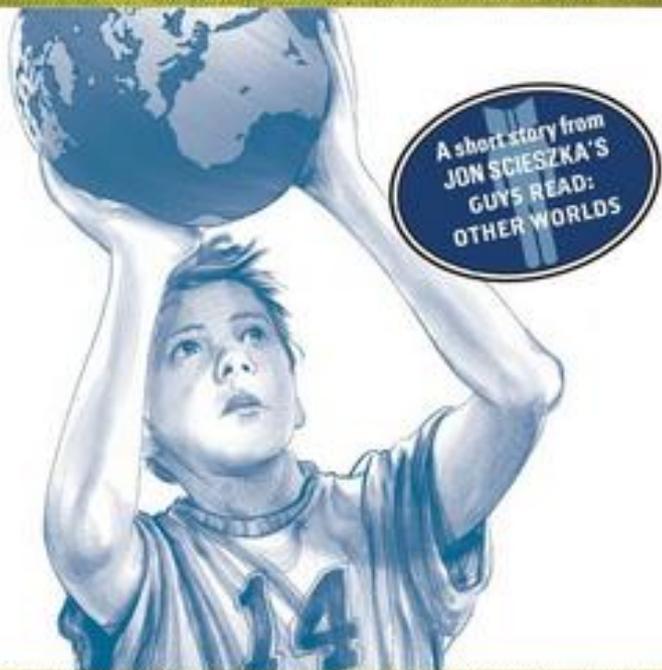


GUYSiREAD



A short story from
JON SCIESZKA'S
GUYS READ:
OTHER WORLDS

**THE WARLORDS
OF RECESS**

A SHORT STORY BY ERIC S. NYLUND

THE WARLORDS OF RECESS

BY ERIC NYLUND

Commander Kane looked from the bridge of his mighty warship, *Colossus*.

The central view screen showed a blue planet swirled with clouds. A world called "Earth." Its defenses would only take a minute to annihilate. Then it would be known as "colony world 4729-B."

Commander Kane smoothed his neat iron-gray beard, brushed imaginary lint from the sleeve of his black uniform, and adjusted the campaign ribbons making a rainbow over his chest.

He nodded to his weapons crew to begin.

Ten junior officers straightened at their stations. Their eager faces were lit from the nearby computers that showed missiles armed and a fleet of invasion craft ready to launch.

Rule Officer Lieutenant Plagen cleared his throat.

Commander Kane grimaced. This happened *every* single time. He held up a hand to signal the weapon officers to halt.

Lieutenant Plagen wore a white uniform with gold buttons that should have made him stand out among the rest of the crew. Yet he had the uncanny ability to sneak up on the commander.

"Yes, Lieutenant Plagen?" Commander Kane asked.

"Sir." Plagen snapped a crisp salute. "Rule 039? I'm sure you *meant* to give the order." He arched one eyebrow, knowing very well the commander hadn't. "It is my duty to remind the commander that *The Test* must be given to any world about to be conquered by the Eternal Empire."

“Rule 039,” Commander Kane muttered. “Of course.”

The Empire spanned the galaxy. It ruled four hundred colony worlds and would last forever because of its rules—all 33,452 of them.

The Commander secretly thought most of those rules could be ignored and no one would notice.

Except, that is, the Rules Officer required to go on every mission.

Which was *another* rule.

Commander Kane exhaled. He turned to his intelligence officer.

She anticipated his order, leaned over her instruments, and scanned the planet Earth.

“Detecting several military bases, sir,” she told him.

A smug smile appeared on Plagen’s face.

Of course the Rules Officer was happy. He enjoyed these pointless, cruel tests.

“Very well,” Commander Kane told his intel officer. “Find an easy target. I want to make this quick. No need to make these ‘earthlings’ suffer more than they must.”

She nodded. “Filtering the results, sir.”

Rule 039 was ancient—from before the Empire had traveled to the stars. It was from a time when they had respected their enemies. Honor and courage had meant more than pushing a button and bombing planets from orbit without fear of a real fight.

The rule tested their enemies.

The Empire sent three squads against a like number of enemy soldiers. If the enemy won these battles, then they were worthy of the Empire’s respect. They would be called “friend,” and the Empire would leave in peace.

It was a worthless exercise. Not since the Empire had taken to the stars had anyone ever won a Rule 039 test.

