

Hurricane Season
by Lesley L. Smith

In the family room, Pablo stared at the suited, helmeted boy connected by myriad wires to the computer system. He twitched and moaned as if he were having some kind of seizure. Pablo couldn't even see any skin; he was fully enclosed in the system--whatever it was.

"Pablo," his mom whispered in his ear. "Leave him alone. I need this housekeeping job so we can stay here. You don't want to get me in trouble, do you?"

Pablo shook his head and let his mom lead him back into the kitchen. He sat on a stool at the center island as she bustled about, cooking. "Is he really my age? How come he's all hooked up like that? Is there something wrong with him?" He'd never seen anything so weird: a kid that was part of a computer.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with him." She shrugged. "His folks said he's hooked up to go to school. He's twelve, like you."

Pablo remembered school back when they were living in the refugee camp; it was filled with other kids but none of them were connected to a computer. "Can I go back to school, Mom? It was fun."

She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "I hope so, Mijo. Some day. First we have to save up a little money so we can get a place to live."

"Have you ever talked to him? That kid?" Pablo asked. "What's his name?"

She smiled. "You're just a bundle of curiosity, aren't you? I'm not allowed to talk to him."

"Where are his parents?" Pablo asked.

"They're at work. That's one of the reasons I'm here." Pablo's mom bustled around the kitchen, getting out mixing bowls and a casserole dish. "His mom said his name is Tyler."

"Tyler," Pablo mouthed. "What does he look like?"

"I don't know. He's always hooked up like that." She glanced at the cookbook on the counter. "Oh, I'm missing the green chilis for this recipe." She checked her watch and quickly grabbed her purse. "I have to pop over to the store for a couple minutes." She started walking toward the back door, but turned around. "Pablo, keep an eye on Tyler, but do NOT disturb him while I'm gone."

Rumbling thunder made Pablo start. "It's kind of creepy being here without you. Do you have to go, Mom?"

She nodded. "I'll be right back." As she headed out the door, she added, "And if the house phone rings, please answer it right away, the way we talked about."

"Yes, ma'am," Pablo said.

"Take that!" In the forest, Tyler plunged his sword into the belly of the rainbow-scaled dragon. Silver blood spurting from the wound all over him, the ground, and the bushes around him. "Yuck." It was really sticky and smelled like some kind of metal.

The dragon roared feebly and shifted, threatening to wrench Tyler's arm out of its socket as he hung onto his sword.

His buddy and fellow knight, Harlan, laughed.

Tyler turned to him as the dragon stirred. "Don't just stand there! Help me!"

"Arghh!" Harlan yelled as he sunk his own sword into the belly up to the hilt. Grinning, he dodged the stream of blood.

The dragon twitched and then was still.

The boys withdrew their weapons.

"Hurray!" Tyler said, jumping on the blood-soaked ground. This'd be worth a bunch of points for sure.

"We did it!" Harlan said, jabbing his sword into the air.

A breeze ruffled their hair as a floating head appeared above them in the sky. "Well done, boys. You just earned one hundred points," it said in a deep, bass voice. "You've also earned a rest at the comfort station." The head started fading away.

"All right!" Tyler yelled, thrusting his silvery fist into the air. "I knew it."

"Wait," Harlan said. "Was that a hundred points a piece? Or do we have to share?"

But, the head finished disappearing, beard last, without answering.

The sylvan backdrop transformed into a medieval pub with an audible pop, and the metallic tang of blood was replaced by the sweet smell of mead and sawdust.

"Yeah!" Harlan said. "Bring on the food and drink!"

Tyler stood as still as a statue, staring at another knight at the bar.

The knight in question had cornflower blue eyes, long blonde hair and freckles. She smiled at him. "Greetings, brave knights. How fare thee?"

Tyler said to Harlan, "Who's that?"

In the kitchen, it was getting darker. Pablo jumped when the phone rang. "Hello. Hughes residence," he said.

