

Mean Green

By A.C. Hall

Ned lay on the hard steel floor, the collection of papers that made up his mattress offering little to no support. His eyes were wide open despite the early hour, his mind racing like it had been all night long. Finally he heard movement on the warehouse floor below but forced himself to stay in his room. If they knew he had been up all night they might not let him go so he remained there for many more minutes. It took all of his willpower to do so, but Ned wasn't about to jeopardize the most important day of his young life.

Once he heard voices, Ned could stand it no longer. He leapt up and rushed out of his room onto the catwalk. Only the Elders were awake, gathered and speaking as was their morning ritual, but Ned didn't care. He bounded down the metal steps, trying to wipe the smile from his face as he came onto the warehouse floor. Richard, one of the youngest Elders, smiled at him.

"Excited for your big day?" Richard asked.

Ned tried to play it cool but the smile on his face betrayed him.

"I guess so," he replied nonchalantly.

More of them were waking now. Ned greeted each of them but his eyes continually fell on the door that led outside. Nineteen Saint Patrick's Days had come and gone and Ned had been forced to watch others go outside, experience the human world for that one glorious afternoon. Finally it was his turn.

The heavy scraping of the secret panel opening caught his attention. A hush fell over all as they watched the floor open up. Some of the oldest of them emerged first, then the heavy thumping of a walking stick signaled that their leader was close behind, coming up the stairs at his slow pace. They all knew their leader was growing older, as when he finally emerged he had to take several minutes to catch his breath.

“Good morning, Jeremiah,” Richard said as he approached the elderly leader with a cup of water.

Jeremiah offered him a smile and accepted the cup. He drank deeply of it, then spoke.

“We all know what today is. Saint Patrick’s Day is the one chance each year we have to move freely among the people outside. This is a precious opportunity to gather critical supplies so that we can live another year. You will find the humans in a jovial mood, full of laughter and good nature. Not only will they not judge you, they will be kind to you, compliment you, offer you beverages and foods.”

He paused and fixed those gathered with a serious stare.

“Make no mistake, these kindnesses are far from genuine,” Jeremiah continued. “These are the same people who are responsible for what happened to our ancestors! Our forefathers worked hard in this very warehouse, never aware of the nuclear facilities hidden below their feet. And when the humans made mistakes, and the nuclear energies began killing our ancestors, did they lend a hand? Did they evacuate them? Make them well with their medicines? NO!”

Jeremiah’s scream reverberated off the walls and sent chills through everyone.

“They locked them in here! Left them to die! They abandoned this entire facility, sealed the doors and left their dirty little secret to rot.”

Even though they all heard the same story each Saint Patrick’s Day it still captivated them. Ned tried to pay attention but found it difficult to stay too angry at some long dead humans who wronged some long dead other humans. He just wanted to go outside.

“But not all of them died, did they? Despite the nuclear poison coursing through their being, they found ways to survive. Locked away in what was meant to be their tomb, they started to turn it instead into our fortress and many generations later it is now something even more meaningful. It is our home.”

He inserted another dramatic pause before continuing.

“Each of you going out knows what you’re to do. Stay on task, stick to what you have been taught. Be polite to the humans, but do not be tricked into complacency by

them. Take advantage of their drunken holiday, their dulled senses, turn them to your favor, but whatever you do, never forget that you must return here before midnight.”

Now Ned was paying attention.

“The very same humans who would invite you in to partake in their fun today will look upon you with fear tomorrow. They will call their masters down upon you, kick and punch you. They will kill you.”

It wasn't enough to extinguish Ned's excitement but it was enough to dampen it.

“Ned will be heading out for the first time in his young life. Due to his low attention span and independent spirit, we will be teaming him up with Felix,” Jeremiah announced.

That was enough to extinguish his excitement. He was about to protest when he felt a massive hand on his shoulder. Ned reluctantly turned around to see the scowling face of Felix. He was a foot taller and one hundred pounds of muscle heavier.

“Good morning, Felix,” Ned said.