“Found a likely candidate,” the intel officer said, looking up from her scanners. “A training camp for young warriors. They are currently engaged in simulated battle drills. Something called ‘recess.’”

“That sounds perfect,” Rules Officer Plagen said. “What is the name of this place for the official record?”

“Evergreen Elementary School,” the intel officer replied.

“Proceed then,” Commander Kane ordered. “Send in Squad Alpha.”

“Sir? Alpha?” the intel officer asked.

Alpha squad had the ship’s best soldiers. They won *every* fight, no matter what it cost. They were also known for leaving few, if any, survivors on the battlefield.

“Nothing fancy,” Commander Kane said. “Just take them out. Quick.”

Josh and Tony sat on the sidelines of Evergreen Elementary’s basketball court. It was a hot spring day. The smell of cut grass was thick in the air.

The boys would’ve given anything to be out there running, dribbling, and having a great time.

No. That wasn’t true.

They knew they were better off sitting out the game.

They *wished* they could run and pass and have a great time at basketball like everyone else.

But Josh and Tony were total klutzes.

Their classmates thundered past them and left them coughing in a cloud of dust.

So basketball wasn't their game (neither was dodgeball or soccer). No big deal. Instead, Josh and Tony were great at chess and board games with tiny squads of men that captured military bases in historical battles. No one else in the entire school could beat them.

Instead of everyone thinking this was cool, though, it just got them picked last every time, for every sport.

And they never got put into play anymore. That was fine with them. The few times it'd happened they'd gotten bruised and scuffed and spent more time flat on their faces.

It was humiliating.

So was sitting here. They were on display as the *least* athletic kids in the sixth grade.

Josh scratched a "#" in the dirt with his filthy sneaker. "Tic-tac-toe?"

Tony pushed his glasses higher onto his nose. He sweated and his glasses were always slipping and covered with greasy fingerprints.

"What's the point?" Tony said. "We always tie. How about chess?"

"Takes too long to find rocks to make the pieces," Josh said.

Josh knew Tony was about to suggest they draw the pieces in the dirt, then erase them and redraw every time they made a move. Last time they tried that the other kids called a timeout, came over, and trampled what had been one of their best chess games ever.

"Let's just—"

Tony stared past Josh, ignoring him, eyes locked on the court.

Josh followed his gaze.

The game had stopped. Both basketball teams faced some new kids.

There were five newcomers.

Josh had never seen them before. He was sure. He would have remembered *these* kids.

The three guys and two girls were a foot taller than any other kid at Evergreen. They looked like bodybuilders, in shorts and tight T-shirts with “ALPHA” stenciled on them along with numbers, one through five. They all wore mirrored wraparound sunglasses.

“Alpha’ is the first letter in the Greek alphabet,” Tony said.

“Whatever,” Josh told him, annoyed because he *hadn’t* known that. Tony was always showing off.

The new kids must’ve said something funny, because all ten ordinary kids on the court laughed.

The biggest new kid (one with a crooked nose that looked like it’d been broken a few times) looked deadly serious as he continued to talk to them. He had the number 1 on his shirt. He picked up the basketball.

The two teams on the court lined up against the newcomers.

“How can they all play?” Tony whispered. “It’d be *two* teams against *one*.”

Josh scooted to the edge of the bench, eager to see what would happen next. “Doesn’t matter how big those other kids are,” he said. “With two teams, our guys will just dribble the ball around them.”

The leader of the new kids tossed the ball at the Evergreen teams.

Shawn, the best basketball player at school, caught it, bounced the ball, and passed it to his teammate Jordan.

That’s when the new kids burst into action.

The new kids’ leader, Number 1, sprinted toward Shawn—and tackled him!

Shawn didn't even have the ball anymore.

He went down in a heap. The big guy bounced off him, and Shawn "whoofed" as the air blasted out of his chest.

The large kid rolled to his feet, ready for more.

Meanwhile, Shawn lay moaning, barely moving.

Josh and Tony jumped to their feet.

"That was a *total* foul," Josh called out.

Tony nodded, wide-eyed.

That was just the start.

The huge kids jammed down the court.

One of them pulled out a bazooka squirt gun with a huge plunger. She aimed for Jordan and fired.

