

EGBERTO FRANKENSTEIN

By Bruce Hale

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NO fourth-grader had ever won the science fair before, and Egberto Cruz knew why. Their projects were boring with a capital *B*. The Water Cycle, How to Make a Lemon Battery, Pinto Bean Germination, and How Does Frost Form were some of the most interesting.

And that was being generous.

"I'm going to change all that," Egberto told his friend Robbie at recess.

"Change what?" said Robbie. "Your shorts?" Robbie could always be counted on for the classy jokes.

"I'm going to be the first fourth-grader at this school to win the science fair," said Egberto, retrieving the soccer ball.

"Dream on, dude," said Robbie. "You know Maya's already got it in the bag."

Maya Jackson, sixth-grade genius, had been winning science fairs since she was in second grade at a school across town. She'd continued her unbroken string of victories when she transferred to Rupert Munch Elementary a year ago. Everybody knew she'd sweep this year's science fair.

Everybody but Egberto.

He bounced the ball from knee to knee. "She can be beaten," he said.

"By Albert Einstein maybe," said Robbie. "But he's dead."

Egberto shook his head. "By me. All I need is the right project."

What he didn't mention was that winning the science fair was crucial. Since he was currently conducting a "no homework" experiment, Egberto's entire science grade depended on his project doing well at the fair.

The ball went flying, and Robbie chased it. "What are you gonna do," he asked, "cure cancer? Create life? Build a time machine?"

A funny look spread over Egberto's face. "What did you just say?"

“Build a time machine?”

“No, before that.”

Robbie’s eyebrows rose. “Create life? I was joking.”

Nodding slowly, Egberto said, “Yes. That’s it.”

“Dude!” Robbie protested. He held the ball under an arm. “You can’t create life.”

“Why not?” said Egberto. “Dr. Frankenstein did.”

Robbie rolled his eyes. “You do know that Dr. Frankenstein wasn’t real?”

But Egberto was unfazed.

He watched the movie *Frankenstein* for ideas and took lots of notes. He got his dad to drive him to Radio Shack for supplies. And he started searching for the perfect place to conduct his experiment.

Obviously, not the room he shared with his obnoxious little brother, Ruben. That kid got into everything, and Egberto didn’t want his triumph spoiled by some sticky-fingered brat. Egberto’s mom vetoed holding the experiment in a corner of the living room or the downstairs bathroom.

“The last thing we need is for someone to create new life in that bathroom,” she said. “With two boys in the house, I can barely keep the funkiness under control.”

* * *

When the solution came, Egberto was amazed he hadn’t thought of it sooner. After all, it was the only place he could truly call his own, the only place that nobody ever snooped.

His desk at school.

Nobody would disturb his desk, not even his teacher, Mrs. Asante.

Perfect.

Now, the only challenge was how to set up the experiment. Egberto couldn’t just haul in everything, spread it out in the aisle, and assemble it during class time. Mrs. Asante was easygoing, but not *that* easygoing.

The room got locked up shortly after school, so he couldn’t do it then. Morning? Egberto was not a morning person—his brain didn’t wake up until after first recess. So that left lunchtime.

* * *

One morning, three days before the fair, Egberto toted his box of supplies to school. He waited until silent reading time, then approached the teacher's desk.

"Can I stay in at lunch and work on my science fair project?" he asked Mrs. Asante.

She removed her red-framed glasses and rubbed her eyes. "It doesn't involve fire, does it?"

"No."

"Sharp knives, gunpowder, or dangerous chemicals?"

"Nope, nope, and nope," said Egberto. "I'm trying to create life, like Dr. Frankenstein."

"Oh." Mrs. Asante shrugged. "Okay, then. I'll be at a meeting in the teachers' lounge if you need any help."

And that was that.

Robbie volunteered to help Egberto. "After all," he said, "every Dr. Frankenstein needs an Igor."

They slowly ate their sack lunches while Mrs. Asante prepared for her meeting, waiting until every living being had left the room, except for the class hamster, Zorro. Then Egberto and Robbie got to work.

First, they emptied Egberto's desk. Then they lined the bottom with all the homework assignments that Egberto had refused to do. The creature needed a comfortable bed, after all. And maybe it would fuse with the assignments to create a kind of homework monster—that would be something to see!

In *Frankenstein*, the doctor had sewn together parts of human bodies to make his monster. Egberto thought this was kind of gross. But worse, it wasn't practical, since no human, however small, could fit inside his desk.

After serious thought, Egberto had reached a better solution—one that wasn't quite so creepy. Still, when he opened the first jumbo freezer bag, he and Robbie had to take a step back.

