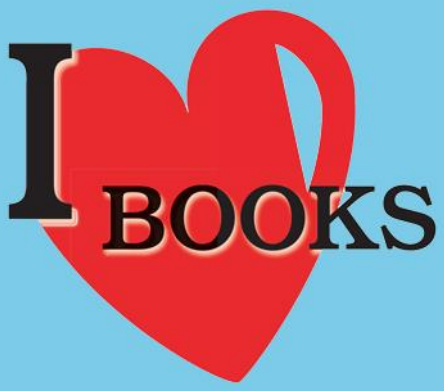


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CHAPTER 1

The Archenemy

The day Patches was stolen from Smashie McPepper's class started out like any other day. Well, except for the fact that her teacher was out sick and Smashie's class was stuck with the worst substitute in the world. And except for the mysterious business with the glue. And except for the fact that Patches himself had become Smashie's new archenemy.

"I do not want to go back to Room 11," said Smashie to her best friend, Dontel Marquise. Art was just ending, and the two of them were cleaning up

their materials in the art room alongside the rest of their year four class. "I do not want to go back at all."

It wasn't just because art was over, though Smashie had enjoyed working on her Prehistoric 3D scene (frightened prehistoric people fleeing from animals with pointy teeth). It wasn't even that the substitute, Mr Carper, was lying in wait for them back in the classroom. Smashie's reason for not wanting to return was both smaller and larger than either of those things.

"Don't worry, Smash," said Dontel, putting away his own model (thoughtful prehistoric people working out how to invent tools). "It'll get easier. You'll get used to it."

Smashie shook her head. "No," she said. "I will never get used to it."

Feet dragging, she attached herself to the end of the line of her classmates gathered at the art room door.

"What if you make one of your suits?" Dontel asked, coming up beside her. "You could make a Brave Suit to wear in Room 11."

"I do not need a Brave Suit!" Smashie cried. "I am

not unbrave about what's in our room! I just think it is awful."

"Hrrm," said Dontel.

Perhaps Dontel was right, though, Smashie thought. Perhaps a suit would help. She was only just wearing regular dungarees today, but she often wore suits of her own devising. When she and Dontel had participated in the year three maths competition last year, for example, she had made a Maths Suit by painting numbers on an old opera cape of her grandma's and pasting equations to the toes of her wellies. And when she had rashly signed up to man the present-wrapping table at the Mother's Day fair last spring, her Present-Wrapping Suit had been the only thing that had gotten her through the day. (Smashie was not at her best with a pair of scissors. Cutting things always led to plasters and a trip to the school nurse, and the present wrapping had been no exception. Nonetheless, in her suit, she had persevered.)

At various other times, Smashie had created Writing Suits, Cooking Suits, and Distracting-Adults-from-Messes Suits. Being in a suit always helped

Smashie get into the right frame of mind to solve hard problems.

"I can't think of a suit that could help me with this problem," Smashie said now as she and Dontel and the rest of their class arrived at Room 11. "Room 11 is wrecked forever."

"Smashie," said Dontel, "it is only a hamster."



Patches.

It was his feet that got her. The rest of the hamster's body was all right, Smashie supposed: round with tan fur and nervous black eyes. But his feet!

"A little soft creature should have little soft feet!" Smashie had cried to Dontel when the rest of the class decided that a hamster would be the perfect

class pet after a series of strenuous discussions the previous week. "But Patches has claws! Terrible, scrabbly claws!"

"Now, Smashie," Dontel had said soothingly, "I think you just don't really understand about hamsters. There are reasons they have that kind of feet. Hamsters are—"

"They are two kinds of creature, smushed together; that's what they are. It's like somebody stuck a chicken's feet onto a mouse's body! What kind of creature is two kinds of creature?"

Dontel thought for a moment. "What about the sphinx?" he'd offered at last. "You liked learning about the sphinx during our ancient Egypt project. And Asten, the dog-headed, ape-bodied servant of the god Thoth – you loved him, too."

"Hamsters are nothing like dog-headed, ape-bodied Asten! Asten is wonderful." Smashie shuddered and raked her hands through her hair. "Hamsters look like a crazy biologist bashed different animals together to make a monster!"

"Smashie…"

"Like that guy Dr Frankenstein made! *Our class is*

getting a Frankenstein rodent monster!" Dontel patted her shoulder, but Smashie shook his hand off. She was very worked up. Even Dontel could not calm her.

Smashie herself had argued for a lizard. "It would be like having a miniature dinosaur! It would fit perfectly with our project on prehistoric times, Ms Early!"

"We are not studying pre-*human* times, Smashie," Ms Early had said. "Just prehistoric."

But Smashie pressed on. "At least lizards are *uniform*. And most lizards are vegetarians, too!"

She thought the last point would go over well with the children who had been opposed to Billy Kamarski's suggestion of a mouse-eating snake.

But no. The rest of the class was firm. They wanted a hamster. So Patches had been selected and purchased and brought to their room just yesterday. And because his cage was right next to the children's coat area, there had been plenty of opportunities for Smashie to confront the reality of his feet.