A stream of green fluid splattered Jordan—who slipped and fell and struggled in a web of blue-green slime.

The rest of the new kids tackled other players. One boy got tossed off the field (thankfully into the gym pads stacked on the sidelines).

The remaining three standing basketball players stared at the mayhem—then turned and ran!

Or, at least, they *tried* to run.

Two got hit with those gigantic squirt guns and went down. The last guy got straight-armed into the ground by the captain of the new kids.

It'd taken ten seconds. Both Evergreen basketball teams were on the ground, stuck in green goo, or dazed and barely moving.

And the new kids hadn't even *touched* the basketball!

"They can't do that," Josh whispered.

"Yeah, but they kinda *did* do it," Tony whispered back.

“We need to get a teacher,” Josh said.

Which is when the leader of the new kids, this Number 1 guy, turned to them. “You two,” he said. His voice sounded like rumbling thunder.

“Us?” Josh squeaked.

“You are on the team, aren’t you?”

“N-not exactly,” Tony stammered. “I mean, I guess, technically, yes. But we’re on the bench. We’re not supposed to actually play.”

Josh elbowed Tony. He wasn’t making this better.

Too late.

The captain of the new kids grinned at them, revealing a mouthful of pointed *shark* teeth. “Good. Get out on the field. And then we can finish this battle.”

Josh had to escape. He took two steps away from the basketball court and started to run.

But Tony was too slow. The new kids surrounded him.

Tony looked panicked. He turned to Josh like he was the only person in the world who could save him.

If Josh could just sprint to the classrooms and get a teacher . . . but these kids were seriously damaged in the head. Especially that one with his teeth filed to points. What kind of crazy person does that? He couldn’t leave Tony alone with Shark Face.

He glanced at his classmates on the ground, tangled in webs of sticky green goo. Josh didn’t think he’d get very far running anyway.

“Great,” Josh muttered.

He marched back to Tony. The gigantic kids parted and let him stand with his friend, and then closed ranks.

Josh nodded to the center of the basketball court. “Let’s get this over with.”

Tony shook his head so hard his glasses almost flew off. “We—we can’t,” he sputtered.

“There a choice?” Josh asked.

Tony sighed.

The new kids kept Josh encircled as he stopped at the half-court line.

Yeah, Josh was scared out of his mind, but he was also *annoyed*. None of these new kids were where they were supposed to be. They didn’t have anyone to face him for the toss-up.

The shark-toothed leader shoved the basketball into Josh’s hands.

“Play,” he demanded.

The new kids crouched, ready to pounce.

“So who’s going to throw the ball for the toss-up?” Josh asked.

The leader shook his head, not understanding. “Play!”

Tony pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Don’t you guys know how to play basketball? There are rules, you know.”

Every one of the new kids suddenly stood up straight—no longer in “crush and destroy” mode. They all stared at Tony.

The leader looked apologetically at his team. “No one told us there were . . . rules.” His gaze dropped to his sneakers.

Josh recognized the awkward reaction because *he* felt that way when he’d played basketball and did something stupid (which was every time).

Which gave him an idea.

“Rules,” he murmured to Tony and elbowed him.

Tony shook his head, not getting it.

“Just follow my lead,” Josh whispered.

Josh cleared his throat. “Yeah, there are *lots* of rules.”

The gigantic kids all started as if someone had cracked a whip. There was definitely something going on here.

A grin spread over Josh’s face. “You guys just broke about a dozen of the *biggest* rules in basketball.” He pointed out the leader. “Especially you, buddy!”

The color drained from the big kid’s face. His sharp smile vanished.

The other big kids muttered and looked around, everywhere but at their leader. It was as if they were embarrassed to know him.

“I . . . I didn’t know,” their leader protested.

“That doesn’t matter,” Tony said, picking up on Josh’s idea. “Rules are rules. You broke them, and there are penalties.”

The leader hung his head. He looked as if Tony had just said he was about to be shot by a firing squad.

“Free throws,” Josh told the leader. “That’s the usual penalty for a foul.” He counted the dazed and tangled kids on the basketball court. “I figure at least ten of them.”

Josh marched to the free-throw line, bouncing the basketball along the way. He almost kicked it. *That* would have looked cool.

“And since we’re the only ones left on the team,” Josh said, “we’ll take the shots.”