"Eeeww!" said Robbie. "What the heck is that?"

"Roadkill," said Egberto. "It was in the freezer overnight, but I guess it's defrosting."

Covering his nose and mouth, Robbie said, “Pee-yew! What’ll we do about the stink?”

After consideration, they borrowed the pine-scented air freshener spray from the restroom and unwrapped two packs of eucalyptus cough drops. The stink was tamed, but just barely.

Working quickly, Egberto stitched together the body of a cat, the head of a raccoon, and the tail of a squirrel—which had a tire mark across it, but still seemed serviceable. When the creature was finished, he and Robbie set up ten potato batteries around it.

“Will ten be enough?” asked Robbie.

“It better be,” said Egberto. “We’re out of spuds.”

With copper wire, they linked the batteries to two electrodes on the creature’s neck. Just before Egberto closed the desktop, Robbie added two items from his own desk: half of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and some dried apricots.

“What’s that for?” Egberto asked.

Robbie shrugged. “In case it comes to life and gets hungry.”

“Good thinking.”

The bell rang, and soon the rest of the class trickled into the room. By this time, Egberto and Robbie had cleaned up and taped the lid shut with masking tape.

When Mrs. Asante came in, she gave the desk a funny look. “What’s going on here?”

“My science project,” said Egberto. “It’s, um, sensitive to light.”

“Huh,” said the teacher. “Smells like a forest.”

The rest of the day passed smoothly. Just before the final bell, Egberto thought he heard a faint rustle from inside the desk. But when he lowered his head to listen, all was still. With a sigh, he chalked it up to general classroom noise.

Would his experiment really work? Maybe he’d bitten off more than he could chew.

On the walk home, Robbie buzzed with questions. “How long will it take? Will the thing follow your commands when it comes to life? Should we feed it cat food or raccoon food?”

To all questions, Egberto answered simply, “I don’t know.”

Sleep was a long time coming that night. Doubt alternated with excitement as he gazed out at the nearly full moon. If the creature came to life and he won the science fair, Egberto could rub Maya's face in it (his victory, not the creature). But if the experiment failed, he'd be a laughingstock.

It was a gamble. But then, he thought, great scientists accept great risks. If Egberto wanted to win, he had to take some chances.

* * *

The next morning, Egberto had planned to reach school early to check on his experiment. But after a sleepless night, he was running late.

As he and Robbie hustled through the stream of kids hurrying to their classrooms, Egberto found his way blocked by a tall girl with tightly woven braids. Maya Jackson. She stared down at him with bulging brown eyes.

"I hear you think you can beat me at the fair," Maya said.

Egberto played it cool. He raised one shoulder. "Everyone loses sometimes," he said.

"There's your mistake," she said.

"Oh?"

Maya gave him a pitying smile. "I'm not everyone. Prepare yourself for defeat." And with a little brushing-off gesture, she pushed past Egberto and headed down the hall.

His face felt hot. "Oh, yeah?" Egberto called after her. "We'll see about that!"

Robbie grimaced. "'We'll see about that'? That's the best you got?"

"She took me by surprise. I'm not afraid of Maya."

"Of course not," said Robbie. But he didn't sound as convinced as Egberto would've liked.

When they reached the classroom, Mrs. Asante and a bunch of kids were standing around Zorro the hamster's cage, looking serious. Robbie and Egberto joined them.

"What's up?" said Robbie.

Tiffany's voice wavered. "It's Zorro. He... he's dead."

“Dead?” asked Egberto. He inspected the cage. The exercise wheel, food bowl, and soup-can shelter stood there, same as always. But beside the wheel, a smear of blood stained the sawdust. “Where’s his body?”

“That’s a mystery,” said Mrs. Asante.

“How’d it happen?” asked Robbie.

“That’s a mystery, too,” said Mrs. Asante. “The classroom door was locked overnight, but somehow a predator got inside. The custodian is investigating.”

Egberto’s gaze met Robbie’s, and Egberto knew what they were both thinking. Robbie raised an eyebrow. *Could it be...?*

Egberto frowned and shook his head. *No way.*

No way could his creature have come to life so soon. No way could it have escaped and gobbled up a hamster.

Could it?

Hurrying to his desk, Egberto squatted down and examined it. The masking tape strands still clung to the lid, but the lower ends hung free, like the desk wore a floppy straw hat.

Hmm...

Egberto lifted the lid a few inches and peeked. His hybrid creature still lay inside, surrounded by potato batteries. Egberto’s shoulders relaxed. All was well.

But wait—the half sandwich and dried apricots had vanished! What was—

“Everything okay?” Mrs. Asante loomed over him.

Startled, Egberto let the lid drop and jumped to his feet. “Huh?”

