

Last Laugh

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“Victor, get in here and help your sister with her homework!”

My mom’s voice echoes through our apartment, piercing even my noise-canceling headphones. I pause my game and pull them down around my neck.

“What?” I call out. Even though I heard her the first time. I just know the question gets under her skin. Almost as much as being forced to help my little sister, Genevieve, gets under mine.

I hear Mom groan from the kitchen.

“I said, come and help your little sister with her homework!”

I mutter to myself as I set the controller down and get out of my beanbag chair. I’m half tempted to keep playing. Then when Mom eventually comes in and demands to know why I didn’t help, I’ll coolly reply that *she didn’t say the magic word*.

Or not. Even though I like being right, I don’t like being grounded. So. Here we go.

I make my way to the living room, where Genevieve is sitting at the coffee table with her books and papers spread out in a mess before her.

Genevieve is like my complete opposite. And also the complete opposite of my older sister, Sarah. While Sarah and I are funny and adventurous and really not that into school, Genevieve is a total nerd. She's super quiet and shy and doesn't have many friends. She's eight, four years younger than me. Sarah's sixteen.

Genevieve does *not* need my help. I think this is just my mom's way of keeping me from playing video games. Especially since we don't even have school tomorrow—it's a teacher workshop day.

"What's the damage, twerp?" I ask, sitting across the table from Genevieve.

"Math," she replies. "And I'm not a twerp."

"Could've fooled me."

She sticks out her tongue, but she doesn't say anything else. Also unlike me, she's a complete pushover.

She's got curly black hair and dark olive skin, just like me and Sarah. But whereas I'm tall and keep my hair cut close, Genevieve is short, and her hair nearly reaches her midback. I lean over and start helping her work. As expected, she's already half done with her homework, but she doesn't mind the extra hand.

The one thing that my siblings and I have in

common? We're all really smart. Genevieve's just the only one who seems proud of it.

So I help her with her homework while she does most of the work and my mom finishes up dinner. Dad normally cooks, but he works Thursday nights. Sarah is . . . well, I have no idea where Sarah is. Like usual.

Mom has me set the table, and she's just putting out a giant pot of pasta when the front door opens and Sarah walks in.

Sarah has streaks of blue and green in her long curls, and her clothes are mismatched in a way that totally makes sense. But it's not how she looks that makes her cool—it's how she acts. When she walks into a room, she owns it. No matter where she is, she acts like she's the hero of the story. Which makes the rest of us her sidekicks, I guess.

She tosses her backpack on the sofa and tousles my hair.

"How's the homework, twerp?" she asks Genevieve.

I snicker. She totally stole the word from me, and I love how much it bugs Genevieve.

"Done," Genevieve replies. She glares at Sarah. "No thanks to you."

"Ouch! I'm slain!" Sarah says with a dramatic flop to the couch.

Genevieve giggles, dropping her angry front, and jumps on top of Sarah, tickling her relentlessly.

Like I said, total pushover.

“Come on, you three,” Mom says from the dining room. “Time to eat.”

We head into the dining room and settle in.

Our condo isn’t huge, but it’s ours. Even without Dad here tonight there’s just barely enough room for us at the table. We pile in, and Sarah begins shoveling food onto her plate before Mom has even set out the salad.

“Leave some for the rest of us!” Mom yelps.

Sarah chuckles, takes another small scoop, and passes the tongs to me. I make sure to serve Genevieve first before I pile up the noodles on my own plate. I’m her big brother. Even if we get on each other’s nerves, I gotta take care of her.

Mom asks us about our days, and I sort of tune it out, already thinking about the upgrades I need to make to my avatar in the game. I hear Genevieve mention some kids at school who made fun of her—I know Sarah’s gonna talk to her about that later, because Sarah is the type who just refuses to be picked on—and Sarah mentions some extra band practice coming up. I even manage to talk about what we were doing in science class today even though I’m not really

paying attention. Hopefully it sounds at least a little smart.

Then Mom says something that makes me focus in.

At least, to the second part of the sentence.

“—Grandma’s for the long weekend.”

“What?” I ask.

“I’m taking Grandma out to Iowa City this weekend for some scans. Totally routine,” Mom says. “So you three are going to stay there to take care of her cats tomorrow night.”

“But I have band practice!” Sarah interjects.

“And we’re too young to take care of the cats,” Genevieve sagely says.

“You’ll be fine,” Mom tells her. There’s a tired look in her eyes that begs us not to push it. “Your dad will be there for bedtime, but he’s working tomorrow night so you’ll have to feed the cats dinner. That’s it. It’s just one night.”

“But I’m allergic,” I say.

I’m not, really. But I also really don’t want to go over there. Grandma somehow doesn’t have the internet, our phone plan won’t let me stream games, and I’m supposed to raid a dungeon with some friends.

I mean, sometimes I sneeze a little bit at Grandma’s place, but that could also be the dust.

“Please,” Mom says. It’s not a request or a question. “You know I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.”

“Are we getting paid?” Sarah asks.

“Paid?” Mom replies.

“Well, yeah. We should be getting paid for catsitting.”

Mom lets out a big sigh.

“I’ll take you out for ice cream after. Okay? Just do this for me? This once?”

“We will, Mom,” Genevieve answers for us.

I look at Sarah, and Sarah looks at me. *Total push-over*. But there’s also no point in arguing.

“Thank you,” Mom says. “It’ll be over before you know it.”

If only I’d known how terribly wrong she was.