The big kids didn’t move.

“You guys have to line up on either side.” Tony told them. “And just watch. No jumping in to mess up the shots. That’s another rule.”

The big kids gulped and lined up.

Their leader was the last to join them. “No one told me about the rules,” he repeated to himself.

Josh stepped up to the free-throw line. He bounced the ball a few times to warm up. He wasn’t any good at this.

He launched the ball—it *spanged* off the backboard.

A miss.

The big kids shifted as if they wanted to jump and tackle Josh. They restrained each other, though.

They *really* had a thing about rules.

Tony got the ball and tossed it to Josh.

He threw again—missed.

And missed again.

And again!

Josh shook his head. He was such a spaz sometimes.

He took a deep breath and squinted at the net.

He tossed the ball.

This time it rolled along the rim . . . circled once . . . twice . . . and dropped inside.

Josh grinned.

He turned to Tony. “You want to try?”

“Sure!” Tony’s face lit up. In the few games he’d ever gotten to play in, no one had ever given him the ball.

Josh bounced the ball to Tony and he went to the free-throw line.

He threw the ball.

It bounced off the rim.

He tried again. This time he *entirely* missed the backboard.

Josh chased down the ball and passed it back to him.

Tony wasn't bummed. He just took the ball in both hands, swung it between his legs, and chucked it up underhanded.

It swished through the net.

Tony jumped up and whooped.

He used the same stupid technique again—and another swish!

Tony did a war dance on the free-throw line.

The big kids glared and moved in like they wanted to tear Tony apart.

Josh was about to warn him to cut it out, but then a bell rang.

Tony stopped dancing. "That's it," he said. "That's the fifteen-minute bell. We're supposed to stop and clean up before lunch break ends."

"It's three to nothing," Josh declared. "We, uh . . . won."

The big kids stared at them and their mouths dropped open in astonishment.

Each had those weird shark teeth. Josh squinted. They didn't look fake, either. How could they be real?

Their faces twisted with barely contained rage. Jaws jutted out at sharp angles.

Something was really *off* with these kids.

One with the number 2 on her shirt tore the wraparound sunglasses off her face, crushed them in a fist, and tossed the remains. "You've won *this* battle," she said. "But it's not over. Our honor *will be* avenged."

Josh and Tony stared at each other.

There was a flash of light on the court. Another at the far end of the playground.

The lights left them both blinking, eyes filled with tears.

When they were able to see clearly again, the big kids had vanished. Except the leader. He stood by the free-throw line, his head hung low.

“What just happened?” Tony asked.

Josh shook his head. He went to their leader. “Why’d they leave you?”

“I have dishonored my squad,” he whispered. “We have lost. By the rules, I am your captive now.”

“Captive?!” Josh said. “What *are* you talking about?”

Tony yanked on Josh’s arm. “Hey, look.”

“Just a sec. I gotta ask this guy what—”

“No, seriously,” Tony said, his voice rising.

Josh turned to tell Tony that this weird big kid was about to cry. That something was really, really wrong with today’s recess. And that maybe they were about to find out why.

But the words stuck in Josh’s throat.

He couldn’t believe what he saw.

In the middle of the playground was a fort. It was made of plastic logs. Everyone loved to climb the thing. It was two levels high, and kids usually played a tag version of capture the flag during lunch.

Only at this very moment . . . there was a REAL battle happening.

Every kid at Evergreen Elementary out for lunch recess screamed and sprinted to the plastic log fort.

Everyone . . . except Josh and Tony (and the still-glued basketball teams stuck on the court).

Thirty new big kids had appeared from nowhere. They were like the ones Josh and Tony had trounced at basketball. But these wore blue shorts and numbered T-shirts that read: BETA.

There was no way they went to *this* school. They were huge enough to be in high school (or to be professional wrestlers!).

Any bit of them looking normal was gone too. Their faces were wide, jaws twice normal size. They all had snarling mouths full of shark teeth.

And unlike when they were “playing” basketball, this time they carried those snot squirt guns out in the open. They zapped Tony and Josh’s classmates left and right.

Josh and Tony watched, stunned, as terrified kids tripped and fell over one another to get away.

Blango! Splat!

In the bark-filled play area, kids tried to rise from mucous cocoons. They fell face-first into the gunk. Gross!

