything (6 year olds tend to sort themselves by gender), but Griff was assigned to sit next to Tikka on the long airbus ride from Boston to the outskirts of Chicago where the school was located. She didn't know how to contain her anger as she watched Carnie dump unnecessary pain onto Griff by the bucketful. She could actually see Carnie's words wearing the boy down, his head dropping lower and lower after each successive assault.

Because she was an orphan who'd lost both of her parents when she was 3, even at the young age of six Tikka had already had more than her fill of the unfairness of the world. She saw the boy Griff suffering unnecessarily- at the whim of this angry mean boy- and she had to do something.

There were a number of rubber bands looped around Tikka's wrist- the latest fashion trend with the kids in the school. It was an easy way to cheat. Kids wrote crib sheets on the thin bands of plastic- the teacher's knew about this, but allowed it as long as the student acted with a reasonable amount of sneakiness. When Griff eventually began to sob from Carnie's unrelenting attack, she pulled one of the rubber bands off of her wrist, slipped her thumb into one end and her index finger into the other- took aim- and fired. The rubber band flew across the room and directly into Carnie's eye.

Hitting Carnie in the eye was no accident- the rubber band went precisely where she aimed it and she'd predicted the rubber band's trajectory almost perfectly. Tikka was a bit surprised when the blood vessel burst and the left side of his eye blossomed red- but she just considered the burst blood vessel a bonus.

It wasn't until a second later, Tikka allowed herself to think the thought her anger refused to acknowledge. They'd probably throw her out for what she'd done. She considered this for a long moment, and then decided she still would've done what she did, no matter the consequences. Stopping Carnie was the right thing to do.

To Tikka's immediate satisfaction, Carnie immediately began to cry and wail like a kid five years his junior. He put his hand over his eye and ran from the room, both eyes now leaking tears. About twenty seconds later, several teachers burst into the cafeteria and demanded to know what happened. Tikka did the right thing and owned up to what she did.

The teachers, Mr. Kyle and Mrs. Arriaga led Tikka out of the cafeteria and straight to the Head of the School, Mrs. Mountwalsh. Every time she tried to talk, or to explain why she'd shot Carnie with the rubber band, she was met with a stern gaze from Mr. Kyle and a firmly gestured 'shush.'

Because the school took kids from such a broad age group, the hallways had high ceilings, making Tikka feel like a tiny doll walking through the halls, hurrying to keep up with the purposeful strides of her unsympathetic teachers. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, she came to the high oaken door of Mrs. Mountwalsh.

The only time she ever actually laid eyes on the principle was on the day they arrived. After being escorted off of the buses they were ushered into a big auditorium where a large video screen was set up. After a brief introduction by one of the school's teachers, Mrs. Mountwalsh's face appeared on the monitor. It was only a close up on her face- George Orwell 1984 style.

Mrs. Mountwalsh's stern visage spoke to everyone about the importance of behaving and being very careful to "mind their p's and q's." On that occasion, Mrs. Mountwalsh came across as a horribly unpleasant woman and Tikka had to struggle to hold back tears when she was finally summoned inside.

"Get in here." Demanded a harsh, high pitched voice.

Tikka took a deep breath, swallowed, and went in to face the music.

The communicator attached to Geoff® Argoss's lapel blinked.

"You've got to be kidding me." Geoff groaned.

As if to confirm it wasn't a joke, the lapel pin blinked again, this time adding a single harsh chirping noise. Geoff wanted to keep going- to pretend he hadn't heard. Technically, he was already off the clock, although he'd only placed a single foot out the door- according the contract- he had to have both feet outside before he was technically off of work. Until he stepped both feet outside, they could call him back. Having one foot out made him eligible for overtime, but it was mandatory overtime and he didn't want it- he just wanted to get out of work, go home, eat dinner, worship, and maybe catch some music and a beer at the corner pub.

