

# January

Jay Lake lives in Portland, Oregon with his family and their books. In 2004, he will have stories in over twenty different markets, including *Asimov's*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Leviathan 4*, and *Realms of Fantasy*.

This story is the first of the *Calends* series, taking the etymology of the name of each month of the year and spinning a tale therefrom. January is the month of the Roman god Janus, two-faced god of doorways and transitions. And sometimes, school custodians.

*"Something boomed sharp and loud along the corridors of Geminus High — kids throwing firecrackers in the dumpster behind the cafeteria. Janós heard that almost any other night of the year. This night was different."*

Janós shuffled down the hall. His uniform pulled and tugged at his body like the hands of an ill-tempered lover. His reflection rippled on the polished granite floor, interrupted by brass ridges every yard and odd stains he could never quite buff out.

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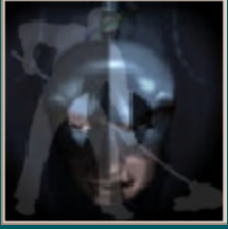
A gold tooth sparkled in his reflection as his smile, a *rara avis* in its own right, cracked open.

Tonight they would try to burn the school down. Just like every New Year's Eve. Tonight he would hold the doors against them. Just like every New Year's Eve. It was a tradition as old as the Empire.

He arrived at the south closet on the first floor, which had been Old Rennie's back when Janós first returned to Geminus after his own graduation. Set free to fend for himself, the old slave had kept coming around and bothering Janós until he'd been run off by the watch. Rennie had finally starved to death under the Sulispont.

Now Janós was old. He'd been smart, stayed free but never become a citizen. Citizens had rights and duties. Slaves had nothing at all. Little bondsmen like Janós who stood in the middle were the glue that held the Roman world together.

Another boom echoed, this from the front hall. Battle had been declared. Janós



took his strongest-handled mop in one hand and his enormous key ring across the knuckles of the other and headed for the racket.

There was crowd of juniors and seniors outside, barely visible through the narrow, wire-reinforced glass windows of the main doors. Janós rapped on his side of the glass with the key ring. "Go home, pukes!"

An inarticulate roar arose outside. Young shoulders battered against the metal doors. Fists pounded on the narrow windows. The door frame groaned as the locks clicked under the pressure.

"I won't tell you again," he shouted.

They didn't listen. Kids never did.

As the crowd drew back for a concerted rush at the doors, Janós slipped the lock. The kids spilled into the main hall, tumbling and shouting. A Molotovian cocktail shattered on the granite, blue flame racing down the hall toward the first bank of lockers.

Janós set to with mop handle and key ring. The spirit of the year moved him, gave him the strength it always did at this time. Even the hulking gladiatorial lettermen were no match for him. He shattered teeth and splintered ribs, careful never to kill. Their nerve broke when a wiry junior varsity wrestler caught fire and ran shrieking into the night like a blue comet.

Breathing hard, Janós shut the doors. "They close for peace," he said to the empty hallway, "and open for war." After dousing the flames, he knelt to pray in the New Year, taking his joy of the change. Tomorrow, everything would be as it always was, until some year when a younger man would finally take the south closet away from him.

He looked forward to the day.

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