Having been on the receiving end of more than his fair share of beatings from the ill tempered man, Ned always did his best to be polite. But now that he was staring at the large individual, he wanted badly to punch him in the face. Today was supposed to have been his day of freedom, his chance to experience life outside of the facility.

“Batteries,” Felix said. “We are to retrieve batteries and then return here and that is all we will do.”

Ned's spirits crashed and burned. He wanted to go sight seeing, to spend time among the humans he had heard so much about. They were, after all, his distant relatives. But now the outing would be all business, conducted under the watchful eye and quick fist of Felix.

The two of them approached the door and Ned found a tiny bit of his enthusiasm returning. He tried to focus on the positives, that at least he'd see a little of the city, but it didn't raise his spirits much.

They were given dark sunglasses to wear. There were few lights in the facility and Ned had been told that the full power of the sun would be enough to blind them if they went out without the eye protection. Knowing that Felix was watching him

closely he forced himself to walk normally as they emerged outside. Even with the sunglasses on the sun was overpowering and Ned had to squint to see properly. Some of the others passed him, heading towards the nearby city on their own missions.

“Let’s go,” Felix said.

Ned followed along as they moved down an overgrown path. Soon it emerged at the edge of the city and he wanted to squeal as he saw a parked car. Felix moved purposefully down the sidewalk but Ned craned his neck constantly, looking for any signs of humans. They rounded a corner and headed deeper into the city. After taking a few steps, Ned froze.

“Oh my,” he whispered.

Crouching on the sidewalk not thirty feet away were two children playing. Ned smiled as he looked at them, shocked at the paleness of their skin. Felix punched him hard in the side of the head, sending him stumbling out into the street.

“Focus,” Felix growled.

Ned shot him a dirty look but knew better than to talk back. They continued on. As they moved past the two kids the boys stopped talking and stared at them. Ned smiled and waved, but neither of them waved back.

The new sights, sounds and smells continued as they made their way towards their first destination. Ned nearly peed in his pants when the first car drove past them, and it took a vicious punch to the stomach from Felix to get him to stop standing next to the hot dog vendor sniffing the food. They were entering into one of the commercial districts and the insanity of Saint Patrick’s Day was starting to reveal itself. They were accosted by a drunk woman who threw green beads at them and spilt her green beer on the sidewalk.

A group of loud young men spotted them and started pointing and laughing.

“You guys are crazy!” one of them shouted.

Felix stopped and tensed as the group approached. They looked harmless enough to Ned but he could tell that Felix was ready to fight. The men laughed more as they drew near.

“You two went all out!” one of them yelled.

Ned was surprised when one of the men reached out and touched his face. He laughed and so did the young man.

“You’re gonna have hell getting that off,” the man said.

Ned just shrugged and laughed, unsure of what else to do. The group moved on and Felix let out a tense breath. There was a glass window nearby and Ned looked at himself in it, surprised how bright his green skin looked in full sunlight.

“We need to keep going,” Felix said, following up the statement by punching Ned in the side.

When they entered the first store Ned did exactly what Felix had told him to do. He was to distract any workers while Felix found the batteries and put them in his pockets. Unsure of what else to do, he jumped up and down in front of the counter. The old man who ran the shop stared at him for a moment, then returned his attention to the newspaper he was reading. Felix dragged him out of the store by his ear when he was ready.

They made their way up and down the street like this. Ned was growing more unwise, tiring of their boring routines and getting more desperate to explore. By the time they reached the tenth store Felix’s pockets were sagging under the weight of stolen batteries and Ned’s nose was bleeding from the repeated beatings he was receiving from his companion.

Ned was barely holding himself together. He stared at Felix’s back, hurling silent curses at the ill tempered bully. Something strange wafted through the air, a sound Ned hadn’t heard yet, and it froze him where he stood. He strained his ears to hear more of it, trying to make sense of the deep rhythmic thumping.

“What is that?” he asked.

Felix growled as he turned and saw that Ned had once more stopped following him.

