

The Straw And The Camel
By Domenika Marizone, Pebblin, and Jim Smith

"Leggo, Charlie!"

The golden retriever looked up at him with adoring eyes. Clark looked down balefully and let his backpack slide off of his shoulder. It had been a long day and he didn't need this. Charlie, however, did and a day's worth of anticipation had whipped him into a frenzy. He had started barking as soon as he had heard Clark's footsteps outside the door and had pounced before he could even close the door behind him.

"Go away," he muttered, trying to disengage himself from seventy-five pounds of fur and slobber. Charlie, thinking Clark was playing with him, jumped up again. Clark whimpered (although it sounded more like a whine even to his own ears) and pushed the dog down again, this time with a little more force. He slammed the door with a gust of super-breath and headed toward the stairs to his room. Charlie trailed behind, nearly tripping him as he tried to nip at his ankles. At the first step, Charlie's teeth found the hem of his jeans and he tugged, hard enough for Clark to lose his balance and send his backpack hard to the ground.

Normally, he'd have been happy to indulge the dog, but he wasn't in the mood today. The rain, getting caught first without his homework in Math and then barely avoiding disaster with the pop quiz in English, having to pretend to stumble around all day because he had left his glasses on his dresser, and then the *horrible* moment in gym...

"Clark, have you done your chores yet?" His mother's voice, used to calling across a field full of corn, carried up clearly from the kitchen.

He sighed, stifling the urge to say something that he'd regret. Annoyance coursed through him nonetheless, however, and he pulled his hand away from the bannister before he left marks.

"Clark? Honey? Did you hear me?"

She knew absolutely well that he'd heard her; he could hear a rabbit piss on cotton on the far end of the farm -- something she also knew. He gritted his teeth, forced his mouth into a smile no one could see, and called back in his best 'dutiful son' voice:

"I just wanted to change my clothes first, Ma!"

With a final jerk of his leg to free his pants from the still-attached Charlie, he sped up the stairs, slamming the door to his room before Charlie could even yelp in surprise. He stalked to his bed and dropped his backpack, sitting down heavily after it. Taking a deep breath to collect himself, he could hear Charlie plod up the stairs, eager for the next round.

He'd woken up on the wrong side of the bed. Sure it was an expression, but this morning it had had a more literal interpretation and he'd stepped straight into the latest proof that Charlie was not yet fully housebroken. He'd been late out of bed and this had made him

later down to breakfast and he'd barely had time to brush his teeth -- but not enough time to remember to put on his glasses -- before he'd heard the distant rumble of the school bus' ancient shocks over the bumpy dirt roads.

Forbidden by his parents from using his super-speed outside the immediate vicinity of the house and barn, he'd missed the bus and had had to walk -- **slowly** -- to the main road and was soaked to the skin before he'd caught a lift to school by Joe Clarence and his bread truck. He'd shaken his clothes dry before reporting to the principal's office for his late pass and enduring a lecture on punctuality.

What little of Social Studies that remained had been boring -- he'd seen the Amazon for himself -- and there had been a substitute teacher in Chemistry. But then had come French and there had been no way to explain how he'd accidentally let lions eat both his textbook and his homework. (Going to Kenya and sitting in the veldt to watch the zebras had seemed like a good idea at the time.) He'd mumbled something about leaving his book on the bus and accepted the little index card with the replacement cost of the book written in his own uneven scrawl.

Lunchtime had been a disaster. Without his glasses, he'd had to remember to play clumsy and nearsighted, tripping over backpacks and chair legs and not being able to read the blackboard. In the cafeteria, an ill-planned pratfall had left Mrs. Irving, the school aide, wearing most of his creamed corn and staring angrily at the chicken patty at her feet.

Sixth period, the end of his day on Tuesdays, had brought English and he'd broken his parents' rules to avoid ending it as the worst day of his high school career. The fifth period class had exited the room muttering "pop quiz" and he'd taken the opportunity to run to the boys' room with his copy of *Hamlet* and read the assignment for today that he'd been unable to do because he'd forgotten the book in his locker the day before. After the humiliation of fifth period gym...

"Clark? Everything okay?"

Standing up and crossing the room -- Ma and Pa didn't believe in talking to anyone through a closed door -- Clark was about to reply when Charlie pushed his wet nose through the narrow opening, followed immediately by the rest of him. Cheerfully forgetful of his early-morning gift, Charlie ran around the room, sniffing at books and furniture as if he'd never seen them before.

"Fine, Ma! Be down in a minute."

He turned around to find Charlie and drag him out of his room when he stopped suddenly. Charlie was sitting by the foot of his bed, a sock in his mouth.

"Aw, man," he sighed, embarrassment making his cheeks flush hot. That it was Charlie and not Ma who found it really didn't make much of a difference at the moment. "C'mere, boy."

He slapped his thigh for emphasis and Charlie dutifully approached, sock in mouth, and sat down almost on Clark's toes. Wrinkling his nose in disgust, he reached down to take the crusty sock out of the dog's mouth. "You had to go stick your nose under the bed, didn't you?"

Charlie didn't answer. If he'd barked, then maybe Clark could have snatched the sock easily. Instead, Charlie considered Clark's tug to be the start of a new game. Tug of War was Charlie's favorite game and Clark realized that there was a very good chance that he wouldn't be able to get the sock back before there were witnesses. Clark fought a wave of panic as he remembered Charlie's habit of giving Ma "presents" like dead mice or the potholder that had fallen out of the laundry basket. He kicked the door closed behind him, closing off Charlie's escape route.

Pulling hard and growling at Clark's seeming inattention, Charlie was persistent. A day full of things going from bad to worse without stopping at miserable suddenly came to a head. Clark reached down and picked Charlie up by the collar and shook. Hard. Charlie whimpered, but still didn't release the sock. Clark tugged harder, but to no avail and he growled in true frustration. He pulled back his free hand and was prepared to smack the dog's head when he was snapped out of his rage by a voice.

"Clark?" Pa's voice came from right outside the closed bedroom door. "Are you okay, son? Your ma's worried about you."

Wide-eyed at what he'd nearly done, Clark gently put Charlie back down. The dog barked happily, dropping the sock on the ground. Clark snatched it quickly and turned on the ball of his foot, opening the door with his empty hand.

"Fine, Pa. I just...just got distracted playing with Charlie."