

The Intruders
In This War They Had The
Advantage

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Linked

They were so similar and they lived in the same imperfect world with overwhelming family problems. Each boy, in his own way, was begging for help. One was black and the other was white and they had switched!

The Starlight Kids, Mystery of the Feather Burglar

After her parents' divorce, Shari is angry, frustrated, and feeling helpless, until she joins the Starlight Kids Club. Who is that strange man packing boxes late at night in the attic of the house across the street? Why doesn't the home attendant want any kids visiting Mrs. Broderick? Shari is determined to find out. With the help of her friends, Shari gets her chance to turn a boring summer vacation into a fantastic action packed adventure.

Chapter 1

Hamid and Derrick were sitting on Hamid's stoop trying to concentrate on another dreary game of cards when Lenny rode up.

"Hi," he said as he carefully leaned his new bike on the low fence that surrounded Hamid's home. "What say we go explore those rocks today?"

Derrick's eyes brightened. "Great idea! We'll need flashlights and stuff like that, but I could easily run home and get some."

Hamid hesitated and glanced toward his house. He wasn't supposed to leave the house. That's why he and Derrick were out here on the stoop. His parents were at work and they had left strict instructions - don't leave Lente by herself. Lente was his thirteen-year-old sister. She was

inside watching TV.

"I can't leave," he reminded Derrick.

"Dog!" Derrick snapped a finger.

The other two did not comment on his bizarre phrasing. It was Derrick's trademark. He liked using odd terms instead of swear words, and regardless of how weird, no one dared teasing him at school. He was too unpredictable and was likely to punch first - regardless of the consequence. Club, Hamid's German Shepherd, was sleeping on the lower step. He was the only one to react. Club lifted one eye and gave Derrick a lazy inquiring look.

"Not you Club." Derrick absentmindedly patted the dog's head, and turned to Hamid. "I forgot you told me you got to baby-sit."

Lenny wasn't giving up his idea just yet. "I could get Ginny and her friend Angela to come over."

Derrick grinned and turned to Hamid. "He just said that to let us know he and Ginny are talking to each other again."

Hamid joined in the teasing. "We ought to

time how long this hot spell lasts."

Lenny scowled. "Go on, keep that up and I'll take back my offer."

Hamid held up his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay," he said as he and Derrick laughed.

"So, who is Angela?" Hamid finally stopped laughing and asked.

"Angela Yap. She's a friend of Ginny. Lives next door to her."

Hamid frowned, "Do we know her?"

"I don't think so. She doesn't come to our high school. She goes to the Catholic high. Look, I'll go get them. I just left Ginny's house and Angela was with her." Lenny was already on his bike. "I'll be back in less than half-hour."

"Hold on a second Lenny." Hamid stood up hurriedly.

"What's the problem?" Lenny asked impatiently. "If Ginny and Angela stay with Lente, she's not alone. That's what your parents wanted isn't it?"

He was right... technically. Although Hamid was sure that was not how his parents would

interpret things. "Alright," he finally agreed. "We just can't stay too long. I want to get back before my parents get home.

"Sure, sure..." Derrick started packing the cards. "Hurry," he said to Lenny. "You have to go to the next block while I just live two houses down."

"I'll go in and tell Lente," Hamid was already at the front door. "We'll meet here in about half-hour, okay?"

A half-hour later they were gathered outside Hamid's home.

"I still don't see why I can't come," Lente insisted.

She had been nagging since Hamid first told her his plans and he was now getting seriously annoyed. "Listen, Lente. One good reason is that *I* don't want you coming." It was years since he had used tact with his sister. He didn't want her along and he wasn't going to try to pretty up his

feelings.

"She is right." Ginny suddenly joined in. "I don't see why we can't all go. Where are these rocks anyway?"

Lenny pointed up the block. "It's a sort of mountain of rocks in there."

Theirs was a block of detached single-family homes. The road ended in a lightly wooded area, which was about a four-block square. Most people avoided the woods, especially since the area was unkempt and often foul-smelling. Once, when the smell got really bad, the people in the area called the police. After a search, the police found a dead body. This only convinced everyone around that the area was to be avoided.