“I’ve had enough of this,” Felix spat.

He laid into Ned hard, punching him in the stomach and then kneeing him in the side of the head. Ned fell to the sidewalk, but tried to keep his attention focused on the distant rhythmic sound. Felix kicked him again and again.

“HEY!”

Ned looked and saw the group of young men from earlier. Felix stopped kicking him and turned to face the men.

“This is none of your concern,” Felix warned.

One of the young men kneeled down and looked at Ned.

“Do you need us to help you teach this guy a lesson?” he asked.

Ned almost instinctively said no, almost said that they were just playing around and that he was fine, but he could still hear that rhythmic sound. It was alluring, like a siren’s call that he couldn’t resist. He thought about everything he could do with the rest of the day if he wasn’t under the rule of Felix.

“Don’t you dare,” Felix said, sensing what Ned was thinking.

“He’s been beating me up like this for no reason. Let’s pay him back!” Ned yelled.

The men whooped and hollered as they attacked. In their inebriated state they were no match for Felix, but they were all the distraction that Ned needed. He leapt to his feet and sprinted away.

“Come back you fool!” Felix yelled.

Ned didn’t respond and he didn’t look back. He took the first turn he came to, then another, then another, and continued on like this for as long as he could. He was in a completely different part of the city by the time he was finally too tired to continue. He crouched in the shade beside a building to catch his breath. He smiled, realizing he was truly free. He’d catch hell when he returned to the facility that night, but for now the day was truly his.

Ned laughed. It was quiet at first but grew until he was doubled over and clutching his stomach. It was the happiest he had ever been. For a long time he remained there, content to just be on his own, to be truly free for the first time in his life. Then he heard it again.

The rhythmic sound was much closer this time and it was accompanied by more sounds. Voices followed along with the noise, layers of sounds stacked upon one another to create something magical that had Ned tapping his foot and laughing. He stood and wandered back onto the street, desperate to find the source.

“Where’s that coming from?” Ned asked of a drunk old man wearing a green suit.

The man pointed to a building across the street. On the window it said Flannigan's and Ned ran towards it. He flung the doors open to find the place filled nearly to capacity. The noise washed over him now, loud and amazing. Ned grabbed the first person he saw.

"What is this sound?"

The confused man was wearing a green top hat and holding a mug filled with green beer.

"Hip hop!" he answered.

"Hip hop," Ned laughed as he repeated.

He felt hands on his shoulder and turned around to see a young woman.

"Your costume is amazing!" she yelled.

Ned was about to ask what she meant when he saw himself in a mirror behind the bar. Even in the low lit bar his green skin stood out. He realized that the woman was giving him a funny look so finally he just smiled and shrugged. She laughed and pulled him towards the bar.

"Hey Phil, get a load of this guy!"

Several people turned to look, including a man behind the bar with a wild red beard. The man looked Ned over and then nodded.

"You drink for free my friend," Phil said.

More people were noticing him now and they complimented him, patted him on the shoulder and back, gave him high fives, offered to get him drinks. Within thirty seconds Ned had four different green drinks presented to him. The words of Jeremiah came into his mind, the warning not to take anything they offered to him. But the hip hop was starting again, everyone was smiling and laughing, several attractive women were swaying to the hip hop, and Ned decided that one drink wouldn't hurt anything. He selected the smallest cup being offered and drank the contents quickly.

His hands shot to his throat as it felt like his insides were on fire. For a moment he thought that Jeremiah had been right, that the humans had just poisoned him, but soon the burn passed and was replaced with a pleasant light heatedness and a tingling

sensation. Several people around him cheered and two women pulled him onto the makeshift dance floor in the middle of the bar.

The particular hip hop playing included a set of instructions and Ned and everyone else on the overcrowded dance floor did as they were told. They threw their hands in the air, swayed from side to side, leaned back and more. Someone handed him another drink and at the urging of one of the attractive women he drank it. She laughed and so did he.

