

SOMNI
THE TENETS
OF
SAN ACCIA

— TENET I —

~ TENET I | TERNION I ~

TRUE I

Tuesday, September 3, 1985

Ferdinand Quispe Junior & Senior High School

Mesa, Arizona

8:31 am

Olly was good at lots of things. At thirteen, he was, for instance, pretty good at spelling. He could perform a rifle shuffle of playing cards, usually on command, though sometimes he needed a few warmups. And he was a decent runner and could outpace Matty—who everyone knew was a total jerk face—when the need called for it. But Olly was a creature of habit, a lover of routines, and he most certainly was not good at change. He liked knowing what to expect, when to expect it, and how to navigate it. So when the bell rang to end homeroom and he tentatively followed his classmates out the door and into the giant halls of Ferdinand Quispe Junior & Senior High School, a wave of panic washed over him. A new school, the cacophony of babbling voices belonging to a sea of unfamiliar faces, and the labyrinthine hallways were a recipe for disaster. And to make matters worse, it was all happening on a Tuesday.

“Deep breaths. Figure out where you are. Get the lay of the land. Focus on where you need to be,” his mother’s words whispered soothingly

in his mind. And so he did. He closed his eyes, drew in a deep breath, and sought to find his clam in the middle of the maelstrom called junior high.

“Focus,” he whispered to himself. He opened his eyes, gripped his backpack straps tight with balled fists, and worked to summon his courage. “Gotta find room 111.” He took his first steps, arriving at a four-way intersection, and immediately faltered.

Now which way? His mind spun as his eyes darted, looking for anything that might point him in the right direction. But with so many other kids going in every which direction, each one trying to draw his attention, he felt rudderless. *Great. I’m already lost...*

The Ferdinand Quispe school district didn’t have a lot of money so, unlike most of the other schools in the sprawling suburbs of Phoenix, they did not have a middle school. For Olly this meant that after graduating sixth grade in the spring he would never again walk the familiar hallways of Garbiñe Quispe Elementary. Now he was in the *big* school—Garbiñe’s *dad’s* school—with all the older kids. And while he hadn’t actually seen a single upperclassman since he began his timid exploration of the maze-like hallways of the junior high wing, that didn’t mean they weren’t there. Somewhere. Waiting to pounce.

And it’s a Tuesday, his brain was kind enough to remind him. Yesterday had been Labor Day and so everything had been closed, delaying the start of the new school year. But, in Olly’s mind, new things should only be allowed to start on a Monday.

All of it was just wrong. Wrong day, wrong place, wrong people. *How do they seriously expect me to learn anything?! Everything is new! It’ll take me weeks just to remember my locker combination...* Olly’s mind railed against the pure insanity that was junior high school.

“Focus,” he reminded himself, the word a silent mantra that helped him finally acknowledge the world around him. And that’s

when he finally found a sign, way up high on the wall, that pointed him left towards rooms 110 through 119. “Finally...” he blew out a sigh and turned left.

Olly just barely made it into room 111 before the bell rang, and he nearly jumped out of his aging shoes when it did. But other kids were coming in behind him, so at least he wasn’t last, he thought. The teacher—Mr. Burt, apparently, as the name was written on the chalkboard—was herding the other students to line up along the outer edge of the classroom. Olly dutifully made his way to the wall, joining the twenty or so other students—none of whom he knew—and gazed wide-eyed at a room filled with twelve large, sturdy, dark grey tables covered with matching sets of funnels and test tubes, safety goggles, textbooks, and a single microscope in the center. Two stools finished the setup.

“Good morning, class,” the man at the front of the room called out. “My name is Mister Burt, and welcome to Introduction to Life Sciences.”

Oh great. Another thing I’m not good at, Olly thought with a tremble, looking at the other kids to see if anyone else was worried. Of course, they all looked unconcerned, staring blankly ahead like the super smart people they probably were, waiting for their chance to prove just how dumb he was in comparison. Even their clothes looked smart, he realized, whereas his worn jeans, faded yellow t-shirt, and soon-to-be-too-small shoes made him stand out. The laundry list of things that he was doing wrong might have continued had he not suddenly realized that Mr. Burt, with his aged and greying beard, was still speaking, and he had missed every word of it.

“So, those are just a few of the things we’ll learn this year.” Mr. Burt gave a knowing smile that Olly was sure was directed to him, as if the teacher knew he hadn’t been paying attention.

I am so dead. Olly sighed.

“Let’s get started, shall we?” Mr. Burt moved across the front of the classroom as he spoke. “You’ll be paired up with another student for the first part of the semester, and you’ll each be in charge of keeping your combined workspace clean during class. I’ll call out names, starting with this table here,” He continued, pointing to the front left-most desk.

Doing science, and I’m stuck with someone I don’t know? Olly lamented, the dread washing over him anew. *This is so gonna suck.* The seconds ticked on, and each name the teacher called spiked Olly’s blood pressure higher. *Maybe I’ll be last. Maybe there’s an odd number, and I’ll get to do all this by myself...*

“Oliver?” the teacher called out. Olly didn’t reply, annoyed despite being used to people saying his name wrong. “Sorry,” the teacher corrected, “Oli-ven.”