Only a dozen kids made it to the fort. They climbed the walls and cowered inside.

Meanwhile the big kids made sure all the kids down *stayed* down. They shot them an extra two or three times with their weapons . . . leaving blobs of quivering, angry, snot-covered kids.

“What’s going on?” Josh whispered, terrified.

He hadn’t expected any answer, but he got one from the leader of the weird basketball team he and Tony had beaten.

“It’s the second test,” he told Josh. “You won the first.” He nodded to the basketball court. “This is the second test. If the Empire wins, we will be tied.”

“Em-empire?” Tony sputtered. “Tied? For what?”

“Rule 039,” the big kid replied as calmly as if he were talking about the weather. “The Empire tests primitive worlds before they conquer them. If these worlds can beat the Empire three times, they leave in peace.”

Josh and Tony exchanged confused looks.

“I am Unit 1,” the big kid said. “In the *highly likely* case that this world will lose, the Empire moves in. First they will take this school. Then they take the planet.”

Josh mouthed to Tony, “*Take the planet?*”

Tony shrugged and made a “crazy” circle motion near his head.

Josh blinked. Whatever was going on—rule whatchamacallit or not—all he knew was he had to help the Evergreen kids. Somehow.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Josh said to Unit 1, “but you’ve got to help us stop those guys. You’re on *our* team, right?”

Unit 1 stood taller, suddenly at military attention.

“Unit 1 ready for orders, sir!”

“Wow, neat,” Tony said.

Josh and Tony huddled and drew a map in the dirt—as if this were a board game. The kids were *Xs* clustered in the fort. The attackers were *Os*. They had them surrounded. Arrows showed the *Os* moving in for the kill.

After a split second, Tony whispered, “So, what are the rules?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Josh hissed. “There are no rules. This is a battle!”

Josh thought about it a second. That might not be true. There *were* rules. Plenty of rules on the school playground. Every time he set foot in the flower beds some teacher was waiting for him, handing out demerits.

And these new kids might be ruthless, but they also seemed to have this thing about following rules.

“I’ve got a crazy idea,” Josh said to Tony and motioned Unit 1 closer. “Just do what I do. Come on.”

Unit 1 snapped off a crisp salute.

Tony didn't look sure, especially when Josh marched boldly onto the playground—straight for three new kids. They were zapping a helpless, snot-covered boy.

“Hey, you creeps!” Josh shouted.

The three turned. They had numbers, 7, 18, and 29, on their shirts. They aimed their guns at Josh, Tony, and Unit 1.

“You jumped off that wall.” Josh pointed to the cinder block wall near the library. It was four feet tall. Almost everyone climbed up and balanced on it during recess. Nearby was a sign that read: NO CLIMBING OR JUMPING OFF THE WALL.

“Yeah, it's against the rules,” Tony added, picking up on the idea. He crossed his arms over his chest like teachers did when lecturing rule breakers.

Unit 1 gasped as if this were the worst thing in the world.

The three big kids looked at each other. “There are no such rules,” Unit 29 snarled.

“Sign?” Tony pointed to the library wall. “It's right there.”

The three squinted—then they looked totally shocked. They set down their guns and raised their arms.

“We were not told,” Unit 18 whispered. “What is the penalty? Death? Cutting off our ears? Vaporization?”

Unit 1 nodded enthusiastically at all these suggestions.

“I'm afraid,” Josh said, tapping his finger to his lip, “it's worse.”

“You have to join *our* team,” Tony told them.

The three looked stunned, then looked to Unit 1. But then they shrugged, picked up their guns, and marched over to Josh and Tony.

“Yes!” Tony said.

“Orders, sir?” Unit 18 asked Josh.

Orders? Josh had no idea what to do next. He was just making this up as he went along.

“Look!” Tony pointed.

A squad of five larger kids had concentrated their slimy fire on the left side of the fort.

Josh gulped. “They’re going to paste everyone up there.”

“Not that,” Tony muttered and pointed lower. “*Where* they’re standing.”

The five stood smack in the middle of the flower beds. These were the same trampled daisies that had gotten Josh so much detention.

He jogged toward them. “Hey,” he shouted. “You can’t be there. . . .”