"You went into those woods?" Angela's eyes widened.

Hamid nodded. "Last week. We wanted to cross to the other side. Do you know there is a stream in there? Just before you get to the road, it forms a little lake."

"It's the lake that smells. I guess it's used as a dump," Derrick continued.

"Is the rocky mountain far in?" Lente asked.

"That's the funny thing." Derrick voice rose with excitement. "We followed the stream, trying to find the source. And in the middle of the woods, there is this hill, just rocks really - and the water just sort of gushes out of the rocks. So we were trying to figure out exactly where the water was coming from when we found this crack. Well... it may even be a cave. It looked like a narrow passage behind the rocks. We didn't have any flashlights so we couldn't explore it."

"The passage is hard to get to." Hamid was still trying to discourage the girls from coming. "We had to climb a good way up the rocks. It's like a mountain and the hole looked narrow and dark and there could be bats in there for all we know."

Ginny scoffed. "You won't scare me, Hamid Morgan. I still want to come."

"You make it sound like a real mountain." Lenny was equally mocking. "It was just a pile of rocks. There's no reason they can't come. The passageway wasn't even that far up the rocks."

"They aren't dressed to go cave exploring."

"Lenny says it's not a cave and what's wrong with jeans and T-shirt?" Lente asked. They were all wearing jeans and T-shirts.

"What about supplies?" Hamid asked.

"Come on, Hamid," Lenny said. "What supplies do they need? Besides, you always go overboard. I'll bet you have at least four flashlights in that backpack of yours."

"Okay, fine," Hamid was annoyed. It was true that he tended to bring more than was necessary on trips. He was the only person carrying a backpack. Lenny carried only a flashlight, and Derrick had his flashlight in a small bag belted to his waist. "Just wait. I'm going to laugh my head off when you girls start screaming."

For a minute Angela looked hesitant, however Ginny took her hand. "Don't let him scare you. It's probably not much of anything anyway."

Hamid huffed out a breath. "It's getting late. Let's go if we're going."

"What about our bikes?" Lenny was looking

for a place to put his bike. He, Ginny and Angela had ridden.

"Leave your bikes behind the house," Hamid suggested.

It was the middle of a hot summer day. If not at summer camp or forced to stay indoors most of the school kids hung out at the park, which had a pool, so the street was deserted as the six made their way up the block and into the woods. They followed one of the many paths that led to the lake. Even before they saw the lake, the smell greeted them. And when they finally got there, no one wanted to linger. The lake was about the size of six bathtubs placed three in a row. As they got close, they all held their noses and circled what could easily be mistaken for a garbage dump.

"Just look at this junk." Derrick kicked at a torn garbage bag.

"Don't kick it," Angela warned. "Something may come out."

"Jeez!" Lente's voice sounded muffled because she had both hands covering her nose and mouth. "I hope it doesn't smell like this the entire way."

"Here by the lake smells the worst," Lenny said. "It's not so bad further up. Come, let's hurry."

Hamid led the way with Club immediately behind. It wasn't much of a "woods". And since the trees were not densely packed, the sun was their unrelenting company. All too soon, they were hot, sticky and irritable. Worse, beyond the lake there were no paths. They had to stay close to the stream, sometimes walking in the slushy soil along the banks. The only other option would have been to try trampling through the shrubs and bushes that covered the ground wherever a tree wasn't.

"These sneakers are ruined," Angela said. She was directly behind Club, so Hamid turned and glanced down at her sneakers. They were covered with thick black muck - the stuff that lined the stream's bank. Hamid did not need to say

anything. His facial expression said it all.

Angela glared at him. "I know. We weren't really prepared for hiking. Don't even bother saying anything."

Hamid shrugged and continued walking. He wore hiking boots, so did Lenny and Derrick. All the girls wore sneakers.

After trudging along for a few more minutes they came to a bend.

"How much further?" Ginny called out.

Since Hamid didn't answer, Lenny replied. "That's the mountain of rocks we're looking at now. We just need to get closer."