Instead, he turned around and went back inside, the fluorescent lights kicking back on automatically. Geoff worked as a maintenance technician, one of the most vital and unappreciated jobs any person could find themselves doing. As Geoff could commonly be heard to complain about at the bar, without him, and the thousands of people like him keeping the machines running- their entire world would slow down, and finally ground to a halt.

Of course, the bartender at Geoff's regular bar, quite rightly, was sure his own job was equally vital to the well being and survival of their society. Like Geoff, the bartender gave very little thought to whether or not their society was worthy of survival- he just did his job, lived his life, tried not to feel to crappy about the fact his kid had been thrown out of Indra school before the end of the first year- and just be grateful she'd gotten admitted at all- it meant she would have a better job than both him and his ex-wife- and to some degree, that was success in parenting in and of itself.

Geoff didn't have kids. He'd never been married. Geoff worked and Geoff drank and that was about it. Which was ironic because Geoff hated work- and he really wasn't fond of drinking either- almost every morning started with a headache that didn't go away until his third cup

of coffee- but he was able to sleep after a few beers, and that was luxury enough.

In a minimally defiant way, Geoff walked as slowly as he could manage over to his locker and palmed it open. As soon as the pad flashed red, the fat, red, and ruddy face of an Administrator appeared on the flat monitor mounted into the locker's front. In his mind, Geoff named the man "Mr. Jowls".

"What can I do for you sir?" Geoff said, trying not to sound annoyed, but not trying very hard.

"It's about time you answered the call. It's been ringing for eons and I have places I need to be." Mr. Jowls complained.

Geoff believed the man when he said this. Unlike their service brethren, the Administrators (Typically known by their generic term, "Administration") always left their offices the moment their daily work time was up. To be fair, they didn't go home when they left the office. Geoff didn't know where the Administrators went, but it wasn't home. His ignorance on this subject was a distinct sore spot in Geoff's mind- he really wanted to know, but all of his friends were as ignorant as he was, not that this stopped them from speculating wildly. The most common theory amongst Geoff's friends was that the Administrators were all vampires, which was why they stayed inside during the day- but Geoff thought this idea was more than just a little bit stupid, and none of his friends were really serious when they said it anyway. Geoff legitimately wondered, but clearly, most of his brethren did not.

"Sorry sir. You caught me on my way out." Geoff said by way of explanation, he didn't even imagine the man might apologize for causing Geoff an inconvenience- and he wasn't disappointed.

Instead, the man said, "I don't give a fumble what you were doing. Just get your ass up here a minute ago."

The face disappeared and was replaced with his location information. It came as no surprise the guy was on the periphery of Geoff's responsibility. Two doors further east his jowly red face would've been someone else's headache.

There was nothing to be done about it though. Geoff grabbed his tool bag from his locker and walked over to where the electric scooters were kept. Of course all three vehicles in dock were almost completely drained of charge.

Kicking the nearest of the lightweight yellow scooters didn't make him feel better the way he'd hoped it would- it just made his foot hurt. Once he was finished hopping around and cursing, Geoff headed off towards the nearest bank of elevators on foot.

Describing the way the buildings were set up is a bit difficult. As a general rule, height was equal to status. The higher the floor you lived and/or worked on, the higher your social standing- except buildings weren't exactly designed vertically. Instead, they sprawled, often for miles in every direction. Amongst the endless maze of corridors and

hallways you encountered almost random spires that rose high above the rest of the surrounding building. Sometimes the towers were for living, sometimes for working, and sometimes both. The reason the architecture of the buildings was so strange was mostly due to the way the massive structures were made- or perhaps adapted is a better description. There was a city standing before the current residents arrived. When they did, many of the buildings were half-way to being rubble. They repaired the most intact of the buildings and used the materials from the demolished ones to slowly roof over massive sections of the city. The resulting Frankenstein monstrosities became home to thousands as the interiors were remodeled over the course of a century.

As a mechanical maintenance technician, Geoff was responsible for approximately ten square miles of territory- which consisted of 3 sprawling complexes and several stand-alone buildings. The yellow scooters were supposed to be used to zip him to whatever location he needed to go. The vehicles had their own lanes within the hallways and they were really nice when you could get one. But, naturally, most of the time their batteries were tapped out- especially if you were in a hurry. Instead of a 30 second trip, it took Geoff almost five minutes to walk the mile and a quarter to the nearest elevator complex.