Ned noticed some people moving past outside and stopped dancing for a moment. He thought about the batteries, about his mission and all of the people he was letting down. Then one of the women started dancing close to him, rubbing her body against his, and that was all he could think about. Soon he was handed another drink, a different hip hop song started, they danced some more, then had more drinks.

After an amount of time passed Ned and the woman took a break. She ordered some food for them. After his first bite of cheese fries he was hooked and finished two full plates of them. The woman, whose name was Haley, laughed and ordered some more, as well as more drinks. They were joined by some of her friends and Ned continued to be the focus of their conversations. They rubbed his green skin, laughed about how long it must've taken him, about how hard it was going to be to wash off. He just smiled and nodded, feeling only half awake, his brain fuzzy and happy and overwhelmed with new sensations.

They danced some more and Haley's movements became more aggressive and seductive. Ned wasn't sure how to react. At the facility they took a mate once they were thirty years old, but it was looked at as a necessary action to keep their species alive. If it was anything like what was happening here, no one had ever told Ned. More drinks were passed around and before he knew it the sun was starting to set.

The fast dying sunlight panicked Ned, pulled him back to reality.

"I have to go do something," he said suddenly.

"Oh no you don't," Haley giggled.

She tried to pull him closer but he stepped away.

"There was something I was supposed to do today."

“The only thing you have to do is come to the after party at my house,” Haley said with a smile.

“I can’t. I have to...”

She leaned forward and pressed her lips against his. Ned’s eyes went wide, then wider when she pushed her tongue into his mouth. He laughed and she pulled away and laughed too.

“Let’s go,” Haley said.

Ned just nodded and allowed himself to be led out of the bar. They rode with a friend of Haley’s and soon they were at her house. It was small, made even smaller by the throng of people packed into it, in the grips of a raging party. The crowd of people washed over Ned like a wave. The hip hop here was twice as loud as it had been at the bar, the drinks handed out at twice the pace. He lost site of Haley for some time but just when he thought about leaving she found him again, kissed him again.

The party lasted deep into the night. At some point Ned made his way into a small room and sat on the bed. He was finding it hard to stand up, hard to think, hard to do much of anything at all. He lay back, intending to rest for just a moment.

“NED!”

Haley’s voice crashed into his brain, causing pain unlike he had ever felt. It took him three tries before he could peel his eyelids open to look at her. She was standing beside the bed, looking down at him angrily.

“Urgh,” was all that came out when Ned tried to speak.

She sighed and picked up a bottle of water from the nightstand. She tossed it to him.

“You need to get out of here, I have to go to work.”

Even though she spoke at a regular volume the sound still caused his mind to explode with pain. He drained the water bottle and was about to answer her when he felt his stomach lurch. He rolled out of the bed, thudding to the floor. He got to his

hands and knees and then puked. It came out for what felt like minutes, a great big green pile of nastiness.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Haley screamed.

When it was finally done Ned felt a little better and was able to stand up. He turned towards Haley, looking at her fully for the first time since waking up. Gone was the wild party girl he had met at Flannigan’s. Here stood a respectably dressed, angry person who clearly wasn’t pleased with him at the moment.

“I want you out of my house.”

Ned rubbed his head and nodded.

“Okay,” he said.

He started walking for the door.

“And wash that ridiculous green paint off. Saint Patrick’s Day was two days ago,” Haley snapped.

Ned spun around.

“It was what?!”

She rolled her eyes.

“You passed out in my bed and you’ve been asleep for almost an entire day.”

He started backing away from her.

“Oh no,” he muttered. “This can’t be happening.”

He hit a wall and a picture fell off, shattering when it struck the floor.

“Get out of here!” Haley yelled.

Ned sprinted for the door, his mind a jumbled mess. He threw it open and was assaulted by the full power of the morning sun. Without his sunglasses on it burned into his eyes with an overpowering intensity. He squeezed his eyes closed, causing him to trip and fall down the two steps. Ned tumbled awkwardly into Haley’s front yard. He wanted to cry, wanted to scream. He tried to think of a plan, of anything that could get him out of this terrible mess, but his head was pounding. He got to his feet and opened his eyes just enough to see where the sidewalk was, then started moving down it quickly.