Hamid looked at their mountain. As Lenny said, it really wasn't much of a mountain. First, it was all rock and not much else - no trees, not much plant life. Then it was small - maybe as tall as a two-story house. About halfway up the water just seemed to pour out of the rocks - rocks that were wet, slimy, and green with some kind of a fungus.

"Yeah, this is it." Hamid walked up to and leaned against a dry area of the rocks.

Club took the opportunity to explore the water's edge as Hamid unslung his backpack and took out a water bottle. The others watched enviously as he tipped his head back and took a few quick gulps. He didn't offer them any. This was payback time!

Derrick wiped the sweat off his brow with the back of his hand as he came up beside Hamid. "Do you think the stream water is safe to drink?"

"I don't think you should drink it," Angela cautioned. "It may be polluted."

"How can it be polluted if this is the source?" Lente asked. "And look at Club. He's drinking it. Dogs are supposed to know aren't they?"

She was right. Club had taken his full of the water and was now relieving himself at nearby tree.

"We don't know that this is the source," Hamid pointed out. "Besides, dogs don't get every sickness that we get."

"Well let's just go in and get it over with," Derrick urged. "Shirts! I'm thirsty and hungry."

"I don't see any cave," Ginny said looking up.

Lenny pointed. "It may not be a cave, but see where the rocks jut out and form sort of a shelf, right next to where the water is coming from?"

Ginny stared. Their mountain was craggy, with ledges jutting out haphazardly, forming countless natural steps. At least they wouldn't have any difficulty climbing up! The shelf Lenny spoke of was just one of a number of such rocky ledges. She nodded.

"Well if you stand on that ledge, you'll see a large vertical gap. You can't see it good from down here. You have to stand on the ledge. You'll see it then. It's this dark passageway. We think it's a cave or something."

"Time to get moving." Hamid pushed himself off the rocks. "I'll go first. Come, Club."

The climb up was easy and he was at the entrance of the passageway in a minute. Club came as far as the entrance then stopped.

"Couldn't we rest first?" Lente tipped her head up to ask. She was using a stick to get the worst of the muck off her sneakers. Ginny and Angela began copying her.

"No. We don't have enough time." Hamid called down. "We have to get back home before Mom and Dad. You can clean up your sneakers when we get back. C'mon Club. It's just a cave."

Hamid tried pulling Club by the collar, but the dog simply sat on his hunches and refused to budge. No amount of tugging got him moving.

"Leave him." Derrick had clambered up beside Hamid. "He'll stay here 'till we come out."

From below, Angela anxiously watched Club. "Maybe we shouldn't go in since Club doesn't want to go," she suggested.

"If you don't want to come, you can stay here with Club." Hamid had already picked up that Angela was more cautious and serious than her headstrong friend Ginny.

"What about the girls?" Lenny shouted as Hamid switched on his flashlight and slipped between the two rocks. "They haven't any light. Give them the extra one that you have."

Hamid's head reappeared. "I want to save my spare flashlight for any emergency."

"What emergency?" Lenny scoffed.

Hamid ignored the question. He didn't think there would be a problem; he was just extra cautious - most often unnecessarily so. "Let them walk between us and use our light."

Lenny and the girls climbed up. "Seriously Hamid, what big emergency do you think we need to prepare for?"

Club began whining as Hamid disappeared into the split between the rocks, without answering. Strangely, Club did not follow even as one by one the others followed Hamid.

The passage was long and narrow... and wet. It did not look scary, yet Lenny stopped harassing Hamid as soon as they entered. The walls were slimy to the touch. Even the floor was damp - the soil, sandy rather than muddy. Fortunately, the ceiling was high enough for them to walk upright. In a single file, they slowly followed Hamid.

Then Angela screamed.

"What is it? What's wrong?" They were all jumpy.

"Something brushed against my leg," Angela cried.

"It's only Club." Hamid bent and gave Club a huge squeeze, masking his relief. Club stood quietly, his tail thumping a beat on the ground. "So you decided to come after all, eh Club."

"C'mon let's hurry. I don't like it in here." Ginny looked around. The flashlights were casting spooky shadows on the walls.

"This place gives me the creeps" Lente agreed.