By the time he got there, he was sweating and puffing in the warm stale air of the massive building. He got a brief flash of fresh air when he arrived at the elevators that would take him up the tower to Mr. Jowls' office- or maybe house- the fat man's face filled the whole screen and Geoff couldn't tell the context from which he was being scolded. Since all of the towers were unlabeled beyond their address numbers- he still had no way of knowing. The building's function was presumably understood by the Administrators and they had no interest in announcing it to any of the "prols"- the derogatory nickname used for the service class by both the Administration and the prols themselves.

Geoff got onto the elevator with about ten other people, all of them Administrators. Because he was on an emergency call, Geoff had every right to ride on the same elevator with the Administration, but judging from the looks he was getting, none of them were very happy out this fact. Resisting the urge to punch one of these cushioned little babies in the throat, Geoff stared at the numbers and did his best to block the bastards out. It wasn't easy.

Finally, the doors slid open on his floor and Geoff got out, counting slowly in his head to ten, telling himself he still had fat Mr. Jowly to talk to, telling himself he really needed to calm down. He found the designated door and waited another minute or two outside before ringing the bell. He wanted to make sure he was going to be able to hold it together. He needed his job. As far as Geoff was concerned, the only thing worse than going around behind the Administration fixing their stuff- would be not getting the paycheck that came along with the headache.

Geoff rang the bell. Within a second the door swung open and the man from the video screen was standing there, looking every bit as bloated and unhealthy as he had on the phone. Behind him was a smallish, cubicle sized room with a desk and two chairs. A large computer monitor was on the desk, but there wasn't a wall-screen, which meant this annoying prick was barely junior Administration- and had no real place to act so uppity- even the technician's locker room had a wall-screen.

"Good evening Mister..." Geoff waited for the man to fill in his name- he knew he couldn't call the guy Mr. Jowly.

"Mr. Standish."

"Very good Mr. Standish, now what is it I can do for you this evening?"

Geoff was as polite as possible- a big, fake smile was plastered across his face. Every verbal interaction he had with customers was recorded and ran through an analyzer and any overt hostility in his tone could cost him his job- or at the very least, would trigger a dock in pay.

"My monitor isn't working." Mr. Standish said. He pointed at the monitor, as if Geoff needed him to identify what he was referring to.

It was suddenly necessary for Geoff to redouble his efforts to keep himself under control. He looked at the monitor, and then looked at Mr. Jowly. He had barely taken a step into the room before he put his finger on the problem. If Mr. Standish could've bothered himself for half a second, the problem would've been apparent to him as well.

The monitor was unplugged. And since Mr. Standish was the only guy in the office- it meant the monitor had been unplugged by none other than Mr. Standish. And Geoff wasn't allowed just to jump on the guy and bang his head into the floor until he promised to never bother another human being about something so stupid ever again.

"I believe you have knocked the plug loose." Geoff said.

For about a millionth of a second, Mr. Standish looked sheepishly at the plug with a clear look of embarrassment. But just as quickly as it arrived, the humility drained out of the man's face.

"You made me wait all this time and all that was wrong was a plug?" Mr. Standish demanded. His hands were on his hips, like a little kid being told it was his bedtime.

Geoff didn't answer. He just walked across the room, put the plug back into the wall, stepped around to the front of the monitor and confirmed the plug was the only problem. With its plug replaced, the monitor immediately clicked on again. A picture of a scantily clad woman filled the entire screen. Apparently the "Administrator" was too busy working himself to notice his foot knocked the plug out.

"Don't you look at what I'm working on!" Mr. Standish demanded, coming around the desk at speed. He punched the monitor back off. Then, knowing what Geoff had seen, he said, "It's research. I'm working on a paper regarding the effect of pornography on adolescent minds- it's

very technical, not something I'd expect someone like you to understand."