Like right now, for example. Caught in the throng of students heading to the back of the room, Smashie was forced to stop in front of Patches's cage as the children came to a halt to admire him.



"Look how sweet he is," said Jacinda Morales.

"I *know,*" moaned Charlene Stott. "He is the cutest darling boy!"

Smashie gulped.

"Come on, Smash," whispered Dontel encouragingly. "Don't you think he is at least a little bit cute?"

Patches trembled on his bed of wooden shavings.

"No," said Smashie, and gulped again.

What if Patches manages somehow to open the door to his cage and escape? she thought hectically. What if he made his way to her seat and crawled on her with those awful feet?

"Do you think Patches would ever be able to open that cage?" she asked Dontel, her brow creased with worry.

Dontel sighed. "No," he said. "I don't. He would need thumbs to work the latch."

"Phew," said Smashie.

In front of them, Willette Williams poked her forefinger through the bars of the cage to stroke Patches's head. "I hate that he had to spend his first night here in the classroom all alone," she mourned.

"He was fine," said Billy Kamarski gruffly. "Patches is tough."

Smashie and Dontel exchanged surprised glances. It was not like Billy to have a soft spot for a hamster. Mostly what Billy liked was playing jokes on his classmates. Last week, for example, he had telephoned Smashie.

"Is your refrigerator running?" he asked.

"Yes," Smashie answered.

"Then you'd better go catch it!" he yelled, and hung up, laughing insanely.

"That joke is as old as Methuselah," Smashie's grandmother had said. Both Smashie and Dontel had grandmothers who lived with them and kept an eye on them after school. The two grandmothers were close friends and saw eye to eye on the subject of Smashie and Dontel.

Jokes like Billy's refrigerator joke were irritating, but some of his jokes were downright unkind. He was always giving people wedgies, for example. And once he put a plastic tarantula in Siggie Higgins's work box, when everybody knew that Siggie was

truly frightened of spiders. Smashie had kindly fished it out of the box for him while Dontel calmed Siggie down and reassured him that it wasn't real. Billy, on the other hand, had collapsed on the floor and drummed his heels with mirth.

Getting in trouble never seemed to deter Billy from his pranks, either. He got into plenty for the wedgies and the tarantula in Siggie's box, but that didn't stop him from laughing like a loon at the very mention of a spider.

But now even Billy was being extra nice to the hamster.

Patches squirmed and wriggled and scratched on his shavings. Then he grasped Willette's finger tightly in his forepaws.

"Oh!" Willette cried, and swooned with joy.

Smashie swooned with horror. She rounded on Dontel, who shook his head warningly.

"Don't say you think hamsters look like a zoological experiment gone wrong," he whispered. "Don't, Smashie. The kids got really mad when you said that last week."

Smashie subsided.

"You are right," she said. "And a lot of them are still mad at me, too."

This was the other part of Smashie's problem. Although she was generally well liked in Room 11, the pet debate had gotten rather sticky in the end. And Smashie had not made things any better yesterday when they had voted on the hamster's name.

"He doesn't even *have* patches!" she'd complained.

But none of the other children would consent to name him, as Smashie had suggested, Uggles de Blucky. And they had not been shy about expressing their feelings about her suggestion.

"You are being mean, Smashie McPepper!" Joyce Costa had cried.

"How can you say such awful things about the animal we love?" Willette had agreed with accusing eyes.

Standing amid her happy classmates now, Smashie had to admit it was lonely being the only member of Room 11 who did not love Patches. Even Dontel liked him. He liked him a lot. It was one of the few times that Smashie's and Dontel's minds were not as one.

Mostly, Smashie and Dontel had so much in common that they were practically twins. Besides having grandmas at home, they both enjoyed cartoons with a lot of action and milk shakes with extra ice cream. They were co-champions of last year's maths competition, and they'd won the lower-school spelling competition as well. And both of them loved to think about complicated things. As with the hamster, Smashie's thoughts tended to be hectic and shouty, while Dontel's were calm and well constructed. But when they put their two kinds of thinking together, Smashie and Dontel were an unstoppable team.

So the fact that Dontel did not mind the purchase of Patches – was even happy about it – threw Smashie.

Maybe I am wrong, Smashie thought now. *Maybe Patches is secretly cool.*

She stared at the little rodent. If he was secretly cool, it was a very big secret.

Maybe if I think of him as Patches as in eye patches, she thought. *Like a pirate.* She imagined a little circle

of black fabric cocked rakishly over one of Patches's eyes and pictured him striding fearlessly about in his cage, as if on the deck of a ship.

But the real Patches did not swashbuckle. He quivered. And scratched again.

Smashie sighed.

Maybe if I imagine him with a cutlass and peg leg, too, she thought. And a less trembly personality.

But Smashie was interrupted in her thinking by an irritated voice barking at them from the front of the room.

"Kids!" the voice boomed. "Stop mooning over that animal and sit down."

It was Mr Carper. The substitute.