"Nobody forced you to come." However, Hamid wasn't crowing at their fears. He agreed with them. It was creepy.

"Can you see the end, Hamid?" Derrick was last in line. "We should be coming to the other side soon."

"I think we are going down, not across," Lenny muttered.

"So it's a real cave then. We are going into the earth." Ginny did not sound reassured.

"Well....There is a corner coming up. I can't see around it." Hamid had his flashlight aimed at the wall. That did not help because the weird shadows made it difficult to tell exactly what was

ahead.

They squeezed around the corner then stopped dead. A huge boulder blocked the path.

"This is it. This is as far as we can go," Hamid voice reflected the relief he felt at thoughts of turning around and getting out. He used his light to scan the area.

The passage had widened slightly allowing them to stand three abreast and the combined light from the boy's flashlights illuminated the area. Not that there was much to see. A huge boulder, about ten-feet tall and four-feet wide, filled the entire height and width of the passage.

Angela gave a nervous giggle. "Doesn't it look as if someone just plugged up the passage? That boulder is an exact fit."

"Shirts! I could easily climb it." With characteristic impulsiveness, Derrick dropped his flashlight and reached up to grip the boulder with both hands. The surface was rough so he had actually found sufficient hand and foot holds to start pulling himself up when the floor started to shake and rumble. He jumped off in alarm.

"Get back...Get back! Let's get out of here!"
Hamid yelled.

They all turned, but they didn't get a chance to run. The floor was disappearing from under them! There were screams and utter confusion as they felt themselves falling. The boulder vanished with a huge splash.

After what seemed like hours, but was probably only a few minutes of coughing and sneezing, Hamid slowly dragged himself up.

"Lente! Everybody okay?"

Lente! Everybody okay? His voice echoed off a distant wall.

They were okay. The flashlights, scattered around, were still casting eerie shadows. Slowly, the six scrambled to their feet, dusting off the worst of the dirt. They were all damp, courtesy of the splash the boulder had made. Club began whining and pressed his nose against Hamid's legs. As the dust settled and the noise stopped, they realized they had been fortunate. They had dropped only about four feet, onto a wide ledge. The ledge however overlooked a cavern – a huge,

water-filled cavern.

"Shirts!" Derrick shivered as he looked down.
Shirts! His echo replied.

Lenny used his flashlight to search the water. There was no sign of the boulder. Yet, it had to be down there. It was a drop of almost thirty feet, which meant that the water was very deep. The cavern was about quarter the size of a football field. Looking at the now calm and still surface, they found it hard to believe the water had, only minutes before, swallowed a huge boulder.

"Do you realize that we've found the source? It's the source of the stream," Hamid whispered excitedly.

Lenny frowned. "This doesn't make any sense. How does the water get outside to the stream? It's too far down."

His echoes were the only answers.

"Can we go home now?" Lente spoke in a whisper - afraid of the strange echoes.

Hamid gave her an impatient look, then shone his light up. "We should be able to climb out of here. It's not that far up." Just by standing

upright, he was able to see into the cave passage. The cave roof now continued as the roof of the cavern. It must be enormous because his light could not penetrate the darkness, to see the other side of the cavern. The answer to Lenny's question was puzzling. How *did* the water get up?

"Hello!" Ginny suddenly shouted. She giggled as she listened to her echo. After a bit even Lente lost some of her fear and began shouting for the echo effects.

Club pushed even closer to Hamid. With his tail tucked tightly between his legs he looked miserable and Hamid could not understand why. "What's wrong Club? Are you hurt?" Bending, he examined his dog, but found no sign of an injury.

"Club is like me," Lente said. "He just doesn't like caves. Can't we go now?"

Angela looked at her watch. "Do you all realize it's almost four-thirty? It's been one hour since we left home."

"Yeah. I have to wash my hair and clothes

before Mom gets in or she'll have a fit." Ginny looked down at her dirty T-shirt and jeans.