In a few minutes, Josh and Tony had rounded up thirty of the big kids—busting them for trampling flowers, spitting, and the unauthorized discharge of a snot gun in the hallway (Tony made up that last one, but these new kids were so clueless, and so terrified of breaking rules, they believed him).

The only holdouts left were in the corner of the playground: ten bigger kids by the toolshed. One had “oo” printed on his shirt, and looked even bigger than Unit 1. That’s where Josh and Tony had seen flashes of light before the major mayhem had started.

Josh moved closer and tried to yell at them—but they opened fire!

Globules of snot splattered on the ground near him. A strand got on Josh’s sneaker. It was such strong glue that he couldn’t pry his shoe off the concrete.

He had to leave it behind.

Tony, Josh, and their new gang retreated. (The sock on Josh’s foot made smacky sounds.)

“If you’re worried about your foot, sir,” Unit 1 told Josh, “we have cleanup solvent on the ship.”

“Forget my foot,” Josh told him. “We need to get that last bunch.”

“You guys have a ship?” Tony asked.

Unit 1 pointed at the sky. “We have many ships between this planet and your moon.”

Josh wasn’t sure what to believe. Unit 1 said they were being tested. Three battles they had to win or the planet would be conquered. How else to explain the sudden appearance of all these weird big kids?

Or maybe nearby Lakeside High School had let out early. But there was no way high school kids would be following rules.

No, alien invasion was the more likely thing.

So, that meant they had to win this fight or their school and the Earth were toast!

“Should we get the teachers?” Tony whispered.

“Sure.” Josh gestured to the playground and the dozen kids struggling in snotty webs. “They’ll come out here and get goosed like everyone else.”

Unit 1 fidgeted. “The longer we wait, sir, the more soldiers will be sent down.”

“Okay,” Josh said. “Let’s try this.”

He gathered everyone around him and drew in the dirt.

“We’ll have a squad run up the middle to distract those hooligans at the shed,” he said. “Two smaller squads will go right and left. I’ll lead one. Unit 1, you lead the other. A third bunch will go the long way and surprise those guys from behind. That one”—he pointed to Tony—“you lead.”

Tony’s eyes widened at this, but he smiled.

“It should be over,” Josh explained, “before anyone gets into serious trouble.”

“Good plan.” Unit 1 handed Josh and Tony each one of the guns.

Josh took it reluctantly. He’d been taught that guns were dangerous and not to be handled by twelve-year-olds. This thing was heavier than he thought it would be. It dripped snot from the end. Yuck!

“Ready?” Josh said.

Tony, Unit 1, and the other big kids on their team nodded.

“Okay—go!”

A pack of big kids sprinted up the middle of the playground. They screamed and fired at the other kids by the shed.

The enemy fired back, well hidden behind cover.

The middle squad got plastered—literally plastered—to the concrete!

But they did their job. Josh’s squads silently running up the sides were *completely* ignored by the shed kids.

But as soon as Josh got close enough to open fire, six new big kids swung around the corner of the shed and opened fire on him.

Josh took cover by the swing set, which got covered with sticky strands.

He shot back and splattered a nearby maple tree. A total miss.

He gritted his teeth. He was pinned down behind this stupid swing. His team was going to lose!

But just then Tony appeared out of nowhere—*behind* the shed.

The enemy kids wheeled around. Tony and his team shot first.

Blammo—splat—splorch!

The enemy squad was covered in goo, stuck *to* the shed, cursing and struggling, helpless.

Josh ran over to them.

Tony had already taken charge. “Where’s this transporter thingy you guys used to get down here?” he asked the largest enemy kid, number oo.

“We’ll never tell you,” Unit oo snarled. He glanced back to the shed he was stuck to.

Tony opened the shed door.

Inside were four steel pillars covered with blinking lights.

“What are you doing?” Josh asked Tony.

“Going to win that third battle *before* it starts,” Tony said.

The five-minute bell rang. Lunch recess was almost over. There wasn’t much time left to save the world.

Inside Josh trembled, but he somehow turned to the enemy kids stuck to the shed and told them, “So . . . take us to your leader.”

Josh and Tony burst onto the bridge of the alien ship and opened fire!

Two minutes earlier they’d teleported up from the shed and tangled every guard they saw on the ship.

The crew never expected to see two kids leading a dozen others, splattering everything that moved.

Josh had taken a black officer uniform to help blend in. (Actually, he just wore the jacket. The pants were too big and kept falling down.)