He was in a part of the city he didn’t recognize, but was pretty sure he knew what direction the facility was in. Sounds smashed and crashed all around him. Gone was

the fascination with them, now he heard them for what they were. Blaring and terrible, chaotic. Horns honked, planes flew overhead and all that Ned wanted was to be away from it all.

Moving back into the downtown area he started to feel a bit more confident about getting to the facility, but there were more people around now. They all stared at him strangely.

“Saint Patty’s day was two days ago!” one man yelled.

“Go back to Ireland!” another shouted.

Ned stumbled into the road and a car had to slam on its brakes to avoid hitting him.

“Get out of the road you freak!” the driver screamed.

His world was spinning out of control but he tried to focus on keeping his feet moving, going back to the facility. But what would he say when he got there?

Ned stopped as he thought about that question. He knew they were going to be furious with him and it was a given that Felix would give him a vicious beating. A store across the street caught his eye and at last a plan started to form in his mind.

He hurried across the street and went into the store. He ignored the strange look the employee gave him and scanned the shelves for batteries. A smile spread across his lips as he spotted a large battery display. Ned had never seen so many batteries and he thought about what would be said at the facility if he came back with all of them. It wouldn’t stop them from being angry, but it would help.

A row of backpacks hung nearby on a hook and he pulled one down. He started filling it with the batteries.

“I hope you’re planning on paying for all of that,” the employee said.

Ned didn’t bother to respond. He continued shoving the batteries in until the backpack could hold no more. He had to force the zipper closed and the pack caused him to grimace as he swung it over his shoulder. Batteries were heavier than he had realized.

“I’m calling the police right now so you better come up here and pay for that!” the employee shouted.

He knew who the police were. They were peacekeepers, investigators, a danger to him and the people of the facility. Ned knew he should leave before they showed up. He ran out the door, straining under the weight of the batteries.

“You’re going to jail!” the employee yelled after him.

The area was getting busier and more people gave him strange looks, called him names. Ned longed for the nice people from Flannigan’s, the fun they all had together, the acceptance they showed to him that day. He thought about Haley and wished that he could’ve explained things to her. Maybe she would’ve been nicer to him if she had known more about him.

He was slowed greatly by the heavy backpack and was only a few blocks away from the store when he heard the sirens. Of all the terrible noises he heard this day, the siren was by far the worst. A police car came screeching around the corner and Ned was filled with fear. It stopped suddenly and two men jumped out. Ned stopped and stared at them for a moment.

“Don’t move!” one of them yelled.

Ned disobeyed. He tried to block out the pain in his shoulder from the backpack and run faster. Sweat was pouring down his face and his legs were weakening. He could hear the footfalls of the pursuing policemen, knew that whatever they were going to do to him wasn’t going to be good.

“NED!”

The ferocious roar could belong to only one person. Ned looked to the side just in time to see Felix barreling across the street towards him. He could tell by looking at him that Felix hadn’t slept, hadn’t returned to the facility. Instead he had been searching for Ned, and now that he found him things weren’t going to be pretty.

Felix tackled him, grinding him into the sidewalk.

“No, Felix! The police!” Ned shouted.

There were no words that could be said that would stop the beating Felix was ready to hand out. He started raining down blows on Ned’s face. All of his frustration from his citywide search was poured into his fists.

“Stop right now!”

Ned recognized the voice of the policeman. Felix didn't listen, and the cop slammed into him and pulled him to the ground. The two of them rolled to a stop and Felix jumped to his feet. His shirt was ripped, revealing his heavily muscled green torso. The second policeman was upon him now and he pulled a club from his belt.

"This is none of your concern, humans!" Felix yelled.

He pounced on the second policeman, wrenching the club from his hand and throwing it into the street. Ned scurried away, trying not to get caught up in the melee. The other policeman grabbed Felix from behind in a choke hold, but he was no match for Felix's power. The green skinned man roared as he flung the policeman off of his back. Felix ran towards the downed officer and raised his leg.