“Your project,” the teacher said. “Was it disturbed?”

“Oh, uh... no,” said Egberto. “The tape just came unstuck.” He smoothed the strands down. “See? All good.”

Mrs. Asante called the class to order. But as Egberto sat down, he wondered. How good was it, really?

At lunch, Egberto and Robbie stayed in again. They added some pine-scented car fresheners to cover the smell. The wires had come loose from the electrodes. But Egberto didn’t know if that was due to the creature moving or to his own sloppiness.

He reattached the wires and added four lemon batteries, just to be on the safe side. But his roadkill creation looked just as dead as ever.

Another night, another almost-full moon.

Overnight, nothing weird happened in their classroom, but by recess word had spread. All the class pets in the fourth-grade building—Waldo the rat, Beyoncé the garter snake, and a leopard gecko named Chuck—had disappeared. All that remained were blood smears.

Again, Egberto inspected his creature, but again it seemed motionless. The science fair was this afternoon—would his project work?

After school, Robbie helped him load the squirrel-cat-raccoon (squatcoon?) into a box and carry it to the multipurpose room where all the projects were being displayed. Most were the usual foam volcanoes, water cycle models, and so forth. But at one end of the room, a fancy curtained booth displayed the sign:

NUCLEAR FUSION REACTOR—MAYA JACKSON

Robbie winced. “Ooh, that’s gonna be hard to beat.”

“Don’t worry,” said Egberto. He bit his lip. “I’ve got this wired.” He draped a black cloth over the box and set up his own sign, complete with dripping, monastery letters:

THE CREATION OF LIFE—EGBERTO CRUZ

As a backup, he connected a car battery to the creature’s electrodes. Just in case.

Later that afternoon, the multipurpose room teemed with parents and kids. Five judges strolled from exhibit to exhibit, watching demonstrations and taking notes. After the panel witnessed Robbie’s Diet Coke Eruption display, Robbie came over to stand by Egberto.

“Good luck,” he whispered.

Egberto wiped his sweaty palms on his pants and gave a tight nod.

The judges stood before him, two teachers, two parents, and one actual scientist. “Well, Egberto?” said the head judge. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Egberto cleared his throat. “From the earliest days, man has longed for the ultimate power—the power to create life. And now, at last... I have succeeded. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you”—he whisked the cloth away—“my creature!”

The five adults leaned over his box. Parents and kids looked on. The creature didn’t twitch a whisker. Egberto’s heart sank.

“Whew!” said the head judge. “This stinks.”

“And it’s not alive,” the scientist said with a sneer. “Shall we go?” The group turned away.

Sneakily, Robbie bumped the box. “Wait, what was that?” he said.

“Your elbow,” said the head judge. “Sorry, Egberto. Not this year.”

Egberto clamped his lips together and nodded, not trusting his voice. He wasn’t a scientist. He was just a kid who’d indulged in magical thinking. Really, what sane person would believe that a creature made of roadkill and homework could really come to life?

The judges moved off, headed for Maya’s prizewinning project. Robbie patted his friend’s shoulder. “Tough luck, dude.”

Egberto nodded, staring up at one of the high windows. Real scientists don’t cry, he reminded himself, even though he wasn’t a real scientist. Absently, he noticed the full moon rise into view. It shone onto his table.

Robbie nudged him. “Come on. Let’s go make fun of other people’s projects.”

Letting out a sigh, Egberto trudged after his friend. That was that. There would be no fourth-grade victory this science fair, no rubbing Maya’s nose in it. No A in science.

He had failed.

Fellow fourth-graders shot him looks of sympathy.

Egberto and Robbie had almost reached Maya’s station when the screams started. They turned.

Kids and parents pushed and shoved, trying to get away from a station down the row. Egberto’s station.

“Run!” cried a teacher. “It’s alive, it’s alive!”

A quiver shot through Egberto’s limbs. His heart hammered.

Could it be...?

An unearthly yowl filled the multipurpose room. Screams answered it. The crowd surged for the exits, carrying the boys along like twigs in a flood tide.

Egberto fought against the crowd. He jumped as high as he could, straining for a glimpse. What he saw chilled and thrilled him simultaneously.

Swollen to three times its size by the moon’s magic, his squatcoon had reared up onto its hind legs. The creature howled and raked its claws at the mob, terrifying and triumphant.

And then the crowd swept Egberto onward.

Just before he was pulled out the door, Egberto happened to catch Maya Jackson's eye. She was scowling like someone had just sat on her birthday cake. He smiled at her.

Egberto turned to Robbie. "And that," he said as they spilled outside, "is how you win a science fair."