They strolled right up to the ship’s bridge.

Josh, Tony, and their team goosed and splorched the seven-foot-tall officers working the bridge controls.

Their leader (Josh guessed he was the leader because his uniform was covered with ribbons and medals) was the last unstuck enemy left standing.

He slowly looked around and raised his hands in surrender.

Tony whooped and did his victory dance.

Josh meanwhile stared out the wide view screen at Earth. The world was so beautiful from up here.

“I am Commander Kane of the Imperial Star Ship *Colossus*,” the leader told them.

Josh practically dropped his gun. The commander’s voice was ironclad, and Josh felt like saluting him.

Instead, he cleared his throat. “I’m Josh, sir,” he said, “from Evergreen Elementary. And this is Tony.”

Tony waved at him.

“As I understand it,” Josh went on, “if we win three battles against you guys, you can’t conquer Earth, right?”

Commander Kane looked to one officer in a white uniform glued to the deck.

“No . . . ,” the person in white muttered. “The Empire cannot be defeated. Not by two children!”

“Rule 049,” Commander Kane told him. “Are you suggesting, Lieutenant Plagen, that we break *a rule*?!”

There was a long pause, then Plagen said, “No, we follow *all* the rules.”

A smile flickered under the commander’s beard, revealing three rows of extra-sharp shark teeth (that sent gooseflesh crawling up Josh’s arms).

“We will go in peace, then,” Commander Kane said to Josh and Tony. “Well fought, young warriors.”

Josh and Tony whooped and gave each other a high-five.

Unit 1 beamed at them. “When is the next battle, sirs? Perhaps Lakeside

High School?” He cracked his beefy fingers.

“Uh . . . I think,” Tony said, “you and the other guys have to stay.”

Unit 1 looked as if Christmas had been canceled.

“No—you don’t understand,” Josh said, suddenly feeling bad for the big guy. “*Our* rules say that once the battle is over you have to go back to *your* team.”

There was no such rule, but how else to get Unit 1 to stay? And how could he ever explain to his mom that he had to bring a few dozen alien warriors to live in their basement?

“It was fun,” Tony said, “but rules are rules.” He held out his hand for Unit 1 to shake.

“We’ve got to go,” Josh added. “Recess is almost over and we’ve got a *huge* mess to clean up.”

Unit 1 stared at Tony’s hand, puzzled, as if he were unsure whether to clasp it . . . or bite it. He finally shook the offered hand. “It has been an honor to fight on your team, sirs.” He looked around the bridge, at the struggling, glued officers. “I’ll see to it that you get a few cans of detangling spray to clean up your school. . . .”

A minute later, Josh and Tony had handed out the last can of detangle spray to the basketball team at Evergreen.

As soon as the mist from the can touched the alien goo, it turned the stuff to dust.

Almost everyone on the playground was back to normal—stunned and not having a clue what had just happened but normal.

Not one of the big alien kids was left. They all must have teleported back to their ships.

The final recess bell rang.

Josh and Tony trotted off to their fourth-period science class.

Tony looked up. "You think they'll ever come back?"

"No way," Josh said. "We won. According to their rules they have to leave us in peace."

"I don't know . . .," Tony whispered. "That Plagen guy didn't sound too happy that we beat him."

"You worry too much," Josh said. "Those rules of theirs are like unbreakable laws. I'd bet you a bazillion dollars we've seen the last of them."

Josh looked down—almost stepping into the flower beds. He caught himself, stopped, and carefully set his foot down on the concrete path.

Whew. That was a close one.

Rules Officer Lieutenant Plagen tried to wipe the last of the congealed tangler fluid from his normally clean white uniform.

Ugh! He would have used the detangle spray, but it tarnished his medals. What a mess.

How was he going to explain to Imperial Headquarters that two children from an insignificant planet had defeated the Empire's best?

And by using the Empire's own rules!

He ground his pointed teeth (making a *screeeeeeching* sound that he very much enjoyed).

Plagen would not let this happen.

He took out his datapad and scrolled through the Empire's rulebook. All 33,452 entries.

Two could play *this* game.



He'd find some rule that would let him come back to this planet one day .
. . and then, his new lifelong enemies, Josh and Tony, would be sorry they'd
"won."