It didn't seem fair to Geoff he wasn't going to get a reward for not knocking this asshole's teeth into the other side of his mouth. He supposed it was possible Mr. Jowly took care of something important for the Indra- but Geoff didn't think so- and the little office went a long way toward validating his opinion. Geoff thought it was much more likely Mr. Jowly's Dad was someone who was connected. And he, like so many others in the Administration had absolutely no place amongst those lucky enough to serve the Indra.

"Have a nice day sir." Geoff said. He'd repeated this phrase so many times- in the same banal tone- he was able to keep any trace of the anger out of his voice.

Mr. Standish tried to continue to huff on about how slow Geoff was and how ridiculous it was his time was being wasted. But Geoff paid no attention. He just went to the door, opened it, and walked out. He decided to take the stairs so he could kick the concrete wall hard enough to leave a deep bruise on his big toe.

Even though it was exceedingly difficult, Geoff tried to look on the bright side. It could've been a difficult problem- something requiring hours of work- instead it was a moron problem. Now he'd only be leaving a half hour late- which wasn't so bad. He tried to tell himself this- but, while some people might've accepted this as a bright side- for Geoff- it was just the depressing truth of his existence. The one aspect of Geoff's job that came with a corresponding sense of accomplishment was solving tricky problems. He was actually quite talented in this area- as talented as any maintenance person working anywhere in the world.

Ironically, in spite of his extraordinary talents, Geoff was seen as a marginal employee, one who would probably be on his manager's list of guys to lay off if word came from above to scale back the workforce. Geoff often worked more slowly than the rest of the guys and he had what was universally recorded in his employee file as "a bad attitude." What the managers failed to see was the fact Geoff almost never utilized his portable diagnostic machine- he puzzled out the problems in the mechanics using only the neurons in his brain. As far as Geoff knew, he was the only one capable of doing this- not that his talent was recognized. It wasn't like his boss didn't know- one time, while in a huff, Geoff had reported his skill to his manager- and all he received in return was a look of confusion and maybe even a hint of disgust. It was as if Geoff had told the man he wiped his butt with his finger.

The Portable Diagnostic Machine, or PDM, was the bread and butter device used by the technicians. Because of the PDM, it wasn't really necessary for the technicians to *know* anything. All they needed to know how to do was follow the simple instructions demonstrated on the computer screen, but they no more had to understand what they were

doing than a person driving a car has to understand the way a fuel injector or antilock brakes work.

Every electronic device had a USB sized interface which allowed the PDM to be plugged into it. The PDM analyzed the machine, solved the problem and then explained to the technician exactly how to do the repairs. The degree of assumed stupidity cannot be overestimated. For example, if you had a screw you had to put in, the PDM would tell you to turn the screwdriver clockwise to tighten the screw and would even have an animation running, showing the handle turning the correct direction- you had to be consciously trying to screw up to make a mistake.

If parts needed to be ordered, the machine ordered them automatically and had them delivered directly to the job. The PDM left nothing to chance. In comparison, Geoff's method was trial and error, solving the problem the way a detective tracks down a killer, by eliminating possibilities and understanding motivation. It wasn't as efficient as following directions more accurate and easy to understand than putting together a dresser from Ikea. All of which left Geoff in the unfortunate situation of liking his work- but not being allowed to practice it in a way he found satisfying.

At one time, the Administration considered phasing out the technicians. Since the machines were doing most of the work anyway, it seemed reasonable to replace the people with robots. But even though robots probably would've been easier, the Administration decided to make the process idiot proof and keep people working- because if the pros didn't have something to do with themselves, they'd likely spend their time starting trouble.

Geoff rode the elevator back down to ground level, enjoyed another brief waft of fresh air, and then turned back down the hallway for the long walk back to his locker so he could check in his tools. With a little luck, one of the scooters would be charged enough to get him home- but he wasn't counting on luck today.