"Mi Dios. I'm glad I reached you, Pablo," his mom said.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"It's the storm," she said. "It's supposed to get much worse with flooding and everything. We're supposed to evacuate. The entire Gulf Coast of Alabama's under orders to leave."

"Leave?" he asked. "Where are we supposed to go? Another refugee camp?" That might not be too bad. At least the camps had normal kids he could make friends with.

Thunder boomed.

"Yes, but, Mijo," she said. "I can't get away right this minute. The National Guard is here. They're loading people onto buses."

"When are you coming back, Mom?" Pablo asked.

"I will be there as soon as I can. I'll sneak away. Very soon. I promise. In the meantime you must get Tyler and go to their emergency shelter on the roof. This is very important. Do you understand me?"

"I thought you said not to bother that Tyler," he said.

"This is an emergency. You have to get him to go up to their emergency shelter. You'll both be safe there. Do you understand?"

Pablo shrugged. "I guess. When are you coming back?"

"Soon, Mijo. Very soon," she said. "I have to go now. Go to their emergency room. I love you."

"I love you, too, Mom," Pablo said, hanging up.

In the family room, slowly he approached the kid. "Tyler," he said.

The suited boy did not respond.

"Tyler," he said more loudly, taking a step closer.

Again, there was no answer.

Pablo stood there for a moment, watching the boy twitch, before reaching out and touching his arm and shaking it. "Tyler! It's an emergency! C'mon! We have to go to the emergency shelter! C'mon!"

Nothing happened. What was wrong with this stupid kid?

Reluctantly, Pablo reached for one of the wires.

Tyler burped. He probably shouldn't have drunk that mead so quickly. But he felt calmer now, not so jittery. He scooted his chair through the sawdust on the floor closer to Hannah's. "So, Hannah, have YOU ever killed a dragon?"

She smiled, flipped her blond hair, opened her mouth to reply, and the world went staticy.

"Hannah!" Where did she go? Tyler tried to think, but it was difficult with the adrenaline coursing through his system. This had happened before. When? And more importantly, how did he fix it? He remembered. One of his leads must have gotten disconnected. Carefully, he traced their paths with his fingers. Yes! There it was! He reconnected it.

The pub scene rematerialized, but Hannah, Harlan, and the other knights were standing, staring at him.

"What happened, Ty?" Harlan asked. "Where'd you go?"

Tyler sat back down in his chair. "Just a little malfu, no big deal."

The rest of the troupe sat down.

"What was it? Did you lose power at your house?" Ethan asked.

"Nah," Tyler said. "We have generators anyways so that's not even a possibility."

"Well, that's a relief," Hannah said. "Where were we?"

Pablo was pretty surprised that Tyler kid could plug his wire back in without even looking at it.

"Tyler!" Pablo reached grabbed him and shook him. "Snap out of it!"

Tyler didn't seem to notice.

A burst of lighting lit up the family room like the noonday sun, followed by a bolt of thunder that made Pablo jump.

Pablo wondered where his mom was. He really hoped she wouldn't get caught in the flooding.

"Tyler!" he screamed. "I'm going, with or without you! C'mon!"

The power went out.

"Shit." That was it, he was going up to the emergency room, now.

Surely, now Tyler would come. "Tyler!"

Tyler didn't answer.

The generator kicked in and the emergency lights came on.

"I give up," Pablo said, shaking his head, and started up to the roof.

At the top of the stairs he had to struggle to open the airlock door, but finally it opened with a big creak. Inside, more emergency lights came on, illuminating the carpeting, pull-out couches, refrigerator and the rest.

"I hope Mom gets here soon," Pablo said, securing the door.

The troupe was still lounging around the pub, some overturned mead pitchers lying on the table. Tyler felt buzzy and great. His chair was touching Hannah's. Gazing into her face, he realized she had even more freckles than he originally thought.

"What?" She smiled at him.

"Ow," Tyler said. Something had shocked him.

Everyone looked at him.

"What's wrong?" Hannah asked, frowning.

Tyler got another shock. "Ow!"

And then his mouth filled with water and he started choking and he couldn't breath.

And the world went away.