"No! They're just trying to keep the peace!" Ned screamed.

Felix was beyond listening now. He brought his foot down as hard as he could, crushing the skull of the police officer. Blood oozed out of every available hole, the sick, slurping noise of it reverberated off the nearby storefronts.

The remaining policeman's eyes went wide in horror. He went for his gun but Felix dove on top of him. Ned got to his feet and started to back away, overcome by the display of violence he was seeing. A car stopped in the street and a man got out.

"Hey! Cut it out!" the man yelled.

Felix was choking the policeman now, a crazed look on his face.

"Help him!" Ned yelled.

The driver rushed forward, but Felix was ready for him. He kicked the man in the knee, knocking him to the ground, and then he was upon him. Felix smashed his face into the sidewalk again and again until blood flowed freely.

Two more people dove upon the raging Felix. They all twisted together into a mass of violence, a blur of fists and grunts and blood. Ned kept backing away, tears filling his eyes as he watched the terrible scene unfold in front of him. He ran into someone but didn't apologize, didn't even look at them. Felix wrenched one man's neck backwards until there was a loud popping sound and the man fell limp.

Ned couldn't watch anymore. He ran. He was crying so hard that he could hardly see where he was going but he never slowed. He barely noticed the backpack

now, barely noticed anything. Two gunshots rang out behind him, back on the street where Felix had been, and Ned could only hope that they had killed the maniac.

Ned was shaking and his clothes were soaked through with sweat when he was finally in view of the facility. He was on the far edge of the city and he fell to his knees and just stared at it. Ned had thought he'd be overjoyed to see it, that it would make him feel safe and secure, but it didn't. It was imposing, a sore on the horizon, anything but inviting. But what choice did he have?

A sound drifted down the mostly empty street and caught his attention. Ned strained to listen, and after a moment recognized it as hip hop. He looked down the street for the source, then back at the facility. He wanted to feel homesick, wanted the sight of the imposing building to call out to him, to compel him back to its loving embrace. But none of that happened. All he thought about was the joyless people inside, the miserable existence they scraped out, the hatred of the humans that they bred. It was that hatred that led to Felix's violent outburst.

It was that hatred that Ned wanted nothing more to do with. He turned away from the facility and moved towards the hip hop. This area of the city was filled with rundown buildings and long closed stores. But something was generating the sound. As he got closer he could hear the words. It was telling him to feel the beat, to bob his head.

Ned rounded the corner and saw a girl sitting against the building. In her hand was a small device that was playing the hip hop. She was barely a teenager and had a backpack of her own sitting beside her. Their eyes met.

"Are you sick or something?" she asked.

"I don't know," Ned answered.

"Your skin is green."

Ned looked down at it and then nodded.

"Is it contagious?"

He shrugged.

“I don’t think so.”

She stared at him suspiciously.

“Can I listen to the hip hop with you?” Ned asked.

The girl frowned.

“You should probably go see a doctor,” she said. “There’s a clinic nearby, I can show you where. The doctor there is real nice.”

“Can we keep listening to the hip hop while we go?”

She chuckled before answering.

“Sure.”

He smiled as she got to her feet and slung her backpack over her shoulder.

“Follow me,” she said. “I can show you the building but I can’t go in. I’m supposed to be in school right now and I can’t let anybody see me.”

Ned wasn’t sure what school was but he nodded anyways.

“Okay.”

He fell in beside her as they walked leisurely down the empty street. A different song came on and Ned bobbed his head from side to side. The girl laughed and did the same, flicking the volume up as loud as it would go. A thought occurred to Ned.

“Say, does that thing take batteries?” he asked.

The girl nodded.

“Yeah, it goes through them really fast too, it’s a pain.”

Ned smiled, feeling at peace for the first time that day as he swung his backpack off his shoulder and opened it up.

“Excellent,” he said.