Forty five minutes later Geoff was home, he'd gotten lucky- there was a charged scooter waiting for him when he walked back into the maintenance deployment center. His feet as grateful as his mind, Geoff took the scooter and thought about the beers he would drink after worship.

Mrs. Mountwalsh's office was sparsely decorated and looked to Tikka's young eyes like a tomb. There was a large desk, empty except for a terminal, an ink blotter, and a holographic nameplate that said "Mrs. Mountwalsh- Principal" in blocky, no-nonsense letters. There was a single framed certificate on the wall and two chairs for visitors.

Then there was the principal herself.

Mrs. Mountwalsh was the polar opposite of the room she surrounded herself with- she wore a bright, loud patterned dress that seemed to utilize all of the primary colors to their most clashing and eye popping effect. She looked massive on the monitor during orientation, but in reality, she wasn't that big- probably a foot shorter than either of the teachers who walked Tikka to the office.

Tikka walked in, trying to look brave and thinking she was probably failing miserably. Mrs. Mountwalsh neither frowned nor smiled, she simply indicated the open chair with her hand. Tikka noticed both hands were covered in large, gaudy rings laden with egg-sized stones of obviously dubious quality. The one on her ring finger appeared to be made from pink plastic.

"You've been here for twelve days Ms. Masala, and already you've managed to perform an expulsion worthy act." Mrs. Mountwalsh said.

She was the type of woman who stared at you in the eye while she talked, never blinking, never giving even a moment's relief from her laser-like attention.

"Would you like to explain what you were thinking?"

Tikka, like a million students before her, had to fight back the urge to groan. Was it really so hard to understand what she was thinking?

"I saw Carnie picking on Griff. He made Griff cry. So I shot a rubber band and I hit him in the eye. I was thinking if he had a rubber band in his eye- he would stop picking on Griff."

"I see. So you thought it was your place to dispense discipline?"

"No, it's just the rules say he's allowed to pick on Griff- he wasn't hitting him with his fists. He was just hitting him with his words."

"And why isn't it Griff's responsibility to stick up for himself?"

Tikka looked at her hands and didn't respond.

"So you see the glaring arrogance." Mrs. Mountwalsh proclaimed, her eyes still locked on Tikka like a dog staring at a ribeye. "You decided you know better than everyone else, including the Administration and officers of this school when you decide you are the one who is going to mete out justice. In anyone else, such arrogance would be punished by expulsion. However..."

Tikka wasn't expecting a however.

"However, in your specific case- your arrogance has some bearing in reality."

A deep frown furrowed Tikka's face. She didn't know exactly where Mrs. Mountwalsh was going, but she didn't think she was going to like it.

"I am familiar with your file, so I understand this may come as a bit of a shock. The community you come from was small. But you, Tikka, are the most promising recruit we have in this school. You're just a stupid little bastard right now, but in time, under our tutelage, we expect you to be magnificent."

"So I'm not in trouble?" Tikka asked. The news was jarring.

After her parents died, Tikka was put into a foster home for the 3 years leading up to her acceptance in the Indra Recruiting School. Her foster family was very different than her real parents, who recognized Tikka's intelligence very early on. At only four months Tikka spoke her first complete sentence- and her real Mom had done everything to encourage her precocious and brilliant little girl. But she died and the environment changed. Her foster family was a bit frightened by her advanced intellect.

Her foster Mom used to say all the time, "Just because you're smart doesn't mean I'm going to let you get away with murder. The fact you're smart means I ain't gotta take no shit from you."

But Mrs. Mountwalsh seemed to be saying the exact opposite- so long as Tikka remained at the top of her class- she would take whatever shit Tikka felt like dealing her.

Recognizing the look of confusion on Tikka's face, Mrs. Mountwalsh said, "Perhaps you've been told you shouldn't get special privileges because you're smart. As I said, I've read your file and it sounds like something your foster mother would say- they were very stupid people. But this school serves a purpose far more important than some dim bulb kid who just happens to have a gift for cruelty. There are certainly places in our society for kids like Carnie, but he wasn't going to be here much longer anyway. It is Carnie's place to act as a security guard- for someone like you. Guards don't have to be smart. You, my dear, are gifted in a way we cannot teach, so we have no choice but to let things slide with you. Now, let me be very, very clear."