They examined each other in silence as the even the walls continued rumbling with the echoes of their speech. They were all equally covered in dust and dirt. Hamid and Derrick had already removed most of the dirt from their short black hair. With their low cut hair there wasn't much to remove anyway. Lenny, who sported a crew cut, also had no trouble. His dark blond hair was almost free of dirt. Even Lente, whose black hair was neatly braided in corn-rows, had managed to get rid of most of the dirt. The same could not be said for Angela and Ginny. Angela wore her straight, waist-length black hair loose, and it was now a tangled mess.

Lenny began using his fingers like a comb to get the dirt out of Ginny's equally tangled hair. Like Angela, Ginny wore her dark brown hair loose, the curly strands reaching just below her shoulders.

"Don't worry about it," Ginny said, giving Lenny a smile. "It'll wash out."

"Let's get out of here first," Angela suggested.
"Then we can think about cleaning up."

"Derrick, you go first," Hamid suggested.

Lenny objected. "Let's get the girls out first."

"No." Hamid shook his head. "Better let Derrick go. He can lead the way out."

"Oh, alright." With blatant petulance Lenny turned, looking Derrick up and down, taking in his six-feet two-inch height and said. "Need a hand up?"

Derrick gave Lenny a dirty look. Placing his flashlight on the cave floor, he casually reached and gripped the floor of the cave with both hands. He easily hauled himself up.

Ginny went next. With the help of the boys, she was able to scramble up to the cave floor. Then it was Angela's turn. Next, Hamid lifted Lente by the waist. She was the youngest and shortest so Derrick had to reach down to pull her up. At five-feet nine inches, Lenny had no difficulty climbing up by himself. That just left Club and Hamid. Club, uncharacteristically timid, was continuously whining. His tail was still

tucked well down, and he refused to budge from Hamid's side.

"Come Club. You're next." Hamid grabbed at Club's collar. He planned on lifting Club, but the whines grew louder. Club did not want to leave the ledge, yet it was obvious that he was also uncomfortable where he was. The dog began backing away from Hamid. Fearful that he would back right off the edge of the ledge and into the water, Hamid stopped reaching for him. "Come on Club. We're trying to get out of here!"

"Come up and see if he'll follow," Lenny suggested as he watched them.

"He won't be able to climb up," Hamid said as he turned and placed his flashlight on the floor of the ledge. "Keep the lights shining down here. I'll pretend to jump up."

Club moved away from the edge as Hamid pretended to climb up. Hamid immediately released his hold on the cave floor and dropped down to the ledge. The entire ledge rumbled and shook.

"Shirts, Hamid!" Derrick cried. "Come on up!"

That ledge doesn't sound safe."

"I can't leave Club." Hamid slowly approached the dog, then bent and hugged him. "Come, Club. We got to go." His arms tightened around his dog. It wasn't easy lifting eight-nine pounds of whining, wiggly, dog and shoving him up to Lenny. "Grab his collar! Pull him up!"

Lenny and Lente both grabbed hold of Club's collar. With Hamid pushing and them pulling, they were able to get Club off the ledge and onto the narrow passage. Hamid then quickly scrambled up.

"Okay," Derrick urged them. "Let's get out of here now."

"What's the rush now?" Lenny had picked up on the unease in Derrick's voice.

"Remember when we were coming in how slimy and wet the walls were?" Derrick aimed his light up and down the cave wall. "Look at them now."

Using their combined lights, they stared at the walls. The walls were dry and smooth.

Hamid looked down. The floor was still

sandy. It was also totally dry!

Ginny huddled closer to Lenny and Lente slipped one hand in Hamid's.

Their unease mounted as they turned the corner. "What's ahead?" Lenny called out. "Can you see any light?"

"Yeah," Derrick said. "There's a faint light ahead."

They hurried on.

"So that's it then." Derrick didn't bother hiding his relief as he squeezed past the final boulder marking the entrance to the cave. "So much for our cave exploration."

He stopped abruptly.

"Move out," Hamid called. "Don't block the entrance."

The others added their take on Derrick's action in an eerie match with their personality.

"What's wrong?" Lente asked.

"Is he hurt?" Angela tried peering past her.

"Next time, signal or something," Lenny complained. "Ginny crashed right into me."

"Just get out of the way, Derrick," Ginny

yelled.

Derrick did not move. "The stream is gone!"

End of Sample

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