“That’s me,” Olly muttered softly, dragging his feet as he made his way to the desk in the middle of the room.

“Good to meet you, son.” Mr. Burt beamed a smile through the whiskers of his grey beard. Olly was trying to think of something to say when Mr. Burt looked down at his list of names. Knowing that the teacher was going to call out the name of whomever would be his partner, Olly instead focused his mind on trying to influence the outcome.

Please let it be someone normal... Olly closed his eyes tight, putting all his might into the wish. *Just be normal...*

“You can call me Ellie, Mister Burt,” the voice of a girl chimed, and Olly opened his eyes to watch her skip in excitement to the desk.

“Very good, Ellie.” He smiled at her, then moved on to the next desk. The girl—Ellie—set her bag down on the floor beside the desk, then she hopped up onto a stool to face Olly, putting them at about eye-level.

“You’re Oliven, right?” she confirmed. “That’s a weird name.”

“Um... Olly is fine,” he replied softly.

"Nice to meet you." She beamed, and for the briefest of moments he thought that might be the end of it. Small talk was another of those things he wasn't good at, after all. "I really like to draw things. Bugs and flowers and houses and stuff. What about you?"

"I, um... I guess drawing is neat?" he offered with a sniffle.

"I hear they make you keep a journal in this class of all the stuff you learn, and that you need to keep it neat and tidy. Like, you aren't allowed to scratch out words, or doodle on the edges, which I think is pretty dumb," Ellie explained. "But if we get to draw things in our notebooks, I'll help you."

"Thanks? And, um, who told you that?"

"My cousin on my dad's side. His name is Wallace, and he just turned sixteen, so he's got his learner's permit. I just turned twelve four days ago, but he promised to teach me to drive when I'm old enough."

"Wait, your birthday was four days ago?" Olly asked. "Mine was yesterday."

"You were born on a holiday? Lucky!" Ellie said, awe on her face. "Are you twelve, too?"

"Thirteen."

"*That's* why you're so tall!" she said, as if it was obvious now. Olly gave her a weird look and was debating what to say in reply when Mr. Burt cleared his throat at the front of the classroom, drawing their attention.

"All right, students, let's get started with our first lesson."

Olly quickly followed Ellie's lead, putting his bag down beside the desk, then sat on the stool. He glanced over at her, watching her already scribbling away, probably taking notes on whatever Mr. Burt was saying. Looking a little closer at her, he realized that while he didn't tower over the girl, he was definitely a few inches taller now that they were both sitting.

But she's also a year younger than me, he acknowledged. He'd technically had an extra year to grow. Shrugging off the thought, he reached down to his bag to pull out a notebook. But as he went to plop the notebook down he spotted a slip of paper, covered in cursive scrawl, laying in front of him.

Hello, Ollie!

Age: 13 years, birthday: September 2nd

Would you like to be friends?

Circle Yes or No

From Ellie

Age: 12, birthday: August 31st

He considered the note for a moment, with two competing thoughts running through his mind. First, he debated the alternate spelling of his name. He supposed it wasn't that big of an error, especially since she spelled her own name with an 'ie' ending, but it was still wrong. Then there was the second question of becoming friends. He had met this girl approximately four minutes ago, but she already wanted to become friends? Part of him wanted to be happy about that, but there were variables to consider. He didn't know this girl and it seemed a little sudden... but his mom would probably approve of him making friends, so it was definitely in his best interest to say yes.

But she spelled my name wrong, his mind contended. *If I correct it now we can avoid the issue in the future. But if I offend her, what if she doesn't want to be friends anymore?* He knew full well just how impossible the situation was. And while he would be content to argue this with himself for the rest of his life, he could see the curious look the twelve-year-old girl sitting beside him was giving. *Whatever I do will probably be wrong...* Not wanting to offend her for taking too long, he reached down to his bag, unzipped the front pouch and removed a mechanical pencil. He glanced over the note one last time, then clicked the eraser end of the mechanical pencil five

times to get the graphite to appear from the tip at just the right length. *Here goes nothing.* After a few quick modifications, he slid the note back to her.

Hello, ~~Offie~~ OLLy
Age: 13 years, birthday: September 2nd
Would you like to be friends?
Circle Yes or No
From Ellie
Age: 12, birthday: August 31st

A moment passed. Olly watched her from the corner of his eye, encouraged that she didn't flinch at the correction, but her eyes kept darting across the paper, obviously re-reading it a few times. *Yup*, he thought, his heart sinking in his chest. *You blew it.*

As often as this happened, Olly realized it shouldn't surprise him that people almost always read his intentions the wrong way. And it was the simple things—like correcting people when they spelled his name wrong or explaining that he thought pickles were gross—that shouldn't really matter, but that seemed to upset people the most. Olly had resigned himself to yet another failure when something unexpected happened. Ellie looked up from the piece of paper, a huge grin on her face as she leaned over to him and whispered, "Happy belated birthday, new friend!"