Mrs. Mountwalsh made sure she had Tikka's direct gaze before she finished. "You have now put yourself under extreme pressure- the worst kind of pressure I can imagine. The only one who keeps the student rankings is me- there is no computer you can hack into or paper you can steal to know how solidly you are in first place. As of this day, you now have a mark after your name in your permanent record. If you ever, for any reason, fall out of your first place ranking- maybe because you get the flu and some other kid, who's not far behind just happens to excel on an assignment, bringing the overall coefficient of his score above your own- you will be out of here before you know what hit you."

Tikka swallowed. She felt like there was a robin's egg in her throat.

Mrs. Mountwalsh continued, "So for the rest of your nine years here at the recruiting school #75-96 you had better work your skinny little butt off- because you are just a test score away from hitting the road and living the rest of your life like," she paused, mustering up a full blast of contempt at the very idea of what she was going to say, "like a common prol." She finished.

Tikka had no idea what to say so she didn't say anything. She'd learned that lesson after the first time her foster Father smacked her for "smarting off".

The principal frowned, and turned one of the gaudy rings around on her finger, her eyes still locked onto Tikka's. "Maybe we should test you again, because you look all scared right now. You should be happy. If you were the least bit clever, you would realize you know have carte blanche- you've already cut your own throat- so you're free. You can do whatever you want now. Kill a kid, see if I care."

Tikka looked at Mrs. Mountwalsh with horror. "I would never do such a thing."

"Perhaps you wouldn't. But I'm telling you it is up to you now. There's only one exception- if you bump off the kid who is number 2- and believe me that kid isn't really too far behind you- maybe a few points here and there, if you do anything to harm the student in second, you will be brought up on charges of treason and shot for the destruction of potentially valuable government property."

With a start, Tikka realized the principal was saying that she was also government property in the eyes of the teachers. She was a commodity, and they really wouldn't hesitate a moment to give her the boot if somebody better came along. The really scary thing was, she'd only been at the school for a couple of weeks, and already she'd achieved the highest student status- whoever held the place before her arrival might've been sent home on the same bus that brought her to the school.

"So, it's in your hands now. Are you going to use your rather considerable power for good- or for ill? As long as you keep up your work, and produce superior results- we will look the other way- so your morality is no one's but your own."

"This isn't right. I don't want to get expelled, but I shouldn't get to do whatever I want just because I'm the smartest kid. That's not fair." Tikka said. She thought there was a possibility this was all a test. Maybe they wanted to see what she would say if the teachers lied and said they would no longer exercise any real authority over her as long as she continued to be the best student in the school.

But then she knew it wasn't a test because Mrs. Mountwalsh neither praised her nor scolded her. Mrs. Mountwalsh didn't object at all. She took a different tack.

She said, "I don't care if it's fair. It's the rules. You can follow them- or not- it doesn't matter- but this is how it's going to be whether you like it or not."

Even though she was trying hard not to, Tikka began to cry. She scolded herself, silently yelled at herself to stop, but she couldn't help it. Even worse, there was nothing even approaching compassion in Mrs. Mountwalsh's eyes.

She just sat and stared at Tikka for a few moments before saying, "You are dismissed. I don't intend to have to see you again. Are we understood?"

Tikka nodded, sniffled once loudly and got up from her chair. She was only 6 years old and there was a lot of consternation running

through the strange bit of gleeful relief she felt at getting away scot-free for shooting Carnie in the eye.

When Tikka left, wiping tears from the corners of her eyes, Mrs. Mountwalsh looked at Mr. Kyle and Mrs. Arriaga and frowned.

“This one has a very well developed sense of justice and fairness.” She said.

“She certainly does.” Mr. Kyle agreed.

“We are going to have to watch her very carefully.” Mrs. Mountwalsh sighed, and looked out the window at the dirty grey sky.